

“So the Beginning of This Was a Woman”: Tracing Black Religion’s Temporal Narrative Creation in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Carolyn A. Schweitz
Religious Studies
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rodger M. Payne

Abstract

This research project is an attempt to break down the walls imposed by academia between the field of literature and the field of religious studies. Literature and religious studies as academic fields too often operate in opposition to one another as modes of truth-making and epistemological grounding. Though the field of study exists as a combination between religious studies and literature, this field still leaves some authors on the margins. Some pieces of literature, including fictional novels, demand to be read with the backing of a religious studies lens, and further can develop into religious texts themselves given the cosmological assertions they pose. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is such a novel and it is one that has been left on the fringes of the combined field of religion and literature. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, perhaps more than any other novel, bears weight in breaking down distinctions between literature and religious studies. Hurston utilizes fiction to interweave both the theology and the cultural practices of black religion into the narrative. Through literary analysis, one can read Hurston’s process of narrative creation as a commentary on the very nature of black religion’s formation and temporal location. This project argues that Zora Neale Hurston utilizes themes of time and sight, through the symbol of the horizon, to pose the deeper cosmology of black religion’s innate temporality as located in the process of narrative creation.

1. Introduction

In 1979, writer and activist Audre Lorde famously proposed that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”¹ Though Lorde wrote this assertion a few years after Hurston’s death, no truer words could have been spoken about Hurston’s undertaking to be an anthropologist. Hurston knew setting out as a cultural anthropologist and collecting black folk narratives that she could not escape the realm of Western academia. She struggled to be taken seriously as a scholar her entire life, and debates continue about the validity of her work long after her death. The beauty of Hurston’s work is that she does not strive to dismantle or operate against the larger project of Western scholarship. Instead, Hurston attempts to operate within the given model to present conceptions of existence - specifically that of the black religious experience - that had previously not been addressed.

In the same essay, Lorde also writes, “difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”² Like Lorde, Hurston values the difference of narratives. Hurston is not interested in discrediting experiences, but rather in the presentation of ever-shifting narrative creation. Her anthropological work attempts to collect as many versions of a folktale as possible. Hurston’s interest lies in the facets between the real and the perceived, the actual and the story. She seeks to find the common threads between versions of narrative but allows readers to have space for their own interpretation. This framework of narrative creation and interpretation firmly positions Hurston as a black religious scholar in her own novels.

Enter Janie, the narrator of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A character so full and vibrant, yet so difficult to read, it is hard to know exactly what we are supposed to do with her. Hurston tells us in her autobiography that Janie's story "was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks."³ Hurston's internal pressure manifests itself into one of the most spectacular works of narrative of the modern era. Yet Janie's own story is also one of narrative creation. Framed by a recounting to her best friend Phoeby, Janie's entire story unfolds as a process of self-determination through reflexive narration. Hurston not only uses the process of narrative creation to tell Janie's story, Janie also uses narrative creation to tell her own.

This process of narrative creation highlights some of the most foundational tenets of black religion. Donald H. Matthews discusses black religion's narrative creation in his book *Honoring the Ancestors*. He states, "black criticism must be an interdisciplinary process by which cultural practices and ideas are analyzed by describing and attempting to retrieve the meanings of a culture as seen within that culture's system of meaning."⁴ Black religion itself is fluid in nature, adapting to the situation in which it finds itself in and creating narratives around such. This fluidity is something that James Noel highlights in his book *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*. Noel writes, "black religion is involved and implicated in the manifestation of the new forms of materiality represented by black people themselves."⁵ One can read these insights into black religion through the very narrative creation process within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Through literary analysis informed by such scholarship, this paper will explore how Zora Neale Hurston utilizes themes of time and sight, through the symbol of the horizon, to pose the deeper cosmology of black religion's innate temporality as located in the process of narrative creation.

