Our Eyes Were Watching Janie: Janie as a Prophetic Woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neal Hurston defines Negro expression as a highly imagistic and metaphorical artform: "His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile" (Citation "Characteristics of Negro Expression" 1934). In T*heir Eyes Were Watching God (Eyes)*, Hurston relies on this mode of expression to construct a feminist narrative that celebrates female self-actualization. Although Hurston's critics argue that her fiction is too idealistic and not explicitly political, Hurston's carefully crafted metaphors are both beautiful and politically charged; this duality speaks to the complex issues of race and gender explored in Eyes. Hurston uses Eyes' female protagonist, Janie Crawford, to create a platform for black female visibility while also critiquing patriarchal structures. Janie's journey may seem like an idealized and pastoral representation of black womanhood, but in actuality, Hurston infuses the narrative with satirical images and actions that subvert expectations and celebrate the independent black woman. Specifically, the motif of water creates both tension and harmony within Janie's life, and the parallels between different instances of water imagery are only fully realized at the end of Janie's journey when she is without a man. Using natural and religious imagery, Hurston critiques gender and race issues and implies that Janie is a type of prophet who can disconnect herself from the patriarchy and control her narrative.

Hurston expresses her vision for black womanhood by beginning *Eyes* at the end of Janie's journey and ending with the possibility of new life; she places the story on a threshold and implies that Janie, who is "full of that oldest human longing—self-revelation," has found a new beginning (7). The story reads as cyclical, for Hurston pushes the ending into a new beginning and calls the readers to follow in Janie's footsteps and to "pull in her [their] horizon

like a great fish-net" (193). In addition to starting and ending the novel in the same physical space, Hurston threads symbolic water imagery throughout the narrative and uses this motif to mark the passage of time. *Eyes* starts with Janie on the porch, washing her feet, but once the reader learns about the hurricane, the washing gains new significance; therefore, Hurston uses water to connect Janie's past and present experiences. The repeated water imagery immediately connotes movement, change, and new life, but many critics fail to recognize that "pastoral has a political edge to it, much like satire" (Grant and Ruzich 18). Within *Eyes*, the two instances where Janie explicitly interacts with water demonstrate how Janie has grown: when she washes her feet after returning to Eatonville, Florida, and when she and Tea Cake escape the hurricane.

Firstly, Hurston evokes religious imagery with the spiritual act of feet washing, thus characterizing Janie as a prophet-like figure. In portraying Janie as a prophetic woman clad in overalls with dirty feet, Hurston reimagines the prophet as a black woman, thus breaking religious and social expectations. When Janie sits on the porch to retell her story to her old friend, Pheoby, she tells Pheoby that she is "'tryin' to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outa mah feet'" (4). As she "rubbed vigorously" to cleanse her feet, she recounts her journey to Pheoby and preaches about what she has learned. Janie scrubs away the pain of the past—from a loveless marriage with Logan Killicks to Joe Starks' oppressiveness, to the tragedy of Tea Cake's death—and performs a sort of self-ordained baptism. Here, water connotes new life and spiritual cleansing, and it is important to note that Janie enacts this cleansing herself. While Janie's physical journey is rather straightforward and, according to critics A.J. Grant and Connie Ruzich, her progression through different marriages is often equated to being "like the Israelites leaving Egypt for the promised land, Janie leaves first Logan Killick then Joe Starks and finally enters the promised land with Tea Cake," *Eyes* is more than a journey of self-actualization (18). In

equating Janie's travel to the Israelite's pilgrimage, Grant and Ruzich fail to recognize how Hurston does not create a promised land within Tea Cake and Janie's relationship, rather, Janie's revelatory happiness comes when she is alone and returns to Eatonville, Florida. While Janie's three marriages are necessary for her growth, Hurston specifically ends the novel in this way: Janie, alone, on the porch, washing her feet and retelling her story, and preaching to Pheoby in the hopes that other black women follow in her footsteps.

When Janie washes her feet, Hurston implies that her body and mind are prepared and strong enough to undergo another transformation, one that is devoid of a man. By returning to Eatonville, she experiences a re-birth and can start a new life despite being alone when she returns to Eatonville. Whereas the hurricane represents an uncontrollable force of nature or God, Janie ironically washes her feet in the same universal water that caused destruction and sorrow, as if to prove to God and the community that she has a hand in her future. Hurston subverts the hurricane through the simple act of washing her feet to show how Janie holds power and agency over her past, present, and future. Not only did Janie survive the hurricane, but she is thriving; Janie controls her narrative, evident in Hurston's use of free indirect discourse, and acts as a model for other black women. In her essay, "'The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking:' Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Deborah Clarke writes about participatory feminism in which Hurston "provides a model for reconciling voice and vision, for transforming black bodies from museum pieces or ethnographic objects into embodied voices… a move away from passive sensationalism to active participation (611). To Clarke's point, Hurston actively utilizes natural imagery; she engages with and subverts pastoral tradition and motifs to express political and social commentary. Her vivid imagery is not ornamental or sentimental, rather it speaks to Janie's development and engages with deeper social issues.

