

"The porch couldn't talk for looking": Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

"So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different from a coon hide." (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 7)

When Janie explains to her friend Pheoby the reason that simply telling her story will not suffice, why she needs to provide the " 'understandin' to go 'long wid it,' " she employs a metaphor of vision: Unless you see the fur, you can't tell a mink from a coon. Stripped of their defining visual characteristics, the hides collapse into sameness. Recognizing visual difference, Hurston suggests, is crucial to understanding how identity is constructed: by skin and color. With this claim, she invokes new avenues into an African American tradition that has privileged voice as its empowering trope. From Phillis Wheatley's demonstration that an African can have a poetic voice, to Frederick Douglass's realization that freedom is measured by words and the ability to address a white audience, to Charles Chesnut's presentation of the triumph of black storytelling in *The Conjure Woman*, voice has prevailed as the primary medium through which African American writers have asserted identity and humanity. Voice announced that visual difference was only skin deep, that black bodies housed souls that were, in essence, no different from those residing in white bodies. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is very much a part of this tradition, and has inspired many fine studies on the ways that its protagonist finds a voice and a self.¹ Yet, as others have pointed out, Janie's voice is by no means unequivocally established by the end of the book. Robert Stepto was among the first to express dissatisfaction with the narrative structure and its third-person narrator; for him, the use of the narrator implies that "Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (166). More recently, Michael Awkward has pointed out that Janie is not interested in telling the community her story upon her return (6), and Mary Helen Washington argues that Janie is silenced at crucial spots in the narrative. Carla Kaplan, reviewing the discussions of voice that the novel has inspired, examines the ways that voice is both celebrated and undermined, noting that "Hurston privileges dialogue and storytelling at the same time as she represents and applauds Janie's refusal to speak" (121). Clearly, Janie's achievement of a voice is critical to her journey to self-awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough. As Maria Tai Wolff notes, "For telling to be successful, it must become a presentation of sights with words. The best

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talkers are 'big picture talkers' " (226). For Hurston, then, the construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see, a voice that celebrates the visible presence of black bodies.

I would suggest that, with its privileging of "mind pictures" over words, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* goes beyond a narrative authority based solely on voice, for, as Janie tells Pheoby, " 'Talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else' " (183). In contrast to Joe Starks, who seeks to be a "big voice" only to have his wish become humiliatingly true when Janie informs him that he " 'big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice' " (75), Janie seeks for a voice which can picture, which can make you see. The ability to use voice visually provides a literary space for African American women to relate their experiences in a world where, as Nanny says, " 'We don't know nothin' but what we see' " (14). Thus, to expand "what we see" increases what we know. Throughout the novel, Hurston's use of visual imagery challenges dominant theories about the power hierarchies embedded in sight, long associated with white control, with Plato's rationality and logic, and, from a Freudian perspective, with male sexual dominance. She recasts the visual to affirm the beauty and power of color and to provide a vehicle for female agency.

In so doing, Hurston opens up different ways of conceptualizing the African American experience. Responding to the long history of blacks as spectacle—from slavery to minstrelsy to colonized object—she offers the possibility of reclaiming the visual as a means of black expression and black power. Controlling vision means controlling what we see, how we define the world. Visual power, then, brings political power, since those who determine what is seen determine what exists.²

In recent times, the Rodney King beating trial highlighted the significance of this power, when white interpretation sought to reverse the apparent vision presented by the video of the assault. Commenting on the trial, Judith Butler writes that the "visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (17). Zora Neale Hurston recognized this, anticipating what Houston Baker terms the "'scening' of the African presence" as a means of silencing that presence (42). As opposed to the King jurors, who learned not to see what was presented, Hurston's Janie makes readers "see" her story, and thus takes control of both the visual field and its interpretation. Visual control is not, obviously, the answer to racist oppression: Had the jurors "seen" what happened to Rodney King, it would not have undone his beating, and Hurston fully realized that black bodies bear the material evidence of racial violence (indeed, Janie's perceived beauty—her long hair and light skin—results from an interracial rape). But by taking visual control, Hurston looks back, challenges white dominance, and documents its material abuse of African Americans.

