

# The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by William M. Ramsey

"I wrote 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again."

Long out of the literary mainstream, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is now a popular text in college studies, and Hurston herself the subject of a growing industry. Yet eager to establish canonical status for *Their Eyes*, that industry tends to gloss over, evade, or ingeniously explain away the novel's most troubling problems, while it is sharply divided on related interpretive issues. Increasingly, as one turns from Hurston's text to the subtle theoretical stratagems in its critical praise, one feels a discrepancy between that initial reading experience and current worship of Hurston's achievement. In the classroom, moreover, students are quick to note evident problems in the text, and are suspicious of strained elaborations and ideological agendas where more candid explanations might better suffice. As Joseph R. Urgo warns: "The need to explain, especially when the explicator is not quite convinced, only emphasizes the assumption of textual weakness. In this way the novel is allowed into the canon with a wink" (42).

*Their Eyes* is an inventive, original, and provocatively compelling novel; nonetheless, it is not a fully finished or conceptually realized text. On this issue the circumstances of its inception are of crucial relevance, as Hurston's own words in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) might suggest. "I

wrote "Their Eyes Were Watching God" in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again. In fact, I regret all of my books."<sup>1</sup> Those productive seven weeks are more incredible in light of her other activities, for she was on an anthropological research trip funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her biographer, Robert Hemenway, notes she arrived in Haiti in late September, 1936, and it was concurrent with anthropological collecting that she poured out her novel, dating the finished manuscript December 19, 1936 (244, n. 24). During this time, explains Hemenway, "she perfected her Creole, acquired a working knowledge of voodoo gods, attended a number of ceremonies presided over by a voodoo priest," and was "sometimes writing late at night after a day of collecting" (230).

Moreover, it is well known that her creative motives were enmeshed in the emotions of a failed love relationship. In *Dust Tracks*, she explains how an aborted affair with a man she identifies as A.W.P. (Arthur Price) gave rise to the novel. He was from New York, and they were in love when both were doing Master's work at Columbia University. In her words, "I did not just fall in love. I made a parachute jump" (252). Though it was, as she said, "the real love affair of my life" (255), his wish that she give up her career for him began an "agonizing tug of war" (256). It was partly to escape the "exquisite torture" (259) of this relationship that she accepted the research fellowship in the Caribbean. There, she explains, "I pitched in to work hard on my research to smother my feelings. But the thing would not down. The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in "Their Eyes Were Watching God"" (260).

In short, *Their Eyes* was conceived in conditions certain to compromise even a far lesser novel's gestation. It was written in a hasty seven weeks, with little time for the ripening process of multiple drafting; it involved difficult emotional sortings out of a failed affair; and, presumably because of Hurston's marginal race and gender status, the J. B. Lippincott Company took her manuscript without requiring the rigorous redrafting of a conscientious editorial process.<sup>2</sup> The result is a text tantalizing in excellent promise, fertile ambivalent thinking, technical uncertainties, and latent self-contradictions.

<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984) 212. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> As Hemenway notes, "the editors had found little need for revisions" (231). Part of the marginality problem was that Lippincott's lacked enough racial knowledge to work constructively with her manuscript. Carby cites a Hurston letter to James Weldon Johnson, January 22, 1934, complaining that the firm was "not familiar with Negroes" (92, n. 25).

Had she let her novel mature more slowly, had she an opportunity to have it back, and had Lippincott asked for more substantive finishing, its final shape might have been quite different.

The text we now have is roughly equivalent to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, which was unfinished at his death but published, received, and assessed practically as if it were a finished novel. Some of that text's famed interpretive issues (is it a testament of resistance or acceptance?) might never have arisen if Melville had lived to give it full gestation. As it is, one can see Melville's brilliantly tentative probings of Billy, Claggart, and then Vere in that fascinating creative flux preceding final design, and therefore final coherence. Likewise, Hurston's text displays probings, discoveries, and tentative—even contradicting—critiques that resist shapely, formalist interpretive decodings. The current fashion is to fault formalist and patriarchal interpretive assumptions<sup>3</sup>; yet while we now appreciate much in Hurston's project that we did not once see, significant technical and interpretive issues remain, and critics read *Their Eyes* in dramatically opposing ways.

