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VODOU IMAGERY, AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRADITION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

by Daphne Lamothe

I. Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937 while in Haiti collecting folklore on Vodou.¹ A year later, she published *Tell My Horse*, which documents the findings from that expedition. While the history of these publications suggests that, for Hurston, folklore and fiction converge in Haiti, few critics have adequately explored that juncture. Most acknowledge Hurston's interest in Haitian Vodou, but their analyses of the impact of this belief system on her work frequently do not extend beyond perfunctory glosses. A notable exception is Ellese Southerland's essay, "The Influence of Voodoo on the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," published in the 1979 collection, *Sturdy Black Bridges*. Southerland's article makes an important contribution to readings of Hurston's integration of folklore and fiction. The essay discusses the appearance and significance of various "voodoo" signs, symbols and rituals in Hurston's fiction; and more specific to this paper, it identifies the use of Vodou symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* very early in the history of the novel's criticism. But Southerland does not cite her sources for certain voodoo rituals, or for the significance of various numbers and colors which appear repeatedly in Hurston's fiction. Her analysis therefore seems based on anecdotal evidence and it ignores the cultural distinctions amongst Haitian, Louisiana and other kinds of voodoo and hoodoo. These aspects of the essay contribute to the failure, or refusal, of succeeding generations of literary critics to further examine the cultural influences that Southerland found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Some—although certainly not all—critics have categorized Hurston's study and incorporation of Vodou as an intriguing curiosity, perhaps considering it to fall within the purview of anthropology and not literature. Reading the novel within such narrow parameters, however, has resulted in a general inability on the part of Hurston's readers to identify the extent to which her use of Vodou ethnography in her literature enables her exploration of female empowerment and African-American cultural identity.

In this paper, I focus specifically on Hurston's use of Haitian Vodou imagery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and I argue that the folklore enables her confrontation of various kinds of social and personal transformation. Her use of Vodou imagery enables her to analyze the relationship among migration, culture and identity that lies

at the heart of the African Diaspora. In contrast to those critics who read Hurston's use of folk culture, such as Vodou, as a sign of nostalgia, I view it as her means of comprehending transformation. Within traditional cultural forms lies a structure which encourages and enables dynamic change. Therefore, Hurston's reluctance to abandon African-American tradition does not signal a rejection of modernity; rather, it becomes a vehicle for her to acknowledge modernity.

I concern myself here specifically with Vodou because *Their Eyes Were Watching God* alludes to similarities between the protagonist, Janie Killicks Starks Wood, and the Vodou goddess, Ezili. Janie's physical appearance, her romantic relationships and her interactions with the Eatonville community mirror in a multitude of ways the characteristics of that spirit (Iwa). These allusions are so embedded into the foundation of the narrative that they are virtually invisible, compelling us to ask what it was about Hurston's experiences in Haiti that compelled her to relate Vodou to her characters. Perhaps her instincts as a folklorist and writer led her to a cultural experience in which the self-expression of a displaced people comes to the fore. Perhaps because she was raised in the self-contained all-black community of Eatonville, Florida, she looked to a belief system that addressed black people's capacity for self-determination. Hurston found in Haitian Vodou a syncretic cultural production that spoke to both of those interests and more. Her anthropological research revealed that the ways in which Haitian people worked out their political, social and psychic conditions in the spiritual plane resonated with the concerns and experiences of African Americans in the United States. Because the Vodou gods' and goddesses' appearances and actions speak to the concerns and experiences of their worshippers, one finds that Vodou alludes to the heroic and the rebellious; reflects mundane jealousies, desires and hierarchies; illustrates the ravages of slavery on a collective consciousness; and provides a means of self-expression for that same collective.

Hurston was very aware of Haiti's symbolism for African Americans, and implicit references to its significance are scattered throughout the text. For example, Joe Starks dreams of a place where he can be a "big voice" and settles on Eatonville because "de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves" (27). This reference to a place where black people live independent of white authority alludes to post-revolution Haiti, the first black independent republic in the Western hemisphere; and it underscores the revolutionary notion of a town in the United States built and run by black people. Nanny makes a similar allusion to the black republic and the collective desire for autonomy and empowerment. She dreams of "some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power," revealing Haiti's significance as a place where the potential for black autonomy has been realized (14).

Nanny's musings also address a desire for female empowerment. For it is in that "place way off in de ocean" that she also imagines that a black woman might not have to be "de mule uh de world" (14). Anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown writes in *Mama Lola* about the possibilities for empowerment afforded to Haitian women by Vodou:

The adaptability of Vodou over time, and its responsiveness to other cultures and religions; the fact that it has no canon, creed,

or pope; the multiplicity of its spirits; and the intimate detail in which those spirits reflect the lives of the faithful—all these characteristics make women's lives visible within Vodou in ways they are not in other religious traditions, including those of the African homeland. This visibility can give women a way of working realistically and creatively with the forces that define and confine them. (221)

Through the use of a Vodou subtext, Hurston comments on and rebels against the forces that “define and confine” black women as sexual beings, work horses and mothers. She also uses Vodou philosophy to shed light on the characters' views on poverty, class, community, and displacement. Building on the work of those critics who investigate the political implications of Hurston's cultural work, I argue that her use of Vodou imagery provides her with a vehicle for political engagement and social commentary.

