"No Tomorrow in the Man": Uncovering the Great Depression in Their Eyes Were Watching God

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"No Tomorrow in the Man": Uncovering the Great Depression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

> Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill: they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the negro live: between laughter and tears.
>
> Richard Wright on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

> Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around.
>
> Ishmael Reed

> If he has no memory of yesterday, nor no concept of tomorrow, then he is My People. There is no tomorrow in the man. He mentions the word plentiful and often. But there is no real belief in a day that is not here and present.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston

> If history has disabled human potential, then assertion . . . must come outside of history
>
> Karla F. C. Holloway

THE PORTRAYAL OF WORKING-CLASS BLACK Americans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has provided the impetus for a striking preponderance of its criticism and accounted for its most significant critical moments—from Henry Louis Gates' designation of the speakerly text to black feminist mappings of the blues vs. club women's divide in early twentieth-century African American culture.[1] However, despite the diversity that has characterized approaches to this novel from its publication to the present,[2] there has been little disagreement

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about describing Hurston's "folk" as existing somehow outside of history. Indeed, much critical evaluation of the novel has rested on decisions about how and/or whether to value this seemingly ahistorical portrayal, which has been called stereotypical, minstrel, idealized, utopian, pastoral, and romantic by a list of writers that reads like a who's who of twentieth-century black literary criticism: from Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps, and Richard Wright in the first half of the century, to Robert Stepto, Hortense Spillers, and Hazel Carby in the last.[3]

Interestingly, and in stark contrast to criticism hinging on the political value (or lack thereof) of the vernacular poetic articulated by Hurston's "folk," a survey of the recent literary histories of the Depression era turns up little more than a footnote here and a paragraph there on this prominent novel written in the mid-1930s.[4] Since the early 1980s, significant studies of proletarian fiction, the culture of the Popular Front, working-class women's writing, and the works of "New Red Negro" writers have revealed the richness of the literary landscape during the Depression—simultaneously expanding the canon of American Modernism and, along with it, our understandings of the relation between political engagement and literary form. Despite this body of work, however, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is rarely examined by those interested in the relation between literature and the class politics of the 1930s.[5] No critic yet has discussed the degree to which Hurston's apparently "timeless" or "mythological" story of Southern black "folk" is embedded in the cultural politics of the Depression.

In order to uncover this aspect of the novel, I begin with Janet Galligani Casey, who points out that the significant revisionary literary histories of the Depression era have "generally been undertaken within the context of specialized discussions of left-wing cultural politics." This specialization, Casey argues, is limiting. Instead she advocates "deliberately leav[ing] open the notion of what can or should constitute 'Left.'" In so doing, she argues, literary criticism can begin to "demonstrate the many (contradictory) strands of left-liberal reformism in the period" and "forc[e] further reconsideration of not only the Left, but also a host of categories by which critics and historians attempt to regularize a complexly variegated terrain of political-aesthetic expression" (xiii). Hurston's often stated antipathy to "protest writing," then, should not preclude a consideration of her work in this context. In what follows, I argue that Hurston's engagement with the hardships of the Depression

has been, thus far, invisible because criticism of the novel has sought to uncover it through a primarily Marxist hermeneutic. Viewing the novel instead through the distinctive historicity of the African American literary tradition illuminates both a historically sound portrayal of exploitative labor conditions for working-class black Americans and a protest against them.

The relation between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the literary protest of the 1930s has remained undiscussed for several reasons. First, the novel's rediscovery in the context of second-wave feminism and the sexually divisive Black Arts Movement produced a gendered schism that has had far-reaching implications. This schism famously begins with Richard Wright's 1937 review:

> 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 eat and laugh and cry and work and kill: they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the negro live: between laughter and tears. . . . The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. . . . She exploits the phase of negro life which is "quaint," the phrase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race. (qtd. in Gates and Appiah 17)[6]

For feminist critics like Alice Walker, Wright's criticism, when placed alongside similar comments by Sterling Brown and Alain Locke, manifested the androcentrism of the black literary tradition and therefore explained Hurston's puzzling fall from fame in the 1930s to nearly complete obscurity by the 1970s. The novel's recovery, then, was framed in terms of redressing the exclusion of black female writers from the canon.[7] However, as William Maxwell points out, the gendered nature of what has come to be known as the Hurston/Wright divide "does a heap of cultural work" (155). Some of that work has obscured Hurston's political voice. When Hurston and Wright became opposed absolutely, Hurston came to represent the anti-radical counterpoint to Wright—one of the most prominent black intellectual members of the American Communist Party (CPUSA). As Larry Neal summed up 1974, "One thing is clear . . . unlike Richard Wright, [Hurston] was no political

radical" (qtd. in Headon 29). The gendered polarity produced by the criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, then, has made it quite difficult to see Hurston's work as being engaged in any way with the working-class politics of the Depression.

