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**African American Literary Tradition
In Zora Neale Hurston's
*Their Eyes Were Watching God***

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of a Master of
Literature and Civilization**

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Board of Examiners

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation is entirely the result of my investigation and that reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

I am duly informed that any person practicing plagiarism will be subject to disciplinary sanctions issued by university authorities under the rules and regulations in force.

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Acknowledgement

I would like first and foremost to say that this dissertation would not have been possibly conducted without the guidance and mentoring of my supervisor Dr. Selma Djaballah.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to:

My Father who pushed me to achieve my dreams and believed that I can do anything.

My annoying yet colorful siblings: Soulef, Nabil, Takwa, and Mehdi.

My best friends and support group: Hadil, Hayam, Ibtihal, and Yousra.

Last but certainly not least, to my mother, my hero and my role model, I would be really proud if I become half the woman you are.

Abstract

This research paper investigates how elements of African American literary tradition add meaning to the main theme and idea of Hurston's famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. African American literary tradition is limited in this research to the two prominent elements of folk motifs and orality, which are investigated through Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifying. This theory explains the tension between the literal and figurative, in other words, Signifying is a rhetorical strategy wherein ideas and themes have a deeper meaning that goes beyond their literal sense. In the same way, the two characteristics of folk and orality in African American literary tradition have a figurative meaning to the novel. This research paper makes the assumption that the folk and oral traditions used in the novel signify on the theme of voice and the tension between the inside and outside.

Key words: African American literary tradition, voice, folk, oral/ orality, Signifying, signify.

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Introduction

African American literature has always been the subject of fascination, and as a result the focus of multiple research topics that explore the black experience as presented by black authors. The African American literary canon explores diverse topics; in often times it represents the political agenda of marginalized black people and in other times it celebrates their culture, experience and uniqueness. This celebration is manifested primarily by black authors' adherence to the African American literary tradition; the focus on which was mainly during the Harlem Renaissance when black folklore was of great importance to self-expression and representation. At the time, intellectuals like Alain Locke argued that black authors provided America's genuine folk tradition with complex folklore and music as the American contribution to world culture.

Consequently, The Harlem Renaissance was a time when anthropologists travelled around the country, visiting black communities and collecting orally transmitted folk stories to archive them and protect them from loss. White folklorists and anthropologists like Joel Chandler Harris collected African American folktales. However, their depiction of folk characters like Uncle Remus mounted to degradation; enforcing stereotypes of black folks being uncivilized and barbaric in their rituals and customs. That unflattering depiction sparked a spirit of self representation during the Harlem Renaissance among African American authors. Therefore, many black folklorists opted to tell their own stories and take the task of collecting black folktales themselves in an attempt to preserve this tradition as it should be. Zora Neale Hurston was one of those cultural anthropologists and folklorists who took that journey and quite successfully even wrote in the folk tradition.

Hurston's most famous work is her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is labeled as a 'folk novel' and considered as one of the most significant African American literary works. Despite its colorful folk themes and oral qualities, the novel was severely criticized at that time of its publication. Critics like Richard Wright claims that the novel was addressed to a white audience; because to him and many others, it ridicules the black individual and puts emphasis on the racial stereotypes (Lamothe 171).

Despite the fact that Hurston was not vocal about racial injustices and oppression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; her main purpose of writing a folk novel was to have an authentic depiction of how black middle class people led their lives. Moreover, Hurston strived to celebrate the folk tradition and its orality, in addition to proving the falsity of said stereotypes. Most importantly, the novel dismisses the presence of racial conflict to prove that black literature can hold themes other than oppression and victimization. The themes and ideas presented by Hurston transcend oppression; most significantly the quest of asserting one's voice and the entailed conflict between the inside and outside that a character goes through upon being silenced (Gates 202).

Their Eyes Were Watching God tells the story of Janie Crawford and her journey to find happiness and fulfillment. The novel's main theme is 'voice' as it is noticed from the beginning how Janie is not allowed to voice her opinions and express her ideas. The inability of the protagonist to be vocal about anything and the subtle oppression she undergoes create two dimensions in the novel wherein we feel the existence of two worlds; a metaphor of an inside and outside, the former is expressed through Janie's inner thoughts and the former through the life she is forced into.

This research paper aims to look into how elements of African American literary tradition add meaning to the themes and ideas of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Essentially, African American literary tradition is divided into two main characteristics/elements: folk motifs and orality (Tyson 386). Nevertheless, the folk and oral traditions are without a doubt interconnected, in the sense that any folk element contains orality as an undivided component to it. Both characteristics are used in the novel to celebrate African American folklore and its oral forms. However, each element individually holds meaning to the novel's themes and ideas like that of the inside and outside metaphor and the play of voices. This is precisely what this research paper attempts to prove by using Henry Louis Gates signifying theory of African American criticism.

Henry Louis Gates introduced his theory of Signifying in his book *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. This book is an attempt to analyze specifically African American literary tradition with an original theory rather

than any Eurocentric theory¹. Gates parallels the term with De Saussure's theory of signs², and makes a clear emphasis that the term "Signifying" originates from the folk stories that were brought to America by black slaves, before the twentieth century. African slaves who survived the "Middle Passage" after being ripped out of their culture and land did not move to the new world as "Tabula Rasa" but rather brought with them their culture. One of their myths and stories was preserved by oral narration and recreated from memory to what is now known as the story of the Signifying Monkey.

