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Author(s): Sigrid King
Published by: African American Review (St. Louis University)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041796
Accessed: 06-06-2018 19:12 UTC
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Their Eyes Were Watching God

Sigrid King

The women say, unhappy one, men have expelled you from the world of symbols and yet they have given you names, they have called you slave, you unhappy slave. Masters, they have exercised their rights as masters.

—Monique Wittig, Les Guerilleres

Naming has always been an important issue in the Afro-American tradition because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated. Slaves were forced to abandon their African identities when they were captured, and were renamed with their masters’ identities when they arrived in America. In Orality and Literacy, Walter Ong points out that for primarily oral cultures (such as the early slave communities) naming conveyed a power over things, for without learning a vast store of names, one was simply “powerless to understand” (33). This sense of powerlessness could extend beyond the individual to include an entire community of “unnamed” people. Naming is tied to racial as well as individual identity: “To have a name is to have a means of locating, extending, and preserving oneself in the human community, so as to be able to answer the question ‘who?’ with reference to ancestry, current status, and particular bearing, with reference to the full panoply of time” (Cooke 171). William Halsey in his essay “Signify(cant) Correspondences” further emphasizes the importance of naming for Afro-Americans, saying that names and naming are “a heavily ritualized rite (or is that right?) of passage and theme prevalent in African culture” (259).

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Black American Literature Forum, Volume 24, Number 4 (Winter 1990)
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This concern with naming in Afro-American culture is evident in black literature from the earliest slave narratives to more contemporary works. The titles of many of these works, such as Black Boy, Invisible Man, and Nobody Knows My Name, indicate their authors' awareness of the correspondence between namelessness and lack of power. Ralph Ellison, in "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" stressed that "our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own" (147). Taking possession of one's own name and thus claiming sovereignty over one's self is an act of power. In his article "'I Yam What I Am': Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature," Kimberly Benston defines language in a way which is particularly relevant to a discussion of naming and power:

Language—that fundamental act of organizing the mind's encounter with an experienced world—is propelled by a rhythm of naming. It is the means by which the mind takes possession of the named, at once fixing the named as irreversibly Other and representing it in crystallized isolation from all conditions of externality. (3)

Benston's use of the phrase take possession shows clearly the underlying text in the naming of slaves by their masters. Fixing the named as "Other" also implies an interpretation of the named as an object, rather than a subject—something which cannot be part of the namer's self. The objectification of slaves is a well-documented method used by slave owners to distance themselves enough from their slaves to treat them as non-human. The namer has the power; the named is powerless. For the powerless, being named carries with it the threat of limitation, reduction, and destruction.

In order to break away from this sense of powerlessness, Afro-Americans have historically "unnamed" or renamed themselves. As Benston points out, renaming can be a means of self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past. Former slaves discarded their masters' names and created new names for themselves. Self-designation indicated social and economic freedom, the birth of a truly new self (3). Benston points out that unnaming has a particular significance for the questing hero or heroine in much of Western literature. Many questing literary characters come to the realization that names are fictions, that no particular name can satisfy the energy of the questing self. So long as the questing character seeks a name through a prescribed social role, he or she discovers only limitation, whereas, when a character is unnamed, he or she can have limitless designations which disrupt the function of social labeling and
deny the applicability of words' topical function to his or her unfolding experience (7-9).

Benston's essay is an important introduction to the relationship between naming and power, but his examples only explore this issue in the literature of men. Naming has a double importance in the tradition of Afro-American women writers. One of the crucial issues for women writing within the Western tradition is the dichotomy between woman's command of language as opposed to language's command of woman (Gilbert and Gubar 236). Gilbert and Gubar point out that "the female need to achieve a command over language has, to begin with, been most practically expressed through strategies of unnaming and renaming, strategies that directly address the problem of woman's patronymically defined identity in western culture" (237). Black women have experienced a "double dispossession" (238). Lorraine Bethel discusses the two ways in which black women are oppressed: "The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms 'thinking like a woman' and 'acting like a nigger . . .' " (178). To counterbalance this, black women writers often focus on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised (Pryse 5).

