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Humans and the Red-Hot Stove: Hurston's Nature-Caution Theorizing in
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Heather Sharlene Higgs Randall

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Humans and the Red-Hot Stove: Hurston's Nature-Caution Theorizing in
Their Eyes Were Watching God

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Master of Arts

This paper gives critical attention to the *nature* versus *caution* porch conversation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, arguing that this is a legitimate addition to the anthropological discussion of *nature* versus *culture*. Addressing literary critics as well as scholars of the environmental humanities and of multispecies studies, I argue that Hurston's nature-caution discussion is a helpful epistemology which Hurston employs throughout her novel to suggest a single, unified way of understanding the human and nonhuman.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, nature, culture, multispecies studies, environmental humanities

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Discussing the traditional binary of nature and culture, Bruno Latour has said that although “all of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day” (*Modern 2*), as Westerners we “have imposed . . . total separation of human and nonhumans” (104) and are reluctant to let “the human and the nonhuman” mix together (3).¹ He notes, however, a solution: anthropology could resolve the “hopeless dilemma” of the human/nonhuman dichotomy by bringing the two sides, human and nonhuman, *together*. Coining the term “nature-culture” (7), Latour explains how anthropology has purchase only if it operates under the assumption that nature and culture work together as equal partners in meaning making. He argues that, with a nature-culture network that can be “*simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*” (6), an anthropologist can produce a full understanding of a subject, an understanding that is “simultaneously real, social and narrated” (7).

While Latour first discussed nature-culture in 1993 (and while nature-culture has now become a conceptual presence in much current work in the environmental humanities), an anthropologist more than five decades before him was working through this same binary and coming up with her own solutions to the putative division between humans and the nonhuman world. In a seemingly small moment within her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston, who had done graduate work at Columbia University with the luminary anthropologist Franz Boas,² lingers on the nature/culture divide through the conversation of two side characters sitting on a porch. However, in this case these men speak in an accent that blurs the pronunciation of *culture* into *caution* and so discuss the difference between *nature* and *caution* instead of between *nature* and *culture*. One asks, “Whut is it dat keeps uh man from gettin’ burnt on uh red-hot stove—caution or nature?” (64) The two volley ideas back and forth, one arguing for caution and the other for nature.

This moment of “theorizing,” as Barbara Christian calls it (52), between two working class black men rewards critical attention.³ By making culture synonymous with, or a replacement for, caution, Hurston revises the idea of culture itself, undermining the long-held academic preference for humans as a species set apart from nature and re-seeing non-natural (i.e., cultural) humanity in terms of caution—in terms of weakness, limitation, and wary carefulness when compared with nature. To call this “nature-culture *avant la lettre*” would be a misunderstanding. Decades before Latour noticed anthropology’s melding of the nature/culture binary, Hurston was engaging in this melding—but more than that, she was radically shifting the term *culture* to the curious term *caution*. Indeed, Hurston’s *Their Eyes* is a venture into a method of storytelling which employs Hurston’s argument that the world can be understood differently through a human-nonhuman lens. The novel takes place as Janie sits on the porch with her friend, Pheoby, and recounts the details of her life, then giving Pheoby license to share her story after it has been told. On this point, generations of scholars have wondered about Janie’s voice. For some, Janie’s decision to give her life’s story to Pheoby and by extension to allow any bystander to have and interpret it seems questionable. By releasing authorship of her story, scholars argue, Janie risks eluding the community of hearers who will know it.⁴ However, more recent scholarship argues that nature in the story legitimizes Janie’s voice.⁵ Building upon these environmental readings of Hurston (and taking a cue from the fact that the name of Janie’s messenger, Pheoby, alludes to a species of bird, the phoebe), I argue that Hurston’s nature-caution epistemology teaches us something about story and voice that we may overlook. If we are too focused on Janie as an individual, we miss the unified whole she becomes by the end of the novel. As we shall see, when reenvisioned through Hurston’s unique theorization and practice of nature-caution, Janie’s willingness to share her story with every thing that wants to

listen—human or nonhuman, living or nonliving—becomes a narratological move that gives Janie’s story wings.

By reading Janie’s story through a nature-caution lens that blends the nature and the culture into what *Their Eyes* calls “one comprehension” (12), we allow her story to escape the fleeting realm of culture and the often inaccessible power of the natural world to become one single account that houses worlds. This epistemology transforms Janie’s voice into a transtemporal force that reaches across generations. Janie apparently has no children, but collaborative storytelling with the natural world around her makes her story an intergenerational one reaching far beyond the porch and across all natural-cultural divides. All listeners, present and future, essentially “[boil] down to a drop” (76) because the world will continue to tell Janie’s story; it will be found everywhere.

Particularly relevant to such an approach to *Their Eyes* is the conceptual terrain we see in discussions of multispecies ecology, an emergent arena in which scholars in the environmental humanities have been considering how humans identify and disidentify with the nonhuman world. The aim of this kind of ecology is “to develop ‘lively ethographies’: a mode of knowing, engaging, and storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others and that, in so doing, enlivens our capacity to respond to them by singing up their character or ethos” (Van Dooren 77). Multispecies studies acknowledges and values the ethos (the character, or the life) of species other than humans, “taking others seriously in their otherness . . . [and] learning to ask and to see how we might be called to respond” (87). Multispecies ecology is the exercise of “passionate immersion” (Tsing 19) into other species’ lives for the benefit of all involved.⁶ Here we remind ourselves that humans are not the only metric of existence. This mode of ecological thought aligns with much of what Hurston was doing with her own nature-caution discussion, but

Hurston, years prior to the emergence of the arena of multispecies studies in the 2010s, practiced multispecies ecology by recognizing other species' stories and giving their voices space to be heard. In *Their Eyes*, Janie's life plays out alongside nonhuman forces of nature, her stories ultimately blending with theirs until they come together as one.⁷ I argue that these moments culminate in a union between Janie and the species around her that deepens the meaning of Janie's and the nonhuman world's stories as both draw meaning from the other.