II. Folklore, Literature and the Lure of the Primitive

In order to fully comprehend the significance of the text's Vodou imagery, it is crucial to understand the context in which Hurston wrote. I believe she submerged the Vodou images in the novel beneath more accessible folk images of the black South in a dual effort to conform to and resist popular demands for the primitive. Unlike the performance of the dozens, the telling of folk tales and other aspects of African-American folk culture which the reader can easily identify and separate from the plot, Hurston's use of Vodou is not as easily discerned. Its presence in the text has no stylistic markers, nor can we categorize the Vodou elements as mere ornaments for the central narrative.² Hurston's more obvious use of African-American folk culture made her vulnerable to criticisms of pandering to the then popular taste for “the minstrel stereotypes of the lazy, sensual, ignorant, laughing darcy. . .” (Hemenway 154). As one of the stars of the Harlem Renaissance, courted and funded by white benefactors, Hurston juggled her literary aspirations with the often racist expectations of her patron and audience. For example, Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, was a generous benefactor; but “as perhaps with all patrons, . . . she expected some return on her money. In Hurston's case it was a report on the aboriginal sincerity of rural southern black folk . . . Her black guests were either primitive, or they were not being themselves” (Hemenway 107).

Many of Hurston's critics viewed this external pressure as a handicap to her literary production. H. Nigel Thomas, for example, counts Hurston as one of a school of writers (including Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar) who could not meet the challenge of simultaneously satisfying the demand for “minstrel-type buffoonery” and “ensuring that [s]he did not compromise the dignity of the black race” (175). Thomas mistakes Hurston's humor for buffoonery, and fails to recognize the dignity of her lowly characters. Furthermore, his dismissal of her work arises from the notion that a successful narrative seamlessly blends folklore with fiction. Thomas marks the 1930s as, in general, a time in which African-American writers mastered the

art of incorporating those elements of folklore that were necessary to their fiction, without pandering to the audience's "baser instincts" or hindering their art. From the 1930s on, black writers produced literature in which "rituals are not allowed to remain a thing apart or as caricatured quaint antics; instead they are integral aspects of the characters' struggle to survive" (175). According to Thomas, Hurston is an exception to this rule, but he fails to acknowledge that her attempts to set apart and highlight some elements of the folklore (like the stories told by the townsfolk) may be deliberate. Rather than judging the obvious seams between the novel's third person, standard English narration and its first person, African-American vernacular as a sign of Hurston's failure as a writer, it is possible to view it as an emotionally powerful juxtaposition of two very different kinds of language. Furthermore, like many other critics, Thomas does not recognize that she makes Ezili, a figure from Caribbean folklore and ritual, a central, yet nearly invisible, aspect in Janie's struggle for survival. Hurston achieves a doubled triumph over those in her audience who demanded primitive images. First, by setting apart the African-American folklore within the central narrative, she makes a case for the recognition of the literary possibilities of folklore. Second, her use of Vodou achieves the harmonious blending of folklore and fiction that Thomas holds as a standard of successful, black creative expression.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the widespread desire for the primitive extended beyond a demand for minstrel stereotypes of "happy darkies" into the world of the exotic primitive. These demands dovetailed with Renaissance writers' struggles to define what was unique to African-American culture. One way they did so was by attempting to articulate and define blacks' African heritage. But when imagining African culture's relevance to African-American culture and identity, Hurston and her contemporaries often used stereotypical images of beating drums and the jungle, feeding American society's perceptions of Africa as a savage, primal and uncivilized place. Hemenway writes:

Such tom-tom beats were almost a cliché in Harlem Renaissance writing, and both blacks and whites became enmeshed in the cult of exotic primitivism. For the whites it was the idea that Harlem was an uptown jungle, a safari for the price of cab fare, with cabarets decorated in jungle motifs. They went to Harlem to see the natural rhythm and uninhibited grace of America's link with the heart of darkness. For the black artists it was a much more serious concern, an attempt to establish a working relationship with what Locke called in *The New Negro* the "ancestral" past. (75)

Harlem Renaissance writers' uses of African images frequently held a dual significance as expressions of a serious attempt to articulate the relevance of an African past to African-Americans' present and futures, and as a base appeal to racist demands for exotic entertainment. Hurston's literary forays into blacks' ancestral past often made use of the clichés mentioned above. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, for instance, and in her 1928

essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she makes prodigious use of the metaphor of the drum to invoke an ancient African heritage as the foundation of African-American identity.

One could view Hurston's turn to Vodou as another example of her exploitation of the primitive because, historically, representations of Vodou in the U.S. have been rife with clichés. For example, Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* contains numerous stereotypes in its depiction of a voodoo cult of savages: Brutus Jones, the noble savage; the tom-toms beating incessantly in the background to foreshadow evil; and natives using black magic to depose their emperor. However, Hurston's weaving of Vodou imagery in *Their Eyes* completely evades such predictable stereotypes, delving instead into the complexities of the belief system, the culture from which it springs and the ways in which those complexities address African-American (and Afro-Caribbean) social and political concerns. The Vodou subtext represents a facet of the primitive that exceeds the scope of the plantation and jungle bunny stereotypes that dominated the Harlem Renaissance era. It links the southern folk with a Black Atlantic experience rooted in slavery, armed revolution and African spirituality.

