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Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* sees its protagonist Janie Crawford navigate the stormy American South through three marriages and an all-powerful hurricane in a transformative and volatile journey of self-realization. In the novel, Hurston uses the spaces Janie encounters to both construct and contest power structures, interrogating the validity and reproduction of the oppressive social hierarchies that govern her autonomy.

This essay seeks to analyze Hurston's use of three primary spaces—sorted into the geographical, liminal, and corporeal—as a means of understanding and dissecting intersecting forms of authority. The geographical, explored through the town of Eatonville, is used to visualize class relations and the mechanisms of power. The liminal is represented by porches—key sites of performance and play in which social dynamics are both challenged and maintained—through which Hurston contends with the performativity of power and gendered roles of speaker and subject. Finally, the corporeal sees the body as an active entity through which Hurston explores how violence—both physical and sexual—reinforces ideas of identity and perpetuates subjugation, as well as how autonomy is physically embodied. Crucially, this essay explores how Hurston's use of space is dynamic, meaning the spaces in the novel are not static, fixed entities, but transformative sites in which the rigid structures and hierarchies governing Janie's self-expression can be not only destabilized, but dismantled.

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Zora Neale Hurston creates an intimate connection between locality and identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, exploring the underlying values of social power structures by tethering the politics of the text to spaces. The text uses different planes—geographical, liminal, and corporeal—to explore power dynamics, rendering them sites of activity to examine social relations. In the novel, Hurston develops geographical spaces through Eatonville, liminal spaces through porches, and corporeal spaces through the body to both construct and contest social systems. The effectiveness of this technique in dismantling oppressive hierarchies lies in the nature of the spaces Hurston creates; rather than existing as static entities, the spaces of the novel act as sites of transformation either through the subversion or rejection of regimented hierarchies. In this essay, I will explore how Hurston's spatial politics, particularly the use of dynamic spaces as loci of transformation, undermine the legitimacy of intersecting forms of authority.

### Geographical Space: Eatonville

*Their Eyes*, set in early 20th-century Florida, sees its protagonist Janie Crawford traverse three marriages in the pursuit of love and identity. The novel progresses across several key locations, through which Janie's character progression can be tracked. Hurston transforms physical spaces into planes of discourse throughout the novel to manifest her politics spatially. In this essay, I will examine the town of Eatonville, an all-black town where Janie resides during her second marriage to its mayor, Joe Starks, to examine Hurston's class politics. While racial hierarchies seem to be more or less suspended in Eatonville due to its homogeneity, class inequalities are exposed through the town's construction.

The double-edged nature of power is explored in Eatonville's locality, particularly its corruptive potential. The social structures Hurston engages with—particularly class—are inherently hierarchical and rely on systems of subjugation. As such, they are necessarily unequal, a notion that Hurston explores by recreating them. Eatonville, as a burgeoning town, sees power dynamics form from the ground up, through which Hurston explores their mechanisms and maintenance. Upon the arrival of Joe and Janie, Eatonville is in its infancy,

“nothing but a raw place in the de woods.”<sup>1</sup> Joe is quick to capitalize on the power vacuum, commandeering the physical establishment of the town and overseeing its very construction. The resulting geography of Eatonville comes to represent an unequal class dynamic as demonstrated through material status and property ownership.

Joe's social status is irretrievably linked to his material status, but a material status sourced from older, perhaps pre-Civil War-era values. This is exhibited in the text through the descriptions of Joe's house, painted a “promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W.B. Jackson, and the Vanderpools wore.”<sup>2</sup> The mentioned names are all those of upper-class, respected white men, quietly emphasized by the white color of the house itself. Further, “the rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the ‘big house.’”<sup>3</sup> Through a direct reference to slavery, this suggests, to some extent, that the power hierarchies that governed the institution of slavery have been replicated in Eatonville, with Joe stepping into the position of power.

As Joe's material identity resembles pre-Civil War wealth and eminence, it is suggestive that he is sourcing his conception of power from those systems as well. This is best evidenced through the relationship between Joe and the townspeople, as “There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town. It was not because of physical fear... Neither was it because he was more literate than the rest,”<sup>4</sup> Rather, it has to do with his material status, “...that new house of his,” that made the townspeople “feel that they had been taken advantage of.”<sup>5</sup> Though Joe and the townspeople entered Eatonville as equals, they are soon divided on the principles of wealth as social hierarchies take root. This wealth disparity quickly influences their social engagements, as Joe practices subjugation over the town. The townspeople note, “He loves obedience out of everybody... He can't help bein' sorta bossy.”<sup>6</sup> Class division, then, through its innate inequality, sows social division. The townspeople “respected him and even admired [Joe] in a way,” but because of his elevated class and, therefore, increasingly controlling behavior, they begin to resent him, as “...any man who walks with power and property is bound to meet hate.”<sup>7</sup> Power, then, takes on a more corruptive face as the relationship

between the townspeople and Joe sours.

