

“Some Other Way to Try”:  
From Defiance to Creative  
Submission in *Their Eyes Were  
Watching God*

by Shawn E. Miller

Since 1979, by which time *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) had established itself as “the most privileged text in the African-American literary canon” (Washington xii), some Hurston critics have been of two minds about her best-known book.<sup>1</sup> Citing various unresolved textual problems, some cautious skeptics have asked whether the novel’s preeminence, won through nearly universal praise from Alice Walker and other first-generation advocates, is premature, and perhaps even unwarranted.<sup>2</sup> In the early days of the Hurston revival, one might have expected enthusiasts to regard such questions as hostile, and to respond in the mode of spirited defense; they were, after all, engaged in a delicate operation to recuperate a mostly forgotten writer who did not exactly fit the extraliterary profile of Herman Melville and other previously successful candidates. When the question was whether Hurston would be remembered at all, one can hardly blame her advocates for their wagon-circling against rigorous interrogation by critics of uncertain loyalties. But now, with the revival an accomplished fact, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* not only competes with, but even overshadows and threatens to eclipse, most other modern novels. Not surprisingly, questions about its worth have become more frequent and insistent, even from some of the book’s early admirers. Such questions now

are not so much measures of the book's precarious status, as they are of its ubiquity.

Understanding this latter-day reception history may help us get to the bottom of more recent questions (and answers) about the book's purported inconsistency; indeed, reception politics may even explain why they have been raised to begin with. When Hurston's position in the canon seemed uncertain, little deviation from the fundamental feminist interpretation was possible without hazarding the success of the recovery effort. Gradually, this initial interpretation became standard, then assumed, even after the book had become a fixture in high school and undergraduate curricula across the country. Few now seriously ask whether the interpretation advanced by first-generation critics is valid; even the novel's detractors simply assume that it is, then point out all the ways the book contradicts it. When William M. Ramsey charges that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is "not a fully finished or conceptually realized text" (36), he means that substantial textual evidence does not accord with, and at times contradicts, the widely-assumed feminist interpretation of the novel. He concludes that perhaps *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not as good as we had thought, but an alternate conclusion is of course possible: perhaps the conventional interpretation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not as right as we had thought. Rather than acknowledge the necessity of either conclusion, Hurston advocates have often addressed the concerns of readers like Ramsey with ever more fanciful explanations of why the standard interpretation is nevertheless still adequate to its task, an activity which Joseph R. Urgo laments "only emphasizes the assumption of textual weakness" (42). The reader who craves unity of effect is left with the notion that something is still awry.

A more helpful strategy for assessing the book might lie in reconsidering our allegiance to certain assumptions that undergird the traditional feminist interpretation, especially now that Hurston and her work are widely known and respected. In brief, this interpretation posits Janie Crawford as an internally static feminist hero seeking liberation from masculine oppression as a necessary prerequisite to self-actualization. Her first two marriages fail because Logan Killicks and Joe Starks insist too severely on Janie's obedience to them and to conventional sex-role and class-role stereotypes. Janie heroically defies the roles imposed upon her, and eventually finds the love she had first envisioned under the pear tree when she marries Tea Cake Woods. Their marriage, unlike her first two, is egalitarian and liberating. She thus completes her journey from object to subject. Though this interpretation in its more fleshed-out

form is still the standard in Hurston criticism, many of its adherents are bothered by certain aspects of the text that seem not to measure up to it, including a questionable choice of point of view (Washington xi), an “uncritical depiction of violence toward women” (Washington xiv), the “ambiguities” of Hurston’s characterization of Tea Cake (Lupton 49), and, of course, the novel’s ending. Some have been content to label these oddities flaws, but we also might entertain the notion that they perform substantive functions that the standard interpretation cannot yet sufficiently explain. When we do, a modified interpretation emerges, within which many of the conventional assumptions about the book cannot be sustained. As Tea Cake’s “ambiguities” begin to look more like character traits he shares with Killicks and Starks, who meanwhile begin to appear more human than monstrous, we must locate a different rationale for the failures and achievements of Janie’s quest, one that does not depend too greatly on the attitudes of her husbands. Such ruminations lead inevitably, I believe, to the conclusion that Janie is more dynamic than we have previously realized, and that her final triumph has more to do with her mastery of conventional marriage than with her escape from it.

### An Underacknowledged Pattern

Many have observed that Hurston’s novel is at the core a quest narrative whose object is love, a marriage capable of sustaining Janie’s vision of bee and pear tree blossom. In presenting a succession of three marriages, the first wholly unsuccessful, the second mostly unsuccessful, and the third successful but for the outrages of fortune, Hurston invites a misreading of Janie’s predicament. This common misreading, which assumes that Janie’s triumph is solely over external obstacles, has tempted some to compare the book to *The Odyssey* (Lupton 48) and the traditional literary romance (Daniel 66). Logan Killicks and Joe Starks are merely impediments, Janie’s Cyclops and Circe, who but for her heroism would deny the object of her quest. Janie is the steadfast hero, unwavering in her resolve to see the quest to its end. Undoubtedly, Janie sees herself as this kind of figure throughout much of her life, and this self-perception has added to the confusion, perhaps as Hurston intended; external circumstances often mask the inner struggle of the modern hero. But even if the unchanging protagonist beset solely by external forces were a common figure in the work of Hurston’s contemporaries, the balance of the evidence in this book points in another direc-

tion. As Urgo has rightly pointed out, to read the novel "as a progression from bad to mediocre to best mate for Janie is to miss the repetition of treatment Janie receives from each man" (52).