At the heart of the text's self-contradictions, at the bedrock of Hurston's personality, was her extraordinary individualism, her self-reliant, at times adversarial, drive toward autonomy. This will toward independent self-realization illuminates why her love story is rooted in rejection of love, and why her romantic, racial folk immersion is at odds with the idea of personal happiness. In *Their Eyes*, the consequence of Hurston's personal individualism is that her thoughts unfold in polarities, through bedrock oppositions of self to community, and of female self to male control. As each gravitational pole tugs against the other, negating the opposite attraction even as the opposite negates it, her text is creatively enriched and complicated.

But for critics, one pole or the other tends to exert the stronger attraction. The result, as Jennifer Jordan astutely explains, is that "critics often view the text through ideological prisms that color their conclusions." In particular, Jordan cites black feminist critics who advocate "the unsupportable notion that the novel is an appropriate fictional representation of the concerns and attitudes of modern black feminism" (107). The text is in fact ambivalent, both a precursor to the modern feminist agenda yet also a reactionary tale embalming Hurston's tender passions for a very traditional male. Such

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<sup>3</sup> An anti-formalist example is Michael Awkward's argument that "Hurston's narrative strategies demonstrate not a failure of the novelist's art, but her stunning success in *denigrating* the genre of the novel" (17). A notoriously masculinist critique is Darwin Turner's, which now is universally and rightfully condemned, despite his perceptions of technical flaws in *Their Eyes*.

tensions, born of Hurston's fast yet fertile creative process, give the novel considerable provocative power.

The issue of self and community arises in the novel's much discussed opening pages, as the heroine Janie returns home to Eatonville, Florida, much as Hurston returned to Eatonville, her birthplace, to gather folklore. Unlike Hurston, coming from New York to do elitist professional work, Janie returns in laborer's overalls, having previously wandered off with the gambling, drinking, fighting migrant laborer Tea Cake. Janie, formerly the staid, bourgeois wife of the town mayor, feels the community's eyes scrutinizing her in that prelude before their judgmental gossip. Thus both Ivy League Hurston and renegade Janie stand in ambiguous relationship to community, partly in it, yet partly outside and at odds with its provincial temperament.

How one interprets this homecoming depends on the critical strategems applied to the whole text. Molly Hite argues this is the "triumphal return" of a woman liberated from the heterosexual romantic model. In her view, Janie's maturing into her storytelling voice shows Hurston's intention to subvert and displace Janie and Tea Cake's love paradigm as a preliminary, transformative step toward a reconstituted social order empowering women. In a contrary view, Jennifer Jordan argues that Janie fails to achieve "an independent, self-fulfilled womanhood," never overcoming her passionate dependence on Tea Cake. So this cannot be a liberated heroine's triumphal return, in that Janie "has demonstrated no ability to survive alone" (113). Yet another view, advanced by Cyrena N. Pondrom, is that Tea Cake is modeled on mythic male gods of regeneration like Adonis and Osiris, which Hurston studied under Franz Boas at Columbia. Accordingly, when Janie says, "So Ah'm back home again and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah,"<sup>4</sup> she will reintegrate the community not along feminist lines but by transmitting Tea Cake's "personal, unpossessive, mutually-affirming love" (197).

Clearly the novel's opening pages are crucial. They are part of the narrative's frame, occupying primarily the first and final chapters, in which Janie returns to her home after Tea Cake's tragic death and recounts her experiences to her friend Pheoby Watson, who in turn will relate them to the community. Here, if anywhere, the novel's coherence should reveal itself, as Janie's relationship to the community is reestablished, and the significance of her experiences is clarified. Instead, the text inspires remarkably diverse and antithetical readings. The problem, I have suggested, is that toward both Tea Cake and

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<sup>4</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 182. All subsequent references are to this edition.

the Eatonville community Hurston is profoundly ambivalent because the privileging of her own autonomy undercuts some of the values the novel means to promote.

