

Zora's Jook: Blues Approaches to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Musically speaking, the jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as the blues, and on blues has been founded jazz.

--Zora Neale Hurston

At first glance, it might seem misleading to claim for Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the *kunstler roman* designation usually associated with such figures of High European Modernism as James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust. These novelists, after all, wrote "writerly" texts detailing the growth of a highly self-conscious author's reflection on basically European traditions of self-representation. In Hurston's case, we fail to recognize similar self-consciously Modernist techniques because of her choice of material: the "speakerly" acts of signifying, storytelling, gossip and song that constitute so rich an oral tradition, but that, due to their "lowly" roots, have too often been aesthetically undervalued. Yet Hurston, in presenting Tea Cake Walker to her readers through Janie's eyes, is writing, like Joyce or Mann, about an artist's life and the discovery of a usable (in a literary sense) past in these folk traditions. For the purposes of this essay, I will look at how Hurston uses one of these oral folk traditions -- the classic blues -- and suggest how such an approach to the novel can be implemented in the classroom.

The most important early interpreters and disseminators of this rich tradition were the bluesmen of the Piedmont, the Delta, and the Texas cotton fields. These griots chronicled in verse the joys and pains of a generation of African Americans born after slavery but still struggling for survival and freedom. They were the storytellers and poets who would create a new American idiom, the blues, from which all of our musical

heritage would originate. Men like Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson came out of the Delta fields, choosing lives of personal mobility and self expressions over servitude and obsequious wage slavery. They were, in this sense, notes blues scholar William Barlow, cultural rebels and precursors of that mobility that would soon take African Americans and their music up river to Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and Harlem (4-6).

In approaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God* both critically and pedagogically, I take it as a point of entry that Tea Cake is a bluesman, that a bluesman is a serious and important artist critically involved in the creation of what we think of as American music, and that this novel about a bluesman and the blues such musicians created have much to say to each other. The world of Tea Cake and Janie – a world of jook joints and paydays, Saturday night dances, card games and dice, music, barbecues, homemade liquor, knife fights and jealous lovers, pick up manual jobs, constant migration, natural disasters, forced labor, chain gangs, jails, trains, cardboard suitcases and cheap hotels – is, after all, exactly the universe of the blues singers and the subject of their songs. In turning for inspiration to the dynamic yet outsider culture of the blues, Hurston prefigures the position outlined two decades later by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in *Blues People*:

Only Negro music, because, perhaps, it drew its strength and beauty out of the depths of the black man’s soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the “lowest classes” of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class and the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society. (131).

At the creative center of this distinctly non-middle class world is the jook, which Hurston defines in an early essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”: “Jook is the word for a Negro pleasure house. It may mean a bawdy house. It may mean the house set apart on public works where the men and women dance, drink, and gamble. Often it is a combination of all these” (1028). As a musician and gambler, Tea Cake introduces Janie to life in the jooks, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* brings this world vividly alive: “All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love”(Hurston 125).

Two major goals, then, emerge in teaching Hurston’s novel in conjunction with its blues background. First, the blues themselves help to structure the narrative; Hurston develops her story using blues idioms and playing off of blues themes. Secondly, the novel vividly recreates the blues musician’s world, allowing students a rare glimpse into the historical roots of the music they listen to today. To accomplish these goals, I use the blues to retell in music the story of Tea Cake and Janie.

Tea Cake’s arrival in Eatonville immediately connects the blues with an itinerant, carefree lifestyle, an “ain’t nobody’s business” rebelliousness, and the simple enjoyments still available to poor rural folk. His midnight fishing expedition makes Janie feel “like a child breaking rules,” and her pre-dawn return home with him “made it seem like some great secret she was keeping from the town” (98). These anxieties give way to Hurston’s sensuous account of their meal, where the blues signal the first step in Janie’s evolving inner growth:

“Ah’ll clean ‘em, you fry ‘em and let’s eat,” he said with the assurance of one not being refused. They went out into the kitchen and fixed up the hot fish, corn muffins and ate. Then Tea Cake went to the piano without so much as asking and began playing blues and singing and throwing grins over his shoulder. The sounds lulled Janie to soft slumber and she woke up with Tea Cake combing her hair...(99)

