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Stories to the Remote Reader: Shaping Cultural Narratives in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and
Their Eyes Were Watching God

About three-fourths of the way through Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Marie visits Shanghai seeking answers. She encounters shadows of her family history that, thus far, have been only words from her Chinese-born mother and her friend, Ai-ming, who had taken refuge in Marie's childhood home in Canada shortly after the Tiananmen Square protests. Marie wanders the city, meeting her father's acquaintances and gathering relics of his past while trying to locate Ai-ming, whose circumstances are unknown. As she receives a recording of her father playing piano, Marie remembers something Ai-ming once said to her: "*I assumed that when the story finished, life would continue and I would go back to being myself. But it wasn't true. The stories got longer and longer, and I got smaller and smaller. When I told Big Mother this, she laughed her head off. 'But that's how the world is, isn't it?'*" (Thien 303). Marie does not fly halfway across the world to apply meaning to the stories she has already heard; instead, the stories *supply* meaning to people and objects who are otherwise shrouded by silence and the passing of time. Such is the way that storytelling sifts through the layers of time, space, and meaning to expose the depth and enormity of the world and of a single human soul. Specifically, the novels *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by Madeleine Thien and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston invite readers through a process of learning how to recognize the patterns of storytelling within unfamiliar sociocultural frameworks by exploring

the assumptions imposed upon the narrator by other characters as well as the assumptions that audiences bring to their reading experience. Furthermore, within their respective stories, the authors effectively model the proposed processes of meaning-making through the characters' distinctive expressions of art while simultaneously accentuating the freedom this creativity grants.

Though *Do Not Say* and *Their Eyes* inhabit two distinct cultures in different parts of the world, both demonstrate a common compulsion to share stories relevant to their respective cultural narratives. Thien's novel follows two Chinese families through multiple generations beginning in the first half of the twentieth century to the present day, telling the story of how family members with varied talents (e.g. poetry, music, and mathematics) navigate the unstable sociopolitical climate of the Cultural Revolution before, during, and after the height of its influence. Hurston, on the other hand, relates the history of Janie Crawford and her experiences being a complex black woman in a segregated America. Most white readers of these novels quickly discover that the scenes described are far more traumatic than anything they will experience in their lives, and though both stories elicit sympathy for the characters, some would argue that only those who have physically experienced traumas of those capacities can truly understand the weight of those oppressive forces. In other words, only the people who lived through the Cultural Revolution or segregated America can truly empathize with the characters in the novels. However, what is the purpose of Thien and Hurston writing their novels at all if the expected audience cannot hope to understand the trauma experienced by real people in these characters' situations? What is the purpose of listening to others and even offering one's own story if, at the deepest level, no one will care? Both authors demonstrate how passing stories matters not only for the purpose of selling their books, but also within the worlds they create.

Storytelling creates the framework under which the novels progress; they connect the generations throughout *Do Not Say* and provide a source for the narrative in *Their Eyes* through Janie's sharing of her life story. Additionally, the ways characters listen to and interpret stories affect their perceptions of themselves in the world, which reflect the paths they choose as the narratives move forward.

Though many readers may not be Chinese or black, both novels are written predominantly in the tradition of the cultures they inhabit. Both authors therefore must teach their audiences how to read their stories, though they must do so without being overly didactic. Naturally, a delicately crafted intimacy with the characters establishes a connection between the reader and the story. None of the characters in either book drastically changes the world, but rather their ambitions convey simple and uniquely human qualities: the desire to create, to express oneself, to share joys and sorrows with others. Early in the novels, neither readers nor characters fully realize that their ambitions should not be taken for granted, and the readers experience the crushing disappointments of reality alongside the characters. Moreover, in addition to this developed intimacy, both authors acquaint readers with their characters by setting up opening scenes that illustrate the characters' lives with an image similar to what readers might already expect. *Do Not Say* initially creates an image of a Chinese-Canadian mother and daughter living a quiet life in their humble home. The mother is strict and slightly distant, and the daughter—Marie—is considerably more influenced by the Western culture in which she has grown up. *Their Eyes* drops the reader in a black community in which women are gossiping on the porch about the return of one Janie Crawford from her wild escapade with a man whose reputation is questionable. So far, the audience is not experiencing substantial culture shock (possibly aside from the thick dialect of Hurston's writing style) and the reader might even

expect these circumstances. However, after introducing small components of the characters' lives, both authors introduce a significant time lapse as though to emphasize the pertinence of more extensive background knowledge, or as if they decide it is necessary to start over from the beginning. In *Do Not Say*, this lapse goes back a couple generations—highlighting the difference between a pre-Revolution era and its subsequent consequences—while *Their Eyes* rewinds to the storyteller's childhood. Neither transition intends to startle the reader, and thus the authors begin to ease readers into a new frame of mind that informs the practices readers use to follow the rest of the story. This structure offers the authors a space to help readers deconstruct their initial assumptions as layers of complexity are added to the original image supplied in the opening scenes. Furthermore, the realizations intended for the reader are modeled through the depiction of unjust stereotypes imposed on the characters.

In both novels, culture and circumstances impact how the characters react to different people and events. There is a delicate balance between the influences of nature and nurture—the soul that produces the personality and the environment which informs everything the characters know. In *Do Not Say*, Marie wonders, “Would I still be the same person if I woke up in a different language and another existence?” (88-89). Alternatively, would Janie make the same choices under a different social status? Did Zhuli choose to love music or was she inherently predisposed to dedicate her life to it? Both sides of each coin are necessary to examine these individuals as multi-dimensional beings limited by the constraints of their personal character and circumstances. In any case, to comprehend the full effect of Thien's and Hurston's storytelling on the readers' perceptions of the characters, it is important to recognize the stereotypes attributed to these characters.

