

Voice, Agency, and Black Womanhood: A Black Feminist Reading of Zora Neale Hurston's Select Works

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Abstract: This study interrogates the interconnected configurations of voice, bodily and social agency, and Black female subjectivity across four foundational texts by Zora Neale Hurston: the novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the ethnographic folklore compilation *Mules and Men* (1935), and the autobiographical narrative *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). Utilizing Black feminist literary theory and intersectional frameworks pioneered by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Barbara Smith, this paper traces how Hurston models discursive authority and resistance against overlapping matrixes of racial, patriarchal, and economic oppression. Moving beyond conventional critical binaries that prioritize political protest over cultural affirmation, this analysis demonstrates that Hurston constructs a distinct paradigm of agency grounded in linguistic mastery, the reclamation of physical movement, folkloric epistemologies, and narrative self-definition. By reading across genres integrating domestic fiction, rural anthropology, and self-mythologizing memoir the article highlights how Hurston crafts Black womanhood not as a site of perpetual victimization, but as a dynamic space of interiority, creative sovereignty, and political self-actualization.

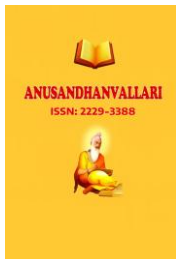
Keywords: Black Feminism, Voice, Agency, Intersectionality, Orality, Subjectivity, Womanist Epistemologies.

Introduction:

Zora Neale Hurston occupies a central yet historically contested position in African American literary history. Often marginalized during the Harlem Renaissance for refusing to subordinate creative expression to male-dominated agendas of racial uplift and didactic protest literature, Hurston forged an aesthetic paradigm centered on the vernacular practices, intra-racial dynamics, and interior life of Southern Black communities. Reclaimed in the late twentieth century through foundational interventions by Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington, and Barbara Christian, Hurston's oeuvre is recognized as a pioneering body of work in Black feminist thought.

Central to Hurston's literary corpus is the exploration of Black womanhood under the interlocking systems of domination that Patricia Hill Collins terms the "matrix of domination" and Kimberlé Crenshaw categorizes as "intersectionality." Black women in Hurston's texts navigate an existential terrain where racial subjugation intersects with domestic subordination, labor exploitation, and discursive silencing. However, rather than presenting Black women as passive sufferers, Hurston locates agency within the very linguistic, spiritual, and communal forms historically dismissed by dominant literary hierarchies.

This study examines how Hurston conceptualizes voice and agency across four distinct generic modes: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). By examining this specific cross-section of domestic fiction, participatory ethnography, lyrical bildungsroman, and self-fashioning autobiography, this paper demonstrates that Hurston articulates a



multidimensional model of Black feminist agency—one realized not merely in direct political confrontation, but through linguistic reclamation, performative self-defense, folkloric preservation, and authorial autonomy.

Dialectics of Domination and Subversion in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

In her debut novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston establishes the domestic household as a primary site of gendered struggle. While the narrative ostensibly centers on the rise and moral fragmentation of John Buddy Pearson, a charismatic preacher whose linguistic eloquence catapults him to clerical authority, the moral and philosophical anchor of the text resides in Lucy Potts Pearson. Lucy embodies a quiet, strategically deployed agency that operates within the strictures of post-Reconstruction Southern patriarchy.

Lucy's resistance against marginalization is enacted through discursive guidance and domestic intervention. Recognizing John's vulnerability to impulsive violence and spatial aimlessness, Lucy acts as the architect of his social ascent:

"You ain't got to worry 'bout nothin', John. You got sense and you got a strong arm. All you need is some pushin' behind you." (Hurston, *Jonah's* 68)

Lucy's counsel transforms John's vernacular gifts into institutional authority. However, this dynamic simultaneously exposes the structural precarity of Black womanhood: Lucy provides the intellectual and organizational backbone for John's public triumph, while remaining vulnerable to his emotional infidelity and domestic violence.

From an intersectional Black feminist perspective, Lucy's tragic trajectory critiques the systemic erasure of Black women's labor within male-led institutions. Yet Lucy refuses total erasure. On her deathbed, in an emblematic confrontation that prefigures Janie Crawford's climactic speaking out in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Lucy issues an uncompromising decree regarding her daughter Isis and strictly forbids the communal practice of turning her face to the wall to expedite death:

"Don't let 'em take the pillow from under my head, John, till I'm dead and gone. Don't let 'em turn me over." (Hurston, *Jonah's* 131)

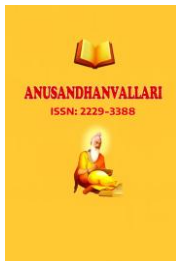
In refusing to allow patriarchal tradition to dictate the terms of her passing, Lucy asserts bodily autonomy and linguistic authority at the threshold of mortality. She bequeaths to her daughter Isis an imperative toward creative expression and defiance, establishing a lineage of female resilience that informs Hurston's subsequent writing.