To illustrate this scene, I play Taj Mahal’s cover of “Fishin’ Blues,” (on *Giant Step/ De Ole Folks at Home*) originally written, performed, and recorded by one of the pioneer blues musicians, Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, the “first true star of Texas blues” (Johnson 5). Like Tea Cake, Thomas was a self-taught musician who traveled the South by foot and train, playing an eclectic mixture of blues, dance tunes, popular ballads, ragtime compositions, minstrel numbers, and gospel songs. Among his most popular tunes, “Fishin’ Blues” captures the freedom and joyful playfulness of Hurston’s prose:

I’m a goin’ fishin’, goin all of the time / and my baby’s goin’ fishin’ too.
Bet your life your sweet wife’s gonna catch more fish than you...
Honey, put ‘em in the pot, honey put ‘em in the pan,
jes cook ‘em till they’re nice and brown
Bake a batch of buttermilk hotcakes, mama
We’ll chew ‘em up and chomp ‘em down.

Because of their metaphoric and metonymic associations in the blues literature, trains not only played an important role in spreading the blues culture throughout the South, but also serve to introduce major themes of the novel. The train that carries Janie

from Eatonville to Jacksonville in Chapter XIII, then, is a good place to start the classroom journey:

The train beat on itself and dances on the shiny steel rails mile after mile. Every now and then the engineer would play on his whistle for the people in the towns he passed by. And the train shuffled on to Jacksonville, and to a whole lot of things she wanted to see and to know. (111)

First, note how Hurston's language captures the blues idiom. The train "beat on itself" and "danced on the shiny steel rails" like a guitarist's rhythmically slapping at his instrument as his fingers dance over the shiny steel strings. The engineer "plays on his whistle for the people" much as a bluesman plays his harmonica. Finally, the train "shuffles" off to Jacksonville to the steps of a new dance. These train effects are traditional riffs for a county blues musician, and to illustrate I play for my students recordings of artists like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, whose cover of "Freight Train Blues," for example, is replete with such guitar- harmonica train effects.

In detailing how the train was Janie's passport to "a whole lot of things I wanted to see and to know," Hurston also signifies to the train's major metaphorical role in the blues. Trains meant travel, mobility, freedom on the one hand; on the other they meant loss, separation, and exile. In the 1890's 80% of American Negroes lived in the rural South; in 1950, 80% didn't. From rural to urban, from South to North, the disruption of families, of men leaving to find work or to escape the shackles of Jim Crow—all are captured in the lonely whistle of a passing train or a suitcase on the station platform.

I'm a railroad man and I love that M and O (twice)

And when I leave this town, I ain't comin back no mo'

I'm in a world of trouble—believe I gotta go (twice)

Gonna leave here people; gonna catch that M and O.

(“M and O Blues”)

When a woman takes the blues, she tucks her head and cries.

When a man catches the blues, he catches freight and rides.

(traditional, quoted in Levine 262)

LeRoi Jones, in *Blues People* directly relates this mass migration to the musical forms that emerge from it:

It was a decision Negroes made to leave the South, not an historical imperative. And this decision must have been preceded by some kind of psychological shift; a reinterpretation by the Negro of his role in this country. It was the same kind of human “movement” that made jazz and blues possible – the discovery of America or its culture as would be Americans. (96)

While almost all of the early country blues singers, like Tea Cake, were male, the biggest stars on the urban, professional and recording circuit were women. Janie's experiences in Jacksonville allow me to draw connections between Hurston's concerns with voice and female identity in the novel and the rich legacy of a women's tradition in the blues associated with Ma Rainey and, especially Bessie Smith. These women are free and independent, openly sexual, and yet very vulnerable. Like Janie, they have entered a male world of verbal signification, sexual freedom, personal mobility, and economic independence. Angela Davis, in her ground breaking *Blues Legacies and Black*

Feminism, notes how their songs “directly address the circumstances of black women’s lives” and further “encouraged them to be “as strong and independent as they were loving and caring” (143). Similarly, for Daphne Duval Harrison, the women’s blues of the 1920’s “introduced a new, different model of black women – more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive” (111). The novel’s major feminist themes are *leitmotifs* in the music of the “Empress of the Blues.” Let me pick up our story.

After her arrival in Jacksonville, Janie finds herself alone in her hotel room. Both Tea Cake and the two hundred dollars she brought as insurance are missing. She waits all night, but the sun finds her next morning, still alone, slumped on the floor with her head in a chair. “... it was always going to be dark to Janie if Tea Cake didn’t come back soon” (115). Abandonment, betrayal, loneliness, these are “Any Woman’s Blues,” and no one could sing them better than Bessie Smith. As musical background to the novel, then, I introduce two Bessie Smith recordings: “Dirty No Gooder’s Blues,” and “It Makes My Love Come Down” (on Bessie Smith’s: *Any Woman’s Blues*, Columbia G30126). The first of these tunes starts by lamenting the general undependability of men, and then mockingly ridicules the various male types available.

