Nanny, Signifying Empowerment: The Evolution of the Dispirited Black Female in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

The essay contains a stylistic analysis of the dispirited black female. Hurston uses Their Eyes Were Watching God *to deconstruct the negative image of the dispirited black female, a woman who is dogged by a tragic past. True to her commitment to not fall under the constraints of feeling "tragically colored," Hurston uses Nanny and an empowered sermon to create a warrior woman who struggles to hold on to the remnants of a spirit that had been beaten down by the effects and after effects of slavery.*

While there are a plethora of articles on Nanny, there are no articles (at least none that were found after quite an exhaustive search) that focus on a stylistic study of Nanny's sermon. In an effort to add to the scholarship for Nanny, this paper analyses Nanny's sermon – the independent and dependent clauses, the signifiers, and the cohesive ties – all of which help Nanny shed the burdens of her past, whereby freeing her from the burdens of the dispirited black woman.

Key words: *Hurston, stylistics, linguistics, signifying, Nanny*

Got on da train didn't have no fare
But I rode some
Yes I rode some. (Dust Tracks…133)

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance—Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, etc.—used art to create images of black characters who were more vivid, more real, and more in tune with

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Alain Locke's "make it new" mantra. Alain Locke, in his 1925 text entitled "The New Negro" states that black writers had to commit themselves to creating reconstructed views of blacks. After being viewed for generations as more of a formula than a human being—as something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down" or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social burden—Locke believed that the Negro community was primed and ready to enter a dynamic new phase through the expression of the young Negro in his poetry, his art, his literature, and his education. Locke's words created a mantra; words that proclaimed that the new Negro wished to be known for what he was, even in his faults and shortcomings, rather than what he was not.

In 1937, Zora Neale Hurston upholds Locke's 'make it new' mantra by re-visioning the negative image of the dispirited black woman; a woman who is dogged by a tragic past. In her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (*TEWWG*), Hurston, true to her commitment to not fall under the constraints of feeling "tragically colored" uses Nanny, and an empowered sermon, to create a warrior woman. Mary Jane Lupton contends, *TEWWG* "is a novel about life, power, and survival" (46). Thus, through the transcending power of her literary skill in redefining the feminine spaces, Hurston constructs Nanny, a survivor, who struggles to hold on to the remnants of a spirit that had been beaten down by the effects and after effects of slavery.

TEWWG is a novel that begins with Hurston's declaration that this story will be a "woman's story" (9). Hurston writes…"so the beginning of this was a woman" (9). Thus, the narration of Nanny about the life lived as a dispirited black woman, and the creation of truth that comes about as a result of this narration, is about and for the sake of empowering women. Even though at a first glance Nanny may not be read as a symbol for empowerment, this title is uniquely hers because she is insistent on renaming her past as progress rather than pain. This is not to say Hurston creates a character who overlooks all of the pain of her past. On the contrary, Hurston is insistent on recreating or 'making new' the life of the dispirited black woman. In fact, her decision to construct Nanny, a character who is resolute about renaming her pain, her hurt, and the evilness of her past is at the very heart of what it means to be empowered. Clenora Hudson-Weems proposes that black women become empowered

when they create their own name, and define themselves and their critical perspectives and agenda in ways that reflect their particular experiences and African culture (qtd. in Johnson 2008: 117). And this is what Hurston does; she characterizes Nanny in such a way that her voice, her past, and her sermon become empowering symbols of liberation, wholeness, authenticity, and spirituality; characteristics that Hudson-Weems argues that black women need in order to reclaim ourselves (18).

In the novel, Nanny is classified as a dispirited woman because her spirit has been broken just enough to force her world to be "diffused into one comprehension" (*TEWWG* 12). Nanny was continually raped by her owner, Master Roberts, and consequently, she gives birth to a mulatto daughter, Leafy. Nanny tells Janie that Mistress Roberts does not take well to Leafy's "gray eyes and yaller hair?" (15) In a heart-wrenching narrative, Nanny tells Janie that not only does her mistress threaten to whip her until "de blood run down to [her] heels" (15) but she tells her that as soon as Leafy is a month old she will be sold off of the plantation.

