

**THE MEANING OF SILENCE: THE SILENCE OF THE
OPPRESSED IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY
THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*, AND ZORA NEALE
HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*
AND *JONAH'S GOURD VINE***

ANCA-BEATRICE MATEI

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"There are oppressed women in the United States, and it is both appropriate and necessary that we speak against such oppression" (hooks, 1984, 5).

Abstract:

The paper explores the meaning of silence in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The short, introductory section entitled *The meaning of silence: some theoretical considerations* defines the concept of *silence* from a feminist perspective and tries to determine its causes and consequences. While mainly intended to suggest some forms of silence, it also contrasts the meaning of silence to that of language, emphasizing their power to both relieve pain and cause spiritual and physical death. *The silence of the oppressed* examines sexism and racism as causes of silence and renders a person's emergence from silence to speech not only possible, but also enriching. It further points out that although silence may, indeed, create the illusion of self-protection, it does not help establish a network of support, nor does it make psychological scars disappear. Rather, like a boomerang, it turns against the very individual who has chosen its course, deepening his or her crisis and perpetuating precisely that which it is supposed to resist.

Keywords: *black women, silence, language, racism, sexism*

The Meaning of Silence: Some Theoretical Considerations

Broadly defined as the complete absence of sound, *silence* is often understood within feminist circles as the fact or state of abstaining from speech or else of being prevented from speaking by the forces of racism, sexism, and classism, which have so long acted together to suppress black women's voice. Described

by critic Frances Beale as “double jeopardy,” (1970) the dual discriminations of racism and sexism are completed with classism and even homophobia in the interpretation of critic Deborah King, who renders “multiple jeopardy” (Meyers 76) as an interactive model which better captures the status of black women as women taught to resort to secrecy and silence.

Talking about her own coming to voice, feminist critic bell hooks, who sees in *silence* a sign of woman’s submission to patriarchal authority, points out the fact that, although women in black communities have not always been silent, their speech has been limited to their interactions with other black women. *Silence* and *speech* are thus revealed to be strong metaphors of feminist discourse meant to illustrate the ways in which women are denied the right to express themselves other than in the context of the private sphere of their domestic lives. Therefore, as bell hooks writes, “our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard. Our speech, ‘the right speech of womanhood,’ was often the soliloquy, the talking into thin air, the talking to ears that do not hear you—the talk that is simply not listened to. Unlike the black male preacher whose speech was to be heard, who was to be listened to, whose words were to be remembered, the voices of black women—giving orders, making threats, fussing—could be tuned out, could become a kind of background music, audible but not acknowledged as significant speech” (hooks, *Talking Back* 6). Highly informed by the ideal of femininity, which asked women to adopt a submissive, obedient, passive position both inside and outside their households, they came to interiorize the lesson according to which men had the power of speech, while women “had, or were supposed to have,” as Sandra Gilbert remarks, “the graceful obligation of silence” (34).

In their private lives, black men, even educated black male activists and political leaders demanded that their wives assume subordinate roles, a painful reality that Maya Angelou addresses when she decides to speak about her marriage to Vusumzi Make, a South African freedom fighter. Promised “the joining of Africa and Africa-America” (Angelou, *The Heart* 120), Maya is utterly disappointed to find herself reduced to the status of a “portable pussy” (135), as Ruth Thompson, a West Indian journalist in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical novel *The Heart of a Woman*, states. Though shocked with her friend’s language, Maya is overwhelmed with the truthfulness of the words and the reality of her situation: “When other Africans visited, Vus would insist that Guy sit in on the unending debates over violence and nonviolence, the role of religion in Africa, the place and the strength of women in the struggle. I tried to overhear their interesting conversations, but generally I was too busy with household chores to take the time” (141). Further on, when she finds herself a job as associate editor for a magazine, in an attempt to escape the subordinate

role her husband has cast her into, she is charged with foolish, headstrong American ways and accused of having endangered the struggle.

Similarly, Mary Church Terrell “recorded in her diary,” as critic bell hooks reports, “that her activist lawyer husband desired her to play no role in political affairs. She complained that he treated her as if she were a fragile glass object in need of constant protection. Terrell’s husband used his patriarchal status to sabotage her political work. His fear was that her femininity would be ‘tarnished’ by too many encounters with the world outside the home” (hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman* 90). By contrast, Lewis Douglass, the son of Frederick Douglass and one of Mary Church Terrell’s best friends, expressed his confidence that public work of various kinds and not housekeeping was Terrell’s destiny. During a casual encounter on a street car, he told her proud mother: “Try to persuade your daughter to use her head and let others whose brains have not been trained use their hands” (Terrell 162). However, in a world which, by and large, viewed women as a second sex with limited privileges, few men if any shared Lewis Douglass’ feelings and concerns.

As a group, black women have long occupied the lowest possible position in the American society, being continuously pushed back and silenced by the capitalist system they lived in, by white men, white women and black men alike. Paid less for the same work that men did and without the possibility of advancement, black women found no allies in the other socially victimized groups. Silenced and emasculated by racism, black men turned to sexism to shut women up and defend their masculinity. In a similar way, white women silenced by white men acted as oppressors of black women, who were left with no *inferior others*. Black women, the scapegoat of society, functioned as an element of catharsis, providing both white women and black men with the possibility of relief from strong and repressed emotions.

