The Lifeforce of Women: The Uses of the Erotic in Black Women's Literature & Art

By

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Introduction

Audre Lorde's work as an activist, writer, and warrior for freedom inspires me to think about the women who have, as Zora Neale Hurston writes, "throw(n) up a highway through de wilderness" (Hurston 16). I am intrigued by the connection of freedom and survival for black women in those linkages and how this kinship is reliant on the reclamation of power, pleasure, and creativity as articulated through Lorde's 1979 theory on erotic liberation. Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston's written works teach us to seek alternative liberatory practices for their characters and ourselves. My project is a broad examination of Hurston and Morrison's depictions of femininity and liberation in their novels as informed by Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

Lorde's essay legitimizes this attention to "the erotic" as a powerful tool of interpretation and information that we have long been taught to suppress. For Lorde, the erotic is the capacity for *feeling,* it demands an in-depth exploration of one's creative and political "lifeforce." In her essay, Lorde names how patriarchy works to "devalue" women's inner and public lives. Lorde argues against the erasure and misconstrual of "non-rational knowledge" for its use holds an abundance of information about the truths that lies within ourselves, which is similar to the way physical movement through dance has revealed itself to provide abundance to my own lifeforce. I recognize the unique approaches writers and performers alike take to establish freedom informed by the artistry of creative energy. Despite the cultural and political challenges put in place to stagnate and prohibit their movement, black artists, particularly women, found ways of actualizing their desires. These desires I speak of range in feeling, so I aim to explore the full

range of sensations and desires that assist in liberation. Just as black feminist scholar, Joan Morgan explains in her article *Why We Get Off: Moving Toward A Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure*, "My interest is in a capacious casting of the erotic that includes black women's variegated sexual and non-sexual engagements with deeply internal sites of power and pleasure —among them expressions of sex and sexuality that deliberately resists binaries" (Morgan 40). Morgan's reshaping of "Pleasure Politics," informed by the writers and theorists that came before her, argues for the recognition and importance of sexual engagements as equally significant to conversations on the role of feeling in liberation movements. My interest lies in Morgan's opposition to binaries: the gray space that resides between two points that enmeshes a multitude of feelings and ideas. It is there where I seek to uncover sources of liberation. In each of the texts I discuss, women affirm eroticism as a pathway for liberation through "sexual and non-sexual engagments," as Morgan states. They mirror that capacity for joy through all aspects of their lives.

I begin this project by thinking chronologically about black women's erotics. In one of Zora Neale Hurston's most popular novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937, she explores the depth of womanhood, self-fulfillment, and identity through her main character Janie Mae Crawford. The horizon she chases takes on many forms and continuously adjusts to match the individual approach of her experiences. As she matures throughout the course of the novel her desire to remain fixed on the authenticity rooted in her meaning of "the horizon" is unwavering. From the first lines we read of the novel the audience can sense this centered foundation she crafts for herself; the horizon is her guiding post.

Hurston begins the novel with a quote by the narrator that aids the reader in beginning to question our own tools and methods in the quest for individual truth. In Hurston's exploration, gender plays a role in this pursuit,

> "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon…his dreams mocked to death by time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget" (Hurston 1).

Here, the quest for truth by women is contrasted with the struggle for black women's autonomy and liberation against an overwhelmingly patriarchal state. In this passage, men's search for truth is fixed; every aspect of our society is crafted to uphold "the life of men" which is reflective of white cisgender heterosexual male power. This is the blueprint that black women must revise in order to survive. In Hurston's opening this makes the "dream," an essential tool of erotic life. The language of Hurston's last sentence fuses the space between dreams and reality. It requires deep dreaming and action to lead our lives with an authenticity that is affirming. Enduring both racial and gendered constraints, it is no wonder why Hurston has created a character like Janie who must discover self-revelation. Moving through the world with this level of assurance is dangerous for the class of women usually obligated to reject or deny their desires. To 'act and do things accordingly' is to frame our decisions most in accordance with the information it provides to all aspects of our lives. Chasing our own unique lens of truth demands a sincere knowledge of ourselves, it requires the attestation of our value, which becomes increasingly difficult to navigate in the aftermath of slavery and patriarchy. The path Hurston

introduces the reader to is the path of honesty, and if led intentionally, can liberate us and our experiences from self-abnegation. When we root ourselves into genuine and unfaltering foundations we can move effortlessly and resiliently under any disruptions, just as trees do. This exploration helps us look ahead to one of the most "erotic" scenes in the novel that I will examine in detail later: Hurston's infamous pear tree scene with Janie.

Chapter 1: Rootedness

In 1984, Toni Morrison published an essay entitled, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." This trope of 'rootedness' is felt across Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotics: The Erotics as Power." The connection to self Lorde desires her audience to work towards is the epitome of "root work" -- the act of working with the seed or core of our feelings. Lorde's work on eroticism founds itself on a deep ability to listen internally to our bodies and feelings. I argue the depth of engagement Lorde pushes towards in reference to our bodies and minds can be understood through our relationship to the natural world. Trees and plants possess a highly intricate and vast root-system that acts as a foundation and a system of communication. Their roots grow towards water. They actively pursue the necessary nutrients for their survival using a network that is beneath the surface. The natural world is thus significant to the conversation of the "erotics" as it demonstrates how deep internal connections can lead to ways of creating and

exploring the things that nourish and sustain us in our lives. Lorde erotics and her larger body of work argues for finding inspiration in the robust natural world.

Lorde's writing hints at society's condemnation of following our inner truths. She states, "Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light towards any understanding" (Lorde 56). Trusting the information of sensation driven from the erotics identifies what Toni Morrison in "Rootedness" describes as "discredited knowledge." Lorde discusses this distortion through a patriarchal lens to help us rethink those associations.

The concept of root work often refers to the process of planting and harvesting from the natural world to use in food, medicine and spiritual rituals. Recognizing the importance of nature to our livelihoods has always been practiced and understood by black and indigenous communities. I want to frame the idea of root work as deep internal listening necessary to guide our movement through the world and survival. Thus, root work done for ourselves and root work associated with the natural world nurture the depth of Lorde's knowledge of eroticism.

My aim in drawing upon the natural world through Lorde's work is to argue for its rightful place as an accredited knowledge for Hurston's protagonist: Janie Crawford. Scholars have argued that Janie's life and its connection to the erotics can be understood similar to how rootwork has functioned: "[...] people of color have always theorized–-but in forms quite

different from the Western form of abstract logic" (Christian 68). This is similar to Lorde's point about nonrational knowledge.

Janie understands the events of her life through the forces of nature. We see this also when Lorde encourages us to nurture the life force that arises to "personify(ing) creative power and harmony" (Lorde 55). Janie's story follows the depth of feelings Lorde speaks of. For example, listen to this beautifully illustrated moment under the shade of the pear tree. She recounts,

> "From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why?...The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation…The hold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace…So this was marriage! She has been summoned to behold a revelation" (Hurston 10-11).

Janie partakes in an eroticism that is depicted serenely and quite beautifully; it refuses the patriarchal lens of control and provides a precedent for the mutuality of the natural world. Her understanding of partnership is gauged by the sensitivities of the natural world, leaving her in search of intimacy in the real world that can be mirrored by the sweet visions that she has seen in

her backyard. Janie's pursuit for pleasure is not focused on outcome but on a journey that is led with intentionality and honesty.

