# Reading the Deck with Zora Neale Hurston

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King: What is the price of tight grips and firm rules?
*Ace, means the first time that I met you.*[1]

My mother said don't come home, so I didn't. I was seventeen years old. She'd found birth control pills in my bedroom closet, pills I was not taking, not anymore. I'd filled the prescription because—look, that's another story, but let me ask you this: How can a girl who is taught to hate her body and fear her sexuality, taught that desire is evil and she will burn in hell eternal if she has nonmarital sex, how can a teenage girl like that consent? What exactly is she consenting to? Years later, after I finally came out as queer, my mom said I was in the clutches of Satan and loving it. I understood her meaning: that the only thing worse than Satan's snare was pleasure itself. *Of loving it.*

Ace: Will you open to this element, to help from beyond?
*Deuce, there was nobody there but us two.*

1. From "Reading the Deck," typed document in Hurston Collection, University of Florida. A version of this text appears in Hurston's play *Polk County*, which was first produced several decades after her death.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, sixteen-year-old Janie notices the sensual aliveness of nature and follows that feeling, the "inaudible voice of it all," to the front gate, where she kisses Johnny Taylor. A kiss her grandmother witnesses and fears. Having already lost her daughter, Grandma knows how easily a teenage girl can be violated by any man around her, males who were taught, and still are, to treat female bodies as prey. So Grandma arranges for Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks. For her protection, Grandma says. Grandma's not wrong, though Killicks was probably as old as I am now, in my forties, and Janie was hoping for love, not a husband. But Janie obeys, telling herself that love will come "after they were married, [for] Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so." Hurston has already given her readers something young Janie can't yet fully see—the understanding to go with Grandma's reasoning: her own emergence from slavery and sexual trauma; her aging body and longstanding desire to care for Janie like no one did for her. This means making sure Janie has material resources enough to hold her own regard. Janie's grandma pleads, she is getting older and won't be able to "die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you." Black women, says her grandmother, are the mules of the world. But she's planning a different role, a different world, for Janie.

Deuce: How and what and who guides your relations?
*Trey, the third party, Charlie was his name.*

My mother said don't come home, so I went to a small apartment in Big Rapids, Michigan, where I lived for six weeks with three boys who were best friends. They were nearly my age, a year or two older. No, I wasn't sleeping with any of them. They'd grown up in similarly religious households, and because I was with them that weekend (ironically, we were trying to reach a Christian music festival in Illinois), they offered me a floor spot in the studio apartment that one of them, the one already in college, was renting with money from a summer construction job. Every night, we slept, each one alone on the floor; every day, we folded our blankets and piled them in the corner. That's where I was living, in that apartment, when I first read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I had decided to accept a full-ride scholarship to a college I did not want to attend but where else would I go, and the school had sent a copy of the novel to every first-year student, as we'd be discussing it during our single day of orientation that fall.

This was 1991. I'd never heard of Zora Neale Hurston; I had not read a single book by an African-American writer. Nor any writer of color, I later realized. For I'd grown up in a rural area populated mostly by white people, in a country with an ongoing economic investment in whiteness, in schools (first parochial, then public) where the English classes stressed grammar over literature, and the few books we did read were by white men and exactly one Harper Lee. At home, anything not Christian was suspect, so there was only the Bible and Frank Peretti novels about spiritual warfare, and a series of Christian books about wayward teen girls who rededicated their tarnished bodies to Jesus Christ. That summer, encountering *Their Eyes*, I felt an imaginary door open into a space I hadn't known I wanted. And while I did not understand the book's many chambers, I was deeply moved. Transfixed. I read sitting on the apartment floor, or when that became too stifling, on the grass outside or at a nearby park, listening to the trees. One of the boys asked if the book was good and I said yes, registering my own surprise. I had, I realized, already decided against the school, and was ready to dismiss everything about it as similarly unlikeable. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* messed with my confirmation bias—two words I hadn't yet learned as a conceptual pairing, though I did know the experience of favoring, of literally only perceiving, information that confirmed already held beliefs.