To be sure, *Their Eyes* was written to celebrate rural black folkways, which Hurston's anthropology training showed her had great cultural significance. As Hemenway explains, "Zora had come to think of herself as a woman with a mission: she would demonstrate that 'the greatest cultural wealth of the continent' lay in the Eatonvilles . . . of the black South" (113). Moreover, a chief tenet of the Harlem Renaissance was to speak for the folk masses, as Hurston learned when studying at Howard University under Alain Locke, who advocated that young black writers speak for the masses. Above all, *Their Eyes* was a return to Hurston's roots, because Boas and anthropology had prompted her to seek, in Hemenway's words, "a scientific explanation for why her own experience in the black rural South, despite all her education, remained the most vital part of her life, and why the black folk experience generally was the primary impetus for her imagination" (62-63).

Nonetheless, Hurston's personal ambition had taken her long ago from Eatonville to a wider, cosmopolitan, more educated world. At fourteen she left home alone, unhappy with her new stepmother. Then, with uncanny and resilient resourcefulness, she obtained college scholarships, wealthy Northern patrons, publications, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In this significant respect she parallels Janie, who tells Pheoby in Chapter 1, referring to Eatonville's townspeople: "Ah could . . . sit down and tell'em things. Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me" (6). Because they have never left, Janie implies, the folk of Eatonville haven't fully lived.

With her travels and training at Howard, Barnard, and Columbia, Hurston illustrates Thomas Wolfe's awareness that even if you look homeward, you can't entirely go home again. In *Dust Tracks* she humorously notes her alienation from the rural South when she first tried to collect folklore there, and failed: "The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me" (174). No longer a child of the South, she confesses: "I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, 'Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?' The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads," some of them suggesting evasively, "Maybe it was over in the next county" (175).

Various commentators have noted Hurston's ambivalent relationship to Eatonville. John D. Kalb aptly describes her status as that of anthropological

participant-observer, which required her “to separate and disassociate herself from her community and culture” in order to comprehend it scientifically.<sup>5</sup> Diane F. Sadoff, very perceptively examining Hurston’s ambivalent “double perspective,” states, “Hurston’s record of return south covertly exposes her distance from her home” (19). Perhaps Hurston’s own words, in *Mules and Men* (1935), best define her situation: “It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that” (3). In sum, Hurston stood with one foot in the folk community and the other in the wider world without, paralleling the very tension Janie feels in the frame chapters.

The novel’s opening words, comparing people’s dreams to “ships at a distance” that “sail forever on the horizon” (1), establish Janie as someone who has sailed to the horizon (much as Hurston had sailed to the Caribbean just before writing this narrative). The theme recurs in the closing chapter when Janie concludes, “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back now. Ah kin set heah in my house and live by comparisons.” The enlargement of Janie’s mind is now clear: “Dis house ain’t so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo’ Tea Cake come along. It’s full uh thoughts . . .” (182). If Janie implies her mind once was empty of the thoughts coming with growth experiences, Pheoby’s response validates that: “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’” (182–83). Not so with the untraveled folk, who are disposed first to condemn rather than praise. Knowing this, Pheoby asserts, “Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin’” (183).

As they are described in Chapter 1, the town gossips reflect the obverse side of that rural folk spirit Hurston wants to preserve in anthropology and art. Insignificant toilers by day, at dusk “They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment” (1–2). Reflecting Hurston’s ambivalence, they may be regal speakers in a dynamically oral folk culture, but their petty narrowness can be cruel with the “envy . . . they had stored up,” so that now “they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with

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<sup>5</sup> Carby also treats this issue, brilliantly questioning the current cultural privileging of Hurston who, as autonomous intellectual, was not embedded in the folk community she presumed to represent. Carby argues that Pheoby must mediate for Hurston the gap between Janie and Eatonville. My own argument focuses more on the power of the text, which I perceive Hurston’s authorial ambivalence as enhancing.

questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty" (2).

Their remarks are withering, all the more depersonalized in that Hurston does not attach to them speaker attributions. "What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?" says one anonymous person. Another adds, "what dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?" Another asks, "why she don't stay in her class?—" (2). This class issue, reflecting a rigid belief that social definition is grounded in class status, is soon repeated: "She sits high, but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys" (3). At the very least there is ambivalence here, if not a latent contradiction. On the positive side, the Eatonville folk are fiercely equalitarian, assuming that since the lowest individual has worth equal to the socially privileged, anyone may stand on Jody Starks's store porch to speak his mind in lies, jokes, and verbal contests. This is indeed a significant element in the novel's anti-bourgeois argument. But more negatively, that individual aspiring to go too far above or beyond the communal circle is suspect.