Near the end of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the hurricane becomes an extremely significant point in understanding Janie's relationship to her environment. She finds peace in the ways it steers her life, whatever direction that may take. In the midst of working on the swamp in Florida with her boyfriend Tea Cake, there are many signals of a fast-approaching hurricane that could damage everything and everyone still working and living on the field. Janie seems unaffected by the severity and destruction it may bring, after hearing a huge burst of thunder and lightning, she says to Tea Cake "'Ah'm glad ya'll stop dat crab-shootin' even if it wasn't for money,' Janie said. 'Ole Massa is doin' *His* work now. Us oughta keep quiet.'" (Hurston 159). Janie seems meditative during a time of chaos. She urges Tea Cake to be mindful of the commotion that begins the hurricane because she admires the work of the natural world. Her understanding of the natural forces at play mirrors the strength and assurance Lorde carries in her theorization. It is a form of 'abstract logic' for Janie that Tea Cake does not fully understand. Eroticism is rooted in listening to ourselves: Janie and her connection to the storm serve as an embodiment of Lorde's approach to listening and guiding. Janie has a deeper knowledge of the fixed course nature retains and she knows not to disrupt its movement. She understands there is nothing more to do than to experience the wrath of its magic—to her it is magic she intends to trust.

Janie's assurance in weathering the beginnings of the storm makes Tea Cake nervous and frightful. Perhaps Tea Cake represents the patriarchal voice of so-called rational knowledge that Lorde and black feminist scholars form their critique against. He asks Janie if she is scared of the death that may come from the storm's wrath and if she regrets staying with him to endure it, to this she replies unabashedly,

> "Naw. We been tuhgether round two years, if you kin see de light as 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" (Hurston 159).

For Janie, the natural world is the law of land and humanity; it governs her life and to see all that it is capable of is to live the path of fulfillment. Hurston depicts Janie's unflinching strength so beautifully in this moment. Janie has put her complete and total trust into the hands of the natural world, and whatever may occur as a result of their choices, at least it honors her path towards liberation or "the horizon." This scene provides a unique lens of imagining Lorde's eroticism in action while emphasizing so perfectly the conviction with which Janie and other black women live their lives. Janie has consistently followed the path that prioritizes her desires in accordance with the natural world around her. She does so knowing generations of her lineage have not been afforded the same movement and privilege. Thus, she is more than happy to relinquish all of her power to the force of nature, trusting that her journey will honor those who have come before. The hurricane then is her spiritual source; Janie draws upon its "strength" to apply a knowledge

that ties her to Lorde's informative erotic capacity. Hence, Janie's desire to let nature steer her future is an avenue of liberation towards the erotics.

It is as a result of the powerful hurricane that has swept through the Everglades that Tea Cake loses his life, leaving Janie back on her own by Phoebe's side where she began the story. Hurston's implementation of the hurricane has restored Janie's freedom, taking Tea Cake along with it. Though Janie may not fully acknowledge Tea Cake's growing possessiveness over her, it is purposeful the natural disaster has taken Tea Cake and reestablished order in her life. Although Janie loves Tea Cake, the hurricane scene shows that not only must the force of the natural world be honored over man-made systems of control, but that Janie's path to liberation is hers alone. Like the women on the ships at the opening of the novel, whatever force the hurricane brings, it *is* purposeful. The unwavering acceptance Janie carries requires a profound rootedness and sensitivity to the natural world just as those characteristics are essential to Lorde's theory on the erotics. The root of our deepest cravings that Lorde's theory desires her readers to understand is explored through Janie's relationship to the harmony and chaos of the natural world. It is an intrinsically deep trust that is erotic even when it is not sexual.

The horizon captivates Hurston's protagonist, Janie; she searches the horizon with such consistency that it acts as one of the novel's primary metaphors for the path to liberation. Following a source of power that is self-affirming and creative is to live with a deeper sense of knowledge. This act of imagination and creation is critical to Janie's pursuit of truth but also to Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" published nearly forty years later.

Artistry is inherent to the women that embody and mirror Lorde's "erotics." The freedom to create and affirm their own process of naming and storytelling is necessary to their survival and it serves as their primary mode of conceptualization. Janie's centering of the horizon signals her artistry and creativity in seeking out new paths for liberation. As she embraces her own physical and emotional mobility, she defines herself against confining models of domesticity. This kind of movement is important in Lorde's work too. In the introduction of Lorde's non-fiction work, *Sister Outsider,* Nancy Bereano writes "Movement is intentional and life-sustaining" (Bereano 11). The responsibility and creativity accomplished through movement are pertinent to Lorde's erotics. Both Hurston and Morrison write characters that mimic its sensations in their lives for affirmation. Like Janie's horizon, Lorde tells us that, "…[the erotic] is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (Lorde 54). Lorde's language in this explanation supports the significance of movement towards routes of eroticism; it is a life-long pursuit that provides meaning and survival in the face of erasure. If we follow this path, our life endeavors can prioritize movement as a physical and emotional "lifeforce of women." The "erotics" is never then appeased by one action, it is an all-encompassing journey, whose trajectory, sensations, and revelations demand presence and drive.

To fully understand the need for Lorde's theory on the erotics we must first recognize the role of the patriarchal hegemony in place. I quickly use another one of Lorde's essays, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" to help analyze the invariable structures in place granting the important formation of erotics. Here, Lorde lays the groundwork for a theory that explains the instruments or pathways of liberation cannot be the same tools that have upheld the current foundations of gender and racial superiority. Through community

engagement and a recognition of differences, it is possible to dismantle these structures. Replicating the identical tools of violence and domination will not work to obliterate these powers in place. This essay is essentially Lorde's theorization of the erotics working in tandem with her other works. Observing and writing an idea centered around the sensation of eroticism is a tool Lorde wields to gain control of herself and fellow women. The sexually explicit connotation denoted by the word "eroticism" becomes a tool of empowerment for Lorde because her works harness the stigmatization which accompanies it to create an expansive theory of feminine and creative energies.

The house Lorde seeks to overthrow is hegemonic. It consists of patriarchal methods of control and domination. Its forces have and continue to perversely enter our consciousness and steer our pursuits in contemporary life; it is a dominating mindset, even for those who do not share proximity to it, because it seems to be the only life force that we have seen materially successful. That being said, Jodie and his Eatonville home become a perfect manifestation of such a pervasive and corrosive ideology, resulting in Janie's eventual and necessary rejection of those frameworks. I analyze Janie's later departure from his control (a.k.a the "Masters" house) as an act of creative and political force. Pursuing "the erotic" or the horizon is not possible in such an environment.

In the novel we quickly learn that Jodie has ultimately colonized the small town of Eatonville with Janie at his side, (a perfect illustration of an instrument utilized by the master), and named himself the mayor. It is obvious his desires align with, and replicate, colonial rule. Hurston has shown the unconscious effects of white imperialism through Jodie's character's desires; it has seeped its way so far into our consciousness that it may be easy to misinterpret Jodie's idolization of the patriarchal state and material wealth as a sign of independence. Hurston

shows us that this interpretation is illusory. He intends to wield control over others via his proximity to white patriarchal power and to build a life most in accordance with the wealth and security associated with "the master's house." However, his demand for achieving material surplus will not grant him the security and mobility that he thinks it will. Ultimately it will not bring him true freedom because it is a duplicate of a terrifying structure of power. Like Tea Cake after him, his death becomes a metaphor for the effects of chasing that illusion. In the meantime, under his direction, the house grows to ambitious proportions. It is described as having,

> "Two stories with porches, with banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'. And look at the way he painted it - a gloaty sparkly white… No sooner was he all set as the Mayor- post master- landlord-storekeeper, than he bought a desk like Mr. Hill…" (Hurston 47)

The home he assembles deliberately shares an uncanny resemblance to the coveted house that ruled over the lives of enslaved people for centuries. It reflects even the identical "gloaty sparkly white" color. Even the language of self-assertion he assumes towards the town emphasizes his desire to embrace all of the roles of power and policing in the town. Jodie's path to success is clearly modeled on a patriarchal assertion of domination. Jodie desires the physical markers of power such as the house, the desk, the 'swing-around chairs,' the cigars, the 'gold-looking vase' used as a spittoon etc., because they all symbolize material assets which connote social climbing and presumed safety from white supremacy. This passage illustrates that Jodie, like many black men, assume that if they achieve the material safety of white patriarchy they will somehow transcend the racist ideals embedded into society and become welcome co-rulers.

