

# The Double-Voiced Feminine Discourses in Ding Ling's "Miss Sophie's Diary" and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay compares Ding Ling's "Miss Sophie's Diary" and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both of which tell about female quest for self. Examining the two fictions through the lens of the cultural mode of feminist criticism proposed by Elaine Showalter in her article "Feminist Criticism in the Wildness," the essay "deconstructs" the feminine discourses of the two heroines, calling into question the "purity" of their feminine voices. Following the trajectory of their searches for self, it compares their sense of self, their relationship with the community and with men and explores how they undergo parallel experiences grounded in their conflicted status (Westernized vs. traditional Chinese, and African-American), how their self is socially, historically, culturally, and/or racially constructed, how a modern Chinese woman's sense of self is similar to as well as different from that of a black American woman, and how their discourses manifest a double-voicedness, undercutting and are, at the same time, undercut by the two specific dominant cultures, both of which are patriarchal in essence.

## KEY WORDS

feminine discourse  
feminine space  
split-self  
quest for self

patriarchal order  
"wild zone"  
sense of self  
identity

other  
self-erasure

self-assertion  
double-voicedness,

## Introduction

Ding Ling's "Miss Sophie's Diary" (hereafter "Sophie") and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (hereafter *Eyes*) pair well for a comparative study of feminist discourses—both deal with the problems of modern women's quest for self, projecting their heroine's journey toward self-realization paradoxically as a self-assertion as well as a self-erasure; both have provoked much critical controversy which, while contributing to a vigorous investigation of the problems of feminine subjectivity, also provide reasons for a postmodern skepticism of gender-based feminist criticism.

First published in 1928, Ding Ling's "Sophie," which explores the feminine sexuality of a modern Chinese woman with unprecedented audacity and sensitivity, had the effect "of a bomb shell thrown on the deadly quiet literary scene" in China (Yizhen 107). This "bomb shell," while resulting in the recognition of Ding Ling as "China's most celebrated feminist writer," also led to her condemnation as a notorious immoral woman and anti-revolutionary rightist (Yue 880).

In spite of the great critical attention and controversy it has evoked, however, the heroine of "Sophie" has always been seen as a lonely modern soul who is totally alienated from the world around her and completely withdrawn to her self. For such "proletarian revolutionary critics" as Yao Wenyuan, Sophie's indulgence in petite bourgeois individualism is certainly an intolerable betrayal of the Marxist master narrative of class struggle and her sexual fantasy "a sort of opiate for youth . . . to forget the class struggle of real life" (218).

Feminist critics, Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker and Rey Chow, for example, while rightly discarding such Marxist critical clichés, also tend to read "Sophie" as a narcissistic love story. Critiquing "Sophie" from the perspective of a gender-based position, they overlook the social and cultural contexts which constitute or construct Sophie's sexuality and subjectivity. As a result, they see Sophie as unaware of the social and cultural forces operating upon her and as unable to separate her self from the other within her.<sup>1</sup> I would argue, however, that, in spite of her obsession with self, Sophie is fully aware of the operation of the external forces upon, as well as within, her; that it is such an awareness that leads her to frequent self-pity and self-repudiation; that her frustration at her inability to separate her self from the other within her is also a frustration at the unavailability of a feminine language through which she can express her self; and that her decision to leave Beijing and her death desire should be read as another attempt to escape from and a final protest against the patriarchal order rather than an acceptance of her defeat or a surrender to the patriarchal power.

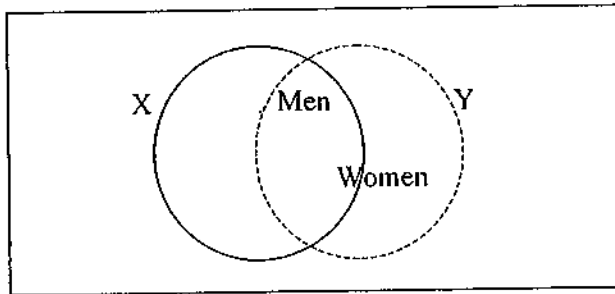
Hurston's *Eyes* suffers a similar fate as Ding Ling's "Sophie." Upon its publication in 1937, within the period when stark social realism was still the predominant mode to represent the "pathological" black American experience, Hurston's non-protest idiosyncrasy which emphasizes "difference" (blackness) rather than "blackness" (Amenricaness)<sup>2</sup> was received with opposite attitudes. While some praised its expert employment of black dialect which vividly and accurately conveys the black experience, others criticized its author for being out of step with the social realist mode of writing. Richard Wright, for example, labeled the book as one that "carries no theme, no message, no thought," and therefore was not worth any serious attention (25). The negative response from such an influential figure as Wright had its swaying power at the time, and *Eyes* was soon buried, along with its author, in oblivion until its rediscovery by Alice Walker in 1970s.

