

Naturalism and the Florida Setting in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

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RÉSUMÉ

Zora Neale Hurston situe l'action de Their Eyes Were Watching God en Floride, seul décor pour elle possible. Hurston, dont l'enfance passée dans le centre de cet état informe le roman, fait vivre à sa protagoniste Janie, dans "l'épisode du poirier," une expérience de l'exubérance de la nature qui déterminera sa vision du mariage et le cours de sa vie. Janie quittera la région du panhandle (nord ouest de l'état) et les violences héritées de l'esclavage et de Jim Crow pour une liberté relative dans la péninsule de cet état autrefois connecté à l'Afrique, et dont les multiples cours d'eau fournissent comme une feuille de route à la protagoniste.

Afin de réaliser son rêve et revivre cette union avec la nature, Janie traversera une Floride parcourue de canaux et rivières en suivant des hommes attirés par l'horizon. Elle fuira ainsi la région du panhandle et un premier mariage arrangé pour suivre son deuxième mari vers les lacs du centre de la Floride, avant d'accompagner son troisième époux, moins violent, le long des fleuves St John et Kissimmee. Elle retournera finalement seule à Eatonville, le long de la lagune de l'Indian River, enfin libérée de souvenirs et de maris oppressifs.

Readers may wonder, upon finishing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,¹ why Zora Neale Hurston has her protagonist, Janie, return to Eatonville, Florida, to live in the house she shared for twenty years with an abusive husband. There were destinations Janie could have chosen that, to some readers, would have been just as logical, if not more so, than Eatonville. She might have decided to go back to "West Florida," the panhandle.² After finally realizing her dream of marriage, Janie might have forgiven her grandmother, Nanny, for arranging her first marriage, and reversed her decision not to tend Nanny's grave (89). Besides, the panhandle was the site of Janie's transcendent pear tree experience (10-11), a place she may have wished to revisit since it defined her dream of marriage, which determined the course of her life. Janie may have also felt compelled to stay in south Florida, where she buried Tea Cake (189), her final husband, through whom she approached her pear tree dream.

Yet another option, reflecting Janie's newly acquired sense of self, would have been for Hurston to place Janie somewhere entirely new, outside of Florida. In fact, Hazel Carby takes issue with Hurston for ignoring northern migration and privileging Florida in order to represent

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper, 2006). Parenthetical page references are to this text.

² Ann R. Morris, and Margaret M. Dunn, "Flora and Fauna in Hurston's Florida Novels," *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991) 3.

“a cultural form that is disappearing.”³ But Florida, I’ll argue, is the only place the novel could have been set.

When crafting her novel, Hurston had the state’s unique geography in mind, particularly the peninsular region. In central and southern Florida, Hurston found a setting that was close enough to the violence of slavery to give Janie a place (the Florida panhandle) from which to flee, but far enough from that violence (due to its wilderness and resulting low population) to give Janie a clean slate, away from the sites of past violence done to her grandmother and mother. Both Janie’s mother and Janie were conceived in white rape during slavery and Jim Crow, respectively. Because of unforgiving natural conditions, such as dense wilderness, insects, and heat, peninsular Florida remained largely unpopulated by humans until the mid-twentieth century, and was thus largely spared the violence rampant in neighboring states and the Florida panhandle. By escaping to the Florida peninsula, Janie also escapes this violent legacy.

In addition to giving Janie a fresh start, the geography of central and southern Florida, specifically the state’s waterways, provided Hurston a blueprint for the characters’ movements. Hurston opens the novel with a deterministic declaration that men seek horizons and women do what they must to follow their dreams. Thus, in following horizon-seeking men to lakes and rivers across the Florida peninsula, Janie not only escapes the violent legacy of the panhandle, but also realizes her dream of marriage, as presented to her under the pear tree. Her escape from the panhandle, and from her arranged marriage, begins when she follows her second husband to lake-splattered central Florida. Her journey continues when she follows her third husband up the north-flowing St. Johns River, then down the south-flowing Kissimmee River. Finally, Janie travels alone up (and down, in dreams) the Indian River Lagoon back to Eatonville. There, readers presume Janie will live the rest of her life in her own house – her painful memories with Jody replaced by pleasant ones with Tea Cake.⁴ Florida is the only place that could afford such geography, both in terms of the state’s relation to other Southern states and in terms of its own topographical features, namely waterways.

