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The Body and The Blood: A Literary Exploration of Female Sexual Violation

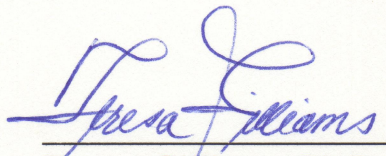
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Bachelor of Arts

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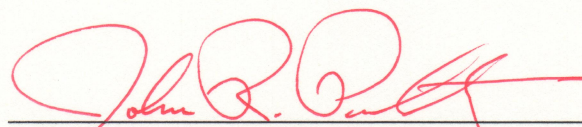
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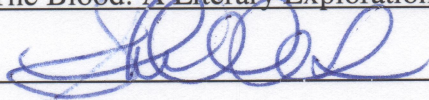
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Senior Honors Thesis

“The Body and The Blood: A Literary Exploration of Female Sexual Violation.”

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I. Introduction to Paper

During my first-year in college, I experienced literature in my Honors English class in a way that transformed my thinking and life. In fact, while a student in that course, I read eight coming-of-age texts that challenged me to examine the ways in which contemporary writers portray their characters as individuals and in the context of American society. The novel that changed my life and appreciation of literature and learning was *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian woman writer whose literary formulations of black womanhood transcend the limits to which flesh is heir. Later on, in my Junior year of college, under the instruction of the same professor, Dr. Teresa Gilliams, I took an English 390 course on Black Women Writers, where for the third time I encountered Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and for the second time in my college career Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Reading these two novels together, in a different context than I had previously read either novel, led me to realize that the female protagonists in the novels were both in search of the same thing: they were both trying to find freedom of body and mind. Also, the females in these novels had both had their bodies and minds abused by their loved ones, and in one form or another had undergone some sort of sexual distress.

With this idea in mind, I proposed this project to Dr. Gilliams, who recommended that I add Alice Walker's *Possessing The Secret of Joy* to my list of texts under examination. After a close reading of this novel, I became conscious of the fact that similar to *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the female protagonist in *Possessing the Secret...* underwent a sexual trauma that left her unable to function normally as a female in her future relationships, and similar to the conclusion I had already drawn, she was

also in search of freedom of mind and body and had undergone a sexual trauma. At the same time, I had been also working with Dr. Gilliams to revise a paper that I had previously written for her on *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which I was going to be presenting for the second time at a national conference. When I was working closely with Dr. Gilliams in analyzing the text for presentation, and simultaneously working on potential ideas for my Senior Thesis, I came across the idea that female sexual violation is a critical factor in the foundational grounding of a woman's psyche. I also realized that this violation causes the female characters in the novels to act in ways and/or take certain actions that they would have not otherwise taken had it not been for their sexual violation. With this thesis in mind, Dr. Gilliams and I worked out my objectives for this paper. In working together to develop this project, we came up with three major points that I wanted to convey by the end of the essay. First, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the role that female sexual violation plays in the shaping of the lives of the women in these novels. Secondly, I wanted to see if my thoughts on the subject matter at hand are comparable to the thoughts of those who have written/published scholarly articles on this subject. Finally, when the project was finally completed I wanted to have a paper that could not only be presented again at another conference in the future, but could also potentially become the basis for a future dissertation if I decided to pursue graduate level schooling. Keeping in mind these goals that we had produced, we came to the conclusion that my essay would have three sections, each section focusing on one major theme prevalent in all three of the novels, with relation to my primary thesis of sexual violation and its impact on the female protagonists.

Throughout the essay, I will make efforts at illuminating the various ways in which each of the novels central women characters seeks to move beyond the restrictive space in which her sexual trauma has placed her. In section one, "Freedom of the Sexual Body," I argue that prior to experiencing the sexually traumatic moments that undermine Sophie, Tashi's and Janie's yearning for full feminine liberation-individually and communally-Danticat, Walker and Hurston go to great lengths to present their characters in the fullness of their natural-born innocence and emotional freedom as a means of setting realistic objectives for them to fulfill, even after having experienced their fair share of disappointments and challenges. In section two, "The Role of Culture in the Freedom/Oppression of the Sexual Body," I investigate the ways in which the culture(s) of the female characters being analyzed form their understanding of the expectations placed upon them as women. Additionally, I will be focusing on the ways in which the traditions and/or oppressive practices of the culture(s) immobilize (however temporarily) each woman's search for self and ultimate self-expression. In section three, "Men as Sexual Oppressors," I will shift my focus slightly away from the women of the texts, and provide insight into each man's role in oppressing each woman's psyche and body. I will be describing each man's background, upbringing and interactions with the female characters of their respective novels, as well as highlighting each man's strengths, weaknesses and/or shortcomings in addition to their lack of role models and/or cultural influences in an effort to not only show the ways in which they engage each of the female characters, but to also introduce the framework that leads to them becoming the oppressors.