Hurston's ambivalence is embedded in gender as well as class concerns.<sup>6</sup> The envy of these women toward Janie clearly is as sexual as it is provincially social. Moreover, though the novel depicts the love between Janie and Tea Cake in highly lyrical terms, Hurston is well aware that if men can be gods they are also simply men: "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. They . . . were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye" (2).

In this social context, no wonder Tea Cake prompts such disparate critical views. Putting behind her two disastrous marriages to possessively patriarchal men, Janie finds romantic love in Tea Cake because, in her view, "He was a glance from God" (102), a declaration at odds with anti-patriarchal criticisms of his character. Indeed, if separated from the frame chapters, the core love romance might seem less ambiguous than the whole text. But here in a very probing, ambivalent frame, men notice Janie's buttocks, hair, and breasts—her parts rather than her person. Later, it is difficult to reconcile the

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<sup>6</sup> A brilliant feminist demonstration of gender, class, and racial determinants, especially in her reading of Janie's courtroom trial, is given by Rachel Blau DuPlessis. She also shows how the whole narrative is a community trial of Janie, arguing that one must read the text "multifocally, conflictually" (99).

regenerative side of Tea Cake with what the author already has shown she knows of men.

This awkward yoking of frame to core narrative is both a flaw, in consequence of seven hasty weeks of composing, and partly a saving strength. As a flaw, it gives rise to the technical clumsiness of Janie's narrating her tale directly to Pheoby in the frame, the narration then shifting to third person in the core. It also manifests some of the text's unresolved contradictions, because in the frame Hurston's wavering between realistic and lyrical impulses is more pronounced than in the core.

Fortunately, Hurston's ambivalence checks her from excessive idealizing and gives the novel a significant and saving criticality. As Janie strides provocatively back into Eatonville, her hips and breasts so evident through her overalls, her hair swinging freely, she surely feels the strain of men's eyes boring at her in possessive desire and mounting resentment at her unavailability. "Yes," she would seem to say, "just as Zora I return to my roots, and here I will stay." "However," she would add, "my individual personhood is something that I now proudly assert." In the polar sexual and social tensions of Janie's situation lie much of the novel's complexity and provocative power. Nothing, not even Janie's romantic love, eludes Hurston's ambivalent impulses.

Latently, in Janie's love of Tea Cake are the same seeds of contradiction that Hurston describes in her love of Arthur Price. The crippling issue was not their age difference, she like Janie being the older, but that he, studying for the ministry, wanted her to be a supporting wife instead of independent career woman. So the relationship's problematic nature was, as Hemenway surmises, "its sense of ultimate impossibility" (231), which Hurston replicates in Tea Cake's fictionally arbitrary infection by rabies. Much as Hurston finally broke away from Price with her Caribbean fellowship, herself ending the love affair of her life, Janie shoots Tea Cake to death as he rabidly attacks and bites her. The plotting here is melodramatically gratuitous, much as the hurricane is that blows onto the Everglades to destroy Janie's happiness. That is because Hurston meant to embalm in Tea Cake only the "tenderness" of her passion for Price. If, presumably, she reserved her criticisms of him for husbands Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, then Tea Cake must die a Romeo-like innocent, destroyed by star-crossed natural forces rather than by character limitations. Yet, as commentators like to note, Tea Cake's murder suggests there is a snake in Janie's pastoral Eden, and the snake is man.

"He was the master kind. All, or nothing, for him," says Hurston of A. W. P.

in *Dust Tracks* (257). In demanding she give up her career, he took a patriarchal protector's role that, curiously, she refused to criticize no matter the pain it produced. Once, when he resented her offer of a quarter for his fare home, his argument was: "He was a *man!* No woman on earth could either lend him or give him a cent. . . . Please let him be a *man!*" To which Hurston acquiesced in both principle and deed: "He had done a beautiful thing and I was killing it. . . . he wanted to do all the doing, and keep me on the receiving end. He soared in my respect from that moment on. Nor did he ever change. He meant to be the head, *so help him over the fence!*" Amazingly, though "That very manliness, sweet as it was, made us both suffer," she also loved him for it (253).

