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The African-American Female Body as Spectacle in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

LOREN LEE

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Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, was an enslaved Khoikhoi woman taken from South Africa and put on display throughout Europe during the 19th century because of her prominent sexual features. Even in death, Baartman did not find peace. Her body was displayed publicly in a museum in France until 1976, and finally, her remains were repatriated to South Africa in 2002 following demands by Nelson Mandela for her return. The female body is often used as the representation of ideas (justice, liberty, abundance). The Hottentot Venus was once a physical representation of the eroticization and manipulation of the black female, but now, she passes into abstraction and becomes yet another metaphorical receptacle of power and ideas. However in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston successfully avoids the literary trope of establishing her protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford, simply as the black woman who overcomes racism and sexism. Rather, Hurston initially establishes Janie Mae Crawford as the exhibit of both racial and sexual power. She then systematically removes the factors that withhold agency and selfhood from Janie to create the concept of a woman that exists separate from the pedestal. Janie escapes the spectacle-spectator relationship and gains selfhood by taking absolute ownership of her body.



Since the removal of the “Hottentot Venus” as a physical spectacle from France in 2002, Saartjie Baartman has more recently been pedestaled in the academic world as the abstract representation of the oppression of the black female body through display¹. The modern “Hottentot Venus” appears in literature as the black female who is made a spectacle by those in power who express their authority through physical and psychological acts of dominance over her body². Janie Mae Crawford, the mixed race, female protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is an exceptional example of the modern “Hottentot Venus”. Hurston published her unique novel in a time when African Americans faced overt *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination, when lynching was not considered an act of terrorism, and when a woman, especially a black woman, could not make a living as an author. Despite such obvious personal and societal barriers, Hurston completely rejects the common literary trope of the black woman who overcomes racism or sexism. Janie emerges as the racial and sexual victor by taking ownership of her body on her own terms. She does not overcome anything. Rather, she removes herself from the equation of the spectacle and the spectator entirely. The state of being a perpetual exhibit disempowers the female body. Escaping the exhibit and its inherent subjugation of the self is only possible by the complete removal of either the show or the audience. When the female body, particularly the eroticized black female body, on display becomes conscious of her status as an object, negotiations of power will inevitably begin and can only be stopped by a return to the docile body or an act of forceful self-assertion. Hurston initially establishes Janie as the exhibit of both racial and sexual power. Hurston then removes the factors that withhold agency and selfhood from Janie to create the concept of a woman that exists separate from the pedestal.

The modern “Hottentot Venus” is the women whose body is put on display and exploited for the purpose of housing an idea in a body. The female body for centuries has been the common receptacle of many thoughts, movements, and nations. Justice is the blind woman, Liberty is the torch-bearing woman, and Abundance is the bare-breasted, fertile, cornucopia-toting woman. Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus”, was once a physical representation of the eroticization and manipulation of the black female, but now, she passes into abstraction and becomes yet another metaphorical receptacle. The often-cited essay “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” by literary historian Sander Gilman adeptly defines the modern “Hottentot Venus” as an icon. However as literary critic Zine Magubane points out in her essay “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus’”, the use Baartmann so extensively in literary criticism as a model creates a sort of “theoretical fetishization”³ (818). Magubane argues that the “construction of black women as ‘other’ ... makes race and gender transhistorical and metaphysical constructs” meaning that the use of Baartmann as a theoretical model steals her selfhood from her memory (817). When critics use Baartmann as a concept, Magubane writes, “... they valorize the very ground of biological essentialism they purport to deconstruct” (817). She is further fetishized. Hurston, however, skillfully avoids the pitfall of pedestaling the female body by giving Janie the agency to remove herself from the conflict entirely. The agent which controls Janie’s body transitions throughout the novel, but ultimately, Janie transcends the performer-audience dynamic and owns her own body. In using the relationship between the observed and the observer, Hurston details the mechanics of power as a pervasive, fluid, and transitory force. The authority of the spectator comes from his ability to observe and judge, but the spectacle has the ability to subvert that authority under the right circumstances.

Although racial constructs of power permeate the novel, Hurston’s artful rendering of racial conflict is both noticeable enough to be appreciated and subtle enough to allow Janie’s existence to not be defined solely by her race⁴. In the chapter “Ambiguities of Self, Politics of Race” from his biographical text on Hurston, Robert Hemenway considers the uniqueness of Hurston’s ability to write on race without the cliché idea of overcoming obstacles. Though, one

of Hurston's major problems in writing novels, suggests Hemenway, is her need to "identify with the masses, yet affirm the supremacy of the individual" (283).

