Migrating Fictions

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Manzella, Abigail G.H.
Migrating Fictions: Twentieth-Century Internal Displacements and Race in U.S. Women's Literature.
The Ohio State University Press, 2018.
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CHAPTER 1

The Economic and Environmental Displacements during the Great Migration

Precarious Citizenship and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

LANDOWNERSHIP WAS a dominant force for European methods of colonization, displacement, and control. When the British, French, Dutch, and Spanish came to the Americas, they promulgated the idea that power should be in the hands of those who legally possessed land and were thus capable of holding property rights as a supplement to physical violence. They extended that connection between land and power as they began to conquer the native peoples and spaces around them in order to build what would only later become a new nation. Not only did the colonists claim that their view of land and authority was the only legitimate one, thus marking Native Americans as racially and legally inferior, but they also reinforced racial hierarchies by kidnapping Africans and enslaving them, labeling them as bodies without legal rights, to work on those lands. Yet even with the American Revolution, many of the same tactics and methods employed previously—including the enslavement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, Africans, and African Americans—would continue to serve as a model for U.S. mythologies and legislations about landownership and movement that extends to other racial groups and later internal migrations discussed elsewhere in this book. The case of enslaved blacks, who existed within the state but were not acknowledged as citizens, in particular exemplifies the problems of the ideology of American exceptionalism as well as the restrictions on who is able to claim American-ness. In other words, the history of space and movement for African Americans in the United States is foundational to the argument of *Migrating Fictions* because it highlights the development of a governmentality of precarity, which utilizes
both limitations on movement as well as forced movement without protection. In Alexander Weheliye’s revision of the largely deracinated notions of bare life and governmentality put forth by Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, the law is employed to place different racialized groups “in a perpetual state of emergency” that nonetheless preserves their bodies for labor.¹ This revised view of bare life and governmentality that incorporates race allows us to see how the history of unequal subjects began at the very inception of American colonization and evolved through slavery, emancipation, and Jim Crow, to today. This precarious existence, as Judith Butler explains, is a “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence.”² This chapter opens by briefly recounting that history in order to focus more specifically on how this relationship progressed in the twentieth century and is then interpreted and altered in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.

The first recorded Africans in the English colonies are listed as arriving in Jamestown in 1619. While the status of these earliest immigrants is often studied for its complexity, because of a deficiency of clear documentation about such issues like the definition of indentured servitude versus slavery, as time passed the “loose system of African long-term labor [was] turned into codified, perpetual, and inherited racial slavery.”³ This move to enslavement not only gave whites a free labor source but also allowed them to dispossess their fellow inhabitants of what they had accumulated. This happened to Anthony Johnson, who, though a free black man when he died in 1670, had his land seized because he was “a negro and by consequence, an alien.”⁴ As decided by this case, “negroes” were marked by their race and as such by a lack of citizenship, leading to an inability to own land. From the very start of the English colonies, the notions of landownership, race, and citizenship were intertwined.

Citizenship’s tie to spatialization was two-pronged, comprising both spatial possession itself and the ability to move between spaces. Therefore, denial of access to movement was part of being an enslaved person. The mobility of enslaved people was one of the earliest concerns as a means of control via confinement. As Stephanie Camp points out in her work on the “geography of containment” of Southern enslaved women, slave laws were enacted as early as 1680 “for preventing Negroes Insurrection” and slave patrols were used to reinforce these laws.⁵ Slave owners wished to control black mobility, and

¹. Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 88.
³. Horton and Horton, Hard Road to Freedom, 27.
⁴. Image 177 of Virginia, 1665-76, Foreign Business and Inquisitions.
⁵. Camp, Closer to Freedom, 12, 25.
blacks understood the risk to their own bodies if they disobeyed these restrictions. Overall, this historical relationship between the law and African Americans on limiting mobility and landownership has long-term reverberations.

At the end of the Civil War, new promises about landownership and citizenship rights were made and retracted. Some of those soon-to-be citizens, such as Garrison Frazier, were part of the conversation on how those rights should develop. Frazier, who understood the connection between these ideals, explained that the best path to freedom was “to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor.”⁶ After hearing such statements from black leaders, William Tecumseh Sherman established, through Special Field Order No. 15, the Sea Islands and much of the coastal region in the South for black settlement with the promise of forty acres and later the loan of mules—the probable source of the famous offer of forty acres and a mule. Subsequently, this land was retracted during President Andrew Johnson’s attempted amelioration of the relationship with white Southerners; the explanation was that the order was said to have been intended for “‘temporary provisions’ […] not to convey permanent possession.”⁷ There were also the promises of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments after the war that granted the rights of freedom, citizenship, and voting, but with the dismantling of Reconstruction these elements were also not fully realized. Instead what was created was a devalued citizenship without full rights, one defined by race and a perception of inferiority.

These legal constraints extended into extralegal suppression as well, for long after the end of Reconstruction, as Grace Hale states, “lynching denied that any space was black space, [and] even the very bodies of African Americans were subject to invasion by whites.”⁸ Critics from Ida B. Wells at the end of the nineteenth century to Sandy Alexandre in the twenty-first century have commented on how the violence of lynching at the turn of the twentieth century was used to prove that African Americans lacked even self possession—the legal and physical control over their own bodies—through the public taking of their lives. Lynching was also used to take possession of their land, reinforcing that whites still controlled all the land symbolically and literally.⁹ African Americans’ bodies, even when they were not slaughtered, continued to be commodities under sharecropping that did not even have slavery’s promise of basic sustenance.¹⁰ The dehumanizing effects of sharecropping

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⁶. Foner, Reconstruction, 70.
⁷. Ibid., 70–71.
⁸. Hale, Making Whiteness, 229.
¹⁰. Foner, Reconstruction, 106.
overlapped with the restrictive segregation of Jim Crow, which codified the two-tiered system of citizenship that had been implicit all along, where access to landownership and movement between spaces were limited by economic conditions and the racial divide. Yet even as the economic forces of urbanization and industrialization after World War I created a need for labor in the North that gave African Americans an apparently greater possibility of movement, resulting in the Great Migration, this movement was not ultimately liberating. Various forms of governmentality, such as the redlining that limited African Americans’ access to credit and therefore equal access to housing and other social and economic opportunities, made the move to northern cities analogous to living in the segregated South, albeit often in more subtle ways. Even to this day, questions about equal access to the legal system and police protection continue, not just with the violence against black bodies taking a dominant position in our political conversations but also with the role of the prison system in controlling these same bodies by diminishing their citizenship rights and freedom of movement. Thus, when viewed through the lens of space and movement, the history of African Americans in the United States, rather than demonstrating a clear narrative of progress toward freedom and equality, reveals an increasingly refined apparatus for control and disenfranchisement that, despite several important legal changes, works to maintain a state of precarity and lack of full citizenship. In general, then, African American history is fundamental to my examination of migration because it reveals how governmentalities of movement and stasis are part of a U.S. mythology that too often connects landownership to those empowered citizens who are seen to embody “American-ness,” an abstraction that is tinged with preconceptions about issues such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, and gender.

While the history can describe the changing legal restrictions on movement and citizenship, literary narratives about the black migratory experience are valuable because they provide critiques and alternatives. Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) offers just such a powerful perspective. Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, and raised in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. Through her life and writing she not only provides knowledge of the time but also creates some unrealized prospects for change. She slowly migrated north in the 1920s to become a writer (of fiction and anthropology) and receive her education at Barnard College. Even so, Hurston’s movements north and south were complicated, because she often traveled into the South to live and to do research, and, in 1936, as a woman in her forties, Hurston earned a Guggenheim fellowship that she used to do research in Jamaica and Haiti, journeying into black spaces beyond the boundaries of the United States. While in Haiti, she wrote
Their Eyes Were Watching God, a novel about an African American woman, Janie, who does not migrate north but instead travels further and further into the South, living within several communities. In this novel Hurston narrates these historical interactions between African Americans and their relationship to space, movement, and citizenship while presenting some of her own imagined solutions.

Although Hurston too often is read as an ahistorical writer, her most famous novel illustrates and illuminates the larger historical process by which African Americans were denied citizenship. Strikingly, Their Eyes encapsulates this history through an allegorical structure that links its main character’s movements south to the ways in which African Americans were first denied citizenship through slavery, then denied full citizenship via a precarious existence as sharecroppers unable to afford their own land, then by a class system that divided economically and enabled ownership only for the elite, and finally were further undermined by a migrant laborer structure that made movement, now no longer a sign of liberty, a marker of diminished citizenship rights. This last phase of migratory labor rendered African American workers a category of their own that did not require help when disaster struck and could be imposed upon in a state of emergency. Hurston treats southern migration literally and allegorically to affirm the importance of diasporic black cultural heritage for identity. At the same time, the novel is not simply a mirror of historical occupation and migration patterns. It symbolically inverts the migration to the North to reflect upon the larger history of African American experiences, expanding the conversation about race and space across time, while it searches for ways to connect to black, rural culture. Yet Their Eyes is also inverting the gendered expectation of the rugged, male individual with a female traveler, the protagonist Janie. By staging Janie’s journey through a counter-narrative that challenges the American myths of exceptionalism and freedom through movement, Hurston exposes the governmental structures that inhibit African Americans while also imagining what several theorists call “Thirdspace,” a postcolonial and social geography term that emphasizes how the combination of real and imagined space creates new cultural options and exposes the limitations of the dominant ideology. Hurston’s utopian Thirdspace of the individual home indicates how citizenship through self-possession and landownership is possible for blacks but fails to include

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11. Soja in Thirdspace directly states that Thirdspace is a combination of “a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representation of spatiality” (6), while Bhabha in “The Third Space” emphasizes postcolonial and historical elements, showing that the intermingling of various cultures can create a positive hybridity. Soja’s and Bhabha’s spellings of the term differ. In quotations I will spell it as each scholar does, but when I am employing the term, I will use “Thirdspace.”
the larger African American community. Her work, though not fully jetting the association of ownership with citizenship, acknowledges the historical reality of African American experience up to and including the Great Migration and its concomitant raced and gendered effects while attempting to reconfigure what movement means.

