

**WHAT HIDDEN  
ATTITUDES DO  
HURRICANES UNLEASH?  
RECONSIDERING  
GENDER, CLASS, AND  
RACIAL ISSUES IN ZORA  
NEALE HURSTON'S  
*THEIR EYES WERE  
WATCHING GOD*<sup>1</sup>**

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The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.

*Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God**

It is the *community* that offers a cushion to pain, the *community* that offers a context for intimacy, the *community* that serves as the repository for binding traditions. And when the community is profoundly affected, one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way that one would speak of a damaged body.

*Kai T. Erikson, *New Species of Troubl**

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*Abstract*

The famous sentence that African-American novelist Zora Neale Hurston chose as a title for her novel comes up at a very critical moment of the story when, confronted with the “monstropolous beast” of a Caribbean hurricane, many of the key characters realize that social codes and norms begin to lose their weight and functionality. The author uses the example of the 1928 hurricane that struck the Everglades in Florida to illustrate all kinds of intriguing shifts in the human relations and social structures that had developed among different groups throughout the novel. Some scholars have argued that “questions of gender, class, and race rise in structural and figural importance in the latter part of the book, building toward, and away from, the hurricane” (Duplessis 1990). It is indeed undeniable that this natural disaster compels socio-racial collectivities and specific individuals to rethink their positions regarding others.

*Keywords:* Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Caribbean Hurricanes, Trauma Theory, Gender Studies, Race/Class Issues.

*Resumen*

La famosa frase que la autora afro-americana Zora Neale Hurston eligió como título para su novela surge en un momento crucial del argumento cuando, expuestos a la “bestia mos-truopulosa” de un huracán atlántico, muchos de los personajes clave se dan cuenta de que los códigos sociales empiezan a perder su sentido. La autora aprovecha el huracán que barrió los Everglades de Florida en otoño de 1928 para ilustrar los profundos cambios que se produjeron en las estructuras y relaciones sociales que existían entre los diferentes grupos humanos. Varios críticos/as han afirmado que “las cuestiones de clase, género y raza adquieren una creciente importancia en la parte final del libro, a medida que el huracán se acerca y luego pasa” (Duplessis 1990). Resulta innegable que este desastre natural obliga tanto a colectivos como a personajes concretos a repensar sus relaciones con los demás.

*Palabras clave:* Zora N. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, huracanes del Caribe, Teoría del trauma, Estudios de género, Conflictos de raza/clase.

## 1. INTRODUCTORY: ON NATURAL DISASTERS AND PSYCHO-WOUNDS

On September 14, 2008, Jeff Klinkenberg published an article in the *St. Petersburg Times* reporting on a memorial event organized by the township of West Palm Beach to remember the over 2,000 victims of the hurricane that hit the area in the late 1920s. As the writer reminds us, “September 16, 1928, fell on a Sunday. Folks noticed the gray skies on the way home from church. That evening, the storm

blasted ashore in southern Palm Beach County, sweeping aside trees and buildings. Then it roared inland toward the state's largest lake" (Klinkenberg 2008).<sup>2</sup> Despite the dizzying number of casualties and the huge destruction caused by the floods that followed the hurricane, it took over seventy years for the city to purchase the land where the mass graves had been dug and to build a modest memorial park where visitors and relatives could remember their dead. Incidentally, we also learn in the article that a great majority of the victims of the natural disaster were poor, Bahaman and African-American migrant farmers whose remains were quickly –and rather shabbily– buried to avoid epidemics, thus, claims Klinkenberg, adding “insult to injury.” The fact that eighty years after the cataclysm some local authorities and residents were going to take time off to commemorate it by holding a ceremony featuring speeches, African burial rituals and hurricane stories is a clear sign that the psychological wounds inflicted by the disaster are not fully healed as yet.