Hurston's written statements on Communism and the CPUSA, almost entirely written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, constitute another impediment to this goal. Critics too often read them both as if they were transparent and as if they were indicative of the entirety of her thinking.[8] What Barbara Foley has called the legacy of American anti-Communism can help us to understand why even critics versed in the poststructuralist analysis of autobiography might not proceed beneath or beyond Hurston's anti-Communist statements from the Cold War period when thinking about her Depression-era writing.[9] Whether or not we take pieces such as the virulent "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (1951) as indicative of Hurston's "true" feelings when they were written, they provide scant support for understanding her work in the mid-1930s. Hurston, after all, certainly wouldn't have been the only American intellectual to make a right turn in the 1950s. The inability to see any engagement with the hardships of the Depression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, therefore, a result of an undue emphasis on Hurston's Cold War–era public statements. This dynamic illustrates one primary effect of literary anti-Communism—an absolute division between realist "political protest literature" and modernist "apolitical" texts such as the canonical works of the Harlem Renaissance. A glimpse into the race, gender, and class politics of twentieth-century U.S. literary history, then, clears the way for a new understanding of Hurston's relationship to the politics of her time and, consequently, makes it possible to reconsider the issue of realism or romance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Thus far, critics who have gone into this novel looking for some engagement with working-class politics have been unable to find it. For Susan Willis, for example, Janie's southward migration "leave[s] unexplored the possibility of a black working-class culture in this country. By their absence from her novel, industrialization, urbanization, the city, the black working classes are not shown to represent the future for black people" (124–25). Willis' contention is one example of the limitations of an exclusively Marxist approach to the novel. Because her understanding of what might constitute an accurate historical representation

is grounded in the teleology of historical materialism, when she looks for resistance to capitalist hegemony, she can only see the absence of an urban proletariat.

Hazel Carby's influential contention that Hurston's folk is "highly romanticized" is grounded in similar expectations. Carby cites Hurston's work as a prime example of how "contemporary critical theory has produced a discourse that romanticizes the folk-roots of Afro-American culture and denies the transformative power of both historical and urban consciousness" ("Ideologies" 140). The critical reconstruction of the canon, she argues, is based in representations that *conflate* the social and economic conditions of chattel slavery with those of twentieth-century sharecropping (125, emphasis added). Following Lukács on the historical novel, she argues that the resulting "mythical rural folk," the source for the black vernacular voice, negates historical differences, mystifies the social conflicts arising from black migration, and represses urban history and the urban imagination by creating the myth of a shared rural heritage (127). Carby's argument about the tradition is extremely relevant. However, a close examination of Hurston's representation itself (something her article doesn't do) reveals a more complex relation to history than is suggested by the language of conflation. Rather than conflate slavery and sharecropping, Hurston uses slavery as a metaphor for migrant labor. This use of metaphor functions as a protest against worker exploitation.

In order to see this protest, it is necessary to move from a consideration of content (what class is or is not depicted) to one of form. Specifically, the protest is made visible through an examination of one distinguishing characteristic of the African American literary tradition—a fundamental antagonism to dominant U.S. history. In his seminal work on black autobiography, William L. Andrews characterizes the literary imagination behind the slave narrative as historically revisionary:

> Slave narrators [were] "in the dilemma of the revisionist," [Harold] Bloom's term for "a reader who wishes to find his own original relation to truth whether in texts or reality . . . but [who] also wishes to open received texts to his own sufferings, or what he wants to call the sufferings of history." The "received texts," the tradition, that Afro-American autobiography "wishes to open" and force the reader "to esteem and

> estimate differently" . . . are the culture-defining scriptures of nineteenth-century America, the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. The "misreading" of these texts in Afro-American autobiography . . . is often a fundamental part of the act of literary self-creation. (231)

One central rhetorical technique utilized in the service of this fundamental historical revisionism, Andrews explains, is the use of metaphor as argument. Because the slave narrative necessitates "embedded" rather than explicit criticism of the society it portrays, metaphors in black autobiography "do not simply adorn arguments for persuasive purposes. Metaphors *are* arguments. Their success depends greatly on the capacity of the reader to accept and explore the creative dialectic of the semantic clash until new meanings emerge from the debris of old presuppositions" (229, emphasis added).

Recognizing the historical revisionism at the foundation of the African American literary tradition helps us to understand the apparent lack of history in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Beginning with Robert Stepto in 1979, critics have commented on the circular nature of Janie's journey. Indeed, reading the novel through Stepto's narratives of ascent and immersion is useful because it highlights the novel's complex conceptualization of history and time.[10] While recent criticism tends to understand Janie's geographical movement in terms of Hurston's contemporary history, some earlier critics took up a different strategy, reading Janie's journey in relationship to the history of African American women—from slavery through Emancipation, Reconstruction, and into the twentieth century. Both approaches contextualize her journey within the white supremacist American capitalist economy. However, both also tend to cancel each other out, by privileging one historical narrative at the expense of the other. Critics either see the novel as being about the past (slavery, Reconstruction) or the present (the 1920s, the New Negro Movement, Boasian anthropology). Neither approach takes into account that Janie journeys through both past and present simultaneously. The novel, I contend, argues implicitly against the possibility of understanding the present outside of the past or the past outside of the present.