Bringing Hurston's theorizing on multispecies ecology into dialogue with contemporary conceptual work on these topics, I further argue that the novel's investments in storytelling in the mode of *nature-caution* (rather than what has become the conventional *nature-culture*) constitutes an intervention in how we understand interspecies and human-earth relations. As Janie attempts to understand her own life, her nature-caution experience allows her to comprehend as one her self, her story, and "each and every" (192) living and nonliving thing. Through nature-caution, she finds the horizon she seeks within herself as she simultaneously finds herself in the horizon, overcoming entangled relationships to access unified truth. Ultimately, reading *Their Eyes* through its own self-theorizing brings an opportunity to multispecies studies and to the environmental humanities to move past *nature-culture's* traditional networks and entanglements and embrace *nature-caution's* connections and correspondences. Through Janie, Hurston models a nature-caution epistemology that denies the inhumane meshes of distinction and separation in favor of "one comprehension" (12).

The Nature-Caution Humbug

The southern porch is a hallowed place for storytelling, and porch talk in *Their Eyes* is especially important for Janie's emotional well-being.⁸ Indeed, when people gather on Joe Starks's store porch to share stories and discuss philosophical questions, the porch becomes "the

center of the world” (64). As intimated in this essay’s introduction, one important discussion that takes place at this center of the world involves a philosophical argument between Sam Watson and Lige Moss. Lige introduces a question that has “’bout drove [him] crazy” (63): “Whut is it dat keeps uh man from gettin’ burnt on uh red-hot stove—caution or nature?” (64). Sam answers, “Ah’m gointuh run dis conversation from uh gnat heel to uh lice” (64), suggesting that he could answer the question easily but that since Lige is so invested, he will take this issue and think it through in an extremely detailed manner.⁹ Sam argues that nature is the obvious winner: “It’s nature dat keeps uh man off of uh red-hot stove” (64). Lige argues the other side: “’Tain’t no nature at all, it’s caution.” The two begin a heated discussion, seeking to answer one question: Which has more power over the actions of humans—nature or caution?

With this argument, Hurston introduces a compelling companion discussion to the typical clash between nature and culture. Among many scholars who discuss this binary, Bruno Latour notes that the binary happens when we compartmentalize the way we determine truth. Instead of a reality interwoven between the natural world and the cultural world of humans, too often we prefer one epistemology—either the study of what nature can tell us, or the study of what culture can tell us—as we make sense of the world (*Modern* 5). Latour ultimately argues that only when we combine epistemologies, as in his nature-culture concept, do we understand the whole. By using nature-culture networks, we increase our ability to fully comprehend the world.

Hurston’s porch scene obviously alludes to the traditional binary between nature and culture; Sam and Lige argue about the terms *nature* and *caution* as opposites, and we can see the relationship between caution and culture both in sound and in meaning. This is underscored when Lige’s first argument for caution illustrates learned behavior (that is, culture) much more than caution as a principle. He says, “If it was nature, nobody wouldn’t have tuh look out for

babies touchin' stoves, would they? . . . So it's caution" (64). Lige's explanation is of culture; a baby has no caution and must *learn* it from the society around him. I suggest that Lige's use of caution is meant to be understood against the backdrop of culture; culture teaches us what to be cautious about, and when we are cautious, we draw upon our learned cultural understandings. However, in the discrepancy between *culture* and *caution*, Hurston has changed the terms of this problem just enough to reframe the entire binary. She presents the terms of a new clash, one that might shed more light on what nature is, what caution is, what the phantom presence of culture is in caution, and how these terms and notions could possibly become commensurable and make meaning together rather than remain in opposition to each other.

Analogous to Latour's conjoining of nature-culture, Sam and Lige's discussion of nature and caution—even as they believe they are discussing binary terms—models a way of knowing that transforms the slash between nature/caution into a conjoining hyphen, to form nature-caution. Originally, the binary is maintained completely. Sam traces the root of caution to nature, but Lige reminds Sam of nature's limits: "a whole heap of things ain't even been made yit" (65), he says, thereby pointing out that nature isn't everything; it can't supersede time. By this point in their discussion nature and caution seem evenly matched, but the separate threads of nature and caution eventually weave their way into one another. First Sam relies heavily on nature to make his argument for nature.¹⁰ For example, he relies on nature even in his colloquial talk of taking "dis conversation from uh gnat heel to uh lice" (64). He does this again when he argues that after God made nature, "nature made everything" that followed (65). This nature-informed reasoning works well for Sam's argument; nature is even powerful enough to get "so high in uh black hen she got tuh lay uh white egg" and thus makes seemingly impossible things possible.

But after hearing these arguments rooted solely in nature knowledge, Lige warns that Sam is working under a limited epistemology and draws upon a different understanding than a binary-driven one. He tells Sam, “Ah knowed you would going tuh crawl up in dat holler! But Ah aims tuh smoke yuh right out” (64). This metaphor represents a moment of nature-caution wherein blending between the two binary terms happens three times over. In this metaphor, Sam and Lige become representations of their respective sides of the argument: Lige becomes a hunter, the metaphor for caution and culture, aiming to catch his prey; and Sam, the metaphor for nature, becomes an animal being hunted up the holler. Lige, as hunter, smokes out the animal that thinks it is free from culture, proving to the animal otherwise, for Sam has run up the holler to get away from Lige, caution, and culture—and in following his natural instincts to flee, he practices caution. In this way the first blending of nature and caution occurs, in which Sam, in his natural animal state, acts cautiously by fleeing up the holler, away from culture. Then the second moment of blending occurs, as the holler acts simultaneously as a natural environment and as a cultural epistemological arena for Sam and Lige. But the blending is not over; Lige sets the holler on fire, which brings the two friends back to the same question that prompted their journey up the holler together: What teaches a man to avoid the hot stove? Or, in this new arena, what teaches Sam (as nature and animal) to run out of the burning holler? The third blending occurs in this moment, when we realize that nature *and* caution, or nature-caution, will bring Sam out of the holler. Sam, as an animal, has only nature to rely on; with the threat of fire, Lige has proved that he is cautious *by nature*.