The story of the Signifying Monkey basically entails how the Monkey plays tricks on the Lion. He figuratively repeats insults generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant, but the lion doesn't fully grasp that the Elephant did not say those insults. Gates through this tale tries to uncover the line between the figurative and the literal, between saying something and meaning another with some sense of irony and comedy; exactly how the Monkey insulted the Lion in the name of the Elephant to prove who is stronger. Furthermore, Gates extracts his theory of "Signifying" from these tales by trying to prove that literary works by African American authors have a clear signifying relationship. In other words, black texts always seem to have ulterior meaning as each strategy used by the author most definitely amounts to include more than one idea. Gates also claims that "the Afro-American tradition assigns to Signifyin (g) multiple roles" (Gates 123). That is to say that in "the Signifying Monkey" he identifies its occurrence in three forms: an explicit theme, an implicit rhetorical strategy and a principle of literary history.

Signifying as a thematic matter is a folk tradition wherein black people engage in playful conversations that hold a deeper meaning; for example, indirectly insulting someone without saying it explicitly. On the other hand, Signifying as an implicit rhetorical strategy represents the tension between the literal and figurative. In other words, it is the way that a literary work is not haphazardly assembled as each strategy

¹ Eurocentric theory: derived from Eurocentrism, it is the belief that European culture is vastly superior to all others, it reflects European experience and conforms to the style and subject matter of the European literary tradition. (Tyson 361)

² Theory of Signs: also known as Semiotics, the study of signs founded by Ferdinand De Saussure, who defined a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something". (Encyclopedia Britannica)

used by the author has a hidden purpose or meaning. Lastly, Gates identifies Signifying as a principle of African American literary history. He explains that black texts speak to or about each other by using pastiche, parody and what he called black intertextuality the same way black people do in the Signifying ritual.

Gates dedicates a chapter of his book to analyze Hurston's contribution to the African American literary tradition by using his concept of the "Speakerly Text". The Speakerly idea mainly explains the multileveled use of voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which is manifested through Hurston's use of black dialect and multiple narrative voices. Gates' analysis of the novel is mainly focused on how Hurston signifies on other black texts and the debate over the use of black dialect that she was able to resolve by her narrative strategies.

Aside from Gates, many critics embrace diverse theoretical approaches in analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* since it is considered an important novel in African American literature. One interesting critique of the novel and the folk tradition is made by Carla Kaplan in "Zora Neale Hurston and the Margarine Negro". Kaplan provides a feminist criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by arguing that in the categorization of the novel as a "folk novel", many overlook Hurston's gendered view on the folk she used. According to Kaplan, Hurston shows through her main character, Janie, how women were excluded from folk rituals like signifying, sermons, courtship...etc. Therefore, Hurston intended to criticize and revise the folk tradition.

Given the importance of the oral tradition in African American literary tradition in general and Hurston's novel in particular; there are many researches on the topic that shows how the tradition of dialect represents an essential part of the novel. Gayl Jones in his book *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* devotes a chapter to black dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where he sheds light on Hurston's unique use of the dialect tradition. He explains how the novel's dialect speech portrays shifts of mood and atmosphere which in a way gives quality and depth to characters' relationships and multitude of voices in the novel.

There are also many researches that show a disproportionate part of either folk or the oral tradition and examine how these elements play a role in the novel's theme or ideas. One example is "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" by Sigrid King. Primarily, King analyzes the folk element of 'naming' and asserts in his paper its importance in Afro-American culture as it correlates with power and oppression. King explains how in Hurston's novel, Janie suffers from the oppressive power of those who name her, being renamed, and finally unnamed after gaining her freedom.

Regarding the previous literature on Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a recurring idea can be clearly distinguished. Critics analyze elements of literary tradition disproportionately to link them with an underlying critique that Hurston tries to convey. That is to say that they study elements of folk and orality in relation to the concealed ideas of the author, which is important to building perspective around the novel. On the other hand, analyzing the same elements to see how they contribute to the novel's own themes and ideas is quite interesting as well. Particularly because Hurston's use of the folk and oral traditions in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* enable them to play an important part in the novel's plotline. The two characteristics of African American literary tradition represent a varied scope to investigate since they present many elements and themes. However, the topic of this research paper is limited down when connected to Gates' theory of Signifying. Thus the focus is shifted to see how folk elements and orality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* signify on the novel's own themes and main idea.

This paper is divided into two chapters. The first chapter investigates the relationship between the folk elements and Signifying in the novel. Folk rituals and practices are numerous; however given that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* mainly has storytelling and signifying as its two prominent folk elements, this chapter is limited to only the two. Both Signifying as a thematic matter and storytelling play a huge role in the novel; the former is used as a ritual and the latter appears in many instances, including the main story of Janie being told in a storytelling mode. This chapter tries to uncover how storytelling and signifying in the novel are used not only

in accordance to the folk tradition, but to the theme of voice and inside and outside metaphor.

The second chapter looks into Hurston's adherence to the oral tradition of African American literature and its signifying relationship within the novel. Orality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is demonstrated through Hurston's use of black dialect, cultural practices, and a distinctive narrative voice with free indirect discourse. All of these elements give the novel an illusion of oral speech and the feeling of hearing a human voice. This chapter tries to prove how the use of the oral tradition in the novel contributes greatly to the theme of 'voice'.

Chapter One: Folk Elements and Signifying

African American literary tradition could be traced back to as early as the oral stories from the transatlantic trip by the first generation of slaves brought to America. Ever since, and with each phase in African American literary history, there has been some sort of agreement on what to write about and how to do so as an initiative of tradition; as Henry Louis Gates states “Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience” (Gates 111). Perhaps the most important phase to the studies of African American literary tradition is the Harlem Renaissance because it marked its inception in collective thought by critics who sought to give it definition and writers who wrote their fiction according to it. The folktale element is one captivating aspect of the African American tradition that this chapter is dedicated to look into, in order to see how some of the most prominent elements of folk are represented in our designated novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston.