This repetition of treatment underlies the discomfort many readers have with *Tea Cake*. Initially, critics such as S. Jay Walker viewed Janie's romance with Tea Cake as a "blurring of sex-role stereotypes within an intensely sexual relationship" (527). In her previous marriages, Janie had been kept in her place, either as domestic servant to Killicks or as Starks's ornament, and in both cases had suffered the oppressions of a narrowly-defined sex role. Her marriage to Tea Cake, on the other hand, is egalitarian; both Janie and Tea Cake work in the field, both fix supper, both go shooting, both play checkers, and so on. This argument, of course, has its problems. From a feminist perspective, it takes agency away from Janie and makes her happiness a function of her relationships with men. It also conveniently ignores that Janie often chooses to occupy these roles. When Killicks orders her to help him shovel manure before the day gets hot, noting that she might "take a bit of interest in dis place" rather than "foolin' round in dat kitchen all day long," Janie responds, "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine" (30). As Karen Jacobs argues, while "on the muck, [Janie] may interpret her husband's invitation to share the spheres of work and domesticity as an opportunity for gender and class parity . . . she greets Killicks's intention to buy her a mule of her own as a violation of her newly won status as a woman who does not have to work" (344). Shortly thereafter, Janie leaves Logan of her own volition, already captivated by Joe Starks's image of her as "A pretty doll-baby . . . made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan [herself] and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for [her]" (28). Janie's own desire to occupy these roles aside, this common view of her final marriage also ignores the many characteristics all of her husbands, including Tea Cake, share.

More recently, critics have begun to recognize these shared characteristics. Under Killicks and Starks, Janie's oppression takes a number of specific forms. Though Janie's interlude with Killicks is brief, Hurston here manages to set the basic pattern. First, Killicks intends to exploit his wife by putting her to work plowing his fields. Janie is completely powerless to assert her will, for as Killicks claims, Janie "ain't got no particular place. It's wherever [he needs her]" (30). Killicks silences Janie whenever she tries to assert herself, scorning her family when Janie tries to confront him about their marriage (29) and again when she refuses to shovel the manure (30). When Janie resists this silencing, Killicks re-

sorts to threats of physical violence: "Don't you change too many words wid me dis mawnin', Janie, do Ah'll take and change ends wid yuh! . . . Ah'll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!" (30).

Likewise, Joe Starks insists on placing Janie where he wants her to be. Though he, too, puts Janie to work minding the store, Janie seems to be bothered most by the "high stool" Joe insists she sit on, as she tells Phoeby after his death (109). Silence is, again, an integral part of Janie's role. The first time Starks leaves Janie "feeling cold," the first time he "[takes] the bloom off of things," is when he refuses to allow her to make a speech at his election. When Tony Taylor requests "uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks," Joe takes the floor and says, "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" (40-41). He again makes Janie "sullen" (58) when he refuses to allow her to attend the funeral of Matt Bonner's mule: "*you* ain't goin' off in all dat mess uh commonness. Ah'm surprised at yuh fuh askin'" (56). Joe's motive in silencing Janie seems to be, as Haurykiewicz has noted, his "sexual jealousy" (56), and the pattern continues through his making Janie wear the head-rag (51), his refusing her the right to join in the mule-talk and checker-playing of the store porch (50), and his insisting that Janie is "gettin' too moufy" (71) whenever she challenges him, all the way up to the day of his death, when he commands her to "Shut up!" (82). Starks, like Killicks, resorts to scorn whenever Janie tries to assert herself, often disparaging her looks or intelligence. The threat of violence under Killicks turns into Starks's actual violence when he beats her for a poorly-cooked dinner (67) and for insulting his sexual prowess, when he "[strikes] Janie with all his might and [drives] her from the store" (76). Just as Killicks on his last day with Janie threatens to kill her, so Starks, bedridden and helpless before Janie's verbal assault, wishes "thunder and lightnin' would kill [her]!" (82).<sup>3</sup>

Killicks and Starks have been charged with patriarchal domination, treating Janie as little more than chattel (no better than a mule, according to Julie Haurykiewicz [54]), yet Hurston's narrator notes that Tea Cake also displays "all those signs of possession" (105). The source of this domination, according to most readings of the novel, is the husband's exacting insistence on conventional sex roles (the complication of Killicks's intent to take Janie out of the kitchen notwithstanding), combined with his sexual jealousy. Tea Cake, again, shows all of these flaws Killicks and Starks have been faulted with, and his treatment of

Janie is remarkably similar to theirs once we see beyond the difference in Janie's reactions to the treatment. Tea Cake insists, for instance, on a traditional economic arrangement; Janie is to rely solely on Tea Cake as bread-winner, and leave her own money useless in the bank: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain't got nothin' you don't git nothin'" (122). Though Tea Cake's invitation to Janie to work in the fields has been much-discussed as a site where sex roles break down, its significance pales when we realize that Tea Cake is only asking Janie to do what "de rest uh de women" do (127), and though his words are gentler than Killicks's, the substance of what he is asking Janie to do is the same.<sup>4</sup> Further, Tea Cake prevents Janie from being in situations inappropriate to her sex and class; just as Starks does not allow Janie to mingle in the "commonness" of the mule's funeral, so Tea Cake insists that Janie stay away from his gambling: "dis time it's gointuh be nothin' but tough men's talkin' all kinds uh talk so it ain't no place for you tuh be" (119).<sup>5</sup> The place for Janie to be is, in fact, solely Tea Cake's prerogative; just as Killicks tells Janie that her place is "wherever Ah need yuh" (30), so Tea Cake brags to Sop-de-Bottom, "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be" (141). Hurston is so careful to highlight evidence that Tea Cake rules in this marriage that one must wonder how S. Jay Walker could ever have dubbed it "a relationship between acknowledged equals" (521).

