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Pheoby's Queer Quietness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

PHEOBY WATSON IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING God* (1937) is a figure who speaks up for, listens to, and invites queer discourse, or narrations of the sexual that nuance givens about desire by unsettling normative cisheterosexual storylines. In doing so, Pheoby models leadership in creating queer possibility, or ways to enjoy, express, and reimagine desires that dwell outside sexual standardization.¹ When Pheoby's close friend Janie Crawford returns to the town of Eatonville after a prolonged absence, most townspeople watching her arrival presume to know what sexuality is, especially women's sexuality. Unlike Pheoby, the townspeople tend to be heteronormative apologists. They want Janie's erotic experience to conclude in a predictable way, and then they judge her for her supposed failures at normative heterosexuality: "[W]e all know how she went 'way from here and us sho seen her come back," one townsperson asserts (*Their Eyes* 3). They would rather presume and judge than listen "to be surprised" (Tippett 29).² "'Tain't no use in your tryin' to cloak no ole woman lak Janie Starks" (*Their Eyes* 3) assert the townspeople, who "sat in judgment"

¹ The term "queer" is generatively unruly and indefinable, which has made its usage both fruitful and controversial across literary scholarship. As Annamarie Jagose writes in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996), "there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably." Jagose observes that while some scholars use the term queer strictly in fields of sexuality and gender, she quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that other critics apply the term to rethink ideas of "language, skin, migration, state." Despite these wide and varied applications, Jagose maintains that most usage of "queer maintains a relation to resistance to whatever constitutes the normal" (99). I use the term queer to identify the ways in which Pheoby's discourse, behavior, and listening practices pose a quiet, often unimposing but nevertheless unambiguous "resistance to" common assumptions about Black women's sexuality held by members of the novel's Eatonville community.

² For more on listening "to be surprised" as a way to "let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity," see Tippett 29.

(1) holding foregone conclusions “‘bout dese ole women,” apparently like Janie, “runnin’ after young boys” (3). Hurston associates their pronouncements about a woman’s sexuality with “mass cruelty” (2). In contrast, Pheoby approaches matters of sexuality as realms of the inconclusive. The first time Pheoby speaks, she introduces discursive space for sexual indeterminacy and queer story(telling): “Well, nobody don’t know if it’s anything to tell or not. Me, Ah’m her best friend, and Ah don’t know” (3).

Pheoby inserts the language of not knowing (“nobody don’t know” and “Ah don’t know”), conditionality and alternative (“if”), and not disclosing (“tell or not”) in conversations that presume sexual determinability and disclosure. Pheoby thus serves as a queer agent because she neither makes assumptions about women’s sexuality nor expects women’s confession about it, what Pheoby calls the porch sitters’ notions that Janie should “speak tuh suit ’em” (5). Pheoby’s outlook aligns with a foundation of queer thought: to invite non-knowability rather than seek consensus about what sexuality looks, sounds, or behaves like. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), a foundational text for queer literary studies, queer thought unsettles givens about sexuality and finds in the sexual an indefinite, perhaps not fully knowable or agreed upon phenomenon. Sedgwick suggests scholars should resist critical pressure “[t]o crack a code and enjoy the reassuring exhilarations of knowing[.]” what sexuality presumably is. For Sedgwick, scholars can too easily “buy into the specific formula ‘We Know What That Means’” and thus miss noticing sexuality’s nuances (204). The townspeople in Hurston’s novel make this mistake when they announce “we all know” Janie’s erotic story when, it turns out, they do not. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson extend Sedgwick’s work to Black queer studies, finding Black queer sexuality “creative, necessarily undisciplined, and ‘misbehaviorally’ liberatory” (14), welcoming of “unpredictable nuances” and “signification of a plurality of dissident sexualities” that “destabilize a monolithic understanding of such labels/categories as gay, heterosexual, or queer” (13, 14, 8). Sedgwick, Johnson, and Henderson encourage thinkers and writers to question definitional consensus on what exactly sexuality is or should be, and to let literary art and cultural artifacts surprise scholars into new imaginings about it.

Pheoby’s character aligns with Sedgwick’s, Johnson’s, and Henderson’s queer approach to sexuality because she expresses misbehavior in

sexual discussions, welcomes a plurality of dissident sexualities instead of only the one that “we all know,” and is open to hearing stories of sexual nuance. Pheoby is the first character in the novel to challenge discourse that squashes women’s sexual agency rather than expands it into possibility. When the townspeople stereotype Janie as one of “dese ole women runnin’ after young boys,” Pheoby subtly but dynamically un-types Janie. She “hitched her rocking chair forward before she spoke. ‘Well, nobody don’t know’” (*Their Eyes* 3). Pheoby “rocks” the conversation (gently, not confrontationally, by remaining seated) about women’s sexuality from conclusion to inconclusion.

The gravity sexual discourse carries for Pheoby, impelling her from sitting to rocking, perhaps explains the remarkable stamina she displays in listening to the surprising stories Janie as the novel’s main orator elaborates about desire. Pheoby’s listening presence to Janie’s tale across the expanse of nearly the entire novel reveals her as welcoming a multiplicity of sexual stories of the kind Johnson and Henderson advocate. Nicole Brittingham Furlonge considers listening “an interpretive practice that emerges from a place of wonder, curiosity, and *not knowing*. . . . At the center of listening . . . is inquiry” (2). Listening as an expression of not knowing makes it an excellent tool of queer discovery, since queer thought tends to value the indeterminate. The novel’s chief listener, Pheoby states, “*Ah* don’t know,” entwining a listener’s willingness to dwell in wonder with queer thought’s regard for inconclusiveness. Pheoby is the novel’s only character who pauses for the length of the narrative as a listener to Janie’s tale of sexuality flowing beyond so-called respectable bounds, from the protagonist’s blossoming into sexuality under the pear tree to her first kiss with Johnny Taylor, her sexual repulsion for Logan Killicks, her steamy flirtations with the newcomer Tea Cake, and Janie’s revelations that she is a sexual outlier: “mah love didn’t work lak they love” (*Their Eyes* 191). These sexual recollections emerge in a site of queer erotics: men with whom Janie had these erotic adventures are not present. Instead, Janie is present with Pheoby, the two women enjoying the erotic atmosphere: “They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager” to merge with her friend on an emotional and physical level, “to feel and do through Janie” in the “kissing, young darkness” (7). As the novel’s main speaker, Janie extends kissing’s metaphorical import to same-sex mouths, telling Pheoby that “mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” as she shares out her story. Pheoby shifts Janie’s erotic metaphor

of speech into one of quietness: “[i]f you so desire,” bringing the subject of eros from speaking to an inner, nearly silent drive: “desire” (6). Pheoby resurrects the “if” she earlier raises with the townspeople and couples it with “desire,” reaffirming her stance that the discourse of the erotic—as Janie’s interplay of two women’s tongues indicates—can always be imagined otherwise; its givens can be reconsidered. Thus Pheoby’s “if” invites Janie’s description of desire to remain open-ended if she so chooses. Pheoby creates space for the sexual to exist as indeterminate territory, ongoingly mutable, and therefore auspiciously unstable.

Pheoby’s erotic “if” and its realm of sexual alternatives align her point of view with other Black women visionaries of her time. Saidiya Hartman celebrates Black women across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, the time period explored in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as “radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise” (xv). Hartman’s “radical thinkers” include mostly urban Black women living in Philadelphia and New York City. Hurston’s novel shows that a vibrant thread of sexual reimagining was also occurring among Black women who made their homes in rural communities.³ Pheoby’s “if you so desire” places her within this geographically broad community of Black women and demonstrates the power of queer listening to imagine and create a world beyond the one dictated by the racist heteropatriarchy.