Similar qualities are evident in *Tea Cake*, despite the conspicuously egalitarian aspects of their relationship. When Janie jokes about his flattery of women, he responds biblically, "Ah'm de Apostle Paul tuh de Gentiles. Ah tells 'em and then agin Ah shows 'em" (100). He is quasi-divine, a "glance from God" who "seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps"; and "Spices hung about him" (101–102). If, as Janie asserts, "Dis is uh love game" (108), *Tea Cake's* role is at times traditionally very masculine. In an act of astounding male prerogative, he takes Janie's hidden two hundred dollars as she sleeps, leaves her in the hotel for a day and a night, blowing all but twelve dollars on a guitar and a party, at which "he stood in the door and paid all the ugly women two dollars not to come in" (117).

The next day, toting switch-blade and cards, he leaves again to win back Janie's money by gambling. For her part, Janie defends him rather than criticize: "She found herself angry at imaginary people who might try to criticize," because "*Tea Cake* had more good nature under his toe-nails than they had in their so-called Christian hearts" (120). When he returns with his winnings and two razor slashes, he closely echoes Arthur Price's sentiments: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman." Janie's reply is, "Dat's all right wid me." When he drifts into sleep, after she has tenderly nursed his wounds, she feels such a "self-crushing love" that "her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122).

With such incidents Hurston deliberately provokes the bourgeois reader, and her defense of *Tea Cake* here would be along class rather than feminist gender lines. Her point is that as Janie descends the socioeconomic ladder with a man who "ain't got doodly squat" (98), she is progressively liberated from the empty values of her earlier middle-class life. To borrow Hurston's phrase from *Dust Tracks*, the idyllic interlude with *Tea Cake* is Harlem Renaissance praise of the "raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down" (177).

On the other hand, for all his machismo Tea Cake exhibits some protofeminist qualities. In teaching Janie checkers and rifle shooting, in fishing with her, and allowing her out of the kitchen to be in the fields with him, he cuts the oppressive shackles that her first two husbands put on her. In sum, Tea Cake is a self-contradiction, partly a man's man, partly a women's advocate. He presents the same contradictions in love that Arthur Price did, who accepted and loved Hurston's intellectual parity,<sup>7</sup> but who insisted on being her bread-winning protector.

These opposing polarities in Tea Cake's characterization remain unresolved. Only an arbitrary death by Janie's rifle ends them, and the reader is left pondering what his significance precisely is. One cannot know. In contrast to Killicks and Starks, he would seem unequivocally to be Janie's regenerative liberator. But in contrast with Janie's emerging independence, and with Hurston's own deepest needs for self-fulfillment, Tea Cake presents problems. Just as her own affair with Price was an ambivalent "exquisite torture," Janie's love of Tea Cake keeps her on tenterhooks: "She adored him and hated him at the same time. How could he make her suffer so and then come grinning like that with that darling way he had?" (103). Would Janie remain happy if tied to the seasonal cycles of grinding migrant work? Would she have money of her own that she could expect not to be taken? The novel ends conveniently before such issues arise to require resolution.

Hurston's characterization of Tea Cake is its most strained in the handling of his violence toward Janie. Irrationally fearful that Janie will be wooed away from him by Mrs. Turner's light skinned brother, Tea Cake gratuitously beats her, "Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession." No matter that he "just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss," his possessive jealousy is flatly incompatible with Janie's concurrent liberation (100). Earlier she rejected Logan and Jody for exactly such patriarchal prerogative. The chief difference here is that it is Tea Cake who controls her, and on the pedestal of their exclusive love this violence seems acceptable.

Hurston's confusion here stems in large part from an ideological shift from the feminist theme to the anti-bourgeois class critique. Tea Cake, an anti-bourgeois folk hero representing the raucous "Negro farthest down," has given Janie a marriage that is a medium of growth and mutuality. With his

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<sup>7</sup> Hemenway notes the attraction was intellectual as well as physical, that "the two of them held long conversations about religious issues," and she was attracted to his "quick intelligence and considerable learning" (231).

slapping Janie around, Hurston means to flaunt the stuffy elitism of her genteel middle-class readers. Indeed she very carefully precedes this episode with Janie's beating of Tea Cake first, because of her jealousy over Nunkie's interest in him; thus Janie exerts a sexual control equal to Tea Cake's. Likewise, Janie learns rifle shooting from Tea Cake and soon surpasses his skill. In the rough and tumble, give and take of this love, the reader is intended to focus foremost on Janie's developing self-reliance and egalitarian autonomy, even in conflictual moments.