Apart from providing informative data regarding the disaster, Klinkenberg's piece also tells about Robert Hazard, “a gray-haired community activist of 60,” who heard regularly from his elders about the Storm of 1928 and turned the search for the forgotten mass grave into his life's mission. At first, he had serious difficulties, since not even those who had lived through the level-4 cyclone seemed to remember where the grave lay: “Nobody, not even hurricane survivors, could remember the exact location. He'd drive them to the field and walk them around. Someone would point to a spot. Someone else would say, ‘No, a little south’” (Klinkenberg 2008). It took Hazard over a decade to persuade the town council to hire a group of specialists in order to look for the location of the unmarked graves and, then, to buy the land from the legal owner. Up to the late 1990s, when Hazard and a group of friends founded “the Storm of '28 Memorial Park Coalition,” hardly anyone had shown much interest in retrieving the memory of all those who perished as a result of the disaster. Not unlike Alice Walker's celebrated crusade to plant a gravestone on Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked resting place,<sup>3</sup> Hazard made it his urgent goal to gather enough support to have his people's ancestors finally

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot Kleinberg's *Black Cloud* offers all kinds of enlightening details about the arrival and the effects of the hurricane, both on the coastal area and inland (see especially 69-95). He also chose a quotation from Hurston's novel as the epigraph to his scholarly book.

<sup>3</sup> Walker describes in “Looking for Zora” (1984:104-8) some of her adventures while trying to find the exact place where the Harlem Renaissance artist had been unceremoniously buried in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida, in 1960.

recognized –although, in fact, that has been just one of his many other achievements.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Hazard could definitely be described as one of the leading figures of the “carrier group” that have been broadcasting symbolic representations of this collective disaster and have eventually turned them into a claim that has initiated the whole “trauma process.” As we know from the literature on this subject, this type of claim often refers to a severe injury, a protest against the oblivion and profanation of basic rights and, ultimately, a demand for some sort of institutional and emotional reparation.<sup>5</sup> Most trauma theorists would agree now that the psychological wounds left by collective disasters are not so much the result of a human group experiencing pain at a precise historical moment but, rather, “of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander 2004:10). Indeed, had it not been for the efforts of people like Hazard and Hurston, who gave new significance to the death of those black farmers, it is difficult to believe that the “trauma process” would have been initiated at all. Alexander maintains that the trauma process is “a socially mediated attribution” (2004:8) of meaning to events that would otherwise not have been interpreted as signs of injustice, unequal treatment, and historical erasure. In this regard, it is not surprising that Hazard’s project to recover the memory of his people began to gather momentum only when a group of black historians started to send letters to the local authorities informing them of the lack of humanity they demonstrated by turning a deaf ear to Hazard’s requests.

It was Kai Erikson’s groundbreaking study *Everything in Its Path* that established the importance of collective traumas as opposed to earlier approaches that had mostly focused on the analysis of individual psychological effects. Erikson’s moving account of the impact that a devastating flood had on the sixteen villages of a relatively small Appalachian community shows important insights into the community-wrenching consequences of these kinds of disasters and the broader cultural crises they cause. As he sees it, collective trauma is:

[...] a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs their prevailing sense of commonality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hazard’s contributions to the advancement of the black community in West Palm Beach cannot be easily listed here. Inspired at first by Martin Luther King Jr. and by Malcolm X, he then joined the Panther Party. When he moved to Florida to look after his retired parents, he opened a charter school for black children and was a counsellor in the justice system.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Thomson (1998) explains how cultural representations of trauma begin with such claim-making exercise about the shape of certain social realities and their possible causes.

with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (Erikson 1976:153-54)

This passage and the second epigraph to my essay evince that Erikson is particularly interested in the collectively emergent properties that disasters generate under certain social conditions. One does not need to stretch much one’s imagination in order to see the remarkable similarities existing between the Buffalo Creek community in West Virginia and that of the black agricultural laborers in the Everglades in Florida. As becomes clear in the second half of Hurston’s novel, the dawning of new economic interests also increased the distance between the cultural poles in what Erikson calls “axes of variation” (1976:84-88).<sup>6</sup> My analysis below will show that the black farmers “on the muck” grew either self-centered or group-centered in rather extreme ways when they were exposed to the immense productivity of the land. Here is the protagonist’s early perception of the area:

To Janie’s strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (Hurston 1978:193)

