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DANGEROUS WOMEN

HEATHER BAGGOTT '99

The master narrative is a broad term that can be used and applied in many contexts. It is a term that, in many ways, is relative to the exact situation in which one is placed. In one situation the term might refer to social protocol while in another situation it might refer to the dominant culture's oppression of the minority classes. Both Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison in *Sula*, however, use the master narrative in reference to authority. This authority is rooted in the accepted traditions, rules, expectations, and definitions which any society or culture attempts to levy against and upon which to judge its members. The authority of the master narrative can be most easily understood, as an often silent, yet unbelievably oppressive force that operates under the surface of common culture. It searches to define and, consequently, confine all members of the society in which it festers.

Given this understanding of the master narrative, it is not surprising to find that women, especially African-American women, have often fallen prey to the dictates of authority which rests within its control. The dominant authority of the master narrative desires to classify women as one thing or another. The master narrative thrives on being able to label women as black, white, mothers, whores, bitches, etc. Once such labels are placed upon women, the master narrative seeks actively to confine women to such predetermined roles. The biggest threat to the power of the authority is an authentically defined woman. In this way, the master narrative strives not to give women the ability to be more than one thing at a time. It does not want to overtly realize that women are human and, consequently, have the human capability of total and complete definition. If the authority of the master narrative admits that the true existence of a woman is as a completely actualized human being then its power crumbles—women become self-defined. Thus, the

key to feminine power rests in women's ability to become dangerously unpredictable through self-definition. The cry is then called for women to find an existence outside of the stereotypes that the master narrative actively assigns. Both Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* attempt to answer this cry. Although written nearly fifty years apart, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Sula* similarly trace the physical and spiritual journeys of two African-American women as they search for authentic existence outside the confines of the master narrative which attempts to impose definitions of race and gender upon them. The two struggles differ, however, as Janie, being more compassionate than Sula, has significantly more trouble in finding the power of her voice outside of the oppressive demands of authority. Yet, in the end, both Hurston and Morrison are successful in sculpting Janie and Sula into new models of womanhood.

Let us begin our analysis with the character of Janie. Throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston makes it undeniably clear that Janie has no real concept of race or racial identity. Furthermore, it is clear that Janie scorns being identified and categorized by her race. She naturally has no concept of race. Instead, starting from her childhood, Janie knew that she was something other than her race. Hurston describes that Janie, although African-American, has many Caucasian features, thus indicating a mixture of the blood lines. As a result of her Caucasian features juxtaposed against her dark skin, Janie is exotically beautiful. As a child, however, Janie has no concept of her external identity either in relation to her beauty or race. She remarks after seeing a photograph of herself,

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where

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Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'.(9) Janie's self-image is based on factors which exists outside the definitions of her race.

Janie adds to our understanding that she does not attribute race to her identity when she explains that as a child her schoolmates called her Alphabet. Janie says, "Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (9). Everyone had a different name for Janie, including herself. Thus, the question is raised as to why. What significance is it that Janie is literally called words and language? If we look at her name in terms of racial definition, we can understand that Janie was called language because she could not be called race. As her looks and, ultimately, her lifestyle do not conform to the authority invested in the master narrative of race, Janie is forced to find an existence outside of race. She eventually did so through her personal voice and language.

Janie continues to defy the definition that her race inherently places upon her throughout her adolescence and adulthood. She refuses to racially define herself as a child and she refuses to do so as an adult. In fact, Janie seems confused by the whole concept of racial definition. Janie is ignorant to the fact that most of her culture sought to find their identity in their race. Janie consistently lives with the notion that the separation of race and self is a natural behavior. Janie's mind set is most readily seen when she is simply unable to understand Mrs. Turner's stereotyping and generalization of whites and African-Americans. Mrs. Turner, like Janie, is dark skinned, but has many Caucasian features. Unlike Janie, however, Mrs. Turner externalizes her self-definition based on her interracial features. She desires most to be associated with, and accepted by, white culture. In doing so, Mrs. Turner finds it necessary to vividly pronounce and exalt the master narrative. Thus, she declares a belief in the authority of the master narrative as she adheres to its stereotypes of African-Americans. Mrs. Turner believes that agreeing with these stereotypes is the only way she can identify herself with white culture.

