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Abstract:

Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is examined to demonstrate how storytelling and the blues, as aspects of diasporic survival, function in her fiction which depicts how African cultural heritage operates in the United States. She articulates the need for her black folks throughout diaspora to confront racism by employing their African cultural heritage as a vehicle for empowerment. Janie, Hurston's protagonist, finds that when she embraces her African heritage not only does she gain great awareness of her selfhood better as African American, but she also discovers that her Africanness and her identity are intertwined.

Key words: African cultural heritage, diaspora, storytelling, the blues, and Afro-American vernacular.

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston (1891—1960) is one of the most accomplished Afro-American writers. She has established herself since the mid-1920s as a distinguished literary Afro-American figure, and is seen by many critics and fiction scholars as “one of the most prolific authors” in Afro-American literature (Bader 129). Hurston dedicates herself to speak for the black experience and is concerned mainly with the issues, challenges, and problems dominant within the black community. She insists upon the specific Africanness of her characters who are shown under pressures peculiar to their own position as blacks in a white society. Defining Hurston's credo in this respect, Jill Terry refers to her as a voice “speaking of black experience,” in order to explain, in terms of Africanism, “the realities of the experience of captivity and enslavement” (525). Elaborating on Hurston's Afro-American background, Bader maintains that all Hurston's writing was “informed by her roots in the rural American South and by a love of African-American folk culture” (129). On 28 January 1960, Hurston passed away, after spending over three decades portraying the suffering of individuals entrapped in racism, isolation and hostile

surroundings. During her lifetime, Hurston published, to name but a few, four novels—*Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), two collections of folktales—*Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), fifty short stories, many plays, two collections of poetry and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

In Hurston's works, narrating one's own story is a salient theme. Such a story carries the flavor of one's personality, as well as cultural identity, which in turn embodies the true entity of the black folks; their cultural roots, their ancestors' legacy, their dreams and even their relationship with each other. This story, to William L. Andrews, is “a metaphor of self,” as it acts as a person's “self-discovery, self-watching and self-pleasuring” (110). It is this story that grants the black self-acceptance and cultural pride. This theme manifests itself in Hurston's model identity novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which, as Valerie Boyd declares, there is a particular case; for the first time Hurston depicts the African identity by using a female storyteller called Janie, who seeks self-affirmation and selfhood in the eyes of the world (303).

Through telling her own story, Janie manages to connect herself to her community and to understand who she is.

Their Eyes is set in Eatonville in the South during the 1900s, a period of racial discrimination that would not bring any positive changes for the blacks in America. Through the characterization of Janie, Hurston sketches the dire social condition of black females by stressing their homelessness and restlessness during that period in which they were disconnected from their heritage, dislocated from their roots and alienated from themselves and their community. Sharon L. Jones remarks, Janie is a symbol of the Afro-American woman “in early 20th-century America, a time and place in which the black female experience was marginalized,” Jones further holds that *Their Eyes* is a notable novel which puts “a black female on center stage; whereas elsewhere during her era black women were marginalized in fiction as well as in life, this text validates the black woman’s experience by focusing directly on Janie Crawford, her family, and her life” (173). Subsequently, Hurston portrays Janie as a wanderer searching for a real sense of identity that reflects her true self. Janie’s confusing longing for love and stability in a society, where estrangement sounds to be the black female’s destiny, reflects her alienation. She is separated from her community, and as the novel moves on, she tries to redeem her lost relationships by finding someone that gives meaning to her existence. Reflecting her protagonist’s sense of estrangement, Hurston employs a nontraditional plot structure which makes the novel seem to lack coherence because of its “nonlinear narrative that begins in the present, shifts to the past, and then returns to the present at the end” (Jones 173). Maria Tai Wolff agrees that “the narrator presents Janie’s story as a series of episodes and pictures” (32). However, Hurston’s selected novel is quite coherent, as it fictionalizes not only the life of a disoriented female who is still on her way to self-discovery, but also

the spirit of the post-slavery era and the 1900s, which can be seen as the most unsettled periods in the black Americans’ history. Having these restless periods as its time setting, it makes sense that *Their Eyes* is made of some narrative clips that have been collected to form a novel.

Though *Their Eyes* begins with Janie coming back to her hometown Eatonville; she recalls memories that reach back to her childhood. The whole novel is a narration of Janie’s life to her friend Pheoby. Janie lives with her grandmother, Nanny who works as a maid for the white Washburns. One day, Janie finds a photo of some children, she “looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair,” Janie does not realize that she is black, “Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me. So ah ast, where is me? Ah don’t see me,” Janie’s portrait of herself as a white girl is fully smashed. It is a tragic experience to a young girl of Janie’s age to recognize that she is black in a white, racist society, “Aw! Aw! Ah’m colored!,” she says sourly. Actually, Janie is uprooted of any aspects of identity because she nearly does not have a certain name, “Dey all useter call me Alphabet cause so many people had done named me different names” Janie recounts (*Their Eyes* 9).

Interpreting Janie’s loss of a certain name within the context of the slave narrative, it can be said that naming is very important for black Americans because it gives them some extent of identity. Historically, in American diaspora the slaves lost their African real names because they were identified by their white master’s name. Consequently, the slave, who already suffered a sense of dehumanization, suffered more because of losing identity. Sigrid King holds that naming is a crucial issue for man because it is related to man’s racial and personal identity as the name enables man to answer the question ‘who?’ (57). In short, Janie, who “receives her sense of definition from others,” fails “to recognize herself,”

except as black 'Alphabet,' thus, she begins her journey of self-assertion and "her story without name or color" (Meese 45).