Carla Kaplan's dating of the narrative's events provides a useful place to begin analyzing this interrelationship. Kaplan locates Janie's

birth in 1881 or 1882, and the moment of storytelling forty years later, in 1921 or 1922 ("Erotics" 143–44). Janie and Jody arrive in Eatonville, then, in 1898 or 1899 and Janie leaves for the muck some twenty years later, in 1920 or 1921. Interestingly, a comparison between the Eatonville of the late 1890s and the Eatonville of the early 1920s is never made in the novel; the town seems curiously static. The only mention of changes are those that occur almost immediately upon their arrival in the town—the establishment of the store, the post office, the street lamp ceremony, and the building of the Starks' home. When Janie returns in 1921 or 1922, no mention is made of how or whether Eatonville has changed in the intervening years. Eatonville, it seems, is simultaneously located in the years following Reconstruction (when Janie and Jody arrive) and in the early 1920s (when Janie leaves and returns). This suggests that understanding the Eatonville of the present (the early 1920s) necessitates understanding the Eatonville of the past (the late 1890s) and the future (the mid-1930s, when the novel is written).

Significantly, the blurring together of past, present, and future is aligned with economic conditions. Paradoxically, as Janie moves forward in time, she moves backwards in economic circumstance. She goes from being the wife of a free, independent farmer, to being like a slave—a field hand in the muck. This complicated economic and historical movement works against dominant Western notions of "progress." Hurston's narrative resists temporal limitations while, at the same time, strongly insisting upon temporality. That is, the historical experience of African Americans is paradoxically ubiquitous in a narrative commonly criticized for its removal from history. This paradox is resolved, however, if we understand the narrative to represent simultaneous multiple historical locations rather than to resist location in any single one.

Eatonville, under the leadership of Joe Starks, seems like both a Reconstruction-era town and an antebellum plantation. The narrator notes that compared with Joe and Janie's two-story house "with porches [and] banisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (47). The men of Eatonville "murmur hotly about slavery being over." One remarks, "all [Joe] got done he made offa de rest of us." Another adds, "You can feel a switch in his hand when he's talkin to yuh" (49). Like a plantation master, Joe "loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice." On

the porch, this control is discussed in terms that recall the withholding of literacy from slaves: "he talks tuh unlettered folks wid books in his jaws" (49). The novel explicitly likens Joe Starks to a plantation master by using the power of voice to explain his domination over those institutions and technologies that signal Eatonville's transition into the twentieth century. In this way, Hurston reveals an analogy between the experience of life in Eatonville of the 1890s and the experience of slavery. In both antebellum and post-Reconstruction-era America, cultural oppression works to maintain economic exploitation.

Of course, Joe's domination is also an explicitly gendered one. The intimate relation between ownership of voice and body epitomized in slavery is manifest in Joe's demand that Janie keep her hair tied up in public. Little more than another of Joe's possessions, Janie's position as "Mrs. Mayor" resembles both that of a bourgeois wife and a female house slave. While she takes on a privileged place in Eatonville, like a concubine, her relative privilege denies her both voice and control of her sexuality. After Joe dies, Janie recognizes that she, like a slave, has been "set up in the marketplace to sell" (90).

Hurston's presentation of Eatonville, then, utilizes the imagery of the slave era as an embedded argument in the service of historical revision. Likening Joe's domination to antebellum conditions, Hurston points her readers' attention toward the repetitious nature of the African American historical experience, therefore undermining linear narratives of progress that mark dominant historical narratives. This representation of history as repetition is also vividly captured in this metaphorical description of Joe:

> It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister and you'd rather not. (48)

Such "familiar strangeness" in Eatonville sets the reader up for the representation of the muck, which suffers from a similarly troubling historical doubling. Hurston's representation of migrant workers uses the imagery of slavery to produce an embedded argument against the unacceptable historical recurrence of material exploitation.

In one of the censored sections of *Dust Tracks on a Road* deemed "too political" for publication by editors in 1940, Hurston comments directly on the relation between race and the historical experience of time:

> If he has no memory of yesterday, nor no concept of tomorrow, then he is My People. There is no tomorrow in the man. He mentions the word plentiful and often. But there is no real belief in a day that is not here and present. For him to believe in a tomorrow would mean an obligation to consequences. There is no sense of consequences. Else he is not My People. (777)

In this passage Hurston signifies on a demeaning stereotype (blacks, like children, fail to think about or understand the consequences of their actions) in order to expose the devastating historical effects of centuries of institutionalized exploitation. She argues that white Western notions of past and the future seem irrelevant to African Americans who, through the first four decades of the twentieth century, have been subject to exploitation that fails to differ significantly enough from the experience of slavery. Within this context, notions of the past and future are inoperative. Experientially, the difference between yesterday and tomorrow is negligible, at best. There can be "no sense of consequences" for the individual who believes that nothing has, will, or can change. If the "progress" made by blacks since emancipation seems to be no progress at all, time is not experienced as linear but repetitive. For the man in whom "there is no tomorrow," history is experienced in terms of repetition rather than change.

Hurston's claim that "there is no tomorrow" in "My People" works as an apt description of narrative detemporalization, as discussed by Karla F.C. Holloway. In her theory of black women's writing, Holloway draws on white feminist Joan Kelly's notion of historical deperiodization—that is, a deconstruction of androcentric notions of historical period. In her histories of women in the Renaissance, Kelly found that "events that further the historical development of men, liberating them from natural, social, or ideological constraints, have quite different, even opposite effects upon women" (19). Male historians periodize history according to male experience and memory; therefore, she argues,

women's history *de*periodizes dominant history. The work of deperiodization, Kelly theorizes, reveals how masculine accomplishments depend on the domination of women because women have a "different historical experience from men" (4).