III. Vodou Imagery and Female Agency

The primary Vodou element in this novel is the implicit presence of the goddess, Ezili. Hurston infuses Janie with the characteristics of two aspects of this spirit: Ezili Freda, the mulatta goddess of love, and Ezili Danto, the black goddess who is associated with maternal rage. These two spirits display attributes that are completely opposed. Freda is of an elite class; she is a mulatta, self-possessed and materialistic. Danto is working class, black and associated with motherhood. These contradictory qualities reside in one spirit, and in the case of the novel, they also lie in one body—Janie's. The tensions that stem from these oppositions reflect the conditions and desires of African Americans; and while they cannot always be assimilated or resolved, they frequently result in cultural and individual expressiveness that is dynamic and powerful. Therefore, Hurston uses Vodou imagery, in particular the image of Ezili, in order to implicitly enter a discourse on the present and future of African-American culture.

Just as all Vodou ceremonies begin with songs, dances and prayers in honor of Legba, the novel starts with an implicit invocation of him. Janie calls forth the power of Legba, the keeper of the crossroads, which is the gateway between the spiritual and material worlds, as she searches "as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps" (11). And when she walks "down to the front gate"—the symbolic crossroads—"and [leans] over to gaze up and down the road" (11), her air of expectation invokes the potential embodied by Legba. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston calls Legba the "opener of gates"; he symbolizes opportunity (115).³ As Janie stands at the gate, "looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made," she feels acutely this sense of opportunity (11).

This invocation of Legba, a Black Atlantic god, takes place in a text marked by its multiple references to the Christian God, most notably in its title. During the storm

that erupts near the end of the narrative, the folks stranded on the muck stare into the darkness, putting themselves at the mercy of a Christian God. But throughout the narrative, as they gaze upon Janie's body, they have also been looking to a New World goddess rooted in African spirituality. Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that "there are a number of substitutions for God made in this book, usually in the form of big talkers—'Mouth Almighty' of the rural folk, and 'I God' for Joe Stark's comic blasphemous condensation of political and economic power."⁴ The temporal powers of Jody and the gossiping Eatonville folk give scant competition to the all encompassing power of God to whom Janie, Tea Cake and their friends silently appeal as they wait for the storm to arrive. But the novel refers in passing only to these false gods, and to the ultimate authority, the God who controls the potentially devastating forces of nature. This God is Ezili's primary challenger in the competition for the characters' allegiance.

Janie resembles Ezili Freda physically. In *Voodoo in Haiti*, anthropologist Alfred Mètraux describes Freda, the goddess of love, as "a pretty Antillean half-caste. . . . a personification of feminine grace and beauty. She has all the characteristics of a pretty mulatto: she is coquettish, sensual, pleasure-loving and extravagant" (110). Freda can make any man she chooses her husband, a characteristic that finds its parallel in Janie's search for a suitable mate. Janie dresses in blue (2), Freda's favorite color.⁵ The description of Janie's return to Eatonville echoes Mètraux's description of Ezili's entrance into a Vodou temple. Hurston writes:

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. (2)

Mètraux writes:

At last, in the full glory of her seductiveness, with hair unbound to make her look like a long-haired half-caste, Ezili makes her entrance to the peristyle. She walks slowly, swinging her hips, throwing saucy, ogling looks at the men or pausing for a kiss or a caress. (111)

Janie's long hair and sensuality mark her as the object of sexual desire. Although, unlike Ezili Freda, Janie does not actively solicit male attention, Freda's desire for sensuality and love blooms in Janie as she muses under the pear tree in her grandmother's garden. And finally, the celebration of love and sexuality symbolized by Freda culminates in Janie and Tea Cake's playful, loving relationship.

The text celebrates female sexuality with its sensuous prose and its positioning of Janie's quest for love at its center. By linking Janie's sexuality with Freda's, Hurston radicalizes it by associating it with the ritual of possession in which a god mounts an initiate. The goddess is said to "ride" her horse. The implicit sexuality in this

terminology is self-evident and Ezili's desire for numerous "husbands" is well documented in the anthropological literature. The image of a woman, either human or spirit, "mounting" a man proves significant because it implies the woman's control over her own sexuality and over the man's pleasure as well. For Hurston, representing a woman's sexuality in full bloom is not just affirmative, it is revolutionary.

But Freda's presence also represents a desire for wealth and status, which eventually leads to conflict for Janie. After joining in a loveless marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie tells her grandmother, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think, Ah. . ." (23). Janie's desire for "things sweet" corresponds with the mythology surrounding Ezili Freda, who also desires sweets.⁶ Janie eventually satisfies that desire when she marries a man with a sweet sounding name, Tea Cake; but that only occurs when she shucks off her grandmother's belief that a secure, middle-class home should take precedence over romantic love. Nanny responds to Janie's rejection of the economically stable and physically unattractive Logan Killicks in the following way:

If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and . . . Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on Dis love! (22)

The similarities between Janie and Freda go only so far because, ultimately, Janie rejects the aristocratic ideal that Freda embodies (represented by her love of jewelry, brushes and combs, the valorization of her light skin and long hair and her preference for French over Creole, the language of the lower classes in Haiti). She laments to Pheoby the fact that "Jody classed me off"; and rejoices when she finds in Tea Cake not only romantic love, but also the connection with the folk from which she has so often been discouraged. Janie finds no satisfaction in Logan Killicks' possessions, resents the fact that Jody sits her on the front porch like "a pretty doll-baby" (28) and rejoices when Tea Cake asks her to work in the muck with all the "common" folk.

Although Janie resents being "classed off," most of the other characters crave and envy the status that comes with having material possessions and a light-skinned wife. They worship and desire the materialistic and elitist lifestyle represented by the mulatta Freda, which eventually proves their downfall. While most of the folk share these desires, Mrs. Turner, Janie's "visiting friend" in the muck proves the most egregious example of this mindset because her worship of Janie's mixed race features borders on self-hatred. Mrs. Turner "didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such" (13):

Once having set up her idols and built altars to them it was inevitable that she would worship there. It was inevitable that she should accept any inconsistency and cruelty from her deity as all good worshippers do from theirs. All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason.

Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood. (138–39)

Mrs. Turner worships Janie's Caucasian features like an initiate worships the lwa—with blood sacrifices and an awareness that the gods can sometimes be arbitrary in their cruelty. This critique of Mrs. Turner's misplaced faith in whiteness is not a condemnation of Vodou, however. Rather, it is an honest assessment of the religion's tendency to respond to and reflect all of its worshippers' desires, including those that may be self-destructive. While the other characters are not as virulent in their internalized racism as Mrs. Turner, Nanny, Logan, Jody, the townsfolk and even Tea Cake show signs of being color struck and materialistic. Thus, the text's condemnation of Mrs. Turner implicitly extends to a critique of other characters who share her views.

Despite the popular tendency to worship that which Ezili Freda represents, Janie eventually rejects the elitist trappings that characterize the lwa and embraces the working-class, folk identity of Ezili Danto. When she returns to Eatonville, the women remark on the changes in her appearance. "What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls?—What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?" (2). While their vituperative comments reflect their envy of Janie's appearance and wealth, the changes in her appearance reflect a profound change in Janie's self-perception and a departure from the iconography of Ezili Freda.⁷ The references to Janie's "overhalls" and age place her in the province of Ezili Danto, the Petwo spirit, at the same time that her long hair and sensuality continue to align her with Freda. This passage resonates on multiple levels, positioning Janie as two kinds of women: one who benefits from and reaffirms gender, class and color biases (signified by Freda), and one who is noted for her willingness to work and for her maturity (signified by Danto).

McCarthy Brown describes Ezili Danto as an independent woman with an unconventional sexuality. She has "dark black skin" and is "not too proud to work" (229). Although the fair-complexioned, relatively well-off Janie must convince Tea Cake that she is not above working in the fields with the other migrant laborers, she soon proves to be an enthusiastic worker. Danto's black skin mirrors the blackness of the muck and that of the people in whom Janie finds fulfillment. Unlike the light-skinned Mrs. Turner who says, she "can't stand black niggers" (135), or the mulatta Ezili Freda who detests those with black skin, Janie loves Tea Cake, his dark skin and the affirmative connection with her community that blackness represents.

But Danto also has the power to destroy, which earns her the reputation of being "red-eyed," or evil. Hurston calls her "the terrible Erzulie, ge-rouge. . . . an older woman and terrible to look upon" (123).⁸ That destructive force makes itself known during the hurricane, which erupts in order to convey Danto's displeasure. This spirit, who represents working-class values and an affirmative blackness, violently objects to the African Americans' deference to white cultural, racial and economic supremacy

at the expense of their own autonomy. The danger of such attitudes becomes clear when the folk remain in the path of the storm, despite the warning signs they receive, because they are making “seven and eight dollars a day picking beans.” In contrast to the Native Americans who know how to read the signs that nature gives them—“Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming,” they say as they flee the Everglades—the African Americans ignore the warnings (146). They stay where they are because, “De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (148). This implicit trust in white people’s authority proves their downfall and results in the deaths of scores of people. Tea Cake’s “possession” by the rabid dog that bites him is the most graphic example of the consequences suffered by black folks who blindly worship whiteness.

Vodou stands in this novel as a reminder of black independence and expressiveness, and the Vodou goddesses demand payment when proper attention is not paid to these principles. Janie’s deferral to Tea Cake, who insists that they follow the example of the white landowners, runs against her own instincts. Her acquiescence to his will mirrors the African-American community’s subordination to white authority and underscores the notion that their flaw is in the refusal to read the situation and interpret its meaning for themselves. When we first meet the young Janie, we learn that she can communicate with nature and understand its signs:

. . . Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. . . . She had been summoned to behold a revelation” (11, emphasis added)

Janie’s ability to “read” nature’s signs mirrors that of the Native Americans who warn her and her friends to leave before the hurricane strikes. But her unwillingness to heed her own internal barometer results in a terrible price paid to nature’s forces. Karla Holloway writes in *The Character of the Word*:

Nature has bowed to human forces throughout the novel. Here she shows that she is a power that can control, as well as be controlled. Perhaps her fury is a lesson for Janie, who has been linked with natural imagery throughout the story and who needs to learn the potential strength of her own independence. (65)

All of the folks living in the Everglades, and not just Janie, need to learn to honor their independence.

Ezili Danto makes her angry presence known at this point in the narrative. She is connected with water; a gentle rainfall signals her presence and a deluge signals her rage.⁹ The hurricane is described as a terrifying and cosmic force that extracts the blood sacrifice that “real gods” demand: “Ten feet higher and as far as they could see the muttering wall advanced before the braced-up waters like a road crusher on a cosmic scale. The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an

hour wind had loosed his chains" (153). Danto's rage erupts as a violent reminder to the folk that their passive faith in Euro-Americans, or Christianity, to determine their fate is misguided. The events leading up to the hurricane vividly illustrate the need for self-determination in the collective black consciousness. This lesson comes too late for Tea Cake to learn; but his death is an example for other individuals. Likewise, Janie suffers for her passivity not only in losing Tea Cake, but also in having to act as the agent of his death.

