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Between the Camera and the Gun: The Problem of Epistemic Violence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Between the Camera and the Gun: The Problem of Epistemic Violence in
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Katherine Rich

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Between the Camera and the Gun: The Problem of Epistemic Violence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Since the 75th anniversary of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane in 2003, a growing number of journalists and historians writing about the disaster have incorporated Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as part of the official historical record of the hurricane. These writers often border on depicting *Their Eyes* as the authentic experience of black migrant workers impacted by the hurricane and subsequent flood. Within the novel itself, however, Hurston theorizes on the potential epistemic violence that occurs when a piece of evidence—a photograph, fallen body, or verbal artifact—is used to judge a person. Without a person's ability to use self-representation to give an "understandin'" (7) to go along with the evidence, snapshots or textual evidence threaten to violently separate people from their prior knowledge of themselves. By offering the historical context of photographs of African Americans in the Post-Reconstruction South, I argue that Janie experiences this epistemic violence as a young girl when seeing a photograph of herself initiates her into the racial hierarchy of the South. A few decades later, while on trial for shooting her husband Tea Cake, Janie again faces epistemic violence when the evidence of Tea Cake's body is used to judge her and her marriage; however, by giving an understandin' to go along with the evidence through self-representation, Janie is able to clarify that which other forms of evidence distort and is able to go free. Modern texts appropriating *Their Eyes* run the risk of enacting epistemic violence on the victims of the hurricane, the novel, and history itself when they present the novel as the complete or authentic perspective of the migrant workers in the hurricane. By properly situating the novel as a historical text that offers a particular narrative of the hurricane rather than the complete or authentic experience of the victims, modern writers can honor Hurston's literary achievement without robbing the actual victims of the hurricane of their voice.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, Okeechobee Hurricane, photography, guns, textual appropriations, epistemic violence

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Introduction

On September 16, 2008, the United States House of Representatives published a report entitled “Commemorating the 80th Anniversary of the Okeechobee Hurricane of September 1928 and its Associated Tragic Loss of Life.” The report details a set of statistics and historical facts related to the hurricane, including an estimate of 3,000 victims and wind speeds exceeding 160 miles per hour. It discusses the inadequate efforts of the governmental agencies responding to the disaster and encourages twenty-first century agencies to prepare to respond better in the future. Among the extensive statistical data lies a single reference to an artistic representation of the hurricane. The report observes that “the extensive impact of the Okeechobee Hurricane on African-American migrant workers in southern and central Florida was memorialized in the famous 1937 literary work of Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” Precipitated, no doubt, by the heightened attention Hurston has received since her rediscovery in the 1970s, Hurston’s novel has exceeded the literary-critical realm to become part of the official congressional record of the Okeechobee Hurricane.¹

The House of Representatives has not produced the only recent document that draws upon Hurston’s novel as a piece of historical evidence regarding the hurricane’s impact on southern Florida. In the last decade, a growing number of journalists and historians writing about Florida history (particularly about Eatonville, the Belle Glade region, and the 1928 hurricane) have incorporated *Their Eyes* into their works—sometimes as a passing reference, and other times as a major primary source. While these writers recognize *Their Eyes* as a work of fiction, they often border on taking the novel as an authentic and accurate representation of the experience of migrant workers displaced by the hurricane. Treating Hurston’s work as historical evidence is easy to do because, discounting several obvious artistic embellishments, her narrative

aligns well with historical accounts and photographs of the hurricane's effects upon southern Florida. Indeed, the novel itself bears a certain historicity inasmuch as it represents one writer's version—condensed from local research involving interviews with eyewitnesses and victims—of the themes, locations, peoples, and events involved in the hurricane and ensuing flood. However, when contemporary writers deploy the text as representing the perspective of actual victims of the hurricane, they run the risk of placing an undue burden of authenticity on Hurston.

Authenticity, of course, has long been a central problem in studies of identity, with Robert Stepto classically commenting on the conditions by which African American texts can become authenticating narratives for other works to draw upon (5-6) and Jeff Karem more recently arguing that placing a strong emphasis on textual authenticity restricts the complexity and individuality of both the author and the culture represented (12). Hurston, I argue, has some of her own theorizing to do on the point of authenticity. She emphasizes the importance of self-representation in accompanying alternative perspectives and pieces of evidence when a person is judged. As a text can never produce a complete representation of a person or culture, any claim that *Their Eyes* contains *the experience* of a particular group of people is an overstatement at best, and an epistemically suspect misappropriation at worst.

Recent trends toward appropriating *Their Eyes* seem ironic because Hurston's own work implicitly criticizes the violence that occurs when a single image—whether a photograph, fallen body, or verbal artifact—is used as evidence to represent a person or culture. *Their Eyes* particularly highlights the power and danger of cameras and guns to capture an object, claim ownership of it, and place it on display for others to judge. While recognizing the physical and functional differences between the two tools, Susan Sontag offers a classic discussion of their similarities: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see

themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is the sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder” (14–15). Though the camera does not physically kill, the camera may be a violent tool when it objectifies people and causes them to see themselves in a way that runs counter to their self-determined view. To be sure, the practices of photographing, shooting, or even misappropriating a text do not yield equal levels of violence, and their respective acts are not always comparable; however, in the context of claiming a body or producing a text to be used as evidence to judge a person, culture, or historical event, the camera and gun may indeed produce a comparable violence. The potential similarities between the camera and the gun can be seen in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropological practices. Historian James R. Ryan has argued that just as the gun was used by naturalists and hunters to shoot wild animals prior to embalming them for an exhibition, photography quickly became a method to commemorate hunting exploits. Photography, however, worked alongside the gun rather than replacing it. Ryan observes that some hunts were not only undertaken “primarily for the purpose of photography,” but at times the objects of study were shot simultaneously by both camera and gun (100). The photographer shares with the hunter the acts of loading, aiming, and shooting at the intended target. While the camera can never physically kill as a gun can, it is able to objectify and exploit that which comes under its scope. The gun can likewise become a tool for seeing when the fallen body it produces is placed on display for observation and judgment.²