While the 60s black power movement opposed racism, it was also perceived by feminist criticism as a movement that allowed black men to take sides with patriarchy. According to bell hooks, “militant black men were publicly attacking the white male patriarchs for their racism but they were also establishing a bond of solidarity with them based on their shared acceptance of and commitment to patriarchy. The strongest bonding element between militant black men and white men was their shared sexism—they both believed in the inherent inferiority of woman and supported male dominance” (hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman* 98-99). Thus, although racism, sexism, classism and homophobia have all contributed to keep black women speechless, it seems their *silence* is most profoundly rooted into the intertwined forces of racism and sexism.

Within patriarchal society, women’s silence about men has often been interpreted by feminist critics as a gesture of *submission* and *complicity*, wherein women have faithfully kept male secrets and have, at all costs, refused to speak against male authority. This pattern of behavior, that female children are taught

since early childhood precisely by their mothers, has helped institutionalize and perpetuate male domination, which has, in turn, resulted into the dehumanization of women and the setting up of *the silence of the oppressed*. As bell hooks writes in *Talking Back*, “feminist scholarship about women who are physically assaulted by men is full of autobiographical accounts of males punishing women for speaking, whether we speak to defend ourselves, to engage in critical argument, or just to say something—anything. It is as though the very act of speech, wherein a woman talks to a man, carries embedded in that gesture a challenge, a threat to male domination” (hooks, *Talking Back* 128). For the objectified, male dominated women, their silence is not only about refraining from actual speech, but also about enduring violence and pain, the pain of human misery and degradation, the pain of loneliness, of disappointment, loss and isolation, all for fear of exposure, for fear that one’s innermost beliefs, feelings and thoughts will be dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration. The barrier of fear and misinterpreted feelings of respect for patriarchal authority must be destroyed if women, black or white, are to allow themselves a chance to self-respect and self-transformation from voiceless object to speaking subject.

Silence may also be interpreted as a gesture of *protection* or *self-protection*, whereby women try to protect themselves as well as others, usually their children, husbands or siblings, from violence, public scorn, or the pain of remembrance. Normally in opposition, love and violence have become so interconnected in family contexts that women fear that the exclusion of violence from their lives will automatically trigger the loss of love and security they take comfort in when victims of an abusive relationship. Women often risk their self-esteem, their sense of worth and value, and keep quiet about their everyday ordeals for fear they might be judged, misunderstood, or even rendered guilty of their own victimization, of having been unable to live up to the standards set by the idealized, socially constructed image of womanhood. In bell hooks’ words, women “have had to pay a price for breaking the silence and naming the problem. They have had to be seen as fallen women, who have failed in their ‘feminine’ role to sensitize and civilize the beast in the man” (hooks, *Talking Back* 89). The power to end domination, and with it violence and silence, in family relationships lies in the hands of men and women alike. Through education, personal effort and will, men must begin to question the validity of the judgment according to which masculinity is about the ability to exert power over women and femininity is about knowing one’s place and being silent. Women, on the other hand, mothers of sons, who out of a misunderstood sense of shielding their children from whatever kind of pain, continue to educate them in the spirit of perpetuating sexism, should actively engage in the feminist struggle to put an end to patriarchal domination, to eradicate exploitation and oppression in family relationships.

Speaking about her own silence concerning her traumatic cancer experience, Audre Lorde reveals in her essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* that what she regretted most, while contemplating death, were her silences:

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. ... What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am a woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask, are you doing yours? (*Sister Outsider* 41-42).

Questioning the apparent protection that silence endows women with, Audre Lorde also pinpoints the terrible *consequences* of remaining voiceless when she reports her daughter's words of encouragement before her speech: "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside" (42). Much in the same way, bell hooks recalls in *Talking Back* that, as a child, she was never taught absolute silence. Instead she was taught that it was important to speak "but to talk a talk that was in itself a silence. ... Madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if you were female" (hooks, *Talking Back* 7). The multiple fears, the inner struggles to overcome sexism and racism, the efforts made to get the necessary confidence to speak, are all elements which can create *confusion* about one's identity and place in the world, leading one either to self-acceptance, at best, or to madness and death, at worst.

In opposition with silence, *language* is often described in feminist criticism as a source of empowerment, a way to overcome fear and a signifier of self-recovery. Consequently, women's coming to voice becomes an act of resistance, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes self-transformation possible and that restores women in the possession of their long confiscated self. Be it racism or sexism or, perhaps, both the source of women's anger and frustration at having been marginalized and silenced by a society which has unjustly stripped their existence of human dignity, it is the act of speaking up, of *talking back* that liberates them and gives them strength to support each other and move on. "We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid," Audre Lorde writes, "in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of

fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (*Sister Outsider* 44).

Just as the spoken word has the power to heal and soothe, so does it have the power to inflict injuries and, in certain circumstances, even cause spiritual and physical death. Nevertheless, people must always remember that one type of oppression does not excuse the other, and that sexist and racist exploitation will not cease to exist unless they take the courage to speak against it.

The Silence of the Oppressed

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston's most celebrated novel, primarily deals with Janie's struggle to find her voice, despite the *sexist* and *racist* forces that continuously attempt to define her self, her needs and place in the world. Silenced more than once in her life, Janie's disappointments strengthen her will to make choices of her own and succeed where many others have failed. A coherent narrative of "ascent and immersion", as critic Robert Stepto calls it (5), the novel chronicles Janie's journey from childhood to maturity, from her grandmother's home and throughout her two disastrous marriages to Tea Cake's love and death, from dependence to independence, from silent, submissive object to speaking, assertive subject.

