

“The Hierarchy Itself”: Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority

The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place. (Arendt 93)

There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town. It was not because of physical fear. He was no fist fighter. His bulk was not even imposing as men go. Neither was it because he was more literate than the rest. Something else made men give way before him. He had a bow-down command in his face, and every step he took made the thing more tangible. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 44)

As both Hannah Arendt and Zora Neale Hurston recognized, and indeed as most contemporary political scientists and literary critics would agree, authority figures are able to exercise power for reasons that are complex; authority is not a simple matter of physical or intellectual coercion. The social and psychological complexities of power, however, are difficult to articulate. Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one extended attempt to articulate these complexities. Even more importantly, *Their Eyes* offers a critique of more than one model of political authority. Though the novel shows Hurston to be sympathetic to the felt need for African American leadership (about which W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, felt strongly), and even to concede that improved material conditions for African Americans could be bought by adherence to strong leadership, Hurston indicates that the cost of traditional authority is too great. In subscribing to traditional Anglo-American authority patterns, African Americans risk replicating the very means of their oppression, Hurston perceived. *Their Eyes*, then, represents a troubled search for a “third way,” a method for breaking out from the accommodating and replicating patterns of, respectively, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks.¹

The many recent critics of *Their Eyes* have frequently read the novel as a celebration of Janie’s ability to free herself from the confinement represented by her first two husbands and, after the death of her third husband, Tea Cake Woods, to attain a new form of cultural power, the ability to shape her own story. Henry Louis Gates, for example, claims that Janie discovers her own narrative power when she rhetorically “kills her husband” Joe (192), and that Joe’s methods are supplanted by Janie’s development of a “communal narration”—one that is inclusive rather than exclusive of the voices within the listening community—which is also Hurston’s major innovation in this novel (200, 214). Others who

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have found in Janie a model of political self-assertion include Alice Walker, Susan Willis, Glynis Carr, Sally Ann Ferguson, Wendy J. McCredie, Jerome E. Thornton, and Robert Hemenway. On the other hand, some critics have found that Hurston illustrates with this novel Janie's highly *limited* potential for political assertion. Robert Stepto raised this issue at a session at the 1979 MLA convention (Washington, Foreword xi) and does so again in his book *From Behind the Veil*: "Hurston's curious insistence on having Janie's tale . . . told by an omniscient third person, rather than by a first-person narrator, implies that Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (166). Mary Helen Washington concurs in part, agreeing with Stepto that Janie is not empowered but contending that Hurston is intentionally illustrating "women's exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech" (" 'I Love' " 98).

Members of both camps—those who regard Janie, in the end, as empowered or defeated—have noticed that Hurston is critiquing the assumptions traditionally held by writers and readers about the uses of narrative prose. One member of the former camp is Sharon Davie. While conceding that Hurston necessarily speaks from "within" the culture she is critiquing, Davie admires Hurston's ability to "create for readers a glimpse of a 'force' excluded from ideologies or languages that assume a binary and hierarchical model of reality," even as this force is "excluded from [Hurston's] ideology and language" (447). For Davie, Hurston suggests this nearly indescribable force when she describes Janie's signifying rebuttal to Joe's abusive words, and when she uses physical experience (in the Tea Cake section especially) "as a reminder that human beings cannot know, much less control, everything with their rational minds" (456). Writing from the latter camp, Michael Awkward doubts that power arises from "an independent voice such as Janie's individual (first-person) nar-

ration" (45), but contends nonetheless that "Hurston's narrative strategies demonstrate not a failure of the novelist's art, but her stunning success in *denigrating* the genre of the novel" (17). Whether or not one feels that Janie is able to use self-expression to overcome her confinement as an African American woman, most critics agree that Janie's author manages to achieve, or at least suggest, liberating possibilities for narrative, and that she does this by exposing the limits of rigidly hierarchical expectations for narrative prose.

It cannot be emphasized enough, however, how difficult and uncertain a task Hurston recognizes the revision of her readers' narrative expectations to be. Davie notes the salient question: "How are moments that disrupt the expectation of a hierarchy of meanings—the expectation that one meaning will stand still on top—politically useful?" (456). How did Hurston reconcile her central argument about authority—that aspiring to be a "big voice," as Joe does, is oppressive to others and self-defeating—with her own aspiration to write a novel, and a politically-oriented one at that? Although I agree with the common critical perceptions that Hurston attempts to replace traditional authorship and its rigid, hierarchical language with alternative forms of narration and power, my discussion of *Their Eyes* will also attempt to articulate Hurston's sense of *loss* in her attempt to demolish the authority of a leader and author such as Joe. In sacrificing traditional notions of authorship, one gives something up in the hope of leading to something better—a strategy that, at best, is no guarantee of success. And the success Hurston realized in producing this book has come, for the most part, after many years and great personal sacrifice for the writer herself. For decades a nearly forgotten figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston died in obscurity, and the importance of her writing has been recognized only by means of a long and complicated process of recovery.

Despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on *Their Eyes*, surprisingly little close attention has been given to the character of Joe ("Jody") Starks, the mayor of the innovative all-black town of Eatonville, Florida.² Yet Joe, and what he represents in the book, is an important component of Hurston's political message and of her own self-conception as an author. For all his faults, Joe is not merely what Janie and Hurston define themselves against. He also represents a type of power that, Hurston suggests, must be sacrificed only with regret. Gates is—as far as I know—alone in pointing to Joe's major significance to Hurston's conceptions of narrative and authorship: He writes, "Joe is the text's figure of authority and voice, indeed the authority of voice. . . . Joe is the figure of the male author" (206).

Though Gates does not fully elaborate this reading of Joe Starks, the concept of authorship—and its companion term, authority—that Joe represents is worth exploring, especially since much of the recent attention to the novel has, appropriately, been to Hurston's restructuring of narrative technique and of the authority to define the self. Furthermore, Joe is very much like many of the other authority figures encountered in American political texts since Henry Adams's *Democracy*. Hurston, it appears, is slyly critiquing the figure of authority that some white and black novelists rather uncritically promote. Although there are intimations that Joe has had a difficult life filled with labor, his supreme confidence and seemingly natural political ability allow him relatively easy access to power: He becomes the unquestioned leader of Eatonville literally overnight. Joe states that "'in de very first beginnin' . . . Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice'" (43); by the time he appears in the novel, however, he is clearly *already* a big voice, dominating the town's discourse from the first moment he enters it. In these respects he is like many of the characters in politically oriented American fiction, including

Silas P. Ratcliffe of *Democracy* and a later invention, the similarly-named Willie Stark of *All the King's Men*.³ These are characters who, despite questionable methods, use their immense (and seemingly innate) political talents to break open stagnant political situations and get things done that help people. Joe, for example, within days of his arrival in Eatonville, purchases additional land for the town, organizes the clearing of roads, builds a store and post office so that residents will no longer have to travel long distances for provisions, and installs a street lamp (36-41). He is the sort of politician who makes civic prosperity and personal profit one and the same; as with Ratcliffe and Willie Stark, it quickly becomes difficult to separate the well-being of the town from the interests of Joe Starks.

In common with Du Bois, Henry Adams and Robert Penn Warren express anxiety about the leadership of such a politician, and the potential for corruption and abuse of power, but seem scarcely able to imagine an effective political landscape without such a leader. The choice they represent is between corruption and chaos; whereas corruption is lamentable, chaos is unthinkable. For her part, Hurston recognizes the positive aspects of Joe's authority, but indicates that what is gained in material prosperity is overwhelmed by what is lost in personal freedom when an individual amasses too much power. Joe's authority, she shows, replicates the authority by which whites have oppressed African Americans:

[Janie] slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit. It was especially noticeable after Joe had forced through a town ditch to drain the street in front of the store. They had murmured hotly about slavery being over, but every man filled his assignment. . . . Take for instance that new house of his. It had two stories with porches, with banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the "big house." (44)

Though most of Joe's visible faults lie in his domineering and abusive attitude toward Janie, it is clear from the outset that he compromises the ability of all of Eatonville's residents to achieve personal fulfillment, despite the prosperity that he offers.

Joe's enterprise—becoming mayor and building the town store—is justified by his belief that “ ‘everything is got tuh have uh center and uh heart tuh it’ ” (38). The store, in fact, is intended to be a location for dialogue, a place where the community can shape discursively the issues of the day: This is the role the store in Eatonville plays in numerous Hurston books, such as *Mules and Men* and the long-unpublished collaboration with Langston Hughes, *Mule Bone*, as well as in *Their Eyes*. In this sense, Joe's project of bringing a “center” to Eatonville is actually successful: The communal, dialogic narrative at the store replaces the scattered individual narratives that seemed, when Joe and Janie arrived, to go nowhere. Joe, however, makes the mistake of displacing himself from this community dialogue. He purposely sets himself and Janie apart from the other Eatonville residents by displaying material possessions, such as expensive cigars and a fancy chair. “What with him biting down on cigars and saving his breath on talk and swinging round in that chair, it weakened people” (44). Although the townspeople are undoubtedly more prosperous than they were before Joe came, his complete subscription to bourgeois, material values—represented by his purchase of expensive, decorative spittoons for himself and Janie—demoralizes them: “It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them” (45).

