Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God:* Southern Food Culture and Regional Identity

(Butler, Bisa. *Wrapped in Rainbows)*

Heather Wright
IDS 461: Seminar in American Studies
May 11, 2022

Thank you to Dr. James Gubbins and Dr. Duclos-Orsello for their advice and support throughout this research and the entirety of my scholarship at Salem State University.

Ancestors

This same tongue, thick, velvety, soft,
repeats love, lies and a southern drawl.

Our ancestors are too poor
to even discover new words.

Greetings flung hearty to the neighbor
but rocking to and fro, the brittle porch cracks.

Will we ever stare out at the cotton field
and speak with the stolen spirits?

-Heather Wright

Preface:

I am a freckle-faced, red-headed southerner. I moved to Boston in the early aughts. Before then, I had not considered what it meant to be southern. Once I heard a saying *one is never more southern than when they leave the south,* and for me, this is fitting. My characteristics like a southern drawl, chattiness, and odd idioms attracted comments from friends, clients, and clerks. They said, "you're too friendly", called me "Pollyanna" and told me that I smile too much. My southern disposition prompted many spontaneous conversations. My New England friends quizzed me on southern politics while raving over my chicken-n-dumplings and peach cobbler.

Soon, the question, "Where are you from?" comments mixed with the nightly news and controversy over Confederate flags, statues, and symbols. As I scoffed at Confederate culture, I found myself trying to understand this misplaced southern pride: was it poverty, a failing education system, a selective history? Based on my own family, I understood much of it as rural isolation and the regional normalization of racism. I was mad—even conflicted: if I was still proud of being a southerner, what exactly was I proud of?

I began to explore my southern mindset, upbringing, and bias. I read the new Black American canon with works by Ta Nehisi Coates, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Jesmyn Ward while returning to the expected southern canon of Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner, Harper Lee, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers. It was here that I discovered *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston.

From the first chapter, I was beside myself in deep admiration of her writing and her ability to express what I could not yet define. Hurston depicts a rich and vast southern landscape, full of idiomatic language, personal exploration, and blanketed references to the staples of the South, like rocking chairs, front porches, and southern food. Everything from a barbeque to beans, greens, and lemonade. Hurston provided a familiar and interesting lens for me to reexamine the South. Her voice became my guide and a lighthouse to the southern

cultural identity. Reading her work, I began to ask myself: how does Hurston develop a South so familiar to me? What are the cultural connections I share with her characters, and yet, not my northern peers?

The exploration of these questions inspired the research for this project. Not only did I discover that Hurston incorporates familiar southern language, but she also elaborates on African American foods and cooking techniques that later become appropriated as southern food. Most of all, I discovered that Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reflects a southern African American culture that I had long identified as my own.

"Southern cuisine is a series of geographic and gastronomic mutations made long ago by people whose fade into the earth provides half of the justification for why their descendants keep the process going at all."

- Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene*, 2017

Hurston and Southern Food

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* 1937

African American author Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) provides a literary gateway to the past. A close study of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* written just 73 years after the abolition of slavery, reveals numerous references to southern food and southern food rituals. Hurston's uses the universal experience of food rituals to create an emotional connection to the American South. These food traditions connect the reader to the emotional experience of cooking and sharing a meal, while simultaneously exposing the rich history of African American foodways in the south. Many of these foods, recipes, and cooking methods are adapted directly from enslaved Africans. Notably, these African foodways are now popularized generically as *southern food.*

As an African American author and southern woman, Zora Neale Hurston has a complex and inspiring intersectional perspective on the south. In her autobiography *Dust on the Tracks*, she describes growing up in Eatonville, Florida, in a large home on five acres, with fruits and gardens aplenty (Hurston, *Folklore* 571). The Hurston homestead is described as "almost self-sufficient in terms of the food staples the family depended on for its survival" (Opie, *Zora Neale Hurston*). Hurston's childhood stories are mostly happy ones. The bounties of Eatonville, Florida undergird her happiness as it is often the setting for Hurston's writings, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Eatonville, Florida is recognized as the first US town, organized, incorporated, and governed by African American citizens ("About," Eatonville).

In his book, *Zora Neale Hurston on Florida Food*, scholar Frederik Douglass Opie examines with detail and admiration Hurston's relationship to food as depicted in her writings. Opie gives a 20th-century historical context to Florida foodways and makes a connection to Hurston's anthropological fieldwork, which recorded many African American accounts of the

South through cultural folktales and songs[1] (Boyd 375-387). During this period, Hurston created archives of the otherwise undocumented Florida African American culture, including those in her hometown of Eatonville. Many of the sound recordings collected contain folk songs about foods, such as "Mama Don't Want No Peas and Rice" ("Mama Don't Want"). Opie also indicates that Hurston's letters often reference food. For example, Hurston suggests starting her own southern fried chicken business (84), and she discusses sharing her garden bounty with northern friends (57). Opie expands Hurston's work by cataloging many of the recipes and cooking techniques noted in her writings. Based on her childhood and anthropological experiences, Hurston clearly understands southern African American food culture.

In Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* protagonist Janie Crawford, is an independent young woman navigating self-expression and poverty inside the social constraints of the Jim Crow era South. The tale is set in a fictional representation of Hurston's hometown Eatonville. Even though Eatonville is geographically southern, it is Hurston's use of food culture that masterfully identifies the southern setting. Hurston uses regional foods to develop a regional identity. References to "southern" foods and cooking are abundant and include cooking in bacon grease (5), frying pans full of cornmeal dough, (31) salt pork (73), and fried chicken and biscuits (122). Hurston also includes an abundance of figurative language derived from foods. Along with common southern terms of endearment like "honey" and "sugar" she describes homes as "absent of flavor" (22) and young men "like young mustard greens in the spring" (67). This technique locates the reader in a full southern experience of flavor and language.

[1] 1928-1948 Hurston conducted extensive anthropological and ethnographic work in the American South and the Caribbean.

Food and Food Rituals

"She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes!

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* 1937

Hurston's uses the universal experience of food rituals to create an emotional connection between characters. Many of the food descriptions in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are central to social interactions and alliances among characters. Hurston employs food as a social glue. These scenes bring comfort and social bonding. These comfort foods create emotional connection to home—both literal and metaphorical.

In the opening, protagonist Janie Crawford returns to Eatonville, hungry and disconnected from gossiping neighbors. Her friend Pheoby ignores the social pressure and brings Janie a plate of "Mulatto rice"[2] (Hurston, *Their Eyes Are Watching* 5). The dinner is needed, well-received, and establishes the kinship between Janie and Pheoby that inspires Janie to tell her story—which becomes the narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A simple plate of food is the exchange point of history. Hurston writes, "Janie full of that oldest human longing—self-revelation," (7) and "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story" (10). Pheoby is like a mother knowing what a 'hangry' child needs before they can express it themselves. Pheoby brings a plate, but she also offers comfort.

Further evidence of Hurston employing food to develop the plot is evident when Joe Starks hopes to win the hearts of the townsfolk and convince them that his vision of a self-governing African American township begins with a streetlamp. He strategizes, "We got tuh feed 'em something, and 'tain't nothin' people laks better'n barbecue" (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching* 44). Mayor Starks, like Hurston, knows human nature. Starks's barbecue, his

[2] The term mulatto is an outdated, offensive racial classification.

streetlamp, and town are a success. Other examples occur in the romantic scenes between the protagonist, Janie Crawford, and Teacake. He brings her "a string of fresh-caught trout for a present" (103). Teacake states, "'Ah'll clean 'em and, you fry 'em and let's eat." Hurston then writes, "They went out into the kitchen and fixed up the hot fish and corn muffins and ate" (103). Mr. Starks wins the hearts and minds of his township, and Teacake wins the love and admiration of Janie Crawford. Food ritual of cooking and sharing a meal prove an effective means of soliciting Janie's history, bringing a town together, and feeding a courtship. These exchanges are universal acts, that Hurston uses o to cultivate a regional identity—one distinctly African American, one distinctly southern.

Along with the human alliances developed in Hurston's novel, she captures specific types of foods that reveal the African foodway in the US. It would be presumptuous to assert that Hurston had an intention to bind her characters metaphorically to Africa, and yet, how can it be avoided? African American communities and food connections in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* evoke a food heritage adapted from Africa, the Transatlantic slave trade and enslavement. Thus, Hurston's foodways often lead back to Africa.

African Foodways

"No, I do not weep at the world. I'm too busy sharpening my oyster knife."
(Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings)

Interestingly, many foods in Hurston's novel, like rice, barbecue, and beans, are distinctly African. Perhaps most famous are the navy beans, or crowder peas mentioned by Hurston as Janie and Teacake "make money picking beans" and establish a new homestead (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching* 183). Along with navy beans, cowpeas— better known as black-eyed peas—are crops transported from Africa to the United States with the Transatlantic slave trade (Pillsbury 47-49). Scholar and historian Frederick Douglass Opie even suggests that

"it is probable that hopping john [a popular southern dish of rice and black-eyed peas] evolved out of a rice and bean mixture….that sustained slaves during the Middle Passage"(Opie, *Hog and Hominy* 29). While there is a notable 129-year gap between the ban on importing humans[3] (1808 Federal Law-Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves) and the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is important to acknowledge the influence and adaptation of African crops as staples of the southern palate.