She thus manages to present a material self that can withstand the power of the gaze, transforming it into a source of strength. In establishing a rhetoric of sight, Hurston ensures that black bodies remain powerfully visible throughout the novel, particularly the bodies of black women.³ As Audre Lorde has noted, visibility is the cornerstone of black female identity, "without which we cannot truly live":

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. . . . And that visibility which makes us

most vulnerable is that which also is
the source of our greatest strength.
(Lorde 42)

In attempting to reclaim visibility, Hurston focuses not just on rendering black bodies visible, but also on redeeming the "distortion of vision" of which Lorde speaks. Neither is an easy task, for Janie's visible beauty makes her vulnerable to both adoration and abuse, and the ability to see does not come readily. As the title of the novel indicates, Hurston is interested in far more than the development of one woman's journey to self-knowledge; she seeks to find a discourse that celebrates both the voices and the bodies of African Americans. By emphasizing "watching God," she foregrounds sight.

The existing theoretical work on vision is both useful and limiting for one seeking to understand Hurston's use of visual language. While various feminist theorists such as Braidotti, Haraway, and Keller have contributed greatly to our understanding of the topic, joining film theorists Mulvey, Doane, and Silverman, their work does not always take race sufficiently into account, though Jane Gaines reminds us of the racial privilege inherent in the gaze: "Some groups," she remarks, "have historically had the license to 'look' openly while other groups have 'looked' illicitly" (25). Some African American theorists such as Fanon, Wallace, and hooks do engage issues of visibility, but it is surprisingly under-examined in African American literary and film theory despite the fact that the visual is critical to black female identity, the source, Lorde insists, of black women's vulnerability and strength. Michelle Wallace has noted that "black women are more often visualized in mainstream American culture . . . than they are allowed to speak their own words or speak about their condition as women of color" (*Invisibility* 3). Hurston takes this visualization and turns it into a source of strength and a kind of language, thus redeeming visibility and establishing voice. While

vision has long been associated with objectivity, this objective position has been assumed to be raceless (white) and sexless (male). Hurston exposes these dynamics, and in so doing lays the groundwork for a kind of vision that embodies blackness as both body and voice. The visible presence of Janie's material body reflects the complex historical and cultural forces which have created her and offers her a unique, individual identity. The visual, then, allows for a negotiation between the post-structuralist argument that identity is largely a construction and the concerns, particularly by non-whites, that such a position erases individual identity and presence just as non-white peoples are beginning to lay claim to them. Awareness of the visible brings together the "politics of positioning," of who can look, with a recognition of the political and psychological significance of the gaze and with the "real" presence of a material body and individual self (Braidotti 73).

Hurston's insistence on the importance of visual expression, of course, stems largely from racism's disregard for African American individuality. In "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston explains the American attitude toward blacks as "THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY. This is an intangible built on folk belief. It is assumed that all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes. Everybody knows all about them. They are lay figures mounted in the museum where all may take them in at a glance" (170).⁴ By characterizing the white American perspective as that of museum-goers, Hurston suggests that the non-white population becomes mere spectacle, "lay figures" to be taken in "at a glance" by white eyes. We generally see this power dynamic in operation when black bodies are displayed. In minstrel shows, as Eric Lott points out, "'Black' figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which

audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures" (140-41).

The dynamic still exists. Steven Spielberg's 1997 film *Amistad*, for example, opens with an extended display of naked black bodies and offers its black cast few words, inviting the public to view blackness rather than listen to it.⁵ One is defined by how one is seen. For African Americans, this leads to a condition of "hypervisibility," in which "the very publicness of black people as a social fact works to undermine the possibility of actually seeing black specificity" (Lubiano 187). We need only look to Frantz Fanon for confirmation: "... already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. . . . I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!" (116). The racist power of visibility thus seems daunting, but Hurston not only takes on the challenge of reclaiming the visual as racially affirmative, she does so in response to a masculinist tradition in which visual power so often objectifies women. Her fiction reveals that, even in the context of a black community, the ability to see "black specificity" may be impaired, particularly when the specific individual is a woman. Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, who pioneered the participant-observer model of anthropological study, recognized the need for looking closely and carefully.⁶

Their Eyes opens with almost an anthropological tone, presenting us with a group of people who have been "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long" (1). After spending their days erased by white eyes as a

specific presence, they become talkers and lookers. In order to regain human identity after "mules and other brutes had occupied their skins," they need to speak, listen, and see. It is important to note that Hurston equates all three sensory apparatus; she does not privilege the verbal over the visual. Just as

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Pheoby's "hungry listening" helps Janie tell her story, so Janie's keen vision provides her with a story to tell. This vision is far different from one which "glances" at objects in a museum; such a way of seeing merely replicates white erasure of everything but skin color. Hurston seeks a uniquely African

American vision, a way of seeing that both recognizes color and sees beyond it. But being black does not automatically confer, for Hurston, visual ability. In fact, visual language is predominately associated with women in her work. As Michelle Wallace has observed, "Gender is as important as 'race' to understanding how 'invisibility' has worked historically in all fields of visual production" ("Race" 258). Initially, the "big picture talkers" are male in this novel, and much of the talk centers on impressing and evaluating women. Janie's first appearance in Eatonville causes Hicks to proclaim his plans to get a woman just like her " 'Wid mah talk' " (34). Hurston's challenge is to redeploy the language of the visual in ways that do not simply re-evoked the objectification of women of any color by situating them as objects of the male gaze.