When we think we have “found” Zora is when her contribution will truly have been lost.

Joe's materialism is not isolated from his other flaws as a leader. The relationship Joe stipulates between himself and the other residents of Eatonville (and especially Janie), by means of his displays of wealth and by means of his speech, illustrates that the idea of Eatonville—designed as an

alternative to the oppression its residents faced in white-dominated society—is severely compromised by Joe's presence. As one resident, Sam Watson, states: “ ‘Some folks needs thrones and ruling-chairs and crowns tuh make they influence felt. He don't.

He's got uh throne in de seat of his pants’ ” (46). Joe unconsciously expects that, upon his ascent to power, his real work has been finished—when in fact it should just be beginning. As long as his displays of voice and prosperity include the town—as they still do when he displays the new street lamp in his store for a week before ceremoniously installing it (41-42)—he seems an effective, popular leader. In gradually withdrawing himself from the concerns of the town, however, Joe strives for an unattainable sort of timelessness—a semblance of immortality, the expectation that his reign will forever remain unchallenged—that is anathema to dialogue, which must always occur across time.

Hurston contrasts the stasis represented by his “gloaty, sparkly white” house (44) to the continuing dialogue of the town, of which Joe is no longer a part: “As time went on and the benefits he had conferred upon the town receded in time they sat on his store porch while he was busy inside and discussed him” (45). Again, the dialogue at the store offers the residents an opportunity to discuss current issues and come to some sort of consensus, as when they debate Joe's banishment of a man who has stolen from him (45-46). But Joe's continuing, domineering presence causes the town's political

reality to remain stagnant, cyclical rather than forward-moving: "The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about Joe's positions and possessions, but none had the temerity to challenge him. They bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down" (47).

As the narrator's remarks here suggest, the town is ripe for a revolt against Joe's reign. Importantly, it is Janie who initiates Joe's downfall. Although Janie's oppression by Joe is distinct from the other residents' because she is a woman and a wife (almost every other Eatonville resident depicted in the Joe Starks chapters is male), she also represents the community as an embodiment of their suffering and dissatisfaction. Despite the distance between Janie and the other community members—a distance imposed by both Joe and the other men of Eatonville—Janie in many ways speaks for the townspeople. As we will see, Hurston uses the oppression of Janie, as both an African American and a woman, as an emblem of the oppression of African Americans generally; however, the appropriate response to such oppression arises from narrative strategies that Hurston codes female. In other words, the men of Eatonville are able to help neither Janie nor themselves combat their mutual subjugation; Janie, in contrast, *does* arrive at positive methods for (narrative and political) leadership, even though these methods are not immediately valued by her community.

What Mary O'Connor has written of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* could equally be said of *Their Eyes*: It "could well be plotted by the heroine's growing awareness of the languages that surround her" (203). Even though Janie is forbidden by Joe to "indulge" in the talk occurring at the storefront, she clearly is fascinated by it (*Their Eyes* 50-51). Finally, she succumbs to the temptation to speak out after Joe frees Matt Bonner's long-suffering

mule. Her words are communal in that they continue the "mule talk" that has preoccupied the community for several days, but they also are an example of discursive leadership. They express a community sentiment in a way that the other individual community members apparently never thought of; Janie's words are an articulation of an idea that was already present in the community but that had formerly been shapeless. Janie says:

"Jody, dat wuz a mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak a king uh something."

As one listener, Hambo, says, "'Yo' wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts'" (55). For his part, Joe "beam[s]" at Janie's speech, which is an only partly ironic account of his leadership abilities and methods.