As Janie herself recalls, her conscious life starts with Johnny Taylor's kiss at Nanny's gate. Although a brief appearance in the novel, he marks a turning point in Janie's life, unknowingly triggering her grandmother's decision to have her married to old, well-off Logan Killicks. While Johnny stands for youth, love, innocence and playfulness, somehow previewing Tea Cake's stepping into the course of events much later, he is essentially as powerless and voiceless as Janie is at this point. Too young and inexperienced to assume control over her actions and destiny, Janie is, ironically, first silenced by the one person who most loves her in the world: her grandmother.

As a former slave, who all too well knows the *mule of the world* customary fate of the black woman, Nanny wants to ensure her granddaughter the life neither she nor her daughter has ever had. Clearly an attempt to protect Janie, Nanny's slap to silence the young girl ends up placing her into the exact type of marriage she would have wanted Janie to avoid, had she known that "sittin' on high" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 15) could not feed an empty heart. In telling Janie the story of her slave experiences, Nanny actually projects her unfulfilled dreams onto her free of slavery, adolescent granddaughter: "It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they

wasn't no pulpit for me. ... So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 15-16). Silenced by her condition as a slave, and then by racism and classism, Nanny never got to tell the story she longed to tell. Yet, through Janie, as Elizabeth Meese writes, "Hurston exposes the crack in the plate and preaches the liberating and defiant sermon that Nanny was never able to deliver and that black women, indeed all women, have been waiting to hear" (62). While Nanny's wish to give Janie the gift of easy life is understandable, her choice of Logan Killicks is questionable, if not truly unwise.

Much older than Janie, Logan is a propertied man who has achieved material success and who thinks his wife is just another piece of property, an object with no thoughts or feelings of her own, an appendix meant to serve him well, or, maybe, an extra hand that he can boss around. Actually, his high social position strongly contrasts with his inability to express his feelings, to put his fears and disappointments into words. Unable to get through to a girl of sixteen, he resorts to the good, old easy way out and shuts Janie up whenever she opens her mouth to speak, thus turning their marriage into one absent of flavor, of *sun*, *bees*, or *pollen*. When Janie threatens to leave him, upon his decision to work her behind a plow and his questioning of her birth, her mother and grandmother, Logan once again seems unable to speak his thoughts: "There! Janie had put words in his held-in fears. She might run off sure enough. The thought put a terrible ache in Logan's body, but he thought it best to put on scorn" (*Their Eyes* 29). Himself voiceless, perhaps, as Nanny once explains, silenced by the white men who subjugate black men, Logan reinforces his tarnished male authority by trying to bring Janie under his total control. Instead of facing the problem and making an effort to sort it out, he decides to silence Janie and pretend sleep, hoping his words will both hurt her and put her back into her place: "Ah'm getting' sleepy, Janie. Let's don't talk no mo'. 'Tain't too many mens would trust yuh, knowin' yo' folks lak dey do" (29).

With Nanny dead and Logan threatening to beat her to death on account of her "law-rating" (30) him, nothing holds Janie back from running off with "citified, stylish dressed" (26) Joe Starks "from in and through Georgy" (27), whom she meets one day at the water pump. While readers may sympathize with Logan, "an African American man who must have worked twice as hard as a white man to grow and sell his produce", as critic Maria Racine partly defends him (286), his hardships at having been oppressed by white people do, by no means, justify his oppressive behavior towards his young wife. Janie's resolution to leave Logan and take her chances with Jody is the first choice she makes about the course of her life, a choice that in itself speaks about Janie's ability to later triumph over patriarchal oppression.

No longer Nanny's arrangement, Janie bears responsibility for her marriage to Jody, who, although does not represent "sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (*Their Eyes* 28), reminds her of Mr. Washburn, the successful white man for whose family Nanny has worked for a large part of her life. Besides, he speaks for "change and chance" (28) and *seems* to be able to offer Janie the affection her previous marriage lacked: "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (28). However, it doesn't take long until Janie realizes she has only succeeded in trading one emotional prison for another.

As Jody takes Janie to Eatonville, a town lived in and run all by black folks, his becoming a "big voice" (27) parallels her forced retreat into silence. With his becoming the mayor of Eatonville and the owner of the only store in town, Janie finds herself reduced to a mere doll-baby, a beautiful object for others to admire from a distance, a silent wife to add to his power. When the townspeople ask Janie to say a few words upon his election as mayor, Jody cuts in and robs her of her voice: "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (40-41). Instinctively sensing her loss, Janie reflects upon Jody's selfish act: "Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn't too easy. She had never thought of making a speech, and didn't know if she cared to make one at all. It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things. But anyway, she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold" (41).

Janie's high expectations from her relationship to Jody gradually die out, as his energy and full attention are directed towards town business only, and his social advancement requires her to live a speechless existence. While the store porch functions as the cultural center of the town, hosting both big picture talkers and gossipers, Janie is allowed to listen but denied active participation as a storyteller. In his hurry to surround himself with property, respect and admiration, Jody keeps Janie silent not because he fears her competition, but because she might rumple his perfect image, making him look less than he is. His favorite exclamation, *I god*, which often starts his discourse, proves he feels superior to everybody else in town, something like a powerful white man. And no wife of a wealthy, white man was ever supposed to speak outside her home, to act independent, or live any other way than in the shadow of her husband.