1.1. Folk Tradition and Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston, without any doubt has a rich legacy in what Gates admits to be multiple canons “for Hurston is now a cardinal figure in the Afro-American canon, the feminist canon, and the canon of American fiction” (Gates 180). Evidently this is shown in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being one masterpiece that incorporates many themes and ideas. The novel tells the story of Janie Crawford and her journey to find happiness and love with eyes watching what God would bring forth in her life upon each turn; all written as a modern folktale about ordinary working class black people during the early twentieth century.

Hurston adheres to the folk culture in her novel, which consists of material objects, cultural practices, and linguistic idioms and forms actualized by her use of folklore elements such as storytelling, proverbs, songs, jokes, sermons, games, riddles, sayings, signifying, music, labor, and courtship rituals (Sanders 97). The most prominent of these elements is Hurston’s combination of storytelling and signifying weaved together to create this amusing yet apprehensive plotline built on the metaphor of the inside and the outside.

The novel's central theme revolves around Janie's search for her voice by asserting her presence and reaching her goal of finding love and thus happiness. Therefore, it is through this theme that we sense the tension between the world as viewed by Janie and the one she is forced to live in. Similarly, the metaphor of the inside and outside that we are accompanied with throughout the novel presents Hurston's outlook on the theory of "Signifying" by showing the actual tension between the literal and figurative.

1.2. Signifying as a Theme and Strategy

Signifying is a colorful and amusing trope that occurs in black texts as either an explicit theme mimicking ironical lines and jokes; or as an implicit rhetorical strategy that stresses the tension between the literal and figurative (Gates 89,90). Gates makes the connection between signifying and Hurston's novel as he explains:

Hurston, whose definition of signify in *Mules and Men* is one of the earliest in the linguistic literature, has made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into a paradigmatic Signifyin (g) text. Its narrative strategies resolve that implicit tension between the literal and the figurative, between the semantic and the rhetorical, contained in standard usages of the term signifying. *Their Eyes* draws upon the trope of Signifyin (g) both as thematic matter and as a rhetorical strategy. (Gates 193)

As this statement suggests, Signifying is used in Hurston's novel to celebrate the African American ritual, as well as a rhetorical strategy to stress the tension between the words and the meaning they hold. The novel then, celebrates the folk tradition of signifying, but it is still used to signify on Janie's quest to obtain her voice and how the world opposes with her views.

There are many instances of Signifying that Hurston implements in her novel; the use of this ritual serves the folk tradition and celebrated this cultural practice that is distinctively African American. However, even Signifying as a thematic matter is still used as a rhetorical strategy to disguise other meanings.

Signifying as a theme is presented in our novel through two occasions, one of which is the case of Matt Bonner's Yellow Mule and the town's engagement in the signifying tradition. The Yellow Mule was a constant amusement source for Sam and

Lige and Walter, who three sat on the porch and told jokes about the Mule, especially if its owner was there to listen as they signified to rattle him in mock scorn.

The Ringleaders of the mule-talkers along with other residents including Joe talked about the mule's bad condition and how its master was mistreating it in a sarcastic way that made the whole scene comical. The bunch signified on the Mule's bad shape and thinness; telling Matt that the women got his Mule and were "usin' his sides fuh uh wash board" (Hurston 88). This passage shows the nature of Signifying as critic Carla Kaplan suggests: "Signifying depends heavily on humor. Signifying does not tear down what it signifies upon; it plays with it" (Kaplan 229). In other words, humor makes a huge part of the ritual, yet it is used as a disguise of the actual insult that the speaker tries to communicate.

Hurston in this story that takes up almost all of chapter six is able to employ the theme of signifying as a ritual used by African Americans for amusement sake. In the same way, the theme is employed as a rhetorical strategy to signify upon oppression and how it is manifested in the novel. The mule in this case is representing a slave and Matt Bonner is its master and oppressor who mistreats and blames it for the suffering. This sort of narrative is quite similar to the original story of the Signifying Monkey.

The Signifying Monkey has many counterparts in other folktales around the world. For example: the Monkey is a rabbit in some tales, a Coyotes in Native American folklore, and a spider in African mythology. This figure of the trickster³ is almost present in every culture; used to express the frustration of the people who resort to animal mythology to show their resemblance to the animal. The likeliness that they paint is aligned with its vulnerability and weakness, but also with its intelligence that out powers its oppressor even if it was only by humiliating them (Gates 56). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* our trickster figure is the Yellow Mule. Whereas the beast obviously is incapable of speaking and defending itself; Hurston made the townspeople speak in its stead and humiliate Matt Bonner by Signifying on him.

³ Trickster Figure: a character type used in n black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America; which is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius. (Gates 56)

Hurston with the tales of the Yellow Mule Signifies on the tradition of animal mythology; it is her way of reinstalling the folk tradition into her novel, as if to keep this type of writing alive. However, the Mule also signifies on Janie and how her life is similar to the life of that beast that could not speak and tell on its master. The analogy was made early on when Janie's grandmother told her that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston 47). Put differently, Nanny foresaw Janie's future by letting her know that black women were made to suffer the hardships of life with little to no rewards.

The events that proceed play an important role in the signifying rhetoric and the tension between the literal and the figurative. Particularly, when everyone, Joe included, attends the mule's mock funeral which turns out to become this big event of signifying and celebrating. Yet Janie is forbidden from attending and stays at the shop working and resuming her enslavement.

