



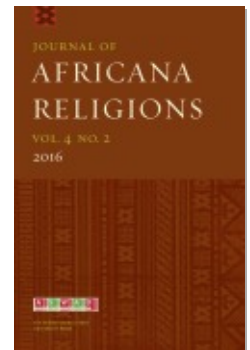
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Journal of Africana Religions, Volume 4, Number 2, 2016, pp. 186-214 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Epistemological
“Opacity” in Black Religious
Experience

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Abstract

Approaching Zora Neale Hurston as both a *littérateur* and cultural theorist who challenges conventional methodological and discursive boundaries, this article investigates her famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Drawing on Charles Long’s category of “opacity” as a crucial factor in the dynamics of Black religious experience, I contend that the value of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* extends beyond the domain of literary theory into the domain of religious theory. More specifically, a close reading of certain passages in the novel signals *disruptive wonderment* and *sacred silence* as two motifs underscoring the integral status of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience. Further, the way the novel encodes these two motifs suggests the phenomenological receptivity of Black religious experience to spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires originating outside the Judeo-Christian tradition that construct reality independently.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, Black religion, African religions, literature and religion, epistemology

Few would impugn Zora Neale Hurston's seminal contributions to folklore studies and to the North American literary canon. A major figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Hurston's uniquely iconic status among the "New Negro" intelligentsia of that time is further underscored by her substantial work as an international anthropologist, sociopolitical critic, playwright, and stage performer.¹ Despite the considerable breadth of Hurston's corpus, many scholars prefer to imagine her in their work principally as a *littérateur*, thereby directing attention away from her important function as a cultural theorist whose ideas traverse the geographic boundaries of Africa's diaspora in the North American southeast and in the West Indies.² Though somewhat lamentable, this preference is understandable given the success of Hurston's literary career. Nevertheless, it is only since the late 1970s—more than a decade after her death—that Hurston's position in North America's intellectual canon has garnered wider scholarly interest.

For reasons that are unclear, Hurston has yet to consistently emerge as a major focus of research in the field of Africana religious studies. To be sure, the relevance of her work to Black North American cultural experience and religion has not gone unnoticed. For instance, scholars have explored Hurston's fictional and nonfictional writings with an eye toward their implications for understanding womanist identity and ethics, her use of African religious idioms in narrative contexts, and her insight into the polyvalent layers of Black spiritual traditions.³ These explorations notwithstanding, the following questions remain to date underinvestigated: What can be learned from an analysis of Hurston's *fiction* as broadly relevant *theoretical* reflection on Black religious experience, and what methodological implications obtain from this for more expansive critical diasporic engagement with spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires?

Approaching Hurston as both a *littérateur* and cultural theorist who redefines conventional methodological and discursive boundaries, this essay addresses the previous queries through an investigation of her famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston rapidly completed the novel during a seven-week period in 1936 while conducting Guggenheim Fellowship-supported ethnographic fieldwork in Haiti on the Fon-derived spiritual system known as Vodun.⁴ With differing levels of insight, literary studies of *Their Eyes* consider a range of topics. Some of these coalesce around the entwined issues of orality and naming in the novel.⁵ Other studies suggest, for example, that autobiography, the subversion of hierarchies, Vodun symbolism, transformation, and other tropes are important conceptual keys to unlocking the novel's sundry meanings.⁶

Their Eyes has attracted relatively little examination from scholars concerned with religious phenomena in the African American milieu. This is not to suggest that these scholars have overlooked literary fiction as an idiom pertinent to the analysis of Black religious experience. Indeed, Josiah Young III, Clarence Hardy III, and Monica Coleman all make articulate cases for the important role of fiction in elaborating the abstruse experiential contours of Black religion.⁷ However, this appraisal of fiction is uncommon in Africana religious studies. Moreover, on the rare occasion that a fictional work is extensively treated in this field, a predominant tendency is to interpret the work such that it appears in conformity with politicized forms of Black Protestant thought, the most prominent example being Black theology.⁸ Other useful modalities for interpreting Black fiction are at best marginal to mainstream scholarship on Black religion.