Later in the conversation, nature and caution further blend in complicated ways; for example, caution-knowledge sometimes informs nature-knowledge, as when Sam argues that nature is so powerful it has made everything—including caution—and Lige uses caution to

remind Sam of nature's limits: "[Nature] ain't made it so you kin ride uh butt-headed cow and hold on tuh de horns" (65). In this example, Lige uses the nature of the cow to show how caution can be just as powerful as nature; a butt-headed cow is a cow that no human is able to ride because the cow has no horns to hold onto.¹¹ Nature evidences that caution champions here, and thus caution and nature work together. Once Lige uses nature-knowledge to build a better understanding of caution-knowledge, this hybrid knowledge overtakes the porch, and Sam also begins merging caution and nature together, although perhaps unwittingly. He continues to argue for nature, but the binary terms coalesce despite himself as he calls caution a "humbug"—a hypocrite, a sham, "uh inseck dat nothin' he got belongs to him. He got eyes, lak somethin' else; wings lak somethin' else—everything! Even his hum is de sound of somebody else" (65). Caution has now taken on a suspiciously natural form.

The narrative notes that the porch is "boiling now" (66)—with anger and frustration, no doubt, and also boiling, as I have outlined above, in a way that creates a stew in which the flavors of nature and caution have seeped into each other. Finally, there is no clear winner, and we are left with a caution plastered in nature, or with a caution morphed into natural creation. This nature-caution "humbug" is a partnership, and once the flavors of the boiling stew have fused together, there is no easy way to separate them. A fusion has been created, or discovered, on the porch. Hurston presents us with a creation in which nature and caution are inseparable from each other and are equally influential in a person's avoidance of the red-hot stove (or in an animal's inclination to flee from the red-hot and smoky holler), no matter which came first.

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston's porch humbug acts as an initiating conceit, evidence that knowledges of caution and nature cannot work independently. By themselves, neither epistemology is immense enough to explain or fully comprehend any situation. For Hurston, the

power lacking in either epistemology alone *is found in the humbug*, in the essential mixing of the two sides of knowledge which the binary tricks us into separating. The narrator tells us that the worlds created on the porch “never ended because there was no end to reach” (63). Hence it is unsurprising to find that the thematic of nature-caution continues without end in the novel, in ways that are less hyperbolic than they are on the porch, even if they are no less meaningful.

Humbugs in the Trees, the Funerals, and the Storm

Within *Their Eyes*, nature and caution consistently merge, reflecting the porch humbug which Sam and Lige have created and illuminating nature-caution knowledge as a powerful epistemology that helps us understand Janie’s story. For example, nature and caution are seemingly at odds in interactions between Janie and Nanny, whose attitudes and goals reflect the nature/caution binary. On the day Janie spends under the pear tree, she becomes wholly concerned with seeking nature-knowledge. As Janie experiences an intimate portrayal of nature’s springtime in bloom—“a marriage,” “a revelation”—her overwhelming desire is to find the “personal answer” (11) that she feels nature has for her. With this desire, Janie seeks nature-knowledge. However, opposed to Janie’s desires for whatever knowledge nature will give her, Nanny argues that caution-knowledge should win out over nature-fueled desires; in life, after all, “de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up . . . He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). Guided by this caution-knowledge, Nanny arranges Janie’s marriage to a secured and proven man in the community. She explains, “‘Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (15). For Nanny, caution attends to what nature leaves black women vulnerable to. The rift here between Janie’s nature-knowledge and Nanny’s caution-knowledge may originally seem irreparable. However, with the

humbug on the porch in our minds, some moments of this clash between nature and caution can be read differently.

The pear tree itself demonstrates that nature alone is not adequate for Janie to attain the knowledge she seeks. After she witnesses the “marriage” of bee and blossom and wants to find the same fulfillment in nature for herself, nature never provides that experience. The narrative explains that the natural revelation “seemed to elude her” (11). Even the bee, “[sinking] into the sanctum of a bloom,” and the flies, “tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in her marriage” (11), experience the revelation, but the narrative explains that “nothing . . . answered” Janie (11). Even kissing Johnny Taylor, with whom Janie expects to have a marriage-like witness, falls flat; the only description of this seemingly promising moment for Janie comes in Nanny’s words, undercutting nature’s power even further for, instead of the beautiful marriage Janie wishes for, Nanny’s caution perspective describes how Johnny Taylor is “lacerating . . . Janie with a kiss” (12). The violent connotation of the word “lacerating” leans the listener toward caution. This moment of natural revelation becomes a point of nature-caution blending.

The blending happens visually next: a reflection of the nature-caution humbug appears in the figure of Nanny, who stands at the window as she interrupts Janie’s kiss with her caution-driven scream. First, the narrative describes how nature blends into caution as “Nanny’s head and face” become “the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm,” like a “foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered” (12). Nanny becomes a tree, which reflects Janie’s pear tree experience, and thus both women are directly connected to nature. The connection is complicated, however, as Nanny’s tree is simultaneously obliterated by nature in another form—the storm (as I explore later in this essay, the storm is an ultimate force of nature-caution, blending human and nonhuman together until everything becomes one devastation in its

aftermath). Furthermore, it is a caution-driven Nanny, awakened to this state by caution for her granddaughter, who overthrows any original power nature holds in her tree scene.