Mrs. Turner finds it necessary to speak to Janie about her views as she thinks that Janie will identify with her because of their similar racial appearances. Janie, however, has no concept of the myths which Mrs. Turner spins. Mrs. Turner bombards Janie with stereotypes commonly associated with African-Americans; she says,

And Dey makes me tired. Always laughin! Dey laughs

too much and Dey laughs too loud. Always singin' ol' nigger songs! Always cuttin' de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn't for so many black folk I wouldn't be no race problem. De white folk would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back. (135)

Janie responds to Mrs. Turner's saying, "You reckon? 'Course Ah ain't never though about it too much" (135). Janie's reaction to Mrs. Turner's shocking and degrading words is bizarre. She acts as though she has never heard such stereotypes of African-Americans. She seems confused and mystified by Mrs. Turner's vendetta against African-American culture. As the narrator says, "Janie was dumb and bewildered before and she clucked sympathetically and wished she knew what to say. It was obvious that Mrs. Turner took black folk as a personal affront to herself" (136). Janie is so taken back by Mrs. Turner that she does not even know what to say to her. Even more bizarre than Janie's ignorance, however, is the fact that she does not become personally offended. Mrs. Turner insults Janie's identity as an African-American and Janie simply allows her to speak without any resistance.

The question then becomes why. Would not most people, if placed in Janie's situation, become offended? Naturally, most people would have been offended, but Janie is somehow different. People who externally identify themselves on the basis of their race would have been offended by Mrs. Turner's remarks because the remarks are personal affronts to their identity and culture. But Janie does not become outraged because race is not her identity. Her sense of self rests separate from her race, making her race objectified. Janie, unlike Mrs. Turner, does not take personal offense to black stereotypes. She does not desire to define herself as black or white. Instead, her identity comes naturally from another source. This source rests in the power of her voice. Mrs. Turner, conversely, conceptualizes herself in terms of black and white. She wants to define herself as a white woman. Thus, Mrs. Turner's agitation with the black population is caused because she still physically resembles a black identity and she is constantly surrounded by black culture. She ultimately desires to leave this culture and assimilate into white culture. As the narrator says, "It was distressing to emerge from her inner temple and find these black desecrators howling with laughter before the door" (139). Janie's existence is more authentic than Mrs. Turner's. Although Janie does not consciously understand it, her resistance to her racial identity allows her to escape the rule of the master narrative. Unknowingly, this attitude allows

Janie to escape the same fate of Mrs. Turner.

Whereas Janie seems to innocently and naively live her life outside of the boundaries of race, Sula seems to challenge these boundaries in a more deliberate fashion. Thus, for Sula, the effort to defy the master narrative of race is a less innocent and more offensive attack. Nevertheless, Sula, like Janie, is successful in ultimately finding an existence outside of her race. Sula specifically challenges the limits placed upon her through attaining a college education and achieving sexual power over men.

Earning a college degree allows Sula to confront the limits which the master narrative places upon her. Education takes Sula out of the world of ignorance and, consequently, gives her the ability to make her own decisions and censor information. Unlike other uneducated women, Sula no longer has to blindly follow the so-called knowledge of authority. In order to obtain her education, however, she has to live completely outside of the master narrative. Thus, she could not allow herself to be like Nel who adheres to the master narrative in both race and gender. Sula does not allow herself to settle for Nel's usual life as the stereotypical African-American woman that Nel represents. Sula does not want to have a husband, kids and a household. She, as well, refuses to live by Eva's rule. Eva desires Sula to live according to her race and gender as she says, "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (92). Sula explains that she does not want to live for anyone else. She wants to spend her life searching for herself outside of everyone's expectations. She says, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Through going to college, Sula is able to begin the process of defining herself according to her own rules and not the rules of authority. Says the narrator in regards to Sula's and Nel's position in life,

Each had discovered that they were neither white nor male, and that all the freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. (52)

Sula's way of creating something is through getting a college education. That is her way of showing that freedom and triumph are actually not forbidden to her as an African-American woman.