In a culture that has so long defined black people as spectacle and black women as sexualized bodies, one needs to transform and redeem the potential of vision. While the visual certainly holds the threat of objectification, it can also serve as action—both personal and political. bell hooks argues that, for blacks, looking can be

viewed as an act of resistance. She asserts that "all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze . . . produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze." With this gaze African Americans declared, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (116). Looking becomes an act charged with political resistance, a way to reconfigure the world and its power dynamics.⁷ One must look, then, at African American writing as a means of challenging the power of the white gaze. We need to employ what Mae Henderson terms a new "angle of vision" (161), a means of looking back, of seeing without objectifying. To analyze Hurston's "angle of vision," I would argue, necessitates bringing together a wide range of theoretical perspectives, for seeing and being seen are highly complex acts in her fiction, acts which place individuals within an intricate web of personal and historical forces.

In Hurston's work, looking is more than a confrontational challenge. Her fiction is replete with examples of women's need to look, see, understand, and use language visually. In "Drenched in Light," an autobiographical story which recalls Hurston's descriptions of her childhood days, Isis, "a visual minded child," "pictur[es] herself gazing over the edge of the world into the abyss" (942). She escapes punishment for her many mischievous actions by impressing a white lady as being "drenched in light" (946); her strong visual force marks her as a child destined for creative accomplishment. Delia, the protagonist of "Sweat," prefigures Janie in her use of visual metaphors to re-evaluate her marriage. "She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way" (957). This visual realization grants Delia the strength to defy her abusive husband. "The Gilded Six-Bits" presents the story of Missie May, unable to see through the shining

currency to recognize its meager value; this mis-sight leads her to an affair with the man who owns the false coins, nearly ruining her marriage.

Interestingly, her husband Joe finally forgives her when her son is born and turns out to be "'de spittin image'" (995) of Joe himself. Only visual proof of paternity can erase his anger.

Jonah's Gourd Vine, in many ways a pre-text for *Their Eyes*, examines many of the same issues of voice and identity with a male protagonist. But though John Pearson, like Janie Crawford, struggles to establish a self, he does not employ her rhetoric of sight. In fact, his white boss specifically associates him with blindness as an explanation for John's lack of foresight:

"Of course you did not know. Because God has given to all men the gift of blindness. That is to say that He has cursed but few with vision. Ever hear tell of a happy prophet? This old world wouldn't roll on the way He started it if men could see. Ha! In fact, I think God Himself was looking off when you went and got yourself born." (86)

Not only is John a result of God's blindness, but John consistently fails to see his way, particularly in failing to pick up on Hattie's use of conjure tricks to entrap him into a second marriage. The vision in the novel belongs to his first wife, Lucy. She is the one whose "large bright eyes looked thru and beyond him and saw too much" (112). Lucy, far more self-aware and perceptive than John, harnesses the power of vision so successfully that her visions live on after her death. Interestingly, when John finally does attain a degree of vision, it proves highly ambiguous and problematic, leading to his death when he drives his car into a railroad crossing: "He drove on but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward" (167). Lacking Lucy's ability to put her visual power to practical use, John fatally blinds himself to his surroundings and pays the ultimate price for his inability to see. Here Hurston sets up her paradigm: Vision

must be embodied, one must see outwardly as well as inwardly.

Hurston establishes the full power of the visual in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Initially subjected to the defining and objectifying power of a communal gaze, Janie, unlike John Pearson, learns to employ vision in ways that are self-affirming rather than self-sacrificing. Returning to Eatonville at the novel's start, Janie finds herself in a position very familiar to her: the object that all eyes are upon. When she approaches, the people are full of hostile questions to which they "hoped the answers were cruel and strange" (4). But when she keeps on walking, refusing to stop and acquiesce to their voyeuristic desires, talk becomes specularization: "The porch couldn't talk for looking." The men notice 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." The women focus on the "faded shirt and muddy overalls." Looking at her body, the men see her as sexed; for the women, gazing on her apparel, she is gendered. In both cases, it seems, Janie vanishes. The men define her as female body parts and the women deny her feminine identity. While the female resentment of her attire may seem less intrusive than the male x-ray vision, both looks constitute "mass cruelty" (2). Yet having set up Janie as spectacle, Hurston then illuminates the positive potential of vision in the ensuing interchange with Pheoby. Here, the visual takes on a different tone. Just as voice, according to Kaplan, becomes a kind of double-edged sword, so can vision—particularly when shared between friends—both specularize and affirm. Pheoby tells Janie, "Gal you sho looks good. . . . Even wid dem overalls on, you shows yo' womanhood" (4). What she sees is presence, not absence.