After Joe goes back to the store, we see his thoughts on Janie and how his opinion on her is quite similar to Matt Bonner's on his Mule. Joe resents that she was upset because he thought that "She wasn't even appreciative of his efforts and she had plenty cause to be" (Hurston 99). That is to say that Janie is the replica of the Mule that according to Matt was "jus' too mean tuh git fat. He stay poor and rawbony jus' fuh spite. Skeered he'll hafta work some" (Hurston 89). In the same way, Janie according to Joe was ungrateful to the work he did for her and the privileges that she received by being his wife.

Although the events around the Yellow Mule were concluded without any confrontation; the funny legends and the bleached bones were not the only thing left of these stories; rather an understanding of one's own predicament came over Janie. As a consequence, this led to the second signifying ritual and Janie gaining that voice that she longed to have.

Hurston describes the lives of women in her opening paragraphs by writing: "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget" (Hurston 32). This is exactly how Janie lived

years on end with Joe. However might that be, the dream was not the truth to Janie, and she ought to stand up for herself at some point and find her voice.

Gates determines that the exchange between Janie and Joe is a Signifyin (g) ritual of the first order. “Janie Signifies upon Jody's manhood, thereby ending his dominance over her and over the community, and by doing so killing Jody's will to live” (Gates 201). Put differently, the Signifying exchange between Joe and Janie held a greater impact on Joe because it was made public. Joe wanted to play the signifying game on Janie by calling her old; but Janie's shocking response changed the narrative as she says:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (Hurstons 119)

Unlike the signifying on the Yellow Mule, the mode around the signifier and signified (Janie and Joe) is tense, awkward and lacks any humor. Rather than using meditation (as in talking to oneself) or irony; Janie directly insults Joe; fully aware of the impact her words will have on Joe's ego especially with other people watching the scene unfold.

All in all, the rituals of signifying in the novel play an important role to the protagonist's self awareness and consciousness. Accordingly, Janie answers back to Joe and refuses to submit to his will. Her outburst marked an end to the tension between the inside and outside realms, and establishes “Janie's freedom long before Joe's actual death”. (Gates 202)

For Signifying as a thematic matter in the novel to have a clear storyline, it overlapped with another folk ritual which is storytelling. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* held many instances of storytelling that built a perspective around each event in the novel.

1.3. Storytelling

Storytelling is an undivided part of the African American literary tradition. It is the way through which our center story is surrounded with minor stories embedded into the narrative to paint a bigger picture around the characters and the plot. This is one of Hurston's narrative strategies in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that classifies it as a folk novel. Throughout the plot there are a few important stops; moments when the story seemed to divert from Janie to pass the spotlight to another character that narrates their own perspective.

There are many stories told as we proceed with the plot that narrate the lives of multiple characters. Nevertheless, it is worth to mention that the main story, about the protagonist Janie, is first and foremost told in the mode of storytelling. Janie, who is met with the town's peculiar stares, chooses to entrust the major events of her life to her friend Phoebe. Therefore; each of these playful narratives is, by definition, a tale-within-the-bracketed-tale, and most exist as Significations of rhetorical play rather than events that develop the text's plot (Gates 196).

The importance of Storytelling in the novel is shown from the first chapter when Janie starts 'telling' her story to her best friend. Consequently, throughout the novel there is a constant unconscious reminder that the story is being told while the reader is overhearing it. This shows the significance of storytelling to Hurston, as Kaplan explains:

Its form –a frame narrative where Janie tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby– stresses the key role that storytelling plays in that search.... Hurston figures human desire, our “oldest human longing,” as the desire to participate in storytelling or “self-revelation”. (Kaplan 227)

This indicates the importance of storytelling to the African American literary tradition. Storytelling represents this need and desire to communicate events and lay out ideas and subjective truths. This desire of storytelling is accomplished by Janie; even after all the hardships she went through.

Furthermore, we once again encounter storytelling through Nanny's story; as she narrates about life in enslavement and afterwards. In particular, Nanny's story explains her vision on success and happiness, and how this in part affected Janie's life choices. In fact, this instance of storytelling resonates from the beginning to the end of the novel, as we are constantly reminded of Janie's escape from the life Nanny envisioned for her, first from Logan Killicks and later on from Eatonville.

Nanny brings up the theme of voice, as she tells Janie: "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do"; Nanny "wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high," (Hurston 48); but her dreams evaporated by her reality. Nanny lived a hard life during her slave years and even after gaining her freedom; so she sought for Janie to have the life she could not have; a life that could only be achieved by marrying a rich man and having security and luxury.

The significance of Nanny's 'slave narrative'⁴ and vision on how Janie's life ought to be; is that it came right after Janie's revelation on love and marriage in the garden. The garden and all other metaphors surrounding nature were used by Hurston to show Janie's entry into womanhood and understanding of the idea of marriage as she says: "So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation" (Hurston 43). This shows the innocent ideas Janie had on marriage, and the expectations she had for her future.

Janie had her first kiss on the steps of her Nanny's gate, just to get caught in the action. This marks the start of the tension between the inside and outside in the novel as Hurston narrates: "So she extended herself outside of her dream and went inside of the house that was the end of her childhood" (Hurston 44). This is to say that from the moment Janie was caught on her Nanny's front yard, she instantly lost her voice and was subjected to the will of those around her.

⁴ Slave narratives: an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a former slave. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

It is the opposition between the literal and the figurative that we witness from this event onward that shows the manifestation of signifying. The figurative is the real that exists inside Janie wherein she hides her disapproval of the life she is forced to live. On the contrary, the literal is the outside world surrounding her where the visions of those around her dictate every aspect of her life. Correspondingly, Janie saw purity in her feelings and thoughts about her first kiss, but “Nanny’s words made Janie’s kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain” (Hurston 45). Therefore, there is a clear contrast between Janie’s inside thoughts and Nanny’s reaction.