One of the most important and innovative Afro-American women writing in this tradition is Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was a pioneer in the attempt to define the totality of Afro-American women in literature and anthropological studies, rather than their being defined by others (Bush 1035). Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focuses on the character Janie, whose quest for the "horizons" of herself finally leads her to a place where she defines herself, despite a society which wants to deny her power because she is a black woman. The importance of naming and unnaming in Hurston's novel fixes it firmly within the tradition of Afro-American women writers. As Janie develops in the novel, she experiences the oppressive power of those who name her, the growing potential of being renamed, and finally the freeing experience of being unnamed.

Near the start of the novel, Janie has no name when she returns to Eatonville: "So the beginning of this was a woman" (9). The sentence places her within the larger context of the women mentioned in the book's second paragraph: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget" (9). As Janie walks into town she remains nameless; in fact, it is not until several pages into the novel that she is finally named by the townspeople on
the porch. Ironically, when they say her name, they do so incorrectly; since she had married for a third time, her name is no longer "Janie Starks" (12). Naming is clearly a source of power for the watchers on the porch, yet their power cannot affect Janie. Because the townspeople have been under the "bossman's" eye all day, they now need to exercise some power in the only way they can—within their oral tradition. "They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (10). The metaphors used to describe their words equate them with weapons. Janie recognizes the negative relationship between her neighbors' sense of power and naming. Speaking to Pheoby later, she calls them collectively "Mouth-Almighty" (16), and Pheoby comments that "so long as they get a name to gnaw on they don't care whose it is, and what about, 'specially if they can make it sound like evil" (17).

According to Hortense Spillers, it is important that Hurston chose to name her character Janie because it differentiates her from a literary type (such as the women found in literature by Larsen and Fauset) whose life possibilities have been circumscribed and prescribed by preconditions (253). Janie's name gives her an identifiable status, yet it does not limit her to one role or life experience.

As Janie and Pheoby talk, Janie begins to trace the experiences that have brought her back to Eatonville. Starting with her years as a little girl, Janie makes it clear that naming was used as a limiting or prescribing force by people around her and that, at a young age, she adopted their views of naming as her own. Janie relates how she was raised by her grandmother, Nanny, in the home of a wealthy white family, the Washburns. Because of her protected environment, Janie did not know she was black until she was six years old. As she explains the event in which she discovered her racial heritage, Janie mentions that the white family named her "Alphabet": "Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (21). As "Alphabet," Janie seems to be no more than a character (like a letter of the alphabet) who signifies nothing for herself while facilitating the "circulation of signs" that reinforces communication among those who exercise power (Gilbert and Gubar 238).

Elizabeth Meese feels that Janie, at the beginning of her life, "receives her sense of definition from others. She is woman as object in a racist, patriarchal culture. Failing to recognize herself as the one black child in a photograph, she begins her story
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without name or color” (61-62). It is interesting that Hurston begins both the narrative frame and Janie’s narrative with Janie as a nameless character. The effect is one more of contrast than of resonance, though, since Janie as an adult is well-defined and does not need to be named to identify herself, as she did as a girl.

Janie’s first lessons about naming come from a woman whose name, Nanny, exemplifies her place within the white patriarchal structure. One of Nanny’s responsibilities was to look after the four white grandchildren who lived in the Washburn house. Janie says, “Dat’s how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin’ but Nanny, ’cause dat’s what everybody on de place called her” (20). Nanny lived under the naming system of the white slave owners who used force to teach her the connection between names and power. Nanny relates an incident to Janie in which the mistress of the plantation where she was enslaved confronted her in the slave cabins. The mistress, angry over Nanny’s illegitimate child, tells her, “Look lak you don’t know who is Mistis on dis plantation, Madam. But Ah aims to show you” (33). The white woman invokes her own name, Mistress, and ties it to the brutal power of the whip which she will use to “show” Nanny.

Nanny teaches Janie the same lessons she learned about naming: Names are bound within the white male power structure, and the most s black woman can hope for is to endure within them. Nanny’s explanation of the power hierarchy places black women on the bottom as “de mule[s] uh de world” (29). Nanny’s naming of all black women, including Janie, as “mules” will haunt Janie for the next twenty years. She will be identified with the work animal first by Logan Killicks and then by Joe Starks when he buys a mule many years later in Eatonville. Janie will not be free of the mule name until Joe’s mule finally dies.