Thus, the house he has built is a replica of white power. It alienates him from the rest of the town in the same way that the master's house during slavery is meant to create division between black people on antebellum plantations. Jodie upholds the gendered hierarchy of patriarchal power while Janie resists it. She dislikes being alienated from the townsfolk: "She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit" (Hurston 46). Nor is she amused by Jodie's idolization of the very same tools used to confine her in the house. Janie hates the grandiose home and its wealth. She comes to despise how Jodie hides behind the ruse of power. This ruse parallels the plantation power used to solidify white supremacy and Janie recognizes that it is the same one that Jodie uses to diminish her existence and autonomy,

> "'Ah told you in de very first beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be a big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you.' A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely" (Hurston 46).

Although the master's house is a site of domination for Janie, for Jodie it offers the potential for safety and mobility. Janie is aware Jodie yearns for material possessions only because of the opportunities for safety it seems to promise. In the novel, economic security is the central concern for many black characters including Janie's grandmother, Nanny. The legacy of slavery in the novel through Nanny and Jodie's desire for security emphasizes the desirability of money and property as a means of power for black characters. These class aspirations may signal mobility, but it is shown to be ultimately limiting, especially for black women who have already experienced scarcity or security. Janie is conscious of how satisfying and confining patriarchal "houses" can be. Where Jodie can only imagine a future from within the master's house, Janie's only future lies beyond it. It therefore becomes Janie's responsibility to separate herself from his

distortions of power and his definitions of domesticity. Janie refuses what Lorde will also refuse. Neither care to "operate under an exclusively European-American male tradition" (Lorde 59).

This refusal to live and love under the control of the state also informs the characters of Toni Morrison's 1991 novel, *Jazz.* I turn our attention towards the significance of Wild's home in Morrison's *Jazz* as it directly rejects all of the notions associated and depicted by Jodie's imperialistic house. Wild's home supports the tools and methods exercised by the Lorde's erotics.

Black women have consistently sought out survival methods that push outside the bounds of propriety and "tradition" to create anew. This happens in defense of the patriarchal state which has defined femininity narrowly for women and has governed the way we must act and carry ourselves through the world. Morrison's character Wild rejects these designated restrictions and implements a sovereignty of her own, still allowing her to explore and re-define a "creative lifeforce" for herself.

In Morrison's novel, "Wild" is a female character that lives in and roams the woods. She claims an independence that is misconstrued and redefined by characters of the novel. The third-person narration of *Jazz* does not allow the reader to build an unbiased image of Wild. Our perception of her is skewed by the lens through which the narrator speaks. This method used by Morrison is significant. It demonstrates what I will later describe as "misnaming," and what Lorde and others have shown is a form of violence or distortion instituted by a patriarchal lens that is used against black women. The construction of Wild's character that the audience receives is proven to be unreliable. This is why I intend to understand her existence and choices apart

from the male lens of power and through a new framework of liberatory practices learned from Lorde's eroticism.

In this novel, Wild's son, Joe, is adamantly looking for his mother after years of separation from her. He desires to know what kind of woman she is, though we quickly realize his search is not to truthfully acknowledge her experiences but merely to question her motives as a way of coping with his abandonment. In Joe's perspective, the woman called "Wild," did not fulfill her role of motherhood to him properly. He believes stories that characters tell him that support this thesis and assumes that she lives an uncivilized life without a house. It is eventually understood by Joe she has in fact fashioned herself a home in the privacy of a formation of rocks in the woods. Joe's confusion is an important scene for contrasting "the master's house" to Lorde's erotics. He is utterly confused by the natural burrow he discovers that acts as her site of home, with the normalcy of objects that lay within it, and the arduous route of discovery involved in reaching it. The following scene recounts his interiority in the route and discovery of this space:

> "[...] to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on. The slopes and low hills that fell gently toward the river only appeared welcoming; underneath the vines, carpet grass, wild grape, hibiscus and wood sorrel, the ground was as porous as siev. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self…He had come through a few body-lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. Going nowhere…He had seen what there was. A green dress. A rocking chair without an arm. A circle of stone for cooking. Jars, baskets, pots; a doll, a spindle, earrings, a photograph, a stack of sticks, a set of silver brushes…" (Morrison 184)

The language insinuates the amazement at the life his mother, the one who seemingly abandoned the responsibilities of motherhood, has created for herself. He is unable to imagine the culmination of her life could appear so peaceful, organized, and domestic because she refused to submit to the societal norms of mothering. His confusion mirrors patriarchal society's own limited conceptualization of motherhood and "wildness." Though an orphan, Joe's masculine privilege is obvious in his distorted view of womanhood. It is nearly impossible for him to locate the depth of her 'hidden' cavern and his patriarchal views make it impossible for him to find Wild's home with ease and to interpret the objects within. He cannot imagine that Wild could create and maintain a space for herself (a home) that exhibited familiar modes of living in an unexpected, natural, space. Joe's ignorance epitomizes the neglect this perspective relies upon. He cannot see her as possessing a full subjectivity and cannot place the broader significance of her home as a safe haven.

Wild disrupts and dismantles the notions of femininity generated by the surveillance state by carving a home for herself in the wilderness, an atmosphere that is both seen often as the territory of men (for hunting) and animals, while expressing her preference for privacy, creativity and sexual intimacy. This creation of this space is a haven of survival and an act of creation and choice; it is within nature that she has transfigured her form of survival into serenity–- the natural world aids her existence through and against a suffocating patriarchal state. Morrison utilizes Lorde's concept to have her character reimagine a house that is literally outside the hegemonic structure of violence, distancing her character's proximity to the master's house and gaze. Wild's act of creating a support system for herself that eludes the eyes of the world is necessary to adequately embody her truest form. Every facet of herself is upheld by the intimacy of the home

in the wild that she alone is obligated to create for herself. In this way, she maintains a space to support her innate desires.

Chapter 2: Misnaming

In "Uses of the Erotic" Audre Lorde describes misnaming as a strategy of patriarchal violence and control. This misnaming occurs through the mass misuse and deployment of language. Lorde writes, "The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation" (Lorde 54). The tool of misnaming is also utilized by the state, instilled in communities, and is meant to direct a threatening or erasing gaze towards those who choose to pursue alternate paths of freedom. As a counterargument, the erotic functions as a scale of feeling and power that challenges those who seek to vilify the freedom of black women. Men's opportunity of governance over the lives of women is displaced if they choose to value the functions of the erotics; they become irrelevant to our conversation. Misnaming is employed, on their behalf, to retain control over women's choices. This strategy is clearly implemented by male characters in both *Jazz* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to dismiss the substantiated erotic power women have discovered through themselves that is necessarily outside of patriarchal control.

