Claiming and Making: Ethnicity, Gender, and the Common Sense in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Toni Flores

_Thought-Woman, the spider,
   named things and
   as she named them
   they appeared._

_She is sitting in her room
   thinking of a story now
I'm telling you the story
   she is thinking._

Leslie Marmon Silko

The writer in the modern world necessarily lives and works within a context of domination, whether in the arena of race-ethnicity, nationality, language, class, sexual orientation, gender, or any of a number of others. To be in a context of domination is to suffer. A writer who is a member of a dominating group will suffer the constrictions and limiting visions of those who rely on privilege and command. A writer who is a member of a dominated group may suffer from a lack of confidence, and certainly will suffer from a lack of influence and opportunity. On the other hand, undeniable hardship as it is to be a member of a nondominating group, it is also possible for the writer to turn this very position to artistic, moral, and imaginative advantage. Clearly, there is no virtue, in itself, in being a victim. Still, the writer who has not participated fully in the culture of the victimizer, who writes from the margins or, better, from another center, will have a different world view from that of the dominating culture, a different perspective. One way to express this perspective is to take domination and resistance as a subject, as Toni Morrison has in the shining *Beloved*. Another way, the one that interests me most, is to use one's experience of non-elite, nondomminating ways of being in constructing new and nonexploitative definitions of power.

To do this, however, the writer must first deeply know the other way of life, in considerable fullness, and not just as a wistful, wispy longing for some fancied utopia. She or he must really understand, whether through birthright or through long study, the "common sense" of a different way of life. By "common" sense I mean what is joint or shared, and also what is ordinary, daily, unexceptional, on the ground, unelevated, even material. The common sense of a culture is its bedrock, that which underlies its various traits and which, being rooted in the daily material world and the habits of daily survival, most persistently and consistently forms and orders the disparate impulses of geography and history and political power.

Second, in order to use a common sense to construct new visions of the world, the writer must have claimed its validity and intrinsic worth, with no apology and relying on no

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authority other than, in Arlyn Diamond and Lee Edwards's felicitous phrase, the authority of experience.

When that has happened, when the writer has both known and claimed a way of life whose center is not one of the dominant centers of power, then she or he may use that common sense, not just incidentally (as local color or embroidery) and not simply in opposition (as opposition is always defined by what it opposes) but as a real grounding for a new edifice.

It is my belief and the argument of this paper that precisely this process may be seen in the work of two extraordinary twentieth-century American writers, the Native American novelist Leslie Marmon Silko, author of Ceremony, and the black novelist-anthropologist-folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, author of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Both of these people come from “off the center.” The one is of Indian and Mexican descent, the other is black, and both are women. Both have been deeply immersed in the lives of their own people, yet both have navigated their way in the dangerous waters of the patriarchal, bourgeois, and white elite world of literature and academia. Both have used the common sense of their own cultures to redefine power in ways that avoid the old dualisms. Both, it is my contention, have turned their origins, which might have been seen to be and might indeed have been liabilities, into advantages and strengths.

Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony

The story of Ceremony, published in 1977, revolves round the illness and cure of a young Laguna pueblo man. At the outset, Tayo has returned from World War II, from battle in the Philippines. He is “crazy,” withdrawn, hallucinating, despairing. He mourns the death of his brother Rocky, who died from wounds and gangrene and the jungle. He mourns his own inability to save Rocky or to substitute for him. He mourns for the Japanese killed in the war; although he himself has not killed any, he perceives an identity between the Japanese and his own people (a correct racial identity, of course), and he recoils in horror at his own complicity, willed or not, with both sides in this slaughter. He mourns the death while he was away of his uncle Josiah, his mother's brother, and the only one of his kin to be unequivocally kind to him. He mourns the drought in the Southwest, and the death it causes, and he feels himself guilty of bringing it on, since in the steaming jungle, with Rocky dying of the damp, he had committed the sacrilege of cursing the rain. He rages over white racism. He mourns the loss to Native Americans of the land, of freedom, of the old things and the old ways, of self-respect. He rages against, all the while being complicitous in, Indian drunkenness, thievery, prostitution, poverty, violence, and despair. He doubts the efficacy of the old ways, but he fears change. He mourns his mother's shame in going with white men and bearing him illegitimately; he mourns her desertion of him; he is wounded by his family's grudging acceptance of him and in particular by his mother's sister's insistence on the stigma he both bears and inflicts. He feels unwanted, unloved, and misplaced. In Tayo there is a coming together of the sicknesses of the land, nature, the social order, power relations, the family, and the soul.

