

Power and Vulnerability in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

This article examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) through Michel Foucault's relational theory of power in order to argue that vulnerability functions not as the negation of agency but as its generative condition. Janie Crawford's three marriages—to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods—enact shifting configurations of domination, resistance, and self-articulation that reveal power as mobile, unstable, and omnipresent rather than centralized and coercive. By tracing Janie's negotiations of race, gender, voice, embodiment, and space, this essay demonstrates how Hurston reimagines female subjectivity within and against patriarchal and racialized structures. Drawing on Foucauldian theory alongside feminist and queer-inflected readings, the article situates Janie's journey as a sustained critique of hegemonic authority and as a reconceptualization of empowerment rooted in lived vulnerability.

Introduction

Since its publication in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has come to occupy a central position in African American literary studies and feminist criticism. Initially dismissed by some contemporaries for its perceived lack of overt political protest, the novel has since been reclaimed as a seminal exploration of Black female subjectivity, vernacular expression, and cultural autonomy. Contemporary scholarship recognizes Hurston's work as formally innovative and theoretically rich, particularly in its treatment of power, voice, and embodiment within intersecting systems of race and gender.

This essay argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* conceptualizes vulnerability not as weakness or passivity but as a productive site from which agency and resistance emerge. Drawing on Michel Foucault's formulation of power as relational and omnipresent, the essay contends that Janie Crawford's life narrative

dramatizes the instability of power relations and the possibilities of resistance embedded within them. Janie's experiences of subjugation—first within her grandmother's protective but constraining vision, then within three marriages marked by differing forms of domination—do not culminate in simple liberation through escape. Instead, they produce a complex process of self-fashioning in which vulnerability becomes the condition of ethical and existential agency.

By examining Janie's marriages, her struggle for voice, her movement through gendered and racialized spaces, and her fluid negotiation of feminine and masculine roles, this article situates Hurston's novel within a Foucauldian framework that emphasizes power's productive, rather than merely repressive, dimensions. In doing so, it demonstrates how Hurston anticipates later feminist and queer theoretical insights into the instability of identity and the subversive potential of liminal subject positions.

Critical Context and Literature Review

Early critical responses to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* often measured the novel against expectations of racial protest literature, finding it wanting in explicit political critique. Such readings overlooked Hurston's deliberate investment in cultural specificity, vernacular language, and the interior life of Black women. Subsequent feminist scholarship has corrected this oversight, foregrounding the novel's engagement with gendered power, voice, and autonomy.

Joseph R. Uργο identifies power and vulnerability as central to Hurston's narrative design, arguing that Janie's relationships expose the inevitability of power struggles within intimacy. Ryan Simmons emphasizes the novel's concern with narrative authority, particularly Janie's gradual reclamation of her voice in a patriarchal context. Todd McGowan reads the novel through the lens of domination and liberation, situating Janie's trajectory within broader socio-economic forces.

More recent criticism has turned to spatial analysis and discourse, highlighting sites such as the porch and the muck as arenas of resistance and performance. Feminist and proto-queer readings have also noted Janie's fluid movement across gender norms, though such interpretations require careful historicization to avoid anachronistic claims about sexuality. This essay builds on these critical conversations by providing a sustained

Foucauldian reading of power that integrates gender, race, voice, and space into a unified analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault and Relational Power

Michel Foucault's theory of power, particularly as articulated in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, provides a productive framework for reading Hurston's novel. Foucault rejects the notion of power as a centralized force possessed by sovereign subjects and instead conceptualizes it as relational, diffuse, and omnipresent. Power, he argues, "comes from everywhere," operating through networks of social relations rather than through top-down domination alone (Foucault, *History* 93).

Crucially, Foucault insists that power always generates resistance. Resistance is not external to power but immanent within it, appearing at "points, knots, or focuses" across the social field (*History* 95–96). This understanding destabilizes binary oppositions between ruler and ruled, strength and weakness, dominance and submission. Vulnerability, within this framework, does not signal the absence of power but rather a position within its circulation.

Applied to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Foucauldian theory illuminates how Janie's experiences of subjugation—racial, gendered, and emotional—do not simply silence her but instead produce the conditions for resistance and self-definition. Hurston's narrative repeatedly demonstrates that authority is unstable and that those positioned as vulnerable can disrupt hegemonic structures through speech, embodiment, and strategic withdrawal.

Vulnerability, Race, and Inherited Trauma

Janie's life is shaped from the outset by inherited histories of racial and sexual violence. Her grandmother, Nanny, embodies the trauma of enslavement and its aftermath. As a formerly enslaved woman who was sexually exploited by her white master, Nanny understands power primarily as ownership and protection. Her worldview is shaped by the belief that security for Black women lies in material stability rather than emotional fulfillment.

Nanny's desire to see Janie married to Logan Killicks reflects this logic. She equates landownership and economic security with safety, urging Janie to "take a stand on high ground." While Nanny's intentions are protective, her vision reproduces patriarchal norms that subordinate Janie's desires to survivalist pragmatism. Nanny's vulnerability—rooted in racial and gendered oppression—thus generates a form of power that constrains Janie's autonomy.

Hurston does not dismiss Nanny's perspective but situates it within a historical continuum of trauma. Nanny's authority over Janie exemplifies Foucault's claim that power circulates through intimate relationships rather than operating solely through institutional domination. The novel thus frames Janie's early vulnerability as historically produced rather than individually chosen.