Lawd, I don’t think no man’s love can last. (two times)

They’ll love you to death and treat you like a thing of the past.

There’s nineteen men livin in my neighborhood. (two times)

Eighteen are fools and the other just ain’t no good.

Bessie’s song reflects a growing independence, a “Who needs you?” attitude toward men expressed by a woman daring to banter with the male language of signifying that Jody

Starks had expressly forbidden for Janie. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates illustrates how signifying verbally challenges and potentially reverses status relationships and claims Hurston's novel the "paradigmatic signifying text," one that "uses the tradition to represent signifying itself as a vehicle of liberation for an oppressed woman, and as a rhetorical strategy in the narration of fiction":

Their Eyes represents the Black trope of signifying both as thematic matter and as a rhetorical strategy of the novel itself. Janie, the protagonist, gains her voice on the porch of her husband's store, not only by engaging with the assembled men in the ritual of signifying (which her husband had expressly forbidden her to do) but also by openly signifying upon her husband's impotency. (241)

Tea Cake, of course, comes back to Janie in the morning. His return is announced musically: "After a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was. Then whoever it was started to sing"(115). I use Bessie Smith's "It Makes My Love Come Down" to illustrate both a second aspect of Janie's growth and another equally important side of this female blues tradition – the embracing of female sexuality as healthy and normal:

When I see two sweethearts spoon underneath a silvery moon
It makes my love come down – I wanna be around
Kiss me honey; it makes my love come down.
Curl up close, turn out the light, do just what you did last night,
It makes my love come down, I wanna be in town

Sweet, sweet Daddy, it makes my love come down.

After Tea Cake settles back in, Janie learns a few things about her new husband's chosen professions, gambling and music, and the inherent dangers of a life in the jooks. Tea Cake's narrative of the previous evening's jook party, with its emphasis on the guitar's role in the dancing, parallels Hurston's account in "Characteristics of Negro Expression":

In past generations the music was furnished by "boxes," another word for guitars. One guitar was enough for a dance; to have two was considered excellent. Where two were playing one man played lead and the other seconded him. The first player was "picking" and the second was "framing," that is, playing chords while the lead carried the melody by dexterous finger work. Sometimes a third player was added, and he played a tom tom effect on the low strings. Believe it or not, this is excellent dance music. ("Characteristics" 1028)

As an example of the blues guitar styles used for dance music in the jooks of the 1930's, I play some early recordings of the legendary Big Bill Broonzy, who began his career in the rural South as a blues soloist performing for jook dance audiences. These early dance tunes were adapted from the syncopations of the ragtime pianists and imitated on the guitar. Two excellent examples of this style are Broonzy's cover of "Pig Meat Strut" and his "Guitar Rag," both found on his *Big Bill Broonzy: Do That Guitar Rag – 1928-1935* (Yazoo L – 1035).

While the middle class and "respectable," both black and white, looked on the "sportin' life" with disapprobation, Janie freely and enthusiastically commits to the

itinerant life of a bluesman. “Tea Cake,” Janie tells him, “if you even go off from me and have a good time lak dat and then come back heah tellin’ me how nice Ah is, Ah specks tuh kill yuh dead. You heah me?” (119). Hurston’s comments on the Negro Theater debates of the 1930’s aesthetically validate Janie’s choice of individuality and self expression over middle class respectability. “To those who want to institute the Negro theater, let me say it is already established. It is lacking in wealth, so it is not seen in high places. . . . The real Negro theater is in the jooks and cabarets. Self – conscious individuals may turn away the eye and say, ‘Let us search elsewhere for our dramatic art.’ Let ‘em search. They certainly won’t find it.” (“Characteristics” 1031).

Their Eyes Were Watching God, of course, reaches its climax in Hurston’s harrowing descriptions of the powerful hurricane that hits the Florida fields where Tea Cake and Janie are working. For those, mostly poor and black, living in the lowlands and flood zones of the South, such devastation by water was a common occurrence. In 1927, for example, 26,000 square miles of the Delta near Greenville, Mississippi were inundated by flooding of the Mississippi River. 600,000 people lost their homes; half of them black (Traum 46). For these victims of natural disasters, there were no safety nets, no insurance, no Federal Disaster Relief or low interest loans to rebuild; they lost everything. Countless songs were sung on this subject by the blues singers of the Delta, and I illustrate this portion of the novel with the best of them, Bessie Smith’s “Back Water Blues.” Originally recorded in the 1920’s by Bessie Smith, the song has been covered by many blues artists since. Josh White’s performance on his “Empty Bed Blues” album (Elektra EKL211) is exceptional for its vocal phrasing and guitar effects.