Ezili Danto's brutal insistence that the folk maintain their independence defies Christian doctrine which traditionally advocated submission to authority.¹⁰ The passiveness of the folk as they wait for the onslaught to begin underscores Christianity's traditional call for submissiveness: "They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (151). In contrast to this situation which forces the folk to assume a posture of defeat, Hurston saw Vodou as facilitating a peasant self-expression that often subverted authority. Her account in *Tell My Horse* of the events that take place when Gede, the peasant god of death, mounts an individual, highlights the potential threat in the Vodou tradition to upend hierarchies and disrupt social order:

On several occasions, it was observed that Guedé [sic] seemed to enjoy humbling his betters. On one occasion Guedé reviled a well-dressed couple in a car that passed. Their names were called and the comments were truly devastating to say the least. With such behavior one is forced to believe that some of the valuable commentators are "mounted" by the spirit and that others are feigning possession in order to express their resentment general and particular. That phrase "Parlay cheval ou" is in daily, hourly use in Haiti and no doubt it is used as a blind for self-expression. (221)

When Gede speaks through the possessed, political, economic and social injustices come under attack in ways that could never be possible in Haitian society under ordinary circumstances. If an individual pretends to be possessed by the lwa, in effect putting on a mask of Gede, that attack becomes even more threatening than one from a possessed individual because it is a willful expression of anger, disgust or defiance.

In Gede's burlesque antics we find the most striking, but not the only, example of peasant self-expression which threatens the stability of a social order. While possession by Gede results in the subversion of class hierarchies, the presence of Ezili Freda and Danto illustrates the ways in which class identity and female agency are expressed in Haitian society (and, by extension, within Eatonville society as well). Vodou's implicit stress on self-expression echoes the novel's more explicit celebration of black expressiveness through the storytelling that takes place. Storytelling and, by extension, other forms of self-expression have the capacity to liberate Janie from the many constraints placed on her. Powerful truths about life and love exist in Janie's story, which she recounts to her friend Pheoby while they sit on the back porch of her

house. Janie's story takes on a mythic dimension and her words transcend even the limitations of her own life. Mary Helen Washington aptly describes those limitations:

One can hardly make . . . an unequivocal claim for Janie's heroic posture in *Their Eyes*. . . . Her friendship with Pheoby, occurring apart from the community, encapsulates Janie and Pheoby in a private dyad that insulates Janie from the jealousy of other women. Like the other women in the town, she is barred from participation in the culture's oral tradition. When the voice of the black oral tradition is summoned in *Their Eyes*, it is not used to represent the collective black community, but to invoke and valorize the voice of the black *male* community. (Washington 99)

While I concur that the novel primarily celebrates the black male oral tradition, I would reassert the significance of the frame story told by Janie to Pheoby. The frame story takes on the power and status of myth, which Leslie Desmangles describes as possessing "a paradoxical capacity to express complex truths in everyday language, to use common words and familiar objects to reveal what is most sacred in life" (61). Janie's gender and race certainly circumscribe her experiences, but her story speaks to the potential she carries within. Desmangles notes that "myths are . . . powerful vehicles which can transcend the limitations of profane existence" (61). While Janie may not fully realize her voice and agency in the time frame of the narrative, her mythic tale underscores the potential which exists within all black women. Janie entrusts Pheoby with the responsibility of passing on her story and "de understanding" that goes along with it: "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (6). With this exhortation, the promise arises that a ritualized sharing of stories and experiences between women will develop. Pheoby will recount Janie's tale, but she will also revise it as she grows and experiences new things. She may inspire future listeners, just as Janie has inspired her. Janie's experience, her story, functions as myth for the folk, teaching them the value of self-expression and the necessity for self-determination.

IV. Critical Schools: Tradition and Transformation

Hurston's incorporation into her novel of a religious tradition which she viewed as ancient and African does not preclude the text's relevance to the condition of modern African Americans. The Vodou intertext in *Their Eyes* actually enabled Hurston to grapple with issues which preoccupied black intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, such as class, gender and inter- and intraracial conflicts. Critical responses to the text failed to perceive, however, its immediate relevance to current events and modern political thought. Because Hurston positioned herself as an authority on black culture in her lifetime, she practically instigated others to attack her representations of black people and black culture for their lack of authenticity or legitimacy. Alain Locke chastised Hurston in his annual literature review for *Opportunity* magazine for creating "those pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over, and

envy" (18). More biting than Locke's review was the critique by the leading black novelist of the day. Richard Wright wrote that the novel, like minstrelsy, "carries no theme, no message, no thought," and functioned only to satisfy the tastes of a white audience for the simple and exotic primitive (17). Locke and Wright registered their conviction that Hurston's characters are too cartoonish, simple and docile to be real.

Locke and Wright expressed their squeamishness with Hurston's portrayal of local color during a time in which Northern black newspapers regularly instructed those in their readership who were newly arrived from the South on proper etiquette in public places. Their discomfort with her portrayal of folk characters echoed the sensitivity of many African-American intellectuals to the public's perception of black culture. In his introduction to *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Michael Awkward notes:

Sensitive to the need to improve white America's perception of Afro-Americans, some powerful black intellectuals, including Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, believing that literature represented the most effective means by which to begin to dispel racist notions that black Americans were morally and cognitively subhuman, insisted that Afro-American writers were obligated to present Afro-Americans in the most favorable—and flattering—light possible. (10)

Although Wright was subjected to similar criticisms upon the publication of *Native Son*, his review of *Their Eyes* reflects a touchiness regarding the proper strategy for depicting the African-American lower classes. Although Locke and Wright couch their criticism in a rhetoric of authenticity, they seem to object more strenuously to Hurston's seemingly apolitical depiction of poor, uneducated blacks to a presumably racist white audience.

