



**Harun
Farocki
Institut**

**THE USE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AS A FOUNDATION FOR
COMMUNITY COHESION AND SELF-ESTEEM IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD***

Skip Norman

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a book about women. It is about a woman's right to equality and personal development. The book is about men too – about masculine impediments to female growth and development. But the book is also about African American culture and the tremendous role culture plays in making the African American culture of a black township cohesive and self-confident. In the particular black township in question, cultural homogeneity was viewed by Zora Neale Hurston as a source of survival and ethnic strength. There are several passages in the book that underline the importance of community “rap” sessions for the community's sense of self. These sessions are not always kind to the folk, for they are often shown as unbending, and even reactionary. Nevertheless, the community acted as a unit, even if sometimes in bad faith.

Our first experience with the importance of communal “rap” sessions begins in the first chapter. “It was the 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. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment”¹. The need for “passing nations through their mouths” is a direct comment on the need for community members to share ideas, fears, aspirations, dreams, fantasies, gossip, and news. They had to define their environment and measure the reality of their survival. “The hearing and talking” produced a rich and beautiful folklore. And it is this folklore that is the basis for Zora Neale Hurston's artistic creativity and love for black people: “Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town to the sun....”

¹ Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, London: Virago Press 2018, p. 1–2. [We have adjusted the references and page numbers to this readily available paperback edition of the book – the Rosa Mercedes editors.]

The store itself was a pleasant place if only she didn't have to sell things. When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that thought *picture* were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to" (58).

Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist, folklorist, and novelist. She was concerned about the role of the woman in society and the use of African American culture as a foundation upon which to build strong, proud, and enduring black people. "As a dedicated Harlem Renaissance artist, Zora Hurston searched hard for a way *to* transfer the life of the people, the folk ethos, into accepted modes of formalized fiction. She knew the folklore context better than any of her contemporaries, and this led to a personal style that many did not understand [...] While dividing her time between the activities of the Niggerati, the white interest in the new Negro, and the general frenzy of the Jazz age, she worked hard to portray the Eatonville [black township in Florida] essence for the renaissance readers, eventually discovering that the best one could do was *represent* the folklore process. She tried to reconcile high and low culture by becoming Eatonville's esthetic representative to the Harlem Renaissance, and when she discovered that this was an unsatisfactory role, she turned to the professional study of folklore as an alternative."²

Their Eyes Were Watching God is dominated by three strong female characters: Nanny, Janie, and Phoeby. *The* story is based on Janie's efforts to find her being. Zora Neale Hurston speaks directly about the experiences of black women in a white male world. To begin with we have the white master and the slave woman:

"Dat mornin' on de big plantation close to Savannah, a rider come in a gallop tellin' bout Sherman takin' Atlanta. Marse Robert's son had done been kilt at Chickamauga. So he grabbed his gun and straddled his best horse and went off wid de rest of de grayheaded men and young boys to drive de Yankees back into Tennessee.

"They was all cheerin' and cryin' and shoutin' for de men dat was ridin' off. Ah couldn't see nothin' cause yo' mama wasn't but a week old, an ah was flat uh mah back. But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin' and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightin'. Ah heard 'em give one last whoop for him. Then de big house and de quarters got sober and silent." (19–20)

Next, we have the white mistress and the slave woman:

² Robert E. Hemenway: *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press 1977, p. 56.

“Nanny, Ah come to see that baby uh yourn’ [...] You better git dat kivver offa dat youngun and dat quick! [...] Look lak you don’t know who is Mistis on dis plantation, Madam. But Ah aims to show you [...] Nigger, whut’s yo’ baby doin’ wid gray eyes and yaller hair?’ She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a’ way [...] But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look white.” (20–21)

Then, we have the child of the master and the slave woman, the tragic mulatto:

“But one day she didn’t come home at de usual time and Ah waited and waited, but she never come all dat night.[...] De next mornin’ she come crawlin’ in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run off just before day. ‘She was only seventeen....’” (22–23)

And, we have the daughter of the tragic mulatto:

“Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So 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 womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. [...] Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection.” (17–18)

Finally, we have the black man and his woman:

“You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can’t tell you nothin’ Ah see!” “Dat’s ‘cause you need tellin’”, he rejoined hotly.
“It would be pitiful if Ah didn’t. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think none theirselves.” (81)

Three generations comment on the abject vulnerability of their unprotectedness.

There are three important black male characters in the book, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods.

