

**UNDERSTANDING ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD**

Tatjana Vukelić

Abstract

The work of Zora Neale Hurston, in particular, the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has been the object of more than a decade of critical attention. But, in addition to the critical consideration of Hurston's writings, her work has received the level of institutional support necessary for Hurston to enter the American literary mainstream. The article addresses the issue of black women literary tradition and the search for freedom and identity in the white American social and cultural environment.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is today a standard text in American literature, African American literature, and women's studies courses from high school to graduate school. The popularity of Hurston's novel is largely due to the groundbreaking efforts of writer Alice Walker¹ in the early 1970s to resurrect Hurston (1903-1960) and her work from literary and critical oblivion. To rediscover and to reintroduce Hurston was, according to Walker, "to celebrate and legitimize the diversity and textured nuances of African American culture – language, folklore, American political and social history, American race relations, feminism and womanism; in short, to provide readers today with an exploration into the complex life of a black woman artist whose prolific works and whose enigmatic life defy categorization within others' convenient boundaries."²

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, an autobiography written at the urging of her editor, Bertram Lippincott, Zora Neale Hurston expresses some dissatisfaction with her second

¹ Alice Walker (b. 1944.), poet, novelist, essayist, biographer, short fiction writer, womanist, publisher, educator, and Pulitzer Prize laureate. Born the eight child of a southern sharecropper and a parttime maid, Alice Walker has climbed the proverbial ladder of success to become one of America's most gifted and influential writers. She has received notoriety for her taboo-breaking and morally challenging depictions of African American passions and oppressions. Although her work is diverse in subject matter and varied in form, it is clearly centered around the struggles and spiritual development affecting the survival whole of women. Her writing exposes the complexities of the ordinary by presenting it within a context of duplicity and change. See also: White, C. Evelyn. *Alice Walker, a Life*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

² Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," "Looking for Zora," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983., pp. 58.

novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was published in 1937. She says of the novel:

I wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Haiti. It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again. In fact, I regret all of my books. It is one of the tragedies of life that one cannot have all the wisdom one is ever to possess in the beginning. Perhaps, it is just as well to be rash and foolish for a while. If writers were too wise perhaps no books would be written at all. It might be better to ask yourself „Why?“ afterwards than before.³

Hurston voices the frustrations of an artist brought up in an oral culture like that of her birthplace, Eatonville, Florida, a source of inspiration throughout her writing career and, as she informs us on her autobiography's first page, the first black community in America to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.

Their Eyes Were Watching God appeared at the tail end of what is termed in American literature as the Harlem Renaissance. Roughly between 1917 – the end of World War – and the 1930 stock market crash that marked the beginning of the Great Depression, throngs of 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. This was a time of cultural celebration of blackness – black visual arts, black music, black intellectual thought, black performing arts, and black identity. 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 emphasis on rural common folk of the south both challenged and continued some of the fundamental tenants of the Harlem Renaissance: national and global community, self-determination, and race pride.

Despite the fact that Hurston is a staple in many African American literature and women's studies courses throughout the world, Hurston, the person, was and remains an enigma to scholars. For one, while her gravestone marker states that Hurston was born in 1901, other sources claim her birth in 1891 or 1903. Scholars looking closely at her family history records have fairly definitely concluded that 1891 is the more accurate date. Born in Nostalsulga, Alabama, Hurston grew up in the all-colored town of Eatonville, Florida, about ten miles northeast of Orlando and the source of much of her folklore writings about African American culture. The daughter of a Baptist preacher and three-time mayor of Eatonville, Hurston had a rather strained relationship with her father but a closer one with her mother. Perhaps from these relationships with her own parents Hurston drew upon certain domestic relationships that play out in her fiction.

In Eatonville, as Hurston writes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storytellers sat on the porch of Mayor Joe Clarke's (Starks's in the novel) store and "passed around

³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. ed. Robert Hemenway. 1942. Reprint: Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984. 212 pp.

pictures of their thoughts for the others to look and see" (48). Whereas these storytellers were able to retell, modify, and perfect the tales with which they entertained and enlightened other members of the community, authors such as Hurston had to be content with the successes they managed to achieve in written work which, with the seeming clarity of hindsight, might appear incomplete and hastily composed. Clearly, this is how she felt retrospectively about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a work written to capture "all the tenderness of my passion" experienced during the relationship that inspired the novel.⁴

Her statement reflects some of the difficulties that Hurston experienced in navigating between two distinct narrative traditions – a black oral tradition characterized by active interchange between responsive storytellers and participatory listeners, and a Western literary tradition where, typically, the author composes and the reader reads in isolation from the author – and suggests her interest in infusing the American novel with potentialities derived from African American culture. This statement and the narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, framed by a conversation wherein the protagonist, Janie, presents herself as a storyteller who will provide her audience – her best friend, Pheoby – "de understandin'" (7) of her life story, suggest Hurston's experimental impulse, her desire to employ the novel form as a means to preserve and transmit African American oral narrative practices. In the frame of her novel, Hurston approximates the relationship between speaker and listener in African American expressivity, offering in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called a "speakerly text."⁵