In her adolescence, Janie tries her own hand at naming. As she is stretched on her back beneath the pear tree in Nanny’s back yard one afternoon, she has an intense sensory experience of delight and responds by naming it “marriage” (24). By misinterpreting her own deepening sense of her self as a sign of possible joy with another, Janie limits the thing she names. Missy Dehn Kubitschek states that this identification of marriage with total fulfillment reflects Janie’s immature consciousness, and that her interpretation of the tree is essentially static, focused on a prescribed social institution (22).

Because Janie associates marriage with her experience under the pear tree, she allows Nanny to arrange for her first legal
name change to Mrs. Logan Killicks. Killicks's name is ironic, for his relationship to Janie quickly "kills" her definition of marriage: "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (44). With Killicks, Janie also learns more about the power associated with names. When they argue about her doing outside work in their yard, she calls him " 'Mist' Killicks," a name which ironically reflects his attempt to be her master. He, on the other hand, calls her " 'LilBit,' " a name which reveals her position of powerlessness in his mind. Logan Killicks finally goes too far when he associates Janie with a second mule for working in the fields. Janie knows from Nanny's narrative that the mule has the least powerful position, and she knows that is not what she wants.

Janie finds her way out when Joe Starks appears. The first thing Joe does after asking for a drink of water is to name himself: "Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Georgy" (47). Hurston's naming of Starks is ironic for several reasons. The word *stark* is often used as a synonym for barren, and Joe Starks and Janie never have any children. Hurston hints at sexual problems that develop between the pair because of their separate beds and Janie's eventual verbal "castration" of Joe in the store. Starks's name is also ironic because of his focus on capitalistic pursuits. Starks's wealth gives him a false sense of power because the townspeople resent him and the things he does to gain his wealth. Starks's name could also be seen as a comment on his desire to be a "big voice." As Janie eventually finds out, there is not much behind the big voice; it is a façade for the starkness inside Joe.

Hurston provides some hints about Joe's true nature through the limiting and subjugating names he calls Janie when they first meet. He calls her " 'lil girl-chile' " and " 'pretty doll-baby' " (48-49), indications of the role that he will want her to play once he becomes mayor of Eatonville. When Jody names her in the socially prescribed role of "wife," he says, " 'Ah wants to make a wife outa you' " (50). He clearly places himself in the position of power by his naming Janie. When Janie tries to name him, substituting the more affectionate "Jody" for "Joe," he is pleased, but still controls the naming. He asks her to " 'Call me Jody lak you do sometime,' " and after she starts a sentence with his new name, he cuts her off with " 'Leave de s'posin' and everything else to me' " (50). Janie is satisfied to stop " 's'posin' " for the time being. As she rides away with Joe Starks, she realizes that "her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (54).
Although Joe seems better than Logan at first, once he and Janie are together, he quickly assumes the "master" role. Janie unconsciously associates him with the white patriarchal system from the beginning. When she first sees him coming down the road, she notes that "he was a seal-brown color but he acted like Mr. Washburn or somebody like that to Janie" (47). When Joe and Janie are on the train the day after their marriage, she proudly describes him as "kind of portly like rich white folks" (56). When they arrive in Eatonville, Joe begins to use a habitual expression "I god," which ironically sounds as though he is naming himself God. Joe's association of naming with power is apparent when he finds out that Eatonville has no mayor: " 'Ain't got no Mayor! Well, who tells y'all what to do? " (57). The name mayor connotes control over others to Joe. Hurston's synthesis of the name mayor with the phrase I god may have come from her own life, since her father was a minister and mayor of the all-black Eatonville when she was born (Bloom, "Chronology" 115).

Once Joe finds out there is no named authority, he sets himself up in the town's highest position of power. He gathers the men around him and asks, " 'Whut is de real name of de place?' " (59). Ironically, Eatonville is named for Captain Eaton, a white landowner who has exercised power over the small, black community. Joe replaces Captain Eaton as the power broker when he uses his capital literally to "buy" Eatonville for his own. Once he has bought the town, Joe sets himself up as God; he creates new buildings and names them and brings light to Eatonville in the form of the lamp post.

