

Hues, Tresses, and Dresses:

Examining the Relation of Body Image, Hair, and Clothes to Female Identity in *Their
Eyes Were Watching God* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Chapter One

Introduction

Building a Foundation for the Study of Black Female Identity Relating to Body Image, Hair, and Clothes in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*

African American women's literature has gained immense popularity and critical attention over the last century, and a significant portion of African American literature since 1975 was composed by black female writers. Two such renowned works of African American women's literature are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston uses the life and trials of the protagonist, Janie, to demonstrate the resilience and ability of African American women to transform much of what others use to oppress and destroy them, such as race, gender, education, and poverty, into a source of strength and empowerment. Janie is initially a young woman forced to accommodate the whims and wishes of those surrounding her, but she later transforms into a confident woman who unapologetically takes control of her circumstances, which is particularly represented in her evolving hair styles, manner of dressing, and self-assured portrayal of her body, especially her "firm buttocks" and "pugnacious breasts" (Hurston 2). In a similar vein, Angelou's Marguerite in *Caged Bird* develops from a small child who is self-conscious of her dark skin and unadorned hair into a young lady who discovers the unique significance and power of her Blackness. She turns these attributes (her body, skin, and hair), which others often view unfavorably, into sources of strength. Both Hurston and Angelou convey powerful relations between body image, hair, and clothes throughout

their works, associations that are indirectly and directly connected to their personal experiences of moving from bondage to freedom.

The works of Hurston and Angelou are related on various levels to their own lives. Hurston's strong and independent character is evident in the self-assured state of Janie at the beginning of the novel. Hurston herself was a dynamic writer from the Harlem Renaissance period who inspired fellow authors of that day to write about her unconventional and eccentric ways. Renowned African American writers such as Langston Hughes and Alice Walker describe Hurston's unusual behavior and her splendid writing abilities. Hughes writes about her intelligence and friendliness in his autobiography, stating, "Miss Hurston was clever, too—a student who didn't let college give her a broad *a* and who had great scorn for all pretensions, academic or otherwise" (1334). He also claims that "[s]he seemed to know almost everybody in New York. . .and had met dozens of celebrities whose friendship she retained" (1335). While Hurston's zany character, outgoing personality, and prolific writing skills earned her a place in literary history, only a few of Angelou's works currently receive significant scholarly attention. In her autobiographical series, Angelou shares the trials she faced as a young black child who was shipped between family members living across the country. Her unstable family life; the rape she suffered at eight years of age; her flirtation with drugs, alcohol, and prostitution; and her teen pregnancy are representative of a few of the adversities that could have withheld her from greatness. Angelou triumphed not only over these personal issues, but also over the bitter stings of racism and segregation. She climbed mountainous difficulties that once surrounded her and achieved prominence in singing, acting, and writing. Each of these authors, Hurston and Angelou, led distinct

lives, with varying personal trials and hurdles to overcome, and shared components of themselves in their works.

Both authors' use of body image, hair, and clothes communicates these challenges and triumphs, as well as other thematic ideas. Hurston and Angelou use these elements to depict African American culture and provide a platform for the African American female's voice. This evidence of female solidarity is strongly rooted in womanism. While some may associate works with such emphasis on female identity¹ with feminist criticism, African American female literature is best associated with the theory of womanism. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, author of "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," describes the essence of womanism when she states, "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom" (72). Consequently, womanism is exclusively representative of women of color, particularly African American women. Ogunyemi comments on the distinction between white feminism and African American womanism when she states, "More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a 'womanist.' That is, she will recognize that, along with her conscious-ness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (64). The world of the African American woman is distinct from that of the white woman. Because of their different experiences, the predominantly white feminist theory most often cannot incorporate the unique attributes

¹ For the purposes of this research, the term "female identity" relates to the idea of "self-concept" and how that transforms or "actualizes" over time. Self-actualization is defined in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs as "fulfillment of one's unique potential" (Plotnik 333). It is also related to what Carl Rogers terms "self-actualizing tendency," which he defines as "the drive of human beings to fulfill their self-concepts, or the images they have of themselves" (Morris and Maisto 338).

of African American female experience and culture that are found in various literary works written by black women.

In the text *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker, Walker provides similar definitions of womanism as Ogunyemi; however, she is generally accredited with developing the concept of womanism as separate from feminism. For Walker, womanism not only pertains to the “black feminist or feminist of color,” but it also “[a]ppreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility. . . and women’s strength” (xi). In addition to these concepts, she presents the etymological root of womanism—“womanish.” Womanish is contextualized in a common “black folk expression of mothers to female children, ‘You acting womanish,’” which normally “refer[s] to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior” (xi). The negative connotation of womanish behavior is particularly applicable to the experiences of Janie and Marguerite—Janie because of her willingness to permit a young admirer’s kiss and Marguerite because of the social stigmas she inwardly battles after the rape. The works of Ogunyemi and Walker concerning womanism provide a foundational understanding of the lives and experiences of Janie and Marguerite and assist in dissecting their unique journeys toward self-actualization.

Their Eyes Were Watching God and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also provide insights into the nature and scope of triple marginalization, whether overt or implied, and how these attributes (female body, hair, and clothes) serve as catalysts and symbols of change. Triple marginalization is most accurately defined as the “triple oppression of black women” on the “axis of race, class and gender, through which their subordination and struggle is lived” (Kaplan 181). Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, describes

the social plight of every African American woman (referenced here as a form of triple marginalization) when she tells Janie, “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. . . . 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. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). Not only is the Negro woman marginalized because of her social standing in the lowest tier on the tower of labor, but also because her plight is greater than that of white and black men as a result of her gender and race. Janie is treated as a mule by her first husband but goes on to surmount this tragic dominance at the end of the text. Her individual triumph epitomizes a victory for all of her black sisters. This movement from oppression and powerlessness to strength and assured identity through discovery of voice is evident throughout each novel. Not only do Janie and Marguerite draw upon the ethnicity evident in their outer shells (body image, hair, clothes) as a source of power, but they also use that confidence to prevail upon the limitations with which society attempts to stifle them. By creating these characters as examples of compelling change in female identity, Hurston and Angelou move the triply marginalized mules of the world toward equality and greatness.

This thesis thematizes the journeys of the protagonists, and its purpose is to enrich academia with a deeper understanding of the significance of body image, hair, and clothes in formulating a distinctly African American stable self-concept by researching the aspects of these elements as related to black female identity evidenced in the development of Janie and Marguerite. As one literary scholar, Florence Howe, states, “Literature, in its most ancient and in its most modern forms, illuminates lives, teaches us

what is possible, and how to hope and aspire” (433). Good literature provides man with revelation, enlightenment, and insight through its very nature. Academia, consequently, must expose itself to assorted forms of literature, knowing that the greater diversity encountered, the more enriching the scholastic environment will become. Insight into African American female identity in relation to body image, hair, and clothes, as evident in African American female literature, provides such cultivation.

Examining the significance of various outward elements of appearance in relation to female identity in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird* reveals meaningful insights into the struggles and potential triumphs African American women face concerning body image (particularly skin tone), as well as hair. bell hooks, Ayana Bird, and Lori Tharps provide insightful information about the African American female’s experience and identity in relation to her body and hair. A variety of hooks’ works, including her books *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, as well as an essay titled “Feminism in Black and White,” provide further insight into the plight and potential triumph of the African American female’s journey. She delves into the tragedies of color-based racism, sexism, and devaluation of black women; therefore, her commentaries and criticisms reveal further insights concerning the predicament of the black woman and the circumstances she must surmount in order to gain victory. Additionally, her works embody a positive representation of Blackness as a source of strength and power in molding African American female identity.

While hooks addresses color-based racism and various forms of oppression black women must overcome, Bird and Tharps chronologize African American hair from the fifteenth century to the contemporary age. Their text, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots*

of Black Hair in America, is incorporated in order to examine the development of Black identity over time in relation to hair, while particularly focusing on how coiffural practices before and during slavery have affected African American women over time. This work provides an excellent understanding of African American culture in relation to hair and the effects social perceptions of African American hair have on the individual. The protagonists of the works not only endure racist and sexist oppression and abuse, but they also learn to take pride in the unique physical attributes that often spark the animosities directed toward them.

Body image, hair, and clothes are the primary focus of the research; however, the thesis also includes a chapter on womanism, as well as a conclusion that provides suggested areas for further research. Because a proper understanding of the theory of womanism provides a basis for comprehending the African American female's relation to herself and the world around her, a working definition and description of the term and its general significance to African American critical theory is provided. The chapter then explores female preoccupation with appearances as it relates to the African American woman. The theme of physical representation of self is prevalent in both novels and is closely related to the transformations Janie and Marguerite experience in self-concept. Furthermore, this chapter explores the relation between womanism, the self, and the search for self-actualization in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*.

The third chapter focuses on the general topic of body image in relation to black female identity and includes a more specific analysis of the importance of skin tone in African American culture, as evidenced in both novels. Throughout each work, a person's color is often directly associated with his or her beauty and attractiveness and is

also frequently connected to the individual's social status and professional success. Connections linking the historical development of African American female self-image from the antebellum period to the modern age are also examined. The purpose of this work is not to objectify or further the objectification of the black female body but to focus on the representation of these elements in the primary texts and how each protagonist transforms the negative social implications of her color into a source of power.

The significance of hair in African American culture and the black female's self-image are the principal focus of the fourth chapter. Hair is representative not only of genetic predisposition, but is also a physical portrayal of an individual's personality and style. However, hair and the items with which a woman chooses to adorn her hair, such as a kerchief or scarf, are at times representative of the oppression or pressures she feels from exterior forces. For example, in *Their Eyes*, Janie's first husband obligates her to wear a scarf, which hides and consequently stifles the glory of her beautiful, silky hair. An additional example of the significance of hair in relation to the development of female identity is seen in the way Marguerite changes her hair style and the attitude with which she regards hair throughout *Caged Bird*, which symbolizes her journey toward becoming a young woman who takes pride in her African American heritage. While hair is occasionally reflective of inner change, it is also a source of strength and pride, as well as an indication of heritage. Kinky hair is reflective of African heritage, yet complexities arise when considering black women with straight hair. As Ingrid Banks writes, "Within black communities, straighter variety and texture [hair styles] are privileged as well" (2). These multifaceted aspects of the African American female's hair are explored to

illustrate the experiences Janie and Marguerite undergo as they develop a deep sense of pride and strengthen their identities as African American women.

The fifth chapter of the work considers the role of clothing in the quest toward establishing female identity in each novel. The detailed descriptions given about clothing and the numerous occasions it is discussed in each text is a reflection of its significance. In both works, clothes are a source of physical protection, a symbol of status, an expression of creative style, and a source of comfort. By performing these functions, clothes serve not only as a source of pride these women draw upon, but also as an outward reflection of inward changes. At the beginning of the text, Janie's clothes are representative of her newly found freedom and independence. She is a liberated woman who does not concern herself with the gossip-ridden prattle of the judgmental onlookers in Eatonville. This change in Janie's identity is chiefly evident in her exchange of a woman's dress for a working man's overalls. While Janie's change in attire is an indication of the transformation of her self-concept, Marguerite's clothes signify her metamorphosis from young girl into maturing adolescent. Her wardrobe serves as a source of comfort during the rape trial, an indication of joyous renewal of life on the day of her eighth grade graduation, and a symbol of her Black pride and determination upon working for the streetcar company. This chapter explores how Janie and Marguerite utilize clothes as an outward representation of an internal transformation and as a source of strength and comfort when developing female identity and self-actualization.

The concluding chapter expounds upon additional areas of research relating to these texts written by Hurston and Angelou. This section also encourages further research and critical attention to African American female literature as a whole; however,

various suggestions for continuing research relating to the themes of womanism and body image are discussed. Another critical area in need of additional development originates within the Christian context. The beauty of God is found in all of his creation, and future research related to the development of female identity and self-actualization, particularly relating to body image and hair, would prove insightful.

The primary focus of this thesis is to analyze and explore the relationship between body image, hair, and clothes and female identity as evidenced in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*. Yet, a consequence of the research also results in social implications pertaining to African American female identity in the context of the time periods in which each novel was written. In addition, because of the slight autobiographical correlation between Hurston and Janie and the directly autobiographical relationship between Angelou and Marguerite, a portion of the research relates to the authors. The overall focus, however, is on the strength of African American women and how that strength is developed in relation to the three aforementioned areas, as well as the subtle complexities and triumphant nature of African American female literature. While the genre of African American literature has begun to receive significant attention in the academic field, there remains much literary and critical work to be done with African American women's literature. These powerful writers have a wealth of knowledge and understanding to offer the academic world. Hurston and Angelou particularly represent the complexity of the relationships between African American women and their external shells—body, hair, and clothes. This textual analysis explores the layers of black female identity and enhances the academic world's understanding of African American women from a literary perspective.

Chapter 2

Womanism and the Self

“Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom.”

— Chickwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, “Womanism”

Womanism is an essential aspect of African American female literature. This theory represents a bond between and among women that is particular to women of color, and while some African American female scholars favor the predominantly white theory of Feminism,² womanism pertains to the lives and experiences of black females. Alice Walker is generally credited with creating the term “womanism” and developing its theoretical underpinnings. A proper awareness of womanism, in a variety of its definitions, is necessary for a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the exploration and development of the self throughout the respective protagonists’ journeys toward developed female identity and self-actualization³ in the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Beyond the racial demarcation of Blackness, womanism centers on the black female’s unique experience, which is thematized in each of the novels. However, it is important to note that womanism, while focusing on the female, does not negate the significance and necessity of the male gender. As Alice Walker explains, womanists are “[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi). The intention is not to reciprocate oppressive behavior against the males who often attempt to dominate females. Rather, the purpose is to recognize wrongdoing, evoke change, and

² For more information about racial discord in feminism, see bell hooks’ article “Feminism in Black and White.”

³ See footnote on page 8 for more information about the terms “self-actualization” and “self-concept.”

move forward as a community—male and female—while specifically celebrating the strength, fortitude, and progress of the female. Interestingly, Deborah McDowell recognizes the significance of black males in black feminist⁴ criticism when she states, “An equally challenging and necessary task ahead of the Black feminist critic is a thoroughgoing examination of the works of Black male writers” (418). While she attempts to draw attention to the black female writers who do not receive critical attention from black male scholars, she does not support the complete separation of the “countless thematic, stylistic, and imagistic parallels between Black male and female writers” (418). Therefore, the promotion of African American females does not supplant the black male but “assumes [womanist inquiry] can talk both effectively and productively about men” (Williams 304). Nonetheless, womanism “[a]ppreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility. . . , and women’s strength” (Walker xi). This concept of womanism heightens appreciation for *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*, resulting from attention given to the female experience of developing from the innocence of girlhood into the maturity of womanhood.