Upon their first bizarre meeting in the woods, Golden Grey's narrative section–a character from *Jazz*–who pursues "Wild"--reveals the patriarchal lens dictating Wild's representation. Grey's section represents the dehumanizing effects of racial and gender superiority as a set of internalized ideas brought upon by the patriarchal governing state. As he travels through the woods to meet his father, Wild and Grey see each other, each presence

alarming the other, and as she flees his company, she mistakenly knocks her head into a tree and falls violently back from the impact onto the ground. Wild, a nude black woman walking through the woods, is a startling image for Grey to comprehend. His thoughts, as disclosed by the first-person narrator of the novel insinuate, he has trouble understanding her presence. A patriarchal lens does not allow him to fathom a black woman in the wild. He first sees Wild as a "vision" and unapologetically dismisses her: "He wants nothing to do with what he has seen-- in fact he is certain that what he is running from is not a real woman but a 'vision'" (Morrison 144). Grey cannot fathom the reality of a free black woman choosing to move deliberately through the woods. It is quite evident Grey's intentional blindness in this moment indicates his distrust towards the legitimacy of her existence and it perpetuates the violent tools of erasure Lorde advises against. Although ignorance or selfishness in this capacity is not inherently violent, we must conceptualize the underlying meaning of this interaction within a larger scale and understand its connotations through the lens of the racialized society we inhabit. Grey's language and dismissiveness reproduces the dehumanization of an autonomous black woman during a period just after the Civil War in the South. Historically and contemporarily, such dehumanization–linguistically or symbolically–has resulted in death and abuse. In addition, we see how the patriarchal gaze uses sight in determining legitimacy, therefore his first reaction to deny the "vision," perpetuates violent tools utilized by the racist state. Wild's body falls outside the patriarchal parameters of identifiable visions because it falls at the farthest end of the spectrum in relation to whiteness, resulting in Grey's intolerable reaction towards her. Furthermore, when looking at Wild's fallen body next to the horse he has stationed aside, he reveals how these interpretive strategies link Wild to something inhuman or subhuman: "When he picks up the reins he cannot help but noticing that his horse is also black, naked and shiny wet

and his feelings about the horse are of security and affection… [and] the nausea the woman provoked" (Morrison 144). The comparison he draws between the 'black, naked and shiny wet' horse to Wild provides evidence of Grey's (mis)understanding of her. The negative internalized associations of blackness and nudity overwhelm his consciousness and it prompts an extreme instinctual human response of repulsion. Apparently, Grey's feelings remain more compassionate for his horse than the woman lying unconscious on the ground.

These associations and distortions are both violent and harmful, as it continues the rhetoric of the "wild black woman" trope and works to dehumanize even the presence of her unconscious body in space, much less its functionality and choices. His perception of her falls even below that of an animal. In most cases the denigrative language employed by male characters to correlate black women and animals operates to equalize their minimal value as we have seen in Hurston's reference of "the black woman is the mule of the world," yet Grey replaced even that rhetoric and placed Wild further beneath the category of a four-legged creature. Wild, to Grey's understanding, is "'considered not good enough to be objectified'" as argued by Siobhan Brooks (Nash 512). Brooks' work is cited in Jennifer Nash's *Theorizing Pleasure: New Directions in Black Feminist Studies.* I use this anecdote to note Grey's deeply problematic thought process. Wild does not resemble to him a body that is worth desire, it is not "good enough," appealing enough, "clean" enough etc., for his feelings of desire to arise. Grey exhibits the extremely racist and offensive language that refuses to recognize Wild's humanity.

When Grey asserts his dominion in classifying her body as a new and more grotesque species, he has purposefully misnamed and devalued her body as a mode of disqualifying her femininity and value. Her body is threatening and repelling to him so he proceeds to examine her

state in equally negative ways. He ultimately decides to take her with him on his journey to his destination, not to provide care for her, but instead to try to manage his conscience.

Further assuring himself of his "vision," he investigates her body at length amongst the weeds that fill the wooden terrain, noticing

> "She is still sprawled there. Her mouth and legs open. He leans down, holding his breath against infection or odor or something. Something that might touch or penetrate him" (Morrison 144).

Upon taking in the image of her body the language of dirtiness is embedded into his descriptions, he recounts her body as one that is "open," and hence alludes to her presumed sexual promiscuity or availability. He even defines her odor as dangerous although he claims is holding his breath. Grey's lens highlights how depictions of "wildness" are often presumed to be in contrast to those who can qualify as exhibiting "femininity." Historically, black women have frequently been excluded from this category of the feminine.

From our perspective Wild has just fallen from an abrupt and serious head injury, her mouth and legs appearing spread are not instances for judgment or characterization. At the same time that Grey is seemingly disgusted, his observations of her also suggest her sexualization. Being "open" also seems to suggest a tantalizing image of her body as available. In these interpretations, both Grey and the narrator are unreliable sources wherefore they work together to construct a narrative of a woman whose true name we never get to learn. Instead, the body and the name "Wild," become entrenched with the vilifying language that a racist male world has violently crafted. Wild's apparently outspread body both transfixes and repels Grey's mind and is upheld by the narrator's language since they bear the responsibility of expressing his internal

monologue. Morrison utilizes their conceptualized notion of her body to mirror the misnaming black women are frequently subjected to, even while lying unconscious.

The language of possession is also tied to the colonialist tool of misnaming. When possessive control or greed takes priority there is no regard for the true construction of events or the people whose power has been limited by their command. In both Hurston and Morrison's novels, a critique of the colonial lens is evident. In *Jazz,* the colonial lens is present and Morrison shows how its influence has plagued the seemingly omniscient narrator and in turn the characters they describe. It is the legacy that, if not dismantled, continues to pervade our readings and actions. It is then easier to understand Grey and Joe's desire to name and lay claim to her body and narrative thereafter. Both stem from an outgrowth of the violent ownership and repossession of human beings that forcibly formed our society and characterized American life. The narrator explicates Grey's handling of the woman…

> "He does not see himself touching her, but the picture he does imagine is himself walking away from her a second time… He is uneasy with this picture of himself, and does not want to spend any part of the time to come remembering having done that. Also there is something about where he has come from and why that encourages him an insistent, deliberate recklessness" (Morrison 145).

The savage tools of misnaming are tied to memory and action. They describe Grey's actions in handling Wild and bear the seeds of a supremacist patriarchal legacy. The tone of disgust he exhibits is an outgrowth of the misconstruction of value, or lack thereof, on dirtiness and blackness. Just as the language of this scene is essential to understanding Grey's attitude towards Wild, I am also extremely interested in the detailed colloquium utilized in the last sentence that

describes his origins and reasoning for keeping her. The phrase “where he has come from” immediately prompts me to think about the racial and class lineage Grey inhabits. Unbeknownst to him, his black and white ancestry is entwined with those who devised and maintained the institution of slavery and profited off of its exploitation. He not only internalized these views, he also benefited from the wealth it provides. The wording of his desire to act “reckless” because of “where he has come from and why” used in the last line prompts my reading of its doubled metaphorical meaning. I interpret his recklessness as connected to his ancestral misnaming and mishandling of power. It knowingly or unknowingly continues the legacy of domination and violence linked to his lineage. The roots of colonialism, imperialism, and violence are internalized by characters like Grey and Joe and are rooted in their consciousness. These ideas take precedence when determining their actions. Morrison highlights these distorting lenses to suggest that it takes awareness and work to abolish the engrained ideals of colonization in our minds.

Much like Grey, Joe utilizes language to misconstrue an image of Wild more suited to his perception of her. Joe’s depiction of his mother while out in the woods looking for traces of her are extremely callous and insensitive. For example, before ever meeting Wild he declares her

> “a simple-minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanest sow managed: nurse what she birthed…She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere” (Morrison 179).