The seeds of Joe's destruction are sown by Janie's oration, however. As numerous critics point out, Joe's death from kidney failure immediately follows, and even seems prompted by, Janie's signifying rebuttal to Joe's insults. As Gates notes, "Janie Signifies upon Jody's manhood, thereby ending his dominance over her and over the community, and thereby killing Jody's will to live" (201). The forcefulness of Janie's words strikes Gates so strongly that he describes Joe's cause of death as "displaced 'kidney' failure," accentuating with quotation marks his suspicion that her words are the real cause (193). We must not, however, jump too quickly to the conclusion that Janie arrives at a position of power simply by deciding to assert her latent voice. By no means is Hurston suggesting that narrative power arrives easily, or without struggle. In the years between Janie's mule oration and her apparent-

ly deadly rebuttal to Joe, she strives fruitlessly to make the hierarchical marriage relationship work for her. She recognizes that both she and Joe are harmed by the distance Joe keeps between himself and the community, and by the distance he keeps between himself and her, making it impossible for them to be " 'natural wid one 'nother' " (43). She also seems to recognize that, without Joe, she is vulnerable to the whims of an uncaring and often dangerous world.

Janie struggles to save Joe, and save their marriage, by encouraging him to take part in the discourse of the community: " 'Everybody can't be lak you, Jody. Somebody is bound tuh want tuh laugh and play.' " In response, Joe makes clear that he believes that control and prosperity—which he regards as the outcomes of successful leadership—are incompatible with laughter and narrative "play":

"I god, Ah don't make out no such uh lie [that I don't like to laugh and play]! But it's uh time fuh all things. But it's awful tuh see so many people don't want nothin' but uh full belly and uh place to lay down and sleep afterwards. It makes me sad sometimes and then agin it makes me mad. They say things sometimes that tickles me nearly tuh death, but Ah won't laugh jus' tuh dis-incourage 'em."

Janie disagrees, but as usual Joe cuts her off, making clear that he will not hear her dissent. Hurston writes, "Janie took the easy way away from such a fuss. She didn't change her mind but she agreed with her mouth" (59).

Although Janie's dissenting voice, if heard rather than withheld, might help draw Joe back into his community and his marriage, Joe cuts himself and his wife off from the other residents' discourse. When, inevitably, Janie speaks out publicly a second time, once again Joe perceives a threat in Janie's voice and attempts to cut her off: " 'You getting' too moufy, Janie. . . . Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers. Sam Watson, you'se mah fish' " (71).

Finally comes the watershed moment. In response to Joe's constant,

cutting remarks about Janie's aging, Janie says: " 'You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life.' " Explains the narrator,

Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul's daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them. (75)

Although, in doing to Joe rhetorically what he has done to her for years, Janie creates for herself an eventual path to escape, at first she regards Joe's devastation and death not with relief, but with regret. In the aftermath of Janie's remarks, "anybody that didn't know would have thought that things had blown over, it looked so quiet and peaceful around. But the stillness was the sleep of swords. So new thoughts had to be thought and new words said. She didn't want to live like that" (77). The vagueness of the narrative strategies now available to Janie—"new thoughts had to be thought and new words said"—suggests once again that her position is one of uncertainty. In rhetorically defeating Joe, Janie has by no means arrived at a safe or protected position; nor has she discovered a clear path to narrative power.

Despite his undeniably oppressive presence during their years of marriage, Janie finally experiences strong feelings of pity when Joe dies:

"Dis sittin' in de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody," she muttered out loud. She was full of pity for the first time in years. Jody had been hard on her and others, but life had mishandled him too. Poor Joe! Maybe if she had known some other way to try, she might have made his face different. But what that

other way could be, she had no idea.
(83)

Joe's death scene is a powerful early evocation of the "death of the author" in the twentieth century.

Metaphorically, Hurston suggests that, while the loss of the "big voice" associated with the Western, white male author is regrettable in some ways, nonetheless it must be demolished in the name of a new type of narrative, despite the fact that such an "other way" is difficult to describe or achieve. Like Joe, the "author" sanctioned by modernist aesthetics is too intent on achieving some timeless form of control to heed the call for responsiveness to dialogue. Authorship, for Hurston, is a type of authority, a method for preserving the cultural power of those who have been privileged since time immemorial, and she expresses doubt that the traditional mode of authorship offers the potential of liberation for African Americans or for women; indeed, she doubts that it is even capable of sustaining *itself* indefinitely. Instead, she enacts with her book (as numerous critics—including Davie, Gates, and Awkward—also describe) an experimental form of narrative that attempts to break down readers' expectations and assumptions about reading fiction. Naturally, the experiments of the book have been difficult for many readers to take, which accounts for the initial hostility and long-term neglect the novel encountered. But Hurston offers faith that, even if the readership of her novel will not be prepared right away for its narrative implications, eventually the new possibilities that have been implanted in the text may be recovered.