In the end, Janie's marriage to Jody turns out to resemble her marriage to Logan a little bit too much. Indeed, Jody doesn't ask her to work in the field, but by different strategies he forces her to retreat into herself and shut down, much the same way Logan has done. Despite his big, powerful voice that shapes the

entire community of Eatonville, Jody, just like Logan, proves unable to express his emotions and insecurities to his wife. He doesn't ignore things or pretend sleep to protect himself from his worst fears, but takes action, forcing Janie to wear a head-rag in order to cover her long, beautiful hair: "This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. ... That was because Joe never told Janie how jealous he was. ... She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others. But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him" (51-52). The type worn by slave women as a signifier of their status, Janie's head-rag marks her position as silent object or property that belongs to Joe Starks. Earlier in the novel, Nanny tells Janie about her master, who, before leaving the plantation to go to war, comes to her cabin and asks her to let down her hair so that he can wrap his hand in it for the last time. Thus, while Nanny's oppression is signaled by her master's demand that she uncover her hair, which is a symbol of her sexuality, Janie's oppression is signaled by her husband's demand that she cover her hair, and with it her sexuality. In a sense, both the head-rag and Janie's confinement to the store are meant to isolate her from the community, to keep her tied to her home, like a dog is kept tied to its kennel.

Nevertheless, Janie's silence grows less and her voice improves with every relationship she develops. In response to Logan's sexism and racism, she flees the farm. But in response to Jody's oppressive behavior, Janie learns "how to talk some and leave some" (72). For example, when Jody frees Matt Bonner's yellow mule as a result of his wife's empathizing with the poor animal after much mule ill-treatment on the part of the townspeople, Janie is recognized by the community as "uh born orator" (55), although her irony is missed: "Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed the Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something" (55). The sharp contrast between Abraham Lincoln and Joe Starks, between the United States and Eatonville, or between the Negroes and the mule goes largely unnoticed. Neither her husband nor the people who hear her talk have the ability to read between the lines and understand that, despite his social position and power, the mayor cares to free a mule but doesn't care to free his wife from his own emotionally and physically abusive behavior.

Not only is Janie psychologically silenced, but when her dinner doesn't fit Jody's taste, he slaps her and insults her brains. As Janie confronts him and tells him that "womenfolks thinks sometimes too" (67), he hushes her, claiming that "they just think they's thinking" (67). Yet, it won't be long before Janie starts challenging Jody with words, clearly indicating that he does not have, nor has he

ever had, absolute control over her inner thoughts and feelings. The most dramatic episode and an important turning point in Janie's coming to voice involves her public attack on Jody's masculinity and voice right on the porch of their store: "You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (75). Humiliated in front of his friends, Jody is, for the first time in his life, unable to react verbally, so he once again resorts to physical force in what turns out to be a useless attempt to leave the confrontation triumphant. Ironically, Jody, who has spent all his life constantly trying to silence Janie, ends up having his own voice suppressed. Essentially a narrow-minded man who builds his self-fulfillment on his wife's misery, Joe Starks misses his chance to happiness and, eventually, dies in solitude. Not even on his death bed does he realize his mistakes or understand Janie's right to speak and exist independently of his will. Too weak to slap her now, he wishes thunder and lightning would strike her dead, as Janie, in her newly acquired voice, makes a last effort to disclose her feelings to him: "Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me" (82). Indeed, it is Janie's assertive self that he cannot and won't cope with, preferring to drop dead rather than give up on his vanity. Just as Nanny's death has freed Janie from Logan Killicks, Jody's death frees her from her head-rag and the torment of a bleak life in silence.

In Vergible Woods, or Tea Cake as his friends call him, Janie finds the man she has long been saving feelings for. Unlike Logan and Jody, Tea Cake brings back to Janie the emotion of Johnny Taylor's kiss and the vision of love and passion that she experienced under the pear tree. Although financially and socially inferior to Janie's previous husbands, Tea Cake overtakes them when it comes to translating his feelings and thoughts into words. As he freely expresses his emotions to Janie and engages her in activities she has been denied access before, he actually offers Janie support and encouragement to strengthen her voice. With this third relationship that her Nanny would have, probably, least approved of, Janie enjoys the experience of giving and receiving love and respect, trust and joyfulness. In teaching Janie how to play checkers, how to fish and shoot a gun, Tea Cake treats her as an equal, as a living subject and, by no means, a lifeless object he can show off about. "He is acquisitive," as critic Maria Racine notices, "of experience rather than material possessions or success" (Racine 291).

Despite the fact that year in year out Janie has grown more and more confident about herself, she has not yet become truly independent. She needs Tea Cake to purge her of the twenty-four years of silent endurance under the

tyranny of other people's ambitions. When Tea Cake asks Janie out for a picnic and she hesitates, wondering whether or not he is just trying to be polite, Tea Cake urges her to speak her mind. "Ah just didn't want you doin' nothin' outa politeness. If dere's somebody else you'd ruther take, it's all right wid me" (*Their Eyes* 104), Janie says, trying to pretend strong and indifferent until Tea Cake puts her fears into words: "Naw, it ain't all right wid you. If it was you wouldn't be sayin' dat. Have de nerve tuh say whut you mean" (104). She then voices her concern, but only because he has both encouraged her to and proved willing to listen to what she has got to say.

