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# Black Dreams: Sight and Sound in African American Life Stories

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**Black Dreams: Sight and Sound in African American Life Stories**

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Director: Dr. Daylanne English

An Honors Thesis Presented to the Macalester College English Department  
April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016

## **Abstract**

This project examines the work of Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Langston Hughes, in conjunction with the work of literary and psychoanalytic theorists including Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, and Laura Mulvey. Beginning with Benjamin Franklin's conception of the "American Dream" as emphasizing a linear, progressive understanding of time and space, I argue that Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes all reshape this narrative of upward mobility to include the experiences of marginalized communities. By analyzing how each author used multiple genres, including autobiography, parody, song, and poetry, to form a single narrative, I contend that these life stories reveal the failure of conventional literary forms to fully convey African American experiences. While philosophers such as Bakhtin, Lacan, and Mulvey offer compatible theoretical frameworks for my analysis, a reading of black American authors also discloses the limitations of these theories as regards the lived experience of marginalized communities.

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## Introduction

Benjamin Franklin begins *Autobiography* with what appears on the surface to be an open invitation: “I should have no Objection to a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginning, only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first” (2). Tracing his rise from printing apprentice to renowned statesman, Franklin suggests that by following his example, readers could craft for themselves similar narratives of upward mobility.

This study focuses on how Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Langston Hughes created their own alternative editions of the “American Dream.” These editions, however, complicate Franklin’s implicit assumption that all individuals contain the potential for self-determination. Either explicitly or indirectly, Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes all work to reshape the narrative of the “American Dream” in an effort to incorporate the experience of marginalized communities into the quintessential success story. The resulting narratives each bring together several genres, including autobiography, song, parody, and poetry, in order to depict a more complete vision of the self. The authors’ use of multiple genres to express a singular narrative therefore uncovers the failure of conventional literary forms in fully conveying African American experiences. Read together, the work of Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes all suggest that individuals interpret the “American Dream” differently depending on race, class, and gender.

In order to better interpret the writing of these authors, I will likewise employ multiple methodologies as a means to analyze the nuances of each representation of the “American Dream.” Biography will offer one way to ground Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes’s work in the specific circumstances of their experiences. Douglass wrote his

autobiographies during the Antebellum and Reconstructionist eras, almost one hundred years before the other three authors joined the Harlem Renaissance's literary scene. As such, this biographical approach will be particularly helpful in revealing how Douglass' experience as a slave turned freeman informed his view of freedom in a way distinct from that of Hurston, Petry, and Hughes. Further, whether directly through Douglass's autobiographical writing, or implicitly through Petry's fictional parodies of herself, the narratives considered in this study suggest that the authors not only created alternative versions of the "American Dream" but also that these versions gave each author a place in popular American literature.

This biographical methodology draws in part from the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin, who explained in an interview that the author's lived experience can "help the listener or reader more correctly and profoundly...understand the work of the given author" (257). Bakhtin's distinction between the "listener" and the "reader" points to a central concern of this study: that is, how do Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes, employ both visual and aural themes in order to evoke the experiences of marginalized individuals? In *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin claims that the novel contains the potential to express the complexity of these experiences by orchestrating a multitude of voices and perspectives to create one coherent narrative. As Michael Holquist puts it, the novel "has been most at pains to establish its generic identity...And it does this by flaunting or *displaying* the variety of discourses, knowledge of which other genres seek to *suppress*" (72). Holquist's rendering of the novel is especially resonant for the black American authors, because the very act of writing itself served as a means of resistance against prevailing political and historical narratives. Although only two of the four literary forms considered in

this study fall into the traditionally defined bounds of “novel,” I will build upon this Bakhtinian framework to read all the stories as containing novelistic tendencies.

These tendencies, when observed in conjunction with Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, offer a window into how, exactly, the authors and the characters they create, engage with a multitude of voices in order to complicate dominant narratives. Laura Mulvey, whose feminist rereading of psychoanalysis complicated its male-centered framework, provides particular insight into how Petry and Hurston depict female characters using highly visual language. Mulvey writes that her analysis served as a “political weapon” that transformed “run of the mill sexism...into a series of clues for deciphering a nether world, seething with displaced drives and misrecognized desire” (33). This project will likewise employ psychoanalysis as an x-ray into the texts, considering how the authors use visual tools such as “looking” to create subversive texts that at once adhere to the “American Dream” narrative while simultaneously exposing the gaps within the classic success story.

Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and Lacan’s psychoanalysis offer a theoretical framework for my study, while serving as well to segment my chapters into two distinct halves. Bakhtin’s belief that an apparently diverse grouping of texts may center on specific “nuances and accents characteristic of the given genre” offers a particularly apt framework for Douglass’s multiple autobiographies and Langston Hughes’s extensive body of poetry and prose (280). By considering how Douglass and Hughes’s oeuvres center on similar “nuances and accents,” I will examine the ways in which these authors bring together apparently disparate perspectives in order to formulate a cohesive voice.

Within Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry’s writing, however, themes of “looking” and the “gaze” undermine the female character’s abilities to form a singular, autonomous

voice. As such, Bakhtin, a theorist concerned primarily with speech, cannot offer a fully compatible framework for the experience of women as subject of and subjected to language. Lacan and Mulvey, on the other hand, with their theoretical emphases on the tenuous relationship between voyeur and the object of voyeurism, offer a suitable lens to train on Hurston and Petry's stories. This lens will reveal that both authors blend visual tools such as the "gaze," and aural themes such as song, in order to undermine attempts to render women voiceless objects. Within Hurston and Petry's fiction, this merging of song and literature further aid in creating a form of lyrical prose that asserts the author's distinct voices within American literature as a whole.

These dual theoretical approaches accentuate a similar concern shared by all four authors: the "American Dream" and the ways in which black American experiences may be incorporated into the quintessential success story. Benjamin Franklin, in *Autobiography*, set the bounds of this success story by inviting readers to follow in his path of upward mobility. Creating a discourse of achievement that would soon become inextricably tied to the "American Dream," Franklin writes, "It is true that, if you can clamber and get to the top of a staircase without using the steps, you will more easily gain them in descending; but certainly, if you begin with the lowest you will with more ease ascend to the top" (1). Franklin's conception of upward mobility follows a linear and progressive narrative, each day building upon the next upwards and towards success.

Douglass, whose first autobiography was published only seventy-years after *Autobiography*, grew up during the time period that Franklin's ideology entered into the mainstream consciousness. Petry references Benjamin Franklin throughout her fiction, and Hughes's "Mother to Son" alludes to the Franklinian staircase in the poetic refrain, "life for

me ain't been no crystal stair" (*Completed Poems*, 30). Hurston, however, appears to more directly engage with a different "founding father." Throughout both her autobiography and novels, Hurston positions the natural world as central to representations of identity. As such, she invokes Transcendentalist ideology key to Ralph Waldo Emerson's conception of the "self made man." In a series of lectures defining notions of American individualism that would soon undergird the "American Dream," Emerson drew an indivisible bond between man and the natural world. His essay, "Self-Reliance," contends that "Nature is thoroughly mediate...It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful" (50). The "self made man" therefore not only contains the skills to navigate his own experience, but also possesses the ability to construct the world around him. This man relies entirely on himself, because his surrounding world depends on his actions in order to take shape. As Emerson writes, "an institution is the shadow of one man...and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons" (170).

Chapter One begins with a discussion of how Frederick Douglass views the autobiography as his means to represent the Antebellum and Reconstructionist eras through his particular perspective. Anticipating Emerson's belief that history revolves around singular biographies, Douglass suggests that his writing will shape the prevailing historical narrative of slavery. Douglass, who began his life as a slave and ended his life as a well-respected orator and freeman, appears further to follow the linear trajectory of success implicit in Franklin's "American Dream." However, Douglass complicates this trajectory in his view that slaves are exiled from linear understandings of time and space. Rather than structuring his autobiographies through temporal or spatial frameworks, Douglass therefore bases his depiction of self on themes of exclusion. This focus brings up the paradox that it is

precisely Douglass's ability to center his popular narrative on themes of exile that allows him to achieve self-identity.

Chapter Two moves forward in time to the Harlem Renaissance, and considers Zora Neale Hurston's attempts to reshape the autobiographical form in order to reflect her experience as a black American woman. Her autobiography, with its fragmented narrative voice and inconsistent style, however, proved a critical failure. As Françoise Lionnet suggests, "It may perhaps be more useful to reconsider *Dust Tracks on a Road* not as autobiography but rather as self-portrait, texts which are self contained rather than the representation of past action" (98). This image of "self-portrait" is particularly apt for Hurston's most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which draws upon the visual and natural world to frame the life story of Janie Crawford. While *Their Eyes* is a work of fiction, a reading that considers Janie's struggle to construct an autonomous identity suggests that Hurston's own apparently fragmented narrative voice reflects a resistance towards any universalizing discourse.

This tension between an autonomous identity and universal discourse becomes the focal point of Chapter Three. While Hurston implicitly suggests that both gender and race work in tandem to remove Janie Crawford from the possibility of attaining an autonomous identity, Petry brings a discussion of blackness and womanhood to the fore of her bestseller, *The Street*. In the novel, protagonist Lutie Johnson fails to attain "American Dream" because her identity as a black woman renders her a consistent object of the gaze rather than an active participant in her experience. Lutie's awareness of her subjugated position ironically affords her a degree of self-awareness that a white female teacher does not possess. This awareness allows Lutie to express her experience through blues music, and her performance accentuates

her complex position as both the figure standing center stage and the passive medium through which song is produced.

Chapter Four continues to consider the function of song in expressing identity by examining how Hughes brings together jazz and text in order to create the genre of “blues poetry.” Hughes’s ability to orchestrate multiple genres in order to express black American experiences, however, distinguishes his use of music from that of Petry, who inserts blues lyrics directly into her text. While Petry embeds her depiction of blues within a commercial context, Hughes uses jazz as a more direct way to assume identity. As such, Hughes employs blues music in order to inform both the form and content of his poetry, thereby challenging conventional assumptions that poetry must function as a monologic discourse. This discussion brings me into the conclusion, where I contextualize my project within the 1980s debate over whether the “abstract logic” sustained in Western theory illuminates or overshadows the distinct voices expressed through black American texts (Christian, 54).

I will add that, while philosophers such as Bakhtin and Lacan offer compatible theoretical frameworks from which to consider the writing of Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes, the majority of my study focuses on the ways in which a reading of black American authors reveals the limitations of these theories. By viewing Douglass as one source of this tradition, and Hurston, Petry, and Hughes as recipients of his theoretical and literary inheritance, I suggest that these authors do not simply relegate “abstract logic” as outside of the purview of African American experience but rather recast the terms of such logic in order to evoke the narratives of marginalized communities.

The order of my chapters offers as well an alternative vision of “inheritance.” This project moves from a consideration of Douglass’s autobiographies and Hurston’s “self-

portrait,” to an examination of how Petry avoided all mention of biography, and finally concludes with Hughes’s use of “blues poetry” to create a narrative voice that married his own autobiographical experience with his writing. As such, I trace the traditional autobiography’s evolution into poetic narrative, suggesting that this movement reflects the authors’ attempts to bring together conventional literary narratives with other genres, such as the blues, in order to more fully encapsulate African American experiences.

## Chapter One:

### Frederick Douglass and the Community of Exiles

In the last of three autobiographies, Frederick Douglass describes his journey to seek asylum after the imprisonment of his friend, John Brown. Douglass writes, “I could but feel that I was going into exile...no one who has not himself been compelled to leave his home and country and go into permanent banishment can well imagine the state of mind and heart which such a condition brings” (*Life and Times*, 393). Douglass’s “exile,” while literal in the case of his escape to England, also applies to his experience as a slave. Indeed, the sense of powerlessness, of knowing that an Other governs one’s relationship to surrounding world, is perhaps at its most acute when viewed from the slave’s position. Standing at the hull of the London-bound ship, Douglass reveals the isolating nature of such an exile. Yet, in his very description of isolation, Douglass alludes to a community of the exiled, the few others who can, in fact, “imagine the state of mind and heart which such a condition brings.”

This chapter will seek to place Douglass’s autobiographies in conversation with members of such a community, a society of texts that interrogate the relationship between power and identity through the lens of exile. Key members of such a “community” include Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* and Jacques Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, two theoretical texts framed during periods of exile within their authors’ lives. Approaching the authors’ lived experiences as foundational to their ideological frameworks, will in fact follow a methodology encouraged by both Bakhtin and Derrida. Bakhtin succinctly described this methodology when he wrote, “[although] the image the author cannot, of course, itself enter into the fabric of images that makes up the literary work...it can help the listener or reader more correctly and profoundly to understand the work of the given author” (257). Derrida,

echoing these ideas about the interrelationship of an author's life and his work, explained in an interview, "you must (and you must do it *well*) put philosophers' biographies back in the picture, and the commitments, particularly political commitments, that they sign in their own names" (Peeters, 1)

A reading of how Bakhtin and Derrida construct their texts upon the "image of exile" will therefore suggest that the authors' apparent preoccupation with inserting their own "biographies back into the picture" derives in part from their attempts to establish identity despite exclusion from mainstream ideologies. These attempts provide a compatible framework for Douglass's autobiographies, suggesting that theories of exile often illuminate literary narratives with the same central concern. The converse is also true, as a reading of Douglass's autobiographies reveals the limitations of Bakhtin and Derrida's frameworks for representing the experiences of those who find exile to be a foundation of identity—i.e. the American slave. By arguing that Bakhtin and Derrida understand exile as a transitory period, rather than an inescapable condition of life itself, this essay will further argue that the philosophers understand "exile" in a manner similar to Benjamin Franklin, the renowned statesman whose own autobiography viewed his self-imposed exile as a necessary hurdle cleared in order to achieve the "American Dream." A consideration of how the image of "exile" signifies differently depending on biography will reveal that the varying ways in which Bakhtin, Derrida, Franklin, and Douglass approach the central concern of exclusion offers a more nuanced interpretation of how exile correlates with one's understanding of identity. For Douglass, in particular, this relationship between identity and exile has profound implications on the validity of the "American Dream" itself.

Of the “community of exiled” that this chapter will examine, Mikhail Bakhtin’s experience as a political dissident offers perhaps the most literal example of “banishment.” However, the profound implications of such exile upon the philosopher’s literary theory of the “self,” suggests the complicated “state of mind and heart” that conditioned his dislocation. Surviving the wars, revolutions, famines, and purges that characterized much of the 20th century, Bakhtin led a life marked by displacement, a fact that his biographer Michael Holquist viewed as foundational to the theorist’s preoccupation with “the mysteries of locating a self” (Holquist, 12). Bakhtin’s emphasis on the “self” may well fit with the general aim of modernist thought, but his focus on situatedness renders his theory unique in “the degree to which it insists that apparently abstract questions about selfhood are pursuable only when treated as specific questions about *location*” (Holquist, 12). These questions about location often centered on power. During Stalin’s purge of artists and intellectuals, the Soviet Union had originally sentenced Bakhtin to exile in Siberia. But with the lobbying of his supporters, including high-ranking members of the Party, Bakhtin’s sentence was commuted to a relatively less harsh internal exile. Time, here, was also of importance: instead of a decade, Bakhtin would now only spend six years away from his home. As Holquist has pointed out, it is perhaps no surprise that under these conditions, Bakhtin turned his theoretical eye towards the importance of location and time within configurations of the self. In a political climate where the State in large part governed one’s location and time spent at each place, Bakhtin reformulated the traditional philosophical query, “How can I know myself?” into “How can I know if it is I or another, who is talking?” (Holquist, 13).

In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin worked to answer this question by framing his theory around the themes of time and space, a focus that, if one considers the prevalence of

displacement within philosopher's life, takes on social, as well as literary, implications. Terming the interconnectedness of time and space within a text as "chronotope," Bakhtin writes, "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84). Time and space are therefore not merely an aspect of an individual narrative but instead reflect "specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents" (280). One may thus understand chronotope as a signifier of the larger and political concerns of a text. Or, as Holquist cogently explains, "chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring" (426). Holquist's metaphor suggests how the chronotope can act as a tool to allow readers to see through the literary texts and into the cultural systems in which the narratives are embedded. Further, an author may seek to represent various cultural systems within one narrative, a desire that is reflected in the author's employment of multiple chronotopes to represent "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions" (291). These chronotopes may be "juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" in order to form a complex narrative arc (292). The author therefore finds within the chronotope an ideal tool "for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values" (292).

The chronotope so understood affords a mechanism to illuminate the relationships between the "specific points of view" found between narratives with similar "accents." This mechanism offers an intervention into Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies, which all approach the narrative of Douglass's life in order to express his "intentions and values" as a slave turned freeman. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, The Life and Times of*

*Frederick Douglass, and My Bondage, My Freedom*, all follow the arc of Douglass's life from his birth until his present moment of authorship. However, the fact that Douglass wrote three autobiographies in order to cover one lifetime suggests his awareness that at each juncture within his life, he occupied a different position in relation to his autobiographies.