This article departs from the hermeneutical tendency mentioned above in three primary ways: (1) The article uses a phenomenological mode of analysis informed by historian of religions Charles Long, whose seminal theoretical contributions in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* are grossly underutilized among scholars of Black religion. (2) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is treated not just as a fictional narrative, but also as a theoretical index encoding the uncertain complexities of Black religious experience and a need for constructive contact between this experience and African and African-derived epistemological repertoires not defined by Judeo-Christian epistemes. (3) "Black religious experience" is understood as a multivalent phenomenon that defies simplification. Drawing on Long's category of "opacity" as a crucial factor in the dynamics of Black religious experience, I contend that the value of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* extends beyond the domain of literary theory into the domain of religious theory. More specifically, I argue that a close reading of certain passages in the novel signals *disruptive wonderment* and *sacred silence* as two motifs underscoring the integral status of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience.⁹ I argue further that the way the novel encodes these two motifs suggests the phenomenological receptivity of Black religious experience to spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires originating outside the Judeo-Christian tradition that construct reality independently.

Terminology

Let us briefly pause here to clarify two concepts anchoring this essay: *epistemological opacity* and *Black religious experience*. The term *epistemological opacity*

used herein invokes Long's analysis of the experience of enslaved Africans under the oppressive imperial regimes of Euro-American modernity.¹⁰ Long explains:

As stepchildren of Western culture, the oppressed have affirmed and opposed the ideal of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment worlds. But in the midst of this ambiguity . . . their experiences were rooted in the absurd meaning of their bodies, and it was for these bodies that they were regarded not only as valuable works but also as the locus of the ideologies that justified their enslavement. These bodies of opacity, these loci of meaninglessness . . . were paradoxically loci of a surplus of meaning, meanings incapable of universal expression during the period of oppression. These opaque ones were centers from which gods were made . . . these bodies of opacity were facts of history and symbols of a new religious depth.¹¹

Following the Middle Ages, the intimate cultural violence of Euro-American modernity paradoxically induced in enslaved Africans a religious sense of existential absurdity simultaneously bereft of meaning and overabounding with meaning. From this perspective, modernity is a convoluted web of oppressive anti-African significations and material arrangements rendering Black self-understanding and spirituality thoroughly "opaque" and bizarrely novel. As "stepchildren of Western culture," persons of African descent in North America and elsewhere in the African diaspora can never fully escape this web. Consequently, the struggle among these persons to gain knowledge of themselves in relation to both the material and immaterial worlds is at every level beset by modernity's opaque construction of Blackness. This gives a sense of the historical, material, and discursive conundrum that vexingly informs the basic meaning of the term *epistemological opacity*.

The term *Black religious experience* refers to a manifold African Atlantic phenomenon spanning nearly four centuries whose meanings are largely inexplicable within any single framework.¹² Long's contributions are again helpful here. He proposes that methodologies for the study of Black religious experience must address three "symbolic images" or "principles": (1) Africa as historical reality and religious image, (2) the involuntary presence of Black people in America, and (3) the experience and symbol of God in the religious experience of Black people. In addition, rather than defining Black religious experience along narrow denominational lines, Long suggests a broad understanding of this experience as "orientation," by which he means an experience of coming "to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the

world.”¹³ Building on this loose formula, I provisionally define Black religious experience as a dynamic African Atlantic constellation of multifarious orientations concentrated geographically in North America and rooted in the opacity of Euro-American modernity’s oppressive imperial symbols and in the three abovementioned principles. Some of these African Atlantic orientations include traditional, nontraditional, and contemporary configurations of Protestant Christianity (for example, Black Methodist denominations, Father Divine’s International Peace Mission Movement, and Edge Urban Fellowship), Catholicism, Judaism (for instance, the African Hebrew Israelites and the Congregation of Commandment Keepers), and Islam (such as the Nation of Islam and the Five Percenters). Other orientations include Yorùbá-based socio-spiritual communities (for example, Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina), as well as Hoodoo, rootworking, and Conjure traditions, to name a few. Importantly, the formulation of Black religious experience proffered above severely destabilizes easy presuppositions concerning the adequacy of explanatory models based in apologetic Christian epistemes. Such destabilization is implicit in Zora Neale Hurston’s reflective life as a young girl, in her doubt about the ability of Christian doctrine to circumscribe Black folk culture, and in the circumstances under which she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston—born in Notasulga, Alabama, but raised in Eatonville, Florida—confesses that despite her father John Hurston’s theological certitude and social stature in Eatonville as a Baptist preacher, she harbored serious doubts about Christian doctrine at a very young age:

You wouldn’t think that a person who was born with God in the house would ever have any questions to ask on the subject. . . . It was explained to me that Christ died to save the world from sin and then too, so that folks did not have to die anymore. That was a simple, clear-cut explanation. But then I heard my father and other preachers accusing people of sin. They went so far as to say that people were so prone to sin, that they sinned with every breath they drew. You couldn’t even breathe without sinning! How could that happen if we had already been saved from it? So far as the dying part was concerned, I saw enough funerals to know that somebody was dying. It seemed to me that somebody had been fooled and I so stated to my father and two of his colleagues. When they got through with me, I knew better than to say that out loud again, but their shocked and angry tirades did nothing for my bewilderment. My head was full of

misty fumes and doubt. . . . As I grew, the questions went to sleep in me. I just said the words, made the motions and went on.¹⁴

We might also mention Hurston's controversial claim based on her researches during the late 1920s into Black folk narratives of the southern Gulf states that "the Negro is not a Christian really." She writes of such folk narratives as "God an' de Devil in de Cemetery" and "Why We Say 'Unh Hunh'" that "God and the Devil are paired, and are treated no more reverently than Rockefeller and Ford."¹⁵ Moreover, as noted, Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* in Haiti while researching Vodun. Robert Hemenway, Hurston's first biographer, states that during this time she also "perfected her Creole, acquired a working knowledge of voodoo gods, attended a number of ceremonies presided over by a voodoo priest," and at times worked on the novel "[late at night after a day of collecting [field data]]."¹⁶ Given Hurston's distrust of Christian doctrine, her doubt about its ability to circumscribe Black folk culture, and the circumstances surrounding the completion of *Their Eyes*, it is to be expected that philosopher Cornel West would class her among other "Afro-American humanists" like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Ralph Ellison, all of whom he considers "secure" with their folk "heritage, as well as with those of other groups or nations."¹⁷ These observations lend credence to an interpretation of *Their Eyes* as a discourse refusing to easily presume the adequacy of devotional Christian epistemes for the theoretical elaboration of Black religious experience.

Synopsis

We now move to a synopsis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Likely set in the early 1900s, the novel chronicles Janie Mae Crawford's tortuous quest for self-knowledge, meaning, and personal freedom. Hailing from the town of Eatonville in central Florida, an all-Black town incorporated as a municipality in 1887, Janie—a strikingly beautiful Black woman with semi-Caucasian features whose determination to experience the world on her own terms summons the judgmental suspicion of community gossipmongers—returns home at the start of the novel after being away for an extended period. Having endured as a child the absence of her alcoholic mother Leafy, who at a young age was raped by a schoolteacher, and having been reared by her authoritarian grandmother Nanny, Janie returns only after undergoing an intensely transformative journey that begins with two variously abusive, ill-fated marriages to Logan Killicks and Joe (Jody) Starks. The journey

culminates in a third passionately volatile marriage to Tea Cake (Vergible Woods), a man roughly twelve years Janie's junior. This experience instills in Janie a deep sense of earned wisdom and self-assuredness that many in her community misunderstand. Members of the community wonder where Janie has been and what has become of Tea Cake. Upon Janie's arrival back in Eatonville, she is visited by her best friend Pheoby Watson, who is curious about Janie's experience. The novel concludes with poignant remarks from the narrator describing Janie's reflection on Tea Cake's tragic death, which occurs at her hands in self-defense when, as both are fleeing a calamitous hurricane in the Florida Everglades, he attacks her while suffering from a rabies infection caused by a dog bite:

Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she [Janie] herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. 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! She called in her soul to come and see.¹⁸

By the novel's end, Janie's gauntlet of experiences grows into a deep network of meaning she is eager to plumb. For in this network of meaning is a freshly rediscovered self willing to confront at once the brute terror and sublime beauty of human existence.

Disruptive Wonderment

Our analysis commences with two passages that narrate the arrival of the novel's climactic hurricane. The first passage comments generally on the attitude of the predominantly Black Everglades snap bean harvesting community toward the impending storm. The second passage comments on the attitudes of Janie, Tea Cake, and their mutual friend Motor Boat, all of whom are gathered in Janie and Tea Cake's shack after a rousing afternoon of dice and dancing with other harvesters.¹⁹

It [the hurricane] woke up old [Lake] Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in

the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your cracks, shiver in your wet beds and wait on the mercy of the Lord. The bossman might have the thing stopped before morning anyway. It is so easy to be hopeful in the day time when you can see the things you wish on. But it was night, it stayed night. Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands.