Since its rediscovery, it has been hailed as a "forerunner of the [Afro-American women's] fiction of the seventies and eighties" (qtd.

in *Awkward 4*). Controversy, however, still exists among the excellent scholarships it has generated. Much of the controversy centers around the issue of female quest for self, a significant "theme" Wright fails to see due to his patriarchal bias. While some scholars, such as Alice Walker, believe that Hurston has allowed her female protagonist, Janie, to achieve her voice and realize her self, others express their serious doubt about this belief. Robert Stepo, for example, argues that Hurston only creates "an illusion that Janie has achieved her voice," that her narrative "implies that Janie has not really won her voice and self" (166). It seems to me that these two opposite views concerning whether or not Janie has achieved her voice are both correct and wrong: each correct in its own right and wrong in its exclusion of the other. I would argue that *Eyes* is a text embedded with such dynamic ambiguities that it at once provokes different interpretations and resists any fixed, monological one. On the one hand, Hurston invests Janie with full consciousness and subjectivity, depicting her as a defiant heroine who, in her relationship with men, refuses to be objectified, and who, in her quest, gradually achieves her voice and realizes her self. On the other hand, she also positions her as the object of the male quest, as the other through whom the male accentuates his self. Like Ding Ling's Sophie, Janie, in her quest for self, not only has to confront the external restrictive forces, but also has to constantly fight against the internal restraints, the other others within her self. And her journey toward self-realization, like Sophie's, turns out to be self-asserting as well as self-effacing.

Such an argument that Sophie and Janie's searches for self are simultaneously self-asserting and self-effacing may sound self-contradictory or even impossible. Yet, its "truth" and validity become obvious once we examine Ding Ling's "Sophie" and Hurston's *Eyes* through the lens of the cultural mode of feminist criticism proposed by Elaine Showalter.

In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Showalter makes use of the following diagram, created by Shirley and Edwin Arderner, of the relationship between the dominant male group and the muted female group to demonstrate her theory of cultural feminism.



In Arderner's diagram, much of women's cultural space, circle Y, is covered by men's cultural space, circle X. There does, however, exist an uncovered "wild zone," the crescent Y, which is outside circle X and therefore "stands for an area which is literally no-man's land, a place forbidden to man" (30). This "female space," nevertheless, cannot be separated from that part of circle Y which is covered by circle X. In other words, women's culture as a whole is neither inside nor outside but simultaneously inside and outside of the dominant culture. Thus, feminine discourse should be understood in terms of what Susan Lanser calls a "double-voiced" discourse (qtd. in Showalter 31). This notion of women's discourse as a double-voiced discourse, according to Showalter, points to the problems of language and power. "All language," explains Showalter, "is the language of the dominant order, and woman, if they speak at all, must speak through it" (30).

In arguing that both Janie and Sophie's quests for self can be read as double-voiced discourses, I am not attempting to do the impossible, to reveal a universalized feminine experience or to discover the essence of Woman. Rather, by following the trajectory of their searches for self, I will try to deconstruct their feminine discourses, to question the purity of their discourses, and to explore how their self is socially and culturally constructed, how a modern Chinese woman's sense of self is similar to and different from that of a black American woman, and how their discourses undercut and are, at the same time, undercut by the two specific dominant cultures, both of which are patriarchal in essence. It should be pointed out, though, that to argue

for a double-voiced feminine discourse does not mean that the feminine discourse contains two voices only. The existence of another voice certainly does not exclude the other, or multiple, voices within it.

This having been said, I now will proceed to compare Sophie and Janie in the following three aspects: 1) the sense of self, 2) relationship with community, 3) relationship with men.

### 1. The Sense of Self

#### Sophie

That Sophie's discourse is a double-voiced one has much to do with the fact that she has split selves. As an educated modern Chinese woman living in a semi-Westernized city, Beijing, Sophie suffers from an identity problem and is constantly tormented by the two contradictory selves within her: the modern western self which she identifies as Self and the conventional Chinese self which she conscientiously suppresses as Other, but which exhibits a perverse impulse to return and to suppress the suppressing Self. Sophie's desire to identify with western values and ethics is clearly suggested, or voiced, in the foreign name she adopts for herself. Oddly enough, both western and Chinese critics of "Sophie" have overlooked this too obvious connection. The word "Sophie," or "Sophia," according to Webster's New International Dictionary, is a word of Greek origin, which is not only a feminine name but also means divine wisdom, or intellectual wisdom as distinguished from practical wisdom. Thus, Sophie's name also signifies her intellectual competence which, in turn, signifies her repudiation of the practical wisdom of traditional China, or, to be more specific, the Confucian ethics that a virtuous woman is one without intellectual competence (*nuzi wu cai bian shi de* 女子無才便是德). For the reason that the traditional Chinese moral codes such as the "Three Obediences" (*san cong* 三從) and the "Four Virtues" (*si de* 四德)<sup>3</sup> that govern the female behavior are, to a certain extent, class-based, Sophie, as a middle class woman, exhibits a stronger impulse of resistance against the oppression of the old Chinese value

system than her sisters who work on farms or factories and do not have the "intellectual" or "divine wisdom."<sup>4</sup>

Repudiative to the traditional Chinese values and ethics as she is, Sophie, however, cannot extricate herself completely from their confinement. In other words, the other self, traditional and Chinese, simply refuses to be silenced. In spite of her strong desire to identify with the new, Western values, she frequently finds herself involuntarily checking her own behavior against, and succumbing to, the female "virtues" prescribed by the old, Confucian doctrine. On one hand, she bravely breaks the traditional moral codes imposed upon women, recklessly searching for something new, "so long as it is new, no matter good or bad" (Ding 47), indulging herself in fantasizing about man. Analysed through Arderner's diagram, this is her "pure" feminine voice, which corresponds to the "wild zone," the crescent Y, a space uncovered by circle X. On the other hand, she would suppress this voice, regretting her reckless intrusion into the forbidden land, telling herself that "this is not what a respectable woman should do" (56). In Arderner's chart, this part of her corresponds to that part of the circle Y which is covered by circle X. Or in Showalter's words, this is part of her that "speak(s) through" "the language of the dominant order" (30). Torn apart by the two selves, she wonders "what she really wants" and who she really is (60). Thus, the consciousness of coexistence of the self and the other and of her inability to separate the two results in a sense of frustration and a death desire.<sup>5</sup>