In this moment of nature blending into caution, it is impossible to separate Nanny from nature or from caution, for Nanny's caution has grown out of nature; Nanny's caution *is* nature itself. While Janie's pear tree bears natural fruit, Nanny's ancient tree bears caution. This moment is a humbug creation, analogous to Sam and Lige's porch discussion, in which nature and caution become indistinguishable. The narrative further enriches this nature-caution image as it describes how "the cooling palma christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head with a white rag had wilted down and become part and parcel of the woman" (12). All of Nanny's caution seems to soak into nature itself, and caution and nature blend again. This convergence gives Nanny power, for in staring at Janie with a nature-caution glance, "her eyes didn't bore and pierce. They diffused and melted Janie, the room and the world into one comprehension."¹² There is power here for Nanny in her nature-caution vision as she accesses a full understanding of Janie.

Janie again witnesses the power of blended nature-caution in the death of Matt Bonner's mule, when nature and caution blend as the nonhuman and human gather to lay the mule to rest. In the gatherings of the town, cautionary practices succumb to nature, while nature practices caution better than the humans do. As the city pays their respects (59), they draw upon the caution-driven, human practices surrounding reverence for death with a speech by the mayor and a eulogy about mule-heaven (60). But in parodying a funeral for their mule citizen, "they [mock] everything human in death" and undermine the cautionary practice of the human funeral. Their caution turns animalistic, and they have nothing left to do but "drag him out like all other dead brutes" (59). In this human response to the mule's death, caution blends into nature.

On the other hand, at the funeral ceremony held by the vultures nature morphs into caution. The vultures, determined to respect death, “[hold] a great flying-meet,” and the trees become “peopled” with the birds (61). The vultures become more human than natural as they pay their cautionary respects, with even the vulture called “the Parson” obeying the rules of “decorum” (61). Their ceremony reverences the mule despite the vultures’ natural inclination to eat it. When their caution-driven memorial finally begins, the narrative underscores caution in this natural scene yet again, noting how Parson “[picks] out the eyes in the ceremonial way” (62) so that the feast can finally begin. In the vulture’s natural practices, their nature merges into caution.

Reading the mule as a nature-caution convergence here also rereads Nanny and Janie’s nature-caution blending. It is Nanny’s caution, grown from nature, which allows her to state that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). This argument may initially lead us to believe that for Nanny, a mule’s nature proves caution must rule; the mule is, by its nature, taken advantage of, and so it must practice caution. Her metaphor may seem to reason that black women are likewise abused in the world, and so caution must rule their lives, too. With this reading, Nanny’s nature-caution leads to caution, for caution protects what nature has left exposed; caution would seem the only security in the face of nature. However, the nature-caution used in the mule’s death helps us re-visit Nanny’s nature-caution knowledge of mule and black woman. To the vultures practicing caution over the mule’s body, the nature of the mule actually *creates* the desire for caution—the mule exists, and so the vultures will respect it. This is a distinct change from how we may originally read Nanny—that caution is born *because of* the dangers of nature. Actually, the vultures show that caution is born *through* nature; only in comprehending nature can one truly practice caution. With a new balance of nature-caution, in

which nature inherently begets caution and respect, we see Nanny in a new light. Acting in nature-driven caution, Nanny is not wary of nature itself; instead, her nature-caution brings harmony to the binary. Like the vultures do when they reverently embrace the natural existence of the mule, nature-caution embraces the black woman and cautiously respects her *because of* her nature. Perhaps this is the kind of comprehension Nanny experiences when she “[diffuses] and [melts] Janie, the room and the world into one comprehension” (12), using nature-caution as her “compass” (“comprehend,” OED.com) with which to measure the black woman, the mule, and the world in the same understanding. Within this nature-caution compass, she finds kinship for the black woman.

Nature-caution gives the mule kinship as well, in both Eatonville’s memory and landscape. The narrative describes that “the yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones” (62). The mule’s memory continues on in cautionary tales of cultural porch talk, and its bones endure physically, eventually becoming part of the Eatonville earth; it will live in nature’s memory forever. In this way, the mule becomes a boiling nature-caution stew endlessly combining the human and nonhuman, whether it be the Eatonville residents and the land they live on or the black woman and the mule, empowered through caution because of their nature.

Nature and caution also converge in the ultimate humbug on the ’Glades, as we see human and animal interactions with a storm of immense proportions, perhaps allusive to and anticipated by the storm that earlier has ripped nature-caution Nanny up from the roots. This storm of nature-caution begins with the Seminoles, who rely on nature-caution knowledge in their explanation for leaving the ’Glades: “Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming” (154). Through nature-caution, the Seminoles pay attention to nature and thus know how to be cautious. In much

the same way, nature and caution blend again when the native animals leave the 'Glades. The narrative says that their "procession was constant" (155), just as the Seminoles' was. In the movement of animals and indigenous humans, the very nature of the 'Glades becomes cautious, and thus nature and caution blend into a nature-caution-led movement.

Janie and Tea Cake continue this humbug of nature-caution convergence. In tracing the path of the Seminoles and the animals to get out of the 'Glades, they add an important element to their nature-caution movement: their insurance papers. Tea Cake is especially concerned with these, asking Janie to "git our insurance papers tuhgether" (160) and even reiterating their importance when he asks her to "cut uh piece uh dat oilcloth quick" (160) to wrap the papers in and keep them dry. Just as the Seminoles used saw grass as their nature-caution knowledge, the insurance papers serve a similar purpose for Tea Cake—a nature-caution knowledge that human life, by its very nature, is vulnerable, and so humans must be cautious and insure themselves against the unknown. To Tea Cake, nature-caution is a promise of longevity—as humans act with caution, they can ensure security in the present and the future. From the Seminole's cautionary saw grass to Tea Cake's insurance papers, nature-caution converges through the natural as well as through the nonliving, manmade creations—even insurance papers—to constitute an all-encompassing nature-caution humbug. In this way, the 'Glades become a touchstone by which we further our understanding of nature-caution as not simply the binary dissolution between nature and human but as a reconciliation of living and nonliving as they share past, present, and future.