To confront that issue of the self as both independent and belonging to a community, Hurston goes out of her way to make Janie a racial outsider by way of her mixed ancestry. Janie is first disillusioned about her racial status when she learns at a young age to see her body in comparison to the white body. She describes to her friend, Phoebe Watson, an event from her childhood in which she could not recognize herself in a photo with other white children. Janie explains, "... there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me" (Hurston 9). When seeing herself photographed, Janie acts as both spectator and spectacle, yet she establishes herself as the deviant body early on. Gradually though, Janie learns to look at her own reflection and see Janie as Janie, not simply a dark little girl.

As opposed to Janie's racial fluidity, Mrs. Turner, a mixed race neighbor who highly values more white physical features, later embodies the anxieties of physical racial otherness. Her given posture is proof of her status as an exhibit, "...she must have been conscious of her pelvis because she kept it stuck out in front of her so she could always see it" (139). Although Mrs. Turner is herself a spectacle of racial otherness, she additionally functions as the spectator when she worships Janie's body like an idol. The narrator explains, "So she didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such" (145).

Janie's body is observed in a racially objectifying way during her murder trial as well, but surprisingly, the white witnesses in the courtroom do not judge her nearly as heavily as her black neighbors who assume her guilt⁵. One man in particular asserts, "Well, you know whut dey say 'uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth. Dey do as dey please'" (189). By placing the novel in predominantly all-black settings, Hurston expresses the universality of aesthetic judgments. Even the citizens of Eatonville, Florida objectify Janie in a manner reminiscent of Baartmann and her pronounced sexual features. The narrator notes, "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets... and her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt" (2). Every character is bound in some way by appearances, racial or otherwise, but the black female body is forcibly subjected to an intensely fetishized position. However, Janie straddles the physical and social lines of race through her fluid racial identity and establishes herself as an individual instead of a type.

Hurston, additionally, uses physical and social spaces to structurally plot Janie's progression toward self-ownership⁶. The spaces which Janie's body inhabits through the course of the novel cycle between the domestic and the public and between the natural and the artificial. Hurston discusses Janie's rising autonomy on a multiplicity of levels through the interaction between the space, the body, and the observer. Janie's journey starts in the domestic sphere controlled by her grandmother, Nanny. She then progresses through the institutions of agriculture, commerce, marriage, and law through her three husbands.

In general, the space of nature represents personal freedom for Janie, but the artificial spaces imposed on her are all settings of enslavement. Logan Killicks, Janie's first husband, plans to treat Janie like a mule on the farm, and Joe "Jody" Starks, her second husband, forces her either to stand behind the counter of the shop or to remain shut up in the house. In contrast, scenes with natural elements liberate Janie. She fondly remembers lying underneath a blossoming tree innocently as a young girl long before getting caught up in the sexual politics of life. Later on in her life when Vergible "Tea Cake" Wood, her third and final husband, is courting her, they fish and go on long walks. Tea Cake literally and metaphorically guides her out of the confines of man-made structures in favor of the liberating forces of nature.

Nature is the setting of Janie's liberation, but it also becomes the backdrop for the battle between the equally strong-willed Tea Cake and Janie with the hurricane. Despite Janie and Tea Cake's love for each other, the often violent manifestations of their passions represent the negotiation of external and internal agency over the body. Hurston chose the catastrophic

occurrence of the hurricane and Janie's self-defensive murder of the rabid Tea Cake to indicate that the only way to achieve an autonomous personality is to remove forcibly either the spectator or the spectacle.

After finally surviving the tumultuous process of her liberation, Janie returns to a domestic sphere, a sphere created by herself and for herself. That final space is one in which Janie has absolute autonomy in her near solitude. The only spectator left for Janie is Phoebe who, far from objectifying and judging Janie, only wishes that she could be so free in her own home.

Except for Phoebe who ultimately becomes Janie's only remaining ally, characters of Hurston's work vie for sexual power through attempts at domination over the bodies of others. Janie, however, attains true sexual agency by exiting the perpetual game of sexual tug-of-war all together. Janie's progression toward feminine autonomy is apparent in the way she finds herself paired with her male companions. Killicks is forced on her by Nanny, and Jody is forced on her by circumstance. Tea Cake is the only man who Janie has the option to choose freely. She could have lived alone comfortably or chosen any one of the many other suitors who court her, but she chooses Tea Cake.