Eventually, Tayo returns to or reestablishes health through his willing participation in the creative act of story-telling and in the ritual acting out of story in ceremony. First, he leaves the VA mental hospital and comes home, where people have known him all his life and where he can't be invisible. He allows himself to be taken care of by old Grandma and Auntie, even though the care is partial and edgy; he accepts love, however flawed it may be. He undergoes a ritual with a Laguna medicine man, a ceremony meant to put back in their proper places the ghosts of those slain in war. This helps a little, and he begins to eat and to retain food, but he is far from well. Still he dwells on death and dwells in anger, especially when he is with his friends, young men who, like himself, are returned from war but deeply dislocated by it. Then he is brought to old man Betonie, a Navajo curer, who has under his care not just the Navajo, not just the Southwest, not just America, but the entire universe. Betonie starts for him a long curing ceremony, gives him the pattern (a mountain, a particular constellation of stars, certain cattle, and a woman) that will guide him through the ceremony, teaches him the history of the ceremony and the curers, and tells him that he must complete the ceremony himself. Tayo has no idea how he is to do that, but when he goes searching for the cattle his uncle Josiah bred, cattle that are themselves half-breeds, full of meat like domestic Anglo cattle but wild and rangy like Indian stock, he turns toward a life-sustaining activity, toward change and synthesis, and he begins to take a more active and creative role both in his relationship to nature and his people and in his own cure. In the search for the cattle, he meets a woman, a mysterious and powerful medicine woman who can make the rain and the snow come, who cares for his cattle for him, and who gives him food and makes love to him. He spends the summer with her, centering himself in the present and in love, living with the land and with animals and with the body, allowing himself to be loved and to feel worthy of love, at once making and accepting the harmonious pattern of the universe. Strengthened and filled, he is able at last to face a final encounter with evil and to conquer it, not with more hate but with a resolute turning away from violence and toward life and all that is life-sustaining. At the end, Tayo faces east and greets the sunrise.

This novel, as its popularity attests, can speak to a wide audience; at the same time it is so deeply placed in the American Southwest, so deeply rooted in the Native American culture and situation of that place, that it is difficult for mainstream readers to appreciate its richness, and perhaps even its point, without knowing something about that context.

For one thing, Tayo works out his cure, not solely within himself, but largely by going home, among people who know him deeply and who are known by him because he has been part of their stories. He has been in the Pacific, he has been to California, but he can't get well away from the desert land with which his people have interacted so long and so intensely that the two are interwoven: land and people are one entity.

Most of the major events and themes of the novel are traditional to that land and that people: a preoccupation with drought and rain; a focus on the fertility of soil, animals, and humans; a concentration on herds and flocks and on the material well-being they bring and represent; an involvement with the work life of farmers and herders. In this world there is a proper order to the universe, an order that includes humans,
sentient and nonsentient material beings, and spirits; all evil, illness, misery, and natural disasters result from a disruption of this proper order. Material well-being, health, morality, happiness, long life, and proper function can be attained only by restoring proper order and, especially, properly harmonious relations between humans and the rest of nature. The novel expresses, as well, a traditional concern over evil-dealing, over witches and witchcraft, socially engendered violence, gossip and social control, the search for ritual cures to deal with evil, and the absolute necessity of turning resolutely away from witchery, death, and death-dealing and toward life. Linked with these ancient themes and preoccupations are the more modern ones centering on this culture’s contact with whites—loss of the land, loss of cultural autonomy, loss of dignity and self-respect, poverty, prostitution, prejudice, drunkenness, theft, and, most of all, the dissolution of the old ways, old certainties, old beauties. Southwestern and Native American too are the affirmation of kin ties and community nets, the deep identification with land and place, a peculiarly pervasive and material spirituality, and a deep respect and longing for the embrace of the Mother (in all her social, biological, and spiritual manifestations). Finally, both the novel and the culture in which it rooted are deeply committed to the conviction that story-telling is creation, in the most literal sense. For Tayo, for the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, and for Silko also, to tell a story is to make a reality; to act out a story is to make a world.