2. Abbreviated Literature Review

2.1 Literary Criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston remains one of the most fascinating authors of the modern era. Her works defy the boundaries of genre and the conventions of fiction. Hurston's writing blurs the lines between the distinct division of the religious and the secular, often subverting the category of what we define as "religion." Though much scholarship has been produced about Hurston's works as well as her life, it is Hurston's elusiveness that allows her writing to be analyzed over and over again with fresh interpretations each time. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*⁶ demonstrates the complexity with which Hurston interweaves the religious and the secular, the factual and the fictive. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is "not a fully finished or conceptually realized text," meaning that the ambivalence within the text itself leaves room for a wide window of analysis.⁷ Religious studies is one avenue for exploring this multifaceted text.

Most of the scholarship about Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and religion focuses on the relationship between Hurston's work and Vodou. Researchers like Daphne Lamothe have noted the appearance of many Vodou symbols and rituals in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and even point to the similarities between protagonist Janie and Vodou goddess Ezili.⁸ These Vodou elements within the novel highlight both personal transformation and moments of cultural change.⁹ Janie experiences personal transformation because of the spiritual power of Vodou; as Rachel Stein illustrates: "Voodoo spirituality contests the binaristic hierarchies within colonial structures that prove so damaging to black women."¹⁰ The Vodou spirituality within *Their Eyes Were Watching God* accesses a portion of the religious-scape within the text. Some, like Nancy Ann Watanabe, even point out the tensions between Vodou and Christianity within the novel, highlighting the discursive theology overlapping both overtly and covertly.¹¹ This rich scholarship takes us closer to understanding Hurston as not just a writer, but as a religious scholar.

However, despite scholarship surrounding the elements of Vodou religion present in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and even analysis on the overlapping with Christian religion, there seems to be a general lack of attention to Hurston's work as a modality for black religion. While the exploration of connections to Vodou are certainly extremely important, Vodou is but one sliver of the black religious experience. Some scholarship on connections between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and black religion does exist, even though it is hard to come by. Both Péter Gaál-Szabó and Marcus Harvey position Hurston's work as valuable within the context of the study of religion, specifically the study of black religion. Gaál-Szabó argues Hurston constructs liminal space within the narrative through examining C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's definitions of Black Church space and African American communal space.¹² Likewise, Harvey identifies motifs in the story that lend themselves to the black religious experience, using an application of historian Charles Long.¹³ This research project will attempt to further strengthen these connections and underscore the importance of Hurston as a religious scholar.

I have engaged the motif of time in my research of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and black religion. James R. Giles' classic literary analysis in his article, "The Significance of Time in Zora Neale Hurston's: Their Eyes Were

Watching God,” remains a foundational starting point for this research with the identification of time’s role in the novel.¹⁴ Other authors pose connections between elements of religion and religious experience that can be tied to the motif of time. Patrick S. Bernard’s article “The Cognitive Construction of the Self in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” illustrates some of the philosophical underpinnings of the creation of self, specifically in regard to Janie’s character.¹⁵ The construction of self is crucial to understanding the development of community and formation of ideas of a higher spiritual power, whether that power is time or some other form of the divine. Similarly, Deborah Clarke’s analysis of voice and vision in her critical essay “‘The Porch Couldn’t Talk for Looking’: Voice and Vision in ‘*Their Eyes Were Watching God*’” provides depth into the ways Hurston’s visual language provides a deeper understanding of the African American experience.¹⁶ Finally, Erik D. Curren’s essay, “Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God? Hurston’s Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror” demonstrates how religious experience plays into the plotline, though doing so through the lens of gothic horror.¹⁷ Like Clarke, Curren’s application can be utilized in a new direction to further investigation into the motif of time, religious experience, and black religion.

2.2 The Field of Literature and Religious Studies

Studying literature and religion can be tricky because one must interact with two disciplines in an interdisciplinary fashion. The fields of literature and religious studies have been two academic disciplines that have operated within the Western academy for many years. Notably, the interdisciplinary field of literature and religious studies has also been an established tradition, but scholars have differing opinions on how literature and religious studies should be approached.

W. Richard Comstock argues for a distinct and compartmentalized approach to studying religion and literature.¹⁸ Comstock’s approach leaves little room for crossing boundaries. Literature is studied through the field of literature and religious studies through religious studies. The two can come together to inform each other, but only after research and analysis has been done in their own fields. I contest his stance of a strict divide as I use literary analysis to provide religious analysis.