As Ramsey has noted, Tea Cake displays all the traits of the "man's man" (45). He boasts of his sexual prowess ("Ah'm de Apostle Paul tuh de Gentiles. Ah tells 'em and then again Ah show's 'em" [100]). As Lupton notes, he exhibits plenty of other negative masculine traits as well: "fist-fighting, getting slashed with a knife after a gambling win, hitting Janie, hostility toward her greater economic power, taking Janie's two hundred dollars without permission and not inviting her to the party he throws with it, and so forth" (50). Like Starks and Killicks, Tea Cake is sexually jealous of Janie, commanding her to "keep [Mrs. Turner] from round dis house" (137) and "treat her cold" (138) out of fear that Janie might succumb to Mrs. Turner's unflattering comparisons of Tea Cake with her brother. Out of sexual jealousy, Tea Cake beats Janie in order to "[reassure] him in possession" and "show he was boss" (140). As if Tea Cake's masculinity needs emphasizing, Hurston drags before the reader the pitifully effeminate Mr. Turner with his "powerless laugh" (138), a "vanishing-looking kind of man as if there used to be parts about him

that stuck out individually but now he hadn't a thing about him that wasn't dwindled and blurred" (137). As Hurston indicates, the proper sentiment toward such a castrated male who is not the boss and not in possession of his wife is pity.<sup>6</sup>

### The Dynamics of Oppression

This is the problem for those who celebrate Tea Cake as Janie's liberator: he displays all the nasty characteristics of her oppressors. Skeptics want to see this pattern as proof of Hurston's unexamined ambivalence toward Tea Cake and of textual inconsistency. Apologists respond with a variety of explanations. Some feminist critics, who have become troubled by Tea Cake, insist nevertheless that he is part of Janie's progression toward autonomy, if not its end; once he has done all he can for Janie, Hurston rids her of him through the hurricane device, freeing her to experience "a special fate that lies beyond a happy marriage" (Lillios 93), an "alternative to heterosexuality" (Batker 211). Urgo, who admits a consistency of treatment among the three husbands, explains that Killicks and Starks merely get "the words all wrong" (47), raising an interesting possibility. Certainly Tea Cake looks and sounds the part of Janie's ideal husband more than the other two. Killicks is old, with a misshapen head and neck, and says exactly what he means (at least once he stops talking in rhymes to Janie). Starks also is older than Janie, with a growing belly, and he, too, is no diplomat. Both men demand obedience. Tea Cake, on the other hand, is young and handsome, and achieves what he wants by saying what he does not mean. Unlike Killicks, for instance, who says directly to Janie that she will do the work he tells her to do, Tea Cake invents charming reasoning for his wanting Janie to pick beans with him. In short, he allows her to bow down without losing face. If we accept this explanation as sufficient address to the problem, we ought to recognize the consequences for our reading of Janie: in her relationship with Tea Cake, she is deceived into obedience, struck powerless by a handsome face and charming words that flatter her own pride. Hardly the makings of a feminist hero—or of any other kind.

But that does not have to be the end of the explanation. Both Urgo's assertion and claims of ambivalence and inconsistency rest on two related but erroneous assumptions: that Hurston intends Tea Cake as Janie's liberator and that she intends her first husbands wholly as villains. As the previous discussion shows, the first of these assumptions simply cannot be sustained without admitting Hurston's inconsistency.

The second assumption can easily be challenged using evidence from the text as well, for Hurston indicates that Killicks and Starks are not to be taken as the mere villains those who read the book in terms of epic or romance quest claim they are. Some critics have noted the oddity of telling Janie's story in the core narrative in third person; why not allow Janie to tell her own story? The answer lies in what this technique allows Hurston to do that a first person narrative would not. One thing it allows her to do is get behind how Janie perceives Killicks and Starks to expose their motives for acting the way they do; in short, a third-person narrative allows Hurston to humanize these men.

We see in both of these marriages Janie's ability to hurt her husbands as they have the ability to hurt her. When Janie confronts Killicks about their marriage, he silences her with scorn not out of a desire to oppress, but as a response to fear. Janie's indication that she might run away from Killicks sends fear coursing through his body: "There! Janie had put words in his held-in fears. She might run off sure enough. The thought put a terrible ache in Logan's body, but he thought it best to put on scorn" (29). Janie's words have hurt him, and he responds in kind. As he feigns sleep, "resentful in his agony," Hurston tells us that "he hoped that he had hurt her as she had hurt him" (29). Killicks's threatening to kill Janie is also a response to hurt and fear, as Hurston notes that his speech is "half a sob and half a cry" (30). Janie's marriage to Joe Starks illustrates even further that much of her oppression results from her actual or perceived attack on her husband. The narrowly-avoided "fuss" following the funeral of Matt Bonner's mule originates with Janie, for though Starks returns to the store "full of pleasure and good humor," Janie's "sullen" demeanor makes him resentful (58). The argument over the bill of lading, during which Joe insults Janie's intelligence, also begins with her. After having to wait on a customer despite her wish to hear the end of the play-acting on the porch, Janie returns "with her bristles sticking out all over her and with dissatisfaction written all over her face. Joe [sees] it and [lifts] his own hackles a bit" (66). Likewise, when Joe strikes Janie and drives her from the store, Hurston does not allow the reader to take this act simply as an over-reaction to Janie's insult; in fact, she provides an in-depth look at what goes through Joe's head:

Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. . . . There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all



the time! Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same. Joe didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. (75–76)

By presenting Joe's perspective, Hurston makes this incident less about Joe's insistence on domination and more about his response to hurt. She does the same throughout this part of the narrative, providing us with information that Janie is not privy to, telling us, for instance, that Janie resents the head-rag only because she does not know of Joe's jealousy of her, which Hurston implies would have made the whole thing "sensible" to Janie, "But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him" (51–52).