Listening, I propose, is Pheoby’s active engagement and elaboration of queer subjectivity. This article explains the ways in which listening is one mode through which Pheoby expresses queer agency to feel and enjoy queer desire, as well as to create space to widen conversations about eros and desire beyond cisheterosexual norms. I call Pheoby’s quiet attention to Janie’s story “queer listening” to describe the ways the activity of listening expresses Pheoby’s openness to non-normative sexual stories with indefinite directions; provides an opportunity for Pheoby to dwell with queer desires, language, and visceral sensations; and elicits queer epiphanies from Janie that deliver her to an experience

³ For more on rural queerness, see Scott Herring’s *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*.

of renewal.⁴ Queer listening generates queer discourse in those who are listened to. In Pheoby's listening presence Janie lands in queer revelations about the erotic that reimagine it more as what Janie calls a fluid "mystery" than as a gendered cisheterosexual fact involving men and women (10). As Janie shares out her erotic journey to Pheoby, whose quiet listening facilitates such unfolding, Janie realizes that "love ain't somethin' . . . dat's de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing . . . and it's different with every shore" (191). Pheoby's listening spaciousness draws out in Janie what I would call a queer conclusion: in Pheoby's patient presence, Janie realizes that for her, eros conjures ideas of oceanic depth, fluidity, and difference more than reaffirms consensus and formulas about gender and sexual norms.

As the receiver of Janie's story, Pheoby's willingness to hear nuanced discourse about the erotic is an expression of queer leadership. Her quietness reveals her decision to "hold space" for strange ideas about sexuality rather than share her neighbors' compulsion to announce sexual conclusions before an audience (brown 5). Because it enables conversations and discoveries about Black eros to shift and open, Pheoby's listening is what facilitation writer adrienne maree brown might call "holding change" (5). Pheoby's quietness creates what brown might name discursive "openings" through which ideas about the sexual emerge that would otherwise remain unconsidered and provides the condition of possibility for queer revelations in Janie that would otherwise remain unachieved (5). After all, Pheoby's quietness is a holder of change both on the novel's first pages and its last; her listening facilitates what brown might regard as "new life coming into existence" (8). Pheoby introduces the townspeople to a queer lexicon of uncertainty—"Ah don't know"—in conversations about the sexual, and her listening creates space for Janie to find that sexuality is, at bottom, queer: fluid, less gendered and more oceanic in nature than perceived norms allow.

⁴ For more on queer listening, see my article "Homosexual Calm: Pausing to Listen to Queer Shame in *Frankenstein*." Queer listening functions differently in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* than it does in *Frankenstein*. Hurston applies queer listening as an antidote to controlling Black women's sexuality and their discourses about it, whereas Shelley applies queer listening to heal white gay male shame.

Pheoby listens to Janie's nuanced story because she is hungry for it. Hurston calls Pheoby's activity "hungry listening," entwining it with the sensual experience of enjoying a meal, like the one Pheoby brings to Janie.⁵ "Hungry" aligns Pheoby's listening with an inner drive much like desire and suggests Pheoby's hunger to hear atypical stories of eros that nourish her. As we shall see, nearly all characters in the novel—from Janie's grandmother Nanny to the otherwise creative Tea Cake—speak and behave, intentionally or not, as heteropatriarchal apologists who carry legacies of racism and sexism in their discourse that communicates a wish to control Black women's sexuality. Hence, Pheoby's decision to speak up and listen for discursive alternatives to control is thrown into relief. As a drive, Pheoby's "hungry listening" is fruitful; it "helped Janie to tell her story" of what I would like to call a queer awakening into sexual fluidity both as a teenager who experiences the erotic as a "mystery" and later as an adult whose eros is "lak de sea" (10, 191). Interestingly, even the food Pheoby brings to Janie is queer, unusual; it does not taste like her usual concoction. Pheoby expresses a little shame about it, as if it does not contain enough fluidity: "Not enough bacon grease" (5). Pheoby's condescension about her capacity to create fluid conditions ("not enough") suggests doubt that the gift she brings—whether a meal or her capacity to listen to stories of sexual fluidity—is enough, that the listener represents a subjectivity that can only be secondary to the novel's main course, the speaker, in this case Janie.

But Janie corrects Pheoby. "Gal, it's *too* good!," Janie exclaims, devouring the meal (5). Janie corrects Pheoby's self-doubt about her gifts for nourishing her friend both as cook and listener by adopting Pheoby's quiet character into her own: "Janie ate heartily and said nothing," affirming her friend's queerness by imbibing both the food into her character and Pheoby's quietness into the way she occupies space eating in this scene and infuses quietness into her subsequent recollections of the erotic.⁶ Holding quiet space both to satisfy drives and to allow them to flourish—whether erotic or gustatorial—is Pheoby's gift that stands out amid the noisy "Mouth-Almighty" characters who tend to make pronouncements about women's sexuality rather than to listen to be surprised by it (5).

⁵ For a beautiful analysis of listening and feasting, see Hoeller 196.

⁶ Hoeller examines Pheoby's listening through the lens of gift-giving but leaves unremarked this listening's queer dimensions (196).

Pheoby's sexual subjectivity based in quietness seems all the stranger—queerer—when contrasted with the high theoretical regard for speaking out about one's sexual experience in recent Black queer studies.⁷ Scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson have studied the profundity of Pheoby's listening agency, but do not linger long enough with its queer possibilities, preferring instead to focus on queer speakers. For Johnson, Pheoby's listening holds space for Janie's oral sharing as a Black heterosexual woman in a white supremacist nation. Listening to Black women tell their stories, Johnson writes, bears "witness to their affirmation of self, their trials, tribulations, and trivialities, their reveries, repulsions, and recollections. . . . And if this is true for heterosexual black women," Johnson continues, "it is especially true for black women with same-sex desire. There exists a tradition of heterosexual black women's storytelling, but that has not been the case for black lesbians outside of fiction" ("Put a Little Honey" 62). Johnson values fiction as a site where literary queer women—or those with "nonnormative sexuality"—can speak out (64n1). For Johnson, vocalizing is the favored queer women's agency. A more reserved style when it comes to Black queer women's expression could be viewed as a problem to overcome. Johnson amplifies the role of queer speakers in his volume *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (2016). Johnson explains that the volume's title "indicate[s], 'I mean no offense by what I'm about to say, but I need to speak the truth'" (2).

While Johnson and Hurston remind us that space must be held for Black queer speakers, Hurston reminds us, too, not to forget about Black queer listeners, those who do queerness less by speaking the sexual truth and more by remaining quiet to hear sexuality's mysteries. Pheoby's quietness is thus entwined not so much with sexual silencing as it reveals an overlooked aspect of queer leadership: her decision to clear discursive space for sexuality's unknowability and her freedom from norms to vocalize one's desire.

⁷ Early in the novel, Pheoby seems to share this expectation for speaking out. She encourages Janie to vocalize her erotic tale to the townspeople: "You better make haste," Pheoby states, "and tell 'em 'bout you and Tea Cake." Janie refuses: "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin'" (6). However, Pheoby quickly returns to the figure of the queer listener, ditching her narrative expectations and instead makes room for and absorbs another's story however she wants to tell it.

I am not arguing that Hurston prefers Pheoby's quiet listening as the only or proper model for Black women's queerness. Instead, Pheoby's quietness is one model for sexual expression that Hurston as a literary ethnologist takes care to document as part of her project to recognize that Black lives "are so diversified" and their "internal attitudes so different," even as she also affirms the importance of Black women vocalizing their erotic experiences (*Dust* 192). After all, Janie's sharing out occupies most of the novel's narrative space. Vocal women are central to Hurston's version of eros, for she knows, as scholar Evelyn M. Hammonds puts it, that "[h]istorically, black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex . . . with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (94). Hurston aims to remedy this by writing a novel honoring the sustained voice of a Black woman.