Douglass alludes to his multiple states of self in *The Life and Times*, concluding, "it will be seen in these pages that I have lived several lives in one" (479). His choice to write "several lives" rather than "roles" or "identities," suggests that the distinctions between his status as a slave turned freeman in Antebellum and Reconstructionist America, and the point of view that each position offers, are so fundamental that Douglass wrote three separate autobiographies to encompass the arc of one life. The various chronotopes Douglass employs in order to distinguish between his "several lives" will thus provide an understanding of the various socio-ideological values that inform each life as well as how these chronotopes come together in order to provide a unified narrative of the "state of mind and heart" which the condition of exile brings.

Douglass alludes to the sense of exile that informed his "first life" as a slave when he writes, "slaveholders sought to impress their slaves with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of their own limitless power" (*The Life and Times*, 161). By conflating the infinite coordinates of territory with power, the slave masters aimed for slaves to likewise integrate their understandings of selfhood with their location. Importantly, the masters reinforced this conflation through epistemological means. Indeed, within the scene, slaveholders do not exert physical force on the slave's body but instead work to control the slave's "beliefs." Douglass further emphasizes the practice of cognitive control within the plantation when he writes that the master's power "must not depend upon mere force: the

slave must know no higher law than his master's will" (*The Life and Times*, 187). A former South Carolinian slave, Isaiah Butler speaks of the master's mental and physical control tactics: "Dey didn't have a jail in dem times. Dey'd whip em, and dey'd sell'em. Every slave know what "I'll put you in my pocket, Sir' mean" (Patterson, 6). While the threat of the auction block or the slash of a whip maintained control over the slaves, such actions required, as well, that the slave know the language of imprisonment. The master not only holds the key to the prison of enslavement, but also simultaneously occupies the cognitive space of a prison within a slave's mind—the master's pocket, rather than any jail cell, contained the slave. Douglass echoes the economic implications inscribed upon the slave's body when he recalls that his master Thomas Auld "sold my body to his brother Hugh and pocketed the price of my flesh and blood" (*The Life and Times*, 441).

By describing the commodification of his body, Douglass suggests that as a slave, he perceives himself as equivalent to his labor. Bakhtin's characterization of the agricultural or folkloric chronotope further evidences Douglass's worldview. Within this chronotope, the earth takes on the potent image as a force of reproductive energy: time "is sunk deeply in the earth, and ripening in it" (208). For Bakhtin, this image suggests that characters within a folkloric chronotope track time by the land that they work upon because "the agricultural life of men and the life of nature (of the earth) are measured by one and the same scale" (208). Within the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass describes slaves as measuring years through agricultural cycles. Slaves know "as little of their ages as horses know of theirs...they seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time" (107). The slave's reliance on the earth and its seasonal cycles to measure his age suggests that the slave's life and the slave-owner's land begins to occupy a similar place within the

slave's mind. For the slave-owner, who viewed both his slaves and his lands as property, such thinking would already be in place. The individual slave therefore began to conceive of himself as part of a collective property: the slave, like his birth date, remained an unknown.

In employing the slave's birth date as a signifier of his anonymity, Douglass suggests that the masters begin to exile slaves from discourses of individuality at the very moment of slave's birth. In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson terms such a tactic "natal alienation," suggesting that the master formally isolated the slave from both the slave's relatives and the slave's ancestry in order to render the slave a complete dependent. Within this mode of "natal alienation," a slaveholder exiled his slave from the familial framework, casting the slave as "a genealogical isolate...Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives" (5). Douglass echoes this exclusion from lineage, writing, "genealogical trees did not flourish among slaves...slavery had no recognition of fathers, as none of families" (*The Life and Times*, 27). This lack of genealogy, among other forms of isolation, led to the "social death" of slaves, as, without a familial history to be born into, "the slave will remain forever an unborn being" (Patterson, 38). Indeed, within the folkloric chronotope, "Time's forward impulse is limited by the cycle. For this reason even growth does not achieve an authentic 'becoming'" (Bakhtin, 210). The image of an "unborn being" reinforces the notion of the slave's cyclic understanding of time by implicitly framing the slave as eternally striving to be born. Douglass alludes to this "striving" in his own terming of the slave's "life of living death, beset with the innumerable horrors of the cotton-field and the sugar-plantation" (*My Bondage, My Freedom*, 174).

Douglass, however, challenges the “living death” symptomatic of “natal alienation” by placing himself within a matrilineal genealogy. Though the notion of a “*father* is literally abolished in slave law and slave practice,” Douglass nonetheless depicts himself as having inherited the ability to read and write from his mother (*My Bondage, My Freedom*, 35). Importantly, the matrilineage that Douglass therefore establishes not only indicates his break from his “first life” as a slave but also further reveals key differences among his three autobiographies. In each autobiography, Douglass discloses slightly more about his mother while simultaneously becoming more vehement in his condemnation of the practice of “natal alienation.” *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, My Bondage, My Freedom, and The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* therefore work to create between themselves a dialogic relationship that centers upon Douglass’s deepening awareness that his exile began *from birth*, i.e. from the “condition of the mother.”

Within *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass relegates his mother to a secondary character. Mentioning her on his second page and little after, Douglass writes that “never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (3). Douglass’s short description of his mother can be read as indicative of the relatively short length of *The Narrative* in comparison to his later autobiographies, a brevity that reflected the text’s status as Douglass’s introduction to the published world. Indeed, William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to the autobiography described Douglass as a “stranger,” who, in a recent speech, stood “trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the American soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards” (*Narrative of the Life*, IV). This

introduction contrasts sharply with the one written forty years later by Georges Ruffian for *The Life and Times*, which states, “Frederick stands upon a pedestal; he has reached this lofty height through years of toil and strife,” and further embellished upon by James M’Cune Smith in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, who describes Douglass as “a burning and shining light on which the aged may look with gladness, the young with hope, and the down-trodden, as representative of what they may themselves become” (*The Life and Times* iv, *My Bondage, My Freedom*, xvii). These varying introductions reflect Douglass’s rise in fame as a respected anti-abolitionist as well as the shift in public opinion regarding the institution of slavery. While all three of Douglass’s autobiographies condemn slavery, the movement from implicit to overt criticism of “natal alienation” therefore may suggest Douglass’s growing confidence in problematizing the “exile” of slaves from familial frameworks.

Douglass begins to more overtly attack “natal alienation” in his third autobiography, *Life and Times*, by challenging such a practice through his creation of a genealogy. Learning that his mother “was the only one of all the colored people of Tuckahoe who could read,”

Douglass writes:

I can therefore fondly and proudly ascribe to her an earnest love of knowledge...I am happy to attribute any love of letters I may have, not to my presumed Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother. (36)

Douglass’s terms “ascribe” and “attribute” place him in dialogue with a lineage that provides him with generational inheritance. By placing himself within a family history, Douglass thus challenges the master’s rendering of slaves as “nonbeings.” Further, by constructing an explicitly black history, Douglass redefines genealogy in terms of enslavement—Douglass and his mother are connected precisely because they have, in spite of their slave status, learned to read. Douglass’s emphasis on the mother therefore radically subverts “the laws of

slavery, [where] children, in all cases, are reduced to the condition of their mothers” by suggesting that rather than *reducing* Douglass to her condition, his mother provided the very means towards his freedom by providing him with the tools of literacy (*My Bondage, My Freedom*, 58). Indeed, Douglass later mirrors his mother as “the only slave in that region who could read or write” (133).

Paradoxically, both their ability to read and their slave status are necessary in providing mother and son with a genealogy that challenges “natal alienation.” Douglass’s added ability to write presents a further challenge to slaveholders by suggesting the possibility of progressive movement within slave genealogies. While subtle, this advancement provides an opportunity for the future, alluding to the capacity for Douglass to find the “unceasing progress” that allows him to depart from the agricultural chronotope enforced by slaveholders.

In *My Bondage, My Freedom*, Douglass makes explicit his challenge to the institution of slavery by emphasizing the slaveholder’s “successful method of obliterating from the mind and heart of the slave, all just ideas of sacredness of *the family*, as an institution” (38). The mother no longer simply provides Douglass with the inheritance of literacy but further becomes representative of the general condition of slave-women: “my poor mother, like many other slave-women, had *many children*, but NO FAMILY!” (48). Douglass’s point that the slave-women had children but not family, underscores the primacy of a slave’s reproductive value within the plantation system. The description of the plantation Douglass grew up on as filled with soil “pregnant and prolific with life and energy” further suggests the importance of reproduction within the structure of slavery. Douglass emphasizes the master’s desire for slave reproduction in the example of Mr. Covey, an overseer who

purchases a female slave “as a breeder” (*Life and Times*, 118-9). Unable to afford more than one slave, but obsessed with the “respectability” associated with owning human property, Mr. Covey buys Caroline and locks her in a room with a black hired hand “as a means of increasing his [Mr. Covey’s] stock” (119). Caroline gives birth to twins at the end of the year, and the Covey family “were ecstatic with joy” at their growing property (*Life and Times*, 119).

This emphasis on reproduction supports the notion that slaves operated under an agricultural chronotope wherein, as Bakhtin argues, “single items that perish are neither individualized nor isolated; they are lost in the whole growing and multiplying mass of new lives” (207). In other words, while an individual death is detrimental for the plantation’s economic system, multiple births are productive and therefore remain primary within the plantation. One can note that the Coveys joyously celebrate in part because Caroline has borne them twins and thus increased their wealth twofold. During the celebration, “no one dreamed of reproaching the woman or of finding fault with the hired man” (*Life and Times*, 119). Reduced to their biological sexes, the individuals, now nameless actors of reproduction fade into the success of the double birth. As Bakhtin writes, “such things as old age, decay and death can be nothing more than aspects subordinated to growth and increase” (207).

The shifting emphasis on Douglass’s mother within his three autobiographies can therefore be read as signifying Douglass’s growing awareness that his exile began *from birth*, a condition that derives from the plantation’s emphasis on the economics of reproduction. Douglass’s subsequent critique of this emphasis runs through all three of the autobiographies, though in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, it remains implicit within the grandmother’s death scene. By mediating his criticism through his beloved grandmother,

whose “frame [was] already racked with the pains of old age,” Douglass subtly suggests that the slaveholder exiles the grandmother to die alone due to her “little value,” and more specifically, her little reproductive value. Sent off to a remote cottage, the grandmother is left in “perfect loneliness,” a status reminiscent of exile that Douglass condemns as representative of the “infernal character of slavery” (*Narrative of the Life*, 91). However, whereas in later autobiographies, Douglass overtly challenges slavery as “an enemy to filial affection,” within *Narrative*, he subtly undermines “natal alienation” by suggesting that, precisely through her exile, the grandmother gains a measure of autonomy. By foregrounding the scene in imagery reminiscent of the folkloric chronotope, yet subverting the collectivity implied within the chronotope by emphasizing the grandmother’s loneliness, Douglass continues to undermine the slaveholder’s authority. Douglass writes:

When the beginning and ending of human existence meet...my poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies—and there are none present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. (162)

Throughout the scene, Douglass leaves his readers unable to determine whether his grandmother’s death occurred over days, weeks, months or even years. The often-monosyllabic diction enforces the repetitive nature of the scene as each word blends into the next in a smooth, uninterrupted rhythm. Douglass’s imagery, as well, lends to the scene a certain blurry quality as the “dim embers” and “yonder little hut” provide glimpses of fading or faraway visions. The passage further alludes to the grandmother’s unmarked grave—with no one to bury her, she will simply fade into the Earth. Yet Douglass’s repeated use of the singular pronoun to describe the grandmother, as well as his emphasis on her absolute isolation, contradicts the collectivization assumed within the folkloric chronotope. Douglass therefore begins to challenge the plantation system by suggesting that, precisely through her

exile into the forest, the grandmother begins to gain a degree of individuality and thus the possibility to depart from the folkloric chronotope.

While such imagery and implicit messaging within the grandmother's death scene has been viewed as one of the more evocative moments within the autobiographies, Douglass later admitted to fabricating the entire scene. In *The Life and Times*, Douglass writes, "I had made a mistake in my narrative...attributing to him [the slave master] ungrateful and cruel treatment of my grandmother" (448). In reality, Douglass's grandmother had been cared for on the plantation until she died. Yet, the fact that Douglass imagines the death scene in order to provide a compelling critique further suggests his use of the imaginary, rather than the epistemological, in order to subvert the foundations of slavery.

Douglass employs the imaginary to challenge the "peculiar institution" throughout his autobiographies, a tactic that he underscores in his depiction of a major "turning point" within his life as a slave. Describing his successful retaliation in response to an overseer's violence, Douglass writes, "It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom...I had reached a point where I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, though I still remained a slave in form" (*Life and Times*, 143). In his "resurrection," Douglass suggests that he has been "brought to life," revealing that the "unborn being" has broken away from its cyclic striving by achieving an "authentic becoming." Douglass's diction of "point," along with the implicitly linear movement of a resurrection from darkness upwards towards heaven, emphasizes his departure from the agricultural chronotopic cycle. Yet Douglass "resurrects" himself through physical violence and depicts his freedom as spiritual rather than factual. Within the plantation's three modes of understanding the world—the physical, the epistemological, and

the imaginary—Douglass has thus subordinated the “fact,” using the language of an imagined death to depict the relative freedom he achieved through a physical fight.

By mediating his “relative freedom” through his awareness of death, Douglass’s fight scene predicts the later deconstructionist view of death as a means towards realizing one’s autonomy. Indeed, Douglass once again suggests that slaves prefer to receive death rather than chains when he recalls the threat of his friend Henry to an overseer, “you can’t kill me but once. *Shoot, shoot, and be damned! I won’t be tied!*” (*Narrative of the Life*, 169). For Henry, as well as Douglass, death is a singular moment whereas slavery remains embedded within an infinite cycle. Yet Henry also does not actively choose to end his own life but instead, places the onus on the slaveholder. Within his threat, Henry attaches the verbs “kill” and “shoot” to the master while placing himself as the subject who receives these actions. The slaveholders, however, do not shoot Henry. Instead, “after beating him some time, they finally overpowered him, and got him tied” (42).

This scene provides an allegory for the slave situation as depicted by Douglass: faced with chains or the “comparative freedom” of death, the slaves prefer death. Yet the plantation system so “overpowers” the slave that even this request is mediated through the master who, of course, refuses. Henry, demanding to be shot rather than chained, receives a sound beating and is, by the scene’s end, tied up once again. Emphasizing the “infernal” character of this cycle in which Henry must remain infinitely chained, Douglass therefore suggests that death is better than slavery, yet slavery renders even death an impossible escape. Douglass’s critique thus underscores slavery’s absolute confinement: a slave cannot choose to die, for even when the grandmother does die, it is because the master sent her into exile.

Douglass's focus on the power dynamics of death may be illuminated by Jacques Derrida's reading of the famous allegory of Abraham, the father who is willing to give the "gift of death" to God by sacrificing his beloved son, Isaac. Both Douglass and Derrida draw upon the complexities of "receiving/giving death" in order to interrogate situations where one does not actually have any control over the action due to the presence of an all-powerful Other (i.e., God or the slaveholder). The fact that Douglass and Derrida center their arguments upon the exile of the grandmother and the sacrifice of the son further suggests that the sense of disempowerment may be heightened when the "death" is embedded within a familial framework.

This sense of "disempowerment," however, signifies differently in Douglass's narratives than it does in Derrida's deconstructionist theories. A framing of Derrida's *Gift of Death* within the philosopher's particular biography will therefore suggest that Douglass's depiction of death illuminates, rather than reflects, the deconstructionist conclusion that "every structure...that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion" (Taylor, 1). While for Douglass this exclusion materializes in the slave's exile from freedom, Derrida largely centers his understanding of exclusion within an epistemological framework. Derrida's emphasis on the relationship between exclusion and epistemology derives in part from his own academic exile from the French university system. Failing his collegiate exams twice, and barely passing on his third attempt, Derrida faced intense criticism for his "obscure" answers to questions on philosophical texts—as one examiner advised, "[he] can come back when he is prepared to accept the rules and not *invent* where he needs to be better *informed*" (Peeters, 49). Derrida's inability to formulate his thoughts according to the standards of his academic field led to clinical depression. Writing

to a friend from his infirmary bed, Derrida admitted, “I’m no good for anything except taking the world apart and putting it together again” (Peeters, 77).