From the fact of this difference in historical experience, Holloway constructs a theory of black women's writing. "Because slavery effectively placed black women outside of a historical universe governed by a traditional (Western) consideration of time, the aspect of their being—the quality and nature of their "state" of being—becomes a more appropriate measure of their reality." This out-of-time experience, Holloway argues, affects black women's representations of history and explains why "in black women's writing this deperiodization is more fully articulated" than it is in white women's writing. Black women more often "strategically place a detemporalized universe into the centers of their texts" (517). In sum, Holloway theorizes, the double jeopardy marking the black female experience in the U.S. produces a doubled rejection of white supremacist, androcentric history. This creates a particularly de- or anti-historical (rather than ahistorical) representational strategy. Black women's writing, she concludes, is structured by narrative recursions that replace Western conceptualizations of time and progress (past, present, and future) with an "alternative" space that privileges black women's visions and revisions of history—visions that are necessarily outside and counter to dominant history (523).

Holloway points to Hurston as a foremother of this tradition that, she argues, culminates in *Beloved*, though she neither elaborates on this point nor refers specifically to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In what follows, I'll take up this suggestive comment, outlining a narrative structure of temporal recursion that I believe is the key to gauging Hurston's engagement with the working-class politics of the Depression era.

African Americans as a group suffered the effects of the Great Depression both for a longer time and more deeply than white Americans. And blacks in rural Southern areas like Hurston's Florida "muck" were particularly devastated by it (Kelley and Lewis 131–32). Historians characterize the effects of the Depression on black Americans as an escalation of already difficult economic circumstances rather than as a shocking, new experience. Jacqueline Jones uses the phrase "Harder Times" to capture the severity of the black experience, its difference

from the experience of more privileged groups, and the exclusionary nature of popular histories like Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*. "Depression-like conditions were not new for the vast majority of black Americans" Jones summarizes (*Labor* 196).[11] If a familiarity with "hard times" would lead black Americans to perceive the Depression differently, it follows, then, that black representations of it would reflect this difference. Reading for the effects of the Great Depression on African American literature, I suggest, entails focusing on economic crisis as *repetition*. My reading of Hurston's muck as detemporalized rather than ahistorical evidences this difference, suggesting by extension a new approach to reading the Depression in African American literature generally.

I would like to begin by examining Hurston's representation of the muck in relation to its extra-textual counterpart, the real town of Belle Glade, Florida. Hurston's knowledge of conditions for black migrant laborers in Florida came from her 1928 trip to logging and turpentine camps in Polk County (Hemenway 111; Nicholls 470) and from her 1935 folklore collecting trip to Belle Glade itself (Boyd 276). In addition, a familiarity with conditions in Belle Glade can be deduced from her portrayal of the devastation wrought by the 1928 Lake Okeechobee Hurricane, a representation of which, of course, concludes *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.[12]

In *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present*, Jones describes the working and living conditions in Belle Glade, Florida—a town originally settled in the 1880s by displaced sharecroppers. These agricultural wage earners, she reports, were, "by definition the most marginal of all American workers" (170):

> Beginning in the 1920s Georgia sharecroppers were lured to the Florida Everglades by promises buried in the muckland . . . These black women and men came to Belle Glade to pick beans and cut sugarcane all week and "cut loose" Saturday night, when work tickets were transformed into cash that was quickly lost to crap games and [whiskey]. . . . Parents and children in Belle Glade, "on the muck," . . . endured the backbreaking rigors of stoop labor by day and experienced big-city street life by night. In Belle Glade, then, a Southern rural past and a Northern Urban future formed a revealing nexus. (167–68)

Figure 1: "Picking Beans, Belle Glade, Florida." Arthur Rothstein, 1937. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 2: "Scene in the Negro Section of Belle Glade, Florida." Arthur Rothstein, 1937. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Jones contrasts the outsider's image of Belle Glade as a hard-drinking, crime-ridden backwater with the experience of living there. While the work was difficult and the laborers were grossly underpaid, their initiative, she finds, was notable—particularly during the Depression: "Belle Glade families often demonstrated a commitment to hard labor that was disproportionate to the meager compensation they received." Jones explains this gap in terms of the town's social benefits:

> For at least seven months out of every year, Belle Glade offered a relatively settled existence for [the] folk . . . a place where social relations, no matter how difficult or troubled, rather than paid employment, served to define people's sense of themselves. . . . In the 1930s and 1940s the largest growers, along with federal investigators, noted with dismay that workers preferred to live on their own in the home-based towns [like] Belle Glade . . . , avoiding Federal Security Administration (FSA) camps (Called "the projects") and company towns. . . . Wives liked to shop in the stores of Belle Glade and surrounding towns; no matter how limited their resources, these establishments seemed more appealing than the camp commissaries. Workers of both sexes also wanted to avoid the close supervision of camp guards and managers; "in town" households had more latitude in deciding which family members would go to the field on which days. (169–70)

These positive aspects of Belle Glade need to be understood in the context of the large-scale economic shift from a sharecropping to a wage economy prompted by the Depression. As plantation owners split up and displaced tenant families, towns like this one allowed not just for the possibility of retaining those fundamental support systems needed to get by in "harder times," but also for the creation of new ones (Jones, *Labor* 200–1).[13]