Hurston’s *Their Eyes* emerges as a sustained meditation on the violent disparities and correspondences between the camera and the gun. Janie’s journey into blackness begins at age six when she views a snapshot of herself, and the narrative culminates in a trial scene that has

Janie, three decades later, defending the shooting of her husband, which has resulted from the disempowered position to which white narratives of blackness have assigned her. Though Janie's understanding of herself is altered by photographs (the product of a camera), her use of a gun places her relationship with Tea Cake on trial, where she can give a greater "understandin'" (7) to go along with the frozen evidence. Following Barbara Christian in looking toward African American narratives as self-theorizing (68), I draw special attention to Janie's notion of understandin', which involves a conceptualization of the category of the authentic. Understandin', as I read it in Hurston, requires a personal perspective through self-representation to accompany alternative perspectives before a person or culture is evaluated and judged. This formulation of understandin' underscores the role of self-representation in clarifying that which is obscured by the epistemic violence of the camera and the physical violence of the gun; violence separates a person, culture, or text from itself, but self-representation offers a provisional suture to that always uncloseable gap.³ This argument, which surfaces in the novel, brings into dialogue Hurston's criticisms of the anthropological practices of her time with the attempts of several modern writers to use *Their Eyes* as the authentic representation of the experience of black migrant workers in the 1928 hurricane. This manner of appropriation has the potential to enact violence against the actual victims of the hurricane, history, and the novel itself. Hurston certainly lays forth a perspective on the Okeechobee Hurricane that attains historicity as an artistic representation of the event, but her voice is not the voice of the victims of the hurricane. Interrogating the novel's orchestration of a dialogue between the camera and the gun is instructive in relation to *Their Eyes*'s own potential to find itself, after its rediscovery, between the camera and the gun.

Reconstructing Janie's Identity: The Epistemic Violence of Photographs

Within the last decade, several critics have shifted the discussion of *Their Eyes* to focus more on the role of vision in the novel. The first indication that vision is an important aspect of *Their Eyes* is in the title. Further, the novel verbally offers a variety of images that include photographs (9, 117), mind-pictures (16), words that can make people “see” (51), printed graphics (66), reflections from the looking glass (87, 104), and memory pictures (193). Stuart Burrows has published both an article and a book chapter analyzing images and vision in *Their Eyes*. In his article ““You Heard Her, You Ain’t Blind’: Seeing What’s Said in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” he argues that in the novel, “to hear is to see” (437). He claims that the use of photography and other images in the novel are a method of reconstructing the black image through the black voice (434). In *Familiar Strangeness*, Burrows argues that Janie experiences a crisis of vision in which she is often mistaken for someone else, which he claims is a manifestation of modernism brought about by photographic technology (5). Deborah Clarke, also an important voice in this shift towards visuality, argues that Hurston’s emphasis on vision seeks to move beyond the typically oral African American tradition: “Her accomplishment is nothing less than redefining African American rhetoric, rendering it verbal and visual” (611). While Burrows and Clarke make intriguing connections among the variety of visual modes in the novel, I depart from them in suggesting that photography has a historical and cultural significance that separates it from other forms of images or vision in the novel. Furthermore, I bring the similar function of the camera and the gun into dialogue with the way that Hurston reveals the epistemic violence that occurs when Janie sees herself in a photograph and is visually initiated into the racial hierarchy of the South.

In the first of two scenes in which Janie interacts with a photograph of herself, six-year-old Janie learns that her racial identity separates her from her white playmates. Janie describes the impetus to this scene as arising when a “man come long takin’ pictures” (8). Historically speaking, the 1880s experienced a boom in photographic technology that included the advent of easily portable cameras and paper film; these changes in camera technology led to an explosion in the number of amateur, travelling photographers (Welling 284). The man takes a picture of Janie and the Washburn children and comes back the next week to deliver the print and collect payment (9). Janie recalls looking at the photograph with the Washburns: “So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark girl with long hair standing by Eleanor” (9). If “everybody” had been pointed out as Janie says, she would not have had trouble locating herself in the picture as she indicates that she does. Her confusion hints that she indeed was not pointed out like the other children. Janie continues, “Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, ‘where is me? Ah don’t see me’” (9). Janie’s question is met with laughter. Miss Nellie points Janie out to herself—causing Janie to see herself in a new way, thereby reconstructing Janie’s former knowledge of herself—and Janie responds, “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!” (9). Again, Janie’s response is met with “hard” laughter (9). That her first self-identification in a photograph is met with laughter causes Janie to associate herself with the stereotyped, oftentimes cartoonish and exaggerated images of African Americans that were intended to be laughable to their white audience.