Derrida’s attempts to take apart and reassemble the “world” derived not only from his own unconventional mode of thinking, but also from the fact that, as a Jew in the mid-twentieth century, Derrida inhabited a world that often rotated along an axis of anti-Semitism. While the trauma of such racism characterized much of Derrida’s experience in the French academy, his exclusion was at its most tangible in 1942 when, due to the local government’s lowering of the Jewish student quota from fourteen to seven percent, Derrida was expelled from his high school. Such anti-Semitism followed Derrida throughout his scholarly career. Forty-six years after his expulsion from high school, Derrida found himself defending a longtime friend, scholar Paul de Man, who was posthumously revealed to have published racist articles in Nazi-occupied Belgium. Referencing the most shocking of pieces, Derrida wrote, “Nothing in what I am about to say...will heal over the wound I right away felt, when, my breath taken away, I perceived in it...an anti-Semitism that would have come close to urging exclusions, even the most sinister deportations” (Peeters, 394).

It is perhaps no surprise that, having led a career characterized by such “exclusions” and “deportations,” Derrida formulated the foundation for deconstructionism through his emphasis on complicating the theoretical structures accepted by mainstream audiences. Whereas Douglass brings up the example of the grandmother and of Henry in order to suggest that the master’s apparently absolute power extended to determining the slave’s death, Derrida therefore employs the allegory of Abraham in order to undermine previously unquestioned philosophical frameworks. In his analysis of Abraham as the “*dominant figure*” who “inaugurated a tradition” in asking “for God’s forgiveness, not for having betrayed him,

but having obeyed him,” Derrida sought to define for his readers a new theoretical concept of responsibility (74). Working against what Jack Reynolds describes as the “common assumption that responsibility is to be associated with behavior that accords with general principles capable of justification in the public realm,” Derrida instead emphasizes the “radical singularity” of the demands placed on Abraham by God (Reynolds, 158; Derrida, 69). In examining Abraham’s impossible position as torn between the demands of God and the wellbeing of his family, Derrida’s analysis of the allegory suggests that “responsibility is enduring this trial of the undecidable decision, where attention to the call of a particular other will inevitably demand an estrangement from...communal needs” (Reynolds, 2). Derrida’s focus on the tension between Abraham’s “singular relation with the unique God” and the family members “who were closest to him,” therefore suggests the philosopher’s tendency to complicate traditional binaries such as signifier/signified that are inherent within popular ideological conceptions (Derrida, 74). As such, even Abraham’s apparent decision to side with the Other by choosing to sacrifice Isaac for God, presents a paradox in that, while “Abraham’s decision is absolutely responsible because it answers for itself before the absolute other...it is also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men” (Derrida, 77). In other words, caught between the “other” and the “communal,” Abraham faces the “irony” that, as a “knight of faith,” he must appease the Other precisely by going against the implicit laws of fatherhood that render him in a “singular relation” to the Other.

Derrida’s reading of Abraham’s allegory therefore aims to complicate both the structures of fatherhood and of the Other. Abraham’s paradoxical decision to be both “responsible” and “irresponsible” by sacrificing Isaac suggests that one can locate the

ultimate incompatibility between the “general principles” that govern a community and the “absolute law” of the Other. Derrida purposefully grounds this paradoxical decision in the “gift of death” by positing that death is “the one thing in the world that no one else can either give or take: therein resides freedom and responsibility” (45). The significance of Abraham’s decision is therefore compounded by the fact that he is giving the ultimate gift: “mortal can give only to what is mortal” (44).

This statement helps explain Douglass’s complicated depiction of death: Henry and the grandmother cannot “give” death because, as slaves, both experience a “living death” that excludes them from Derrida’s “mortality.” If “mortal can give only to what is mortal,” it follows that the “living dead can only give to what is a living death.” Henry, reaching for death, can only receive his chains because such chains have foundationally determined his existence. This determination is further suggested in the conflation of “communal laws” with the “absolute law of the other” within the plantation system. Describing the end of a workday, Douglass, writes, “old and young, male and female, married and single [slaves], drop down side by side, on one common bed, —the cold, damp floor.... the overseer, used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin, ready to whip any one who was...prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn” (*Narrative of the Life*, 117). Douglass represents the slaves as mediating their lives in relation to their labor in the fields—they do not wake up of their own accord but instead because the master blows the horn. In contrast, the master blows the horn, appearing to hold his control over the slaves as firmly within his grasp as he does a hickory stick.

Whereas within Derrida’s allegory of “the gift of death,” Abraham is caught between the “communal laws” that dictate his role as a father and the “absolute law” of God,

Douglass's depiction of the slave therefore suggests that the Other (the master) and the communal laws are one and the same. In such a way, Douglass's view of "responsibility" differs radically from Derrida's by suggesting that "responsibility" does not reside in one's decision, but simply in whether or not one is able to take "responsibility" for his actions. Douglass writes, "he was the best master I ever had, until I became my own master, and assumed for myself, as I had a right to do, the responsibility of my own existence and the exercise of my own powers" (*My Bondage, My Freedom*, 268). The difference between Douglass and Derrida's conceptions of "responsibility" thus derive from their different motivations: while Douglass argued for slaves to be included within discourses of freedom and responsibility, Derrida sought to undermine the conventional modes of considering such theoretical concepts as binaries. A reading of Douglass's narratives suggests that, despite Derrida's emphasis on revealing what theoretical structures exclude through their binaries, this emphasis presupposes that one can access these structures in the first place. While Derrida therefore once wrote that his deconstructionist methodology lay in "taking the world apart and putting it together again" a reading of Douglass's autobiographies illuminates that this "world" is nonetheless grounded in Eurocentric ideology (Peeters, 77).

While Derrida's "world" revolved around challenging particular binaries, Douglass therefore worked to take apart and put together a world where he alone would be responsible for his actions. Slaveholders rendered such responsibility inaccessible to the slave through two main methods: controlling the slave's conception of time and space in order to embed the slave within the collectivized identity associated with the folkloric chronotope, and second, to enforce the primacy of reproduction over death within the plantation system. These two methods often built upon one another to create the "boundless territory" of slavery

and coincide in their attempt to erase the notion of the Future from the slave's temporal vocabulary. In his first autobiography, Douglass points to such an attempt when he recalls his master's advice "to complete thoughtlessness of the future and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness" (220). The master's advice demonstrates his prescription to exclude the slave from one dimension of the temporal structure in order to render the slave a dependent. Henri Wallon, in his study of in Greece, points out the embeddedness of this technique within slave societies by positing that the slave led "an existence entirely absorbed in another. The proprietor of this thing, the mover of this instrument, the soul and the reason of this body...was the master" (Patterson, 4). For Douglass, this "absorption" feels at its most tangible when mapped out upon the slave's conception of temporality: "to be shut up entirely to the past and present is to the soul, whose life and happiness is unceasing progress, what the prison is to the body" (*Life and Times*, 156).

Douglass, however, begins to challenge this "absorption" by connecting an understanding of chronology with that of literacy in order to emphasize the necessity of the "future" in its potential to provide temporal dimension where the slave might become free. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* reveals this connection in its depiction of one of Douglass's masters. Mr. Auld chastises his wife for teaching their slave to write: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell...if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him" (142). Douglass's inclusion of Mr. Auld's statement suggests that slaves contained a potential for learning that slaveholders forcefully suppressed as a means to exclude the subsequent conceptions of the future that the slave may gain through literacy. The diction of "if" supports this implication, revealing that while one has the choice to educate a slave, the slave *will* take no other course than to continue

learning. Mr. Auld thus demonstrates the notion that if a master prevented a slave from learning to read and write, then a master could control the slave's ability to interact with conceptions of future. As Douglass's portrayal of his interactions with slave masters indicates, the future contained the possibility of freedom.

Douglass's conversation with a group of white street urchins reveals his awareness of the relationship between literacy and temporality. Representing his slave status as antithetical to the pursuit of freedom, Douglass writes, "I wished I could be as free as they [the urchins] would be when they got to be men. 'You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!*'" (*Narrative of the Life*, 149). At a certain age, the urchins will become completely free. Douglass's statement, however, suggests his cognizance that slavery is timeless. In such a way, knowing one's age related deeply to knowing when one could become free—dates had the power to rescue one from slavery's unbounded timeframe. After all, the slave first begins to view himself as part of a collective identity when he must guess his birthday using seasonal changes rather than precise dated chronologies. For Douglass and Mr. Auld, both literacy and linear conceptions of time and space therefore provided slaves with the potential of freedom—the possibility to imagine and perhaps even to write of one's future. Subtly connecting literacy and linear chronology, Douglass, upon learning how to read and write, also adds: "I have now reached a period in my life when I can give dates" (*Narrative of the Life*, 165). For Douglass then, the autobiography, a genre firmly imbedded within traditions of linear chronology and mastery over written language, seems a logical generic choice from which to accentuate his position as freeman.

Implicit in Douglass's trajectory from slave to freeman is the narrative of the "American Dream," a genre traditionally informed by the linear ascent of an individual from

a position of anonymity to one of accomplishment. One key text to understanding the genre of the “American Dream” narrative is Benjamin Franklin’s 1770 *The Autobiography*. Tracing Franklin’s humble lineage through the founding father’s success as a statesman, Franklin’s narrative frames his achievement of the “American Dream” within a linear chronology: “Having emerg’d from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, [I rised] to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World” (Franklin, 1). His autobiography thus represents one incipient text structured under American philosophies of “rags to riches” accomplishment and suggests that by following Franklin’s example, readers could attain similar success.

Franklin, however, does acknowledge certain missteps, writing that his decision to run away from home provided him with the “first errata of my life” (24). An indentured servant for his older brother, Franklin “took [it] upon me to assert my freedom” by stowing on a boat anchored on the Boston Harbor. Docking three days later, Franklin writes that “I found myself in New York, near 300 miles from home, a boy of but 17, without the least recommendation to, or knowledge of, any person in the place, and with very little money in my pocket” (25). In such a way, Franklin frames his escape to New York in terms of exile— isolated in an unfamiliar city, Franklin admits his desire to return home, “I stopt at a poor inn, where I staid all night, beginning now to wish that I had never left home” (26). Yet, the very fact that Franklin has such a realization during his stay at an inn indicates the transient nature of his self-imposed exile. By emphasizing his “miserable figure” during his first days on the road, Franklin works to suggest that his suffering was a necessary penance in order for him to deserve success later in life.

Bakhtin and Derrida provide a similarly compatible framework for Franklin's *Autobiography* in that Franklin experiences the "state of mind and heart" of isolation through the statesman's self-imposed exile. Indeed, as the introduction to Franklin's narrative suggests, despite Franklin's acknowledgement of the "errata" that led to his exile, "the youth who reads the fascinating story is astonished to find that Franklin in his early years struggled with the same everyday passions and difficulties that he himself experiences" (i). Franklin's narrative therefore popularized the "success story" genre precisely through its acknowledgment that the "everyday passions and difficulties" provide an opportunity for one to realize and overcome any exclusion from success. Exile so understood becomes foundational to conceptions of the "American Dream" by suggesting that an objective of the exile is to successfully establish a new identity in spite of, or perhaps because of, hardship. As a reviewer of his autobiography wrote, "your frugality, diligence and temperance, which he considered as a pattern for all youth...a strong lesson to show the poverty of glory and the importance of regulating our minds" (58).

Douglass's autobiographies, the first of which was published only seventy-five years after *The Autobiography*, can be understood as engaging with Franklin's lesson. As such, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Life and Times* enter into a genre informed by an emphasis on individual accomplishment achieved despite great hardship. A significant portion of his audience would have been conversant enough in the popular genre to recognize that Douglass's rise from obscure slavery to distinguished freeman was informed by Franklin's narrative structure of a self-made man. Indeed, Douglass suggests that his autobiography can act as a "pattern for all youth," in its aim "to assure them that knowledge can be obtained under difficulties; that poverty may give place to competency; that obscurity

is not an absolute bar to distinction, and that a way is open to welfare and happiness to all who will resolutely and wisely pursue that way” (582).

Yet, unlike Franklin, Douglass’s “difficulties” did not derive from his choice to run away from home. Rather, Douglass’s slave status rendered him *born into* exile through the “condition of his mother.” While Franklin establishes his “new identity” as a statesman by accepting the conditions of his self-imposed exile in order to achieve success, Douglass suggests that it was precisely the slave’s exclusion from discourses of choice that represented his “success story” as meaningful. In order to support such a claim, Douglass takes on the role of the author, one who uses the “epic” chronotope in order to construct a narrative that radically destabilizes the American Dream genre established by Franklin. Bakhtin writes that within an epic narrative, “individuum[s] are representatives of the social whole, events of their lives coincide with the events of the life of the social whole, and the significance of such events (on the individual as well as on the social plane) is identical” (217). Throughout his autobiographies, Douglass depicts himself as representative of the slave’s social whole, yet he further suggests that his narratives may stand in for the progress of the nation in general: “I have meant it [the narratives] to be a small contribution to the sum of knowledge of the special period, to be handed down to after-coming generations” (*Life and Times*, 479). Here, Douglass continues the genealogy of knowledge, leaving his written account of Antebellum America as an inheritance for later generations. In doing so, Douglass subtly challenges the knowledge bases traditionally assigned to African Americans by suggesting that a former slave, who once mediated his life through the Earth, may now pass down a written narrative that is representative of the very time period that sought to deprive slaves of literacy.

The fact that Douglass views his narratives as a “sum of knowledge” suggests, however, that, while Douglass often challenges the institution of slavery through the imaginary, he nonetheless inserts his autobiographies into an epistemological tradition. By doing so, Douglass alludes to his complex position as a slave turned freeman and the tensions inherent within such a transition. WJT Mitchell, in his study on “Narrative, Memory, and Slavery,” examines the tenuous position of authors of slave narratives, suggesting that “the slave narrative is always written by a former slave; there are no slave narratives, only narratives about slavery written from the standpoint of freedom” (204). Douglass, emphasizing his “several lives,” reveals an awareness of this a contradiction—he can only write of his “first life” as a slave once he has removed, or exiled, himself from it.

This removal offers one explanation for why the image of exile figures so prominently in Douglass’s narratives. Yet, whereas for Bakhtin, exile led the theorist to insist that “apparently abstract questions about selfhood are pursuable only when treated as specific questions about *location*,” Douglass often transcended his exile precisely through his subversion of time and space. This subversion is found in the conclusion to *Life in Times*, where Douglass emphasizes that his legacy will not be found in his “self,” but in the narratives themselves, “to be handed down to after-coming generations” (*Life and Times*, 479). Douglass explains, “The very names of those who sleep within the oldest of them are crumbled away and become undecipherable...suggestive of the transient character of human life and glory” (*Life and Times*, 448).

While Bakhtin’s framework of time and space may prove compatible for Douglass’s autobiographies, Douglass ultimately provides a challenge to the Bakhtinian emphasis on the “self” by suggesting that words, rather than authors, are what remain after “the last American

slave and the last American slaveholder will disappear behind the curtain which separates the living from the dead” (*Life and Times*, 478). Rather than viewing the author as the “orchestrator” of a narrative’s many voices, Douglass instills within his writing the sense of freedom so important to his “several lives.” Concluding *Life and Times*, Douglass notes, “I am impressed with a sense of completeness—a rounding up of the arch to the point where the keystone may be inserted, the scaffolding removed, and the work, with all its perfections or faults, left to speak for itself” (407).

Douglass’s emphasis on the “immortality” of the written word over the “transient character of human life” therefore provides a distinct challenge to Bakhtin and Derrida’s frameworks, which center their theoretical inquiry upon the “self.” This challenge can be read as representative of the different “exclusions” that each author experienced. While Bakhtin and Derrida’s exiles derived from their *attempts* to participate in certain activities, a political dissident movement and the education system of the French academy, respectively, Douglass enters into his exile by virtue of his mother’s status as a slave. Douglass’s narratives therefore provide perhaps the most profound meditation on exile by suggesting that themes of exclusion do not simply relate to understandings of identity, but instead create the very foundation of a slave’s “self.” Douglass’s autobiographies therefore reveal the ultimate paradox of exile: it is precisely due to his exclusion from discourses of freedom, that Douglass achieves a version of the “American Dream” derived from the isolation he once felt setting sail towards the “permanent banishment” that defined his horizon.

## Chapter Two:

### Zora Neale Hurston and the Master-Less Tune

Zora Neale Hurston, feeling the story “dammed up in me,” wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 155). She recalls, “The force somewhere in Space which commands you to write in the first place, gives you no choice. You take up the pen when you are told, and write what is commanded” (155). This “force” derived in some measure from Hurston’s recent heartache, a passionate relationship with a man who “was the master kind” (186). Referred to as A.W.P. in her autobiography, this “all or nothing” man asked Hurston to leave her writing career and marry him. She refused, explaining, “I had things clawing inside of me that must be said. I could not see that my work should make any difference in marriage” (186).