Equally critical to understanding how assumptions are broken is an understanding of how they are formed. While some who harbor prejudices based on stereotypes fully understand the source of their motives—whether they believe themselves to be right or they intentionally manipulate others for power—most people form and act upon their understanding of stereotypes unconsciously. In psychology, this behavior falls under the realm of implicit social cognition, which explores “cognitive processes that occur outside of conscious awareness or conscious control in relation to social psychological constructs—attitudes, stereotypes, and self-concepts” (Nosek et al.). Nosek describes four factors that may contribute to an individual’s unconscious assumptions: motivation (self-preservation takes precedence to thoughtful objectivity), opportunity (the reaction time afforded to the individual), ability (weakness of willpower, whether from character or oppressive forces), and awareness (the individual is simply unaware). Considering the context of oppression in *Do Not Say* and *Their Eyes*, motivation becomes a recurring factor that readers should consider when examining characters and groups on the wrong side of the story, though the other three factors certainly contribute as well. Though no psychological lens ever excuses prejudice and oppression, it helps readers develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social atmospheres that define the boundaries of the characters’ freedoms and limitations.

Thien and Hurston set their characters in a time and place where stereotypes are binding; upper-class Chinese citizens are self-serving, and blacks are less than human. Incredibly, the majority cultures have wholly bought in to these stereotypes. Twenty-first century readers may easily condemn these oppressive behaviors given their temporal, spatial, and cultural distance from the settings. However, at the same time, readers should recognize that this distance complicates their perception of the line between the characters’ conscious racism or classism and

the social expectations that the characters subconsciously espouse as a result of cultural influence. Particularly in these two novels, the characters lacking power are manipulated within a larger system that sets their personal interest in opposition to one another for the benefit of the system itself. While some become perpetrators for their personal benefit, many of the characters are a result of their circumstances—not as a mere excuse, in which they feel helplessly bound by their circumstances, but rather their attempts to maintain control over their lives are not as important to their immediate circumstances as the dominating influence of larger power structures. However, these larger systems are so far beyond the characters' control that any act of defiance against them could be futile or even dangerous.

Unsurprisingly, the characters' reactions to their threatening circumstances reflect the behavior of individuals under oppression. According to the theory of implicit social cognition, people in oppressed situations often lack both the motivation and opportunity to perceive the source of their behavior. Consequently, such people turn against their neighbors to assert power and feel a sense of control over their circumstances. Similarly, just as people might look for easy solutions to gain control, stereotypes help people categorize the world in terms they can understand. To some extent, everyone must make judgments and create categories in order to make sense of the world, which is pragmatically made concrete through written notations of language, mathematics, music, etc. Complex ideas which have insinuations for how the self and others are perceived—class, race, gender—involve too many variations for people to reevaluate over and over again with every person they meet. Because of the effort required, many people overcompensate for ambiguity by making stereotypic judgments, which larger power structures can use to guide people's assumptions and, ultimately, anticipate the reactions of the masses. However, Thien suggests in an interview that this behavior is not confined to people under

oppression, commenting on the irony behind self-imposed restrictions even within a free nation: “North America is fascinating because artists can be tempted to impose limitations on themselves. Or sometimes the structures we inhabit, what Doris Lessing called the prisons we choose to live inside, are the most difficult to see” (Chariandy). Though she speaks in the context of art, her explanation illustrates how human nature is content to loiter safely within defined boundaries, blind to its own self-imposed limitations. In *Do Not Say*, with both political instability and natural human tendency in their favor, the Party relies on the perpetuation of stereotypes and the simplification of art and history to unify their people’s minds to think and act predictably, reducing threats of opposition and establishing the Party as the one credible source of truth. As the Party creates a vocabulary for its cause, the people are instructed to pledge their trust to the government, who in turn promises a life of comfort and mental simplicity.

One of the first characteristics of Chinese culture that a Westerner might question is the family dynamics that provide the characters a context for understanding themselves and their position. The reader quickly finds it not uncommon for multiple generations and multiple branches of family to live in the same household; at any given point, Big Mother Knife’s household might consist of her husband, her sister and her husband, three sons, and a niece. Perhaps because family has such a strong influence on identity in a Chinese context, one family member’s lack of allegiance to the Party might be enough to make the whole family a threat to the Cultural Revolution. Thus, as characters are forced to write denunciations for their parents and siblings and cousins, the Party actually reeducates them on familial identity; instead of participating as a single family unit, the whole nation of China collectively becomes one family with one allegiance. Nevertheless, the Party requires much more than a half-hearted denunciation to gain its trust; Zhuli refers to her lineage as “a bloodline, a touch, a virus” that infects her status

and identifies her as a target to revolutionaries (253). The process of writing denunciations in this era is perpetual; in order to effectively deconstruct the traditional Chinese family structure, these denunciations are required so that individuals might adopt a habitual inclination to prioritize the country over the family unit, which is a massive undertaking on behalf of the Party (which presents another instance of people lacking motivation to pursue self-awareness in favor of self-preservation). Nonetheless, even these cultural circumstances do not exempt many from the deeply human instinct of self-preservation, resulting in familial betrayal and shifting loyalties that favor the Party. Western readers would have trouble identifying the significance of these denunciations if Thien had not established family dynamics as she did. As the novel progresses, the importance of national unity becomes increasingly evident as the citizens of China are molded to accommodate a set of ideas and opinions that mimic the loyalty they owe to their own immediate families.

The history and status of the Chinese family certainly influences individuals' self-perceptions, though not in the overgeneralized way that the Party assumes. The fact that an individual's family member is a counter-revolutionary does not necessarily suggest that the individual shares the same views. Conclusions cannot be determined based on a linear compilation of historical data, which Thien models in her novel through the Book of Records. In an interview with *Literary Hub*, Thien remarks that

records are often kept by the conquerors or perpetrators, as a kind of documentation of power and efficiency, and very disturbingly, of possession of people and lives. They are a record of particular attempts to organize the world. Files can be opened and closed, giving the record keepers the catastrophic illusion that they have every right to control the beginning and end of narratives (Chariandy).