**HISTORY, GENDER, AND GENRE DURING THE GREAT MIGRATION**

Previous discussions of Hurston’s work have questioned its relationship to history, particularly in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Migration, revealing gendered notions of movement for African Americans and assumptions about how those movements should be represented. More recent scholarship has shifted focus, highlighting the importance of the genre of the migration novel for this period but often locating Hurston’s work on the margins of that category. Along with this awareness of genre, some scholars now are attending to transnational elements in Hurston’s text by pointing to her anthropological engagement with Haiti and other African diasporic locales. My work builds on recent scholarship’s understanding of *Their Eyes* as directly participating in the major debates and historical issues of its time by revealing how it engages with issues of movement and expands the migration novel genre by presenting an allegorical, gynocentric migration narrative in the South.

Hurston’s interest in the African American cultural history that surrounded her was long a part of her scholarly process, but critiques of her work as ahistorical by her contemporaries were a real concern for Hurston. From the perspective of some of the African American male writers in Hurston’s time, her subject matter marked her as avoiding the political because her writing about the rural, mostly black South was nothing like “the black urban protest novel [which] was then in vogue.”¹² Such criticisms connect masculinist concerns with political, progressive movement and feminist ones with regressive movement, and much of this criticism maintains this dismissive binary

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¹² Cronin, *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, 9. Importantly, not all writers or critics viewed Hurston’s work negatively; after all, she was one of the most well-known African American women writers during the ’30s and ’40s. She aligned herself with some of the younger writers whom she termed the “Niggerati,” such as Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, and Dorothy West (Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 116). Additionally, this concern about Hurston’s lack of political engagement has not completely disappeared in more recent criticism. Hazel Carby argues that the book’s reemergence into popularity during the 1980s, when “one in four young black males are in prison, on probation, on parole or awaiting trial[, allows the book to act] as a mode of assurance that, really, the black folk are happy and healthy” (*Cultures in Babylon*, 182).
by separating the novel from its historical and cultural context. For example, Richard Wright wrote in the 1930s that the novel “carries no theme, no message, no thought.” The lasting effects of these critiques can be seen even sixty years later, when Hazel Carby states, “Hurston’s representation of the folk is not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation of migration, but also a creation of a folk who are outside of history.” In fact, Hurston certainly did “dis-place” the centrality of the historical migration to the North, but, as I will argue, her book reflects her knowledge in the social sciences and the creative arts through her use of an allegorical literary form and a distinct attentiveness to her cultural moment, particularly in regard to the movements of African Americans in space and time.

More recent scholarship has delved into the topic of migration in African American literature and Hurston’s role in that field. Lawrence Rodgers categorized the genre of the Great Migration narrative, but while discussing Hurston’s work in this context as a “fascinating variant on the migration novel form,” he focuses on the “fictional erasure” he sees her work performing, removing any migratory story. As he adds:

The story that Hurston composed [...] is decidedly not about migration. By completely ignoring the presence of the North at a time when its effect on African-American life in the South loomed ever-larger, Hurston’s novel represents an almost willful desire to negate the existence of the movement that had propelled her into the middle of Harlem culture more than a decade earlier.

He sees Hurston’s sense of space as purely “mythic.” Even Susan Willis, who sees some of the historical elements of Hurston’s work, chastises Hurston for “offer[ing] a utopian betrayal of history’s dialectic [...] that] chooses not to depict the Northern migration of black people.” By contrast, scholars such as Farah Jasmine Griffin and Robert Stepto more directly consider Hurston’s work as an African American migration narrative in their thoughtful and foundational research on the genre. Griffin’s own explanation of the genre,

13. See Cronin’s substantial collection of reviews on Hurston’s work in Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston, which includes analysis by Richard Wright and Otis Ferguson. Moreover, that collection also includes an overview of Hurston criticism (9–12). See also Gates and Appiah’s Zora Neale Hurston for a review by Alain Locke.
15. Carby, Cultures in Babylon, 172.
16. Rodgers, Canaan Bound, 94.
17. Ibid., 92.
18. Ibid.
however, limits the significance of *Their Eyes* because of its counter-migration: “Most often, migration narratives portray the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area.” Other Hurston scholars are investigating alternative kinds of migration, from the regional to the transnational, with some specifically looking at “African traditional beliefs and practices that enslaved people amalgamated in Haiti and brought to the North American mainland.” My research builds on this previous scholarship, especially the careful reading of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, by continuing to think about Hurston’s relationship to her movement and her time, both within and without U.S. boundaries, while broadening the definition of the migration narrative to emphasize how her work is engaged with historical developments.

I wish to connect this research on Hurston’s relationship to the culture of the black diaspora to the historical analysis her novel is providing because Hurston does investigate the potential of migration for women and for African Americans in the midst of the twentieth century—but that migration is into the South. As historical journalist Nicholas Lemann notes, “in 1940, 77 per cent [sic] of black Americans still lived in the South—49 per cent in the rural South.” To turn her attention away from Northern migration was not, therefore, a turn at all, but an awareness that the new stories of Northern urbanity did not encompass the entire African American experience or even the majority one. Hurston, unlike her vocal critics, was interested in the story and possibilities of a return to the South—or at least to its culture—for those who left and those who stayed. Her views on the Great Migration become clear precisely in her reversal of its direction and goals. Instead of viewing the urbanized North as the only location for discussions about African American experience, *Their Eyes* shows mythic and historical presentations of the rural South; furthermore, Janie’s physical and allegorical journeys through it connect her with black culture and people. Stepto has pointed to the importance of such travel for the “symbolic geography” of the novel in which there are expeditions of “immersion” into the South and “ascent” into the North to find a place for internal transformation. I extend this idea to argue not

21. Jennings, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 19. While early works such as Ellease Southerland’s “The Influence of Voodoo on the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston” point to Hurston’s knowledge of black culture that she had studied in Louisiana as well as in the Caribbean, much has been studied on this topic recently, including Bone, “The (Extended) South of Black Folk,” which considers the movement both within the South as well as from the Caribbean, and the recent Jennings collection mentioned at the start of the note.
simply for a symbolic geography but for a consistent allegory that describes an individual's travel while telling a story about African American history and the survival of African American culture, moving from the lack of self-hood and community occasioned by slavery to the systemic oppression of sharecropping and eventually to the foundation of black communities. This allegorical journey reveals the novel's possible real and imagined solutions of self-possession that can be created via narrative and cultural knowledge to overcome precarious citizenship.

SIGNIFYING THROUGH ALLEGORY: MOVEMENT IN THE AFRICAN DIASTORIC TRADITION

Angus Fletcher in his seminal book on allegory states that the classical representation of this mode "involves the use of 'continued' or stretched-out metaphors, whose developed analogies inspire in turn a continuous commentary following the same stretching process." Of course, Fletcher himself complicates this idea with many allegorical texts that depart from this definition, but for my purposes this general conception of allegory will help us to understand the larger shape of *Their Eyes*. By organizing the narrative as an allegory that draws upon the Western biblical tradition, African American oral traditions, and Caribbean narrative traditions, Hurston creates an alternative form to "express the racial spirit," as James Weldon Johnson put it, that works on the level of the character and on the level of the novel's structure. As exhibited

24. This balance between the individual and the community can be seen in Hurston's own concerns as well about issues of segregation and racial pride. In a 1943 letter to Countee Cullen, she states, "Now as to segregation, I have no viewpoint on the subject particularly, other than a fierce desire for human justice. The rest is up to the individual" (Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 480–81).


26. Although most scholars have been uninterested in allegorical readings of Hurston's canon, some have noticed her use of allegorical elements. Blyden Jackson sees in her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, "a story about black America, not because Hurston anywhere says that it is, but because Hurston's folklore everywhere happily transports Hurston's readers to a position from which every Jew in Goshen is converted into an American Negro and every Egyptian in Old Pharaoh's Egypt into a white in the America where Hurston's folk Negroes live" (introduction, xv–xvi). Jackson, however, misses that *Their Eyes* utilizes the same structure, saying instead that in this work folklore is "mere contribution to the atmosphere of [the] tale" (xv). Carla Kaplan in *The Erotics of Talk* recognizes sections of *Their Eyes* as allegorical, but Susan Willis has most fully explored the symbolic structure of the novel when she states that the novel "works through three historically produced economic modes" (*Signifying*, 46). Even Willis's allegorical analysis, though, is limited because her primary concern is how African American women authors use language subversively rather than how the allegorical elements of the novel are tied to the historical and migratory awareness of the text.
by Janie’s movement into the South, the novel offers a counter-narrative to the Great Migration of masculinized urbanization and shows the importance of both an awareness of history and imagination on the part of the character and in the shaping of the story itself.27

Recognizing this counter-migration allows us to see the larger historical movements that Janie’s experience allegorizes. All of her major life events reflect a symbolic progression through space and time. This progression is one often mentioned by scholars of allegory. For instance, though talking about the well-known allegory of Dante’s Inferno, Jeremy Tambling is also effectively describing the structure of Their Eyes: “Life as a journey means that a temporal process is being explained as a movement from place to place.”28 The literal journey follows Janie Crawford, a woman born in West Florida shortly after the end of Reconstruction to a mother who was raped, the mother herself being the product of sex between an enslaved woman and her master.29 Janie’s migration from the home space begins when her grandmother marries her off, hoping that her life will be better than that of her forebears. In the course of the novel Janie travels deeper into Florida because of each of her three marriages until, after her last husband’s death, she finally returns to Eatonville, the town she helped to build, to her own property and self-possession. Along the way, however, Janie has been subjected to the various forms of governmentality and precarious citizenship found in the novel’s allegorical history of Afri-