Ciriaco Moron Arroyo’s work focuses more on the concept of a Western Christian God, but she provides a framework with which to explore how religious narratives operate in a text.¹⁹ She explains how both explicitly religious narratives and more subverted religious threads can be located through literary analysis. Arroyo’s approach is crucial to unpacking the religious themes and tones in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Highlighting the black religious narrative located within the text, Arroyo offers a way to explore these threads of subversion.

Similarly, Cleo McNelly Kearns values both the study of religion and the study of literature and highlights some of the connections between the two.²⁰ Kearns highlights that literary study can break down erected dogmas and encourage serious debate. Likewise, religious study can ground literature within the cosmology of an author. This project attempts to do both by shaking up the category of black religion while grounding the reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* within Hurston’s own cosmology.

2.3 Foundation of Black Religion

We must also contextualize Zora Neale Hurston within the framework of black religion. Black religion is somewhat difficult to define since its experiences vary across time and place. In broad terms of definition, black religion encapsulates the trauma of the middle passage and the epistemological and existential crisis that follows from it.

Writer and historian Gayraud Wilmore offers that black religion can be defined as “a form of belief and practice in the religious institutions of African Americans.”²¹ Wilmore explains that black religion is not only completely different than white religion, but that it offers a new perspective on the human religious experience.²² This black religious experience begins with the transportation of black bodies across the middle passage. Hurston herself discusses the middle passage in her book *Barracoon*, where she details the life of the last living slave who had crossed the Atlantic from Africa to America.²³ Scholar Sylvester A. Johnson explains that the study of black religion has traditionally been analyzed as a form of freedom, but argues that there is no possible way to examine black religion without addressing the impact of colonialism.²⁴ The study of black religion cannot ignore the trauma of the middle passage nor the damage that the American colonial empire perpetrated against black bodies and black cosmology.

Importantly, black religion is not the same thing as the black church. Albert J. Raboteau discusses the difference between black religion and the black church.²⁵ The black church is a branch of Christianity that is predominantly black or African American in nature. In contrast, black religion is belief and practice based on incorporating African religious tradition into the predominant Western Christian framework of America and subverting its principles. Black religion deals with concepts of God but is somewhat dismissive of the Christian God as it stands for white religious

life. Frederick Douglass addresses the inadequacy of the Christian God in the appendix of his memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.²⁶ However it is important to note that black religion incorporates some Christian theology into its system. Black religion keeps what is useful for making meaning. Yvonne Chireau explains that the flexibility between Christianity and Conjure is the essence of spiritual practice for black religion.²⁷ Black religion's ability to adapt to a given scenario is quintessential.

Though the explicit connections from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to black religion continue to be the weakest link in research, this gap in scholarly discourse proves exactly why this research is important. This project seeks to strengthen the field of religious studies as a whole, bridging a gap between literature and religious studies when discussing Hurston. Utilizing the tools I have gained from both my studies in the discipline of literature and the discipline of religious studies, I attempt to benefit both fields by allowing for a fluidity between the two. Intersectionality between the two fields has long existed, but not when approaching Hurston's work. I hope to open the gateways for further research into literary works as embodiments of religious knowledge and experience, explicitly those of the black religious tradition, because I believe more authors than just Hurston demonstrate this capacity. Additionally, much of the black religious tradition is in fact encompassed in fictional works, folk tales, music, and artwork. In analyzing Hurston with the combined power of literature and religious studies, I hope to legitimize Hurston's work as not only an author, but as a scholar of religion and to allow more research exploring the black religious experience.

3. Critical Analysis: Tracing Black Religion's Temporal-Narrative Creation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with the image of ships floating along the horizon almost beyond sight, yet still present in the back of the mind. For a novel in which the main character never sees the ocean, beginning with "ships at a distance"²⁸ proves to be a peculiar juxtaposition with the main character's journey. However, as Janie's narrative unfolds so too does Hurston's agenda as a black religious scholar. Hurston inserts a black religious framework through both cosmology and thematic construction. Through this framework, Hurston utilizes themes of time and sight, through the symbol of the horizon, to pose the deeper cosmology of black religion's innate temporality as located in the process of narrative creation.