Jones' history of Belle Glade sheds considerable light on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Overall, the section of the novel that takes place on the muck represents both its inadequate and exploitative conditions and its positive social aspects, resulting in a balance like the one Jones writes about in the real Belle Glade. Here is Hurston's opening description of the muck:

> Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It's hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity herded and hovered on the inside. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (131)

It is imperative to register this initial description of a place overcrowded with impoverished, anonymous "hordes" suffering from gross material deprivation and exposure to the elements when considering the celebratory representations of vernacular culture that follow. Hurston's detailed description of the migrants as a mix of "permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs" captures the community-building aspect of towns like Belle Glade. Though some people come to the muck alone, once there, the novel shows, they gain the social attachments that will enable them to survive "harder times." While this initial representation shows individuals in desperate competition for subsistence-level jobs, the novel moves to balance this aspect of the migrant experience against the primary benefit of living in Belle Glade: the creation of sustaining community through the everyday expression of culture.

When discussing the muck as idealized or ahistorical, critics often point to the way that exploitative labor conditions are subordinated to cultural activities like story-swaps, gambling, and the blues:

> All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants. Finally no more sleeping places. Men made big fires and fifty or sixty men slept around each fire. But they had to pay the man on whose land they slept. He ran the fire just

> like his boardinghouse—for pay. But nobody cared. They made good money, even to the children. So they spent good money. Next month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with the present. (131–32)

As I have discussed, while this portrayal of a culturally vibrant community has been read as romanticized, its representation of the overcrowded, exposed, and exploitative living conditions in places like Belle Glade is accurate. What critics seem to find objectionable is the suggestion that the spiritual and emotional fulfillment of the migrants can possibly compensate for their material deprivation—a balance summed up in the phrase, "work all day for money, fight all night for love." However, this representation is supported by the history of migrant muck communities, overflowing with people used to (rather than shocked by) getting by on nearly nothing and understanding the necessity of cultural ritual in the creation and maintenance of kin networks.[14]

Other details from Hurston's muck reveal it to be like its extratextual counterpart. Tea Cake and Janie's home provides perhaps the strongest example. Tea Cake insists that they leave for the muck before the start of the season so that they can get a house of their own. His haste, it turns out, has more to do with physical necessity than anything else. In fact, the filth of the muck is the first detail that Tea Cake brings to Janie's attention:

> Two weeks from now, it'll be so many folks heah dey won't be lookn' fuh rooms, dey'll be jus' lookin fuh somewhere tuh sleep. Now we got a chance tuh git a room at de hotel, where dey got uh bath tub. Yuh can't line on de muck 'thout yuh take a bath every day. Dat muck'll itch yuh lak ants. 'Taint but one place round heah wid uh bath tub. 'Taint nowhere near enough rooms. (129)

Not only does Janie enjoy more hygienic living conditions than other workers on the muck, but her two-room shack becomes a base for the workers' community, providing people with a *private* place to build community, an absolute necessity when even the jook is run by the company (Nicholls 476): "Tea Cake's house was a magnet, the *unauthorized* center of the 'job.' The way he would sit in the doorway and

play his guitar made people want to stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night." In addition, then, to her description of the shack as a desperately needed shelter from the hostile environment of the camp squatting on the banks of the Okeechobee, Hurston represents Jane and Tea Cake's home as a place of both physical and psychological resistance to the oppressive surveillance and hard conditions of migrant labor.

Finally, as Jones found in the real Belle Glade, one of the muck's significant benefits is the workers' ability to set their own schedules and determine their own workloads. Tea Cake's long lunch-time sojourns with Janie at home and Janie's decision to work in the fields alongside him reveal that these workers stay on the muck because they are allowed to make lifestyle choices of their own. When the narrator notes that the fun in the fields, their "romping and playing," is all "carried on behind the boss's back" (133), the muck's appeal is shown to be based on resistance to white capitalist authority. In general, Hurston's focus is on worker agency and choice. These workers choose this type of work because they do not want to be defined by exploitative labor. In the words of a worker quoted by Jones, "I might pick, but I ain't no picker" (*Dispossessed* 169), and in Hurston's words, "It's hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you" (131).[15]

"Housing in the Negro Section of Belle Glade, Florida." Arthur Rothstein, 1937. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

By portraying a marginal migrant community whose members *choose* to be separate from white society, Hurston locates Tea Cake and Janie in a place of implicit (though hardly revolutionary) resistance to the economics underlying white supremacy. As Jones notes of the real muck residents, the people "share much with their slave forebears and their inner-city contemporaries" (170). This shared experience reinforces my reading of Hurston's detemporalizing narrative technique, and allows us to read Janie's experiences on the muck as a record of unacceptable similarities between migrant and slave labor. Jones' history lends support here too:

> Agricultural labor in the 1930s had an intensive, primitive quality, prompting one sociologist to suggest that "it seems to take a great deal of social pressure to get people to do this work." Mechanical advances had cut down on the amount of labor required for plowing furrows and hoeing rows of crops, but workers still did most of the harvesting by hand. . . . Those women who labored in the fields resembled their early nineteenth-century foremothers in all but dress. (*Labor* 201–2)

Even if material deprivation does not constitute the sole focus of her narrative, then, Hurston does not ignore the material reality of the workers' lives. She makes clear, as do other Depression-era writers, how owners capitalize on the labor surplus. Tea Cake and Janie live in such relatively favorable conditions not because it's easy to be a migrant laborer, but because Tea Cake knows how to work the system. Tea Cake is fully indoctrinated into migrant culture and, because of this, understands what is necessary to maximize their living conditions. As he tells Janie, "Ah'm gone right now tuh pick me uh job uh work wid de best man on de muck. Before de rest of em'gits heah. You can always git jobs round heah in season, but not wid de right folks" (130). As a result of Tea Cake's planning, their arrival before the season opens ensures that they will not have to pay to sleep on the ground.