### Janie

Janie's sense of self is racially and culturally fragmented. Raised by her grandma "in de white folk's back-yard" (*Eyes* 9), a literally marginalized space, Janie experienced what W. E. B. Du Bois calls a sense of "twoness," blackness and Americaness,<sup>6</sup> and had a difficult time in coming to terms with her black self early in her life. As a child, she was simply referred to as "Alphabet." This unorthodox name, on the one hand, indicates her potential capability to achieve her voice in the future, for "the alphabets," as Anita M. Vickers points out, are "the rudiments of formation of words" (308). On the other



hand, it also “emphasizes Janie’s lack of identity” (309). In fact, she did not know who she was until she was about six. When one day looking at the picture she had taken with her white playmates, she could not recognize herself: “where is me? Ah don’t see Me” (*Eyes* 9). Only after much effort of her own and with the help of others did she finally realize with astonishment that the little dark spot in the midst of the white was her very self: “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!” (*Eyes* 9). This funny little episode carries multiple layers of meaning. It indicates the difficulties which she must overcome before she can achieve a sense of self; it points to the potential danger for her black self to be dissolved in the “melting pot,” and therefore the need for her to relocate herself in and identify with the black community to which she belongs; it also foreshadows the tension she is later to experience between her and the black community, a point which I will discuss in more detail later.

More important to my discussion in this section as well as in this article is Janie’s sense of sexual self, which is conditioned to a certain degree by the dominant patriarchal culture. Unlike her Chinese sister Sophie, who is more educated and self-critical, she seems unaware of the existence of the other, her internalization of the external restrictive forces, within her very self. In order to clarify my point, let me give a brief account of the scene of her sexual awakening at the age of sixteen. In this scene, we see Janie lying under a pear tree, watching “a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch screaming in every blossom with delight” (*Eyes* 10). At this point, we are told that she experienced a revelation: “So this was a marriage,” and she envisioned herself as “a pear tree . . . in bloom,” a tree with “glossy leaves and bursting buds” and looked toward the horizon, expecting her “dust-bearing bee” to appear (11).

This passage of Janie’s sexual awakening has been frequently discussed by scholars and critics as a crucial moment in which she acquires a sense of self as a woman. The paradoxical nature of her sense of self embodied in this vision, however, has often been ne-

glected.<sup>7</sup> To understand this paradox, I believe, is crucial to the understanding of her relationship with men and of the reason why her journey toward self turns out to be both self-asserting and self-erasing.

Janie's awakening sexuality certainly suggests an awakening sense of womanhood, and her longing for sexual fulfillment is also a longing for self-fulfillment. This sense of self, however, also reveals a sense of "otherness" imposed upon woman by the patriarchal order. This sense of "otherness" is embedded in the very image of the blossom, the image to which she identifies herself. This identification reflects the patriarchal notion that the beauty of the flower is subject to the gaze of the male other, that just as the life of the flower lies not in itself but in the union with the pollinating bee, so the realization of womanhood depends on the marriage with man. In other words, the space Janie enters in her wild dream under the tree is not purely sexual space, the wild zone in Ardenner's diagram. Rather, it corresponds to the whole circle Y which is at once inside and outside the dominant culture. Thus, underneath Janie's sense of active self lurks the sense of passive other, and later in her life she will have to fight against this other inside herself as well as the other others, the external restrictive forces.

To say that Janie is unaware of the sense of the other embodied in her sense of self does not mean that she is not experiencing the sense of being othered. Nor does it mean that she is not aware of the existence of the other within her. This other that she is aware of within her, however, is simply her physical appearance, or her "outside," which she is able to separate from her self, or her "inside" (*Eyes* 68). And because of such a capability, Janie, while less educated and less sentimental than Sophie, is more capable of adapting to, and surviving in, a hostile patriarchal environment.

## 2. Relationship with the Community

### Sophie

The double-voicedness of Sophie's discourse is also reflected in her ambivalent attitude toward the community. While quite good at

writing a diary, Sophie seems incapable of communicating with the people around her. This results in a sense of frustration which makes her withdraw into her self and reject the community further, which, in turn, intensifies her despondency and sense of alienation.

Sophie's inability to communicate with the community is closely related to her awareness of her inability to separate the two contradictory selves: the "new," Western self and the "old," Chinese self. How could she make herself understood "correctly" when she does not even know what her true self is, when she cannot find a language through which she can express herself "correctly"? Indeed, the sense of the lack of a "proper" language, or of the "uselessness" of the language, is one of the main reasons that has estranged her from her friends and caused her despondency and frustration: "I've never said anything . . . that comes from me . . . It depresses me that there is no way I can make him (Ling) understand and respect me" ("Sophie" 55); "Tonight I've gone completely crazy. At a time like this language and words seem so useless" (60).