But for Hurston, speaking up and occupying discursive space are not the only ways to heal sexism and racism. So, too, can quiet listening. Enabling Janie's vocalization is Pheoby's queer listening, an equally significant presence of desire. Pheoby's listening is more a quiet, chosen expression than a silent, imposed repression. Her quiet expression is neither secret nor invisible, because it covers nearly the same duration of novelistic expanse as Janie's vocalization. Hurston is "invested in recording the folk in [her] writing, [but she is] also interested in recording in writing *how* they listen" (Furlonge 20). Pheoby's quietness is a version of queer leadership, one way according to Hurston of expressing, even role modeling, queer desire as a Black woman. This desire is at least twofold: to be surprised by sexuality rather than to make conclusions about it, and to hold space that draws out non-normative stories of desire that heal others and lead them to where Janie lands by novel's end: "peace" (*Their Eyes* 193). Pheoby as a queer listener resembles Hurston as a literary ethnologist: their listening practices receive the "varied" and "so different" "appearances and capabilities" and "internal attitudes" in Black southerners' experience of eros (*Dust* 192). Ultimately, the queer listener as one who honors erotic diversity by holding space for its variety to be voiced is a peacemaker both in a Black community that tends to "[sit] in judgment" of its members' erotic diversity and in a white supremacist nation obsessed with staying "de ruler" instead of the listener "of everything" regarding Black life (*Their Eyes* 1, 14). According to Hurston, if a community—racial, regional, national, or otherwise—wants to achieve peace, then its members

might follow the lead of the queer listener's quiet surrender to another's strange, challenging, and beautiful story of eros.

“Sound like Evil”: Some Trouble with Talking

Though Pheoby speaks out on behalf of sexuality's uncertainties, speaking out is not her most sustained or primary maneuver. Quietness is her leading attribute, occupying considerably more space in the novel than her dialogue. As quiet listener to Janie's tale, Pheoby bases a significant part of her subjectivity on not knowing and not self-disclosing erotic experiences. We know that Pheoby is married to a man named Sam, and that she enjoys Janie's sex appeal, telling her, “Gal, you sho looks *good*. You looks like youse yo' own daughter. . . . Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood” (*Their Eyes* 4). Otherwise, Pheoby vocalizes nearly nothing about her own erotics, choosing instead to hold space for another woman to voice hers.

Pheoby's quietness is an expression of her queerness. Pheoby's stamina to remain quiet and listen to another's experiences of sexual nuance whose contours she does not presume to know makes her remarkable as a queer figure. For Kevin Quashie, Black quietness is neither a retreat from societal participation, nor an indication of silencing or oppression, but an active and agential expression of Black subjectivity. Quashie writes that Black quietness is “a manner of expression” (21) that “helps us explore black subjectivity from beyond the boundaries of public expressiveness” (24) typically overdetermined as “demonstrative and resistant” (23). Exploring and supporting Black subjectivity in relation to demonstration, struggle, and resistance are crucial given the ongoing reality of the United States' institutionalized racism. But, Quashie explains, the parameters of struggle and protest give us only a partial glimpse of Black subjectivity, and one that leaves understandings of Black subjectivity interlocked with white supremacy rather than also acknowledging the limitless range of Black subjectivity that exists and flourishes beyond sociopolitical resistance and struggle: “As an identity, blackness is always supposed *to tell us something* about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness” (4, emphasis added). What it means to be Black and quiet tends to go unvalued at best and unimagined at worst. Quashie makes “a case for quiet” to “restore a broader picture of the humanity” of African Americans, their histories, presents, and futures (5).

To correct this limited critical paradigm for Blackness, Quashie elaborates a model of Black subjectivity that emphasizes “surrender” (24) and “give[s] up resistance as a framework in search of what is lost”—such as quietness and inwardness—in resistance’s “all-encompassing reach” (5), since “all living is not in protest; to assume such is to disregard the richness of life” (9). To assume such could also disregard queer quietness such as Pheoby’s as a healing presence both within Black culture and American culture more broadly. After all, unlike the townspeople, Pheoby does not judge but listens. She does not stir gossip but creates conditions for “peace” (*Their Eyes* 193). Hurston establishes quiet surrender as important as speaking up, since both Pheoby the listener and Janie the speaker elaborate the novel through their mutual presence.

Quashie studies both Janie’s and Pheoby’s quietness but leaves unremarked the queer motivations of quiet. Quashie’s work holds open the idea that Pheoby’s queer listening expressed as quietness need not be understood as silencing; instead, quiet could be an expression of erotic agency. Queerness need not be confrontational or even vocal to impact both Black life and sexual ideology; queerness can make an impact through unimposing quiet. Pheoby’s listening opens opportunity in the discursive field for Black women, both Janie and Pheoby, to explore questions rather than determine answers about sexuality, to elaborate new ideas about eros, and to unsettle assumptions about sexuality that may otherwise be given inadequate room to unfold in the discourse community.

Quashie finds the reality of Black quietness is often overlooked by critical attention to the louder discourse of Black “resistance and protest” (8). Similarly, Pheoby’s queer listening tends to be obscured by critical emphasis on the novel’s orality. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., famously characterized the novel as a “speakerly text’ . . . whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition” by its “privileging of oral speech” (181). When scholars mention listening, it is often considered more as a reinforcement of the so-called primary agency—speaking—than as a primary agency itself. Julie A. Haurykiewicz might best sum up the tendency of critics to underscore “the personal growth that comes from giving voice to one’s ideas and emotions”; silence is considered something to outgrow, for “empowerment . . . arises in the act of breaking free from that silence” (45). When critics honor quiet, they tend to find it as Hildegard Hoeller does, more “complicated and

fraught” than reparative (199). Hoeller affirms Pheoby’s listening but ultimately may find it verging on irresponsibility, since Pheoby does not live up to what Hoeller calls the listener’s “responsibility . . . to become the storyteller” and share out the story Janie has entrusted to her. According to Hoeller, “Hurston’s narrative designates Pheoby as the one who should represent Janie’s story but, in the end, never does” (199).

When seen from a queer angle, however, Pheoby’s quiet may emerge as more freeing than fraught. Hurston’s decision not to narrate Pheoby sharing Janie’s story with the townspeople amplifies Pheoby as a queer leader because she resists the community’s expectation to clarify stories of sexuality before an audience. The porch sitters expect vocal disclosure from a Black woman: “[S]he [Janie] ain’t got manners enough to stop and let folks know how she been makin’ out” with the so-called “young boys” (*Their Eyes* 3). Unlike the townspeople, who expect to “know” Janie’s erotic journey, Pheoby understands Janie has a choice to either “tell or not.” Pheoby informs the porch sitters, “If she [Janie] got anything to tell yuh, you’ll hear it” (4). Pheoby’s usage of “hear” hints to the townspeople that they might do well to become more listeners to and less pronouncers about Black women’s sexuality. Pheoby unsettles their idea that they are entitled to a sexual confession. If they were to hear one, any announcement would be Janie’s choice to make and from Janie’s voice, not Pheoby’s. In other words, Pheoby misbehaves, à la Johnson and Henderson, by leaving the townspeople in a queer state of sexual not-knowing, à la Sedgwick. And à la Hurston, Pheoby’s not passing on Janie’s story at novel’s end clears narrative space for Hurston to unfold Janie’s arrival at personal “peace” about her erotics, which we can infer is more important to Hurston than sexual disclosure to a community, since the novel concludes with the former and omits the latter.