One way in which Janie and Marguerite experience this transition is through their relationships with the women around them. As evidence of this female solidarity, another of Walker’s definitions of womanism is “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (xi). Lovalerie King expounds upon this description of womanist solidarity, proclaiming, “. . . Walker’s womanist aesthetic describes the womanist vis-à-vis her relationships with others and with herself [and] stresses connectedness over separatism. . .” (238). This love between women is evident in *Their*

⁴ Some African American women’s scholars differentiate themselves from traditional feminists by interchangeably using the terms “black feminist” and “womanist”; however, many true womanists draw greater distinctions between themselves and black feminists, particularly in their treatment of men.

Eyes in the relationship between Nanny and Janie and is epitomized in the scene where the elderly grandmother obligates the young adolescent to marry Logan Killicks. After Nanny discovers Janie has been prematurely ushered into what she considers womanhood after kissing young Johnny Taylor, she fears for Janie's purity and wellbeing and, consequently, orders Janie to marry immediately. While Nanny's behavior could be considered a marginalization of Janie's worth as an individual by relegating her to an unwanted arranged marriage and indicating that Janie's safety and value in life depend upon a man, the grandmother believes her actions are in the girl's best interests. Upon hearing Janie's protests, Nanny claims that she does not wish for Janie to marry Killicks but wants her to have "[marriage]'s protections" and longs to "see [her] safe in life" (Hurst 15). Perhaps Nanny places greater emphasis on her own need for reassurance of Janie's safety, which she believes will be found through marriage; however, Nanny's life as a "mule"⁵ and slave have taught her survival strategies African American women must resort to in an effort to survive—one of which is marriage and economic dependence upon a well established man. Nanny believes that Janie will find safety in having her fundamental needs of food, clothes, and shelter met by a man, even a man she does not love. Therefore, the elderly soul acts in favor of the girl's wellbeing and does so as a result of her love for Janie, and in reciprocation of Nanny's love for her, Janie ultimately accepts the will of her grandmother. While they are wrapped in one another's arms, Janie sobbing and Nanny tenderly comforting her with "soothing pats of the hand," Nanny assures Janie of her love, uttering, "Ah loves yuh a whole heap more'n Ah do yo mama, de one Ah did birth" (15). From this moment forward, Janie only continues to sob

⁵ See information pertaining to the black female, triple marginalization, and "mules of the world" in the introduction, pages 6-7.

but makes no further protests against the marriage. She understands her grandmother's rather misguided intentions come from love, and Janie in turn demonstrates her love for Nanny by submitting to the elderly woman's desires. The love these women share significantly influences Janie's future and the concept of selfhood she develops.

Demonstrations of female love and questions about the wholesomeness of certain forms of this love are found in the relationships between Marguerite and Momma, as well as Marguerite and her mother, and the adolescent's concerns about lesbianism in *Caged Bird*. Even though Marguerite is influenced by a community of women she encounters throughout her childhood and adolescence, such as Mrs. Flowers and Miss Kirwin, Momma, Marguerite's grandmother, and the woman the young girl simply refers to as Mother are the two most consistently influential people in her life. Momma teaches Marguerite resourcefulness through hard work and instills a value of religion. Because Momma works diligently and manages her money properly, she is able to feed and clothe Marguerite and her brother, Bailey, better than most of the other Negro children in the town during a time of war and hardship. Momma runs her own supply store and even becomes a lender during the Great Depression, loaning money to Blacks and Whites. This financial independence and ability to invest during a time of severe poverty throughout the nation is reflective of Momma's dedication to responsibility, hard work, and conscientious thrift. These attributes instill a determination in Marguerite exemplified by her refusal to be denied the opportunity to work on the streetcars years later, when she becomes the first African American streetcar worker in San Francisco. Part of Momma's scrupulousness with finances is also evident in her emphasis on cleanliness. The children bathe every day and change clothes more often than others,

sometimes more than twice a day.⁶ However, Momma not only instills a strong work ethic and cleanliness in Marguerite, but she also raises the child with religious principles. Every morning “[d]uring the picking season [Momma] would get out of bed at four o’clock. . . and creak down to her knees and chant” her prayers “in a sleep-filled voice” (Angelou 7). She is dedicated to her religion and expects strict compliance from her grandchildren, who attend church every Sunday, as well as the periodical tent revivals. Momma’s dedication to hard labor and gratefulness to her god for the blessings of each day⁷ instill a sense of strength and morality in Marguerite that either consciously or subconsciously impacts her throughout the text.

Marguerite’s mother often encourages her to develop her intellectual resourcefulness and exemplifies a slightly different set of moral values by which to live than those of Momma. While Momma encourages Marguerite’s intellectual development by sending her to school and pushing her to complete homework and excel in her studies, Mother allows Marguerite to skip school on occasion and promotes the acquisition of knowledge in order to use that intelligence to make a living, rather than to perform manual labor. Mother prefers working in casino parlors and saloons, gambling and dealing cards, over working as a maid or cook. Marguerite proudly describes her mother’s resolution to use intelligence before physical strength when she proclaims, “She wouldn’t bust suds for anybody nor be anyone’s kitchen bitch. The good Lord gave her a mind and she intended to use it to support her mother and her children” (206). Mother appears to be the precise opposite of Momma in regards to knowledge and manual labor, and perhaps it is an amalgamation of these two characteristics in each woman that incites

⁶ More information pertaining to Momma’s emphasis on clean clothing and the resulting influence clothes have over Marguerite’s developing female identity is discussed in chapter five.

⁷ Momma’s dedication to religion is further revealed in her prayers. See pages 7 and 102 of *Caged Bird*.

Marguerite's desire to work as a conductorette for the San Francisco streetcar system—a position that balances physical and intellectual labor.

Beyond work ethic, Mother differs from Momma in the moral principles she holds dear. Mother makes various references to praying and god; however, she does not always demonstrate the highest standards of morality. For example, she shoots her business partner several times⁸ and “crashed [a] man's head with a policeman's billy enough to leave him just this side of death” for cursing her (66). While both of these men survive their encounters with Mother, Mr. Freeman, Marguerite's rapist, is allegedly “kicked to death” by her uncles, and one may safely assume that if Mother does not personally drive her heel into his body, then she is intimately involved with the scheme that ends his life (86). Perhaps the plot that ended Freeman's life is justifiable; however, the extreme behavior of Mother in other encounters is reflective of the divergent morals she holds from those which Momma embodies. Despite her mother's occasional violence, Marguerite loves, admires, and defends the beautiful woman, even at the risk of personal injury.⁹

Once Marguerite begins to reach sexual maturity, she experiences foreign emotions and sensations that lead to a sense of insecurity and doubt about her sexual orientation. Influenced by the idea that sexual preference is a biological trait with which one is born, her fears grow stronger as the physical makeup of her body changes, particularly her “heavy. . . dron[ing] and drummm[ing]” voice (274) and “growing. . .

⁸ See pages 207-08 of *Caged Bird*.

⁹ Marguerite attacks Deloris, Marguerite's biological father's girlfriend, after the woman calls her mother a whore. Marguerite is cut (stabbed) in the altercation and must find medical attention. See pages 245-46 of *Caged Bird*.

vagina” (276).¹⁰ Once her mother explains the natural development of the female “pocketbook” (275), Marguerite’s fears are assuaged until she sees a female friend’s naked breasts and the questions return. Interestingly, the adolescent’s fears about becoming one of the “true freaks, the ‘women lovers’” (273) disappear from the text once she discovers her pregnancy by the young man she deliberately seduces in order to prove her “normalcy,” which was “still in question” (282). Perhaps Marguerite simply gives voice to concerns that rise from a deep-seated discomfort with her body,¹¹ the missing father-figure throughout her childhood, or the rape she experiences at eight-years-old; however, once the consequences of her sexual experiment become reality, the question of her sexuality and the concern about the emotions she possibly feels toward other females are silenced. She focuses on a “[commitment] to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” by shifting her attention to the wellbeing of her child (Walker xi). This natural dedication is prominently noted in the tender scene when Mother brings attention to Marguerite’s instinctive protection of the baby as they sleep together. While Marguerite struggles with sexual identity as an adolescent, the love and influence of the women she admires most—Momma and Mother—inspires her movement toward female identity, as a woman and a mother.

In addition to these concepts of womanism, Walker presents the etymological root of the term, “womanish.” She contextualizes womanish as a common “black folk expression of mothers to female children, ‘You acting womanish,’” which normally “refer[s] to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful [sexual] behavior” (xi). The negative connotation of womanish behavior is particularly applicable to Janie’s

¹⁰ She worries that her developing vulva is an indication of her lesbianism.

¹¹ Chapter three discusses female body image in detail.

experience after she permits the young admirer's "lacerating" kiss (Hurston 12). Nanny's sudden decision that Janie is "uh 'oman, now. . ." because she demonstrates what the grandmother considers willful intention to experience sexually impassioned emotions and sensations of a woman (11). The kiss is innocent in Janie's mind; however, Nanny operates under the influence of years as a slave and recently freed black woman living in a racially-charged environment. Nanny's affair with her master forces her and the slaveholder's newborn child, Janie's mother, to flee the plantation and hide in the swamp until news arrives that the Civil War will soon end, and when her daughter, Leafy, is only seventeen years old, she is raped by her school teacher and left with a child of her own for which she must care and provide, a responsibility she ultimately abnegates. As a result of the concerns life-lessons have imprinted on the psyche of Nanny regarding female sexuality and the pain possibly resulting from the exhibition of that sexuality, Nanny views Janie's curiosity about womanly behavior as a threat to the young girl's sexual innocence. Because of her concern for Janie, Nanny resorts to the extreme action of forcing the adolescent into an unwanted arranged marriage to an older man. While her actions are partially motivated by the love she feels for Janie and her overly cautious fears about the girl's future, Nanny's decision also results from her intolerance for womanish behavior. Janie experiments with the new desires developing within her, but is ignorant of the life-altering consequences that soon result from this womanishness.

Womanish behavior by a young girl is also unfavorable in the Deep South setting of Momma's country store in *Caged Bird*. After the rape, Marguerite is changed and now considers herself a woman, which she reveals in the words, "I was eight and grown" (84) and ". . . after being a woman for three years. . ." (142). There is no questioning or

unassuredness in these statements; her young mind, while not comprehending the entire situation, knows she is different and equates the sexual act with transformation into womanhood. Despite the fact that Marguerite is too young to understand all of the progressive changes that lead a female from childlike immaturity to mature womanhood, she recognizes the physical and emotional changes forced upon her by Freeman. However, Marguerite struggles with how to behave after the incident occurs and fears the repercussions of appearing womanish in front of adult females. While she emotionally feels like their equals, she knows that her age separates her from them, and Marguerite worries about the negative consequences if one of them, particularly Momma, interprets her actions as womanish. As a result of this fear, Marguerite decides to find a different location, other than marked with a sign reading “Women,”¹² because she is unnerved by the thought of Momma’s reaction, from whom she “knew what [she] could expect” (139). Another example of Marguerite’s fear of being caught behaving in a womanish manner is evident when Momma tugs the child’s dress up over her head in front of Mrs. Flowers, a woman the girl deeply admires. While she desperately wants to protest and deny Momma the opportunity to embarrass her to such a significant degree, Marguerite knows if she refuses her grandmother, then “[Momma] might have thought [she] was trying to be ‘womanish’ and might have remembered St. Louis” (97). In this instance, Marguerite is not only alarmed by the consequences resulting from acting womanishly, but also struggles with the shame¹³ that would once again rise within her if her grandmother looks

¹² Marguerite also refuses to use the area marked “children” because she “feel[s] ages old and very wise at ten” (139).

¹³ After the rape, Marguerite is ashamed for her “participation” in the sexual act with Freeman. Because she initially enjoys the attention from an older male’s “soft” embraces (73), which she lacks from her biological father, Marguerite believes she encourages the events leading to the rape and therefore shares responsibility, which increases the shame and guilt she suffers. She must also come to grips with the lie

at her through a critical lens shaded by the rape. The shame she carries and the fears she endures not only result from Freeman's violation, but also the general cultural treatment of young girls behaving in a manner beyond their years.

Development of the black female self and the journey toward self-actualization are directly connected with the womanist elements thematized in the novels. Janie's journey toward developing a strong female identity and self-actualization progresses throughout the novel; however, evidence of the fulfillment of this transformation manifests when Janie arrives home in the evening at the beginning of the text. The time Janie returns home is significant because the community is its liveliest just before sunset. In the morning, townspeople presumably wipe the sleep from their eyes, eat a warm breakfast, and dread the day of work they have yet to begin. However, the novel provides a different description of how the "mules and other brutes" behave once the "skin[s]" they occupy return to life; they feel "powerful and human" at the day's end (Hurston 1). The people of the community become conscious of their surroundings, and the town teems with the life that disappears throughout the day. Janie knows this fact about her culture and understands the significance of returning at twilight. Whereas it may be intimidating for some women to arrive at a point when the steaming pressure from the stares of men and women may possibly rise to the point of explosive embarrassment, Janie is unperturbed by the challenge. She has experienced the world beyond the small town and has reached a level of maturity, self-understanding, and individuality that is unaffected by those around her. Janie's return to the home she left as a younger woman in bondage and dependent upon a man she did not love is simply a

she tells at the trial and the guilt she feels resulting from Freeman's murder after the trial (see page 86 of the text).

triumphant stroll through the town's main streets, which is achieved by a cool disregard for the barrage of attacks from the revived "skins."

The willingness with which Janie is ready to face the ridicule of the townspeople as she walks back to her house is yet another example of her actualized self. Because of her experiences beyond the simple lives of her former friends and companions, Janie has a broader perspective on the important matters of life. Therefore, their venomous chitchat about her, which one can only imagine is all too audible to Janie's ears, is unable to permeate the barrier of experience and independence that shields her from attack. Their "killing tools . . . of laugh[ter]" and "mass cruelty" neither affect Janie's spirits, nor persuade her to engage in their battle (2). She refuses to give the other women the satisfaction of knowing where she has been or what she has been doing. Janie also declines to acknowledge their burning attacks upon her working man's overalls and "black hair swinging to her waist and unraveled" (2). Despite their strikes against her appearance and assailments upon her recent actions, Janie remains impenetrable by these "weapon[s] against her strength" (2). She has grown beyond frivolous concerns about the notions of other people and reached a new level of liberated maturity. As Susan Meisenhelder emphasizes, "Janie's wisdom and strength—even her regal, almost haughty indifference toward the gossip of the porch-talkers—indicate a woman. . .not destroyed by the tragedy of her life but able to transform it" (79). Her state of self-actualization allows Janie to rise above the petty assailments of the other women and convert her negative experiences into a teaching tool.