Another reason for Sophie's alienation is her sense of dislocation and superiority. To Sophie, the entire environment in which she lives is boring and suffocating: the noisy tenants of the apartment calling for service, the people shouting into the phone downstairs, the dead silence, the white-washed wall and ceiling, the servant with a pockmarked face, the sand dust in the window frame, the mirror that distorts her face, and etc. ("Sophie" 14, 15). Her friends, in spite of their college education, are not intelligent and modern enough to understand her as well as themselves. They, while part of the oppressing social environment, are also the oppressed, who, unfortunately, have not come to realize their victimized status. Sophie therefore laughs at their stubbornness and conservativeness, ridiculing them as a group of ascetics who need to be educated about love (28). And Wolfgang Kubin is certainly right when he says that "what Sophie rejects is the conventional practice of relationships between man and woman which conform to existing society" (175).

While her modern, or Western, self drags her away from her friends, her traditional, or Chinese, self, however, pushes her toward

them. In other words, beneath Sophie's sense of superiority and dislocation there also lurks a desire to identify with the community, longing for its recognition and acceptance. This ambivalence toward the people around her can be easily detected in the following passage from her diary on December 28:

Everyone is criticizing me, and none of them realize the impact that some people have on me when I'm with them. People say that I'm odd. Little do they realize how I'm constantly trying to make people like me and win their affection. But they don't give me enough encouragement to say things that run contrary to my heart. They're always giving me occasion to reflect my own actions and be further estranged from them than ever (18).

### Janie

Compared with Sophie, Janie's relationship with her community is more problematic. Sophie is alienated from her community only because of her "higher" sense of morality, or to be more precise, her "eccentric" sexual behavior. Janie, on the other hand, is estranged from hers not only because of her "eccentric" sexual behavior but also because of her "higher" social status. Being a mulatto, she is "whiter" than the rest of the folks in the black town, and having been the wife of the late mayor, she is also enormously richer. While Sophie's friends in general tolerate the eccentricity of their "little" sister and show their generous love, the black folks of Janie's community frequently turn out to be indifferent, jealous, demanding, and hostile. This, however, is not to deny that the community can be generous and loving, capable of nurturing and healing. In fact, Janie, in spite of her sense of superiority, is fully aware of the need to immerse herself in the community and to absorb the nourishment vital for the growth of her individual self. If we agree that Janie has achieved her voice and realized her self by the end of her journey, we must also agree that it is with the encouragement from the community, with their willingness to be the audience, that she is finally able to tell her life story and

thereby articulate her self into being. Before we come to this agreement, however, we must realize the fact that there exists a sharp tension between Janie and her community, a tension that cannot be solved without serious negotiation.

Such a tension is clearly indicated in the frame work of *Eyes*, in which Janie finally returns home from "the horizon." In the first chapter, we see her approaching the town at the dust and the folks of Eatonville sitting on the porch beside the road "mak(ing) burning statements with questions and killing tools out of laughs" (2). As she approaches, they keep a respectful distance, checking their urge to ask about her whereabouts, hoping that she would have "manners enough to stop and let folks know how she been makin' out" (3). When she walks past without bothering to stop to satisfy their burning curiosity, they feel hurt and their concern and curiosity turn into indifference and hostility. "Don't keer what it was, she could stop and say a few words with us. She act like we done something to her. She de one been doin' wrong," complains one; "She ain't even worth talkin' after. She sits high, but she looks low," attacks another (3). Despite their grudge against her arrogance, however, they are eager and willing to listen to her story and offer whatever help she needs. A delegate is sent, to whom Janie finally tells her story.

Janie knows what the folks want to know about her: "they got to look into my loving Tea Cake and see whether it was done right or not" (*Eyes* 6). To her, these porch-sitters are nosy, narrow-minded and ignorant. She adopts an indifferent and arrogant stance because she believes that the life and love she shares with Tea Cake are not only not their business but also beyond their comprehension. "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', . . . 'Tain't worth de trouble" because "people like dem waste too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about," because "they don't know if life is a mess of corn-meal dumplings and if love is a bed-quilt," she later tells her friend Pheoby (6).

Just as the indifference and hostility of the community mask their concern and curiosity, so Janie masks her desire to communicate with and immerse in the community. Such a desire is indicated in

subtle but unmistakable ways. For one thing, it's she who utters the unavoidable greetings first in the brief encounter scene mentioned above. She issues the call and they response with "a noisy 'Good evenin'" (2). For another, she does tell the delegate, her kissing friend Pheoby, her story. She knows well that Pheoby will pass it onto the community. In fact, she wants her to do so, "You can tel'm what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause Mah tongue is in mah friends' mouf" (6). Thirdly, in spite of her sense of superiority, her arrogance, her awareness of and unease about the provinciality of the folks, she bears no grudge against them. When Pheoby, enlightened by her story, expresses her indignation at the narrow-mindedness of the folks, she says, Now, Pheoby, don't feel too mean wid rest of 'em 'cause dey's parched up from not knowin' things" (182).

### 3. Relationship with Men

#### Sophie

Chinese society, as societies elsewhere, has always been, and still is, a patriarchal one. Women in such a society are deprived of their subjectivity and objectified as the Other, over whom men exercise their male power, and through whom they accentuate their masculine Self. Since the May Fourth Movement, however, many women have been trying to reverse such a definition of Self and Other as a means by which they challenge the patriarchal order. Sophie is one of these modern women iconoclasts, who seeks to give free expression to her feminine sexuality in defiance of the traditional moral code which restricts her from so doing. In her relationship with men, she does not wait passively to be objectified as the Other. Instead, she objectifies them as the Other, as something to be conquered, to be won on the path of her search for Self.