Nanny’s story shaped the novel on many levels. For one thing, the tension between the inside and outside manifests at the very beginning in the way Janie’s view on marriage opposed that of Nanny. For Janie, “Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant” (Hurston 53); it is this idea of love and affection that Nanny and Janie opposed on when it comes to marriage. Due to Nanny’s Bourgeois ideals, she wanted Janie to marry well, sit on a white porch and enjoy the view of acres of land that belonged to her with little to no regard to the idea of love.

Eventually, Janie rejects the loveless life with Logan, and in a way this represents her rebellion against her grandmother’s ideas. Instead she marries Joe Starks whose visions on the horizon entranced her and promised passion and love. However, her second marriage also proves to be far from what she dreamed it to be as Joe oppresses her and takes away her voice. Although Janie during the course of her marriage to Joe is keener to avoiding arguments; the incident with Mrs. Robins is one of the rare instances of Storytelling in which Janie actually interferes.

Mrs. Robins used to come to the store and beg for food for her and her children, despite the fact that her husband Tony would buy each Sunday what would be enough for his family. The men sitting on the porch had her case for discussion while Janie was listening; they declared that she needed beating to come to her senses. Janie then does an uncharacteristic move by thrusting herself into the conversation:

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. (Hurstun 115)

In this passage, Janie speaks on the men's lack of knowledge on women; but the listeners seem oblivious to the meaning behind her words. Janie was signifying on Joe's speech of how "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows" (Hurstun 110). She chose to speak up and stand for women and herself at that moment.

Mrs. Robins' incident ends when Joe tells Janie that she is getting too mouthy but it sure builds up to the moment she reveals all of her inside thoughts. In fact, all the tales incorporated into the novel clearly have a connection of signification to Janie's storytelling.

Janie comes to the conclusion that her second husband had a big voice that lacked any backed up actions, and she confronts him on his deathbed as she tells him: "You ain't tried tuh pacify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice" (Hurstun 127). Janie signifies on Joe's big voice that engulfed her own, and took her freedom for all those years.

It is only after Joe's death that Janie finds her voice, and her happiness follows suit as she gives up the white porches and high status for love and passion with Tea Cake, as she declares: "Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (Hurstun 156). Janie's rejection of her grandmother ideals ensured her happiness and finding her voice.

In conclusion, this chapter investigated Hurstun's employment of the folk elements of signifying and storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurstun used Signifying and Storytelling as important modes of narration. Signifying was present in the novel to celebrate the folk tradition given that it is part of African American cultural practices, but it was still used as a rhetorical strategy. In instances of storytelling, signifying as a rhetorical strategy was present so as to show the tension

between the literal and figurative; emphasizing the novel's metaphor of the inside and outside.

Similarly, the oral tradition with its different components has the same purpose to fulfill as the folk elements. It also was used by Hurston to celebrate the African American tradition and to signify on the novel's theme of voice and tension of the inside and outside in Janie's story.

Chapter two: the Oral Tradition and Signifying

For centuries, African Americans did not have the privilege of learning how to read and write; and as a result, much of their accounts were orally passed down generation after generation. The oral tradition constituted a huge part of African American literature; it played a fundamental role in the canon by being the cornerstone that every piece of writing depended on. This oral quality of African American literature gives a literary work a sense of immediacy and of human presence (Tyson 403). It is exactly this feeling, of a black text speaking in tones that makes the readers feel engaged, as if they were hearing the story rather than reading it. This chapter aims to look into the different qualities that make Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* adhere to the oral tradition, while at the same time signifying on the main theme of finding one's own voice and the metaphor of the inside and outside.

2.1. Oral Tradition and Zora Neale Hurston

Orality is rather recognized in all works by black authors. It is part of the African American literary tradition that aims specifically to depict the black experience. There are many components in African American literature that determine whether a black text is written with a presence of an oral tradition or not; especially if the said work is the famous novel: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

To begin with, the use of black dialect⁵ is, on a certain level, what gives African American literature voice and oral presence sensed by the readership. The dialogues of black characters imitate the grammatical criteria of real life speech. Particularly, the rhythms and special spelling of words represent authentic interactions and give life to these characters (Tyson 363).

Furthermore, through Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we can shed light on the relationship between folk practices and orality. One example of that is the different cultural practices that demonstrate the folk culture and orality at the same time.

⁵ Black dialect: Black Vernacular English which is also known as Ebonics or African American Vernacular English. (Tyson 363)

Lastly, Hurston's use of the narrative voice has a close relation to the multitude of voice in the novel. Specifically the shift from indirect discourse to free indirect discourse is considered as part of orality in the novel as it gives voice to different characters at the same time.

Hurston's use of the narrative voice as well as black dialect and cultural practices, play a huge role in the novel's adherence to the oral tradition. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* influenced the chain of oral tradition by inspiring many authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker as Gates shows in his Signifying analysis (Gates 111). In the same way, the novel's subscription to the oral tradition was used as a strategy by Hurston to signify on the novel's own theme of finding voice.

2.2. The Narrative Voice

The "Speakerly" concept of Gates is a good start to investigate the oral tradition of "Their Eyes Were Watching God" as he explains it in his book *The Signifying Monkey*:

Hurston's text is the first example in our tradition of "the Speakerly text," by which I mean a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed "to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the 'illusion of oral narration. (Gates181)

Gates viewed the oral quality of Hurston's novel through its narrative voice and strategies; hence, through the meaning of what he called 'illusion of oral narration'. Specifically, the narrative voice shifts from indirect to free indirect discourse throughout the novel; and draws attention to its oral qualities by giving the illusion that multiple characters are speaking.