Janie not only ignores the harassment of the other women, but she also gives Pheoby permission to share the story of her past with them. Perhaps Janie grants Pheoby

this right because she knows her friend will tell them with or without that authorization; however, it is more likely that Janie sympathizes with their ignorance and hopes they will learn from her testimony. The self of the current moment¹⁴ recognizes its difference from the self of the past (which most closely relates with her current assailants) and wishes to help her black sisters along the path of self-identity and actualization. She knows that their ignorance results from the lack of understanding and tells Pheoby, “It’s uh known fact. . . you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. . . go tuh God, and. . . find out about livin’. . . (192). In her wisdom, Janie understands that the other women who have remained within the confines of the small town and have not ventured into the great world beyond its boundaries cannot comprehend the revelation Janie has experienced. However, Janie allows Pheoby to share with the women about her travels in order to educate them. King recognizes the import of such love within the female community and womanism when she contends that “part of the womanist aesthetic [is] concerned with. . . expressing love for self, others, and all things, unconditionally” (246). Despite their abuse, Janie demonstrates love for the other women by supporting their developing African American female identity, which is a further manifestation of the state of self-actualization Janie has achieved.

Marguerite’s path toward female identity and self-actualization does not attain the same strength as Janie’s, perhaps mainly because the self of Marguerite in *Caged Bird* is much younger and less experienced than that of Janie at the end of *Their Eyes*. However, Marguerite develops stronger female identity and experiences self-actualizing moments

¹⁴ For further information about the present self versus the past self and continuity of selfhood (or the lack thereof), see the article by D’Argembeau and his co-authors, particularly pages 244-45.

throughout the work, particularly noted in her transition into motherhood. Her identification with the women surrounding her and her own femininity is realized when she participates in the quintessentially unique female experiences—pregnancy and childbirth. This “fulfillment of [her] unique potential”¹⁵ as mother to a being that is literally born of and through her flesh culminates in Angelou’s reflections about her experience as a new mother: “Just as gratefulness was confused in my mind with love, so possession became mixed up with motherhood. I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. . . . I sat for hours by his bassinet and absorbed his mysterious perfection” (288). The realization that her life exists beyond her own being is a moment of actualization and evidence of an extension of the self beyond the self, which represents her divided self.¹⁶ This is not to suggest that Marguerite’s identity is solely found in her son or reliant upon her role as a mother. As one scholar, Dana Chamblee-Carpenter, aptly claims, “Although Angelou certainly takes her role as a mother seriously, she also seems aware of maintaining her own separate sense of self. . .” (11). Because of the new knowledge she gains as a mother, Marguerite’s self-concept as a woman begins to change, but despite her transformation after his birth, she is “afraid to touch him” and fears sleeping with him (288). She longs for the “casual confidence” with which Mother handles the infant (288), but the young adolescent worries about the worst imaginable result of her “awkwardness”—the possibility of her son’s death (288). However, Marguerite achieves another instance of self-actualization when she instinctively provides safety and shelter for the sleeping baby “[u]nder the tent of blanket, which was

¹⁵ See note on “self-actualization.”

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud is noted for developing the psychological theory relating to the self, and R. D. Laing’s research relating to the “divided self” . . . in schizophrenia [which] was part of his brilliant rendering of our more general many-sidedness,” which provides further insights about the self and the disembodied, or divided, self (Lifton 26). Here the term is used to represent parental extension of selfhood.

poled by [her] elbow and forearm, [where] the baby slept touching [her] side” (289). The realization that her maternal intuition will help her care for her son with instinctive love and protection actualizes her desires to be a confident caring mother like the women who cared for her.

This chapter examined the textual research related to the definitions of womanism that are directly thematized in each of the novels in an effort to elucidate the theory of womanism. However, the remainder of the research focuses on how body image, hair, and clothes affect or are reflective of female identity in the texts. Using this understanding of womanist theory, a fundamental method of critiquing African American women’s literature, as a foundation for appreciating the black female, focus will now shift toward the development of self-actualized female identity in regard to these three significant aspects of female existence—body image, hair, and clothes.

Chapter Three

Coffee Cream and Mud

Body Image as a Source and Reflection of Female Identity and Self-Actualization

“[T]o . . . all the strong / black birds of promise / who defy the odds and gods / and sing
their songs.”

— Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

The protagonists of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* discover throughout their respective journeys toward female actualization that their bodies are sources of positive empowerment. However, Janie and Marguerite initially experience different forms of oppression because of their physical appearances: Janie is marginalized as a result of her beauty and Marguerite feels brushed aside and ignored because of her apparent uncomely appearance. Each woman moves toward an actualized recognition of their true external beauty, as defined by themselves and not the world around them. Additionally, Janie and Marguerite use their bodies as means of expressing the internal changes they incur. Their bodies become vessels of free expression—something once bound by either the confines of male jealousy or the physical awkwardness of a budding adolescence body transforms into a demonstration of pride and self-assurance. While body image initially poses an obstacle to be surmounted, these women counter opposition by using their bodies as a source of strength. In the novels, Janie and Marguerite journey toward an actualized perception of their bodies, particularly their skin tones, which implicitly affects their developing sexualities.

Janie initially lacks an individual self-concept and passively accepts the opinions of others concerning her body. Throughout her life, people compliment her beauty,

saying words such as, “She couldn’t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England” (42), and the narrator notes her “firm buttocks” (2), “pugnacious breasts” (2), and “long legs” (14). Her beauty is challenged only by her second husband, Joe Starks, who attacks her out of his personal pain,¹⁷ but other people Janie encounters in the novel, as well as the narrator, do not question her attractiveness. Her beauty is constant, but she must journey toward actualizing her self-concept of body image by discovering her Blackness, suffering through the marginalization she endures as a mulatto woman in the south, and releasing her sexuality.

Like Janie, Marguerite also journeys toward self-actualization regarding body image. Marguerite’s general self-concept concerning her body is rather dejected. As a little girl, she struggles with the preferential treatment of her brother, Bailey, by adults. He frequently goes unpunished for “his consistently outrageous behavior, for he [is] the pride of the Henderson/Johnson family” (22). His beautiful skin and curly hair contrast against the features Marguerite finds repelling about herself. Her relationship with Bailey is intimate (they truly love each other), but the “unkind things [said] about [her] features” by adults, as well as children, weigh heavily on the small child (22). At one point, the speaker claims, “I was really white and. . . a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (3). Suzette A. Henke illuminates Marguerite’s mis-identification with Whites, stating, “Lost in Euro-centric fairy-tale fantasy, she harbor[s] extravagant dreams of physical transformation and believe[s] that, beneath an African American persona or

¹⁷ Joe assails Janie in order to avert attention away from his fading looks. Further information about Joe’s jealousy is discussed later in the chapter, pages 45-46.

mask, there resides a slim, cream-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde-haired sylph. . .” (22).

Marguerite’s expression of self-conscious hostility toward her body gradually develops into a source of pride throughout the novel; however, there are various dynamics involved in the racial self-hatred over which she gradually prevails.

One of these dynamics is the complexity surrounding skin tone. Within the African American community, a hierarchy of skin tone is traceable to the beginnings of slavery in the United States. Because Janie’s father and grandfather are both white men, she is considered mulatto and therefore subject to segregation by both races, White and Black. As Russell, Wilson, and Hall write, “Neither fully White nor Negro, mulattoes lay outside the social order” (14). These scholars continue by arguing that in the upper south, above South Carolina, the Black population was frequently subjected to the “one-drop rule” (14),¹⁸ yet in the Deep South, the general mixing of races was more acceptable until a time approaching the Civil War (23). During this era in the Deep South, mulattoes enjoyed special privileges. They generally held less taxing jobs¹⁹ because they were considered “more intelligent and capable than pure Africans”; therefore, Caucasian society’s ability to identify more closely with the mulatto based on physicality promoted the belief that these “yellow”²⁰ men and women were a bit more intellectually adept and,

¹⁸ According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall, the “one-drop rule” or “one-drop theory” refers to the notion that any individual with even one drop of African American blood was considered solely African American (14). Maryland and Virginia instituted this law during the 1600s in an effort to relegate numerous mulattoes to the same legal status as African American slaves—severing their claims to white heritage (11).

¹⁹ Mulattoes often held “coveted indoor assignments, including artisan, driver, valet, seamstress, cook, and housekeeper,” and dark-skinned slaves were forced to work in the fields because they were thought to be “stronger and better able to tolerate the hot sun” (18).

²⁰ Brita Lindberg-Seyersted discusses the various terms used to define a person’s color on page 52 of her article.

consequently, a fraction higher on the “scale of being” than those valued as livestock.²¹ Whites also regarded mulattoes as a necessary industrial asset, “whose presence reduced racial tensions, especially in areas where Negroes outnumbered Whites” (15). While the mulatto’s existence did seem to bring the two races together to some extent (physically and socially), ebony-hued Blacks grew tired of the favoritism their lighter counterparts received. Not only did the mulatto slaves have less demanding jobs, but they also “had access to hand-me-down clothes, better food, education, and sometimes even the promise of freedom upon the master’s death” (Byrd and Tharps 18). The tension of preferential treatment by Whites and the resulting bitterness by Blacks trapped mulattoes in the midst of racial friction that continued to exist over the ensuing centuries. Coard, Breland, and Raskin argue that “[i]n part because of privileges and positive connotations associated with light skin, preference for this skin color has persisted in the values passed on to multiple generations of African Americans” (2257). Additionally, one African American singer, song-writer, poet, and actress, Jill Scott, testifies to the lasting bitterness resulting from “colorism”:²²

The truth is, there is a history of slavery that just doesn’t seem to go away—a history of the lighter women working in the house while the darker women had their babies in the field. As much as most of us want to say that we’ve moved on, a lot of that stuff is still sitting in our stomachs.

²¹ In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass states, “We [slaves] were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. . . all holding the same rank in the scale of being. . .” (415).

²² Mark E. Hill uses the term “colorism” to define the “[s]kin color bias. . . in the United States [that] originates from a history of slavery and racial oppression” (77). For more information about the effects of colorism in African American culture, see Alice Walker’s “If the Present Looks like the Past, What does the Future Look Like?”

We still experience that hatred, still say that the lighter person is better than the darker one. (Scott 148)

While this colorism exists within the African American population as a whole, the African American female is particularly touched by its effects. Hill quotes researchers Neal and Wilson: “Compared to Black males, Black females have been more profoundly affected by the prejudicial fallout surrounding issues of skin color, facial features, and hair” (78). The stigmas related to colorism transfer over time and both protagonists of the novels must recognize and overcome its lasting effects. Consequently, a historical understanding of the origins related to racial relations between White and Black populations, as well as within the African American community, illuminates the role of skin tone in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*.

The hues of skin tone play a significant role in how Janie and Marguerite view themselves in relation to the world around them and how they are marginalized because of their divergent degrees of Blackness. Two events in Janie’s life where the color of her skin is a distinguishing factor occur with the discovery of her Blackness through a picture and her encounter with Mrs. Turner. As a child Janie is taught to recognize her difference from the Whites surrounding her through a photograph. Because she is raised in a home with white children and a white family, Janie does not distinguish herself as an “other”;²³ she simply knows the Whites as her friends and family and does not recognize herself as the “dark chile” in the image²⁴ (Hurston 9). However, once the mistress of the house helps the young girl find herself in the photograph, pointing to the picture and

²³ See “Introduction,” page 9, for information concerning the “other.”

²⁴ W. E. Cross, Jr. calls this stage of psychological development the “pre-encounter stage” of racial identity, which “is characterized by dependency upon White (not Black) society for definition and approval; attitudes are anti-Black and Eurocentric in nature” (para. in Coard, Breland and Raskin 2258).

saying, “Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself” (9). After another moment, the revelation ensues: “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!” (9). This realization separates Janie from the people she once saw as her equals. Interestingly, soon after this incident, Janie and her grandmother move to a different home and physically separate themselves from such close involvement with the white community for which Nanny works. The relocation results from a compilation of racially and class-charged events, including how Janie is treated by the other black children;²⁵ nonetheless, the deliberate othering by the white woman forces Janie’s recognition and acceptance of her Blackness and opens a chasm between races in the child’s mind. While Janie is separated from the Whites as a child because of her darkness, she encounters a form of segregation within the Black community as a result of her lightness.

Janie’s light hue inherently separates her from the darker people around her, yet her color is the cause of one woman’s adoration. While living in the everglades, Janie encounters Mrs. Turner, a woman who takes great pride in her own White-ish appearance.²⁶ During their exchange, Mrs. Turner reveals that Janie has a “coffee cream complexion” (Hurstun 140). Until this moment, the audience is not given a clear depiction of Janie’s skin tone beyond the fact that she is most likely a quadroon;²⁷ however, it is significant that this information is revealed at a period when Hurston

²⁵ The children mistreat Janie because she is “livin’ in the de white folks’ back-yard” and Mrs. Washburn, the matriarch of the white family, dressed her in better clothes and “put hair ribbon on [her] head” (9). However, Janie’s perception of the situation as a child, and even now as an adult, may not recognize the racially-charged hostility the children most likely felt toward her as well. For them, Janie is a light-skinned girl who lives with the white folks, dresses like the white folks, and even believes she is one of the white folks.

²⁶ See page 140 of *Their Eyes* for a description of Mrs. Turner’s features.

²⁷ “Quadroon” is a term used for African Americans who are one-quarter black. Janie’s grandfather and father are white men.

chooses to openly explore racial relationships among African Americans in her depiction of Janie's encounter with Mrs. Turner and the occurrences of the murder trial.

During their kitchen table meeting, Mrs. Turner lectures Janie about the innate differences that separate them²⁸ from the "black niggers" that the supremacist woman claims are "holdin' [them]²⁹ back" (141). Mrs. Turner goes on to berate the dark-skinned race of African Americans for their mannerisms, such as their robust laughter;³⁰ manner of dress, with "all dem loud colors" (141); and appearance, comparing a black baby in a "buggy" to "uh fly in buttermilk" (141). She also has the audacity to question Janie's motives for marrying such a dark Negro as Tea Cake, assuming that Janie must have married him for financial security.³¹ Mrs. Turner cannot justify Janie's desire to marry someone so far below her. Lindberg-Seyersted highlights Mrs. Turner's disgust with Janie's marriage to Tea Cake stating, "She cannot understand how Janie Starks. . . can love Tea Cake, a very black laborer-gambler-adventurer. She can forgive Janie for hiding her beauty by 'wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. She didn't forgive her for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake'" (61). Despite these assaults against her marriage and her husband, Janie calmly deflects the woman's bigoted comments and acts as a sounding board, rather than participant, of numerous points of mulatto dissatisfaction, particularly the anxiety over their general association with dark Negroes. Nonetheless, Mrs. Turner equates Janie with an even "better"³² class of Negroes than herself because Janie is lighter than she is, and "[a]nyone who looked more

²⁸ Mulattoes.