Trying as hard as she does, Sophie, however, cannot escape from being othered. For one thing, she, like everybody else, is after all a social and cultural construct. And as such, her self has its "Chineseness" as well as "Westernness," a point which I have discussed

earlier. While the "western part" of her self drives her to seek for excitement and indulge in pleasure, the "eastern part" of her self makes her feel shamed and guilty. It thus acts as an unacknowledged accomplice of the external restraints and urges her to resume the position of the passive other. For another, the Other she wants to objectify is also a social and cultural product, which means that in order for her to be able to catch and gain control over him, she must first play the socially and culturally defined role of the other, turning herself into an object.

Such is the dilemma in which Sophie is caught in her relationship with men. The first man with whom she has a relationship is a native Chinese. She does not really love him, but she plays the love game with him because it offers her a kind of pleasurable comfort and makes her feel released from the suffocating environment. Wolfgang Kubin is right when he says that this relationship "is basically informed by her misrelationship with society, by her estrangement from it" (173). What is more significant and therefore should not be neglected, though, is that this relationship allows her to enjoy the power to control. In spite of the fact that he is four years her senior, she calls him Little Brother Wei (Weidi).<sup>8</sup> By depriving him of his family name and addressing him as little brother, she renders him to the position of the Other, a position he accepts, sometimes willingly and sometimes grudgingly. Being a dedicated and considerate lover, he treats her like a queen, as if his life depended on whether or not he can successfully please her. Whenever she is in a gloomy mood, as she often is, he becomes nervous. And if whatever he has done fails to cheer her up or turns out to make her more gloomy, which, too is often the case, he would become desperate and cry pathetically. Seeing him in tears, however, only makes her "laugh with pleasure like a savage" ("Sophie" 19). In fact, she takes pleasure in teasing and torturing this poor "little" brother, who only dares to "look not at but under" her eyes" (15).

Why does Sophie reject Weidi's love since this relationship not only allows her repressed sexual desire a chance for expression but also puts her in the desired position of controlling Self? The reasons

are offered clearly in the diary: he is too good, too honest, too committed; he does not understand her, and that she is a "fickle woman not worth loving" ("Sophie" 53). If he could understand her, if he were less honest and less committed, she would "hug and kiss him passionately" (53). This confession bears careful examination, for it contains double, or contradictory, voices, speaking simultaneously from the "wild" feminist perspective and the patriarchal perspective. On one hand, it can be read as her denunciation of traditional morality, as suggesting that she wants to love, but not "fall" in love; on the other hand, it can also be read as her judgment of herself by traditional moral standards, as implying that, although in the position of the controlling self, she carries with her a sense of other.

Are there any other unconfessed reasons why she rejects Weidi? Certainly. First, he is too honest to know the rules of love game and offers himself too willingly as the Other, thus depriving her of the chance to exercise power, to experience the excitement of conquering. Second, he is a "baby" brother whose tears turn her off, a "castrated" male who does not have any sexual appeal for her. Third, and perhaps the most important, he is a Chinese, and therefore there is nothing "new" about him. As Ling Jishi enters into her life, she is instinctively attracted by his masculine beauty: his tall figure, his knightly manner, his self-assurance, which make all the other men short, ugly, and stupid. She decides immediately: this is the man she wants to love. She wants "to possess him" and to make him "give his heart unconditionally and kneel before" her, "begging" her "to kiss him" ("Sophie" 28).

In her relationship with Ling Jishi, she adopts the stance of a pursuer, a position necessary to sustain the sense of self. In order to catch the game she is after, she keeps "thinking over and over again of the tricks and methods" she "is going to use" (28). Then, she makes her move decidedly but cautiously. She finds an excuse to move into an apartment which is close to his place so that she can keep him under her gaze. "Unexpectedly" encountering him on her way to look at the place into which she is to move, she "take(s) several good hard looks at him" (25). Then she follows his trace, without



his knowing it, to their common friend's place. There, while talking and laughing, she kept "sizing him up," "examin(ing) him in every detail . . . and feel(ing) the need to kiss him everywhere" (26).

In order to have more chances to be with him alone, she asks him to be her private tutor of English. She waits impatiently for his coming each time; when he is gone she would fantasize about him. He becomes a "wild" fantasy space where she can explore his, or rather her own, sexuality freely. What attracts Sophie to Ling Jishi, however, is not merely his sexual appeal. His name, which carries with it a certain knightliness,<sup>9</sup> his being an overseas Chinese, which embodies something new and foreign, and, paradoxically, even his married status, which suggests a certain inaccessibility, are all an inseparable part of his attraction. In other words, he embodies the West and represents the values of that capitalist world—values that are new and different from those cherished in the feudal Chinese society. It is precisely because she sees in him something new, something that she wants to explore, something to which she longs to identify, that she becomes obsessed with him. To her, he is an object to be possessed, an obstacle to be overcome, on her path to self-discovery. Thus, the more inaccessible the object, the more insurmountable the obstacle, the more excitement and thrill in trying, and the more pleasure in success. But Ling Jishi understands the rule of the game no better than Weidi, and he offers himself as willingly as Weidi did. Not after many encounters, he pledges his "faithfulness" in a "pathetic," "weepy voice," not knowing that in doing so, he has announced his own doom, and reached the end of his usefulness ("Sophie" 62). Laughing at his stupidity, Sophie forcefully pushes him away, celebrating her victory: "I won! I won!" (63).