Ceremony is, then, for all its modern concern with the individual, with the Western problem of guilt, with interior angst, with nuclear war and social prejudice, with art as itself the prime subject matter of art, at the same time a most specifically Indian production. In this sense, the novel must be seen as a claiming of Native American and especially Laguna ways of being in the world. It is, clearly, based in the Laguna common sense, a sense built slowly, over probably millennia, as this Pueblo people have lived out their daily, ordinary, material lives, interacting with each other and with the land, creating their own definitions and solutions to the problems and possibilities for life on that land and with that people. At exactly the same time Ceremony is also a making: out of the confrontation between the ancient and autonomous Native American common sense and the dilemmas and imperatives of the modern white world of power, it makes a new vision of how one might define and deal with power, a new understanding of what illness and evil are, and a new sense of where and how one might place one’s hope and confidence.

In Ceremony, the claiming of ethnicity, then, surely serves as one base for making new possibilities for human existence. I would suggest that gender serves as another, in that it too offers a region where common sense may be claimed and a new vision cultivated, for Silko and for the people about whom she writes. For Tayo and the other southwestern Indians Silko portrays, gender relations have gone all awry. The Mother principle, so strong in all these cultures, matrilineal or not, has been swamped, pressed down by the weight of the white patriarchal culture. On the personal level, Tayo has been damaged. He has been abandoned by his actual mother, who was overcome by her shame; he is hurt by his aunt, his surrogate mother, who is ashamed of his illegitimacy, as though having an Indian mother were not enough to make him acceptable; he feels unnurtured, unloved. In southwestern society, gender relations have been warped; the fine Indian balance between male and female, the mutual respect and sense of equality, have been replaced by the obscene preying of white men on Indian women (always the ultimate objects of conquest), the desperate grab of Indian men for the acquisition of white women (not people but symbols of power, the jewels in the white scepter), and the reluctant disruption and tenuosity between Indian men and women. The southwestern land, the ultimate source of nurture, has been raped, stolen, and sold into bondage. And politically and globally, the male principle has gotten all out of hand. Without the balance of the female power, the male hunters and killers, so necessary for food and protection, have gone on an insane rampage, killing for conquest, for ego-satisfaction, and, worst of all, for pleasure. Tayo’s desperate task is to cure the gender-sick world, that is, to reestablish the proper harmony of the engendered universe by reestablishing respect for the female principle and the bedrock necessary willingness to be loved by and to love the Mother.

He does this by remembering, recreating, ties with the Mother in the guise of a series of women. First, he goes home to his aunt and his grandmother, living in their house (which, in this culture of matrilineal succession, is also his mother’s house), sleeping on his childhood bed, eating the food that they give him, and, ultimately, taking responsibility for herding their sheep and cattle. Next he allows himself the memory of the Night Swan, the half-breed Mexican-Indian, green-eyed woman who had been his uncle Josiah’s lover, who was the source of Josiah’s half-breed cattle, and who had once made love to Tayo himself. Then he listens to the tales old man Be-tonie, the Navajo curer, tells of his own grandmother, an ochre-eyed Mexican girl who was a curer full of power. In learning about her, Tayo learns about the timeless, the cyclical nature, of the Mother, learns that she is Changing Woman, who is the maiden, the matron, the crone, all at once and successively, cycling through the years, ever-changing, ever-persistent. He learns that he must himself become one with Thought-Woman, Spider-Woman, Changing-Woman, that is, the teller of the story, the creative principle. Finally Tayo meets Her, the woman who helps him find and tend uncle Josiah’s cattle, who controls the rain and snow, who is a curer and mistress of the curing plants, who tends and feeds him, who makes love to him and takes him into herself. She is, of course, the goddess herself, the nurturer, the land, and, most important, the mother principle in all humans, male and female. She makes him realize that he is loved, has always been loved, and therefore can love himself and can himself love.