Three: How might this triangulation bring a different dynamic or point of view?

*Four, the fourth time you played that same old game.*

I was raised in both Catholic and Protestant churches, a result of the time gap between my mom's evangelical conversion when I was an infant and my father's born-again experience, nearly a dozen years later. Yet they had met and married as Catholics, so by the time I was born, my older sisters were already enrolled in Catholic school, which I, too, would attend for nine years. I remember a school-day Mass where Father B. spoke of Jesus's anointment of Simon Peter in the Book of Matthew ("and upon this rock I will build my church"), and because Catholics counted Simon Peter as their first pope, the Catholic Church was, concluded Father B., the one true holy church. Meanwhile, at the newly established New Life Christian Fellowship, Pastor S. drew on passages from Acts of the Apostles to show that our nondenominational Sunday services in an elementary school

gym were in line with the first real-deal Christian church, as the Holy Spirit moved us to speak in tongues, heal the sick, dance, and prophesy. Just like in the Bible. *And you know who's not in the Bible?* my mom liked to ask. *The pope.* So early on, I began to see how one book could be used to support paradoxical positions and interpretations, even as there wasn't room in either "church" for the other "church" to exist as something true. Meanwhile, the Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of *church* is "a building for public worship." Which is rarely how the child-me used that word. For *going to church* meant gathering with those who shared similar beliefs. Church was community, a relational dynamic, the people, not the architecture. My definition was biblical, too, for Jesus called the *church* the "body of Christ," his body, created when a bunch of breathing, sweating, singing bodies came together and thus made a larger spiritual-social body, connected via intention, ritual, and language, though what was spoken always exceeded any one tongue. In the Bible, this church emerges from a story in the book of Acts where the Holy Spirit initiates the frightened disciples by igniting their crown chakras with tongues of fire. The disciples began speaking "with other tongues," and a crowd gathered and everyone there, from many different nations, heard their native language and understood. What do I make of this Holy Spirit story now? Maybe it's the fractured community from the Tower of Babel, reassembled in holy fragments, still beyond human comprehension (the people asked: "Whatever could this mean?"). Maybe we speak more tongues than we realize, and sometimes we are spoken through, and maybe each person hears exactly what they need (and can handle) exactly at that moment. Some part of me knew I needed to leave home and that I would never receive my mother's approval. Some part of me wanted her tongue to push me out.

Four: Are you stable &/or stuck &/or holding four directions
in four perspectives?

*Five, the fifth time you played me for a clown.*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with tongues wagging as a group of townspeople watch a woman return home, which implies, of course, an earlier departure. It begins again with this woman, Janie, putting her tongue in her friend's mouth by telling her story to Phoeby, her bosom friend, and giving this friend permission to share and repeat. In both scenes, the novel begins with

gossip, a word which was, in its earliest definition, both gender neutral and spiritually inclined: a "gossip" was a godmother or godfather who sponsored an infant's baptism.[2] By the twentieth century, this definition had fallen into obscurity, replaced by the now familiar image of someone, usually female, "of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler."[3] I prefer the definition offered by two Italian philosophers, Tommaso Bertolotti and Lorenzo Magnani, who describe gossip as "broadly evaluative talk between two or more people, comfortably acquainted between each other, about an absent third party." Here, the speakers could be two men, a man and a woman, nonbinary to gender fluid, and the talk might be condemning or complimentary, as implied in the evaluative gesture. In her book about gossip in literature, Patricia Meyer Spacks places gossip on a continuum, with "distilled malice" on one side and "serious gossip" on the other. Malicious gossip plays with and destroys reputations by "damaging competitors or enemies, gratifies envy and rage by diminishing another, generates an immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent." In contrast, "serious gossip" promotes intimacy and trust building, as the talkers self-reflectively include themselves as subjects of their own gossip. They talk, as Spacks argues, to "express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, and to enlarge their knowledge of one another." So a malicious gossiper might share trust fund information about an award-winning poet who self-identifies as Marxist, because the gossiper feels dismissed by the poet and envies her reputation and success. A serious gossiper, however, might talk about this same poet's self-confidence and insistence, speculating that her privileged background contributes to her elevated sense of self, even as the conversation winds toward the gossiper's deeper questions, such as: I often feel dismissed, minimized, or used by this poet; is this your experience, or am I being paranoid and overpersonalizing? How might I cultivate my own self-worth? Or to paraphrase Claretta Holsey's elegant summation of the gossip continuum: malicious gossipers often speak with certainty about right-wrong, good and bad, while serious gossipers explore their unknowing and uncertainty, so the talk becomes a space for vulnerability.[4]