Before examining the geography of Florida, it is important to consider how Hurston’s milieu – Hurston grew up in Florida’s verdant landscape as she did in Eatonville – led to her reverence of the natural world in life and writing. Scott Hicks details the environmental abundance Hurston encountered in her youth in Florida and concludes, “Her memories of childhood fixate on sublime transactions between human and wild.”⁵ Such transactions, however, were possible only because the Eatonville of Hurston’s youth – as positioned in central Florida – was spared the widespread, systematic violence of the larger South, and because she grew up *when* she did, before Florida’s explosive population growth destroyed the state’s unique landscape and brought its own violence.

The flora and fauna surrounding Hurston in her youth intrigued and led her to adopt an ecological disposition. Hicks explains:

[Hurston] sees herself not as a settler, colonist, or pioneer, someone who sees wilderness as ungodly or dangerous or nature as separate, divisible, and thus conquerable. Instead,

³ Hazel V. Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 79.

⁴ As the novel’s deterministic opening lines state, “women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (1).

⁵ Scott Hicks, “Zora Neale Hurston: Environmentalist in Southern Literature,” *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (Santa Barbara, USA: Praeger, 2010) 114.

she sees herself as one of many parts in a complex community, as someone who listens to and learns from all living things [...] she naturalizes the human: disappearing in the wild oats, she becomes another wisp; eating the stalks, she makes the wild landscape part of her bones, marrow, and muscle.⁶

Hicks recognizes Hurston's embrace of ecology, the "complex community" of an interdependent natural world, which Hurston dramatizes in her description of the exuberant concert of nature Janie experiences under the pear tree. Janie is not the principal in the scene; she is not "settler, colonist, or pioneer," but rather a supporting actor, "one of many parts." She does not subscribe to anthropocentrism, seeing "nature as separate, divisible, and thus conquerable."⁷ Neither do Janie's actions reinforce divisions within society – systems based on gender, class and race – that oppress, or "conquer," Janie.⁸ In doing what she must to realize her dream, Janie resists oppressive divisions both within society and between society and nature. Instead, Janie "becomes another wisp;" she hears "the words of the trees and the wind" and wishes seeds soft landings (25).

Accepting the status quo in life and marriage is not an option for Janie after she experiences transcendence under the pear tree. The pivotal moment, what screenwriters call the "inciting incident," determines the course of her life. The concert of life and sensation, a demonstration of ecology, defines Janie's expectations of marriage. After such an exhibition, she becomes incapable of accepting her arranged marriage to Logan and her consequently lowered status – from a relatively carefree adolescent to a wife who must serve her husband. Instead, Janie follows her dream (which, we'll later see, is the only course she, as a woman in this novel, could take).

Janie's experience under the pear tree informs her decisions henceforth.⁹ It is the moment against which all points in Janie's character arc are measured – from the highs with Tea Cake to

⁶ Hicks 115-16, citing Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

⁷ Knapp misidentifies Hurston's stance when he suggests she saw the need to tame nature in order to benefit from it. Citing *O Pioneers!* he says: "If one can change the land, corral it, tame it, and make it serve one's needs, it provides transcendence. [...] Hurston, too, understands and accepts Cather's basic point about land's transcendent value." Knapp also quotes *The Odyssey* and the Bible in his discussion of home, but omits any multicultural sources that influenced Hurston. See Steven Knapp, "Zora Neale Hurston: Finding the Meaning of Home in a Florida Author's Life," *Florida Studies: Proceedings of the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Florida College English Association*, ed. Claudia Slate and Keith Huneycutt (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 52-53.