Participatory Ethnography and Communal Voice in *Mules and Men*

Published in 1935, *Mules and Men* represents an intervention into American anthropology and folklore studies. As a trained anthropologist studying under Franz Boas at Columbia University, Hurston faced the methodological challenge of documenting Southern rural folk culture through an academic gaze historically steeped in white supremacy and institutional objectivity. Her response was an ethnographic methodology rooted in participatory immersion and African American oral traditions.

In *Mules and Men*, voice operates as both subject and methodology. Hurston positions herself as narrator, participant, and native ethnographer, destabilizing the detached white male gaze:

"I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folk-lore.' In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I was filled with the structure of the community and its thought." (Hurston, *Mules* 1)



By foregrounding her subjective position within the Black folk culture of Eatonville and the Polk County lumber camps, Hurston rejects Western hierarchies that separate the researching subject from the researched object.

Hurston's ethnographic portrayal illuminates the specific modalities through which Black women navigate masculine social spheres. In the logging camps of Loughman, Hurston documents the volatile, assertive presence of women like Big Sweet, whose authority is sustained through verbal precision, physical courage, and refusal to yield to patriarchal intimidation. Big Sweet commands respect not through institutional sanction, but through her verbal dexterity and willingness to defend her person:

"Big Sweet didn't mind fightin' no more than she did eatin'. She wasn't mean, but she would take care of herself." (Hurston, Mules 152)

Through Big Sweet and the communal tellers of "lies" (folk tales), Hurston shows that Black women's folklore is not mere entertainment, but an epistemological archive of survival. Agency here manifests as discursive warfare and cultural stewardship, where communal storytelling preserves historical counter-memories against white systemic violence and internal gender oppression.

The Architecture of Self-Realization in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Their Eyes Were Watching God stands as Hurston's definitive exploration of Black female selfhood, linguistic liberation, and existential agency. The novel documents Janie Mae Crawford's journey from an object of male transaction to an autonomous subject capable of narrating her own history.

Janie's early development is circumscribed by the protective yet suffocating ideology of her grandmother, Nanny, whose worldview is forged in the crucible of enslavement. Nanny defines Black women through the metaphor of economic and social burden:

"De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 14)

To shield Janie from sexual and financial exploitation, Nanny arranges her marriage to Logan Killicks, exchanging Janie's autonomy for sixty acres of land. Janie's trajectory across her subsequent relationships with Logan, Jody Starks, and Tea Cake represents an incremental dismantling of the "mule" trope.

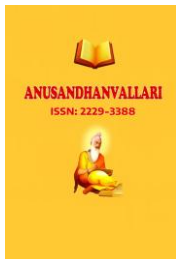
Her marriage to Joe Starks in the all-Black town of Eatonville replaces agricultural drudgery with bourgeois domestic confinement. Starks attempts to assimilate into patriarchal capitalist norms by silencing Janie and sequestering her from the porch—the locus of communal storytelling and democratic orality:

"She didn't change her mind but she held her tongue. Which was just as bad if not worse, for she had begun to think—to think and remember." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 67)

Janie's initial silence is not passivity; it serves as an internal staging ground for eventual resistance. Her public confrontation with Jody over his failing virility and vanity dismantles his discursive hegemony by weaponizing the vernacular against him:

"Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 79)

By striking at the core of Starks's gendered authority in the presence of the community, Janie uses voice to claim physical, social, and psychological sovereignty.



Her final bond with Tea Cake Verghene provides a space for emotional reciprocity and shared labor in the Everglades "muck," yet even this egalitarian romance ends in physical trauma. Forced to shoot Tea Cake in self-defense when he contracts rabies during the hurricane, Janie's ultimate agency resides in her survival and subsequent return to Eatonville. Sitting on her porch and speaking to her confidante Pheoby Watson, Janie controls her own narrative frame. She transforms her oral testimony into a gift of feminist empowerment, prompting Pheoby to declare:

"Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 192)

Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ceases to be merely expressive; it becomes a transformative, relational vehicle of feminist consciousness-raising.

