

According to Sojourner Truth, in What Ways Were Black Women Still Unfree After Emancipation What would enable them to realize their freedom fully? In addition, according to Zora Neale Hurston, writing 70 years later, What Continued to Limit Black Women's Freedom, and What Conditions Would Enable Them To Flourish Fully?

The post–Civil War era marked a pivotal moment in American history, with the emancipation of enslaved people bringing a transformative shift that promised newfound freedoms and opportunities. In her 1867 speech “*Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association*,” Sojourner Truth powerfully highlighted the ongoing struggle for equality, particularly for women and especially for Black women. Truth reveals the shadows of oppression that persists for Black women despite the abolition of slavery. Her insights serve as a foundational exploration into the multifaceted challenges faced by Black women during the Reconstruction Era. 70 years later, Zora Neale Hurston illuminates the persisting reality of Black women's oppression in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a literary luminary of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's work provides a lens through which to analyze the continued struggles limiting Black women's freedom and the conditions necessary for them to flourish fully. Together, Truth and Hurston reveal how Black women remained unfree after emancipation and expose the enduring challenges that continued to shape their fight for equality.

Sojourner Truth was born into a society where economic inequality was deeply intertwined with racial and gender discrimination. Slavery itself was an economic system that exploited the labor of African Americans, denying them not only their freedom but also any economic compensation for their work. Truth outlines her personal experiences working as a Black woman working for white men.

I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay.

I used to work in the field and bind grain..but men doing no more, get twice as much pay, so with the German women.”

In this reflection on the gender-based wage disparity of her time, Sojourner Truth briefly captures the glaring inequality that permeated labor markets in the 19th century. Truth eloquently highlights that Black women are disproportionately subjected to severe economic exploitation, a condition rooted in the enduring legacies of slavery and compounded by discriminatory labor practices. Her statement, "I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay," serves as a stark indictment of a system that devalued women's labor, rendering their efforts equivalent to those of men but compensating them at a fraction of the rate. Truth continues by stating how she "used to work in the field and bind grain" emphasizing the physicality and demanding nature of the work she performed. This debunks the prevailing notion that certain tasks were inherently more suitable for men and therefore deserving of higher remuneration. Truth voices the systemic undervaluation of Black women's contributions, a pervasive injustice that extended across various industries.

Truth's approach continued as she outlined:

When we get our rights we shall not have to come to you for money, for then we shall have money enough in our own pockets; and may be you will ask us for money

Truth articulates a compelling argument that access to basic resources is essential for survival and financial independence, simultaneously challenging the power dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality. Racial and gender biases intersected to place Black women among the most economically disadvantaged workers, facing both racial and gender wage gaps. In highlighting the necessity of financial resources for survival and well-being, Truth exposes how those in power deliberately withheld such resources in order to dehumanize Black women and perpetuate the oppressive conditions of post-slavery. The subsequent clause, "we shall not have to come to you for money," conveys a profound shift in the power dynamics between Black women and men, as she envisions a future where financial reliance on men is no longer necessary. This sentiment echoes the spirit of self-determination, emphasizing that true empowerment comes not from dependence but from the ability to control one's economic destiny. By addressing men directly, Truth confronts the beneficiaries of this unjust system and calls for a reconsideration of these norms. The final clause, "and maybe you will ask us for money," adds a layer of

irony to Truth's statement. By suggesting a future scenario where men might seek financial support from women, she challenges traditional power dynamics. Truth envisions a future where women will not have to rely on external sources, including men, for financial support.

Truth argued that this imbalance had the potential to perpetuate the subordination of African American women within their communities, echoing the oppression they endured under slavery.

“You have been having our rights for so long that you think, like a slave-holder, that you own us. I know that it is hard for one who has held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife. It will feel all the better when it closes up again. I have been in Washington about three years, seeing about these colored people. Now colored men have the right to vote. There ought to be equal rights now more than ever, since colored people have got their freedom.”

Truth draws a striking parallel between historical slaveholders and Black men who perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality. She recognizes that racial and gender discrimination are interconnected, inventing the concept of intersectionality, and the fight for equality needs to address both dimensions simultaneously. Truth saw the danger in achieving civil rights for Black men while leaving Black women behind, as this reproduced patriarchal hierarchies that had existed during slavery, with Black men exercising authority over Black women. She accuses those in power of not merely neglecting to grant rights to Black women but actively "having" them, implying a possession and control that echoes the dark legacy of slavery. For Black men, relinquishing power has been perceived as a challenge to traditional gender roles as notions of masculinity were often tied to dominance and control. The idea of sharing or surrendering power and rights has been difficult for men to accept. The acknowledgment that giving up such entrenched power "cuts like a knife" traces into the discomfort and resistance associated with relinquishing privilege. Truth captures the nature of this transformation, emphasizing that the process of ceding control is not only challenging for Black men but painful for those accustomed to wielding authority. Truth raises a critical concern that if Black men gained their rights without the concurrent recognition and protection of Black women's rights, it would result in a power dynamic where Black men

would have authority over Black women. The optimism in Truth's statement, "It will feel all the better when it closes up again," points toward a vision of healing and progress, reflecting hope for societal reconciliation and the possibility of a more just future.

