

OCTOBER

VOL. 98

PART 4

‘DIS AIN’T GIMME, FLORIDA’: ZORA NEALE
HURSTON’S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

Who owns Zora Neale Hurston? That was the question asked in 1990 by Michele Wallace, in an analysis of the ways in which Hurston has been appropriated by later scholars. Wallace’s pungent comparison of later critics to so many ‘groupies descending on Elvis Presley’s estate’¹ in their haste to turn Hurston to their own purposes strikes a cautionary note for any subsequent writer. As she notes, the risk of canonization is that the work will be misused to derail the future of black women in literature and literary criticism. For Wallace, Harold Bloom’s introduction to his *Modern Critical Views* anthology of 1986 is a case in point. Bloom prefaces this collection of African Americanist and feminist essays with an introduction which essentially erases them, in which, ignoring race almost entirely, he concentrates on the novel as a story of sexual repression, compares Hurston’s protagonist successively to Richardson’s Clarissa, Dreiser’s Carrie, Lawrence’s Ursula, and finally moves from character to author to propose Hurston as the Wife of Bath. Writing anything further about Hurston must strike one as a dubious proposition, for if any one novel has been commodified and fully incorporated into the new canon of American literature, it is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As Hazel Carby argues,² the boom in Hurston studies which has produced a snowstorm of books, papers, and dissertations, ever since Alice Walker rediscovered her in the 1970s, is the result of a variety of factors: MLA support, the book trade, special courses on women’s and on black writing, Afrocentric strategies of analysis, nostalgia for happy rural blacks (as opposed to inner-city violence), political activism of different types, and the quest for literary ancestors. Gloria Cronin observes, however, that amidst all this variety of motive, the criticism has none the less been largely dominated by one type of essay—reading the novel as a feminist triumph tale, unshaded by any less than affirmative vision of the heroine. ‘Readings of the book have been overdetermined by feminist, multi-cultural and Africanist political imperatives of the last twenty years.’³

What has escaped attention in this debate is the degree to which Hurston herself focused on these very questions of ownership and appropriation in *Their*

The initial version of this paper was given as part of a round-table discussion of Hurston at the American Literature Association Conference in San Diego in 1998. I am grateful to Professor Gloria Cronin for inviting me to participate, and for her enormously helpful comments on Hurston.

¹ ‘Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston? Critics Carve Up the Legend’, in her *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), pp. 172–87 (p. 174). Wallace refers to *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986).

² ‘The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston’, in *New Essays on ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’*, ed. by Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 71–94.

³ ‘*Their Eyes Were Watching God*’, unpublished paper, ALA Conference, San Diego, May 1998, p. 4.

Eyes Were Watching God, in the backbone structure and plot of her novel, in the characterization of the heroine's three lovers, in the frame tale, and in such incidents as the 'mule story', Teacake's gambling activities, and the rabid dog. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents a creative appropriation, by a black woman, of an anthropological discourse first analysed by a white Jewish male, Franz Boas, and associated with a Native American people—the discourse of gift exchange. Hurston studied with Boas, one of her principal mentors, whose major work *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*⁴ concerned Kwakiutl 'potlatch', a form of gift exchange which became famous as the exemplification of the theory of conspicuous consumption advanced by Thorstein Veblen. The Kwakiutl had a variety of gift-giving ceremonies involving the giving away of quantities of possessions or their wilful destruction. A man might destroy or disperse all his worldly goods in an attempt to maintain status, or to eclipse a rival. While in theory the gift was spontaneous, in practice it was based on political or economic self-interest: the gift of property implies an obligation on the recipient—which, if not fulfilled, results in loss of face. The 'Indian giver' gives in order to establish credit, since the recipient must return the gift at a future time, with interest. The destroyer forces his rivals to destroy in their turn. As a cultural form, therefore, potlatch prevents any one individual from monopolizing material goods, prevents the build-up of economic surpluses, and subtly maintains social order. Potlatch is none the less fundamentally aggressive (described by the Kwakiutl as 'fighting with property'). Originally potlatch meant 'to nourish' or 'to consume', and it has been seen as a sublimation of cannibal rites.⁵

Gift exchange as aggression is of course a cultural phenomenon as old as the Trojan War. The idea of the fatal gift (e.g. the Rheingold, Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Cut-Glass Bowl') survives even in etymology. As Marcel Mauss noted, the semantic history of the German word 'Gift' contains the idea of the present or possession that turns to poison. 'Gift' in German now means poison. Modern