Sula again proves through her sexual power that she can live with unadulterated freedom outside of the bonds of her race. Morrison is clear and precise in explaining that Sula has minimal sexual morals. Sula simply sleeps with men, both African-American and white, wherever she pleases. It is of little consequence who

the man is or her feeling for the man. Sula operates in the economy of sex. She receives a thrill not only from the pleasure of the act, but more importantly from the power and freedom she gains from it. She derives strength from the ability to use men and then simply discard them. She likes stripping away their sense of domination and the controversy this creates in the town. As the narrator says,

Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgment, cherished their men more, soothed their pride and vanity Sula had bruised. (115)

Sula reverses the game of sex as she becomes the dominant power and her male lovers become weak and submissive.

Sula specifically challenges her freedom as an African-American, however, when she chooses to sleep with white men. This is the ultimate testimony to Sula's search for existence outside the definition of her race. Interracial relationships, in Sula's culture, were a social taboo. The master narrative expected African-Americans to stay within their own race as whites were expected to do the same. The ultimate ruin of an African-American woman's reputation was to engage in sexual relations with a white man. Such a relationship would permanently label a woman. Says the narrator, "But it was the men who gave her [Sula] the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing-the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. They said that Sula slept with white men. (112)

In Sula's community, women who slept with white men were seen as a direct offense to African-American culture. Sleeping with white men was so offensive that the culture immediately wanted to accuse the white men of rape. It was almost unfathomable to think that an African-American woman would chose to sleep with a white man. As the narrator says, "They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable" (113). Thus, Sula's decision to sleep with white men was seen as a racial statement. In effect, Sula's society believed that she was making a statement that African-American men were not good enough for her. It was perceived as a sign that Sula did not appreciate or feel pride in her African-American heritage.

Thus, the question becomes why did Sula sleep with white men? Was she really attempting to shun her own culture? Did she

do it for the simple shock value? The actual answer connects back to Sula's definition of herself outside of the walls of race. Through her sexual behavior it is clear that Sula only views herself as a human being. She does not associate a color to her humanness. Thus, being plainly human, why not sleep with whomever she chooses whether that person is white or black? Sula does not listen to the decree of authority and the master narrative which artificially claims that blacks and whites should remain sexually separate. Sula lives and defines herself outside this power structure and consequently she disrupts and challenges it. The citizens of the town only become so outraged by Sula's behavior because it threatens all of their measures of normalcy and predictability. In this way, Sula revels in a freedom which is lost to all those who follow the master narrative and define themselves according to their race.

Janie and Sula also search for authentic existence outside of the master narrative in terms of gender. Both women struggle to define themselves as something other than merely female. Their struggles are marked and tracked against those women who follow a more traditional model of womanhood. That is, Janie searches for definition, as a woman, in contrast to the definition imposed on her by her grandmother. While Sula searches for definition away from the traditional feminine model as displayed by Nel. Their struggles differ, however, as Janie experiences significantly more trouble asserting herself and sounding her voice because she has more ties and compassion to the traditional model of womanhood than Sula.

Let us first discuss Janie and her journey away from the standards to which her grandmother attempts to make her conform. Janie's grandmother, being a former slave, desires Janie to fulfill the dreams and goals which slavery denied her. She remarks, "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (15). As a consequence of this mentality, her grandmother imposes upon Janie all of her values and standards of African-American womanhood. She wants Janie to marry a rich man-regardless of the love interest-have children, and simply live in the existing power structure of gender. As a former slave, Janie's grandmother resigns herself to the status quo of the master narrative and basically wants Janie to live according to the same narrative. She says,

So you don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh?...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. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd. (14)

It seems as though Janie's grandmother is pushing her fate on to Janie thus not allowing her to fulfill her grandmother's dreams. But, in actuality, her grandmother does think that she is allowing and promoting Janie to live a life different and better than her own. Janie's grandmother believes that if Janie would only marry a wealthy and upstanding man that she could then prove to society that she is a refined African-American woman. Her grandmother also seems to buy into the notion that Janie can only find her pulpit and preach her sermon as a middle-class African-American woman.