In the often explicated opening lines of *Their Eyes*, Hurston's narrator says:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (1)

In the first paragraph quoted here, Hurston conflates the creativity, or "dreaming," of males and the power of God to watch over the world, suggested by the capital letter used to describe the frustrated male "Watcher." Even when the man is incapable of enacting his dreams, his positioning as the "Watcher" gives him a type of power: By making himself a God, with the power to shape his experiences imaginatively, the man compensates for his inability to shape the physical and material worlds. This, in short, is the power of the author: Rather than changing the physical world, one shapes the imaginative one, the structures by means of which experiences are interpreted. Yet women, the novel's opening suggests, are not bestowed this option. For them, neither material nor interpretive realities are easily overcome: While they, too, are capable of dreaming (of creativity), it seems incapable, in their case, of shaping reality. Nonetheless, Hurston suggests, women also make narratives with the intent of shaping their immediate environment, even if this means only selectively "forgetting" certain experiences, a sort of coping ritual. The methods available to women for changing political (less immediate) realities are much harder to articulate; Hurston's narrator must rely on the vague claim that women "act and do things accordingly." Du Bois, in his own political novel, *Dark Princess*, insists that art must move beyond the task of reflection and must produce *action*, but here Hurston shows that to *act* politically is more problematic than it may initially appear.

In her portrayal of Janie's first two marriages, Hurston reenacts the much-discussed struggle over the direction of African American leadership between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois.

Logan Killicks, who attains modest financial success and respectability as a farmer, models the path advocated by Washington: gradual progress that would neither threaten whites nor complicate the capitalist infrastructure they had built. Although Hurston satirized the view of "the better-thinking Negro" that Washington "was absolutely vile for advocating industrial education" (*Dust Tracks* 189), and similarly criticizes Mrs. Turner's disavowal of Washington in *Their Eyes*—allowing Janie to voice the response that "'Ah was raised on de notion dat he wuz uh great big man'" (136)—she also seems to suggest that the appeal of Washington's approach is mainly felt by the dying generation of Janie's grandmother, Nanny. Just as Nanny contends that Janie's happiness must remain subordinate to "protection" through marriage to the unattractive Killicks (14), many believed that Washington's gradualist approach called on blacks to sacrifice the struggle for liberty in the interest of modest prosperity.

One such critic was Du Bois, whose critique of Washington seems to be echoed in Joe's initial appeal to Janie: "'You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid a holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither'" (28). Just as Joe implies the possibility of a freer, better life that—we learn before long—he cannot deliver, so Hurston seems to be suggesting that Du Bois's less compromising, more assertive attitude is not capable, as it claims to be, of leading blacks to positions of real leadership. Joe fails Janie and Eatonville because he subscribes too readily to white, bourgeois values and tastes, and because his style of leadership replicates the domination of the few over the many—criticisms that have been leveled against Du Bois and his "Talented Tenth" as well. In Hurston's implied analysis, neither the accommodationist model propounded by

Washington nor the more assertive, Modernist elitism of Du Bois offers an appealing approach for African Americans.

In short, by the time of her third marriage, Janie is in desperate need of a "third way." Certainly, this undefined new "way" does not necessarily mean a marriage. Consistently, Janie makes clear that she is willing to risk uncertainty in resisting confinement. In leaving her first marriage, Janie reasons that, even if Joe has lied to her, any possible future is preferable to her past with Logan: "A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. . . . Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good" (31). When Janie contemplates a relationship with Tea Cake, she knows full well that the safe, "rational" choice would be to steer clear of him (96, 100-01). Janie's endurance of Joe for twenty years and her marriage to Tea Cake reflect her faith that self-knowledge and "voice" are compatible with marriage, but not dependent upon it. In every marriage relationship depicted in the novel, Hurston shows that, while it is unclear whether a culturally disempowered woman like Janie can create a successful life for herself alone, the presence of men is not itself the antidote to the vulnerability of women. No man can keep Janie safe—men can protect neither her body nor her voice—and therefore, *if* a successful narrative is to be achieved by Janie, it will be a result of her own decisions and actions, whether or not she makes these in the company of a man.