3.1 Time and the Watcher

Time runs throughout the novel. James R. Giles discusses his three interpretations of Hurston's use of Time in his essay "The Significance of Time in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Giles details the three interpretations: "a determinist view of time as a force leading inexorably to death," "a thing to be measured and controlled rationally," and "folk hedonism personified by Tea Cake."²⁹ The following analysis treats the theme of Time most closely to Giles' first interpretation of Time, also presenting Time as a force, but seeks to underscore Time as a divine force.

Indeed, Time is a divine force, one that shapes and reshapes Janie. Hurston opens the novel writing, "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."³⁰ Immediately with the first two lines of the novel, Hurston sets up a divine cosmology, one of discourse between the figure of the Watcher and the figure of Time. The capitalization of Time suggests Time's power as a force, perhaps in direct opposition to the Watcher since the Watcher's dreams are being mocked by Time, but at the very least in parallel with the Watcher. The two are on the same playing field of divine power, although Time's mocking nature suggests that Time perhaps has more power than the Watcher. Regardless, time's divine nature directly impacts Janie's journey throughout the novel.

The Watcher is a form of the Christian God, one that ultimately proves useless to Janie. Rather Janie discovers through her progression that Time is the divine force behind all things. Time is the only constant, always moving forward and always unpredictable. However, a recognition should be included that there are certainly other ways to read this cosmology. Divinity can be read in multiple ways in this text. With focus on the relationship between Time's divinity and the black religious experience, the interpretation of Time as the most divine force and the Watcher as the rejected Christian God holds the most value. This interpretation will be used throughout the following analysis.

It must also be noted that this divine cosmology is set up with gender dynamics at play. Immediately following the first two lines, Hurston writes, "That is the life of men." She continues, "Now, women forget all the 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."³¹ Within this cosmological frame, men are thrown to the whims and chaos of Time, but women are given a certain form of agency over their relationship with Time. The women choose what they remember and what they forget because the stories they tell are the truth. The process of narrative creation also asserts that the stories told - and the pieces remembered or forgotten - are truth, at least in the eyes of the women narrating such stories. It seems that perhaps Hurston also makes an assertion that women can transcend past the woes of the cycle of Time through the process of narrative creation while men cannot. And as Janie is the main character of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* this is indeed a possibility.

3.2 The Theme of Time

Time unfolds as a repetition mechanism for Janie over the course of her journey. Janie has a multitude of beginnings. As the novel progresses, we see Janie experience new beginnings through different marriages, changes in location, and even shifts in her own perspective. Janie's narrative warps the perception of Time, having a narrative presented as linear but constructed as circular. This contradiction of Time and linearity starts right as the novel opens with Janie's return to Eatonville. Hurston writes, "So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead."³² The introduction to Janie hinges on an ending - the end of a life. Beginning ties directly to ending right on the first page of the novel. This opening sets Janie up to be in a direct relationship with beginnings and endings. Fittingly, the novel ends exactly where it begins, completing Time's circular movement in the text. The novel opens with Janie returning to Eatonville to tell her story to Pheoby and the novel ends with Janie having told that story. Although the audience experiences Janie's life unfolding before them, Janie is still alone. Both the beginning paragraph and the ending paragraph feature the horizon, underscoring Time's link with the symbol of the horizon.

This pattern of beginnings continues throughout the novel. Janie begins her own narrative in recounting her full story to Pheoby, not just with the recent events down in the muck with Tea Cake, but by retracing her story all the way back to young womanhood. Hurston writes that Janie "thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate."³³ Janie thinks through the story she will tell Pheoby, starting with when she began to see things like "bees singing of the beginning of the world" for something more than just bees.³⁴ Janie begins when she remembers "her conscious life had commenced" as though up until her first kiss she had been asleep. She sees the divinity of Time within nature itself and this observation sparks her forward on her journey.