II. Introduction to the Texts

I feel that in order to fully understand the arguments that I will be making throughout this paper, one must have a full understanding of the texts that I will be analyzing. One of the three texts that I will be examining in this paper is Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. This novel centralizes on the coming-of-age of its main character, Sophie Caco. Additionally, it also focuses on the lives of the other Caco women, and how their dysfunctional relationships with men impact their lives, as well as the lives of the other Caco women. Martine Caco, Sophie's mother, is the second most important female character in the novel because her dysfunction and traumatic experiences with men directly impact Sophie, since Sophie is living under her roof. Tante Atie, Sophie's aunt and Martine's sister, has also had problems with men in the past, but her past experiences do not directly impact Sophie's life in the same manner that those of Martine do. The Caco women are of Haitian-born heritage, and Martine and Sophie are Haitian-Americans, as they have both immigrated to New York in the novel. Being of Haitian heritage, all of the Caco women have experienced being "tested," an act taken by a mother, where she sticks her finger in the vagina of her daughter in order to make sure that her hymen is still intact, therefore ensuring her purity and guaranteeing that she will be a virgin until she is married. As Martine states in the novel, "The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure." (Danticat 61) Later on in the novel Martine admits to Sophie, "I [tested you]...because my mother did it to me. I have no greater excuse." (Danticat 170) The "testing" leaves behind a family of sexually broken women in the Caco family, and Sophie desperately wishes something new and different

for her daughter than what she has had to endure. Although it is never revealed when or how it came to be that Tante Atie stopped being “tested,” we do find that Martine’s “testing” ended once she was raped by the man who impregnated her, and Sophie’s “testing” ended once she decided for herself that it must end, and broke her own hymen using a pestle from her mother’s kitchen. The primary purpose of my using this novel in this paper is to show how the cycle of “testing” and the abrupt way in which it ended for both Sophie and Martine has contributed to the sexual dysfunction of both mother and daughter in their later years.

The second text that I have included in this work is Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The central focus of this novel is on the main female character Tashi’s life before and after she undergoes an African ritual known as “cleansing” in the novel, but is more commonly known as Female Genital Mutilation, the act of removing primarily the clitoris, but additionally it is possible that the labia and vulva of the girl is also removed, and her vagina is stitched shut tightly so as to ensure that no one but her husband ever has sex with her. Tashi’s choice to undergo the “cleansing” is the primary focus of the novel, as well as the effect it has on her, her husband Adam and her best friend and sister-in-law Olivia. The story is narrated mainly by Tashi, but we see how the “cleansing” has taken its toll on her mental state, because parts of the novel are narrated by Tashi as herself, other parts are narrated by Tashi’s “Americanized” self, Evelyn, and occasionally Tashi narrates as Mrs. Johnson, using her married name to reference herself. This novel, along with *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, both demonstrate how the cultural framework of the women centralized in these texts serve to dictate their sexual lives as adults.

The final text used in this paper is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel is another coming-of-age story about Janie Killicks-Starks, a woman who is searching to find herself within two loveless marriages and finally finds love in her third relationship. Her first marriage is to Logan Killicks, a man her Nanny (grandmother) marries her off to prevent her from 1) being tainted by having sex before marriage and 2) having to live alone and unprovided for. Nanny says, "T'aint Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection. Ah ain't gittin' ole honey. Ah'm done ole...Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life." (Hurston 30) Logan Killicks is much older than young Janie, and Janie feels that when you marry, you should love the person that you're going to be spending the rest of your life with. Hurston's narrator says of Janie:

Janie had had no chance to know things, so she had to ask. Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun the day? In the few days to live before she went to Logan Killicks...Janie asked inside of herself and out...Finally...she made a sort of comfort for herself. Yes, she would Logan after they were married...Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so. (Hurston 38)