Once Joe is officially named mayor, Janie becomes "Mrs. Mayor Starks." Unfortunately, the power that Joe readily adopts with his new name is not meant to be shared with Janie. Her name simply becomes a reflection of the new power of Joe. When the townspeople ask "Mrs. Mayor Starks" to make a speech, Joe cuts in: " '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' " (69). John Callahan points out that Joe views Janie as his "appendage" (102). Joe says, " 'Ah told you in de very first beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you' " (74). Joe reasons that because he loves being Mr. Mayor, Janie should gratefully accept the name and identity of Mrs. Mayor (Callahan 102). Joe does not understand that Janie can make a " 'big woman outa' " herself. This relationship of power with Joe "[a]sk[es] the bloom off of things" (70) for Janie, and "a feeling of coldness and fear" takes hold of her (74).
Janie's fears are well-founded, for the role of the mule returns to haunt her in her second marriage. When Joe first met Janie, he protested against Logan Killick's treatment of her as a beast of burden: "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday!" (49). After Joe's store and house are completed, though, he comes increasingly to treat her like an animal obliged to work his property. One day as she is working in the store, she sees some of the men tormenting Matt Bonner's mule outside. Her thoughts reveal an unconscious identification of her situation with that of the mule:

She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. "They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devillin' 'im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid 'em all." (89)

Janie feels as powerless as Matt's mule; she's being mistreated and "worked to death" by Joe. As she turns away from the window, "a little war of defense for helpless things" goes on inside her, and she thinks, "People ought to have some regard for helpless things" (90). When Joe overhears what Janie has muttered, he buys the mule from Matt, pretending that "freeing" the mule is his idea. In front of the others, Janie delivers an ironic speech in which she compares Joe to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln:

"Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something." (92)

Janie's juxtaposition of the freeing of slaves with the freeing of the mule shows the ironic contrast between the importance of what Joe has done and what Lincoln did. It also links servitude to the state of the mule; thus, Janie's servitude to Joe is clearly less important to him than the "servitude" of the mule.

After this incident, Janie begins to feel a stronger desire for freedom and a greater dissatisfaction with her relationship with Joe. One night, Joe hits her because her dinner does not please him. After that, Janie's image of Joe "tumble[s] down and [is] shattered," and her association of him with the pear tree ideals is ruined (112). He becomes "'nothin' . . . in [her] mouth" (118), and she starts to use words to fight back at him. Janie finally defeats Joe with her words, during their fight in the store, and the "big voice" of Joe is silenced. When Joe hears Janie expose the truth about his sexuality, he feels humiliation and rage: "Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might" (124). When this
happens, Janie's power relationship with Joe is reversed. For Janie, "new thoughts had to be thought and new words said" (125). Joe becomes ill and retreats from contact with Janie. His last attempt to control her is to name her as his murderer. When Janie finds out he is spreading this rumor, she tearfully tells Pheoby, "Tuh think Ah been wid Jody twenty yeahs and Ah just now got tuh bear de name uh poisonin' him" (127). Joe's final actions toward her make Janie sad, but she refuses to be controlled by him.

When she realizes that Joe is about to die, she ignores his order for her to stay out of the sick room and confronts him one last time. When she faces her oppressor, she reverses the seat of power; Janie becomes the one who names. Janie sees that "Jody, no Joe, gave her a ferocious look. A look with all the unthinkable coldness of outer space. She must talk to a man who was ten immensities away" (130). Janie recognizes the difference between the man she affectionately named "Jody" twenty years ago and the man named "Joe Starks," the "big voice." Janie tells him, "'Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died'" (133). Starks protests against the truth, but then Death, "the square-toed one," takes him. Janie muses for a while on the transformation of her Jody into Joe Starks, "the making of a voice out of a man" (134), and then she calls in the community to mourn.

Janie takes on a new name at this stage in her life; she becomes the "widow of Joe Starks," a woman of property. It is readily apparent that the attraction associated with her new name is still linked to Joe Starks. She sees the difference between her state as a "widow" and the status of the other widows in town; men will woo her because she has Joe Starks's money and property. John Callahan feels that with his "big voice" Joe Starks, in effect, became Nanny's successor, and so it is appropriate that after his death and burial Janie discovers her true feelings about Nanny (105). Nanny's dream for Janie has been realized in the security offered by Joe's wealth, but for Janie, Nanny's definition of happiness is not enough:

... Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (138)

What Nanny had named "love" Janie renames as "mis-love" (138). Janie recognizes that she must define her own horizons now. Maria Tai Wolff states that Janie knows that another's
ideas are never adequate; the only truths she will now accept are those derived from her own experience (31).

