In our discussion of race throughout the quarter, one major issue we have not discussed in much detail is that of gender. Using either *House on Mango Street* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, discuss how the question of gender might either complicate or reinforce certain racial identities?

A Place Called Home

Home is a place of dignity, a place for privacy, a place of one’s own. This is where people can be free of the world’s expectations, to just be themselves, a human being. There is an aphorism that says home is where the heart is. Hearts desire to be in a home that offers security and peace because those qualities are not offered anywhere else but the home. For many, home is also a place of comfort, some place where one does not have to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, or carry oneself in a rank-acceptable manner. However, a unique quality of home that makes it so wonderful is that one is not enslaved to it, but rather, the home belongs to whoever owns it. And this quality of home applies to any person, regardless of heritage, culture, race, gender, or color. Yet, from past centuries until now, not any person has been able to own a home, for the quest of ownership has been especially different between men and women.

While a man may struggle with racial differences, a woman must struggle against both racial and gender differences, where racial discrimination comes from those outside her race and gender discrimination comes from within her own race. Gender complicates racial identities. For women, a line is drawn where they are no longer targets for other men and women of a different race, they are targets for all men of any race who can
impede the women’s independence and self-worth. The “white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks” (Hurston, p.14). A man of one color bosses another man of a different color, and in the end, the woman is left with the task. Even if a man owns another man, that enslaved man still owns a person, a woman. There is power being played, and the women are losing. A woman’s home, a symbol of dignity, privacy, and ownership of self, is being seized away. The home belongs to the man, and so in those ways, he takes ownership of the woman, her dignity, her place of privacy, and her identity as a female human being.

Janie, a soulful character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is on a quest to own a home, a right to be one’s own, but not because she does not have a home. After leaving her grandmother, Janie, as a grown woman, comes to live in three homes; however, not all three were her own. Her first two husbands owned the home, owned her, and decided how she was to be beneath them by being an element of the home. When Janie’s grandmother says, “And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you…” (Hurston, p.20), she understands that women are the oppressed, the ones at the bottom of the chain of hierarchy because she does not mention other women of different color being a problem, but specifically men of the same and of different races. Logan Killicks and Joe Starks want Janie to be an asset for the well-being of themselves, and not a woman of her own right. They are her first two husbands who give her a home to live in, but that is all, just a home to blend into.

Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks was filled with an idealistic expectation that “Husband and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It
was just so” (Hurston, p.21). She was dreaming of marrying for love, but for the sake of her aging grandmother, Janie marries Logan and his sixty acres. Janie believed that “she would love Logan after they were married. She could see no way for it to come about, but Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so” (Hurston, p.21). Nanny’s slave generation saw the purpose of marriage as something very different from that of Janie’s. Janie wanted “things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (Hurston, p.24). When Janie brings forth her woes of a loveless marriage, Nanny laughs at her and rebukes her for being foolish. All Nanny wanted for Janie through the marriage was life security, not necessarily love. “”Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection’ (Hurston, p.15). Nanny believed that a man like Logan would give Janie all that women of her generation had strived for, a paid-for house, paid-for land, a paid-for life.

The home Janie married into was “a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods…the house was absent of flavor, too” (Hurston, p.22). As her home was absent of flavor, so became the marriage she idealized to be filled with love. Before the end of a year, Logan no longer touched her hair, a sign of her femininity, and no longer looked at her as a woman or a person, but rather as a form of labor. This becomes apparent when Logan says to Janie, “You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick” (Hurston, p.31). Like a mule, her job is to do hard labor for her master, Logan. However, before Janie succumbs to being a slave to her husband, she leaves him for someone who promises to treat her like a woman, Joe Starks.
With completely different views from Logan, who used women as labor, Jody viewed women as being made to “sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (Hurston, p.29). And at first, Janie enjoys being at the center of attention, of being pampered with pretty dresses and being put on display for the town to see. But in time, it becomes apparent that Jody married Janie neither for her brains nor for her character, instead, it was for her looks. “…He didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (Hurston, p.41). She was the trophy wife that he needed in order to have some height of status, to make people wonder what special quality he brought to the table that could attract such a beautiful woman.

However, she was his, for his eyes only. “She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others” (Hurston, p.55). When other men continued to notice Janie and her luscious hair in the store, Jody uses his power as the man to command her to cover her hair. Although the head-rag continuously bothered her, she still listened to him. From not only the way she has to appear, Jody also decides who she can talk to, because talking to the wrong people would reflect badly upon him. “He didn’t want her talking after such trashy people. ‘You’se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie...’” (Hurston, p.54). Once again, through marriage, Janie had become enslaved to a man.