At the age of sixteen, Janie enters a stage of self-realization as a female. She watches "a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom," this scene of blossoming pear-tree awakes her sexual consciousness as it stirs within her, what the narrator calls, "confirmation of the voice and vision;" therefore, she tells herself, "So this was a marriage!" (*Their Eyes* 11). At this time, a black young man called, Johnny Taylor happens to pass by. Considering him her bee-man, Janie lets Taylor kiss her. Nanny, who watches them, takes this incident as a sign of imminent danger which she has to face at once. She decides to find a husband for Janie because aged Nanny believes, "de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks" (14).

Nanny's life is not fully portrayed; only scattered episodes of her confused life are exposed. As the novel moves on, the readers know that Nanny is a former slave who narrates her own story. Nanny has a key role in *Their Eyes* because she acts as an oral historian, who reserves and recounts her family history-- a role that relates Nanny to her African ancestors. She tells Janie, "Ah'd save de text for you" (16). Since African culture is primarily rooted in the oral tradition, early African history was not kept in written documents, but through the oral historians or the African 'griots' who Thomas A. Hale regards as "The human link between past and present" (20). Those griots, whose verbal art "makes the term 'wordsmith' fit as a partial synonym," serve remarkable roles in their black community because they "function not only in a retrospective sense, linking past to present, but also...in a prospective sense, because of the impact of their words on the future activities of those listening" (114—15).

In *Their Eyes*, Nanny is presented as a modern African griot that guarantees the

true transmission of history from generation to generation. Through employing this African tradition in her novel, Hurston gives her disenfranchised, black characters a chance to be oral historians as an attempt to define themselves according to their own terms instead of being captivated by the negative definition which the white mainstream culture tries to impose on them as an irrefutable fact. Laura Dubek argues that in Hurston's slave narrative the history functions as a call "to remember the history of an enslaved people" whose roots have been ignored (qtd. in Davis and Mitchell 53). In other words, Hurston's characters interpret history according to their personal experience which to them is more authoritative because it is "an act of self-authentication" (Konzett 88).

Nanny's own story, as she tells Janie, goes back to slavery time when Nanny was a slave, she was raped by her white master whose wife cruelly threatened to kill Nanny and her newly born Leafy, so hapless Nanny escaped to the forest with her baby daughter and hid there for years until emancipation. Leafy joined school but she was victimized by a school teacher who raped her. After giving birth to Janie, Leafy escaped, "she was only seventeen....She ain't dead, 'cause Ah'd know it by mah feelings, but sometimes Ah wish she was at rest" Nanny tells wistfully (*Their Eyes* 19).

Nanny, then, is a woman dragging behind her painful memories. Together with the collective slavery past which she shares with all black females, her personal past has been a continuous cycle of grief. First, as a young girl, she lost her virginity and lived with an everlasting shame, then she lost her daughter who escaped after being raped, and now Nanny has to struggle alone as a poor black woman who works as a maid to bring up her motherless granddaughter, "Freedom found me wid a baby girl in my arms," she recalls sourly (16).

In the light of her painful past and her hapless present, Nanny's negative image of the black female sounds reasonable. She

sees no hope for Janie for a better future except in marriage that is why she forces her granddaughter to accept the marriage proposal of aged Logan Killicks whom Nanny believes will offer Janie a comparatively secure life. To Nanny, Janie could spare herself the trouble of working as a maid by marrying Kellicks; she does not have to endure Nanny's daily strife if she marries a rich man, "Ah can't be always guidin' yo' feet from harm and danger. Ah wants to see you married right away" she warns Janie (*Their Eyes* 12). Nanny seems to be a firm believer in the double standards of society concerning men and women as she is with the patriarchal social belief that no woman can be complete without a man, a belief which defines women only related to man. Nanny who was "a work-ox and a brood-sow," (16) tells Janie, "Ah wouldn't marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby" (19).

While on the surface Nanny's words seem to portray her as a faithful feminist, her refusal to marry is not a matter of feminist independence or rebellion against man's dominance as it is a fear of experiencing the pain of separation again with her siblings. After all the suffering which she and her daughter have endured, Nanny sees it more secure not to be married. Therefore, she ignores her femininity, refuses to marry and prefers to live alone. Nanny's advice to Janie, "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's a protection" (15) reveals that Nanny is very far from being a feminist. Thomas F. Haddox summarizes, "Although Nanny evinces a full knowledge of the oppressiveness of the class structure that she describes; she urges on Janie a strategy of resignation instead of resistance and calculates the possible advantage of the marriage only in economic terms" (24).

The theme of the black women's suffering as a result of their attempts to defy their tragic conditions is a major one in *Their Eyes* and it is Nanny's stance to give

tribute to women's sacrifice which has been ignored in the narratives and practices of patriarchy. Nanny seems to define herself according to the script of white people; she is ashamed of her race and her color, which is very apparent when she tells Janie, "'Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause 'Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave" (*Their Eyes* 17). Nanny is a manifestation of this internalized racism. In other words, her self-loathing has given her consent to be looked upon as an inferior when she has allowed the whites to control her image of herself, and to dominate not only her past but her present as well; she is spiritually enslaved to the painful memory of the past and the hard times of the present.

It is clear that marginalized Nanny, who "was never able to achieve what she wanted and fulfill her potential" in life, (Jones 195) employs storytelling as an African tradition to survive and reassert her identity in a society made and run by others. She keeps telling her granddaughter touching, gloomy stories about her past and her folks' struggle to survive in white America. As Jacqueline Fulmer opines, Nanny is an example of the black women's ability to employ storytelling to free "themselves from the extremes of 'othering', binary images set upon them by the dominant Anglo culture and sometimes by the men in their own culture" (53). Those painful stories portray this black maid as a patient female who needs an almost super human will to achieve even the most limited success life can give a woman like her.