Though this scene has often been discussed by critics, the historical context of photographs in the Post-Reconstruction South offers further insight into Janie’s experience.⁴ As this scene is such a pivotal moment in Janie’s development, such scholars as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Stuart Burrows, and Katherine Henninger have evaluated how the photograph fixes

Janie's understanding of her racial identity. DuPlessis uses this scene as a starting point for a discussion of how a multiplicity of other social factors work together to form Janie's identity. Burrows argues that rather than fixing her identity, this scene "inaugurates a series of moments in which Janie is mistaken—first by herself, and then by others—for someone else" (Burrows *Familiar* 159). Devoting specific attention to the importance of photography in this scene, Henninger comments on the role of photographs in literature on fixing identity for southern women. She writes that the cultural clues within the photograph inform Janie of her racial identity for the first time (3). Beyond allowing Janie to recognize that she is "colored,"⁵ this photograph distances Janie from herself and imposes a world of meaning that violently disregards previous notions Janie had of her identity. Not only does Janie see herself differently, but she is judged by the Washburns who point her out and laugh. In *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, Elizabeth Edwards argues that "photographs are never simply evidence—they are themselves historical and the complexities of the contexts of the perception of 'reality' as manifested in the creation of the image intersect with the complexities of the nature of the photograph itself in great diversity" (7). Photographs may represent "reality" in that they depict something that did exist at one time, but they never stand alone; the meaning of a particular photograph is shaped by limitations of the actual technology of the camera and the social uses of the other photographs at the time an image was taken. The social and historical context surrounding images of colored people in Janie's time frame demonstrate how this scene becomes a moment of epistemic violence.

As a young girl in the Post-Reconstruction South, Janie would have been inundated with images of African Americans, often racist in composition, which would influence the way she reads a photograph of herself as a colored girl. Given that Nanny gives birth to Janie's mother

the week that General Sherman takes Atlanta in 1863 (16), and that Janie's mother is raped at age seventeen in about 1880 (19), Janie would have been six years old in around 1887. While Janie is of course a fictional character, Hurston places her in a very particular time in history and has her interact with technologies, locations, and events whose meanings outside of the text shed light on Janie's experiences. Janie would have seen this first photograph of herself about a decade after the end of the Reconstruction, during what historian Logan Rayford has famously called the nadir of race relations in the United States.⁶ In "The Trope of the New Negro," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes the incredibly common presence of racist, stereotyped visual images (photographs and drawings) in this time period:

I have a collection of ten thousand racist visual images of blacks from between 1880 and 1940. The largest percentage of these images appeared between 1880 and 1920, in the form of trade cards and then postcards. By 1900, when Booker T. Washington called for *A New Negro for a New Century*, it would have been possible for middle-class white Americans to see Sambo images from toaster and teapot covers on his breakfast table, to advertisements in magazines, to popular postcards in drug stores. (149–50)

Though Gates' collection includes illustrations as well as photographs, he demonstrates the widespread culture of racist photographic images. Given how common these images were in the Post-Reconstruction South, it would have been nearly impossible for Janie, growing up in the backyard of a middle-class white family, not to be familiar with at least some of these images.

Offering additional insight into the historical context of the photographs at this time, critics including Martha Jane Nadell and Katherine Henninger have discussed the racist, stereotyped images of African Americans in the Post-Reconstruction South. Due to what Nadell

terms the “graphic revolution” of the late 1800s, lithographs and other images became increasingly common, with images of African Americans having a tendency to “burlesque all aspects of black life.” The visual images found “in advertisements, postcards, magazine and novel illustrations, sheet music, posters, and lithographs, were paramount in codifying ideas of race” (17). Henninger’s work expounds on the manner in which these images attempted to fix African American identity. The use of photographs themselves, she says, “help[ed] constitute the visual legacy of the gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies that characterized southern identity” (8). Part of this character of southern identity, she argues, coincides with “the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of a successful white southern effort to reassert dominance in the South” (36). While illustrations and images had long been used to depict African Americans in racist ways, in the nineteenth century, photographs took a more specific role in the attempt to limit the social movement of African Americans. The most extreme, and sadly all-too-common, example of the manner in which southerners composed racist photographs to reinscribe the racial inferiority and animality of African Americans was not in the cartoonish Sambo image, but through lynching photographs which celebrated and trivialized the horrendous murders.⁷ In the U.S. lynching culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the physical violence of lynching was converted into epistemic violence when the lynching was photographed, printed on a postcard, and sent through the mail. In turn, the epistemic violence of circulating lynching images—in tandem with the era’s barrage of minstrelsy images—conduced towards physical violence as these images rationalized lynching culture by objectifying and animalizing African Americans.

Furthermore, aside from the intentional racism of popular photographs in the Post-Reconstruction South, photography became an important aspect of creating and defining

domestic spaces. Photographs became prominent in home décor—walls and hearths were filled with framed pictures of family members and loved ones. As Laura Wexler discusses, middle-class and wealthy families could hire photographers to travel to their homes and take pictures of the family posed in front of their property. The application of photography to compose the family's public image created an awareness of the need to consciously construct a particular image. Wexler writes that an important aspect of this construction was the proper placement of servants who were often visible in the pictures, though standing in the background or in the periphery: "The servants are not depicted in these photographs as family members, but sentiment is extended towards them as well. . . clearly visible as an 'outsider within'" (169). Wexler reveals through her study of domestic photographs that while African Americans may not always be explicitly mocked in photographs as they are Gates' collection, African American servants had a particular location and place within pictures.

