

The Responsibility in Representation: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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1.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*¹⁾ was published in 1937: in the middle of severe whirlwind of ideological debates in Afro-American literary arena. When Zora Hurston put the work out to the world, Richard Wright, so called belligerent proponent for Afro-American literature as a battlefield in which black life should be represented in the raw and it's harshness is to alarm both white and black complacency, unhesitantly called the novel counterrevolutionary. Wright grumbled that "Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction." Another influential Harlem Renaissance figure like Alain Locke reduced the novel to "folklore fiction at best" dismissing it's literary value to such point of an anthropological episode.²⁾

Those above are main responses, mainly depreciating and hostile in it's nature, to Hurston's work around at the time of publication; it's lack of seriousness as a ficton, naive compromise to the traditional image of the Negro who always laugh and shed tears.³⁾

1) Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes were Watching God*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1937; 1998.)

2) Barbara Chritian: *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980) p. 62.

3) Another example of depreciative comments by Richard Wright appeared in his essay contributed to *New Masses*: "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the white folks' laugh. Her characters . . . swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which American likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears." "The second sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a

However, recent criticism has found Hurston in a totally new position. After Hurston died obscurely of stroke in 1960, her four novels, a lot of essays and autobiography, that is, her literary career lapsed into oblivion for two decades. Hurston revival was ignited by modern black female novelist Alice Walker. As she put elaborately the procedures of 'excavating' the forgotten artist in her essay "Looking for Zora", Walker's pilgrimage to Hurston's grave eventually made Hurston a virtual maternal literary ancestor in Afro-American literature and let her cut an outstanding figure in 20th century English literature.⁴⁾

As a beginner of Hurston revival and also a donator to tombstone of formerly deserted Hurston's grave, Walker appreciated Hurston's works this way.

This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. . . . Zora's pride in black people was so pronounced in the ersatz black twenties that it made other blacks suspicious and perhaps uncomfortable (after all, they were still infatuated with things European).⁵⁾

If this appraisal by Walker is to evaluate Hurston's works in terms of creative effort to establish certain tradition in which modern readers can grasp the wholesome black experience and further re-thinking, judging the White-European-centered civilization, then an attempt to evaluate Hurston's works, examine its 'present' richness at its full scope is to be very rewarding.

white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase of Negro life which is 'quaint', the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race."

Michael Fabre. *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) pp. 250-251.

4) Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora", *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983) pp. 93-118.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 85.

2.

As Walker circumscribed, to be conscious of being black for the most part of Afro-Americans is, unlike Hurston, likely to be led into a feeling of incomplete, diminished human beings. For the succinct outline of this black culture one can refer to the foremost twentieth century philosopher and critic, Cornel West.

Of all the hidden injuries of blackness in American civilization, black rage is the most deadly, the most lethal. Although black culture is in no way reducible to or identical with black rage, it is inseparable from black rage. . . . The two major choice in black culture (or any culture) facing those who succumb to the temptation of hate are a self hatred that leads to self-destruction or a hatred of others — degraded others — that leads to vengeance of some sort.⁶⁾

If one has clear sense of the prevailing hatred permeating in one's culture, then the representation of this reality in any serious literature can hardly dodge out of it into the self-deceiving romantic daydreams or consciously overlooking exploitation of one's reality reducing it to a marginal, insignificant episode. That kind of evasion deserves to be categorized as Wright claims, "minstrel technique". However, to be responsibly conscious of the depressing reality where hatred and despair is omnipresent, does not necessarily mean an artist should select the subject matter of 'hatred' out of reality. The question of 'selection' is essentially to be evaluated upon the degree of so called, responsibility — in this sense, higher responsibility compared with the easily assuming the form of predetermined, politically correct selection of subject matter out of reality. The literature of the latter can be 'sincere' but not 'responsible' or 'serious' in that there lies the complexity of reality the artist can hardly achieve to represent unless he or she responsibly tackles the problem of deeper representation of life.

Hurston is the one who is never able to get along with this sincere, but fundamentally naive recognition, representation of life. She does not want herself to be misunderstood in the predominant interpretation of black life into

6) Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization", Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) pp. 94-95.

sheer hatred, despair.

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. . . . No, I do not weep at the world.⁷⁾

Given the tragic history Afro-Americans have been forced to undergo for over three hundred years, her attitude toward being colored, expressed in this somewhat casual, pleasant, nonchalant fashion, might well offend a great deal Harlem contemporaries such as Richard Wright. Some said of this Hurston optimism ascribing to Hurston's own autobiographical privilege, that is, the fact that she has fortunately lived up to her adulthood in all-black-town Eatonville, Florida.⁸⁾

Nevertheless, that seemingly none-of-my-business attitude of Hurston toward being colored is not to be considered with predetermined correctness. That is, it is seriously misleading if one considers Hurston's expression as a clear evidence of a sentiment devastatingly lack of responsibility as an Afro-American. Misleading is inevitable when one assumes others' feeling about being black has to be something he or she can positively conform to; a general symptom of imposing politically, socially pre-oriented sentiment upon one who somehow may feel another way.