However, Janie realizes that she will never be in love with Logan, and Logan realizes that he will never have Janie's heart fully and completely. When Joe Starks comes through Janie's town in West Florida on his way down to a new "colored" town in Southern Florida called Eatonville, he seems like the love that Janie has been searching for. Joe (or Jody as Janie refers to him) says to Janie, "De day you puts yo' hand in mine, Ah wouldn't let de sun go down on us single. Ah'm uh man wid principles. You ain't never knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady, and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh." (Hurston 50) Janie believes in him and his promises and leaves Logan and marries Jody once they begin their journey. However, as the years wear on, and Jody rises to power in

the new colored town, his promises take a back burner to the fame he has achieved as Mayor of Eatonville. Janie soon realizes that Jody was no better than Logan and settles herself with the realization that again, she is in a loveless marriage. Soon, Jody dies and a new man enters Janie's life. Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods meets Janie by accident, after having gotten lost on his way to a ball game that was taking place. Soon, Janie has fallen in love with him and decides to meet up with and marry him when he decides to go to Jacksonville to work. Soon, Janie realizes that Tea Cake is the love that she has been waiting for, but she sadly has to choose between her life and his when he goes crazy and tries to kill her. This novel's main focus is Janie's search for love, and the men in her life that she encounters while on this search. Additionally, the novel speaks on the ways in which each man in Janie's life mistreats her and how this impacts Janie's life and search for self. Furthermore, this novel in this paper demonstrates how a woman can overcome being mistreated and oppressed and still continue to retain possession of her own body.

III. Freedom of the Sexual Body.

"My grandmother walked over and put her hand on my shoulder... 'Listen. Listen before it passes. Paròl gin pié zèl. The words can give wings to your feet. There is so much to say, but time has failed you,' she said. 'There is a place where women are buried in clothes the color of flames, where we drop coffee on the ground for those who went ahead, where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear a mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free my daughter?' ...My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips... 'Now,' she said, 'you will know how to answer.' " (Danticat 234)

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, as previously noted, we find Sophie struggling to free herself from the cycle of "abuse" that has been passed down through the generations of

Haitian women: the act of being “tested.” The decision that she makes is to “free” herself of her virginity by breaking her hymen using a pestle. That night, when her mother comes in to test her, she finds no resistance and demands that Sophie leave her house. Sophie’s decision to “deflower” herself leads to many problems in her future life. She is unable to perform sexually with her husband Joseph, and she is so disturbed and depressed by this whole situation that she develops an eating disorder in order to cope with the pain. Sophie eventually begins to see a therapist to help her deal with her problems, and in turn the therapist recommends that she begin meeting with a “sexual phobia group” in order to further help her deal. In the group, Sophie along with two other women who have suffered different sexual traumas (one was the victim of Female Genital Mutilation [FGM] and the other was a victim of repeated sexual assaults at the hands of her grandfather) have their meetings at the house of Davina (the rape victim). Sophie explains what happens at the meetings in the following passage:

Davina had a whole room in her house set aside for our meetings. When we came in, we changed into long white dresses that Buki had sewn for us. We wrapped our hair in white scarves that I had bought... We sat on green heart-shaped pillows that Davina had made. The color green stood for life and growth... We each wrote the name of our abusers in a piece of paper, raised it over a candle, and watched as the flames consumed it. Buki blew up a green balloon. We went to Davina’s backyard and watched as she released it in the dark. It was hard to see where the balloon went, but at least it was out of our hands... I felt broken at the end of the meeting, but a little closer to being free. I didn’t feel guilty about burning my mother’s name anymore. I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt too... (Danticat 201-202)

The color symbolism in this passage is hard to ignore. Danticat as Sophie explains explicitly the symbolism of the green pillows that were made by the host and that each woman sits on. This symbolism also applies to the balloon blown up by Buki. The release of the green balloon symbolizes the wish to attain growth from their situations,