That Killicks and Starks are human does not, of course, wholly exculpate them. In most instances, Janie acts as she does because she believes her husbands are trying to dominate her. But fingering the correct perpetrator is not so important, perhaps, as understanding the dynamic at work in these exchanges. Janie receives a command that she thinks unfair; in reply, her fighting spirit asserts itself. This assertion, however, is always futile, as Janie herself recognizes: "Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it" (67). As Janie is weaker, the only possible outcome of her resistance is further escalation of conflict ending in defeat. Over the years, Janie tries to mask her fighting spirit to avoid conflict, but never really gives it up entirely. As Hurston notes, "The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul" (72), but Janie is mistaken. It asserts itself again when Janie figuratively castrates Joe Starks before his admiring public, ending any chance for the two to reconcile. Janie's final, seething conversation with Joe on his deathbed has been seen both as her triumph and as an insensitive attack (Lupton 47), but in any case an unmasking of the central problem of their marriage. Here we discover Joe's fault: he has not yet found out that "you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any sympathy in dis world. [He] ain't tried tuh pacify *nobody* but [himself]" (82). The reader has no qualms against accepting Janie's assessment of Joe, even if he thinks her speech insensitive given Joe's condition, but what often goes unrecognized is that this charge applies equally to Janie. In all instances, it is Janie's unwillingness to pacify Killicks and Starks that leads to their further oppression of her. That Janie herself suspects this to be true is evinced in her overwhelm-

ing sense of pity after Joe's death: "Poor Joe! Maybe if she had known some other way to try, she might have made his face different" (83).

Strangely, in her third marriage, Janie offers no resistance to Tea Cake's commands, which are often as patriarchal as those of Killicks and Starks; in fact, we usually see Janie in absolute submission to him. She wears what he wants her to wear, goes where he wants her to go, and accepts all manner of negative behavior from her new husband with a quiet passivity uncharacteristic of the Janie we have come to know. Janie's willingness to take a beating, for instance, makes Tea Cake the envy of the muck; Sop-de-Bottom congratulates his friend on his luck in finding such a submissive wife, a wife so much unlike his own, who is a shrew by comparison (140–141). But this development is not so strange if we understand Janie as a character who changes. The obstacles she overcomes are not solely outside of herself; she must also overcome her own impulse to demand that her marriages conform exactly to her immature understanding of what a marriage is (and surely it is reasonable to suggest that Janie's understanding has, by the time she is forty, progressed beyond that of a pubescent girl). In fact, expecting her husbands to conform is exactly what strips Janie of her power; once they do not, she is powerless to do anything but fight or run away. Janie must learn that she can have the marriage of her vision, but that it will not be provided to her by any man, no matter how promising he might seem. Hurston carefully manages events to underscore this theme. Two marriages fail, one succeeds, yet all three husbands treat Janie the same way. One might argue that Tea Cake's treatment is not so extreme, but, according to the logic provided by Janie herself as she describes how her resistance provokes escalation with Joe, one might respond that Janie does not allow it ever to become as extreme. She submits to Tea Cake, and the result is the growth of their relationship and Tea Cake's willingness to empower her; as Tea Cake explains to Sop-de-Bottom, his response to Janie's submission is "Ah love her for it" (141). By the time she marries Tea Cake, Janie has learned the true source of power in marriage and in this book, which Joseph Urgo correctly identifies when he asserts that "Power, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is rooted in one's sense of vulnerability" (41). To find her vulnerability, Janie must first subdue her fighting spirit, which Hurston symbolically anticipates in the first checker match between Janie and Tea Cake; "Yuh can't beat uh woman," Tea Cake muses, "Dey jes won't stand fuh it. But Ah'll come teach yuh agin. You gointuh be uh good player, too, after while" (92).

### A Feminist Hero?

This argument may seem to complicate the notion that Janie is a feminist hero. Hurston, by allowing Janie to achieve her vision of marriage by submitting to a man, has seemingly winked at an oppressive tradition. But we ought not simply ignore that Janie does achieve her goal. At the end of her story, she is undeniably the dignified, empowered woman that Hurston's feminist advocates have claimed she is. The current reading differs only in that it takes responsibility for that achievement out of Tea Cake's hands and puts it solely in Janie's; she gains her subject position as a result of her own subversive actions, and not because she fortunately meets the right man. It posits Janie as an internally dynamic, rather than internally static, character; she must abandon her "fighting spirit" in order to achieve her ideal marriage. Many critics, however, have misread Janie's quest for a marriage as a search for a suitable man. Comparing Janie to Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Alice Walker suggests that each "desires . . . a man who loves her and makes her feel alive. Each woman finds such a man" ("Saving" 6). In order to be free, Janie must locate the temporal circumstances (that is, the man) best suited for freedom. Walker refers explicitly to slave narratives, where "escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together" ("Saving" 5), as the appropriate paradigm for understanding *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. To Walker, Janie's situation is little different from that of escaped slaves in the Antebellum South heading for Canada; as with Janie, their freedom depends on getting to the right place. This interpretive scheme does not allow for submission because submission would necessarily entail defeat.