Tea Cake's previous experience also allows him to secure a home for his new wife: "Boss done bought out another man and want me down on de lake. He got houses fuh de first ones dat git dere. Less go!" Tea Cake also knows that wages alone will not support the couple: "All day Ah'm pickin beans. All night Ah'm pickin mah box and rollin

dice. Between de beans and de dice Ah can't lose" (129). Tea Cake knows that while all bosses exploit existing labor supplies, some are more exploitative than others. He understands exactly what a migrant has to do to impress a boss and, in addition, he understands the wealth being generated by migrant labor. In his words, "dis' ain't no game fuh pennies. Po' man ain't got no business at de show" (130).

In *Their Eyes*, the exploitative relation between capitalist and worker is acknowledged, though not foregrounded. To this extent, the novel is usefully contrasted with *The Grapes of Wrath*, which details the Joad's slow and painful initiation into the culture of worker exploitation. Tea Cake takes as a commonplace the many realities that shock and frighten the Joads—for example, having to pay to camp in the fields. Because Tea Cake has never suffered under the illusion that he will be treated fairly, neither he nor the narrative itself expresses the kind of shock and rage that come across so vividly in a book like *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In line with Jones' historical analysis, Hurston's muck is "a place where social relations, no matter how difficult or troubled, rather than paid employment, served to define people's sense of themselves." The muck provides humanity and nurturing to the migrants, enabling the formation of kin networks to get them through "harder times." As in the real Belle Glade, Hurston's bean pickers focus on the freedoms allowed them. Hurston's portrayal of the muck emphasizes the necessity of cultural ritual in the creation of those kin networks necessary to supplement a less-than-living wage. In balancing spiritual and material concerns, Hurston's representation of the muck is a key site of narrative detemporalization, and its violent destruction implicitly protests the exploitative conditions it represents.

As an anthropologist, Hurston is interested in how folk culture enables coded forms of resistance for oppressed communities. However, she is also aware of the inadequacies of this purely cultural resistance. Her representation of the muck resembles slavery to the extent that the workers' dependence on the owners is so complete that it seems invisible. Note the similarity between her description of the migrants and the passage previously quoted concerning the African American sense of historical time. Regarding the muck residents she writes, "They made good money, even to the children. So they spent good money. Next month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with

the present" (132). Of "My People" she claims, "If he has no memory of yesterday, nor no concept of tomorrow, then he is My People." In this context, Hurston's representation of the muck resonates with Jones' conclusions about the real Everglades migrant workers:

> Once in Florida and drawn into the migratory labor stream, families continued to reenact a cycle of optimism followed by disillusionment, as young people recapitulated the struggles of their parents and their parents readjusted their sights on the future according to lessons learned "on the season." Black people tried to carve out for themselves and their families a measure of autonomy within a labor system that offered few rewards for hard work; these strategies reflected their resistance to field-work servitude, twentieth-century style. (*Dispossessed* 189–90)

Jones goes on to describe these strategies as adaptations of *antebellum* survival strategies, citing the continuance of field-hollers, work songs, and folktales. In sum, she argues, the twentieth-century migrants "carried with them the remnants of African American slave community when they sought to care for themselves and eschew contact with whites" (197). Hurston's novelistic representation of the muck, then, as culturally rich and materially poor resonates significantly when set beside Jones' history. The cycle of hope and disillusionment Jones describes is similar to Janie's experience on the muck. She goes there with Tea Cake "working for love" and barely escapes with her life. In other words, while celebrating the limited forms of resistance available on the muck, *Their Eyes* does not go so far as to sanction or condone this oppressive situation. Instead, the reverse occurs when the muck community is literally decimated by a hurricane.

The economic reality of life on the muck, the degree to which migrant labor is both experienced and resisted in terms of slave labor, explains why Belle Glade's inhabitants (and Tea Cake in particular) privilege cultural freedom over material deprivation. They spend their money immediately upon acquiring it because there is no basis for any belief that the future might be significantly better than the present is or the slave past was. In this context, the hurricane that destroys this community reveals the conviction that conditions on the muck truly are unacceptable. The hurricane, I believe, enacts Hurston's desire to

get rid of exploitative working conditions for African Americans and other poor, dispossessed peoples.