⁸ Ondieki argues that Janie fights dual oppressions, as wife and laborer, from both Logan and Jody in the novel, though stops short of asserting Hurston rejects white supremacy, which I believe she does. In the muck, Janie rejects her privileges too: both her class status when she decides to work in the fields (133), and her lighter complexion (resulting from two generations of white rape) in conversation with bigoted Mrs. Turner (141). Rejecting societal oppressions and privileges aligns Janie with the ecology she found under the pear tree. See Benjamin Orina Ondieki, *The Denunciation of Patriarchy and Capitalism in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*, MA thesis, Wichita State University, 2008, 11, Web. 4 July 2014 < <http://hdl.handle.net/10057/2058> >.

⁹ Grewal says the experience provided Janie a "blueprint for the soul's quest" and that Hurston's evocation of flutes signifies an Eastern belief in the ability to recall the divine; see Gurleen Grewel, "Beholding 'A Great Tree in Leaf': Eros, Nature, and the Visionary in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (Santa Barbara, USA: Praeger, 2010) 105-06. Bealer agrees that the vision was more than sexual, but says the scene represents a moment of unbridled pleasure that psychologists say all people experience in infancy and which all strive to recreate. See Tracy L. Bealer, "'The Kiss of Memory': The Problem of Love in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American Review* 43 (2009) 312-13. McKnight suggests that the pear tree is Janie's object of nostalgia, which becomes the reference point to which she returns throughout her life, reevaluating the experience through "her sensitivity and her acquisitiveness regarding

the lows with Logan and Jody. Through Hurston's use of natural imagery, readers can detect whether Janie and each of her three husbands are compatible based on that husband's relationship with nature. The mere thought of Logan desecrates Janie's pear tree image (14), and his property is a "lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been" (21-22). Janie knows from the start that Jody does "not represent blooming trees" (29), but has no way of knowing that he will forbid her play (54) and abuse her physically and verbally. In contrast with her first two husbands, Tea Cake encourages Janie's outdoor recreation, both around Eatonville (96-110) and in the Everglades muck (131, 146). Even his name, Vergible Woods, signals to readers that he is a better match for Janie than her previous husbands. Even on paper, their personalities aside, Janie could never be compatible with Logan, a land-owning, nature-taming farmer; or Jody, a land-owning, nature-destroying developer.

At one point, for example, Jody seeks the perfect post for Eatonville's first streetlight and displays his cavalier attitude: "He sent men out to the swamp to cut the finest and straightest cypress post they could find, and kept sending them back to hunt another one until they found one that pleased him" (44). That Jody will destroy nature in order to boost his reputation, to "improve" Eatonville, illustrates to readers how incompatible he and Janie are. Such destruction forces wildlife to seek other shelter, killing those unable to do so. To someone like Janie, who values all living things, Jody's actions – designed to impress, and oppress, the community of Eatonville that Jody mostly owned – would be inexcusable.

Hurston saw Florida's ever-increasing population as the biggest threat to its wildlife. *That it was already disappearing*, what Carby says in regards to the folklife Hurston portrays in *Their Eyes*, can also be said of the natural world she depicts in the novel. As development increased, more wild areas were cleared of the dense vegetation that kept the peninsula sparsely populated well into the twentieth century, meaning even more areas became accessible to develop, which in turn exacerbated the natural destruction. In the novel Hurston depicts the residential growth she encountered in life: throughout Janie and Jody's twenty-year marriage, the town of Eatonville, just north of Orlando, grows larger. Mere decades before Orlando would become an international travel destination, Jody is able to "buy in big" during Eatonville's infancy and become a town founder (28). At a time when the United States had already expanded to California, peninsular Florida remained largely untouched by non-native Americans. As we will see, the peninsula's lower population meant fewer violent acts were committed there than in other parts of the South.