However, the discontent of the townspeople does not amount to any real resistance as “none had the temerity to challenge him.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, their resentment continues to build while they continue to feed Joe’s power. Hurston then comments on the self-sustaining nature of power structures, as “[The townspeople] bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down.”<sup>9</sup> As such, she suggests power dynamics are maintained through a negative feedback loop that relies on the tools of subjugation. Thus, through the development of Eatonville, Hurston explores the nature of power structures as they progress with the town, and the social ramifications of class inequalities stemming from material disparity.

### **Liminal Space: Porches and Storytelling**

Through Joe and Eatonville, Hurston explores the corrosive nature of power, as well as the danger of social hierarchies. While class structures are examined through the locality of Eatonville, gender relations are explored on a more microcosmic level—played out on the porches throughout the novel. Hurston interrogates patriarchal subjugation and gender roles through performative activity on different porches in *Their Eyes*. Janie’s interactions with porches throughout the text signify her transformation into a role of agency by the novel’s end, largely through the act of storytelling.

Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon defines porches as an important transitory space and a significant symbol in Black Southern culture. She argues that the porch is a gathering place, “synonymous with summer socializing.”<sup>10</sup> Contextually, the porch is commonly associated with the South as a place to escape the summer heat and chat with neighbors. As a literary device, the porch functions as a site of relational discourse, acting as a space where “individuals can negotiate an identity within a community.”<sup>11</sup> The porch is one of the most versatile spaces in the novel, as it serves as a site of transformation and negotiation. Dale Pattison describes it as “a liminal space... encouraging discursive activity capable of responding to pervasive power structures.”<sup>12</sup> The porch acts as a catalyst for transformation and social mobility in *Their Eyes*,

functioning as the threshold between the house and the world, the inside and the outside. Importantly, it is a place that simultaneously engages with the private and public spheres, a bridge between self-identity and collective identity.

The centrality of porches, and its relationship with social dynamics, is outlined during the very first pages of the novel, a section which is crucial to analyze in more detail to understand the dual nature of the porch, as both a site of contesting and cementing power structures:

“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.”<sup>13</sup>

On one hand, the porch represents a space to fully embody oneself, freed from the expectations of society, burdens of work, and systems of control, as exemplified by “the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human.” On the porch, the sitters become “lords of sounds and lesser things,” usurping a role in which they can exercise social power and judgment not available to them in their regular lives. However, within this freedom, the resulting activity is not always productive nor empowering; often, it becomes a place to impart harsh judgment and replicate existing social structures from a newfound position of power.

This is largely exemplified through the porches in Eatonville, which become a place to perform a form of masculinity based on the subjugation of women for the men of the town. While the porch does offer the opportunity to subvert power dynamics, whether they be race or class-based, it also becomes a breeding ground for misogyny and the realization of masculinity. While Joe’s institutional power in the town serves as “a symbol of black self-determination,” according to Claire Crabtree, the autonomy of the male in Eatonville fails to extend to the female, who continues to be subjugated under a patriarchal structure.<sup>14</sup> Through storytelling and play-acting, the men of Eatonville reenact and reinforce patriarchal gender roles, instigating inter-male

competition based on subjugating women—as exemplified by Sam Watson and Lige Moss' mock-argument in chapter six. At first a philosophical debate on the porch, “an elaborate show... That draws everybody on the porch into it,” the play-acting turns into a display of masculinity when a group of women walks by.<sup>15</sup> To get their attention, “the boys had to act out their rivalry,” in a display that bleeds into reality as “everybody knew they meant some of it.”<sup>16</sup> As such, the porch comes to function as both demonstrating the performativity of social identity while reinforcing its implications.