In a strong show of courage, Nanny refuses to be separated from Leafy, so she fights for her life and the life of her daughter. Thus, what characterizes Nanny as an empowered woman in this text is not only her decision to save a text for her Janie, but her decision to "throw up a highway through the wilderness" (16), and steal her daughter away into the night to save her from certain death. In her sermon, Nanny admits that she knows that she did not know what she would be faced with in the wilderness, but she was "more skeered uh whut was behind [her]" (18) than what was hidden in the darkness. Nanny is successful in keeping Leafy safe from harm for a while, but she is unable to protect her when she is raped by her white school teacher. And because Leafy cannot endure the mental scars left by the rape, after her daughter Janie is born, "she took to drinkin' likker and stayin' out nights" (19). Finally, Leafy runs away and Nanny provides for Janie the best way she knows how.

Nanny's decisions are intimately tied to the pain she and Leafy experience. So much so that she bases her decisions about Janie's life on *her experienced* truth: "de nigga woman is de mule uh de world" (14). And it is because she does not want Janie to suffer the way she and Leafy had, she has a very narrow-minded vision for Janie; a vision that some scholars dismiss as irrelevant to Janie's journey to wholeness. Nanny is seen as a woman who limits Janie's progression by "shackling her to a middle-aged

farmer—all in the name of safety and protection" (Howard 1982: 404). However, she does this because she has lived a hard life and she does not want Janie to have to experience the pain she had. Though the reader gets to know very little about Nanny because she dies early on in the novel, the reader does get to see her move beyond the burdens of the dispiritedness that plagued her most of her life. Through a simple sermon given by Nanny, feelings of alienation and loss are replaced with feelings of freedom and empowerment for the dispirited black woman.

In early literature written by both black and white authors, the dispirited black woman plays a part. This character derived her name during the initial stages of an indoctrination process that was supposed to transform the African 'free' human being into a slave. Slave masters, in an effort to try and transform the African personality so that a more marketable, docile slave could be brought to the American colonies, brutalized the independent spirit of the slaves. Once broken, the slaves would willingly conform to proper slave demeanour. The methods of destroying the spirit of slaves often forced them to repress their awareness of themselves as free people and to adopt the imposed slave identity. Yet, even though slaves did fall prey to this dispiriting process, many struggled to maintain a sense of self; a feat that was not easy for most female slaves.

Jacqueline Royster in her text, *Traces of a Stream* (2000), believes this fight to move beyond dispiritedness was embedded in Africans before the European invasion, and it was the internal residue of this spirit that black women had to hold onto because they were expected to be "beasts of burden". Beasts of burden (women viewed as non-human objects) who were expected to not only carry the weight of their slave identity, the pain of being raped, and the back-breaking labour they experienced in the fields, but they also had to make sure they were the primary caregivers in their families. Royster goes on to say that, in spite of the heaviness of the loads they had to bear, the dispirited black woman had to carve out a space of credibility and respect as women and human beings (2000: 109). However, the mechanism that would help them maintain a sense of spirit was literacy. The literacy tools that were available to slave women were: the trickster tales, the oral retelling of ancestral histories, and sermons and testimonies.

For Nanny, her literary tool of choice was the sermon. In *TEWWG*, Hurston portrays Nanny as a strong woman who, through the use of the

sermon, tries to circumvent the demarcations set by her dispiritedness. However, some scholars do not see much strength in Nanny. Houston A. Baker believes that Nanny's history under slavery is a determining factor in how she manoeuvres through life. Nanny's past and her feelings about being seen as only property force critics such as Klaus Benesch to read Nanny as one of the earliest efforts in the text to exclude and isolate Janie" (1988: 628). In fact, Klaus Benesch, in his article "Oral Narrative and Literary Text", characterizes Nanny as "deprived of self-determination and free will" (629); thus, he feels this forces her to turn a blind eye to Janie's needs. But it is important to note that because Nanny lived under the old system of slavery, her conception of freedom was of wealth and idleness, rather than a re-visioned voice.

Adding to Benesch's claims is Glenda Weathers (2005), who in "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance" argues that, because of Nanny's misconstrued idea of how each person achieved their own level of freedom, Nanny imposes a death sentence on Janie when she forces her to marry Logan Killicks. In the same vein, Todd McGowan (1999) believes that Janie is denied her own autonomous voice because of Nanny. Furthermore, Sandra Pouchet-Paquet believes Nanny is so deprived of self-determination she has abandoned her ancestral roots in the African American community (1990: 503). But are these valid assessments of Nanny? Lillie Howard argues that they are not. According to Howard, Nanny:

> …is hurriedly dismissed as one of those desecrators of the pear tree who spit on Janie's idea of 'marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think' by cluttering up her life with materialism, security, and other stifling trappings supposedly necessary to a happy marriage. While Nanny is guilty of limiting her granddaughter by shackling her to a middle-aged farmer-all in the name of safety and protection—her intentions are wholly good, her actions understandable, and her advice well-meant (1982: 404).