Two things are troubling in Janie's almost perfect relationship to Tea Cake: first her silence about his having slapped her, and secondly her silence during the trial that follows his death at her hands. Not flawless, Tea Cake beats Janie to reassure himself in possession, when he overhears racist, light-skinned Mrs. Turner tell Janie that her brother would have made a much better match for her, suggesting that she should meet him. While critic Michael Awkward reads Tea Cake's act as "one of unmotivated violence ... intended to exhibit to others the extent of his authority over Janie" (Awkward 40), Maria Racine takes the matter further and interprets the slap as Tea Cake's inability to articulate, to speak: "Tea Cake beats Janie because he does not know how to verbalize his fear of losing her to someone else, someone who is a lighter-skinned African American like Janie, someone of innately greater value in white society" (Racine 293).

It is not Janie in her own voice that tells readers about the slap, but Hurston's third person omniscient narrator. The same happens during the courtroom scene at the trial which Janie undergoes as a consequence of her having shot Tea Cake in self-defense. Bitten by a mad dog during a hurricane, Tea Cake gets sick and tries to kill Janie, thus leaving her no alternative but grab hold of the gun and fire it to survive. As bell hooks points out, Janie defies "traditional notions of romantic love, which encourage female masochism; she is not willing to die for love" (qtd. in Campbell 77). Because of Janie's being fairly silent during this particular episode, which comes at the end of her tale and, supposedly, at a point where she has developed her ability to speak, critic Robert Stepto claims that Hurston creates only "the illusion that Janie has achieved her voice" (7), and deems the writer's strategy of having much of Janie's tale told by an omniscient third person rather than by a first person narrator as the novel's single great flaw. Yet, accepting Stepto's view point means depriving Janie of her lifelong progress from a person not in control of her self to one able to assert authority when required. Definitely, Janie is no longer the same powerless young woman that Nanny coerced into marriage, that Logan Killicks threatened with an ax or that Joe Starks bossed around in the store. Her having beaten both Nunkie and Tea Cake when fearing she might lose the keys to his kingdom in the other girl's favor, her strength to pull the trigger against the man whom she most

cherishes in the world, and her decision to return to Eatonville, where she knows people will look down on her, are all evidence of her confident and forceful personality.

A more appropriate, feminist reading of Hurston's choice to keep Janie silent in some crucial places in the novel, was expressed by Alice Walker who, during a convention in San Francisco, rose and fought back Robert Stepto's interpretation, "insisting passionately," as Mary Helen Washington records in her foreword to *Their Eyes*, "that women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women *had* found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it" (xii). In a similar way, Rachel Blau Du Plessis defends Hurston's narrative strategy when she presents Janie's consciousness and the narrator's fusing into one, an interpretation with which critic Maria Racine also feels comfortable: "If the narrator's voice and Janie's voice have melded throughout the novel, then perhaps there is no need for Janie to speak to the reader; her voice is evident through the narrator's" (283).

Shortly after the trial, Janie's choice to return to Eatoville, the place where her transformation has begun, bears the implication that Tea Cake's death is not in itself an end, but a beginning. Tea Cake may be gone, but Janie, who has barely begun to live her way, must carry on with her growth and preach the sermon her Nanny never got to. Unlike Janie, the members of the black community of Eatonville are stuck in their limited understanding of social class and gender roles. As such, they need Janie's story which has the potential to transform them, to enlighten not their streets, as Jody has done, but their minds. However, Janie chooses not to confront the sharp tongues and scornful eyes of the porch storytellers, but to project her voice onto a receptive friend, whom she allows to speak for her: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. 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" (*Their Eyes* 6). Most critics characterize Janie's voice at the end of the novel as a communal one. Supportive of this view point, Mary Helen Washington argues that "when she [Janie] tells Pheoby to tell her story ... she is choosing a collective rather than an individual voice, demonstrating her closeness to the collective spirit of the African-American oral tradition" (xii). Regenerated by having been permitted to share Janie's experience, Pheoby stands for all the other women in her community that will undergo renewal once she has broken down the barrier of silence to reveal their gossip and judgment of Janie as cheap and utterly wrong. In refusing to submit to male authority and conform to socially constructed gender roles, Janie emerges from silence to speech and changes not only herself, Pheoby, and, presumably, the rest of the community, but also everybody else who cares to read her story and pass it on to people in need of spiritual rebirth. Perhaps the most important lesson that Hurston's novel

teaches its readers is that *it is possible*, that one can defy rules and beat the oppressive, sexist-racist system as long as there is will and strength to stand up after each blow that comes with the act of defiance.

Dealing not with a silent heroine struggling to come to voice, Zora Neale Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, pictures John as a master of language who makes use of his gift *to silence* his wife and his community whenever his actions threaten to rob him of his family and job. A story of love, loss and regain, of sin and redemption, the novel, just like *Their Eyes*, presents the reader with the main character's three marriages. The three significant women in John's life stand each for a new chance he gets to straighten out his ways, and help to shed light on his true nature, bringing him up and down and up again until it is by his own lack of self-control that he dies.