This gesture of pushing is double-edged. It is self-asserting as well as self-erasing. In pushing Ling Jishi away, she manages to sustain her position as an "independent" self. But this self is neither her true self nor her whole self, which includes another self which is identified with Ling Jishi. Therefore, in pushing him away, she also cuts herself away from the other half of her self. If that part of her which is identified with the new and foreign is her self, then what is

left is the other, which can only be "waste(d)" and "quietly die" (64).

This gesture of pushing is also "sophie's critique . . . directed at capitalism" for Ling is but one of its representatives (Kubin 176). It is her discovery of "the mean and low soul . . . in that noble and beautiful form" that makes her despise and reject him. What makes his soul "mean and low" is, of course, the fact that it considers everything in terms of property and ownership. Through her contact with him, she finds out that which is new and foreign is not as good as she thought, and she does not really want to identify with it. In this sense, the pushing also reveals the working of the other, the traditional Chinese self, within her.

In fact, this other has never stopped working in her relationship with Ling Jishi. Not only does it constantly make her feel guilty for succumbing to the temptation of the new, foreign body, for indulging in erotic fantasies, it also finds its way into the very workings of her new self, her sexual fantasies about Ling Jishi and "the tricks and methods" she uses to catch him. We notice that her fantasies about Ling Jishi show slight variations each time, but the aspects of his beauty with which she has become obsessed are all conscientiously "feminized" (for lack of a better term): "delicate white face . . . thin lips . . . soft hair," (21) "fair-skinned and red lips" (46). This feminization of male beauty, while positioning her as self and him as the other, also serves to degrade herself as a woman, for it seems to imply that only women are objectifiable. As for her "tricks and methods," they are certainly designed to hide her intentions. She does not want him to see her as a pursuer or "as a push-over" (26). Instead, she wants to lead him into believing that she is an ordinary Chinese girl, timid and passive, therefore chaste and virtuous. She wants to present herself as an object because she knows that "her ability to control him depends on the degree to which she could turn herself into an object" (Barlow 84).

### Janie

Like Sophie, Janie also seeks her self-fulfillment through relationship with men. Unlike Sophie, however, her stance seems more

practical and "conventional." While Sophie ambitiously seeks domination over men, she only modestly demands equality with them. Sophie, conscious of the contradictory forces within herself, seems to be "constantly at war" with herself; Janie, on the other hand, unaware of the existence of the other within her self, seems to be at constant war with the external forces, her grandma Nanny, the narrow-minded folks in the community, and particularly her three husbands. Whether she is conscious of it or not, however, the other within her self is definitely at work, undercutting the heroic struggle she is putting up against the external others, rendering her discourse double-voiced. That's why Williams M. Ramsey considers *Eyes* a book embedded with "compelling ambivalence" (37).<sup>10</sup>

Janie does not love her first husband Logan Killicks, a stubborn farmer with sixty acres of land. To her, "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree" (*Eyes* 13). Yet it is the otherness embodied in her vision of life under the pear tree (which I have discussed in the section about her sense of self) that makes her submit to the slaps and tears of her Grandma and believe that marriage will generate love between them and gradually bring into congruence the vision of life with Logan and that of union between the blossom of the pear tree and the bee. So "finally out of Nanny's talk and her own conjectures she made a sort of comfort for herself. Yes, she would love Logan after they were married . . . Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (*Eyes* 20).

Shortly after her first marriage, Janie realizes that "marriage did not make love" (*Eyes* 24). She becomes restless again and looks forward to a chance to free herself from the confinement of this marriage. As Jody Starks comes along, she takes the chance. When Janie first agrees to elope with Joe, she is regarding him not as a pollinating bee but as a vehicle which she can take on her journey toward self-realization. In fact, whether or not Jody will be at their appointed place to meet her, she is going to leave Logan: "Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to be good" (31). A moment later, however, "she no longer sees Jody as a vehicle but as a thing-in-itself" (Kubitschek 110). Sitting on a hired rig beside him,

she feels like sitting on “some high, ruling chair” (*Eyes* 31). She now considers him “a bee for her bloom,” and she envisions that “from now on until her death she was going to have flower dust and spring-time sprinkled over everything” (31). Janie’s vision of life here is a strange combination of her earlier vision under the pear tree and that dreamed for her by her grandma—“a stand on high ground” (*Eyes* 18). This vision reveals that her grandma, whose values she rejects, has become another other inside her. It also foreshadows her inability to break away from the second marriage with Joe when it has already become an impediment to her self-realization.

They settle down in Eatonville, where Joe soon becomes the single most important figure of the town. Being mayor, postmaster, and store-owner, he holds political and economic power firmly in his hand and succeeds in achieving his “big voice.” This big voice, however, won’t allow Janie any chance to have her voice as he has promised. Instead, he treats her as a helping hand in his store, a thing for him to look at (*Eyes* 52). Janie tries to fight back as best as she can, but she is forced to “talk some and leave some” (72). As a result, she discovers that “she had an **inside** and **outside** now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (68 emphasis added). With this newly discovered capability to separate her inside from her outside, she is able to deceive Joe, put up her defense most “effectively”<sup>11</sup> and attack at the most appropriate time. She puts up with his verbal and physical abuses for twenty years and when he is in his death bed, she pours out her heart and silences him for good. Now the question to be asked here is whether or not this inside is the crescent Y outside circle X, the wild zone, the no-man’s-land, which was discussed earlier in the introduction. The answer should be negative because this inside where her true self resides is simultaneously the place where she “was saving her feelings for some man she had never seen” (68). Thus, this inside is not the “wild zone,” “the no-man’s-land,” the pure female space. It can be seen either as corresponding to the overlapping part of the chart or as corresponding to the whole circle Y, which is at once inside and outside of the male space, the circle X.

