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The Life of Women: Zora Neale Hurston and Female Autobiography

James Krasner

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (*Their Eyes* 9)

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel concerned with the ordering of personal history. In its opening passage the difference between male and female ordering is defined. Briefly put, men construct their lives around the tension between subject and object, the union of the two representing their ultimate ambition. Men's life stories describe either success or failure. For women, any conjunction between subject and object is transient and artificial. Their histories are manifestly fictional; their stories describe the construction of fictions. While men are "Watchers," observing the fulfillment of plans, prophecies, and desires over time, women are creators, building up and tearing down their atemporal fictions as they go. The autobiography of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the autobiography of Zora Neale Hurston, manifests such self-conscious construction. Both life stories seem to be structured around a prophetic moment: The main character has a vision which is fulfilled by the end of the story. In both cases, however, these prophecies are ultimately shown to be useless as structuring principles and the process of tale-telling is exposed.

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In the fourth chapter of her autobiography, Hurston describes the visionary experience she had at the age of seven:

There was some cool shade on the porch, so I sat down, and soon I was asleep in a strange way. Like clear-cut stereopticon slides, I saw twelve scenes flash before me, each one held until I had seen it well in every detail, and then be replaced by another. There was no continuity as in an average dream. Just disconnected scene after scene with blank spaces in between. I knew that they were all true, a preview of things to come, and my soul writhed in agony and shrunk away. But I knew that there was no shrinking. These things had to be. (*Dust Tracks* 57)

She goes on to describe the scenes in some detail, emphasizing that "Time was to prove the truth of my visions, for one by one they came to pass" (59).

Critic and Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway finds the fact that Hurston's visions either do not come to pass or are not described as having done so altogether frustrating:

Although meant to explain Hurston's life, the visions do not successfully structure the autobiography. They fade into insignificance as the story unfolds. Although visions one and two serve as chapter endings, vision three is given only a single sentence; we encounter no further visions until Zora suddenly announces that six visions have now passed. The seventh vision is of her brother's house There is no mention of the eighth. The ninth vision, the meeting with Mrs. Mason, is not identified Visions ten through twelve are nowhere in sight, perhaps because—while claiming to see "twelve scenes flash before me"—her list ends with Godmother and number nine Did the visions occur? Probably. But if they were confirmed by subsequent events, why are they not more prominent? (*Zora* 282-83)

Certainly Hemenway has paid closer attention to the outcome of the visions than had Hurston herself. He criticizes them for being "inadequately integrated into the literary structure," and goes on to say that "the visions also beg the question of how she got there, a black writer in a white world, a woman who refused the roles men imposed, a southern agrarian who learned her way around the city" (Introduction xxxvii-xxxviii). Hemenway judges *Dust Tracks* by standards of male ordering. He wants a tale of success, the story of how Hurston's ship was carried in on the tide after many years of its being mocked by time. His own biography of Hurston is one such tale. It begins, "In the first week of January, 1925, Zora Neale Hurston arrived in New York City with one dollar and fifty cents in her purse, no job, no friends, but filled with 'a lot of hope'" (9).

Hurston herself will not write a Horatio Alger story, however.¹ Her visions are important because of the profound emotional impact

they had at the time; their fulfillment is only an afterthought. It is the emotional strength garnered from the transformation of a life into a series of self-generated narratives which empowers the young Zora. This process is repeated throughout the work, which reads, as Hurston describes her vision, like a series of unconnected slides, rather than a unified narrative. By showing that the visions are true, but that by the time they become true they are too unimportant to mention, Hurston places her emphasis fully on the generation of narratives rather than on their completion.