Indeed, Hurston suggests that orality, speaking out, and “voicing one’s ideas” can be but are not always laudable accomplishments. The ideas that the townspeople voice—that Black women’s sexuality both fits a known storyline and must be broadcasted to the public—carry legacies of sexism and racism, namely, that a Black woman’s sexuality is more public entity than personal choice. While speaking can be an act of breaking free from enforced silence in many instances of Janie’s “self revelation” and is a monumental feature of her subjectivity, vocal-

izing, to Hurston, is not consistently redemptive (7). Janie states sometimes orality is a waste rather than a renewal; speaking can block rather than open revelation: “[P]eople like dem wastes up too much time puttin’ they mouf on things they don’t know nothin’ about” (6); “Let ’em consolate theyselves wid talk,” Janie continues; “Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans” (192). And Pheoby agrees, pushing her friend’s observation on talk to a more extreme level. Whereas Janie finds such talk “wastes up too much time,” Pheoby states that talk about Black women’s experience can be worse than waste and “sound like evil” (6).

Hurston amplifies the peace of Pheoby’s quietness by contrasting it with the violence of sexist and racist discourse about Black women’s sexuality expressed by most characters in the novel. We have already seen the townspeople’s judgmental pronouncements when Janie decides to keep quiet instead of disclosing her sexual status to them. This presumption that Black women announce their sexual experience before an audience is echoed by nearly every other character in the novel: by the white mistress who enslaves Janie’s grandmother; by Nanny, who strikes Janie when she does not respond to questions of sexuality (“You answer me when Ah speak,” Nanny demands, and “slap[s] the girl’s face violently” [14]); as well as by each of Janie’s husbands. Pheoby’s preference to listen to a woman’s experience rather than make demands of, talk at, or talk about her is thus an act of peacemaking in a culture crowded with punishing, heteropatriarchal discourse from both Black and white subjects. No violence happens during Pheoby’s queer listening to Janie’s sexual nuances. The violence (from Nanny’s rape to Tea Cake’s threat to Janie’s life, to the “mass cruelty” expressed by townspeople when Janie returns to Eatonville) happens before Pheoby’s activity of listening, neither during nor after it. After queer listening, safety remains, exemplified in Janie arrival at “peace” (193). Hurston thus suggests that a Black woman’s—Pheoby’s—activity of queer listening creates one of humanity’s safest and most transformative zones for not only Black women, but for all members of the Black community, and for sexual subjects, queer or otherwise, to exist.

Other scholars have paused with listening but have not focused on Pheoby’s *queer* listening. Furlonge hints at an erotics in Pheoby’s listening, calling Hurston’s literary ethnography an account of “knowledge gained through the sensual experience of listening,” leaving queer dimensions of that sensuality still to be explored (20). Both Amanda

Bailey and Hoeller examine “the art of listening” (Hoeller 195), highlighting Pheoby as “the facilitator of the narrative experience” (Bailey 327). The queer agency that Pheoby’s facilitation enacts remains open to examination. Maria Tai Wolff acknowledges the erotic power of Pheoby’s listening: “there is a certain amount of pleasure to be taken in listening.” Wolff, however, considers listening ultimately unsatisfying in a character’s subjectivity. Listening may not be enough: “Every text, especially an oral one,” Wolff writes, “directs the listener to go outside or beyond it, to live and to know for oneself. Unless it is done with memory of experience, talking or listening can be only a consolation” for real knowledge or lived experience (32). While “to live and to know for oneself” is a value that both Janie and Pheoby carry, this view assumes that Pheoby is not living when she is listening. Such an assumption precludes the idea that listening is a lived experience, one that Hurston herself lives, having grown up “hearing things” that shaped her as a literary ethnologist documenting patterns, nuances, and surprises of Black speech, music-making, conversation, religion, sexuality, singing, and a vast range of cultural arts as her anthropological and novelistic vocations.⁸

Listening for Hurston is more aspiration than consolation, for it demonstrates the capacity to “have some curiosity” about the diversity of Black lives rather than rely like the novel’s townspeople on forgone conclusions about them (*Dust* 180). Pheoby’s listening enlivens her and affirms her already considerable challenges to heteropatriarchy. Pheoby says after Janie’s tale, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this” (*Their Eyes* 192). Listening is an expression of Pheoby’s pattern of challenging givens about sexuality, including in her marriage with Sam. She asserts here a desire that both she and her husband change their behaviors and expectations in their marriage. Listening is thus not an underdeveloped action; it is a robust action that unsettles orthodoxies about sexuality. “Jus’ listenin’” is a practice during which Pheoby’s sexual agency expands rather than disappears. Pheoby “done growed”—in the past—*during* the

⁸ For more on Hurston’s writing and research based on her listening practices, see her essays “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “Shouting,” “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” and “Ritualistic Expression from the Lips of Communicants of the Seventh Day Church of God” in *You Don’t Know Us Negroes, and Other Essays*.

listening, not only after it. Listening therefore is an achievement in holding space to reimagine sexual norms that expand one's life.

Carla Kaplan's concept of the "erotics of talk" to describe Janie's discourse is useful in understanding the impact of Pheoby's listening (115). "Telling her story to Pheoby," Kaplan writes, "supplies the erotic fulfillment Janie misunderstands as 'marriage'" (116). Shifting Kaplan's focus on the erotic from speaker to listener, we might ponder Pheoby's "erotics of listening" that nourish both the listener's queer longings for discursive nuance and elicit a speaker's queer epiphanies. Pheoby reveals her queerness less through the vocalization of her desire and more through the quietness of her desire, her openness to listen to another's erotic journey as well as a willingness to let what she hears change her ("Ah done growed"). Pheoby's listening changes Janie, too. It carries Janie across the discursive tumult of three marriages to arrive at quiet "peace," "love and light" on the novel's final page (193).

Quiet Queerness

In contrast to nearly every character in the novel, Pheoby's willingness to "not know" about the sexual generates queer story, through which Janie explores her own queer listening and not-knowing. As Janie shares out her memories, she infuses them with queer listening and not-knowing that Pheoby's character models. Janie recounts to Pheoby an experience she had as a teenager hearing in the erotic the sounds of organic mystery rather than the discourse of cisgendered certainty. One of the novel's most lyrical narrations of the sexual involves a listening Janie. Reclining under the novel's famous pear tree, Janie remembers hearing "the panting breath of the breeze" (11). This listening awakens Janie to sexual dawning, the "love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight"; Janie "had been summoned to behold a revelation." The revelation is queer to the degree that the erotic "had called her to come and gaze" not on a sexual certainty as the townspeople tend to see, but "on a mystery," a sensibility for the unknown, similar to Pheoby's approach to erotic discourse (11, 10).

Janie receives this mystery aurally. It "had called her"; she hears its rustling "ecstatic shiver" and fluid "creaming" and "frothing." Quiet, she hears "the alto chant of the visiting bees" as part of the "voice of it all" (11). These sounds inspire questions in Janie—"How? Why?";

“What? How? Why?”; “but where? How? When?”—that go unanswered (10, 11). Instead of providing answers about the erotic, Hurston reveals Janie’s own capacity for queer listening: “It [eros] was like a flute song forgotten in another existence. . . . this singing she heard” (10). Humans discover the roots of sexuality, Hurston suggests, in a state of their quietness among sounds of tree, root, branch, and blossom. Sexuality is less a discursive and gendered certitude and more a collection of mysterious sounds one hears.⁹ Far from an established “fact” of heterosexuality, sexuality is queer to the degree that it emits an otherworldly sound, deriving from “another existence,” its tones opening sexual questions more than confirming sexual givens and inviting one to listen in and notice more. In telling her story of the erotic, Janie follows Pheoby’s lead in establishing quietness as a state in which to receive erotic messages that enliven.