2. "gossip, n." Def 1. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press.
3. "gossip, n." Def 3. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press.
4. Holsey made this observation during my guest lecture to Advanced Open Studio, Stetson University, February 2019.

We see both types of gossip in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The people on the porch observe Janie's return, malice-ready, envy easily recalled and relished. "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive." We see it again in the courtroom, where people sit with their "tongues cocked and loaded," as Janie fights the "lying thoughts" of others. "It wasn't death she feared," writes Hurston, but "misunderstanding." There is more than one kind of death, and gossip, notes the narrator, is the "only real weapon left to weak folks," a "killing tool" that African-Americans are allowed to use around white people. Such gossip differs radically from the story Janie tells Phoeby about what happened between her and Tea Cake, the absent third. Janie knows she must give Phoeby the understanding to go with her story, which means going back to childhood and her revelation beneath the blossoming pear tree, to the inside of those first two marriages, the hurricane, the muck. This is serious gossip, an act of intimacy between two friends, shared to enlarge their knowledge of each other, their community, their future. If Janie's first marriage was arranged in fear, her second marriage was played on a gamble (trying her luck when opportunity walked by). Her third marriage, which will last "until she herself had finished feeling and thinking," was for love, by which she became, most fully, herself. She gives this story of self-realization to Phoeby, and Hurston plants a love-seed in U.S. American literature, wondrously rupturing the U.S. national narrative with a story of Black female belonging and becoming. With art.

Five: "God is change";[5] what must be released?
*Six, six feet of earth when the deal goes down.*

Reading *Their Eyes* that summer, when one of the boys asked about the book, I vaguely remember saying something about a Southern Black woman's experience with marriage and life, but more than that, too, given U.S. history. I want to say the boy's eyes glazed over, but did they? I do know that, as a group, the boys did not see me as one of them, because I was female and not one of their best friends, and never would be because of *bros not hos*, though these boys would not use that language—they were *punk* and *alternative*, a little hippie, definitely not jocks. Yet I felt myself othered in their presence, knew myself as *girl*. Later that fall, I sat

5. From Octavia Butler's Earthseed philosophy, in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.

in the college theater, in a circle of other first-year students while our facilitator asked for impressions of the book. I did not speak. I did not know how to talk about books. Nor about race and gender (which I still called *sex*), and it seemed that we couldn't talk about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* without talking about race and gender. I had never heard the term *white privilege* but knew, as white people do, that I benefited in ways that people of color, especially Black people, did not. The privilege of being seen as *human* and treated as such by those in power simply because of the color of my skin. I didn't know that my language—*Black woman* instead of *woman*—pointed to another privilege: whiteness as the default imaginary, the "transcendental norm,"[6] so *woman* implied *white woman,*[7] which is why the descriptive *white* felt strange or upsetting the first time I heard it, as if the speaker was pointing at something wrong with me. Later, I understood my initial reaction as defensive personalization, a characteristic of whiteness I needed to get over if I wanted to hear the speaker and understand, in part, what she was doing: calling on language to rupture a social assumption of whiteness as the unspoken norm; wielding language to create space for change.