To look like a woman is to look good, a way of visualizing which does not fixate on sexual anatomy but which allows for materiality. She *shows* her womanhood, a far different sight than that gazed upon by the men, who see not Janie's presence but their own desire, desire which her body is expected to satisfy.

The materiality of Janie's body as an object of desire has, of course, determined much of her history. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, presumably wants to marry her based on what he sees, though her own eyes tell her something very different: "He look like some old skullhead in de graveyard" (13). But her vision lacks authority; despite what her eyes tell her, she is married off to him, defeated by Nanny's powerful story of her own oppression which seems to give her the right to impose her will upon Janie. Having "save[d] de text," Nanny uses language to desecrate Janie's vision of the pear tree (16). Joe Starks, Janie's next husband, is likewise attracted to her beauty: "He stopped and looked hard, and then he asked her for a cool drink of water." This time, Janie does not submit passively to this specularization, and tries to look back, to return the gaze, pumping the water "until she got a good look at the man" (26). But her look still lacks the controlling power of the male gaze, what hooks call the ability to "change reality." At this point, Janie has difficulty even seeing reality, as is evidenced by her inability to see through Joe Starks. She takes "a lot of looks at him and she was proud of what she saw. Kind of portly, like rich white folks" (32). What Janie sees is whiteness, and her valuation of this sets her on a path that will take twenty years to reverse. Looking at Joe's silk shirt, she overlooks his language of hierarchy, his desire to be a big voice. She has privileged the wrong kind of sight, a vision that fails to see into blackness and thus fails to see through language.

Still, Janie is not entirely fooled. Joe does "not represent sun-up and pollen

and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (28). Janie thus gives up a vision she has seen—that of the pear tree—in favor of one she can only imagine: horizons, chance, and change. In allowing herself to be swayed by his language, she fails to notice that his rhetoric is that of speech, not vision. Joe only speaks; he does not see. Consequently, Janie's own vision deteriorates even further. Having initially recognized that Joe does not represent "sun-up and pollen," she later manages to convince herself that he does: "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and spring-time sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (31). Stubbornly, she tries to force Joe into her vision, possibly to justify running off with him. Convincing herself to see what is not there leads Janie into an unequal marriage in which she is expected to sit on a "high chair" (58), an infantilizing position where she can overlook the world and yet also be subjected to its envious eyes.

But Joe has a problem, for while he wants to put Janie on display in order to reap the benefit of reflected glory as her owner, this is precisely the position which is threatened by the eyes of other men. He wants her to be both present and absent, both visible and invisible, a task he attempts to accomplish by insisting that she keep her hair tied up in a head rag because he sees the other men not just "figuratively wallowing in it" (51) but literally touching it, and she "was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (52). Joe wants to engage privately in scopophilia within a public forum, without subjecting Janie herself to this public gaze. Once she is fixed by gazes other than his own, he loses his exclusive ownership of her body. As Lorde notes, while visibility entails vulnerability, it can also be a source of great strength, a characteristic Joe certainly does not want to see in Janie. But the situation reflects more than Joe's concern about Janie's gaining cultural

power; Janie's visibility also invokes a classic Freudian scenario. Laura Mulvey, in her groundbreaking psychoanalytic study "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," notes that the female figure, beyond providing pleasure for the looker, also implies a certain threat: "her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. . . . Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of the men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (21). Indeed, Joe's greatest anxiety is not focused on Janie's body but on his own. He wants to have the dominant position, but without being visually objectified by the viewers. "The more his back ached and his muscle dissolved into fat and the fat melted off his bones the more fractious he became with Janie. Especially in the store. The more people in there the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (73-74).

But the racial situation problematizes this notion of woman as icon, which presumes looking to be a masculine act. The cultural permutations of the significance of the gaze within the African American community challenge a strictly Freudian reading. If looking is an act of political defiance, it cannot be exclusively associated with black masculinity, particularly given the long history of black female activism and resistance. When Janie challenges Joe, she does so not just to defend her female identity—" 'Ah'm uh woman every inch of me' " (75)—but also to protest against Joe's almost constant oppression. Joe, with his prosperity and seemingly white values, fails to realize that his mouth is not all-powerful, that, despite his favorite expression, "I god," he is not divine. His centrality as mayor and store owner renders him even more vulnerable to specularization than Janie, and he falls prey to a kind of reversed Freudian schema of the gaze which entails serious repercussions for his political power.