Self-Fashioning and Authorial Autonomy in *Dust Tracks on a Road*

In her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston shifts the exploration of voice and agency from fictional characters to her own public persona. Written during World War II under the scrutiny of mainstream white publishers and a fractured critical landscape, the text has generated debate among feminist scholars regarding its evasions, contradictions, and shifting narrative registers.

Read through a Black feminist hermeneutic, *Dust Tracks* constitutes a masterclass in what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson terms "speaking in tongues" the capacity of Black female writers to speak simultaneously to and across multiple dominant and marginalized discourses. Hurston constructs a shifting, elusive subjectivity that resists easy categorization by either white liberal patrons or male Black nationalists:

"I have no race prejudice, and I think it is just as unscientific for a Negro to be prejudiced against white people as for a white person to be prejudiced against Negroes. What does a single man have to do with the whole race?" (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 282)

While critics historically viewed such statements as conservative capitulation, contemporary analyses highlight Hurston's strategic self-masking. Confronted with the demands of an industry eager to consume stereotypical narratives of Black trauma, Hurston refuses to commodify her pain. Her agency in *Dust Tracks* lies in what she deliberately withholds.

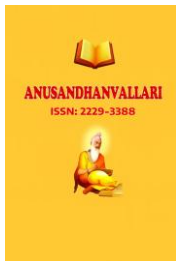
She emphasizes her individual intellectual lineage, derived from her mother's admonition to "jump at de sun," positioning her personal agency as an act of will rather than a reaction to racial victimhood:

"Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun.' We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground." (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 21)

By asserting authorial control over her origins, folklore field trips, and political philosophy, Hurston exercises discursive autonomy. She writes her life not as a sociology case study, but as an unapologetic, sovereign American epic.

Cross-Textual Synthesis: Voice, Space, and the Intersectional Matrix

When read in dialogue, these four texts illustrate how Hurston conceptualizes Black female agency not as a fixed, monolithic posture, but as a fluid spectrum calibrated against distinct environmental and structural barriers. In the domestic realism of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, agency must contend with post-Reconstruction patriarchal hierarchies and the unacknowledged emotional and intellectual labor of the domestic sphere; here, resistance is staged through private strategic counsel, intergenerational transmission, and the refusal to submit to customary



rituals of erasure on the deathbed. Conversely, *Mules and Men* relocates the matrix of domination from the private home to the intersection of white institutional anthropology and male-dominated rural workspaces. Within this folkloric milieu, Hurston foregrounds figures like Big Sweet and adopts an immersive participant-observer methodology, demonstrating how verbal assertiveness, bodily defense, and the communal preservation of oral lore function as collective instruments of survival against external erasure.

This movement between private and public spheres culminates in the developmental trajectory of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where Janie Crawford navigates the bourgeois, capitalist constraints of Eatonville and the sexual objectification embodied in the trope of the "mule of the world." By moving from strategic silent interiority to devastating public confrontation, and finally to oral retrospective testimony, Janie embodies the complete arc from silencing to self-authored subjectivity. Finally, *Dust Tracks on a Road* elevates this dialectic to the meta-critical plane of authorship itself. Facing the expectations of white publishers and the prescriptive politics of Harlem Renaissance protest literature, Hurston utilizes narrative self-invention, deliberate omissions, and polyvocal address to protect her creative interiority. Across domestic fiction, rural ethnography, lyrical bildungsroman, and autobiographical memoir, Hurston consistently affirms that whether through the spoken word, communal performance, strategic withholding, or authorial self-definition, voice remains the foundational axis through which Black women dismantle subjugation and lay claim to their own destiny.

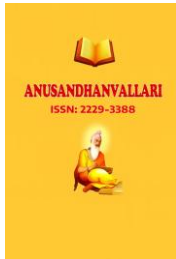
Conclusion:

Across *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Mules and Men*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston maps a comprehensive topography of Black female agency. Rather than subscribing to a single, monolithic model of resistance, Hurston demonstrates that agency takes varied forms depending on the constraints of class, geography, and gender. Whether expressed through Lucy's deathbed resistance, Big Sweet's communal authority, Janie's self-authored narrative liberation, or Hurston's own autobiographical self-fashioning, voice emerges as the primary vehicle of self-definition.

Hurston's scholarship and literature dismantle the assumption that Black women's experiences can be adequately analyzed through race or gender in isolation. By centering the dialectics of voice and silence, bodily movement, and cultural memory, Hurston anticipated the core tenets of contemporary intersectionality and Black feminist literary theory. Her works affirm that Black womanhood is not a state of passive endurance, but a site of creative agency, complex interiority, and persistent self-liberation.

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