Language lets us reorder time, too, outside of a clocked linearity or fated future. Playing cards, like all varieties of oracle decks, are a technology for working with the energetic present to make more conscious and liberatory choices into the future. Reading the deck means letting the invisible (ancestors, guides) weigh in. At college, in that circle of first-years, there was a hesitancy to speak, then a white boy began talking, sharing his thoughts as if they were near-facts. I don't remember what he said, or what anyone said, specifically, though my impression is that one girl really liked the book and other girls didn't. After orientation, I feel like someone, a white girl in my dorm, said the school picked the book because it was by a Black writer, the implication being that the book wouldn't otherwise stand on its own. Did she say this, her straight fine hair pulled into a low ponytail, her face contorted around her contemptuous pale-blue eyes? Does any book, especially so-called canonical ones, propped up by countless critical interpretations and adaptations, ever *stand on its own*? The school hadn't given us any context for *Their Eyes*, and this was a college of mostly white students who had learned to read everything—books, the world, ourselves, each

6. See Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008.
7. See Hull, Akasha Gloria, et al. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies.* Feminist Press, 1982.

other—through what philosopher George Yancy calls the distorted white gaze. A twisted "seeing" that criminalizes, sexualizes, and minimizes Black bodies, while holding whiteness (the disembodied viewer) as the felt unseen center of public conversations, the power-group that owns the historical narrative (whiteness claims this power is "circumstantial," "earned," and/or "god-ordained"), and hence the ability to name. How to make sense, then, of this book by a Black writer that in 1991 most of the students hadn't heard of? A book that centers the felt experiences of a Black female protagonist within an all-Black town, which Hurston renders as imaginatively rich as the heroine's internal landscape. Such nuanced characterization was part of Hurston's larger project. In her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print," she wonders at "the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negros, and for that matter, any non-Anglo-Saxon peoples within our borders, above the class of unskilled labor." Published in the *Negro Digest* thirteen years after the publication of *Their Eyes,* she notes that this lack of "very human" representations feeds a "feeling of unsurmountable difference, and difference to the average man means something bad." It's in the national interest, she argues, to publish subtle and complicated stories of minorities, depictions of the "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro," as a counter to racist stereotypes and fear. Let's put a pin in her use of "non-morbid" while noting that books can and do reveal ourselves, individually and collectively. In *Their Eyes,* Hurston notes that reading books is a way to "know that [you are] the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop. Man attempting to climb to painless heights from his dung hill."

Six: What is your position vis-à-vis the communicated message?
*Seven, I hold the seven for each day of the week.*

By 1970, Hurston's work was mostly forgotten and out of print until Alice Walker uncovered *Mules and Men* while researching voodoo practices of rural Southern blacks. Walker was writing a short fiction based on her mother's often repeated tale about a white woman who, having denied her mother's Depression-era application for government surplus food, became "old and senile and so badly crippled she had to get about on *two* sticks." Walker's mother attributed this woman's deterioration to a "working of God," whereas Walker, one day while listening and watching the subtle shifts in her mother's body as she retold this

story, played the fiction writer's game of *what if*. What if "after the crippled old lady died, it was discovered that someone [. . .] had voodooed her?" Well, a story *told* is not the same as a story *written*,[8] and to make her fictional account[9] ring true, Walker wanted hard facts about the craft of voodoo, or more precisely *hoodoo*,[10] as practiced in the 1930s. Facts that fit with family stories, like the one about her aunt who, as a young woman, was healed of temporary madness by a root doctor. But in the early seventies, Walker's research was hard going. All the scholarly and African-American folklore material she found was written by white people, whose distorted white gaze made them unreliable sources. As Walker began earnestly calling for a Black writer's account, she saw Zora Neale Hurston mentioned in a footnote[11]—a name she remembered from the recommended-but-not-required reading list in a Black literature class she had taken a few years earlier. This is how Walker began reading Hurston, became a fearless advocate of her work, traveled to Florida where she found Hurston's unmarked grave (or the general area in a segregated cemetery), bought a headstone, and had it inscribed with: "Zora Neale Hurston, A Genius of the South, 1901–1960, Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist." In a recent talk at the ZORA! festival, scholar and writer Chesya Burke describes Walker as performing an act of *Sankofa,* a Ghanaian word that "literally translates to 'it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.'"[12] Walker's gesture, Burke explains, was "to reach back and bring to the forefront that which has been forgotten." Burke places *Sankofa* within the contemporary discourse of Afrofuturism, which "quite literally [reaches back] to the ancestors, while calling on histories, spirituality,