The irony in its name, the Book of Records, points to the dissonance between its formal title and the purpose prescribed to it; though its name suggests an official document full of factual data, the pages relate the fictional story of the adventures of Da-wei and May Fourth. When Wen the Dreamer begins his project, he simply copies chapters as a gift to his future wife, Swirl. He faithfully embarks on a search for each individual chapter of the original, mirroring the work of a collector of historical data, which also presents an irony in light of Wen's identity as a poet. Yet, the Book of Records does not remain merely a work of copied fiction; when he cannot find any more chapters, Wen the Dreamer continues in its tradition by allowing it to evolve into a work of creative nonfiction, and he uses the record to document indirectly his own family history. The Book of Records blurs the boundaries of objective fact and genre as an expression of subjective experience. However, it serves as only one example of the disillusionment of non-complexity and linearity; all throughout her novel, Thien challenges the assumption that one story or idea can offer a comprehensive or objective portrayal of reality. Nevertheless, the Party attempts to perpetuate this perception of objective reality, undertaking the great challenge of navigating the whole population of China through one narrative. If the Party wants to succeed, no one can doubt its sovereignty, and so they simplify the narrative of China past and present to guarantee ideological understanding and acceptance from both the uneducated as well as higher-status citizens seeking an easy path to power. The Party provides categories, narratives, and even language in a tidy package, relying on the people's propensity toward simplicity to gain sociopolitical momentum.

However, the main characters in *Do Not Say* are educated in a practice of meaning-making that is more complex than daily observation. For these characters, one of the main sources of outside narrative emerges through music. Specifically, the connections in storytelling

and music rely on the ways in which people before them have established a tradition from which future generations formulate a basis of meaning. For example, Sparrow taps the core of this idea when offering advice to his cousin about her Ravel piece: “It’s a matter of finding the simple in the complex, rather than the complex in the complex, do you understand what I mean?” (115). Not only do Sparrow and the other musicians have the motive and patience to continually make meaning every day, but Sparrow here describes a strategy for approaching complexity as it pertains to music. In these terms, complexity is not a vague, unattainable ideal accessible only to lofty intellectuals or those of financial means as Party propaganda would suggest. Sparrow and his cousin, Zhuli, happen to be thoroughly practiced in their arts, but as they work toward improvement, they can still return to the fundamentals of music—individual notes and rhythms—to make meaning out of complexity.

In *Their Eyes*, Janie Crawford also inherits the status of her heritage, though the consequences unravel differently in her own cultural context. Most obviously, Janie suffers all the implications of being a black American in the early twentieth century. However, throughout most of the novel, the stereotypes imposed upon her are not from white people, but rather people of her own race (which is not to suggest that prejudices from white characters are completely absent or do not exist in Janie’s world outside of the story she tells, but rather that her narrative focuses its attention primarily on social dynamics within black communities). Her specific family history is revealed through Nanny, the most influential adult in her life, and this story provides context for the stigmas she continually fights throughout the novel. Being born into slavery and having lived a life of unprovoked beatings and rape, Nanny has her share of traumatic experiences. Quite nobly, Nanny wishes Janie all the securities she never had, such as

protection in a marriage and the opportunity to sit on the porch like the white women. Even so, she inadvertently compresses all of Janie into a stereotype:

Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by the storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered. ... Her eyes didn't bore and pierce. They diffused and melted Janie, the room and the world into one comprehension (Hurston 12).

In Nanny's eyes, Janie's only chance for happiness is to place her in circumstances where she has respectability and security. To Nanny's credit, she and Janie grew up in different social climates; the opportunities that Nanny needed under the oppression of slavery are reflected in her desires for Janie's future. Janie, born under improved circumstances, certainly has freedoms and privileges that Nanny never imagined. However, Janie can still be set apart from the other characters of her generation, which leads readers to believe that her distance from slavery is not the only contributing factor to Janie's intellectual curiosity.

Nanny tells Janie, "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways" (Hurston 16). Nanny appears to correctly observe that there is no way to predict or prepare for the future as a person of color; their culture and lineage have been distorted by oppression, and they must navigate life as an unnatural, uncharted territory without the assistance of any external structure. Consistent with the attitude of humans in community, black people begin constructing their social systems and individually asserting their control where they can—another implicit act of self-preservation. The larger power structure continues to be white America, a force which dominates most literature by black authors in Hurston's time. However, white America is not the focus of Hurston's novel, and instead, she boldly permits Janie to tell her story authentically. Janie, being a product of two

racess, stands out in the eyes of the black community with the tone of her skin and the quality of her hair—contributing to the influence of her natural beauty—and consequently she is granted a tailored social status by the people in her town. Janie herself is indifferent toward the particularities of her genetics; she is more concerned with her search for self-revelation and personal agency. However, the stereotypes imposed by her neighbors trap her in situations where she is objectified for the wealth she symbolizes to them.