As was the case of the mining sites in West Virginia in the late 1960s and early 70s, the economic exploitation of this rich area was in the hands of people from outside the region who never spent much time considering the working and living conditions of the farmers. This fact, of course, had very serious consequences for the survivors’ capacity to react to the catastrophe of 1928. It will be noted that the Dantesque scenario left behind by the cyclone was characterized by a deep psychological disorientation, prolonged signs of social disorganization, and an absence of effective community assistance either from within or without.<sup>7</sup> According to Neal, cataclysmic events such as violent conflicts or natural disasters usually have “an explosive quality” that is likely to disrupt the extant foundations of the social order so that dramatic changes may occur in very short periods of time (1998:9-10). The last three chapters of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) can be seen to portray both the heart-wrenching images of the hurricane wreaking havoc on a place that up to then had seemed quasi-

<sup>6</sup> By “axes of variation” Erikson means the mental maps that people construct in order to make sense of their surrounding reality. The term is analogous to what Pierre Bourdieu calls “*habitus*”.

<sup>7</sup> Erikson (1976:194) concludes his study by noting that the disruptive state of community affairs continued in Buffalo Creek at the time he was completing his writing, three years after the flood.

paradisiacal and the devastating impact that the flood had on the survivors as they tried to recover from their social and psychological disarray.

Interestingly, to date little attention has been paid up to the hurricane section of the book, and some reviewers and critics have even complained for years that the title of Hurston's novel does not do justice to it and may be misleading considering the main achievements of the work.<sup>8</sup> Among those achievements, the following should be mentioned: on one hand, there are the protagonist's recurrent attempts to transcend the roles that a heavily patriarchal and race-conscious society has imposed on her; on the other, the use of vernacular speech and African-American storytelling conventions can be seen to serve the purpose of giving voice to the concerns and affections of the underprivileged. In Gayl Jones' opinion, it is in this novel that Hurston finally "fulfill[ed] the possibility of what dialect might do when moved beyond the literary conventions and allowed more of the image and flexibility of authentic folk creation" (1993:152). While admitting that Hurston's emergent female heroine and her masterful use of the figural and the dialectal are among her greatest contributions to the African-American novel, we would be committing an unpardonable analytical blunder if we discarded the closing chapters of the novel as just a convenient way of wrapping up these other components of the narrative. It should certainly be noted that the onset of the tropical storm allows the author to stretch her figural skills in original ways:

Ten feet higher and as far as they could see the muttering wall advanced before the braced-up waters like a road crusher on a cosmic scale. The monstropolous beast had left its bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed his chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be-conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel. (1978:239)

Yet, apart from the artistry with which Hurston depicts the deadly hurricane and its aftermath, it is also important to note that the author takes this opportunity to show how social structures and human relations change dramatically when events of this nature take place. The same as Erikson claimed that observers of the catastrophe in the Appalachian mountains failed to notice the real dimensions of the "great change" undergone by the community (1976:71), Hurston also seems to be sending a message to unwary readers who may not grasp, at first, her intention of showing how attitudes and norms of behavior among human groups are deeply

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<sup>8</sup> Sheila Hibben, for one, described the title of the book in an early review as "inept enough" (1993:22). Curiously, though, hers is among the most positive assessments of the novel as she stresses several times that the author's "warm and vibrant touch" saves the work from some of its possible limitations.

transformed by cataclysmic events of this kind.<sup>9</sup> There is no denying that most of the key characters and collectivities in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* need to rethink their positions regarding others –be they friends, bosses, lovers or antagonists–, for new responses and dispositions emerge that would have been unthinkable under other circumstances. In DuPlessis’ opinion, one of Hurston’s major achievements in the novel is that she compels the reader to carry out a thorough “critical analysis of multiple social determinants in their narrative meanings” (1990:97), which, according to her, becomes especially important in the latter part of the book when those social determinants –most clearly, gender, class, and race– are substantially altered by the effects of the hurricane. More recently, Schwartz has also argued in the same line that natural disasters [in the Caribbean area] usually show differential effects depending on “the social, cultural, economic and political contexts of the storms” (2007:4).