Throughout *Dust Tracks on a Road* the reader is reminded that she or he is reading a constructed past. "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life" (3). In these three sentences which begin the autobiography, Hurston presents the characteristics of personal history which will be demonstrated throughout the work. Any life story must be both consciously crafted by the author (constructed out of the materials that went to make it) and interpretatively malleable. But even the materials from which one is made, the facts of one's personal history, are open to interpretation, according to Hurston's giddily self-referential narrator. "This is all hear-say," begins the chapter titled "I Get Born." "Maybe some of the details of my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really did get born" (27). "Pretty well," but one can never be quite sure. After all, this narrator is prone to misrepresentation. Partly this is the unalterable lot of humankind. "Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle" (61). But Hurston also makes it clear that she is an expert at intentional misrepresentation as well. She is born into a culture in which the people not only interpret their experience by passing "this world and the next on through their mouths," but in which there are "lying sessions." That is, straining against each other in telling folk tales" (63). The two forms of discourse become elided in the autobiography, and one is never quite sure whether Hurston is simply passing the world through her mouth or straining against the belief of the reader in a 200-page-long lying session. "When I began to make up stories I cannot say. Just from one fancy to another, adding more and more detail until they seemed real. People seldom see themselves changing" (70-71). The story of

Hurston's life abounds in colorful detail and seems quite real, but as Robert Hemenway points out, one seldom sees Zora's personality change. "*Dust Tracks* fails as autobiography because it is a text deliberately less than its author's talents, a text diminished by her refusal to provide a second or third dimension to the flat surfaces of her adult image" (Introduction xxxix). But since people seldom see themselves changing, any representation of "the private motives that led to public success" would be inconsistent with Hurston's understanding of the personality as time-dependent. Hemenway is interested in seeing Hurston's personality develop; Hurston does not believe in such development and, therefore, simply portrays change.

The ability of time to change all things is a keynote of *Dust Tracks*. In her chapter entitled "Love," Hurston suggests that even truth is a time-dependent phenomenon:

Under the spell of moonlight, music, flowers, or the cut and smell of good tweeds, I sometimes feel the divine urge for an hour, a day or maybe a week. Then it is gone and my interest returns to composure and mustard greens, or rubbing a paragraph with a soft cloth. Then my ex-sharer of a mood calls up in a fevered voice and reminds me of every silly thing I said Accuses me of being faithless and inconsistent There is no inconsistency there. I was sincere for the moment in which I said the things. It is strictly a matter of time. . . . No two moments are any more alike than two snowflakes. Like snowflakes, they get the same look from being so plentiful and falling so close together. But examine them closely and see the multiple differences between them. Each moment has its own task and capacity; doesn't melt down like snow and form again. It keeps its character forever. So great difficulty lies in trying to transpose last night's moment to a day which has no knowledge of it. (263-64)

In a world of such chaotic inconsistency, in which desire, perspective, and comprehension change from moment to moment, is it possible to write a consistent personal history? The failure of Hurston's prophecies to structure her life story makes it apparent that it is not. If consistency and continuity are one's criteria, then the best one can hope for is the ragtag organization of an obviously biased and probably self-serving rendition. *Dust Tracks* has often enough been characterized in this way. If, on the other hand, the personal narrative is seen as an expression of self-conscious creativity, then *Dust Tracks* can be seen as the least deceptive type of autobiography. As Hurston herself warns the reader, "anybody whose mouth is cut cross-ways is given to lying, unconsciously as well as knowingly." By admitting her lies, Hurston comes closest to the truth.

In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston is aware that the very process of making dreams truth precludes the possibility of truth. She balances on the final step of the making process, never tumbling into belief as does Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for to tumble into believing one's own narrative is to lose the potential for creating new ones. Janie's story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a good deal more literary, a good deal more consistent, and a good deal more critically acceptable than Hurston's. Janie makes a conscious attempt to tell a thematically and imagistically unified story—the lyrical narrative of a young woman growing into knowledge, independence, and true love. Her prophetic vision of the pear tree in bloom is finally fulfilled by her love for Tea Cake. This is the reading forwarded by critics like Hemenway, who sees in *Their Eyes* everything he finds missing in *Dust Tracks*. Even those critics, like Maria Tai Wolff, who see Janie's story as a consciously constructed narrative use developmental terminology—Janie's "experience" leads to her "development" (Wolff 30). This is certainly the way in which Janie seems to want her story to be perceived, and Janie is such an irresistible heroine that the reader can hardly stand to disagree with her.