Numerous critics have questioned the common assumption that Tea Cake is an emblem of Janie's liberation. Michael Awkward, for example, contends that Tea Cake is a barrier to Janie's fulfillment: "Janie . . . is [with Tea Cake] a submissive woman, suppressing her will to fit the needs of an exceedingly charming, but nonetheless frequently domineering, husband" (37). Deborah G. Plant takes the argument further, agreeing that "the freedom Janie gains is circumscribed by Tea Cake's desire to dominate her"

(168), and using his presence in the book to support her argument that Hurston "idealiz[ed] male authority" (172). I would agree with such critics that the text can hardly be used to support any claim that Tea Cake rescues Janie. She cannot depend on Tea Cake's protection. Notably, Tea Cake does not approach Janie until she is alone—the rest of the town has gone to a ball game (90-91)—when his courtship will be safe from approbation. Just as the men of Eatonville uncomfortably witness Joe's abuse of Janie but are unable to do anything about it (74), so Tea Cake is unable to protect Janie from the narrow attitudes of conventional society, and responds to Eatonville's hostility toward their relationship by asking Janie to move to Jacksonville (105-11). Furthermore, as Maria J. Racine points out, Tea Cake's act of violence toward Janie demonstrates his own "inability to articulate—or lack of a voice" (289). That Janie stays with him despite the sexism and the violence he exhibits toward her suggests that she makes a conscious decision, in the absence of compelling economic or safety reasons, to remain—even though, from a contemporary standpoint, many of us might question her decision. Both in her marriage to Tea Cake and in her apparently isolated position back in Eatonville after his death, Janie embraces risk rather than approval and protection.

Tea Cake does, however, offer important consolation and support to Janie. As Maria Tai Wolff contends, Tea Cake helps Janie recognize qualities that are already present in herself: "Rather than telling her who or what she is, he directs her only to recognize it for herself. . . . He becomes a mirror for her, but one which refers her back to her own experience" (223). In taking on this role, Wolff suggests, Tea Cake offers to Janie the possibility of being understood on terms that are personal and immediate rather than sterile and imposed from outside: "From her grandmother, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks, Janie receives a ready-made text, a definition of her role. She is

expected to conform to it. From Tea Cake, on the other hand, she receives an invitation to live a text, to formulate a role" (224). By opening up new interpretive possibilities—allowing Janie to break out of the "texts" that have been imposed on her—Hurston calls on the reader of *Their Eyes* to become involved in the making of her story, Wolff states: "The reader's own experiences and dreams will lead him or her to interpret the text in an individual way, to transform it into a personal image" (228).⁴

Tea Cake, in short, is Janie's best "reader" in the book—even though he is also, at times, a self-centered and neglectful one—and thus he is a figure of the reader Hurston *hopes* to encounter outside of the book. However, Hurston makes clear that she does not require the approval of readers. Or, rather, the success of her (and Janie's) narrative *does* depend to an extent on having good readers, but even if these implied readers are not available—if those who encounter this text are not yet prepared for it—the writing of the text is important for other reasons as well. For Hurston, language is not simply a method for communication; the process of articulating experience in words is a way of shaping, of making sense of, the self—and the audience to which this articulation is directed may be real and physically present, or it may be an implied audience—an ideal, imagined listener who is responsive to the varied dialogues that make up the self. As Racine points out, Janie's attainment of a "voice" before the white jury that tries her after she kills Tea Cake is "insignificant" in her project to discover herself, which is one reason that here we do not have access to Janie's words (291). The jurors are attentive listeners, but the "truth" they are listening for is purely exterior—they evaluate the extent to which Janie's actions do or do not fit the legal definition of murder—and there is no evidence that they come to a fuller understanding of Janie's individuality

or, on the other hand, the larger issue of racial oppression (and their own complicity in it).⁵ Janie must re-narrate her story to her sympathetic friend Pheoby—which appears to be, approximately, the story Hurston's narrator relates to the book's readers. Even in this case—as I will explain momentarily—Janie's dialogic narration of her story and her "self" is only relatively successful; we have not yet located a narrative ideal.

The purpose of dialogue, as Hurston illustrates in this book, is not simply to achieve the elusive (perhaps unattainable) goal of self-understanding. Since authoritative (or monologic) discourse—that which allows Janie's oppression—is characterized by *stasis*, by its textual stability, then dialogic discourse must work to break down the language of the empowered. The voice articulated by Janie—and that of Hurston, which (as Gates notes) is often indistinguishable from Janie's (196)—is disruptive in that it cannot be rendered useful to the community, unless the community changes its own attitudes and practices. The would-be listeners to Janie's tale after her return to Eatonville, Janie knows, will be affronted by her story unless they can learn " 'dat love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch' " (182). Similarly, *Their Eyes* itself is an affront to its modernist readers, who struggle with its perceived shapelessness and confusing message. Evidence of the disruption offered by *Their Eyes* can be seen in its varied readings and misreadings; even sympathetic readers of Hurston almost invariably are troubled by some aspect of her narrative that sticks out funny, that their interpretation cannot cleanly account for. As Alice Walker writes, Hurston "was quite capable of saying, writing, or doing things *different* from what one might have wished"—which itself is part of her appeal ("On