Nanny has not had many opportunities to take a stand on high ground, but because she does hold on to her ancestral roots, and she remains true to what she believes is good because of her faith in God, Nanny takes a stand for herself and for the survival of Janie.

Nanny is not only a former slave and a victim of rape, but she is fighter. She fights for the survival of Janie. Thus, Nanny's story is about the strength that comes in spite of *and because of* the struggle. Once Nanny is

able to see beyond the pain of her past, she uses her sermon to try and help Janie become a whole woman. Hence, I argue that Nanny does not lose touch with her ancestral roots. On the contrary, these roots, along with the sermon, permit Nanny to use her dispiritedness as a tool to move forward. Furthermore, through Nanny's voice, Hurston not only reclaims power for the dispirited black woman, but through this re-characterization, which leads Janie's first steps toward her journey to wholeness.

How does Hurston help the dispirited black woman rename her past as a tool to unlock her empowering spirit? Hurston through several "linguistic moments" as biographer, Robert Hemenway (1971) calls them, is able to revision the ending for the dispirited black woman. Thus, studying the grammatical functionality of these linguistic moments is what allows readers to see how Hurston is able to breathe new life into the dispirited black woman.

Looking at the functionality of Nanny's language helps trace the journey to renaming her past. Hence, studying functional grammar will shed light on this renaming process. Functional grammar, according to Halliday, is concerned with the way in which grammar is organized to make meaning" (1994: 6). In this study, functional grammar, as it pertains to stylistics, is used to show how Nanny is a warrior rather than a handicap. This stylistic study presents data that will show how Hurston, using parataxis embedded with cultural signifiers inside the black sermon, help Nanny reclaim the voice of the dispirited black woman.

In order to dismantle the fragmented psyche, or to understand the path to self-consciousness, Nanny's signifying must be understood. Signifying includes history, life experience and word association that assign new meanings to a particular culture. Henry Louis Gates (1989) argues that black literature must be evaluated by the aesthetic measures of its context of culture and context of utterance. Gates brought this strain of thought into his ground-breaking text, *The Signifying Monkey,* whereby he discusses the concept of signifying to analyse African American literature. In this text, Gates explains the Yoruba trickster god Esu-Elegbara, whose African American descendant, the signifying monkey, continually outwits his foes with skilful stories and verbal barrage. The signifying monkey is "distinctly African-American" and depicts Esu-Elegbara with a monkey at his side. There are numerous stories about the signifying monkey and his interactions with the Lion and the Elephant. In general, stories about the

signifying monkey see him insulting the Lion, but maintaining that he is only repeating the Elephant's words. The Lion then confronts the Elephant, who retaliates against the Lion. The Lion soon realizes that the monkey has been signifying or used double-talk and trickery to deceive him. The signifying monkey's power and identity lie in his mastery of verbal techniques that act as manoeuvring skills (Gates 1989: 46). Thus, slaves, who were able to hear about the signifying monkey's dual voiced technique used to outfox an enemy, were able to learn a useful strategy that would allow them to find freedom in spite of their imprisonment. Nanny's signifiers help create a meta-language, a sermonized rhetoric that could be used to testify to Janie about the stories of not only rape and bondage, but also hope and freedom.

There was no pulpit for Nanny, but her sermon, along with signification, is the powerful rhetorical tool she uses to empower herself and her granddaughter. The dynamics of the black sermon help Nanny create a new voice for the dispirited female. The basic components of the black sermon include: 1) an understanding of what blacks believe about power and the sovereign God and how that belief has traditionally informed their sacred story; 2) awareness of and sensitivity to the history and culture of black life in America; 3) an insightful competence in describing and addressing the many and varied life situations that blacks experience daily in America; and 4) an ability to wed the scriptures to those experiences (testimonies) in a practical and relevant manner (Proctor and Watley 1984: 10). Granted, Nanny's talk with Janie does not follow the basic guidelines of the black sermon—which, at the time, was normally given by black men—but it captures some of the basic tenets of the sermon, a belief in the power of God, and an insightful competence in describing and addressing life situations.