This “some man” is her third husband Tea Cake. Unlike her first

two husbands, who treated her more as an object than as a person and suppressed her femininity, Tea Cake treats her as his playmate and companion, appreciates her femininity, and encourages her to bring it to full expression. His love and respect become "a source of liberation and fulfillment" for her (Urgo), and enable her to shake herself free from the shadows of the past, from the restrictions imposed upon her by her grandma: "Ah done lived Grammar's way, now Ah wants tuh live mine" (*Eyes* 108). Janice Daniel, in her article "De Understandin' to Go Long Wid it," quotes Sherley Anne Williams as saying, "Janie's horizons are broadened by the love and respect she shares with Tea Cake. She becomes a participant in the life that Nanny, Logan, Joe and other friends and advisors would have her believe is beneath her" (72). Indeed, Tea Cake helps bring out that part of herself which had long been confined and suppressed. So her soul "crawled out from its hiding place," and she "felt a self-crushing love" toward him (*Eyes* 122).

Why is Janie's love self-crushing? This sense of "self-crushingness" betrays a sense of inferiority, of otherness, associated with woman in the dominant male discourse. It suggests the return of the same other which is implied in her image of self as blossom, whose life and self-fulfillment rely on the visiting bee. Indeed, the narrative shows that the more she loves him, the more she becomes dependent on him, and the more she is afraid of losing him. In her "self-crushing love," she regards him as her pollinating bee, as her life-saving God. Thus, she exists not as self but as other. She humbles herself before him, moving in his orbit, catering to his needs. As she moves with Tea Cake into larger physical and social space, she becomes more and more dependent on him, and there is less and less space left for her self. When Tea Cake demands: "you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear de sam," she obeys readily: "Dat's all right wid me" (*Eyes* 122). And she is "always in blue because Tea Cake told her to wear it" (105). As Cassidy points out: "In her relationship with Tea Cake, . . . she is determined to be one self-identical person, and she represses all dissenting feelings, to the extent that her identity is simplified into being Tea Cake's wife"

(262). Ironically, Hurston's narrative verifies this through the verdict of the judge: "she is a poor broken creature, a *devoted* wife trapped by unfortunate circumstance" (*Eyes* 179, italics added).

Indeed, a sense of otherness manifests itself throughout Janie's relationship with Tea Cake, even after his death. Those who argue that Janie has achieved her voice and independence might cite as a support the fact that Janie finally kills Tea Cake and goes back to Eatonville, telling her life story, articulating her self into being. While this is true, they overlooked an ambiguity embedded in the death scene in which she kills him. In this death scene, we see Tea Cake, who has transformed into a beastlike character as a result of being bitten by a mad dog, bite his deadly teeth into Janie's neck simultaneously as she shoots him. Therefore, Janie is likely infected with rabies and will die soon. Thus, Hurston, on the one hand, allows us to see that Janie is now strong enough to take action to protect herself and step onto the journey anew toward self-realization, but evokes, on the other hand, for the speculation that she is not able to survive the journey alone. Even given the assumption that she may have taken the anti-rabies medicine, it can still be argued that, in a figurative sense, in killing Tea Cake, she has also killed her self, which is embodied in the image of bloom, and which depends on Tea Cake, the pollinating bee, for life. This, in fact, is clearly suggested in the ending of *Eyes*. After telling her friend her story, Janie says: "So Ah'm back home again and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah . . . Dis House ain't so absent of things lak it used to be befo' Tea Cake come along" (182). These lines by Janie indicate, on the one hand, that her home-coming is a triumphant return, for she is now "satisfied" with life, which is to say that she has achieved a sense of self-fulfillment; on the other hand, they also suggest that this home-coming could be a perilous return to self-confinement, to self-erasure. She is "satisfied tuh be heah" primarily not because this is the home which allows her a sense of belonging, which connects her with the community, but because it is the house 'full uh thoughts of Tea Cake" (182). Tea Cake is not dead, he still haunts the house and has become part of her, "he wasn't dead, He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and think-

ing" (183). In this sense, her return to this house indicates the return of the "repressed other," that part of her which internalizes the external restrictive forces, which willingly plays the role of the other to man and subjects itself to his domination. She has unconsciously equated her self with the other and thus, lost her selfhood again.

### Conclusion

Maybe I should have used "Anti-Conclusion" as the subtitle here, for, in writing this conclusion, I do not mean to impose it as the Conclusion, the final judgment, on the discussions about Sophie and Janie's quests for their self, or about feminine discourses in general. I want to make it clear that my intention in writing this essay is precisely not to judge who is right or wrong. Rather than trying to close the case, I have been trying to open up "Sophie" and *Eyes*, to problematize the critiques of these two literary texts, for further discussions.

