

Obsidian

Her Eyes Were Watching Katrina: Unnatural Deaths in a Natural Disaster

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I like the violent aspects of nature (if I am safe). Zora Neale Hurston, 1942

George Bush doesn't care about Black people.
Kanye West, 2005

As a former resident of New Orleans, I, like countless others, had a difficult time fathoming what had happened to my beloved city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, but fears over the destruction of the city were soon displaced by deeper fears over the welfare of the residents who did not flee the city. Images of dead bodies, dehydrated children, and

the suffering elderly flashed across television news programs nightly. Scenes of looters and people fighting each other for federal shipments of food and bottled water undoubtedly scared and horrified millions of viewers across the nation. An email I sent to the campus at the community college where I work attempted to express some of the feelings I was experiencing at the time. Quite unexpectedly, the email ignited a college-wide effort to help in the Katrina relief effort and led to the development of a student forum that was designed to help students make sense of the tragedy. I was glad to participate in these events and share my knowledge of the city to aid the understanding of others, but I remember students being puzzled about, and in some cases unsympathetic towards, those residents who did not leave the city despite repeated warnings to do so. Given the relative affluence of the community where I teach, this ignorance about the realities of poverty was not wholly surprising. However, I also remember feeling frustrated that students did not seem to grasp the class-bound and racial dimensions of the tragedy.

It was not until the following semester in my African-American litera-

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ture class that I came upon the teaching tool that has eluded me months earlier: Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Part of the appeal of teaching this book for me has always been the overwhelmingly positive response by students, regardless of race, gender or age. On this particular day, my students and I were having a wonderful time laughing at clips from the Oprah Winfrey-produced film version of the novel starring Halle Berry. They hooted at the film's Harlequin romance-inspired introduction of Teacake; one student called him Beefcake. They giggled through the film's overwrought "sex during a hurricane" sequence, wondering aloud, "Where's the cow?" When we returned to the book and read the following passage aloud, the mood of the classroom changed:

Teacake found that he was part of small army that had been pressed into service to clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead. Bodies had to be searched out, carried to certain gathering places and buried. Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage.

Trucks lined with drag kept rolling in from the 'Glades and other outlying parts, each with its own load of twenty-five bodies. Some fully dressed, some naked and some in all degrees of dishevelment. Some bodies with calm faces and satisfied hands. Some dead with fighting faces and eyes flung wide open with wonder. Death had found them watching, trying to see beyond seeing. (*Their Eyes* 199-200)

And then upon reading a second passage, the racial dimensions of the hurricane began to strike a chord of recognition with the students:

'Got orders from headquarters. They making coffins fuh all de white folks. 'Taint nothing but cheap pine, but that's better'n nothin'. Don't dump no white folks in de hole jus' so.'

'Whut tuh do 'bout de colored folks? Got boxes fuh dem too?'
'Nope. They cain't find enough of 'em tuh go 'round. Jus' sprinkle

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plenty quick-lime over 'em and cover 'em up.' (*Their Eyes* 200)

I found myself getting choked up while reading the passage, hoping my students would not notice. As I was trying to collect my thoughts, one of my students said, "It kind of reminds me of Hurricane Katrina," thus commencing one of the best class discussions of the semester and sparking the idea for this paper which views the story of Hurricane Katrina, specifically its effect on New Orleans, through the lens of Hurston's novel. Central to the plot is Hurston's fictionalized depiction of the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928, which killed thousands of African-Americans in South Florida, many of whom had been migrant workers in the sugar cane and vegetable fields. The Lake Okeechobee Hurricane was the deadliest in U.S. history, with an estimated death toll of 4,078, while the 1,836 fatalities that resulted from Katrina ranks second.

However, while the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 may be the historical inspiration for the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's more personal experience with a hurricane in the Bahamas may have fueled the episode's emotional drive. In September of 1929, Hurston travelled to the Bahamas, inspired by the vibrant Bahamian culture she witnessed in Miami, and quickly fell in love with the island nation. She spent her time studying Bahamian folklore, specifically music and dance, which she found as a useful contrast to the folklore of African-Americans. However, her visit was marred by a five-day hurricane with winds up to 150 miles per hour (Boyd 187). Hurston remarked of the deadly storm, "It was horrible in its intensity and duration" (*Dust Tracks* 159). Like many of the local residents, Hurston found herself homeless after the storm because the home of the Bahamian family with whom she had been staying had been demolished. At the local police station, which had been turned into a shelter, she desperately vied for the limited rations distributed to the victims of the storm. She would later write of the incident, "I saw dead people washing around on the street when it was over. You could smell the stench from dead animals as well" (*Dust Tracks* 159).

The way that Hurston translated these two events into *Their Eyes Were Watching God* transforms the novel into a literary precursor to Hurricane Katrina, a connection made all the more interesting by examining her intense

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experience in New Orleans. “New Orleans is now and has even been the Hoodoo capital of America,” Hurston once proclaimed (qtd. in Boyd 284). While on a research trip to the city, she immersed herself in Hoodoo, going so far as to become an apprentice of Luke Turner, the nephew of Marie LaVeau, New Orleans’ celebrated queen of conjure. Under the guidance of Turner, Hurston underwent the necessary preparations to “wear the crown of power” including a ceremony that involved her laying naked under snake skins for three days and wearing face and body paint: lightning painted down her back, eyes painted on her cheeks and a sun painted in the middle of her forehead (*Mules and Men* 207). After the ceremony, which she later described as “thrilling,” she was given the name “Rain-bringer” and had so impressed Turner that he asked her to become his partner; in essence, it was an invitation to become a Hoodoo Queen, but Hurston sorrowfully refused because she could not accept the offer (Plant 101-102). Her field work in New Orleans also included a ceremony in which her finger was cut in order for her to become the blood brother of a rattlesnake; she described it as “a marvelous dance ritual from the ceremony of death” (qtd. in Hemenway 118). Hurston’s writings about New Orleans reveal a fascination with the specter of death that looms over not only the practice of Hoodoo but also the city itself in the rituals to which Hurston found herself drawn.

As is evident in the novel, Hurston was also drawn to the dramatic nature of the hurricane itself as an overwhelming force of nature, but the novel indicates her awareness that, even in times of natural disaster, racism remains a potent force. The similarities and parallels between Hurston’s account of the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane and the details and real-life accounts of Hurricane Katrina belie the sixty-eight years that separate the two natural disasters. Hurston places the issue of race in the foreground in the hurricane episode of the novel, but her initial invocation of race appears with a twist: Janie and Teacake dismiss the Seminoles’ warning to evacuate because “Indians are dumb anyhow, always were” (*Their Eyes* 181). The increasing exodus of animals, which Hurston describes as “constant procession” and a “crawling horde,” including rabbits, possums, rattlesnakes, deer and even a panther, is reminiscent of the steady flow of cars creeping along the 1-10 Interstate as New Orleans residents evacuated the city. Janie and Teacake will