⁴ (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897). Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 63, gives an account of Hurston's relationship to Boas, whom she idolized. He notes that Boas had already discovered that Indians, presumed to be savages, maintained a highly complex, sophisticated belief system, and that the evidence suggested the same was true for illiterate black people. It would therefore be quite logical for Hurston to make connections between Indian and black folklore. On Boas see Melville Herskovits, *Franz Boas* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953). Boas was such a notable foe of racism that his 1933 essay 'Aryans and Non-Aryans' was circulated clandestinely, printed on tissue paper, by the Anti-Nazi underground. Hurston also studied with Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University in 1935–36 but gave up her doctorate and used her Guggenheim money to write the novel. It is worth noting that Saul Bellow graduated from Northwestern in 1937 with honours in anthropology and sociology, and that he went on to graduate study with Herskovits. Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975) is also structurally based upon gift exchange. See Judie Newman, 'Bellow's "Indian Givers": *Humboldt's Gift*', *Journal of American Studies*, 15 (1981), 231–38. Hurston's 1933 short story, 'The Gilded Six-Bits', *Story*, 3 (August 1933), 60–70, also involves a poisonous gift, a gold coin which turns out to be merely gilded. Missie May is seduced by a travelling man in exchange for the coin, but discovered by her husband, who forgives her and uses the coin to buy candy in the store.

⁵ For a later, but comprehensive, account see Eli Sagan, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). See also Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Cohen and West, 1954), originally published as *Essai sur le don* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

survivals of gift exchange include gambling, which is commonly considered not as contractual but as involving honour and the surrender of property, even when it is not absolutely necessary to do so; philanthropic giving (e.g. the rivalry and competition of a pledge dinner); and intellectual property, where the donor retains an interest in the object given. (Artistic ownership is often considered to survive beyond the sale of the actual work of art.) Academics preserve gift exchange in the form of the scholarly offprint.

As a collector of folk material, proprietary rights over which remained with her patron, Mrs Rufus Osgood Mason, Zora Neale Hurston was intensely aware of the ambiguous nature of such ownership. Indeed, her relationship with her patrons—those who gave her gifts—was clearly an uneasy one, as more than one critic has noted. Robert Hemenway sums it up: ‘What Hurston possessed during the Renaissance decade was a career in patronage.’⁶ Essentially Hurston had major financial support from three white women (Annie Nathan Meyer, Fannie Hurst, and Mrs Mason) beginning in 1925, and spanning the years while she graduated from Barnard and conducted fieldwork in African American folk culture. She met Mrs Mason in 1927 and signed a contract for \$200 a month, a cine camera, and a car, in order to collect folklore in the South for two years. The folklore collected was to be Mrs Mason’s property. Mrs Mason finally cut off funds in September 1932, having reduced the stipend by half in 1931. Hemenway notes that Hurston was unable to write creatively while under the influence of personal patronage and suggests that ‘Hurston sensed, later in the patronage period, that something about the gift-giving had inhibited her talent’ (p. 32). Mrs Mason gave Hurston the money to carry out her work, but in return she had to give back to a white donor (and culture) the materials of her own people. Instead of beginning studies in general ethnology in 1935, Hurston used the time to write her novel. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she gives without being passive, placing those who ‘take’ (the readers) under obligation to repay, in what amounts to a meta-anthropology, turning the anthropologist’s tools on himself.

How does this work? As Sherley Anne Williams has noted, by the end of the novel ‘Janie has come *down*, that paradoxical place in Afro-American literature that is both a physical bottom and the setting for the character’s attainment of a penultimate self knowledge.’⁷ In outline the story is that of a woman who swaps status and prestige of an empty material kind (running a store as the wife of the town mayor) for erotic happiness ‘on the muck’, picking beans in a booming farming area of Florida, at her lover’s side. From an initial loveless marriage, arranged by a grandmother (Nanny) whose sole motivation is to preserve Janie from being like other African American women (‘De nigger woman is de mule uh de world’),⁸ Janie becomes a field labourer, a participant in a world which originally seemed beneath her, willingly working at her man’s side and finally at one with her community. As Williams argues, the differences between the

⁶ ‘The Personal Dimension in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*’, in *New Essays on ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’* ed. by Awkward, pp. 29–51 (p. 32).

⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (London: Virago, 1986), ‘Afterword’ by Sherley Anne Williams, p. 297.

⁸ Virago edn, p. 29. All subsequent references follow quotations in parentheses.

image of the mule and its final reversal are obvious. On the muck, Janey is working only in name; she converts hard toil into play. Teacake has asked, not ordered:

his request stems from a desire to be with Janie, to share every aspect of his life with her, rather than from a desire to coerce her into some mindless submission. It isn't the white man's burden that Janie carries; it is the gift of her own love. (p. 297)

One might wonder, however, how this romantic vision squares with the Teacake who steals Janie's money and spends it on a party; beats her; and attempts, in a rabid frenzy, to kill her. Williams's unconscious use of the term 'gift' is telling. In Hurston's world the gift is always also a threat, a potential act of aggression, and the structure of her novel draws out all the tragic ambiguities involved in the safeguarding—and the voluntary loss—of prestige.

Janie's story (profoundly economic in emphasis, as Houston Baker has argued) focuses on three representative husbands. The first, Logan Killicks, is selected by Nanny, purely in order to safeguard the budding Janie's honour and security. As Baker comments, Nanny's history under slavery dictates her strategic manoeuvres in the wars of property and propriety. 'Having been denied a say in her own fate because she was property, she assumes that only property enables expression.'⁹ The African American community bear silent witness to their own awareness that Janie has been *given* in marriage, rather than choosing her own fate. Nobody gives any wedding gifts to the couple (p. 39) and they depart empty-handed from the feast. By not giving presents, the community demonstrates solidarity with Janie, and a fundamental distrust of her commodification as a bride. To Janie's protests that she wanted a husband to love and to be loved by, Nanny can argue only that she should be glad of the organ in his parlour, his house and his sixty acres. Nanny assumes that Janey is hankering after 'some dressed-up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe everytime he cross de street tuh see if he got enough leather dere tuh make it across' (p. 42). For Nanny, Janie's property is much more important than her feelings, as assuring her status and security. 'You can buy and sell such as dem wid what you got. In fact you can buy 'em and give 'em away' (p. 42). In the mouth of an ex-slave, the comment on the commodification of a person as property to be bought or disposed of at will is particularly chilling. It takes Janie only a short while to realize that she owes nothing to Killicks, as her final words to him reveal: 'You ain't done me no favor by marryin' me. And if dat's what you call yo'self doin', Ah don't thank yuh for it' (p. 53).

In contrast, Janie's second husband, Joe Starks, apparently establishes at the outset that she is a gift all in herself, and recognizes the fact by showering her with presents: 'He bought her the best things the butcher had, like apples and a glass lantern full of candies' (p. 56). Yet as his dealings with the townspeople reveal, Joe Starks gives only to establish credit and 'take'. Eatonville has been founded as a town by the gift of land from Captain Eaton, a gift which Starks derides as far too small in size to assure economic prosperity. By buying 200 acres from Eaton, Starks 'gives' the people of Eatonville a town—though it is

⁹ Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 57.

a town which they then buy from him with their own money. To celebrate the town's foundation he offers a 'treat' of crackers and cheese, followed up by a barbecue. (They provide most of the food.) He uses their labour to cut drains and streets, and establishes Janie as a conspicuous object of display, dressed up to the nines in his store. Whenever Joe gives, it is for the purpose of assuring his own prestige and status, and ultimately seeing the gift come back tenfold. In the famous mule story, for example, Joe establishes his prestige by the destruction of property. He buys Matt Bonner's bony, cussed, yellow mule for five dollars, to Matt's astonished delight. Joe, however, humiliates Bonner by destroying the mule as an object of economic value. He sets it free.

'Beatyuh tradin' dat time, Starks! Dat mule is liable tuh be dead befo' de week is out. You won't git no work outa him.'