As soon as Janie has this realization, she imagines her own creation. Missy Dehn Kubitschek says that Hurston underscores Janie's rebirth by associating her reflections on her marriages with a creation myth (24). Janie finds a "jewel" within herself and opposes that image to "tumbling mud-balls" (139). Janie has a new sense of strength and identity which comes from within herself rather than from her association with someone else.

Tea Cake's entrance into Janie's life and his relationship to naming foreshadow the kind of relationship they will share. Whereas Joe Starks's first words were to name himself ("Joe Starks was the name"), Tea Cake's first words call Janie by name, " 'Good evenin', Mis' Starks,' " (144). Janie tells him that he has " 'all de advantage 'cause Ah don't know yo' name' " (144), but Tea Cake does not view his name as important. " 'People wouldn't know me lak dey would you,' " he tells her (145). Janie finds herself relaxed and laughing as she talks to Tea Cake because he uses his words to entertain her. John Callahan says that Tea Cake "revivifies" names (106): Instead of asking Janie for a match, he says, " 'You got a lil piece uh fire over dere, lady?' " (145). When Janie finally learns his name, she finds that he has been renamed from Vergible Woods to Tea Cake. Janie likes the renaming and asks Tea Cake if it suits his nature: " 'Tea Cake! So you sweet as all dat?' " (149). Tea Cake does not name to gain power; he names to explore the true nature of a thing.

As their relationship develops, Janie finds that naming no longer holds the limiting power that it manifested in her relationships with Logan and Joe. She explains to Pheoby that the age difference between her and Tea Cake does not affect them because they " 'thinks de same' " (173). Janie forms a new relationship to language, but this time she has power over it rather than its having power over her: " 'So in the beginnin' new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used tuh dat, we gits 'long jus' fine. He done taught me de maiden lan-
guage all over' " (173). Tea Cake's use of language is positive and creative, rather than limiting and destructive.

Soon after this, Janie and Tea Cake are married. This time, her name change does not bring about a relationship of unequal power. Instead, she and Tea Cake move away from Eatonville and form a new life in the " 'Glades." Their trust and love for each other develop so far that Janie can finally feel free to say to Tea Cake, " 'All right then, you name somethin' and we'll do it' " (250). She
knows that, because she and Tea Cake think "the same," he will never use his naming as a source of power over her.

Although their move away from Eatonville provides them with a place where they can create their own relationship to language, it also places them in a larger world, a world which is not racially segregated and which brings them face to face with the forces they name "God" and "Death." The issues of race and name are, however, inextricably combined by Mrs. Turner, Janie and Tea Cake's neighbor in the " 'Glades." Mrs. Turner's use of naming falls into the Western literary tradition described by Benston. The privileging of "white" over "black" and the reduction of a human being to the word nigger are methods used by Mrs. Turner to give her a sense of power. She tells Janie:

"Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself. Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wud 'em, . . . If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wud dem. De black ones is holdin' us back." (210)

Mrs. Turner names people by their skin color rather than their individual names. Her rejection of "black niggers" is a complete denial of her Afro-American heritage.

Mrs. Turner is not Janie's only exposure to the destructive naming based on skin color. After the hurricane, when Tea Cake and Janie are recovering in Palm Beach, Tea Cake is approached by two white men with guns. He is concerned because they do not know him, but he soon discovers that they are not interested in his real name:

"Hello, there, Jim," the tallest one called out. "We been lookin' fuh you."

"Mah name ain't no Jim," Tea Cake said watchfully. "Whut you been lookin' fuh me fuh? Ah ain't done nothin'." " (251)

The men's generic misnaming demeans Tea Cake by grouping him with all black men, denying him a separate identity. Tea Cake is forced to go with the men to bury the dead, and again he sees the denial of identity based on skin color. The white men have the workers separate the bodies according to color and save the white bodies for burial in a box, whereas the black bodies will be covered in a mass grave. Tea Cake remarks ironically on the fact that, with the shape these bodies are in, he " 'can't tell whether dey's white or black' " (253).

When he escapes back to Janie, he tells her, " 'It's bad bein' strange niggers wid white folks. Everybody is aginst yuh' " (255). Because the white people of Palm Beach do not know Tea Cake and Janie by name, he feels, they are not safe there. Janie comments further on the naming according to race: " 'Dat sho is
de truth. De ones de white man know is nice colored folks. De ones he don't know is bad niggers' " (255). Janie and Tea Cake decide to return to their former home in the "Muck" where they control the naming, and through their naming maintain a sense of control.