These stories which pervade *Their Eyes* show that storytelling is certainly a part of African Americans' daily rituals. To Geneva Smitherman, Africans are by nature storytellers who often use narrative in their daily conversations, "They are not content just to sit back and rattle off the words to a story....If the story is in response to an actual comment or question in a real-life situation, the story-teller comes on with a dramatic narration.... Thus one's humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her

sense of isolation is diminished" (150). Historically, storytelling for black slaves was an effective device for self-empowerment and self-assertion as it granted their right to voice their inner depressed feeling. African Americans' innovative eruption of stories springs from their belief in the fact that stories do not only function as a "psychological mechanism," but also function "significantly as a mechanism for emotional survival" (Oster 558).

However, storytelling is not only Nanny's aspect of survival; she also draws on her metaphorical language. Tree, for instance, is one of the most significant metaphors which she employs in almost of her speech. Although long ago, she was uprooted of her homeland Africa and was deprived of the chance to find a place in the American land, images of trees remain always in her mind. As a subconscious device to relieve her sense of pain over this homelessness and deprivation, she continues to see life as a large jungle full of trees and animals. She borrows the language of the jungle to interpret different everyday life situations, justify her behavior and deal with her familial relationships. Nanny's philosophy of life is rendered in terms of trees. To her, "colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round queer ways" (*Their Eyes* 16). Significantly, Nanny names her only girl Leafy. As she mutates her wasted dreams into survival talents, she habitually integrates tree images as with her animal metaphors. She says, for example, the black female "is de mule uh de world" (14). On the whole, chained to her stinging feeling of powerlessness, depressed Nanny has no more than her verbal talent to express her sense of freedom.

In the context of discussing Nanny's storytelling and her figurative language, it should be noted that Hurston was a remarkable forerunner in using non-traditional modes of narration such as overlapping between black American

vernacular and Standard English; she employs Afro-American narrative voice as spontaneous connection with her black folks in most of her literary works and *Their Eyes* is no exception. Her characters speak Afro-American dialect to assert their black cultural identity versus the white Americans' Standard English. Although utilizing broken English from the side of the Afro-American writers is criticized by some critics such as Elsa Nettels who claims that those writers "made the speech of blacks seem more illiterate than it was" (78).

Yet, before the Harlem Renaissance era, to which Hurston belongs, some black American writers were in favor of writing about the Afro-American experience in Standard English as an attempt to break the ice between black and white Americans. Often, Hurston's fiction is more concerned with fictionalizing the difference of her black folks, represented in their rich culture and language, than with assimilation in the white culture. It is acceptable to say that Hurston's main focus is to portray realistically her African cultural expression, so she presents the black dialect "as a valuable and relevant part of the culture and not inferior to white versions of English" (Jones 212).

As a consequence, throughout Hurston's novels, the Afro-American dialect dominates most of the characters' utterance. It is their sense of belonging to their homeland that makes them speak in the black American accent to construct a connection to their African roots. Deborah G. Plant remarks that to Hurston, the African Americans should adopt their black accent as an aspect of their Africanism which is a "source of individual and collective power," from which they can achieve "self-love and self-respect" (92). In short, Hurston's characters such as Nanny tend to communicate in their unique black dialect as a move towards achieving a sense of community, besides renewing their sense of belonging to their African cultural identity.

Owing to her faith in the powerlessness of the black female, Nanny does her best to persuade Janie to embrace a pragmatic perspective on marriage as a step towards protection. Thus, she forewarns Janie, “You ain’t got nobody but me. And mah head is ola and titled towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo’self,” (*Their Eyes* 15). Whereas Janie tries to romanticize her dreamy notion about marriage, Nanny insists on considering marriage as a practical way to fashion a social-esteemed woman. Regardless of her resistance, Janie finds it is reasonable to accept old Killicks as a husband because “Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so” (21).

Janie, then, is forced into a slave-like marriage on Killicks’ farm which indicates that Nanny’s perspective on marriage is not authentic. Killicks regards Janie as a mere “LilBit,” (26) that should be thankful because he has lifted her social rank from a black maid that lives in the whites’ backyard to a lady that lives in her own house. Indeed, To Killicks, Janie is nothing, but a mule that he has bought to work on his farm, a maid that has to chop wood with him and be generally around to take orders from her master. Killicks’ mistreatment of Janie is about to clip her fly-high dream about love, “Some folks never was meant to be loved and he’s one of ’em” she complains to Nanny (24) who thinks that Janie should be proud because the latter has fulfilled the ultimate expectations of “what a woman ought to be and to do” (16).

Like most black females of her time, Nanny believes that the black woman’s salvation lies in being a wife and a mother. As Nanny lacks any sense of self, she imagines no future for Janie in being by herself. Nanny believes that Killicks gives her granddaughter the feeling of security which she needs. Hence, Nanny does not only refuse Janie’s complaints, but also rebukes her saying, “you got yo’ lawful husbandHeah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo’ bawn days, and big protection,

and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killicks” (23).

By marrying Killicks, Janie becomes a hapless woman whose image of love is shattered. She laments, “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think,” but Nanny does not care for such a sentimental argument which her granddaughter delivers because, through her life-long experience, Nanny has learned that social prestige and material comfort are more important than love. But at the same time, she sees how much Janie is devastated by her broken marriage relationship, so Nanny employs a speech brimful of sorrow and figurative language to help Janie gain a better understanding of life by telling her granddaughter that seeking change is a nonsense move because it is likely to distort Janie’s marriage and hold back her quest for happiness, “Janie.... Better leave things de way dey is. Youse young yet. No tellin’ whut mout happen befo’ you die. Wait awhile, baby. Yo’ mind will change” Nanny advises (24).