As a child, Hurston would sit in her Eatonville front yard and greet tourists who passed through town. She calls herself "the first 'welcome-to-our-state' Floridian" and says the guests gave her coins.¹⁰ The tourists Hurston encountered, relatively affluent to be able to travel, likely had little regard for the subtle beauty of the landscape they passed through only temporarily. Unlike conventionally beautiful places with dramatic mountain views, Florida is a study in subtlety,¹¹ and has thus been especially prone to destruction. Those who "improve" the land, historically rich white men, value anthropocentric utility over ecology or preservation. Hurston's intersectional lens, revealing the complex convergence of gender, race, and class, is perhaps

nature." See Maureen McKnight, "Discerning Nostalgia in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Quarterly* 44.4 (2007) 92.

¹⁰ This scene reveals Hurston's recognition of Florida's magnetism to both residents and visitors, and also her lifelong reliance on white patronage; see Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *The Literature of the American South*, Norton Anthology, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Norton, 1998) 416.

¹¹ Michael Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York: Simon, 2006) 13.

inaccessible to readers of insufficiently diverse literature.¹² Through her use of natural imagery, Hurston conveys the complexities of society and advocates for the preservation of Florida's disappearing landscape. By giving Janie such a strong connection to the natural world, Hurston asks readers who might come to Florida to tread lightly.

Despite the refuge wilderness can provide, it can also engender painful memories and associations in both black and white Southerners alike. Ursula Heise describes African American viewpoints regarding sites of past violence through an ecocritical lens, reexamining the canonical assumption that all readers share a pastoral longing for the natural world: "African American authors tend to associate rural life and sometimes even wild places with memories of slavery and persecution rather than with peaceful refuge."¹³ Readers can easily see how Janie, upon learning her grandmother and mother were raped by white men who faced little, if any, chance of prosecution in West Florida, would want to flee the region. Even white Southerners can have painful memories of the South. Joan Didion found, in her exploration of her Californian identity, that many of the travelers who endured the Oregon Trail were from the South – and most were white.¹⁴ Didion interviewed many of these former Southerners and found that "in the South they remained convinced that they had bloodied their land with history."¹⁵ As we can see, negative associations with past violence become powerful motivation to flee a place, whether for north-going blacks, west-going whites, or Janie in *Their Eyes*.

Slavery was not as widespread in Florida as in other Southern states because, among other reasons, the Spanish controlled the Florida territory for nearly 300 years and granted freedom to runaway slaves who converted to Catholicism.¹⁶ In addition, Native Americans living in Florida offered refuge to runaway slaves. But beginning in 1821, when Florida became a state, the panhandle began to resemble other Southern states as the area's participation in the plantation economy increased. In 1775, there were 3,000 slaves in Florida;¹⁷ by 1845, there were 63,000 slaves.¹⁸ In central and southern Florida, though, the population remained low, and slavery did not expand with such force into the peninsula.

While Hurston celebrated nature in life and fiction, her positive associations with the natural world did not preclude her harboring negative associations with sites of past violence. Knapp says that Hurston associated the Alabama of her birth with slavery.¹⁹ He cites her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a "barely fictionalized account of her parents' marriage,"²⁰ which suggests

¹² While Hurston's celebration of the natural world is an aspect of her work many readers perceive, her work is largely not included in the canon of nature writing. To account for this omission, Hicks points to that very intersectional lens – Hurston's position as an African American, a woman, and a (poor) Southerner. The South has been traditionally overlooked in the canon of works by Muir and Thoreau, who extol the West and New England respectively. Both African Americans and women supposedly have aversions to the natural world because they have been historically exploited in similar ways – abused by the same systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. See Hicks 113-14.

¹³ Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 508. Heise cites the work of scholars Wallace and Armbruster, who examine the work of Tony Morrison.

¹⁴ Able to travel freely in the nineteenth century, these Southerners were largely, if not all, white.

¹⁵ Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York: Vintage, 2003) 71.

¹⁶ Florida Dept. of State, "Florida's Role in the Civil War, Before 1861: Florida's Journey into Civil War, Slavery in Florida Before 1821," *Florida Memory* 2012, Division of Library and Information Services, Web. 18 July 2013 <<http://www.floridamemory.com/exhibits/civilwar/before1861/>>.

¹⁷ Florida Dept. of State "Slavery in Florida Before 1821.