It is on the "Muck" that Janie comes up against two powerful forces which she cannot control: the force which causes the hurricane and the force which she describes as the "being with . . . square toes" (129). Janie names these abstractions to try to understand them. The first force, the one she and Tea Cake encounter in the hurricane, she names "God." Janie has already used the name God in association with Tea Cake. She describes him earlier in the novel as "a glance from God," bringing him together with her vision of the pear tree blossoming in the spring (161). During the storm, she reiterates Tea Cake's connection to the force she names "God" when she explains her love for him:

"We been tuhgether round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door." (236)

For Janie, then, God is a name for what she has learned through her own growth and through her relationship with Tea Cake. God is the unexplainable force which is located somewhere beyond the horizon, the goal which Janie is constantly seeking. As Janie and Tea Cake sit together in the darkened shanty, they become aware of their connection with this unknown force:

They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes strain-ing against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (236).

Hurston's use of the final clause as the title of her novel emphasizes its importance. The name God is not defined by Hurston in the way that it is used in the Western literary tradition. Hurston's renaming of this force (or potential) places her novel outside the white male literary canon, and creates a powerful new place for black women writers to rename their experience.

Along with her re-signification of the name God, Hurston also re-signifies the name Death. When Joe Starks is dying, Janie personifies Death as the "strange being with the huge square toes" who has been standing in his high house since "before there was a where or a when or a then" (129). Janie's renaming of death as a being identified by the shape of his toes (tombstones) helps her understand the phenomenon of death and helps her control her fear of it. She describes the time after the hurricane like a reprieve after the visitation of a dreaded neighbor or relative:
And then again Him-with-the-square-toes had gone back to his house.
He stood once more and again in his high flat house without sides to it
and without a roof with his soulless sword standing upright in his hand.
... The time of dying was over. It was time to bury the dead. (249)

By naming death, Janie gains an understanding of it. It is this
understanding of death that enables Janie to shoot Tea Cake
when she is forced by his illness to become an instrument of
death. Although she is filled with sorrow at the thought of killing
him, she recognizes that she must do it for her own life to
continue.

When Janie kills Tea Cake, she becomes once again unnamed.
She has actively ended her role as his wife, which leaves her an
option to name her own roles. She easily overcomes the last
attempt by someone in the novel to name her when she is tried
for Tea Cake's murder. The white lawyers designate her " 'the
defendant,' " rather than Janie (279). In their arguments, the
lawyers offer the jury a variety of other names: " 'poor broken
creature,' " " 'devoted wife,' " or " 'wanton killer.' " Janie knows
that the assignment of any of these names to her would be
untrue and would limit the "horizon" she has come to know. The
assignment of one of these names to Janie would result in a
misunderstanding of her relationship with Tea Cake, and Janie
fears such a misunderstanding more than death (279). To
counter this last attempt at naming, Janie tells her own story to
the jury. Her words hold more power than the names: "She just
sat there and told and when she was through she hushed. She
had been through for some time before the judge and the lawyer
and the rest seemed to know it" (278). The jury comes to an
understanding of Janie through her own words, and so she is
freed.

Janie has been to the horizon and back (284), as she tells
Pheoby. Her return to Eatonville is not a defeat, as the watchers
on the porch interpret it to be. Instead, Janie returns full of new
knowledge and power, able to rename her surroundings because
she has unnamed herself. She tells Pheoby, " 'Dis house ain't so
absent of things lak it used tuh be befoc Tea Cake come along.
It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom' " (284). Janie trans-
forms her experiences with renaming: Tea Cake becomes the
"son of Evening Sun" (281), and the lamp in Janie's hand is a
"spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire" (285). Janie Craw-
ford Killicks Starks Woods has survived a succession of marital
and other identities, and at the end of the novel, empowered to
tell her own story, she has become a sort of goddess who pulls
"in her horizon like a great fish-net" (Gilbert and Gubar 238-39).
Janie's last act is an invocation of her self: "She called in her soul to come and see" (286). Janie is the final one who names in Hurston's novel, and with her call to herself, Janie becomes a model of powerful self-identification for later Afro-American women writers.

Works Cited


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