'Didn't buy 'im fuh no work. I god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let 'im rest. You didn't have gumption enough tuh do it.' (p. 91)

While Starks gains the respect of the townspeople, Janie, sensing the potential parallel between woman and mule, is more pointed in her comments:

Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United Sates to rule so he freed de Negroes. You got a town so you freed a mule. (p. 92)

In a capitalist economy, freedom becomes an ambiguous gift. Just as the original gift of land for the town was too small to assure its prosperity, so the gift of freedom without economic equality becomes ambivalent. Like the vultures later seen feeding on the mule's carcass, like Starks feeding off the townspeople, the gift lays obligations on the recipient, and nourishes the giver. Janey is displayed by Starks as a 'lady'—just as he displays the retired mule. Above all, Jody's gifts—like the salt pork he apparently donates to Mrs Tony—are carefully calibrated. After Mrs Tony has begged for a piece of meat for her starving children, after she has poured scorn on the tiny piece which he cuts for her, and flounced out of the store, Starks comes back to his seat on the porch, after a moment's pause. 'He had to stop and add the meat to Tony's account' (p. 116). Mrs Tony has shamed her husband by accepting the gift; Starks has maintained his own prestige at no cost whatsoever. As Houston Baker argues, Starks is intent on imitating the economics of Anglo-America (p. 58). He clearly represents an aggressive, white-identified capitalism, consuming Janie. As textual evidence makes explicit, Hurston evidently understood the dynamics of the relationship in terms of gift exchange. When Starks slaps Janie (over a ruined dinner), the text in manuscript reads 'she began to fold in on herself and to take without giving'.¹⁰ Janie has become emotionally dead. When she retaliates, destroying Joe with an emasculatory insult, she realizes that the fatal blow has been to separate the man from his possessions. 'When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them' (p. 123). When Joe sickens (kidney disease), the rumour immediately runs that Janie is responsible.

¹⁰ John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 174.

Poison is suspected. The accusation is symbolically appropriate. As the only person to see through his gifts, Janie has understood how gifts can turn to poison, property to a source of pity and danger. Meanwhile the townspeople bring gifts of broth and sick-room dishes to replace Janie's suspect cooking. They nourish Starks without recognizing the extent to which he has made them consumers and consumed them. When Joe dies, the system lives on. He is replaced by Hezekiah, seen refusing credit with the ringing phrase 'dis ain't Gimme, Florida, dis is Eatonville' (p. 142). But in a sense the town is 'Gimme, Florida', founded on and entrapped within the economics of the gift.

In contrast Teacake appears to be a subtler manipulator of gift exchange. From the beginning of their relationship Teacake is established as a games player prepared to take Janie's king (p. 147) at checkers, a taker on equal terms with her. For the townspeople his gifts to her are motivated by the inheritance which she possesses from Joe. 'Dey figger he's spendin' on her now in order tuh make her spend on him later' (p. 168). The community, for whom an older woman can only lose prestige when in erotic association with a younger man, foresees a fate for Janie similar to that of Annie Tyler, who lost her pride and all she possessed to her younger lover, Who Flung (p. 179). Although Janie may argue that 'Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game' (p. 171), the reader may feel similarly uneasy when the pair marry and Teacake promptly disappears with the \$200 which Janie had secretly pinned inside her shirt. Janie has imbibed enough of Joe Starks's views to conceal the existence of the cash from Teacake, as well as the twelve hundred dollars which she has in the bank. In order to demonstrate his lack of interest in material things, Teacake takes Janie's money and gambles it away, in the context of a stupendous feast, a ritual destruction of property. At the feast he gives ugly women money to stay away, a form of gift-giving which destroys female status. Janie is also excluded. Ostensibly Teacake is motivated by his perception of the crowd at the party as of lower class than Janie. 'Dem wuzn't no high mucky mucks' (p. 186). In reality he uses her money to teach her her place in his community, destroying her assumed class prestige in the process. Appropriately, Teacake gets the money back—with interest—in the course of a gambling game. He is careful to let the losers have a chance to win back their losses—etiquette even today in gambling. The men grumble, but with one exception, agree that the game was fair. But the aggression just below the surface culminates none the less in a furious fight, in which Teacake gets knifed. Teacake's involvement with money is as dangerous to him as it was to Joe Starks.