Many of the foods Hurston incorporates in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also reflect the endurance of the African American people. In the previously mentioned quote, Teacake and Janie are establishing a homestead. They are free people, yet they are still subject to the poverty and oppression that follows the Emancipation Proclamation in the Jim Crow era South. Their ability to garden the land indicates a character-defining will. Hurston writes that while Teacake is harvesting, Janie "baked big pans of navy beans with plenty of sugar and hunks of fatback laying on top…and boiled pots of black-eyed peas and rice" (132). In this example, the act of gardening is a self-sustaining medium that connects directly to the kitchen and the meal Janie cooks. A less known fact of the Transatlantic slave trade is that African people were famous for their agricultural and farming knowledge. Opie even reveals that "Rice planters often sought Igbo, an African people known for their rice cultivation knowledge, by name when purchasing slaves" (Opie, *Hog and Hominy* 14). Enslaved African people used these skills to create vast and flourishing southern plantations of rice, tobacco, cotton, and other crops. Hurston utilizes food farming and agricultural know-how to reflect the evolution and of African ingenuity.

[3] Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves of 1807 (2 Stat. 426, enacted March 2, 1807)

Remembering

"A thing is mighty big when time and distance cannot shrink it."

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 1938

To contextualize the American timeline, and our place in history, we need to look no further than our own grandparents. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, a mere 74 years after the issue of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, and the abolition of slavery. It is also critical to remember that Hurston was the granddaughter of four grandparents (both maternal and paternal) all born enslaved in the US South (Boyd 15). Conceivably, our distance to Hurston's generation and others of the Harlem Renaissance[4] is as close to us today as Hurston herself was to slavery. This context is imperative to Americans, and even more so to Americans who share a southern identity.

It is difficult to grasp the context of the time in relation to historic events. For example, the Transatlantic Slave trade, the Emancipation Proclamation, and even the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God appear* inapplicably distant and thus irrelevant. I believe however that the contemporary reader is closer to that history than imagined. I also believe literature provides a bridge to understanding the past. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston expose the power of literature to expose how the African diaspora expands the American narrative. If literature is a product of the culture in which it is conceived, then African American literature illuminates many cultural contributions and gives greater context to US history.

Attention to the subtleties of the foodway history in Hurston's work is especially relevant because the southern identity is so often associated with the colonization and plantations of the South. Many voices that reconstruct our complex American identity remain missing. Only posthumously, beginning with Alice Walker's work in the mid-1970's, has Hurston gained recognition for her contributions to American literature. Even so, the significance of her insight

[4] The African American cultural movement spanning the 1920s and 1930s.

to southern culture is less often discussed. The detailed accounts of southern African American foodways in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides a cultural snapshot of the 1930s more vivid than those captured by photograph or recipe. It is in Hurston's cultural reconstruction of southern foods and food rituals which emotionally connect the characters to one another and the storyteller to the tale, that the reader learns the complexities of the southern region.

Ancestors II

The children are forgetful, as mouths
devour history, pulled from the bone.

Women's hands glisten in its greasy fat
with bent country knuckles they pick

and cackle like birds above a carcass,
the slow dirty work of separating.

These Irish roots are African—how do
I return a recipe to its owner?

-Heather Wright

Work Cited

Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows : The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York : Scribner, 2003. *Internet Archive*, http://archive.org/details/wrappedinrainbow00boyd.

Butler, Bisa. *Wrapped In Rainbows*. 2018. Fiber Art. https://www.bisabutler.com

"Carolina's Gold Coast: The Culture of Rice and Slavery." *S.C. Sea Grant Consortium*, 19 Nov. 2014, https://www.scseagrant.org/carolinas-gold-coast-the-culture-of-rice-and-slavery/.

"About." *Town Of Eatonville*, http://www.townofeatonville.org/about/. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Valerie A. Smith, editors. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Third edition, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. Library of America : Distributed to the U.S. by Penguin Books, 1995.

Hurston, Zora Neale, et al. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 75th anniversary edition, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013.

Jones, Sharon L. *Critical Companion to Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*. Facts On File, 2009.

"Mama Don't Want No Peas, No Rice." *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*, https://www.loc.gov/item/flwpa000016/. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

McDaniel, Rick. *An Irresistible History of Southern Food: Four Centuries of Black-Eyed Peas, Collard Greens and Whole Hog Barbecue*. Arcadia Publishing, 2011.

Opie, Frederick Douglass. *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. Columbia University Press, 2010. *Open WorldCat*, http://site.ebrary.com/id/10387042.

Opie, Frederick Douglass. *Zora Neale Hurston on Florida Food: Recipes, Remedies & Simple Pleasures*. American Palate, 2015.

Pillsbury, Richard. *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place*. Westview Press, 1998.

Prahlad, Anand, editor. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Greenwood Press, 2006.

The Jim Crow Era (1896-1954) | The Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement. https://sites.psu.edu/civilrightsrhetoric/plessy-v-ferguson-jim-crow-1896-1954/. Accessed 11 Apr. 2022.

Twitty, Michael. *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African-American Culinary History in the Old South*. First edition, Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.

White Acre Peas. https://specialtyproduce.com/produce/White_Acre_Peas_14009.php. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

Wilson, Charles Reagan, and William R. Ferris, editors. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. University of North Carolina Press, 1989.