They [Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat] huddled closer and stared at the door. They just didn't use another part of their bodies, and they didn't look at anything but the door. The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning *God*. The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.²⁰

The arrival of the hurricane disrupts the consciousness of the Everglades harvesting community by impugning the power of the community's white authorities. Community members suddenly realize that the white authorities in the "big houses around the shore" cannot ensure their safety. It becomes apparent that the hurricane is a much greater power against which they all are virtually helpless. The surging, "hard skies" above bring with them growing doubt as they remain cloaked in the darkness of night. As Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat prepare to escape the hurricane's onslaught, they "watch" with "questioning" eyes, wondering what God's purpose is in unleashing the ferocious storm upon them. This quandary provides an opportunity to explore a motif best described as disruptive wonderment.

The hurricane's significance encompasses more than the negation of the tutelar power of white overseers and physical devastation; its significance lies also in its disruption of nonthreatening conceptions of the spiritual dimension. This climactic storm arouses in Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat a troubling wonderment about the nature of God and God's activity in the world. The narrator draws a subtle causal link between God and the hurricane, thereby

relating the hurricane's destructive power to God's intentionality. Such an association dislodges consoling notions these three characters may have about the "mercy of the Lord"; they are all faced with the cruelly indiscriminate power of the hurricane as well as their own fragile mortality. The question is posed whether God intends to "measure" God's power against that of the community, which is "puny" in comparison. However, though Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat continue to "watch" God in the roiling darkness, no answer to their question is forthcoming.

The lethal chaos of the hurricane peels back the layers of their material and religious consciousness, imposing an awareness of the physical and spiritual dimensions as fearsomely mysterious. The unanswerable question instigated by the hurricane precipitates a crisis of meaning; neither Janie, nor Tea Cake, nor Motor Boat can determine the ultimate purpose of the hurricane relative to their own lives. The hurricane incites a suspension of meaning in the existential and religious experience of the three characters. They must acknowledge the often-unintelligible stream of human circumstance along with the impenetrable opacity of spiritual power, and this acknowledgment leaves them with an acutely disruptive sense of wonderment and an unfulfilled desire for clear meaning; the hapless trio is challenged to face the sheer mystery of the hurricane in unrelenting disquietude.

The hurricane is experienced by the trio not only as a catastrophic occurrence but also as an instructive event. The disruptive experience of the hurricane affords the trio the opportunity to realize the fundamental asymmetry between religious experience and intellectual mastery. The characters' momentous encounter with the hurricane's power adds little to their factual knowledge of themselves and the world. The encounter confounds their knowledge, thus engendering in them an interrogative posture impugning what they know of reality. The hurricane's presence implies that the disruptive quality of spiritual power is expressed in variously unpredictable ways, hence generating unanswerable questions and crises of meaning in any number of different settings. These unpredictable expressions can dramatically impact the religious consciousness of those who experience them and in so doing destabilize the status of knowledge as the principal source of human orientation in the world.

The interpretive scope of the disruptive wonderment motif is sufficiently broad to encompass our exploration of opacity within the context of Black religious experience. We now pose the following question: How is this motif relevant to our developing understanding of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience?

Disruptive Wonderment and Epistemological Opacity in Black Religious Experience

Disruptive wonderment implies that epistemological opacity in Black religious experience is sometimes characterized by intense vexation rather than contentment, by exponentially increasing questions rather than easy or eventual resolution. If we examine the motif at a phenomenological level, we begin to apprehend that epistemological opacity in Black religious experience is marked by inexhaustive knowledge of matter and spirit, and by a potentially threatening relationship with the spiritual dimension in particular. This opacity involves existential anxiety and an entire host of related incessant struggles. Recall Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat's experience of the hurricane; for them, the hurricane is an awe-inspiring but perplexing expression of spiritual power posing a direct and unapologetic threat to their lives. This experience compels the question of whether the hurricane is a brutal demonstration of God's superior "might." We are given the impression that these characters feel "puny" in the hurricane's presence. The threat posed by the hurricane, coupled with the unanswered question it raises, creates in the characters a heightened state of existential doubt. And yet it is precisely this state that makes possible for them a keen recognition of their question's orienting function vis-à-vis the sacral reality toward which the question is directed.