Curiously, young Janie’s eroticism in this scene feels incomplete to her: “She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How?” (11). The erotic never offers Janie a conclusion. Ultimately her experience of eros follows Pheoby’s style of listening and not knowing. Just as nature does not give Janie a clarifying answer to questions of eros, Pheoby does not give the townspeople a clarifying answer about Janie’s erotic journey. For Hurston, desire is fundamentally less about discursive clarity and more an experience of listening. One receives desire as a queer experience by listening quietly to it, like Janie listens to nature and like Pheoby listens to Janie. Indeed, Pheoby’s role modeling as queer listener enables Janie to relate her queer listening to nature, since Pheoby’s listening in the novel’s sequence of scenes precedes Janie’s recounting of “the singing she heard” under the pear tree. Hurston suggests that sexuality is experienced most naturally, even most transformatively, neither when one is speaking nor heterosexually coupling, but when one’s quiet listening leads one to a realm

⁹ My argument about desire based in the activity of listening privileges the ability to hear. Deaf studies shows there is exciting work to be done on the novel’s usage of silence and rich visual and gestural elements to narrate the queer erotic. For an excellent critique of the limits of centralizing hearing in studies of twentieth-century American literature and the promise of Deaf studies for reconceptualizing language and the visual across modernist literature, see Rebecca Sanchez’s *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and the Visual Poetics in American Literature*.

of not making conclusions about eros. A silent listener, Hurston posits, is equipped to enter the heart of the erotic, which according to Hurston is the capacity to linger in incomprehension, even to make incomprehension an orientation to life and entwined with growth. We recall that Pheoby “done growed” by listening to Janie’s tale and intends to make changes in her marriage with Sam.

Quiet Anthropology

In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston emphasizes her capacity to listen as awakening her awareness of limitless diversity in Black life which she would study and write about as both anthropologist and novelist. Hurston as intellectual and storyteller is first and foremost, like Pheoby, a listener. “Hearing things . . . from my childhood,” Hurston recollects, “sooner or later I was bound to have some curiosity about my race of people. What fell into my ears . . . tended more to confuse than to clarify. . . . At different times I heard opposite viewpoints expressed by the same person or persons” (*Dust* 180). Even the cisheterosexual family represents divided subjectivity; there is no consensus: “My mother was the one to dare all. My father was satisfied” (185). With such differences both within one Black family as well as across a Black community, the idea of unity or consensus among a race, “like all other mirages, . . . fade[s]” (179). “Our lives are so diversified,” Hurston remarks, “internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all” (192). In Hurston’s autobiography, she applies the activity of listening, “hearing things,” to unsettle conclusions about and nuance ideas about Black subjectivities.

Listening confuses; yet listening also enlightens the listener to difference and mystery. Pheoby, who avows “*Ah* don’t know,” resembles Hurston, who pairs a willingness to listen with a high regard to abide with stories that might “confuse more than clarify.” Pheoby is not entirely sure of the meaning of Janie’s erotic story that she hears: “It’s hard for me to understand what you [Janie] mean, de way you tell it,” Pheoby admits; “And then again *Ah*’m hard of understanding’ at times” (7). Yet Pheoby does not demand clarity; the importance she places on listening and holding space for someone to feel heard is greater than the importance she places on understanding. For Hurston, then, the activ-

ity of listening to someone's accounts of the sexual may be more important than needing to understand them. We might read Pheoby's self-recognition that she is "hard of understanding" Janie's story "at times" as her erotic intelligence: she knows that the erotic, let alone communicating its meanings to one another, may remain at bottom a mystery.

Documenting the queer listener is not only Hurston's literary project, but also her anthropological one.¹⁰ Pheoby's queer quietness functions as Hurston's intervention in anthropology. The novel serves as both an archive of southern Black folk culture and a challenge to the white academic institution that establishes ideas about it based on a presumption that Black cultures operate in ways that can be archived by (white) scholars. As a student of Franz Boas, Hurston was trained in a method of anthropology whose goal, according to Françoise Lionnet, was a "textualization of the object of representation," that is, "the preservation of disappearing cultures and vanishing lore," especially of so-called primitive cultures such as the Black South, into a "written version" penned by the observer (99). Both participant in and destabilizer of anthropology, Hurston creates in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* what Lori Jirousek calls a new genre of writing: "ethnographic work," a "mixed genre" of fiction and anthropology, "cultural record, and racial commentary" (418). Hurston's mixed genre mirrors her multifaceted position as participant observer. According to Lionnet, Hurston's

position of fundamental liminality—being at once a participant in and an observer of her culture—would bring home to her the distorting effects of that problematic shift from orality to fixed, rigid textuality and thus would reinforce her skepticism about the anthropological project, in her assigned role as detached, objective interpreter and translator. (99)

As a southern Black anthropologist of Black southern life, Hurston dwells both within and outside institutionalized anthropology, giving

¹⁰ For an excellent critique of the documentary film industry's listening practices that "invent[] the very disenfranchised humanity that it claims to redeem," see Pooja Rangan's *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (1). Differently from "invent[ing] disenfranchised human beings" so that they can purportedly redeem them, both Hurston's and Pheoby's listening practices assume an agent at the heart of their inquiries into Black southern experiences.

her space to participate in, innovate, and critique archivist presumptions.

We might read Pheoby as Hurston's quiet disruption of Boasian anthropology's white ideas about archive. On one hand, she provides a written account, albeit fictionalized, of the oral storytelling tradition among Black southerners. On the other hand, by centralizing the role of a listener in that community, Hurston critiques the white institutional presumption that these communities function in ways that align with white ideas about documentability. Pheoby shows that a significant part of Black southern life the anthropologist aims to archive is unarchivable because it is more quiet than vocal.¹¹ Some people in that culture, such as Pheoby, are doing more listening than talking. To be sure, traditional anthropology supposes a silent listener, the anthropologist. But this anthropologist aims to archive as much as possible the culture she is listening to. If one of two protagonists is mostly quiet, then half of Hurston's anthropological story about Black southern life resists "fixed, rigid textuality" that the white anthropological project expects. Hurston documents the stance of the listener by naming Pheoby, but what exactly Pheoby's subjectivity or consciousness consists of as she listens remains indefinite, outside the text, because she expresses more quietness than discourse. Hurston is less interested in pinning Pheoby's subjectivity down into language than she is in honoring the role of the listener whose quietness does more than welcome new ideas about sexuality; she draws them out for the sake of both individual and communal peacemaking.¹²

¹¹ For an excellent biographical account of queer women's practices, cultures, and histories that evade structures of archive, see Lisa Cohen's *All We Know: Three Lives*.

¹² Quiet is a considerable agent of peacemaking for Hurston. She announces such in her essay "High John de Conquer," about a spiritual messenger of Black inspiration, laughter, and agency. Hurston writes that quiet is generative of peace; it reveals the limits of white knowing and control over Black subjectivity and opens room for both Black and white awakening into healing. "It is no accident that High John de Conquer has evaded the ears of white people," Hurston writes. "They were not supposed to know. You can't know what folks won't tell you. If they, the white people, heard some scraps, they could not understand because they had nothing to hear things like that with. . . . Old John would have been out of place for them" (*You Don't Know* 29). Yet white Americans can learn John de Conquer's otherworldly message of hope and healing with sustained listening. "[L]isten hard," Hurston advises, "and you will hear John de Conquer treading on his singing-drum." When both whites and Blacks "listen hard," then dehumanizing ideologies of racism, and I might add, sexual shaming in the context

In writing a figure who draws out queer revelations in another person, Hurston adopts less a white anthropological stance than an African artistic one. Hurston borrows conventions from West African dance to create Pheoby's character: "Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. . . . It is compelling insinuation"; its movements remain incomplete intentionally, so that the "spectator . . . is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer." The dancer "is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests" (*You Don't Know* 53). African dance's high regard for gestural incompleteness aligns with much of queer thought's valuation of sexual open-endedness. We might think of Pheoby's queer listening as "restrained" dancing. Pheoby is "eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. . . . Pheoby held her tongue for a long time, but she couldn't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke" (*Their Eyes* 7). Pheoby's listening performs a version of a West African dance of queer quietness, holding her tongue still but "moving her feet." Pheoby's quiet "holding" and "moving" exert muscular motion that invites Janie in the "spectator" position to continue Pheoby's queer suggestion and talk queerly. Janie lands in queer revelations about both her teenage erotics and the oceanic sexual that Pheoby's dance-like listening elicits.

