FOLKLORE AND VOODOO IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

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Abstract *Zora Neale Hurston's best-known novel,* Their Eyes Were Watching God *(1937), has become a major part of the African American as well as the American literary canon, though it had not always received a large readership. As a trained ethnologist (B.A., Columbia University, 1928), Hurston had conducted field work in the Southern states of the U.S. as well as in the Bahamas, Jamaica and Haiti, and published in scholarly journals as well as one book of collected folklore,* Mules and Men *(1935) before* Their Eyes Were Watching God *was written and published. This contribution attempts to show the impact and influence her cultural anthropology field work exerted on the novel.*

Keywords**:** *African American literature, ethnology, folklore, voodoo, Zora Neale Hurston*

1. Introduction: biography and works

Known best as the author of the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the African-American author Zora Neale Hurston started her professional career as an anthropologist. Hurston's parents and grandparents had worked on cotton plantations in Alabama, and all four of her grandparents were born into slavery. Born in 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida, the sixth of eleven children, and Eatonville was the home base of her early field work in Southern African American ethnology. Hurston's father, John Hurston, was a Baptist minister, a tenant farmer, who served as mayor of Eatonville from 1914-1916; as a prominent member of this African-American community in Central Florida, he figures as a domineering character in two novels, the aforementioned *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), her first novel. Hurston's father seemed to have embodied what W.E.B. Du Bois (1989: 155) underscored in the chapter entitled "Of the Faith of the Fathers" in *The Souls of Black Folk* as "the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss', an intriguer, an idealist", as well as a Baptist preacher. John Hurston's father was a white man who never acknowledged his paternity, and he was nicknamed "dat yaller bastard" by his mother-in-law and others in the Notasulga society (Hurston 1991: 8) and included in the opening of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1990a: 3).

Hurston's mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, was supportive of young Zora, helping her with her school-work and arranging for others to help when the lessons became too advanced for her. She pushed Zora and her siblings to be ambitious. However, Hurston's mother died in 1904, when Zora was thirteen, and her father's quick remarriage with Mattie Moge, a disagreeable woman only six years older than Hurston, led to demoralizing personal conflicts, ultimately resulting in Zora leaving grammar school prematurely. Hurston spent the next years away from

home, mostly cooking in kitchens while attending school. She did not graduate from high school until she was in her late twenties.

Hurston initially attended the historically black institute of higher education, Howard University in Washington D.C., before transferring in 1925 with a scholarship to attend Barnard College, the women's college at Columbia University. She was financially supported to attend the elite female school by Annie Nathan Meyer, the founder of Barnard. Hurston majored in anthropology under Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas, among the renowned scholars in this field at the time. "Papa Franz", as she called the eminent German Jewish scholar, "imbued Hurston with his ideas about cultural relativism, a theory that lifted anthropology from the racial constraints of nineteenth-century evolution theory and placed equal value on all cultures" (Bordelon 1999: 10). Boas emphasized exacting field work methods and even after Hurston graduated with a B.A. in 1928 (Hemenway 1977: 21), Boas continued supporting her by helping her to win a fellowship from Carter G. Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, to study folklore and voodoo practices with Marie Laveau in New Orleans and later in Florida, from 1928 to 1930 (Lawless 2013: 159).

Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written while she conducted fieldwork in Haiti in 1936, and the masterpiece was completed in just seven weeks, from November to December. Awarded a second Guggenheim Fellowship, Hurston spent six months in Jamaica in 1936 and a further eleven months in 1937-8 in Haiti. Her research resulted in the study *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938). This work, written concurrently with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), offered, along with her earlier book on folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), new information and interpretations of the mores of rural blacks in Florida, Jamaica and Haiti. This paper sets out to review some specific anthropological influences evident in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

A short recapitulation about Hurston's activities after the thirties may be necessary to complete this brief portrayal. Required to receive government welfare when she returned from Haiti, Hurston served in the Roosevelt Administration's program for, among others, poor writers and artists during the Great Depression, called WPA (Works Progress Administration), in Florida. In her late forties and fifties, she worked as a librarian and teacher, and in her sixties as a cleaning woman. At this point, Hurston's works were largely out of print and ignored (Hurston 1999: 139-145). In 1960, aged 69, she died impoverished. In the early 1970s her novels and short stories experienced a revival. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and a few stories by Hurston are today the focus of considerable research and are read and taught extensively at U.S. high schools and in English departments at universities around the world.