Wild’s choices to chase her internal measure of eroticism are clearly misunderstood by Joe. He thinks she has crafted a home for herself in the woods simply because she does not care to “beg for a livin’,” his conclusion is completely void of the complex reasons she chooses to be out of

sight. Joe's ruthless language of Wild displays his limited capacity (like Grey!) to see black women as subjects of their own making. He interprets mothering as an exclusive and all-encompassing role; he reduces the lifelong commitment of the task to a single word, "nurse," as if it is a simple imperative and not a choice. He utilizes the word to allude to the ease with which he dismisses Wild. He could not be more ignorant of the physical, moral, and creative demands of such a task. The act of mothering goes beyond any concise definition, it does not only require the physical labor necessary to care for a toddler. It is also other things: the moral obligation to ensure the livelihood of the child, the creative demands to fashion a life within the constraints society has upheld, the reliance upon community. In addition, to nurse signifies the act of breastfeeding and admittedly the action of doing so is not exclusive to those who give birth. The task is also difficult and draining for the mother. Providing a child with all the milk your body produces is to, metaphorically, provide them with all of your "life force." Lorde's re-use of that phrase helps us see mothering in a different lens. Sharing or giving one's "lifeforce" can be accomplished in other ways besides what is limited to biology. We also see too that it is not selfish of Wild to make her choice to mother differently, it is self-sufficient. Just as Grey does to Wild, Joe misconstrues her choices because they do not place him at the center of them; it is a world he cannot bear to imagine. Wild abandons Joe to pursue a version of freedom that did not entail the traditional responsibilities of motherhood. It can be understood that he has trouble finding her because she has not chosen a readily identifiable path for motherhood, as it has been misused as a device of control implemented historically by plantation "masters" and others that keep women confined to the house and the child. He has been taught to criticize those who do not fall under patriarchal methodologies without attempting to comprehend their necessity in doing so.

In the novel, Wild hands off her child to a family named the Williams family after Joe is born and he is raised alongside their youngest son, Victory. They eventually become “chosen brothers” and best friends. If we think about this from a perspective that is not Joe’s, Wild leaves Joe in safe hands. Her decision to pass her child off to a family she entrusted is mistaken by her son as carelessness, but it is because she knows she must follow the pursuit of her sensations that she has chosen to give him a home more suited to traditional modes of upbringings. He has misread the meaning of her home in the woods, the choice to leave her child, and declared her “powerless, and invisible” because he believes that she desires visibility and power. The opposite is true. It is important to note that Wild does not aspire to be visible. She is already powerful, capable, and visible to herself and those willing to truly see her. Despite this, she continues to be misunderstood by the dangerous legacies of the patriarchy and it is no wonder she seeks comfort elsewhere to avoid their watchful scrutiny. Wild and her actions function as a manifestation of the tools that will dismantle the master’s house, securing her own respite away from those mechanisms who assist in maintaining supremacist values.

Violet, another character from *Jazz,* although similar to Wild, does not get to participate in the liberation of invisibility. Actually, Violet is regularly at the center of public attention and is scrutinized by her community, many of whom carry on the dangers of the patriarchal lens. As Joe’s wife, Violet’s motives in slashing Dorcas’ face at the funeral becomes relevant to this conversation about the tactic of misnaming, executed by men meant to diminish and devalue women. Through Violet’s slashing of Dorcas, the young woman murdered by her husband, Morrison shows how misnaming and disfigurement are risks women face even in death. Unexpectedly, even women can take up the tools of domination and patriarchy to disfigure

others. Not only is such violence antithetical to Lorde's insistence on the erotics, but she explains how the erotics have been "made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic…" (Lorde 54). After Violet slashes the dead girl's face, Dorcas, at the funeral, she is nicknamed 'Violent' by members of the community. They continuously conflate her violent actions without investigating the motives that brought her to such a place. Joe has replaced Violet romantically with his affair with Dorcas, and she feels betrayed, but we notice how Joe's new love is even characterized as "one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy" (Morrison 3). It is no surprise that Violet desires to insert herself into their climactic and mercurial love affair; she longs for such feeling with her own husband since it has been replaced by Dorcas. Violet's desire for feeling shows her desperation for a pathway to liberation that mirrors Lorde's erotics. In her attempt to achieve this liberation, she misinterprets what actions will bring her closer to satisfaction. Whatever will get her to be a part of it will be done. She loves Joe with that same vigor he has for Dorcas. Even as a black woman, Violet's attempts to seize power by disfiguring another woman parallels our previous discussions of black characters who utilize patriarchal modes to secure safety and power for themselves. Moreover, Violet's actions in slashing Dorcas become the central act of characterizing how she in turn will be just as easily misnamed and disfigured by her community. Her acts will be read as an act of 'the psychotic' as Lorde states, rather than be seen compassionately. As a result, the community seeks to ostracize Violet. The questions they ask center less so around Joe's reasoning and punishment for killing Dorcas, and focus more on Violet's grounds for inflicting violence, after the fact. This patriarchal lens relieves responsibility for Joe and vilifies and scrutinizes Violet. It is another instance where misnaming acts as a tool monitored by the political state. Thus, even the community is

alternatively at fault for literally and figuratively misnaming Violet's psyche. She is reduced only to being "Violent" much like how "Wild" is reduced to the inhuman.

Despite this title, Violet's character is not depicted as violent. She does not appear to have the desire to engage in other acts of aggression. Alternatively, Joe, who has committed the ultimate act of violence (murder), never has to face the judgement of the legal system or the community. In this setup Morrison invites us to see the constraining treatment of these characters as necessary failures of interpretation. It becomes increasingly urgent that individual work must be done to recognize the control such misnaming practices have over our system of value. With this realization there can only be a transformation of the culture of danger and harm into a safe haven, when women can be free to redefine themselves and to harness the power of the erotic. Then, it becomes a space or a practice where women are given the encouragement to recognize their power and claim their own interpretive strategies.

At this moment, I now turn back to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to analyze Janie's relationship to this violent tool of misnaming in another context. In Hurston's novel, Janie takes an interest in the promise of language. I want to ask why. I believe Janie's focus of language stems from the misnaming she experiences as a child. Janie mentions this devastating experience early on. While recalling her story to Pheoeby, Janie says "'Dey all useter call me Alphabet `cause so many people had done named me different names'" (Hurston 9). Living amongst the white family her grandmother Nanny took care of, it was there she was nicknamed "Alphabet." An alphabet is a collection of letters, not a name. There is no regard for the significance of a name, not only because they name her something completely different but it is

also insinuated by the multitude of names she would receive that were still not her original name. In this scene Janie is called multiple different names: this strips her of her identity, autonomy and forces Janie to conform to "a spelling of her name"[1] that did not define her to their standards. By having to accept other people's names as her own, Janie does not get to participate in the act of affirming her own selfhood. This misnaming removes her identity. Our names allow us to reclaim our unique entry into the world and society. When it is stripped from us we fall under another person's idea of what we should be. It is another form of ownership or possession. In this scene we see how powerful misnaming is and how devastating it is for young black girls.

We have seen how Lorde's essay also explains that the erotics themselves have been misnamed. She describes that due to the powers in place by the state, the erotics has been misinterpreted into the pornographic, though they carry a stark differentiation. Pornography has been employed as a suppression tactic, resulting in women's bodies and sexual nature falling under the state's control, and made into a 'plasticized sensation'. It is a struggle for black women, and communities of color to confidently trust the measure of the erotics as an avenue of information due to its correlation with the pornographic, and if they do so it is oftentimes sorely misinterpreted. I am inclined to return to Janie's pear tree scene at this moment and the discoveries she details in the scene as a deeply intimate revelation that has been misread. Rather than focus on the scene's transformative value, many are quick to decontextualize the scene's sensual language and imagery:

> "From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why?...The rose of the world was breathing

[1] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

> out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation…The hold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace…So this was marriage! She has been summoned to behold a revelation" (Hurston 10-11).