The novel is told through an omniscient or a limited omniscient point of view and Gates identified three modes of narration (Gates 191). The first of which is narrative commentary, which is written in standard English with an indirect discourse. Indirect discourse is used to report the events of the novel; from Janie coming back to Eatonville after she "had come back from burying the dead" (Hurston 32) to her going back down memory lane telling her friend about her journey from the very beginning.

The second mode of narration is that of characters' discourse, which according to Gates "manifests itself as a direct speech rendered in what Hurston called dialect" (Gates 191). Therefore we hear the characters converse their stories and thoughts as if they are directly narrating them; which would be better explained in reference with Dialect.

In between these two types of discourse comes what is known as free indirect speech. Free indirect discourse is hard to spot because it is used through characteristics of the third person narrator along with the essence of first person direct speech. In other words, free indirect discourse gives an insight into the feelings, thoughts and experiences of the characters as if the novel is told through a first person narrator. It presents knowledge not into events but into the essence of whichever character given the floor to tell a story, and that is exactly part of what gives *Their Eyes Were Watching God* its oral qualities.

We can picture a stage where each time the narrative voice shifts, there is a light shed on a certain character. Whenever the feelings and thoughts of that character are expressed through free indirect discourse, it seems as though they narrate the story and it becomes their own. It is this strategy used by Hurston that gives the novel its multiple voices, contributing directly to orality

As a first example, we can look into Nanny's free indirect discourse used right before she narrates to Janie her story: "Mind-pictures brought feelings and feelings dragged out dramas from the hollows of her heart" (Hurston 49). Hurston's use of this phrase gains Nanny sympathy because we get to know that her actions of slapping Janie, and afterwards marrying her off at only sixteen to an older man, come from a genuine feeling of concern and love.

Hurston gave voice even to Joe Starks through free indirect discourse to show how he views matters between him and Janie. Joe's idea on Janie's behavior is thoroughly explained through this passage: "Here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it!" (Hurston 99). We sense here that the narrator is inflicted by Joe's perspective

as if he was the protagonist in the novel. As a result the passage showcases Joe's emotions of disdain and bewilderment as to why Janie is not satisfied.

Free indirect discourse when it comes to Janie's inner thoughts and outlook on things around her is used to demonstrate the disparity between her and those around her. It puts emphasis on the metaphor of the inside and outside and shows the irony of these conflicting views. While Nanny wanted for Janie to have a descent life, similar to that of the bourgeois, Janie's vision is explained in the next passage: "Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (Hurston 53). Janie's expectations in this passage clearly did not align with the reality she was suddenly facing. While her feelings intensify we see once again free indirect discourse used: "But anyhow Janie went on inside to wait for love to begin" (Hurston 53), this is a clear indication of her despair and dimming hope.

As the plot progresses, Janie comes to terms with the truth and the revelation that love cannot be forced out of marriage as Hurston writes: "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 57). Although this passage indicates that Janie lost her first dream of love and marriage, that did not stop her from wishing and hoping again with her second marriage, only to be met with the same disappointment.

Free indirect discourse in the novel peaks out as either a form of presenting a certain character and giving it voice; or at moments in Janie's life that are somewhat charged with emotions and feelings. This is particularly shown in this passage: "It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (Hurston 78). It is through this instant of free indirect discourse that we understand Janie's first feeling of displeasure towards her second husband. Part of the fact that it was altered through free indirect discourse is because she was muted, and not allowed to voice her displeasure directly.

As Janie's voice is taken away from her so that her husband can have utter obedience, once again only through indirect discourse that we get to see her grasp reality:

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. (Hurstun 111)

This passage is a clear indication of the inside and outside metaphor that the novel is built on. It shows how Janie comes to terms with her reality, the reality that the person she married was not who she thought he is. Moreover, she comes to the understanding that she must not mix her inside thoughts with the world outside in order for her to cope with reality.

Free indirect discourse is not used solely to signify on the novel's conflict between the inside and outside, as in between Janie and Nanny's ideals or Joe's actions. Most significantly, there are many passages when Hurston would present the town's people and their collective thoughts on Mayor Starks as part of free indirect discourse:

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. (Hurstun 83)

This was added for the purpose of having multiple voices in the novel. It also shows Joe's authoritative presence and its effect on those around him. This later on adds effect to his grievance when Janie Signifies and belittle him. While free indirect discourse is embedded into the narrative commentary, black dialect is specific to characters' dialogues to represent orality in the novel.

2.3. African American Vernacular English

Aside from the narrative voice, black dialect is one of the oral forms that identify whether a text has orality or not. African American authors from the beginning of tradition debated on whether they should use standard English in presenting their black characters' dialogues or if they should use black dialect (Jones 125). This marked the beginning of the tension between standard and dialect English.

Using dialect would prove to be authentic and representative of black people in works of literature. However, this sparked an endless controversy among white writers who saw it as a language malfunction. Put differently, black dialect to the literary mainstream was a series of mistakes and wrong spellings; used only for mockery as proof of the whole race's incompetence and lack of intelligence (Tyson 363).