Janie intrigues her readers because she stands at a distance from the rest of the community, though not for the reasons the townspeople would perceive. Janie’s role as the narrator offers unrestricted insight into her observations and reactions, which adds layers to her character from a reader’s perspective that her fellow townspeople cannot access. Janie feels drawn to describe her experiences in words, so she takes all that she knows and applies it to experiences that she accumulates in an exercise of self-teaching: “Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (Hurston 32). Her learning methods echo the tradition of call-and-response, except she has no external person to fulfill the latter role. Instead, she teaches herself to respond to her own calls and questions, thus producing a strategy for making meaning and empowering her to trust in her capabilities. However, to critics, Janie’s poetic internal dialogue represents an inauthentic and condescending tone because she both inhabits the thick dialect of a black American and speaks the eloquent vernacular of a white intellectual. Richard Wright, who was Hurston’s contemporary and a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, faulted Hurston with “recreating minstrelsy” through her intellectual approach (qtd. in Carby 29). Given her privileged educational background, can Hurston possibly leverage both intellect and native culture to produce an authentic black narrative? Scholar Hazel V. Carby would argue that Janie shares her story only with Phoeby

instead of the whole community because they lack the intellectual foundation to empathize with her linguistically sophisticated thinking (33). Carby argues that “oral language is represented as a ‘weapon,’ a means for destruction and fragmentation of the self rather than a cultural form that preserves a holistic personal and social identity” (32-33). However, Janie’s eloquent narrative does not necessarily represent a superior white influence; rather, it serves to acknowledge the human flaw that supersedes race—the perversion of a neutral cultural entity utilized in an attempt to secure some degree of power within a context of uncertainty. Oppressed communities cannot be exempt from this characteristic, though rather than condemning Janie’s community through negative connotations, Hurston illuminates the steadfast consistency of their humanity. In any case, a lack of knowledge on behalf of black communities cannot be helped, but even this uncovers the community’s parallels with majority culture; the townspeople do not understand how to accept Janie for herself because they cannot see beyond the curiosities of her beauty and stature. Perhaps they do not possess the same desire to make meaning of the world, but because they are already established in community (unlike Janie), they have no immediate need for it. Being an outsider, Janie only retains the life she has in her mind. Thus, her dedication to building knowledge upon experiences through words communicates Janie’s determination for agency in spite of her lack of material grounding in her culture.

In both novels, these processes of making meaning are not chaotic; ideas do not randomly assemble and suddenly become complex, but they derive from a combination of a curiosity pursued by the character and the structure of learning that has been passed on through family and culture. Specifically, *Do Not Say* allows flexibility within this structure of learning; poetry, numbers, and music pursue similar ends through inherently diverse means. Thien capitalizes her creative freedom to translate the structure of storytelling into terms of classical music, wherein

the theme must be understood first before one can begin to comprehend the variation. For example, in Glenn Gould's rendition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the untrained ear might be tempted to dismiss the piece as chaotic or non-cohesive, yet Bach composed with an approach similar to Thien's by easing the listener into the piece slowly. Even a great composer such as Bach is pulling inspiration from his own interpretation of the world, which takes form through music in this piece; he integrates his own creative expression and interpretation with his underlying theme, building complexity and intensity to a climax. Though the musicians of *Do Not Say* are indeed heavily influenced by their heritage, the novel also illustrates the characters as unique individuals with personal interests, motivations, and aspirations. They allow themselves to be influenced by Bach's piece, providing them with a medium through which they can understand the world outside of their own family history and identity. Zhuli describes this expanding complexity in relation to her understanding of the physical world:

But what was music? Every note could only be understood by its relation to those around it. Merged, they made new sounds, new colours, a new resonance or dissonance, a stability or rupture. Inside the pure tone of C was a ladder of rich overtones as well as the echoes of other Cs, like a man wearing many suits of clothes, or a grandmother carrying all her memories inside her (189).

Here, Zhuli suggests a simultaneous restriction and freedom that demonstrates the logic behind meaning-making; the notation on a page and even the physical sound waves that travel from the source to the ear are bound by rules at the most basic level. "A man wearing many suits of clothes" does not alter the fabric of the clothes, nor does he try to stick his arms through the pant legs, but rather he dresses himself in an order of his own choosing. As complexity develops,

more patterns emerge and direct how certain pieces should fit together, making the process of interpretation more logical—if also individualized—than chaotic.

The main difference between the storytelling in *Their Eyes* and *Do Not Say* is that while Sparrow, Zhuli, and Kai are all parts of the story, Janie *is* the living, breathing story. In other words, while *Do Not Say* encompasses the scope of multiple perspectives to convey the story that Thien needs to share, *Their Eyes* is structured by the narrative that Janie shapes in her mind, which is accessible only to Phoeby and readers of the novel. Still, both novels' approaches to narrative scope, whether through breadth or depth, equal in relevance when understanding how people effectively tell stories. In *Do Not Say*, Thien plays with the etymology of the Chinese word *yǔ*, which means both “room” and “universe,” illustrating an intrinsic connection between the small and the large (457). She draws similar connections to the perceived physical space of a city: “Shanghai seemed, like a library or even a single book, to hold a universe within itself” (295). The large cannot exist without the small, and the small must necessarily collaborate to form the large. Stories on every level throughout the narrative are relevant to the context of any given story, but ultimately the angle and perspective is left to the discretion of storytellers to mold according to their channel of meaning-making. Both Thien and Hurston introduce readers to creative, unique characters to offer an example of how they view a process of interpreting the world in the context of their respective cultures, contributing to the intent to teaching readers how to read their stories. In each novel, the authors describe in depth the ways in which the characters react and interpret the events surrounding them, which develops empathy for those characters even if the readers would not necessarily choose the same paths. Most evidently in *Do Not Say*, the three main musicians—Sparrow, Zhuli, and Kai—interpret their culture and emotions through the lens of music. Yet, even within this specific genre, these three differ in

their processes of interpretation and how they view themselves in their self-defined roles varies according to their understanding of music.