The nature-caution humbug is solidified in the aftermath of the hurricane, in which everything has been churned up and blended together—even the very basic tools of societal order. As men work to bury the bodies of victims the hurricane killed, they are given orders to

put the white bodies in caskets and to leave the black bodies unboxed in the ground. But this segregation is immediately problematized because in the aftermath of such a horrible storm, “nobody can’t tell nothin’ ’bout some uh dese bodies, de shape dey’s in. Can’t tell whether dey’s white or black” (171). In a gruesome way, the hurricane has combined and connected its white and black victims, making any kind of separation of the two supposedly different races impossible. Ultimately for Hurston, “all of [caution] and all of nature get churned up” (Latour, *Modern 2*) again and again in the novel. Janie’s story proves this unifying, as we see the nature-caution humbug take shape time and time again throughout the novel. The divided, single epistemologies of nature and caution which Janie originally lived by are blended within the muck of the ’Glades by the hurricane’s power and are joined together, ultimately producing a more complete understanding for Janie. The narrative hints at this comprehension, in fact, when Janie begins telling her story to Pheoby. It explains that “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (8). In this moment, Janie identifies nature and caution as dawn and doom, done and undone, and prepares her audience to understand her story through a nature-caution epistemology.

Tea Cake’s Death and Pulling in the Horizon

Critics often read Tea Cake’s death as a moment of self-enacted liberation for Janie, whether it be liberation *from* the overpowering influence of men or white folks, or liberation *within* Janie’s black matriarchal heritage.¹³ These readings of liberation, however, do not resolve the issues scholars have with Janie’s voice. As Laura Korobkin notes, Janie’s voice after Tea Cake’s death is still hidden and hard to identify. Even when Janie speaks directly about her story in the courtroom, Korobkin argues, Janie’s “rich, figurative dialect” may actually be lost on her

white audience, and “the court’s procedure takes little real notice of Janie” (28). No matter what power Tea Cake’s death may have brought to Janie, her voice is still not taken seriously. These intersecting and pivotal questions surrounding Tea Cake’s death and Janie’s voice come to a head, I argue, when read through the novel’s own concept of nature-caution. Building on this essay’s previous work in connecting the human and nonhuman and reconciling multiple species across times and locations, I argue that Janie’s moment of liberation here is in her ability to access nature-caution power—that her voice accesses power through the nature-caution story of kinship it tells.

Tea Cake’s death at Janie’s hand presents a climactic struggle between nature and caution for both characters. For Tea Cake, the rabies is an overpowering force of nature. As the virus takes over his body, he loses power over his faculties and becomes an animal; Janie suggests people will relate him to “some mad dog” when they see him (183). In response to his deteriorating control, Janie practices caution, fixing the pistol under his pillow so that “it would snap three times before it would fire” because “it [does] no harm to play safe” (182). Through their nature/caution actions the two live in limbo—the balance hangs unresolved between the nature-fueled actions of Tea Cake and Janie’s cautious ones. Soon, however, Janie’s caution takes on a familiar nature-caution form. As Tea Cake’s wild, nature-driven state is “urging him on to kill” (183) and he aims the pistol at Janie, she grabs ahold of a rifle, aiming “in frenzied hope and fear. Hope that he’d see it and run, desperate fear for her life” (184). In this moment, Janie houses both nature and caution—caution in prolonging Tea Cake’s life and nature in protecting her own. When Janie finally shoots first, it may seem that her natural desire for self-protection ultimately wins. However, her next actions leave room for another reading. After she shoots, her nature becomes cautious as she immediately runs across the room to Tea Cake and

practices caution for his welfare, “trying to hover him” down to the ground (184).

Simultaneously, Tea Cake “[closes] his teeth in the flesh of her forearm,” imposing his nature onto Janie even as she practices caution. This moment testifies of an unremitting nature-caution convergence, as Janie’s act of caution-become-nature-become-caution ends in Tea Cake’s nature-driven bite.

It is now known that rabies is very rarely, if ever, transmitted via contact between humans.¹⁴ But because Hurston includes the specific narrative detail of the bite in this crucial moment it is likely, as Robert Haas has astutely noted, that Hurston wants us to believe Janie is now infected with rabies.¹⁵ If she is infected, then Tea Cake’s bite instigates an exchange of natural/human worlds that makes this moment of nature-caution convergence even more unifying and on a grander scale for Janie. With this bite, she accesses a network that reaches across species and through time.¹⁶ In particular, the nature of the disease—a *virus*—makes this bite a world-creating one for Janie. Dorothy Crawford notes the “ancient” quality of viruses, explaining that they evolved before “Archaea, Bacteria, and Eukarya . . . separated from their common ancestor” (14) 3.7 billion years ago. Essentially, viruses have the ability to communicate with various kinds of DNA, which suggests that viruses have a kinship on a fundamental level with all species.¹⁷ While all viruses are not the same, the rabies virus is particularly interesting because, as Velasco-Villa et al. note, it has “the widest host range of all the lyssaviruses” (223)—meaning that there are more “documented reservoir hosts,” or species that typically carry and spread the virus, than in any other virus of the Lyssavirus genus. The researchers list “*Chiroptera, Carnivora, [and] Primates [Euarchonta]*” as such reservoir hosts. Through these hosts, the rabies virus spreads, infects, and kills other species—including humans—today.¹⁸ Additionally, records from ancient Mesopotamia (eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries BCE) record symptoms of rabies following a dog bite (Fales 25), which further illustrates the far-reaching scope of the rabies virus and the length of time it has been infecting species. Thus, in its ability to communicate with multiple species throughout time via DNA, rabies connects human beings to species ancient and modern.