As it stands, Janie's life story is built on the male model. The vocabulary used by those critics who accept her interpretation of her life makes this apparent. Sherley Anne Williams says that "Janie holds onto her vision of a fulfilled and fulfilling love" until she "comes at last into her own, at home with herself, her man, and her world" (xii, xv). Maria Tai Wolff states that by the end of the novel Janie's "past becomes, at last, something that she can possess. The world is reduced to an image" (33). "As Janie tells her story to Pheoby, she establishes a past that belongs to her, is her possession," states Wendy J. McCredie (28). All of these descriptions partake of the language of fulfillment, reduction, and possession typical of the success-oriented male autobiography. McCredie even goes so far as to say that Janie's "dreams will not 'be mocked to death by Time,'" tying Janie's story directly to the paradigm for male autobiography established at the beginning of *Their Eyes*.

But as Hurston both states and demonstrates in *Dust Tracks*, time is always a factor which limits our access to the past as well as the future. Furthermore, in the words of Barbara Johnson, "Unification and simplification are fantasies of domination, not understanding" (218). To accept Janie's self-portrayal unequivocally is to accept a model of autobiography which is politically as well as aesthetically romanticized. Donald R. Marks has pointed out that the "organicist

ideology of romantic pastoralism” which Janie promotes in her autobiography is “undercut by the violence the author finds inherent in the heterosexual relationships she uses to represent them” (152). Lloyd W. Brown has also claimed that Janie’s representation of herself as “the woman as dreamer in waiting . . . really confirms the limited role and dependency which Janie’s dreams of unlimited horizons attempt to transcend” (44). Is it possible, then, to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an example of female autobiography? Although Janie’s prophecy and its fulfillment are emphasized, the most interesting operation in the book is not Janie’s telling of her own success story, but the narrator’s retelling Janie’s telling in order to demonstrate the way in which autobiographical fiction is constructed. *Their Eyes* is therefore an excellent example not of women’s autobiography but of women’s biography. Through the use of the frame narrator, Hurston allows Janie’s tale to be undercut; the tale contradicts its own prophetic structure (which is no doubt why it is so often accused of narrative sloppiness), and by doing so reveals the process by which male prophetic autobiographies are made. While Janie waits for her ship to come in, the narrator makes the dream truth.

It should be borne in mind, to begin with, that Janie’s story has an audience other than her friend Pheoby and that she knows it. “‘Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ ‘em nothin,’ ” she tells Pheoby in reference to the people of Eatonville, but adds, “‘You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to’ ” (17). The townfolk have already constructed their version of Janie’s life with Tea Cake in the ugliest colors they can think of. “Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty” (10).

The violence of the town’s reaction to her reappearance makes Janie’s telling of her own tale a necessity. As she has just learned in court, fighting lying thoughts is worse than fighting death. Is it any surprise, then, that she tells a story of the fulfillment of prophetic desire and that that fulfillment, that Godlike being, should be Tea Cake? Her story is both her explanation to and her revenge against Joe Starks’ town.

But it would be wrong to overemphasize Janie’s cynicism; although she is aware of her Eatonville audience, she is not speaking entirely for their benefit. Janie’s story is, unmistakably, a tribute to someone she has loved well, if not too wisely.² It is an emotional necessity for her to see Tea Cake as the fulfillment of her

life's quest, for her understanding of happiness is built on the male model. She thinks in terms of desire and fulfillment throughout the novel; her faith in the pear tree prophecy never wavers. In *Dust Tracks* Hurston describes the sort of person who is capable of devotion to a single vision, and that description fits Janie almost perfectly:

I have a strong suspicion, but I can't be sure, that much that passes for constant love is a golded-up moment walking in its sleep. Some people know that it is the walk of the dead, but in desperation and desolation, they have staked everything on life after death and the resurrection, so they haunt the graveyard. They build an altar on the tomb and wait there like faithful Mary for the stone to roll away. So the moment has authority over all of their lives. They pray constantly for the miracle of the moment to burst its bonds and spread out over time. (264-65)

Janie's life with Tea Cake has become "a golded-up moment" by the end of the novel, just as her pear tree vision is one in the beginning:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. 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 in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (24)

Janie's revelation is even more overwhelming than the adolescent Zora's in *Dust Tracks* because she receives both the sign and its meaning in a thunderclap of comprehension. The bee's union with the flower suggests to Janie a continuity between natural processes and human institutions. The equation, pear tree = marriage, flashes suddenly and decisively across Janie's mind. Her understanding of the pear tree prophecy is metaphorical in the strictest sense. The descent of the bee into the pear tree flower is not only like a marriage, it is a marriage.