¹⁸ "Florida's Role in the Civil War: 'Supplier of the Confederacy,'" *Exploring Florida* 2009, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, Web. 18 July 2013 <http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/cvl_war/cvl_war1.htm>.

¹⁹ Knapp 51.

²⁰ Morris and Dunn 3.

that the associations of the novel represent how Hurston felt. Her negative associations with the neighboring Florida panhandle work their way into *Their Eyes*. In revealing her motivation for arranging Janie's first marriage, Nanny, a former slave, imparts her own violent past as well as the violence done to Janie's mother that resulted in Janie's birth (16-19). Immediately after giving birth to Janie's mother, Nanny hid in the swamp, which teemed with frightening wildlife. Only when Nanny heard the gunfire of Union troops and saw their ships could she breathe with some level of ease.

Hurston perhaps attempts to convey her complex views, both loving and fearing nature, through Janie's decision to have Tea Cake chop down "that tree she never did like by the dining room window" (110). While this action might perplex readers who note Janie's otherwise persistent admiration of trees, the action is not surprising to readers who sense that the tree reminded Janie of Jody and the violence he embodied. Therefore, Hurston does not categorically celebrate the South or even Florida. Instead, her reverence extends only to the peninsula.

Rather than having negative associations of slavery, the Florida peninsula might actually have positive connections with Africa due to its geological history. Michael Grunwald says that North America dragged Florida across the Atlantic when Pangaea split 200 million years ago.²¹ He elaborates: "Geologists have found rock patterns below Senegal and Sierra Leone that match rock patterns below Florida like the two sides of a ripped dollar bill."²² Not only does Florida land have geological origins in Africa, but some Florida residents – those in Hurston's Eatonville, according to Betty Kuyk – have cultural origins in Africa as well.

Kuyk cites landowning traditions, specifically in the region from which many slaves were stolen, in an attempt to address Janie's return to Eatonville. Janie, a town founder and longtime store laborer, built an inheritance there that she did not forgo when she left Eatonville since she came back.²³ Hurston perhaps intuited the past connection between Florida and Africa, which could explain her associations of waterways with hope. Growing up in the all black community of Eatonville in central Florida, Hurston was surrounded by lakes, near rivers that do not run through slave states, and close to the Atlantic. One might even imagine that perhaps as a child Hurston stood on the beach and tried to see the African shore, sensing its existence from across the ocean. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston establishes a clear connection between certain waterways and opportunity.

Unlike the waterways in peninsular Florida that surrounded Hurston in her youth, the waterways in the Florida panhandle originate in, and run through, slave states. The Suwannee River, for example, begins in Georgia swampland – perhaps the same swamp where Nanny hid to escape the slave master who raped her and the mistress who wanted to kill her. The Suwannee then runs through Florida panhandle woods – possibly the same woods in which a white teacher raped Janie's mother. In contrast, Janie travels with her husbands along peninsular waterways that originate in, and travel through, land that largely lacks these violent associations. Thus, to Hurston, waterways represented opportunity or lack thereof, especially for people of color. Freedom from painful memories, I believe, is a requisite for the setting of a novel that places such importance on opportunity.

²¹ Grunwald 15.

²² Grunwald 374.

²³ Betty Kuyk, "From Coon Hide to Mink Skin: Understanding an Afro-American 'Sense of Place' through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *A Rainbow Round Her Shoulders: The Zora Neale Hurston Symposium Papers*, ed. Ruthe T. Sheffey (Baltimore: Morgan State University Press, 1982) 83-86.