Logan Killicks, Janie’s first husband, was not a bad man, and he didn’t really oppress Janie in any

overt way, but he was motivated by a sense of property, being a farmer, and was not able to develop the sensibility needed to awaken any love or affection in Janie that might have supported a deepening of their relationship. We must not forget that Janie, still a child, was forced to marry Logan Killicks. Even if Logan had been able or willing to touch Janie, he might not have been allowed to. Logan Killicks was a victim of conditions and somehow deserves our sympathy. But Janie was also a victim of conditions, being intimidated by her grandmother into marrying Logan. So, she deserves our sympathy too. Joe Starks, Janie's second husband, proves to be sexist par excellence. He is unwilling to recognize any individual initiative in Janie and denies her the existence of rudimentary intelligence. He regards her as a machine, or a very fragile possession. "Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell cow, the other women were the gang" (47). Joe Starks is symbolic of a male attitude that must dominate women because it feels threatened by their ability to think:

"Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me, de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." (98)

Janie's relationship with Jody was a struggle for self-assertion, and she made several aborted attempts to awaken in him some recognition of her needs as a human being. Janie knew that Jody was wrong, and she also knew that Jody's arrogance and chauvinism were signs of weakness. Women were no less human than men simply because men thought they were.

Tea Cake Woods, Janie's third husband, was unconventional in his relationship with Janie in that his sexist and chauvinist tendencies seemed extremely minimal. Tea Cake was the dominant partner in the relationship, but he seemed unthreatened by mature womanhood. Tea Cake could accept Janie's personality and even worked to help it flower. "He bought another rifle and a pistol and he and Janie bucked each other as to who was the best shot with Janie ranking him always with the rifle. She could knock the head off of a chicken-hawk sitting up a pine tree. Tea Cake was a little jealous, but proud of his pupil" (198).

Tea Cake seemed to have a sure grip on life. He approached life with human depth, and possessed a real potential for interpersonal communication. But there is an uneasiness about Tea Cake because he stands outside the confines of conventional responsibilities. Tea Cake is a free spirit, and, as such, able to stretch the limits of conventional behavior. Janie describes her relationship with Tea Cake in the following terms:

“Dey gointuh make ‘miration ‘cause mah love didn’t work lak they Jove, if dey ever had any. Then you must tell ‘cm dat love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore. (220)

Janie’s statement about her relationship with Tea Cake is truly inspirational. It reflects the depths to which they were able to communicate and the personal strength and insight that can accompany such communication. The concept of sexual parity - equal growth potential for each partner, without sacrificing male/female uniqueness - is a progressive concept and it makes Zora Neale Hurston stand out as an original thinker and writer.

Zora Neale Hurston emphasized the dynamics of the homogenous black community. Her creativity was rooted in the folklore of black people. As a result, there was little need to portray the white world. “Because she immersed herself in her own culture, even as she recorded its ‘big old lies’, i.e., folktales, it was possible to see how she and it fit together. The authenticity of her material was verified by her familiarity with its context and [...] she was exposing not simply an adequate culture, but a superior one. That black people can be on occasion peculiar and comic was knowledge she enjoyed. That they could be racially or culturally inferior to whites never seem to have crossed her mind” (Hemenway, pp.xi).

“If all them dat’s gointuh cut de monkey is done cut it and through wid, we’ll thank Brother Starks fuh a respond.” [...] “Ah thanks you all for yo’ kind welcome and for extendin’ tuh me de right hand uh fellowship. Ah kin see dat dis town is full uh union and love. Ah means tuh put mah hands tuh de plow heah, and strain every nerve tuh make dis our town de metropolis uh de state. So maybe ah better tell yuh in case you don’t know dat if we expect tuh move on, us got tuh incorporate lak every other town. Us got tuh incorporate and us got tuh have uh mayor, if things is tuh be done and done right. Ah welcome you all on behalf uh me an mah wife tuh dis store and tuh de other things to come, amen.” [...] “Brother and sisters, since us can’t never expect tuh better our choice, Ah move dat we make Brother Starks our mayor until we kin see further.” “Second dat motion!!!” It was everybody talking at once, so it was no need of putting it to a vote.” (49)

Zora Neale Hurston, as an African American intellectual, understood and embraced the significance of African American folklore for her work. She and a few others³ had arrived too soon, but the truth of

³ “[...] because they needed a forum for their views, a group of the young writers led by Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace

their conviction would be verified by the growth of cultural nationalism in the sixties and the emergence of African American Studies departments on campuses at major universities around the country.

Wilbert Reuben Norman, Jr.

Howard University

Source: Zora Neale Hurston Forum 5 (1990), pp. 30–36.

[Suggested citation: Skip Norman, “The Use of African American Culture as a Foundation for Community Cohesion and Self-Esteem in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” *Rosa Mercedes* 03/A (January 2021), www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2021/01/28/their-eyes-were-watching-god/]

Thurman, created their own magazine, *Fire !!*. While *Fire !!* did not grow from an explicit response to *The New Negro*, implicit in its very existence was the need for a magazine that really was, in Thurman’s words, ‘purely artistic in intent and conception.’ The proof of its purity, moreover, would be its commitment to the masses, or, in Hurston’s terms the folk [...] ‘Hoping to introduce a truly negroid note into American literature, its contributors had gone to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material, had gone to the people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin.’” (Hemenway, 43–45)