According to Nanny, then, it is reasonable for Janie to embrace the philosophy of subjection; Janie has to wait for change to come by itself. She has nothing to do but standing “around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn’t know exactly,” In fact, Janie waits for the right man that she needs, the man who is most likely searching for her doorstep right now. She should stop being worried all the time about finding her ‘bee man,’ and stop being worried about “the road towards way off” (25). But Janie’s waiting does not last long; meanwhile, she meets Joe Starks who opens the gate to which she has been tied like a mule (26). Starks, as the narrator describes him, “was cityfied [sic], stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn’t belong in these parts” (27). It seems that Starks’ image has a hold in Janie’s consciousness because he speaks for change and “for far horizon” (29), so she happily decides to escape with him without any hesitation. Portraying Janie’s happiness, the

narrator tells that "A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her," that is why she "hurried out of the front gate and turned south...the change was bound to do her good" (32).

At first, Starks seems to live up to all Janie's expectations, but he is very far from being her soul mate that is bound to her story because they are essentially incompatible characters whose perspectives are extremely different. Janie does not search for just a traditional wife-husband relationship; she is searching for a man who treats her as a human, for a long-lasting love relationship with a lover that walks with her on the path of life for better and for worse. Starks, on the other hand, looks at Janie as nothing but "a lil girl-chile," (28) that offers him good company and gratifies his manhood desires. From the very beginning of their relationship, he regards Janie just as a sexual object; his description of her unfolds his view of woman in general, "A pretty doll baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (29).

Because of working "for the white folks all his life," Starks' identity is quite absorbed by the white culture which he has taken as a benchmark to uplift himself on the social ladder. He dreams to be "a big voice" (28) and marrying a "pink-white," woman such as Janie is a very important step towards achieving his dreams because "in the mind and the life of" a black man like Starks, a beautiful woman "symbolizes at once his freedom and his bandage" (Ephraim 330). Starks and Janie settle at Eatonville where he buys some land, opens a store and founds a post-office. He lusts for power, so he runs for mayor election and becomes the first Mayor of the town, "Janie took a lot of looks at him and she was proud of what she saw. Kind of portly, like rich white folks." (*Their Eyes* 34).

Ironically, Starks always blames his black fellow people and considers them naïve because they yield to the white man to

lift them socially or gives them jobs. To him, "De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin'," Starks' lack of sympathy for blacks' hard social circumstances can be attributed to his completely different life dreams. He stands in sharp contrast with those African Americans in the town as a perfect example of a black man who knows what he wants to be because he lives "nearly thirty years to find a chance" (28). Starks' self-confidence can be explained in the light of the fact that he does not have to depend totally on the whites for income because he has a store and some land that make him self-sufficient. He has four jobs, "Mayor—postmaster—landlord—storekeeper" (47). Starks accuses blacks of what is supposed to be the whites' crime against them; he cannot understand that it is racism that has forced blacks to sacrifice their dignity and stability and to travel around America in search of jobs. By and large, Starks has a deep insight into the nature of racism in America. Through his own experience, he has grown to hold that black Americans should stop depending on the whites concerning jobs and business, "Ah wish mah people would git mo' business in 'em and not spend so much time on foolishness" Starks complains to Janie (62).

But it is challenging for Starks to lift himself up a high social rank in the North. His "charismatic nature," (Jones 202) as an ambitious young man and his ethic of hard work can make him to a successful businessman if he is given the opportunity. Being black, however, he is denied the opportunity for self-assertion. He decides to work hard to have enough capital to launch his own business because he does not accept the whites' financial support. Thus, he "saved up some money...right here in his pocket. Kept hearin' 'bout them [blacks] buildin' a new state down heah in Floridy and sort of wanted to come...he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be" (*Their Eyes* 28). Therefore, Starks comes to Eatonville

in the South because he realizes that if the opportunities are so rare in the North even for northern black Americans who are used to urban life and who know what to do to earn their living, there will probably be no opportunities at all for the southern blacks, especially during the 1900s when the owners of companies and factories preferred white, European migrants who entered “the United States at a rate of over 1 million per year” (81).

Starks sounds to be right in his belief that the North is far from being the promised land of better opportunities and fulfilled dreams that the southern migrants dreamed of. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston “reverses the direction of most black migration, moving deeper South than North” (Lamothe 181) because, as Tiffany Ruby Patterson opines, Hurston “knew that racial discrimination was just debilitating in the North as in the South” (35). Unlike many African Americans who wasted their lives to see that they could never really overcome racism and break the barriers of color except by heading North, Starks realizes that the great migration is not the solution for the southern blacks.

As he refuses African Americans’ migration to the North, Starks also is at odds with those blacks who try to revive their African roots. To him, the African rituals such as storytelling and the blues are nothing but a sign of backwardness, and foolishness (*Their Eyes* 62). Unlike Eatonville residents, who in their free time “laughed and told more stories and sung songs” (45), Starks is completely Americanized; he has been more detached from the African culture than the southerners whose African folk heritage provides them with a means of survival to cope with the harsh reality in the South. Starks simply disavows his African heritage and sees himself as American, not African American. His western materialistic view of the world makes him scorn his African roots.

It should be remembered that folk songs are an important aspect of folklore which African slaves brought with them to Diaspora. Such folk songs are known as the blues. On their white masters’ plantations, African slaves tended to sing the blues during their hard work. The blues maintained the spiritual survival of those slaves as one of the devices which empowered them to face their harsh reality and redeem the painful experience of slavery. As they sang together, through the system of call and response, they maintained their sense of community and shared suffering.