The central locality of most of Hurston's stories and first two novels is Eatonville, Florida. In her first book of folklore, entitled *Mules and Men* Hurston collected tales and other folklore of the denizens of this all-black central Florida town. The residents never traveled far from Eatonville and consequently did not know much of Florida beyond nearby Jacksonville. The township of Eatonville still is an all-black, incorporated town, which had been established by Samuel Eaton of Hartford, Connecticut for freed slaves, after the Civil War; its geographical isolation allowed for the maintenance of the oral tradition expressed in Hurston's collected tales that reveal rural black Americans' world outlook. Since it was the same town Hurston had grown up in, she knew some of the inhabitants contributing to *Mules and Men* from her childhood.

The tales in the first anthropological study, *Mules and Men*, offer, as Boas writes in its Preface, "the Negro's reaction to every day events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions […] the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life" (Boas 1978: x). Many facets of these tales and the people who told them to Hurston became models for her fictional characters and helped form the rather sophisticated, modernist narrative devices in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

2. Folk tales and the female voice

Since the tales of *Mules and Men* are not collected from faceless informants, but from individuals whose lives are briefly introduced to the reader, Hurston displays rural black life more realistically in her fiction, when integrating these individuals in some measure into her fiction. While doing field work for this book, Hurston met a woman in January, 1928 in Polk County, Florida, at a saw mill camp. This woman, called "Big Sweet" in her community, had physical power, emotional strength and tenderness, prototypical attributes of the main character called "Janie" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. "Big Sweet" contributed two tales included in *Mules and Men,* but neither tale offers any particular female view of the Eatonville society. Cheryl Wall (1993: 88) has noted that, although many tales exist about women told by men (many "virulently anti-female"), almost no tales are told by women from the female point of view.

This fact stands in stark contrast to the woman's voice which is the great central point for Hurston's novel. Hurston wished in her novel to give a voice to the women in this world of rural blacks, which was missing in her field work observations. The plot is framed as a story Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods tells to another woman, well out of hearing-range of any man; her friend Pheobe condoles with Janie after she returns from a hurricane, the death of her husband and a court trial. On the other hand, in ways similar to the female blacks of Eatonville represented in *Mules and Men*, Janie is insulted and humiliated by her husband. Ironically, as a light-skinned black, Janie is admired when, beaten by her husband, her eye bruises to a noticeably darker color. "It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women." The community's black men regard this bruise as something erotic as well as the silence in which Janie took the beating (Hurston 1978b: 218-219). Elaine Lawless (2013: 164) elucidates that Hurston "was often writing about intraracial politics and gender politics", which is evident in this scene of the novel. Her third husband, Vergible Woods or Tea Cake, cheats on her, and after many of these various humiliations, Janie makes little to no comment and therefore remains without a protesting voice. When she is beaten, she does not yell, but only cries to herself, another aspect greatly admired by the novel's black male characters. On occasion, Janie spoke out, for instance, when she confronts her second husband, Jody Starks, near his death, as he can no longer physically abuse her anymore.

The fact that Janie rarely confronts her husband in these encounters reflects Hurston's anthropological observations of the paternalistic male/female relationships in Eatonville whereby the husband's "[b]eing able to whip her assured him in possession" (Hurston 1978b: 218). This behaviour is noted in the folklore included in *Mules and Men.* In one tale, violence in domestic relationships receives an anodyne "folk explanation." Told by a black Eatonville woman named

Mathilda Moseley, this tale is one of the few told with a female voice which addresses a number of gender distinctions. I have summarized this tale's plot below:

> Men and women were originally of the same strength. Man and woman fought but since neither was any stronger than the other, fighting was minimal and respect and equality pervaded. One day, man went to God up in heaven and said, "Ah ast you please to give me mo' strength than dat woman you give me, so Ah kin make her mind. Ah know you don't want to be always comin' down way past de moon and stars to be straightenin' her out and its got to be done." So God gave him more strength. Then man went down, bragged to his woman about his new strength and immediately went about beating her up. No matter what she did, there was no chance for the woman. He beat her viciously. Then woman went to heaven and complained to God, asking why He gave man more strength and not woman. "You ain't never ast me for mo' power," replied God. Woman asked for just the same strength that He gave man. God said no. Woman was real mad and went straight to the devil. The devil made woman get three keys from God which hung on the wall of heaven. Woman went to heaven, received these keys and returned to the devil. The devil showed woman how to be powerful with them: the first key was to the kitchen, the second key was to the bedroom, and the last key was to the cradle (where the children were). Man does not want to be shut out of any of these three rooms. The Devil advised woman to keep these doors locked until man used his strength for woman's benefit and woman's desires. Additionally, the devil tells woman not to talk about these keys and her new power. Woman expressed gratitude to the devil: "If it wasn't for you, Lawd knows whut us po' women folks would do." This tale ends with distinctions between the voice of man and woman: "And dat's why de man makes and de woman takes. You men is still braggin' 'bout yo' strength and de women is sittin' on de keys and lettin' you blow off till she git ready to put de bridle on you" (Hurston 1978a: 33-38).