On the surface it may appear that Teacake is able to provide Janie with a better place in a more authentic, less money-driven world than Joe Starks, offering her an open, giving form of love and treating her as an equal. Indeed, the workers on the muck are distinguished by the celebratory nature of their existence, replete with parties, dances, games, and music, without apparent reference to the world of commerce. 'They made good money [. . .] So they spent good money. Next month and next year were other times' (p. 197). When one woman does attempt to establish her own separate prestige (based on intra-community colourism), arguing that she and Janie, both 'light-skinned', should 'class off' from the

darker members of the race (p. 210), Janie is unpersuaded by Mrs Turner's arguments. 'Us can't do it. We're uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks' (p. 210). Mrs Turner pays no attention to her protests. She is quite content to live off the workers' money (profits from her restaurant business) while deriding them in private. (She consumes as she apparently nourishes.) Teacake promptly takes a hand, arranging to 'rescue' Mrs Turner from a disturbance in her restaurant. While loudly proclaiming that Mrs Turner deserves respect, Teacake succeeds in orchestrating a riot which entirely destroys all her property. To add insult to injury, the prime movers appear the next day and make Mrs Turner a ceremonial present of five dollars apiece.

Yet for all his apparent open-handedness, his lack of interest in prestige on white terms, and his ability to function on a footing of equality with Janie, Teacake is still mired in the world of money. The process of destruction of property culminates when the idyll on 'de muck' terminates in a hurricane which lays waste the whole area. The hurricane functions as a great leveller, reducing animals and men to one common society. In their flight Teacake and Janie pass a dead man entirely surrounded by snakes and other animals. 'Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other' (p. 243). Significantly, Teacake's tragic mistake had been to ignore Indian folk knowledge. He discounts the warnings of the local Seminoles that there is a hurricane on the way, in the first place because they are not property-owners ('Indians don't know much uh nothin' [. . .] Else they'd own this country still' (p. 231)) and secondly because of the lure of money: 'Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, *must* be wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans' (p. 229). As the dyke bursts, he sees his error: 'he saw that the wind and water had *given* life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and *given* death to so much that had been living things' (p. 236, emphasis added).

The gift comes also to Teacake, and is fatal. Teacake's death by rabies offers a horrendously appropriate image of the consumption of the human being, his identity eaten away by the saliva of the rabid animal until he can no longer consume, eat, or drink. The image of contagion by saliva is significant. Nanny arranged Janie's marriage so that she would not become 'a spit cup' (p. 37) to others. Starks provided her with a luxury spit cup, painted with sprigs of flowers, but a spit cup none the less. Teacake becomes the cup himself, catching the disease from canine spit. Rabies appears to present the spectacle of a man turning into a dog, becoming possessed by the animal, until he snarls and bites—just as in totemic possession. It is as if the totemic animal is eating the man. In addition Teacake's paranoid jealousy when rabid transforms him into a mirror image of Jody, the arch-capitalist, devotee of consumer exploitation, and finally himself consumed. More specifically (and an answer perhaps to critics such as Peter Messent¹¹ who have found the mad-dog plot melodramatic and forced), rabies associates Teacake with the Kwakiutl cannibal dance in which the initiate bites a piece of flesh from an enemy's arm, identifying with the totemic animal.

¹¹ *New Readings of the American Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 243–88.

Teacake's last action, falling from Janie's bullet, is to sink his teeth in her arm. The position of the snarling dog, standing on a cow's back, above the floodwaters heaving with fish, snakes, and people, recalls the animal hierarchy of the totem. Kwakiutl totems often depict animals biting a 'copper'. As the imagery suggests, gift exchange thus goes some way to account for the difficulties posed for modern critics by the character of Teacake. Teacake's last gift to Janie was a packet of garden seeds. She gives away all their other possessions, keeping only the seeds to plant back home, for a living remembrance. Teacake remains a giver, seeding the future with a promise of growth, rather than leaving a legacy of material objects. But Teacake is also a warning to the future, his fate admonitory. As the gift-exchange structure demonstrates, Hurston did take account of an Indian warning, not least in the fashion in which she frames her tale.