and to also obtain a better life. We can see that the color white in this passage clearly makes reference to the freedom that these women are trying to achieve by actively attending and participating in these meetings. White is frequently known to be a color of freedom and/or peace, and by dressing in all white at their meetings, these women are representatives of those who are trying to find peace of mind and soul, and trying to make peace with their past and their "tormentors" in order to move on and have a better life in the future. The passage with which I opened this section of my paper is also representative of freedom from the distressing cycle of abuse the Haitian women in this novel were made to suffer, due to the patriarchal boundaries into which they were born. This passage is spoken to Sophie by her grandmother at the funeral of her mother. Martine could no longer cope with the demons of her past, and so she ended her life by stabbing herself seventeen times in the stomach-the spot where she believed her unborn child was trying to kill her from the inside. Martine feels that the only way that she can be free is to kill the demon inside of her-literally and figuratively. In trying to abort her child she kills herself too, and whether or not this act is intentional is debatable. In the end, Sophie chooses to try to surround herself with others who can share her pain, help her grieve and then help her try to rebuild her life after her torment, but Martine chooses to permanently free herself from her earthly hell.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi's liberation from the patriarchal framework into which she was born comes in two forms. The first form is when she and Adam engage in multiple acts of pre-marital sex in forbidden places. Adam says:

In Olinka society the strongest taboo was against lovemaking in the fields. So strong was this taboo that no one in living memory had broken it. And yet, we did. And because no one in the society could imagine us capable of such an offense---lovemaking in the fields jeopardized the crops; indeed it was declared

that if there was any fornication whatsoever in the fields the crops would definitely not grow---no one ever saw us, and the fields produced their harvest as before. (Walker 27)

Adam then goes on to say:

[Tashi] was like a fleshy, succulent fruit; and when I was not with her, I dreamed of the time I would next lie on my belly between her legs, my cheeks caressed by the gentle rhythms of her thighs. My tongue bringing us no babies, and to both of us delight. This way of loving, among her people, the greatest taboo of all. (Walker 28)

By going against the myths set up by the Olinkan people, Tashi frees herself of the boundaries that her ancestors have placed upon her, as far as when and where she can have sex. Additionally, Tashi takes control of her body and of her sexuality by allowing Adam to engage her in oral sex-and by the phrasing of Adam's statements, it is inferred that both of these practices took place on more than one occasion. Tashi's freedom with her body and sexuality with Adam takes place prior to her "cleansing," and afterward neither she nor Adam received the same amount of neither joy nor pleasure from sex that they previously been used to experiencing when Tashi was "unclean." Tashi's decision to "Africanize" herself placed her immediately into the framework that her ancestors had put into place so many years ago, and negates the Tashi from before that was so free with her feelings. After becoming "more African" Tashi essentially loses herself: her spirit was taken out of her the same way in which her clitoris and labia were, and her soul was stitched shut so that no feelings could get in or out, just like her vaginal opening was.

The second way in which Tashi finds freedom is through her death. Similar to Martine in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Tashi murders her tormentor. However, in this situation, Tashi goes to trial and is sentenced to death by firing squad. Tashi recounts her

last moments, and says, "There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied." (Walker 279) Parallel to Martine Caco, Tashi realizes that dying will offer her the most chance of being free from the life of torment that her abuse has left her to live, and she acknowledges that she is "satisfied" with being there. These two women have chosen death over living because only in death can they truly escape their problems and "live" as they were meant to: as free spirits. The only difference is that Tashi once embodied this idea of being a "free spirit," but chose to give it up when she decided to become a "true Olinkan."

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we find a different take on the situation. Janie was never really oppressed or abused or suffered in the manner that Tashi, Sophie and Martine did in their respective lives/stories. Janie's freedom is from herself, more or less. Janie has constructed an idea of what love is, what it should be, and how it should feel. However, she marries twice in contrary to what she believes in. With her third marriage, she feels that she has finally found what she has been searching for, but is crushed when she has to kill her husband in self-defense. The freedom that Janie experienced when she married Tea Cake (her third husband) is taken away from her in the end, and replaced with a new freedom: life without a man in it. In learning how to live without a husband, and living with the memory of her lost love, Janie is as free as Tashi and Martine are in their final resting places and Sophie in her therapy group(s). Janie says at the end of the book:

...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, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her

shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.
(Hurst 286)

In being free from marriage and men overall, Janie has found the greatest love of all: self love. She is now secure and comfortable enough with her self that she can call out her soul that has been hiding away for so long, waiting for its chance to re-emerge. In calling out her soul from its hiding place, Janie recognizes that she will be ok without a man, and she will survive, even if the townspeople plan to talk about her and spread rumors behind her back. She is secure and self-sufficient now, and she has reached the freedom that she has been dreaming of.

