

American modernism

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Has modernism any relevance to the South of the world? Black people have always united together in order to create and maintain positive definitions of Blacks. The most important and common form of this racial union has been Afro-American folkculture: the musical, oral, and visual artistic expressions of Black identity that have been handed down from generation to generation. The Harlem Renaissance, whose spirit Hurston's work reflects, was a manifestation of this bonding, although it had many false revolutionaries and failed in some respects to realize its radical potential.

The modernist black writers who arose in the first three decades of the twentieth century introduced a new stereotype into American literature. Zora Neale Hurston wrote as a Black woman about her own experiences and therefore, in some way, spoke to the general Black female experience in America. Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) offers an excellent source for demonstrating the modern Black female literary tradition. A large and chief part of Hurston's career took place during the Harlem Renaissance, which began in the twenties while she was attending Howard.

Hurston's best work, especially her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is the product of a Black female folk aesthetic and cultural sensibility that emerged from the best revolutionary ideals of the period. It also anticipates the comparable renaissance in black women's literature. Despite, or perhaps because of, these achievements, Hurston, like many Black women writers, has suffered "intellectual lynching" at the hands of white and Black men and white women (Brigham 23).

Their Eyes Were Watching God appeared at the tail end of what is termed in American literature as the American Modernism. Roughly between 1917 - the end of World War I - and the 1930 stock market crash that marked the beginning of the Great Depression, throngs of southern African Americans migrated north - a migration that technically began as early as 1910 - primarily to the northeast for economic and social reasons, escaping more overt and often violent manifestations of tensed black-white race relations.

A time when "the Negro was in vogue," this was a time of cultural celebration of blackness - black visual arts, black music, black intellectual thought, black performing arts, and black identity (Hemenway 34). Leading voices of the Harlem Renaissance challenged black authors and artists to define African American life beyond the prescribed boundaries of stereotype and caricature, sentimentality, and social assimilation. Arguably a movement among intellectuals, the Harlem Renaissance proved spiritually and aesthetically liberating for African Americans and established global connections with an African past.

Hurston's accent on rural common folk of the south both challenged and continued some of the essential tenants of the Harlem Renaissance: national and global community, self-determination, and race pride. The most concentrated place of this cultural explosion was Harlem (New York). Published in 1937, Hurston most famous novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, was not immediately famous. In fact, the novel was largely mistreated and greatly criticized by her black male contemporaries, because it allegedly presents blacks in stereotypical ways that white readers enjoyed and encouraged of black writers.

This criticism was particularly harsh from those who thought that Hurston should be writing more overtly protest pieces about whites as blacks' enemies. While Hurston does not center around white people in the novel, their Jim Crow presence is apparent from the opening through the closing pages. The novel was not printed some thirty years after its initial publication. In 1971, it was reprinted but again was not printed by 1975. In 1977, Hurston's novel was on the top of reading lists among American colleges and universities and continues that even today (Kenner 234).

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Janie, a black woman of mulatto ancestry, in search of spiritual liberation from patriarchal control. The format of the book is Janie's telling of her own story in her own voice as she remembers the details of her own life. As the narrator, Janie has an authority that even the readers cannot challenge when they want details, particularly technical details, that Janie does not remember or choose to share.

While Janie's story is on many levels gender and racially related -readers never forget that Janie's grandmother was a slave or that the characters are living during Jim Crow segregation in the period of the 1930s and 1940s - much of Janie's social relations within the community of black people is gender specific. Her plot is mainly based on others' opinions of how a woman should live, what a woman and especially a woman her age should and should not be doing. Moreover, Janie in the narration is one of a person who is able to self-define and to transcend restricted boundaries ultimately through communal storytelling rituals (Lemke 90).

One of the new ways in which Hurston demonstrated alternative ways of writing is that she often collapsed the boundaries between fact and fiction. The cultural and contextual situatedness of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reflect a Black woman's interpretation of social reality in the sense in which the 'real world' is constituted, in terms of personal and cultural experience, is likely to be at variance with the interpretation of these notions by Euro-American males.