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27. In Allegory in America, Deborah Madsen comments that twentieth-century American allegory has often been used “as a fundamental expression of dissidence” (4) and gives specific examples of how it can be used as “counter-history” (3). Also, of course not every male text during this period took this northern journey, as Jean Toomer’s Cane will serve as an example, but it was a common discourse that gained much attention then as now.
29. Nanny speaks of her sexual experiences with her master with terms that show they were against her will. For instance, he “made me let down mah hair” (17; italics added). More telling than what could be construed as a more superficial control of her body is her statement, “Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and brood-sow and ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn’t mah will for things to happen lak they did” (16). While she’s covering a lot of time when talking about what wasn’t her “will,” part of what is included in opposition to that will is her being used as a “brood-sow”—as a breeder for her master. Although she states her will, as an enslaved woman, she is put into a double bind from others’ perceptions, where the owner sees her as unable to be raped since she is property and thus always willing to do the bidding of the master, but he also sees her as unable to desire since she has no ability to consent to the interaction. Saidiya Hartman sets out this idea and elaborates, “The opportunity for nonconsent is required to establish consent, for consent is meaningless if refusal is not an option” (Scenes of Subjection, 111). Additionally, the fact that Nanny’s mistress calls her back “yaller” (18) implies that Nanny’s experience with her white master is not the first generation of such interactions for this family.
can American experience. With her first husband, Logan Killicks, who lives just down the road from her childhood home, we see Janie symbolically linked to the agricultural space and lifestyle of sharecropping that too closely resembles slavery. Her subsequent movements continue this pattern. Her marriage to Jody Starks takes her south to help to develop the town space of Eatonville, moving her forward in time to question whether W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of the “Talented Tenth,” the idea that elite blacks are needed to help to lift up the rest of the community, reinscribes white hegemonic power onto the African American community. Later, with her last husband, Tea Cake, Janie moves even further south to the Everglades, a swampland in the southern tip of Florida built upon migratory labor. There she attempts to connect to the “folk” to form a more egalitarian community. Countering the Northern migration into industry, the novel presents the possibility that southern migration leads to a fuller “immersion,” as Stepto puts it, in folk culture and a space for self-determination. As Janie states, “You got tuh go there tuh know there” (192). Migrating south—not north—leads Janie deeper and deeper into the spaces that tie her to African American culture. Janie’s movement through space connects her internal journey to her external journey and thus allegorically reflects the oppression within African American history while also imagining alternative ways to use that history to find new spaces—a Thirdspace—of personal empowerment and, by extension, empowerment for African Americans.

This Thirdspace idea of combining the historical and the creative also functions on a structural level in the novel, as is evident in Hurston’s use of allegory. Hurston’s application of allegory integrates elements of Christian hermeneutical practices of “speaking that is other than open” with African American and Caribbean elements of storytelling, making it “double-voiced,” as scholar of African American literature Henry Louis Gates, Jr. labels such a

30. Edward M. Pavlić comments on Hurston’s movement south as an inversion of sorts—what he calls an “absorption” (“Papa Legba,” 118), but his focus is on defining this work structurally in relationship to the modernist novel and Stepto’s idea about the need for northern movement into awareness (119).


32. This is a loose translation of the “inversion” of allegory’s split between words and meaning that “encod[es] our speech” (Fletcher, Allegory, 3). Fletcher states,

The whole point of allegory is that it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself. But somehow this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation. [. . .] What counts in our discussion is a structure that lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning. (Allegory, 7)
combination of literary antecedents, with “modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition.”33 For example, Hurston’s use of black vernacular ties her to the history of African American culture.34 As Gates explains, “It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals.”35 In Their Eyes, African American linguistic practice also includes the storytelling style of “signifying,” a word typically used in oral folklore to explain a trickster figure’s use of verbal wit or (often veiled) insults to defeat a stronger power.36 Gates defines it more generally as “the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning,” which “presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another.”37 For linguistic anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, this indirection of language defines signifying; it also shows how the metaphoric can then be extended to the level of allegory.38

At the same time, Hurston’s text participates in a Caribbean or black diasporic tradition that is often linked to allegorical modes of writing. While Fredric Jameson once described “third-world literature” as being “necessarily allegorical” in reductive, nationalist terms, later scholars such as Roberto Strongman have modified this sweeping view, finding that “far from being a simplistic genre pronouncing literature from the area as elementary, allegory functions as a powerful anticolonial discursive mechanism exposing the need for personal and collective self-determination in the Caribbean.”39 Hurston’s experience in the Caribbean, specifically in Haiti and Jamaica, in the 1930s also places her writing in the tradition that Sheri-Marie Harrison labels as the “first wave of West Indian writing,” which extended from the 1930s to the

33. Gates, The Signifying Monkey, xxiii. Gates borrows the term “double-voiced” from Bakhtin’s discussion about specific words that should be understood on more than one semantic level (Signifying Monkey, 50). He also specifically names Hurston as using this trait: “This double voice unreconciled—a verbal analogue of [Hurston’s] double experiences as a woman in a male-dominated world and as a black person in a nonblack world—strikes me as her second great achievement” (“A Negro Way of Saying,” 3).

34. Some of Hurston’s contemporaries were concerned that the black vernacular distanced a writer from politics and instead engaged with black minstrelsy. See James Weldon Johnson’s preface (xxxix–xli) for the argument against the use of the black vernacular.


36. Although Gate’s punctuates the term as “signifyin(g)” to highlight the orality that often drops the final “g” and its separation from the more general term of “signification” through capitalization (Signifying Monkey, 45), I employ its more common spelling since I am pulling together definitions from various sources.

37. Gates, The Signifying Monkey, 82. Hurston would agree, elaborating that African Americans’ “interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile” (“Characteristics,” 79).


1960s. As Sandra Pouchet Paquet explains, this type of diasporic allegory provides not just “self-inquiry [. . .] and self-evaluation” but also “cultural assessment,” so that “the autobiographical self as subject is transformed into cultural archetype.” In this way, Hurston’s choice of allegory for her novel embraces a sophisticated tool that developed in response to governmentalties of bare life and slavery and that extends beyond the boundaries of the United States.

Hurston’s hybrid use of allegory in its European and black diasporic modes is itself a kind of Thirdspace, creating new possibilities from the interactions among cultures. Their Eyes employs it to challenge Western, specifically U.S., notions of law, citizenship, and ownership. As a writer interested in religious narratives, which a glance at her titles Moses, Man on the Mountain, and Jonah’s Gourd Vine instantly reveals, it was logical for Hurston to employ allegory, a form used to interpret the Old and New Testaments. When Janie is expelled from her yard and the pear tree, for instance, on one level she simply is repeating the European biblical story about being expelled from Eden; however, on another level Hurston is challenging the Western tradition by reframing it through a major topic in black vernacular storytelling—undermining the master’s asserted power of ownership over the slave—since Janie, a woman, is expelled from an Eden for seeking carnal knowledge and control of her own body, and in the process gains free will. Hurston also uses the Western conception of allegorical peregrination—the notion that the pilgrimage functions as an allegory of human life, and the fall from grace in Eden marks humans as an exiled and diasporic people—to explore the limitations of black citizenship in the United States and the creation of community in the South. Following in the path of Dante and John Bunyan’s Christian, Hurston’s Janie takes on the role of the traveler, but her voyage forces an adjustment of the gendered and raced protagonist. A black woman takes the literal and symbolic journey in Hurston’s narrative; the novel’s alternative ideology begins with a powerful shift in representative body and voice.

40. Harrison, Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects, 7.
42. These common folktales include “Ole Massa” stories and the symbolic trickster animal stories, where the smaller animal often outwits a seemingly more powerful animal. See Hurston’s own work in Mules and Men for some of these tales.
43. Griffin discusses other African American women in literature who were also “walkers” during this time period created by authors such as Ann Petry, Marita Bonner, and Gwendolyn Brooks, but even where the gender is shifted, the location of these examples still focused on the “urban landscapes” (Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women, 143), making Hurston’s attention to the South of particular interest.
Hurston's mixing of Christian and African diasporic allegorical techniques allows her narrative to remain true to African Americans' painful past while expressing hope for the future that preserves rather than severs ties with the majority of black experience. In *Their Eyes* she demonstrates this new allegorical method and her interest in movement by bookending Janie's tale with two key images that reflect the interconnectedness of both space and time.

Mikhail Bakhtin's term “chronotope” is useful in understanding Hurston's method. A chronotope is a “unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories” to better understand “the cultural system from which they spring.”44 Consider, for example, how Hurston begins *Their Eyes* with the image of a ship in generalized, abstract language: “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time” (1). Functioning as a chronotope because the object both takes up space and moves through space over time, this ship, which is tied to unrealized hopes and dreams, evokes the ship image within the African diasporic tradition that is also laden with death and despair.45 As Paul Gilroy explains in *The Black Atlantic*, this most famous of chronotopes, “refer[s] us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialization and modernization.”46 By invoking the image of a ship as the book's first idea, Hurston locates her work as engaging with the history of slavery and the slave trade, and announces migration as a central, if not the central, concern in *Their Eyes*.

Even though Hurston employs this chronotope that demonstrates the significance of African diasporic history to her narrative, she does not wish to remain within this space of violence and oppression or of white-defined and white-controlled migration. According to Hurston’s use of the symbolic slave ship, “the life of men” (1) stays forever with that image, their dreams “mocked to death” (1).47 Her response, however, is not to get stuck waiting for that ship

45. She used the phrase “slave ships in shoes” to talk about the results of poverty on some individuals (Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 17).
47. As Tiffany Ruby Patterson says of Hurston's representation of African American experiences and those of her critics: Hurston's eyes were watching those atrocities, but her eyes were open to other aspects of the lives of southern black folk as well. Unlike her detractors, who preferred to view black people in relation to whites, Hurston sought first and foremost to study black people on their own terms. Although she recognized oppression as a daily fact of African American life, Hurston's literary and ethnographic work
to arrive, because for women “the dream is the truth and they act and do things accordingly” (1). Rather than watching the hopeless images of “industrialization and modernization,” Hurston and the female protagonist of her text remember the past but also actively move into a new and different present and future through space and time—their selves taking on a chronotopic role that eventually reaches the horizon.48

Instead of dwelling in the place of oppression—and there are still key moments when whites arrive to threaten and harm her characters as symbols of the government at large—Hurston fights oppression by writing about the positive and negative elements of black life as defined by black people themselves. By engaging with the possibilities within the African American community, she attempts not to focus exclusively on the death that she sees tied to the return to the idea of the slave ship and the oppressive governmentality it signifies. She acknowledges and presents the history of slavery. Through these kinds of symbolic moments, she reveals the external forces that created an enslaved, bare life and continue to create precarious lives, yet she wants to free blacks from the death of the slave ships by also talking about the potential within the African American community and the power of the mind to imagine beyond that past into the possibilities of the future.