African Americans, then, regard the blues as an effective device for self-empowerment and self-affirmation. However, those critics, who are captivated by their racial perspective such as Paul Garon, claim that “Only the very specific sociological, cultural, economic, physiological and political forces faced by working-class black American—forces permeated with racism at their every turning—produced the blues. Nothing else did!” (170), but the blues cannot be seen as a mere reaction to racism as it has been, from the earliest days of field hollers and shouts, the essence of African slaves’ humanity and resilience. The blues was an indirect device of confrontation and resistance to their white oppressors. Thus, it “would be more accurately conceived of as a positive form that affirms and preserves African American culture” (Walton 34). It is a developed and artistic style of music which “has its roots in African modalities” (Tracy 122) that African Americans developed to oppose openly cultural assimilation or rather annihilation.

Hence, the blues has a special significance in the minds of black Americans in general and Afro-American writers in particular. Ralph Ellison, for instance, considers it “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness” (78). In her novel *Meridian*,

Alice Walker asserts the significance of the blues as “the song of the people transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul” (205—6). Babatunde Lawal believes that “the blues exemplifies a specific attitude to life—the will to survive and, in the process, convert disadvantages into advantages” (50).

In the same fashion, Hurston attributes the relevance of the blues to the fact that it stimulates a strong feeling of primitivism which she inherited from her African roots. She maintains that the blues “constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond,” in such an atmosphere she is overwhelmed with a desire to “follow those heathen—follow them exultingly...I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know (“How it Feels” 154).

It would be relevant in the context of tackling the importance of the blues as an aspect of diasporic survival to allude to one of Hurston’s short stories titled “High John de Conquer” in which she represents High John as a folkloric blues hero to hint at her folks’ attempts of survival. High John is a brave figure whom the slaves consider a beam of hope and “a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song” (Hurston “High John de Conquer” 139). He is an African superman who comes “walking on the waves of sound” (140) from Africa to America to enliven African cultural roots in the spirits of his black fellow people. He works with his black folks on the plantation where he becomes famous for his talent in singing. During their dreadful and cruel work, slaves get help to endure through John’s power and sentimental voice. Thus, he is the personification of hope because he makes a “way-out-of-no-way,” and wins

“with the soul of a Black man whole and free” (141).

Herein, Hurston draws on the blues-folk hero represented in John as a symbol of her folks’ happiness and song. He embodies such a hidden power which gives hope when the surrounding milieu appears unbearable. Consequently, John encourages his black folks to keep “singing as they went off to work” (147). The song which he wants to implant in them includes their African identity, the feeling of self-esteem which makes them feel proud to be who they are, the ability to trust themselves, and also the singing spirit which has enabled generations of black Americans to lift up from the burdens of bondage to a free spiritual sphere of their own. It is this spirit which Maya Angelou praises in her poem “Caged Bird” when she writes:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (15-22)

The blues can be seen as one of the most important motifs in *Their Eyes* and as a distinguished folkloric aspect of survival which African Americans employ as “a device for making the best of a bad situation” through its “orientation to continuity in the face of adversity and absurdity” (Murray 36—7). Like their ancestors, blacks resort to their folkloric songs to alleviate their misery, achieve something similar to Aristotle’s catharsis (Majithia 87) by purifying, even for a while, their psyche of the agony of slavery. For instance, by the end of the novel, despite the destructive results of the hurricane which takes place in Everglade, the black folks face such an awful experience by “handling Big John de Conquer and his works. How he had done everything big on earth,” and he went to the heaven “picking up a guitar and got all de angles doing the ring-shout round

and round the throne,” inspired by their legendary blues hero, blacks chant:

Yo’ mama don’t wear no *Draws*
Ah seen her when she took ’em *off*
She soaked ’em in *alcoHol*

She sold ’em tuh de Santy *Claus*
He told her ’twas aganist de *law*
To wear dem dirty *Draws*. (*Their Eyes* 157)

Rightly, Hurston’s novel is criticized for portraying black Americans as happy folks who spend their times narrating folk tales and singing regardless their painful reality because of segregation during the time in which the novel was written. To Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Their Eyes* “says almost nothing about racism,” and “in the dialogue of the characters, racism is minor irritant and concern” (14). But Hurston’s characters employ folktales and the blues as a way to elevate them from the depths of depression; in the most dreadful moments when those victimized blacks feel lonely, abandoned and alienated, it is the blues that enables them to adjust to their loneliness and feel optimistic. They seem to embrace Hughes’ point of view concerning the blues, as he holds that “Sad as the blues may be, there is almost always humorous about them—even it’s the kind of humour that laugh to keep from crying”(qtd. in Steptoe 49).

Storytelling and the blues, as an aspect of African heritage, are part of the everyday rites of Eatonville black people whom Anglo-Saxon Starks treats racially. True, Starks’ unique attempt to empower himself through becoming a landlord should be respected as it is untypical of his time in which the majority of black folks are suffering awful economic conditions, but this does not give him the right to act as a sort of a slave owner towards his fellow people; he keeps himself apart from them, whereas, he lives in a house with banisters, stories, and porches, “The rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house’” (*Their Eyes* 47).

It can be stated that Starks’ over-ambition and power infect him with what can be called “pathological narcissism”

(Knudsen 221). He often initiates his speech with “I god,” (*Their Eyes* 46) such a sentence indicates that he sees himself as a matchless figure in his community as a result he wants to dominate all people around him. Jones, a fellow black, observes that Starks “loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice” (49). Starks’ behavior can be explained in the light of what can be termed the “double problem for the Negro,” as John Howard Griffin describes, “First, the discrimination against him,” second, and the most catastrophic, the black man’s “discrimination against himself; his contempt for the blackness that he associates with his suffering; his willingness to sabotage his fellow Negroes because they are part of the blackness he has found so painful” (40).