In the novel, Janie uses waterways, and the men travelling them, to escape a legacy of violence and to follow her dream. While Janie dreams of the marriage she witnessed under the pear tree, rooted in ecology, Jody dreams of being wealthy. In following Jody from the “lonesome place like a stump” in the violent panhandle to lake-speckled central Florida, Janie acts to realize her dream. Hurston presents these actions not as pained decisions but as choices predetermined by the characters’ genders. She opens *Their Eyes* with the lines:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. (1)

Janie abandons her first husband, Logan, in the Florida panhandle to join Jody in high lakes of central Florida surrounding Eatonville. Jody’s dreams “come in with the tide,” though he becomes oppressive not only to Eatonville collectively – as sole employer and landlord – but to Janie as well. Janie and Jody’s marriage of twenty years ends with his death, after which Janie meets Tea Cake. With him, in life and later memory, Janie follows the courses of two rivers and a lagoon across the Florida peninsula.

The opening pronouncement regarding men is likely the conclusion Janie reached on her walk back to Eatonville. Every mile she traveled stemmed from her efforts to realize her pear tree dream and to escape painful memories. Thus, Janie-as-narrator declares: “Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly” (1). It is interesting that Hurston does not employ natural imagery in this description as she does with Janie’s generalization of men since, conventionally, women are compared to nature. This suggests that Hurston intended to distance Janie, in a sign of enlightenment, from others who make such comparisons. Nanny, for example, says, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). In following her dreams, Janie not only rejects Nanny’s claim, but the hierarchy behind it as well.

Having defined the differences between men and women, Hurston characterizes the residents of Eatonville, who are black and working-class. The position of the sun, whether during or after working hours, determines how empowered these residents feel: “These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human” (1). It is significant that, during daylight hours, the narrator-as-Janie calls the workers “skins,” and that only in the evening do the workers begin to feel human.²⁴ This suggests that dehumanization, which slave masters employed to control their “property,” is still used by capitalist employers. The “bossman” in much of the novel is Jody, who fashions himself after the white men he worked for in Georgia (27-28). While Hurston’s critique of race is more nuanced than those of gender and class, probably owing to her lifelong reliance on white patronage, the implicit critique remains. The fact that Janie thought she was white until she was six years old, when she saw a photograph of herself and the white family she lived with (9), illustrates that Janie sees

²⁴ Ondieki claims: “Tea Cake was an oppressive man, and whether his oppression was different and not as extreme as Logan’s or Jody’s is immaterial.” But it’s significant that Janie considers Tea Cake “the son of Evening Sun” (189). To Janie, Tea Cake represents the state in which oppressed people are most free, and through knowing him, she gains freedom. See Ondieki 33.

differences in skin color as arbitrary and implicitly does not approve of the uneven power distribution that results from such differences. Thus, Hurston constructs societal distinctions in gender, race, and class to have Janie reject each of the systems of oppression resulting from these divisions, which are incompatible with the ecological dream she experienced under the pear tree.

To escape the oppressive forces of the Florida panhandle, and doing what she must to realize her dream, Janie follows horizon-seeking men to the high lakes of central Florida surrounding Eatonville, up the St. Johns River to Jacksonville, and down the Kissimmee River to Belle Glade. Following the hurricane, Tea Cake's "dreams mocked to death by Time," Janie walks the length of the Indian River Lagoon from West Palm Beach, where Tea Cake has been buried, back to Eatonville in central Florida.

When Janie decides to leave Logan's farm in the Florida panhandle to follow Jody, Jody's ambition is evident (27). While his dreams lead to the lakes surrounding Eatonville, these waterways are almost incidental in terms of Hurston's connection between water and opportunity. The lakes are barely mentioned in the text until Tea Cake takes Janie to fish in them after Jody's death (102). When they are mentioned during Jody's life, they are references to places Jody forbids Janie from enjoying. Because Jody comes to power so fast – his dreams quickly "come in with the tide" – he does not have to "sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing," as Tea Cake does.

The rivers Janie and Tea Cake travel, therefore, deserve the most consideration. The source of the first river, the St. Johns, is about one hundred miles southeast of Eatonville. After Janie and Tea Cake get married, they follow the St. Johns River to its mouth in Jacksonville. However, Jacksonville doesn't prove to be a good match for Janie and Tea Cake because it is too close to the violence of slavery and, as a city, disconnects Janie from the natural world: "It was too big to be warm, let alone to need someone like her" (118). Janie's pear tree dream could never be realized, or even approached, in such a place.