More than half a century later, Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* develops similar themes through the life of Janie Crawford, a young African-American woman navigating personal and societal constraints. Janie lives with her grandmother, who carries the trauma of slavery and sexual violence, highlighting the lingering effects of oppression that Truth addressed in her speech. Through Janie's journey toward self-discovery and autonomy, Hurston explores the continued struggle for freedom, agency, and dignity among Black women, showing how the challenges Truth identified persisted long after emancipation. Janie's grandmother believes that true freedom means being wealthy and providing Janie with the carefree life she never experienced. At the beginning of the novel, Janie must marry a wealthy farmer named Logan Killicks. The marriage is loveless: Janie works hard on his land, and he often verbally abuses her. When the ambitious Joe Starks comes along, he charms Janie with his charisma and optimism. He is headed to Florida which is a state built and run entirely by Black people. They move to Eatonville where Joe opens a thriving grocery store and is later voted mayor of the town. After Joe delivers his speech, a member of the town asks to hear from Janie, also known as "Mrs. Mayor Starks." Joe reluctantly replies:

"Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home."

Joe embodies traditional gender roles that were deeply entrenched in society during the early 20th century. He asserts a clear division of labor, with Janie's role confined to domestic duties, reinforcing the notion that the woman's primary place is within the home. Joe makes sure to deny Janie any chance of speaking, even if she is publicly invited to. Joe prevents Janie from speaking, even when she is publicly invited to do so. By controlling her voice, he dominates her autonomy and denies her the ability to make her own choices. Furthermore, by assuming that Janie does not "know" about delivering a speech, Hurston is emphasizing the common implication of limitations on a woman's education and exposure

beyond the domestic sphere. In addition, Joe's assertion that he "never married her for nothin lak dat" suggests a hierarchy within the relationship, where the woman's value is primarily associated with her role within the household. This implies that Joe married Janie for reasons other than her intellectual or public capabilities. In addition, it reveals the reductionist view of Black women, valuing them for qualities traditionally associated with domestic roles rather than appreciating the full range of their abilities.

Hurston provides insight into the complexities of Janie's relationship with Joe Starks and the societal expectations in shaping her behavior. This continues to expose the underlying issues of control, and jealousy In this scene, Joe insists that Janie wear a head-rag when in public, as her hair is appealing to other men:

"This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. It didn't seem sensible at all. That was because Joe never told Janie how jealous he was. He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in it as she went about things in the store. And one night he had caught Walter standing behind and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing. Joe was at the back of the store and Walter didn't see him. He felt like rushing forth with the meat knife and chopping off the offending hand. That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store"

The head rag frustrates Janie, representing the limitations Joe places on her autonomy. This represents the restrictions imposed on Janie by societal expectations for Black women and Jody's controlling nature in their relationship. The head rag symbolizes the constraints placed on Black women's individuality and freedom, echoing Sojourner Truth's critique of social and economic systems that limited autonomy and forced dependence on men. However, Hurston extends this discussion by showing how oppression

operates on a personal and symbolic level: through clothing, appearance, and social expectations, Black women's self-expression is restricted in ways that Truth could not have fully anticipated. In this way, Hurston highlights the ongoing, nuanced challenges to freedom and identity that persist long after emancipation. Jody's order that Janie wear a head-rag reflects his desire to control her appearance. The phrase "Her hair was NOT going to show in the store" underscores Jody's possessiveness and his wish to mold Black women's image that aligns with his idea of respectability and social standing. Jody's jealousy is rooted in his awareness of how other men may perceive and desire Janie, highlighting a possessive aspect of his character. The phrase "other men figuratively wallowing in it" suggests that Jody views Janie's beauty not only as a source of pride but also as a potential threat. The objectification of Janie by other men creates discomfort for Jody, revealing the fragile nature of his masculinity and the societal norms that perpetuate such dynamics. Hurston uses the vivid imagery of Jody feeling "like rushing forth with the meat knife and chopping off the offending hand" to convey the intensity of his emotions. This violent imagery contributes to the eventual deterioration of their relationship and hints at the destructive impact of Jody's jealousy. This reaction is not merely a symbolic gesture; it signifies Jody's desire to protect what he perceives as his possession and control over Janie. This serves as a moment in the narrative, displaying the challenges Black women often will face as they navigate the constraints of societal expectations and seek their path to self-realization and independence.

After Joe Stark dies, Janie meets and marries a man named Tea Cake. For the first time, she bases her marriage strictly on feelings, without having to worry about money, security, or other needs. In this scene, Tea Cake invites Janie to play checkers when they first meet:

"He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice. She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points."