While Hurston was likely unaware of the details of the evolutionary history between rabies and its hosts, it is clear, based on her portrayal of the symptoms, that she had done her research on rabies and that she understood it—in its capacity to transmit itself from one species to another—as what we today might think of as a multispecies communicator. Thus, in the very moment Janie receives Tea Cake’s rabies-ridden bite, she finds kinship, gaining access to the vast network of species similarly vulnerable to rabies. Her connection extends beyond her present, through literal *genealogical* ties, to any species vulnerable to the virus. In this nature-caution experience, as the rabies works to literally translate and copy its RNA by using Janie’s own cellular processes, it acts as a translator, or communicator, akin to Bassnet and Lefevere’s idea of “translation as rewriting” (vii); as her story is translated into a new language, Janie’s voice unites with species across times and places, becoming accessible to more than humans alone.¹⁹ However, it is in true nature-caution fashion that Janie experiences this kinship, for the very nature (rabies) that connects her to all things inherently requires extreme caution—from Janie’s body at a natural, cellular level as well as from Janie and the doctors around her at what we could consider a cultural level. It is likely that Janie will die from Tea Cake’s multispecies bite. But this nature-caution vulnerability allows Janie direct access to kinship, which empowers her voice. When Janie first begins telling her story, she warns Pheoby, “‘Tain’t no use in me telling you somethin’ unless Ah give you de understandin’ to go ’long wid it” (7). Through the nature-caution coalition that rabies gives Janie, Janie’s story is not left to Eatonville porch talk,

where listeners will lack the full “understandin.”” Instead, rabies unites Janie’s story with nature—nature which, much like it did with Matt Bonner’s mule, understands and cautiously regards the story. In this way, scholars who worry about liberation for Janie’s voice neglect what Janie’s story actually requires—“understandin.”” It is nature-caution that opens the way for Janie’s story to achieve the comprehension it deserves.

From Entanglement to Stews

In recent years, the environmental humanities in general and multispecies studies in particular have definitively moved beyond trying to argue the binary of nature/culture. As Latour noted during a 2015 talk at the Breakthrough Institute in California:

Everyone of you here who knows anything about controversies regarding human and non-human entities entangled together are fully aware that there is not one single case where it is useful to make the distinction between what is ‘natural’ and what ‘is not natural.’ . . . ‘Nature’ isolated from its twin sister ‘culture’ is a phantom of Western anthropology. (“Fifty Shades of Green” 221)

Instead of the binary language of nature versus culture, our discussion has shifted. Now conditioned by the model of nature-culture in the environmental humanities and in multispecies studies, we perform “entangled” thinking, as Latour calls it in the above quote. In fact, Deborah Rose Bird and her colleagues describe this “inescapably entangled” (1) perspective as our ultimate goal within the environmental humanities. These scholars identify our entangled thinking as integral to the acts of “[resituating] the human within the environment” and “[resituating] nonhumans within cultural and ethical domains” (3). In taking Latour’s nature-culture network seriously, entanglement between nature and culture has become an epistemology

of choice.²⁰ This idea of an enmeshed existence has enabled environmental humanists to understand and respect new worlds in a studied, serious way.²¹

However, scholars should note how Hurston's *Their Eyes* problematizes the idea of *network entanglement* as an unqualifiedly beneficial way to understand human-nonhuman affairs. In the final scene of the novel, Janie engages in *net-work* activity, creating human-nonhuman *entanglements* by working with a net. As she "[pulls] in her horizon like a great fish-net," the narrator tells us that there is "so much of life in [the net's] meshes" (193). This scene has generally been read as a moment of triumph and self-actualization on Janie's part,²² but by invoking a metaphorical fish-net, Hurston makes room for readers to question their reverence toward this revelation. Fish-nets pose an incredible threat to sea creatures. For ocean animals, being caught, or *tangled* up, in a net signals the end of life. In true multispecies ecology fashion, Patricia Yeager has encouraged literary scholars to think about literary works as "echo chambers . . . for the most pressing questions about the ocean's and oceanic creatures' survival" (538). She suggests that we note the problems caused by our consistent and enormous human interference in the oceans: with the advent of industrialized fishing, the ocean has become "just another site where human relations take shape and connect through . . . an unregulated environment" (532). Yeager's ultimate warning is that we recognize how "the sea functions in literature . . . as a trope instead of a biotic world or swarm of agencies" (535). By recognizing the full implications of the ocean in literary works, we can more fully respect the ocean and the many agents living in it.

When read in the cautionary contexts that Yeager and others in the environmental humanities have so dexterously highlighted, Janie's actions in the final scene of the novel become more harmful than revelatory.²³ In using her fish-net to comprehend the beauty she has found, Janie entangles the very life she is trying to appreciate, threatening its well-being as well

as that of the ecosystems the sea life depends on, extending out to the far horizon. This reading of *Their Eyes* complicates the idea of the *network* and its meshes' entanglements, revealing how nets can only gather "so much of life" for a moment, for they ultimately prove deadly to the entangled creatures caught inside them. In reading this final scene while refusing the "tendency to make the ocean sublime and thus available for sublimation" (Yeager 538), the image of the net and its meshes gives pause to environmental and multispecies scholars, who rely on ideas of networks to connect them to the nonhuman, living beings that may well be hurt by the proverbial nets cast in the name of connection. This final scene also illuminates the problem that an epistemological reliance on networks causes. Even as Janie gathers in the fish-net, she is not whole with herself; she must "[call] in her soul to come and see" (193) the result of the actions she has taken. Janie's disjointed state might be taken as a symbol of the divisions that are produced and maintained within networks. Entangled together, nonhumans and humans are endlessly differentiated, and beings—including human beings—are separated from their own souls. Indeed, Janie's soul, beckoned from afar, may not issue a cry of joy upon seeing the entanglements Janie has caused with her network.