Hurston's reputation has benefited from a surge in scholarly interest since the publication in the early 1970s of Alice Walker's essay, "Looking for Zora." To this day, however, some critics retain a residual discomfort with her often flamboyant and controversial statements about black culture. For example, in *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy asserts that Hurston's romanticization of "the folk" and idealization of rural, southern black culture prevent her from acknowledging African-American cultural transformation. Gilroy's critique of Hurston assumes that the desire to preserve a sense of tradition automatically marks one as antagonistic to change. Hurston's forays into Vodou symbolism illustrate her respect for a tradition and culture which she considered ancient and African. But more importantly, her appropriation of this African diasporic tradition allowed her to participate in an ongoing dialogue about social and cultural change within black communities in the United States, which preoccupied her contemporaries during and after the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston was absolutely interested in exploring the extent and effect of cultural transformation within African-American communities; and Vodou was the primary avenue for accomplishing this exploration.

To illustrate his point, Gilroy teases out a compelling analysis of Hurston's contempt for the operatic performances of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, focusing on her theories of authenticity and black culture:

For Hurston, the success of the Fisk choir represented the triumph of musicians' tricks over the vital, untrained, angular spirit of the rural folk who 'care nothing about pitch' and 'are bound by no rules.' . . . She attacked the choir's performances as inauthentic. (91-92)

Gilroy goes on to say:

I would emphasise that as far as this chapter is concerned, whether Hurston was right or wrong about the Fisk Singers is not the primary question. The issue which interests me more than her correctness is her strongly felt need to draw a line around what is and isn't authentically, genuinely, and really black. . . . (92)

The implied critique in Gilroy's observation is that by insisting on an authentic way of singing the spirituals, Hurston resists an inevitable and dynamic change that is an inherent part of the Black Atlantic experience. In order to make this point, he understates the desire for upward class mobility that motivated individuals and groups like the Fisk Singers to elevate a lowly folk art into "high" culture. I think it important, however, to focus on the reasons for her objections to what she considered the loss of integrity in a black cultural production. Hurston's criticism was directed primarily toward a group of formally educated African Americans who attempted to transform a rough, improvisational musical form born of illiterate blacks into an operatic, and therefore more "cultured," form of music.¹¹ Her refusal to see the operatic performances of spirituals as authentic stems from her resistance to an aesthetic which continued to view poor black culture as inferior, even as it attempted to rehabilitate and transform that culture for a wider audience.

While Hurston grappled with the significance and consequences of transformed cultural experiences, she was not willing to define a "New Negro" who was completely ignorant of, or free from, the influences of the past. Karla Holloway accurately notes that "Hurston's was an ancient spirit in an age that demanded modernism, that called the Negro 'new' and expected that Negro to be male" (17). Hurston refused to submit to the demands of modernism and progress without question because she feared the loss or repression of African cultural fragments. Her objection to the choir's innovations was not so much that they diluted the music's blackness with their injection of class and educational privilege; rather, she objected to the compromise, or abandonment, of the principles on which the music was based.

In an essay entitled, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," Hurston describes such unique characteristics of Negro singing as "jagged harmony," disharmony, shifting

keys, “broken time” and improvisation (80–81). She was very much aware that most of these musical characteristics were African in origin. Eric Sundquist’s comparison of black English and black music proves illuminating in understanding the rationale behind Hurston’s supposed resistance to change. He asserts that the perceived strangeness of the language and the music (which we could also call African-ness) often led to anxiety in and ridicule from the dominant culture: “For whites’ complaints about the ineffability of black dialect, which led in turn to the grotesque caricatures of minstrelsy and some plantation romance, repeated comparable observations by musicologists . . . that the intonations of the black spiritual were difficult to transcribe” (60). The elements of the spirituals that seem wrong to the ear trained in Western music (like the polyrhythms and blue notes which Hurston called broken time and disharmony) are the very elements that Hurston sought to preserve. Her critique of the Fisk Jubilee Singers was directed as much at the westernization of the spirituals at the expense of their African elements as it was towards the elegant concert halls and bourgeois performers and audience members. Hurston expressed her rejection of white cultural supremacy through her insistence on an authentic mode of performance, which Gilroy reads as a rejection of modernity. While some might argue that westernization is an inevitable and not necessarily negative cultural transformation, to do so without reservation is problematic because it does not challenge the then widely held assumption that European values were superior to and more sophisticated than African ones.

Unlike Gilroy, Hazel Carby acknowledges Hurston’s investment in deflating class-driven pretensions; but like Gilroy, she finds Hurston too quick to delineate who *the* folk might be, as if such a homogenous group identity ever existed. In “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” Carby notes that Hurston avoids any mention of the newly emergent northern, urban black and chooses to focus on an almost mythical South:

Hurston was concerned to establish authenticity in the representation of popular forms of folk culture and to expose the disregard for the aesthetics of that culture through inappropriate forms of representation. She had no problem in using the term ‘the people’ to register that she knew just who they were. But critics are incorrect to think that Hurston reconciled ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of cultural production. Hurston’s criticisms were not reserved for the elitist manner in which she thought the authentic culture of the people was reproduced. The people she wanted to represent she defined as a rural folk, and she measured them and their cultural forms against an urban, mass culture. (75)

Carby concludes that Hurston displaces the migration of blacks to the urban North with a nostalgic discourse about the rural South, resisting the cultural transformation that resulted from that migration. Carby stresses the need to recognize the transformation of black culture and warns against the impulse to romanticize a homogenous experience. Her critique, like Gilroy’s, is facilitated by Hurston’s many assertions of the genuine and authentic in black culture.¹² But Hurston’s polemics do not preclude

an active engagement in her literature with African-American social and cultural change.