Does the motif of disruptive wonderment suggest a complete deficit of meaning in the opaque regions of Black religious experience so poignantly described in Hurston's novel? The simple answer is no. If the opacity of Black religious experience was entirely without meaning, then its epistemological significance would evaporate. Nonetheless, when disruptive wonderment is understood as a primary component of the opacity in Black religious experience, the *status* of human meanings diminishes. Disruptive wonderment provokes the realization that such meanings lack ultimacy. Within the theoretical schema introduced by disruptive wonderment, human meanings make sense only as inadequately constructed approximations of material and immaterial phenomena. Therefore, while the construction of meanings is pragmatically necessary for human survival and productivity, the experience of disruptive wonderment nevertheless tempers these meanings. When seen as an explanatory discourse, *Their Eyes* forwards the idea that experiences of disruptive wonderment function collectively as a matrix for epistemological opacity in Black religious experience.

As a source of this opacity, disruptive wonderment illumines the point that absolute knowledge ensues neither from contact with the spiritual dimension

nor from engagement with the physical world, which is always subject to the influential power of the former. On this view, knowledge in either relational context is de facto provisional and mutable. Of greatest importance then from the purview of Black religious experience is not knowledge itself but one's orientation to knowledge. This is not to say that orientation is somehow more stable than the meanings produced by human knowledges. The point rather is that orientation is vital to maintaining a critical perspective on human knowledges that disallows their elevation to the level of ultimacy. The spiritual dimension's provisionalization of human knowledges and orientations facilitates an openness to experiences of disruptive wonderment, thereby promoting epistemological growth that increasingly sharpens awareness of the spiritual dimension's indecipherability and of the limitations of human knowing.

The passages from *Their Eyes* quoted above help frame what follows next. Their account of the unique crypticism of spiritual power and the boundaries of human knowledge signals something further about the disposition of the spiritual world. Admittedly, the "something further" here could refer to a wide array of variously relevant conceptual vectors. However, we will focus our attention only on one of these vectors: namely, the motif of sacred silence.

Sacred Silence

The third passage to be examined is set after Tea Cake was bitten by a rabid dog while fleeing the hurricane. By this time Tea Cake was displaying symptoms consistent with rabies, such as severe headache, mood swings, and difficulty swallowing water.²¹ Janie consults Dr. Simmons, a local physician, who diagnoses Tea Cake with rabies and informs Janie of his poor prognosis due to significantly delayed treatment. Dr. Simmons suggests Tea Cake be "tied down" in the "County Hospital," a recommendation Janie knows Tea Cake will reject.²² Janie is greatly pained by Tea Cake's suffering and unfortunate prognosis. In this context, the narrator makes the following remarks:

She [Janie] looked hard at the sky for a long time. Somewhere up there beyond blue ether's bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must be because He knew everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He'd give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in

the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart.²³

Tea Cake's rapidly declining condition causes intense unrest in Janie. Their dire situation makes little sense to her, yet she struggles to remain hopeful while caring for Tea Cake. Inevitably it seems, this tragic predicament foments in Janie a theological crisis. She instinctively turns to the spiritual dimension under the assumption that meaning can be found there in the form of a "sign" that will resolve the opacity of her circumstances. But no useful sign is forthcoming. Janie's urgent search for spiritual meaning goes unsatisfied. Her earnest appeal to God is met with sacred silence.

Janie assumes that her ordeal is not without purpose. She sees God's putatively all-knowing power as the key to unlocking this purpose. Moreover, Janie senses a greater intentionality behind Tea Cake's suffering and her own that is not reducible to a hurricane or to the violent behavior of a rabid dog—hence her query as to whether or not *God* intends "to do this thing to Tea Cake and her." Janie also recognizes that alone she is powerless to change the situation, and so is Dr. Simmons. In fact, no one in her community is able to end the suffering she and Tea Cake undergo. Janie thus concludes that she "can only ache and wait."

While doing so, Janie searches for a "star in the daytime," a "shouting sun," a "mutter of thunder," or any other sacred sign she can interpret as a meaningful response to her questions. She petitions the spiritual dimension for assistance, explaining the significance of what she and Tea Cake are experiencing. However, her petition is painfully met with a "hard looking, quiet sky." Janie understands this signless, quiet sky to mean God is indifferent to her and will therefore do "less than He has in His heart." Spiritual power speaks in a loudly menacing way through the hurricane's destruction and Tea Cake's diseased condition. But this same power falls silent when presented with Janie's "desperate" petition. Consequently, she is forced to come to terms with the horrific reality of Tea Cake's impending death and her own suffering.