But Hurston's folk romanticism founders here on the conflicting premises of her ideologies. Tea Cake's polarities—regenerative lover but slap-her-around plebeian—undermine plausibility even as they enrich the narrative with ambivalence. Further, Hurston's critiques are too hastily doctrinaire. For instance, in most male-on-female marital violence, women lack the power that Hurston gives to Janie. Richard Wright, who negatively reviewed the book, accused Hurston of a "facile sensuality" in which her depiction of "the Negro folk mind" is characterized by "pure simplicity" (25).<sup>8</sup> His own writings present a completer picture of the racial, economic, and psychological determinants of male frustration and violence. *Their Eyes*, however, is "uh love game," and the text won't treat Tea Cake as it did Logan and Jody, as controlling men who enforced their wife's submission. Rather, in fellow migrant workers the beating of Janie "aroused a sort of envy in both men and women." In fact, Tea Cake's subsequent petting and pampering of her "made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams" (140).

In this episode, Janie's growing individualism fails to counterbalance grimmer American social realities, making life on the egalitarian Florida muck implausibly Edenesque. In the closing frame chapter, Pheoby declares, "Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this" (183). Pheoby's new autonomy is a response quite at odds with those admirers of Janie's helpless hanging on to Tea Cake. Indeed, Hurston herself finally refused to hang onto Arthur Price. She left for the Caribbean and the gains, both monetary and intellectual, of a self-fulfilling career. But she must have felt as if she had shot her man. In that respect, Janie's killing of Tea Cake is no more arbitrary than Hurston's painful, necessary insistence on her self-realization. Tea Cake's death is Hurston's vicarious revenge on Arthur Price, a concealed recognition of the snake in Hurston's southern folk Eden.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the

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<sup>8</sup> Even Alain Locke regards the book as an "oversimplification" lacking the social weight of "motive fiction and social document fiction" (10).

novel, her covert rage is displaced onto the fury of the hurricane, which brings with it a rabid dog and Tea Cake's inevitable doom.

*Their Eyes* is neither an evasively nostalgic, pastoral folk romance, nor is it wholly a feminist text. It is an ambivalent and contradictory text reflecting tensions Hurston felt both in love and in her rural South. Above all, it is powerfully provocative, as its admirers well know despite discomfort with its problems. To dismiss it out of hand, with formalist charges that it has evident flaws, is to deny its exciting and informing values. If *Their Eyes* were simply an unambiguous tragic romance, it would have only the power of a love lament for Arthur Price. If it were only an uncritical folk idealization of Eatonville, it would be romantic ethnography wedded to a Harlem Renaissance taste for fashionably exotic primitives.

What the novel does, while immersing one first in a woman's patriarchal oppression and then her lyrical love, as well as the richly felt life of a dynamic folk culture, is to probe these worlds with instinctively keen acumen. For Janie, Tea Cake is undeniably attractive and liberating, but beneath her love lurks a troubling unease. His polarities, rooted in Hurston's experience with men, give his idealized characterization a curious complexity, a submerged criticality that finds vent in his death. Neither anger alone nor love alone is Hurston's narrating motive. The anger is there, covertly, Sadoff perceptively states, as "the subterranean theme in Hurston's *Eyes* that women most truly become themselves without men" (22). But the love equally is there, the recognition in Tea Cake's loss that to privilege personal autonomy over heterosexual love is to suffer a stinging sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> The contradictions of Eatonville, too, carry Hurston deeper than the cosmetics of nostalgia. Eatonville may be a world of racial and cultural vibrancy, but it can be mean to Janie once she has become an outsider. Hurston may have intended to celebrate Eatonville's richness, but from her probing comes an emergent, tentative critique of it as a paradise flawed and needing reconstruction.