## 2. A LYRICAL NOVEL, YET ALSO HISTORICALLY ACCURATE

It has been often remarked that Zora Neale Hurston failed to gain the favor of most of her contemporary black male writers because, unlike them, she refrained from creating the naturalist, protest fiction that would explore the nation’s historical mistreatment of African-Americans. For authors such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Richard Wright, Hurston represented “the perfect darkie,” a naïve, complacent, and humorous Negro who mostly wrote to please white audiences. Wright’s review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is among the most direct –and, somehow, cruel– indictments of her art:

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. (1993:17; emphases in original)

While it is true that it would be difficult to picture Hurston in the stark social realist tradition that Wright led or the motive fiction that Locke advocated, as

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<sup>9</sup> Awkward (1990:11-15) and other recent scholars have devoted significant parts of their analyses of Hurston’s novel to pointing out those aspects of it that had remained unnoticed by earlier critics or had been utterly misread.

Johnson has remarked, it is also unfair to think that her occasional adoption of the “happy darkie” stereotype “exhaust[s] the representational strategies of her *writing*” (1993:131). In fact, if recent feminist and cultural approaches have proved anything, it is precisely that her work cannot be easily subsumed under convenient labels such as “the folklorist,” “the cultural nationalist” or “the sensualist.”<sup>10</sup> Contemporary black women writers such as Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker have insisted that if any feature characterizes Hurston’s fiction, that is its complex nature and its constant aspiration to represent human beings in all their diversity and multi-dimensionality (Walker 1984:85). Most critics would agree that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* marks the zenith of her writing career because in this novel she managed to keep a perfect balance between her various interests as a storyteller, an anthropologist, an autobiographer, and a social commentator.

No doubt, the passages of Hurston’s novel that most unnerved Wright and company were those in which the author tries to portray her protagonist’s awakening to different dimensions of herself, as well as those others in which she attempts to represent in imaginative ways her culture’s worldview, values, and mode of expression. Regarding the former, they frequently accused Hurston of a romantic streak and an excessive sensuality that, to them, was reminiscent of the most damaging examples of Negro “escapism” and double consciousness in literary expression. The widely-quoted paragraph in which Janie becomes aware for the first time of her sexuality would be a perfect instance of the high levels of lyricism that the novel reaches in moments when we gain glimpses of the protagonist’s inner development:

She was stretched on her back beneath a pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (1978:24)

Paradoxically, the pictures-in-words and original metaphors that many of her (mostly male) contemporaries found far-fetched and unpalatable were precisely the ones that feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s often retrieved in order to prove Hurston’s uncommon imaginative powers. What to earlier analysts might have seemed irreverent details –such as the heroine’s hairstyle or the shape of her

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<sup>10</sup> McKay (1990:56) shows in her article how superb Hurston was at accommodating and harmonizing diverse strands in her fiction so that, eventually, she offers a more complex and holistic vision of black identity.



horizons at different stages of the story— now became part and parcel of some of the most compelling meanings of the novel. More or less the same could be said about the author's efforts to represent authentically the popular forms of folk culture which, again, were sometimes read as examples of the simple-mindedness and comic relief that white readers would expect from African-American writers. Scenes such as the funeral of Matt Bonner's yellow mule and the conversation among the buzzards (chapter 6) or the "lying lessons" Janie listens to in the muck (chapter 14) have been recently reread as interesting examples of the ways in which folklore may empower one to deconstruct the exclusionary practices one has been a victim of.<sup>11</sup> Thus, neither the protagonist's indirect monologues and her reflections on the nature of her inner changes nor the instances of folktales and traditional jokes should be interpreted as just figurative asides only marginally related to the story. In Jones' opinion, "Oral tradition enters, complements and complicates character in the use of "storytelling" or reported scenes to reinforce dramatic ones" (1993:151). As will be seen below, the reservoir of images and tropes that Hurston employs in describing the hurricane is not only an affirmation of the uniqueness of her community's perceptions but also a way of fixing under a magnifying glass elements of reality that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