Through these epiphanies of the Mother, Tayo is strengthened and guided in his task of telling the correct story, setting the world right. He establishes that race is an unreal category and that intercourse between races is a vital aspect of change. He establishes that his mother, his aunt, his grandmother have always loved him, that they have always done their best under difficult and complex conditions. He establishes that the land has not been stolen, that land cannot be stolen because it cannot be property, and that, on the contrary, the people belong, as they have always belonged, to the land. He learns that violence cannot be defeated by violence but only by a resolute turning east, a balancing of killing with life-begetting, of death-dealing with curing, of anger with nurture. In short, Tayo
reestablishes the female principle in himself and thus in the moral universe, the political arena, and the social world. Silko, in her character Tayo, has rejected the patriarchal, authoritarian, bourgeois, and Western set of ideas about what it is to be male, what it is to be female, and what relations one must expect between male and female, and she has, in stead, claimed the authority of a different vision of gender, a vision based on that of the mother-centered Native American peoples of the Southwest and on the collective experience of women in many cultures of the world. In a sense, she may be seen as working from a double folk, that of the Pueblo-Navajo peoples and that of women, relying on these two collective common senses.

Ultimately, and tellingly, Silko is staking a claim, not just to the authority of established ways of being but also to a newly made territory, a new telling of the story. She claims Laguna-Navajo patterns of belief, cosmology, and morality, but she casts them into new forms. In a deliberate use of one culture's forms for another's content, Silko opts not for telling a myth or performing a chantway but for writing a novel. It is not so much that she imitates or even preempts the modern bourgeois literary form as that she unites it with Native American meanings and transforms both into an entirely new existence, a form suitable to twentieth-century American life and accessible to its people. The hero is not the boy adventurer of old myths but a modern person. In this new version of renewal, Tayo, who is of mixed blood and living under the conditions of mixed culture, learns that he does not have to choose between white and red but must learn to accept what he is so that he can become what he can become. A man, of a white father and thus carrying the blood of the dominant and dominating culture, Tayo learns to accept alliance with the female, to accept the Mother in himself. He comes to terms with that part of his past which is implicated in the actions of the victimizer—American, violent, male—and with that part which is implicated in the role of the victim—Indian, suffering, female. Resolved to accept neither of these roles, rejecting the necessity of dichotomizing them, he tells the story in a new way, making good rather than evil and active creation rather than passive suffering the salient principles.

In effect, Silko the novelist has made herself into an epiphany of Betonie the curer, for whom nothing is lost, who keeps everything, who keeps the ceremonies alive, precisely by changing them. Silko is with her people, responding to their shared needs, evolving lives, and continually changing common sense; at the same time, she has expanded the Laguna world to include, in her vision of possible changes, the world of the dominant and dominating culture as well. Ultimately, of course, Indian and Anglo, female and male, are part of one system that can be healed only as a whole.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The story opens with Janie's return to town after a two-year absence with Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, a man a good bit younger than she and much below her in status. Naturally, the townspeople see the good story her return without Tea Cake implies, and eventually Janie relates that story, her story, to her friend Phoeby.