As a dance, listening is dynamic muscularity. For Laura Dubek, Hurston's "literary structure" of storyteller and listener is dynamic; it attests "that listening is not a passive act. Listening means becoming an active participant in a dialogue intended to move you. This 'movement' should be understood as a visceral reaction, a challenge to existing (hierarchical) beliefs, and a conscious response to a call for action/change" (119). Given Hurston's interest in dance, I am drawn to Dubek's observation that another's presence can "move" one. For Dubek, it is the speaker who primarily generates the dialogic dynamism that moves the listener. But for Hurston, it might primarily be the queer listener who, like a West African dancer, moves the speaker. One of Hurston's "calls for action" is thus perhaps not obvious if we limit queer action to vocalizing and other behaviors meant to call attention to themselves.

of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, loosen their hold and "the power of love and laughter . . . win by their subtle power" (37).

Hurston's call for action includes a call to dwell in quietness and surrender. Pheoby's queer quietness, for instance, invites Janie directly and other characters indirectly (via Janie's narration of them) into the discursive dance of queer story.

Indeed, Janie concludes her story with a healing dance performed silently, carrying on Pheoby's trait of queer listening as a variation of dance. As Janie recalls her sorrows (Tea Cake's death and her trial for it), her sadness "commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sing" (192). But these sorrows disappear into a dance: "Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was," and Janie continues the hands-on dance: she "pulled in her horizon. . . . from around the waist of the world" and "the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees," leaving Janie in healing quiet, "peace" (193). Thus, it is not only Janie's dialogue that moves Pheoby, but also Pheoby's quietness that moves Janie into a discursive dance to discover dimensions to the erotic that would otherwise remain unrealized for her. Pheoby's calm abiding provokes us to rethink Black women's queer agency as one's quiet surrender to another's presence. This surrender paradoxically is a form of queer agency: it holds space for a speaker to unfold an unusual erotic tale whose telling delivers the speaker to healing.¹³

Pheoby's queer quiet is more an expression of agency than an effect of marginalization, oppression, or fear. As we have seen, Pheoby is one of the most daring, though soft-spoken, members of town. Pheoby is complex: quiet, yet transgressive. Pheoby's capacity to listen is associated with her capacity to move her body in a wide range of motion like a dancer. She is the first one to stand up for Janie when the townspeople stereotype her: "Pheoby stood up sharply" (3), tending to let her soundless behavior more than her words express her character. Like a dancer, Pheoby enjoys more physical mobility than the others. She leaves the porch dwellers with a sense of fearlessness, announcing "Nothin' couldn't ketch me dese few steps Ah'm goin'" (4), aligning her with the free motion of Janie who "kept walking" past the porch sitters who remain immobilized in their small imaginations of eros: "nobody moved" (2). And Pheoby as a queer woman is not unhappy in her marriage; she

¹³ For more on surrender as queer agency, see Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"*; Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*; and Margot Weiss's *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*.

admires with Janie her husband Sam's playfulness and comradeship. Janie laughs, "Sam is *too* crazy! You can't stop laughin' when youse round him" as he makes fun of the townspeople's gossip, and Pheoby agrees: "Uuh hunh," "Sam is right too" (6). Though Pheoby sometimes outwardly resists, resistance is not her chief feature. Her quiet surrender occupies overwhelmingly more space in the novel. A quiet queerness is thus the ideal subjectivity for a listener such as Pheoby because it is an inconclusive subjectivity. By centralizing the figure of the quiet listener, Hurston's literary ethnography archives the un-archivability of much Black American vitality, queer or otherwise.

Pheoby's range of physical motion is mirrored in the ways she welcomes a full spectrum of Black erotic discourse via Janie's story—from conservative to queer, from revelatory to repulsive, as will become clear. Unlike other characters—from Nanny to Joe Starks to Mrs. Turner and more—Pheoby does not limit Janie's speech by interrupting, judging, commenting, or advising on the diversity of Black erotic experience Janie narrates, suggesting the queer listener's extraordinary openness to the immense range of Black sexual thought and experience. Thus the queer listener is the model living archive—whose ever-changing motion cannot be captured in text—of Black southern life in its rich diversity. The fact that Pheoby's character goes more undisclosed than narrated suggests a chief agency in Black southern culture that remains propitiously uncaptured in any anthropological project of it. The rich diversity of Black erotic culture therefore will forever live less in the archive and more in the Black listener.

"Answer Me When Ah Speak": The Choice for Quiet

Pheoby's quiet listening emerges as all the more reparative when contrasted with nearly every character's propensity to discourse about sexuality in ways that uphold violent heteropatriarchy. More heteropatriarchal speakers than queer listeners, most characters tend to push Janie's sexuality, which she fundamentally experiences as a quiet "mystery," into a discursive formula (10). The townspeople do not pause to listen for open-ended desire; they speak over it. For instance, a jarring vocalization breaks the quiet "whispery" spell of Janie's first kiss with Johnny Taylor. Janie's grandmother Nanny calls out "Janie!," and Janie's experience of erotic expansion and freedom shrinks into deadening do-

mestication. Nanny's call corrals the aerial fluidity and fruitful promise—"glorious being" and "pollinated air" (11)—of Janie's desire "inside of the house," where Janie beholds not nature's expansion but its destruction: "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm" and the "cooling palma christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head . . . had wilted down" (12). "Nanny's words" do not invite Janie to explore and reflect on her erotic experience, but "[make] Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain" (13).

The ugliness of sexual discourse gets worse. Nanny decrees: "Ah wants to see you married right away" to "Brother Logan Killicks" (12, 13). When Janie questions domesticating her sexuality into heteropatriarchy, saying "What Ah know 'bout uh husband?," Nanny closes the conversation with her own opinion: "What Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey" (12, 13). As with the porch sitters, seeing and knowing for Nanny take precedence over listening and uncertainty. Because Janie remains silent at what she considers distasteful sounds of erotics (the words "marry," "husband," and "Logan Killicks"), Nanny demands orality: "'You answer me when Ah speak.' . . . She slap[s] the girl's face violently" (14). Black women's silence is perceived as an act of transgression in the face of compulsory sexuality; a woman must speak and answer when in the presence of normative sexual narratives.

Nanny's discursive and physical violence toward Janie carries on some of the sexism and racism white supremacy enacts onto Nanny as a formerly enslaved person. Whether Black women speak or remain silent about sexuality, they become targets of violence. For example, Nanny is raped by a white man and abused by white women. Nanny relates that the plantation's "Mistis come walkin' in mah door," demanding "Nanny, Ah come to see that baby uh yourn." The mistress continues, "Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?" The white woman "begin to slap mah [Nanny's] jaws ever which a'way." When Nanny finds a chance to respond, she speaks the language of a woman already stripped of sexual agency and humanity: "Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave" (17). A Black woman's response to sexuality, even when the response effaces her own sexual agency, is met with more white violence. The white woman exclaims, "[F]irst thing in de mornin' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back" (18). In a community

of white people, Nanny has no choice whether to be silent or to speak. Either way, she is punished.