Although Hurston maintains that the plot “was far from the circumstances,” she did acknowledge that her most well known novel carried “all the tenderness of my passion for him” (188-9). Perhaps for this reason, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers on question of whether or not Janie Crawford can sustain both an autonomous identity and a romantic relationship. Much of the critical attention paid to Hurston’s novel reorients this question to focus on themes of speech and identity. As Deborah Clarke writes, “Janie’s achievement of a voice is critical to her journey to self awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough” (599). Clarke brings up the trope

of “vision” as the way to fill the gap between “voice” and “self-awareness,” claiming that Hurston employs the “language of the visual” in order to subvert the history of women as the object of the male gaze (602).

I would add that for Janie, the language of the “visual” is deeply related to the language of the “natural”— that is, her engagement with “the words of the wind and trees” allow her to transcend patriarchal structures by emphasizing sensuality over solitude (*Their Eyes*, 25).

Within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie develops and participates in a sort of “call and response” with the natural world: after experiencing the “revelation” of sexuality, Janie “got up from where she was and went over the little garden field entire. She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers” (11). Janie’s “revelation” sets her narrative into motion, and her decision to seek out “voice and vision” by interrogating the natural landscape further structures the worldview that Janie holds throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

While Hurston therefore invokes Transcendentalist notions that the natural world corresponds to a self-reliant individual’s emotional state, she also suggests that, far from allowing Janie to achieve a “voice,” nature complicates what many critics have read as the novel’s feminist message. Maria Racine, for example, reads Janie’s relationship to confidant and friend, Pheoby, as evidence that “there is a unity within Janie that allows her to share with other. She has acquired her voice, and she may choose when and how to express

herself” (292). Racine’s reading suggests that Janie succeeds in gaining a certain measure of selfhood because she has “chosen” her own mode of expression. The role of the nature within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, with its bewitching blossoms and raging hurricanes, calls into question how much choice Janie actually has when it comes to navigating the world around her. This ambiguous characterization of nature reflects Hurston’s view, articulated in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, that “it is nothing to [nature] if I choose to make personal tragedy out of her unbreakable laws” (254).

While current scholarship often views Janie’s “journey to self-awareness” through the lens of gender, vision, or nature, I will consider how Hurston relates language itself to the pursuit of an autonomous identity. Here, language will not be defined in its traditional sense—as the system of communication used by a specific community—but instead broken down into three dialogic speech types: the patriarchal, visual, and natural. As Janie’s interaction with each “language” suggests, Hurston’s “ambivalent presentation of voice” reflects Janie’s own ambivalence towards language—an ambivalence that stems from her complex relationship to nature as both a subject of and a being subjected to forces beyond her control. When considered in relation to Hurston’s own autobiography, this reading will further suggest that the “fragmentary” rhetoric of *Dust Tracks on a Road* represents Hurston’s view that no “force” but language itself can unify experience.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey reframes the “subject of and subjected to” position by examining how the “language of the patriarchy” predicates

itself on the role of the woman as the “bearer, not maker, of meaning” (834). Mulvey’s analysis of this role borrows in large part from Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “unconscious,” where the unconscious emerges in the split between our consciousness and a certain “gap” that we perceive within our lived experience. We often perceive this “gap” or “lack” through the drive within us to fill some usually inexplicable desire. Mulvey, developing a feminist reading of this “unconscious,” argues that within a patriarchal society, the woman is defined by her “absence of a penis” and desires to “make good the lack” by bringing a son into the world (833). Mulvey’s argument has radical implications for the field of psychoanalysis, which bases itself in large part upon the Lacanian claim that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (834). By suggesting that the unconscious operates as a form of control, Mulvey therefore also claims that language within a patriarchal society works to subjugate women. As she writes, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command” (834).

Mulvey brings up the psychoanalytic concept of the “mirror stage” as a way to undermine the patriarchal culture’s reliance on “linguistic command.” Written about extensively by Jacques Lacan in *Ecrits*, the “mirror stage” constitutes the first moment that a child looks into the mirror and leans in to “take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind” (76). Before this moment of looking, the child only has a “fragmented image of the body,” but, viewing the “ideal unity” of his reflected image, the

child is “caught up in the lure of spatial identification” (113, 97). The child identifies with his body’s reflected “form of totality” rather than with his actual body, which is characterized by a lack of coordination in motor functioning (92). The child’s first moment of “recognition” is, therefore, a moment of “misrecognition,” and begins to stitch in place a pattern where the child will continue to fixate “on an image that alienates him from himself” (92).

As Mulvey suggests in her analysis of the “mirror stage,” important for feminist criticisms “is the fact that it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary.... of the first articulation of the ‘I,’ of subjectivity” (836). Because the “mirror stage” occurs before the child learns to speak, the first moment of recognition reveals that notions of “subjectivity” and “identity” predate language (836). Patriarchal “linguistic command” ceases to be the end-all for constituting and maintaining identity. Rather, the visual becomes foundational in creating the “self,” leaving room for the “silent image of the women” to reclaim her position as a maker as well as bearer of meaning.

The fact that this foundation of “identity” builds itself upon “misrecognition,” however, points to the “paradox of phallocentrism” (834). The idea of a woman stands as “linchpin” to a patriarchal system: her lack of phallus “gives order and meaning to its world” by representing the threat of castration. As such, while the woman is often displayed for the pleasure of man’s gaze, her lack of phallus simultaneously produces within him the anxiety of the possibility of his own castration (840). In order to circumvent this anxiety, the male unconscious employs one of two strategies. He “investigates” the woman and deems her

guilty for what she lacks, thereby setting up the male figure as the woman's punisher or savior. Or, he fetishizes the woman to the point where she becomes "reassuring rather than dangerous," i.e. a beautiful, but silent image (840).

This split between the feminine "silent image" and the masculine "linguistic command" presents a challenge in interpreting *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—that is, how are we to offer a critical reading of the ways Janie uses language to create an empowering identity when women are, as Mulvey writes, "caught up within the language of the patriarchy?" (834). Hurston alludes to Janie's tenuous relationship with "the language of the patriarchy" by suggesting that much of Janie's second marriage to Joe Stark is defined by his desire to render her a silent "shadow" of his own accomplishments (77). Unhappy with Joe's need to control her "image," Janie thinks, "he is something in my mouth. He's got tuh be else Ah ain't got nothin' tuh live for. Ah'll lie and say he is. If Ah don't, life won't be nothin' but uh store and uh house" (76). Disregarding material property, Janie convinces herself to stay with Joe by imagining that he is the "something" in her mouth that makes her life meaningful. While Hurston leaves this "something" open to interpretation, the thematic prominence of voice and speech within *Their Eyes Were Watching God* suggests that Joe, known to Janie as "big voiced," takes up the place of "words" within her mouth (28).

Janie's desire to inject meaning into her life by imagining that Joe "is something in my mouth" echoes the "silent image of the woman as the bearer, not maker of meaning" (834). Janie appears to conceive of herself as a container, rather than a producer, of what she

has “tuh live for.” Janie’s second husband, Joe Stark, uses his “big voice” in order to encourage this “silent” identity. Talking to the townspeople of Eatonville, Joe says “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” (43). Correlating marriage with “no speech-makin’,” Joe suggests that Janie’s lack of voice stems from her role as a wife. Through this suggestion, Joe positions Janie as “reassuring” figure, one whose speech is bounded by the four walls of their home. Barbara Johnson writes of a similarly patriarchal understanding of speech and storytelling: “Even plot itself...has been conceived of as the doings of those who do *not* stay at home, in other words, men” (165). Joe appears to view the narrative of his and Janie’s marriage in much the same terms: “Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, ‘cause dat makes uh big woman outa you” (46). In other words, Janie’s identity, or her “plot,” can only be thought of in relation to Joe’s “big voice.”

Hurston frames this version of Janie’s identity as the “shadow of herself” (77). Sitting outside of the grocery store Joe built, Janie watches this shadow as it goes “about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody” (77). Shadows appear to encapsulate Janie’s experience as she attempts to construct an identity while “battered against” the rock of the Joe’s voice (54). Janie, “uh born orator,” has a talent for language, but remains tied to Joe’s voice like a shadow that cannot exist without the body that casts it. One can read this image of a shadow as a sort of mirror in and of itself: a reflection of Janie that she watches while “all the time she herself sat under a shady tree” (77).

By viewing this reflection as removed from herself—a shadow rather than the body—Janie appears to derive a degree of autonomy from vision as she “watches” a “prostrating” form. Hurston continues to develop a sense of Janie’s autonomy in tandem with the “visual” world by positioning the moment of “watching” just a few scenes before Janie begins to turn Joe’s “big voice” back upon him. Angry that Joe continually and cruelly points out how she is “lookin’ old,” Janie tells Joe in front of the town that “You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘taint notihn’ to it but yo’ big voice Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout *me* lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak da change uh life” (79). Janie places Joe’s “big voice” against the image of “da change uh life,” suggesting that his speeches cannot cover up for what he lacks under his britches. When Joe asks Janie to repeat herself, “hoping his ears had fooled him,” a townsman taunts, “You heard her, you ain’t blind” (79). The townsman conflates the visual and aural, suggesting the Janie’s words and Joe’s body both signify Joe’s impotence. In suggesting that he “ain’t blind,” the townsman further implies the limited nature of what Joe actually sees. Indeed, Joe constantly calls Janie his “doll,” revealing that while he can visualize the form of a woman, he is incapable of seeing “inside” Janie. As such, Janie’s words not only point to Joe’s impotence but also undermine his “big voice” as the measure of his authority over her and the townspeople. Hurston writes:

Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible.... she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, and would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They’d look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them...for what can excuse a man in the eyes of other men for lack of strength? (80)

Joe appears to reenact the “mirror stage:” looking at the shattered “ideal unity” of his masculinity Joe realizes that his body is characterized not by his “big voice” but rather by a “lack of strength.” Joe no longer identifies with “illusion of irresistible maleness;” instead, he views his manliness as an “empty armor,” or what psychoanalysts might reframe as a “fragmentary body.” Joe’s preoccupation with the “look” and “eyes” of other men support this Lacanian reading, suggesting that Joe, revealed to be impotent rather than important, must now come to terms with the fact that he has fixated on an “image that alienates him from himself” (*Ecrits*, 92). Joe comes to this realization in large part because Janie has turned his own language against him—while Joe defined Janie by her outward “doll” appearance, for example, Janie alludes to a similar lack of interiority by pointing out that Joe wears a suit of “empty armor.”

After Joe recognizes “all the meanings” signified by his now empty armor, he retreats from Janie, moving to a room downstairs where his health quickly deteriorates (79). Janie, who imagined she had turned a mirror back on Joe by using his own language against him, wonders, “Why must Joe be so mad with her for making him look small when he did it to her all the time?” (81). Janie does not appear to realize that, in undermining his “linguistic command,” she has symbolically castrated him, depriving him of his potency in all senses of the word. Deborah Clarke reads Joe’s symbolic castration through the linguistic and “visual dynamics that he has established” as indicative of how Hurston transforms the “the visual into a tool of female power” (606). I would argue, however, that although Janie appears to

derive a degree of autonomy through undermining Joe's power over her "voice," she does so by playing into a system that orders itself around the symbolic phallus. As such, Janie appears unable to extricate herself from a patriarchal view of the world, and instead acts out the "phallogocentric paradox" by gaining agency through a metaphoric castration. In other words, while "the visual" opens up the possibility for acquiring identity, it does not create a "female power" removed from the "language of the patriarchy."

Hurston points to the limited nature of the "visual" in offering Janie an autonomous identity by describing Janie's own "mirror" scene. After Joe dies, Janie looks at his body and thinks:

Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass...Perhaps she'd better look. She went to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. (87)

Unlike Joe, Janie looks in the mirror and sees a self not defined by its "ideal unity" but instead by a beauty characterized by "lack," i.e. the loss of Janie's youth. As such, the mirror presents a "fragmented" image of Janie, a reflection that reveals how time has changed her face from that of a young girl to that of a woman. Janie's self-awareness appears to lend her a degree of autonomy. By removing the kerchief, which Joe demanded she wear so that no other man could see her hair, Janie appears to resist his "big voice" and act of her own accord.

After looking at her reflection for a few moments, however, Janie “combed her hair and tied it back up again. Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see, and opened up the window and cried, ‘Come heah people! Jody is dead. Mah husband is gone from me’” (87). By choosing to announce her widowhood from inside the house, Janie plays into the patriarchal belief system that a woman’s “place is in de home.” Further, Janie still changes her appearance in order to please the gaze of an other, and does so with movements generally associated with household chores.

The fact that this gaze likewise requires Janie to wear a kerchief suggests that the town’s collective gaze is embedded within the same patriarchal systems that Joe signified. Hurston points to the town’s patriarchal order in the novel’s opening scene when, returning home after the death of her third husband, Janie finds herself subjected to the town’s invasive gaze. As Janie walks by the townspeople, “The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist...the women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid the away for remembrance” (3). Both the men and women appear to incorporate Janie into a fantasy: the men view Janie through highly sexualized images, while the women focus on her clothing as a means to maintain “hope that she [Janie] might fall to their level some day” (2). Both gazes therefore merge in their focus on Janie’s appearance and their desire to bring Janie into the folds of their community, whether through sex or shame.

The town's collective gaze, in its implicit conflation of sexuality and shame, alludes to what black feminist bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) refers to as the tradition of viewing the black female body as "mere spectacle:"

She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts. Objectified in a manner similar to that of black female slaves who stood on auction blocks while owners and overseers described their important, salable parts, the black women whose naked bodies were displayed for whites as social functions had no presence. (62)

While bell hooks writes explicitly here of 19th century European representations of women, the town's gaze in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* nonetheless parallels the attention paid to Janie's "salable parts" at the expense of her internal thoughts. This similarity points to Hurston's complicated depiction of Eatonville as acting out the patriarchal order of "linguistic command." Janie herself appears aware of the connection between her position within the town and the "auction block" when she describes her first marriage to wealthy farmer, Logan Killicks: "She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell" (90).

Janie's reconfiguration of a "jewel" as outside of, rather than a part of, the "market-place" points to her understanding of romantic love as distinct from the institution of marriage. Janie begins to develop this view when, sitting underneath a pear tree, she hears the "inaudible voice of it all" and watches as a bee enters into a bloom, "the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest

branch” (11). Hurston begins to suggest how Janie is both a subject of and subjected to the natural world when, after experiencing the “revelation” of the bee and blossom, Janie feels herself “beglavored” by the pollen dust (12). The dust transforms a local boy from “shiftless” into “glorious,” and Janie kisses him in search of her own ecstatic union (12).

Janie’s first experience with sexuality works simultaneously to set her outside community norms while also rendering her a more direct subject of the natural world. The result of her kiss mirrors this linked effect: Janie’s grandmother, watching the scene in horror, marries Janie off to Logan Killicks in an effort to protect Janie from the “harm and danger” of an untamed sexuality (13). Living with Logan in his isolated cabin, Janie soon discovers that marriage does not figure as the “love embrace” and tells her grandmother, “Ah want things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (24). As such, Janie’s “revelation” and subsequent marriage allow her to distinguish between the sexuality she reads in the natural world and the absence “of flavor” that she finds in the institution of marriage (23).

Janie rejects her first two marriages precisely as they are located in the “marketplace” rather than within the natural order. Janie blames her grandmother for placing her in the marketplace, terming her grandmother’s desire to see Janie “git up on uh high chair and sit dere” to live out a wealthy, leisurely lifestyle as “mislove” (114, 90). Janie later reframes this “mislove” as her grandmother’s decision to take “the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still beyond you—and pinched

it into such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her" (89). Janie condemns her grandmother for twisting the boundless, natural horizon into a material object, a tangible "thing" that chokes Janie like a noose. Underscoring the incompatibility of Janie's understanding of nature and her experience in the marketplace of marriage, Hurston writes, "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (25).

Janie's first "dream," to become "a tree, *any* tree in bloom," ties in with her understanding of the natural landscape as representative of her own internal bloom of sexuality (11). As such, Janie invokes the Transcendentalist language of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture" (42). In his series of lectures on Transcendentalism, Emerson continued to develop the relationship between nature and the self, employing a visually oriented language in order to suggest that the "marketplace" clouds the "natural" state of mind by removing the individual from "the independence of solitude" (166). A reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that frames Janie's worldview within Emersonian terms will therefore suggest that although the "language of nature" offers Janie a degree of autonomy, her view of nature as deeply connected to desire and love, rather than solitude, appears to undermine her ability to gain "independence."

Emerson begins to relate the natural world with independence by shaping nature itself into an autonomous character. He describes nature as a figure that plays the role of “an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men” (45). Nature “interprets” by connecting images of the earth with man’s state of mind: “light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope” (42). This is the language of “God,” for Emerson describes the natural world as the “plantations of God,” a land where “decorum and sanctity reign...we return to reason and faith” (32).