The discussion of sexual agency also manifests itself in who puts their body on display and why. When Jody first comes walking down the road, Janie momentarily takes control over her own body by knowingly displaying herself. She intentionally gets Jody's attention with her long hair and the sound of the water pump, but Janie later realizes that her previous control over her body has been stripped away by the end of Jody's life. From the beginning of their marriage, Jody slowly takes Janie's bodily power. He does not allow her to make a speech upon the request of the townspeople of Eatonville saying, "...my wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 43). It is apparent that his main motivation in marrying Janie is to own her body as a symbol of his power. Her body is kept on display behind the counter of the store, a space set apart from any influence other than his own⁷. Jody is so desperate to assert his masculine authority onto Janie's body that he shuns proper customs of etiquette and talks underneath Janie's clothes in public to insult her, but Janie retaliates by saying that Jody's body looks like "de change uh life" (79). She makes him a spectacle. Janie's act of defiance brings her one step closer to liberating her sexually objectified body. The narrator comments on the grave stakes of the situation explaining, "Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible... she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed..." (79). After the reawakening of her sexual vigor in that moment, Jody's body becomes the object of Janie's power especially as he lays as an exhibit for her eyes on his deathbed. Jody, the spectator, is removed by death, and Janie temporarily escapes sexual politics and becomes her own spectator. She examines herself in the mirror immediately following Jody's death thinking, "Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass... The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (87). Janie's feminine agency emerges victorious in the absence of an audience for her body.

However, Janie submits herself again to the spectator-spectacle dynamic in her relationship with Tea Cake. Their mutual groping for power manifests itself in their violent, passionate outbursts. When Nunkie, a chunky girl who works in the fields with them, makes herself an exhibit to captivate Tea Cake, Janie reacts violently toward him, but their violence turns to fiery, romantic passion. Janie's violent reaction and her ability to pull Tea Cake back in with her body reflects the possibilities for power even as the exhibited body. Janie's entire third marriage is an experiment of negotiating sexual power. In her essay "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", Jennifer Jordan, literary critic and author, suggests that "Tea Cake's death is the result of a sexual war in which the male receives his comeuppance" (109). Jordan goes on to point out that the image of Janie clinging to the cow and Tea Cake slaughtering the mad dog stands as a metaphor for the gender politics of the whole

novel. When threatened, the male reacts with violent outbursts and eventually falls because of his wild striking out for control, but the woman sustains herself through endurance and patience. Janie survives by the endurance of her will, and her husbands die through the overcompensation of their threatened masculine identity. When Janie shoots Tea Cake, she momentarily takes on that masculine violence and liberates her body. Unfortunately, the only way for her to find the autonomy and individual identity that she has always lacked is to destroy herself, the exhibit, or Tea Cake, the audience. Janie's newly established authentic personhood following Tea Cake's death is reflected in the clothing on her body. The narrator describes, "No expensive veils and robes for Janie this time... she was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief" (189). Excluding Phoebe's female companionship, Janie is alone by the end of the novel, but there is freedom in her solitude. Janie has been the naïve girl and the objectified woman, and she graduates to the transcendent level of a woman without her pedestal.

Hurston's Janie Mae Crawford is potentially the first sexual black woman in literature to achieve wholeness and selfhood (Weir-Soley 38). A potential reaction for readers of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would be to pity Janie as a woman who cannot find happiness in love, but such a judgment is misguided. Yes, she loses the man she loves after three painful marriages and suffers public shaming, but she is free. Her body is the receptacle of her personhood, not the insecurities of a man or the conventions of society.

Notes

1. Saartjie Baartmann was an enslaved Khoikhoi woman who was duped into leaving South Africa behind to join a freak show as an exhibit in Europe in 1810. She had always intended to return home, but instead, she spent the remainder of her life naked, gawked at by bewildered white faces. Baartmann was nicknamed the “Hottentot Venus” by her owners; Hottentot, a Dutch imitation of the Khoikhoi language, was the adopted term for the Khoikhoi. Baartmann did not even find peace in death. Her genitals, brain, and skeleton were displayed in a French museum until President Nelson Mandela demanded the return of her body for burial on the grounds that such a vulgar and inhumane display did not exist anywhere else in the world.
2. Consider Elizabeth Alexander’s poem “The Venus Hottentot (1825)” in which the speaker is at first a cold, calculating Georges Cuvier and then a defiant Saartjie Baartmann.
3. Magubane also asserts, “Gilman’s analysis of Baartmann was the genesis for a veritable theoretical industry” (817). The basic structure of her essay breaks down Gilman’s essay on three of its essential points: European fears of the other were the impetus for the construction and synthesis of images of deviance, ideas about Blackness were static in the nineteenth century, and Baartmann’s body evoked a uniform response.
4. The most overt use of racial power over the physical body occurs when Tea Cake is forced into helping recover bodies after the hurricane. White victims are laid aside to be buried in coffins, but black victims are haphazardly tossed into mass graves.
5. Tiffany Patterson writes, “Vigilante justice was often the only means by which black women could defend their honor in an era when they were assumed to be unchaste and to need no protection from the judicial system” (96).
6. See photos from of actual Eatonville buildings and citizens and explicative maps of Florida for anthropological and geographical context in Patterson’s *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* (112-15).
7. See Weir-Soley’s discussion of the “politics of silence” (16-17). Janie, like many black women before her, endures her sexual relationships through strategic silence.

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