8. In "On Pure Storytelling," Samuel R. Delany distinguishes between the aural tale, which relies on "speech, incantation, invocation, and repetition," and the written story, which is primarily evocative, "conjuring up of pictures, tones of voice, resonances, implication, and reminiscences."
9. Walker's story was published as "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," later selected for *Best American Short Stories, 1974.*
10. Walker uses the word *voodoo*, though in *Mules and Men,* Hurston writes about *hoodoo,* noting that *voodoo* is the white pronunciation of this word. Voodoo, or Voudoun, is a West African religion brought to various sites throughout the Americas by slaves, while Hoodoo is a U.S./Southern-grown African American folk magic or spirituality, which combines elements of African and Native American practices, Christianity (Catholic and/or Protestant), and European folk magic. Hoodoo is also called *conjure* and *root work.* The local root doctor could help someone heal from migraines and keep their honey home.
11. So often it's the footnotes—the seemingly inconsequential or *beside the point*—that show us where we're trying to go.
12. Burke, Chesya. "Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*." ZORA! 2023, Seminole State College of Florida, 25 January 2023.

and lived experiences to imagine new futures for Black people, despite the lack of representation in mainstream society."

In 2018, I visited Hurston's archive at the University of Florida, where the archivist told me the collection's origin story. At the end of her life, Hurston was living in a county welfare home. She was poor and needed medical care; she was proud and would not ask family or friends for help. She had published seven books, and had two more unpublished manuscripts, including one on Madame C. J. Walker. She moved into the county home on October 29, 1959. On January 28, 1960, she died, and the staff began burning her papers and belongings, as was standard practice. But the burning was interrupted by a deputy sheriff, who rushed in and ordered them to stop. He knew that Hurston was a woman of literary significance and thought her papers should be preserved, which is how they became the Hurston Collection, held in the library's Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries. There I gazed at sheet-protected, fire-damaged papers sometimes held together with archival tape, including pages from her unfinished manuscript about Herod the Great (depicted in the Bible at the time of Jesus's birth). "He was polite, but evaded her skillfully. To ward her off, he repeatedly spoke of his utmost fidelity to Antony. // However, Cleopatra knew more ways to kill a cat besides choking it to death on butter."

Seven: What is the relationship between victory and healing?
*Eight, eight hours you sheba-ed with your sheik.*

My mother said don't come home, but she often yelled in anger, hot flame of rage. *What are you saying?* I might have asked. I cannot remember my specific words, though I did say something like: *Are you saying I can't live there?* She replied with something like a *yes*. Something she does not remember. Though I could. Have gone there. To that house already un-becoming home. I was already deciding. Already relieving. Because going back would hurt more than punishment. Going back would be the thick fog of wrongness even heavier, and I could feel my own anger. How she would regard me with increased disgust and distrust, and this time, this time I did not deserve it. Not for this, these pills I was not taking. She said don't come home, so I did what she said. Words spoken in anger may erupt from a temporary feeling, but still cannot be unsaid.

I planned my leaving.