From the mouth of one river in Jacksonville, Janie and Tea Cake head to the mouth (of sorts) of a second. The Kissimmee River begins fifty miles south of Eatonville and flows to Lake Okeechobee. Before the lake was diked, water flowed freely over its southern shore and into the Everglades. There, Florida's subtle beauty is on full display; the elevation so remarkably flat: "A raindrop that fell in its headwaters in central Florida could have taken an entire year to dribble down to its estuaries at the tip of the peninsula."²⁵ The unique hydrology of the Kissimmee River and the Everglades suggests, and delivers, an abundance of opportunity for Janie and Tea Cake. They settle in Belle Glade, fertile farmland along Lake Okeechobee's southern shore (128).²⁶

Before cataloguing various types of vegetation, both crops and weeds, that Janie saw, the narrator declares: "To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new" (129). It is interesting that the narrator calls Janie's eyes strange, and not the vegetation; and yet, that same voice calls the Native Americans Janie saw "wild." This suggests that Janie, with whom the third person narrator is intimate, privileges the natural world over even mankind. This display of Janie's anti-anthropocentric values as an adult is a manifestation of her ecological dream in

²⁵ Grunwald 18.

²⁶ The destruction of the Everglades is a testimony to its subtlety. Before Belle Glade was farmland, a custard apple forest bordered the lake's southern shore. According to Grunwald: "in 1913, the [...] curator of the New York Botanical Garden, found the area 'picturesque beyond description [...] one of the most beautiful spots [he] had seen,'" but "when [he] returned a few years later, he found that 'the whole region is a waste.' He snapped photos of a desolate landscape littered with twisted trunks and branches." To many people, though, such actions were considered "improvements." See Grunwald 168-69.

youth. If Janie marveled at the abundance of life under the pear tree, the abundance of life in the Everglades must have seemed surreal. It was as close to her original vision as she had ever come.

The Everglades is exceptionally biologically diverse because it sits at the same latitude as the Sahara, yet is surrounded by water: “This combination of abundant sunlight and abundant rain was the ultimate recipe for abundant life.”²⁷ Thus the Everglades, situated at the southern end of the Florida peninsula, host scores of ecological anomalies:

Temperate species from the north, including hawks, raccoons, oaks, bobcats, and white-tailed deer, joined tropical species from south, including roseate spoonbills that flew in, loggerhead turtles that swam in, tree snails that floated in on branches, mahoganies whose seeds blew in during storms, and cocoplums whose seeds were dropped by birds. Gators came down from the north; crocs came up from the south. They all came together in the Everglades – and nowhere else.²⁸

Like the bobcats and cocoplums, Janie, Tea Cake, and workers “from east, west, north and south,” converge in the muck to “work all day for money, fight all night for love” (131).

But while the damp, fertile Everglades muck brings economic gains to the workers (most, like Janie and Tea Cake, of color), the landowners reap the greatest economic benefit. The white bosses live on high ground; the workers in low-lying areas. When the same ingredients that together make life in the Everglades so abundant combine to form a hurricane, workers pay the highest price. After Janie buries Tea Cake in West Palm Beach, she heads alone towards Eatonville.

Temporally, this trek occurs just before the start of the novel. While Hurston does not specify the exact course Janie takes, Hurston likely imagined Janie walking parallel to, if not along the shore of, the final waterway in eastern Florida: the Indian River Lagoon. This intracoastal waterway extends from West Palm Beach north to New Smyrna Beach, and is the most ecologically diverse estuary in North America.²⁹ Since Janie leaves south Florida from the coast, where she buries Tea Cake, it would make sense for her to walk along the relatively high ground along the Indian River, rather than trudge through the inland, low-lying areas that comprise the sources and floodplains of both the St. Johns and Kissimmee Rivers.