Opposite to the reign of Logan, Jody gives Janie the chance to be white in the sense that she could be someone of high society. Their whiteness shows at how Jody builds and decorates his house. “It had two stories with porches, with banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters...He painted it—a gloaty, sparkly white” (Hurston, p.47). No one else in the town had a house quite like Jody’s, in
fact, their homes looked like servants’ quarters in comparison to Jody’s brand new white house with fancy spitting pots and swivel chairs (Hurston, p.47). In addition to Jody and Janie’s whiteness, the town viewed them as not so black anymore. “It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder” (Hurston, p.48). Yes, Jody treated Janie more like a woman than Logan did, but both men share the similar quality of enslaving Janie to be whatever they desire her to be, and whatever creation she becomes, she will make them look good and do good for them.

Freedom rings for Janie when she notices physical flaws of Jody. “…She noticed that Joe didn’t sit down…[he] fell in it…Joe wasn’t so young as he used to be…Jody must have noticed it too…Because he began to talk about her age all the time” (Hurston, p.77). From that moment on, she had found the key to the awakening from being a slave to being free. Before, “she fought back with her tongue as best she could…It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it (Hurston, p.71). Jody fought until Janie had no more spirit in her to fight for herself, to fight for her self worth, to fight for her own home. He caged her in the store, just as he caged her spirit. But that was then before she saw the weakness that Jody did not want her to see, his body.

When he critically attacks Janie’s physical features, making fun of her age and the sagging of her womanly body in front of the people of the town, she fights back. The weapon, his own aging body, is used against him, to the worst degree so that “Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish...” (Hurston, p.79). For what had held up his power, or in this case, the illusion of power, was that the people could not see his physical weakness past the barrier of power he had built. “They bowed
down to him…because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down” (Hurston, p.50).

After the death of Jody, Janie tears off “the kerchief from her head and lets down her plentiful hair” (Hurston, p.87). A major element of her feminine beauty was masked by the kerchief. The power that once held her femininity has died and now Janie can be herself. Even though people told Janie that “Uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing…” (Hurston, p.90), she refused to allow men to impede upon her newfound freedom. “Six months of wearing black passed and not one suitor had ever gained the house porch” (Hurston, p.91). Her house is a place of her own, and the notion that not even one man made it to the area in front of the entrance door tells that here is a woman who has found herself. That is until Vergible Woods, or Tea Cake comes into Janie’s life.

For the first time, a man wants Janie to be his equal. For the first time, a man offers to teach her checkers. And for the first time, a man recognizes and encourages her to speak her mind. Tea Cakes walks into Janie’s store, and then becomes the first man to walk onto her porch and into her home. He does not make her cover her hair, her beauty, but wants those qualities to be accentuated. “…She woke up with Tea Cake combing her hair and scratching the dandruff from her scalp” (Hurston, p.103). Even after marriage, Tea Cake continues to treat Janie not only as a woman, but as an equal human being. He allows her to be her, and so she allows him to be him. Even though Janie first temporarily lives in a broken down apartment, and then in a shack in the Everglades, Janie’s heart no longer depends on a home, but the home is found where her heart is.

Janie reached the top of what Nanny strived for her to reach, but once she arrived at the top, there was nothing more to do. “She didn’t have time tuh think whut tuh do
after you got up on de stool uh do nothin’. De object wuz tuh git dere” (Hurston, p.114).

There was no point in reaching for the ultimate goal, because in doing so, Janie had become consumed in someone else’s home, she had become a favorable object to the owner. Now that her heart chooses her home, no matter where she goes, Janie can be a woman of her own, a person with dignity and pride. Her heart was with Tea Cake, and this can be seen after Tea Cake dies, and leaves their home, the muck. “But the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn’t there. So it was just a great expanse of black mud” (Hurston, p.191). Janie had to struggle, and the two generation of women before had to struggle against the power of men. Through two broken marriages that enslaved Janie and prevented her from being a female human being, it took one marriage to a man of equal understanding to allow her the chance to be a wife and her own master. Finally, Janie had a place of dignity and a place for privacy, her own home. “Now, in her room, the place tasted fresh again…Here was peace” (Hurston, p.192-193).