But in suggesting the limits of the network and entanglement paradigms associated with nature-culture, Hurston's closing scene also points toward nature-caution as a potential answer to these problems. Because Janie invites her soul back to herself so that she can view the horizon as a unified being, this final scene returns us to the nature-caution model of knowing, the humbug epistemology employed throughout the novel. Instead of a delineated network that connects separate, natural things to separate, human things, Hurston's nature-caution model works, according to language in *Their Eyes*, to consistently "[diffuse] and [melt] . . . the world into *one comprehension*" (12, emphasis added). Within Hurston's nature-caution—whether in Nanny's

moment of nature-caution blended together, in the mule's nature-caution story that will last forever, or in the hurricane that blends together black and white—there is no entangled web waiting to enmesh separate things within it. Instead, nature and caution blend in a “stew,” as this paper calls it, in which the two things seep into each other so thoroughly that separation, let alone entanglement, of either thing is impossible; to comprehend one is to comprehend the other. Rather than an *indistinguishable* fusion of human and nature, Hurston's “one comprehension” is an epistemology echoed by Édouard Glissant's idea of “Relation”: “*the acknowledged validity of each specific [entity] yet at the same time the urgent need to understand the hidden order of the whole*” (131). Natalie Melas identifies this Relation as “a mode of being,” “the condition of existing in the midst of the copresence of all” things (654). Hurston's “one comprehension,” accessed through nature-caution, can be seen as the front lines of this focus on the whole; Hurston provides a “capacious” enough epistemology, which Stacy Alaimo suggests we need (“Trans-corporeal Feminisms” 259), in order to recognize and value all parts that contribute to meaning-making. In this way, Hurston's nature-caution epistemology allows access to “the sense of kinship, connection, and unraveling between dirt and flesh, word and world” (“Trans-corporeal Feminisms” 259) that *Their Eyes* suggests is reality.

Achieving the single, nature-caution comprehension of the final scene, then, revolves around understanding the state of Janie's soul. Earlier in the novel, the narrator explains that Janie's relationship with Joe Starks creates a deep rift in Janie's soul as Janie tries to convince herself that her own desires do not matter. As Janie and her soul grow apart, the narrative identifies Janie's problem: “She didn't know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop” (76). Here, nature-caution's “one comprehension” is at work. Janie doesn't realize that she and her soul are the world and the heavens, “boiled down” to one understanding. She fights

within herself, but the narrative warns that she is missing the greater truth—the one comprehension—that a *whole* perspective might provide. But Hurston makes room for reconciliation of Janie’s self and soul—and for the things caught in the meshes of Janie’s net—when Janie recognizes that “each and every chair and thing” (192) are there to witness this moment of reverence and then, perhaps, recognizes that one thing is missing. Her final act, to “[call] in her soul to come and see” (193), attests to her desire for the singular comprehension that the things around her are practicing. She seems to finally realize that everything, including herself, “[boils] down” to “one comprehension,” and so she invites her soul to be one with her again. In this way, Janie’s final act is a nature-caution act: Janie unites herself and her soul, the world and heaven. With nature-caution as her epistemology, she now understands herself boiled down, like Sam and Lige’s nature-caution stew, to one drop. Through this epistemology, Janie accesses “one comprehension,” achieving a connective and reconciled voice much greater than what her individual voice could have accomplished alone. Additionally, in re-reading this final scene I suggest that Hurston leaves hope not just for Janie’s voice but also for the life caught in the meshes of Janie’s net. Janie’s act of one comprehension, because it is an action, signals that she is prepared to continue to act with her new nature-caution epistemology, uniting herself and the vast horizon around her into one instead of using nets to endlessly catch and entangle separate entities. Because Janie has begun to act with nature-caution as her guiding tool, she can now let down the networks she has cast, release the life inside their meshes, and comprehend “each and every . . . thing” as one in a nature-caution union.

Notes

¹ In 1922, anthropologists like William Fielding Ogburn argued that being born into a natural environment, which “all animals” experience, is different than being born into “a social heritage”

(or culture), which only humans experience (3). In 1943, Leslie A. White wrote that “man, being the only animal capable of symbol-behavior, is the only creature to possess culture” and that the natural world only exhibits “manifestation of energy” (335). (For other discussions during the first half of the century, see Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas.) In the last half of the century, scholars began to question whether culture and nature could be more fluid. In 1980, Carol P. MacCormack critiqued such “stark categories” (1) and suggested that nature shapes culture (2). In 1996, Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson suggested we elasticize nature and culture. Monica Casper and Barbara Koenig, also in 1996, wanted to reconfigure nature and culture. In 2000, the conversation broadened to the intersections rather than the dichotomies of nature and culture and what that means in other fields as well; see Sarah Franklin, et.al; J.R. McNeill; and Glen Sean Coulthard.

² In his biography of Hurston, Robert E. Hemenway notes that she left Barnard and her study with Boas “as a serious social scientist” (21), having become an anthropologist practiced in the “scientific objectivity” which was “intrinsic to the Boas training” (62). Her time with Boas helped her see “how folklore could be preserved without transformation into conscious art” (81).

³ In her essay “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian notes, “People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. . . . Theorizing . . . is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create” (52).

⁴ Some of Hurston’s fellow Harlem Renaissance authors questioned Janie’s narrative voice as a deserving representation of black people (see Richard Wright). And Mary Helen Washington notes that the novel does not follow the “protest fiction” model that Hurston’s contemporaries were producing (ix). After Hurston’s recovery by Alice Walker in the 1970s, questions arose regarding narrative voice as readers tried to separate Janie’s voice from an omniscient narrator or

from Hurston herself (see Edwidge Danticat's foreword in the version of *Their Eyes* published in 2006).

⁵ More recent Hurston scholarship answers questions of narrative in ways that encapsulate what Janie's voice accomplishes (see Adam Ewing, Isaiah Lavender III, and Daniel Spoth, who read Janie's voice using diaspora theory, Afrofuturism, and environmentalism, respectively). These readings legitimize Janie's voice by relating it to the black storyteller, whose voice is "stony ground" whereon selfhood is formed (Ewing 131); they label Janie's voice "intentional storytelling," promising "something better" for future generations (Lavender 216); they reveal, in Janie's voice's rejection of stasis, a new understanding of the southern landscape itself, which becomes disposable and temporary (Spoth 150).