The historical accuracy with which Hurston depicts the arrival and the early effects of the tropical storm can be easily attested by comparing chapters 18 and 19 of the novel to the newspaper reports of the disaster and some of the historical reconstructions of the event that began to appear almost forty years after the fact.<sup>12</sup> One aspect that initially surprises the readers of Hurston's narrative is that some of the main characters do not seem to take very seriously the first warnings they get about the onset of the hurricane. However, we have learnt years later that while hurricane warnings were properly issued on the coastal line, inland the information had been much more confusing. Although a call had been made earlier in the day to evacuate the low ground near Lake Okeechobee, the storm did not arrive on schedule and many residents returned to their homes. Although Janie and her husband, Tea Cake, are advised by some Bahaman friends to abandon the area in Hurston's novel, Tea Cake prefers to show incredulity: "Dat ain't nothin'. You ain't seen the bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now. Man, de money's too good on

<sup>11</sup> According to Duplessis (1990:101), Hurston was constantly challenging the traditional boundaries of the art work by using the tactics of the African-American "deformation of mastery" which managed at once to preserve its folkloric roots and to present them now in a finished (integral) form. See also Manzanos and Benito's *Intercultural Mediations*, especially the first two chapters of the book.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Will's (1961) account of the storm and some of its demolishing consequences remained for decades the only book-length study of the 1928 disaster. See also Mykle's book (2006) on the subject, which includes numerous interviews with the survivors and descendants.

the muck. It's liable tuh fair off by tuhmorrer. Ah wouldn't leave if Ah wuz you" (230). Thus, they decide to stay in their house exchanging tall tales and throwing the dice with some friends. Still, at some point in the night, the world began to rattle and heavy mists started gathering in the west:

It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your cracks, shiver in your wet beds and wait on the mercy of the Lord. The bossman might have the thing stopped before the morning anyway. (Hurston 1978:234)

It is interesting to note that, although high winds –reaching 140 mph– had been crossing the region for hours, Hurston should immediately focus her attention on the lake, transforming it into a perverse monster. But, in fact, despite the heavy rain and violent winds, this huge mass of water was to prove the most fatal enemy because the south-blowing gale was going to cause a storm surge that overflowed and destroyed the dike (or seawall) surrounding the southern shore of the lake. By the time Janie and Tea Cake manage to gather their insurance papers and a few of their belongings, the water is almost up to their waists outside and they have to keep “dodging flying missiles [and] floating dangers”:

[...] And the lake. Under its multiplied roar could be heard a mighty sound of grinding rock and timber and a wail. They looked back. Saw people trying to run in raging waters and screaming when they found they couldn't. A huge barrier of the makings of the dike to which the cabins had been added was rolling and tumbling forward. (Hurston 1978:238-39)

Hurston describes the lake as “a tired mammoth” that came muttering and grumbling onward, destroying everything in its path. We know now that the resulting flood covered with water an area of hundreds of square kilometers and that in some places was over seven meters deep (Klinkenberg 1992). Telephone poles and power lines were downed by the winds and the water, and as we see in the novel, houses floated off their foundations and, in most cases, were dashed to pieces. As the passage above reveals, although Hurston is obviously interested in reproducing many of the objective details of the disaster, she also wants to keep record of the human responses to it, which range from sheer astonishment to heroic struggles for survival. Author Gloria Naylor has admitted in lectures and readings that her own depiction of a hurricane in her much-acclaimed novel *Mama Day* was deeply indebted to Hurston's vivid description of the Okeechobee cyclone in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While it is true that some of the scenes may seem a bit

melodramatic, they do not differ substantially from those reported by survivors on the days following the catastrophe:

Another man clung to a cypress tree on a tiny island. A tin roof of a building hung from the branches by electric wires and the wind swung it back and forth like a mighty ax. The man dared not move a step to his right lest this crushing blade split him open. He dared not step left for a large rattlesnake was stretched full length with his head in the wind. There was a strip of water between the island and the fill, and the man clung to the tree and cried for help. (Hurston 1978:244)

But if Hurston's depiction of the arrival and immediate reactions to the cataclysm are fraught with particulars that speak of her familiarity with these phenomena in various places around the Caribbean, nothing less should be said about her portrayal of the effects of the storm on the landscape and the population. One first observation to be made is that the author's take on this natural disaster does not differ much from that of historians and social scientists, since she also reads the hurricane as a terrible accident or the handiwork of God and, thus, completely "beyond human control and [...] outside of history, which explains why they [natural disasters] have been ignored as a theme in themselves" (Schwartz 2007:4). When the storm finally withdraws, the only explanation to be found is the kind of *deus ex machina* that reporters and historians so often refer to:

And then again Him-with-the-square-toes had gone back to his house. He stood once more and again in his high flat house without sides to it and without a roof with his soulless sword standing upright in his hand. His pale white horse had galloped the waters, and thundered over land. The time of dying was over. It was time to bury the dead. (Hurston 1978:249)

Kleinberg (2003:xiv) reminds us that "The 1928 storm killed more than the 1906 San Francisco earthquake (about 700), more than the sinking of the *Titanic* (1,503), and probably more than the estimated 3,000 who died on September 11, 2001." Yet because most of the victims –about 75%– were West Indian and African-American farmers, the cataclysm did not have even the tiniest public repercussion in comparison with any of those events. As is clearly seen in Hurston's novel, the days that followed the disaster were characterized by a hectic attempt to "clear away the wreckage." When Tea Cake finally decides to step out of their hiding place near Palm Beach, where he had sought refuge with Janie, the spectacle that he witnesses makes one's hair stand on end:

Bodies had to be searched out, carried to certain gathering places and buried. Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting in wreckage.

Trucks lined with drag kept rolling in from the 'Glades and other outlying parts, each with its load of twenty-five bodies. Some bodies fully dressed, some naked

and some in all degrees of dishevelment. Some bodies with calm faces and satisfied hands. Some dead with fighting faces and eyes flung wide open in wonder. Death had found them watching, trying to see beyond seeing. (Hurston 1978:252)

Again, we observe in these passages that the author is especially interested in how the storm and its aftermath affected the people who had to deal with those horrendous realities. However, her references to the recently-created Red Cross, the small armies of men –mostly black, again–, and the limited relief assistance that came from other parts of the State are evidence of how well-informed and precise Hurston wished to be in her rendition of the event. In this regard, it is not surprising that many of the scholarly books that have recently been published on the 1928 cataclysm should generally include her as one of the key sources academics consult when trying to get the right picture of what happened in the area south of lake Okeechobee during those few harrowing days.

### 3. GENDER, CLASS, AND RACE ISSUES REVISITED IN THE HURRICANE SECTION

In the above-mentioned article entitled by Schwartz, the author studies the 1928 hurricane as a revealing example of the widespread fear of natural disasters in the Caribbean area and the immense influence that “social, cultural, economic and political” differences in the contexts usually have on their effects (2007:4). According to this specialist, by looking into the distinct impact that storms of this kind have on different settings –in his analysis, Florida and Puerto Rico– we become aware of the ways in which local conditions usually affect and serve to contextualize the same natural disasters. Although Schwartz maintains that both societies showed “a desire to rebuild for the future” (2007:6), it is clear that differences of class and color made that aspiration much more difficult to materialize in the case of Florida. In fact, the Red Cross felt obliged to create a “Colored Advisory Committee” that had, among several other tasks, the object of verifying the “rumors” that the aid was not being equally apportioned among blacks and whites, and that the former were bearing the brunt of the early sanitation and reconstruction work.<sup>13</sup> As Schwartz and other scholars have maintained, the socio-

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<sup>13</sup> In the final chapters of his book, Kleinberg (2003:213-46) refers to the kind of tasks that African-Americans were forced to do right after the cyclone had swept by.

cultural and economic contexts where disasters take place are likely to determine the kind of impact they have on the local populations but, likewise, social dynamics among different human groups are bound to be inevitably altered by traumatic events of this kind. In this sense, it is not surprising to discover that ethnic conflicts, revolts, revolutions or political elections in the Caribbean region have frequently been preceded by one or several hurricanes. As my title suggests, then, these events tend to “unleash” attitudes in people that before had been hidden behind the veneer of social conformity and the weight of the power structures.