While Carby astutely observes that, in *Their Eyes*, Janie reverses the direction of most black migrants, moving deeper South rather than North, she does not investigate the reasons for and implications of this movement.¹³ She notes that Hurston situates “the southern, rural folk and patterns of migration in relation to the Caribbean rather than the northern states,” viewing that migration ever southward as yet another displacement (82). Hurston’s evocation of the Caribbean through Vodou, however, allows her to grapple with many of the issues being debated in cosmopolitan, intellectual circles during the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁴

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston comments on issues of class, gender, sexuality and cultural identity primarily through her use of Vodou imagery. The novel takes up many of the same issues being debated by her contemporaries during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Harlem was frequently celebrated as unique because it was a gathering place for diverse people of the African Diaspora. Alain Locke writes in *The New Negro*:

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the north and the Negro of the south; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. (6)

In asserting that “their greatest experience has been the finding of one another,” Locke minimizes any social or cultural tensions that may have existed between the different groups gathered in Harlem and celebrates Harlem as a center of African diasporic culture. This emerging and changing culture, noted for its diversity, is but one of the social transformations Carby believes Hurston should have recognized.

Locke’s optimism actually was shared by Hurston, however, and is implicitly echoed in an easily overlooked passage in the novel. In it she describes how the Bahamians and Black Americans working in the Everglades overcome their initial trepidation over each other’s foreignness by dancing together. The Bahamians “quit hiding out to hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn’t laugh at them as they feared. Many of the Americans learned to jump and liked it as much as the ‘Saws.’ So they began to hold dances night after night in the quarters, usually behind Tea Cake’s house” (146). The relative ease with which these groups overcome their differences suggests that national and ethnic identification can be blurred with a greater awareness and cultivation of cultural similarities, and a greater tolerance of and interest in cultural difference. So, in the midst of their dances, we cannot distinguish between American and Bahamian as they make “living, sculptur-

al, grotesques in the dance" (147). This reference to "sculptural grotesques," African sculptures brought to life, evokes the dancers' shared ancestry.

This allusion to Africa and the passage's naive suggestion that cultural, political and economic differences can be easily eradicated by social interaction reveal that Hurston ascribed to the notion of a unified and idyllic African past. Carby and Gilroy have accurately identified Hurston's tendency to romanticize the past in this novel, yet I argue that the allusions to Vodou reveal a more complex vision of Black Atlantic cultures. Her immersion in tradition, specifically Haitian Vodou tradition, opens the novel up to politicized readings of contemporary African-American racial, gender and class politics.

Just as Locke saw the social and political potential of Harlem because it was a site of "group expression and self-determination," Hurston saw that same potential in Haitian Vodou. The elements of the text which Carby identifies as displacements to the South and to the Caribbean actually allow Hurston to explore through metaphor and symbolism the social and political concerns of African Americans in the North, South and throughout the Caribbean. Hurston was not solely interested in elevating African-American folk culture; she was also invested in collecting and recreating through fiction what black people had to say about themselves. Haitian Vodou provided Hurston with the ideal vehicle to voice African diasporic peoples' (especially women's) views on their social status and unique experiences, demonstrating that ancient tradition can effectively shape our comprehension of modern cultures that are constantly evolving.

NOTES

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1. In *The Faces of the Gods*, Leslie Desmangles writes, "Thanks to Hollywood and the film industry, what average persons conjure up in their minds when they think of *Voodoo* is a picture of witches and sorcerers who, filled with hatred, attempt to inflict diseases or even death on other persons by making wax or wooden representations of them, and perforating them with pins. Another popular image of *Voodoo* or *Hoodoo* is that of a conglomeration of exotic spells celebrated clandestinely by blacks inebriated with blood . . ." (1-2). Given that the terms, "voodoo" and "hoodoo" are saddled with misleading and defamatory meaning, I have chosen to use in this paper the Creole spelling of Vodou and other terminology related to it, except when citing sources that may spell them differently. The Creole spelling also approximates the etymological root, the Dahomean term "*vodu*" or "*vodun*" which means "spirit."
2. Trudier Harris claims that Hurston "excessively packs in folk expressions and beliefs to the extent that the excessively metaphorical folk language becomes an added character, plugging up the cracks between theme and plot, not a smoothly woven, integral part of the whole; language and story seem to have mutually exclusive functions" (6). Although the African-American folklore functions separately from, and sometimes competes with, the narrative, the Haitian folklore blends in with and extends the narrative's themes.
3. Hurston's characterization of Legba as the master of potentiality is supported by other sources. For example, Robert Farris Thompson writes that "God granted *Ashu* [the Yoruba manifestation of Legba] the force to make all things happen and multiply (*ashé*). . . . He is . . . the ultimate master of potentiality" (18-19).
4. References to God and god-like figures abound. Blau DuPlessis notes that "the absolute

beginning of the book begins playing with title materials and meanings by opening issues about words and the Word in relation to gender and racial power. The third paragraph starts with a revisionary articulation of Biblical rhetoric, 'So the beginning of this was a woman', taking the world-creating place of Word or God" (109).