Out of the three, Kai appears to place the most emphasis on talent and opportunity; he loves and feels music deeply, and he feels responsible for sharing that beauty with the world. At the most basic level, music is the means by which he climbs the societal ladder. His devotion to music carries him a long way from his lowly upbringing to a lofty status as renowned pianist, and that gratitude manifests itself through Kai's interpretation of the music he performs. Even among a group of trained pianists, his talent emanates as an extension of himself. However, he has endured every challenge with the help of his talent; when pressed too far, he finds that his reliance on music achieves only material ends. When the Party cracks down, Kai folds, and he subjects himself to performing shallow, Party-approved music to satisfy his immediate need for security. He continually clings to music as a lifeline to his political safety, just as he has previously, though the patriotic music he plays no longer embodies his identity and talent. As he continues to dress in this false identity, Kai becomes increasingly distant to the narrative perspective. By the end of this era of the novel, his narrative point of view is notably missed, considering he is one of the main three characters in this section of the story and the father of Marie. Yet, he continues to pursue revolutionary music under the disillusionment that the expression is the same. Zhuli astutely identifies this subtlety in Kai:

She wanted to ask him how he could acquiesce on the surface and not be compromised inside. You could not play revolutionary music, truly revolutionary music, if you were a coward in your heart. You could not play if your hands, your wrists, your arms were not free. Every note would be abject, weak, a lie. Every note would reveal you. Or perhaps

she was wrong and Kai was right. Maybe, no matter his or her convictions, a great musician, a true genius, could play any piece and be believed (Thien 205).

However, such an attitude misrepresents the purpose of sharing stories and art, which explores the complexity of nature and pursues expression in capacities accessible through creativity.

Using art as a pretense to achieve political ends reduces it to a fact to be regarded as nothing more than a sentence or a slogan. Kai becomes distant because he no longer has a story of significance to tell; he has allowed himself to be molded into the story of the Party, believing his position to be a temporary phase, but he is mistaken to think that one day he could pick up where he left off. His story loses momentum alongside the Party's, and he does not realize for a long time that his life has become stagnant.

Sparrow, another main character, finds his natural talent not in performing but in composing:

At a very early age ... he had known that he would not be a performer, he did not have the *genius of interpretation*, even if he played well enough. Sparrow's gifts were of a different temperament. There was music inside him, it was as simple, inexplicable and exhilarating as that. Music overflowed from everything he saw. If it ended, he would have no idea how to make sense of the world [emphasis mine] (Thien 224).

Unlike Kai's, Sparrow's participation in music appears passive; instead of perceiving himself as a creator of music, he understands music as a timeless constant, already existing in the world, passing through him as a channel into physical form. He reveres the great composers that preceded him—Bach, Stravinsky, etc.—yet he does not consciously try to inhabit the same realm of genius, perhaps because he does not perceive himself as the creator of music as much as a messenger. He describes his muse as such: “Each morning when he woke, he heard these pieces

like vanishing noise on the street, and he wanted to weep over the music he had lost” (120). His dedication to music is a responsibility he owes to it, and he believes that if he falls short, his presence in the world is trivial. Sparrow does not bear one aggressive bone in his body; similar to how he approaches music, he never attempts to control his circumstances or surroundings. When the Party subdues his creative channel, his passive self-perception transforms him into the only alternative role he can conceive: the Bird of Quiet. More than once, other characters confront Sparrow for falsely perceiving himself to be invisible: “Does he think that this life doesn’t matter? Does he really believe that he can carry on as if he is invisible?” (427). Sparrow’s tragedy is his inability to see himself as others see him. He is deeply loved by his wife and daughter, as well as the reader, but he feels thinly anchored to the world with the loss of music and allows himself to wither away without perceiving any consequence.

Zhuli perhaps has the most intricate and vivid process of making meaning in which she simply forgets herself entirely to music. Whereas Sparrow interprets through composition, Zhuli masterfully transforms the notation on the page into sound. As she describes, “She envied the composer’s intellect, the observant passion that Sparrow possessed, and wished to cultivate it within herself, but it was impossible. She was a performer, a transparent glass giving shape to water, nothing more than a glass” (138). Nonetheless, the reader understands that Zhuli’s wisdom surpasses the pure intellect she desires, perhaps by the very acknowledgement that clarity and truth do not arise from within herself. In this mentality, she becomes subservient to music, listening with the intention of learning to more authentically understand. Though she has extraordinary talent from the beginning, the reader perceives development in her understanding of music during the short time frame of her narrative. The younger, optimistic Zhuli shows more concern for the present—wary of the unchangeable past in favor of the more controllable future

(129). Yet, as social pressure from Party propaganda prompts her to reevaluate her own opinions, she turns back to her understanding of music as a foundation for understanding the world. In times of crisis, Kai clings to the physical institution of music, and Sparrow offers his quiet as a sacrifice for his loyalty to the purity of music; meanwhile, Zhuli suffuses herself in it as both a source for understanding as well as a coping mechanism. Consequently, her observations of a musician's relationship to music are among the most profound. This dedication is so critical to her identity that she chooses to take her own life rather than break her loyalty to it. Her essence lingers like a ghost even after her death, following the other characters throughout their lives: "Zhuli was sitting on the edge of the mat, so alive it seemed as if [Sparrow] and Kai were the illusion" (280). Her spirit pervades the novel just as music pervades silence, like it resurfaces in the Bird of Quiet through his last composition, *The Sun Shines on the People's Square*. While Kai and Sparrow most feared that the music in their heads would become silent, the developed Zhuli simply does not believe in a world without music. Can music embody meaning if its impact is limited to the moment that sound reaches the listener's ears?

Following her death, an apparition of Zhuli says, "The only life that matters is in your own mind. The only truth is one that lives invisibly, *that waits even after you close the book*. Silence, too, is a kind of music. Silence will last [emphasis mine]" (280). Not only is silence a necessary facet of music, but her observation of the very nature of music deconstructs the idea that music exists only through sound. Perhaps music encompasses both sound and the lack of sound, which the composer uses to navigate the story within the music to embody its purpose. Throughout the novel, Thien makes the rhetorical decision to personify the idea of quiet, as though it is a distinct presence that the characters experience. Later, after Sparrow gives up music, he transforms into the Bird of Quiet—a title which superficially implies that he has been

emptied of his music and passion for life. Sparrow fails to identify as anything other than an empty vessel during this time, and he must now live daily having lost what he previously feared to lose most in the world. However, Zhuli's definition of silence offers a hope that Sparrow never quite grasps; his own daughter notices hints of a kind of grace within him despite knowing little about his past. Sparrow's quiet does not make him invisible, as he would believe, but rather he becomes another version of himself like another movement in a symphony. He is still loved by others, and he reciprocates love in the ways he knows how. Some part of him still connects him to his identity as an artist; though he increasingly loses his physical sense of self, he never compromises his core humanity. Like the other musicians, his temperament and decisions are highly influenced by the value he applies to his own authenticity revealed through his narrative and music.