Hurston's autobiographical comments also read as a prophetic warning against the types of rash judgements about her life and work that have led to a devaluation of her accomplishments. Her novel was not widely recognized as an important achievement until long after an impoverished Hurston, seriously ill after suffering a stroke in 1959, died of heart disease in 1960 without funds to provide for a proper burial. In fact, although the novel did receive a few positive reviews from critics, the initial impression of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in African American literary circles was that it was a seriously flawed text. Such a view was expressed by Alain Locke in the journal *Opportunity*. Despite his belief that Hurston was a talented writer with a "gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect and folk humor", Locke, an earlier supporter of Hurston's work and her teacher at Howard University, viewed her novel as an "over-simplification" of the African American situation in the post-Reconstruction South. Even more harsh than Locke was Richard Wright, the most widely read and celebrated black American writer during the last two decades of Hurston's life. Wright saw *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as lacking material that lent itself to "significant interpretation". Wright argued

⁴ For Hurston's discussion of her relationship with the man she identifies only as A. W. P., see *Dust Tracks*, 252-62. There are striking similarities between Janie's marriages and Hurston's relationship with this figure whom she shrouds in mystery. For example, connections between Joe Starks's attempts to gain Janie's submission to his authority and A. W. P.'s efforts to transform Hurston in an obedient, submissive mate can be noted. Both these attempts take the form of the male's attempt to deny to the female the power of voice: Starks commands an oratorically gifted Janie not to participate in the verbal rituals of the Eatonville community, and A. W. P. demands that Hurston abandon her burgeoning writing career.

⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text." *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988., 170-216.

that the novel evidences Hurston's shameless pandering "to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy."⁶

Such negative reactions were to become quite common, and made an unbiased evaluation of Hurston's work nearly impossible during her lifetime. It seems that Locke and Wright have been inspired by the perception that persisted until very recently: that the black artist's primary responsibility was to create protest fiction that explored America's historical mistreatment of blacks, boosting black self-esteem and changing racist white attitudes about African Americans in the process. Nothing that Hurston ever wrote convinced her contemporaries of the limitations either of didactic polemical fiction or of derisive biographical criticism of her work. And none of her defenders during her lifetime was able to read these limitations as persuasively as contemporary scholars such as Barbara Johnson who has asserted:

While Hurston has often been read and judged on the basis of personality alone, her "racy" adoption of "happy darkie" stance, which was a successful strategy for survival, does not by any means exhaust the representational strategies of her writing.⁷

After years of general neglect, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has since the early 1980s achieved a position of prominence within the American literary tradition. Hurston's second novel, written in 1936 during a folklore-gathering expedition in Haiti while the author was recovering from a painful relationship with a younger man (a relationship that served in essential ways as emotional fodder for her novel), has come to be widely considered one of the important novels produced during the last century. The novel has become a commercial success and a best-seller. Proof of this shift can be found in the number of scholars specializing in well-established critical traditions who have recently chosen to place Hurston's work at the center of their canon. For example, male African Americanist literary critics, white feminist critics, and mainstream canonical critics have begun to discuss in illuminating ways of the significance of Hurston's work. Furthermore, what is more important, many black feminist scholars view *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a forerunner of the African American women's fiction of the seventies and eighties believing that several black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor and many others, are repeating, imitating and revising her narrative strategies.

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 novel is Janie's telling of her own story in her own voice as she remembers the details of her own life. As the storyteller, 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 specific – we never forget that Janie's grandmother was a slave or that the characters are living during Jim Crow segregation of the 1930s and 1940s – much of Janie's social

6 Michael Awkward, *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990., 2-3.

7 Barbara Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston." *A World of Difference*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987, 173-4.

disruption within the community of black people is gender related. Her intracommunal attacks are largely based on others's opinions of what a woman and especially a woman of her age should and should not be doing. Moreover, Janie's story is one of a person who is able to self-define and so transcend restrictive boundaries ultimately through communal storytelling rituals.