Janie does not believe in her grandmother's theories about womanhood or marriage. She wants to find physical and emotional love with a man. Janie silently obeys her grandmother's narrative. After all, Janie loves her. Seeing that her grandmother is old and that she has lived through so much heartbreak and sorrow, Janie simply did not have the heart to violently evade her wishes. Later in her lifetime, Janie comes to realize that she hated her grandmother for the rules of behavior which she strongly urged her to follow. Janie realizes that she lived her life according to her grandmother's authority and not her own. It was a struggle for Janie to find her personal voice because her grandmother's voice always interfered. The narrator remarks, "She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from her all these years under a cloak of pity. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love" (85). Regardless of her hidden feelings, however, Janie ultimately complies with her grandmother's will and unhappily marries both Logan and Joe.

Thus, it was obviously difficult for Janie to actualize her own voice against the voice of authority represented through her grandmother. In fact, throughout much of Hurston's novel, the reader is attuned to Janie's struggle to speak-out and defend herself as a woman. In part, the novel actually illustrates the series of "silent rebellions" which Janie must overcome in order to find an existence outside of the definition of her gender. These "silent rebellions" are most clearly seen in Janie's relationships with her husband, Joe. Joe expects Janie to simply be his wife and to perform all the duties of a good wife. Thus, he expects Janie to cook, clean, wash clothes, run errands, and entertain. Joe places upon Janie all

the definitions of womanhood, and unfortunately, for the better part of their marriage, Janie conforms to the definition.

Eventually, however, as she does with her grandmother, Janie does lament the loss of her voice and the sense of helplessness she feels as Joe's wife. After one of Joe's commands Janie remarks, "People ought to have regard for helpless things. But Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh hit along" (54). Although she consciously wants to exert her voice, Janie cannot find the courage and consequently she still resigns herself to Joe's views and opinions. She agrees to Joe's will with her body, but not with her mind. Thus Janie does not express or share with Joe her true feelings and emotions. Instead, she locks them up inside and allows Joe to impose his narrative upon her. She lets Joe define and categorize her as only a woman. The narrator remarks on Janie's feelings saying,

She [Janie] 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 heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. (68)

Janie did, however, ultimately find that man with whom she could share her voice and thus begin her life outside of the definitions of her womanhood.

Even before she meets Tea Cake, Janie actively undertakes and successfully wins the battle to find an existence outside of her gender. She begins this battle with Joe upon finding the courage to share her voice with him and threaten his manhood and power. Janie first usurps Joe's command over her when she interrupts him as he is stereotyping women with his friends. Janie interrupts saying,

He [God] told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens. (71)

Janie further succeeds in striking back against Joe through emasculation when she remarks on his age and declining sexual prowess. She says to him, "Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (75). Thus, through these examples, it is clear that Janie does eventually es-

cape the definitions and boundaries of her gender as she asserts her voice loud and clear against Joe and metaphorically against her grandmother and the master narrative. She takes the first step towards living authentically.

Janie completes the struggle to find authentic existence as she enters into a relationship with Tea Cake. With Tea Cake, Janie finally experiences life as she desires. She is, at last, able to break free of the chains which her grandmother placed on her. As she says, "Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (108). Janie lives with Tea Cake according to her own rules and without regard to the opinions of society and authority. For the first time in her life, Janie lives outside of the boundaries of the master narrative in both race and gender. She is able to live with such freedom with Tea Cake because he allows Janie to experience life as a natural and impulsive product of nature. He gives Janie the one thing she wants out of life, love. Tea Cake lets Janie love him and in return he loves her. Janie is able to become a sexual being. Through Tea Cake, Janie blooms like a pear tree just as she fantasized about in her youth. Janie's dream becomes the truth as she lives the narrator's wisdom, "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is truth" (1). With Tea Cake, Janie remembers and lives everything she never wanted to forget. Tea Cake teaches Janie the "maiden language" again. He teaches Janie the language of love, desire, and happiness which her grandmother stripped away by clouding Janie's existence with the dictates of the master narrative. At last, Janie is able to call herself a woman according to her own definition and not someone else's.

Sula, however, differs from Janie as she exhibits no inhibitions or qualms about asserting her will and voice upon those around her. Instead, it seems as though Sula's defiance of the narrative comes more naturally to her character. Sula, like Janie, has to face the same demands of society which believed that she should adhere to the traditional principals of African-American womanhood. Eva represents these societal beliefs as she pleads with Sula to settle down with a husband and raise children, but Sula flatly refuses to listen. She plainly tells Eva to "shut her mouth." Unlike Janie, Sula only looks out for herself and her own happiness. She never allows anyone else's voice to be heard above her own. Sula simply does not have the same compassion to appease those around her and, consequently, it is easier for her to live by her own definitions than is was for Janie.