Fortunately, however, the slave narrative is not the only paradigm available to help us understand what is going on in this book. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., has shown, the strategy of direct resistance common in slave narratives, which he calls deformation of mastery, is only one of two strong currents running through African-American texts concerned with issues of race and power. The other, which Baker dubs mastery of form, seeks empowerment not through escape from conventional expectations, but rather through satisfaction of them. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston herself engages in deformation strategies regarding race—her use of African-American folklore would be one example—but Janie's strategy in negotiating oppression predicated on gender follows a different pattern. Clearly, Janie has pursued the strategy of deformation in her first two marriages—that is, "go[ue]rilla action in the

face of acknowledged adversaries” (Baker 50)—leading some to believe that this is the strategy which allows her to achieve her final subject position. As the current discussion has shown, however, this strategy has always resulted in defeat because Janie is no go[ue]rilla. Her defeats do not vanquish Janie because she abandons direct resistance in favor of the mastery strategy, which “conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee” (Baker 50).

In referring to the slave narrative tradition, Walker offers convincing, if circumstantial, evidence for the unchanging feminist hero theory. Janie fits into a long line of black characters whose physical circumstance is inextricably linked to larger issues of freedom; to suggest a Janie who wins freedom through submission is therefore counterintuitive. Yet, as Baker has shown, mastery of form is far from uncommon in African-American discursive practice. A Janie who uses submission as a strategy of resistance would be no newfangled Hurston invention; she would fit into a tradition of black activists and characters stretching from Booker T. Washington and Charles Chesnut’s Uncle Julius to Houston Baker’s own father and Ishmael Reed’s Uncle Robin.<sup>7</sup> All of these win power and freedom not by direct resistance or horizontal displacement, but by recognizing the realities and exigencies of their temporal situation and by using this keen insight within a context of covert resistance. In short, this strategy may be characterized as uncle-tomming with a purpose. It is not radical, therefore, to suggest that Hurston used a pattern of power through submission already available to her in literature dealing with race and applied it to her own story of gender and power in marriage.

The scope of the power Janie achieves through submission to Tea Cake is far-reaching. By appealing to his patriarchy, Janie flatters him. In order to justify his pride, he must constantly consult Janie for approval, most notably after she has taken the job in the fields (“You don’t think Ah’m tryin’ tuh git outa takin’ keer uh yuh, do yuh, Janie, ’cause Ah ast yuh tuh work long side uh me?” [127]), and again during the storm (“Ah reckon you wish now you had of stayed in yo’ big house ’way from such as dis, don’t yuh? . . . ’sposing you wuz tuh die, now. You wouldn’t get mad at me for draggin’ yuh heah?” [151]). These passages show that Tea Cake’s identity as the good husband relies on Janie; she must approve in order for him to maintain it. She has been so submissive to his will, such a good wife, that he begins to wonder if he really deserves her, and so he must demonstrate that he does in word and deed. In this way, Tea Cake’s understanding of himself becomes a reflection of Janie’s response; she is able to fashion his identity and guide his actions

by appealing, directly or indirectly, to his pride in the role of benevolent patriarch.

We understand why this strategy might succeed when we remember the claims conventional marriage makes on the patriarch, who, like the submissive wife, has his own externally-imposed role to play. According to this tradition, men must give up absolute freedom to take on full executive responsibility for their families. They must be monogamous. They must work to provide economic support. As wives are incapable of performing complex tasks of the mind and providing for the future, husbands must hold full decision-making powers; they also must shoulder full responsibility when their decisions fail to achieve desired ends. To the extent that a husband is incapable of fulfilling these responsibilities, he is inadequate. To say that this ideal male has nowhere existed does not diminish his ability to shape community standards of masculine behavior. Husbands who rule unjustly are objects of ridicule, their wives innocent victims. If, as Nanny suggests, black women are the mules of the world, even literal mules in this book are considered by community standards to have certain rights, and their owners certain responsibilities; consider the town's harsh judgments of Matt Bonner. Luckily for Janie, none of her husbands is so shameless; she therefore has available to her the stereotype of the good husband for her own use. As marriage is somewhat of a contractual agreement, a wife who fulfills the role expected of her has the reasonable expectation that the other party will do the same; thus, submission becomes a way for a wife like Janie to demand that the other terms of the contract be satisfied as well, and a source of power in controlling her husband.

A number of passages in the book support this understanding of the force of contract in its matrimonial or other forms. Power, according to Hurston, may be achieved in two ways. If a subject is not willing to be ruled, then the would-be ruler must resort to coercion to achieve and maintain power. If, on the other hand, a subject submits willingly to rule, then a ruler's power derives directly from the subject's will. In the first case, resistance is futile if the subject is weaker, but in the second the subject maintains certain rights within the framework of a social contract. The most conspicuous (non-matrimonial) social contract in the book is that between the citizens of Eatonville and Mayor Joe Starks, and as such it is a telling example of how Hurston understands power to work. Joe's power does not derive from the direct use of force; as Hurston notes, the citizens have no "physical fear" of him (44). When he catches Henry Pitts with a load of his ribbon cane and makes him

leave town, some of the citizens think the act unjust, and they begin to complain among themselves of how exacting Joe is with his citizens, of his haughtiness, of his love for obedience. Sam Watson acknowledges these things, noting that the citizens are but blades of grass bending before the wind that is Joe Starks, yet he also defends the Mayor: "at dat us needs him. De town wouldn't be nothin' if it wasn't for him" (46). Despite their feelings "good and bad" about Starks, the town does not challenge him. They willingly accept the costs of being subjects under Starks in order to gain the benefits. Hurston explains that this arrangement has consequences for Joe's identity and the way he exercises his power when she explains that he is who he is not only because of intrinsic character traits, but also "because the town [bows] down" (47); this ruler's identity and actions are both functions of his subjects' willingness to submit. As Joe is hardly capable of making the town submit under force, he surely must see his own self-interest in carefully preserving its citizens' willingness to be ruled. In this way Joe's self-interest becomes aligned with the interests of the citizens; he must become a ruler they understand to be just if he wishes to preserve his power.