Pragmatically, this tale may be viewed as an instrument to indicate to women their power and thus aid them to survive, just as African-American tales generally serve the function of facilitating black expression of hostility towards society and its rulers (Blassingame 1979: 114-115, 127-130), including "Ole Massa" stories and trickster animal tales, in which weaker or smaller animals outwit the more powerful animal. This tale allows the woman to be self-effacing and poke fun at herself while expressing hostility to her man, a similar feature also reflected in Janie, the narrator of the framed plot within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While this tale concerns wife-beating, it also offers an explanation why, under such humiliating circumstances, the female protagonist in the novel would keep silent, remaining voiceless while nevertheless preserving a few areas of power which men could not control.

Janie's voiceless 'submissiveness' might be interpreted in light of traditional mores in black culture. Generally speaking, in African-American communities, eloquent 'talkers' ostensibly hold power. The oral endowment of African-Americans developed over centuries in an overwhelmingly illiterate culture during slavery, where folktales and music invoked African heritage as well as substantial entertainment. Hurston's own father, a moving and domineering speaker, held his powerful positions such as community church preacher and mayor, in many ways echoed in the character Joe Starks, Janie's powerful, bragging husband in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or the main protagonist John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Thus, these unpublished details of the oral arguments made by Robert Stepto

at an MLA conference and referenced by Mary Helen Washington that Janie's silence (rather than a verbal confrontation) indicates that Janie had not found her voice and thereby, for all intents and purposes, remains a weak character, a statement argued down by Alice Walker (Washington 1998: xi-xiii, and Washington 1993: 98-101).

Throughout her lifetime, Hurston (2000) called for equal rights for women, and wrote about the oppression of women in the rural southern U.S., Jamaica, and Haiti (Hurston 1990b: 16-18, 57-62). Indeed, the title of *Mules and Men* refers to a tale about women as 'mules'. Yet she does not permit her views on women's rights to interfere with an authentic representation of Janie's voicelessness in her novel. As the infuriated Alice Walker pointed out at the December 1979 MLA Conference debate on Janie finding her voice (as a response to Stepto), "women did not have to speak when men thought they should […] they would choose when and where they wish to speak because, while many women *had* found their voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it" (Washington 1998: xi, italics in original). Another critic asseverates this idea more succinctly: "Where Janie yearns, Zora was probably driven; where Janie submits, Zora would undoubtedly have rebelled" (Williams 1978: x).

Most critics today view Janie as expressing at the novel's end the collective, communal (black woman's) voice rather than an individual one. Her voice is regarded as a sort of collective spirit of the essential female African-American oral tradition. The plot of this novel centers around Janie, who not only tells Pheobe, a younger married black woman from town, of her life and pursuit of romantic love, but who also imparts wisdom gathered from her forty years of experience. The novel is a revelation - not only Janie's life story, but her love guidance to Pheobe, the embodiment of the African-American female community at large.

3. Elements of voodoo in the novel

Hurston's research in Voodoo also is reflected in her fiction. Since her composition of the novel took place concurrently with her field work in 1936, which particularly accentuated the Voodoo practices in Haiti, some aspects of Voodoo are more than tangential to Hurston's classic novel. However, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* should not be read as a Voodoo novel *per se*. The setting is imbued into the culture of Protestant Eatonville, while only a few Voodoo elements may be detected.