Janie's story of resistance begins with her Granny's command that she marry Logan Killicks, a man with a mule and land, to prevent her from throwing her life away now that she has moved into womanhood physiologically. Nanny's great worry, and the catalyst for Janie's search to find marriage in a male partner, is that Janie experiences sexual pleasure under a pear tree and then defines "marriage" through what she witnesses between bees pollinating flowers. That search takes her through two husbands, the old and unattractive Logan, who threatens her repeatedly with violence when she refuses to obey his commands, and the city builder and economically privileged Jody Starks, who wants to mold Janie into his vision of "the Mayor's wife" – the one who speaks only when spoken to, dresses as he designs, and stays inside his store as he demands. While Janie waited for love that never came with Logan, her relationship with Jody is initially based on the spiritual and the physical until Jody makes it publicly and privately clear that he plans to mold Janie into his perfect wife. After Jody's physical death, Janie meets and weds Tea Cake Woods, a man significantly younger than she and with absolutely nothing to offer Janie materialistically or financially. Though short-lived, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake allows her to experience the feeling she recalls from the pear tree of her youth. As the hands of fate would have it, the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake ends tragically, and Janie is left with a spiritual excitement at having loved despite her great loss. Through Janie's story, Hurston introduces a number of significant themes that bear out the complexities of human experience: gender roles in marriage, definitions of marriage legally and spiritually, community performance rituals, individual and community storytelling, male and female power struggles, and discrimination within black communities based on skin complexion and hair lengths and textures.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, the personal narrative of Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods, acknowledges the location of some of its major points in the life of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's reputation rests on her work as one of the most important literary figures to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; she is best known as a champion of the primacy of black folk culture, and for her challenge to conventional social expectations of female conduct in relationship between men and women. As a writer in the twentieth century, she was among the early black women unequivocally to assert women's rights to self-fulfillment outside of their allegiances to men. The novel explores several themes: (1) Hurston's delineation of Janie's psychological journey from male-identified female to assertive womanhood; (2) her exploration of self-acceptance and black identity in a response to such a work as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man*; (3) Janie's text serves as a vehicle that restores black voice to the as-told-as slave narratives of the nineteenth century; and (4) Janie's achievement of voice. In the combination of these themes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a representative text in the Afro-American cultural tradition, but one that claims a central place for black women.

Arguably, Hurston's novel is less about action than the narrative telling of the story that defines the main character Janie as a woman and as a black woman. It defines the collective character of African Americans able to define and empower themselves in racist America through talking.

HURSTON'S PERSONAL DIMENSIONS IN THE NOVEL

Everyone who knows anything about Zora Neale Hurston knows that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not her autobiography. Yet the novel is autobiographical on two levels. First, in a continuation of one of the oldest tradition in fiction, Janie tells us the story of how and why her life came to be in the place that it is; second, we also know that Hurston invested this narrative with joy and pain of her own experiences of female development and romantic love, familiar subjects in women's narratives. Thus, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers an opportunity to examine the autobiographical impulse from the perspectives of author Hurston, the writerly self, and fictional Janie, the speakerly self. In their combined oral and written narrative, Hurston and Janie reinforce Janet Varner Gunn's theory of the autobiographer as self-reader, writing (and speaking) from the "outside in, not inside out – or in other words, from the position of the *other* side of [the] lived past which the reader self-occupies" at the time of writing. In this paradigm, Gunn expands the boundaries of "reader" and "reading" to make the reader not only one of "person," but also of "position," permitting the subject of the text to be the participant-observer par excellence – the main character in, narrator, author, and reader of his/her book-like life; and to make reading an interpretative activity in which "clear and certain knowledge of determinate meanings" give way to "contingent historical experience" and "richer depth in human significance."⁸

Autobiography as an activity that takes place from the outside in rather than from the inside out returns the debate on the subject to an issue that theorists of the genre disagree on: the nature of the "I" behind the self-in-writing. On one side of the problem, the "classical" theorists, representing predominantly a mainstream Euro-American perspective, promote the private "I" as the basis of the genre. They perceive this self, writing outward from the inside, as the best and only source of self-knowledge and remaining hidden behind public version. On the other side of the problem, another group of critics, those who study mainly the lives of women and Third World people, argue for the possibility of a different kind of self in autobiography. They believe that private "I" represents a privileged group, mostly white and male. They promote the existence of an inclusive "I" that places the autobiographer inside of and inseparable from the cultural context which, they say, informs his or her identity. From this perspective, autobiography, Gunn suggests that instead of "the private act of a self writing, autobiography becomes the cultural act of a self reading" against the background of time, place, race, class, gender, and the other aspects that define individual members of particular groups.⁹

From the beginning, scholars of African American autobiography have been in

⁸ Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982., 6, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.* 8.

general agreement on the extent to which social and cultural forces influence African American identity. Textual evidence shows that, in the face of various oppressions, the black self achieves a wholesome identity through awareness and acceptance of interdependence between the individual and his or her supportive community and the knowledge that collective black American physical and psychological survival depends on the union of the individual and the group. In this respect, the African American autobiographer writes not from an internal position of isolated selfhood, but from having to interpret, to read the self through the existing social groups that empower and shape that individual self. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's story, simultaneously written and told, emerges as a "reading" of black female growth and development against the history of the oppression of race and sex. This narrative reinforces the cultural approach to identity that has dominated the African American male-centered tradition from the slave narratives of the nineteenth century to the present time, but it also makes of the autobiographical situation another vehicle for the self-empowerment of black women.