IV. The Role of Culture in the Freedom/Oppression of the Sexual Body.

“But you taught them this...it is what you told me. Remember? The uncircumcised woman is loose...like a shoe that all, no matter what their size, might wear. This is unseemly, you said. Unclean. A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on an opening it might take months, even years, to enlarge. Men love and enjoy the struggle, you said. For the woman...But you never said anything about the woman, did you, M'Lissa? About the pleasure she might have. Or the suffering.”—Tashi to M'Lissa in Possessing the Secret of Joy. (Walker 217)

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Tashi's want to be a part of her culture is what informs her decision to undergo the “cleansing.” Tashi explains this to her therapist when she says:

Certainly to all my friends who'd been circumcised, my uncircumcised vagina was thought of as a monstrosity. They laughed at me. Jeered at me for having a tail. I think they meant my labia majora. After all, none of them had vaginal lips; none of them had a clitoris; they had no idea what these things looked like; to them I was bound to look odd. There were a few girls who had not been circumcised. The girls who had been would sometimes actually run from us, as if we were demons. Laughing though. Always laughing. (Walker 120)

Essentially what Tashi describes is her being discriminated against, mocked and humiliated for not having undergone the cultural practice of being “cleansed.” In order to live with her fellow tribesmen, Tashi felt compelled to be one of them; and the only way to do so was to have her genitals circumcised. The Olinkan society believes that a woman who is uncircumcised is not really a woman at all, but a man. Tashi again explains to her therapist:

Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they’d soon touch her thighs; she’d become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in the way...Everyone believed [this], even though no one had ever seen it. No one living in our village anyway. And yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago. (Walker 119)

The myths and superstitions that the Olinka have perpetrated regarding the female anatomy come together to form a cultural bias that in turn becomes a tool of oppression for all females living in their camp. Basically, the myths of the past have become the laws of the present, and as such the women become the sole sufferers of these “laws.” The culture of the Olinka involves the “cleansing” of the female body, and those who do not abide by these rules are subject to feeling, as well as being, outcast. In order to feel more connected to her culture, Tashi undergoes the ritual, and her life actually changes for the worse.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we find that culture is the central reason for the *testing* that the Caco women have all undergone, and have passed down through the female generations. Sophie notes the history of this cultural practice when she says:

I have heard it compared to a virginity cult, our mothers’ obsession with keeping us pure and chaste. My mother always listened to the echo of my urine in the toilet, for if it was too loud it meant that I had been deflowered. I learned very early in life that virgins always took small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles. They always covered

themselves well and, even if their lives depended on it, never parted with their panties. (Danticat 154)

Sophie's assertion that this idea has come from "our mothers," clearly shows how these standards and practices have been passed down and repeated over time in the lives of Haitian women. The fact that a practice such as this has become a sort of "bond" between these women illustrates how this cultural practice has served to oppress the female and her sexual body. The patriarchy of this whole situation is revealed by Grandmè Ifè, the Caco family matriarch, when she explains to Sophie:

From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, ha can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me...My heart, it weeps like a river...for the pain we have caused you (Danticat 156-157)

Sophie gives another example when she tells a story that, like the *testing*, has been passed down to her:

The story goes that there was once an extremely rich man who married a poor black girl. He had chosen her out of hundreds of prettier girls because she was untouched. For the wedding night, he bought her the whitest sheets and nightgowns he could possibly find. For himself, he bought a can of thick goat milk in which he planned to sprinkle a drop of her hymen blood to drink. Then came their wedding night. The girl did not bleed. The man had his honor and reputation to defend. He could not face the town if he did not have a blood-spotted sheet to hang in his courtyard the next morning. He did the best he could to make her bleed, but no matter how hard he tried, the girl did not bleed. So he took a knife and cut her between her legs to get some blood to show. He got enough blood for her wedding gown and sheets, an unusual amount to impress the neighbors. The blood kept flowing like water out of the girl. It flowed so much it wouldn't stop. Finally, drained of all her blood, the girl died. Later during the funeral procession, her blood-soaked sheets were paraded by her husband to show that she had been a virgin on her wedding night. At the grave site, her husband drank his blood-spotted goat milk and cried like a child. (Danticat 154-155)