²⁹ Mrs. Turner's original word, "us," refers to mulattoes generally, a group she wishes could "class off" to form a separate social class (141).

³⁰ She claims dark blacks are "[a]lways laughin'! Dey laughs too much and dey laughs too loud" (141).

³¹ See page 140 of *Their Eyes*.

³² "Better" according to Mrs. Turner's ideology; see page 144 of the text.

white folk-ish than herself was better than she was in her criteria” (144). While her skin tone is not the only attribute that contributes to Janie’s Caucasian-like appearance, her light exterior is an obvious characteristic of her similarity to Whites. When Janie disregards Mrs. Turner’s attempts to form a friendship, the woman believes Janie is justifiably ignoring her and has the “right. . . [to] be cruel to her at times” because her appearance elevates her in the social hierarchy that resembles the “pecking-order in a chicken yard” (144). Mrs. Turner has succumbed to the White supremacist ideal that lighter is better; however, Hurston uses this character to demonstrate the ridiculous nature of such notions. Naomi Pabst contends the “cacklingly humorous” light in which Hurston portrays the colorist³³ woman and the community’s rejection of her notions “speaks to the nondominance of such white worship, [and] its transhistorical laughability” (200). However, rather than being a discredit to the existence of such racism, Hurston arguably attempts to denigrate the use of such practices. As previously discussed, the existence of inter and intraracial racism (biases within the African American community regarding skin) is a serious concern. While Mrs. Turner believes Janie is superior and accepts her more warmly than the Blacks surrounding them in the everglades, the dark Negroes in the area demonstrate suspicion of Janie during the murder trial because of their personal emotional pain and her affinity with Whites.

Common race dynamics, separating Blacks and Whites as oppositional forces, are transposed during the murder trial. Janie is initially accepted by the nomadic people living “on de muck” and harvesting crops (Hurston 128), but when the crisis with Tea Cake arises and she is forced to shoot him in order to save herself from his rabid madness, the Negroes turn against her. The Black mass of men and women stand at the

³³ A reference to her racism based on color.

back of the courtroom and pass their own form of judgment over Janie with “their tongues cocked and loaded,” which are “the only killing tool[s] they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks” (186). The white lawyers, judge, and jury members hold the legal power to decide Janie’s fate, but the Negroes have already decided her guilt. She shot the man they loved, their friend and workmate, and they make repeated attempts to testify to how much Tea Cake loved her, his adoring treatment of her, and Janie’s alleged adulterous behavior; for her betrayal, “[h]anging was too good” (186). The narrator later recognizes their actions result from their love for Tea Cake, pain at his death, and misunderstanding of the situation (189); however, their immediate turn against Janie arguably derives from the racially-charged atmosphere of the courtroom. Susan Meisenhelder affirms this notion when she argues, “The pressures of a white context, which exacerbate internal divisions, result. . . in the black men’s rejection of Janie. . .” (83). The woman who is so different from themselves and their black brother, Tea Cake, is consequently identified with the white folks. After centuries of mistreatment by Caucasians, the Negroes know southern Whites have no emotional motivation to vindicate the death of a black man,³⁴ and they attribute her acquittal to her outward affinity with the White world, “astutely recognize[ing] that race has played a role in her trial” (Meisenhelder 83). After the judgment, the men complain to one another, “Aw you know dem white mens wuzn’t gointuh do nothin’ tuh no woman dat look lak her” (189). In their minds, the white man will not convict a woman who looks so similar to themselves for doing something most of them want to carry out. While Janie is rejected

³⁴ The group of Negro men recognize this discrimination when one claims, “[L]ong as she don’t shoot no white man she kin kill jus’ as many niggers as she please” (189).

by the black people filling the courtroom, she receives affectionate concern from the Whites, particularly the white women.

The white people gathered in the court room, some officiating and others spectating, defend Janie's innocence throughout the trial. Janie notices before the event begins that the women "d[o]n't seem too mad" and wishes she could convince the white women of her story. Meisenhelder purports that these women are swayed in favor of Janie's innocence because of the white man's sympathetic speech that casts her as "an adoring wife who took her loving husband out of his misery" (81). While the defense of Janie's situation undoubtedly affects the audience, Janie notices their friendliness and immediate sympathy toward her before the trial begins. Perhaps they already heard rumors of the situation and decided to believe her story, or their propensity to sympathize with her is propelled by their physical affinity with her resulting from her light skin and other Caucasian features, such as her hair. Furthermore, the women are not the only Whites who support Janie during the trial.

The white men believe her story and lash out against the incredulous contention of the Negroes. The white lawyer, Mr. Prescott, rebukes their protests. Yet, the white women demonstrate a physical alliance with Janie and commiserate with the pain of her loss when they "[stand] around her like a protecting wall" after the trial (188). Beyond the natural reliance upon the intelligence of mulattoes and the white population's propensity to bond with those that look more physically similar to themselves, the white people see a woman who has experienced the traumatic pain of shooting the man she passionately loves because of a debilitating disease. The Whites come to Janie's defense because they view the situation with the objectivity the African Americans lack and are

not emotionally tied to Tea Cake; additionally, and the white people have a corporeal connection with Janie. After a short interval of time, Janie's black oppressors realize the folly of their conviction and make amends with her at Tea Cake's funeral. They accept her back into the fold but only after their emotions subside and their perceptions of Janie are founded upon the friendships of the past, not the racism of skin tone differences exposed in the courtroom.

While the manner in which Janie is subtly forced back and forth between the races demonstrates the segregation and lack of belonging she faces as a light-skinned mulatto, Marguerite encounters racism based on her darkness. Marguerite experiences various forms of oppression throughout *Cage Bird* because of her skin tone. She, unlike Janie, provides the perspective of an African American with dark skin. Angelou addresses racism and othering and explores the power struggles based on skin color relevant to the setting of her childhood. Marguerite not only encounters oppression from the white community, but she also endures marginalization by other Blacks because of her dark hue. In contrast to Janie's situation, Marguerite struggles with gaining a positive body image and directly addresses racism she encounters because of her appearance. In *Their Eyes*, the narrator expounds upon the racially-charged atmosphere; however, the reader does not receive much information about Janie's thoughts and perspective concerning the issues of racism.

While Janie's beauty and light color give her unsolicited privilege over those around her, Marguerite's ebony color forces her to struggle for a positive self-concept. Marguerite journeys through the process of discovering her racial identity and gradually moves toward acceptance and pride in that heritage. Readers first encounter the child

living with Momma, her paternal grandmother, in Stamps, Arkansas. At this stage of life she laments the fact that the wrong color dress can make her “skin look dirty like mud” and fantasizes about waking “out of [her] black ugly dream” (2). bell hooks attributes this rejection of the physical self to the idea that “black children have tremendous difficulty feeling good about their looks” (71), which results from cultural indications that “blackness is not beautiful” (70). Marguerite also distinguishes her “real hair,” clothing style, and appetite from the Black population that surrounds her by internally proclaiming her Whiteness.³⁵ Lindberg-Seyersted argues that Marguerite’s attitude toward Blackness as a small child is negative because “physical beauty has been assessed in accordance with White aesthetic standards,” and color-based “trauma for black women” is particularly more difficult than for men because “a woman’s worth traditionally rests on her physical appearance” (64). Consequently, Marguerite is innately sensitive to her level of physical appeal (or lack thereof) to those around her. While the folks in town praise Bailey’s beautiful, “velvet-black” skin and handsome features, Marguerite is often disregarded by adults and occasionally taunted by schoolmates. Some spiteful children mock her skin-tone by calling her “shit colored” (22). Consequently, the lack of positive reinforcement or affirmation from adults and the negative attention she gains from other children result in a low self-concept; consequently, Marguerite envisions herself as an “ideal” white girl. This preference of white skin is further heightened when Marguerite visits her birthmother and maternal grandmother for the first time, both of whom are light-skinned mulatto women.

³⁵ See pages 2-3 of *Caged Bird*. Also see footnote number six for information about Cross’ “pre-encounter stage” of racial identification.

Marguerite idealizes her mother as a vision of beauty. She describes Mother's skin as a "fresh-butter color [that] look[s] see-through clean" (60). Even though the narrator describes Mother's other beautiful attributes, such as her smile, the text focuses on elucidating her skin. Shortly after the description of her mother, the narrator goes on to describe the skin tone of Grandmother Baxter, who is "a quadroon or an octoroon,³⁶ or . . . nearly white" (61). Grandmother Baxter is a powerful and influential woman who has political and constabulary sway. The speaker attributes this authority to a variety of factors, including her pince-nez and "six mean children" (62); however, "her white skin. . . brought her a great deal of respect" (62). Until this stage of her life, Marguerite has learned that Whiteness or light-skinned Blackness is preferred and her darkness is undesirable. Despite her initial fantasies about being White and the general social reverence toward mulattoes, Marguerite gradually gains an appreciation for her Blackness and fights to supersede the boundaries society places on her as an ebony African American female.

Marguerite continually feels the racial oppression of the White world around her, yet there are two defining examples of the war she faces—her eighth grade graduation ceremony and the battle against the San Francisco streetcar company. Before the ceremony begins, the narrator describes a scene of children rushing around in their new dresses and finely combed hair and reveling in the joy of this distinguishing moment in their young lives. On her way to the ceremony, Marguerite recognizes that "[t]he faded beige of former times had been replaced with strong and sure colors" (Angelou 172).³⁷ The excitement of the moment floods her with delight, and her perspective changes. She

³⁶ "Octoroon" is a term for African Americans who are one-eighth black.

³⁷ Most likely a reference to the dull lifelessness that crept into her life after being raped by Mr. Freeman when she was eight years old, just four years prior to this event.

sees the colors of the world more vibrantly, particularly her “classmates’ . . . skin tones” (172). The event promises to be one of great significance; however, the child’s revelation about the colors around her becomes more significant as the events of the evening unfold.

Two white men arrive at the graduation to give the commencement speech and ultimately destroy the thrill of the occasion for everyone in the room. The school official’s speech complimenting the school’s success in athletics is an indirectly racist comment, which even the young girl recognizes. The black children are not praised for their outstanding educational achievements but are relegated to aspiring only for physical activities that show off their limber dexterity and athletic prowess. The narrator illuminates this form of scholastic racism when she states, “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons, and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (179).³⁸ Not only does she feel the sting of academic and vocational segregation according to color, but she also recognizes the marginalization she suffers as a female.

According to this white man, her success is impossible. If the only accomplishment an African American can achieve is through professional sports, a patriarchal entity, then “anything higher that [she] aspired to was farcical and presumptuous” (180). The heavy message of the still prevalent social racism and sexism trumps the previous felicity of the moment and the spirits of those present are downtrodden. The author recounts the rage she feels as a child sitting in that room: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no

³⁸ Marguerite now enters what Cross calls the “encounter stage” of racial identity because she has a “personally challenging experience[] with White society” (para. in Coard, Breland and Raskin 2258).

chance of defense” (180). The suffering of her race climaxes and Marguerite is left in despair. However, despite the grave reality of the ever-prevalent racism, the spirit of hope rises in the auditorium once the white men leave the room and Henry Reed takes the stage. Reed, the class valedictorian, eventually leads the audience in singing the “Negro National Anthem.”³⁹ The emotion Marguerite sees in the tearing eyes of the adults gathered in the room and the hope that begins to stir among all who are present incites the transformation of a traumatizing reminder of the racist oppression of the black people into a moment of self-actualization for Marguerite. Seconds before, she hated her race and color, but upon listening to the words for the first time, “despite the thousands of times [she] had sung them,” and witnessing the pride and indomitable spirit of her fellow Negroes, Marguerite is “no longer simply a member of the graduating class of 1940; [she is] a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (184). An occasion that initially threatens her identity as an African American morphs into the defining moment on which her identity as a black female builds.⁴⁰ The change in how Marguerite relates to her race is significant because it brings her a greater sense of self-actualization. hooks argues that “darker-skinned black females who internalize the assumption that dark is ugly and constantly assault themselves by inner negative feedback also cannot fully self-actualize” (*Sisters of the Yam* 70); nonetheless, Marguerite begins to recognize the true beauty of her unique color and the black race as a whole. Marguerite’s identification with her Negro brethren sparks the gradual beginning of her body self-concept and leads

³⁹ James Weldon Johnson wrote the poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in 1900. The song “resonated throughout black America, achieving within Johnson’s lifetime the unofficial title of the ‘Negro National Anthem’ (Gates and McKay 792). For a full reading of the poem, see page 794 of the same text.

⁴⁰ Marguerite now longs to identify more closely with the African American community and “enters a period of pro-Black or Afrocentric, anti-White feelings,” a time referred to as the “immersion-emersion stage” (para. in Coard, Breland and Raskin 2258).

to the proud determination to trump any obstacles that threaten to hold her back simply because of her color, even the prejudiced streetcar system of San Francisco.

Various factors, including personal drive and the support of her mother, contribute to Marguerite's determination to work on the streetcars. However, the revelation she has at the graduating ceremony about her identity as a Negro is arguably a catalyst of her fortitude. When Marguerite learns to take pride in her identity as an African American, dissatisfaction with racist bigotry arises. Evidence of this antipathy surfaces when she resolves not to be denied her dream simply because of her color. Mother warns Marguerite that "[t]hey don't accept colored people on the streetcars" (265), but the young adolescent is decided. The mother soon realizes her daughter will not be swayed and encourages her dream: "Give it everything you've got. I've told you many times, 'Can't Do is like Don't Care.' Neither of them have a home" (265). With her mother's approval, Marguerite sets off to find her job, but she encounters opposition as soon as she enters the building. Nevertheless, Marguerite coolly handles the white secretary's attempts to dismiss her inquiries merely because she is Black. She initially sees the other woman as a fellow sufferer of the racism "concocted years before by stupid whites" (267), yet Marguerite ultimately refutes the notion that they are both victims and removes the innocence from the battle in which they are engaged. She and the receptionist are responsible for the racism of that moment; they cannot control the past, but Marguerite is determined not to allow the racist precedents of history prevent her from obtaining the job. The self-identity and pride she develops as a child does not allow her to abandon hope, and she eventually becomes the first African American, male or female, to work for the San Francisco streetcars. The maturity Marguerite cultivates

through an increasingly positive self-concept of body image is evidenced in the young girl's developing comfort with her body, a transition Janie also experiences.