Before Katrina, the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane was the second-deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. It is estimated that 75% of the over 2500 fatalities were migrant farm workers—mostly African American. However, due to the undocumented nature of this work, many of the bodies were never identified. For years after, farmers dug up remains when plowing their fields (Kaplan, *Zora* 640). Everglades historian Lawrence E. Will concluded that "of all the towns most affected by the hurricane, Belle Glade . . . suffered by far the greatest amount of property damage—and loss of life" (Will 79). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston uses this disaster to make her criticism of migrant labor conditions.[16]

Hurston's description of the hurricane again reveals her detemporalizing strategy. The storm is personified in terms of the master-slave relationship. In keeping with black folklore, Tea Cake and Motor Boat refer to it as "Big Massa"—an uncontrollable force with totalizing power over the bodies of the folk in the quarters. However, despite the fact that the workers understand the storm as the master, Hurston's narrative represents it clearly in terms of a slave revolt:

> The two hundred mile an hour wind had *loosed his chains*. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his *supposed-to-be conquerors*, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses. (161–62)

The contradictory representation of the storm as both master and slave is accounted for by the logic of detemporalization. While a life of migrant labor seems to satisfy the desires of the migrants themselves, its essential similarity to slavery (a similarity that Tea Cake and Janie do not seem exceptionally bothered by) renders it even more unacceptable than Janie's bourgeois life in Eatonville. Hurston's representation of the storm as a violent slave revolt reveals the narrative's desire to destroy an economic system that, in the twentieth century, is too similar to the slave past. The hurricane, personified as a revolutionary leader, not only escapes its chains to walk the earth in freedom, it also attacks the most visible manifestations of the antebellum institution itself—battering both the slaves' quarters and the masters' house.

Tellingly, Hurston represents the fleeing migrants as escaping slaves:

> The three fugitives ran past another line of shanties that topped a slight rise and gained a little. They cried out as best they could, "de Lake is comin!" and barred doors flew open and others joined them in flight, crying the same as they went. "de Lake is comin!" and the pursuing waters growled and shouted ahead, "Yes, Ah'm comin!" (162)

The contrast between the lake's inexorable desire to destroy the exploitative order and the relatively powerless people, now described as "fugitives," shows the hurricane to represent both the desire for freedom from white supremacist economic systems and the impossibility of that freedom. The storm rolls on, obliterating everything in its path, but the workers, by and large, drown and die. Here, the slave past, where radical and violent means were often necessary to ensure escape, is contrasted with the present where the migrants, not realizing their own exploitation, must be literally forced to leave. It is as if history itself, the memory of slavery personified by the storm, rises up to destroy the conditions enslaving a new generation of African American workers.

After taking refuge in a "tall house," the "three fugitives" debate the merits of staying in it. Their dilemma is telling: "Dis is uh high tall house. Maybe it won't reach heah at all," Janie speculates, "and if it do, maybe it won't reach tuh de upstairs part" (163). Janie, who had previously rejected her position in "the big house" on the "high stool," now begins to reconsider the safety of the lower ground she has chosen. However, she ultimately accedes to Tea Cake's opinion, "us better go," just as she had gone along with his claim that the Indians, who had already left for higher ground, "don't always know" what to do. He had argued: "Indians don't know nothin,' tuh tell the truth. Else dey'd own dis country still. De white folks ain't gone nowhere. Dey outghta know if its dangerous" (156).

In his refusal to validate the Indians' hard-won knowledge, Tea Cake reveals his fatal flaw—the conviction that ownership proves superiority. Tea Cake exhibits here a classic lack of class-consciousness. He cannot value the Indians' judgment because, having adopted white ideologies, he believes their current demeaned position is a result of ignorance rather than violence and economic exploitation. And further,

because he does not see the place of the muck community in relation to the whole plantation economy, he doesn't resist the inequalities in physical circumstance that distinguish his life from the life of the white bosses. The shantytown's very vulnerability to the elements practically ensures the continuation of the white dominated economy. The novel vividly captures the migrant's vulnerability to natural disaster, in the initial description of the "quarters that squatted so close that only the dyke separated them from great, sprawling Okechobee [*sic*]" (130). The white owners, of course, don't exhort their workers to leave, reasoning that one group of migrants is just as good as another. In fact, if one established group is driven out, a new group willing to settle for lower wages can always be found. Hurston, like Wright in *Native Son*, reveals the parasitical nature of the class-race system through the contrast in housing conditions, a system that can be summed up in the narrator's ironic formulation: "If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry" (158).[17]

The hurricane, contradictorily personified as both master and slave, embodies that same "familiar strangeness" that characterizes Joe Starks. On the muck, Janie would simply rather not see "the gator in yo' sister," "the familiar strangeness," the corrosive and exploitative aspects of her life with Tea Cake. Hurston, however, sees them as both destructive and inevitable. This explains why the hurricane destroys the muck but leaves the big house intact. And why Janie only escapes the cycle Jones describes because, unlike the other migrants, she can return to the middle class. The destruction the storm wrecks on the migrants, their town, and on Janie's life, enacts the desire to abolish exploitative working conditions for African Americans. Hurston's detemporalized (rather than idealized) representation of the muck, then, articulates a desire to move beyond a white supremacist capitalist system that has dominated the bodies of African Americans, in different forms, in both the antebellum and postbellum eras.