Emerson contrasts his depiction of the natural, godlike world, with the image of society as a sort of hellscape, one where “the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters” (163). Bringing up and rejecting the concept of the “marketplace,” Emerson compares society to a “joint-stock company,” and suggests that the members’ “amputation” derives from their decision to give up “liberty and culture” in order to secure a wage (163). As such, within this “monstrous” world, “the virtue in most request in conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion” (163).

In order to escape from the “joint-stock company,” an individual must draw upon his autonomy and come out of “the din and craft of the street” (36). Once the individual has done so, and has relocated to the solitude of the “sky and the woods,” he becomes “man again” (36). Emerson adds, “In their [nature’s] eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough” (36).

Janie, condemning her grandmother for taking “the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon” and twisting it into a “little bit of a thing,” appears to hold a similar belief in the redemptive natures of a boundless horizon. However, whereas Emerson connects the horizon to nature’s “eternal calm,” Janie views the horizon in terms of social relationships: “she had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her” (89). The distinction between Emerson and Janie can be further drawn out in their view of what “makes” a man or woman. While Janie “becomes a woman” after the death of her first dream, the Emersonian man “is man again” once he returns, alone, to the great outdoors. As such, whereas Emerson emphasizes how an individual must keep “with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude,” Janie views desire and the lack of “sweetness” in her marriage, as foundational to her womanhood.

These different understandings of “sweetness” point to what Rachel Stein has described as the “inherently gendered” nature of Transcendentalist literature (27). Emerson centers his essays on a masculine self and often presents nature as a feminized other—throughout his lectures, Emerson suggests, “the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life” (44). Considering that Emerson once wrote, “The whole history is in one man,” one can read the analogy as positioning “human history” as the masculine figure, while “natural history” serves as its female counterpart. Emerson’s emphasis on “barren” and “full of life”

support this reading, contextualizing nature within cycles of reproduction, while “human history” figures as the “maker” rather than “bearer” of life. As Stein writes, “nature does not exist in its own right and for its own purposes but acts solely as the mirror in which the male speaking subject sees himself writ large” (28).

Hurston begins to undermine this “mirror,” then, in her casting of a female subject as central to the narrative. Janie, who “learns the words of trees and the wind” in order to map her desire for romantic love upon her natural surroundings, invokes Emerson’s language while simultaneously recasting it in order to center on reproduction rather than solitude. While Emerson views nature in terms of how it can reflect the individual’s internal thoughts, Janie engages with nature as a means to understand the “revelation” of union. In this way, Janie creates a more authentic dialogue with her natural surroundings, viewing nature as an active participant in, rather than medium for, her construction of identity.

Janie’s first experience “talking” to the natural world occurs underneath the pear tree, where the “kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world” help “beglamour” Janie into kissing a local boy (11). Janie continues to connect “natural language” to sensuality when, standing by Logan’s isolated cabin, she “often spoke to falling seeds and said, ‘Ah hope you fall on soft ground,’ because she heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed” (25). Janie’s language evokes images of reproduction: the seeds gently entering into the earth with the hope of sprouting up again in the form of young trees “in bloom.”

Sitting on a porch with Joe Starks, Janie further reveals her preoccupation with union by viewing the sunset not as day isolated from night, but instead as the sun plunging “into the same crack in the earth from which the night emerged” (33). As her relationships with Logan and Joe reveal, Janie does not find this sort of “love embrace,” the plunging of one being into another, within her first two marriages. Rather, she finds her “first dream” revived in the character of Tea Cake, who “could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (106). With no fixed employment and little desire for a stable wage, Tea Cake figures outside of the marketplace mentality of Janie first two husbands. Janie, calling Tea Cake a “glance from God,” appears to encase him in a natural language, separating him from images of the “auction block” and instead placing him in relation to the visual, godly world she first experienced under the pear tree (106).

Hurston, however, complicates Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship precisely through the natural landscape, sending a hurricane into the novel’s final chapters that ultimately results in Tea Cake’s death and Janie’s return to Eatonville. Throughout the hurricane scene, nature operates as a silent, monstrous force, suggesting that while Janie is a subject of nature, she is also subjected to its uncontrollable language of destruction. Ironically, Janie encounters the hurricane because, caught up in the “bloom” of her romance, she ignores all the warnings of the natural disaster’s arrival. As the “dead day was creeping from bush to bush,” Janie and Tea Cake stay in their shanty to gamble, sing, and dance with friends (157). When the hurricane finally approaches, Tea Cake asks Janie, “Ah reckon you wish now you

had of stayed in yo' big house 'way from such as dis, don't yuh?" (159). Janie, recalling perhaps the sun plunging into the same crack from which earth emerges, responds, "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" (159). Here, Janie merges vision with nature, "light" becoming synonymous with the "love embrace," as the natural world and Janie's sensuality appear to speak in the same terms.

The image of God opening "de door," however, points to the complex relationship between Janie and the patriarchal society she grew up in: even when speaking of her emotions in highly visual and natural terms, Janie nonetheless alludes to the place of the material home in her conception of self. Hurston points to Janie's inability to completely take on the "natural language" by describing how the hurricane, a "monstropolous beast," appears to operate outside the bounds of language. Rather than speak, the hurricane "seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors" (162). Here, Hurston appears to critique society as a whole, revealing that despite efforts to control nature, these "conquerors" fail to such an extreme that they are brought into the language of nature as small blades of grass. In her depiction of the hurricane as "muttering and grumbling onward," Hurston further suggests that the hurricane removes itself from the realm human speech—gone are the "words of the trees and wind," and Janie, even if she strained to listen, would likely be unable to communicate with the "beast." This gap in speech points to Janie's position as both a subject

of and subjected to the “language of nature:” while the “singing of bees” offers her a dream of desire, she appears powerless in the face of the “grumbling” hurricane.

Hurston emphasizes this powerlessness in the novel’s eponymous scene. Janie, Tea Cake, and their friends “sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes straining 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” (160). Vision and speech appear here to falter against the darkness of God and His hurricane, suggesting that while Janie has learned the language of nature, she does not have the ability to enter into conversation with it. Indeed, in a later scene, when Janie looks up to the sky, “asking questions...the sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house” (178). Hurston offers perhaps her greatest critique on the home by adding that, after Tea Cake becomes ill, Janie must kill Tea Cake in self-defense. Taking care of him in their home, Janie sees Tea Cake steady himself “against the jamb of the door” before attacking her (184). The door, which once operated as the opening for the “light” of their love, now becomes the last thing Tea Cake touches before his death.

Returning to Eatonville after Tea Cake’s death and walking up to the bedroom she used to share with Joe Starks, Janie suggests her ambiguous relationship with home, love, vision, and nature when she imagines that Tea Cake “came prancing around her” (193).

Hurston continues:

Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it in from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see (193).

Within this scene, Janie begins to blend the language of the natural, visual, and patriarchal. Janie appears to define herself in terms of Tea Cake, and seems unable to imagine her life without him. Dressing him in the "sun," Janie further suggests that he occupies the same position within her life as light does in relation to the natural world. The "kiss" and "horizon" bring up images of the natural world she first experienced sitting underneath the pear tree, while the language of "pictures" further structures the distinctly visual landscape that Janie inhabits. Yet it is perhaps in her "call" to her soul to "come and see" that Janie offers readers the most ambiguous depiction of her relationship to language: summoning Joe's "big voice" to command her own natural spirituality, Janie points to the importance of vision in allowing her to "see" the pictures of "love and light" that she has spent a majority of the narrative hoping to develop.

In the novel's opening pages, Hurston writes of "Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song" (2). The last scene of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* appears to act out this image: Janie, who does not privilege one type of language over the other, seems to let her words walk "without masters." This image mirrors Hurston's approach towards writing itself. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she points to the prevalence of spirituals among of African American communities, explaining, "The words do not

count...the tune is the unity of the thing...Negroes can fit in more words and leave out more and still keep the tune better than anyone I can think of” (144). Hurston develops the notion of “master-less” words by suggesting that individual words themselves do not matter in the context of a unified tune, one that is structured by the addition of words just as much as it is by the absence of language.

Such an argument is particularly compelling considering that critics often censure Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for its fragmented narrative voice, inconsistent style, and apparently assimilationist racial politics (Walker, 387). As James Karsner suggests, “Janie’s story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a good deal more literary, a good deal more consistent, and a good deal more critically acceptable than Hurston’s autobiography.” While Hurston’s novel may appear more traditionally “literary” than her autobiography, the “tune” of both the novel and *Dust Tracks* center upon the impossibility of choosing just one type of “word” in order to tell a story. In this sense, I agree with Pierre Walker’s post-structuralist reading that it is precisely the autobiography’s fragmentary form and content that reveals “an individual persona that resists reduction to a coherent, consistent unity” (Walker, 387). As Françoise Lionnet specifies, this resistance may also explain Hurston’s unpopular racial politics, for Hurston refused to “be framed and packaged for the benefit of those human, all-too-human mortals, ‘both black and white who [claim] special blessings on the basis of race’” (Lionnet, 103). Through both her autobiography, and her novel, Hurston resists this framing, the “all-too-human” attempts to

view experience through one specific lens. As such, Hurston and the characters she creates are able to derive a degree of independence from the patriarchal order, living, instead, within the meshes of a language as boundless as the horizon.

## Chapter Three:

### Ann Petry and the Performance of the Gaze

When asked whether or not she preferred if her fiction was shelved in the black literature section or the women's literature section of a bookstore, Ann Petry responded that she did not care as long as "people read them" (*At Home Inside*, 101). Petry's answer points to a central tension within her bestseller, *The Street*—that is, how do race and gender work together in order to exclude black women from narratives of upward mobility? In the novel, Lutie Johnson, the protagonist, aims to achieve the "American Dream" through a singing career, but fails in large part because the constantly appropriative looks of both men and women upon her body render her an object, rather than subject, of her experience. Viewing Benjamin Franklin as her role model, however, Lutie does not appear to realize that her position as object of voyeurism excludes her from the autonomous identity assumed in his quintessential success story. As such, she continues to strive throughout the novel to achieve the "American Dream," viewing the voyeuristic gaze as a hurdle to be cleared, rather than as a foundational aspect of her experience.

Laura Mulvey contends that this voyeuristic gaze undergirds patriarchal society, enforcing a "male/active and female/passive" gender dynamic. Petry, who often complained that critical comparisons between her fiction and that of Richard Wright labeled her "a copycat female incapable of creating a body of work on my own," appears at least cognizant of how this gender dynamic "diminishes me as a writer, belittles me" (101). In *The Street*, this dynamic appears to take center stage in that all the female characters, including a white teacher, seem defined in relation to a voyeuristic, and often belittling, male gaze. Petry's depiction of the white teacher, Miss Rinner, further complicates the theme of voyeurism by

suggesting that the teacher perceives herself as an authoritative figure. Believing that she is supported by the implicitly white power structure framing public school systems, Miss Rinner casts a reductive look on her Harlem students based on their racial identity.

French philosopher Louis Althusser offers a compatible theoretical model for how an individual, such as Miss Rinner, may figure as both subject of and subjected to a power structure. Althusser theorizes that a formalized discourse allows an individual to access the related system, while also rendering the individual subjected to that system's laws. While Lutie, unable to access any power structure, appears aware throughout the novel that her position as a black woman renders her an object of the voyeuristic gaze, Miss Rinner therefore mistakenly believes that her relationship to the public schools system allows her a degree of control over the students. As such, Lutie's realization that her gender and race both play a role in her subjugated position ironically offers her a greater degree of self-awareness than Miss Rinner possesses. This irony relates back to Ann Petry, who was aware of how her identity as a middle class black American woman rendered her the object of the gaze. It is precisely this awareness that allowed Petry to author a bestselling novel largely centering on how blackness and the "active/male and passive/female" dynamic work together to render a black woman unable to attain success.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey contextualizes this gender dynamic through an analysis of how "film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established function of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (57). The established role of women as passive objects is most prominent within cinema in how actresses are "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote

*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (837). Budd Boetticher makes a similar point in his analysis of the female character’s purpose within a plot: “What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (Mulvey, 838). Examining this actress/hero relationship using psychoanalysis, Mulvey suggests that voyeurism depends on the viewer’s unconscious need to identify with object of desire while maintaining a distance from this object. As such, cinema simultaneously allows the audience to identify with representations of sexual difference, while also employing the “brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen... [to] promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation”(835).

This “complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary)” appears to frame a scene within *The Street* where Lutie Johnson watches a movie and cannot identify with the “glamorous” actresses because of her preoccupation with the success story narrative. Lutie’s preoccupation with Benjamin Franklin offers a possible explanation for why she views her position as object of the gaze as a transient, rather than foundational, aspect of her experience. The scene additionally accentuates how Lutie is almost exclusively defined in relation to voyeurism, and is thus precluded from Franklin’s “American Dream” because his discourse of upward mobility requires that readers have autonomous identities.

Mulvey’s contention that film offers a satisfying degree of voyeuristic separation seems to resonate with Lutie’s initial view that cinema serves as a form of escapism, offering a narrative arc that will “take her mind away from these fears” of poverty (412). As Lutie watches the “technicolor world,” however, she realizes that “the glitter on the screen did

nothing to dispel her sense of panic. She kept thinking it had nothing to do with her” (413). The film fails to “act out a complex process of likeness and difference” because for Lutie, the sense of voyeuristic separation is too strong. She thinks, “the picture didn’t make sense...the only worry was whether the heroine in a sequined evening gown would eventually get the hero in a top hat and tails out of the clutches of a red-headed female spy who lolled on wide divans dressed in white velvet dinner suits” (413).

In her detailed description of the female character’s appearances, Lutie focuses almost exclusively on racial and class divisions between her and the female characters: with expensive outfits and red hair, these actresses do not code for “visual and erotic impact” but instead signify material wealth and whiteness. Lutie further removes herself from these characters by calling them “heroine” or “female spy,” signaling that she views the actresses as foils, or one-dimensional archetypes, rather than sympathetic characters. In this way, Lutie’s summary literally places the male protagonist at its center, defining the heroine and villain almost exclusively by their relationship to the hero.

Within the scene, Lutie, watching the narrative action, ironically cannot identify with a film that appears to position its female characters as objects of the voyeuristic gaze. Instead, she reads the film as “glitter on the screen,” viewing the plot as entirely removed from her experience “because there were no dirty little rooms, no narrow crowded streets, no children with police records, no worries about rent and gas bills” (412). Lutie leaves in the middle of film, signaling the screen’s failure to evoke, as Mulvey writes, “a fascination with likeness and recognition” (836). Implicit in Lutie’s reaction to the film is the emphasis placed on socioeconomic standing rather than womanhood as key to constructing an identity. Indeed, after her son’s arrest, Lutie sits in the waiting room of a Children’s Shelter, and,

looking at the women crowding the Shelter, thinks, “we’re all here because we’re all poor” (409).

Laura Mulvey writes that cinema’s “formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it” (834). Likewise, Lutie’s reading of the film reveals her own obsession with Franklin and socioeconomic status, at the expense of an awareness of her identity as a black woman. Lutie does first learn of Franklin’s “American Dream” when working in a wealthy Connecticut home that looked “like something in the movies” (38). A household maid, Lutie, “after a year of listening to their talk.... absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and planned it out carefully enough” (43). Lutie’s initial engagement with the quintessential success story therefore suggests her seemingly inextricable tie to voyeurism. Even when Lutie does not function as the object of the gaze, she appears to figure as a voyeur upon the “American Dream,” listening to, rather than participating in, the conversation.

Lutie’s highly visual relation to the “American Dream” suggests the incompleteness of Althusser’s analysis that individuals must be incorporated into a power structure through direct speech. Lutie gains unstable access to the quintessential success story through absorbing the conversation of white businessmen who do not even seem to notice the black maid. Throughout *The Street*, Lutie appears to imbed her aspiration in the “American Dream” narrative using visual tools such as looking rather than active participation. As Lutie walks down the Harlem streets, she recalls a scene from Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography where the founding father strolls down a Philadelphia avenue eating bread rolls. Lutie, who just recently purchased bread, thinks, “You and Ben Franklin. You ought to take one out and

start eating it as you walk along 116<sup>th</sup> Street” (64). Whereas the editors of Franklin’s autobiography encouraged readers to imagine “daily walk and conversation” with the founding father, Lutie appears to directly insert herself into his discourse by reenacting a scene from his autobiography (i). While at first this reenactment might point to Lutie’s autonomy, I would argue instead that it continues to emphasize that neither Lutie nor any representative of the “American Dream” discourse actively incorporate her into its structure.