Simultaneously, Starks dominates Janie and manages to mute her voice by demolishing her personality for years because he regards her as nothing but ‘a pretty doll-baby’. His character seems to absorb her identity and reduce her role to a mere property in his house. Take for instance, on the occasion of launching his store, Starks frowns at a man who asks Janie to deliver a speech because he thinks such a speech may make Janie popular among the people of Eatonville. He says firmly, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home.” Describing Janie’s soreness, the narrator says, “Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn’t too easy...she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold. He strode along invested with his new dignity thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts” (*Their Eyes* 43).

Furthermore, to assert his domination, Starks alienates Janie from her community by preventing her from joining her folks while they enjoy storytelling and singing because, according to him, this act blemishes her fame as ‘Mrs. Mayor Starks’,

“the wife of the mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind.” As a result Janie “couldn’t get but so close to most of them in spirit” (46). Starks believes that to control Janie, he has to undermine her identity and the only way to do this is to adopt “the debilitating game of sexual superiority” (Wallace 84). Now, Jody, as Janie often calls him, is no more a source of love and warmth to her; the loss of his love has benumbed her feelings, thwarted her ability to give love, and caused an emotional void in her heart. She now lives in a world of mourning in which she keeps her dreams; after a twenty-year-marriage, “she found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about” (*Their Eyes* 72).

Remarkably, *Their Eyes* is an example of the slave narrative novel in which “escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together” (Walker “On Refusing to be Humbled” 3). Like Nanny who narrates her harsh experience of slavery and how she is abused by her white master, Janie recounts her story which echoes the slave narrative style. Hurston portrays Janie as a symbol of a slave female who tells her story after escaping from the Antebellum South in search for freedom. Janie does not show direct resistance against her oppressors represented in her grandmother’s rat-trap-like vision and her husbands’ patriarchal perspectives. Instead, she seeks a concealed resistance in the form of submission. As Shawn E. Miller elucidates:

Janie fits into a long line of black characters whose physical circumstance is inextricably, linked to larger issues of freedom, to suggest a Janie who wins freedom through submission...by recognizing the realities and exigencies of their temporal situation and by using this keen insight within a context of covert resistance. (195).

For years, Janie has been an obedient wife, who even fetches Starks his shoes, but

he orders her to cover her hair because she gets old, “You oughta throw somethin’ over yo’ shoulders befor’ you go outside. You ain’t no young pullet no mor’.” (*Their Eyes* 77). At this point, Janie’s silent submission comes to an end. She cannot bear it anymore, so she decides to fight back by empowering an Afro-American vernacular game called the dozens, “an oral contest, a joking relationship, a ritual of permitted respect in which the winner was recognized on the basis of verbal facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor” (Levine 347—48). Janie has succeeded in undermining her husband’s masculinity in public, “Yeah, Ah’m nearly forty and you’s already fifty...you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.” Unconsciously, Starks, who cannot respond verbally, hits Janie with all his power because she has deformed his social prestige before his community as she robs “him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherished” (*Their Eyes* 79).

It can be said that Janie draws on her oral folkloric tradition not only to voice her depressed feeling but also to reconfigure the power relations with her husband (Olaniyan 37). But the narcissist Starks cannot bear such a new relation in which his seemingly powerless wife stands as an equal rival to him. He feels disgraced because of being humiliated by Janie who faces him on his deathbed saying:

Listen, Jody....Ah run off to
keep house wid you in
uh wonderful way. But you
wasn’t satisfied wid me
the way Ah was. Naw! Mah own
mind had to be
squeezed and crowded out tuh
make room for yours
in me...now you got tuh die tuh
find out dat you
got pacify somebody besides
yo’self if you wants
any love and any sympathy in dis
world. You ain’t

tried tuh pacify *nobody* but
yo'self. Too busy

listening tuh yo' own big voice.
(*Their Eyes* 86—7)

After years of servitude, Janie finally sets herself free from Starks' patriarchal nest to find that "she got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value" (76). Hurston seems to integrate characters such as Killicks and Starks as examples of the black males' different patriarchal perspectives into her novel; she represents them as a kind of antagonist who threatens the black females' psychological stability. Besides, these characters enable Hurston to link her 1900s novels to the whole past of the black woman in America. It can be suggested that the years which Janie has spent with Killicks and Starks can be seen as an allegorical representation of the four hundred years of how the African female was brought into enslavement in America.

As a black female, Janie can be seen as a product of a period of instability and wandering for the Afro-American man, a period in which the black man is quite free to go wherever he wants while his wife sings the blues as a lament for her unfortunate destiny. Whether his wandering is self-imposed or forced upon him by the bleak circumstances which black man has to face everywhere he goes, he does not stop for a moment to think about the feelings of the woman he has left home. Carrie, a woman in Hurston's musical three-act play, *Meet The Mamma*, aptly describes the black female's emotional insecurity:

I'm blue, I'm blue, so blue,
I don't know what to do
Because my man don't stay home;
Every night he has to roam
Because I'm his, he thinks me slow
But other men don't find me so.
Everybody's man is better to me than my
own
Here me cry, hear me sigh
Oh listen to me moan

He cheats me, he cheats me and stays out all
night long.

(Hurston, *Collected Plays* 5—6)

True, Starks' death has physically released Janie, but she is still spiritually chained. Feeling like one of Starks' properties for a long time, Janie now has lost her self-worth and is full of bitter feelings of insignificance. Her prison-like marriage has resulted in her alienation from herself and the whole world. It is acceptable to say that Janie's experience of marriage has destroyed her sense of self, alienated her from herself, and continued to haunt her spirit even after becoming free. For Janie, her ex-husbands and Nanny still capture a great part of Janie's soul which she needs to retrieve to be internally free. She cannot get rid of Nanny's story which seems to control Janie's psyche up till now. Such a story hinders "her great journey to the horizons in search of" her identity (*Their Eyes* 89).