Hurston transforms the chronotope of the slave ship into something positive through her repetition of the image of the horizon, the image that ultimately concludes Janie’s journey. Indeed, with the word “horizon” appearing in her opening sentences, its repetition throughout the text reveals it as an alternative chronotope.49 The horizon, like the slave ship, breaks down traditional boundaries: as the place where the land or sea meets the sky, it is itself always moving based on a viewer’s location.50 Additionally, it contains a tem-

48. Hurston herself stated, “I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. [. . .] No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (“How It Feels,” 115).

49. In the original holograph that I was able to see at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the first lines of the novel were crossed out and rewritten with edits on the front side of the first page as well as on its reverse. Even so, the words “ships” and “horizon” remain throughout this process, revealing them to be key words as Hurston developed her overall idea.

50. This focus on the horizon also points to her interest in how black culture extended beyond national boundaries. Additionally, this curiosity about the horizon appears in her autobiographical novel Dust Tracks on a Road: “The most interesting thing that I saw was the hori-
poral element, often referred to in the text, in that its spatial location marks the passage of time—the setting and rising of the sun and the potential of that passage of time.

Thus, unlike the predetermined meaning of the slave ship that is rigidly self-contained, the positive or negative possibilities of the horizon are expansive and shift according to the individual’s viewpoint. Each person’s position in time and space affects how the horizon is seen. Janie, and by extension the reader, learns from the many perspectives on the horizon that she encounters, enabling her to find her own definition that stems from, but also expands beyond, those presented to her. The first mention of the horizon is associated with the ship in the opening lines of the novel, showing the direct connection between two elements: slave ships come from the horizon. But then, while Janie’s horizon still includes the ships of slavery, her perspective also humanizes those who would have been on such vessels since she eventually realizes the journey of her life would be “to the horizons in search of people” (89). Unlike the men in the initial image of the novel, whose goal remains forever at a distance, Janie completes her goal: “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons” (191). By the end of the Janie’s journey, as I will explain, Hurston expands upon the chronotope of the horizon to emphasize the importance of being true to the oppression of history while also stressing how people might live with hope for the future and themselves by thinking about a new relationship to space and movement.51 As Strongman explains regarding the history of European colonization,

One of the ambitions of the state has always been to establish a certain “territory” as its referent . . . . But what is often overlooked is the way in which identity is location as well, one that finds its coordinates within the sphere of the nation. Critical theory interprets the subject’s mapping of its community and nation as “Who am I?” when the more appropriate interpretation is: “Where am I?”52

In Hurston’s narrative of Janie’s movement as a means of defining her identity, the images of the (slave) ship and horizon are especially effectual because they exceed the boundaries of an isolated U.S. history, pointing elliptically to

zon. Every way I turned, it was there, and the same distance away. Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like” (27).

51. It is not surprising that she wrote Their Eyes while in Haiti, where a successful slave rebellion took place. She was immersed in a location filled with the history of slavery but also filled with a community that threw off that yoke.

the triangle trade and the black experience in the Caribbean and thus unsettling dominant narratives of oppressive governmentality through counter-examples such as Haiti, which rejected colonial control via its successful slave rebellion.

By beginning and ending the novel with the symbolic chronotopes of the slave ship and the horizon, respectively, Hurston indicates to the reader that Janie’s physical journey will also explore African American history and movement allegorically. Janie’s story starts with a prolepsis: “She had come back from burying the dead” (1). This is followed by the harsh judgment of the people watching her return to town. These first steps of the protagonist inform the reader that the story is about travel and the complexity of community. The narrative then re-embarks with Janie relaying her story to her friend Pheoby, starting with her as a teenager in the Edenic space outside her grandmother’s house. This telling rewrites the entire history of Judeo-Christian theology, placing an African American teenager as Eve under a “blossoming pear tree” (10). In this version the snake who tempts this new “Eve” is a neighboring boy whom Janie kisses “across the gatepost” (13). Janie sits in Eden alone because, as the novel tells us, “the beginning of this was a woman” (1). Located “in the place of, taking the world-creating place of the Word of God,” Janie/Eve precedes Adam.\textsuperscript{53} Gynocentrically, this narrative starts at the very beginning of a recreated Judeo-Christian time and space. With the foreshadowing of the biblical story, the narrative prolepsis reveals that Janie will be cast out from Eden to wander on her own so as to control her own body and space, in contrast to what was possible for her grandmother and mother before her. By understanding Janie’s counter-migratory journey as an allegory and in terms of Thirdspace, we are able to see that Hurston’s novel revises Western tradition and uses African diasporic history productively for future empowerment.

UNFREE CITIZENSHIP: SHARECROPPING AND OPPRESSIVE OWNERSHIP

The farming system known as sharecropping seemed to offer economic independence to African Americans after the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment. In reality, however, sharecropping in several ways was simply an extension of slavery because of its combination of a lack of ownership with the exploitation of black labor. These elements produced a precarious existence in which black workers could not earn enough money to buy land, instead remaining continuously indebted to the landowners. Even politicians of the

\textsuperscript{53} DuPlessis, “Power,” 90.
time, such as George W. Julian, chairman of the House Committee on Public Lands, saw that without a breaking up of the “land monopoly,” the newly freed would be trapped in “a system of wages slavery . . . more galling than slavery itself.”

*Their Eyes* engages with the system of sharecropping and its connection to slavery in a complex, allegorical fashion. Previous scholars have been divided on the symbolism of Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks and her work on his farm. DuPlessis states, “In fact, allegorically speaking, this marriage is an image of slavery,” while Willis claims that Janie marries into the sharecropping system that followed the end of slavery. I posit that Hurston represents both sharecropping and slavery because she, as well as many other scholars, saw sharecropping as a new form of slavery. Allegorically, Janie’s marriage moves her forward into the historical economy of sharecropping that replaced the economy of slavery, but she will continue to be worked like those who came before her under slavery because, although the system shifted, the governmental treatment of African Americans did not.

The plot of this section can be read allegorically, as can the names of the characters. For Janie, Logan Killicks is a double weight around her neck since his last name means a stone used as an anchor and his first name is similar to logan stone, a stone that rocks with the slightest touch but cannot be dislodged with any force. Though Killicks is not the most obvious allegorical agent in Janie’s life, he does embody abstract ideas. The initial “weight” Janie feels is her lack of passion for him, putting her in the position of her mother and grandmother: “Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don’t want him to do all de wantin’” (23). Janie wishes to claim her desire for herself since the history of slavery prevented its free articulation. Her grandmother, however, misconstrues Janie’s view because she believes the sole goal of a woman must be to attain a “lawful husband same as Mis’ Washburn [i.e., a white woman] or anybody else!” (22). She thinks marriage will free Janie, but without love there is little chance for equality between the partners. In this marriage the forced sexuality of slavery is reinscribed.

Although Killicks seems pliable as both a rocking stone and a stone in water may at first appear, his heavy weight holds Janie down and ties her to a past that she wishes to escape. This burden becomes obvious in his desire

54. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 68. Hurston’s own family “rejected sharecropping as an improved version of unfree labor and looked for a place to create a self-determined life” (Lucy Anne Hurston, *Speak*, 6). Hurston was born into a family that worked on sharecropping cotton. Only after she was born did they move to Eatonville, where her father eventually became a reverend.


to work her in the field. DuPlessis comments, “It is significant that as she leaves the marriage, Janie was about to become Killicks’s third mule and be put behind a plow.” 57 He plans to return her to the field labor of slavery, where she and the mule she leads are both property used for labor. In this marriage, rather than gaining what her grandmother hopes, she takes on the role of “de mule uh de world” (14) that her grandmother wished she would have escaped. On the literal level, Killicks is a pathetic man who does not understand how to create a relationship with a wife, but allegorically, he stands as a landowner with sixty acres and a mule (he has more than was promised and retracted by the North at the end of the Civil War). Janie, by comparison, does not truly own the organ in her parlor, which was a high sign of Victorian womanhood, or the parlor it is in, or the land itself. 58 As a woman, she does not share in that ownership; she is just asked to share in the labor. Killicks promises his worker a portion of the fruits of the labor at the start—as was the case under sharecropping—but does not fulfill even that meager promise. Instead, like Southern blacks after the Civil War, Janie finds that little has changed through sharecropping, with her economic subordination maintained, her access to landownership limited, and her private life regulated. 59 Some of the dialogue also demonstrates that this new system functions as another rendition of slavery, with Killicks as the slave master unwilling to allow his slave her own independence; he precisely accuses her of being too “powerful independent around here” (30). The language escalates from there; for instance, Janie warns Killicks she might “run off” (30) from this life, using the terminology of fugitive slaves. Shortly thereafter, when she attempts to show her ability to rule her own body, he threatens, “Ah’ll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!” (31). Sharecropping too closely resembles slavery and the oppression created via this economic and legal system. Janie’s experience with Killicks ties her to the culture and pain of the past; as she loses faith in the life Killicks can give her, “she beg[ins] to stand around the gate and expect things” (25), challenging the barriers around her by spending her time near a door that opens onto new spaces and possibilities away from the powers holding her back. She seizes her first chance to escape when Jody Starks arrives.