This struggle between dialect and standard English took on well into the Harlem Renaissance with black authors finding it hard to agree on a common standing point as Gayl Jones explains:

Many African American writers hesitate between dialect and standard. For some the standard language becomes precious, that is, too respectful, observant, and attentive to the rules, too meticulous, too punctilious and seemingly "derivative" without the versatility and easy informality of writers who take their tradition and language for granted. (Jones 126)

This passage explains the tension of writing in dialect or standard English that African American authors faced. Standard English to them could not represent the black people with their language and tradition. Yet black dialect was representation of the minstrel tradition⁶ (Jones 125). Hurston was able to resolve this tension in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching* by assigning black dialect to characters' dialogues and standard English to narrative commentary.

Zora Neale Hurston, far from the minstrel tradition, used dialect to show how the oral tradition can be portrayed in literary works. The novel that has virtually only black characters demonstrate a variety of personalities of regular middle class black people and their day to day interactions. Hurston celebrates the language and tradition of black people as opposed to the minstrel tradition that degrades and humiliates them.

Hurston was able to create black characters that spoke in dialect presenting their authentic speech in their daily interactions. The novel's protagonist does not speak standard English but she is intelligent and complex. Janie's quest to find happiness is adorned by all the intricate equations of life like struggling with the inner self and the world outside as well as finding one's voice in an oppressive predicament.

⁶ Minstrel tradition: from the minstrel show that began in the late 1820s and consisted of white actors applying burnt cork to their faces in degrading portrayals of African Americans in mockery and derision. (Krasner 57)

According to Gates, Hurston was able to dissolve the problem of whether black dialect should be used or not in order to show the authentic speech of African American characters. Hurston by assigning both dialect and standard English with a narrative role was able to meditate between “black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated Standard English literary tradition on the other hand” (Gates 174). Moreover, she achieved this with her “depiction of the relationship among character, consciousness, and setting, and its engagement of shifting points of view” (Gates 184).

Hurston’s use of dialect can be analyzed and discussed using Gates’ signifying theory by demonstrating the novel’s significance to the African American literary history. However, black dialect as much as it is used in the novel to signify on the oral tradition generally, it was also used as a rhetorical strategy by Hurston to signify on the play of voices in the novel.

The novel’s central theme is Janie’s search for her voice; a quest to be heard and for her voice to actually count to something. Throughout the plot we see her struggle between the world divided with an inside and an outside; this tension is manifested through characters’ discourse or in other words with the use of dialect.

The first chapter holds great significance to the play of voices given that we dive directly into characters’ discourse with the townspeople conversing about Janie’s return. There’s something quite notable about the fact that the novel is narrated by the protagonist as a form of storytelling which in turn is part of the African American oral tradition. However Janie did not tell her whole story in dialect because the narrative voice shifted and standard English was used to narrate the events of the story.

Janie chose to tell her story to her friend Pheoby, and she gave her permission to carry on the storytelling ritual as she says: “You can tell ’em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ’cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (Hurston 38). The fact that Janie narrates her story to her friend is remarkable to the tradition, given that it shows how by the end she actually fulfilled her quest of finding her voice and was able to tell someone of what she have been through.

The story begins from infancy and it is initially told in dialect form and with direct discourse. Hurston however does not let Janie narrate the whole story as the event at Nanny's gate marks a shift in the narrative voice to indirect discourse, and from dialect to standard English. This shows how Janie's voice was toned down as she hardly ever uses dialect to converse with those around her.

Throughout the course of her second marriage, there is one remarkable incident that sums up how Janie was muted and not allowed to converse her ideas openly. When the people of Eatonville ask of Janie to make a speech, Joe tells them directly:

Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home. (Hurston 78)

This was a plain dismissal of Janie's free will to speak, even on the trivial matters like giving a speech. Furthermore, Hurston explains the depth of this incident by writing: "the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (Hurston 78). This shows how Janie felt estranged towards her husband when he spoke on her behalf and silenced her.

This pattern took on well into the seventh chapter until Janie finally has the courage to signify on Joe. Up to that point Janie virtually has no characters' discourse; her articulation in dialect is pretty much summed up in one or two instances of free indirect discourse. One of these instances is when she thinks about arguing or not, she says: "But Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along." (Hurston 94). This statement though communicated through black dialect, it was not spoken outwardly. Hurston used this statement as a monologue that shows Janie resignation and her choosing piece over freedom of speech.

Joe Starks' death marks the end of the inside and outside metaphor because during the course of their marriage Janie developed her inside world to appease him. However, that inside world crumbled when she signified on him and her inner thoughts were laid out for everyone to hear. From that moment on, Janie is able to speak freely, and she becomes part of the characters' discourse as she engages in dialogues speaking in black dialect.

Although black dialect makes a huge part of the presence of orality in the novel, the cultural practices in the novel demonstrate the change in the novel's theme of voice from a time when Janie was silenced to a time she gained her voice.

2.4. Cultural Practices and Orality

Cultural practices of African American people constitute a large part of their tradition and beliefs. These practices hold significance to both the folk and oral tradition intertwined together to give unique expressive forms to black people. Nevertheless, orality can take precedence when we speak of cultural practices since they give a distinctive spoken quality when articulated by black dialect.

Mark A. Sanders in "African American Folk Roots and Harlem Renaissance Poetry" identify some forms of African American cultural practices:

Cultural practices and linguistic forms included work songs, seculars, field hollers, shouts, spirituals, blues, tall tales, aphorisms, dance songs, children's rhymes, toasts, sermons, gospel music, the blues, jazz, playing the dozens, lies, sounding and signifying. (Sanders 97)

Several practices of the above mentioned, were used by Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to attach the novel to the oral tradition as well as to draw attention to the plot and turn of events in the novel.