Though Janie functions through a different medium in *Their Eyes*, the same metaphor still applies to her perception of herself: is she, like Zhuli, merely the glass holding the water, or does she, like Sparrow, adopt the role of composer? As observed in *Do Not Say*, everyone lies somewhere on a spectrum between the extremes (Zhuli must first create meaning before she can interpret music through her instrument, and Sparrow perceives himself more like a channel through which music flows into a composition). The framework of Janie's narrative suggests that she has the agency to compose her story through the vocabulary she develops through experiences, yet she tends to draw from specific themes throughout her story. She strongly connects with nature, oral culture, and sexuality, paying special attention to images associated with these as she develops an understanding of herself and the workings of the world.

In *Their Eyes*, the formation of Janie's processing does not simply happen; in the beginning, she somewhat follows a tradition of processing similar to her grandmother. Nanny—

representing one who understands her place in the structure of culture—exemplifies a type of thought process to which many readers can relate: “There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought. Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees” (Hurstun 24). Developmentally, Janie begins in more or less of the same place; within her pear tree connection, she derives a conclusion from the bliss she discovers in witnessing the interaction between bee and blossom. However, in the accumulation of her experiences, Janie’s nature does not allow her to be content with the raw emotion, but rather she demands answers for her existence. Still, her process of learning does not completely divert from the feeling- and image-oriented form that many of the other black characters use. She is still drawn to images, particularly those of nature, but she has a notable talent for choosing the right words to express those images. The following passage trails her thought process as she thinks through her regrets regarding her marriage to Logan Killicks:

She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, “Ah hope you fall on soft ground,” because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed. She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every morning and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off (25).

She finds what she observes in nature to be constant. She finds security and meaning in its reliability and the knowledge that it is ever-present. She recognizes that the beliefs of people who

have determined her path have not met her expectations, and so she takes a step toward relying on her own competence to make her way in the world.

After having attempted Nanny's ideology for a content life, Janie finds the opportunity to choose her own path when Joe Starks arrives and offers her an escape from her monotonous, unfulfilling marriage with Logan. Though at this moment she recognizes herself as a grown woman, she still heeds her late grandmother's caution and the inclination of her own instincts: "[Joe Starks] did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (29). Her development thus far has taught her to understand the elements of nature she observes up-close: the pear tree, the sun, etc. The horizon appears as a new natural image that first accompanies Joe and represents the romanticized and idealized dreams that she cannot sufficiently study from afar. Nonetheless, she is compelled by the novelty of a new adventure and the opportunity to gather new knowledge. However, while Janie believes she's following a light, Joe Starks is not an entity so natural as the sun. He summons his own artificial light; literally, he plants the town of Eatonville's first street lamp and creates a grand exhibition for it. While Starks seemingly promotes the good of the town—which he manipulates for his own gain—he fails to fulfill Janie's thirst for experiential knowledge. Under his authority, her search for knowledge and desire for expression are suppressed for the sake of maintaining Starks's status. Like her ancestors, her voice is muted as Starks exploits her beauty to mold her into a symbol of his own wealth and authority. As necessity demands, Janie adapts, though she never loosens her grip on her identity. The moment she understands the implications of her new position, she tells the listener that she has "things packed up and put away in parts of hear heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not

to mix them” (72). Janie has placed her trust in a man she does not fully understand, and consequently she inadvertently traps herself in a marriage that fastens the lock on her aspirations.

Most tragically, in her pursuit of a man whose motives and ideas were still intangible to her, she becomes increasingly disconnected from her culture. Now, if the physical marks of genetic difference did not separate her enough, Starks deliberately separates her from participating in community by positioning her on a “high ruling chair,” such as when he showcases her in his store like a prize or buys her a special “little lady-sized spitting pot” for their home (47). However, he gives her only as much power as necessary to make a production of his own power over her. She is set on the “high ruling chair” to be seen, but she’s never allowed to participate because those activities excite individuality. Culture in oppressed communities is preserved through interactions with each other—the ability to gossip and stage conversational productions creates a comradery and a sense of belonging—but Starks does not give Janie opportunities to establish relationships that exercise her imagination, which could compel her to reject the status he has provided for her. Worse, the other people in the town might recognize her for something more, or other, than how he defines her. By compressing Janie into a two-dimensional figure—light-skinned, soft-haired, and beautiful—Starks successfully severs the pathways of influence both directions between her and the rest of the community, restricting her from accumulating the experience she desperately seeks in her pursuit of self-revelation.