Hurston’s closing chapters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provide ample evidence that ethnicity, class, gender, and skin color are all markers that will define the characters’ reactions to the traumatic events and their perceptions of each other. In DePlussis’ words, “Race, class, and color within race rise in structural and figural importance in the latter part of the book, building toward, and away from, the hurricane” (1990:116). Not only that but, as will be noted, the very destiny of the protagonist and some of the secondary characters is very much determined by the position they occupy in a social hierarchy that becomes more and more apparent as the hurricane sweeps the land. Janie and Tea Cake are exposed to a blatant instance of this kind of prejudicial difference when, after dragging themselves quite a while in the fill, trying to get away from the chasing lake, they finally reach a more elevated area where they hope to rest: “But it was crowded. White people preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room. They could climb up one of its high sides and down the other, that was all. Miles further on, still no rest” (243). This scene graphically illustrates how much more slippery the social pyramid becomes in times of difficulty and how class and race determinants weigh heavily on the fate of characters. It is often assumed that it is mostly the dominant group that demarcates its rights and prerogatives regarding the other collectives, but Hurston is quite convinced that prejudiced attitudes are not observable only among the privileged. Repeatedly told by the Seminole Natives that they should abandon the low lands because signs of the hurricane’s arrival are becoming increasingly evident, this is how part of the black community responded to their advice:

Everybody was talking about it that night. But nobody was worried. The fire dance kept until nearly dawn. The next day, more Indians moved east, unhurried but steady. Still a blue sky and fair weather. Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians *must* be wrong. You couldn’t have a hurricane when you’re making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were. ((Hurston 1978:229; emphasis in original)

The second half of this paragraph quite clearly traces the train of Tea Cake’s thoughts, since, as the reader has come to realize in previous chapters, he has grown ostensibly materialistic and money-driven when things begin to roll their way on the muck. The onset of the hurricane will make Janie’s husband change in several

significant ways and major problems will result when his class-conscious and male-chauvinist attitudes –magnified by disease, it must be said– turn him into a rather unrecognizable lover: “Janie saw a changing look come in his face. Tea Cake was gone. Something else was looking out of his face” (Hurston 1978:269). DuPlessis praises again the great cunning with which Hurston places traps in front of some of the characters that are “built of the cross-currents of class and race, with a tricky admixture of gender and sexuality” (1990:114).

It would be short-sighted, though, not to see that Hurston’s criticism of how human collectivities are transformed by difficult circumstances falls primarily on those who used the disaster to enhance even more their feelings of superiority and supremacy. In this regard, the most telling incident comes up when the sullen armies of mostly black men recovering the corpses and digging mass graves are told by the guards to examine the victims and treat them differently depending on their skin color: “Got orders from headquarters. They makin’ coffins fuh de white folks. ’Tain’t nothin’ but cheap pine, but dat’s better’n nothin’. Don’t dump no white folks in the hole jus’ so” (Hurston 1978:235). Of course, the workers react rather abruptly to this discrimination, not so much because of what it signifies in terms of postmortem unequal treatment, but because of the precious time wasted in classifying the bodies and the impossibility of determining the color of many of them, given their state of deterioration:

The guards had a long conference over that. After a while they came back and told the men, “Look at they hair, when you cain’t tell no other way. And don’t lemme ketch none uh y’all dumpin’ white folks, and don’t be wastin’ the boxes on colored. They’s too hard tuh git holt of right now.”

“They’s mighty particular how dese dead folks goes to judgment,” Tea Cake observed to the man working next to him. “Look lak dey think God don’t know nothin’ ’bout de Jim Crow law.” (Hurston 1978:253-54)

The irony of Tea Cake’s comment remains highly resonant not only because it makes explicit the nonsense of the dominant group’s discriminatory practices but also because it points at fissures in the social system that, to date, have by no means been completely repaired. In an article tellingly entitled “Storm’s Path Remains Scarred after 75 Years,” Deborah Sharp claims that the effects of the Okeechobee Storm can still be seen not just in the South Florida landscape but, primarily, in the divisions between black and white. As this author remarks, even after all these decades, “resentment lingers over a storm recovery effort that was tainted by racism” (2003). However, it is important to underline that while the above-mentioned report by the Red Cross and another issued by the Florida Chamber of Commerce remained silent about those racist incidents –or even argued that complaints were being made by “chronic kickers”– Hurston’s vivid presentation of

these events shows some of the most unpalatable consequences of disasters, at least in regard to interracial relations.