Typically, with the black sermon, "there is a creative tension between the black sermon's delivery of heavenly truths and its steadfast linking to the here and now. And despite the relative rigidity of the sermon's foundational structures, it is jazz-like in its insistence that the "performer"—in this case Nanny—finds his or her own "voice" and imprint upon each performance his or her own particular style" (O'Meally 1988: 198). Even though Nanny's suggestions about Janie's future are not considered life changing, it is important to note that Nanny's past cannot allow her to see a completely clear future for Janie, but it does allow her to

let Janie know that there is a possible way out of the chaos that she (Nanny) and Leafy had to endure. Nanny's sermon is meant to inform Janie about "colored women sittin' on high" (*TEWWG* 15), yet at the same time it is meant to help Janie find security. Nanny believes that marriage, family and belief in God are the best ways to find security, and she preaches about this in her sermon. However, Janie sees beyond the closed world that Nanny has lived in for so long. Nanny and Leafy were enslaved by life and life's circumstances, but Janie does not want to be imprisoned. Thus, Nanny's sermon and her signifiers do not handicap Janie's growth. Quite the contrary, her sermon and the signifiers become rhetorical tools that help Janie see her past, her present, and in time, a new future.

In her sermon, Nanny not only finds her voice, but she is able to link her faith in God with her faith in Janie's here and now. Throughout Nanny's sermon, several paratactic clauses are used to extend the sermon so as to include invigorating words for Nanny. Parataxis, according to Halliday (1994), consists of two independent clauses joined by a linking word—oftentimes a conjunction—that can stand alone. Because the independent clauses are linked, the first clause is considered the initiating clause, and the connected clause is considered the continuing clause. Qualitative data (shown in the appendix and throughout this essay) will prove that the majority of cultural signifiers found in Nanny's speech are in the initiating clauses. Thus, Nanny can be read as the initiator or the beginning of Janie's journey toward wholeness. Also, data from Nanny's sermon will not only produce new ways of thinking about literary-linguistic data, including what can be learned about the literary text, but also what can be learned about how Hurston uses Nanny to revision the dispirited black woman.

When Nanny gives her sermon to Janie, she assigns a variety of signifiers to inspire Janie to action. The sermon is supposed to invigorate the soul. It is a form of oral narration or storytelling where listeners of the Word hear a communal voice which is normally raised to help people, blacks post-slavery for example, attempt to break free from psychological immobility. If the purpose of storytelling is not to impart information, "but rather to engage in a free play of signifiers that invoke a range of meanings and truths having multiple sources and origins" (Rishoi 2003: 115), then Nanny's choice of signifiers enable her to preach an important and meaningful sermon to Janie.

The signifiers in Nanny's sermon are cohesively tied together. Cohesion is the process by which sentences are infused to create and build texture within a text (81). Cohesion occurs "where the interpretation of some element in the text is dependent on that of another" (184). The first cohesive tie used in this study is collocation. Collocation happens when "sets of words turn up together in texts because they relate to the same idea" (81). For example, mule, work-ox, and brood sow, flightless bird relate to the same image: burdened animals. Black female slaves were burdened with the pain of being imprisoned by silent voices. The second cohesive tie used in this study is referencing. Referencing is used when a writer wants to introduce an idea or image that will be referred to in a succeeding clause or later in the text. There are three types of referencing, anaphoric, cataphoric and exophoric. In this study, anaphoric referencing will be used to present another level of cohesion that is found in Nanny's sermon. Anaphoric referencing points back to previously mentioned information in a text. Consider the following example:

Carrying and maintaining the load of the slaver was difficult. It was heavy and difficult to manage. It sometimes burdened the overworked slaves.

In this example, the use of anaphoric referencing between *the load* and *it* adds cohesion to the two sentences, so the reader interprets them together rather than separately. Building meaning through signifiers, collocations and a specific context of culture helps Nanny discover her most important role—being a voice that will help Janie begin to re-interpret her future.

The frequency of the cultural signifiers in Nanny's sermon is important because Nanny's sermon is only four pages long. Hence, in four pages, twenty six signifiers (see Appendix) are presented to signify women as burdened animals, mammies/caregivers, and women warriors. The excerpt pulled from Nanny's sermon that will be used in this study contains sixty-four clauses (see Appendix). Of the sixty five clauses, only three are written using narrative voice. Thus, sixty-two of the clauses are written in dialogue, and forty-eight of these clauses are independent. Using collocation, the twenty-seven signifiers are linked inside of seventeen clauses in Nanny's sermon. Interesting, these clauses are independent. Independent clauses are able to stand alone; thus, Nanny's sermon becomes a fight to take a stand on her own. This is worth noting because

stealing her daughter away from certain death, saving a text for Janie, preaching a sermon—something only men did—are all independent, empowering moves for the dispirited black woman.