Janie's experience demonstrates that human beings are sometimes made to suffer alone in the face of sacred silence. Her unanswered petition belies the notion that one can always turn to the world of spirit for succor in times of travail. Janie has no choice but to confront the existential brutality of her ordeal without definite knowledge that at some future point God will reveal the

ultimate meaning of her situation. Her ordeal discloses a religious consciousness of spiritual power as a reality that is not responsive to every instance of human suffering. Janie learns she cannot always expect the spiritual dimension to intervene and rescue her from the innumerable terrors attending physical existence. She must deal with the world as it is, not as she wishes it to be, and the world as it is sometimes involves sacred silence amid unspeakable human suffering.

Janie's unexpected encounter with sacred silence implies that the human capacity for meaning-making in the worst of circumstances is limited. That God offers nothing but silence in response to Tea Cake's worsening condition and Janie's fervent petition indicates that religious experience can entail an element of epistemological displacement. Janie does everything in her power to help Tea Cake convalesce. But her efforts are frustrated, and she finds herself essentially alone in a bleak situation wherein survival depends on her ability to struggle against a growing sense of hopeless isolation. Janie learns she cannot rely on the spiritual dimension to allay the tragedy before her. Her bold questions to God and loving concern for Tea Cake are refracted back at her through Tea Cake's precipitous decline and God's refusal to acknowledge her request for a sign. Janie must confront the chaotic hardness of life through an uncertain frame of meaning.

The motif of sacred silence casts light on the dynamics shaping the human-sacred relationship. Janie's experience reveals that the agency of the sacred cannot be controlled or predicted, even in times of human desperation. Therefore, sacred agency—*not* human agency—dictates the terms of the human-sacred relationship. Within the narrative world of *Their Eyes*, spiritual power has significant bearing on human existence, whereas, as Janie's ordeal makes clear, human power has little if any bearing on the spiritual dimension. In searching the skies for a sign, Janie hopes to find an answer to salve her profound agony. However, no such answer is found, and her agony holds sway. Sacred silence as conveyed through Janie's experience bespeaks the uneven nature of the human-sacred relationship, leading us once again to ponder epistemological opacity in Black religious experience.

Sacred Silence and Epistemological Opacity in Black Religious Experience

What is the significance of sacred silence as a facet of the epistemological opacity lingering in the ever-shifting fabrics of Black religious experience? The

first point to make in addressing this question has to do with ultimate meaning; sacred silence accents the inaccessibility of ultimate meaning. I am not proposing that epistemological opacity in Black religious experience exists sans meaning. On the contrary, this opacity is partially constituted by the fashioning and attachment of fragmentary meanings to an expansive range of historical occurrences, several of which include geographic dislocation, genocide, racialization, violent Christianization, and cultural re-creation.²⁴ However, we must remember that, as Janie's desperate petition implies, these fashioned human meanings never reach the level of ultimacy, despite the intentions of their architects. Meaning within the context of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience then is dynamically functional; it is dynamic in that it requires pliancy for effective adaptation to constantly changing realities in the material world, and it is functional in that it contributes to the basic theoretical coherence informing experience itself as a psychological phenomenon. Thus, even on the most rudimentary level, the meanings shaping this opacity are *nondoctrinaire*. Moreover, the provisional status of these meanings suggests they are subject to ongoing scrutiny and contestation that can prompt reevaluation of their usefulness, result in their eradication, or hasten their reconstitution along lines more in keeping with the flux of material existence. These constructed meanings are inherently fragile because of their inseverable connection to the reality of sacred silence, which not only delimits their scope but also at every moment dimly signifies the inaccessible, potent meanings of the spiritual dimension.

The second related point is that, as provisional constructions bound to the reality of sacred silence, the opaque meanings of Black religious experience are always accompanied by epistemological uncertainty. Put another way, the modes of knowing to which these meanings give rise are as unstable as the meanings themselves. This becomes more evident when interpreting Janie's response to the hurricane and its effects as demonstrative of a mode of knowing. Janie's response, which is primarily interrogative, begins with a question as to whether God is even aware of her crisis. She concludes God "must" be aware of it given that God "knows everything." She then contemplates the possibility that the crisis she and Tea Cake face is just "some big tease" engineered by God, and she hopes God will give her a sign to this effect. But because no sign appears, Janie concludes God will "do less" than is in God's "heart" and is therefore apathetic to their plight. Janie's response shifts dramatically from contemplation of a potentially caring God to resignation about God's apathy. I would submit that this shift reflects an unstable mode of knowing, and that this instability is endemic to the epistemological opacity in Black religious

experience. The term *unstable* need not carry a pejorative connotation, for, as our analysis implies, instability enhances the creative possibilities of Black religious epistemology by instructively signifying the spiritual dimension's provisionalization of human knowledges.