Thus Janie's coming of age is contemporaneous with her coming into an awareness of the natural world as a symbolic canvas. The pear tree flower becomes the type ever in search of an antitype, and one metaphorical equivalence leads to another:

She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking. Finally out of Nanny's talk and her own conjectures she made a kind of comfort for herself. Yes, she would love Logan after they were married . . . Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. (38)

The narrator allows us to see the mechanism of misinterpretation at work in Janie's mind. By adopting the socially sanctioned metaphor that the state of marriage or legal union bears an actual, rather than simply a conventional, relationship to spiritual union, Janie adopts another equivalence into her metaphoric vocabulary: pear tree = marriage = love.

By the next spring, "when pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world" (43), Janie has become fully aware of the failure of her string of metaphors. "She knew now that marriage did not make love" (44), but she is not willing to admit that the pear tree prophecy is an arbitrary interpretation of a meaningless event, or that the metaphor pear tree = marriage has led her astray. It did not equal her first marriage, but there is no telling who might come down the road.

To free herself from her marriage with Killicks she need only invalidate the elements of his symbolic vision. Janie's vision under the pear tree has made her aware of the symbolic mechanisms of the mind. She recognizes that, for Killicks, as for her grandmother, marriage is primarily a financial arrangement, the sixty acres acting as both sign and guarantee of matrimonial unity. When Janie tells him, "'Youse mad 'cause Ah don't fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain't done me no favor by marryin' me'" (53), she ruptures the Killicks metaphor of marriage = money = love and invalidates the marriage contract. Thus we see Janie's skill at perceiving the linchpins of other people's metaphors and her ability to manipulate them through this perception. After telling Killicks off, Janie "gave Logan's speech a hard thought and placed it beside other things she had seen and heard. When she had finished with that she dumped the dough on the skillet and smoothed it over with her hand" (53-54). The narrator thus offers an image of Janie handling Killicks' personal symbolic language as deftly and easily as she handles the biscuit dough. But the great irony is that despite her ability to see through other people's self-generated symbols she does not see through her own. Like Zora in *Dust Tracks*, she understands that "Nothing God ever made is the same to more than one person," but unlike Zora she does not apply this principle to her own story. Her use of her personal symbols and prophecies is therefore not capricious and amusing, as is Zora's, but aggressive and combative. Her vision will only be realized if it is victorious over the visions of others; her tale becomes the demonstration to Eatonville and to herself of how this victory is achieved. When Janie tosses her apron aside and stops to pick flowers, the action is laden with symbolism; Killicks' vision has been

tossed aside and hers has been reasserted. "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom. Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (54-55). The pear tree vision is still in operation, still acting as a prophecy; it simply has a new meaning assigned to it.

That the new words are somewhat contradictory is readily apparent. When Janie first meets Joe she thinks that "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (50). The transformation of Joe from not-bee to bee occurs, as it did with Killicks, through an extended set of signs. As Janie's first marriage is ending, she re-experiences the golded-over moment in a somewhat revised fashion. This time she glories not in the creative power of nature, but in its re-creative power:

She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, "Ah hope you fall on soft ground," because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed. She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. (44)

Her first vision having failed her, she revises it to include the possibility of a second chance. This second chance at the pear tree prophecy is associated with recreative change and that which is "way off" or on the "far horizon." Thus the equation pear tree = far horizon = chance and change comes into operation, and Joe Starks becomes the new bee-man.