Lorraine Bethel writes, "Hurston's first description of Nanny in *Their Eyes* establishes her as a representative of the religious experience that stands at the center of Afro-American folk tradition. She is described in terms suggestive of a Christ figure. Janie makes Nanny a wreath of 'palma christi leaves,' and the words 'bore' and 'pierce' used in this passage invoke images of the crucifixion" (13-14).

Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates Jr. note that "Joe Starks . . . fondly and unconsciously refers to himself as 'I-God.' During the lamp-lighting ceremony . . . Joe is represented as the creator (or at least the purchaser) of light" (73).

5. "Each *loa* has its representative colour—red for Ogu, white for Damballah, blue for Ezili etc. . . ." (Mètraux 167).
6. "Ezili being a white *loa* and a 'woman of the world' has a fondness for pale and sugary drinks" (Mètraux 176).
7. Janie's donning of the overalls can be read as a moment of symbolic transvestitism which disrupts and challenges Eatonville's social order. In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber argues that "transvestitism was located at the juncture of class and gender, and increasingly through its agency gender and class were revealed to be commutable, if not equivalent. To transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both, and the set of social codes—already demonstrably under attack—by which such categories were policed and maintained" (32). The townsfolk react to Janie's transgression of class and gender boundaries, seeing the overalls as a violation of their social codes.
8. While some anthropologists mistakenly represent the Rada and Petwo spirits as symbolizing good and evil (Hurston included), the actual significance of these two Vodou pantheons is more complicated than suggested by this binarism. McCarthy Brown writes: "The Rada spirits are sweet-tempered and dependable; their power resides in their wisdom. . . . They are intimate, familial spirits who are given family titles such as Papa and Kouzen [cousin]. . . . The Petwo spirits, in contrast, are hot-tempered and volatile. They must be handled with care and precision. Debts must be paid and promises kept, or they will badger and harass those who serve them. The power of the Petwo spirits resides in their effectivity, their ability to make things happen" (100-1).
9. "Danto's anger can exceed what is required for strict discipline. At times, it explodes from her with an irrational, violent force. Ezili Danto, like Lasyrenn, has connections with water. A gentle rainfall during the festivities at Saut d'Eau, a mountain pilgrimage site for Ezili Danto (Our Lady of Mount Carmel), is readily interpreted as a sign of her presence; but so is a sudden deluge resulting in mudslides, traffic accidents, and even deaths. . . . Thus Danto's rage can emerge with the elemental force of a torrential rain, which sweeps away just and unjust alike. This aspect of Ezili Danto might be described as an infant's eye view of the omnipotent mother" (McCarthy Brown 231).
10. Donald Petesch notes that during the period of enslavement, in sermons and catechisms, "grand moralizing gave way to immediate practical ends: the language of religion became the language of social control" (60).
11. Arnold Rampersad's assessment of the contributors to *The New Negro*, some of the most influential black intellectuals of the day, supports my suggestion that the desire to elevate the spirituals to a "higher" art form betrays a belief in the cultural inferiority of African Americans. Rampersad writes, "It is fair to say that, in the face of racial 'science,' most of the contributors to the volume accepted the notion of black racial and cultural inferiority compared to the standards of European civilization. Most also believed, however, that the African race was on the move forward, that politically, economically, and culturally, peoples of African descent around the world were engaged in the first stages of a transformation that would eventually lead to independence from Europe" (xvi). Ironically, most believed that independence from Europe could only be achieved by successfully replicating, with minor adaptations, its cultural, social and political paradigms.
12. For example, in "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," Hurston asserts, "There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adaptors [sic] based on the spirituals" (80).
13. Carby is far from alone in perceiving the novel as being removed from history and reality.

Robert Stepto writes, "The narrative takes place in a seemingly ahistorical world: the spanking new all-black town is meticulously bereft of former slave cabins; there are no railroad trains, above or underground, with or without Jim Crow cars; Matt's mule is a bond with and catalyst for distinct tribal memories and rituals, but these do not include the hollow slogan, 'forty acres and a mule'; Janie seeks freedom, selfhood, voice, and 'living' but is hardly guided—or haunted—by Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman, let alone Frederick Douglass" (6). What Stepto calls an "ahistorical world," Carby names a displacement. Carby remarks upon the text's avoidance of the present, while Stepto focuses on its avoidance of the past. But just as Hurston implicitly signifies on then contemporary debates and experiences, so does she signify on African-American history. One can read the fact that Logan Killicks owns not just forty, but sixty acres and a mule not as a historicism, but as an ironic commentary on the nation's unwillingness to realize its promise to the newly emancipated slaves.

14. Deborah E. McDowell makes a similar point about Hurston's willingness to engage in political dialogue in an essay on *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. In it, McDowell discusses the ways in which the text's symbolism critiques the United States' rhetoric of liberation and reveals its hypocrisy by implicitly juxtaposing the United States' oppression of African Americans with the ideology of racial purity which fueled Germany's entry into a world war in 1939. McDowell concludes, "All too often Hurston's readers have consigned her to Eatonville and left her there on the porch. . . . Even when readers stretch her province to New Orleans and the Caribbean, the sites of her fieldwork, they often read these migrations as extensions of Eatonville, seen as the repository of black folk culture on which all Hurston's work is dependent. But reducing Eatonville and its symbolic geographic coordinates to the repositories of black 'folk' expression that Hurston mined so well regionalizes her work and ensures her removal from a more global context of cultural production and exchange" (240).

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