I wanted a few things, more shirts, my sewing machine. I entered the house on Sunday morning while they were at church. I did not let myself imagine my mother when she came home and found me more permanently gone; I focused instead on packing. Do I want this afghan made by Grandma? Yes, put it in the bag. Should I return my uniform shirts to Bob's Big Boy when I quit my hostess job? Yes, put them in the bag. Later, once I reached the small apartment in Big Rapids, I tried to calm myself by staying in the present: the sun on my skin, a song on the radio, the peanut butter and banana sandwich I was making, eating, trying to keep down. I waited a week or two before calling my parents. Dad answered. *You must not love your mother*, he said. I remember those words exactly. He was wrong, but what did he know of my heart? I realize now it was probably easier for him to accuse me than to acknowledge his own fear or feelings of failure. It was easier for my mom to yell her feelings, and for me to smoke a cigarette (my new habit), than for either of us to navigate our desire for connection alongside our hurting, shame-cloaked hearts.

In the coming weeks, as my mother and I began a long dance of rupture and reconciliation, the gossip began. She decided I must be prostituting myself in exchange for rent. She didn't say this to me directly, but someone (who?) said she suspected me of sleeping with those boys—why else would they give me a place to rest? Her hypothesis was so outside my sense of self, I could not believe she believed it. Which made it less painful than a rumor spread by my older brother, which meant it wasn't just Mom anymore, making stuff up. Evidently, my brother had run into one of my ex-boyfriends at a bar, not a serious ex, but a skinny Mormon I'd gone with for three months when I was fifteen. We went to homecoming together. He gave me several hickeys, and we'd felt each other up. When he broke it off with me, I was sad for a minute, then moved on. He was Mormon; I was fifteen; it wasn't supposed to last. But the story he told my brother did. He said he ended our relationship because I was pressuring him to have sex. To me, this was as preposterous as Mom's prostitution hypothesis, but my mother believed him. She believed an eighteen-year-old boy she'd met exactly one time, over me. Her daughter. The girl. There are many ways to become the bad kid, the wayward child, and while I certainly made some naïve, even dangerous decisions, I was beginning to understand that my mother's perceptions were about something more than me.

Female sexuality is so terrifying, they had to turn me into a whore. Later, I learned the virgin-whore binary is one of patriarchy's power tools. Even later, I discovered that within the experience of another's misperception is an invitation to learn your own compass, to uncover self-realized truth.

Eight: What movement do you need to make?
*Nine, nine hours I worked hard every day.*

Here is another definition of "church," said to be used primarily in the middle regions of the U.S.: "To put on trial in church; to subject to church discipline; [. . .] *spec.* to expel from a congregation." As in: "The main thing I like about being a Methodist is they don't have a bunch of rules to go by. You can do just about anything you want to without getting 'churched.'" To church, as judgment and expulsion, is perhaps what *the church* is best known for, at least among the unchurched. Was this what my mother feared? Does this explain her fear of birth control? Of female sexual agency? She never asked about the pills, why I had them, what might have happened. If I had been drinking, which would have been a fact, not a reason. Like how H., the farmhand who lived at my mother's childhood home, went on weeklong binges and did things he presumably did not remember. He was nice, my mother says, when he wasn't drunk. At least H. did not have her father's abusive temper; no one was safe when Pa, my grandfather, was home. I never knew my grandfather or H., but I knew the specter their violence imprinted within my mother's body. Even now, I feel a heaviness in my chest, as if writing this is somehow wrong. My father was wrong to mistake obedience for love, to tell me how I must feel while not acknowledging his own feelings. Why was my expulsion just about me and my mother? Where was my father; what was his role?

It's unbearably common: female lives fraught with sexual violence. In *Their Eyes,* there's Janie's grandmother and the enslaver; there's the schoolteacher who raped Janie's mother. Yet these characters—Janie and her ancestors, narrator-me, and my mother too—are far more than what has been acted upon us. Hurston writes this awareness into Janie's grandmother who asks her granddaughter—nicknamed "Alphabet" when she is young—to tell her story, to "expound what [she] felt" and share the "text" she's been saving for her descendants to tell. "Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie," says her grandmother. This moment recalls a

scene in Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, where nine-year-old Hurston stands beside her mother's deathbed, feeling her mother's desire that her child should speak for her. "She depended on me," writes Hurston, "for a voice."