When Janie's encounter with this first photograph is read within the context of the historical uses of photographs of African Americans in the Post-Reconstruction South, it is evident that the photograph violently separate Janie from her former knowledge of herself. Janie's place within the family becomes clear through the Washburns' responses to the perplexed Janie trying to locate herself within the group photo. Janie was not a servant of the Washburn family herself, but Nanny was, and Nanny's service was the reason for Janie's involvement with the family. Janie's confusion hints that she indeed was not pointed out like the other children. Though the Washburns may be fond of Janie, she is peripheral in a family picture. Within the photograph, her place in the family is visually clear in a way that her other interactions with the children do not reveal. When she eventually recognizes herself and is laughed at, she realizes that she is not "just like the rest" (9) as she initially thought—she is estranged from herself.

Janie's reaction affirms the provisional success of campaigns by racist whites to control the power of the image and enforce the white power structure.

When Janie reconceptualizes her identity due to this photograph, Hurston demonstrates the power of photography to not only shape reality, but to create an unreality—a violent separation of the self⁸ due to the way that others construct the meaning surrounding a text. A simple photograph alone may not have had this power, but because of the manner in which the photographs of the time depicted African Americans in both public and domestic spaces, Janie's photograph takes on greater meaning. Not only does Janie see herself differently, but she is judged by the Washburns who point her out and laugh—she finds that there is something she does not know about herself that the photograph can teach her. Hurston understands the intersections between a photograph and its place as “evidence” in history. She suggests here that the power of the image moves beyond textbooks, exhibits, and museums to have a potentially great impact on the lives of individuals. When Janie later uses a photograph for her own purpose, she reclaims the power of the image, even if for only herself and not the larger public.

The next instance in which Janie interacts with a photograph of herself is markedly different from the first scene in that the photograph serves as a confirmation of her married self rather than a challenge to her identity and social position. Though this photograph exists in dialogue with the pivotal moment of Janie's racial recognition, it is often overlooked in evaluations of vision in *Their Eyes*. Just prior to Janie running off to marry Tea Cake, Phoeby comes to caution Janie against the “mighty big chance” she is taking (115). Phoeby convinces Janie to take two hundred dollars cash in a hidden purse as well as ten dollars over her fare in her pocket book as security against Tea Cake taking advantage of her or leaving her. This time, it is Janie's turn to laugh: “Every minute since she had stepped off that train she had been laughing at

Phoeby's advice" (117). Her reason for laughter becomes clear as she confirms to Phoeby her marriage to Tea Cake: "So it came around that she had been married a week and sent Phoeby a card with a picture on it" (117). Phoeby had questioned the wisdom of this marriage—cautioning her that meeting Tea Cake in Jacksonville "might not turn out like she thought" (117)—but Janie sends the photo postcard as a confirmation of her confidence in Tea Cake. By 1903, the availability of "real photo cards," or photos with a postcard backing, was widespread (Dilley 8-9). Janie and Tea Cake's marriage would have taken place in the mid-1920s, so the practice of sending photo postcards would have been well-established. In order to create this card, Janie would again have to stand within the scope of a camera. Again, the photo would present a single image, open to various interpretations, and still insufficient to offer a full understandin' of Janie's relationship. However, the image demonstrates that Janie recognizes the ability of a photograph to depict her standing in a relationship.

By using a photograph to assert her identity as a married woman, Janie reclaims the power of photography for her own purposes. At age six, Janie is laughed at when she realizes that she is a "colored" girl. She recognizes herself as part of the bombardment of disturbing images of African Americans perpetuated in the United States. In this later instance, however, it is Janie who laughs before sending the photograph. As previously mentioned, postcards of lynchings and Sambo images were common even into the 1940s. Janie's shift is certainly not because she has escaped the photographic rhetoric of the post-Reconstruction South; rather, she takes advantage of her recognition of the power of photography. She consciously switches her position as a peripheral object to be studied or ignored in a photograph to be the subject of the photograph. She and her husband stand as the dominant images, neither in the periphery nor as objects of humor or pity. Janie asks as a young girl, "Where is me?" (9). By using the third-

person conjugation of the “to be” verb, Janie speaks of herself as an object in the picture rather than its subject. Years later, by choosing to get married, take a photograph, and send it on a card, she gains the self-determination and confidence necessary to assert her image as valuable and important. She says through her image, “Here I am.”

Bodies of Evidence: The Epistemic Violence of Guns

The novel’s strongest argument for the need of self-representation before judgment comes through the trial scene resulting from Janie shooting of Tea Cake in an act of self-defense. Though Tea Cake’s physical body is not laid before the judge and jury, the testimony of the doctor who found Tea Cake lying dead in Janie’s arms verbally presents the evidence of Tea Cake’s body before the court. Like the picture she encountered as a young girl, the verbal artifact of Tea Cake’s body threatens to violently separate Janie from her knowledge of herself, her intentions, and her relationship with her husband. Janie’s role in his death is not in question, but his body becomes part of the evidence by which the all-white jury and judge evaluate Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship. While the jury deliberates, the narrator reflects on Janie’s fears: “It was not death she feared. It was misunderstanding” (188). “Misunderstanding”—antithetical to Hurston’s notion of understandin’—would occur if the jury did not allow Janie’s perspective to inform their knowledge of her and Tea Cake before passing judgment.