Unequivocally, Janie is the novel's protagonist who has to wrestle against the antagonist to achieve self-fulfillment. By definition, the antagonist represents the opposition that hinders the protagonist from getting his or her dreams, but an antagonist is not necessarily human; it may be social conditions, a racial system, or even a personal psychological conflict that opposes the protagonist's dreams. In the case of Janie, it is her psychological inability to enliven her self-respect and get rid of the deteriorating effects of her painful past that functions as the very antagonists that stand against her dream. Starks no longer exists in her life, nor does her grandmother, but Janie has to fully recover from the psychological wounds which her husbands and her grandmother have caused her before she can live authentically. This means that both the goal and the opposition are included within Janie's character, which proves William Dow's belief that Janie's salvation lies in her ability to "break out of her grandmother's slave-working mentality" (174). Explaining Janie's overwhelming feelings of estrangement and the impacts

which her awful past have upon her, the narrator tells:

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....But Nanny belonging [sic] to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon...and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her grandmother's neck tight to chock her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (*Their Eyes* 89)

Now Janie is trying to restore herself confidence again, but she cannot achieve this until she accepts her past which she tries doggedly to hide from others because it reminds her of how she has been victimized by her grandmother and husbands who have always reminded her that she is worthless and cannot go on in life alone. In spite of "being lonesome for a change" (90) which gives her a sense of freedom, Janie presently seeks to find out true love that will make her feel feminine again and erase her feeling of worthlessness. That's why she insists on finding her 'bee man', but this time according to her own principles. She tells Pheoby, who advises Janie not to marry a young man called Tea Cake because he is poor, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game: Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (114). It is Tea Cake's free spirit that makes him an ideal companion for Janie. Like her, he is a roaming spirit following whatever path the road of life takes him to in search of self-fulfillment.

Vergible Woods or Tea Cake is a blues singer who comes to Eatonville with nothing but his guitar and a hope that he will find himself in the southern city. He is an accomplished guitarist whose smiley face indicates his optimistic spirit. Tea Cake, as the narrator describes, always walks with a

"guitar hanging round his neck with a red silk cord and a grin hanging from his ears" (120). In jungle-like America, he is marginalized by racism; his musical talent may support him spiritually, but it is not enough to support him financially, so he has to work "in the railroad shops" (116), a job that no white man would accept and with a salary that is hardly enough for his living.

Regardless of his hard life, Tea Cake is completely reconciled with himself. Janie recognizes that while Killicks and Starks "care more about their own wants, needs and reputations than they do about the woman they married," Tea Cake needs a woman to love "without suppressing her individuality" (Christensen 138). Janie welcomes his companionship as a husband because his deeds, before marriage, set the terms of their equitable relationship from the very beginning; "Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies....Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie's yard and seeding the garden for her," by giving up, "signs of possession" (*Their Eyes* 110). Tea Cake seems to implant in Janie's mind that he does not embrace any patriarchal notion of female subordination.

The newly wedded, Tea Cake and Janie, decide to leave Eatonville to settle in Everglades where they work hand in hand on a farm which Janie has bought. They spend their time singing, laughing, listening to folk tales, and dancing around the fire. It is with the assistance of Tea Cake that Janie manages to acquire a sense of identity and accept herself for who she is. Singing the blues songs, Tea Cake manages to break Janie's spiritual deadlock. She quivers with pain at each word in his songs, but he keeps singing and "playing a guitar outside her room....It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was" (120). By connecting Janie "to a Blues life, from which she is alienated because of the life she has been socialized to live" (Jimoh 107), Tea Cake manages to revive in her the spirit which Starks wanted to suppress

within her; such a spirit includes her feeling of self-esteem which makes her satisfied and proud to be who she is and gives her the ability to trust herself.

A short time later, a destructive hurricane takes place in Everglades and kills a lot of blacks and whites. Thus, the whites force some of the blacks to dig a deep, large ditch for all the black corpses and to put white ones in wooden coffins: “don’t lemme ketch none up y’ all dumpin’ white folks and don’t be wastin’ no boxes on colored” (*Their Eyes* 171). Herein, Hurston portrays American racism as a cradle-to-grave enemy that chases her black folks even after their death. Boyd notes that Hurston employs “this brutal scene from Okeechobee hurricane,” which took place in 1928, as “a devastating yet subtle indictment of the racism” (305). Tea Cake, who joins those digging for the dead, laments this scene saying, “its bad bein’ strange niggers wid white folks. Everybody is aginst yuh” (*Their Eyes* 172).

Through that black Americans’ mass burial scene, Hurston seems to raise a question about the value of blacks in white America; blacks are identified only by their dark skin. Whites see the blacks as anonymous people that have no rights as humans, even in death. In the preface of his book *My Face Is Black*, Charles Eric Lincoln sheds light on this fact which has continued to be a phenomenon in white America for long decades after the emancipation when he writes, “the man whose face is black...is turning away from the American Dream and from the hope that he will be delivered by it” (no. pag.).

Now Janie has attained an acceptance of self and a desire to move ahead in the future regardless of what Starks did to her. Once she finds her true identity as a worthy black female, the opportunity for a new beginning is offered to her through Tea Cake. As they both are thirsty for love and stability, they can help each other heal the wounds of the past and establish a healthy relationship that promises happiness.

Expressing her new sense of self-gratification, Janie says, “Once upon uh time, Ah never ’spected nothin’, Tea Cake, but bein’ dead from standin’ still and tryin’ tuh laugh. But you come ’long and made somenothin’ outa me. So Ah’m thankful fuh anything we come through together” (*Their Eyes* 167).

But the couple’s happiness does not go on because Tea Cake is bitten by an insane dog during the hurricane. As a result, he gets mad and attacks Janie who shoots him dead. The court regards the murder as an act of self-defense, thus Janie is set free. Meanwhile, she decides to return to her hometown, Eatonville. On her leaving, she takes some seeds that have been in Tea Cake’s pocket to plant them in the yard of her house as a significant reminder of her happy memories with him, “She had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had brought to plant...The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things” (191).