Henry Louis Gates Jr. recalls this mother-daughter deathbed scene as fundamental to his reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In Janie's story, he notes, "the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self." Janie realizes her self-contours alongside the emerging big-picture account of Eatonville—the first incorporated Black city in the U.S.—which comes alive through the talk and signifying that happens on Joe and Janie's store porch. Janie and Eatonville provide context for each other, like how a sentence needs words to exist, even as the meaning and significance of each word will be determined, in part, by the sentence.

And what if we are words in a world already whole? What if we hold the world already within us? In *Their Eyes,* the world *told* is sensual and communicative, alive. Trees shiver in ecstatic embrace, and buzzards meet and talk a call-and-response. It is a world where language holds creative force: words can seduce a woman or puff up a man, make "thought pictures" and big stories, provide the stuff for playing the dozens or for "stuffing courage into each other's ears." Hurston—novelist, folklorist, anthropologist—delights in this talk and in the people talking. If a book, if a body of work, resurrects a set of shared signifiers, does it become, can it be: *church*? Alice Walker notes that when she shared Hurston's writing with her family, it "gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed […] and showed how marvelous, and indeed, priceless, they are." And this, as Burke argues, leads us to Hurston's act of Sankofa, not just in her stories, but in her book *Tell My Horse,* where Hurston "validate[s] voodoo practices of Black people around the world," through a book that "acts as a veneration of the ancestors." Which leads me to another definition of "church." In the glossary in *Mules and Men*, Hurston writes about a kind of service called Testimony, a "love-feast" (in the Methodist church) or an "experience meeting" (with the Baptists). Held once a month, Testimony was a kind of "Protestant confessional," but instead of focusing on errors and wrongs, this was an opportunity for "public expression of good-will to the world." The meeting could take a few different forms, though always with a similar focus: proclaiming love for each other, joy in life, determination, and a commitment to stay through to the end.

"They seemed to be staring in the dark," writes Hurston, as the floodwaters kept rising, "but their eyes were watching God."

Nine: How might you compromise, for what, for whom?
*Ten, the tenth of every month I brought you home my pay.*

Gossip, like literary analysis, relies on abductive reasoning, meaning people form a hypothesis to explain what they have already observed. *(She has birth control so must be having sex.)* These hypotheses, or theories, are subsequently tested against or reinforced by collectively held beliefs, as well as future observations of the person being discussed. *(Teen girls who kiss and sex are morally wanton; she must be immoral too.)* A person knows they're part of a group when they know how to gossip with that group. *(Is the lit-review portion of a proper academic essay a form of gossip?)* The more adamantly you believe your own gossip, the more likely you'll interpret future encounters as confirmation of your belief. *(Consider how a writer's critical reputation influences how and what you read.)* Our abductive reasoning process is automatic and often unconscious, an instinctual skill we've evolved, in part, to ensure survival: it's good to know who we can or should not trust. The problem, of course, is that a hypothesis can be 100% wrong, even as it continues to inform (literally form) what we see.

And if this is true for how we observe others, it's true, too, for our internal observations. For the distorted white gaze, or a misogynist bias, also gets inside us. Just a few years ago, I was on a plane piloted, I realized as she spoke, by a woman. This was my first experience with a female pilot and my first thought, not my best thought, was that I hoped she wouldn't crash. Even more upsetting was the clenched grip of fear I suddenly felt in my body. Followed by a horrified awareness of my own internalized sexism. Did I really believe a woman could not fly a plane? But rather than trying to justify my thought, or deny its existence, I let myself be curious. That after twenty-plus years of feminism, my body could still hold such a basic and erroneous belief. And in my wondering, space opened for detachment and release, for new thoughts that could re-regulate my nervous system.[13]

Our focus creates our perceptions create our experience; an old idea that's easy to forget. Half empty, half full. Like it or lump it, as my mother used to say.