Despite these setbacks, Janie still learns from these experiences and takes caution upon first meeting Tea Cake, with whom she has the most successful—though far from perfect—relationship. In many ways, he falls directly within the ostensibly appropriate stereotype that would be expected of him. However, to suggest that Tea Cake simply happens to fit this stereotype is an oversimplification; Janie notices details about him that implicate his intelligence

and cunning that could not be easily fooled by a mere stereotype. Instead, he appears to use it to his advantage almost as a survival tactic, manipulating his way through the expectations of society rather than blatantly disregarding them like Joe Starks. He pays close attention to Janie throughout their relationship, which he uses for both her benefit and, most likely, his knowledge to navigate future situations with her. In the early days of their marriage, when he discovers that she has hidden money from him, Tea Cake responds by slipping away to spend it. Still, he manages to both elicit and diffuse Janie's worry and confusion by creating a situation that emphasizes Janie's fault in the matter—she hid money from him, and he went off without her—and responds in the role of the forgiver. At the end of the scene, Janie experiences what she describes as a “self-crushing love” (128) for Tea Cake, encompassing both her satisfaction in the resolution and the acknowledgement that their love would sometimes be painful. Later, Tea Cake further establishes his authority when he beats her: “Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession” (147). In the undertones of this passage, hints of the repulsiveness of his actions barely pervade through the veil of justifying language, consistently lessening its severity and normalizing the action as necessary to maintaining control over the relationship. His actions are further justified by the fact that it actually works: “It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams” (Hurston 147). Though the circumstances might offend readers, some characteristic of this relational convention represents stability to the other couples observing Tea Cake and Janie. The possession is assured while affection remains, and the strength of their partnership manifests through this kind of unspoken ritual that establishes a

sense of belonging. Even in her most fulfilling and loving relationship, Janie is limited by the stereotypes that others perpetuate; however, perhaps given her time and circumstances, such dreams of possessing complete agency are impractical. Perhaps *in any time* complete agency is an illusion, because humanity is unlikely to escape the safe boxes supplied by stereotypes.

Nonetheless, this relationship cannot be dismissed as entirely vain. Even if Tea Cake's intentions were littered with ulterior motives, such an experience in her relationship with him offered Janie the kind of experience in the black community that she has been craving. She is drawn to him because he invites her into his culture, offering an experience which, under normal circumstances, she should have been exposed to long ago. She spends her time with Tea Cake riding the highs and lows of being in love and absorbing the novelty of the experience she has been seeking the entire novel. Despite Janie's love-struck adoration of Tea Cake, not all readers care for him, nor are they necessarily expected to. Zadie Smith, author and long-time admirer of Hurston, directly challenges the reader's presupposition that Janie's ideal husband must necessarily follow a set of supra-cultural moral conventions:

That Tea Cake would not be *our* choice, that we disapprove of him often, and despair of him occasionally, only lends power to the portrait. He seems to act with freedom, and Janie to choose him freely. We have no power; we only watch. Despite the novel's fairy-tale structure (as far as husbands go, third time's the charm), it is not a novel of wish fulfillment, least of all *our* wishes. It is odd to diagnose weakness where lovers themselves do not feel it (7).

Smith incisively identifies yet another point of tension that Hurston develops in the novel between characters and readers that contributes to breaking down the barriers between imposed expectation and free narrative authenticity. Readers are left with little choice but to persevere

through the story with the discomfort of a relationship that they disapprove, preparing them to continually engage, or even empathize, with unfamiliar motives and choices as they finish and walk away from Janie's story.

As Janie does in other situations, she reflects on this relationship most completely following the trauma of Tea Cake's death, and as she has done before, she seeks words to form answers for her pain. Notably, in times of greatest distress—the wrath of the hurricane, the death of Tea Cake—she considers the presence and sovereignty of God over the world. Though Janie mentions God only a few times toward the end of her story, the reader understands the relevance of a divine being if only because of the blatant reference in the novel's title. Following Tea Cake's death, Janie approaches God seeking answers:

Tea Cake, the son of Evening Sun, had to die for loving her. She looked hard at the sky for a long time. Somewhere up there beyond the blue ether's bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must be because He knew everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He'd give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart (178).

Janie relating her life story compares to one offering a testimony, though the church is notably absent from the novel. In a religious sense, the purpose of a testimony is to bear witness to how

God works in a person's life. By the end, Janie has no grand revelations about God, or arguably even herself, but she has a story of significance to tell and she feels compelled to bear witness to the challenges she has faced being who she is. As a whole, her story does not necessarily cast anyone, including herself, in a favorable light, though the way her story is told—by the nature of human empathy—induces readers to understand her position and suspend judgment for any faults they might observe. Testimonies are raw with the acknowledgement of human sin and limitation, which the nature of Janie's narrative models while prodding at the negligence of the church where it was most needed. Given the circumstances of her life, Janie has been forced to negotiate these questions and revelations on her own, and through her testimony of sorts, she helps listeners and readers feel a little less alone.

What Janie has accomplished here complicates the characteristic of art that crosses the boundaries of human comfort. Yes, storytelling challenges the neat presuppositions that people need to make judgments every day and explores the realities of authentic human experiences. At the same time, it accomplishes more than making people uncomfortable. It offers comfort as readers and listeners recognize themselves in the characters exploring the limits of human nature. By this definition, good art must necessarily exceed the boundaries of context. The Party crafts a story and performs patriotic music, both recognized as legitimate art forms. However, the Party designed propaganda for a specific audience, and by the nature of cultural values that shift over time, future readers and listeners cannot engage in these ideas with the same level of understanding as would have been perceived by its original audience. But how do people distinguish an old truth from a culturally-engraved maxim? *Do Not Say* asks, "How does a copy become more than a copy? Is art the creation of something new and original, or simply the continuous enlargement, or the distillation, of an observation that came before?" (418). When the

Dreamer's own Book of Records is not entirely his own creation, nor is it an explicit autobiography. It rests somewhere in between, accumulating storyline alongside Wen's travels while embodying the same characters that have endured since its conception. The story is guided by a movement that is not bound by time, but rather flows alongside it. In the novel, Ai-ming offers an observation characteristic of authentic, enduring stories, saying, "But for anything to be alive, it required motion: the current must run, the record must turn, a person must leave or find another path. But without movement or change, the world became nothing more than a stale copy" (331). Thien's idea of motion does not resemble the Party's upward-and-outward definition of progress; her motion is fluid and circular, reiterating many of the same themes and concepts embedded in nature, expressed through different contexts and mediums which, combined, make an infinite number of stories.