A portion of the evolving self-concept of body image, or actualization thereof, is affected by or reflected in the individual's use of the body, including sexuality. Even though Janie's beauty is continually celebrated throughout *Their Eyes*, her body and sexuality are oppressed by her first two husbands. Logan Killicks is much older than Janie, and she is so put off by him that sexual consummation of the marriage, while a possibility, seems unlikely. Additionally, Killicks complains of Janie's "stingy" behavior toward him, implying her lack of wifely attention to his needs—sexual and non-sexual (26). In her relationship with Joe, the more he controls her body the more her sexuality diminishes. Initially, he parades her around the new Negro town in frilly, satin dresses and flaunts her like a prize, but jealousy soon clenches his heart and he gradually lowers a heavy weight of oppression around her to the point of suffocation. Janie's clothes and hair⁴¹ are restricted, and Joe relegates her to the domestic realm of the house and the vocational atmosphere of the store, places where his observant eyes need not wander far to check on his wife. However, his control over Janie's body not only results from his jealousy of other men but also his envy of her youthful appearance and disappointment with his own aging body.

Because of the anguish he feels about his body, Joe verbally lashes out against Janie. His ridicule seems endless: "The more people in there [the store] the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (78). At one point, he derides her before a full audience in the store, shouting, "Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees" (78). His insecurity drives a

⁴¹ Hair and clothes are discussed in greater detail in chapters four and five.

wedge deeper between the two, and the marriage that had long “left the bedroom and [taken] to living in the parlor” becomes a superficial, loveless farce (71). However, after Joe’s death, Janie begins to discover her beauty. Until this time, the remarks made about her attractive face, glorious hair, and robust figure originate with other people, but once Joe dies, she sees the true beauty of her outer shell. The years she spends attempting to disregard the brutal attacks she endures from the man she once loved no longer have a stronghold. She now begins to see her true self in the mirror, the “girl self” she had told “to wait for her in the looking glass” (87). Scared to find what that young girl had become, Janie anxiously looks into the mirror and finds “[t]he young girl [is] gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place” (87). It takes Janie years to reach this step toward self-actualization, yet evidence of her completely actualized concept of body image is not realized until she returns to Eatonville after marriage with Tea Cake helps her develop a greater awareness of her body.

Tea Cake is an ideal man who only falls below the standards of near perfection after the illness from the rabid dog bite diminishes his sanity. He loves Janie with pure affection. The young man’s patience and full acceptance of Janie releases her to enjoy a plethora of new experiences, including shooting, cultivating land, traveling, and the fight for survival. Not only does Tea Cake save Janie from the monotony of life in the town she and Joe helped build, but he also saves her life repeatedly during their escape from the hurricane, as well as her self-concept. Once they escape the immediate danger of the hurricane, Janie confesses, “Once upon uh time, Ah never ‘spected nothin’, Tea Cake, but bein’ dead from the standin’ still and tryin’ tuh laugh. But you come ‘long and made somethin’ outa me” (167). He releases her from the bondage of life between the big

house, the store, and the obligation to make her body perform through laughter at the whims of those around her.⁴² She is free to be herself and act as she pleases.

Furthermore, Tea Cake teaches Janie the bliss of sexual pleasure, an intimacy they frequently enjoy that provides her with a lifetime of memories she continues to relish.⁴³ Because of the freedom she finds in her relationship with him, Janie is prepared to move on with life and retake the place she once left as a woman in bondage after Tea Cake's death.

Janie's physical manifestation of her actualized self-image is physically evident when she struts back into Eatonville. Janie is around forty-years-old at this point, yet the men are immediately drawn to her physique. Her "firm buttocks" swing from side-to-side, and it looks as if "she [has] grape fruits in her hip pockets"⁴⁴ (2). While the women are hurling unseen daggers at her and storing the vision of Janie's old shirt and overalls in the forefront of their memory banks, the men enjoy the view. Janie's "great rope of black hair swing[s] to her waist," drawing even more attention to her posterior, and her "pugnacious breasts" attempt to "bore holes in her shirt" (2). While Janie may not necessarily be "panging and posing," as Hurston describes in her essay, "The Characteristics of Negro Expression,"⁴⁵ the confidence she exudes is relatable to this form of female corporeal movement. Janie does not skulk or slip into town. She swaggers down the main street, "walking straight on to her gate" (2). Her movement is continuous, the goal of reaching her house is clear, and she is not hindered by

⁴² Joe frequently restricts Janie from speaking. This domination is seen when he continually demands "her submission," and Janie "presse[s] her teeth together and learn[s] to hush" (71).

⁴³ See Huston 191 for references to Janie's fond "thoughts" about the bedroom.

⁴⁴ For more information about the significance of the female buttocks in African American literature and culture, see bell hooks' "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance."

⁴⁵ Hurston describes the "Negro girl [who] strolls past the corner lounge. Her whole body panging and posing. A slight shoulder movement that calls attention to her bust. . . [and] a hippy undulation at the waist" is her way of "acting out" the message: "I'm a darned sweet woman and you know it" (1042).

meaningless conversation with insatiable gossips or the communal absence of privacy. There is no rush in her manner; she effortlessly strides toward her house at just the right pace—fast enough for onlookers to know she has no intention of explaining where she has been or what she has done, yet she is slow enough for every man to “sav[e] with the mind what they lost with the eye” (2). Despite the manly clothes, the confidence manifested through her body and movements makes her more attractive than ever.

While Janie attains a liberated self-concept and expresses that self-actualization through her body, Marguerite begins developing a positive self-concept of her body and exploring how to express her budding sexuality. The change in how Marguerite perceives her body begins when she moves back to Momma’s house after the rape. After a significant time of silence and disconnection from the world around her that results from the violation against her body, Marguerite begins to reengage in life. The trauma of the rape certainly has lasting emotional effects; although, around the time of her eighth grade graduation, Marguerite begins viewing herself from a positive position. She is delighted with her growing hair⁴⁶ and relishes a favorable compliment on her “pretty complexion” from one of Momma’s elderly friends—“a rare compliment in a world of very few such words of praise” (159). Her developing self-perception and the affirming admiration of an adult female, coupled with the ensuing revelation she has about her racial identity as an African American at the graduation mark the beginning of her maturation into adolescence and growing adulthood.

Marguerite begins to take control of her body during her adolescence. Various factors leading to this transformation (such as hair growth, the compliment, and racial identification as a proud Negro) are influential, yet Marguerite starts to feel comfortable

⁴⁶ Hair is discussed with greater detail in chapter four.

with her body once she begins dance lessons. Throughout the text, she continually refers to herself as awkward and at one point refers to her “cucumber-shaped body with its knobs for knees, knobs for elbows and, alas, knobs for breasts” (217). Bailey convinces her to take dance lessons by assuring her “the exercise would make [her] legs big and widen [her] hips” (217). The thought of improving her physical appeal is irresistible, and once Marguerite enters dance classes, her fascination with the ability to control bodily movement and deliberately “occupy space” through fluid motion captivates her (218). The knowledge and self-discipline she gains through dance give Marguerite new confidence. She calls dance one of the “allegiances” of her life at the time, an outlet that gives birth to new forms of self-expression.

Marguerite not only gains understanding about her body through dance, but she also transfers the concept of self-governing the body to her sexuality. Marguerite begins to experiment with her ability to seduce men. She has become comfortable with her color and is rapidly learning how to express herself through movement, but physical changes to her anatomy bring new concerns about her sexuality. Marguerite is not only bewildered by the foreign development of her “pocketbook,”⁴⁷ but concerns about her physique also arise. Marguerite’s “heavy” voice, large hands and feet, and shapeless figure contribute to her self-conscious sexuality, and she wonders whether she is one of the “true freaks”—a lesbian (273).⁴⁸ In an act of self-will resulting from anxiety about her sexual orientation, Marguerite decides to seduce a young man; however, her resolution not only derives from confusion about sexuality, but also from her desire to manifest control over

⁴⁷ See page 275 of *Caged Bird* for more details.

⁴⁸ For more information see the “Womanism and the Self” chapter, pages 6-7, and pages 273-79 of *Caged Bird*.

that sexuality. What was once abused and ravished by an “[o]ld, black, nasty thing”⁴⁹ in the prime of childhood (85), Marguerite now determines to use at her own discretion. Nevertheless, her plan to prove her heterosexuality results in dissatisfaction and an unplanned pregnancy.

Marguerite acts on her emotions with the immaturity of adolescence and attempts to define herself through patriarchal affirmation of her sexuality. While the thought that she can use her sexuality at her discretion is empowering and brings a new sense of bodily ownership, her actions are hasty and immature. Henke analyzes the intent of the sex act when she contends, “When the boy she propositions eagerly complies, Marguerite at first feels delighted by her successful initiation into heterosexuality, then becomes anxiety-ridden over an unexpected pregnancy. In her own mind, she has taken control of an awkward and ungainly adolescent body through a bold act of wily seduction” (30). Henke further argues that by seducing the boy, Marguerite “inadvertently reenacts the earlier trauma of childhood molestation” (30). Rather than forced penetration from an unwelcome source, Marguerite willfully violates her own body and sexuality. Despite the fact that Marguerite journeys on a path toward developing actualized body-awareness through a positive self-concept of her skin tone, body movement, and sexual discretion, her immaturity and self-violation prohibit total corporeal self-actualization.

Janie and Marguerite experience divergent journeys toward self-actualized body-concepts. As an adult female who has decades more living experience than Marguerite, Janie attains self-actualization, whereas the young ebony adolescent gradually progresses toward that goal. Despite the marginalization Janie receives from the White and Black races around her, she attains a positive self-concept of her body image and eventually

⁴⁹ A reference to Mr. Freeman.

finds support in her relationships with the Blacks and Whites surrounding her in the everglades, a form of racial affirmation. Through her various marriages, Janie's corporeal identity is tried and eventually released. Tea Cake, the dark black man she loves more than herself, affirms her beauty and helps her discover independence of mind and body, as well as sexual delight, and Janie's self-love and acceptance is expressed through her body. Similarly, Marguerite expresses the confidence she gains about her physicality through her body, particularly with the art of dance. Marguerite learns to appreciate her outer shell and finds strength in her dark color through identification with other African Americans. She values the strength and fortitude of her race and is determined to overcome the Euro-centric, White oppression of her people. Despite the fact that Marguerite does not attain the same level of self-actualization as Janie, both women gain greater understanding of themselves and how their bodies influence and express their beauty as African American women.

Chapter Four

Coiffurial Oppression

Janie's and Marguerite's Journeys toward a Positive Self-Concept of Hair

“I want to know my hair again, to own it, to delight in it again. To recall my earliest mirrored reflection when there was no beginning and I first knew that the person who laughed at me was me. I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me. Before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me.”

— Paulette M. Caldwell, “Hair Piece”

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Janie and Marguerite journey on paths toward self-actualized female identity in relation to their acceptance, maintenance, and adornment⁵⁰ of hair. Janie and Marguerite fight the oppression they face in relation to their hair and come to recognize this attribute as a source and reflection of their female identity as African American women, yet these two characters experience divergent forms of oppression. Janie's hair is recognized by the society around her as a beautiful source of long, flowing splendor. Yet, her jealous husband, Joe Starks, becomes covetous of her beauty and forces Janie to hide her hair with a restricting head-rag. While Janie battles the oppression of her husband, Marguerite combats the social stigmas related to Black hair. The hair she characterizes as “black steel wool” is initially a reflection of the self-hating denigration of her Blackness (22). Because of the emphasis society places on the beauty of Whiteness and nearly White (mulatto) physical features, Marguerite must fight to accept her Blackness

⁵⁰ Hair adornment in early African tribes would have included shells, jewels, clothe, royal headdresses (such as crowns), and other similar materials. Similarly, hair adornment today is considered that which is related to accessorizing, embellishing, or styling hair.

and value her physicality through a positive self-concept. A comprehensive understanding of the historical and cultural significance of African hair and the evolving treatment of African American hair over time illuminates the oppression Janie and Marguerite encounter and the significance of their struggles to gain freedom through positive self-concepts of their hair.

African American hair has historically been a social signifier, and the importance of hair can be traced back to the practices of early African tribes. In Africa, societal distinctions between classes were evident in how an individual adorned his or her hair. The various tribes throughout the continent had diverging preferences for such decoration. Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps discuss a number of these people groups' fashionable coiffural arrangements in their book *Hair Story*. The Nigerian Kuramo's "unique coiffure—a shaved head with a single tuft of hair left on top" is particularly demonstrative of the cultural emphasis upon hair (Byrd and Tharps 2). Precision, order, and cleanliness were essential in attracting a mate, and "an unkempt coiffure in almost every West African culture was anathema to the opposite sex" (3). In other tribes, such as the Mende, disheveled hair "implied that a woman either had loose morals or was insane"; furthermore, group members frequently changed their hairstyles according to various purposes, including mourning, "attract[ing] someone of the opposite sex[,] or signal[ing] a religious ritual" (4). In order to achieve these glorious displays, native Africans often used wood combing tools to manipulate and palm oil to condition the hair and scalp. When "Europeans first came in contact with the African natives in the fifteenth century they were astounded by the complexity of style, texture, and adornment of Black hair" (Byrd and Tharps 7). However, the African fixation with hair and the

European's intrigue concerning the unique beauty of African hair faded with the beginning of the slave trade.

The slave trade marked the end of ornate hair adornment by those sold into slavery and shipped around the world. Because hair was a social signifier of status and more ornate arrangements implied higher social ranking, slave traders often shaved their captives' hair, which, according to Byrd and Tharps, "was an unspeakable crime" (10). Slaves from different tribes around Africa were thrust together in foul ship hulls and sent to various destinations around the world. While these tribes held different standards of hair adornment, there was a general respect for the art of hairdressing. Hair styles were, and continue to be, a form of self-expression. By shaving the slaves' heads, slave traders not only removed the visual signs that identified individuals with their communal tribes, but also stripped them of their individual uniqueness. Frank Herreman confirms the idea that "a shaved head can be interpreted as taking away someone's identity" (qtd. in Byrd and Tharp 10). Beyond the loss of individuality, the horror of having their heads shaved was compounded by the social sanctity of cutting hair and the possible spiritual danger involved if the procedure was not properly effectuated. According to Byrd and Tharps, the process of cutting an individual's hair in early African societies was sacred: "Because a person's spirit supposedly nestled in the hair, the hairdresser always held a special place in community life" (5). The stylist had to be the "most trustworthy individual in the society" (5), and many times only family members performed the task (6). Hair was treasured to such an extreme not only because of its aesthetic value, its role as a social signifier, and its ability to house the human spirit, but also because it was a highly sacred object. Witchdoctors used hair to guard their potions and to cast hexes on people, as well

as perform a variety of other spiritual rituals that could harm an individual. The potential powers of hair to cause harm instilled skepticism about who was permitted to handle it. Considering the deep reverence and exultation of hair in many African societies, the traumatic and lasting effects of shaving the slaves' hair was considerably detrimental throughout slavery and the ensuing centuries.