Critics have wrestled with many qualities of Janie, who develops in many respects from a vulnerable, diffident teenage girl, directed into obeying her conservative and religious grandmother, into a strong woman deliberately doing what she desires, in spite of the pressure originating from society gossip, in the relentless pursuit of romantic love. As a virgin teenager, one spring she witnesses:

> a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from the root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (Hurston 1978b: 24)

This event marks a vital stage in Janie's youth: she wishes to discover her love, her own part of nature which was apparent "for all other creatures except herself"

(Hurston 1978b: 24). This sexual awakening arises in the spring season as Janie observes nature in the act of creation. In the scrupulously researched chapter on Voodoo in her Haitian section of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston emphasizes the primal feature of natural sexual creation as the very foundation of Voodoo. Through her mentor in Port-au-Prince, Hurston describes how she came to understand creation of life. Voodoo is

> the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms. Voodoo is a religion of creation and life… worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces… "What is the truth?" Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life. (Hurston 1990b: 113)

To the Haitians, the 'mystery of life' does not transcend sexual creation, and this creation is evident in nature as in man. The influence of nature on Janie's sexual awakening at the opening of the novel definitely reflects an organic response practitioners of Voodoo embrace in the natural mystery of sexuality. Janie responds to nature near the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in much the same way as the Haitians Hurston studied. As with the folklore in *Mules and Men*, although Voodoo is not explicitly practiced by any of the main characters in the novel, in their mores, medicine, and funerals, the African American community members described in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reflect some similarities to practitioners of Voodoo in Haiti. For example, Hurston's characters culturally respond to time only through biological cycles and seasons. Yet the Seminoles are much more closely connected to the changes and dangers of nature: "she went home by herself one afternoon when she saw a band of Seminoles passing by. The men walking in front and the laden, stolid women following them like burros… this was a large party" (1978b: 228); after two more sizable groups of Seminoles pass, she learns that they were heading towards high ground since a hurricane was on its way, thoroughly aware as these Native Americans were due to their closeness to nature. Yet Janie and Tea Cake stayed, thinking "Indians are dumb anyhow, always were […] Still a blue sky and fair weather" (1978b: 229). Repeatedly warned of the dangers, the notion of a hurricane really being dangerous still did not occur to them even with many animals acting strangely, and as a consequence, Janie and Tea Cake nearly drowned in the subsequent flooding of the lowlands. Hurston fictionalized the San Felipe – Okeechobee Florida Hurricane of 1928, which killed approximately 3000 people. It remains to this day the second deadliest hurricane in U.S. history, and three quarters of the dead were African Americans (Manzella 2018: 57-58).

Hurston frames the narration for Pheobe's imminent experience to appear real because she initiates her narrative with the familiar reality of bourgeois life: a home, a worried grandmother, a first romance, a matched-up and conventional, loveless marriage to an acceptable man arranged by the parental authority figure. This life moves modestly forward, except that, occasionally, a voice from nature intrudes, such as the "dust-bearing bee sink[ing] into the sanctum of a bloom" (1978b: 24), reminding Janie of her primal quest for romantic love. This repetitive return to nature in the narrative by Janie echoes Lawrence Buell's conception in *The Environmental Imagination* (1996: 64), referring specifically to *négritude*,

as "a traditional, holistic, non-metropolitan, nature-attuned myth of Africanity [and a] reaction to and critique of a more urbanized, 'artificial' European order."

Another example of Hurston importing anthropological elements into her novel is the Voodoo funeral rituals. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston recounts the death and Catholic funeral of a goat, which is so essential to the Voodoo of a mambo in strengthening her powers of conjurement. The funeral is presented as lamentable and embarrassing to the Catholic priest who performed the funeral. The goat had been deliberately killed in order that the mambo could marry; the act of killing the goat Hurston found especially vexatious. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a similar funeral, though with a decisively Protestant touch, takes place for a mule (an animal used extensively on Southern plantations), whose owner was the comic butt of many town jokes and extensive gossiping: the mule represented a slave and its black owner is fabricated as a cruel slave master. At variance with the Haitian scene, the mule died a natural death. However, both animals were treated with veneration and buried with much religious pomp and circumstance. Both the goat in Haiti and the mule in Florida were buried in Voodoo fashion: upside down with all four legs pointed straight towards heaven. The animals in death were buried with formal performances of rituals commanding respect, because the particular animals were viewed as essential in their respective community's world outlook. In Haiti, the goat had an essential role in the Voodoo rituals and appeared to effect a most powerful force, both political and military. The mule in the African American community, on the other hand, was a point of sidesplitting humor and gossip in the comical commentary about the mundane existence of poor black individuals in a small town in the South. In both cases, the animal's afterlife is referred to.