Further, the designations of speaker and subject come to inhabit gendered roles in Eatonville, as Joe does not allow Janie to participate in play-acting on the porch. When they first meet, Joe tells Janie, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Janie, and more largely women, are expected to be props in the performance, rather than actors—visible to others and available for definition. At Joe’s command, Janie is excluded from social activities on the porch as he tells her to go inside. At first, she goes against her wishes, as “Janie wanted to hear the rest of the play-acting and how it ended... [but] she got up sullenly and went inside.”<sup>18</sup> However, while the porch originally reinforces Janie’s submission, it comes to be the site of her transformation into a position of power. Pattinson designates the porch as “Janie’s medium for self-definition,” as Janie’s role on the porch mirrors her increasing autonomy in the world as she comes to resent her role of a passive observer.<sup>19</sup>

In a key moment, Janie “[does] what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation,” scolding the men of Eatonville as they ridicule the townswomen on the porch.<sup>20</sup> Joe responds, “You gettin’ too moufy, Janie... Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers,” in an attempt to reset the conditions of the porch.<sup>21</sup> But despite his dismissal, Janie threatened the intrinsic values of the gender-based power structure by inserting herself into the dialogue. This marks a significant step in her transformation, which is fully realized when Janie returns to Eatonville at the end of the novel.

After Joe’s death, Janie leaves Eatonville with her third

husband, Tea Cake, and undergoes her most transformative period in the Everglades. Of Janie’s three marriages—to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake—the latter is the closest to the idyllic relationship Janie longs for throughout the novel. She feels genuine companionship with Tea Cake, and they seem to share an intimacy unfettered by the restrictive marital dynamics that tormented Janie in her prior marriages. Tea Cake and Janie retreat to the Everglades, or the Muck, to escape the restraints of Eatonville. The doorstep of Janie and Tea Cake’s house, like the store porch in Eatonville, is the site of gatherings and storytelling as “all around the doorstep was full,” each night as people came “to talk and tell stories.”<sup>22</sup> However, the activity on the doorstep manifests very differently than on the porches in Eatonville, as exemplified by their architecture; unlike the structured, constructed porches in Eatonville, the ‘porch’ in the Muck is not a structure at all, it is open to the natural world. The openness of its architecture translates to its freedom from the power structures that governed the highly repressive Eatonville, further demonstrated by Janie’s participation in the performances. Unlike in Eatonville, Janie is not excluded from the activities on the doorstep. She recounts that while “the men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch... here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to.”<sup>23</sup> As such, the Muck offers a sanctuary, at least temporarily, from the hegemonic structures that dominated Janie’s self-expression. It also marks a transition, from subject to speaker, that was highly transgressive in Eatonville. As such, Janie’s role as storyteller both underscores her transformation and undermines the legitimacy of the gender roles enforced in Eatonville.

Returning from the Muck to Eatonville, the porch again becomes a site of activity to demonstrate Janie’s character progression. As a frame narrative, the book begins with her return to Eatonville, where Pheoby Watson finds Janie “sitting on the steps of the back porch... full of that oldest human longing—self revelation.”<sup>24</sup> Though the townspeople still “sat in judgment,” ridiculing Janie as she walked back into town, she asserts control over her narrative outside of their gaze by taking her place on the back porch.<sup>25</sup> Like the architecture of the other porches, it is important to

note the significance of the back porch, rather than the front porches which served as a site of performance for all the people of Eatonville to watch—and judge. It is on the back porch—in her own space, free from the harsh gaze of the townspeople—that Janie finally realizes her final role as the novel's storyteller. With “Pheoby's hungry listening [to help] Janie to tell her story,” Janie usurps the role of storyteller in the novel's ultimate act of becoming.<sup>26</sup> From the store porch to the doorstep in the Muck to the back porch in Eatonville, porches are used in *Their Eyes*, through the mode of storytelling, as a liminal space to both construct and undermine gender roles and track Janie's journey of personal agency.

### Corporeal Space: The Body

Along with geographical and liminal spaces, the body serves as an important site of hierarchical activity. In *Their Eyes*, the body is used as a site of exploitation and testimony to hegemony, most explicitly through rape. Sexual violence in the text is a weapon of oppression used to assert control forcibly. Janie is a product of generational trauma reaped by supremacism, both racially and patriarchally; Nanny was raped by a white slaveowner which resulted in the birth of Leafy, and Leafy was raped by a schoolteacher which resulted in the birth of Janie. As such, Janie is a physical manifestation of the repercussions of oppressive social structures. This haunts Janie throughout the novel as her attempts to recast sexuality in a positive light are unavailing. Janie's sexuality is a recurrent theme in the text, typically euphemized through the use of nature-based metaphors. She experiences her sexual awakening, “beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees.”<sup>27</sup> Janie's further sexual experiences continue to be represented with feminine-coded pear trees and masculine-coded bees, taking the role of the tree while situating her lovers in the role of the bee. She sees Johnny Taylor, her first romantic interest, “through pollinated air,” Joe as “a bee for her bloom,” and Teacake as “a bee to a blossom - a pear tree blossom in the spring.”<sup>28</sup> But while the natural connotations of Janie's sexuality superficially place it outside of manmade hegemonic constructions, her experiences are not exempt from the cycles of violence and generational trauma reaped by both white and patriarchal supremacy. Throughout the novel, she is made to be an unwilling participant in the reassertion of male identity through physical violence

and suppressed self-expression, becoming more and more disillusioned with her idealistic vision of love. Even within her own metaphor, the bee takes an active role in pollinating while the tree is passive, alluding to the strictly gendered models of romance Janie comes to find herself in. These structures, reinforced through physical control, are most clearly demonstrated through Janie's marriages, as the most intimate example of male-female relationships, particularly the influence her partners exert over her body.