Janie is forced to shoot Tea Cake when he attacks her in a rabies-induced rage; ironically, it was Tea Cake who first taught Janie to shoot. While still in Eatonville, Tea Cake takes Janie out hunting (110). Once they arrive on the muck, they have some time before the harvesting season begins, so Tea Cake buys a shotgun, a pistol, and a rifle and teaches Janie how to use them (131). In the hurricane, Tea Cake contracts rabies from a mad dog while trying to save

Janie from drowning in the Okeechobee flood waters. Weeks later, his symptoms progress to the point where he is gone, and in his place is a jealous wild man. While caring for a sick Tea Cake, Janie discovers that her increasingly aggressive husband is storing the pistol under his pillow; fearing that he might attempt to use it against her, she moves the chamber of the gun three clicks to give her warning if he aims to kill her (182). In a jealous rage, Tea Cake points the pistol at her and she recognizes the warning snaps of the gun (183). She picks up the rifle, loads it, and prepares to aim as she unsuccessfully tries to talk Tea Cake out of his delirium. As the narrator describes it, “The pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie’s head” (184). Tea Cake experiences a physical violence when he is shot and killed; however, the result of this violence—his dead body—becomes a piece of evidence used in Janie’s trial that poses the threat of epistemic violence against Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship. In this sense, the gun produces a similar violence to the camera in its ability to separate Janie from her knowledge of herself and her relationship.

To defend her actions, Janie must stand trial in a scene that shares some striking similarities to an anthropological exhibit in which she and Tea Cake are the objects of scrutiny. While in the courtroom, Janie observes the strangeness of being placed on trial for others to observe and judge: “Janie saw the judge who had put on a great robe to listen about her and Tea Cake. And twelve more white men had stopped whatever they were doing to listen and pass on what happened between Janie and Tea Cake Woods, and as to whether things were done right or not” (185). Janie experiences what film critic Fatimah Rony refers to as the “third eye,” or the distance with which one can come to view oneself as an object under scientific scrutiny (4). When turned into an object for the scrutiny of the white men, Janie is at the mercy of their

assumptions and interpretations; however, while it is typically the case that the object on display had been subjugated by the camera or gun, it is Janie who had done the shooting in this case.

Whether in a picture or an actual body preserved after death, the object of anthropology comes on trial by those who view it; they can place it on a stand, examine it from different angles, poke, prod, and interrogate the object before determining its place and role in nature and society. Michael Ames writes that late nineteenth century anthropological museums emerged as an expansion of Western imperialism and rationalism:

A typical objective of early anthropological displays was, therefore, to present [artifacts] from 'primitive societies' as if they were specimens akin to those of natural history. Following the tradition of the cabinets of curiosity, primitive peoples were considered to be parts of nature like the flora and fauna, and therefore their arts and crafts were to be classified and presented according to similarity of form, evolutionary stage of development, or geographical origin.

(51)

So-called primitive peoples and their possessions were put on display, sometimes quite literally as in the case of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904,⁹ and were compared to each other to determine their state of evolution. Under this model, the peoples and artifacts represented are stripped of their natural context and are evaluated under a standard of scientific racism. Ames further writes that in the early 1900s, in an attempt to remedy this problem of missing context, anthropologist Franz Boas, who was Hurston's mentor at Barnard College in the early 1920s, created a new method of museum displays that emphasized placing images and artifacts in the context of their natural state. It was the context, he argued, that "would give the [artifacts] their meaning" (52). Hurston was trained to understand the importance of context in evaluating

peoples and cultures, but she pushed Boas's methods further. Through her observer-participant methods of collecting ethnographic material, Hurston would immerse herself in a culture and listen to and interact with the people in addition to simply taking pictures, films, and other recordings.¹⁰ Self-representation does not negate the role of bodies, texts, and artifacts in evaluating a person or culture, but it offers a necessary layer of context and understanding that can help mediate the violence of an outsider looking in to judge.

Janie's use of the gun does not free her from the racial and legal hierarchy of the South—she remains an object to be tried—but her actions do give her the opportunity to speak. Hurston explains the power of speech through a metaphor of shooting. She describes the black, migrant workers who crowd the back of the courtroom: “They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks” (185). Though the migrant workers present in the courtroom come to speak against Janie, she recognizes their commonality in sharing a “weak” position—language is now her only “real weapon.” African Americans in the early twentieth century did not control the power of image on an institutional level, and they were typically the victims of gun violence rather than the purveyors of it. Ultimately, when given the opportunity to speak, Hurston demonstrates that language can function like a gun. By speaking, Janie metaphorically kills the false image that had been presented of her. Once she is able to give an understandin' of her situation to go along with the evidence, she is released from the trial as a free woman.

Hurston echoes this pattern and reinforces the importance of self-representation in her 1950 short story, “The Conscience of the Court.” Here, protagonist Laura Lee Kimble is accused of several crimes and, without any education or legal training, is placed on trial to represent herself. The evidence presented against her consists primarily of the testimony of Clement

Beasley, a man who plays on the court's racial prejudices and claims that Kimble had beaten and cheated him. However, once she is able to speak for herself and offer her perspective on the situation, the attitude of those in the courtroom is softened and the judge lets her go free. The judge's prior opinion is so completely changed that he claims Laura sets "an example which no decent citizens need blush to follow" (*Complete* 176). Self-representation can clarify that which other forms of representation distort. Hurston's repetition of this model reinscribes the notion that an understandin' comes after self-representation is added to other forms of evidence. Whether the evidence is a body, a text, or the testimony of others, the evidence is not sufficient to judge a person until she can add her own perspective. While violence may still occur—the physical violence of a gun and the epistemic violence caused by texts or verbal artifacts are not replaced by self-representation—a person can mitigate the violence when she adds her own perspective.