The abstract nature of music more easily accesses the fluidity of art in motion. It is easier to lie through language and to believe that those lies encompass the complexity of the idea—or, at least, all a person needs to know of it. Music, on the other hand, is not associated with concrete definitions like words in a language, making it a clever choice as a metaphor and model in Thien's novel. Sparrow thinks, "Sound was alive and disturbing and outside of any individual's control. Sound had a freedom, that no thought could equal because a sound made no absolute claim on meaning" (315). This is why the Party approved only eighteen operas for public consumption, and why denunciations and slogans became so powerful within their propaganda. However, for Thien as a writer, language is her chosen art, and therefore she must believe that language can be utilized to point to more profound themes. She creates an undertone throughout her words that suggests implications greater than their literal meaning. Thien says of her work, "I sometimes think that experimentation in storytelling is partly about finding ways to

defy the linearity of language, and more powerfully, the linearity of time” (Chariandy). In her intentions to make her language meaningful, she looks to music as a model to structure and develop her novel in the tradition of compelling art.

Not surprisingly, Thien utilizes themes and variations—a pattern often found in classical music—to create a framework for telling the story, forming the musical undertones that run throughout the novel. When structuring music in themes and variations, the composer introduces a simple theme at the beginning, and the subsequent movements evolve into more complex versions (or variations) of that theme. As addressed earlier in this paper, pieces such as Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* can appear to the untrained ear to be chaotic and messy when, in fact, they are built on the foundation of the theme established in the first movement. In a similar fashion, Thien hints at multiple themes toward the beginning of her novel that she tracks as the plot and characters become more complex and multi-dimensional. To one who is not well-versed in the art of listening to music, watching the same kind of structure manifest itself in language through the medium of a novel is fascinating. Thien weaves her story so complexly that by the end, the connections she makes between music, storytelling, numbers, and silence are nearly seamless. Her focus on generational storytelling also contributes to expanding her themes, following the paths of two families of artists in the time during and surrounding the Cultural Revolution. In seeking truth, both storytelling and music show that the reaches of either medium are insufficient to fully grasp truth. Even so, the characters find a wealth of meaning in the pursuit of these subjects, and the clarity it offers them in their circumstances is often sufficient to make their daily endurances worthwhile.

In Hurston’s era and experience, the predominant genre of music that defined and unified black communities was blues. Appropriately, Hurston was exposed to blues even in her

intellectual endeavors, being both a cultural anthropologist and good friend of Langston Hughes, whose poetry adheres to the conventions of the genre. In her short autobiographical story “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston describes her experience listening to a live jazz band, dancing and experiencing the music while attributing vibrant colors to her body. However, when she sits once again next to an unperturbed white man, she observes, “Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored” (“How It Feels”). She identifies a richness of culture in the inherent link between color and music, or more specifically, her color and jazz or blues. In her novel, the reader can trace hints of blues influence through the patterns embedded in Janie’s story. The scope of her narrative tracks her development through different relationships, and while her sexuality matures throughout these phases, her mental and emotional maturity also develops through her experiences. Now, if the reader considers the structure of blues music, a vague parallel emerges. According to sociologists Hatch and Watson, “The prototypical county-blues song is, for hearers, made up of three stanzas, each of, approximately, four bars in length; the second stanza being, lyrically, a repetition of the first, and the third stanza, either ‘commenting on’, ‘extending’ or ‘resolving’ the position attested to in the first two stanzas” (167-168). Similar to the lyric AAB pattern of blues, the progression of Janie’s relationships depicts a mistake (Logan), another mistake (Joe), and a resolution to her quest for love (Tea Cake). Nonetheless, as previously established, Tea Cake fulfills his role imperfectly, but all three are part of the same song. In his own way, each man exercises power over her, and the defining difference in the last marriage is Janie’s expressed happiness. In other words, Logan and Joe

represent the repeated pattern while Tea Cake offers her a richer experience that hints at an answer that she has been seeking throughout her story.

As much as the process of playing music and sharing stories comprises art, another important facet to the subversive nature of art is its impact on people even after the music has ended or the storyteller has finished. The essence of music and storytelling is not confined to temporal sound; even after the music stops, the melody can replay again and again in the listener's mind (albeit imperfectly), and characters do not cease to "live" in the imagination of the reader. Toward the end of *Do Not Say*, Yiwen tells Marie, "It might be finished, it might be over, but that doesn't mean I've stopped hearing it" (418). *Do Not Say* encompasses enough generations for the novel to be read as a collection of stories in different times; certainly, the tone and essence changes with each section—the carefree optimism of the young musicians inhabit a different world than the impassioned activism of the university students. Nonetheless, readers cannot help but read the whole novel as a unit. People tend to perceive time as a forward progression, and all the good and bad will eventually be forgotten or thinly dissolved into the past, to which Thien responds with the startling implication that not all things pass. Even if the story is over, it never stops; Thien and Hurston even complicate the idea that every story has a true starting point. Ideas ebb and flow with the tide of the time, but as long as people are available to listen, the perpetual interaction between storyteller and listener continues. Marie, Thien's character who lingers throughout the novel as an attentive listener, ends her story for a time, saying, "It is a simple thing to write a book. Simpler, too, when the book already exists, and has been passed from person to person, in different versions, permutations and variations. No one person can tell a story this large, and there are, of course, missing chapters in my own Book of Records" (462). Though stories must necessarily stand incomplete, some people still

feel compelled to contribute their vision of the narrative through a range of perspectives or the expression of a chosen craft. Hurston and Thien demonstrate that good storytellers participate in distending the limits of creativity and thought and deliberately withdraw from the comforts of pretension, choosing to become smaller and smaller within the vast amplitude of a beautiful and complex history of the world.

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