To conclude, let me say a few words about the trial scene that brings Janie's narrative to an end and, in a way, gathers in a single space all the different social forces that we have seen at work during the novel. As DuPlessis sees it, it is this rather bizarre and diffuse episode that orchestrates an interaction between the different vectors of race and class, gender and sexuality that we see emerging in the novel, "show[ing] intense cross-purposes and mutual conflicts in their narrative impact" (1990:102). In the scene, Janie is tried for her unintended murder of Tea Cake, which the author takes great pains to present as committed in self-defense and when there was absolutely no other way out. Yet, due to reasons of class and gender, the black community will dramatically turn against her to the point that Janie fears that serious harm could be done to her if she were not in the hands of the law:

[...] They were all against her, she could see. So many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat her to death. She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts. They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they were allowed to use in the presence of the white folks. (DuPlessis 1990:275)

Paradoxically, the fact that the white men who are the jury and judges of the protagonist's case are strangers who take little interest in the internal dynamics of the black community proves to Janie's advantage, since they concentrate only on "what happened" and "whether things were done right or wrong" (DuPlessis 1990:274). Once more, Hurston shows here that all the groups are moved by some hidden agendas that are going to make them read the heroine's "crime" in a completely different light. The black community is too deeply injured and resentful after the catastrophe to let the opportunity of finding an appropriate scapegoat go. Their worst sexist and class-conscious attitudes surge up in a context in which their own disempowerment becomes too evident. But, predictably, the law will constrain the black male community when they begin to launch their anger at the heroine. Moreover, racial questions get interestingly intercrossed with gender when a group of white, middle-class women come to attend the trial and Janie feels convinced that *they*—and not the males, either black or white— would understand the romantic motives that pushed her to her dramatic decision. Mostly unaffected by the impact of the hurricane, these ladies could read her experience as one more of their stories with a "damsel in distress," in which a woman was forced to kill the person she most loved to put an end to his suffering. In a way, the trial scene proves particularly successful because, as Wolff (1993:228) has argued, it compels us to re-evaluate our own earlier readings of the protagonist's experiences and of those around her, and to see how they have been profoundly transformed by the psycho-

wounds left by the hurricane. Schwartz is correct when he underlines that it is only by looking comparatively across different settings and “internally across social and ethnic boundaries that the impact of hurricanes is best understood” (2007:4).

#### 4. A FEW CLOSING REMARKS

Alexander explains that the “[r]epresentation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story” (2004:12). Yet, we also know from experience that the symbolic process of putting together that narrative is by no means an easy task and, sometimes, it may take several generations to take root.<sup>14</sup> I have tried in this article to show how the contributions of creative writers, social activists, historians, and journalists are decisive in initiating and bringing to a successful end the construction of that framework of symbolic representation. No doubt both Zora Neale Hurston and Robert Hazard did their best to engage in the delicate work of giving significance to a traumatic event that, like many others, would well have been forgotten or have remained unknowable without their efforts. In their work as writer and social worker, respectively, one finds the urgent desire to see the psychological wounds caused by a collective disaster finally cured by both restoring memory and trying to lift the societal repression that still lives on in the culture.

I have used the last few chapters from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to show that this novel is usually read through reductive prisms that pay little attention –or none at all– to elements and structures that would allow us to see her work in a rather different light. While never denying the validity of approaches that highlight the heroine’s attempts through three marriages to form a self of her own or the delightful use that the author makes of storytelling conventions and dialect to give voice to her people’s concerns, it is also evident that she shows other socio-ideological interests in the hurricane section of the novel that also deserve our attention. For one thing, we have seen that in this section Hurston seems much more precise in her descriptions, as if she were trying to reproduce as accurately as possible both the onset and the early effects of the disaster. On the other hand, she seems especially engrossed in showing how unexpected shifts begin

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<sup>14</sup> See Horowitz, especially her Introduction to *Voicing the Void* (1997:1-32), in which she discusses the epistemological and ethical complications of representing traumatic experiences such as the Jewish Holocaust.



to take place in human relations and social structures as they had been represented in the novel. It has become clear in the final part of the article that issues of race, class, and gender need to be re-evaluated after we read the closing chapters of the novel, since the disaster will effect significant transformations in how groups and individuals see and interact with each other.

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