John Buddy Pearson, the illegitimate son of a former slave and white Judge Alf Pearson, her owner, lives in poverty with his mother Amy, his younger brothers, and his stepfather Ned Crittenden. It is inside his childhood home that he first witnesses *sexism* and experiences *racism*. Different from his brothers because of his light skin, John is frequently abused, overworked and humiliated by Ned, who most often refers to him as "dat punkin-colored bastard" (*Jonah's Gourd Vine* 9) and "yaller nigger" (9). A former slave himself and a poor sharecropper in the post-slavery South, Ned feels powerless against the white men he works for and who cheat him every other day, and therefore, turns his rage and frustration against those who cannot strike him back, that is his wife and children, particularly John. Unable to question Beaseley, his boss, about "dem two bales uh cotton" (5) he and his family made a year before, Ned plays the boss at home, silencing Amy when she tells him that the supper is not ready because she has been working side by side with him in the fields: "Don't you change so many words wid me, 'oman! Ah'll knock yuh dead ez Hector. Shet yo' mouf!" (5). Later on the same day, as Amy is giving second-helpings to the smaller children, Ned whips and tries to choke her on account of his seeing no plate fixed for him. Luckily, John's fist frees his mother from Ned's rage, making him slide slowly down the wall. Because he cannot slap John whenever he feels like it, partly because Amy protects him and partly because the boy is already old enough to protect himself, Ned resorts to other means of abusing his stepson. Yet, when he binds John to work for Mimms, a white landowner well-known for his ill-treatment of black workers, the sixteen-year-old boy decides he will be better off over the Big Creek on Alf Pearson's plantation. With his mother escorting him to the creek and cautioning him against his childish, often irresponsible behavior, John leaves Ned behind without even a shadow of the thought that one day he might turn up just like him.

In Notasulga, Alabama, Alf Pearson hires John Buddy because he remembers his mother Amy, and, presumably, because he can recognize part of himself in the looks of the young, "splendid specimen" (18). As the boy is too

tall to make a good cotton-picker, the Judge initially intends to have John drive his carriage for him and his wife. However, the mistress, who, most likely, can as well see the resemblance between her husband and John, does not agree, claiming the boy is "too ... large sitting up there in front" (20). Consequently, John is put through school and then "promoted" from feeding the chickens to checking on the black tenant farmers to see to it that their financial accounts with Pearson are in order.

It is at school that John meets Lucy Potts, a smart girl of the Potts family, who live on their own land and own their home. After a beautiful courtship, but against her mother's better judgement, Lucy accepts to marry John and trust him to be both father and mother to her: "Lucy, don't you worry 'bout yo' folks, hear? Ahm gointer be uh father and uh mother tuh you. You jes' look tuh me, girl chile. Jes' you put yo' 'pendence in me. Ah means tuh prop you up on eve'y leanin' side" (79). Still, he never lives up to his promise. "A walking orgasm, a living exultation" (50), as Alf Pearson calls him, John doesn't seem able to resist women, not even after his marriage to Lucy, whom he always claims, and indeed appears, to genuinely love. His born, most likely inherited sensuality, along with his terrible habit of running away from problems instead of dealing with them, are, probably, John's greatest flaws. Not only does he cheat on his wife and lies to her, but he constantly pushes her back into silence by putting it all on "de brute-beast" (88) in him, an entity within himself that she apparently has to learn to live with. It is neither fear nor resignation but true love and hope that keep Lucy by John's side, always silent and submissive despite her husband's numerous romantic escapades that she can see for herself or, otherwise, hear people talking about.

As nice a character John may seem at the beginning of the novel, he gradually loses his charm, as he abandons his wife and seriously ill girl-child, Isis, to find comfort in the arms of another woman, or leaves Lucy alone during childbirth to face her brother, Bud, who comes to take the bed she's lying in as payment for a debt her husband owes to him. Facing arrest and jail, after having beaten Bud and having stolen a pig to feed his family on, John takes Alf Pearson's advice and flees to Eatonville in yet another of his attempts to put physical distance between himself and his troubles. Although quite shameful, his flight to Eatonville appears to grant him with a second chance to "live clean" and redeem himself from his past womanizing and neglect of his family. Just as Lucy is once again tricked into trusting John, so is the reader, who, at this point, comes to accept Lucy's silence about her husband's affairs and her unconditioned support of him, which in the end propel him not only into the best carpenter in town, but also into a successful preacher on his way to become the moderator of the Baptist convention and the mayor of Eatonville. Nevertheless, John is bound to disappoint again.

Once a “big nigger” (116), John turns out to be very little different from Ned. As critic Debra Beilke points out in her critical essay “Yowin’ and Jawin”, “John stifles Lucy’s voice as surely as Ned does Amy’s” (qtd. in Campbell 51). A property owner now, John deludes himself into thinking it’s all due to his good mind and talent, and, therefore, he doesn’t need Lucy to tell him what he has to do: “Ah wouldn’t be where Ah is, if Ah didn’t know no more’n you think Ah do. You ain’t mah guardzeen nohow” (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* 115). Yet, it is Lucy who teaches John how to use language effectively. Her good memory and speaking ability, even as a child, have largely contributed to John’s social rising, and, despite his attempts to keep her silent, the entire Eatonville community knows that John Pearson is a “wife-made man” (113), as Sam Mosely calls him and Walter Thomas implies when he says: “Aw, ‘tain’t you, Pearson, ... iss dat li’l’ handful uh woman you got on de place” (109). Not only that John does not keep his promise to always stand by his wife, but he leans on her instead, coming to depend on her guidance, patience, and endurance. The same as Ned Crittenden and Alf Pearson before him, John views women as objects that exist to give men pleasure, to serve them one way or another. Although he sets Lucy apart from the other women he “lusts after once in uh while” (111), John basically ties her to their home, seeing her function as that of producing and bringing up children for him. Lucy is, after all, an asset, a piece of property that he can get out of his pocket and brag about whenever he finds fit to: “Git yo’ things on, Lucy, and come on tuh Sanford wid me. De church ain’t seen mah wife in six month. Put on dat li’l’ red dress and come switchin’ up de aisle and set on de front seat so you kin be seen” (115).