This reenactment, however, does give Lutie a “feeling of self confidence,” and she begins to notice how “the glow from the sunset was making the street radiant” (64). During a later scene, Petry describes again how “the sun transformed everything it shone on... Even the drab brick of the buildings was altered to a deep rosy pinkness” (195). Lutie’s emphasis on the “glow,” however, suggests the transient nature of any “transformation,” ironically undermining any feeling of autonomy her identification with Franklin gives. In a further irony, Lutie’s view of the “rosy pink” buildings mirrors the language that Lutie’s Super uses to sexualize her body. Petry writes about the Super and Lutie: “He got his first good look at her in daylight. Her eyes were big and dark and her mouth was rosy with lipstick” (100). The scene, told from the Super’s perspective, excludes Lutie from the possibility of narrative authority by using passive voice to frame her appearance. Her mouth, for example, becomes a distinct feature that she does not paint rosy with lipstick but rather, simply *was* rosy. The light therefore begins to act as a source of confinement, segmenting Lutie’s body into passive objects and removing her from the possibility of achieving an autonomous identity

Lutie’s passive position is underscored in a later scene when, travelling on a train towards Harlem, she feels “the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs” (57). These “white men” not only cast

Lutie, or more precisely, Lutie's legs, as the object of their desire, but do so by "appraising looks," a financial term that recalls both slave traders and the businessmen whose talk Lutie absorbed. In this way, Petry adds in a capitalist dimension to Lutie's subjugated position, suggesting that, rather than incorporate Lutie into the socioeconomic structures that might allow her to access the "American Dream," the male gaze works in a capitalistic framework to render her subjected to appraisal.

Lutie, however, does not appear to realize that the very group of people who taught Lutie about the "American Dream" underscore her "female/passive" position by casting an appraising gaze on her body. Rather, as she leaves the train, she thinks that she leaves the "moist looks" of white men behind. As Lutie stands at the subway entrance, she watches as her fellow Harlemites "scattered in all directions, laughing and talking to each other" (58). Here, Petry once again depicts Lutie through her role as onlooker, suggesting that Lutie does not entirely belong in either the capitalist world of the white men, or the "laughing" Harlem community. Lutie's career choice as a singer, however, complicates Lutie's isolated position by suggesting that blues music paradoxically makes her an embodiment of the black working class experience that separates her from the audience watching her performance. This relationship becomes particularly evident in the Junto Club scene where, as Lutie sings, her audience begins to identify with her song. Petry employs the image of mirrors throughout the scene, suggesting that Lutie's voice serves as a reflection of the working class experience she so desires to escape.

Lutie, after a difficult day at work, goes to the nightclub "hungry for the sight and sound of other young people" (144). Sitting at the bar, Lutie watches the club through the "sparkle of the big mirror" (144). This mirror seems to transform the club, "shining" the

liquor bottles so that they had “the appearance of being filled with liquid, molten gold,” and reflecting the dancing men and women so they “had a kind of buoyancy around them” (145-6). Leaving behind the “creeping silence” of her apartment, Lutie appears to project her own fantasy of a golden happy ending onto her surroundings. Petry, however, highlights the impossibility of this fantasy by pointing out that Lutie could only “for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things she lacked” (144).

As Lutie begins to sing a blues song, Petry reveals that in reality, Lutie’s voice allows her to join the community of the Junto Club while simultaneously alienating her by attracting the gaze of the audience upon her body. As she sings *There’s no sun, Darlin’. There’s no fun, Darlin’*:

The men and women crowded at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn’t in the words—a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died. (148)

Lutie becomes the center of the club, drawing the eyes of the crowd towards her voice. In one of the few moments of the text where Lutie appears to control the gaze, rather than be subjected to it, Lutie’s voice “makes” the song important, suggesting that Lutie acts as an individual to create, or build, a story. W.E.B. Dubois, writing of sorrow songs, notes that “they are the music of unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing towards a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (1). As Lutie sings, her voice therefore appears to create a sorrow song, the sense of “unvoiced longing” echoed in the fact that her song told “a story that wasn’t in the words.”

Although the story that Lutie tells exists outside of words, her audience appears to engage in conversation with the song, “adding to it until the day they died” (148). Whereas

Franklin encourages readers to learn his story by reading his textual autobiography, Lutie therefore seems to create a dialogic relationship between her story and her audience by putting forth a narrative they have known since birth. Lutie, who cannot participate in any sort of authentic conversation with Franklin's discourse, instead enters into a dialogue with her working class audience. As such, Lutie becomes a sort screen for her audience, acting out, as Mulvey describes, a "process of likeness and difference" in her ability to voice their collective story while still maintaining a degree of "voyeuristic separation" by sitting alone at the bar.

Petry complicates this position of "likeness and difference," however, by suggesting that Lutie does not want her listeners to identify with her story and further, that Lutie views her singing as a way to "leave this street and these dark narrow rooms and these walls that pressed in against her" (207). Whereas Mulvey positions the cinematic screen as "the glamorous impersonat[ing] the ordinary," Lutie instead sees herself as leaving behind the "ordinary" for the "glamorous."

Boots Smith, the Junto Club's piano man, apparently offers Lutie a means towards leaving a glamorous lifestyle when he asks Lutie to perform with his band at a different club. Despite knowing that Boots's offer serves as "tantalizing bait" in order to seduce her, Lutie nonetheless agrees (151). After she accepts the job, she "started building a picture of herself standing before a microphone in a long taffeta dress that whispered sweetly as she moved; of a room full of dancers who paused in their dancing to listen as she sang. Their faces were expectant, worshipping, as they looked up at her" (207). Here, Lutie invokes the language of the "self made" man by creating an image of herself as the central figure in the room, the successful singer who commands the attention of those around her. This "picture" is not

representative of her lived experience, and her emphasis on worship further suggests that the dancers do not engage in any sort of conversation with Lutie's song. Listening to her voice, they do not add anything to the scene except for their gaze.

The emphasis Lutie places on the voyeuristic look serves to call forth, as well, the image of the "blues woman." Kimberly Drake, in her analysis of this musical figure, writes, "the blues woman makes use of her voice and her body, aspects of her person traditionally controlled by men, to give herself agency in the public realm" (72). Lutie appears to attain this agency by imagining herself in front of a microphone, her voice so powerful that she pauses any movement in the ballroom. Lutie's taffeta gown compounds this sense of empowerment. As scholar Hazel Carby suggests, "the visual display of spangled dresses...reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (481). Returning to Mulvey's analysis of cinema, one can read this reclamation in terms "recoding" appearance in order to create a sense of autonomy that includes, but is not limited to, "visual and erotic impact."

Petry undermines Lutie's impact by suggesting that Lutie can only gain complete control over the gaze when she imagines a performance. On the actual night of Lutie's singing debut, she looks out at the crowd of men and women and thinks, "It doesn't make much difference who sings or whether they sing badly or well, because nobody really listens" (224). While Drake and Carby's analysis of the blues woman relies on the fact that the woman is "seen," and therefore derives a measure of agency from the look of others, Lutie does not fully reclaim the gaze because, although center stage, she is aware that the crowd was too busy "making love or quarreling or drinking or dancing" to watch her performance (224).

Boots Smith, “waiting, watching” as Lutie performs, accentuates her passivity within the scene. Boots’s facial expressions, rather than her own opinions, measure her performance: “each time she sang, the smile of satisfaction on Boots’ face increased” (223). Although Petry writes the scene largely from Lutie’s perspective, Lutie’s point of view only further emphasizes her lack of control. As she sings into the microphone, Lutie feels only “a blur and a mist of happiness” (223). This image, alluding perhaps to the sorrow song’s “misty wanderings,” warns readers that Lutie will be unable to see her way through the mist and will fail to climb upwards towards her “American Dream.”

The dancers within the scene continue to highlight Lutie’s position as object and subject of the gaze as they “moved in front of her, rocking and swaying. Some of them even sang with her” (224). The wall of dancers amplifies Lutie’s lack of control within the situation as she once again finds her song repossessed and added to by her audience. Kimberly Drake suggests that such a relationship between singer and audience is common within the blues genre, where the “song acts as a reflection on and interpretation of a common social problem, allowing members of the audience to discover themselves mirrored by the singer; they then contemplate the singer’s interpretation and develop their own” (72). Music and personal narrative therefore appear here to come together in order to suggest that Lutie’s paradoxical position as both performer and object of her music excludes her from the individualistic pursuit of the “American Dream” narrative penned by Franklin.

Lutie’s shift from subject of to subjected to her music echoes the process Louis Althusser defines as “interpellation.” For Althusser, “interpellation” points to the power of language in transforming an individual from an active participant into a passive subject. Althusser offers the example of a policeman calling out “Hey, you there!” in order

to illustrate this transformation (Althusser, 1). Despite the fact that the policeman yells “you there” in a crowded street, “one individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round...recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing” (Althusser, 1). In this moment of recognition, and subsequent turning around, the individual “becomes a subject” (Althusser, 1). As Peter Booker adds, not only does the individual become a subject, but also becomes subjected to “the general ideological codes of law and criminality” (Booker, 158). In other words, while the individual gains subjecthood, i.e. identity, he is simultaneously incorporated into the power structure of an other (in the policeman example, the legal system).

Lutie’s song performs an inversion of “interpellation:” her audience’s recognition of themselves within her music renders Lutie a subject of and subjected to the “ideological codes” of the black working class. Neither fully the figure who “hails” nor the individual “hailed,” Lutie therefore nonetheless finds herself incorporated into lower working class. Ironically, Lutie desires to leave this class behind precisely because of the powerlessness implied within its structure.

The only other female character to experience “interpellation” within the novel is Miss Rinner, a racist white teacher who finds herself subjected to the chants of her Harlem students. Miss Rinner offers a foil to Lutie’s character as both women share a similar socioeconomic background, but experience the gaze differently based on their racial identities. This distinction makes all the difference in allowing Miss Rinner to believe she has a degree of control over her “performance” as a teacher.

Petry suggests that Miss Rinner and Lutie are both subjected to a similarly appropriative gaze by describing the teacher’s walk to the train station:

The people on the street either examined her dispassionately, as though she were a monstrosity, or else they looked past her, looked through her as though she didn't exist. Some of them stared at her with unconcealed hate in their eyes or equally unconcealed and jeering laughter. (331)

Miss Rinner finds herself the object of another's voyeuristic gaze, one that either reduces her to a "monstrosity" or does not see her at all. The phrasing of "examined" and "looked through" further suggests that Miss Rinner figures as a voyeuristic object, quickly appraised based on her physical body rather than a more in depth consideration of her character.

In noticing the "unconcealed hate" and "jeering laughter," however, Miss Rinner frames herself as the object of the same gaze that she turns outwards. In an earlier chapter, Lutie thinks that the "Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke" (199). Miss Rinner, aware of the gendered gaze upon her body that renders her either monstrous or invisible, therefore projects a similarly reductive gaze upon the people on the street as well as her Harlem students. Importantly, Miss Rinner's gaze does not center on gender, but rather reduces her students to objects representative of racial stereotypes. Looking at her classroom, she thinks, "there was a sudden, reckless violence about them and about their parents that terrified her"—and her relationship to the students can be aptly summarized by her view of their gaze as "a look that never failed to infuriate her at the same time that it frightened her" (331, 333).

In her Harlem classroom, Miss Rinner believes that she can nonetheless maintain a degree of control over her students because of her relation to the public school education system. As she sends students on pointless errands rather than teach lessons, she thinks, "Because the school was in Harlem she knew she wasn't expected to do anything else" (330). Here, Miss Rinner reveals both her awareness that she is subject to the expectations of her school system and also that these expectations give her the power to devote "most of the day

to maintaining order” (330). However, Miss Rinner loses much of her authority once she leaves the classroom and walks to the train station. As she walks on the street, she hears the chanting of students behind her, “O! Miss Rinner/Is a Awful Sinner. / She sins all day/ She sins all night. / Won’t get a man/ Just for spite” (333, 334). Her students use almost song-like chants in order to disempower Miss Rinner, connecting her with Lutie Johnson, who, in an earlier scene, sings to herself, “Ain’t no restin’ place for a sinner like me” (17).

Read together, Lutie’s song and Miss Rinner’s chant suggest that the characters appear as two sides of the same coin. As women living outside the convention of marriage, Lutie and Miss Rinner are viewed as either highly sexualized or monstrous in large part because they “won’t get a man.” Unlike Lutie, however, Miss Rinner sustains her position as the subject “hailed” by language. As she walks down the street, Miss Rinner hears her students’ chant and “turned to glare at them” (333). In turning around, Miss Rinner “becomes a subject.” Her glare suggests the role of the gaze in rendering her students “motionless, silent, innocent” (333). The fact that the students have shifted from animalistic to innocent, however, points not only to the deceptiveness of Miss Rinner’s gaze but also to its ineffectiveness. As soon as she turns away from the students, they chant again. Miss Rinner therefore becomes incorporated into the power structure of an other, the group of students who turn language against Miss Rinner in order to reveal her lack of control as a teacher.

In this way, Miss Rinner appears unaware that her position as subject of the public school system does not afford her an authoritative position. Rather, she holds an illusion that she can maintain order through performing the expectations of a Harlem teacher, rather than engaging in dialogue with her students through lessons. Miss Rinner’s lack of self awareness is revealed in her fantasy that “she would be transferred to a school where the children were

blond, blue-eyed little girls” (329). The school system, however, rejects Miss Rinner’s applications for transfer, suggesting that, although she believes her teaching position offers her a degree of authority, Miss Rinner is ultimately still subjected to the laws of her structure.

When considered with Mulvey in mind, Miss Rinner’s double position as subject and subjected to the public school system can be read as reflective of her established sexual role as a passive object. Indeed, Miss Rinner appears to view her relationship to teaching through what Mulvey might term as a cinematic screen. Watching in horror as her Harlem students act in ways so incomprehensible that she labels them as “animals,” Miss Rinner desires to abandon the Harlem theater for a cast of white students whose appearances reflect her own experience (329). However, as a woman, Miss Rinner is subjected to a similarly harsh cinematic gaze, as her students view her as a villain defined by her monstrous “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Ultimately, then, Miss Rinner appears to participate in a patriarchal structure that dehumanizes both herself and her students. This participation points to a distinction between Lutie and Miss Rinner: while Miss Rinner chooses to participate in this structure by casting her own reductive gaze, Lutie can only be passively absorbed into the discourse. Such a distinction offers Lutie a degree of self-awareness that Miss Rinner does not have, because Lutie is not incorporated into the laws of her structure.

Interestingly, as the only teacher described within *The Street*, Miss Rinner’s experience most closely resembles Petry’s own biography. A pharmacist’s daughter, Petry grew up in the same quiet Connecticut town that her character, Lutie, worked as a maid. After college, Petry moved to Harlem where, among many professions as an activist, journalist, and writer, she also worked in a Harlem elementary school (Griffin, 81). In a radio interview for the Pathways to Children’s Literature program, Petry remembers:

I had been working there—[116th Street, the street in *The Street*]— in a school. There was an after school program and I was very much involved in it and of course I must point out to you that of all the shocks that I ever had I think that that area at that time was the biggest one because I had been brought up in a New England village where we even had a village green—a very beautiful village—and when I began to work in that area—in that school. ... And the youngsters who . . . well they had keys around their necks they had no place to go after school because there wasn't anybody home. And, well, I wrote *The Street* because I was so furious and I was so upset ... and I still am and I expect I always will be until all children in areas everywhere, no matter what the colors of their skin, until the point where there is somebody home and where the house is a good place to be and where the streets are good places to be. (Dingledine, 100)

Petry perhaps outlines here her own moment of shock when she realized that her middle class background incorporated her into a power structure that barred her from understanding the experience of Harlem students. In her biography of Petry, Farah Jasmine Griffin offers further evidence for such a reading, suggesting that Petry did not write about the black bourgeoisie because “she felt like an outsider and never completely identified with the social world of the black elite” (84). Choosing, instead, to focus on the black working class, Petry therefore places herself between two distinct groups, neither of which she recognized as her own. As such, one can read *Miss Rinner* not as a mirror of Petry, but instead as a parody of Petry’s alienated position as a comfortably middle class woman who did not identify with the values associated with her elite upbringing. Faced with the disparity between her background and that of her students, however, Petry does not leave the community behind, but instead writes her own narrative of the street.

This narrative points to Petry’s awareness that her identity as a black woman allowed her to articulate Lutie’s narrative with a clarity that was perhaps compounded by her simultaneous position as outsider, or voyeur, upon the lower working class experience. In this way, one can read *The Street* as Petry’s challenge to the universality of any one aspect of identity in expressing lived experience. As Petry suggests in the particular case of the “American Dream,” this sort of universalizing discourse often presupposes an autonomous

identity that women are generally excluded from because the gaze renders them objects of voyeurism. Even Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation does not offer a perfectly compatible frame for Lutie Johnson's narrative. Petry therefore appears to also reject traditional literary genres by creating a parody of herself in the figure of a white woman, rather than attempt to take on the autobiographical form constantly referred to in *The Street* through Lutie's engagement with Benjamin Franklin. As such, Petry brings together autobiography and parody to suggest the importance of intersectional, rather than universal representations of identity. Consistent with the ambiguous and intersectional representation of black female characters in her novel, Petry undermines even her own authorial position by suggesting that she herself cannot fully express the black American woman's experience in one, singular, text.