Nanny's violent slap to Janie echoes the white mistress's violent slap to Nanny for not properly continuing the demanded conversation about sexuality. This pattern suggests that entering marriage for Black women may be less the "protection" Nanny hopes it will be for Janie and more akin to the violence of racism (15). Nanny says as much: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out," a tyranny which makes "[d]e nigger woman . . . de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). Hence, "[T]ain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (15). Though Nanny's discourse around sexuality comes from a place of love, it carries with it the horrors of racism.

Janie's husbands continue a pattern of weak listening skills and a robustly oppressive orality around women's sexuality that echo the white mistress's, Nanny's, and the porch sitters' discourse. Janie's first husband, Logan Killicks, speaks over her desires, asserting his expectations without asking about her own: "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (31). Janie's second husband, Jody Starks, announces Janie's subjectivity extends only as far as "wife," not as a person with desires beyond heteropatriarchy: "Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice," Joe Starks asserts, nearly proud of his disinterest in listening; "You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" as his wife (46). Even Tea Cake, who seems the best match for Janie, reproduces a violent discourse with little space for listening, to which cisheterosexuality can lead both men and women. Tea Cake goes insane after being bitten by a rabid dog, rendering him unable to take Janie's preferences seriously. He begins voicing insane sexual demands that cannot register doctor's orders to be "in a bed by yo'self until you hear from me. Just you keep Janie out of yo' bed for awhile, hear?" (176). With little capacity to listen and "hear from" both the doctor and Janie, Tea Cake demands of Janie, "How come you ruther sleep on uh pallet than tuh sleep in de bed wid me?" Janie sees the gun in his hand, and his command that she "Answer me when Ah speak" repeats the threats that the white woman makes to Nanny and that Nanny makes to Janie when she remains silent or gives wrong answers to questions about sexual matters (183). Characters tend to make pronouncements that Janie's sexuality belongs in heteropatriarchy. Yet each one of these characters either disappears or dies in the novel—Logan, Nanny, Joe, and Tea

Cake. The characters who endure are the queer talker and the queer listener, Janie and Pheoby, suggesting that a queer angle to listening for and speaking about sexual nuance expands one's life by creating conditions of peace over danger and threat.

Pheoby's quietness regarding Black women's sexuality might thus be multi-layered. Besides what might be understood as Pheoby's natural inclination toward quietness—her consistent decision to not “give her opinion to people along the way” (112)—Pheoby's quietness might also be read as socio-political survival wisdom, since vocalizing sexual activity, while freeing to Janie in the presence of Pheoby, has also been historically dangerous for African American women. Pheoby's quietness could be a queer welcoming of sexual surprise as a healing correction to discursive and physical violence of racist and sexist ideology that demands that Black women's sexuality be announced and punished in a country that operates on control of Black women's sexuality. And yet, the fact that Hurston never narrates Pheoby interacting with a white person in what Hurston calls the “colored town” of Eatonville suggests that her quietness could be less a self-preservation response or effacement of agency within white supremacy than it is her decision to enact queer agency by widening discursive space for non-normative sexual stories like Janie's in a Black community healing from generations of heteropatriarchal racism (81). While Nanny in a white supremacist community has no choice whether to speak or to remain silent about her sexual experience, Pheoby has a choice to be silent or vocal in a community of Black people. Pheoby learns the nuances of Janie's erotic journey but does not share Janie's story to the townspeople. Pheoby's nondisclosure leaves them in a position of not-knowing about Janie's sexuality, a stance toward sexuality Pheoby has openly avowed to them and which she chooses for her own sexual status. Pheoby's not-telling is an affirmation of queer agency to choose opacity in a culture that expects sexual confessions from Black women.

Despite Hurston's critique of a Black community that tends to judge and squash Black women's sexuality into heteropatriarchy, she depicts the Black community as a site where queer quietness, let alone the choice to remain quiet, could be an expression of Black women's agency. By situating Pheoby's quietness in a Black community as Pheoby's expression of queerness, Hurston suggests that a Black community might serve as a national model for healing from racist heteropatriarchy that all Americans need. After all, the American legacy—from the

white man who rapes Nanny to Tea Cake's violent demands that Janie sleep with him—to control and judge Black women's sexuality disturbs the oppressors' peace as it does the victims': the white woman's violence makes her "tired and wore out" (17), and the townspeople stew in "envy they had stored up" (2) rather than enjoy peace by enacting queer quietness.

"Going Straight by Walking Crooked": Queer Quiet's Motion

Pheoby's listening emerges as all the queerer when we notice that she seems to be in a committed heterosexual marriage with Sam and can uphold somewhat conventional ideas about marriage. Yet she consistently displays behavior that welcomes more options. Early in the novel, Pheoby departs the porch sitters and walks to Janie's house, preferring to walk in a crooked direction, what Saidiya Hartman in her study of diverse expressions of desire among Black women might laud as "an errant path" (1): "Pheoby Watson didn't go in by [Janie's] front gate and down the palm walk to the front door," Hurston writes; instead, she "walked around the fence corner and went in the intimate gate. . . . Janie must be round that side" (4). Pheoby's sideways, apparently "errant path" leads her exactly where she wants to go: toward her "kissin' friend," Janie Crawford (7). Pheoby decides to remain with Janie for the overwhelming remainder of the narrative, lingering in the "fresh young darkness" and listening to her story of sexuality flowing beyond normative bounds instead of bowing down to traditional wifely roles. When Janie suggests that they pause their queer "kissin' friends" conversation to re-enter heteropatriarchy and check in with Pheoby's husband Sam, who might be "waitin' on [Pheoby] for his supper," Pheoby refuses: "It's all ready and waitin'. If he ain't got sense enough to eat it, dat's his hard luck" (7). Pheoby prefers to dwell with Janie, in whose presence surprising stories of sexuality unfold (they make her feel expansive—she "dilated all over with eagerness" [7]) instead of following heteropatriarchal norms that a woman plan to cover for a man's mistake if he ignores his own best interests.

Pheoby continues to create crooked paths through heterosexual norms. To be sure, Pheoby seems to support conventional marriage when she tells Janie to remain married to Jody Starks despite her unhappiness: "It's too late fuh y'all tuh be splittin' up and gittin' divorce,"

Pheoby states; “Just g’wan back home and set down on yo’ royal diastictitis and say nothin” (82). However, these conservative ideas about marriage—Pheoby’s advice to “say nothin”—co-exist with her queerness, what Hurston might describe as her tendency to go “straight by walking crooked” (112). In other words, Pheoby is queer even as she also abides by cisheterosexual norms. After all, Pheoby, the queer listener, reappears in the narrative when Janie’s cisheterosexual marriage is defined by accusations, poisoning, sickness, and deceit. Pheoby declares that the doctor caretaking for Jody is a “two-headed doctor” and a “multiplied cockroach . . . tryin’ to sell gophers,” manipulating a husband’s health rather than reviving it (83). In this instance, Pheoby does not so much sanctify cisheterosexual marriage as hold space for conversations about its fragility and facades.

Pheoby’s crooked motion through heterosexual storylines continues. On her way to discuss Janie’s developing relationship with Tea Cake, Pheoby “[s]topped and talked a little with everyone she met, turned aside momentarily to pause at a porch or two—going straight by walking crooked,” recalling her “errant path” to Janie in the novel’s opening pages and emphasizing her dance-like physical, social, and imaginative range of motion. “So [Pheoby’s] firm intention looked like an accident and she didn’t have to give her opinion to folks along the way” (112). Much like Pheoby’s crooked walk to Janie’s house, Pheoby’s motion around town is as “crooked” as it is “straight.” Unlike the townspeople, who make assumptions about sexuality, namely, that Tea Cake and Janie’s romantic relationship is built upon her cluelessness of his manipulation, Pheoby does not “give her opinion” about the matter. Instead, Pheoby seeks out conversation with Janie rather than makes conclusions about (hetero)sexuality.