Then one may question what Hurston's attitude toward being black, toward life, both in person or in her works really is. Did she lack the tragic sense of Afro-American experience? As Richard Wright commented negatively, she was unable to achieve 'seriousness' in her fiction at all? Can we assert there to be an essential trait in Hurston's work showing that she tackles the problem seriously about what is being black in America, being woman within or without black community and so forth?

On the other hand, can we bear witness to praises dedicated to Hurston by

7) Hurston, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me", Walker, p. 115.

8) Walker, pp. 85-86.

recent critics concentrating upon her spiritual ancestry to modern black women writers? As a Korean reader somewhat alienated from racial experience — although one cannot say it's possible to be alienated from ethnic reality especially on this globalization — Hurston's representation of being black, being woman, i. e., her achievement has any relevance to us? The evaluation naturally calls forth the necessity to examine her best work, *Their Eyes were Watching God*.

3.

Their Eyes is a story within a story. Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life, and her loves to her best friend, Phoebe, and to the community to which she has just returned. This aspect of the novel is critical to its substance, for Janie Stark is not an individual in a vacuum; she is an intrinsic part of a community, and she brings her life and its richness, joys, and sorrows back to it. As it has helped to form her, so she also helps to form it.⁹⁾

As Barbara Christian pointed out, *Their Eyes* deals with Janie's physical, mental development in the independent, insular black community, Eatonville. After willingly put an end to unsuccessful first marriage to old, obstinate Rogan Killicks, Janie flows into Eatonville, a newly-built town for only blacks with her second husband Joe Starks. Although Joe is an energetic leader, to be elected for the first mayor of that Eatonville, he, like Rogan the fist husband of Janie, forces his wife into silence, suppresses self-awareness in Janie. During her eighteen year lasting marriage, Janie's soul becomes withered, sterilized until she meets Tea Cake, a roustabout who, after Joe died, waters Janie's soul onto free, full blossoming like a pear tree to which she confided the secrets of her girlhood.

She saw 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 root to tiniest branch creaming every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! (11)

9) Christian, p. 57.

While this moving lyrical touch of Janie's commencement of conscious, adolescent life at her grandmother's yard generally permeates all over the novel, one cannot overlook Hurston's amusing artistry using the vernacular of the rural South. For example, the very first introductory scene of the novel, with black folk at the porch watching Janie's return to Eatonville is followed by a lively talk about, cut in, and judgment. However, this porch people's seemingly casual talk and 'judgment' allows readers to get to a far-reaching, underlying meaning of judgment which black experience has entertained, resorted to, guided by, and pursued for. In a sense, the beginning scene of the work, Janie's return to Eatonville symbolically means the return of the experienced pilgrim to her deeply cherished old faith, for which she took a journey out of it, on a quest for new thought, a new beginning. After the long pilgrimage she can add this new beginning, experienced power of insight to her old faith. So it is not surprising, at the beginning scene, to see her surrounded by the watchful eyes of black folks at the porch where she used to feel a vitality, eagerness of black life.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches besides the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment. (1)

It is noteworthy Hurston begins the novel with porch judgment on Janie's return since the porch scene is, for Hurston, the most frequent, effectual device conveying Janie's interweaving with the black community.

We can find another heroine's return to the hometown after the pilgrimage in Toni Morrison's earlier work, *Sula*. Coincidentally Morrison locates Sula, the heroine of the novel, returning to Medallian city in the year of 1937, the year Hurston published *Their Eyes*. One can recognize the explicit similarity of these two scenes of return to the old black community.

Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The

little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning. . . . In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they call evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, full itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent it's happening again. So also were they with people. . . . By the time she reached the *Bottom*, the news of her return had brought the black people out on their porches or to their windows. There were scattered hellos and nods but mostly stares.¹⁰⁾

As Morrison elaborately describes the sensibility of black folks in the situation of receiving it's pilgrim, it is undeniably a sort of 'judgment' like Hurston's beginning scene. Janie, like Sula, returned to her old town, that is, to her community's judgment which she took an integral part to form it. Both Janie and Sula came to re-form an old belief, to be a part of that judgment; even if Sula got insulated from her bosom friend Nel and died in utter solitude, she became a part of judgement by the *Bottom* people, who regard her as a kind of a plague robins and waited.