## Chapter Four:

### Langston Hughes and the Fragmented American Dream

Throughout his career, Langston Hughes maintained that his poetic voice spoke from and for a distinctly African American experience. Trying his hand at poetry during the Depression, Hughes was “determined to find out” if he could succeed even in such untenable conditions “by taking *my* poetry, to *my* people. After all, I wrote about Negroes, and primarily *for* Negroes” (*The Big Sea*, 72). Hughes’s emphasis on the “I,” along with his desire to write for a specific audience and from a specific point of view, appears to match notions of poetic authority that theorist Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as characteristic of the genre. Bakhtin’s analysis of poetry led him to claim that, while the novel allows for the author to orchestrate a multitude of voices and ideas in order to create complicated narrative, the poet employs language as a “a pure and direct expression of his own intention” (285).

This “pure expression” appears to fall in line with Hughes’s definition of a poet as “a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country” (408). However, a closer look at Hughes’s biography suggests that these three categories did not have as distinct boundaries as one might initially imagine. This difference derives from the fact that, while Bakhtin viewed poetry through a conventional lens specific to Eastern European and Russian literature, Hughes approached writing with the purpose of incorporating the black American experience into the literary

canon by means of innovative poetic form. Adam Lively, in his analysis of the historical context that framed the beginning of Hughes's career, writes that "the 1920s, saw the birth of the idea of blacks as the inside outsiders of modern life" (7). As a black man, Hughes was at once brought into the discourse of the "American Dream" through his U.S. citizenship, while simultaneously rendered outside of its parameters because, as Lloyd Brown articulates, "the dream of a progressive society based on individual fulfillment and social harmony...[was] written down for white folks" (17).

Hughes often blended blues music with his poetry as a means to express his position as a black poet seeking the success promised by the "American Dream" while aware that this promise was made by and for the white majority. In his seminal work on the African diaspora, *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy suggests the blues music offered an apt medium for such expression because "their special power derives from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity" (73). Jazz music, like its singers and audience, existed in an "unsteady" time and space, a sort of no man's land that both adhered to and undermined the conventions that characterized the 20th century.

The "doubleness" of Hughes's experience suggests that his poetry complicated modern literary convention and aesthetic. His work therefore does not appear to offer the directness that Bakhtin defined as central to the poetic genre. However, whereas Bakhtin's dialogic and monologic discourse focuses on the novel, his model nonetheless offers a useful

frame for understanding Hughes's early poetry, which simultaneously claims an authoritative poetic speaker, "I," while also deploying various voices in order to more fully express the modern African American experience. By considering poems such as "Formula," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Afro-American Fragment," and "Same in Blues," I will ultimately develop a revised version of Bakhtinian analysis, one that no longer distinguishes between novels and poetry as monologic and dialogic generic traditions, but rather considers the radical ways in which Hughes expands upon the "I" narrative to encompass a multitude of voices in order to create an alternative vision of the "American Dream."

Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote the *Dialogic Imagination* while in exile from the Soviet Union, opens his essay on the "Discourse of the Novel" by clarifying why he chose to focus his analysis on the novel rather than any other genre. Bakhtin begins by imagining the "intention" of a word "in the form of a ray of light" (277). This "ray" creates a pattern of color and light as it travels towards the actual word, creating a "spectral dispersion" or "atmosphere" around the word itself. The atmosphere as envisioned by Bakhtin encompasses all the value judgments, beliefs, and associations that the actual word invokes and it is this "atmosphere" that surrounds that word and "makes the facets of the image sparkle" (277). A novel, with its many different characters, each with their own "intentions," figures as a kaleidoscope, a collection of these sparkling images that "fully unfold, achieve full complexity and depth" (278).

Bakhtin compares this more “complex” use of language to the “direct” discourse of the poetic genre. He writes, “Everything that the poet sees, understands and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language” (285). Whereas the action of a novel unfolds in the relationship between its characters or the tension between different ideological values presented, a poem aims to produce an indisputable, singular point of view that is reflected in a cohesive voice. As Jacob Blevin claims, “the primary difference between monologic poetic discourse and dialogic novelistic discourse is that poetry represents the ‘author’s direct discourse,’ while the author of the novel treats all discourses as objects of representation and sources of dialogue” (15).

Bakhtin does, however, acknowledge that poetry can produce a dialogic narrative: “a certain latitude for heteroglossia exists only in the ‘low’ poetic genres—in the satiric and comic genres” (287). This latitude is limited in nature because any perspective presented other than the poet’s “appears, in essence, as a *thing*...not in the capacity of another language carrying its own particular points of view, about which one can say things not expressible in one’s own language” (287). In other words, while poetry may present “discourses as objects of representations,” these objects do not act as “sources of dialogue” but are rather complete “things” carefully molded by the poet’s hand.

While Hughes may not have been familiar with this Bakhtinian analysis, he often challenged the view of poetry as “direct discourse” by writing his own satirical versions of

“highbrow” poetry. These satires worked as well to challenge a common criticism of Hughes’s oeuvre as lacking “cultured” writing. Countee Cullen, one of Hughes’s most well-known rivals and critics, wondered, for example in a review of *The Weary Blues*, if many of the poems “really belong to that dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry” (Cullen 1926, 74). Writing that Hughes’s poems focused too much “on strictly Negro themes,” Cullen argued that *The Weary Blues* failed “because of its dissociation from the traditionally poetic” (74).

Hughes’s “Formula,” published later that year, appears to parody this notion of the “traditionally poetic.” Throughout the poem, Hughes presents the conventional view of poetry as a “lofty” genre and suggests that this discourse, and as well as the elitist belief systems dispersed through it, serve as objects to be parodied:

Poetry should treat  
    Of lofty things  
Soaring thoughts  
    And birds with wings.

The Muse of Poetry  
    Should not know  
That roses  
    In manure grow.  
The Muse of Poetry  
    Should not care  
That Earthly pain  
    Is everywhere.  
Poetry!  
    Treats of lofty things:  
Soaring thoughts  
    And birds with wings. (*Collected Poems*, 74)

Employing the directive “should,” the speaker in the poem appears to offer a lesson on what does and does not count as a poem. “Formula’s” own linear rhyme scheme, with its stanzas made up of almost equally long phrases leading perfectly one into the next, suggests that a poem should follow the patterns traditional to lyrical poetry.

Hughes begins to satirize this sort of “traditional” verse in his characterization of the “Muse of Poetry” as a sheltered being who appears out of touch with “earthly pain” and the possibility for this pain to bloom into narratives as beautiful as roses. The poem’s title points to this parody, suggesting that as long as the poet follows certain rules, he will be able to create a perfect work. This formulaic understanding of poetry, however, undermines the poet’s own skill and creativity.

In using satire to depict “high” art as formulaic, Hughes appears to reenact Bakhtin’s argument that only “low poetry,” i.e. satire, can engage in dialogue with other discourses. I do not believe, however, that Hughes employed satire solely as a means to criticize the tendency of his poetic colleagues towards “lofty things.” By suggesting that “soaring” poetry may derive from roses grown in manure, Hughes appears rather to question the distinctions Cullen makes between what is and what is not poetically beautiful. Birds, after all, must take flight from some rooted, earthly thing.

Hughes continues to problematize the distinctions between “high” and “low” art by claiming that it was precisely the African American poet’s duty to write about what Cullen deemed as the un-poetic subject of racial identity. Hughes offers the most comprehensive

outline of this duty in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” an essay he wrote as a response to the “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (12). Claiming that this “urge” plays out mainly in the black American middle class, Hughes condemns the elitism of African Americans who believed that moving upwards in society meant progressing towards whiteness rather than towards a more empowering vision of blackness. This sort of belief manifests itself as the “Racial Mountain,” and Hughes suggests that in order to overcome the “mountain,” young black American artists must “express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (1).

Hughes’s emphasis on the “individual,” and his desire for black poets to express the “dark-skinned” experience, appears to match up with Bakhtin’s theory that the poetic genre operates through the “eyes of a given language” and rarely ventures outside of this singular perspective. The monologic elements of Hughes’s argument in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” are further crystallized in the essay’s end. Returning to the anecdote of the young poet, Hughes writes, “So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world” (1). Framing race as a singular “world,” Hughes suggests that “Negro poems” function as distinct units and do not require any “alien languages” to structure their narratives. This structure appears to be the case for Hughes’s poetry, for he writes that “most

of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know” (1).

Hughes therefore suggests that his poetic discourse plays out only in the black American “racial world,” rooting itself in his personal experience and rejecting interaction with “any other world.” This argument, despite its apparently monologic tendencies, operates as a double dialogue—a way to contend with Countee Cullen as well as formulate a distinctly black American form of literary criticism.

One of Hughes’s earliest poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” gives the similar appearance of establishing a monologic voice by employing a universalizing “I” as its seemingly all-knowing and definitively black American narrator. This “I” centers on the image of rivers, asserting its position as the collective voice of the “Negro” that overcomes geographic difference in order to create a cohesive narrative of African American history:

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.  
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.  
I've known rivers.  
Ancient, dusky rivers.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (*Collected Poems* 23)

In his autobiography, Hughes recalls writing “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” while looking out onto the Mississippi and remembering what it “had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage”

(55). The repetitive “I” in the poem then, that works to establish the authority of the “Negro” voice, can be read as a radical challenge to the historically passive position of African Americans in relation to rivers. As the “I” raises pyramids, bathes in the river, and looks, hears, and sees all aspects of the rivers, Hughes reorients the position of the “Negro” as an influential participant in history. Jeff Westover has pointed out that this anaphoric “I” also links the poem’s structure to the performance of an African storyteller, locating the speaker’s voice within a specifically African context (1221). Indeed, the only specifically White presence named in verse, Abraham Lincoln, is placed at the end of a line, framed by two “I” statements and absorbed into the descriptive language of the “golden” Mississippi. While Hughes invokes the traumatic history of bondage, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” also serves as an empowering poetic narrative, one that affirms the centrality of the “Negro” voice and further, as Westover suggests, “challenges its projected audience to conceive of itself as a cohesive community despite its disparate geography” (1222).

The fact that within the poem itself the “Negro” speaks of rivers in the past tense suggests, however, that this “cohesive” vision exists in some temporality distinct from the present moment of speaking. Yogita Goyal has convincingly differentiated between how those in an established nation-state conceive of time and how those in the diaspora think of temporality. She suggests, “while nation time links past, present, and future in a march towards progress, diaspora time emphasizes the breaks and discontinuities in such a movement, recalling the trauma of the Middle Passage” (15). As the “I” of the poem

describes the African American's' journey from the "Euphrates" to the "Mississippi," the speaker's use of the past tense therefore underscores that the "march towards progress" suggested by the flow of rivers is "broken" by the fact this march is out of time with the current African American experience.

Famisha Brown reframes this "out of time" characteristic of the speaker by reading the "I" as a mythic figure:

Hughes enumerates rivers associated with African American heritage and history to evoke a mystical sense of the eternal presence of the speaking "I." From the beginnings of recorded history, "the Euphrates"; through the greatness of empire and civilization, "the Nile" and its "pyramids"; through slavery and freedom, "the Mississippi"—the voice proclaims its presence and knowledge. (68)

This emphasis on the "mystical" further works to remove the poem's "I" from the everyday, suggesting that the voice's all-knowing and authoritative presence cannot exist in any practical reality. Indeed, by shifting from river to river, the poem reveals a sense of placelessness that is compounded by the free flowing nature of the river currents that form the poem's central image. The river therefore offers a dual narrative: the first, an affirming vision of history that places the "negro" at its center, and the second, a meditation on the trauma of dislocation that caused this history to hinge upon rivers, along with other bodies of water such as the Atlantic, that carry with them memories of exile.

This second narrative of dislocation is made more obvious to readers by the fact that Hughes dedicated "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to W.E.B. Dubois, whose most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pays a similar attention to the complex relationship between

placelessness and the black American experience. Dubois writes, “One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1). Dubois terms this “twoness,” “double consciousness,” arguing that the main wish of an African American is to be both “a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1). Dubois’s analysis of black American consciousness invokes the “American Dream” and suggests that the African American is doubly excluded from such opportunity. This exclusion plays out first in his identity as the “Negro” outsider, and second in his failed attempts to merge the “Negro” with the “American” identity.

In “Afro-American Fragment,” Hughes invokes Duboisian thought by creating a narrator who is similarly unable to merge his awareness of his African heritage with his identity as a member of the diaspora. Language serves to illustrate the incompatibility of the narrator’s “two souls:” the “I” can hear the “strange un-Negro tongue” but cannot engage with it in any meaningful way just as the exile recalls his origins, but cannot return home.

So long,  
So far away  
Is Africa.  
Not even memories alive  
Save those that history books create,  
Save those that songs  
Beat back into the blood—  
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung  
In strange un-Negro tongue—  
So long,

So far away  
Is Africa. Subdued and time-lost  
Are the drums—and yet  
Through some vast mist of race  
There comes this song  
I do not understand  
This song of atavistic land,  
Of bitter yearnings lost  
Without a place—  
So long,  
So far away  
Is Africa's  
Dark face. (*Collected Poems* 129)

If “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” renders Africa in relatively “romantic” terms, then “Afro-American Fragment” serves to counteract this view of the “motherland” by focusing on what Jeff Westover has noted as the “alienation and disunity” of the African Diasporic experience (1221). The poem’s narrator, speaking in the present tense, emphasizes what Goyal would term the “breaks and discontinuities” in his perception of how time operated in order to render him a member of the diaspora, rather than as part of the African nation-state.

The poem’s short lines emphasize this break, appearing like fragmented sentences with the enjambment leaving the right half of the page an exercise in emptiness. The narrator appears preoccupied with this sense of absence. While still a singular “I,” he announces his presence only once within the poem, the “I do not understand,” suggesting that not only is he lost within the narrative of the Diaspora, but that he is also lost in large part because he does not understand the “atavistic land.” The “double consciousness” as articulated by DuBois therefore figures here as the “fragmentary” nature of the narrator’s understanding of self. The “I” is unable to fit together his position as a member of the diaspora with his African origins.

As such, even his senses become split—he can hear clearly the “songs” but he cannot see “Africa’s dark face.”

In *Dusk of Dawn*, Dubois writes, “As I face Africa, I ask myself: what is it between us that constitutes a tie that I can feel better than I can explain?” (Gilroy, 126). Hughes’s “Afro-American Fragment” reformulates this question by suggesting that the narrator cannot even “face Africa” because he does not have the language needed in order to understand its “tongue.” The “alien language” as imagined by Bakhtin shifts here to a language of lack, an absence of understanding that haunts the narrator with the persistence of beating drums.

Hughes, on his first trip to America, felt this absence profoundly when the native Africans refused to see him as “Negro.” He recalls in the *The Big Sea*, “You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family...In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*” (11). When Hughes visited Burutu, the native Kru tribe refused to allow him to see the Omali dance because he is “impure,” explaining “White man never go see Ju-Ju” (118). Genealogy here becomes reminiscent of the split between monologic and dialogic discourse: race as understood by the Kru tribe appears “pure,” the “direct expression” of blackness, while Hughes’s racial identity becomes fragmented, a mixing together of “different kinds of blood.” In his “fragmented” racial identity, Hughes therefore becomes exiled from both the “all black” of the Kru tribe and the “pure white” implicit in the discourse of the “American Dream.” Hughes illustrates his alienated position by writing that, unable to watch the Omali dance, he spent the night in

a docked English ship, a distance from the African coast yet not quite on solid European land. Like the “I” in “Afro-American Fragment,” he hears “far off...the drums of the Omali,” but, sleeping on the “sinister ships” of the “white strong men” cannot engage with the tribal dance in any meaningful way (120).

“Afro-American Fragment,” therefore offers three distinct point of views: the “I” of the diaspora, the “I” of Hughes’s personal experience, and the “we” of the Africans who rejected Hughes as a fellow black man. I also read a fourth “discourse” in the poem, that of silence, or the “strange” language that fragments the poem and the speaker’s identity. This fourth discourse figures in the “song I do not understand,” alluding to the presence of other fragmentary languages that, if brought together to form a whole, could perhaps allow the poem’s speaker to engage with the “atavistic land.” These other languages, however, do not enter into the poem. As such the narrator’s inability to engage with the discourse of absence or fragmentation serves as a driving force within the poem, making the narrator aware of “bitter yearnings lost,” but leaving him unsure of what, exactly, he has lost.