58. Domosh and Seager, Putting Women in Place, 13. This use of the piano symbol will also be seen in chapter 2.
59. Reich, A Working People, 10, 17.
THE TALENTED TENTH: REPLICATING THE GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURES OF THE PLANTATION

When Janie turns to Jody to flee her new enslavement, she escapes her current position by marrying him and moving to Eatonville. In Eatonville, which historically was Hurston’s childhood home and one of the first all-black towns, the possibility for the escape from older forms of governmentality seems possible through self-governance, yet this promise fails through an elitism that replicates white hierarchical structures. Based on the timeline for Janie’s birth, it can be calculated that at this point in the text it is now the turn of the century. Therefore, while Jody epitomizes the “nascent black bourgeoisie,” as Willis generally labels it, even more specifically in his actions and circumstances he represents the theories of W. E. B. Du Bois, which Hurston criticizes in the text and opposed in her life.

In his approach to existence, Jody haughtily embodies the qualities of Du Bois’s idea of the Talented Tenth. “The Negro race,” Du Bois states in The Negro Problem, published in 1903, around the moment of Jody’s arrival in the text, “like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,” and these exceptional men are “the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass.” Embracing the notion that the educated elite should lift the black masses, Jody positions himself as part of this upper echelon through his demonstration of his education and his ability to lead. Although his place of education is never stipulated, the novel states, “he was more literate than the rest [of the townspeople]” (47). He is also interested in helping “uplift” his community by bringing his money and education to Eatonville:

He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come fro and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves. Dat was right too. De man, dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over some-thin’. (28)

Jody wants to help start this black community so it can run itself and have something of its own. Nevertheless, his travel to create “uplift” that might

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60. Hurston herself wrote about Eatonville in her unpublished documents for the Federal Writers Project, “The Negro in Florida, 1528–1940,” 120–21. Although she only briefly discusses it, she states its self-governance. Thanks to the National Humanities Center and Brooke Andrade specifically for helping me to access this document from the Florida State Archives.

61. Willis, Signifying, 47.

yield egalitarian self-ownership is undermined by Jody’s own self-interest. His desire to be a “big voice” seems to outweigh his desire to help the black community to take ownership of their own work.⁶³ His “exceptional” education makes him believe he is superior to others, which they notice: “‘Whut Ah don’t lak ’bout de man is, he talks tuh unlettered folks wid books in his jaws,’ Hicks complained. ‘Showin’ off his learnin’’” (49).⁶⁴ He also uses his money to gain a position of authority. He buys land for the town and is promptly named as mayor, the person who “tells ya’ll what to do” (35), Jody’s own definition of the job.

In Hurston’s novel, Jody is a satire of the Talented Tenth because of his pompous self-interest in power for himself instead of “lifting up” the rest of the black community. If anything, Jody is taking on an old, familiar position: when others hear him, they say he is acting like “a section foreman” (35) and that “you kin feel a switch in his hand when he’s talkin’ to yuh” (49). He even gets townspeople to build a drainage ditch for the road, causing the community to whisper about the issue directly in play here: “They had murmured hotly about slavery being over” (47). As DuPlessis notes, although Hurston may have stated elsewhere that slavery “occurred in the past and [was] of no particular concern to her,” her writing demonstrates precisely how she acknowledges that past and the ways in which it remains within U.S. culture.⁶⁵

Hurston argues through her characterization of Jody that the exceptional man runs the risk of reinscribing the hierarchy of slavery by substituting himself for the white master and sole arbiter of governmental authority, thereby undermining the will of those around him. Jody’s attitude demonstrates his desire to take on the role of whites from the first time Janie sees him: “He was a seal-brown color but he acted like Mr. Washburn [i.e., a white man] or somebody like that to Janie” (27), and he was “kind of portly like rich white folks” (45). At first his demeanor suggests to Janie that he has lofty goals, but as time goes on, both she and the community see that he takes on the role of whites and does not share the authority he has gained.

The house that Jody has built for himself spatializes this reinstitutionalization of the slave system:

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⁶³. He also seems unaware of the irony that of course “colored folks” had long been building things and that he was setting out not to build something for himself but to have others do it for him.

⁶⁴. While Hurston makes no direct comment on education here, focusing instead on the idea of being “elite,” education is far from untouched by this book, starting with Janie’s own inception through her mother’s rape by a teacher. The educational system holds threats to blacks in its current state.

It had two stories with porches, with banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the “big house.” And different from everybody else in the town he put off moving in until it had been painted, in and out. And look at the way he painted it—a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpool’s wore. (47)

Adding to this allegorical identification of Jody’s home with a plantation house, this house is even painted like the homes of the prominent whites of the area, broadcasting Jody’s desire for the power of whiteness in its color. Even his spittoon is an attempt at emulation: “[He] [s]aid it was a spittoon just like his used-to-be bossman used to have in his bank up there in Atlanta” (47); the gold-colored vase helps him take on the role of the white boss. Jody governs like a slave master but his righteousness about his black elite power comes from his enactment of Du Bois’s theories. More dangerously, Jody’s ownership of his house and of Janie does not critique dominant views linking landownership to citizenship or create a Thirdspace of egalitarian opportunity. Instead, Jody focuses on purchasing land, incorporating the town, getting a post office, and building a store so that he may economically and politically dominate his neighbors as mayor, replicating governmental structures previously imposed by whites.

Overall, Hurston rejects the “uplift” idea of the Talented Tenth that undermines the potential of anyone other than that top 10 percent. As scholars such as Jerome Thornton have shown, Hurston “urged that lower class African Americans had something better to offer.”66 In her own words, turning Du Bois’s language against him, Hurston states, “Everybody is already resigned to the ‘exceptional’ Negro, and willing to be entertained by the ‘quaint,’” but “the average, struggling, nonmorbid [sic] Negro is the best-kept secret in America.”67 She wants to look at not the exception but the rule.

Not only is the community hurt by Du Bois’s theory under the rule of Jody, but so too is Janie. For her, Jody’s desire to be the boss of his people also places her in a new servitude. Although she has the economic benefits that her grandmother intended for her, her husband is viewed as the owner of their property and home with “that new house of his” (47). He is the one who “walks in the way of power and property” (48), and he commands her interactions with the community. She is merely a display for Jody, with him requiring her to act in an elite manner that prohibits her from sitting on the porch with her neighbors. Jody “class[es] her off” (112), telling her to “look

on herself as the bell-cow, the other women [as] the gang” (41). Then, when the townspeople ask her to make a speech, Jody 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). Even as the top black men lead the way, following Du Bois's idea, Janie is told that she cannot be part of the grand project. She has instead become Jody's ornament, the wife of an elite man “against the honor of whose womanhood no breath was ever raised.”  

Women are overlooked for their exceptionality except in their chastity. Like Du Bois, who was twenty-three years Hurston's senior, the much older Jody wants to assume a powerful and protective role over his young wife, a hierarchical positioning that demonstrates in Hurston's view the problem of Du Bois's theory for the African American community in general and for African American women specifically.

Janie resists this subjugation by trying to connect to and support her community through a literal engagement with black vernacular storytelling, which symbolically results in the destruction of Jody and the power structure he represents. Although her husband “has forbidden her to indulge” (54) in the conversations of the community, and in a type of signifying called the dozens where two people trade insults, she still learns how this kind of communication works by listening to the “big picture talkers [. . .] using a side of the world for a canvas” (54). As DuPlessis points out, “Janie's alienation from her marriage [with Jody] is marked by her growing identification with folk life, its contests and rituals, its pleasures and its narrative skills.” Eventually Janie manages to rise up on her own, even though Jody as an “uplifter” is ironically trying to keep her down. She defeats his silencing power over her by claiming her right to speak in the ways of the people. She devastates his “big voice” by using her voice and her knowledge of the dozens against him. He tries to humiliate her by saying that she looks old, and she tells him: “You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talk' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life” (79). By imagining him as stark naked, she strips away the layers of pretense derived from his view of his education, house, and attitude; she stakes her claim as one of the people. This striking blow deflates the idea that his position as the elite, as the one in the “rulin' chair” (87), gives him the right to control everyone else. Starks, aptly named as being hard and unyielding but powerful, leads to barrenness and desolation. Janie's defiance in effect “kills” him, and she then moves on to new spaces and interactions that

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69. DuPlessis, Writing beyond the Ending, 156.
show how African American communities should work away from the forces of the white hierarchy.

After Jody’s death, Janie finds that her real desire is expressed through travel and community: “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). Her journey becomes a reciprocal one focused on humanity and culture instead of this “back road after things” (89) that only creates hierarchies. She also acknowledges that she has been tied to the past of slavery—even with Jody—because instead of being treated as an individual with “a jewel down inside herself” (90), “she had been set in the market-place to sell” (90). She has been treated as an object to be bought and sold all her life, and she is determined to escape from that objectified and oppressed role. She quickly begins to bask in her new role: “Ah jus’ loves dis freedom” (93). She sees her new life without Jody as a possible escape from yet another form of slavery. The ideas of Du Bois and their reinscription of the elitist white power dynamic do not contain the answers that Janie—or the black community—needs for full independence and citizenship.

Rereading moments in African American history through Hurston’s allegorical migration narrative does not simply repeat or romanticize historical events; instead, the symbolic reconfiguration of evidence to show the problems and repetitions within that history allows Hurston and her reader to envision future possibilities for community and self that can lead to a Third-space that imagines autonomy. Just as sharecropping failed to replace slavery with a system that enabled full black autonomy and an escape from precarity, so too does the oppression of black people by other blacks merely replicate preexisting governmental structures without providing independence for the whole community.