What Pheoby learns along her “crooked” path is a story about eros that surprises. Tea Cake is not manipulating Janie as the townspeople believe. Instead, Janie enjoys an equality with her romantic partner that was lacking in her previous marriages. Janie shares with Pheoby that “Tea Cake ain’t draggin’ me off nowhere Ah don’t want tuh go” (112). Once again, Pheoby’s presence creates space for sexual assumptions to be challenged, but her conservative ideas on marriage resurface when she shares that she would rather Janie marry a more traditional partner: “Ah’d feel uh whole heap better ’bout yuh if you wuz marryin’ dat man up dere in Sanford,” a suitor more financially stable than Tea Cake (113). Yet Pheoby’s character opens a dialogue of queer not-knowing;

how Janie's experience will unfold with Tea Cake is uncertain. "Maybe Tea Cake might turn out lak dat," expressing a secret reserve of "dirt and meanness," Janie considers. But "[m]aybe not. Anyhow Ah'm ready and willin' tuh try 'im," for Tea Cake is someone who undoes Janie's certainty and delivers her to wonder (113). With Tea Cake, Janie says that "new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said" (115). Despite preserving some traditional ideas about marriage, Pheoby's presence nevertheless invites queer surprise or "crookedness" in heterosexual or "straight" stories, because she herself is a queer listener, a married woman eager to hold space for discourse that reconsiders assumptions about sexual knowledge.

Pheoby's quiet listening emerges as reparative—associated more with flourishing than silencing—when we notice her quietness as part of a larger pattern Hurston writes of threading silence with erotic transformation, agency, and wonder. The first time we see sexual desire explicitly enter the novel, it does so silently. Men enjoy beholding Janie's body in silence as she returns to Eatonville: "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt" (2). Though this scene may appear to objectify Janie, it also beautifies the quiet nature of the erotic. Hurston applies lexicons of nature's free motion ("swinging" and "unraveling in the wind"; "bore," as in, an ocean wave billowing), and vegetation and fruit metaphors ("grape-fruits" and "plume" expanding) to describe the men's silent enjoyment of eroticism. The men are "saving with the mind" the vision of Janie's beauty. Their silence before natural beauty echoes the erotic silence Janie experiences as a young woman under the pear tree. Hurston thus celebrates the men's silent erotics more than she critiques it as repressive to Janie. Indeed, part of Janie's eroticism is the way she moves her body away from patriarchal presence, advancing her independence in this quiet scene. The men enjoy her sex appeal privately and independently; Janie as a character is neither stuck in the men's "mind[s]" nor within the women's jealous "hope that [Janie] might fall to their level some day" (2). In these cases, Hurston interweaves quietness with Janie's deliverance into independence and her advancement to a woman-centered home. Pheoby's quietness is associated with Janie's

discursive freedom to tell her erotic story and with Pheoby's willingness to receive it as a force that expands her own erotic agency and freedom of motion.

"Love and Light": Queer Quietness and Peacemaking

Listening is Pheoby's active engagement and elaboration of queer subjectivity. Pheoby, as quiet listener, "act[s] and do[es] things accordingly," not by vocalizing her own desire but by listening to another woman explore hers without judgment or conclusion (1). Pheoby's more obvious physical activity—her walk to Janie and talk to her—concludes within the novel's first pages. But this errant path—or dance, we might call it—takes muscular expression in Pheoby's remarkable endurance to listen. The "things" Pheoby does "accordingly," or in a proper way for herself, is to express silently her queer approach to sexuality through her patient quietness that generates Janie's story and queer epiphany.

The novel ends in a healing quietness, leaving readers with Pheoby's impact. After Pheoby departs, leaving Janie in solitude, the quiet Pheoby embodies remains. Janie becomes more like Pheoby as she lingers in erotic silence. Janie, "[c]ombing road-dust out of her hair. Thinking," becomes a queer listener again: she hears a strange story of eros. Memories of "[t]he day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing" (192–93). In Janie's listening, the ultimate erotic mystery emerges: Tea Cake resurrects and "came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window. . . . Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead. . . . The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace" (193). At bottom, the subject of eros is less a love story between a man and a woman and more a fluid and nearly nonsensical state of mind, "memory" and resurrection. Tea Cake's maleness is relegated to a preposition ("of his"), while the "kiss"—the same word that establishes Janie and Pheoby's relationship as queer "kissin' friends" in the "kissing young darkness"—holds the subject position. "Kiss" conjures the sea, Hurston's metaphor for queer eros: wet, fluid, and recurring motion like waves that touch the shore, or another body,

differently each time. Pheoby's role-modeling of quiet has perhaps returned Janie to her own inborn queer quiet that she had intuited as a teenager. Eros as both queer, nonsensical, and a state of mind—a queer state of mind—equips Janie to see and understand eros neither as patriarchal nor gendered but as shifting forms of “love and light.” In this moment when Janie loosens herself from cisheterosexuality, she lands in an expanse of oceanic superabundance, catching immensity as one would catch fish: “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net.” She experiences her relationship with Tea Cake as less heterosexual and more a quiet “memory” of “love and light” (193).

Perhaps the queerest part of Janie's desire is that it has landed not on a romantic relationship but on a state of mind: peace. Pheoby's queer quietness has led Janie to see less gender and more love, less tumult and more peace. As narrated by Hurston, the queer listener is a central agent in bringing love and peace to Black southern life whose tendency—as the townspeople, Nanny, Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, and others show—is to produce controversy, antagonism, and violence around women's sexuality through discursive control. Listening more than speaking establishes Pheoby as a leader of peacemaking who models more a curiosity about women's sexual experiences rather than a control over them.

Listening, according to Furlonge, is “central to Hurston's practice as a writer and an anthropologist” (19)—and I would add as a peacemaker. Hurston's novel has invited readers to become queer listeners and peacemakers like Pheoby, having acquainted them with an immense range of Black sexuality, from the horrific (Nanny's experience under enslavement) to the revelatory (Janie's erotic awakening under the pear tree); from the nearly unnoticeable (Pheoby's queer quietness) to the miraculous (Tea Cake's resurrection from man to light) and more. Hurston thus renders the reader into a living archive who evades full archivability in her quiet anthropology, as Pheoby does, for the reader carries within themselves the “varied” and “so different” “appearances and capabilities” and “internal attitudes” in Black southerners' experience of eros, now co-existing in a reader's mind, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality (*Dust* 192). Hurston's literary ethnography is an emissary of peace “working for all America now” (*You Don't Know* 37). Facilitation expert adrienne maree brown might say that both Hurston as a writer and Pheoby as a listener do the hard, quiet

work of “holding space” and “holding change,” synonymous with creating “openings” (5) for “groups of people to do the hard work of dreaming, planning, visioning, and organizing together” (7). Hurston begins the novel by raising a challenge to the story of sexuality “we all know” and takes readers on a journey of sexual surprise and strangeness through Pheoby’s capacity to hold space and to hold change. By including a range of erotic stories and experiences in the novel, Hurston role models how to listen and learn instead of pronounce and judge; to be surprised by what one hears; and to let the nuances one hears expand ideas about self and other; to, like Pheoby, “grow[] ten feet higher,” together, “from jus’ listenin’,” because there may be much about sexuality we “don’t know.” We, with Pheoby and Hurston, might convey messages of “love and light” and peace through a nearly unnoticeable, unimposing activity: quiet listening to another’s story.

* * * * *

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