Unfortunately, we get to know little about Nanny because she dies early on in the novel. The little we do learn, however, is highly revealing and offers insight into Nanny's thought and actions (Howard 1982: 405). Even though Nanny had been born during slavery [...], slavery could not kill her will (405). This is why, in the beginning of Nanny's sermon, she bares her soul about the heavy burdens she has had to carry all of her life. Thus, she starts her sermon not by preaching about the supreme ruler, she begins putting some perspective on the life she has been forced to live. The signified load—which will connect later to the signified mule and work-ox—presents the life situation for the dispirited black woman.

> [So] De white man throw down **de load**
> [and] tell de nigger man tuh pick it up.
> He pick it up
> *because he have to,
> but he don't tote it.
> He hand it to his womenfolks.

*Dependent Clauses

In these six clauses, only one signifier is mentioned in the first independent clause. However, a pattern is revealed in four of the clauses in the middle of the passage. Every word, phrase and signifier is cohesively tied together in Nanny's sermon. The reason for these links is to continually tie Nanny's words together. In a sermon, the preacher will use links throughout his sermon to pull together the lesson. For example, if he is presenting a sermon on enduring faith, he will use images that connect to faith, such as the immovable rock, the mustard seed, or the rain of manna provided to the Jews who felt God had forgotten them while they wandered through the desert. In Nanny's sermon, anaphoric referencing is used to signify about 'de load' that slaves had to carry. 'De load' for the dispirited black female is the role of slave, mother, seamstress, cook, maid, sexual object. In the first clause, Nanny signifies about the load, and then, in four succeeding clauses, there are references to the load with the use of the pronoun 'it.' The constant use of 'it' allows this reference to become

anaphoric in that the constant use of 'it' points the reader back to the signified 'load.' Hurston uses anaphoric references when an idea needs to be extended or amplified. The burden of the load the dispirited black woman had to carry is heavy, and it is enduring. Later, in Nanny's sermon and in the passages for Janie, the image of 'de load' will resurface to show how both Nanny and Janie persevere through being seen as beast of burdens.

In the middle of Nanny's sermon, there is a heavy use of collocation, and in turn, this conjures up burdened animal images and mother/caregiver images. The signified burdened animal images are the most telling part of Nanny's sermon because with these signifiers, Hurston is able to construct the life of the dispirited black woman, while at the same deconstructing this trope.

> **De nigger woman is de mule uh de world**
> *so fur as Ah can see.
> Ah been prayin' fuh it to be different wid you.
> Lawd! Lawd! Lawd!
> 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.
> Ah don't want yo' **feathers always crumpled** by folks throwin' up things in yo' face.

* Dependent Clause

In this part of the sermon, there are eight clauses, and five of these clauses are independent. Nanny's ability to stand on her pulpit and preach a great sermon to Janie is important for her and for her granddaughter. Hurston empowers Nanny with the sermon in an effort to present the dispirited woman with a voice, an independent voice that rejects the beast of burden image. Nanny was forced to bear the weight of the labour inflicted by her slave owner. She says, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). The signified mule, because this animal is of mixed heritage, connects to the idea of the double consciousness many black women fought every day. Mules, which are a mix between a donkey and a horse, are relevant signifiers because they represent the female whose identity is broken into two parts. On the one hand, black women saw

themselves as a product of their own culture, but they also recognized that the racist world they lived in distinguished them as sexual beings, hard labourers, and non-human.

Mules are docile, compliant animals, thus, this image helps Nanny relay the idea that sometimes the dispirited woman had to lead a silent, passive life. On the other hand, the mule has a stubborn spirit. This obstinate spirit represents potential resistance to an oppressive system. Nanny's signifying about 'mules' shows that many black women, even though they carried broken spirits, desperately tried to hold on to the value and beliefs of their culture.