Claims of Authenticity: The Risk of Epistemically Violent Appropriations

Modern texts run the risk of enacting epistemic violence on the victims of the hurricanes, history, and the novel itself when writers imply that *Their Eyes* is an authentic representation of the experience of migrant workers displaced or killed by the Okeechobee Hurricane and flood. Through Janie's experiences with the camera and the gun, Hurston demonstrates that snapshots of evidence can offer some insight into an individual or culture, but violence occurs when the snapshot separates people from their past knowledge of themselves. Snapshots are incomplete representations that enact violence on the peoples or cultures depicted when those peoples do not have the opportunity of offer an understandin' to go along with the evidence. When *Their Eyes* is misappropriated, modern writers may commit a violence

analogous to the epistemic violence Janie experiences in the novel. Appropriating *Their Eyes* can be done in a manner that limits or even avoids this violence when modern writers situate the text so as not to claim that the text replaces the voice or experience of the real victims of the hurricane, but represents one perspective on behalf of these people; in fact, several texts over the last couple of decades which reference *Their Eyes* in relation to the hurricane do so without enacting violence on the victims. However, since the 75th anniversary of the hurricane in 2003, there has been a growing trend to incorporate *Their Eyes* as part of the official record of the hurricane, taking the text as the authentic experience of the migrant workers. While participants in this trend do not intentionally enact violence on the peoples depicted in the novel, they reveal a need for additional caution in future treatments of *Their Eyes* in relation to the hurricane. By situating the novel as a historical text that offers a particular narrative of the hurricane, modern writers can honor Hurston's literary achievement without robbing the actual victims of the hurricane of their voice.

Over the last couple of decades, several sources discussing the Okeechobee Hurricane have referenced or quoted Hurston's *Their Eyes* without bordering on epistemic violence to the victims. William E. McGoun's *Southeast Florida Pioneers* (1998), for example, discusses both the victims of the Okeechobee Hurricane and Hurston herself in its attempt to highlight several important events and people in Florida history. The chapter on the victims highlights the devastation and loss of life to the migrant workers and others by drawing upon several sources, including files held by the Palm Beach County Historical Society, newspaper articles, and accounts by journalists and historians. Never does it claim to represent the complete perspective of any group. In its chapter on Hurston, it mentions *Their Eyes* for its "powerful description" of the hurricane, but again, not that it represents a complete perspective. Other sources, including

Marjorie Stoneman Douglas's *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1988), Roger A. Pilke's *Hurricanes: Their Nature and Impacts on Society* (1997), and Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (2000), each either footnote Hurston or suggest *Their Eyes* as additional reading about the hurricane. They draw upon multiple sources, including Hurston's artistic representation of the hurricane and flood, to offer facts and perspectives on the disaster without claiming to present the authentic perspective. Referencing Hurston, quoting her words, or even mentioning that she attempts to demonstrate the perspective of the migrant workers impacted by the flood is not a violent appropriation of her novel: it is only when the novel is used as a textual snapshot to be evaluated as a complete representation of the migrant worker's experience that appropriations border on epistemic violence.

Particularly since 2003, several texts, including Elliot Kleinberg's *Black Cloud*, Kerry Emanuel's *Divine Wind*, and the Congressional Report mentioned in the introduction, have incorporated *Their Eyes* as part of the official record of the hurricane in a way that fails to sufficiently complicate the novel. Between chapters about the post-flood Okeechobee dike and the mass graves for victims of the flood, Kleinberg embeds a chapter titled "Zora." The chapter details how in *Their Eyes*, Hurston "immortalized the hurricane just as she captured the lives and humanity of mid-twentieth-century black Americans" (205). Along with a lengthy summary of the novel, the chapter contains a mini-biography of Hurston's life and career. Though Kleinberg recognizes that Hurston's "story takes some liberties" (206), he includes it as the experience of the poor, black, migrant workers that Hurston depicts; he concludes that *Their Eyes* was "a piece of fiction, but it rang all too true" (211). Emanuel similarly includes *Their Eyes* as the authentic experience of migrant workers. Chapter 17, titled "Their Eyes Were Watching God: *San Felipe* and the Okeechobee Disaster of 1928," begins with scientific and historical information about

the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane and concludes with an excerpt of several pages from *Their Eyes*. He introduces the novel by saying that in *Their Eyes*, “the horrors of the Okeechobee hurricane as experienced by migrant workers and their families were recounted by Zora Neale Hurston” (121). Lacking here is any information about Hurston’s methods for gathering information, her presence or absence from the hurricane, or any analysis of the novel compared to other historical or artistic works of this particular hurricane. While these texts do not intentionally enact violence on the hurricane victims, history, or the novel, they do not sufficiently complicate *Their Eyes* as a perspective rather than a complete representation of these victims.