Having set up the dynamics of the body as visualized object, Joe becomes its victim, as Janie linguistically performs the castration of which she is the visual reminder. As she tells him publicly, " 'When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life,' " her pictorial language renders it impossible for him to deny the vision she creates. He tries to erase the image by questioning her speech. " 'Wha—whut's dat you said?' " It doesn't work, however, for Walter taunts him, " 'You heard her, you ain't blind.' " This comment highlights the interconnection between hearing and seeing; to hear is to see. And yet, given the words of her insult, Joe might as well be blind, for Janie has, in fact, revealed his lack of visual difference. By not using a visual metaphor in this case, she emphasizes that there is nothing there to see. She bares his body to the communal gaze, not only denying his masculinity but displaying his lack to other men: "She had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing" (75). Feminized by the visual dynamics that he has established, Joe dies, unable to withstand the gaze which erases his masculinity and identifies him as empty armor. Not only is it impossible for him to continue as mayor under these circumstances, it is impossible for him to continue. Joe has no life once denied both sexual and political power.

Though Hurston uses the visual to expose the vulnerability of a phallocentrism which abuses women, she also recognizes its empowering potential. In transforming the visual into a tool of female power, Hurston reclaims the power of the visual as a vehicle for examining African American women's experiences. After all, if one erases vision, one erases race, which is culturally visualized by the physical body, the sign of visual difference. As Michelle Wallace notes, "How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very markers that

reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual" ("Modernism" 40). Racial visibility as a marker of difference allows black women to "show" their womanhood.

Yet, as Joe's experience makes clear, this must be a particular kind of vision, a way of seeing which expands rather than limits understanding. Despite Joe's entrapment in his own gaze, the novel is replete with examples of the affirmative quality of the visual. Janie's attempts to define a self originate with the act of looking. Her "conscious life" begins with her vision of the pear tree, leading to her sexual awakening. Having felt called to "gaze on a mystery" (10), she beholds a "revelation" in the bees and flowers. She seeks her own place in the picture, searching for "confirmation of the voice and vision." Looking down the road, she sees a "glorious being" whom, in her "former blindness," she had known as "shiftless Johnny Taylor." But the "golden dust of pollen" which "beglamored his rags and her eyes" changes her perspective (11). Johnny Taylor's kiss, espied by Nanny, sets Janie's course in motion. Whether or not Johnny Taylor represents a better possibility is both impossible to determine and irrelevant; what matters is Janie's realization that her fate is linked to her vision, though the recognition will lead her astray until she learns effectively to interpret what she sees.

This vision, after her mistake in mis-seeing Joe Starks, is finally fulfilled when she meets Tea Cake, a man who is willing to display himself rather than subject others to his defining gaze. When Janie says, " 'Look lak Ah seen you somewhere,' " he replies, " 'Ah'm easy tuh see on Church Street most any day or night' " (90-91). By denying any anxiety in thus being viewed, Tea Cake transforms sight from a controlling, defining gaze into a personal introduction, demystifying himself by inviting inspection. In fact, Tea Cake cautions her about the importance of looking

closely in the ensuing checkers game, challenging her claim that he has no right to jump her king because " 'Ah wuz lookin' off when you went and stuck yo' men right up next tuh mine. No fair!' " Tea Cake answers, " 'You ain't supposed tuh look off, Mis' Starks. It's de biggest part uh de game tuh watch out!' " (92). His response underscores the importance of watching, of using one's vision not to fix and specularize but to see and think, to understand. Consequently, Janie realizes that he "could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101), a man who can confirm her initial vision. She defines him with visual metaphors: "He was a glance from God." This metaphor highlights Tea Cake's connection to the visual; he recognizes the need to combine voice with understanding, remarking that Janie needs " 'tellin' and showin' " (102) to believe in love.