Just as the mule helps characterize the dispirited female, other animals in this section of Nanny's sermon provide further insight into the burdened animal signifier. "You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob'em of they will," Nanny says. "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" (16). When Nanny admits that she did not want to be a work ox, she signifies about women as hard labourers. The ox, normally a castrated male, has the job to pull, carry, and labour all day. The dispirited female often felt castrated by her slavers, like something that was essential to her physical psychological well-being had been taken or stripped away. The dispirited black woman was often emotionally closed off and silenced, but like the ox, she was still expected to pull and carry 'de load' all day. Just as the work ox and the mule are considered beasts of burden, so is the brood sow. The brood sow is a pig whose primary job is to breed. "African American women were positioned in the social order as workers and breeders and were thereby central to the slave economy—a degraded status" (Royster 2000: 111). Hence, when Nanny uses the "brood sow" signifier, she is pleading with Janie to not feel as though the only thing she is good for is breeding. The life of a breeder had been forced on Nanny and her daughter, but she uses this sermon to release herself from this history.

After the harsh reality of slavery, black women often felt as though their ability to fly like soaring birds was lost to them. When Nanny signifies about crumpled feathers, an image of the dispirited black female can be visualized. Nanny says, "Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by white folks throwin' up things in yo face" (16). Using the phrase "crumpled feathers", instead of just signifying a flightless bird, constructs a picture of the broken spirit of black women who were forced to walk around with

"crumpled feathers". Nanny's feathers were beaten down, and she was unable to soar above life's troubling circumstances, but she knew that no one could be beaten down "so low till you can rob 'em of they will" (16). Crumpled feathers embody the psychological fragmentation often presented in the dispirited black woman.

The animal signifiers connect back to the signified dispirited black female, but the mother/caregiver signifiers reinforce the idea that these women were not only expected to live as hard labourers and sexual objects, but they also had to do whatever they could to maintain their homes.

> You ain't got nobody but me.
> And mah head is ole and **tilted towards the grave**.
> Neither can you stand alone by yo'self.
> De thought uh you **bein' kicked around from pillar to post** is uh hurtin' thing.
> Every tear you drop squeezes a **cup uh blood outa** mah heart.
> Ah got tuh try and do for you befo' mah head is cold.
> Freedom found me with a baby daughter in mah 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 think Ah knowed here you was in de world.
> *Whilst Ah was tendin' yuh of nights
> [so] Ah said Ah'd save **a text** fuh yuh.
> [And] Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de men folks white or black is makin' a **spit cup** oughta yuh.
> Have some sympathy fuh me.
> Put me down easy, Janie.
> Ah'm a **cracked plate**.

*Dependent Clause

These eighteen clauses that appear in the middle of Nanny's sermon create an image of the mother/caregiver. Of the eighteen clauses, eight contain collocated signifiers that connect to the mother/caregiver image. The signified 'head titled to the grave,' 'broom,' 'cook-pot,' the 'highway through the wilderness,' 'the text' and 'the cracked plate' are embedded inside independent clauses. This is significant because the sermon for Nanny is the tool she uses to teach Janie how to stand on her own. Part of

the black sermon requires that the person giving the sermon uses insightful competence in discussing situations that blacks experience every day. When Nanny begins to use signifiers that explain her role as a mother and a caregiver, the independent clauses are longer and more complex. In the first example listed below, Hurston embeds four images that signify the strength and perseverance of the dispirited black female. The second independent clause only has one signifier, but it is housed inside a detailed independent clause.

> Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a
> 1 2
> highway through the wilderness for her
> 3 4
>
> Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de men folks white or black is makin' a **spit cup** outa yuh.
> 5

The broom and the cook-pot signify the heart of the slave woman. "Emancipation liberated [Nanny] from slavery, but not from the burdens of domesticity […] her broom and cook pot are domestic staples allowing Nanny to provide for herself and her daughter, Leafy" (Kelley 1999). The broom and the cook-pot are signifiers that had become intricately tied to the dispirited black woman. Yet, even though the dispirited female is associated with these tools, Nanny admits to herself and Janie that the broom and the cook-pot could be used to help her create a way out for her and her daughter.