13. So, too, with our literary heroes. Hurston, like every writer, had her perceptual biases and problematic beliefs. See Chesya Burke's talk for how to hold space for both veneration and accountability.

I couldn't stay within my mother's imagined reality, that's what I came to realize. At college, I studied anthropology, with all its troubling roots in colonialism. But ethnography also gave me another lens to peer through when I did return home. When I decided to pursue writing, I bought several more Hurston books, though it took me years to read them. That's okay. Books are energies we draw to us when we are ready. "There are years that ask questions," writes Hurston, "and years that answer."

Ten: What does it mean to go beyond?
*Jack, that's cheating, Charlie, trying to play me for a goat.*

My mother says I ran away and she's not wrong to say so; does she remember telling me not to come home? Later that summer, I returned to her house, and she agreed to drive me to college. She even took me to Kmart to buy a few things for my dorm. While writing this essay, she sent a text saying: "Love you. Stay safe. Kissing emoji face." There is always another side to the story. Like there is always another definition for any given word. *Church,* for example, can also mean to "take (a woman who has recently given birth) to church for a service of thanksgiving." This usage is archaic, and the churching ceremony—which welcomed a postpartum woman back into the congregation—is now rarely, if ever, performed. Yet in some buildings, you can still find the churching bench, which is where these new mothers sat, veiled and holding a taper candle. How do we enter back into communion, for isn't this, really, what church is about? But that term is heavy, fogged with trauma, so I'll turn, again, to Burke's suggestion: that writing itself can perform Sankofa—that this is what Walker does with Hurston, what Hurston does with voodoo and other magical practices and ways of perceiving, that both writers do on behalf of the community.

I wrote that Hurston died in St. Lucie County Welfare Home, and this is the story most often repeated. But in another account, a woman who knew Hurston at that time (J. H.) insists that Hurston died at home.[14] Hurston's papers and personal effects were still in her Fort Pierce home, and that's where the burning took place, in the backyard. The deputy sheriff who stopped the

14. This account comes from *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, edited by Carla Kaplan. Kaplan provides introductions to each decade of Hurston's life, interviewing folks and contextualizing the letters to come. "The legends about her death are legion," writes Kaplan, though in my research, the St. Lucie County Welfare Home story is the one most oft repeated.

burning was Patrick Duvall. He was one of Florida's first Black deputies. He kept Hurston's papers on his porch for two years while he, and eventually the journalists Marjorie Silver and Anne Wilder (two of Hurston's friends), looked for their more permanent home. "Zora knew her own worth," said Wilder in an interview. "She had a lot of hard luck, but she always knew who she was."

Jack: Pay attention to the how, there's a message coming in—
*QUEEN, that's you, pretty mama, also trying to cut my throat.*

My mother told me not to come home, so I began searching for other mothers. I had no idea, then, what a beginning this would become: how my mother's inability to love her younger selves (the ones who survived that sanctioned violence, who dreamt that forbidden love) would stretch our estrangement to such seemingly impassible lengths. I want to accept the parts of myself that my mother still shuns. Still, and too often, when I pick up my pen, I'm inclined to question my own story: who is this younger narrator-me and why is she there, or here, sharing space with Janie, with Zora Neale Hurston? And then I remember the mothers, how I count Janie and Hurston among them, how writing is an alchemical process, and how proud I am of the way she realized what was happening and she stood up, yes, she had been drinking, but she slapped that boy across the face, five years older but shorter and none the wiser, and she told him to take her home. And on Monday, she steadied herself as we (meaning she and I) drove to Planned Parenthood. For an exam. For birth control, the pills she was not taking but it did not matter: they got her out.

Queen: She who reads, who opens the deck:
*KING, that's me, and I'm bound to wear the crown.*
*So you had better be ready when the deal goes down.*

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