It's a story that begins, really, with Janie's grandmother, Nanny, born into slavery and, like so many other slave women, the mother of a child by the white master. To escape the wrath of the mistress, Nanny flees with her infant daughter Leafy into the swamps and survives there until the war's end. "Emanicipated," she goes to work for a white family, her sole aim to "make the sun shine on both sides of the street for Leafy," to raise her daughter to a higher and more comfortable place than she has had. It doesn't work that way, because Leafy is raped, gives birth to Janie, and, ruined and shamed, runs off, leaving Nanny with another girl child to raise, yet another set of hopes and fears. As she wanted Leafy to be, she wants Janie to be well off, to be comfortable, to be safe. Janie has other ideas. In a most beautifully written passage, Janie has a vision of the erotic, of an intense connection with life and with life's possibilities for connection and love and pleasure and human reality. Under the influence of this vision, of the springtime eroticism of bees and pear trees, and of her own blossoming sexuality, Janie takes a step into the world—and Nanny reacts in terror, lest the world harm her Janie. Her response is to marry Janie off to Logan Killicks, an older man with a house and sixty acres, a good name, no imagination, and dirty feet. Janie tries hard to love him, but there is little enough in Logan Killicks for a young girl to love, and nothing in his property and respectability. Hurt by her inability to appreciate him, Logan reacts by trying to put her down, to turn her into an obedient drudge, what Nanny says a black woman is, "the mule of the world." Unable to accept this, Janie runs off, in search of life and the horizon, with Jody Starks, an ambitious, big-talking, heavy-handed man. Jody aims to and does make himself a prosperous man, a big man, the mayor of the all-black town of Eatonville, and in the process he tries to turn Janie into Mrs. Mayor Starks, a respectable lady, sitting up on a high chair above the common world, her hands folded. But Janie longs for the life of the common world around her, the passionate, messy, creative life of the ordinary people, and increasingly she resents Jody's attempts to make her into his image of a proper wife, his restraints on her, his lack of knowledge of or respect for her. The relationship between them shuts down, and Janie withdraws into an interior life. When Jody dies after twenty years, Janie begins to live. Quietly, she begins to enter the life around her, to do as she likes, and to become herself. Finally she meets Tea Cake Woods, a man twelve years her junior, a gambler by trade, without property or name, but with a vast love of life, a ready acceptance of people, and a quick and ready humor. Tea Cake and Janie enter into one of the great love relationships of literature, a connection in which each accepts the other for exactly what he or she is, Janie blossoms. Fulfilling her childhood vision of the bee and the pear blossoms, she embraces with Tea Cake on a life full of work, laughter, fighting, tears, passion, acceptance, love and respect, dancing and song, and plenty of other people. In the end, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while trying to save Janie, gets rabies himself, goes

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Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The story of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937 and republished in 1978 as part of the revival of interest in the work of black novelist-folklorist-anthropologist (and perhaps feminist) Zora Neale Hurston, revolves around the life and development of Janie Crawford, a black woman from Florida.
mad, and dies when Janie, in self-defense, shoots him as he attacks her in his madness. Janie buries Tea Cake, returns to Eatonville with her memories, and tells the story to Phoeby.

The very basis of this novel, then, are the twin concerns of power-wielding and autonomy. If Janie moves to an ever-increasing sense of self and of autonomy, she moves, as the novel moves, pushing against a background of powerlessness. Nanny, formed by her experience of being the helpless object of her master’s desire and the nearly powerless victim of her mistress’s rage, by her realization of the precariousness of her reliance on kind white folks, and by the tragedy of Leafy’s rape and victimization, can only hope to provide for Janie some bulwark against outrage. She concentrates herself on wanting Janie safe; she neglects to want her free. Logan Killicks, with his house and sixty acres, offers Janie security, but at the extortianate price of her love. When he fails to get that, he, a black man, begins to use the little power he might have in the white man’s world, the power over his woman. He seeks to tame her, punish her, harness her, almost literally make her into his mule. Jody Starks, realizing that his world is arranged in hierarchies and that he doesn’t want to be at the bottom, decides that he had better become the master, or at least as much a master as any black man can be. He accepts dominance as a way of life. He has to control everybody who might possibly be brought under his control: not only Janie but all the people of Eatonville. The difference is that Janie, as Mrs. Mayor, is to be not only under his control but also the very symbol of his control and his position. The struggle for autonomy, both personal and cultural, is then set at the very heart of the novel.

The struggle leads in two parallel directions, a claiming of autonomy along racial and cultural lines, and a claiming of autonomy along gender lines.

For the first part, Janie refuses to be kept apart from the life of the people and most particularly refuses to participate in the exercise of power over that life. She seeks not to control the life of the people around her but to participate in it. She embraces the common life of the people, the life that is both shared and ordinary. Relieved of being Mrs. Mayor, she experiences the work life of the bean fields and the muck. She participates in the shifting social life, the song, the dance of jook joints, spontaneous jumps, and eating houses. She has always been a good cook, but now learns to serve and share great pans of baked beans, barbecue, sweet potato pie. She learns to hunt. She watches the gambling, the drinking, the teasing-testing games of the men, and the flirting games between women and men, and she swims in all of it. Above all, she revels in the talk, with all its richness and salt, and she learns to participate in it herself.