These two passages both demonstrate the idea of the female, and consequently her (sexual) body, as a possession of the male/husband. Grandmè Ifè repeatedly makes

reference to the “giving away of” the girl to her husband. It’s as if the female has no choice in the matter; not rights, no say at all. Her voice is never heard, because she is never given the opportunity to speak up. Her decision has already been made for her, and if she objects, there is absolutely nothing that she can do about it. Furthermore, the idea of humiliation and shaming are very much expressed in both passages. In Grandmè Ifè’s passage, we see that in order to avoid humiliation and shame, a mother will *test* her daughter daily, further purporting a cycle that they both know should be broken. In Sophie’s story, we see that the husband was so hung up on being humiliated and shamed that he (accidentally) kills his wife. His pride and joy on having married a virgin comes at the expense of his wife’s life. Ideals like this are culturally focused, because they are handed down through the generations via oral tradition and physical practices. When the justification for the actions taken stem as far back as this, it becomes increasingly harder to find a way out of the cycle.

In *Their Eyes...*, we see less of the idea of humiliation and shame, with respect to their role and cultural base in oppressing the sexual female body, and move more toward the idea of culture *itself* oppressing the female and her body. That is to say, in *Their Eyes...*, we find Janie caught in a patriarchal cycle, where she is stuck in marriages that she can’t escape, all due to her culture and their beliefs. This idea is most evident in a speech that Nanny gives to Janie:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you from wishin’. You can’t beat nobody down so low till you can rob ‘em of they will. Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a 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. 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. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in my arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. 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 31-32)

Nanny's cultural base is her memory of slavery, and the hard life that she had to endure as both a female and a slave. This framework informs her ideas on what she wants for her future generations. However, she is unsuccessful with her daughter, since she befalls the same fate as her- being raped by a white man and made to bear his child. With this child, Nanny now sees her chance to have her dreams fulfilled/have her sermon preached, so she decides that Janie must have a better life than her mother and herself, and she marries Janie off to the best man that she can find. She is trying to explain that she does, in fact, care about Janie's feelings in this whole situation. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Janie's feelings have taken a back burner to Nanny's want for Janie to have a better life, to "stand on high ground [like she] dreamed." This cultural framework binds Janie to her marriages, because she does not want to disappoint Nanny, or ruin her dreams that she had for her. In this instance, we see how culture is used to oppress females in a patriarchal system, and how even the best intentions can damage someone's life.

V. Men as Sexual Oppressors

"...Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women

see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams. (Hurstun
218)

In *Their Eyes...*, we find that Janie, like her female counterparts in the other novels examined in this work, has suffered oppression mostly at the hands of the men in her life. In this passage we see how Tea Cake, who was supposed to be her knight in shining armor, has found himself caught in the web of abuse that the patriarchy has been imposing upon females. By beating down Janie to make himself feel better, Tea Cake is no better than Logan Killicks who wanted Janie to plow his fields, nor Joe Starks who promised Janie the world in order to gain her hand in marriage, and then reneged on his word as soon as he got what he wanted. Tea Cake is an oppressor more so than any of these other men because he openly admits that his beating Janie had no real merit- he wanted nothing more than to advance his status in the eyes of the community. Joe Starks does something similar; Joe puts Janie down in public in order to do what Tea Cake has done-advance his status in the eyes of the community as well as make himself feel like more of a man. This becomes evident in a few places in the novel, but the most specific one that comes to mind is what I will refer to as “the beginning of the end” for the Starks’ marriage. When Joe and Janie arrive in Eatonville, and Joe begins to climb the ladder of success and eventually becomes Mayor, he makes a great speech. Soon the town is calling to hear a speech from Janie as well. The book says:

“‘And now we’ll listen tuh uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks.’ The burst of applause was cut short by Joe taking the floor himself. ‘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.’ 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. He strode along invested with his new dignity, thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts.” (Hurston 69-70)