Even if Janie looked somewhat detached from what Eatonville people talk about, think about, as she cynically tones to Pheobe: "Let 'em console theyselves tuh rattle tuh make out they's alive. 'Corse, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else. And listenin' tuh dat kind uh talk is jus' lak openin' yo' mouth and lettin' de moon shine down yo' throat. It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there" (192). This realization of Janie is far from belittlement of people's judgment. It is another expression of heartfelt necessity of building a new judgment, 'knowing'.

To put figuratively, there are several judgment scenes, that is trial scenes in *Their Eyes* including virtual trial held right after Janie arrested for shooting rabid dog bitten Tea Cake. The other scenes are at the porch talk or at the front of boarding house or in the form of mock judgment, i. e., at the bird feast on Matt Bonner's mule.¹¹⁾

10) Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) pp. 89-91.

Each judgment naturally occurs in accordance with the general code of black community. Janie's life has been at once within and without this circle of judgment. It is of paramount importance for reader to see that her life is a conscious response to this circle of judgment and that Janie doesn't want herself to be misrepresented. Misrepresentation, for Janie, amounts to a kind of death so she desperately pursues for conscious articulation of herself in various situations. She feels all the way that it's her responsibility to articulate when summoned by her surrounding community, Eatonville with Joe Stark or Everglade with Tea Cake or white dominant courtroom.

4.

Janie's strivings not to be misrepresented is inherently related with her self-esteem, responsibility as a woman and human being within and without black community. The scene at Joe's deathbed succinctly shows her desperate effort to articulate on her marriage life. Janie doesn't want herself to be in the place of that mule of Matt Burner's which suffered lifetime exploitation, only starved to death and fell prey to the 'white-headed leader' buzzard.

"... You changes everything but nothing' don't change you — not even

11) see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies," Michael Awkward (ed.) *New Essay on Their Eyes were Watching God* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) pp. 95-123. She focuses on the device of figurative trial scenes in *Their Eyes*. According to her, there are altogether five trials except for the real trial in the work. The first is: the trial of the black "men talking around the front" of the boarding house after Janie set free out of the courthouse. Those black men said, "Yeah, de nigger women kin kill up all de mens dey wants tuh, but you bet' not kill one uh dem. Deh white folks will sho hang yuh if yuh do." (*Their Eyes*, 179-80) The second trial is the judgment of muck people who at first favored of Janie bereaving beloved Tea Cake, but that mass conviction changed into favor of Janie after Tea Cake's funeral. The third trial held at the store porch at the beginning of the novel, the verdict is a prejudgment: "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty." (1-4) The fourth is by Phoeby, whose tongue is Janie's tongue, and the porch sitters (6), and the last trial is a mock trial by buzzard: the buzzard "picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on." (57-58).

death. But Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh hush. Now, you gointhuh listen tuh me one time befo' die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash down and then die ruther that tuh let yo'self heah 'bout it. . . . Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me."

"All dis tearin' down talk!" Jody whispered with sweat globules forming all over his face and arms. "Git outa heah!"

"All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice — dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you." (86-87)

For the first time Joe is struck with silence of death culminating Janie's outburst of articulation. In this scene of somewhat tragi-comic argument between them, Hurston emphasizes on Janie's deep felt pathos for Joe and her elastic plunge into womanhood at Joe's deathbed at the same time.

She was full of pity for the first time in years. Jody had been hard on her and others, but life had mishandled him too. Poor Joe! Maybe if she known some other way to try, she might have made his face different. But what that other way could be, she had no idea. She thought back and forth about what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man. Then thought about herself. . . . The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her places. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. (87)

There is another cardinal scene for Janie's effort not to be misrepresented; at the courtroom, she dispassionately delivers a defense of herself against the charge of murdering Tea Cake.

. . . She was in the courthouse fighting something and it wasn't death. It was worse than that. It was lying thoughts. She had to go way back to let them know how she and Tea Cake had been with one another so they could see she could never shoot Tea Cake out of malice. . . . It was not death she feared. It was misunderstanding. If they made a verdict that she didn't want Tea Cake and wanted him dead, then that was a real sin and a shame. It was worse than murder. (187-8)

Janie knew that reality begins with words and words begins with a new thought. As she told her bosom friend Phoebe, "So in the beginin' new thoughts

had tuh be thought and new words said." (115). If reality originally lies in words and following judgment of those words, then one has to try hard to take the responsibility of making, forming that reality by one's articulation even if the attempt turns out to be the one against the temporal mass verdict, since temporality will make way for more lasting human values. In the courtroom "She just sat there and told and when she was through she was hushed." (187)

This courtroom scene is, in it's nature, a counterpart of Hurricane-blasted muck where Janie and Tea Cake helplessly got overthrown by the unrelenting, merciless power of nature, and "they seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." (161) It is this waiting, trying to see through the invisibility out of which Janie, with her lover Tea Cake, strives to get to some sort of dry land of reconstruction, although that reconstruction may not promise the safe, wholesome start.