Well it rained five days and the sky turned dark as night,

Yes, it rained five days and the sky turned dark as night,
Trouble's takin place in that low, that lowland tonight.
It thundered and lightnin'ed and the wind began to blow,
It thundered and lightnin'ed and the wind began to blow.
Thousands of poor people didn't have no where to go.

Janie survives the storm; Tea Cakes does not. Like Tea Cake, the pioneering bluesman paid a price for his freedom of mobility and self expression. He was a challenge to the authorities and lived under the threat of retribution and white "justice." Vagrancy, for example, was a crime, and jooks were often raided for impressments into county chain gangs and work projects. Tea Cake's forced labor in the clean up of Jacksonville had its counterpart in the chain gangs of the rural South. After one annual flood of the Mississippi, a Greenville minister writes of blacks "being made to work under the gun, whites bossing the colored with big guns buckled to them" (Davis 110). This fear of the authorities, the forced separation from loved ones, and the economic hardship on the families – all found expression in the blues. From song titles like "Search Warrant Blues," "I'm In the Jail House Now," and "Police Dog Blues," one might infer that Florida bluesman Arthur "Blind" Blake had a few encounters with the law. Bessie Smith recorded "Jailhouse Blues," and Ma Rainey covered "Chain Gang Blues." "Prison Bound," on Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee's *Back to New Orleans* (Fantasy 24708) can serve to illustrate an all too common experience.

The bluesman paid another price for his artistic and personal freedom, an internal one. Loneliness and alienation were the downside of this mobility, along with a fatalistic sense that, outside of the music, there was no escape. Women would eventually turn

unfaithful, jobs would end, and luck would run out. Sooner or later Joe Turner would show up, handcuffs ready. One hotel, or train, or jook, was ultimately, the same as the next. If trains were a symbol of freedom, they were equally a symbol of separation and uprooted alienation. Despair, that long dark night of the soul, finds a prominent place in the blues.

The most personal and poetic of the Delta bluesmen, beyond a doubt, was Robert Johnson, whose lyrics of alienation have the existential spiritual intensity of Kierkegaard. Chased by his inner demons in songs like “Crossroad Blues,” and “Hellhound on My Trail,” Johnson sings like a soul on fire:

I got to keep moving; I got to keep moving,
Blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail.
I can't keep no money, Hellhound on my trail,
Hellhound on my trail, Hellhound on my trail.

In Hurston's novel, Johnson's fatalism in the face of unshakeable demons has its metaphoric counterpart in Tea Cake's encounter with his own Hellhound -- the mad dog whose poison attacks him from the inside. Metonymically associated with the dark infernal powers of the hurricane, the dog “stood up and growled like a lion, stiff standing, hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge” (157). Tea Cake's language, too, associates the dog with the netherworld, “he'd uh raised hell, though, if he had uh grabbed me uh inch higher and bit me in the eye” (157-158). Like the Hellhound that pursues and torments Robert Johnson, the mad dog will not go away; although Tea Cake literally knifes the animal, its wild rage is internalized in the wounded Tea Cake, erupting in madness and violence. Hurston writes of Tea Cake's rabidness as

though a “demon was there before him, strangling, killing him quickly” (167). There is a “fiend in him [that] must kill” (175). The identification is complete when Janie cries to the doctor, “Ah can’t stand de idea us tyn’ Tea Cake lak he wuz a mad dawg” (169).

Whether through music or substance abuse, the bluesman can only temporarily keep his demons at bay and escape the oppressions that surrounds him. Robert Johnson, like Tea Cake, was shot and killed by a girlfriend shortly after making the recordings that would, posthumously, give him immortality.

At the end of the novel, Hurston again connects the human voice singing to the cathartic release of emotional pain:

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room, out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sign flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees (183).

That song is the blues. More than a metaphor for Janie’s transcendence, the blues song is also a historical reality, captured in old vinyl recordings of Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, or Big Bill Broonzy, living today in the music rooted in its traditions, and vibrantly enacted by Janie and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

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