But Janie also illustrates that her story starts in various places. She doesn't become a woman until after she realizes that she doesn't love Logan, her first husband, as she thought she was going to love him. Later, she begins anew with Jodie, running away to Eatonville to become something else. And much later, Janie experiences yet another new beginning when she falls in love with Tea Cake. After she and Tea Cake have sex for the first time, Hurston writes that Janie "got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount the sky on a wind. That was the beginning of things."³⁵ Almost two-thirds of the way through the novel there is another beginning. Janie begins again with each new marriage, even though each marriage ultimately fails for the same reason. Janie's true nature is not seen by any of her partners. Even Tea Cake, who Janie claims she feels a different kind of love for, does not truly see Janie for who she is. I will unpack Tea Cake and Janie's relationship further when I discuss the symbol of the horizon. Crucially, it is the lack of spiritual vision that Janie seeks that forces her into repetition, a forced interaction with the divine nature of Time.

3.3 The Motif of the Sun

Time also becomes physically manifested through the motif of the sun. The opening of the novel features Janie returning at dusk: "The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky."³⁶ Thus the beginning of the novel opens with sundown, an ending of sorts. Though the sun has left, the impact or "his footprints" are still visible. However, Janie isn't rendered visible until the sun - the most illuminating essence - is gone. We could interpret the sun in a few ways in this sentence. The sun could be a reference to Tea Cake, who is linked continually throughout the novel as being of the sun or sunrise, although Tea Cake is dead at this point in the narrative. He is gone, but he certainly left imprints in Janie's life. However, the sun could also be representative of Time. Though Time does not ever fully disappear, Time's hold on Janie's life has lessened since she has claimed her own narrative. Time has impacted Janie's life leaving "his footprints." The sun can be more directly linked to time within the line a few sentences further on: "But now, the sun and the bossman were gone."³⁷ Hurston sets up a difference here. The sun is not the same as the bossman, rather they are two separate entities, both of which are gone at this moment of the novel. If we link the sun to time, or Time, and the bossman to the Watcher, then we

have a continuation of the dichotomy set up with the first few sentences. Additionally, both the sun and the bossman are both gone. Because Janie has taken control of her narrative, neither Time nor God has power over her any longer. The sun's movement will remain consistent, just as Time will, but Janie will determine her own story.

Early in the novel, Janie operates within the modality that the Watcher or the Christian God is in charge of the movement of the sun. This is the story that she has been told and it is a story that continues to be supported early on in Janie's journey. A young Janie comments on the sun and God's relationship, "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."³⁸ For a young Janie, God controls the sun and the sun is the mode of creation. Although Janie at this point claims that it is the Christian God who controls the sun, we know that she eventually realizes that Time is the only constant. Even when Janie is young, the underlying motion of Time is present within her thoughts. Like the sun rises and sets every day, so too does the process of narrative creation make and remake stories and meaning.

Likewise, Joe Stark, Janie's second husband, affirms this narrative of God having the power of the sun when he discusses the Sun-maker. Joe gives a speech saying, "Folkse, de sun is goin' down. De Sun-maker brings it up in de mornin', and de Sun-maker sends it tuh bed at night. Us poor weak humans can't do nothin' tuh hurry it up nor to slow it down. All we can do, if we want any light after de settin' or befo' de risin', is tuh make some light ourselves."³⁹ He attempts to explain the sun through the Christian lens, pointing to God or the Sun-maker, as the being in control. However, just beneath the surface, Joe pinpoints that Time perhaps has more control when he states that they as humans cannot impact Time's progression, seen physically with the rising and setting of the sun. Joe even points to a way out of the hindrances of this cosmology by offering that humans must create their own light when it is dark. This solution requires an acceptance of Time's power and humans' lack thereof. And interestingly, this is the very lesson that Janie goes on to learn and accept later in the story during the hurricane. At the end of the novel, as Janie contemplates Tea Cake's death and the power she has of telling her own story, Hurston comments that "the light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire."⁴⁰ Janie takes power into her own hands by having her own light against the dark, just as she takes control of her own narrative. Janie sees with her own light, not the sun, in the same way that Janie creates her own narrative within the novel. Janie's choice to make her own light directly relates to the lessons Janie has learned about seeing and being seen by the divine. The theme of sight influences Janie's autonomy over her own narrative, reflective of the decision made with the light at the end of the novel.