EGALITARIAN OWNERSHIP AMONG THE FOLK

When a new man, Tea Cake, appears in Janie’s life, he connects her to the folk and rural space and seems to be moving her away from the white power structure. Tea Cake’s full name is Vergible Woods, and, like Virgil in Dante’s Inferno, he helps guide Janie through the woods back to herself. The allusions to the Inferno continue throughout their experience. For instance, when he is away from her, it is like the nine circles of hell: “He did not return that night nor the next and so she plunged into the abyss and descended to the ninth darkness where light has never been” (108). By patterning Tea Cake after an emblematic example from a traditional allegory, the relevance of allegorical peregrination for Their Eyes’s structure is again stressed.
As with the previous example of Janie’s expulsion from Eden, however, Hurston constructs Tea Cake by combining Western and African diasporic traditions, using the signifying allegory to revise expected narrative patterns. Tea Cake is more than a guide from classical literature, since he represents the African American culture Janie seeks. His name itself shows this doubling role: his formal name may tie him to classical literature, but his nickname, Tea Cake, refers to a Southern sugar cookie. In this figurative way, he is the sweetness of African American folk culture that Hurston sees as being rooted in the South. Tea Cake embodies the community that Janie seeks socially, and through him she more fully explores rural, Southern, black life, if only temporarily.

Tea Cake and Janie’s relationship models the egalitarianism of the ideal African American community that escapes the white model of hierarchy, patriarchy, and subjugation. Unlike Jody, Tea Cake includes Janie in his game playing. When they first meet, he teaches her to play checkers: “Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play” (96). He respects her and asks her to take part in the culture around her. He does not belittle her like Jody did; instead, he says, “You got good meat on yo’ head” (96). Tea Cake helps her find a cultural center for herself, and the way they interact illustrates the potential for an equal relationship both in terms of heterosexual partnership and women’s inclusion in cultural activities. Together they play games, fish, and cook, and they both get pleasure out of their interactions. She likes it when he brushes her hair, but he also likes doing it. Later when they are fleeing from the hurricane, they both help each other: “Tea Cake bore her up,” and then “Janie held him up” (164). They support and include each other reciprocally; Janie needs her culture, and her culture needs her.

Hurston’s allegory of women’s full participation in black culture continues in Janie’s linguistic connection to Tea Cake. Tea Cake stands as a representation of the importance of storytelling—of signifying—to the African American tradition in that he both tells stories and enables Janie to develop her own storytelling skills. When Janie first meets Tea Cake, he says hello to her “with a sly grin as if they had a good joke together. She was in favor of the story that was making him laugh before she even heard it” (94). Although there is no actual “story,” Tea Cake is immediately connected to the idea of stories, an association furthered when he opens his mouth to request a match: “You got a lil piece uh fire over dere, lady?” (95). His metaphoric diction turns even a simple question into a signifying one about whether she is aware of her own potential—her own internal fire.

While showing her own potential, Tea Cake teaches Janie new ways to use language. As they get to know each other, she says that Tea Cake “done
taught me de maiden language all over” (115). This “maiden language” refers directly to her courtship but also recalls and corrects her teenage “expulsion from Eden” for her sexualized thoughts, returning her to a prelapsarian space while allowing for female sexual desire and an African American paradise. Tea Cake helps with this connection by getting her in touch with the figurative possibilities of language, as we see when she explains her relationship with Tea Cake to her friend Pheoby in a rhythmic and slant-rhyming couplet: “Some of dese mornin’s and it won’t be long, you gointuh wake up callin’ me and Ah’ll be gone” (115). This is the first time that Janie uses rhyme, revealing that Tea Cake has enabled her to recognize her own internal fire, thus preparing her for their literal marriage, which signifies her long-sought-after connection to the black community.70

Although this marriage between the individual and the imagined folk community is realized in their union, as DuPlessis has commented, Janie’s link to a lived community only begins to be realized when they move to the Florida Everglades to work as migrant agricultural laborers, a common practice at the time.71 This movement to the Everglades, the center of the state’s agricultural zone as well as a center for black culture, shows both Janie’s progression in learning about her community now that she is no longer restrained from doing so and the continued oppression experienced by that community with her awareness of the governmental precarity of such work and such spaces.

MIGRANT LABOR AND THE SHIFTING ROLE OF MOVEMENT: LIVING ON THE MUCK

Hurston focuses on this migrant community in Florida to symbolize the very thing it is—a contemporary phase of black labor often overlooked by those focused on the urbanization caused by the Great Migration. This economic migration began in the United States shortly after the start of World War I, and from the teens through the ’30s over one-and-a-half-million African Americans moved from the South to the North.72 Their reasons varied from

70. Various critics such as DuPlessis have remarked on this connection: “Through Tea Cake, Janie becomes one with the black folk community; indeed, marrying Tea Cake is a way of marrying that community” (Writing beyond the Ending, 157).
72. Lemann, The Promised Land, 6. Historian Carole Marks explains that this kind of movement—what she called a labor migration—differs from other migrations that are more traditionally about moving to the frontier: “Labor migrations represent a modern form of population movement in which workers, in search of employment, are encouraged to move from
seeking work on the railroad, fleeing cotton land destroyed by the boll weevil, taking advantage of labor shortages caused by the slowing of immigration during World War I, and hoping to earn higher wages and more freedom.  

The out-migration from the South was not as swift as migrations enforced by a major natural disaster or government decree. Rather, the economic migration lasted for multiple decades. It changed the racial and cultural makeup of the country and affected economic possibilities, resulting in “nearly one-tenth of the African-American population of the United States [. . .] mov[ing] from the South to the North.”

African Americans began to move in massive numbers starting in this period, but the Great Migration did not just lead to the North. Historian Cindy Hahamovitch states, “By the 1920s African Americans outnumbered all other ethnic groups in the East’s migrant population.” Although some migrated to the North permanently, others were trapped in a cyclical pattern once urban jobs became scarcer, requiring their return to the South for seasonal work. These migrants, who also included significant numbers of immigrating blacks from the Bahamas—further broadening the idea of the Great Migration to include a transnational pattern of migration—became part of the growing population of the “permanent transient,” the migrant farmworker who had no sharecrop arrangement to return to, no state of residence, and no home to speak of. The migrants moving south regressed even further than sharecrop-
ping because they did not own anything—not the land, not a portion of the crops. Their drudgery may have been paid, but the working conditions were too similar to slavery’s lack of citizenship rights to ignore. A key difference in this broader view of the Great Migration, however, is the role of movement, the restriction of which was a sign of dependency under slavery. Rather than movement representing greater freedom after World War I, the results of such movement to northern cities often offered only an illusory freedom because of the labor conditions and limitations on housing and citizenship there. In the South, by contrast, the constancy of movement in the migrant laborers’ lives meant that the older link between a lack of citizenship and a lack of movement changed while the lack of landownership remained constant. Hurston’s text calls attention to this shift, which diminishes the rights of those unable to remain stationary, via the plight of African American migrant workers in the South who have few rights during their daily labor and even fewer when their economic displacement becomes an environmental displacement under a state of emergency. While the United Nations’ codification of the categories of the refugee and the internally displaced person was still many years away, Hurston’s depiction of the September 16–17, 1928, Okeechobee Hurricane and its destruction and displacement of the black migrant community shows how the United States gave little attention to the rights and protections of international workers and of its own citizens because of their race. Without the greater awareness of past displacements afforded by treatments such as Hurston’s, we will fail to see their connections to ideologies of ownership as well as imagined solutions to them.

Hurston, who may have coined the oxymoronic term “permanent transients” herself—in my view a likely possibility given her engagement with migratory discourse and since I am unaware of any earlier usage in contemporary writing—applied it to the labor force in Their Eyes. Janie and Tea Cake watch as these migrants arrive in the Everglades. The initial description of these migrants illustrates their need as they come from all directions for work—the migration is not unidirectional, nor even contained to only those originally from the United States:

Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east,

population meant they couldn’t wield the rights of subjects or citizens in their own defense” (Hahamovitch, “Slavery’s Stale Soil,” 235). This statement about the status of Bahaman laborers under this later program shows ways that citizenship and power were withheld from people of color long after this moment in time.
west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (131)

Out of their desperate search for work comes a positive sense of community, but because it is precarious as well as rooted in shared hardship and oppression, it is far from ideal. We see their “sore feet” and their exhaustion so that when Hurston says that “the jooks clanged and clamored” (131), we understand their use of entertainment as a release from their pain, not an erasure of it.77

This segment addresses the role of the rural South in the history of the 1920s and the precarity of African Americans who occupy temporary, overcrowded spaces that they do not own. Janie and Tea Cake’s house may be “full of people every night” (133), but crowded quarters are also part of quotidian existence on the muck. Tea Cake warns Janie: “Two weeks from now, it’ll be so many folks heah dey won’t be lookin’ fuh rooms, dey’ll be jus’ looking fuh somewhere tuh sleep. [. . .] Yuh can’t live on de muck ’thout yuh take uh bath every day. Do dat muck’ll itch yuh lak ants” (129). Historians explain that the area is called the muck because of the rich, dark soil found there, but much of this soil was only exposed to the air and the plow at the turn of the twentieth century when canals were dug to drain the swampland and part of Lake Okeechobee.78 In this respect, the development of the land shows the large-scale environmental effects prompted by capitalist governmentalities that seek increasing profits and power while diminishing the rights and opportunities

77. Hurston shows her awareness of life in Florida for blacks, including farm laborers and their means to entertainment, from singing to jook joints and gambling. However, she states, “There is little provision for diversion for this underprivileged class” (“The Negro in Florida,” 79).

78. Kleinberg, Black Cloud, 5 and Mykle, Killer ‘Cane, 18. Thinking back to how Hurston and Du Bois were at odds in their philosophies, Gates gives a nice example about how they use the space of the swamp distinctly:

The trope of the swamp, furthermore, in Their Eyes signifies exactly the opposite of what it does in Du Bois’s Quest for the Silver Fleece. Whereas the swamp in Du Bois’s text figures an uncontrolled chaos that must be plowed under and controlled, for Hurston the swamp is the trope of the freedom of erotic love, the antithesis of the bourgeois life and order that her protagonist flees but to which Du Bois’s protagonists aspire. Whereas Du Bois’s characters gain economic security by plowing up and cultivating cotton in the swamp, Janie flees the bourgeois life that Du Bois’s characters realize, precisely by abandoning traditional values for the uncertainties and the potential chaos of the uncultivated, untamed swamp, where love and death linger side by side. Du Bois’s shadowy figure who seems to dwell in the swamp, we recall, is oddly enough named Zora. (Signifying Monkey, 193)
for raced, poor workers to own anything and to remain stationary. While the land provided economic independence for landowners, for the migrant workers who labored in the fields, “the rich black earth cling[s] to bodies and bit[es] the skin like ants” (131). The black earth, like their black labor, has been manipulated by capitalism into a force that is destructive to them and is productive for someone else. Hurston may use descriptive language, but the text still reveals the ways in which space and movement are used to continue the disempowered position of migrant labor in the South.