But Janie does not need simply to find a man capable of assimilating voice and vision, she needs to learn for herself how to formulate a self which is not predicated upon oppression. She finds the task particularly challenging because her racial identity is founded upon invisibility, upon her inability to see herself. The photograph which reveals her color, her difference, divides her from her previous notion of the identity of sameness: " 'Before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.' " To be black is to be not just different but absent, for Janie looks at the photograph asking, " 'Where is me? Ah don't see me' " (9). Both blackness and femininity are culturally predicated upon lack; thus Janie needs to learn to show her womanhood and to find visible presence in blackness. Priscilla Wald has suggested that Janie's problem with seeing herself stems from her "white eyes": "The white eyes with which Janie looks see the black self as absent, that is, do not see the black self at all" (83). This is a particularly important point, for it indicates that Janie needs not just vision, but black vision—black eyes. Vision,

which initially divides her from herself, must then provide the means for re-inventing a self, one in which racial identity adds wholeness rather than division. To deny either her blackness or her whiteness is to deny the specificity of her being, for her body is the site of the physical evidence of white oppression and a partially white origin. The answer is not to retreat into colorlessness but to reconstitute the definition of the self into something that acknowledges the conditions of her physical being: the visible evidence of her whiteness and her blackness, the heritage of slavery and sexual abuse.

Janie takes the first step toward acquiring this visual sense of self in response to Joe's oppression. "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes." (73). She sees the self that prostrates itself before Jody as her shadow, and this realization acts on her "like a drug," offering an escape from an oppressive life. In order to move from passive spectator to active doer, however, she needs to take that vision further. The act of seeing must become active and affirmative before she can re-integrate the disparate parts of her identity into one unified whole. As Andrew Lakritz has written, "Some of the most powerful moments in Zora Neale Hurston's writings occur when a figure in the narrative is represented as watching events unfold, when such acts of looking become constitutive of the entire question of identity" (17). But looking itself does not automatically constitute identity; one must learn how to do it. Barbara Johnson's much cited analysis of Janie's recognition of her division into inside and outside also can be viewed as an experience in learning to use the visual. Johnson identifies Janie's realization that the spirit of the marriage has left the bedroom and moved into the parlor as an "externalization of the inner, a metaphorically

grounded metonymy," while the following paragraph where Janie sees her image of Jody tumble off a shelf "presents an internalization of the outer, or a metonymically grounded metaphor." This moment leads Janie to a voice which "grows not out of her identity but out of her division into inside and outside. Knowing how not to mix them is knowing that articulate language requires the co-presence of two distinct poles, not their collapse into oneness" (Johnson 212). If, indeed, the moment leads her to voice, it does not lead to a voice of self-assertion, as Janie remains silent under Joe's oppressive control for several more years.

I would suggest that the moment does not engender Janie's voice so much as it moves her toward a way of visualizing her experience which will, in time, lead her toward a picturing voice. In imagining her marriage as living in the parlor, she creates, as Johnson notes, a metonymy. But her metaphor of Joe as statue is also a metaphor infused with vision:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. . . . She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (67-68)

The significance of this moment lies not just in Janie's recognition of the division between inside and outside but also in the ability to turn her back on the image and "look further." No longer content with surface vision, Janie is learning to "look further," a necessary precondition for finding an expressive voice.

Joe's death offers her further opportunity to use this knowledge as she fixes her gaze upon herself. Janie

goes to the mirror and looks "hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (83). This scene illustrates why vision is so crucial to Hurston's work. Recalling Butler's comment that the "visual field" is a "racial formation," one sees Hurston establishing precisely that. In looking hard at her "skin and features," Janie looks hard at her interracial body, seeing it now not as different but as handsome. She uses her own vision to find beauty and value in her visually inscribed racial identity. She then burns her head rags, symbol of Joe's attempts to deny her beauty and to hide her from the communal gaze while subjecting her to his own.

Displaying her abundant hair, presumably another indication of her racially mixed heritage, brings her still closer to an affirmation of her visual self, a self that celebrates rather than denying the mark of race—of both races. Kaja Silverman asserts that the "eye can confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain. It can also put what is alien or inconsequential into contact with what is most personal and psychically significant" (227). Even before Janie gains the aid of Tea Cake's loving eye, her own eyes confer love upon her body as she begins to assimilate what has often seemed an alien world into her own psyche.