Gradually, Janie overcomes the bad impacts of Tea Cake’s death and restores her voice which has always been waiting for a chance to express her agonized spirit. The first step towards her rediscovery of this voice which will express both her communal, as well as individual identity is to narrate her story, not the story of others, to reconnect herself to her past as the main key to her true identity. It seems hard to Janie to recount her own story because it is reminiscent of an awful slave-like experience. But Janie’s insistence to recount her story to her friend, Pheoby can be attributed to her desire to feel free or as a psychological device of going back to move forward; “memory need not to be passive reflection” as Bell Hooks’ states, “but it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past...‘retrospection, to gain a vision for the future’” which can be seen as “a catalyst of self-recovery” (40).

Janie's rediscovery of herself lies in reinterpreting her life that she has undergone as a black female whose situation is a reliving of those Africans' terrible experiences. Just as they were kidnapped and uprooted from their families and tribes in Africa, she was fenced by Starks and alienated from herself and the black community. Thus, Janie recognizes her essential connection to her folks. What she needs now is to reconnect herself to them and to learn from their history the spiritual strength which could transcend any hostility and overcome any loss. For all the pains and losses of their experience, Afro-American women, as revealed in Janie's story, can stand up against their oppressors and walk the road of life with raised heads. "Janie stands," as Maria D. Davidson and Scott Davidson agree, "as a symbol of the black female who struggles against the forces of silence and oppression" (252).

The novel ends with Janie reconciled not only to herself but also to her community after discovering that self-fulfillment comes through embracing one's own story, not the story of others. She has managed to purge herself of such an old, awful life and begin a new one with a rehabilitated self telling the story of self-sufficiency. For so long, she has had a deep conviction that if she has the opportunity to tell her own story, she will be able to survive everything that she has gone through. Astrid Roemer remarks that "women must come to voice to be fully self-empowered" (247). It can be said that Hurston, who believes that "there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you" (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 141) tries to spotlight on the point that if African Americans aim at creating a constant black identity, they should revive this oral African tradition by narrating their own stories to the younger generation.

It seems weird that Janie walks this long journey to her hometown just to narrate her story. But it is not the story itself that is important to Janie; it is the past that it

symbolizes which has continued to haunt her for so long. She wants to narrate her story, so as to get rid of her painful of the past. Janie would restore herself as a worthy woman; she would be able to gain room for herself within her black community. She is no longer the Washburns' 'Alphabet,' no longer Killicks' 'LilBit,' and no longer Starks' 'Pretty doll:' she now enjoys a full sense of self-definition as Janie the self-independent woman, who proudly advises Pheoby, "Two things everybody's got to do for theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got yuh fond out about livin' fuh theyselves" (*Their Eyes* 192). These final words signal the beginning of a new life. Now Janie is free from all the physical and psychological chains which have bound her for so long. Alone but at peace within herself, Janie "pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet" and "called in her soul to come and see" (193). For her, it is not the time for weeping over her loss, but it is the time to come and see what she has harvested and achieved in her lifetime.

One can safely say that Hurston portrays Janie not only as an individual but also as an allegorical figure whose experience stands for black American experience as a whole. Janie's final ability to find her identity through reconciling with her past, reconnecting with her community and realizing her self-affirmation can be taken as an example for all African Americans; "Janie's experience, her story, functions as a myth for the folk, teaching them the value of self-expression and the necessity for self-determination" (Lamothe 177). Feeling proud of her own story, Janie asks Pheoby to pass it on to the black folks: "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (*Their Eyes* 6). Moreover, Janie's final embracement of her own story makes her a potential woman who can go anywhere, even to the horizon. Hurston's point is to show that the Afro-American female can achieve her dream. That is why Janie says, "Ah'm back home

agin and Ah' m satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh the horizon and back and now... Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there" (191).

Some critics condemn *Their Eyes* for its unreasonable and obscure denouement. Mary Helen Washington, for instance, criticizes the novel because of its "ambiguous stance" end (35). To William M. Ramsey "*Their Eyes* is a text of unfolding, unresolved ambivalences, a narrative begun perhaps as pastoral romance yet veering toward feminist resistance" (62). Despite this unpleasant criticism which *Their Eyes* has received, the general critical response was in favor of it. Boyd writes that the conclusion of the novel "gives the impression that the woman will not die of grief or remorse for her actions. In *Their Eyes* particularly, she makes it easy for particularly, for readers to envision Janie—still young and attractive...living a fulfilling life and loving whomever she chooses" (304). Plant L. Howard also praised the novel because it "speaks for the self, for equality, for the pursuit of happiness instead of possessions it speaks for, and seems to recommend, a way of life uncluttered by traditions, stereotypes, materialism and violence." Howard concludes that Hurston's *Their Eyes* affirms life, suggesting "that all that is beautiful and necessary can be found among the folk" (110). Likewise, June Jordan holds that the novel "unrolls a fabulous, written film of Black life freed from the constraints of oppression, here we may learn Black possibilities of ourselves if we could ever escape the hateful and alien context that has so deeply disturbed and mutilated our rightful—efflorescence as people"(6).

To conclude, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be seen as a model identity novel, urging African Americans to dig deep within themselves and their history for their true story, their true identity which is, before being anything else, an African identity rooted in the spirit of their Africanity. Discovering this identity,

realizing the power inside themselves, achieving self-determination, embracing their African heritage and recognizing their painful past and accepting it as part of themselves, they will then be able, as Janie is by the end of the novel, to challenge their severe circumstances that symbolize the failure of the American dream for blacks.

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