While this economic migration marks a general shift in the value of movement from freedom to oppression, it is also true that the places migrants occupy often trap them when catastrophe strikes, since then rapid movement becomes necessary in an environmental migration but is exceedingly difficult for the poor. Hurston accurately recounts a great devastation to the temporary location of these migrants. In a direct historical allusion, she recounts the hurricane that hit Lake Okeechobee and breached the dike, sending a wall of water that enveloped the entire area and left the forty-mile region from Belle Glade to West Palm Beach separated by water for days.\textsuperscript{79} An estimated 2,500 to 3,000 people were killed. This second-deadliest hurricane in the United States killed almost fifty percent of the area’s population, including many undocumented workers who lived near the levees with no means of escape.\textsuperscript{80} Historian Robert Mykle notes that at the time of the hurricane few gave any consideration as to what the black migrant workers would do. They had nowhere to go and no cars to carry them to safety, they could not

\textsuperscript{79.} Mykle, \textit{Killer 'Cane}, 205.

\textsuperscript{80.} Ibid., 213. The deadliest hurricane was in 1900, which killed an estimated 8,000 people in Galveston, Texas (Blake et al., “The Deadliest,” 7). While numbers fluctuate between organizations, the death totals for Hurricane Katrina, which swept the Gulf Coast in 2005, directly compare with the U.S. totals for the 1928 hurricane, with the death toll range from just under 2,000 to just under 3,000 (Knabb, Rhome, and Brown, “Tropical Cyclone Report,” 11, and Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, “Hurricane Katrina”). Only two years before Katrina, while marking the 75th anniversary of the 1928 hurricane, the National Hurricane Center adjusted its numbers for the San Felipe/Okeechobee Hurricane to 2,500 but stated that the numbers could have been as high as 3,000 (Klinkenberg, “Unmarked but Not Unmourned” and Blake et al., “The Deadliest,” 7). This recent discussion of the hurricane, however, did not prepare the country for Katrina, a storm reminiscent in many ways of the 1928 hurricane. Even the newly adjusted casualty numbers underestimate the overall impact of this storm, since deaths in Puerto Rico, Guadaloupe, and other parts of the Caribbean are not included in the number listed above. The possible number of deaths could have easily reached over 4,000 (Rappaport and Fernandez-Partagas, “The Deadliest Atlantic,” appendix 1). Beyond the scope of hurricanes, the 1928 storm is the third deadliest of all natural disasters in U.S. history, with only the San Francisco earthquake and subsequent fires in 1906 surpassing it, with current estimates at 3,000 deaths (Hansen and Condon, \textit{Denial of Disaster}, 160). These data show the historical import of this event and the surprising lack of attention given to it.
travel on the barges, and they had no relatives in high and dry places. They would have to take their chances in their flimsy shacks built of scrap wood and tarpaper, most no stronger than poorly built coffins.81

Three quarters of the dead were black, and, as Kleinberg reports, “the hurricane may have also accounted for the most deaths of black people in a single day in U.S. history.”82 Mykle’s wording is telling because if blacks did not survive in the housing that was built like a coffin, they would not receive coffins for their burials, although whites did—a piece of the record that Hurston also reported in her novel.83 In West Palm Beach, 674 unidentified black bodies were buried without ceremony and only received an official marker in 2000.84 In this state of emergency, surviving blacks were then forced into work gangs on the basis of old vagrancy laws to handle and bury the dead.85 In Hurston’s fiction, Janie and Tea Cake observe this death and destruction wreaked on the African American community, and then Tea Cake is forced into such a work gang by two white men carrying rifles. The way that movement functions for migrant laborers shows the precarity of their ordinary existence, while the storm shows their inability to control their movement when necessary during the disaster; both of these states are shaped by the governmental racism against blacks, who are neither given a means for escape when they are alive nor treated with respect when they are dead, which would be expected for internally displaced people.

Hurston’s focus on the harsh conditions for blacks is then paralleled by the positive energy she gives those living in this situation. Although Tea Cake represents this vision of culture, he and Janie live in the realized world of the migrant worker, which is far from that imagined version of community. Here the real and imagined do not fully open up a new spatial option of Thirdspace, but instead, at this point in the narrative, highlight the disparity between them.

Tea Cake helps others overcome some of the hardships in the lived space of the muck by using his imaginative skills of storytelling, but he does more than tell stories. He becomes the story by taking on the role of a trickster figure, a disruptive literary character who turns situations on their head.86 A key example is when he upends Mrs. Turner’s restaurant. On the individual level, she threatens Tea Cake because she wants to set her brother up with Janie,
but her real threat is to the community because her goal with this pairing is to "lighten up de race" (140). She believes, "If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem" (141). To protect the community, Tea Cake emerges as a trickster, pretending to help Mrs. Turner turn drunks out of her restaurant when he is really adding to the chaos and confusion: "Mrs. Turner saw with dismay that Tea Cake's taking them out was worse than letting them stay in" (151). He upsets the authority figure at hand and creates a carnivalesque atmosphere.

Eventually, Tea Cake becomes associated with the African diasporic trickster, Big John the Conqueror—sometimes called High John—whom Hurston brought to the general public's attention in various pieces of writing both anthropological and fictional, showing Hurston's interest not just in African American culture, but in how that culture extends beyond national boundaries because of the forced migration of the middle passage that brought this narrative figure to the United States from Africa.87 The reverence with which African Americans held Big John is directly named in conversation in Their Eyes:

"He was uh man wid salt in him. He could give uh flavor to anything."

"Yeah, but he was uh man dat wuz more'n man. 'Tain't no mo' lak him. He wouldn't dig potatoes, and he wouldn't rake hay: he wouldn't take a whipping, and he wouldn't run away." (66–67)

Hurston adds to this explanation in her anthropological work, defining him in Mules and Men as "the wish fulfillment hero of the race. The one who, nevertheless, or in spite of laughter, usually defeats Ole Massa, God, and the Devil. Even when Massa seems to have him in a hopeless dilemma he wins out by a trick."88 Hurston also explains this African character's mythical origins and purpose:

High John de Conquerer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. But he was not a natural man in the beginning. First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh. His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but

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87. Varro E. Tyler marks Hurston as the "definitive" source of this narrative ("The Elusive History," 165). Carolyn Morrow Long also notes that Hurston herself is the one to tie the folk stories of Old John to John the Conqueror. She adds that the possible connections extend beyond the borders of the United States to "Yoruba/Dahomean deities brought to the Americas with the African slaves. The most likely candidate is Shangó, the spirit of thunder and lightning, fire, and passion, who is also irresistible to women. Other possibilities are Ogún, the spirit of warfare and iron implements, or Eleguá, the divine trickster" ("John the Conqueror," 51).

88. Hurston, Mules and Men, 247.
musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing-drum. [...] High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh.89

Big John helps those in need by giving them hope and laughter as a way to survive and occasionally overcome their situation. As an abstraction of “hope” that “put on flesh,” Big John represents the mix of allegorical traditions, both African and Christian, upon which Hurston draws for her novel. As a plantation figure, though, Big John must transform as African American experience and culture do, protecting the slave first on the middle passage and then on the plantation.90 Here, he returns through Tea Cake, who takes on Big John’s attributes, to help Janie find her own sense of freedom. Right from their first meeting, when Janie seems to already know Tea Cake, he assumes a mystical role since everything he says makes her laugh. He frees her from the “slavery” of running Jody’s shop and shares with her the positive elements of black culture. He gives her hope.

Tea Cake becomes Big John not just for Janie, though, but, once they move to the muck, for all of those around them, both African American and immigrants from the Caribbean. Right before the hurricane, on the muck, a crowd at Tea Cake and Janie’s house discusses the figure, saying that he “had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying at all. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne” (157), which is followed by the statement, “That brought them back to Tea Cake” (157). John the Conqueror’s guitar playing reminds them of Tea Cake’s playing. By uniting Big John and Tea Cake (even in the length of their names), Hurston connects Tea Cake to the stories and the culture of blacks to show how they help migrant workers maintain their hope even as they live in the present-day “slavery” of migrant agriculture.

The hurricane disrupts the fragile hope that the muck community will ever be able to arrive as a fully utopian space—one shaped without the hierarchical structures of landownership—that is free from the external forces of governmentality. Once the storm begins, Janie says, “Ole Massa is doin’ His work now. Us oughta keep quiet” (159). The oppression the workers feel becomes a force of nature. As the hurricane destroys the community, it also leads to Tea Cake’s descent. Janie loses him and her connection to the area because “the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake was not there. So it was just a great expanse of black mud” (191). After the hurricane, the community is lost, and animosity appears. Symbolically, the arrival of the storm signals

89. Hurston, The Sanctified Church, 69.
90. Ibid., 69–70.
the dissolution of the black community that is caused by external powerful forces, and this loop of the Great Migration contains those on the move who are now not just economic migrants but also environmental migrants.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: URBAN PROTEST AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The final portion of the novel expresses Hurston’s ambivalence toward the nature and definition of black community as opposed to its culture. The present moment of the novel, which details Janie’s continuing migration, lines up with the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, thus influencing how Hurston envisions the possibility of community building because of her own difficult relationship with her fellow writers. Therefore, while Tea Cake initially represented for Hurston the black community Janie seeks, following the hurricane both he and the lived community of the muck become a weight on Janie. Tea Cake becomes an image of the violence Hurston sees penned by Richard Wright and some of the older members of the Harlem Renaissance, but in spirit he is able to maintain his role as the African American folk hero Big John. Because the Everglades community also turns against Janie after Tea Cake’s death, and the Eatonville community, where she finally returns, still judges her, Hurston’s text argues that an imagined, inclusive African American community has yet to be realized and that full citizenship will not come through the violence and hatred espoused by much urban protest writing of the 1930s. Even so, Hurston’s own imagined solution remains limited because it is tied to the ownership ideology of white governmentality.