Two of the major ways African slaves adapted their hair to the American culture upon arriving in the colonies included assimilation and head wrapping.⁵¹ Willie Morrow argues that “[h]air is the basic, natural symbol of the things people want to be. . . and its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated” (17). He goes on to contend that “hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery” (61). Slaves who received less labor-intensive jobs (such as valet, house maid, or server) and worked more intimately with their white slave masters attempted to imitate White practices in manner of dress and hairstyle.⁵² Mulattoes were more often able to accomplish these hair trends because of the less tightly curled nature of their hair, but Negroes with compactly coiled hair attempted to copy the styles as best as possible. Slaves who went through the pains of pulling,⁵³ twisting,⁵⁴ and chemically altering⁵⁵ their hair did so in order to give themselves a more colonized appearance. They frequently attempted these physical compliances to White culture in order to gain favor with their masters and avoid the

⁵¹ Wrapping the hair was a female response to the hair-related traumas of slavery.

⁵² See “Coffee Cream and Mud” chapter, pages 3-4, for more information concerning privileged jobs.

⁵³ Because the traditional, wooden combs of their past were left in Africa and unavailable in the New World, slaves began using “sheep fleece carding tool[s] to untangle their hair” (Byrd and Tharps 13).

⁵⁴ Females “also wrapped their hair in strings, strips of nylon, cotton, or eel skin to decrease the kink and leave looser curls” (Byrd and Tharps 17).

⁵⁵ Slaves also used lye to straighten their hair; however, lye “could also eat the skin right off a person’s head” (Byrd and Tharps 17).

degree of othering the field hands experienced.⁵⁶ Ingrid Banks discusses Morrow's ideas about the significance of hair in comparison to skin color and the perceptions of slave owners: "[O]nce Africans were enslaved, their skin color could be 'tolerated by masters,' but not their hair. In fact, the curl of the hair was used to justify the subordination of Africans, which initiated the tension between hair and people of African descent in the New World" (7). bell hooks also emphasizes the notion that hair results in othering by western civilization more so than skin, particularly for women, when she states, "The first body issue that affects black female identity, even more so than color, is hair texture" (63). Not only did white slave owners strip slaves of their identity by shaving them, but White culture also oppressed Blacks because of the consistency of their hair and effectively demoralized their perceptions about the value of their hair.

The shame of head shaving and the inability to properly care for hair because of the lack of tools and available time ushered female slaves into the uncomfortable yet common practice of head wrapping. African women who lived through the voyage across the Middle Passage arrived in the United States with minimal clothing and essentially no other supplies. Barely surviving, reassuming traditions of hair adornment was not a priority; however, when the slave's desire to resume these practices resuscitated, little supplies for treating their hair were available and the practice of head wrapping became prevalent. Even though African "women could spend hours a day grooming their hair and arranging it in traditional styles, on the plantations they used scarves or kerchiefs fashioned from coarse fabric scraps provided by stingy masters to keep their hair well hidden" (Byrd and Tharps 13). While the desire to cover their heads

⁵⁶ Banks and Tharps note that the attempts to assimilate to western culture through hairstyle brought about the reversal of the desired effect. Blacks using mainstream hairstyles of the day were often "ridiculed and satirized in the press, in the theaters, and on the streets" (20).

derived from a need to protect their shaven scalps from the sun and heat, shame became the predominant catalyst for using the head wrap. Headscarves, head kerchiefs, and bandannas evolved from the common practice black women held of keeping their heads continually covered and became “ubiquitous in slave culture” as a symbol of the oppression they faced (13). The oppression of Black hair from the time of slavery to the contemporary age is a social trauma among Blacks evident in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*.

When considering the head scarf as a symbol of the White oppression over Blacks through the bondage and suffering of slavery, Joe’s insistence that Janie bind her hair in public takes on layered meanings in *Their Eyes*. Slavery was a form of White on Black oppression, and despite the fact that Janie lives decades after the emancipation of black slaves, her husband oppresses her with the restriction black slave women were forced to resort to because of slavery, transforming the dynamic of oppression to Black on Black, as well as husband on wife. Joe’s domination of Janie is a form of punishment for her beauty. His jealousy rises when other men begin to enjoy Janie’s hair, the sight and touch, more than he does. Before their marriage, he praises her tresses and encourages her to flaunt their glory: “Kiss me and shake yo’ head. When you do dat, yo’ plentiful hair breaks lak day” (Hurston 30). However, once the common routines of marriage are established and the glow of the newlywed period fades, Joe shifts his focus from basking in the beauty of his wife toward warding off the impending danger, from the numerous single men around him, that threatens his marriage. Joe is particularly aware of this matrimonial peril because of his role in seducing Janie away from her first husband, Logan Killicks.

Joe intimately understands a man's ability to charm a woman; therefore, his defenses rise to high alert when he notices the possible threat to his marriage. Interestingly, the narrator notes that not long after Janie's first marriage, Killicks "ceased to wonder at [Janie's] long black hair and finger it" (26). Killicks' initial attempts to win her with sweet prattling about her beautiful hair were perhaps the only delightful portion of her marriage to him. However, once his attempts to woo her in this manner cease, she almost immediately opens herself up to the love of another man—Joe. Ironically, Joe also falls prey to similar circumstances. While Janie does not physically make herself available to another man during Joe's life, she begins guarding her most intimate and personal thoughts, refusing to share herself fully with her husband: "She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her where he could never find them" (72). Janie preserves her true self for a man of the future and "sav[es] up feelings for some man she ha[s] never seen" (72). Her conscious separation of the self⁵⁷ is a form of self-preservation. The man who once promises to show her what it feels like to be treated like a lady⁵⁸ and give her the world in the form of a Negro utopia (Eatonville) is now a jealous tyrant who forces her to hide the glory of her beautiful locks. People of the town cannot understand why a woman with "hair lak dat" would "keep her hair tied up lak some ole 'oman" (49). Because of her mulatto heritage,⁵⁹ Janie has the "good hair" many women desire—long and flowing. A'Lelia Bundles confirms the social distinction between "good" and "bad" hair when she states, "In America,

⁵⁷ Also known as the divided self. For more information, see "Womanism and the Self" chapter, page 12.

⁵⁸ See page 29 of *Their Eyes*.

⁵⁹ See "Coffee Cream and Mud" chapter on body image, pages 3-4, for more details pertaining to the social privileges of mulattoes based on physical appearance.

African hair and skin became the badge of slavery, so that the adjectives ‘nappy’ and ‘kinky’⁶⁰—instead of being purely descriptive. . . became synonymous with ‘bad hair.’ Straight and wavy hair—identified in America with privilege—became ‘good hair’” (92). Consequently, Janie’s full hair earns the admiration of those around her, and neither they nor Janie understand why Joe insists she wear the head-rag. Furthermore, Janie is continually “irked” by the obligation to do so (Hurston 55). Joe does not reveal to Janie that he has become jealous by watching “other men figuratively wallow[] in [her hair] as she [goes] about things in the store” (55). He also does not tell her about the time he catches Walter gently brushing the ends of her hair with his hand. His instinct to protect his wife is natural; however, Joe’s inability to express his emotions and the drastic measure he takes of punishing Janie by making her wear a head-kerchief results in misappropriation of his love for Janie. Such abuse begins the death of her love for Joe and becomes a symbol of her oppression.

Similarly to Janie, Marguerite must battle oppression related to her hair; however, rather than resisting the tyranny of an individual, Marguerite encounters social domination and faces the oppression of the social stigmas against Black hair. Whereas Janie is subjugated by her husband and renowned by society for her glorious hair, Marguerite learns to detest her hair as a young child. The continuation of social hostility toward African hair that continued well beyond the antebellum era diminishes the girl’s self-concept in relation to the beauty of her hair. She longs for her “real hair, which [is] long and blond, [to] take the place of the kinky mass that Momma [won’t] let [her] straighten” (Angelou 2). Marguerite has a skewed self-concept that results from the

⁶⁰ Regina Spellens describes the term “kinky” as “a negatively connoted word used to describe or express an aesthetic evaluation of hair texture that is tightly coiled or nappy” (227).

advertising in the world around her. hooks contends that “[w]ithin white-supremacist patriarchal society, it is very difficult to find affirming images of black femaleness” (62), and Noliwe Rooks furthers the argument that female beauty products advertised from the late nineteenth-century well into the first half of the twentieth-century forced a skin and hair complex upon the African American woman. While typical commercialization of female products “advertised everything from cures for neurasthenia to girdles and other types of garments. . . lotions and ointments. . . in the black press, African American women were bombarded solely with products that promised to lighten the skin and straighten the hair” (Rooks 26). Consequently, such advertisements “suggest to blacks that only through changing physical features will persons of African descent be afforded class mobility within African American communities and social acceptance by the dominant culture” (26). At this pre-civil rights stage of American history, the notion that light skin and straight hair brought better vocational success and societal acceptance was a reality because of racism—both interracial and intraracial.⁶¹

Advertisements such as the Curl-I-Cure: A Cure For Curls hair straightener propagated racism against Negroes who did not conform to western cultural standards of acceptable or valued appearances: “You owe it to yourself, as well as to others who are interested in you, to make yourself as attractive as possible. Attractiveness will contribute much to your success—both socially and commercially. Positively nothing detracts so much from your appearance as short, matted un-attractive curly hair” (qtd. in Rooks 33). The purpose of this advertisement was to sell a product; however, the message heard around the nation was one of the inferior and repulsive nature of Black

⁶¹ For more information about racism within the African American community, see “Coffee Cream and Mud” chapter, pages 3-4.

hair. With similar messages of Black hatred and White supremacy resounding throughout the market, the notion that Marguerite would despise one of her most prominent Negroid features, a characteristic she deems her “nappy black hair,” is unsurprising (Angelou 3). Not only does she demonstrate rejection of her physical appearance through her desire for a long, blond mane, but she also confirms this rejection of Black hair (through negation) when she defines another black girl’s hair as “good hair”⁶² because it is “more straight than kinky” (141). Marguerite has “internalized racist/sexist notions of beauty that lead many [black women] to think [they] are ugly” (hooks 63). Her insecurity about the Negroid texture of her hair is accordingly rooted in a real fear of the day—social rejection. The social obligation Marguerite feels to conform to White standards of beauty is further propagated by her mother’s decision to straighten her hair.

By straightening Marguerite’s hair, Mother inadvertently confirms the notion that the more White a Black woman looks, the more beautiful she becomes. While Momma will not allow the young girl to take such measures with her hair (Angelou 2), Mother does not hesitate to mold her daughter’s outer shell into a more colonized, “acceptable,” and fashionable style.⁶³ Perhaps Momma does not understand the need for Marguerite to straighten her hair because of the simple country life they live; however, because of her own determination to remain as her creator deemed, without attempting to meet White standards of beauty, Momma most likely also wants Marguerite to take pride in her

⁶² Spellers comments on the detrimental effects of terms commonly used to classify hair and skin: “[T]he terms ‘good hair’ and ‘bad hair,’ ‘light-skinned’ and ‘dark-skinned’ are the language that gives shape to both the experience of being discriminated against because of one’s features and the act of internalizing negative, external definitions” (223-24).

⁶³ Hair straightening was and continues to be a controversial practice within the African American community. For more information about the arguments against straightening, see bell hooks’ article “Straightening Our Hair” and Alice Walker’s “Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain.”

uniquely African American appearance.⁶⁴ However, Mother, who resembles a white woman and is more beautiful than movie stars (Angelou 119), wants her daughter to conform to the standards of contemporary fashion. At this stage in her life, before the self-actualizing moment of Black solidarity she experiences at her eighth grade graduation,⁶⁵ Marguerite most likely welcomes the change, yet her reactions to the alteration are less than positive. She describes the change: “Mother had cut my hair in a bob like hers and straightened it, so my head felt skinned and the back of my neck was so bare that I was ashamed to have anyone walk up behind me” (64-65). Without recognizing it, the adult self, Angelou, describes similar reactions as the African slaves who had their heads shaved by white slave masters. The change in her identity leaves Marguerite with feelings of disorientation, insecurity, and shame; as a result, the white woman’s hairstyle becomes a form of oppression for Marguerite. While Marguerite and Janie face oppression related to their hair, they ultimately discover varying degrees of self-actualized concepts of body-image.

Despite the ways Janie and Marguerite encounter oppression related to their hair, both women surmount patriarchal or social domination through liberating self-acceptance and a positive self-concept of their body images in relation to their hair. After Joe’s death, Janie takes her first step toward liberating her hair. She immediately releases her hair from the confines of the head-scarf before she even tells anyone that he has passed away. Janie walks to the mirror, acknowledges the mature beautiful woman she has become and immediately tears “the kerchief from her head and let[s] down her plentiful

⁶⁴ Momma is a proud, strong black woman who owns her own business, loans money to Whites and Blacks, stands against the taunting oppression of Whites with honor (*Caged Bird* 29-33), and remains a deeply religious woman who believes in steadfast dedication to her god, including respect for his creation.

⁶⁵ See pages 12-14 of “Coffee Cream and Mud” chapter.

hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there” (87). Janie takes a moment to comb her hair and then restores it to its chamber once again. She cannot resist the sweet freedom of letting her hair down, but out of respect for the corpse that lies near her side, and perhaps a fear of what the townspeople would think, she wraps her hair again. Janie longs to “s[i]t under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes” (77), but she forces herself to play the part of the mourning widow and patiently waits until the townspeople finish Joe’s funeral to “burn up every one of her head rags” (89). The next day she wears her hair in a “thick braid swinging well below her waist” (89). Interestingly, Janie does not simply throw the head kerchiefs away; she burns them as an act of cathartic cleansing. When something is thrown away, there is a possibility of its recovery, so Janie burns the rags in a bold declaration that she will not be restrained again. Now that she has tasted sweet freedom from the bonds of a burdensome marriage and released her hair from the symbol that typified this oppression, she will not allow herself to be controlled in such a manner again. The act of letting down her hair and burning the kerchiefs is the first step toward restoring her self-identity; however, the acceptance, love, and companionship she finds in Tea Cake pushes her along the journey toward self-actualization.