Hurston would have imagined Janie walking along the Indian River, though, for more than practical reasons. She lived near the waterway in Eau Gallie in 1929, and that year wrote to Langston Hughes: “I have a chance to buy a beautiful tract of land slap on the Indian river, which as you probably know, passes for the most beautiful river in the world.”³⁰ She proposed they build a “Negro art colony” there and assured him the neighboring whites would not threaten them. In 1951, Hurston returned to Eau Gallie,³¹ where she wrote, “Somehow, this one spot on

²⁷ Grunwald 16.

²⁸ Grunwald 17.

²⁹ US EPA, *Determining an Estuary's Economic Value*, 2009, National Estuary Program, Web. 13 July 2014 <http://water.epa.gov/type/oceb/nep/upload/2009_05_28_estuaries_inaction_Efficient_IndianRiver.pdf>.

³⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, “To Langston Hughes,” 31 May 1929, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002) 144.

³¹ Florida’s growing population negatively impacted not only flora and fauna, but also minority populations as areas became gentrified. In 1951, Hurston was only able to move back to the same Eau Gallie house in which she had lived in 1929, then in a black neighborhood, because she had the support of Eau Gallie’s white mayor. As knowledge of Florida’s appeal circulated, white residents moved into neighborhoods such as Hurston’s in Eau

earth feels like home to me.”³² It makes sense that Janie’s course home to Eatonville would include a waterway that Hurston personally considered both home and a source of opportunity.

Hurston used waterways to represent freedom in other works as well. *Their Eyes* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, for example, have “uncannily” similar endings:

Arvay’s transubstantiation into water parallels Janie *Starks*’s transubstantiation into timber as Janie *Woods*, while *Seraph*’s privileging of water reinvokes Nanny’s dream of a black man in power: ‘Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean.’ (14)³³

The protagonists’ destination in *Seraph* is New Smyrna Beach, the northern end of a “beautiful inland waterway.”³⁴ This waterway, as we have seen, is the Indian River Lagoon; its southern end is where Janie began her return walk home to Eatonville. Thus, Hurston chose the extremities of the same waterway to represent freedom in two different novels.

Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship, like the St. Johns and Kissimmee Rivers, began in central Florida. Like those rivers, their time together encompassed the entire length of Florida, though nearly none of the state’s width. Given the differences between the Florida panhandle and the peninsular regions of the state, namely the relative lack of violence committed in the latter, it is reasonable to conclude that Hurston viewed the panhandle as *Florida* in name only.

Yet not every reader is privy to the history and particularities of Florida geography. The subtleties and significance of some of Hurston’s imagery and settings, therefore, may not be accessible to everyone. For example, one scholar says, “the dark woods [...] [are] the site of both the fatal hurricane at the Everglades and the rape and disappearance of [Janie’s] barely known mother.”³⁵ While the vegetation of the Everglades is certainly dense, it is not like the woods of the Florida panhandle. I would not suggest that an extensive knowledge of Florida geography is a requisite to fully appreciate the novel, just that a dimension may be lost without that background. It may be that, as Janie says, “You got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there” (192).

In writing *Their Eyes*, Hurston makes a protest to slow, if not halt, the destruction of the peninsula that meant so much to her. With its less violent history, when compared to other Southern states, and unique waterways that inspired Hurston, Florida is the only place in which the novel could have been set. Through Hurston’s imagery and characterizations, readers see individuals and society reflected in the same landscape through which Janie traverses and in which Hurston grew up. In the distance across Florida Janie travels, she follows horizon-seeking men, doing what she must to realize her ecological dream. In doing so, she rejects oppressive hierarchies among humans and between humans and nature. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, readers sense the depth of Zora Neale Hurston’s own reverence for the natural world. She imparts in readers an appreciation for nature – intended, most likely, to extend beyond Florida.

Gallie, which raised rents and displaced black residents; see Florida Historical Society, “Panel 4,” *Exhibits, Zora Neale Hurston in Brevard County*, 2012, Web. 26 June 2013 <<https://myfloridahistory.org/educational-resources/exhibits>>.

³² FHS “Panel 1.”

³³ Hicks 125.

³⁴ Morris and Dunn 5.

³⁵ Grewal 110.