Though I can only speculate the precise reason *Their Eyes* has become so closely tied to the history of the hurricane, Hurston’s methods of collecting information and her experiences in Florida make her an attractive source to draw from. Hurston was not personally present in the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, but she did experience a fierce hurricane in the Bahamas in 1929 (Boyd 187). Furthermore, Hurston conducted personal interviews with survivors of the Okeechobee Hurricane seven years after the event. As Valerie Boyd describes in her biography of Hurston, Hurston travelled in June of 1935 with Professor Mary Elizabeth Barnacle and Alan Lomax collecting folk songs in Eatonville and Belle Glade. While there, she interacted with local people, including a community of Bahamians, and witnessed dances and songs (276). Hurston likely based several of her fictional characters on real people who survived the disaster. It is perhaps Hurston’s blending of ethnography and literature that leads historians and journalists to consider *Their Eyes* as what Robert Stepto describes as an “authenticating narrative” (257). In the stratification of authentication Stepto developed while evaluating slave narratives, the earlier stages of authentication require letters, documents, and introductions by white publishers to affirm the accuracy of a text. In later stages of authentication, a text’s incorporation of multiple

voices, documents, and rhetorical strategies lead historians and others to use the text as a historical source itself (258). While *Their Eyes* is not a slave narrative, is fictional, and comes much later than the texts that Stepto analyzes, it is perhaps Hurston's inclusion of multiple voices through her various characters that lead modern writers to view the novel as an authenticating text. The novel is indeed a historical text, but it is not a first-person narrative of actual survivors of the hurricane.

As a possible influence for the trend to include *Their Eyes* as part of the official historical record of the hurricane, Hurston's own racial background and profession as an anthropologist may result in *Their Eyes* both inviting and challenging what Rosemary Hathaway calls "touristic reading." Hathaway describes this mode of reading as occurring when a reader perceives a text, particularly an ethnographic or folkloric text, as being "an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that 'Other' cultural group" (169). As Hurston was African American, raised in Eatonville, and spent time collecting ethnographic materials in the Belle Glade region after the hurricane, it may be easy to assume that she can be representative of the cultures described in the novel. Hurston's experiences likely did grant her great insight into the experiences of the people she fictionalizes in her text, and she puts great effort into focusing her story on people who were otherwise marginalized in American culture.¹¹ However, Hathaway explains that touristic reading is a fallacious practice that places too strong a burden of authenticity on a text: "But the touristic reading is a snapshot, a still photo (with the emphasis on 'still'), a cultural portrait that selectively edits out signs of dynamism or contention, both within the text and within the culture 'represented' by the text, and features only what the reader wants to see" (169). As texts are dynamic and open to multiple readings and interpretations, closing a text off as "representative"

of a racial group (in Hurston's case the migrant workers who became victims of the hurricane and flood) cuts off alternative meanings and perspectives.

Understandin' Through Self-Representation: Mitigating the Violence

Through Janie's life experiences, Hurston is able to frame the importance of self-representation in bringing an understandin' to incomplete evidence. Returning to Eatonville from the 'Glades after Tea Cake's funeral, Janie faces "Mouth Almighty" (5) in the form of the townspeople who sit on their porches, eager to judge her presence. Janie walks past the porch-sitters to her own home where her friend Phoeby greets her with food, wanting to hear her reason for returning. Janie, aware of all of the questions in her friend's mind, prepares Phoeby for a long story: "'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go with it" (7). The story that follows makes up the body of the novel and involves all of the experiences that Janie deems necessary to explain her relationship with Tea Cake and what led her to return to Eatonville alone. Janie's personal voice and perspective answer the questions that Phoeby brings from the townspeople and fills in the gaps of knowledge that Janie's physical presence alone cannot fill. In her interactions with the camera and the gun, Janie experiences the epistemic violence that photographs and bodies of evidence can enact when they lack the context brought through self-representation. She now knows that her ability to speak for herself can save her from the misunderstanding that comes through judgment of incomplete evidence.

Hurston's arguments about the potential for violence when a person or culture is judged by snapshots of evidence demonstrates the importance of recognizing this potential and acting to avoid or mitigate the violence when possible. Placing the weight of authenticity on the novel does not leave room to challenge the perspective it offers or include alternative narratives when

available. Though inadvertent, this manner of appropriation commits violence against the victims of the hurricane, the history of the disaster, and the novel. The violence against the victims is an epistemic violence similar to what Janie experiences when the first photograph changes her perspective about herself and places her within the racial hierarchy of the South. Claiming that one text offers a complete and authentic representation of the experience of these people imposes a narrative on the actual victims that separates them from their individual experiences. Given the eighty-three years that have passed since the hurricane, there are likely not any survivors left capable of offering even a reflective experience, so historians and others writing about the hurricane are left to make do with the texts that survive. Historians are always faced with limitations in the number of sources and perspectives they can access. The violence towards history occurs when writers claim to be able to offer a complete perspective rather than a particular narrative. Just as *Their Eyes* can only offer a limited perspective to the experience of migrant workers, the appropriations of the text only offer a limited perspective of the novel as a whole. While the hurricane is a very significant aspect of the novel, Hurston did not write *Their Eyes* solely as historical fiction about this natural disaster. Referencing Hurston's narrative of the hurricane as strictly historical fiction ignores alternative readings of the afro-mystical, afro-womanist, and other perspectives that might favor the hurricane as a plot device rather than a historical event. To the extent that *Their Eyes* is separated and limited from alternative readings, it too experiences an epistemic violence. As this violence is easy to avoid, it is important that modern writers recognize the need to properly situate the novel in their references to it in order to mitigate the violence that occurs when a snapshot stands in as a piece to represent the whole.