It was also easier for Sula to live according to a new model of feminine existence because she could always concretely measure her life against Nel's. Nel provides Sula with an example of what she did not want her life to become. In this way, Nel provides the catalyst by which Sula's life takes its shape and course. Growing up together as best of friends, Nel and Sula could have turned out identically as adults; the same options were open to both of them. They could have both explored the world, gone to college, and lived a carefree life. Nel and Sula, however, take different paths in life—Nel stays in Ohio and raises a family while Sula went off to see the world. Their lives became diametrically opposed. As a consequence of their different lifestyles, Sula uses Nel's life as a clear and defined example of what she did not want to be. As Janie's grandmother represents authority for Janie, Nel represents authority for Sula. Sula does not aspire to be the good wife and polite woman that Nel is. Thus, Sula is overtly offensive to her family and friends. Sula does not want to put anyone's demands or opinions above her own as Nel is forced to do as a wife and mother. Thus, Sula lives to prove that the qualities women can be more than the ideals embodied by Nel.

Sula lives so vehemently against Nel's lifestyle because Nel personally saddens her. As children, Sula felt that Nel was the only person who believed in her and had no expectations of her. As children, Sula and Nel existed free, unconstrained and undefined. Thus, when Nel chooses to live with the backing of authority as an adult, Sula sees this as a waste of a life. Sula explains this, saying,

Now Nel was one of them. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark and dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snakes own breath below. Their eyes so intent on the wayward stranger who trips into their net. Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall. (120)

Sula becomes a rebel to show the world that, while Nel might have sold out to authority, she refuses. Sula wants to show the town that she is first and foremost an individual human being. Not an African-American or a woman, but simply a human being. As a human, she has the option to satisfy her earthly desires above those of anyone else. Using this logic, Sula explains to Nel why she slept with

her husband saying, "There was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144). Nel's feelings did not enter into Sula's consciousness as she slept with her husband. She was only concerned with exercising her power of choice as a human being. The rules of womanhood and friendship did not exist.

But did Sula ultimately gain anything from her selfishness which gave her the autonomy to define herself outside of her gender and race? Like Nel, did her dream become her truth? As Sula understands it, she does fulfill a dream. Sula lived with energy, enthusiasm and authenticity. Unlike Nel, who is afraid to take the fall and experience life fully alive, Sula lives completely. She exists completely on her own beyond the periphery of the master narrative. Like Janie, who became her dream as she actualized into a sexual and vocal being, Sula became the dream when she dies. Sula dies having lived every moment of her life with passion and fervor. She says before she dies, "Me, I'm going down like a one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (143). Sula also lives her dream, she leaves a legacy behind after she dies. She leaves all the woman of the world an alternative example of how to live their lives with freedom. Sula thinks that her philosophies on life will be understood as a new generation learns and follows her lore and legacy. She believes that people will love her once they let go of the authority which limits their existence. Sula says,

Oh they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me. After all the old women have lain with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck the white ones; when all the black women kiss the black one...then there'll be little love left over for me. (145)

Once society is filled with people who exist simply to live and to satisfy their desires, no matter how perverse those desires might be, then everyone will come to understand Sula and the path she took in her life. Then, finally, Sula's dream will become truth.

Clearly, both Hurston and Morrison are successful in presenting Janie and Sula as characters who actively defy the limits of race and gender that are placed upon them by the master narrative. In so doing, Hurston and Morrison present a new model of feminine existence. Janie and Sula are examples of new women; their existences lie out-of-reach from authoritative definition. The true soul and essence of their beings cannot be summarized by their blackness or their femininity. They exist authentically within. They are

not just women nor are they just African-Americans. Instead, they are mothers, daughters, wives, students, lovers, and spirits because Janie and Sula are in control they cannot be labeled, stereotyped or predicted. In this way, Janie and Sula usurp the base power of the master narrative and live dangerously free as new women outside of its grasp.

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