Though Joe is certainly capable of using coercion to control Janie, the text suggests all along that he would prefer not to. He does not resort to coercion to force Janie to marry him, but rather argues that she should because he will treat her like a lady. Some who think his character wholly unredeemable may judge his flowery speeches to be little more than deception, but they still constitute the offer of a contractual agreement: "You come go wid me. Den all de rest of yo' natural life you kin live lak you oughta" (28). Further, just as Joe needs the town to think him just, so he demonstrates that he wants Janie to think the same. As Joe joins unthinkingly in the mirth attending the baiting of Matt Bonner's mule, Janie turns away in disgust, talking to herself about how cruel the men are being, saying finally, "Wisht Ah had mah way wid 'em all" (53). Here Janie wishes that she could assert herself on behalf of the mule—Hurston notes that she "wanted to fight about it" (54)—but she chooses instead to remain silent to avoid an argument, undoubtedly realizing that she is incapable of bending the men to her will by force. Unbeknownst to her, Joe has heard what she muttered to herself, and he orders the men to stop, buys the mule, and sets it free. Janie responds with a flattering speech of praise. Perhaps if she had known that Joe's act was a direct response to her own powerlessness and not the expression of something intrinsic to his character—he was, after all, laughing with the rest before he overheard her—she might have understood much ear-

lier that dependency and submission can be more effective ways to exercise power than the direct application of force, especially when she is the weaker. She also might have understood that submission can act to fashion a husband into a ruler worthy of her praise.

If there is one woman in this book who understands that the traditional feminine role is in its own way a powerful one, it is surely Mrs. Bogle, who appears for a mere paragraph's duration in Chapter Six. In a novel filled with seemingly extraneous vignettes, it is easy to take little notice of her appearance, but the little information we do learn about her is highly relevant to Janie's predicament. This grandmother is a woman fully at home in the role of desire object; when she strides up to the store porch with "a blushing air of coquetry about her" that invokes visions of "magnolia blooms and sleepy lakes under the moonlight" (65), she obliterates the presence of the mere girls who preceded her. Unlike these girls, who elicit only hyperbolic overtures from the porch-sitters, Mrs. Bogle commands their notice because two men had already worked hard to be worthy of her:

Her first husband had been a coachman but "studied jury" to win her. He had finally become a preacher to hold her till his death. Her second husband worked in Fohnes orange grove—but tried to preach when he caught her eye. He never got any further than a class leader, but that was something to offer her. It proved his love and pride. (65)

In both instances, Mrs. Bogle's husbands had sought for and won her approval. Hurston likens her to "a wind on the ocean," a force which moves men though "the helm determine[s] the port," a reference to conventional patriarchy. If the helm does determine the port, we must at least admit that Mrs. Bogle determines the helm; she recognizes that she is an object of men's desire, and so she sets about using her desirability to make those men into acceptable husbands. She does not rule in her marriages, but she makes certain that her husbands conform to her notion of a just ruler; that is, one who acts as she wishes.

Janie also insists that Tea Cake prove his intentions if he wishes to win and keep her as wife. She has been training him carefully from the days of their courtship, when she plays the role of defenseless widow suspicious that Tea Cake might, in fact, be "uh rounder and uh pimp" (100). He recognizes this suspicion and, in order to win the prize, must set about demonstrating through his words and actions that Janie has nothing to fear—though every piece of information we learn about his

past might suggest otherwise. The Tea Cake who wins Janie is, we suspect, not the same man she meets that first day in the store. Nowhere is Janie's ability to make Tea Cake bend to her vision of what she wants him to be more evident than in their exchange following a night of fighting over Nunkie. Here, Janie charges Tea Cake with still harboring feelings for Nunkie, not, Hurston says, "because she believed it. She wanted to hear his denial. She had to crow over the fallen Nunkie." Tea Cake, seeing his image tarnished in Janie's eyes, answers quickly—and, one might say, obediently—"Whut would Ah do wid dat lil chunk of a woman wid you around? She ain't good for nothin' exceptin' tuh set up in uh corner by de kitchen stove and break wood over her head. You'se something tuh make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit tuh die" (132). This speech is part of a larger pattern of proving himself through affirmation and action in response to Janie's putting "de shamery" (100) on him; to win and keep Janie, Tea Cake must satisfy her need for "tellin' and showin'" (102) that she does hold the keys to the kingdom. When Tea Cake admits that Janie has got him so he can no longer help himself (116), we understand that she has become the wind that drives him, even if he does determine the port. Janie is such the ideal of the submissive wife, and Tea Cake of the benevolent patriarch, that their relationship becomes the envy of every man and woman on the muck; the day following Janie's beating, the men in the fields "dream dreams" because of "the helpless way she [hangs] on [Tea Cake]," and the women "see visions" because of the way he pets and pampers her (140). As Tea Cake's goal has been to demonstrate his ownership of Janie to the world, one can only imagine how different the aftermath might have been had she put up a fight.