Much of this life, which Hurston describes so vividly, is what we might usually include under the term folklore. These elements are not incidental touches of local color; they appear on virtually every page as part of the very substance of the work and the life it describes. The people speak in proverbs, traditional sayings, and common metaphors, in the most natural and complete way in the world. To give a proper example one would almost have to quote the whole book, but perhaps a sample will give the flavor of the thing. Commenting on Janie, one gossiping woman says, “She sits high, but she looks low.” Phoeby says of the gossipers, “An envious heart makes a treacherous ear.” Nanny tells Janie, “Dat’s how come de ole folks say dat bein’ uh fool don’t kill nobody. It jus’ makes you sweat.” Sitting on the front porch of the store, the men discuss Jody Starks:

“But now, Sam, you know that all he do is big-belly round and tell other folks what tub do. He loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice.”

“You kin feel a switch in his hand when he’s talking to yuh,” Oscar Scott complained. “Dat chastisin’ feelin’ he totes sorter gives yuh de protolapsis uh de cutinary linin’”

“He’s uh whirlwind among breezes,” Jeff Bruce threw in.

“Speakin’ of winds, he’s de wind and we’s de grass. We bend which ever way he blows,” Sam Watson agreed, “but at dat us needs him. De town wouldn’t be nothin’ if it wasn’t for him. He can’t help bein’ sorta bossy. Some folks needs thrones, and ruling-chairs and crowsns tuh make they influence felt. He don’t. He’s got uh throne in de seat of his pants.”

Story-telling, and especially the telling of tall tales, is an important and common element of the communicative life of Janie’s people. For example, in an extended and hilarious series of stories about Matt Bonner’s yellow mule, the men amuse themselves, compete in cleverness, and at the same time gently but pointedly let Matt know what the community thinks about his stinginess. Boasts play their part; at one point in a gambling game, Sop, a black “ring-tailed roarer” if ever there was one, declares, “Ah can look through muddy water and see dry land.”4 They frequently play the sometimes dangerous game of the dozens. Folk heroes like High John de Conquer are back of everyone’s eyes. Blues and spirituals and folk preaching are on everyone’s tongue; when Jody puts a lamppost on the town street, for example, the dedicatory lighting is marked by a sermon and spiritual, and when Matt Bonner’s yellow mule finally dies, his passing is marked by an exuberant mock funeral, with all the wonderful details of preaching and getting the spirit a funeral requires.

What is more, the folklore is not only a major part of the substance of the novel, it is also part of its structure. Tea Cake’s life is the life of High John de Conquer, who survives on his high spirits, his cleverness, and his bravery. Janie’s story is the very stuff of the blues. And in the episode that marks the real turning point for Janie, the point at which she begins to be an active shaper of her own life, she plays the deadly game of the dozens with Jody and beats him.

The main point, of course, about these forms of folklore is not just that they are there or even that they form the substance and structure of the novel, but that they are claimed, by the character Janie and by the author Hurston. At the same time that Janie lays claim to her self and her life, she lays claim to the common ways of the common people. And at the same time that Hurston lays claim to the world of black people as a valid subject for narrative, she lays claim to the voice and speech of that world as her own. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of Their Eyes Were Watching God, there is a difference between the voice of the narrator, a cool, distanced voice speaking standard English, and the voices of the folk, who speak in dialect. Midway through the novel, when it begins to take on power and meaning, the narrator loses her distance and takes on the voice of her subjects; from the time Janie takes up with Tea Cake and takes on her own life, the
story is related almost entirely in dialect. The rural black southern world has become not just object but subject; it is telling its own story, in its own words.

Something similar can be said about gender, for here, I would suggest, is a novel not only about a woman but by a woman and, more importantly, from a woman’s point of view. Hurston has her character Janie reject power relations between men and women. She leaves Logan Killicks, not simply because she doesn’t love him (although it is true that she finds the trade-off of love for security unacceptable), but because and when he tries to make her a mule, a docile work animal. She resents and ultimately rejects Jody Starks’s use of her as a symbol of his power over others, as she resents his efforts to define and limit her very being. Janie does not meet power with power and she does not want to rule; she simply does not want to be ruled. In the one real love in her life, she and Tea Cake are equals. She accepts him for what he is—a gambler, a common man, a pleasure-giver and pleasure-taker—and she accepts herself, completely unmovied by incidents like her age and her social status. Except for the incident in which he beats her to demonstrate to Mrs. Turner’s brother that she is his woman (and I must admit that this is a very big exception and, to my mind, a disturbing anomaly), Tea Cake never attempts to exercise power over her, always asks her voluntary compliance in being and doing with him, meets her as an equal in all matters including jealousy and passion, and never denigrates her or undervalues her. He is proud and pleased at her accomplishments even when, as with her shooting ability, they eclipse his own.