Hurston captures a moment of significance in Janie's life as she experiences a sense of validation, acknowledgment, and the beginning of a connection. This passage serves as a stark contrast to Janie's previous relationships, where her agency and individuality were often suppressed. Logan viewed her as a worker on his farm, and Joe Starks sought her as a symbol of his status. At this moment, Janie is valued for her intrinsic qualities, including her ability to play. Janie playing a game of checkers symbolizes how Tea Cake establishes a new romantic dynamic with Janie that allows her to find a form of autonomy, and feel empowered. This reaches the horizon – it is a relationship that is completely different from that which she shared with Joe. Hurston's use of symbols in the game of checkers reveals the pivotal moment in which a Black woman is in an equal position to her partner. This scene shows Tea Cake's fun-loving, playful worldview that excites and enlivens Janie. Janie's glowing response stems from the fact that "somebody wanted her to play." This marks a departure from the constraints and expectations imposed on her, particularly in her relationships with Logan and Joe Starks. The act of someone wanting her to play signifies a recognition of her individuality and agency. The idea that someone finds it natural for her to play creates a sense of belonging, a departure from her previous experiences where societal expectations stifled her true self.

In the ending part of the novel, Janie and Tea Cake's relationship takes a tragic turn. Tea Cake, who has been bitten by a rabid dog, contracts the disease himself. As Tea Cake's condition worsens, Janie is faced with the heartbreaking reality that he poses a threat to her life. The diseased Tea Cake, who flies into jealous rages, is the polar opposite of the man he once was, secure amid the natural world and generally confident in his possession of Janie. In other words, this unstable force destroys Tea Cake's very essence. The scene is a poignant climax in the novel, portraying the complexities of love, sacrifice, and the harsh realities of survival for Black women:

The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie's head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms. She was trying to hover him as he closed his teeth in the

flesh of her forearm. They came down heavily like that. Janie struggled to a sitting position and pried the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm. It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead.

Hurston depicts a tragic and intense moment where Janie is forced to shoot Tea Cake in self-defense due to his violent outburst. Janie, witnessing the danger to her own life, reacts instinctively to protect herself. The fact that Tea Cake's "bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie's head" emphasizes the close call and the imminent threat she faces. Hurston includes the use of the gun as it is symbolic in this scene. It represents a Black woman's agency to react instantly to a violent act imposed on them and the harsh reality of the situation. The firearm, typically a tool of violence, becomes a means for Janie to assert control over a situation that has spiraled out of control. The event is a culmination of the challenges and sacrifices Janie faces throughout her journey, bringing the themes of love, identity, and resilience to a dramatic climax. The violent nature of the scene also sheds light on the physical threats that Black women faced during this time. The portrayal of Tea Cake's rabies-induced violence, coupled with Janie's need for self-defense, can be seen as a commentary on the broader violence and threats against Black bodies in the early 20th century. Hurston highlights the moment of Tea Cake's death, though horrible for Janie to endure, reflecting how much she has grown as a person and how secure she has become. Although Tea Cake means everything to her, she can kill him to save herself displaying the needs that Black women need to do to protect themselves.

Truth's speech and Hurston's novel outline the approach to intersectionality. Both Truth and Hurston do not explicitly use "intersectionality" as it was coined later by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. However, the novel effectively explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the experiences of its protagonist, Janie Crawford. The concept of intersectionality examines how various social categories such as race, gender, class, and others intersect and interact, shaping an individual's experiences and identity in unique ways. Sojourner Truth's approach to intersectionality, as exemplified in

her 1867 speech, advocates for the rights of Black women in our modern society. In contemporary America, Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related death than white women. Racial disparities in the United States' maternal mortality rates exist for a variety of reasons but one notable reason is due to differences in the quality of care that Black women receive as compared to white women. The root causes of poor maternal health are the intersection of racism and gender oppression inside healthcare systems and every other facet of society. Economic inequality, clearly outlined by Truth, is still a key component to this disparity as affluent Black women are less likely to face pregnancy-related complications than poor Black women. The inequities that Black women face have become even more urgent as the pandemic and civil unrest show the many ways racism can kill, whether from COVID, police brutality, or hemorrhaging during childbirth. In addition, Black women remain underrepresented in political leadership roles in our political sphere as 5% of Congress identify as Black women. Achieving equal representation in government is crucial for ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in policy making. In Hurston's novel, Janie's social class also plays a significant role in shaping her experiences. For example, the first marriage to Logan Killicks is arranged for economic reasons and security, highlighting the intersection of gender and class. Later in the novel, Janie's relationships with Joe Starks and Tea Cake involve different economic circumstances, influencing the power dynamics within those relationships. This approach to equality highlights the importance of amplifying the voices of those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, in this case, Black women.