As Janie and Tea Cake flee from the storm and the ensuing flood, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and quickly becomes violent and vengeful. This initial incident occurs just outside of Palm Beach, “the city of refuge” (166). With the muck destroyed and their move to this white-run city, Tea Cake is beaten down by the oppression he experiences under whites who put him to work separating white and black bodies to be buried; here their position as migrants shifts again from environmental migrants to political migrants because of how they are being controlled by the governmentality of vagrancy laws used against blacks to restrict their movement. This loss of black autonomy leads metaphorically to Tea Cake’s sickness. If he had been able to stay away from Palm Beach, it seems that the violence that ensues may have been avoided. This urban migration also indicates that Tea Cake is infected not just by rabies but by the accepted literary representation of black men in white-

dominated space. Tea Cake’s “madness,” Hurston seems to be saying, embodies the violence often found in urban protest fiction such as Wright’s.

The story Wright published a year before *Their Eyes*’ release, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” displays his focus on violence between whites and blacks. Big Boy is a defenseless child sought for a lynching because he was caught swimming naked by a white woman. The story shows how trapped he is by the racism of the community that would want to kill him for being a playful kid in the water. He hides from his attackers in the woods, but they are very near to finding him. As he waits in fear, he considers wringing their necks in order to survive, but what he actually ends up killing are a snake and then a dog that gets his scent:

> Then, he never exactly knew how—he never knew whether he had lunged or the dog had lunged—they were together, rolling in the water. The green eyes were beneath him, between his legs. Dognails bit into his arms. [. . .] With strength flowing from fear, he closed his fingers, pushing his full weight on the dog’s throat. The dog heaved again, and lay still . . . Big Boy heard the sound of his own breathing filling the hole, and heard shouts and footsteps above him going past.92

We feel the boy’s desperation, but since Hurston is more interested in showing the autonomous spaces of blackness with little interference from whites, she resists the politics of Wright’s vision and rewrites it. Big Boy’s violent killing of a dog prefigures Tea Cake’s own killing of the rabid dog that he “seized [. . .] by the neck” (166) and wrestled to death in the water.93 Although killing the dog in both cases is a reasonable response to the attack, Hurston wishes to focus on representations of compassion instead of violence stemming from hatred.

Her repeated rejection of the idea of hatred in both her fiction and her criticism reveals the connections she sees between these representations. When she reviewed *Uncle Tom’s Children*, which included a republished version of this story, she makes her differing perspective clear in similar terms:

> This is a book about hatreds. Mr. Wright serves notice by his title that he speaks of a people in revolt, and his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live. Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work.94

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92. Wright, “Big Boy,” 156.
93. Ibid., 166.
Whether one agrees more strongly with Hurston’s or Wright’s view, Hurston’s work is significant in that it addresses the literal swamp of the muck and reveals her outlook on the devastating results of hostility in her rewriting of Wright’s dog attack. In *Their Eyes*, Janie mentions animosity as residing in the dog’s eyes of “pure hate,” showing that “he didn’t aim tuh jus’ bite [her . . .] He aimed tuh kill [her] stone dead” (167). Tea Cake responds with similar language, saying, “Ah didn’t mean tuh take his hate neither. He had to die uh me one. Mah switch blade said it wuz him” (167). Here the language of hatred creates a slippage because, while Tea Cake means that he planned to stand up against this enemy, what happens is that Tea Cake does “take his hate” by taking it into himself, becoming violent. Once in the hostile environment, Tea Cake, just like the boy in Wright’s story, does not seem to have much choice in making his initial attack, but Hurston’s text shows how Tea Cake’s violence only leads to more violence and death. After the attack, Tea Cake shifts from Hurston’s representation of African American folk culture to Wright’s representation of the oppressed African American. For Hurston, the presence of this type of representation forces her, through Janie, to expunge it by killing Tea Cake. Janie shoots him in self-defense as he approaches her in a rabies-induced rage with his own gun. Hurston wants to rid literature of the violent black male and the image of the South as “a dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else” that allows little space for positive images of growth. Therefore, Janie does not kill her representation of community; she destroys what Hurston sees as the warped view of African American culture represented in other literature of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissance.

After Tea Cake dies, the people from the Everglades turn against Janie. They, like Tea Cake, the book tells us, have been “infected” with those types of views from the Harlem Renaissance. The migrant community wrongly gossips about Janie, saying, “He worked like a dog for her and nearly killed himself saving her in the storm, then soon as he got a little fever from the water, she had took up with another man. [. . .] Hanging was too good” (186). Janie has not run off with another man and disavowed Tea Cake for Mrs. Turner’s lighter-skinned brother, as the community claims, nor has Hurston disavowed the black community and wed herself to minstrelsy, as Wright claims. Hurston continues to write even with the loud opposition of her critics, perhaps continuing to hope for the resolution that Janie receives. For Janie, the community eventually apologizes to her, but by then she has decided to return to Eatonville.

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95. Ibid., 10.
On returning to Eatonville, Janie knows that it too is not the community she has sought. The town itself now metonymically represents the bourgeois ideology of her second husband and Du Bois. While in the courtroom, she witnesses the spread of the views of the Harlem Renaissance; with her return to Eatonville, she travels back “North” to where she first experienced the root of those ideas when she was married to Jody. Even so, she tries to spread some of the folk culture that she has learned by becoming a storyteller herself, but she doubts whether her story will be heard, just as Hurston doubts if other African American writers will listen to her. The community may fight against Janie, but she wants to remind them how to listen to the stories as she has. In her friend Pheoby she finally gets a listener. She tells Pheoby, “You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ’cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (6), but as the novel ends it is left unresolved as to what Pheoby will do with the story she has been told.96 Janie and Hurston know that the community is going to question them, but even though they present a tone of indifference, they still speak/write. The problem with Janie’s solution is that it relies upon an assumption of ownership and autonomy similar to that of the white governmental structures upon which Eatonville was founded.

A UTOPIAN THRIRDSPACE OF OWNERSHIP AND SELF-POSSESSION

In the end, Janie is finally “freed” to know herself. This freedom is demonstrated in two key ways. First, Tea Cake’s death parallels Big John the Conqueror’s return to Africa when slavery ends.97 Big John, and by extension Tea Cake, is no longer needed the way he once was, “but he left his power here, [. . .] and he can be summoned at any time.”98 The last paragraph of the novel shows a second example of Janie’s newfound freedom; she brings together her ownership of her house in Eatonville and the power of Tea Cake:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake,

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96. Although Carla Kaplan refers to Pheoby as an “ideal listener” in The Erotics of Talk, how ideal their friendship is remains questionable because her relationship with Pheoby is just as complicated as her relationship with the community at large. Though Janie tells her story to Pheoby, there are moments when she withholds things from her friend. At one point, “Janie acted glad to see her” (112) but was not. At another point, “she pretended to Pheoby” that she liked a man in Sanford, and because of that Pheoby is later unaware that Janie is interested in Tea Cake.

97. Hurston, The Sanctified Church, 71.

98. Ibid., 72.
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. (193)

This materialization of Tea Cake inside her home reveals that she has created a new space for herself—a Thirdspace that combines the real and imagined. Tea Cake remains with her, showing that his death is not a death—just like for Big John the Conqueror who “went up tuh heben without dying at all” (157). He has not left her, and the culture he represents that ties her to the black diaspora remains accessible to Janie. Tea Cake gives Janie hope along the way, just as Big John gave hope to those who were enslaved. Now that she is freed, he continues to symbolically give her solace.

Janie views space anew within her home but also with the world as a whole. Having returned from her journey to the horizon, she now “pull[es] in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pull[es] it from around the waist of the world and drape[es] it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She call[es] in her soul to come and see” (193). She bends space and time in a new way, illustrating the possibilities of a chronotope that displaces (without erasing) the slave ship. The horizon does not choke Janie as her grandmother’s horizon did, since she can now wrap herself in her experiences of the world and her new knowledge of African American culture from the Edenic space of her childhood, to enslaved sharecropping at her first husband’s home, to elitist empowerment of Jody’s Eatonville, to the migrant communal hardship on the muck, and then to a new Eatonville where she finally acquires self-possession and landownership.99 This utopian Thirdspace, however, remains limited not only because of Janie’s isolation from her neighbors but also because her empowerment is achieved through her reclamation of property; such a Thirdspace does not imagine solutions for internally displaced persons without their own home and without the same level of privilege.

By following her movement through these external spaces, it is possible to track both Janie’s internal journey and her troubled relationship with her various communities—her process to an imagined spatialization that escapes the precarity imposed by society and that incorporates the shifting relationship between labor and land in African American history into a narrative

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99. Janie’s grandmother Nanny takes the possibilities of the horizon and transforms them into the horrors contained by a lynching rope:

Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. (89)
of personal and social development that acknowledges oppression without being defined by it. She finds culture but not community, just like Hurston herself. In contrast to some previous assessments of Hurston’s work, this novel presents a consistent allegorical structure that moves through the history of African American experiences via Janie’s relationships with the men she marries, the communities she encounters, and the spaces in which she resides. Hurston’s desire to focus African American literature on African American culture in the southern United States in the larger context of trans-Atlantic experiences was shaped by her response to migratory patterns and the role of women in the early twentieth century, and it adjusts our standard notion that the northern progression of the Great Migration and urbanization are the only way to view this moment in African American history. Instead, Hurston’s text presents a counter-narrative to American exceptionalism and freedom through movement that reveals the increasingly refined governmental controls disenfranchising African Americans. Finally, as a piece of literature, the novel shows the potential outside of historical narratives for individuals and communities to search for a Thirdspace that can combine real and imagined elements to try to find something new outside of the existing power structure.