The fact that this “loss” manifests itself through song anticipates Hughes’s turn to the Blues as a way to engage with the black American’s “inside outsider” position as both a “Negro” and an “American.” In his autobiography, Hughes explains this turn as a response to the unhappy time he spent working in a Washington D.C. Laundromat: “Folks! Start out with nothing sometime and see how long it takes to work up to something” (205). Isolating this sentence in its own paragraph, Hughes continues after the break, “I was cold and half-

hungry, so I wrote a great many poems...I began to write poems in the manner of the Negro blues and the spirituals” (205). Here, Hughes invokes the narrative of the “American Dream,” but instead of offering a romanticized account of his “humble beginnings,” he undermines the genre by pointing out that his desire to “work up to something” through industry leaves him miserable and still impoverished. Hughes later gains success not through business ventures, as Benjamin Franklin does via the printing trade, but rather by expressing his emotions in poems derived from the “Negro” musical tradition.

Hughes’s revision of the “American Dream” therefore centers on artistry rather than entrepreneurial skill. He continued to underscore the importance of this artistry when he wrote, “I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street.... their songs—those of Seventh Street—had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going” (167). Here, the “keep on going” once again alludes to sort of work ethic traditionally associated with the “American Dream” but is instead framed in relation to the rhythms of song. This rhythm, described as a “pulse beat,” works not only to suggest the enduring strength of the black American people, but also points to the necessity of this strength in order to overcome a history of hardship.

For Hughes, the power of the “songs they sang on Seventh Street” derives its influence from its ability to connect the hard-earned pulse of African American experiences across geographic difference. When Hughes travels to the besieged Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, he finds this “pulse” in the song of a Flamenco artist who performs

despite the nearby bursts of artillery shelling. He writes, “I found the strange, high, wild crying of her flamenco in some ways much like the primitive Negro blues of the Deep South. The words and music were filled with heartbreak, yet vibrant with resistance to defeat, and hard with the will to savor life in spite of its vicissitudes” (333). In France, Hughes again locates the “heartbreaking blues in the Paris dawn, pounding like a pulsebeat, moving like the Mississippi!” (162).

The return of the image of the Mississippi River, this time compounded by the mention of pulse, suggests the “doubleness” of song in its ability to weave a narrative thread through places as apparently different as the Deep South, Madrid, and Paris. This thread both affirms the black diaspora identity by framing it in terms of a “vibrant” global community while also pointing out that this vibrancy is a necessary reaction to the “vicissitudes” of exile. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes more directly connects song with exile by framing his description of music with images rooted in the ocean:

Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power. (167)

This depiction of the ocean emphasizes both its transience and constancy—the eternal rolling of waves traveling towards some distant shoreline. Black music as described by Hughes therefore contains the dual ability to bring together a vision of history rooted in power while also recalling the trauma of forced exile. Indeed, the fact that Hughes felt the need to

emphasize that black music contains a “rhythm that never betrays you” implies that other modes of communications have betrayed “you.”

Hughes, incorporating this “rhythm” into his poetry, inserts as well a sense of duality, or dialogism, within his verse. Amittai Aviram and Richard Hartnett argue for a dialogic understanding of poetry related to song, writing, “Lyric poetry, as its name suggests, is a kind of poetry where words engage in a complex dialogue with musical form” (204). While Aviram and Hartnett center their analysis on Wallace Stevens’s “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Hughes’s “blues poetry” offers a similarly “complex dialogue” between the written word and the blues tradition.

This “dialogue” plays out on the level of both the poem’s content and form. David Chinitz writes, “the category of blues poetry [is] to include those lyrics that make use of blues imagery, formulae and rhythms, as well as a stanza that is at least closely related to the normative blues form” (177). Hughes’s “Same in Blues” offers a particularly interesting example of how Hughes “makes use of” blues music in order to create a dialogic narrative:

I said to my baby,  
Baby, take it slow.  
I can't, she said, I can't!  
I got to go!

*There's a certain  
amount of traveling  
in a dream deferred.*

Lulu said to Leonard,  
I want a diamond ring.  
Leonard said to Lulu,  
You won't get a goddamn thing!

*A certain  
amount of nothing  
in a dream deferred.*

Daddy, daddy, daddy,  
All I want is you.  
You can have me baby—  
but my lovin' days is through.

*A certain  
amount of impotence  
in a dream deferred.*

Three parties  
On my party line—  
But that third party,  
Lord, ain't mine!

*There's liable  
to be confusion  
in a dream deferred.*

From river to river,  
Uptown and down,  
There's liable to be confusion  
when a dream gets kicked around. (*Collected Poems*, 427)

The poem, with its split of italicized and regular font, offers a visual example of the dialogic narrative. Just by glancing at the poem, it becomes clear that at least two different speech types are presented. The fact that the italicized stanzas all related to the “dream deferred” further suggests that the poem mimics a blues song in its use of italicized refrains and regularly formatted verses that tell a narrative related to, but distinct from, the refrain. Indeed, Steven Tracy has argued that “Same in Blues” follows the 8 bar pattern traditional to blues music. Placing the poem side by side with blues singer Tampa Red’s “It Hurts Me

Too,” Tracy convincingly shows that Hughes used “It Hurts Me Too” as scaffolding for the rhythm found in “Same in Blues” (82).

Tellingly, while Tracy maps the rhythmic patterns almost perfectly from the blues song to Hughes’s poetic version, Tracy is unable to pinpoint the identity of the poem’s speaker. Tracy writes under the heading of “Sex of the Speaker:” “Male and Female” (91). I would add that, although the speaker in “Same in Blues” does shift between the male “I” voice that opens the narrative and the female centered discourse surrounding Lulu and Leonard’s dialogue, a third voice emerges as well. The language of the poem’s refrains and last stanza appear genderless, and evokes rather the narrator of Hughes’s earlier poems. This apparently all-knowing speaker refers to the history of “river to river” and “dream deferred” in order to relate the collective narrative of the African Diaspora.

While the poem offers dialogic elements in its play on Blues music and in its several distinct voices, Hughes’s overarching message seems clear: the current discourse of the “American Dream” excludes black Americans. As the refrain tells readers, the dream must be deferred. This monologic bend of “Same in Blues” appears to reflect Hughes’s reading of the Blues as a musical tradition. In his introduction to *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Hughes writes:

The Blues are not group songs. When sung under normal circumstances, they are usually sung by one man or one woman alone...the Blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth (Waldron, 140).

Here, Hughes appears to define the Blues as a monologic discourse: a song performed by a singular voice in order to express a particular theme related to loneliness. His blues poetry, then, which offers up a multitude of voices—male and female, individual and collective—appears to build off the musical traditional in order to create a dialogic narrative. This shift in and of itself offers an affirming narrative of progressive movement: the lonely voice of one speaker joining with others in order to engage in a meaningful dialogue about this loneliness. Paul Gilroy writes about the dialogic relationship between written language and song:

Music, the grudging gift that supposedly compensated slaves not only for their exile from the ambiguous legacies of practical reason but for their complete exclusion from modern political society, has been refined and developed so that it provides an enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words—spoken or written. (76)

Hughes, who incorporated music into his poetry, is therefore able to “refine and develop” the written word so that it offers a mode of communication containing a degree of power beyond even the Blues.

Hughes emphasizes the power of words by inserting himself into a genealogy of black writers who left behind influential literary legacies. In *The Big Sea* he recalls thinking back “to Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, John Brown, Fred Douglass—folks who left no buildings behind them—only a wind of words fanning the bright flame of the spirit down the dark lanes of time” (233).

Known as the “Poet Laureate of Harlem” during his own time and beyond it, Hughes names here authors most known for their autobiographies and novels. Suggesting that it is their “wind of words” that allows these authors to stand the test of time, Hughes does not appear to differentiate between the genres that might have held fanned these winds. After all, although this chapter has mainly focused on his poetry, Hughes also authored plays, novels, essays, and newspaper columns.

Hughes’s ability to engage in a variety of genres, and then to mirror this diversity of style through his use of multiple poetic voices, makes it difficult to consider his work in terms of the dialogic/monologic dichotomy. Whereas Bakhtin attempted to distinguish between poetic and novelistic genres in order to underscore the powerful ability of a novel to bring together a multiplicity of voices, Hughes points to limited nature of “direct discourses” in encapsulating the “doubleness” of African American experience. His attempt to create a literary legacy based on timeless “words,” rather than any other more specific category, therefore revises the boundaries of the “American Dream,” opening up a space with borders as fluid as language itself.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Black American Authors and the Question of Authenticity**

This project began with a consideration of the motif of the “staircase to success” at the heart of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Setting the foundation for the quintessential “American Dream” narrative, this “staircase” represented each day as a steppingstone to the next, casting time and space as linear, progressive movements towards achievement. While an apparently optimistic vision, the image of ascending a staircase has a particular tint, ignoring issues of race, class, and gender that may prevent or at least impede certain groups from achieving the “American Dream.” The four authors discussed in this study destabilized this quintessential understanding of progress, exposing the gaps within the classic “success story” by reframing the ways in which we think about time, space, sight, and sound in order to express the perspective of marginalized subjects.

My analysis in Chapter One showed how Frederick Douglass offered perhaps the most literal reframing: taking on the autobiographical genre, Douglass created a narrative that, on the surface, adhered strictly to literary tradition. However, a closer look into how he constructed time and space within each autobiography revealed that Douglass radically reimagines the narrative to accommodate cyclical temporalities. I examined his reimagined literary-temporal form through Bakhtin’s notions of dialogic narrative and Jacques Derrida’s “gift of death,” suggesting that theories produced during times of exile offer compatible, but limited, frameworks for literatures sharing a similar concern. By indicating the confines of

deconstructive theory and dialogic conceptions in fully conveying Douglass's complex transition from slave to freeman, this project contended that these theories could not fully address the experience of those who find exile to be a foundation of their identity.

Moving forward to the Harlem Renaissance, this project considered Zora Neale Hurston's critical failure, her autobiography, as well as her bestselling novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Within *Their Eyes*, Hurston orchestrates themes of voice, vision, and the natural world in order to suggest that Janie ultimately derives a degree of autonomy by viewing language itself as a means to express her identity. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism offered a degree of insight into how Janie's relationship to the natural world constructs this identity to be both subject of and subjected to forces beyond its control. However, the gender dynamics within *Their Eyes* suggested the shortcomings of Emerson's patriarchal tendencies in framing the complicated experience of a marginalized subject. Just as Derrida and Bakhtin offered well matched but restricted frameworks from which to consider Douglass's autobiographies, Emerson provided a tool to help examine, though not explain, Hurston's complex narrative. Feminist scholar Laura Mulvey offered additional insight into how language and vision may coalesce in order to overturn the prevailing male/active and female/passive narrative. Building upon Mulvey's argument, this chapter interpreted the "fragmentary" rhetoric of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as representative of Hurston's view that no "force" but language itself can coherently express identity.

This complicated relationship between vision and an autonomous self took center stage in my analysis of Ann Petry's *The Street*. Throughout the novel, Lutie Johnson appears aware that her identity as a black American woman renders her the object of a voyeuristic gaze. This awareness allows her to express her experience through song, though even as she performs, Lutie remains subjected to the appropriative look of her audience. Petry compounds the degree of Lutie's subjugation by representing the protagonist as a voyeur upon "American Dream," signaling that Lutie cannot actively participate in the narrative of upward mobility because the appropriative gaze undergirds all aspects of her experience. A reading of Lutie's double position as voyeur and object of voyeurism through the psychoanalytic "x-ray" revealed that the novel's preoccupation with the "gaze" reflects Petry's own experience as a middle class, black American woman. Petry's awareness of how her gender, race, and socioeconomic status intersect to inform her experience, however, allowed the author to create a parody of herself in the figure of a white, racist teacher. This parody worked to undermine Petry's authorial voice, signaling the inability for any single voice to narrate black womanhood.

The closing chapter on Langston Hughes focused on how the "poet laureate of Harlem" coordinated a multitude of voices and genres to express a modern black identity. His "blues poetry," in particular, represented how he blended together musical and literary forms to challenge aesthetic standards that privileged tradition over invention. This inventive poetic style further complicated Bakhtin's view of the novel as the only medium that, "by

means of the social diversity of speech types” allowed each speech type to “flourish under such conditions” (263).

For both Douglass and Hughes, this dialogic understanding of writing played perhaps the most integral role in voicing an autonomous identity: bringing together multiple genres, these male authors created a cohesive body of work by reshaping literary convention. As my study on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Street* contended, however, the “individual voices” of black women did not flourish under the dialogic lens for, as Hurston and Petry reveal, black women are not automatically granted singular identities. Though Janie Crawford and Lutie Johnson create distinct visions of success, both characters converge in their awareness of how visual tools such as “looking” undercut their ability to pursue the “American Dream.” In this way, psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on “seeing through” social convention and into more complex configurations of self, offered a more compatible framework from which to consider Hurston and Petry’s stories.

My use of dialogism and psychoanalysis has disclosed a distinction between the male authors and female authors considered in this project. Whereas Douglass and Hughes employ subjects that are capable of autonomy, a condition of seeking the “American Dream,” the female protagonists in Hurston and Petry’s fiction are more clearly unable to escape the gaze implicit in patriarchal systems. While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ends on an ambiguous note, leaving readers to wonder whether or not Janie will be able to achieve some semblance of the “American Dream,” *The Street*’s final lines depict Lutie asking, “What possible good

has it done to teach people like me to write?” (435). Petry does not provide an answer, ending the novel with a rhetorical question that suggests an incompatibility between Franklin’s textual autobiography and Lutie’s highly visual engagement with the world around her.

This difference between how Petry and Hurston engage with narratives of the “American Dream” as opposed to Douglass and Hughes points to the uncertain relationship between black American literature and feminist criticism. Petry expressed this tension when, asked whether or not she cared if her books were stocked in the black literature section or the women’s literature section of a bookstore, she responded that she didn’t mind what shelf her fiction occupied, as long as the “people read them” (101).

Petry’s apparent ambivalence points to what has been a significant concern of this study—that is, what sorts of categories can we use to identify these authors? How do we effectively understand their work in relation to prevailing historical and theoretical narratives, as well as gender and racial dynamics?

These questions formed the basis of a fierce 1980s debate over the role of Western theoretical paradigms in black American literary criticism. For the majority of critics involved in this debate, these paradigms often concentrated on the recent trend towards considering African American texts through a post-structuralist framework. Barbara Christian suggested that this emphasis overshadowed the deep-rooted black American tradition of “theorizing...in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs,

in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (349). Joyce Joyce echoed this wariness of poststructuralist theorists by suggesting that such critics “have adopted a linguistic system and an accompanying world view that communicate to a small isolated audience” (339). Rather than focus on “arous[ing] the minds and emotions of black people,” this “adoption” has forced the literary critic “to serve as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them” (139).

Henry Louis Gates Jr., in an impassioned response to Joyce, contended, “by learning to read a black text within a black formal cultural matrix, and explicating it with the principles of criticism at work in both the Euro-American and Afro-American traditions, I believe that we critics can produce richer structures of meaning than are possible otherwise.”

Michael Awkward added in his own pointed response to Christian’s essay:

Certainly one of the means by which Afro-Americans have, in Christian’s words, ‘managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity’ has been by successfully appropriating the putatively superior Western cultural and expressive systems...and transferring them into forms through which we expressed our culturally distinct black souls (366).

Both Awkward and Gates argue that, rather than simply take on the post-structuralist “linguistic system” black critics instead “translate” the prevailing theoretical terms into forms compatible to the African American experience. This sort of translation constructs not only “richer structures of meaning” but also builds upon the analytical process to create uniquely black form of theorizing.

Here, we return once again to Barbara Christian, who argued that black Americans have long been engaged with the critical process through songs, storytelling, and riddling. In this way, I read the 1980s debate as largely centering on the question of how scholars can create and sustain an authentic critical language that expresses black American perspectives.

I locate this question as the driving force behind my study, one that forces me to turn a critical lens upon my own conclusions. What does it mean for my project that I weave the voices of Jacques Derrida and Ralph Waldo Emerson together with the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Zora Neale Hurston? Does this structure aid, or rather limit me, as I seek to sustain a critical discourse surrounding black American reinterpretations of the “American Dream?”

The 1980s debate never reached a definitive conclusion and likewise, I do not believe a singular answer exists for the questions I have just posed. I am reassured, however, in believing that the four authors considered may have also encountered similar questions as they crafted their own narratives. Douglass occupied the complicated position of an ex-slave writing to a white audience. Hurston faced criticism for her apparently assimilationist politics. Petry refused to categorize her work based on gender or race. Hughes spent a majority of his career espousing the belief that black artists should write from and for a distinctly black point of view, regardless of actual audience. I read in all these narratives a central tension between crafting an authentic representation of the self and creating a discourse that will further resonate with a larger audience.

The fact that bookstores still shelve, and readers still read, the work of Douglass, Hurston, Petry, and Hughes, suggests to me, however, that whatever responses these authors generated for themselves, have allowed them to create narratives more far-reaching than Franklin's singular staircase.

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