Janie transforms her understanding of color so that the sting of her original recognition of her photograph, "'Aw! aw! Ah'm colored!'" (9), can be alleviated and reversed by recognizing the visual beauty of color. The evening she meets Tea Cake, she watches the moon rise, "its amber fluid . . . drenching the earth" (95). This scene reveals the darkness of night to be full of color, transcending the stark blackness of the sky and whiteness of the moon. Hurston thus presents color as a full range of variation and beauty. Janie starts wearing blue because Tea Cake likes to see her in it, telling Pheoby not only that visual mourning should not

last longer than grief, but that " 'de world picked out black and white for mournin' ' " (107-08). By specifically associating mourning with black and white, Hurston subtly suggests that going beyond the color binary moves one from grief to happiness, from mourning and loss to fulfillment. She further challenges the black-white binary with the episode after the storm in the Everglades, when Tea Cake is forcibly conscripted into burying bodies. The white overseers insist that the workers " 'examine every last one of 'em and find out if they's white or black' " (162). This ridiculous and horrific command inspires Tea Cake to comment, " 'Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law' " (163). The suggestion that God needs the aid of coffins to "see" racial difference again highlights the absurdity of seeing the world only in terms of black and white. By tying vision so intricately to race, Hurston offers a way out of the oppositional hierarchy of both.⁸

Thus Hurston destabilizes the visual racial binary, and Janie learns a new respect for color and for her own image. She restores the image that was desecrated by the photograph, when Tea Cake tells her to look in the mirror so she can take pleasure from her looks. "Fortunately," says Silverman, "no look ever takes place once and for all" (223). As Hurston well understands, looking is not a static activity. To "transform the value," as Silverman puts it, of what is seen, one needs to use one's life-experience in order to see it better. *Having stood up to her husband*, survived the gossip implicating her in his death, taken over the business, and dared to consider a lover, Janie learns to transform her gaze into one that accepts and values her own image.

After learning to use her vision to value herself, Janie is ready to take the next step: using vision to find God. The title episode of the novel reveals the full importance of the power of sight and of being an active looker; watching

God is an active rather than a passive enterprise.

They sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (151)

Like Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, Hurston re-visions the old white man with a long beard. Instead, one approaches God not just in darkness but by looking *through* darkness, to see God where others see blackness. In so doing, she enables a kind of vision that defies darkness, replacing the emptiness with presence, presence in blackness. At the height of the storm, Janie tells Tea Cake, " 'If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk' " (151). Since she can "see" the light in darkness, neither it nor death holds any fear for her. By having her characters watch God in darkness, Hurston redefines rationalist and masculine control of the gaze, transforming scopophilia into spirituality. Her enabled gaze does not make women specularizable, for it takes place in darkness; rather, it makes God viewable and blackness visible. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, the midwife Lone, trying to find out what the men plan to do to the women at the convent, sits in the dark to read the signs: "Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself" (273). Learning how to see—particularly, learning how to see in darkness—takes on special meaning for African American women. One comes to God not through light but through the ability to see in the dark.

But Hurston's world is not solely visual; material bodies exist tactily as well as visually, and color is not always beautiful, as the historical forces of slavery and oppression can be read on Janie's body. She is the product

of two generations of rape, one of them interracial. She suffers physically for her interracial body when Tea Cake beats her to display his ownership in the face of Mrs. Turner's theories of Janie's superiority due to her light skin. The bruises, of course, are clearly evident precisely because of that light skin, as Sop-de-Bottom enviously remarks, "'Uh person can see every place you hit her'" (140). These marks inscribe both visually and physically the full implications of her racial identity as well as the violence that brought it into being. Just as black women cannot ignore the visual, neither can they escape the tactile, a physical language which highlights the material racist and sexist abuse of the body.⁹ As Sharon Davie argues, Hurston's bodily metaphors "acknowledge the tactile, the physical, which Western culture devalues" (454). But Hurston does more than acknowledge the tactile; she *reveals* it. In Hurston's world, the mark of violence is seen, making the tactile visual. Though she celebrates the power of vision, she has no illusions that it can erase or replace the discourse of violence and racism. Rather, it documents, for all to see, the effects of brutality.

Janie's act of killing is an act of physical self-defense to protect the body that Tea Cake has restored to her. Yet even this highly tactile response has a visual component. She waits for a sign from the sky, a visual indication that God will relent and spare Tea Cake's life, but "the sky stayed hard looking and quiet" (169). I find it telling that this is a daytime supplication, as Janie seeks to find a message "beyond blue ether's bosom," waiting for a "star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout." This daylight sky appears much less accessible to her searching eyes than the blackness of the storm. The God sought in darkness evokes a reaffirmation of love, but this light (skinned?) God forces murder. Lack of visual contact spells doom, and Tea Cake's vision consequently suffers to the point where the "fiend in him

must kill and Janie was the only thing living he saw" (175). Thus Tea Cake's death both saves Janie's physical body and erases his false vision.

Her final test involves learning to integrate voice and vision in a different form of self-defense. The trial scene reconstitutes Janie as speaker rather than object. The spectators are there not to watch but to listen. Janie's verbal defense succeeds because she "makes them see," a phrase repeated three times in six sentences:

She had to go way back to let them know how she and Tea Cake had been with one another so they could see she could never shoot Tea Cake out of malice.