3.4 The Theme of Sight

Hurston utilizes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to present black religious cosmology through the theme of sight. The black religious tradition focuses on the process of finding self through one's own voice, typically through narrative creation, and the visualization of this process is crucial to building a successful narrative. Deborah Clarke discusses at some length the patterns of voice and vision in her essay "The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking." Clarke points out the importance of Janie's voice in her own narrative creation, but states that "voice alone is not enough," pointing to the threads of visualization.⁴¹ Hurston reflects this visualization process in the passage where she explains the creation of human beings, explaining how God made Man out of a shining material and the angels got so jealous that they chopped Man up and covered him in mud. Hurston explains that after being covered in mud "the lonesomeness in the sparks made them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine."⁴² Hurston sets Janie up for this repeated and circular journey from a cosmological standpoint. It is in Janie's very creation that she seeks to find connection to other "sparks" and again in her very creation that this desire to be seen remains unachievable.

Janie seeks to be seen throughout the entire novel. When she begins her narrative to Pheoby at the start of her consciousness, Janie also begins with her desire to be seen. Hurston details that Janie "was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How?"⁴³ Janie searches for an answer in a power greater than herself. Initially, she asks for these answers from the Watcher, or God. But while every other creature has an answer, Janie lacks one. She cannot find the answers that she seeks from God.

Janie's quest for answers and vision from God reaches a pinnacle during the hurricane. The hurricane both symbolically and physically presents a relationship between sight and the divine. In his essay "'Hard Skies' and Bottomless Questions," Marcus Harvey discusses the hurricane as a "disruptive wonderment" causing a fracture in consciousness, but also an opportunity for the community to measure themselves against God.⁴⁴ During the hurricane there are significant moments where Janie challenges God through the modality of sight. The novel's own title comes from this portion of the text, where the group riding out the hurricane questions God and his capability to ensure their

safety. However, God does not save them from the hurricane. In fact, Tea Cake gets bitten by a rabid dog during the hurricane and slowly begins to die. As Tea Cake is dying, Hurston writes that Janie “looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. ... It wasn’t exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart.”⁴⁵ Janie encounters the “unmoved” mover form of God. Benjamin E. Mays discusses the unmoved mover God in his book *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature*, stating that “God is described as having outlived his usefulness.”⁴⁶ Mays illustrates the concept that the God of the white man is not useful, relevant, or generally in existence for the black man. Janie encounters a God who is not only distant, but a God who does nothing for her. Cosmologically, Janie remains unseen by other humans due to the mud covering her shine even though she longs to be seen. As Tea Cake dies and Janie stares up at the sky questioning God, she also remains unseen by the divine. This God is The Watcher who “turns his eyes away in resignation.”⁴⁷ This God lacks the vision Janie seeks. Instead, God gives his power over to Time, allowing Time to run its course through nature, which includes Janie and the hurricane.

3.5 The Symbol of the Horizon

The power dynamics between God and Time present themselves in the symbol of the horizon. Time’s elusive nature and ultimate power reflect in the repetition of the unending horizon. In relationship with Time, the novel begins with the horizon and “ships at a distance.”⁴⁸ The horizon is universal, having every man’s dream extend out before him, that is the dream to be seen by the divine. The horizon also encompasses everyone here with the definite article “the.” In contrast, when the novel ends and the horizon appears again, Janie has claimed the horizon as her own this time: “she pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see!”⁴⁹ “The horizon” changes to “her horizon” underscoring Janie’s acceptance that the expanse of Time is the only sense of divinity she will get. At this point, Janie understands that the unmoved God, or the Watcher who turns his eyes away, cannot provide her the vision she seeks. So instead, Janie accepts the inanity that Time and the horizon give her. Janie also commands for her soul to see, a note that she has decided to use her vision for herself, no longer questing after the unseeing God. In his article “The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” William Ramsey denotes that ambivalence that Hurston leaves in the ending with Janie and the horizon, and how the validity of Janie’s story rivals the narratives of the townsfolk.⁵⁰ If Ramsey’s comments are read with a lens of narrative creation then Hurston’s ambivalence becomes the acceptance of multiple narratives. The ambivalence in the ending of the novel allows for the process of narrative creation, tying the horizon as a symbol of Janie’s narrative creation journey. We will further investigate the process of narrative creation as tied to the symbol of the horizon in the later sections.