In African American literature, fiction and autobiography share a long history of common boundaries. Although few would dispute the claim that autobiography has been the preeminent form of writing among blacks for more than 150 years, all agree that this genre influences and is influenced by fiction. For instance, from its earliest beginnings, by adopting the artfulness and rhetorical structures more usually identified with fiction, black autobiography made of itself a form that signified as well as signified on the totality of the African American experience. Subsequently, complementing each other over time, both have, to their greater advantage, shared similar expressive strategies. As a result, contemporary African American autobiographers are among avant-garde writers in the genre who constantly transgress the narrative boundaries of fiction and autobiography. Thus, in appraising African American traditions in narrative, readers face difficulties when they attempt to separate life and art, nature and imitation, autobiography and fiction. Hurston and later black women writers have taken full advantage of the flexibility of this tradition.

As autobiography, the novel is an important text in the literature of the quest for freedom and self. In American life and writing, as experience and metaphor, white and black women have a long history of the journey as a vital part of their traditions. Among the former, the letters, diaries, and journals of pioneer women traveling with their families from east to west provide one of the most useful sources of information on life situations in the settling of the country. In the tradition of African American autobiography, beginning with the slave and spiritual narratives, traveling, physically and psychologically, in search of self and freedom was an intimate part of the lives of African American men and women. For early black women writers, travel and journey became associated with the freedom to choose useful and dignified lives. Janie's story is not only Hurston's travel in the quest for self, but of all black women whose lost identity forced them to start looking for female identity and freedom.

In narratives of quest, ex-slave women wrote of the hardships they endured in slavery and during the hazardous journeys they took in search of physical and psychological freedom. Free black women used travel stories to emphasize their efforts toward greater control over their lives. Always, travel insinuated quest for self by rejecting boundaries and limitations on the self. In addition to the successful journey from male-identified

to self-identified woman, Janie's positive black self-concept at the end of her narrative can be read as Hurston's response to anxieties of identity common among the black people in her time. From the end of the nineteenth century through the early part of the twentieth, many African Americans were especially frustrated by the oppressiveness of marginality as members of a group labelled inferior. During this period, the prevalence of novels and autobiographical accounts of the phenomenon of passing was one indication of the magnitude of this anxiety. Janie's story, set almost exclusively inside of the black community embodies anxieties of racial identities. Her positive identification with the black community and her awakening discover her racial self out of her inability to recognize her image in a photograph in which she appears among a group of white playmates. However, her identity is further fragmented by the fact that because many people have named her differently, she is called Alphabet. Surprised, but not traumatized by it, she looks at the photograph more closely until she recognizes herself by her clothes and hair. She does not feel great shame but accepts herself fully.

In his study of the search for voice in twentieth century African American literature, John F. Callahan observes that the distinct voices in Hurston's novel represent the African American call-and-response dialogue that originated in the oral culture. While Callahan focuses his distinctions of narrative form on the author's independent stand against certain modernist trends in literature, and her call to readers to "respond to Janie Crawford's story ... with new thought and new words", it is also a text that looks backward to nineteenth century autobiographical narrative.¹⁰

The autobiographical "I" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* finds self and voice in forging a new history constructed out of the handling down of one woman's story of liberation to another. Exchanging outsidership for individuality within the community, Janie becomes a feminist heroine with an assured place within that community, and her life becomes an influential source through which other women will find a model for their own self-empowerment.

Unlike the solitary but representative hero of male autobiography, Janie and Hurston join voices to produce a personal narrative that celebrates an individual and collective black female identity emerging out of the search for an autonomous self. Although the structure of this text is different, the tradition of black women celebrating themselves through other women like themselves began with their personal narratives of the nineteenth century. Female slave narratives generally had protagonists who shared their space with the women who instilled their pride of self and love of freedom in them. The tradition continued into the twentieth century, For instance, much of the early part of Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, celebrates the relationship she had with her mother and the lessons she learned from other women in the community. Thus, Hurston's structure for Janie's story expands that already existing tradition to concretize the symbolic rendering of voice to and out of the women's community by breaking away from the formalities of conventional autobiography to make Janie's text an autobiography about autobiographical storytelling in the tradition of African American storytelling. Hurston, struggling with the pains and ambivalences she felt toward the realities of love she had to reject for the restraints it would have placed on her, found a safe place

¹⁰ John Callahan, *In the African American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth Century Black Fiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988: 125, 127.

to embalm the tenderness and passion of her feelings in the autobiographical voice of Janie Crawford, whose life she made into a very fine crayon enlargement of life.

University of Rijeka, Croatia

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