John’s numerous comings and goings, his complete neglect of his family and his generally sexist attitude to his wife, all reach a climax when, on her deathbed, Lucy decides to make her voice heard. Openly confronted with the ugly truth of his “livin’ dirty” (128), John cannot stand the image Lucy mirrors for him and viciously turns against her: “Shet up! Ahm sick an’ tired uh you’ yowin’ and jawin’. ‘Tain’t nothin’ Ah hate lak gittin’ sin throwed in mah face dat done got cold. Ah do ez Ah please. You jus’ uh hold-back tuh me nohow. Always sick and complainin’. Uh man can’t utilize hisself. ... you always got uh mouf full uh opinions, but Ah don’t need you no mo’ nor nothing you got tuh say. Ahn uh man grown. Don’t need no guardzeen atall. So shet yo’ mouf wid me” (128). As Lucy refuses to be quiet and reminds him that he can’t clean himself with his tongue as cats invariably do, that is precisely what he tries to do immediately after he slaps her: “Ah tole yuh tuh hush” (129). John’s constant betrayals of Lucy along with his words to her and his violent gesture as she lies sick contribute to eventually silence her spirit as surely as the lung disease kills her body. His secret wish that her eyes close makes John as despicable a character as Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, is. To John’s mind, clearly lacking both intelligence and common

sense at this point, with Lucy's death, sin is gone and he is set free to have his will with women. Even though no longer alive, John signals upon Lucy's status as *his* object or property, when his friend, Sam Mosely, remarks that it has been his wagon that brought Lucy to Eatonville and his wagon that took her away: "Yeah, but she b'longed tuh me, though, all de time" (136).

Nevertheless, it is not happiness or redemption that Lucy's death brings to John, but punishment, since his marriage to Hattie Tyson will cause him to lose his children, as well as his community. A loose woman, who represents the very opposite of everything Lucy stands for in the novel, Hattie Tyson pays An' Dangle Dewoe, a conjure woman, to get Lucy out of the way and have John as a husband. While Hattie indeed succeeds in marrying John three months after his wife's death, she cannot prevent him from cheating on her. Unlike Lucy, Hattie cares only about herself and when she no longer finds pleasure in Lucy's dresses and shoes, when she discovers she has no power over John and can enjoy nothing of his respectability and popularity within the community, she turns against him threatening to expose his lust for other women. For seven years she keeps him under the spell, but as the conjure woman dies, so does her magic, leaving Hattie to witness and handle John's awakening, all by herself: "Look lak Ah been sleep ... Look lak de first time Ah been clothed in mah right mind fuh uh long time. Look lak uh whole heap uh things been goin' on in mah sleep. You got tuh tell me how come me and you is married" (*Jonah's Gourd Vine* 143). Claiming no recollection of ever having made arrangements to marry Hattie, but fully remembering his marriage to Lucy as well as his behavior to her prior to her death, John blames his violence towards Lucy on Hattie and takes to beating her as "more interest paid on the debt of Lucy's slap" (145). Thus, Hattie who, apparently, once silenced John and ruled over his mind, is now frequently silenced back by his fist. In contrast to Lucy, Hattie doesn't turn her face to the wall and die, but she strikes back by conspiring to deprive John of his community and church. And with John's self-imposed exile, she comes out successful. While the implication that John may have been bewitched when he wished for Lucy to die somehow softens his image and brings relief to the reader, it does not exonerate him from his lifelong bad choices or ill-treatment of his first wife, as his next and last chance to an honest life proves.

A widow with property, Sally Lovelace hires John as a carpenter in Plant City, restores him to preaching and, eventually, marries him. Intelligent, loyal, generous and loving, Sally seems to be another version of Lucy, "an agent of redemption", as Josie Campbell describes her (40). What is really pathetic about John is that, although in asking God to keep him away from women he recognizes his chance to grow and be happy with Sally, he isn't strong enough to keep his pants on. As Sally buys him a Cadillac and trusts him to return to Eatonville and visit his best friend, Hambo, John succumbs to the temptation of young Ora Patton and retraces his steps into sin. Ironically, his car is hit by a

train on his way back to Sally and he dies precisely when, for the first time in his life, he is “looking inward”(*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* 200), questioning his weaknesses and mistakes. Essentially, John Pearson is a failure, an irresponsible man, a permanent teenager dependent on the women in his life. In the end, he is brought down and silenced for ever by his own sensuality, which has worked throughout his life to trick him into thinking he is a man. Despite the brief moment at the end of the novel when he is honest to himself and admits to being a false pretender, John’s recidivistic behavior, his being unable to hold on to his family, his earning for the “shelter of Sally’s presence”(200), and even his death imply that he is beyond redemption. In a sense, John’s death sets Sally free from sharing Lucy’s fate, from a life of disappointments, of silent endurance and false hopes by his side.