Central to appreciating Zora Neale Hurston's genius, versatility, and identity politics is knowing the ways in which she frequently stepped over disciplinary boundaries in her practice of anthropology, intermixing social science with the humanities so many years in advance of what we now call postmodernist practices within anthropology. Hurston's lifelong concern with the self and its limitations (those imposed from without and from within) is, of course, the natural, perhaps even the proper subject of an autobiography. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the narrator observes that "Pheoby [is] eager to feel and do through Janie ... and Janie [is] full of that oldest human longing -self-revelation" (18). Pondrom claims that the "adoption of myth as a principle of meaning and order is Hurston's most important link to modernism" (1986: 201). For Pondrom, Hurston's utilization of myth links her to the modernist writers approaches of Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Pound, and Crane. Pondrom writes that Hurston's "'mythic method' links her even more powerfully to the great female modernists, who found myth a means to affirmation of the self rather than simply a stay against disorder."

For Pondrom, Hurston takes a place among H. D. , Stein, and Wolff "in a current now [mid-1980s] being recognized as fundamental to the modernist

movement" (202). Pondrom discusses overlaps between Their Eyes and Babylonian, Greek, and Egyptian mythologies. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she writes how everyone is drawn "on stage" in the cross-gender verbal jousting: "The girls and everybody else help laugh. They know it's not courtship. It's acting-out courtship and everybody is in the play.

The three girls hold the center of the stage till Daisy Blunt came walking down the street in the moonlight. "Showing the proximity of immersion and recuperation images in Hurston's diasporic underground, the African rhythm infuses the dramatic scene: "Daisy is walking a drum tune. You can almost hear it by looking at the way she walks" (1995: 229). Janie's experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* take place in relation to Hurston's deepening appreciation of the ordering potential of black culture and its West African underpinnings.

Her juxtaposition of sunrise/set images and the chaotic and cosmopolitan experiences of modernity recalls accounts of Yoruba mythology cited early in the twentieth century from divination priests in Badan, Nigeria. In "The Religion of the Yoruba" Leo Frobenius records a myth invoking this structure: Long, long ago, when everything was in confusion and young and old died, Olodu-mare (God) summoned Edshu-ogbe and said: "Create order in the region of the sunrise." To Oyako-Medyi: "Create order in the region of the sunset." Next morning Edshu-ogbe created order in the east and in the evening Oyako-Medyi created order in the west.

(1973: 188-89) From the external correlatives of several scenes to her explicit invocation of Esu/Elegba, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston's points of reference for Janie's emerging consciousness are markedly West

African. In ways that echo the narratives recorded by Frobenius, Hurston uses sunrise and sunset descriptions as a changeable and timeless witness to chaotic developments in the plot of the novel. After Janie's initial march through Eatonville creates a swirl of envy, Phoeby enters through "the intimate gate with her heaping plate of mulatto rice" (1995: 176).

As Janie reflects on her experience and prepares to tell her tale, Hurston's sunset provides the backdrop: the "varicolored cloud dust that the sun had stirred up in the sky was settling by slow degrees" (178). When Janie tells Phoeby about living under Nanny's and Logan Killicks's control, Hurston uses the deepening night to underscore the danger in the tale and the telling: "the kissing darkness became a monstropolous old thing" and Janie "saw her life like a great tree with...Dawn and doom in the branches" (181- 82).

On the morning of the conflict with Logan Killicks, the "sun from ambush was threatening the world with red daggers" (199). In the scene in which Janie awakes after having spent the night alone, wondering, while Tea Cake spent her money on a party, the sunrise is paranoid, "sending up spies ahead of him to mark out the road through the dark" (272). Hurston images the false calm before the final storm "even before the sun gave light dead day was creeping from bush to bush watching man" (301).

The first moments of Janie's excavation are imaged as she connects the mysteries of her emerging consciousness to the eternal rhythms of movement and variability: "mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun" (236). Hurston's new technique in *Their Eyes* combined the excavation of consciousness with an improvised relationship to a living

tradition that she encountered during her research in New Orleans and Haiti. Central to her mythic method is Hurston's brilliant use of Esu/Elegba in relation to the patterns of Janie's descent and emergence.

Hurston's novel *Their Eyes* offers an excellent source for demonstrating the value of an interdisciplinary approach to Black women's culture in general and American Modernism in particular (Awkward 23). Hurston locates her fiction strongly in Black women's traditional culture as developed and displayed through music and song. In presenting Janie's story as a narrative related by herself to her best Black woman friend, Pheoby, Hurston is able to draw upon the rich oral legacy of Black female storytelling and mythmaking that has its roots in Afro-American culture.

The reader who is aware of this tradition will understand the story as an overheard conversation as well as a literary text. The struggle between communal relationships and modern institutions is the core of Hurston's blues critique in *Their Eyes*. Janie appreciates Starks's store as a social center (Baker 98). But she is chronically inept at the tasks that relate to the business. Is Hurston implying that Janie is stupid? Unlikely. Instead, for Janie, selling things in the store distracts her from the essential rhythms of nature and the homegrown power of stories that take place on the porch.