Because these signifiers appear in one independent clause, Hurston is able to introduce Nanny's situation—she had to escape with Leafy to save her from being murdered by her Master's wife—and then explain the only option she had to run and protect her daughter. Nanny, with only her broom and her cook-pot, was willing to risk death in order to make a better life for herself. Also, in the clause Nanny uses the 'a highway' signifier. The highway signifies a way out of an oppressive situation. Thus, the signifier in this clause becomes dual voiced. It not only signifies a way to escape, but it also signifies the horizon that is oftentimes hidden from the mulatto. During a sermon, the preacher and the people are engaged in a dynamic exchange. The preacher, through his sermon, is able to impart his message

so that his congregation is provided the tools they need to purge their pain and replace it with a new understanding. In many instances, the preacher or the one relaying the sermon experiences a sense of kenosis or a purging or emptying of old wounds. When Nanny introduces the signified highway, Janie is given the necessary information she needs to remember she will have to fight with whatever she has, whether it is with a broom or a cook pot, to reach that highway or that horizon.

Next, in the same passage, Nanny introduces the 'spit cup.' For the dispirited black woman, the cultural significance of *spit cup* held an enormous amount of pain. The spit cup is a cup that is used by many to catch what is spit out. Hence, the cup becomes symbolic of that which has been rejected, tossed aside, or simply forgotten. After having their bodies abused (sexually, physically, and psychologically) in every way, the dispirited black woman often felt as if she were the excess garbage that was used and discarded when no longer needed. Yet, even with the feelings of insignificance tied to this particular cup, Nanny still felt it was important to remain vocal about her history. Thus, the signified *spit cup* becomes vital in Nanny's decision to release her horrific history because she wants to purge feelings of insignificance.

Royster states that black women maintained a sense of place in the world, even with its incumbent expectations, obligations, and harsh responsibilities; they struggled to pass along to future generations a new literacy (2000: 103). More important than Nanny using the sermon to try and set Janie on the road to finding her voice, is that she speaks of her history through very telling signifiers, and in the process she reaches for the residual spirit that the slavers were not able to completely beat down. The greatest gift Nanny provides for Janie is a narrative sermon that considers the possibilities of a higher road for her granddaughter.

Towards the end of Nanny's sermon, she pleads with Janie to put her down easy because she is a cracked plate (20). This signified image of the woman who is finally able to lay down easy her past, so her present and future is realized in one short independent clause.

57 Ah'm a cracked plate.

Once a plate is cracked, some pieces may remain in tack, but it is no longer able to hold what it once could. Nanny is strong, strong enough to know that she is no longer able to hold on to the burdens of her past that

have imprisoned her and family for a long time. However, this realization is not Nanny giving in to the pain; this simple sentence shows that Nanny is strong enough to recognize that parts of her may always be broken, but her spirit is whole and intact. Thus, Nanny finally releases herself from the pain connected to her past. Thus, she signifies about this cracked plate in this short and uncomplicated independent clause to help Janie see that it is time for her to make sure that her spirit is never cracked or broken by the weight of her past.

Furthermore, Nanny, through her powerful sermon and her telling signifiers such as the *spit cup* and *brood sow*, is able to prove that Nanny is not voiceless; that she, in fact, has one of the strongest voices in the text. Interestingly, Weiss, in her text, *Tangible Voice Throwing*, states that African women are not as voiceless as is commonly claimed. On the contrary, African women's voices are articulated in a variety of spaces, some women centred and others not (2004: 229). Nanny's voice is centred on the struggle to extrapolate herself and Janie from the constricting bonds of the past. Weiss believes that this is a difficult feat because African women's voices are often "veiled," or muffled by traumatic pasts (229). But she goes on to say that rather than be subdued by this "veil," African women fight back by deploying the strategy of "voice throwing," in essence empowering themselves in their societies by speaking up and speaking out, "airing their opinions, agonies, desires, passions, et cetera" (229). Thus, this is what Nanny does with her sermon. She moves beyond the veil of pain, hurt, anger to find a way for Janie to live a life wrapped in hope and freedom.

The way Hurston makes sure Nanny's voice is heard beyond the veil is to add three levels of signifiers to Nanny's sermon: the signified beast of burden, the signified mother/caregiver, and the signified warrior woman that is made apparent with the heavy use of pastoral imagery in Nanny's sermon.

> 1 Ah wanted yuh to school out
> [and] pick from a **higher bush** and a **sweeter berry**.
> Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby
> It's [it is] protection, now,
> de **angel wid de sword** is going tuh stop by here.
> Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer
> You know, honey, us **colored folks is branches without roots**.

*[and] that makes things come round in queer ways.
Ah wanted to preach a **great sermon**
* about **colored women sittin' on high**
Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie,
but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much
* if yuh just take a stand on **high ground** lak Ah dreamed.