This reading suggests that a combination of forces—the politics of literary history on the one hand and a particular understanding of what constitutes realistic historical representation on the other—has mystified previous attempts to locate Hurston's representation of the black working class in history. As I hope the preliminary gesture I have made here reveals, dissolving the boundaries between institutionally discrete periods, modes, and movements ("proletarian fiction," "Mod-

ernism," and "the Harlem Renaissance" in this case) results in new avenues of textual engagement and should enable future readers to put this important novel into productive dialogue with other key texts which its labeling as anti-revolutionary, bourgeois, and /or romantic has so far made impossible.

Independent Scholar

NOTES

1. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. See also Carby, "It Just Be Dat Way," and Batker.

2. Located by critics as a central text in the relatively "new" fields of African American, feminist, cultural studies, and American multicultural literatures, the ascension of this novel to canonical status followed and marked the successes of the U.S. Civil Rights and Second Wave feminist movements. See Wall, 3–4.

3. See also Kaplan, "Erotics" 160 n.21, and Lamouthe, 186–87 n.22.

4. Following in the wake of Nelson's *Repression and Recovery*, American literary critics have been interrogating the politics of canon-building in the U.S., revealing how American Modernism as understood by the New Critics was constructed during the conservative 1940s and '50s in a concerted effort to expunge the literary Left. Important revisionist histories include Foley, Denning, Rabinowitz, and Hapke. Concurrently, recoveries of the politically radical literature of the Harlem Renaissance have been undertaken by Maxwell, Mullen, and Smethurst among others.

5. Hurston's vocal anti-Marxist politics precludes her from books by Foley, Rabinowitz, and Smethurst, studies devoted to avowedly leftist writers. Hapke is the exception to this rule. However, while her brief analysis aligns the novel with "other period foes of the romance mode" its focus on romance limits its conclusions. Similarly, while Maxwell provides an interesting starting point from which to reevaluate Hurston's work within the context of radical socioeconomic critique, his analysis of Hurston's literary texts is limited to her short stories.

6. I include this frequently quoted review here because I find the characterization "swing[ing] like a pendulum" to be particularly interesting. In this review, Wright points to the repetitious natures of the characters as evidence of their regressive nature. My argument locates the novel's political resistance in that same characteristic.

7. See Washington, and Wall.

8. For the first and still influential examination of Hurston's political views, see Hemenway, 331–37. Like most critics, Hemenway's analysis focuses primarily on explicit political statements made during the Anti-Communist 1950s. Hemenway draws a straight line from the review of *Uncle Tom's Children* to the 1951 article

"Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism," which was published in the staunchly conservative *American Legion* magazine (334–35). Other critics base their conclusions on the 1940 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. However, reading *Dust Tracks* as an accurate reflection of Hurston's political thinking is problematic for two reasons. First, work by McKay, Fox-Genovese and others has established the autobiography as a tour de force text of self-fashioning that demonstrates Hurston's artful creation of self that is both exceptional and acceptable to her primarily white audience. Hurston freely transgressed the bounds between fiction and non-fiction in representing both her life and her ideas. In her autobiography, Hurston constructed herself as a complicated and contradictory subject, a woman whose life and accomplishments fulfilled her own sense of who she wanted to be and one that "told her audience what she knew it wanted to hear" from someone who was, at the time, "the most published black woman in America" (Bordelon 21). See also Lionnet-McCumber.

Editorial politics constitutes the second reason to question the use of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as a reliable gauge of Hurston's politics at the close of the Depression. Claudine Raynaud's scholarship on the original manuscript reveals a Zora very different from the conservative individualist portrayed in Hemenway's still-influential 1977 biography. Understanding editorial interventions in *Dust Tracks* in the light of early WWII patriotism, Raynaud convincingly locates the tensions within Hurston's autobiographical voice in the context of the politics of the time. Ultimately, she reveals, a comparison of the manuscript and the published text shows how "the creation of her fictive self is not solely a self-conscious textual strategy, but also a product of her historical position as a black female writer" ("Rubbing" 35). Hurston's political views in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Raynaud argues, were explicitly anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and even, at times, anti-capitalist (51).

9. Anti-Marxism," Foley concludes, "provided much of the political motivation for the formalist critical program currently under assault by canon-busting critics" (5). Foley tells one version of the story wherein the literary establishment headed by the New Critics and their politically conservative allies used their positions as canon-makers to erase the considerable impact of radical American literatures. For other versions see Nelson, and Schwartz.

10. Stepto's reading is the only one I have yet come across that recognizes Hurston's "seemingly ahistorical world" (165) to be a product of the relationship between past and present.

11. Similarly, Joe William Trotter, Jr. writes, "for many black women the depression was an old experience with a new name" (qtd. in Kelley and Lewis 148).

12. Hurston's interest in this hurricane continued throughout her life. In 1950, she briefly lived in Belle Glade and, while there, collected folklore about the hurricane (Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston* 600, 640 n.2).

13. Without understating the gross exploitation that enabled these farms to operate, Jones does find that "for some women, the stability and closeness of kin ties compensated for the lack of money" (*Labor* 202).

14. See Jones, *Labor* 228–29 for a discussion of the place of kin networks in sustaining African American families during the Depression.

15. For these reasons, Hurston's portrayal of the muck can be read as an antidote to Steinbeck's idealization of the FSA camps in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

16. For details of the hurricane, see "Memorial Website." Kleinberg confirms many of the details in Hurston's fictional account, including those discriminatory practices surrounding the clean up and disposal of the dead.

17. See Guttman.

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