In Hurston's narration, the natural beauty of the South and the communal cool squeeze the business of the store from both sides: Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town to the sun. So Janie had another day. And every day had a store in it, except Sundays. The store itself was a pleasant place if only she didn't have to sell things. When people sat around

on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. (Hurstun 1995: 215)

As the sense of social decay and the power of modern economics increases their hold on people's lives and as Janie moves outside of her middle-class economic position in Eatonville, Hurston's blues images become collective, intensify, and grapple openly with the forces of fragmentation. As a new season opens on the muck, Hurston images the economically and existentially threadbare workforce and the hard times: Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans.

Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (282) But heeding Pound's warning to devise an adequate technique or "bear false witness," Hurston depicts the economic 'dehumanization' in relation to the humanizing forces of living cultural traditions: "Blues made and used right on the spot." On "the muck" the blues voices pierce through the "mud which is deaf and dumb" as "the jooks clanged and clamored.

Pianos living three lives in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning, and losing every hour." Instead of the urban realist's trope of ever-warm boardinghouse beds used three shifts per day, in Hurston's vision the keys never get cold, "pianos... live three lives in one." Refusing to resolve the struggle between the "deaf mud" and "live muck," she concludes the passage with an asymmetrical

image of “ rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants” (282).

Ambiguous and improvised, impulses swirl through Hurston's modernist schema of the mud and the muck. She leaves no fixed path, no pro-forma method for descent. “ Permanent transients” ride the crest of the wave where Wright's “ walleyed yokels” are long since washed over and submerged by his ideological approach to the blues horrors in his memory. Instead, Hurston's excavation of “ the muck” explores uncharted personal and communal territory. Janie's improvised diasporic modernist quest advances with the mantra that “ new words would have to be made and said” (200, 268).

At the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston describes Janie in a space of continuing diasporic modernist process. In connection to various relationships, Janie explored the patterns of inner and interpersonal experience and met many of Esu/Elegba's challenges at the communal and personal gates (Pavlic 234). She excavated new depths in her consciousness and from these depths she examined her relationship to social space with deepened insight. In death, Tea Cake becomes an ancestor and joins the patterns of Janie's consciousness.

Alone in her house again, Janie opens the window to allow Tea Cake's presence to come to mind. Hurston emphasizes the modernist dimensions of ancestry. They inform the combination of communal and solitary processes and present guidance which, at best, can mitigate against the pitfalls of Afro-modernist seclusion. Hurston describes Tea Cake's ancestral presence now combined with her own energy (the wind) and with Janie's asymmetrical

space of communal loneliness: " The wind through the open windows had broomed all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness.

She closed in and sat down. Combing road-dust out of her hair. Thinking" (1995: 333). As an ancestor, Tea Cake will continue to " live" in the images of Janie's mind but, possibly in tribute to Tea Cake's performative skill, Janie's telling of the story to Phoeby demonstrates she is not isolated in Afro-modernist seclusion. Unlike Hurston's other characters, Janie is capable of articulating the depths of her experience in interpersonal terms. Hurston emphasizes how the combination of sense impression and thought prevent abstraction of the ancestors: " Of course he wasn't dead.

He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (333). The close of the novel seems romantic and resolved; however, Tea Cake' continued ancestral presence will disrupt the resolution. Esu/Elegba's role doesn't cease in death. Janie will have to pursue the patterns and enable Tea Cake to overcome the " dogged" stasis that caused his demise. Janie will have to feel the wind and share the thunder. The descendant becomes part of the redemption of the ancestor, because Esu/Elegba will return (Pavlic 243).

In *Their Eyes*, Zora Neale Hurston, is using modernism to bring her intellectual characters out of their isolation and into contact with the needs, concerns, and traditions of black people generally. Zora Neale Hurston's fiction, especially her novels, leads us to examine ourselves in relation to the world around us. Without exaggeration, her novels enlarge both our minds and our hearts. Hurston, however, would not make such a claim; instead, she

would keep moving towards some goal to be reached, some project to be started.

Her anxious restlessness about herself and her work makes her a very contemporary writer, a modernist who tried to enlarge the very notion of what it is to be American. She wrote about traditional subjects—love and loss, displacement and home, failure and triumph—at the same time she attempted to redefine our notion of American culture. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers us the same vital contrasts and the same struggle to reconcile the harp and the sword.

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