Whereas the symbolism behind Janie's foot-washing applies to her journey, the hurricane transforms the water motif into a collective symbol for social and political change. The hurricane more explicitly addresses race tensions in America and provides the reader with Hurston's vision for social equality along with her critiques of how to achieve said equality. The hurricane explicitly recalls religious imagery, for the "dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, surrounded by wild animals and snakes" alludes to Eden and the Fall, but more importantly, it alludes to a false sense of utopia and harmony that Hurston critiques throughout the novel (164). Hurston surrounds the dead man with Edenic imagery: "common danger made common friends. Nothing sought conquest over the other" (164). Using the dead man, Hurston paints a picture of equality, safety, and a utopia in which man lies peacefully and passively with death and animals. However, this Edenic imagery is explicitly tied to death, for the man lies peacefully in death while life and the storm rage on. Furthermore, Hurston portrays an unattainable utopia in this scene and subverts Tea Cake and Janie's perceived utopia: the Everglades. Grant and Ruzich consider the Everglades as a type of representative golden age, similar to Harlem, New York, and they note that Hurston "calls attention to the imperfections and corruptions of the present time, a time, it seems, she bitterly rejected" (18). Hurston saturates the golden age, the Everglades, with the hurricane's waters, and with the flood comes the realities of racial inequalities and injustice, for even in death, the bodies are discriminated against based on their race: the white bodies receive a casket while the black bodies lie in a mass grave. While the hurricane ultimately propels the narrative forwards and is a catalyst for Tea Cake's death, Hurston uses the universal waters as a visual representation of the chaotic and overwhelming race issue in America.

Like the dead man sitting in a hammock, Janie, Tea Cake, and the townspeople remain powerless against the hurricane, and the water's rapid movement contrasts with the stillness of

the people "watching God" (160). In addition to using the hurricane as a form of social commentary, Hurston creates moments of reflection, or gazing, within this scene. The hurricane scene directly recalls the novel's title, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and it brings forth the dichotomy of watching versus acting. Hurston creates moments of stillness where Janie and Tea Cake are dumbstruck by the immensity of the hurricane's power, but more importantly, she explains the possible danger hidden within Janie and Tea Cake's idyllic relationship and blind faith in God. During the hurricane, "the time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning *God*" (159). At this moment, the novel's title takes on a whole new, and slightly ironic meaning: that without the white people to dictate their lives, black people leave their futures up to God. This passivity, or reliance on religion and fate, is Hurston's way of critiquing black communities, or black writers, that do not actively engage in social commentary. Although some critics see this passivity within Hurston's writing, arguing that her images and diction are not achieving racial uplift, Hurston turns this critique on its head by satirizing black passivity in the flood. As opposed to watching God, Hurston guides the reader to watch Janie, and in doing so, she creates a space for black female visibility and allows Janie to control the narrative.

In the essay "Zora Neale Hurston and the Survival of the Female," author Mary Jane Lupton interprets the storm in biblical terms: "Janie, the New Noah, rises from the flood on the tail of a cow, a makeshift ark but adequate transport to land and survival. Tea Cake knifes the rabid dog but is infected in the process. In this flood only the woman and the cow live on" (52). Lupton's essay focuses on Janie's survival and argues that Hurston's Eyes is a novel about female survival, but it would be more accurate to say that Hurston is concerned with black women thriving, not just surviving. As opposed to the passivity present in the flood—the floating

bodies, Motor Boat's sleeping state, and the townspeople watching God—Janie participates in life and actively shapes her future. The flood ultimately detaches her from Tea Cake, both physically when she gets lost in the water and mentally when Tea Cake gets bitten by the rabid dog. This detachment allows her to fully realize herself, gives her the strength to kill Tea Cake, and allows her to confidently return to Eatonville.

During the hurricane, the townspeople's gaze was focused on God, but when the narrative returns to Eatonville, the women of Eatonville train their gaze onto Janie, thus transforming her into a prophetic woman that has returned home. Themes of judgment, observation, and the public gaze are interwoven throughout the frame narrative, but Hurston greatly contrasts the public gaze present in the hurricane scene with the gaze that Janie is subjected to when she returns to Eatonville. On the porch, "Janie stirred her strong feet in the pan of water," and once again Hurston brings up the water motif to illustrate how Janie is washing herself of the past and looking forward to the future (191). Her feet are tired, yet strong, and Hurston wants the reader, and society as a whole, to recognize Janie's powerful story as a testament to the strength of black womanhood. In having Janie verbally tell her story to Pheoby, Hurston encourages other stories to be told and passed down by other, strong black women; she sets up a cycle of storytelling for future generations. Janie's active voice juxtaposes both the passivity present in the hurricane scene and the Eatonville ladies' passive judgment. Janie says to Pheoby that "'all dem sitters-and-talkers goin tuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out whut we been talkin' 'bout,'" and Hurston contrasts the ladies' idle talk and hypothetical judgments with Janie's real-life experiences to critique actionless talk (191). Janie has the experience to back up her story, and she encourages Pheoby that "'you got tuh *go* there tug *know* there,'" thus emphasizing the importance of action and experience. Clarke writes that Janie "manages to

present a material self that can withstand the power of the gaze, transforming it into a source of strength," as evident in Janie's strengthened feet and self-actualized preaching (600). Hurston uses Janie to demonstrate how every black woman has the tools to experience self-actualization and happiness, but that one must be brave enough to walk through a hurricane and return with weathered feet.

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