The horizon symbolizes for Janie the acceptance of others’ inability to see her shine, or rather the acceptance of the cosmological understanding given to us by the shine narrative. After Jodie’s death, Janie again asks self-reflexive questions about her grandmother and realizes that she has not been fulfilled in her search to be seen once again. Hurston writes, “she had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her.”⁵¹ Through her first two marriages Janie searched in her partners to see her shine because it is cosmologically imperative that she do this. Janie journeys to the horizon to find other people and to have other people see her shine. And Hurston underscores that it is important for all the world that Janie be seen by others, not just for Janie herself. However, we know that even with Tea Cake, Janie does not find a way for someone to truly see her. Tea Cake gambles away Janie’s money and then moves her down to the muck - the very mud that Janie has been attempting to escape the entire novel. Janie loves Tea Cake with a “self-crushing love”⁵² and so even though Janie loves Tea Cake it is not within Tea Cake’s seeing of Janie that Janie finds meaning. Rather, it is the self-reflexive sight forced by the hurricane that causes Janie to find the answers to her questions within herself. Janie sees God is not a provider of meaning for her, so she turns within herself.

The horizon depends on one’s commitment to narrative creation. Hurston details, “It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mud puddle and see an ocean with ships.”⁵³ Depending on the way one chooses to see the horizon and if they choose to accept it or not impacts the way their process of narrative creation unfolds. If one focuses on being seen by God, then their narrative proves unfruitful and unfulfilling. But, if like Janie, one chooses to accept the passage of Time and the temporality of narrative creation, then the stories they tell can be fulfilling.

3.6 The Art of Porch Sitting

The importance of storytelling within the black religious tradition cannot be underscored enough. The act of storytelling does not exist simply for entertainment purposes. Storytelling exists for creating meaning in an otherwise unpredictable world. Hurston explains the importance of storytelling in her memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road*, writing, “Men sat around the store on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next ones through their mouths. The right and the wrong, the who, when and why was passed on, and nobody doubted the conclusions.”⁵⁴ Hurston points to facet of storytelling and porch sitting that is crucial to black religious cosmology: Multiple narratives can exist in tandem with one another as long as they hold a valid meaning. A multitude of worlds, ways of being and modes of knowledge get passed through the men’s mouths and told through their stories. The porch is a space of liminality, and in terms of weaving narrative it is a sacred space of creation.

Hurston also opens *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a nod to this liminal and creative space by having the townspeople from the porches watch Janie walk back into Eatonville. Hurston writes, “It was time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long.”⁵⁵ Hurston ties the art of porch sitting directly to the theme of divine Time, singling out not only a place for narrative creation, but sundown as the Time for narrative creation. When the sun sets and the horizon disappears into the dark, humans must create light for themselves, literally and metaphorically. Choosing to tell stories is a way to keep darkness at a safe distance. Hurston also dismisses the porch sitters at the beginning of the novel, stating: “they became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgement.”⁵⁶ Hurston denotes that the porch sitters do indeed fashion worlds, or in this case nations, into being through their words, but Hurston also questions the porch sitters by having them sit in judgment. Perhaps the porch sitters are in one another’s judgment, evaluating the validity of one another’s narratives. But the porch sitters may also be kept in Time’s judgment and only Time will be able to tell whose narrative is more useful than the next.

It is in this element of judgment, whether it be from peers or from Time, that gives the art of porch sitting the potential to be dangerous. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston’s landlady explains to her what is meant by “putting your foot up” on another person: “if you were sufficiently armed - enough to stand off a panzer division - and know what to do with your weapons after you get ‘em, it is all right to go to the house of your enemy, put one foot up on his steps, rest one elbow on your knee and play in the family.”⁵⁷ “Putting your foot up” also known as “playing the dozens” was a performative way of discerning truth or sometimes truths. To “play the dozens” was to seek to present the most valid narrative or to build the best telling of meaning. “Playing the dozens” can become dangerous when it threatens others’ narrative authority, but importantly this act of “putting one’s foot up” becomes one of concern because the porch is a gendered place of interaction.