By examining "Sophie" and *Eyes* through Showalter's cultural feminist criticism, I come to the "conclusion" that the trajectories of Sophie and Janie's searches for self are projected neither as straight lines nor as circles but as spirals, which include both progression and regression. At the end of her diary, Sophie decides to leave Beijing for the "south . . . where nobody knows" her to "quietly go on living and quietly die" (64). Critics generally take this ending to mean that Sophie has acknowledged her defeat and given up her struggle for self-realization. Wolfgang Kubin, for example, believes that "she no longer strives for liberation, but instead seeks to accommodate herself to the power of the established order . . ." (173). For me, however, this ending, like that of Wang Anyi's *The Love on the Barren Mountain* or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or many other stories about the female quest for self, should be read as a cry of despair as well as a final protest. Like Wang's heroine "she" and Chopin's Edna, Sophie has realized her inability to change the established order, and like them, she is not "accommodating" herself to its power but resisting it by taking a pastoral retreat. While "she" and Edna retreat to the

embrace of the mountain and sea, Sophie retreats to the south where she can escape the "heat" of Beijing and "cool down" to reexamine herself, to reevaluate and dissect her "Chineseness" and "Wester-ness."

Janie's journey to the horizon and back, too, is victorious as well as perilous. Janie has achieved a sense of self-fulfillment through her journey toward the horizon, and she has articulated herself into being (for she has told her life story to the community and to us). In her story, in her articulation of self, however, Tea Cake is still a "magnificent presence," and "at times . . . even her interior life reveals more about him than herself" (Introduction to *Eyes* by Washington xiv). Furthermore, the closing scene of the novel where Janie closes her gate and enters the room suggests that she is likely to confine herself in the room, which is "full uh thoughts of Tea Cake" (182).

That both Sophie and Janie's searches for self are self-affirming and self-erasing has much to do with their sense of self. As my previous discussion has shown, in their very self, there exists the other, or rather others. What they thought to be their genuine self is not autonomous, and does not have an independent existence. Whether conscious of it or not, they cannot separate their self and other(s) from one another. They cannot really define what they thought to be their genuine self. In other words, the process of defining their femininity inevitably involves the use of a language which is patriarchal in essence. Thus, their feminine discourses are bound to be double-voiced discourses.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Like many Ding Ling scholars and critics in mainland China, Feuerwerke who chooses Ding Ling as the subject of her life long research and study, considers "Sophie" to be the passing phase of Ding Ling's writing career before she moves onto a broader vision of reality. In commenting on "Sophie," she has this to say: "The broader context of her predicament on larger social forces operating upon her—the critical cliché that Sophie represents the despair of the petite



bourgeois individual caught in the transition from a feudal to a capitalist society—are not considered by the narrator. Sophie sees herself, not an identifiable institution, as setting the terms of her life. This becomes the source of her final despair: her recognition that she has no one to blame but herself.” See her *Ding Ling's Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature* (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1982) 31. Rey Chow, while critiquing Feuerwerke's position as “flawed by her reading of Chinese women writers of the 1920s and 1930s in the light of ‘objective’ literary criteria,” gives an insightful Freudian reading of “Sophie.” Her reading touches upon the fact that the sexual frustration of Sophie cannot be separated from her social position as a Chinese woman, it nevertheless falls short of an elaboration on the social and cultural constructedness of Sophie's self. See her *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 162-70.

<sup>2</sup> Terms borrowed from Michael Awkward. See his Introduction to *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The “Three Obediences” (san cong) demands a female to be obedient to her father as a daughter, obedient to her husband when married, and obedient to her son if widowed. The “Four Virtues” (si de) of a female demands in her propriety in behavior, speech, demeanor, and employment.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion about the issues about women in China, see Phyllis Andor's *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women 1949-1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Elisabeth J. Croll's *Changing Identity of Chinese Women: rhetoric, experience, and perception in twentieth-century China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995); Ester S. Lee Yao's *Chinese Women: past and present* (Mesquite, Tex: Idde House, 1983); Denyse Verschuur-basse's *Chinese Women Speak* (Westport, Conn: Praege, 1996); and Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* (London: Marion Boyers, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> This sense of frustration, which frequently leads to a death desire, is the typical state of mind in which many male characters in the May 4<sup>th</sup> literature find themselves. Like her male contemporaries'

frustration, Sophie's, too, can be seen as a result of the repudiation of the traditional Chinese values and ethics as well as the suspicion of the western values embodied in the capitalist system, which, while encouraging full development of individual potentiality, also legitimizes inequity in its fundamental principles—property and ownership.

<sup>6</sup> See his *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1903).

<sup>7</sup> In "'Tuh de Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" Missy Dehn Kubitschek devotes a good part of her article to the discussion about Janie's vision of life under the pear tree. Aside from mentioning in pass that "This identification of marriage with total fulfillment . . . reflects her immature consciousness," she only elaborates on the "transcendent significance" of the vision. See *Black American Literary Forum* 17 (1983): 109-115.

<sup>8</sup> "Wei" is a first name, and "di" (弟) in Chinese means younger or little brother.

<sup>9</sup> Jishi (in Chinese sounds very close to "qishi," (騎士) which means knight.

<sup>10</sup> See her "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" *Southern Literary Journal* 23. 2 (Spring 1991): 40-45.

<sup>11</sup> By using a quotation mark here I mean to cast some doubts about the effectiveness of some of her defenses. For example, when Jody shouts at her: "Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!" Janie retorts, 'Talkin' bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lakde change uh life" (*Eyes* 75). Like Sophie's feminization of male beauty, such kind of defense, or counterattack, while has the effect of robbing Joe of "his illusion of irresistible maleness" and makes "his vanity" bleed "like a flood" (75), also undercuts, or degrades, women themselves.

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