### Whither Hurricanes and Other Audacities

Of course, the book does not leave Janie and Tea Cake together on the muck, and any evaluation must take account of the hurricane, Tea Cake's madness, and his death by Janie's hand. Hurston has left many wondering why this marriage must end in such a violent way, and here again conventional assumptions have caused confusion. Following her interpretation of the book as literary romance, Janice Daniel sees the hurricane as the "requisite 'dragon' of [Janie's] romance quest" (72). Lupton cites this final action sequence as part of her reading of the novel in terms of evolutionary theory; under stress from the natural world, a woman has been selected as the fittest over a man (53–54).



Carla Kaplan asserts that Tea Cake's death is required by the narrative logic of the novel, liberating Janie "to continue her quest and, ultimately, to satisfy her 'oldest human longing—self-revelation' with someone who *can* listen [Phoeby]" (132). Here again, Hurston comes under fire from skeptics. Ramsey, who describes Janie's life on the muck as "implausibly Edenesque" (46), calls the hurricane "melodramatically gratuitous," Tea Cake's infection by rabies "fictionally arbitrary" (43), and concludes finally that Tea Cake's death is yet another mark of weakness, a way to duck several important questions: "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" (45). Even Urgo calls the novel's final sequence "wildly audacious" (53), fashioning a compliment out of the same material of Ramsey's accusation.

Recently, some have been content to label the hurricane mere plot device, and a derivative one at that, which serves solely to rid Janie of Tea Cake (or, according to Ramsey, to enact Hurston's revenge fantasy against the man she loved [46]) and titillate the reader (Lillios 91–92), but which is in any case insufficiently integrated with the novel's thematic concerns. Assuredly, the hurricane does function in these ways, but it is also more relevant to Hurston's themes than many have been willing to admit. It fits a pattern of incidents in which characters are powerless to overcome external obstacles by main force; survival depends on a careful understanding of the variables which can be controlled and those which cannot. A failed assessment leaves characters wholly at the mercy of fortune, as Motor Boat and Dick Sterrett are at the mercy of the hurricane. Other incidents fitting this pattern include Nanny's slavery experiences, Starks's bout with Death, Tea Cake's rabies, and Janie's trial. In some instances (as with Nanny and Motor Boat), fortune works in the character's favor; in others (as with Starks, Tea Cake, and Sterrett), fortune works against him, regardless of the dictates of cosmic justice. Janie's quest, if we accept that she is too weak to reverse single-handedly the sex role she is expected to play, also fits this pattern, a connection strengthened by her objective both in the quest and in escaping the hurricane waters. In both instances, Janie wishes to reach the high ground.

And here again, as with the technique of third-person narration, we must ask ourselves what the hurricane's aftermath allows Hurston to do that she otherwise could not. First, it allows her to dramatize in extreme fashion Janie's continued use of submission to control Tea Cake. During

his bout with rabies, Janie never fails to answer Tea Cake's increasingly wild accusations and assertions of masculine privilege with pacifying submission: "All right, Tea Cake, jus' as you say" (172). Until the disease consumes him, her abject obedience still makes Tea Cake cry and feel ashamed of himself (171). Janie continues with her strategy of pacification to the verge of oblivion, but here Hurston is able to draw the line where submission must end; only after Tea Cake's pistol has twice clicked on an empty chamber does Janie, for the first time in their relationship, dare to command him: "Tea Cake, put down dat gun and go back tuh bed!" (175). Once Janie sees that her submission no longer functions to make her husband as she wishes him to be, she abandons the strategy entirely, shooting him with the rifle rather than follow him into death. But Janie's role-playing continues to serve her purposes, as it allows the judge in her trial to portray her as "a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy" (179).

These events also allow Hurston to portray Janie without Tea Cake, and to re-emphasize that her happiness depends not on Tea Cake as he is, but on the Tea Cake of her dreams. As the novel comes to an end, and as Janie reflects on the sadness of what she has gone through, suddenly a vision of Tea Cake appears:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was . . . Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. (183–184)

The man Janie met in the store is dead, but the man whom she herself has fashioned out of his raw material still lives. Here Hurston brings the exposition of her novel full-circle; Janie is one of the women who "forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth" (1). This ability to fashion truth out of dreams regardless of temporal reality is what gives women like Janie their power; they are not like the pitiable men whose dreams are "mocked to death by Time" (1). Nanny, who envisions a ruling chair for Janie, has sought a future for her granddaughter where the substance of life accords with her dream of it. But, just as the ruling chair has been by custom reserved for men, so this insistence on the correspondence of dream and reality puts Janie's happiness in the hands of fortune, which Hurston notes is the predicament of the male "Watcher"

of the horizon (1). Only when Janie gives up this insistence, only when she removes the fighting spirit from her soul to focus on achieving her dream through submission, is she able to become self-reliant; the reality of Tea Cake's domination of her becomes irrelevant, and so, finally, does his physical death, for despite these inconsistencies, Janie is able to make her husband into a dream-figure to serve her own needs.