In the anthropological study *Tell My Horse* (Hurston 1990b), the goat's funeral is described with some derision and shown to be part of a larger, tragic mistake. In the novel, however, Hurston makes the animal funeral scene in her novel a very funny one:

> Out in the swamp they made great ceremony over the mule. Starks started off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him… He spoke of the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water… and most glorious of all, *No* … plow lines and halters to come in and corrupt. Up there, mules-angels would have people to ride on, [and the mule] would see the devil plowing Matt Bonner all day long in the hell-hot sun and laying the raw hide to his back. (1978b: 97)

As in the tales collected by Hurston in *Mules and Men*, the mule is a representation or metaphor for the labourer, with multiple similarities to the African-American field slave plowing a master's field without compensation or respect. For Hurston, the mule also signifies the plight of women, for in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny, Janie's grandmother, proclaims: "De nigger woman is de Mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (1978b: 29). This echoes a passage in *Tell My Horse* where Hurston proclaims that if a Haitian woman is not wealthy or set up well by her family,

> she had better pray to the Lord to turn her into a donkey and be done with the thing. It is assumed that God made poor black females for beasts of burden, and nobody is going to interfere with providence… It is just considered down there that God made two kinds of donkeys, one kind that can talk. (1990b: 58)

Near the opening of the novel, Hurston's grandmother, Nanny, arranged for Janie Crawford to marry a man named Logan Killicks, more than twice her age, so that Janie would not become yet another "mule uh de world" to be exploited like the majority of black women. Killicks owns 60 acres of land and a house with no mortgage. Nanny figures Janie would not be a metaphorical mule with a church-going man of property. As one scholar points out, "It is significant that as she leaves the marriage, Janie was about to become Killick's third mule, to be put behind a plow" (DuPlessis 2011: 97).

The reward for the animal is heaven, and the "slave master" black mule owner's retribution is brutal suffering in hell, painted like unending field work on a slave plantation. Mocking everything about human death rituals, the mule manifests an African-American interpretation of the slave's fate and mediates between the old disharmonies of Biblical heavenly justice and America's earthly injustice. This novel thus has a crowd of people performing a parody of the human funeral practice for a mule which resembles part of the Haitian Voodoo animal funeral that Hurston relates in her anthropological study.

Another aspect of Voodoo in the novel concerns medicine, but it receives a more hostile representation. When the health of the once boastful Joe Starks begins to fail, he turns to a root-doctor, for people in the community believe that Janie may have put a curse on her husband. His health turns for the worse immediately after Janie remarks before all the townsmen in their community store that her husband can no longer perform his role sexually, and their quarrel results in marital separation with Joe's public humiliation. The formerly strong leader is revealed to be sexually feeble and thus vulnerable to comic gossip within the community, and his health deteriorates rapidly as a consequence. As he falls politically, socially, and medically into decline, Joe feels deeply his interior crudities, dubitations and materialistic gripes, which he expresses to his wife. Janie visits her husband when she learns of his deteriorating health and the inadequate diet he gets from a new cook. Voodoo medicine described in *Tell My Horse* receives no support or confidence in Hurston's novel. On the contrary, in the deaths of Janie's two husbands, traditional medical doctors arrive too late to save their patients. In Joe Starks' case, the root-doctor deviated attention from a real kidney ailment to Janie's alleged curse thereby eliminating any chance for well-timed medical intervention. Even though Hurston (1990b: 27) describes a Jamaican medicine man's cure for kidney ailments in *Tell My Horse*, this medical folklore receives only derision in Hurston's novel. This may be due to the deaths of a Jamaican girl and the intentional poisoning of a few Haitians at the hands of "medicine men" Hurston recounts in *Tell My Horse* (1990b: 27-29, 184-196).

4. Conclusion

What, to some extent, makes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* amazingly original lies in Hurston's restless effort to make the Neo-African religion and those non-European, African mores, so quickly disappearing in the former slave communities of poor blacks, an essential part of her narration. Moreover, some aspects of Hurston's novel are anthropology fictionalized, and that anthropology is not limited to black folklore within the United States, but encompasses ethnographic studies in non-English speaking countries in the African diaspora, thereby endeavouring to avoid a mere localized, English-speaking African American experience. As Lynda Hill (1996: 181) points out, "*Their Eyes* contains

the stuff of which folklore is made, while the storytelling situations in the book are representations of folklife". In her fiction, Hurston provided the genuine values of the subjects she researched, even when she does not have Janie assume those views herself. Indeed, she is an outsider, isolated from the bourgeois Eatonville community. Additionally, Hurston deviated from her ethnographic studies when giving the strong narrative voice to this fictional rural woman in a southern black community in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston certainly felt that her unique exposure to what was in the 1930s a largely unreported world offered much material for a novelist, and she took full advantage of her personal experiences along with some observations while conducting anthropological field work to create one of the finest American novels of the twentieth century.

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