At the same time that Janie comes to claim her rights to autonomy and self-respect, she comes also to reject victimization, to refuse the role of victim. In the terrible moment when the rabid Tea Cake attacks her and in self-defense she has to kill him, or kill the rabies in him, she heroically refuses to confuse love with self-sacrifice or victimization. Through Tea Cake’s love and through her relationship with him, she has come to love and respect herself enough to kill the person who would kill her, even if it happens to be Tea Cake himself. In a tender and appropriate irony, in teaching her to shoot so well Tea Cake has given her the means to defend herself, even from him.

Finally, in the very first lines of the book, Hurston herself suggests that Janie’s story, which she is telling Phoeby and which Hurston is telling us, results from claiming the authority of woman’s experience:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

This, then, Hurston is saying, is a woman’s story as a woman would remember and want to tell it. It is a story, not about her horizons or world-making, but about human relationships, emotional connections, and real eroticism, in Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic as that which is life-supporting, life-enhancing, connecting, and enlarging.

There is an interesting double claiming going on here. On the one hand, the character Janie Crawford Woods is claiming her own people, the common life and her right to the common speech. As a woman, she is claiming connectedness, mutuality, desire, and the right to be what body you happen to be. And she is claiming herself, the right to be herself and, both figuratively and literally, to live her own life.

Simultaneously, the author Zora Neale Hurston is laying a series of parallel claims. Educated in New York, at Barnard and Columbia, into the white, scholarly world, she was trained as an anthropologist, folklorist, and linguist. In one sense, Their Eyes Were Watching God might be seen as an ethnography of the black rural South, or could have been turned into one. It isn’t that really, however, and my sense is that this is deliberate and even emphatic. Trained as an anthropologist, Hurston eschews any attempt at or pretense of scholarly distance, instead overtly identifying scholar with community, the knowing subject with the known object. At the same time, she claims the right to transform her material (the speech, beliefs, folkways of the black community) into whatever form she sees fit and necessary—in this case not the ethnography but the novel. Finally, as a novelist, she rejects the usual models offered by the literary world of her time and takes the enormous risk of writing a novel not only about black life but also largely in black dialect. Simultaneously, she claims the validity and worth of black speech and asserts her own right to that speech. In valuing the voice of her people, she finds or makes her own voice, and in doing so she greatly expands the possibilities for new voices, new stories, and new realities in American literature and American life. Their Eyes Were Watching God stands squarely within the context of domination and yet sees autonomy, the rejection of domination, and the right to be one’s own proper self not only as vital to a fully lived existence but also as possible. Janie claims her own people and her own self, and she makes her own story. Zora claims her own vision, and she makes a story that not only illustrates but powerfully persuades us of the believability of that vision.

In both of these novels the authors as well as their protagonists have claimed commonality and identity with the culture and the gender that nurtured them. At the same time, they have claimed personal vision, individual value, and the right to change. Both have insisted on alternatives to white, Western, patriarchal power, rejecting the choice between victimizer and victim, between dominance and submission. Instead, both Silko and Hurston have claimed autonomy, the ability to self-direct. They have insisted on the authority of their own experience, both cultural-racial and gender-personal. They have taken on the right and the responsibility to seek change and new possibilities, and they have insisted on their rights and abilities to create new meanings, tell new stories. It is not accidental that the stories of Ceremony and Their Eyes Were Watching God are about people (Ta yo and Janie) telling their stories. Nor is it accidental that the stories are about people attempting to escape or, rather, to change altogether the context of domination. In claiming as valuable their respective ethnicities and their gender, Silko and Hurston have
simultaneously claimed a version of ethnicity, gender, and power that is different from the version of the white male world, and they have newly envisioned what the world might be if we were to understand power not as dominance but as autonomy.

NOTES
3. Hurston, 12, 16, 41, and 78-79.