⁶ For more discussion about multispecies ecology and the "regard" of other living species, see Kohn, Tsing, and Heise. For the regard of "thinghood," see Bennett (1-19).

⁷ Van Dooren and Rose note that multispecies studies "is a story of entanglements" (84) in which all species' lives are "bleeding into and coshaping one another" (80).

⁸ In her book *The Power of the Porch*, Trudier Harris writes of southern porches as places "for interactive storytelling, for the passing on and receiving of oral traditions" (xii).

⁹ A southern colloquialism, "a gnat's heel" is "something quite small; also, perfectly. 'It fitted to a *gnat's heel*'" (Kacirk 80); also, "if it **fits to a gnat's heel**, it fits like a glove," and the term is used "particularly when suggesting precision" (Harrison). These uses support the understanding I suggest—that Sam humors his friend by going along with the precision Lige is requiring of him and even takes it a step further to a louse in order to underscore that he will take the issue very seriously. Additionally, "nattering about gnats" has, according to Harrison, been said in southern areas "since at least 1840."

¹⁰ This paper consistently uses domesticated animals and plants as examples of “nature”—bees, cattle, the dog, the pear tree, the mule, etc. It is important to note that these nonhuman things are all most accurately understood as natural-cultural subjects that have been domesticated by humans even as they have further domesticated humans themselves. But this does not undercut the nature that is still at the root of these examples. As Zeder et al. note, domestication itself is driven by nature, “[growing] out of a mutualistic relationship between a plant or animal species and a human population” in which there are “strong selective advantages for both” the human and the nonhuman (2). Zeder et al. explain that “for the target plant or animal species, human agency in their propagation and care provides a distinct competitive advantage.” And humans also benefit from these relationships with nature, making domestication what Zeder et al. call a “synergistic process” from which both parties benefit.

¹¹ “Butt-headed, adj.,” is listed by Payne as “1. Having no horns. ‘Look at that ole *butt-headed* cow.’ 2. Headstrong, obstinate, bull-headed. ‘He’s as *butt-headed* as an ole mule’” (21). I draw on the first definition because of its focus on the cow as a literal animal, although it is plausible that Lige’s response was more emotional; perhaps he was trying to suggest Sam’s own headstrong ways.

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the verb “comprehend” can mean “to take in, comprise, include, contain” (“comprehend,” OED.com). More specifically, in this understanding, “comprehend” can mean “to lay hold of all the points of (any thing) and include them within the compass of a description or expression.” Nanny performs another act of nature-caution blending as she takes the room and the world—the bees, the flies in the room, and Janie herself—and comprehends them together, containing them in one look.

¹³ Scholars read it as Janie's vulnerability replaced by power (Urgo 40; McGowan 111, 122); as Janie's connection to her heritage of black female power (Sadoff 22); as the final undoing of Tea Cake that allows Janie to choose herself (Meisenhelder 1444); as Tea Cake's own punishment for being "influenced by white culture" (Curren 20); or as an autobiographical choice by Hurston, who had just left her own lover (Bond 50).

¹⁴ See Benmaamar et al., who explain that the virus "is transmitted to other animals and humans through close contact with saliva from infected animals (i.e. bites, scratches, licks on broken skin and mucous membranes)" (2). They stress the involvement of *animals* in giving the virus, noting that exposure between humans has only ever occurred "through transplant surgery."

¹⁵ Haas notes that rabies was not well understood in the 1930s. Even "the doctor in the novel . . . warns Janie explicitly and repeatedly" of Tea Cake biting Janie and Janie getting sick because of it (Haas 206). Citing the accuracy of Tea Cake's symptoms and cultural attitudes about rabies in the 1930s, Haas argues Hurston does want us to believe that Janie is infected.

¹⁶ Along with Robert Haas, other scholars have interesting readings of this bite scene. For the wound as an "unresolved rupture" in Janie's quest for self-agency, see Catherine Kodat (321). For the bite as an "accidental" moment of "together-touching," see Samira Kawash (204).

¹⁷ Microbiologist Eugene V. Koonin notes that humans and viruses may or may not have a common evolutionary ancestor, but their existence is governed by the same genetic coding, consisting of "the four nucleic acid bases that . . . encode all information required" for any organism (22).

¹⁸ Flint et al. note that it is especially "common for RNA viruses" to "infect multiple host species" (326). That viruses like rabies can infect so many species attests to the fact that they do their cellular communicating on a fundamental, DNA-level (see endnote 16).

¹⁹ In discussing translation as rewriting, Bassnett and Lefevere argue that translation can “introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices” to a culture (vii). According to this understanding, rabies can be seen as a new rewriting device for Janie, as it allows Janie’s voice to access a new genre—one in which stories are told naturally as much as culturally.

²⁰ Of the 182 articles published since its inception in 2012, the *Environmental Humanities* journal has published 97 articles that use some form of the word *entangle* to describe an aspect of the relationship between nature and culture. More than 50 percent of articles the journal has published rely on the entanglement of networks between nature and culture to make their arguments. Search conducted through JSTOR Advance Search and Microsoft Excel.

²¹ On the entanglement models as promoting heightened human-nonhuman respect, see Haraway, 15.

²² Jennifer Jordan’s words mirror the idea of inspiration that readers glean from this final scene: “a retreat into self and a kind of final ‘peace’” for Janie (115). Stuart Burrows has also explained this scene as a moment of peace and self-union for Janie (450).

²³ Environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo also expresses concerns about Anthropocene activities and oceans. She states that activities such as “deep sea mining, deep sea fishing and trawling . . . decimate species and habitats” (“Anthropocene” 154).

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