As in her first marriage, however, Janie's prophecy does not mesh with her husband's. Joe is a visionary too, and his visions are eminently practical.³ His rhetoric is that of Protestant prophecy:

"Ah kin see dat dis town is full uh union and love. Ah means tuh put mah hands tuh de plow heah, and strain every nerve tuh make dis our town de metropolis uh de state . . . Ah welcome you all on behalf uh me and mah wife tuh dis store and tuh de other things tuh come. Amen." (68-69)

Joe surrounds himself with emblems of white authority and power. The "bow-down command in his face" which "made men give way before him" (75) is the expression of a man competent in the manipulation of public symbols. His prophecy of bringing civilization to Eatonville is fulfilled symbolically rather than economically. The only significant changes he effects are the

clearing of two roads, the building of the store, the lighting of the street lamp, and the creation of his monolithic home. But these symbols of advancement satisfy his public, particularly when Janie is in his tow. She is his obedient shadow, consistently remarkable for her silent subjugation. That Joe buys himself a golden spit pot is characteristic. That he buys one for Janie is awe-inspiring. While Joe alone would be an ambitious man, Joe and Janie represent an entire upper class of which Joe is clearly the commanding patriarch. " 'Ah often wonder how dat lil wife uh hisn makes out wid him, 'cause he's uh man dat changes everything, but nothin' don't change him,' " remarks one porch sitter. " 'It sho is uh hidden mystery tuh me,' " is the reply (79). Joe's mysterious power to control Janie, mentally, socially, and sexually, is the metaphor by which Joe rules.

Because of Janie's key position among Joe's symbols of power, she is able to topple his world with a phrase. Her public declaration that, " 'when you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life' " (123) shatters Joe not merely because it embarrasses him or reminds him of his mortality, but because it demonstrates in the most ugly and intimate fashion that Joe is not the man who changes everything but is never changed. Both the form and content of Janie's insult deconstruct the metaphor of her subjugation. Joe's earth-shaking prophetic words become "a lot of brag," empty language, where the metaphorical "big voice" once was. He can't put up, so he is forced to shut up, and Janie once again illustrates her ability to manipulate other people's metaphors.

As Barbara Johnson has demonstrated (211), the passage in which Janie realizes that her marriage to Joe has failed is an excellent example of the interplay between metaphor and metonymy. As in the parallel scene of her first marriage, cooking is paired with the destruction of worn out metaphors. The one metaphor which she does not abandon, however, is that of the pear tree: "She wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (111). The narrator makes it clear that although Janie sees her blossom as closed, it is still there. "She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (112). Attempting to adorn Jody with her own golded-up vision, she has failed. Change and chance could no longer be the meaning of the pear tree. Again the prophecy has been frustrated, but not forgotten.

Janie's depiction of Tea Cake as the fulfillment of her pear tree vision is necessary to the thematic unity of her narrative. Unlike the

other husbands, Tea Cake comes to be directly associated with the bee of the prophecy:

She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (161)

Cyrena N. Pondrom states that, when “Hurston introduces Tea Cake, she is at pains to make him the appropriate mythic consort of an avatar of the great female goddess, and an analogue of the dying and resurrected gods” (192). I believe it is Janie who “is at pains” and Hurston who organizes the text so that these pains become apparent to the reader. It seems that in Janie's eyes Tea Cake can do no wrong. If he sneaks off for a night of gambling, taking Janie's money and leaving her alone, it is a boyish prank. If he flirts with other women, it is a form of protracted foreplay, designed to sweeten his lovemaking with Janie. If he beats her, his blows are lovetaps:

Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams. (218)

Such a passage seems startling until it is taken into account that the idyllic happiness of Janie's marriage to Tea Cake is as central to her personal narrative as the utter regularity of Joe's marriage to Janie was to his. Janie, like Joe before her, needs to convince both Eatonville and herself that her prophecy has been fulfilled. The first two marriages were false starts, but this is the real thing. When it comes to fulfilling prophecy, no rough edges are allowed.