Hurston utilizes erotic language in this passage that is misidentified by readers who interpret it as pornographic or explicit. Moreover, many interpret this scene primarily as a loss of innocence and chastity. This reading is far too limiting and is a mistake. It occurs because, as Lorde reminds us, our communities have been taught to discipline sexual encounters that fall outside the purview of a male gaze. If we revisit the passage carefully, we begin to understand how the erotic functions as a model for self-affirmation and reclamation. The lines, "It stirred her tremendously. How? Why?" depicts the weight of the inquiries she makes and the effects it takes on her mind and body. Additionally, it facilitates a correlation between two ideas for Janie, apparent when she states "It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that has struck her outside observation"; it acts as a site of information because it calls on 'vaguely felt matters' outside of this individual experience. This means that the scene, though erotic, is not superficially sexual. Lorde expands the definition of eroticism to encompass a journey of information and creativity that includes but is not limited to sexual experience, "...so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (Lorde 57). Furthermore, Lorde argues that eroticism and pornography do not share the same qualities. She states, "For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power

and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of power of the erotic… pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (Lorde 54). Thus, although many understand the language of Janie's revelation to be deeply sexual because it seemingly mirrors sex acts, Lorde invites us to re-read as a necessary act of reclamation that is deeply erotic.

Interpretations of the pear tree scene have also been understood to be representative of heterosexual marriage and mating exclusively but I believe these lenses are skewed. These readings mimic the internalized ideas that associate eroticism with an obsession with biological "productivity" and male-centered pleasure. However, I would like to gauge Janie's preoccupation with pear tree and the animals as a truly informative one that does not center the male gaze or patriarchal models of sex and pleasure. Instead as Janie observes the pear tree she understands her own interpretation of Lorde's erotics. Janie's realizations in watching the harmony of the natural world ensue reveals her alternative education. Instead of learning to value the man-made systems of love and control, Janie observes the natural world. The scene's eroticism appears in how she learns to understand the roots of creation and self-discovery. The passage leads her to deep contemplative questions and profound revelations of the self, as we see when she repeatedly asks herself when, how and why. When critics deem it erotic, which, in their narrow understanding is pornographic, they minimize and misname the significance of conceptualizing the eroticism as a lifeforce to inform our choices and ourselves.

Chapter 3: “Lifeforce”: Re-Claiming Black Women’s Creativity & Communion

Reading Lorde’s writings alongside Morrison’s depictions of Wild and Violet help us to observe the limitations of narrow definitions of femininity and ultimately teach us to look closely for places that articulate and celebrate black women who create and affirm themselves despite the hostile environment that “misnames” them. It is important to note that Lorde writes, “the principal horror of such system [profit-based society] is that it robs our work of the erotic value… such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or obligations for ourselves and those we love” (Lorde 55).

Femininity, as redefined by the women of these stories, has engaged the role of nature in acceptance with themselves and their range of feeling. Violet Trace, the woman whom Joe marries and migrates with to the City, is from early on in the novel originally connected to scenes of the rural south. After the death of her mother, her grandmother True Belle, sends Violet and her sisters to pick cotton crop in Palestine, where they heard there was an unexpected productive harvest. She was not very good at the work though she trailed with younger kids. Because of this she was assigned to second-picking: this placement saddened and humiliated her, almost leading her to decide she’d run away. She laid down one night farther than most, “under a handsome black walnut that grew at the edge of the woods bordering the acres of cotton” (Morrison 103). In the midst of being teased to tears because of her inability, the tree provided solace for her feelings; it shaded her wounded emotional conditions. In this scene, Morrison shows us what “rootedness” can offer.

For Violet, the tree provided consolation: it brought her a safe haven from the embarrassment she had endured. It also brings her closer to an attunement with her feelings (the

“erotics” and the possibility of claiming love, as it is under the tree that she claims to have fallen in love with Joe. From a young age, Violet trusted the tree to take care of her not because she knew what it would bring, but because it was a place she had chosen intentionally to connect with herself. She knew that if she led with intentionality and trust, just as the erotics require, there may be genuine change. After a man literally falls into her lap from the tree, she spends anytime she has with Joe, the man she will later marry. She uses that spontaneity and connection to move wherever that took her, and after moving in with a family of six and working at anything that kept her alongside him, she uncovers layers of her femininity and self that do not easily coincide with the ideal or traditional perceptions of womanhood:

> “It was there she became the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man. It was there where the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet grew shields no gloves or shoes could match” (Morrison 105).

Working in the field aided her discovery of what it meant to be feminine. She enjoyed the strength of the work and came to be as talented as the men were even while working in a patriarchal environment. There she received validation of her own strength or “lifeforce.” It is significant that Violet is able to accomplish this without the biological act of mothering. Though not a mother, she is able to birth herself.

This reading combines Lorde’s work on the erotic with Morrison’s essay and novel to celebrate the endeavors that help Violet (and other women/characters) reach satisfaction. Through the purpose she claimed from her work in the fields helping Joe, she became empowered by her own strength. She realized her capacity to enjoy her own skill. Violet has found the erotic value of her work and it has brought her a sense of fulfillment and pride. Most

importantly, Violet's power acknowledges her femininity even while she is "growing shields" on her hands and feet. Calluses are not typically read within the realm of femininity. To be callused from continuous and strenuous work outdoors is an act heavily associated with masculinity. Morrison has reimagined the definition and used it as a tool of empowerment, rejecting the trope of the unblemished docile housewife.

If we return again to Wild's mischaracterization, we can now look for the places in the narrative where Morrison allows us to see her agency and creativity. I am drawn to look at the journey to, and the contents of, Wild's home through Lorde's descriptions of feminine lifeforce. This is the same lens of femininity and creativity I have analyzed Violet's work with.

A more in depth look at the placement of materials in Wild's home invites re-interpretation. While Joe sees a series of objects that do not make sense to him. I look again and see Lorde's eroticism on display in Wild's home. Lorde's theory identifies the act of creation as a facet that lends itself to eroticism. Lorde argues there is a level of artistry that is needed to tap into the depth of the erotic feeling. She writes "so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (Lorde 57). Thus, creation is necessary to the intimacy of feeling and reclamation that defines black women's agency and survival. Wild's spindle, her stacks of sticks, her silver brushes all lend themselves to the portrait artist/maker. If creation is one of the primary sensations of the erotic experience, it follows that the significance of crafting objects or art is a manifestation of understanding our own unique capacity for reclamation and renaming.

In Wild's home, art objects are present. A spindle alludes to the act of sewing, wherein someone creates whole articles of clothing out of a single string. A stack of sticks, though less

obvious than a spindle at first glance, suggests the idea of a formation either for beautification or writing. Lastly the set of brushes implies the capacity for creating visual art. The placement of her home in company with these materials is another alternate example of artistry and eroticism at work. We should note too that Wild's home is hewn from hidden rock. She had to very deliberately examine the terrain of the woods, spot an opening, and craft a space that would serve her desires. The deliberation required to envision a sanctuary for herself suggests she is far more than "simple-minded." In fact, I would argue, it is here that we see Wild defining for herself what the act of creation is. She creates a futurity for herself that she had not seen or felt elsewhere.

Wild's recreation of a home juxtaposes that of Jodie's from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Wild's rock does not gleam and is not placed on top of cleared land. Alternatively, it is in the foundations of our earth in the midst of the naturally created levels, and it does not hold material objects meant to signal wealth. Instead, it preserves the truth of artistry. The tools of creation found in Wild's home are intimately her own and it speaks to the modes in which she explores eroticism whereas Jodie's home in Eatonville is merely an empty loveless imitation of master's house; there is no approach to it that renders his individuality. Wild has embodied the "deeply female and spiritual plane" of Lorde's erotics. She characterizes herself and her home and keeps it secluded from the oppressive and corrupt sources of power.

The analysis of language and symbols enables how we are able to understand the acts of creation necessary to these characters. Language too is a form of artistry exercised by these black female authors to investigate themselves and their characters. Thinking about Hurston's Janie at this moment, I regard that language and naming is quintessential to her; she is enamored by the possibilities it creates. Her movement throughout the novel is led by her insistence in following

those who bear the same affection for and sensitivity to language. Both Jodie and Tea Cake initially enthrall her because they represent the skill of storytelling. By the end of the novel, she comes to embody this skill herself and tells her stories to Pheobe.