Through her painful pilgrimage of articulation, re-forming the reality she is in, Janie not only wrestles with being a woman, wife, lover in black community, but voluntarily takes the part of re-forming those hatred-sorrow-ridden black reality. It makes the novel a lyric love story of man and wife who culminated their love into self-importance instead of immersing the other into the stifling flood of deathlike silence in one hand; on the other hand, through recurrent scenes of judgments held at manifold black routine lives, Hurston shows us that life is in itself a conscious effort to take a responsibility to form a new judgment.

Furthermore Janie's struggle to represent herself in a quite desperate surrounding conditions resounds the rage-ridden Bigger Thomas; who fumes about stifling white supremacy about him when he said, "I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They wouldn't give me no room. . . . I thought they was hard and I acted hard. . . . I'll be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them."¹²⁾

We see Bigger Thomas on a different stance when he eventually fails to articulate himself to Jan when he was offered the friendship of Jan, white victim and boyfriend of the slain Mary. Janie was not choked before the white supremacy. She narrated her story to the white courtroom out of similar

12) Richard Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 22-23.

desperateness with Bigger's, however, she made it to an articulation enough to be called, Janie's manifesto.

It has of little bearing upon the appreciation of the degree of responsible representation to ask who of the two is more articulating before the white. In some sense the white is by no means a monolithic lump to form a one-minded warfront before black people: to claim to be so is the obscuring the responsibility of efforts to discern the possible pursuit of human values among whites under the so called white supremacy. Also it is a nonsense to say Hurston in this way achieves more sense of responsibility in her works than Wright because Janie is more articulating or succeeds in finding heart warming love.

It is an author's attitude toward life that matters. Yet this difference between Bigger Thomas and Janie Woods is not to be overemphasized to the point that Hurston lacks any seriousness dealing with black experience. Just as Wright's portrayal of self-hatred, rage-ridden violence of Bigger Thomas can be called in a way 'seriousness', Hurston's representation of Janie's independent, soul blossoming pursuit for love without losing the context of black existence under the white supremacy can be said of Hurston to reach the sense of responsibility in life.¹³⁾

Moreover, Hurston's creative way of conveying the black existence aspiring to a self-esteem through true love in a community, although it is insular and independent one unlike Bigger's black ghetto in Chicago, it is likewise a great deal permeated by omnipresent white supremacy, can be a far more powerful paradox telling difficulties and hardship of being black in America. In this regard, Gates' comments on the novel significantly sums up the achievement of Hurston.

Their Eyes is a bold feminist novel, the first to be explicitly so in the Afro-American tradition. Yet in it's concern with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment, it suggests many of the themes that inspirit Hurston's

13) Gates sees Wright and Hurston respectively wrestle with the black dilemma of articulation in their works, but he points out this fundamental similarity between the two cannot help rupture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Afterword" *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 198.

oeuvre as a whole.¹⁴⁾

5.

For those of us who search for, appreciate the sense of responsibility in life in any work of art, Hurston's intense focus, in *Their Eyes*, on Janie's conscious response to the necessity of articulation, her effort to take responsibility to meet, re-form the judgments of the black community she belongs to is a remarkable achievement. Hurston's effort to grasp the complex grains of black female existence interwoven with pursuit of soul blooming relationship with other human beings under the dominant white western supremacy is even more challenging enough to inspire the modern black women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

When Cornel West diagnoses this twenty-first century as "twilight civilization", he obviously calls for a creative strivings such as Hurston's responsible, serious representation of life: life as it really is, to be aspired, ought not to be stopped.¹⁵⁾

14) Gates, p. 197

15) West, pp. 109-112. In his discussion on the legacy of W.E. Du Bois, he gravely predict thus and calls forth the need of a higher affirmative tradition.

"Since a multiracial alliance of progressive middlers, liberal slices of the corporate elite, and subversive energy from below is the only vehicle by which some form of radical democratic accountability can redistribute resources and wealth and restructure the economy and government so that all benefit, the significant secondary efforts of the black Talented Tenth alone in the twenty-first century will be woefully inadequate and thoroughly frustrating. Yet even progressive social change — though desirable and necessary — may not turn back the deeper and deadly processes of cultural decay in late twentieth-century America. . . . let us look candidly at the tragicomic and absurd character of black life in America in the spirit of John Coltrance and Toni Morrison; let us continue to strive with genuine compassion, personal integrity, and human decency to fight for radical democracy in the face of the frightening abyss-or terrifying inferno-of the twenty-first century, clinging to "a hope not hopeless but unhopeful."

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