Notes

¹ Because hurricanes in the United States were not officially named until 1941, I use “Okeechobee Hurricane” and “1928 Hurricane” interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to the hurricane that hit southern and central Florida in September of 1928, causing the Okeechobee lake waters to flood the Belle Glade region.

² The practice of shooting an object to preserve it was practiced by the famous birdwatcher, collector, and artist John James Audubon. In his biography on Audubon, Richard Rhodes explains that it was a common practice for Audubon to shoot a bird, mount it on a board with a wire for observation, and draw it (157, 308). Shooting the bird was, for him, a necessary step in observing and preserving the creature.

³ I draw upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence, which she describes as occurring when how one knows is changed, forcing one to reconstruct one’s body of knowledge. Physical violence and epistemic violence are intimately interwoven, such as when the colonial subject is constituted as the Other (35).

⁴ Whether as an intentional parallel or coincidence, Janie’s experience nods to W. E. B. Du Bois, whose similar experience is described in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois comes to realize that he is perceived as different from the white children in his school through the rejection of his photograph by a female classmate. Du Bois recalls the experience when the boys and girls of his schoolhouse decided to “buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange” (37). Literary critic Sara Blair offers insight into the historical context of visiting cards: “During the 1870s, the era of the boy’s enlightenment, visiting cards were known as cartes de visite or cabinet cards, and they circulated the United States by the millions, part of a nation-making ‘photomania.’ Typically they featured the engraved name of the giver beneath his or her carefully composed studio photograph” (161). It is significant that Du Bois’s recognition of his difference from other students comes via a photograph. He recalls, “The exchange was merry, until one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance” (38). Du Bois claims he was forever changed by the moment when a photograph resulted in his social awareness of racial difference. His experience demonstrates the plausibility of Janie’s self-identification being altered through the cultural understanding of what it means to be pictured as a black person.

⁵ I use the term “colored” here and in several locations throughout this article because it is the term that Janie uses to describe herself. Rather than choose an alternative term for her, such as African American or black, I use “colored” to carry the same weight of meaning as the word that Hurston selected. I avoid using scare quotes with each reference after the first as they would become stylistically burdensome.

⁶ As explained in *America: A Narrative History*, Reconstruction came to an end in the Compromise of 1877, following the disputed 1886 election between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Southern Democrat Samuel L. Tilden. The election was resolved with several informal agreements that resulted in Hayes being named president with the agreement that he would withdraw federal troupes from Louisiana and South Carolina, effectively ending Reconstruction. The end of Reconstruction resulted in southern Democrats denying civil rights to blacks for decades to come (Tindall and Shi 596-99). Furthermore, the Post-Reconstruction Era has been referred to by historian Rayford W. Logan and other scholars as the “nadir” of African American history—the lowest point of adversity and despair.

⁷ In 2005, James Allen published *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography In America*, which includes a collection of nearly 100 images of lynchings throughout the United States between 1882-1968. His book visually demonstrates, along with relatively brief written descriptions and histories, the manner in which these violent acts were photographed and distributed as souvenirs or mailed on postcards.

⁸ I recognize that the notion of the “self” has multiple ontological meanings or possibilities. Here I mean Janie’s personal understanding of who she is in relation to the world around her.

⁹ In *A World on Display: Photographs From the St. Louis World’s Fair 1904*, Eric Breitbart discusses the live displays of 2,000 or more “primitives” who were brought to the fair and lived in “native villages” for approximately six months. He argues that they were not brought to the fair as individuals, but as “types” meant to represent a particular idea about a tribe, race or culture. He claims, “For six months, they lived on the fairgrounds as subjects for scientific study by ethnologists and anthropologists, and as objects of curiosity and amusement for visitors to the fair” (11-12). Furthermore, like other events and peoples at the fair, the “primitives” were regularly photographed by several professional photographers who frequented the fair. The names of individuals were almost never recorded along with their pictures, and the images again emphasize the role that the primitives were intended to play—objects for entertainment and observation.

¹⁰ Hurston broke from the traditional scientific methods of observation in her experimental filmmaking. Nine of the estimated fourteen short films that Hurston made survive in the Margaret Mead Collection in the Library of Congress. Elaine S. Charnov describes the various roles Hurston undertook while trying to gain multiple perspectives of the people she observed in her films: “Sometimes she stands as the ‘objective’ outsider, other times

as ‘the participant’ of the community, and other times as an unabashed experimenter. In all the roles she adopts, Zora Neale Hurston is involved in capturing the dynamics of ritualized performativity on the level of daily, commonplace occurrence” (41). Hurston avoided taking people outside of their natural setting to record them, but preferred to film and record where they could represent themselves as they usually were.

¹¹ In her article “‘Go there tuh know there’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk,” Leigh Anne Duck further complicates the possibility of Hurston presenting a complete perspective of the peoples in her novel. She argues that the novel separates “folk” culture from the larger nation: “the chronotope of *Their Eyes* is relatively allotemporal, existing outside the time of the nation and its economy” (278). By isolating folk culture, even when certain events in the novel (such as the hurricane) have a particular time and place, the peoples represented are artificially removed from outside influences and concerns. While appropriating *Their Eyes* as the authentic voice of migrant workers is problematic for multiple reasons, the allotemporal nature of the novel further removes the possibility of a complete perspective.

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