For example, while with her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie meets Joe Starks, a seemingly interesting man with the ability to strew language together that encapsulates Janie's penchant for mobility and wandering. The narrator writes of his ability to attract her by commenting, "but he spoke of a far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (Hurston 29). Her attraction towards Jodie is led by his language of determination that illustrates a beautiful life for themselves. Her focus lies intently on his linguistic ability to provide a plethora of possibilities. This same promise of language Jodie has slowly dies as he becomes obsessed with material pursuits, which in turn, dominate his life. As a result, Janie distances herself more and more from him because his ideals don't align with hers. He does not maintain the intimacy of storytelling anymore, and so she follows someone else who does: Tea Cake.

Tea Cake's sudden entrance into Janie's life excites her beyond any proposition she has had beforehand because of the downfall of her previous relationships. The day he enters the store and they meet for the first time they talk a while and play a game of checkers, and instantly she feels herself "glowing inside" (Hurston 96). The comfortability she felt with him contributes to her feeling of familiarity upon initially seeing him; the way he holds language at the forefront of his being catches Janie's attention, it aligns with the ideals she has for herself. Even his name, Vergible Woods, connotes a tree. When he invites her on a walk home the night after meeting at her store, it becomes clear the ways she is able to imagine a romantic future with someone is through their ability to use language as storytellers. She thinks to herself "Seemed as if she had known him all her life. Look at how she had been able to talk with him right off!" (Hurston 99).

His aptitude in language and storytelling represents his ability to share the experience of the erotic that guides her, this is the exact connection of creation and language that enables the erotic. Lorde warns about how such connections can go wrong when writes "...when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in satisfying, rather than make connections with our similarities" (Lorde 59). Although Janie connects with Tea Cake, Lorde warns against exploitative control taking over.

The worth Janie places on language is significant to understanding her own role as a storyteller. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is rooted in the oral tradition of storytelling. It is a revival of written oral art, therefore we can begin to conceptualize Janie's positionality of creator in this form. Janie, through Hurston's composition, bears the responsibility of creating how we read and understand the novel, but it is not without help that she does this. Phoebe Watson is equally essential, her listening ears are the reason we are able to read the events of Janie's life. Without her presence there would be nothing to read. Janie's mode of creation is insistent upon Phoebe's role as listener. It is not without her by her side that she can make sense of the world. Lorde's essay supports the significance of this connection claiming "In order to be utilized, our erotic feeling must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need" (Lorde 58). The language Lorde utilizes in this reasoning emphasizes the role of sharing and listening. The act of divulging and sharing feelings is the act of the creator but a community is needed and created. Janie is exploring the capacity for eroticism not only through the movement that steers the novel forward, but more importantly on account of exercising the gift of language with Pheobe to recognize the validity of her feelings.

Janie had the chance to tell her story before coming back to town, but it does not take place until she feels safe to do so. During the disastrous storm that sweeps through Tea Cake and Janie's home, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog. He becomes delusional and extremely paranoid towards Janie and her absence from him; it seizes such a strong control over him he attempts to shoot Janie for treating him wrongly. Janie, beforehand, able to tell Tea Cake's actions were getting out of hand, had made sure the bullet chamber was empty. He repeatedly attempts to pull the trigger and she finally has no other choice than to shoot him. She is brought to the jail and put on trial that same day. While Janie does present to the courtroom the circumstances that led to her shooting Tea Cake she does not divulge her whole story. This leads her to the moment that she finally decides to do so as she does with Phoebe. She addresses the jury in an assured manner as the narrator describes her composure, "She didn't plead to anybody. She just sat there and told and when she was through she hushed" (Hurston 187). The courtroom, filled with countless white jurors and the same community that has turned against her, watches the actions of the courtroom. Janie shares only what she needed to divulge and nothing more. She did not care to plead for life as she knew the truth of the circumstances would reveal themselves. Her elocution of the events for her testimony are not sewn together through a narrative form then, rather it is with Phoebe's assistance the audience is able to read the novel and learn the story. In the midst of a jury who will judge her inaccurately for any choice and the black community that she feels "pelting her with dirty thoughts" (Lorde 185), it does not facilitate the solace needed for Janie's storytelling. Even on the possibility of death, Janie stands unwavering in the concise truth she delineates. She refuses to share her intimate creation of storytelling and language prioritization because as Lorde surmises so perfectly, "Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within" (Lorde 58). Janie need not expose all of herself to a

space that seeks to control and negate her experiences as well as people who have never invited her growth and support. It can then be understood why Janie says to Phoebe "Dat's just de same as me 'caue mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (Hurston 6) and refers to her friend as "kissin'-friends for twenty years" (Hurston 7). Phoebe helps aid Janie's language of creation. Her tongue is in her friend's mouth because she has given her the support and conditions necessary to disclose the events of her life. It is only with her presence she is able to disclose the depth of her story. The erotic implication of sexual acts such as kissing and her tongue being inside of Pheobe's mouth asserts the desire-filled connection Janie's language beholds. Our individual quests for freedom, though unique to our experiences, cannot live without those who participate in the act of intimate listening, for it is with their help we comprehend our growth and the chase toward the path of fulfillment.

Through a similar but alternate lens, I am interested in further analyzing the sexual implications Janie states towards Phoebe to introduce a queer reading of their partnership. In an article entitled "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing" Carla Kaplan discusses the importance of language to Janie's identity and offers support towards my argument of a queer romance between Janie and Phoebe, as informed by Lorde's erotics. Kaplan claims, "Telling her [Janie] story to Pheoby supplies the erotic fulfillment Janie misunderstands as 'marriage', and in this sense Pheoby, whose 'hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story,'Is the "bee" to Janie's 'blossom'" (Kaplan 116). Phoebe's significance lay not only in the catalyst for Janie's story-telling but alternately as a haven for queer intimacy. Lorde prioritizes the role of sharing as significant to the intimacy within the erotics explaining that "joy, whether physical, psychic, or intellectual forms a bridge between the sharers" (Lorde 56). Therefore I re-constitute the "bridge" Lorde recognizes through Phoebe and Janie's romantic relationship as a route of

eroticism for the both of them. Kaplan's quote imagines Phoebe as both listener and lover, recognizing the validity of queer readings and relationships, unlike the heteronormative majority in the United States.

Scholar Joan Morgan argues that the historical role of our country has been in service to erasing queer subjects even within some black feminist discourse,

> "Finally, it acknowledge[d] that the hegemonic narrative of black female sexuality which dominates black feminist thought in the United States not only erases queer and transgender subjects but also ignores black multi-ethnicity and the diverse cultural influences currently operating in the world US black women occupy" (Morgan 39).

The "Pleasure Politics" Morgan reimagines in her essay seeks to reveal and acknowledge the role of erasure in depicting black women's sexuality. As we have seen with Janie and Violet, it is possible for these acts of disfigurement and misnaming to take place from within the community. In such cases, the hegemonic force can overwhelm even those who share similar sexual, racial, or class positions.

Morgan claims U.S. ideology has promoted a heteronormative understanding and consequently resulted in erasure within black feminist circles. This ideology has resulted in its communities conceptualizing female partnerships solely through the scale of friendships. Because black feminist thought has read sexuality primarily through a heteronormative lens it has not made space for actualizing the potential for romantic and intimate partnerships between women. This has worked to further delegitimize queer existence. I do not imply that Hurston has consciously taken on black feminist thought and assisted in erasing Janie's lesbian visibility, but I urge the audience to recognize Janie and Phoebe's partnership was not given the same depth

and attention as Logan, Jodie, and Tea Cake's. It can be understood that Hurston has both continued the invisibility tactics Morgan speaks of while simultaneously alluding to it through Janie and Phoebe's status as "kissing-friends." In this way, queer intimacy is another way of expressing the "lifeforce of women."