*Dependent Clause

Although not all thirteen clauses in this excerpt are independent, eight of the clauses are, and of the eight, six contain signifiers. Each image signifies the dispirited black woman as a warrior; a woman who is willing to fight for a new ending. The signified 'high ground,' 'colored women sittin' on high,' 'the great sermon' and the 'colored folks as branches without roots' help present the dispirited black woman as she sheds the skin of oppression and subjugation. Nanny's rhetorical prowess is shown in her sermon when she admits that "colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come in queer ways" (16). In this independent clause, the signified root*less* tree is important because it helps solidify the primary purpose of Nanny's sermon. The signified root*less* tree is one that allows Nanny to explain the history she has lived. Thus, the image of the root*less* tree signifies the pain many dispirited females felt, as they were stripped of not only their families but of their dignity. When Nanny uses the signified root*less* tree in her sermon, she is trying to revision her history in an effort to create new roots for her family.

In one section of Nanny's sermon, she alludes to the power of the sovereign God. Nanny states,

It is protection, now
de **angel wid de sword** is going tuh stop by here
Mah *daily prayer* now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer.

A strong reliance on God gives Nanny the strength to tell Janie it is imperative that she "pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry" (13). In keeping with the pattern presented in Nanny's speech, the images of a higher power, the signified "higher bush" and "sweeter berry" are embedded in three independent clauses. As the sermon progresses, so do the clauses. The last clause in the previous short excerpt is longer, and it

focuses more on Nanny's faith that God will see her through the rest of her golden moments. Interestingly, the higher bush provides an image of the woman who is intent on creating a new voice after becoming "privy to ancestral connections and ancestral voices" (Royster 2000: 100). Rarely were the dispirited black woman characters offered such opportunities; thus, Nanny's image of the sweeter berry constructs a visual image of hope for Nanny. Hope and faith are closely tied to nature in this novel. Certain signifiers, such as the sweeter berry, support the idea that many black women felt tied to their history. The root*less* tree, the higher bush, and the sweet berries are collocated images that signify the growth of a broken spirit.

Sometimes the dispirited black woman would "deliberately choose to throw her voice" (14) because oftentimes the pain was too great to bear. However, Hurston does not construct Nanny as a voiceless woman. Taking action, giving her sermon, signifying about the past, and enlarging the vision of the dispirited black woman is what seems to be Hurston's goal. Nanny renames her past which helps her to not only "surpass the boundaries of agony and repression," but to also restore her emotionally mutilated mind and author a new beginning for herself and Janie.

As elucidated by Gates (1989), *TEWWG* is a speakerly text. Through carefully embedded signifiers, basic tenets of the black sermon, Hurston allows Nanny's signifiers to construct a new and empowered voice for the dispirited black woman. When Nanny declares, "Fact is ah done been on mah knees to mah Maker many's de time askin' please—for Him not to make de burden too heavy for me to bear" (13), the reader knows this is not the language of a woman with no hope; this is the language of a woman who is using her spoken soul to help the future generation realize the importance of searching for wholeness. Nanny's sermon and signifiers provide Janie with a chance to go out and find her own voice, and in the process, the chains that tied down the dispirited black woman and the voiceless mulatto are loosened.

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Appendix

Nanny's Sermon

All excerpts are from the 1990 First Perennial Library Edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Key:

Clauses/Total	**Independent**	**Dependent**	**Incomplete Clauses**
67	49	16	1 (not included in clause total)

Signifiers	**Collocated**	**Substitution**	**Anaphoric Referencing**
22	12	10	4

[Free Indirect Speech]: 4 clauses

Direct Speech: 61 clauses

1 Ah wanted yuh to school out
2 and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry.
3 Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything
4 as fur as Ah been able tuh find out.
5 Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean
6 where de black man is in power,
7 but we don't know nothin'
8 but what we see.
9 So de white man throw down de load
10 and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up.
11 He pick it up
12 because he have to,
13 but de don't tote it.
14 He hand it to his womenfolks.
15 De nigger woman is
16 so fur as Ah can see.
17 Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you.
18 Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby,
Lawd, Lawd, Lawd
19 it's protection, now,
20 de angel wid de sword is going tuh stop by here.
21 Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer

22 till Ah see you safe in life.
23 You ain't got nobody but me.
24 And mah head is ole and titled towards the grave.
25 Neither can you stand alone by yo'self.
26 De thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar to post is uh hurtin' thing.
27 Every tear you drop squeezes a cup uh blood outa mah heart.