She tried to make them see how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him. . . . She made them see how she couldn't ever want to be rid of him. (178; emphasis added)

Despite critical concern with the narrator replacing Janie's voice at this crucial moment, we must recognize that Janie has made them see, as she has already made the reader see, that voice at this moment is subordinate to the ability to visualize, an effect that may be heightened by Hurston's deflection of Janie's story. We don't need to hear her, since we can see her story. She manages to refute the implications of the black male spectators, that "'dem white mens wuzn't goin tuh do nothin' tuh no woman dat look lak her'" (179), and they turn their anger against Mrs. Turner's brother who puts "himself where men's wives could look at him" (181). But Janie's looks have not been directed at him; she has been too busy learning to visualize to waste time specularizing.

Consequently, she returns home to discover "'dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along'" (182). Having learned to make presence out of absence, she can now not only re-visualize Tea Cake, whose "memory made pictures of love and light against the wall," but can also

call "in her soul to come and see" (184). In thus successfully employing a visualized voice, Janie becomes both spectator and participant in her own life. To speak the body, for an African American woman, means to recognize its visual racial difference as well as affirming its sexual identity. Hurston's mind-pictures and seeing-voices reclaim the physical world of pear trees and the beauty of the visible presence of blackness. As Hurston herself noted, pictorial language is of primary importance in black discourse, where everything is "illustrated. So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" ("Characteristics" 24). By filling Janie "full of that oldest human longing—self revelation" (*Their Eyes* 6), Hurston presents a text of "revelation"—with all of its visual implications. Her hieroglyphics reflect a community of people whose world is their canvas and whose lives and bodies are pictured in living color.

She thus provides a model for reconciling voice and vision, for transforming black bodies from museum pieces or ethnographic objects into embodied voices, by recasting spectacle as visual, a move away from passive sensationalism to active participation. Hortense Spillers notes of the

Du Boisian double-consciousness that "it is also noteworthy that his provocative claims . . . crosses [sic] their wires with the specular and spectacular: the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining being seen through the eyes of another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze" (143). In Hurston's hands, looking is indeed a performative act. In fact, it becomes a linguistic performance which affirms bodily presence, reversing Fanon's claim that, in the white world, "consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (110). Hurston, as Priscilla Wald so aptly puts it, "redesignates 'color' as performance in a process that draws her readers into the dynamics of 'coloration'" (87). Through the use of hieroglyphics, she reconstitutes women as active and colored performers. Vision, so often a means of fixing and silencing African Americans, can also provide the means to foreground the body without surrendering the voice. As the title of Hurston's novel indicates, her concern goes beyond presenting an individual woman's journey to self-awareness; her accomplishment is nothing less than redefining African American rhetoric, rendering it verbal and visual.

1. Along with several studies cited within the text of my article, the following represent only a few of the many fine analyses of various aspects of voice and language in *Their Eyes*: Bond; Brigham; Callahan; Gates, "Zora"; Holloway; Kubitschek; McKay; Racine; Wall.

2. For more on the political power of the visual, see Rosi Braidotti, especially 73.

3. In this, Hurston differs markedly from Ralph Ellison, who focuses not so much on attaining vision as on the implications of invisibility. Whereas Ellison documents in intricate detail the confines of being invisible, Hurston examines the process of learning to see and be seen.

4. Indeed, in film theory, as Miriam Hansen points out, "an aesthetics of the glance is replacing the aesthetics of the gaze" (135). This reflects a move from the intensity of a gaze to the glance, "momentary and casual" (50), according to John Ellis, who notes that, with a glance, "no extraordinary effort is being invested in the activity of looking" (137). While this may result in a less controlling and hegemonic situation, it can also, as Hurston indicates, illustrate a lack of deep perception.

5. Film, both popular and documentary, has long specularized black bodies. According to Fatimah Tobing Rony, early-twentieth-century ethnographic films "incessantly visualized race" (267).

6. I am indebted to Lori Jirousek's 1999 Penn State dissertation "Immigrant Ethnographers: Critical Observations in Turn-of-the-Century America" for better understanding the significance of Boas to Hurston's fiction.

7. Indeed, vision can offer a challenge to the links which Homi Bhabha has traced between the scopic drive and colonial surveillance (28-29).

Notes

8. As Donna Haraway has suggested, "Vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions" (188).
 9. Again, we see further evidence in Morrison's work in *Beloved's* scar and Sethe's "tree"; like Hurston, Morrison demands that one read the body visually.

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