Chapter 4: Imagining Full Liberation: Hurston, Morrison & Lorde

While striving to survive under the patriarchal state it is vital that these women do not leave any aspect of themselves unturned; they engage with every facet of their desires, even the most taboo and learn to wrench themselves from its grasp. Rooting themselves in the discovery of their truest self and unearthing the parts that are not allowed that same light, provides a deeper understanding of how to navigate the world around them. Morrison's essay "Rootedness" examines the relationship black authors/artists share with their community, reflecting on the foundations they have built to inform the work of present-day artists. The concepts of this essay echo throughout Morrison's own novel and are similarly displayed in Hurston's novel. Though Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* chronologically appeared before Morrison's essay, it unveils their reliance on each other. It encourages readers to study and analyze their works together in hopes of rooting their conceptualizations in former theories while providing new insight from modern ones.

Morrison's essay is entrenched in the acknowledgement of lineage as a vital life-line for constructing new narratives. In both novels, Hurston and Morrison have conceived characters that rely on ancestral ideologies. "And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, intrusive, and protective,

and they provide a certain kind of wisdom… the deliberate effort, on the part of the artist, to get visceral, emotional response as well as an intellectual response as he or she communicates with the audience" (Morrison 62) Morrison explains. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Nanny, Janie's grandmother, is the actualization of that commitment in Hurston's novel; her wisdom roots us into recognizing the value of safety for Janie that is likely misunderstood by younger generations. She is the 'intrusive and benevolent' figure that provides the tools for deciphering the closest route to freedom that she has experienced and withstood. This same dynamic is found in *Jazz* between Henry LesTroy and Joe Trace. In the midst of tirelessly searching for traces of his mother, nobody tells Joe that his mother was the known and misunderstood "Wild." Joe's best friend, Victory, joins him for dinner in Henry's cabin and as they share conversation the subject of Wild comes up, it elicits banter and speculation on Joe and Victory's behalf, questioning what it would take to kill the wild woman. Henry frequently vouches for her admitting, "'She got reasons. Even if she crazy. Crazy people got reasons' 'Now learn this: she ain't prey. You got to know the difference' 'You know, that woman is *somebody*'s mother and *somebody* aught to take care of her'" (Morrison 175). Henry is another manifestation of Morrison's conceptualization of 'rootedness'; he is a reminder to Joe and Victory, two younger men, that Wild is incontestably deserving of respect and consideration despite her decision to reject the usual forms of femininity and motherhood. Henry is protective of Wild's reputation, urging them both to concurrently understand her motives and value her humanness, this relative to Joe specifically. Henry is the ancestral character that presents an alternative male voice of wisdom. Through Henry, other male characters learn that what they perceive as wildness are actions that are essential to her livelihood and survival.

With Hurston, Nanny is an ancestor as well. Although Nanny's lens of survival relies on the hegemonic conflation of gender subordination and material security that Jodi upholds, she does offer Janie a model for appreciating survival in a hostile environment. After seeing Janie kiss a boy over their gate that enclosed the house, Nanny furiously calls her inside to finally disclose to her that she has found a man, Logan Killicks, with acres of land and a comfortable home, who has agreed to marry her. Janie is stunned at her grandmother's urge to suit her, extremely reluctant to engage in any partnership that does not fit her romanticized version of love. Nanny's offer that is eventually pushed upon her kin takes heavy influence from Morrison's writing. To be single is to be defiant, wild, and unfeminine - leaving her more susceptible to society's violence; Janie cannot realize this yet but it is Nanny's form of love that assists Janie in glimpsing at older forms of knowledge that will afford her safety and survival. Though Janie is defiant against Nanny's ideal, at some level she is aware of the protection it secures. Nonetheless, autonomy is not meant to be explored under a controlled surveillance state; it is a dangerous goal for those who have been relegated to the bottom tier of society. It does not rely on proximity to the patriarchy, it is governed by individual will, further diminishing the authority it presides over.

Although Wild and Janie are an illustration of complete autonomy, Morrison's writing in "Rootedness" admits their survival cannot be sufficient on its own. She states, "I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (Morrison 64). Without the 'glue' or context that our ancestors provide, an artist cannot create a maintainable and comprehensive character or story. The character's endurance is rooted in their ability to re-imagine themselves in and with community over and over again. Learning through ancestors allows them to govern a life that is cognizant of their own survival while maximizing the pleasure of their unique discoveries.

Conclusion

This project concludes by arguing that the lifeforce of women can be seen even in the lives of women who do not appear to be traditional artists. Janie, “Wild,” Violet, and the other black femmes that appear in the project do not all bear the title of “artist” or “dancer” but Lorde instructs us that creation is central to their survival. Morrison’s novel *Jazz* calls on Lorde’s work, which then creates new readings of Janie’s character in Hurston’s novel. In turn, Lorde’s essay builds from Hurston and provides a *“uses of the erotic”* that is pragmatic and useful for contemporary movement enthusiasts.

My fixation on freedom comes not only from my adoration of language and the writers that have transformed its meaning, it has also taken shape in my own approaches to movement in dance performance. As a movement enthusiast, a practitioner of embodiment, or more simply said, a dance major, I work tirelessly with the instrument of my body to express concepts and ideas through choreography and improvisation. Dance is a performative art language intent on listening for the spaces of expression that cannot be encapsulated only by words. Through Audre Lorde’s essay and black women’s literature, I could study the language of freedom by those who felt most excluded from it. So, I found that the “erotics” could describe movement qualities that express sensations of black women’s creative autonomy. I could explore sensuality, “wildness,” sexuality, romance, creativity, and control. These ideas appear also as central themes in Hurston and Morrison’s depictions of black womanhood. As a dancer and a reader, freedom demands a rooted truth in ourselves and the malleability of following those desires. I claim connections to a

performative language that enables me to find a foundation in the codified techniques I study, while also finding my individual voice within it. In other words, my capacity for movement is the physical embodiment of Lorde's theorization.

For example, in my senior dance showcase, I choreographed a group of eight dancers. The piece was entitled "will the route be sweet or sticky? gracious or relentless? All of the above." In the piece, I focused on creating routes to freedom through duets, solos, and group work. I chose to have my dancers begin and end the piece by writing/drawing something of their choice on the floor and the back wall of the stage. It became a motif that mirrored the intimacy and individuality of Lorde's erotics; they were able to collectively participate in the act of creation central to Lorde's theory while exploring their individual quest of freedom within a vocabulary of movement. Surprisingly, the inclusion of text into the second section of my piece became the most difficult; I worked to encapsulate both the communal and individual quest for freedom with a duet and small group on stage. At the same time, the text they vocalized focused on the bodily sensations the erotics could mirror and the expanse of the natural world the quest itself mimics. Additionally, I asked them to count from the number 1 through 8 repeatedly, at both the beginning and end of the piece to resemble the circular narrative that could coexist even if the audience were not present. The use of this structural device aided in creating a clear pacing that depicted the gracious yet determined relentlessness required in the pursuit of freedom. Both Morrison and Hurston use similar devices that play with pacing, revelation, and audience in their novels. In both the writings and in my choreography, such pacing required an awareness and deep presence by the performers to listen not only to each other but to the core ideas of the work. In this project, I have shown how Hurston, Morrison, and Lorde re-create this interpersonal

communal space as an expression of “rootedness.” In all, the pieces I study and create serve to interpret movement as a route towards freedom, and in turn it revealed the necessity of movement to understand Lorde’s capacity for eroticism and joy.

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