Since black women have never been as submissive within their community as white women have been in theirs, as Maya Angelou herself implies in an interview to Claudia Tate (Braxton 151), it is *racism* rather than sexism the oppressive force that humiliates and silences young Maya and Bailey, Momma Henderson, Uncle Willie, and the entire black community of Stamps in Maya Angelou’s first autobiographical novel, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Depicting a particular time frame and the influences of that time on a number of people, the novel illustrates, in the racist episodes it deals with, several ways of responding to racist oppression. Silence, as a form of *subtle resistance* often taught in church, seems to bother young Maya the most.

The first instance of such resistance comes with the “used-to-be sheriff” (Angelou 17), who late one day rides his horse to Momma Henderson’s front yard to warn her family, particularly Uncle Willie, to “lay low” (17) since they may be facing a Klan ride on account of a crazy nigger having messed with a white lady. Innocent as she is, Maya reflects on the sheriff’s act of kindness and expresses her feeling of humiliation at his confidence that her uncle “and every other Black man who heard of the Klan’s coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings” (18). Yet, contrary to the girl’s anger at the injustice of the whole situation, Momma Henderson understands the danger and takes the sheriff’s piece of advice because she knows the less black people say to whitefolks the better. Thus, instead of choosing to speak up to the “boys” (18), as Maya finds appropriate for a dignified black man, Uncle Willie chooses the safe way out and goes along with Momma’s plan of having him hidden in a large vegetable bin, covered with onions and potatoes. It is, indeed, with such incidents that Maya first becomes aware of her and her folks’ otherness. At a certain point in the novel Maya Angelou recalls doubting, as a child, that whites really existed because “in Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like” (24-25). When Maya gets to see white people clothing, put on display at the Store by the black women working for white families, her childish imagination excludes

whitefolks from the larger category *people*, picturing them as “strange pale creatures” (25) defined by their not being folks.

One of Maya’s most painful and confusing experiences with racism and her grandmother’s way of dealing with it concerns some “powhitetrash” (29) girls, who come to the Store with their mind set on causing trouble. Sent inside as the girls approach the Store, Maya watches the whole show they put on in their shameless attempt to mock Momma Henderson. Knowing powhitetrash children to be impudent and disobedient of whatever common sense rules, the ten-year-old Maya is not as much appalled at the girls’ rude, indecent behavior, as she is at her grandmother’s response to it. Though an old woman, Momma remains silent about the white girls’ naughtiness, taking refuge into humming religious songs. By keeping her temper in circumstances most people would have lost theirs, Maya’s grandmother rejects *rage* and *indignation* as invalid solutions and adopts *the silence of the oppressed* as the most appropriate course of action. Not merely a reaction against white people’s racism, her silence speaks about the resignation of the exploited and the power to accept one’s lot. It may be that Annie Henderson “is a woman who submits to racist behaviour without a struggle, maintaining the submissive manners of the past” (Lupton 58) but, on the other hand, there may not have been much that she could have done to change things at that particular time. Despite Maya’s often attributing her grandmother powers that are clearly beyond her reach, she is basically an old black woman who lives in the rural segregated South and knows nobody but God Almighty to be able to keep her family out of trouble. Therefore, Momma’s act of resistance should not be read as rendering a black grown-up inferior to some white children, but as opposing *strength* and *dignity* to the violent, inhuman face of racism. Too young to possess or, at least, fully understand Momma’s self-control, Maya reacts with the same anger and humiliation that she has previously felt at the *used-to-be sheriff*: “I burst. A firecracker July-the-Fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean nasty things. Why couldn’t she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz?” (32). Still, once the girls are gone and Maya is left in the company of her grandmother alone, she can see happiness in Momma’s eyes, which makes her change her mind about who the winner of the confrontation is.

Similar incidents, like the dentist one or the episode when Annie Henderson sends the children back to California as she fears white people’s reaction to Bailey’s having witnessed a black man’s death at their hands, portray black people being treated not only as inferior to white people, but also as if they were less than animals, guilty of having been born black in a white man’s world. Counteracting this type of profound injustice with the frail weapons of silence and endurance that the revival meetings provided black folks with, leads Maya

to conclude that her people “may be a race of masochists and that not only was it ... [their] fate to live the poorest, roughest life but that ... [they] liked it like that” (118). This strong disapproval of passivity as a strategy to cope with racist oppression prefigures Maya’s future success in getting hired as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. A victory for both civil rights and Maya’s sense of self, her achievement proves the limitations of silence and the truth of her mother’s advice: “Life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait” (261). Teaching Maya to trust herself and fight for whatever she wants to achieve in her life, Vivian Baxter displays a completely different vision of life as compared to Momma Henderson’s. But again, Vivian stands for a different generation, with a different background and living under different circumstances. And even so, some other thirty years will pass before black activists, like Maya Angelou herself, can put an end to silence, restoring voice to those who had it confiscated.

The same fear of speech, that Momma Henderson lives with, and Maya, as a child, struggles hard to accept, is addressed by Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany For Survival.” Revealing fear to be inherent in human nature, whether people choose to speak or not, the poem urges its readers to overcome their fear of words, to learn to talk and listen to each other, to draw strength from solidarity: “and when we speak we are afraid/ our words will not be heard/ nor welcomed/ but when we are silent/ we are still afraid./ So it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive” (*The Black Unicorn* 32). In their act of emergence from silence and subsequent coming to voice, the oppressed connect with one another and establish a valid pattern of resistance, a gesture of defiance, which carries within the possibility of change, of life, and liberty.

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