Marriage I: Logan Killicks and Economic Domination

Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks represents her first direct encounter with marital domination. Logan offers economic security but demands labor and obedience in return. His insistence that Janie work in the fields reduces her to a utilitarian function, erasing her subjectivity and desire. When he tells her that she has "no particular place" except where he needs her, Logan articulates a form of power rooted in ownership and entitlement.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Logan's authority is neither absolute nor secure. Janie's dissatisfaction, though initially inarticulate, constitutes a form of resistance. Her emotional withdrawal and eventual flight from the marriage demonstrate that power relations depend on consent and participation. By leaving Logan, Janie enacts the most basic form of resistance available to her: refusal.

This departure does not constitute liberation in any final sense, but it marks an important shift. Janie's vulnerability—her lack of economic independence and social protection—does not prevent resistance; rather, it precipitates it. Hurston thus presents vulnerability as a catalyst for agency rather than its negation.

Marriage II: Joe Starks and the Politics of Voice

Janie's second marriage, to Joe Starks, introduces a more complex and insidious form of domination. Joe offers mobility, ambition, and public status, positioning himself as a modernizing force within the Black community of Eatonville. Yet his vision of progress depends on Janie's silence. He transforms her into a symbol of respectability, stripping her of voice and agency in the process.

Joe's suppression of Janie's speech is particularly significant. When he prevents her from speaking at his mayoral inauguration, he asserts control not through physical labor but through discursive authority. As Ryan Simmons observes, Hurston foregrounds women's exclusion from oral power within patriarchal structures. Janie's enforced silence exemplifies this exclusion.

However, Joe's authority is unstable. Janie's vulnerability—her emotional isolation and erasure—becomes the site of resistance. In a pivotal scene, she publicly challenges Joe's masculinity, exposing the fragility of the very power he wields over her. This act aligns with Foucault's assertion that resistance emerges within power relations themselves. By attacking Joe's symbolic authority, Janie destabilizes his dominance.

Joe's subsequent decline and death underscore the novel's insistence on the impermanence of power. Janie's act of speech does not merely invert the hierarchy but reveals its constructed nature. Vulnerability, once again, proves generative.

Marriage III: Tea Cake, Intimacy, and Ambivalent Power

Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods enters Janie's life as a figure of apparent liberation. He encourages play, conversation, and mutual enjoyment, offering Janie a relationship that seems to transcend domination. Unlike her previous husbands, Tea Cake engages Janie as a companion rather than an ornament or laborer.

Yet Hurston resists idealizing this relationship. Tea Cake, like Logan and Joe, is embedded within patriarchal norms. His occasional assertions of control—such as insisting that Janie work in the fields or silencing her during the hurricane—reveal the persistence of gendered power even within ostensibly egalitarian intimacy.

Tea Cake's transformation following the rabid dog bite intensifies these dynamics. His growing jealousy and violence do not introduce a foreign element into his character but amplify tendencies already present. As Foucault suggests in *Madness and Civilization*, passion contains the potential for madness, and Tea Cake's descent illustrates how love can coexist with domination.

Janie's ultimate act of killing Tea Cake in self-defense represents the most extreme form of resistance in the novel. This act does not signify triumph or empowerment in any simplistic sense. Instead, it marks Janie's recognition that survival sometimes requires severing even the most cherished attachments. Vulnerability here demands ethical agency.

Voice, Space, and the Politics of the Porch

Spatial dynamics play a crucial role in Hurston's exploration of power. The porch in Eatonville functions as a site of storytelling, performance, and communal discourse. For Black men, it offers relief from white authority while simultaneously serving as a stage for the reinforcement of masculine dominance.

Women's exclusion from porch discourse exemplifies the gendered distribution of power within the Black community. Janie's attempts to participate in porch talk are repeatedly thwarted by Joe, reinforcing her marginalization. Yet the porch also holds subversive potential. Its vernacular language resists institutional authority, embodying what Hurston describes as "words walking without master."

When Janie eventually claims discursive authority—particularly through her act of public speech against Joe—she repurposes the porch's performative power. Hurston thus presents space as neither inherently oppressive nor liberatory but as a contested terrain shaped by social relations.

Gender Fluidity and Embodied Resistance

Janie's embodiment further complicates rigid gender binaries. Throughout the novel, she moves fluidly between traditionally feminine and masculine roles. She enjoys adornment and domestic intimacy, yet she also

plays checkers, works alongside men, and carries a gun. Her return to Eatonville wearing overalls—a garment not exclusively gendered—symbolizes this fluidity.

While Hurston does not depict Janie as queer in a sexual sense, her transgression of gender norms resonates with later queer theoretical critiques of binary identity. Janie's refusal to remain confined within prescribed roles destabilizes patriarchal authority and suggests alternative modes of being.

Her hair, frequently remarked upon by others, serves as a potent symbol of power, desire, and difference. Joe's insistence that she cover it reflects his anxiety over her autonomy and visibility. Janie's burning of her head rags following his death symbolizes her rejection of imposed constraints and her reclamation of embodied selfhood.

Conclusion

Their Eyes Were Watching God offers a nuanced meditation on power, vulnerability, and agency. Through Janie Crawford's life narrative, Hurston demonstrates that vulnerability is not antithetical to empowerment but integral to it. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, this essay has argued that power in the novel is relational, unstable, and productive, generating resistance even within moments of subjugation.

Janie's journey does not culminate in domination over others but in an ethical relation to herself. By the novel's end, she returns to Eatonville not as a triumphant conqueror but as a woman who has lived fully, loved deeply, and survived profoundly. Hurston thus reimagines empowerment as the capacity to endure, to speak, and to choose—even in the face of irrevocable loss.

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