Hurston is, then, an example of the Southerner who leaves the South and

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<sup>9</sup> Sadoff argues, when linking Janie's resentment to Jody: "Janie's desire . . . to tell stories and to achieve verbal power in the face of Jody's denial are figures for Hurston's drive to write novels and essays in the face of Price's insecure demand that she give up her career for their relationship" (20). Regarding Tea Cake's death she argues, "Hurston has motivated her narrative, perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination" (22).

<sup>10</sup> Various commentators note this contradiction, including Shirley Anne Williams, who suggests, "Zora was evidently unable to satisfactorily define herself in a continuing relationship with a man, whereas such definition is the essence of Janie's romantic vision" (x). See also Donald R. Marks's perceptive examination of Hurston's ideological contradictions.

returns with ambivalent perspective, which in *Their Eyes* pulls in two contradictory directions, folk praise and criticism. In a word, Hurston's feet stood in two quite different soils. As Eatonville's representative to the North and the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston kept one foot planted proudly in the South. In this posture she was uncritical of her roots, her motive being to explain her culture—or flamboyantly to brag about it—to outsiders who were unaware of its values.

In this stance, she backdrops Eatonville's folkloric wealth in a luxuriant Southern Eden, which is presided over by tutelary god Vergible Tea Cake Woods. Tea Cake offers regenerative force. His first name is clearly vegetal in suggestion, and his last realizes the promise of Janie's teenage pear tree vision of organic harmony. In the end, a liberated Janie brings back his seeds to the village for its own regeneration in love. Eatonville, from Hurston's proud stance within her indigenous culture, is an implicit critique of a modern civilization that has lost important frontier, village, and folk values, and which has ignored the African-American cultural legacy. Indeed *Their Eyes* should have made Hurston's mentor Boas happy, for his anthropological efforts contained a similar, implied culture critique.

Surely, as Janie informs Pheoby of the stories, humor, signifying, and wisdom of the black village—things Pheoby need not be taught since she is immersed within them—Hurston is looking past Pheoby to the wider, Northern audience. Richard Wright astutely sensed this, accusing her of writing “to a white audience” for their mere entertainment (25). He feared the white response would be condescension toward—as he saw it—the story's simplistic pathos and laughter. He was correct in part, for the more celebratory, uncritical stance of *Their Eyes* is to convey an idyllic picture of racial wholeness to outsiders ignorant of it.

Yet this novel hardly whitewashes the South. That is because Hurston's other foot was in the North, and from this more alienated viewpoint Janie's arduous maturation seems threatened by snakes newly found in the garden. As Hemenway perceptively argues, Hurston discovered “one of the flaws in her early memories of the village: there had usually been only men telling lies on the front porch of Joe Clarke's store” (232). Logan Killicks, his first name suggesting low worth and a gun's violence, kills Janie's pear tree dream. Because his farm is like “a stump in the middle of the woods” (20), he is a truncation of love (and an antithesis to Tea Cake “Woods”). Subsequently, bourgeois Joe Starks brings only more anti-vegetal starkness to Janie's life. Finally, if there is blight in the garden, it would be expected that the liberating

Tea Cake live; his death suggests Hurston instinctively sensed blight in him as well.

His contradictory characterization emerges from the conflicting feminist and class ideologies discussed earlier, as well as Hurston's divided rhetorical stance. In her more alienated posture, Hurston's critical aim is directed against her home, for most definitely she, a staunch individualist, had discontents with a culture blighted by patriarchal oppression and, behind that, racism. This theme is announced memorably by Janie's Nanny:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de 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. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (19)

In this mode of address, illustrated by Janie's confiding only to Pheoby what the hostile villagers would resist accepting, Hurston cannot be wholly celebratory. From the alienation in this critical posture comes a destructive hurricane and Tea Cake's violent death, a recognition that personal happiness cannot be found in the garden. As Janie loves then shoots him, Hurston both loves and objects to her fallen, unregenerated paradise. Hastily composed and published, *Their Eyes* is a text of unfolding, unresolved ambivalences, a narrative begun perhaps as pastoral romance yet veering toward feminist resistance, a celebration of the low-down folk but a prickly critique of provincial mentality, a novel whose unresolved tensions reflect its remarkable creative intelligence. Hurston's ambivalent pull between praise and critique, while not always yielding a fully coherent text, should continue to compel with its inventive vigor, to cast its widening net around new readers.

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