Refusing" 1). *Their Eyes* is, despite its readability, a truly *surprising* text, one that continually subverts any expectations a reader might put upon it; and this, I suggest, is integral to the point Hurston is making about language: It must change us, rather than allowing us easily to push it into a pre-constructed box.

I do not wish to suggest that *Their Eyes* is uninterpretable, but only that any interpretation must be seen as something other than the final one. Hurston designed *Their Eyes* to accentuate the degree to which, upon each new reading of the novel, its meaning changes. Pheoby, the listener of Janie's story, represents one response Hurston hoped to elicit among her readership; as the implied audience of the narration of most of the novel, she stands for *us* as we read the book. After Janie's tale is complete, Pheoby says, " 'Lawd! . . . Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo' " (182-83). If Tea Cake is Janie's "best" reader, then Pheoby is her second-best. Although (in contrast to Tea Cake) Pheoby seems capable of contributing only slightly to her friend's psychic survival, there is some compensation in the fact that *Pheoby* benefits from hearing Janie's tale, even if Janie does not otherwise benefit from the telling of it. An ideal narrative, in short, would be one that nurtures both the teller and the listener. Hurston indicates that such an ideal, in the absence of extraordinarily sympathetic and responsive "readers" like Tea Cake, is nearly impossible. Nonetheless, narrative is crucial because, given enough time and enough readings, it can change the world, one reader—one connection—at a time.

Although the achievement of a "connection" between writer and reader does not immediately appear revolutionary—it is, after all, an effect commonly experienced by readers of the most traditional and canonical texts—Hurston insists on offering potential connections that are capable of chang-

ing the reader politically. *Their Eyes* valorizes neither the coherent, authorial self nor the identity imposed by community, even though Hurston values both self and community. *Their Eyes* is an expression of "feminist dialogics" (as Dale M. Bauer describes the concept) because, despite the value of self and community, Hurston is willing to sacrifice the possibility of attaining a coherent version of either, recognizing that, in a patriarchy, the coherence of one necessarily means the sacrifice of the other. A dialogic feminism, Bauer writes, "warns against a critical shortsightedness women have in patriarchal culture: the myth of a unified subject under patriarchy. And, . . . it also cautions against the perils of insertion into a community which might drown out one's voice the moment one agrees to enter into it" (x). Hurston hopes to provide, in her novel, an account of a "self" and a potential community that will sustain readers and provoke them to act against oppression, but she does not attempt simply to replace one "unified subject under patriarchy" with another—to do so would be to replicate the very means of oppression, which is Joe's fatal error. Instead, she offers, in representing Janie, segments of a self that is fragmented, that may be recovered by readers over time; and this process of recovery offers, itself, the potential of forming a new community.

In exposing the oncoming "death of the author," and in writing a text that does not subscribe to the expectations of a critical, anti-racist elite (such as Richard Wright, who castigated the book), Hurston risks sacrificing critical and material "success" in the hope of creating a voice that will continue to echo long after her death, even though she recognized that the echoing might not be audible in time to save the author herself from obscurity and impoverishment. She does this for the same reasons that Janie embraces risk throughout the novel: No matter how much Janie tries to save Joe, the authority figure, and protect herself, and no matter how capable she may be of

speaking to the genuine needs of her immediate, disempowered community, there simply is no way to alter the contexts of her reception except—possibly—across time. Janie, in other words, takes risks because, as an African American woman, she has to. Writes DuPlessis, "Janie is in incessant dialogue with the meanings of 'colored,' of which she is not in control. To construct Janie's dialogue, Hurston has treated many of these social determinants (such as class, sexuality, and gender role) as if they were matters of choice and risk for her character, not fixed and immobilized" (96). It would be inadequate, given Hurston's awareness of oppression, to read *Their Eyes* as claiming that an African American woman can produce personal freedom simply by demanding it. It would be equally inadequate, however, to read Hurston or her character, Janie, as utterly confined by the demands of traditional discourse, since creatively to break out of such confinement is very much part of Hurston's intent.