Tea Cake’s relationship with Janie helps her transform her self-concept and liberate her hair. Janie begins wearing her hair in a long braid after Joe’s funeral. This action is a step toward emancipation; nonetheless, the confines of the braid are not completely freeing. One evening with Tea Cake, Janie wakes from a light slumber to find him “combing her hair and scratching the dandruff from her scalp” (103). He finds her hair so beautiful and desirable that he comes to her house that night with his own

comb, intent on caressing her hair with his tender touch. However, Tea Cake does not simply run his hands through her hair to stimulate his own senses or satisfy his desire to touch her soft hair; he combs her hair and picks the dandruff from her head, actions that are a form of maintenance Janie must routinely perform. Therefore, Tea Cake serves her through affectionate touch. Susan Meisenhelder elaborates on the intimacy of this moment and its drastic contrast to Joe's treatment of Janie's hair: "Whereas Starks sees Janie's hair as a symbol of his control of her, Tea Cake combs Janie's hair in the spirit of reciprocity that characterizes their relationship, experiencing pleasure in giving it" (70). Unlike the men of Janie's past, Tea Cake concerns himself with giving Janie pleasure and affirming her beauty. Interestingly, Janie is still unable to trust Tea Cake at this time; she retracts from his outpouring of affection and stands "up at once, collecting her hair" (104). Her previous experiences with men and the difference of age between herself and her young admirer create doubt, and Janie momentarily closes herself off from him in an effort to protect herself from more harm, an action represented in the gathering of her hair. However, she eventually learns to trust Tea Cake, and throughout their adventures together she gradually achieves total liberation. Upon her re-entrance into Eatonville, Janie's hair is a visual representation of this self-actualized state.⁶⁶ Her battle against patriarchal domination ends with the affirmation of an empowering relationship with a good man; the freedom she finds is reflected in her uninhibited flowing hair. Janie's "great rope of black hair swing[s] [to] her waist and unravel[s] in the wind like a plume" (2). Like her hair floating in the wind, Janie is free.

⁶⁶ See page 18 of "Coffee Cream and Mud" chapter for more information about Janie's self-actualized concept of body image and her return to Eatonville.

While Janie achieves self-actualization, Marguerite discovers a different level of freedom. The liberty Marguerite finds in a self-actualized perspective of her hair is less dramatically illustrated than Janie's experience, but her revelation is no less important. Marguerite initially rejects her hair as something ugly and longs to have the long flowing hair that is socially considered "good"; however, as she matures and begins to accept her ethnicity and take pride in her heritage as an African American, her perspective concerning her hair evolves as well. The journey toward a self-actualized concept of Marguerite's hair begins at her eighth grade graduation. This moment of Black pride and solidarity impacts Marguerite's self-acceptance.⁶⁷ Her desire to attain White standards of beauty diminishes as her body-concept gradually, albeit slowly, begins to improve. Long after the graduation ceremony, Marguerite even speaks positively about her hair: "My hair pleased me too. Gradually the Black mass had lengthened and thickened, so that it kept at last to its braided pattern, and I didn't have to yank my scalp off when I tried to comb it" (171). The reasons for Marguerite's delight with her growing and thickening hair are intriguing. She notes that it holds braids and is not as painful to comb—two indigenously African methods of adorning hair. The fact that Marguerite is maintaining her hair with traditional methods indicates a rejection of the White standards. Her decision is another indication of Black solidarity, which helps her develop a more positive self-concept, even though she must still battle the social stigmas concerning hair texture similar to hers when boys her age primarily admire girls with predominantly White features, including "hair '[that hangs] down like horses' manes'" (280).

⁶⁷ See pages 12-14 of "Coffee Cream and Mud" chapter for more information about Marguerite's transformation.

Consequently, Marguerite moves toward full acceptance of body-image, particularly in relation to her hair, despite and in spite of what her male peers admire.

Janie's and Marguerite's journeys toward the self-actualization of their self-concepts concerning hair directly relate to the history of African slaves. As black women, they must deal with the social stigmas that relate to their hair texture, whether positive or negative, which have been passed down through generations of ante and postbellum racism. Janie is forced by her husband to hide her hair in the same manner African women who were embarrassed by their hair used during slavery. This symbol of shame and oppression thrust upon Janie by a man she once loved causes division within herself, but she finds reassurance and love through her relationship with Tea Cake, and she eventually accomplishes self-actualization, which is represented in her free wind-blown hair at the beginning of the novel. While Janie achieves this elevated level of self-concept at nearly forty-years-old, in *Caged Bird*, Marguerite makes progressive strides toward that actualization but does not necessarily achieve the same level as Janie because of her immaturity and youth. Nonetheless, Marguerite learns to combat the social stigmas that pressure African American women to feel devalued and begins to take pride in the features that define her Blackness. These strong black women are able to recognize and move beyond the premises of White beauty established during slavery, as well as unfetter the bonds that prohibit them from releasing or appreciating the glory of their hair.

Chapter Five

Dress as a Symbol of Status and Self-expression

Examining the Importance of Clothing in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*

“The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression. Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator.”

— Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”

The clothing Janie and Marguerite wear acts as a symbol of status and a representation of self-expression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Both novels express interest in clothes as reflections of individuality and personal development over time. Genders and classes are separated according to social standards of dress: Janie is initially separated from the people around her by restricting pretentious clothes, and Marguerite’s plethora of dresses distinguish her from the other little girls. However, clothes are more than just social identifiers; they are also a form of self-expression. While Janie declares her independence from patriarchal oppression and the concern of others’ opinions by wearing a man’s overalls, Marguerite’s blue winter coat, yellow graduation dress, and blue streetcar attendant’s uniform reflect the trials and changes she experiences as a female, as well as her determination to transcend social norms and define herself as a strong willed independent female.

The personal attire of both protagonists is an outward reflection of the statuses they respectively hold. As a child, clothes distinguish Janie from the children around her. When she and Nanny live with the Washburn family, Mrs. Washburn gives Janie the clothes her grandchildren no longer wear, and the elderly woman enjoys “dress[ing] [her]

up” in attire that “wuz better’n whut de res uh de colored chillum had” (9). Her dresses initially symbolize her association with Whiteness and people of a higher social standing. The feelings of bitterness other Negro children express by teasing Janie can be traced back to the roots of slavery. Slaves who worked in the slave master’s house usually received preferential treatment⁶⁸ and “had access to hand-me-down clothes” that other slaves were denied (Byrd and Tharps 18). Noliwe Rooks expounds upon Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s comments on the separation of classes through clothing when she states, “[I]n terms of importance placed on clothes, slave women who worked in the house ‘shared slaveholding women’s appreciation of dress as the badge of class or quality’” (25). Janie receives clothes from the Whites, which sparks the jealousy others feel about the higher quality of clothes and the preferential treatment she receives from them. The separation of Janie from the general African American population around her resulting from her manner of dress follows her throughout the novel and is particularly exacerbated in her marriage with Joe Starks.

Joe’s emphasis on showmanship through clothing becomes a way in which he separates himself and Janie from the townspeople of Eatonville. Joe is a “citified[] stylish dressed man” who outfits himself to impress the people around him (27). He has a bit of money and wants to give the appearance that he has more by dressing well. Before they marry, Joe buys Janie “new clothes of silk and wool” (33). He performs this gesture as an act of generosity toward his new wife and as provision for her wedding day; however, he is also dressing her to play the part of his Negro upper-class wife. Similar to the house slaves of the past, Joe believes the way he and Janie dress will elevate them to

⁶⁸ See “Coffee Cream and Mud” chapter, pages 3-4, for more information about the preferential treatment of house slaves over field workers.

higher social status and differentiate them from underprivileged Blacks. Because Joe wants others to see him as a man of power, he needs Janie to look like a woman that belongs with him. Indeed, her beauty, which is facilitated by her fashionable frocks, draws the respect of the people in Eatonville. After establishing their presence in the recently built town, Joe calls a meeting and gives Janie specific directions about choosing her wardrobe for the event: “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (41). Joe does not concern himself with appreciating the beauty of his new wife; he is preoccupied with parading her beauty and making a stark impression on the people of the town over which he is now mayor. He also isolates Janie from the other women and refuses to have an average looking heifer represent him—his wife must outshine all others. Indeed, Janie recognizes Joe’s role in separating her from the society around her when she tells Pheoby, her only true friend in Eatonville, that “Jody classed [her] off” (112). The people of the town subconsciously understand Joe’s desire to separate himself from them and one man’s words voice the effectuated desire of Joe’s plan: “[Joe] didn’t just come hisself neither. He have seen fit tuh bring. . . de light u his home, dat is his wife. . . also. She couldn’t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen u England. It’s a pledger fuh her tuh be hea amongst us” (41-42). The man honors Janie’s presence and elevates her to the social distinction of a royal world power—the queen of England. Consequently, Joe successfully uses clothing to separate himself and Janie from the townspeople.

While Janie is forced into class distinction by her husband's style of dressing her, Momma's financial stability, sewing skills, and capacity to supply her granddaughter with such a variety of clothes separates Marguerite from other children in Black Stamps. Many of the boys and girls in Stamps wear homemade clothes, including Marguerite, but the quantity of clothes Momma makes the young girl distinguishes her from the others. Momma is a store owner and money lender who, despite the difficult economic situation of the nation during the Great Depression, provides all of the basic needs for herself, her son, and her two grandchildren. Her prudence and hard work facilitate their ability to continue with life essentially as normal, while others suffer greatly.⁶⁹ One way she conserves money is by sewing Marguerite's clothes and "cut[ting]-down" old adult dresses. Marguerite does not always appreciate these clothes as a child, calling one dress "a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway" (2). However, Momma also buys "two bolts of cloth each year for winter and summer clothes. She made [Marguerite's] school dresses, underslips, bloomers, [and] handkerchiefs. . ." (50). Marguerite consequently receives a new set of garments each spring and winter, a luxury many other children cannot afford. She also has a large enough wardrobe to change seemingly every time she leaves the house.

When Marguerite goes to church, school, or runs errands for the store, she changes her dress. The day Marguerite is asked to help Mrs. Flowers, whose "printed voile dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer" (93), the young girl is asked to change her clothes. After struggling with the right choice for the occasion, Marguerite chooses "a school dress, naturally. It was formal without

⁶⁹ See pages 4-5 of "Womanism and the Self" chapter for more information about Momma's diligence and discipline.

suggesting that going to Mrs. Flowers' house was equivalent to attending church" (97). One effect of owning the myriad of dresses Marguerite possesses is that she continually feels pressure to carefully choose the clothing that best suits the situation at hand, and her ability to dress herself properly is an indication of her character to those around her. Jeanette Lauer and Robert Lauer describe the importance of fashion in relation to the individual and how it is reflective of a person's nature: "[T]he clothes we wear tell something about our character. Those who wish to maintain a good reputation will attend to their dress: 'the woman who is careless and indifferent to her personal appearance loses half her influence'" (305). This mentality toward fashion is particularly relevant to Momma's manner of thinking. She wants to maintain her reputation in the community and, therefore, cares significantly about her personal appearance and that of the people connected to her—her family. Momma requires Marguerite to maintain a strict standard of propriety, which is reflected in how the young girl wears certain clothes for specific occasions to maintain a certain level of respectability and distinction. Marguerite's clothes and her ability to change them frequently separate her as part of a higher social class in Stamps; however, clothes not only divide individuals into social hierarchies but also serve as a form of self-expression.

Clothes are a form of visual self-representation in the novels. During her marriage with Joe, Janie's self-expression through clothes is stifled. The last detailed description of her apparel, beyond her headscarves,⁷⁰ is the "wine-colored red" dress with "silken ruffles" Janie wears on the night of Joe's first meeting in Eatonville (40). The ruffles and upscale material of the store-bought dress imply a great deal of formality and rigidity, and the deep, dark color of the dress conveys somber emotions. Both attributes

⁷⁰ For more information about Janie and headscarves, see pages 6-8 of the "Follicle Oppression" chapter.

of the dress are reflective of the ensuing years of stringent oppression Janie endures by Joe's side. However, a significant change occurs with Janie's wardrobe once she and Tea Cake form a relationship. She begins wearing light, thin fabrics that have vibrant colors, and Janie wears "pink linen," "dresses in blue," dons "high heel slippers and a ten dollar hat" (110). People from the town believe her behavior is disrespectful to the memory of Joe, given that he passed away only nine months ago; however, Janie is finally enjoying the freedom to dress herself as she pleases, and the zeal that she feels about her new relationship is reflected in her clothes. Bright colors, whimsical fabrics, and seductive shoes not only mirror her emotions but also make her feel more attractive. Janie enjoys dressing to please Tea Cake by wearing "blue satin. . . high heel slippers, necklace, earrings, everything he wants tuh see [her] in" (115). While some may argue that Janie remains under similar pressure to dress according to patriarchal desires as she did with Joe, the grand difference is that Janie wants to please Tea Cake with her clothes—he does not force her to wear them. Her love for him pours from her heart onto her wardrobe, and she delights in adorning herself with apparel he enjoys. Unlike Joe's, Tea Cake's love for her is not based solely on her physical appearance, evidence of which is apparent when Janie trades her fancy frocks for a working man's attire.

Janie learns to work the earth with the labor of her hands and exchanges the dresses of her past for the worn garments of a migrating crop harvester. She and Tea Cake miss each other to such an extent that they cannot endure being separated throughout the day while he goes to work in the field. As a result, Janie chooses to work with him, a task she refuses to do for her first husband, Killicks,⁷¹ and begrudgingly does for Joe in the store. Her connection with Tea Cake frees her to work alongside him out of

⁷¹ See pages 26 and 31-32 of *Their Eyes*.

love and affection, not obligation. Therefore, the change from bright feminine dresses into “blue denim overalls and heavy shoes” is welcome (134). These clothes not only represent the independence she finds in her relationship with Tea Cake but also a change in Janie’s way of thinking. She initially feels compelled by Joe, the people of Eatonville, and even Tea Cake to dress a certain way, but Janie’s discovery of Tea Cake’s true love frees her to change her wardrobe without concern. His desire to spend all day “romping and playing” in the work field with her brings her to the realization that Tea Cake does not love her simply because of her colorful satin dresses, high heels, or the money she uses to buy such lovely attire (133). His love for her runs deeper than the surface of her physical appearance, and when Janie finds security in knowing that Tea Cake wholly accepts her, overalls become the primary garment in her wardrobe.