### Conclusion

I may here seem to portray a coldly calculating Janie, and to diminish the love she and Tea Cake share. Anyone who has read the book might protest, and rightly so, that there is no evidence for this characterization of Janie, no evidence that her love for Tea Cake and his love for her are anything but genuine. I agree with Alice Walker when she claims *Their Eyes Were Watching God* constitutes "one of the sexiest, most 'healthily' rendered heterosexual love stories in our literature" ("Zora" 17). I have not set out to challenge this claim; rather, the questions before me have been why this final marriage allows the survival of love, and why the first two do not. That traditionally-conceived sex roles are love-defeating in Janie's first two marriages is obvious; why they are not love-defeating in her third is questionable, as I have suggested. Perhaps, in answering Richard Wright's early criticisms of the book, we have been too tempted to discover the social protest he missed; Janie must therefore be the questing feminist who finds her own voice and autonomy in a marriage to a man who will allow her to actualize herself. Evidence from the text, however, suggests that Tea Cake is no such man. Further, it is unreasonable to expect him to be: he is a southern, working-class, uneducated wanderer much more likely to be within the traditional ideology of marriage prevalent in rural, early twentieth-century America. One must assume that he is not conversant with more enlightened ideas of marriage, which were necessarily unavailable to illiterate men, not to mention undesirable to them, until much later in the century. Janie, who is incapable of single-handedly unmaking conventional marriage, must find a way to appropriate it in order to achieve her own ends. She is not responsible for externally-imposed sex roles, nor should we interpret her submission to them as whole-hearted consent to their justice; however, she has learned in her first marriages that defiance, though just, though heroic, is quixotic if not wholly disastrous. Janie's purposes, which I would suggest tend much more toward love than toward autonomy anyway, are served only when she appeals to the force of contract within conven-

tional marriage. She achieves both self-reliance and love in spite of, not through, her third husband.

Once we adjust certain of our long-held assumptions to account for evidence they cannot explain, we are left with a well-wrought text capable of sustaining close reading. We do not have to gloss over “inconsistency” or “ambivalence” to see Janie for the heroine she is, nor do we have to resort to strained explanations that flatter our own sensibilities. This novel is clearly not the straightforward critique of gender and power in marriage that some critics claim it is, but neither is it the flawed, unfinished work of an exhausted and emotionally conflicted Zora Neale Hurston, as Ramsey claims. If we let go of our assumptions of Tea Cake as liberator, of Killicks and Starks as villains, of Janie as the unchanging feminist hero, this text is capable of answering consistently each of our questions and concerns about it. Further, we are left with a reading capable of satisfying the advocates and gate-keepers alike. Janie does not have to remain unchanged and defiant for us to recognize her covert feminism, just as other apparently subservient characters throughout the African-American tradition do not have to defy their white masters for us to recognize their achievement of power despite an imposed racial hierarchy. Neither must we elect this book to the canon with a wink and a nudge, for charges of textual weakness, as I hope I have shown, are due to our own mistaken assumptions and not to Hurston’s shoddy craftsmanship. Though one must agree with Urgo that “there is no longer any need to argue the importance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to American literature” (41–42), it would be best to stop coddling it. The best argument for this change in attitude is the text itself, for Hurston here demonstrates that her book has need of no one’s patronage.

#### NOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge Donald Kartiganer, Wendy Pearce Miller, Jay Watson, and Ethel Young-Minor for their indispensable advice.
2. See, for instance, Mary Helen Washington on an exchange between Walker and Robert Stepto at the 1979 MLA convention (xi–xii), and on her own second thoughts about the book (xiii–xiv). See also Lupton, Urgo, Ramsey.
3. To focus exclusively on the elements that make this marriage disastrous for Janie is to ignore her early perceptions of its promise. Initially, Janie does think Joe is the “bee for her bloom”; “From now on until death,” she thinks, “she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything” (31). Once the relationship sours, her reflections on the present indicate that things have not always been this way. When Janie thinks that “The bed was *no longer* a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in” (67, emphasis added), she tacitly

admits that at one time she and Joe had been involved in a love-game. Likewise, when she learns—and only after seven years of marriage—that “She wasn’t petal-open *anymore* with [Joe]” (67, emphasis added), that “She had *no more* blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals *used to be*” (68, emphasis added), we know that the history of Janie’s second marriage has been one of a romantic union compromised, and not a consistent history of unhappiness and oppression.

4. Though a doctrine of separate spheres follows Janie as she moves between class groups, sphere boundaries change. The role of a wife on the muck is to work in the fields with her husband; because Janie initially keeps to the quarters there, she is considered a “special case” (127).

5. We never witness Janie gambling, which seems wholly within the masculine sphere among working-class blacks like Tea Cake. His preventing her from joining him is roughly equivalent to Joe’s insistence that she not join in the porch talk. From what we see, the porch talk is carried on solely by men; when women enter the scene, they are objects of judgment. In both cases, the husband acts to keep the wife out of sex- and class-inappropriate situations.

6. Some may object to my notion here that Hurston praises traditionally-conceived masculinity by pointing to other Hurston texts that seem to suggest otherwise. Sykes of “Sweat,” whose assertions of masculine privilege over his wife Delia are undeniably unjust, comes readily to mind. The problem with Sykes, however, is not so much that he is too much the man as it is that he is not enough of one. His inability to provide for his wife’s economic needs underscores this claim, as do the judgments rendered by the porch-sitters in that story. Sykes’s death by rattlesnake, the self-chosen symbol of his phallic power, and over which he claims to have mastery, indicates that though he talks the talk of masculinity, he is more appropriately regarded as inadequate. I would suggest, therefore, that Delia’s predicament in “Sweat” is not an appropriate analogue to Janie’s predicament in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

7. Baker discusses Washington and Chesnut as representatives of the mastery of form strategy at length in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987). See also passages relating directly to his own father’s adoption of Washington’s teachings (xvi–xvii, 100–103). Though Baker does not discuss Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), it is a particularly good illustration of both mastery of form and deformation of mastery. In this postmodern slave narrative, protagonist Raven Quickskill’s escape from his master and subsequent guerilla tactics are contrasted with the covert resistance of Uncle Robin, who has mastered the stereotype of the good slave.

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