At the close of the tale, prestige and hierarchy are reasserted. The black victims of the hurricane are tipped into a mass grave, carefully sorted from the whites, for whom all the coffins are reserved. Janie's love affair with Teacake has been underwritten by the store and she can go home again. As Baker comments, Janie's freedom with Teacake was enabled by Starks's property. 'Her position derives from the petit bourgeois enterprises she has shared with her deceased husband' (p. 58). For Baker, therefore, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, ultimately, a novel that inscribes, in its very form, the mercantile economics that conditioned a "commercial deportation" (p. 58). The comment, however, applies at best only to Janie's story and not to Hurston's. In Janie, Hurston focuses upon the possibility that her own work (fiction, folklore, anthropology) could allow others to 'buy safely in' to African-American culture, to appropriate and own its material without considering the fundamental institutional and economic structures which inscribe it as valuable material rather than as ongoing, living process. If the themes of the novel underline the dangers of the donor-as-taker, the frame of the story is equally strategic. The story is framed by a gift—Pheoby's nourishing (and appropriately creole) dish of 'mulatto rice'—a sly, ambivalent gift which makes reference to Janie's white blood. It is in return for this gift that Janie tells her story. The process of storytelling, the manner and occasion of the story's delivery, is as significant as the content. Hurston goes to some lengths to underline the nature of the storytelling as a form of gift exchange. When Pheoby offers the gift, Janie is swift to underline the impossibility of repaying in terms of material exchange. 'You must think Ah brought yuh somethin'. When Ah ain't brought home a thing but mahself' (p. 14). Pheoby's comment, 'Dat's a gracious plenty', is met by teasing denigration of the gift of food—'Ain't you never goin' tuh gimme dat lil rations you brought me? [. . .] Give it here and have a seat' (p. 15)—followed, once the plate has been well and truly cleaned, by the instruction to 'take yo' ole plate. Ah ain't got a bit of use for a empty dish' (p. 15). In the distance the people of the community remain on the porch, clearly discussing Janie's return as if *she* were a meal to be feasted upon: 'Ah reckon they got me up in they mouth now' (p. 16). Janie refuses to satisfy their appetite for her story directly, on the grounds that they will not understand. They are 'puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about' and 'so long as they get a name to gnaw on they

don't care whose it is, and what about, 'specially if they can make it sound like evil' (p. 17). Instead, to avoid her gift becoming poison, she tells the story to Pheoby on the grounds that when the latter repeats it, it will remain Janie's story. 'You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf' (p. 17). As she tells Pheoby, 'you got tuh *go* there to *know* there' (p. 285). A story is not simply transferable from one teller to another, context-free, like an object in a collection of folklore. It needs a reader with understanding, knowledge of its meanings. Janie warns Pheoby that 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah *give* you de understandin' to go long wid it' (p. 19, emphasis added). And what she gives is an awareness of the nature of the donor relation.

Hurston's story is designed both to nourish the folk and to liberate it from the property wars of capitalism. The exchange between Pheoby and Janie establishes the story as a gift—but a gift which lays obligations on both the black community and the reader. The frame tale transforms the gift into a moral transaction, maintaining human relationships rather than exchange relations, and preventing the treatment of authenticity as a marketable product. Folk elements in the novel—verbal contests, the buzzards dancing a call-and-response over the mule's carcass, folktales and games—are carefully positioned inside a frame which establishes the importance of context and highlights folk culture as a dynamic relation and process rather than a reified object. By employing African-American, Native American, and white (Jewish) sources, Hurston provides the reader with a very creole rice indeed. In its implicitly hybrid form *Their Eyes Were Watching God* defends a 'mingled' culture as against essentialist 'authenticity'. In a postcolonial context Trinh T. Minh-ha has remarked on the dangers posed by authenticity as opposed to hybridity.¹² Just as anthropologists want to study 'primitive' (non-state, non-class) societies, so the Third World representative whom the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the 'unspoilt' African or Asian, thus remaining preoccupied with the image of the 'real' native, the truly different, rather than with issues of economic hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change. Similarly, in the African-American context there is a risk that 'authenticity' becomes a product to be marketed, bought and sold, displayed in a museum, or, worse, on an academic's bookshelves. Anachronistically, Hurston had recognized the possibility of functioning as an 'otherness machine manufacturing alterity for the postmodern trade in difference'.¹³ Janie only 'goes folk' once she has made her money, rather as a modern-day millionaire may choose to collect art objects from the oppressed past of his ancestors. But her story is framed and structured in such a way as to prevent the reader functioning in any naive fashion as a mere consumer of another culture. An increased awareness of the novel's insistent language of commodity and exchange implicitly combats romanticized readings of it as a feminist triumph tale. Trimuphalism has itself been located within a dubious rhetoric of status. As a result, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a creole mixture

¹² *Woman, Nature, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 89.

¹³ Gail Ching-Liang Low, 'In A Free State: Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 4 (Spring 1993), 8–17 (p. 17).

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drawing syncretically upon the cultural work of White-, Jewish-, African-, and Native-American, constitutes a literary gift which makes the nature of cultural appropriation problematic.

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