Necessarily, "breaking out" is a process in which not only the author, but also her readers, participate; this is visibly true to an unusual extent in Hurston's case. *Their Eyes* and Hurston's other books fell into obscurity for a variety of reasons, but especially due to two factors—Hurston's refusal to advocate similar views to those of the Civil Rights "elite," and the general apathy and insensitivity of white critics toward African American fiction for much of this century. Hurston's work has been returned to us largely due to the concerted efforts of three critics: Mary Helen Washington, who has written and spoken extensively about Hurston, in both traditional academic settings and popular ones such as the magazine *Black World*, since the early 1970s; Alice Walker, who discovered Hurston for herself and shared this discovery in a 1975 *Ms.* article and elsewhere; and Robert Hemenway, whose well-received biography of Hurston helped launch her books back into print. The

title of Walker's *Ms.* article, "Looking for Zora," is appropriate to the ongoing project Hurston set out for her readers: When we think we have "found" Zora is when her contribution will truly have been lost.

Hazel Carby, in a strong critique of the contemporary Zora Neale Hurston "industry," suggests that this unfortunate moment may already have arrived:

Clearly, a womanist- and feminist-inspired desire to recover the neglected cultural presence of Zora Neale Hurston initiated an interest in her work, but it is also clear that this original motivation has become transformed. Hurston is not only a secured presence in the academy; she is a veritable industry, and an industry that is very profitable.

Questions Carby, "How is she being reread, now, to produce cultural meanings that this society wants or needs to hear?" (72). She concludes that many of Hurston's recent critics share with her a desire to describe, and make use of, "black cultural authenticity" while avoiding implication in actual, material issues affecting the romanticized "folk" (89). Hurston wrote Janie, and we read her, to exhibit interest in the social problems alluded to in *Their Eyes* without actually having to do anything about them, in Carby's view. Although I can only partly agree with Carby's conclusions, I think the point she raises is worth contemplating: One of the disadvantages of writing a dialogic novel is, clearly, that an extended, communal response *across time* may not be enough. If we do not become more

fully connected than a loose assemblage of monadic readers is likely to become, then the political effect of Hurston's writing will be highly restricted, if it exists at all.

Hurston sacrifices the authority to *direct* her readers, clearly and efficiently, to any specific conclusion. She does so knowingly, I believe, recognizing that to assert the power to direct us would be to perpetuate a myth, one that is harmful to her and to others. As Barbara Johnson asserts, Hurston writes "out of a knowledge of the standards of male dominance that pervade both the black and white worlds" (169). Janie becomes detached from the black community from which she comes, and which she appears to understand with a near-artistic sensitivity, not by her own choice: Not only Joe, but the other men and women of Eatonville (as their presence at Janie's trial shows) resist any understanding of Janie. Similarly, Hurston moved "away from the community that produced her[, while attempting] to reproduce" it textually (Carby 85), not out of a desire to redirect "black cultural authenticity" toward selfish ends but because that was virtually the only option available to her. Like any text, *Their Eyes* depends upon its readership in order to achieve its narrative ends. To an unusual degree, however, that dependence is foregrounded by the author of this novel. And Hurston's prescience of her readership's inevitable shortcomings—shortcomings that Carby ultimately enumerates—accounts for the tone of regret and of sacrifice that complicates the joy of the book.

Notes

1. Similarly, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes Hurston's attempt to find a "third term"—between "a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical, privileged black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other hand" (174).

2. Eatonville was a real town where Hurston grew up; the character of Joe Starks is clearly based, at least in part, on the historical Joe Clarke, the leader of the new town before Hurston was born. See Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* 5-6.

3. One can only speculate as to whether Robert Penn Warren might have been familiar with Hurston's book and have been influenced by Hurston in naming his own Willie Stark.

4. Wolff insists that "Janie's search for identity is not a temporal, progressive process" (220), which I find a strange conclusion within a sensitive and enlightening reader-response approach. In my view,

part of Hurston's point is that the meaning of the book is temporal, does emerge across time: In opposition to the Modernist aesthetic of timeless, unified meaning, Hurston proposes (for example, in the book's opening two paragraphs) that the development of an identity is ongoing, a form of dialogue in which the interior self and outside communities—including both the community populating the book and the community of readers—mutually participate.

5. Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that, in acquitting Janie, the jurors "are right for possibly the wrong reasons. Being fascinated by the 'whiteness' of this black woman, and by her 'romance,' but also wanting to put black men in their place, they judge her not guilty" (105).

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