But there are some very rough and terrible edges to Janie's story. Even if one ignores the thorny issue of her domestic warfare, the gold-dusted world of the pear tree vision is a far cry from the gratuitous violence of the hurricane and the absurd tragedy of Tea Cake's death. The natural disaster bodies forth the frailty of human control over, as well as comprehension of, the natural world:

And the lake. Under its multiplied roar could be heard a mighty sound of grinding rock and timber and a wail. They looked back. Saw people trying to run in raging waters and screaming when they found they couldn't. A huge barrier of the makings of the dike to which the cabins had been added

was rolling and tumbling forward. 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. (238-39)

The futility of the human attempt to bind nature within structures of symbolic meaning is illustrated by the water's breaking through the dike. Janie can no more contain the promise of happiness in a pear tree than men can contain water in a dike. Ultimately, signification must break free and humans are left awash and in the dark:

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. 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. (236)

Staring into a hurricane or into the thick darkness surrounding a divinity come to much the same thing, particularly when compared with the sort of metaphor-generating watching which Janie indulges in under the pear tree. To watch God is a dangerous and confusing endeavor, and to attempt to draw meaning from that watching is even more so. The chaos of nature cannot be made simplistically metaphorical. Janie does not try to draw the hurricane into her pear tree vision. Instead, she alters the framework of her story to transform Tea Cake from a perfect husband to a sacrificial victim. The story would be neater had he died while actually saving her life, of course. As it is he languishes, suffers, turns abusive and finally murderous. The glance of God becomes the ferocious look of a mad dog, and Janie is forced to kill him. His death is both a narrative and a practical necessity. It is the only way to make a clean story out of a messy life so that her prophetic vision can finally be fulfilled.

The beatific ending of *Their Eyes* portrays Janie at one with her history. She has told a successful tale and can now live on, feeding on her inner visions of Tea Cake. The real Tea Cake is gone, of course, and may never have really existed in the way he is portrayed in the tale, but this does not seem to matter. Having created a structure for her life, Janie is committed to it. Once the prophecy is fulfilled the only thing left to do is tell the story over and over again.

The danger of believing in one's own stories is that one gets trapped inside them. Pulling in the horizon sometimes snags you in a net. Unlike Hurston's, Janie's autobiography is a fiction meant to be consistent, fulfilled, flawless. But it is not flawless, at least not from the perspective of the male autobiographer, because the

female narrator reveals its constructed nature. Hurston has written a novel in which a woman tries to tell a man's story but ends up telling a woman's story in spite of herself. It thus becomes clear that the female mode of autobiography subsumes the male mode by undercutting its metaphors in the same way that Janie undercuts her husbands' metaphors and in the same way that the narrator undercuts Janie's. No autobiography is flawless because no life has the closed narrative structures of art; the stuff that humans are made of is asymmetrical, discontinuous, like snowflakes in a blizzard. Furthermore, if art is to deal honestly with life it must avoid fulfillment and symmetry. Hurston claims that black art is essentially asymmetrical:

It is the lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so hard for white dancers to learn. . . . The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but they are there. Both are present to a marked degree. There is always rhythm but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. (Hurston, *Church* 54)

Dust Tracks on a Road is a book which has a rhythm of segments, and although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* seems to move more smoothly, the places where its segments have been stitched together become clear. Hurston has structured her narratives in a distinctly black, and distinctly subversive, anti-narrative form. It is therefore neither useful nor appropriate to discuss whether or not *Dust Tracks* is a "failed" autobiography, or *Their Eyes* a "successful" novel. Such evaluative terms are derived from a vision of life and of literature which can be swiftly deconstructed by the multiple possibilities of literary and autobiographical expression. Both books describe the process of watching—not of watching ships come in to shore, but of watching the mercurial, polymorphous possibilities of meaning with the same wondering uncertainty of unbelieving prophets watching God.

Notes

¹My thanks to Peter Dorsey for calling my attention to this point.

²Cyrena N. Pondrom demonstrates the relation of Janie's story to the Isis-Osiris myth but, oddly enough, does not mention the traditional correlation between the reconstruction of Osiris's body by Isis and the fiction-making process. In this case the parallel is particularly appropriate. Janie recreates the dead Tea Cake out of bits and pieces from their life together.

³Ann Rayson claims that Hurston "sees herself as a kind of black, female Ben Franklin" in *Dust Tracks* (43). I would suggest that Joe Starks is a better candidate for a black Franklin and that Hurston's understanding of the nature of female autobiography precludes the possibility of a Franklinish life story.

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