Overalls become such an intrinsic part of Janie’s life that she even wears them to Tea Cake’s funeral. In contrast to Joe’s funeral, where Janie felt the obligation to show the pretenses of grief by wearing a “starch and ironed face” behind her mourning veil (88), she is so consumed with the heart-wrenching emotion of his death that she has no time to preoccupy herself with appearances: “No expensive veils and robes for Janie this time. She went on in her overalls. She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief” (189). Janie has no need to falsify her emotion. While some may frown upon her wardrobe as disrespectful to the memory of her husband, she is more preoccupied with sending Tea Cake off “like a Pharaoh to his tomb” than her own attire (189). The freedom Janie finds through the love she shares with Tea Cake and the pure catharsis she experiences at his death release her from further bondage to clothing. She is more concerned about living her life than accommodating social standards of dress, and her

masculine clothing develops into a representation of the new stage of self-actualization Janie achieves, an attribute evident in her return to Eatonville.

Janie's clothing outwardly symbolizes her internal change at the beginning of the novel; however, she encounters opposition to her wardrobe upon re-entering the Negro town she recently left. While the "women [take] the faded shirt and muddy overalls and [lay] them away for remembrance" to possibly use as a weapon against her later (Hurston 2), Janie remains unconcerned. They spit venomous questions such as, "What she doing coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?—Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?" (2), yet she is confident. The other women cannot understand the experiences she has undergone and only see her clothes as a sign that her adventure resulted in failure. Interestingly, social standards of dress relating back to slavery influence their negative perception of Janie's clothes. Lauer and Lauer indicate that "[b]y far the most common assertion about dress is that it conveys information about the wearer's character and personality. . . . [W]earing clothes in an inappropriate manner conveys the information that one is a person with negative qualities. . ." (306). The women of Eatonville pour criticism over Janie because, upon her return, her "inappropriate" clothes do not conform to social standards of dress. Furthermore, Janie is not only wearing old worn clothes, but she is also dressed in a man's clothes. Helen Foster argues that during times of slavery, masters occasionally forced slaves to "wear clothes of the opposite sex" as a "form of humiliation" (50). In fact, "[b]eing forced to wear clothes of the opposite sex proved one the most humiliating punishments dealt by whites" (Foster 54). White communities also maintained strict regulations about proper personal attire for the different genders, "definitions [that] have remained quite stable

over time,” and the reversal of these gendered garments results in upset (Lauer and Lauer 310). Therefore, both African American and Eurocentric cultures passed down stringent understandings of what men and women should wear. The women of Eatonville sneer and snicker at Janie’s attire when she returns to town not only because she is mixing gender roles, but also because they assume she must have met with financial destitution in order to be wearing a man’s clothes: “Where all dat money her husband took and died and lift her? . . . What [Tea Cake] done wid all her money?” (Hurston 2). In their minds, patriarchal desertion and poverty could be the only reasons Janie is dressed in such a manner; however, Janie reacts to their bitterness with black female solidarity and womanism.

Janie has roamed outside the borders of the small town and experienced a life beyond the front porches of the homes and store of Eatonville. She “don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ‘em ‘cause dey’s parched up from not knowin’ things” (192). While the women see her overalls and worn shirt as an indication of destitution and poverty, Janie is not only financially stable because of the money she inherits, but she is also wealthier than when she left Eatonville because of the love she has shared with Tea Cake and the experiences she has endured. Her happiness has never revolved around clothes or money but hinged on the hope of finding one man who loves her as she is and shows her the world, which relates to the womanist ideal of promoting healthy relationships between men and women.⁷² In their adventures together, Tea Cake teaches Janie how to shoot guns and hunt a variety of animals, including hawks and alligators.⁷³ She even becomes

⁷² Alice Walker’s discourse on womanism promotes the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi).

⁷³ See page 130 of *Their Eyes*.

an excellent story teller.⁷⁴ Tea Cake not only allows Janie to participate in activities normally reserved for men, but he also encourages her to do so. Consequently, her overalls, heavy shoes, and worn shirt become symbolic of the freedom she achieves as she tears down barriers segregating male and female activities and social standards of dress. She liberates herself from the stifling wardrobe of the past Mrs. Starks and raises above any concerns about what other women think of her; however, Janie does not simply dismiss the reaction to her wardrobe by the women in Eatonville. In an attitude of female solidarity, she gives Pheoby permission to share the testimony of her trials and the freedom she has found in life beyond the small town: “Pheoby, tell ‘em. . . . [T]ell ‘em dat love ain’t something lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea” (191). Rather than retaining bitterness about their treatment of her physical appearance, Janie reenters their society with an open heart and willingness to educate the other women with the lessons she has learned about love and gender mobility. While they see her clothes as a negative representation of the black female (who must have met with difficult times), in reality, Janie’s new wardrobe represents the metaphysical state of self-actualization she has achieved, represented in her ability to react against hatred with black female solidarity.

Marguerite’s clothes in *Caged Bird* are also a form of self-expression. When she is eight years old, the small child is forced to testify against her rapist, Mr. Freeman. The “navy-blue winter coat with brass buttons” Marguerite wears during the trial expresses her fear and need of security and comfort (Angelou 84). Despite the fact that the coat is too small for her and the temperature in St. Louis is scorching, Mother allows Marguerite

⁷⁴ Janie “got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” of the men (134). Whereas Joe “forbid[s] her to indulge” in storytelling (53), Tea Cake and the others enjoy communal storytelling episodes with her (134).

to wear the winter garment because she knows her daughter must face one of the most difficult experiences of her life—reliving the rape through testifying against a man she once accepted as a father-figure.⁷⁵ Marguerite is confused and terrified in the “strange and unfriendly place” (84). She does not quite understand the dynamics of what is happening and wrestles with the bitter sting of self-blame and guilt.⁷⁶ However, she finds refuge in the heavy folds of fabric, and the weighty garment acts as a “friend that [she] hug[s] to [herself]” as the trial continues (84). The coat acts as a companion for the small girl and a barrier guarding her from the outside world. As she sits on the witness stand alone, the cloak becomes her only source of strength, and she squeezes out of the material the fortitude she needs to continue with the testimony that eventually leads to Freeman’s conviction. While the dark blue heavy cloth of the coat represents the somber tone of the experience during the trial and expresses Marguerite’s need for security in a moment of great distress, the bright yellow dress of her graduation ceremony conveys her joy.

Marguerite’s yellow dress at the eighth grade graduation ceremony reflects the pure joy and renewed life she finds in the moments leading to the graduation. All of the girls in her class wear “butter-yellow piqué dresses,” and Momma takes delight in sewing “crisscrossing puckers,” “shirr[ing] the rest of the bodice,” and “embroider[ing] raised daisies around the hem” of the frock (171). She even adds “a crocheted cuff on the puff sleeves, and a pointy crocheted collar” (171). Perhaps the detailed work Momma invests in the dress is an expression of her proud satisfaction with Marguerite’s accomplishment. Once Momma expresses her delight by sewing extra details into the dress, Marguerite

⁷⁵ Immediately after the first molestation, Freeman holds Marguerite in such a way that she believes he would “never let [her] go or let anything bad ever happen to [her]. . . . This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last” (73).

⁷⁶ Marguerite mistakenly believes that because she initially finds comfort and satisfaction in the man’s attention and touch (73) that she is guilty of allowing or even encouraging the rape (85).

dons the ensemble with ecstasy and imagines herself as a “walking model of all the various styles of fine hand sewing. . .” (171). The details on the dress reflect Momma’s pleasure and the importance of the moment, and because of the care Momma invests in making the garment, Marguerite’s self-concept soars. As bell hooks argues, clothes that fit well “enhance body self-esteem” (69). Marguerite’s excitement about the graduation and the increasing self-confidence she discovers when wearing the dress change her perceptions of the world, and the bright yellow color of her dress is perhaps the most poignant reflection of the changes she experiences.

The color of Marguerite’s dress is symbolic of the rebirth she experiences on the day of her graduation. The people around the young girl say the beautiful color of the gown makes her “look[] like a sunbeam” (176). The sun that revives slumbering life at the dawn of every day is symbolic of the resurrection Marguerite feels on graduation morning. While wearing the dress, Marguerite begins to see the world around her with renewed vibrancy: “The faded beige of former times had been replaced with strong and sure colors” (172). After the rape, Marguerite slips into a quiet haze and retreats from reality by shutting herself off from the world⁷⁷, and “[c]olors weren’t true either, but rather a vague assortment of shaded pastels that indicated not so much color as faded familiarities” (92). However, “in [her] new happiness,” she begins to see the world in full color again, appreciating the hues of her classmates, the sky, and the flowers (172). Her perspective changes and the “[y]ears of withdrawal were brushed aside and left behind, as hanging ropes of parasitic moss” (172). She looks forward to a future full of

⁷⁷ After the rape, trial, and murder of Freeman, Marguerite detaches from the world around her. One symptom of her withdraw is her refusal to speak for numerous years.

possibilities, and the energy exhumed by her dazzling yellow dress reflects the zeal she feels about life again.

While Marguerite's vibrant frock at the graduation reflects her enthusiasm and personal renewal, the blue uniform she wears as a streetcar attendant represents her actualizing self-concept as an African American woman and is an expression of her determination. Once Marguerite resolves to seek independence from her mother by finding a job, she decides to pursue employment with the San Francisco streetcar company. She longs to wear the "dark-blue uniform, with a money changer at [her] belt" (264). Marguerite notices that women are taking over occupations previously held by men on the streetcars (who are now fighting overseas in World War II) and chooses to become part of the laboring female community. This womanist demonstration of female independence, solidarity, and emphasis on the survival of the community in a time of peril is intriguing. Marguerite not only wants to serve her community by occupying jobs that are particularly needed at the time, but she also wants to move into a realm where women are marginalized and African Americans, male or female, are prohibited. Furthermore, she is from what Whites would consider a middle or lower class black neighborhood, including bars, casinos, and other places of ill repute. Marguerite must combat the triple marginalization⁷⁸ of being a lower class black female making her way into a career that has, until recently, been occupied only by white men. When she finally obtains a position with the company, she not only wins a victory for herself but also for the community of black women in similar positions.⁷⁹ Consequently, her "blue serge

⁷⁸ See pages 3-4 of "Introduction" chapter for more information about triple marginalization.

⁷⁹ This accomplishment gives Marguerite a sense of victory she has not previously experienced and serves as a moment of self-actualization.

suit” (265) not only becomes a symbol of her triumph, but also an expression of her determination.

Clothes in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird* accomplish more than the simple task of physically protecting the body; they become symbols of social status and forms of self-expression. Janie’s exchange of dull ornate dresses for vibrant clothes and eventually men’s overalls represents her personal development over time. Janie’s clothes initially indicate her oppression and gradually transform into a sign of her independence and self-actualization. However, Marguerite’s clothing illustrates the sorrows and joys she experiences growing from childhood into adolescence and expresses her determination and the sense of victory she experiences as the first African American streetcar attendant in San Francisco. The heavy navy-blue coat protects her from interrogators and comforts her in the strange courtroom, and the beaming yellow dress of her graduation reflects the hope she has for a brighter future; furthermore, the blue serge suit is an expression of her determination as she accomplishes a moment of self-actualization. Janie and Marguerite traverse hardships throughout the novels, but they ultimately encounter positive personal development that is reflected and communicated through their wardrobe.

Chapter Six

Future Scholarship

Scholarly criticism of African American Women's Literature is growing significantly. Numerous authors, such as Alice Walker, Noliwe Rooks, and bell hooks, continue to expound upon the African American female experience and the trials black women continually battle in an effort to achieve social and self-acceptance. This thesis adds to the corpus and growth of Black womanist criticism because Janie and Marguerite initially struggle to break free from the oppression surrounding them and eventually gain self-actualization or develop positive self-concepts in relation to body image, hair, and clothes. While this work contributes to a study of female identity in relation to these three aspects to the field of African American women's literary studies, there are a variety of areas for further research, particularly in relation to womanism, body-concept, and the Christian worldview.

The concepts concerning womanism found in this work can be expounded in a number of ways and are by no means limited to the following suggestions. Areas for further study include the significance of female community and the grandmother motif in both texts. The topic is briefly discussed here; however, more research will heighten the understanding of female solidarity represented in *Their Eyes* and *Caged Bird*, as well as the individual's ability to influence and educate the women around her. An additional opportunity for further research related to womanism could be focused analysis of gender dynamics throughout *Their Eyes*, especially the implications of Janie's social crossover into the masculine world. Beyond the sphere of womanism, further research opportunities lay in body image.

An area of further scholarship related to body image is the female posterior. Since the time of slavery, there has been global fascination with the African American female body, particularly the backside. Interest of this sort has objectified the black woman's body, and research about the significance of the buttocks and the male gaze in *Their Eyes* would greatly contribute to African American woman's criticism. Furthermore, as a result of her light-skinned, mulatto nature, Janie becomes a sounding board and mediator for racially-charged grievances in the text, a theme that provokes further interest and study. Additionally, more research focused on the general corporeal discomfort and self-hatred Marguerite battles as a result of childhood parental abandonment and the rape in the *Caged Bird* is needed. This text primarily centers on the insecurities she encounters because of her skin tone and hair texture; however, she faces anxieties about her weight, overall shape, and awkwardness. While there are additional opportunities to study female body image in the novels, the necessity to examine these works from a Christ-centered perspective exists as well.

The focus on body image, hair, and clothes in relation to female identity contributes not only to academia but communicates a strong Christian message: God's truth about the unique nature and beauty of every individual. In Psalms 139:13-14, the Bible describes the individual, intimate transactions between Creator and creation. The passage reads, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (NIV). He forms man and woman with specific purposes in mind and fashions every detail of their anatomy and personalities according to his will. The fact that these two novels reflect the importance of unique

characteristics, such as skin tone and hair texture, is reflective of God's creativity in fashioning humankind. Janie and Marguerite must come to terms with the characteristics that set them apart from the communities surrounding them and the dominating White, patriarchal culture which oppresses black women. How each protagonist relates to her hair, skin tone, and body image in general changes and develops throughout the novels. Their bodies and hair are reflective of the unique physical qualities with which God has blessed them. In Genesis 1:27, the Bible reveals the origin of man, stating, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." God afterwards described his creation as good and beautiful. Janie and Marguerite were created in the image of God and, therefore, are physical, spiritual, and emotional reflections of His glory. Despite the fallen nature of man and the arguments of some that their beautiful ebony hue is a curse,⁸⁰ these women are formed in the image of the Creator. Though neither of these texts is overtly Christian, principles reflecting God's truth are found throughout each. As Augustine states, "A person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature" (47). Consequently, the truths about the positive and negative elements of human nature, triumph over evil and oppression, and the strength and provision God supplies his creation are powerful themes relevant to further studies of these novels through a Christian worldview.

⁸⁰ Reference to the curse of Ham (Genesis 9:20-27). This argument is often used by White supremacists to support the idea that black skin originated when God cursed Noah's son, Ham, and is a symbol of the Negro's inferiority. Frederick Douglass discusses the curse of Ham on page 397 of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

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