In the above passage, we can see how Janie’s second husband, Joe, acts as an oppressor in Janie’s life. By relegating Janie to a place where she isn’t even allowed to speak up for herself, much less speak *about* herself, Joe has taken over complete control of Janie’s voice. Without a voice, Janie becomes nothing more than a trophy for Joe to collect and add to his many accolades he has been accruing since moving to Eatonville. Both of these men in their own separate ways have oppressed Janie for their own personal gain. In gaining their self-respect, they take away Janie’s freedom.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we find that Sophie is also being oppressed because the man in her life is self-serving. However, whether or not Joseph *means* to be an oppressor is up for discussion. What we do know for sure is that Joseph is very selfish with his needs, and (similar to Joe Starks) makes promises to his wife that he later reneges on. The promise comes in the book when Sophie and Joseph are having a conversation. Sophie says to Joseph “...we can’t *be together*.” To which Joseph replies, “That’s all right. I told you...As long as it takes, I will wait...You’re not a machine. You can’t go to a shop and get fixed. It will happen slowly. I’ve always told you this, haven’t I? I will be there for you.” (Danticat 185) In spite of these words, we later find a scene where Joseph can think of nothing more than his own sexual desires:

He [Joseph] reached over and pulled my [Sophie’s] body towards his. I closed my eyes and thought of the *Marassa*, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else...He was panting. ‘You were very good,’ he said. ‘I kept my eyes closed so the tears wouldn’t slip out.’ I waited for him to fall asleep, then went to the kitchen. I ate every scrap of the dinner leftovers, then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and purged all the food out of my body. (Danticat 200)

Although Joseph has promised to wait for Sophie to be ready to have sex, he doesn't even ask her permission. He takes her body, almost as if in rape, and is not concerned with her pleasure in the situation. The fact that he finds it ok that his wife was almost in tears during what is supposed to be an act of love between two people doesn't even phase him- he rolls over and falls asleep after hearing this statement. In this manner, Joseph can be seen as an oppressor, because he is only interested in Sophie's body for his own self-gain. Even though his actions are less severe than those of Joe Starks and Tea Cake, he is still an oppressor nonetheless because of his disregard for the feelings of the woman that he has married, and his neglect of the promises that he has made to her.

In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, we find that Tashi has been oppressed by a man simply known as "Our Leader." This man didn't oppress Tashi directly, rather through his teachings and ways of thought, he oppressed her through the idea of upholding the Olinka tradition. In a conversation with her therapist, Tashi describes this idea:

...from prison we received our instructions...Good instructions. Sensible; correct. From Our Leader. That we must remember who we were. That we must fight the white oppressors without ceasing; without, even the contemplation of ceasing; for they would surely still be around during our children's and our children's children's time...that we must return to the purity of our own culture and traditions. That we must not neglect our ancient customs...We loved him. We believed everything he said. We thought he knew best...about everything. (Walker 115-116)

By The Leader passing along these ideals, instilling these facts into his followers, he is only helping to perpetrate the cycle of abuse that the Olinkan women must endure-the act of female circumcision. With his power, The Leader has made sure that even though he is in jail, his people will continue to follow the traditions of their ancestors, and ignore the new teachings of the missionaries, or as he has called them "the white oppressors."

What is interesting to note in all of this is the idea that those with the new ideas that will

actually help free the women of the Olinka society are seen as the oppressors in this situation, but The Leader who is upholding these ancient ideal of “female purity” that involve the mutilation of the female genitalia is seen as a God in the eyes of his people. Tashi, in not wanting to disappoint the man who is seen as a God-like figure in the eyes of the Olinka, makes the ultimate decision to join herself to him in the best way that she knows how- through having herself circumcised. She realizes in hindsight that in allowing herself to believe in these false ideals of Her Leader she was giving in to his oppression, but there is nothing that she can do at this point in her life. She has realized her mistake, that she had rooted her faith in an oppressor, and she is trying to grow from it in the best way that she knows how.

V. Conclusion:

In closing this paper, it is imperative to note that all of these women eventually find the freedom(s) that they desire from their lives, as well as from the oppression(s) that they are suffering. Although the actions that are taken against each of these women are forever imprinted on their minds and bodies, their souls are able to find the release necessary for them to move forward with their lives; basically changing the path that they've taken so that the future generations will not make the same mistakes and/or have to suffer the same traumas. By using the oral tradition to pass these stories on from generation to generation, the women ensure that their stories will be told and that their footsteps will never have to be walked in again. Conclusively, it is safe to say that the women of these texts began as damaged creatures; broken and wounded by the oppressive actions taken against their bodies. However, they end their stories with a positive outlook for the future of women in their respective cultures, that maybe these

new women will be different; be better. These women of the future will, in their hopes,
be a free as men have always been.

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