When storytelling or “playing the dozens” happens on Joe’s store porch, it is only men who can tell stories. Women are not even allowed on the porch for the chance of interaction. Hurston writes, “Joe was on the porch talking to a small group of men. ... The men were all around him, and he was talking to them by asking questions.”⁵⁸ Joe is the focal point of the porch and Janie isn’t even present in the scene, instead only seen through the window. Joe, as the mayor, is trusted as an authorial voice of narrative for the town and the town’s porch space. The only time Janie is allowed on the porch is during the night when the people have left, and she is completely alone. Similarly, in the very beginning of the novel, the townspeople force Pheoby to leave the porch space when Janie returns and Pheoby doesn’t want to contribute to the negative narrative about Janie they spin. Hurston states, “[Pheoby] left the porch pelting her back with unasked question. They hoped the answers were cruel and strange.”⁵⁹ Pheoby leaves the porch with questioning from the townspeople, who cast ill will towards Janie. This space has cast both Pheoby and Janie out of it, even though it allows for discursive storytelling. Janie herself evades the traditional route of porch sitting, instead building her own narrative creation outside of the realm of the porch. Janie ventures after her horizon, but utilizes the tools given to her by the art of porch sitting to make sense of what she finds.

3.7 Temporality and Narrative Creation

Janie’s own narrative creation process proves to be fulfilling for her as she claims the horizon as her own. The horizon, though a visually linear concept, reflects Time’s circularity in its pattern. Upon finishing her narrative, Janie says to Pheoby, “Ah’m back home agin and Ah’m satisfied to be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons.”⁶⁰ Janie considers herself satisfied to live by comparisons for the rest of her life. Living by comparison for Janie means living by the process of narrative creation. This is reflective of black religion’s own liminality. Black religion grounds itself in the temporal. It is flexible and adaptable in nature due

to its ever-evolving process of narrative creation. Black religion hinges on the devastating experience of the middle passage and the epistemological and existential crisis that follows from this experience. It is this crisis that gives birth to the process of narrative creation, fluid in nature and focused on the explanation of the here and now. The past is malleable because so too is the future. Hurston reveals this process of narrative creation through Janie's own story telling and situates it directly in the liminality of the black religious experience by playing with themes of Time, sight, and the symbol of the horizon.

Ultimately, Janie does not change over the course of the novel. She returns to Eatonville largely the same as she is when we begin her narrative with her as a young girl. Hurston writes that Pheoby observes Janie: "full of that oldest human longing - self-revelation."⁶¹ Pheoby knows her friend set off with Tea Cake really to find herself, but then in finishing her narrative to Pheoby, Janie settles into the liminality of narrative creation. Patrick S. Bernard discusses the construction of self in his article "The Cognitive Construction of the Self in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*."⁶² Expanding upon Bernard's work, further analysis will tie the construction of self to the process of narrative creation. Janie's quest for self-revelation revealed to her that the self is whoever she creates the narrative of herself to be. Although Janie has discovered this through the incident with the hurricane, it is something that Janie has known all along. She begins her narrative when her conscious life began, because she has known all along the significance of her own narrative creation. In this process of narrative creation, Janie fabricates her own self not only into being, but into meaning. It is this development of meaning that is the quintessential essence of black religion that Hurston imbues in her work.

8. Conclusion

Hurston stands as a testament to the raw and the untapped. Her literature is some of the most layered and nuanced writing of the 20th century. Elements of black religion and the ideology of black religion's cosmology lay just beneath the surface of Hurston's writing. A reader only must be astute enough to observe what waits below the words. The beauty and complexity of Hurston's work lies in the fact that it does leave the door open for a multitude of interpretations.

One can read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Hurston's reply to the culture of her time, but the novel is also adaptable to any time because of the temporality of its narrative creative process. It offers a multitude of existence all within the present moment. It is for this reason that Hurston poses Time as a divine figure, in competition with the Watcher God, from the very opening line of the novel. Time may continue to influence future interpretations of Hurston's works as well as the flexibility and multiplicity experienced in the reading of her works.

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