Hurston explores this notion in the text through Janie's hair as a symbol of her autonomy or, more specifically, her lack of it. Joe forces her to wrap up her hair as he does not want “other men figuratively wallowing in it,” as Janie existed solely “for him to look at, not those others.”<sup>29</sup> The regulations placed on Janie's hair seek to curb her self-expression and, as such, assert control over her agency. But, like Hurston's use of liminal spaces in the novel, the body is not just used to reassert power dynamics, but also to challenge them. Joe's body is also a site of transformation, serving as an embodiment of male supremacy. Following Janie's resurgence in autonomy when she verbally confronts him, Joe begins a physical decline as his power over Janie wanes. He loses his dominant standing, physically and socially. His once “prosperous-looking belly” turns into “some helpless thing seeking shelter.”<sup>30</sup> He is essentially incapacitated by Janie's words, as “[she] had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish.”<sup>31</sup> His death, therefore, serves as an important event in Janie's navigation of the social structures imposed upon her; his corporeal death signals the conceptual death of male-imposed dominance. Janie is liberated from the oppressive dynamic of her marriage, symbolically represented by the liberation of her hair as she “burnt up every one of her head rags.”<sup>32</sup> She emerges from her relationship with Joe, “basking in the freedom,” relishing in her newfound individualism.<sup>33</sup>

Though Janie finds some freedom from the oppressive structures of Eatonville in the Muck, even there her body continues to function as a site of masculine reassertion and violence. Even though her relationship with Tea Cake is more liberating than her other marriages, her body is still used as a site for the reaffirmation of masculine identity. Tea Cake beats her to assert his

dominance over other men in the Muck as “he just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss.”<sup>34</sup> The lack of a specified audience in this quote is significant; he did not beat Janie to show her that he was boss so much as he was performing for onlookers. Later, Tea Cake justifies this himself, saying, “Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss.”<sup>35</sup> The beating had little to do with Janie at all, expounding her role as an object to bolster male superiority over other males. But, while physical violence is used against Janie to reinforce power dynamics, it is also used to dismantle them and reassert her agency. Like Joe’s death serves to mark Janie’s liberation from his subjugation, Tea Cake’s death—at Janie’s hand—is the final step in her journey of self-actualization. During the hurricane in the book’s conclusion, in which all social dynamics and human control are suspended by the absolute power of nature, Tea Cake contracts rabies and attempts to kill Janie, forcing her to shoot him in the ultimate test of self-preservation. This physical act of violence, with all its tragic irony, forces Janie, albeit unwillingly, to choose herself, signaling her final break from dependence.

Her transformation can be seen through her body as she returns to Eatonville, donning traditionally masculine clothes, “[a] faded shirt and muddy overalls,” and thus her physical appearance subverts regimented ideas of gender. The vigor imbued in her hair, “a great rope... swinging to her waist,” starkly contrasts with her involuntarily wrapped-up, highly-regulated hair with Joe.<sup>36</sup> Crabtree suggests, “The three marriages and the three communities in which Janie moves represent increasingly wide circles of experience and opportunities for expression of personal choice.”<sup>37</sup> Back in Eatonville, Janie’s transformation is solidified, and she asserts control over her future, “pull[ing] it from around the waist of the world and drap[ing] it over her shoulder,” signifying the completion of her character arc and Hurston’s versatility in using the body as a site of transformation to demonstrate Janie’s relationship with social hierarchies.<sup>38</sup>

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston interacts with intersecting power structures by situating the narrative within planes of discourse and transformation. She equips three primary sites—geographical, liminal, and corporeal—to construct and

contest power structures. All three spaces are dynamic, demonstrating the variability of these structures to undermine their validity. As such, Hurston effectively uses spatiality in *Their Eyes* to question the pervasive nature of hierarchical social structures and assert the possibility of their dismantling.

## Footnotes

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5. Hurston, 54-55
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24. Hurston, 5, 8
25. Hurston, 2
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33. Hurston, 105-106
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38. Hurston, 221

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