Upon reading the novel, a line can be drawn to separate the plotline into two parts. The first of which is Janie's life in Eatonville with Joe Starks and the second takes place in the Everglades with Tea Cake. This distinction between the two settings brings us back to the theme of voice and Janie's struggles to attain it. In other words Eatonville presents a time when Janie didn't have her voice whereas the Everglades signify the times after she gained her freedom and voice.

Cultural practices in the novel such as: work songs, toasts, and signifying; are used by Hurston to signify on the contrast between Eatonville and the Everglades as Cynthia Bond explains in "Language, Speech and Difference in *Their Eyes Watching God*":

The nature of these marriages in relation to Janie's search for identity... Her relationship with Tea Cake represents the burgeoning reconciliation of the inside and outside she had so scrupulously separated to live false emotions with Joe. (Bond 50)

This passage indicates that Janie's life with Tea Cake drastically changed from what it was like with Joe. After Joe's death, Janie regained her voice and her marriage to Tea Cake marked a new chapter in her life.

The cultural practices that took place in Eatonville excluded Janie from participation; from the toasting to celebrate the Starks arrival to town, to signifying and storytelling on the porch. Janie was put on the sidelines and ordered by Joe to keep quiet and not engage with the others. Put differently, all the events that happened on the store's porch held the presence of an oral cultural practice, and Janie was ordered each and every time to go 'inside' the store.

In contrast, the Everglades present the setting in the novel wherein Janie was able to participate in the cultural festivities of the community. Hurston describes life in the Everglades as: "Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour" (Hurston 174). This is to say that there was a dazzling sense of freedom and easiness about life in Janie's new home.

Tea Cake and Janie's house was a magnet to the workers much like Joe's store gravitated people towards it. Yet Janie's experience differed greatly between the two locations, because in the Everglades "She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (Hurston 177). In other words, she was able to be the orator that the people in Eatonville foresaw her to become.

Even the atmosphere surrounding African American ceremonies and festivals was quite different between the two towns. On the one hand, during the lamp lighting ceremony in Eatonville, Joe made sure to display his grace and power over the people attending by a great show of lighting the lamp right after a prayer poem was uttered and the chanting started: "We'll walk in de light, de beautiful light" (Hurston 81). Although the ceremony was supposed to be a joyous incident, Janie felt uneasy and uncomfortable.

On the other hand, a gathering in the Everglades took a completely different course. The celebration was during a time when the storm was brewing and the people were notified of the hurricane. However, everyone including Janie and Tea Cake were enjoying the festival with rhythm chanting: “Yo’ mama don’t wear no Draws Ah seen her when she took ’em Off” (Hurston 201). Moreover, they resumed dancing and playing games well into the storm before everyone started dispersing.

All in all, the difference in atmosphere between the two phases of Janie’s life was quite distinguished by her reaction towards the two towns. Janie felt uncomfortable during a time of celebration, whereas she was unbothered when a storm was forecasted in the Everglades. Most significantly, the difference between the time Janie didn’t have her voice and a time she did is only made clear through the cultural practices used in the novel.

This chapter aimed at looking into how some of the components of the oral tradition, signified on the novel’s theme of finding one’s voice and the metaphor of the inside and outside. As the novel tells the story of Janie Crawford and her quest of asserting her presence and her voice; black dialect, free indirect discourse and cultural practices were weaved together to hold more than only one significance. Hurston’s use of these elements of the oral tradition was to celebrate African American literary tradition as well as to signify on the novel’s theme of voice and the struggle between the inside and outside.

Conclusion

This research paper examined the use of African American literary tradition in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It shed light on the characteristics of the folk and oral traditions, and examined how they were used to signify on the novel's themes and ideas. This research paper relied on Henry Louis Gates' theory of signifying which specifically looks into the manifestation of literary tradition and its different meanings in black texts. Specifically in this study, Signifying was used to look into how elements of folk and orality add to the novel's own theme of voice and the metaphor of the inside and outside.

This research was divided into two chapters, with each chapter discussing one element of African American literary tradition. The first chapter discussed the two prominent elements of folk in the novel. Signifying (as a thematic matter) and storytelling were used in the novel to develop the plot and add to the tension of the inside and outside, as well as to show the protagonist's lack of voice. This chapter deduced that Janie was excluded from the ritual of Signifying as a way to silence her. Similarly, storytelling served to show how the narratives of those around Janie dominated her and created a tension between their stories that represent the outside world and the world inside Janie. However, Janie's narration of her story to her friend Pheoby proved her ability to regain her voice and that the metaphor of the inside and outside ended.

The second chapter examined the presence of the oral tradition in the novel. Orality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was identified in this chapter with three elements: the narrative voice with free indirect discourse, black dialect and cultural practices. This chapter proved the importance of orality to the multitude of voices in the novel. While dialect demonstrated the talking voices in the novel with the absence of Janie's, free indirect discourse was her only communicative tool to express her feelings and ideas. In the same way, cultural practices presented a shift from a time when Janie was unable to participate in the rituals to a time after she gained her voice and was able to.

In conclusion, Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* relied on folk elements and orality to celebrate the folk tradition and culture. However, these characteristics of African American literary tradition were not assembled haphazardly or simply to categorize the work as a 'folk novel'. Hurston made sure that the folk and oral traditions contributed to the development of the plot and building perspective around the theme of voice and the tension between the inside and outside. This paper opens possibilities for focusing on the contribution of African American literary tradition to building the plot and adding depth to other black texts. The rituals and themes of both the folk and oral traditions are used by black authors to show how their cultural heritage correlates to the ideas they try to transmit. This research paper attempted to highlight this correlation in Hurston's artistic abilities, which allowed her to not only celebrate the folk and oral traditions of her culture, but also to subtly hint to her novel's hidden meanings.

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