The third point is that the motif of sacred silence highlights the chaotic danger of the physical world as a reality deeply informing the opacity in question. Janie's candid acknowledgment of the sacred silence with which her petition is met suggests this opacity is reinforced by the myriad limitations and perils of physical existence. From this standpoint, the harsh rigors of survival in the physical world extend a measure of articulability to Black religious experience. Hence, rather than encouraging withdrawal from materiality, the epistemological opacity in Black religious experience impels engagement of materiality; in short, this experience necessarily involves uncertain yet creative participation in the physical world tempered by acute awareness of the epistemological boundaries imposed by the spiritual dimension. Janie's experience is a poignant theoretical discourse asserting that while the spiritual world is at times silent, the perilous physical world plangently announces itself on a near-constant basis, demanding a reflective consciousness marked by engaged attention and courageous action.

The Phenomenological Receptivity of Black Religious Experience to Spiritually Based African and African-Derived Epistemological Repertoires

The foregoing analysis of disruptive wonderment and sacred silence in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emphasizes that the question of Black religious experience is fundamentally a question of epistemology. Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat are not just characters in the novel. They are also discursive instruments used to encode wider theoretical reflection on the dynamic contours and fabrics of Black religious experience. Bearing this critical procedure in mind, what might be made of Hurston's inclusion of Judeo-Christian terms like *Lord* and *God* in the three focal passages from *Their Eyes* treated earlier? Is this decision at all significant?

The narrative mood of these passages, a mood implied by the word *watching* in the novel's very title, is worth noting. The mood of the passages is one of desperate reflection amid an existential crisis imposed by natural destruction, for which there is no satisfying spiritual theory. Inquiries are insistently raised

regarding divine power, empathy, and intentionality. In a literal sense, Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat are all mortally invested in such frantic questioning. Nonetheless, the mournful conclusion is that "God would do less than He had in His heart." The three characters are left to watch, searchingly, for God in restive resignation.

This narrative mood of desperate reflection is germane to our questions about Hurston's use of Judeo-Christian language in the three passages under discussion. It is significant that the context for this language involves experiential extrospection and introspection on a basic level: Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat consider the possibility that the novel's climactic hurricane is a callous demonstration of God's superior power, and Janie wonders privately if God's aim is to specifically inflict suffering on her and Tea Cake. From an epistemological perspective, it is also significant that the characters unsuccessfully attempt to think through their unfortunate circumstances according to what appears to be an underlying Judeo-Christian lexicon, the cosmology of which sweepingly declares the omnipotence and omniscience of God. The profound religiophilosophical confusion of the three characters goes unabated. Likewise, their hunger for meaning goes unsated, creating an epistemological void that further enables receptivity to knowledge repertoires offering other possibilities. Said differently, the bewildered condition in which Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat find themselves casts a degree of doubt on the prevailing Judeo-Christian cosmological script they automatically invoke, thereby creating additional space for the exploration of less dominant scripts whose cultural origins lie elsewhere.

Keeping in mind Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat's greater role in *Their Eyes* as discursive instruments that encode broader theorization on Black religious experience, we apprehend even more the significance of Hurston's use of Judeo-Christian language: it underscores the explanatory inadequacy of this language vis-à-vis Black religious experience, and thus facilitates a reimagining of this experience as *phenomenologically* receptive to spiritually based African and African-derived repertoires of knowledge that construct the world differently. The phrase "phenomenologically receptive" in this instance denotes a willingness to constructively encounter such repertoires on their own dynamic terms, not on terms set by the coercive programs of Christian theological agendas, veiled Western cultural imperialisms, or other similar programs. This reimagining of Black religious experience warrants further attention. Our task now is to offer a brief constructive reflection on some of the methodological implications of such reimagining.

Methodological Implications for Critical Diasporic Engagement with Spiritually Based African and African-Derived Epistemological Repertoires

When taking into account the research methodology evident in Hurston's published ethnographic works and folklore collections extending back to the early 1930s, it is perhaps not surprising that the three passages examined from *Their Eyes* depict Black religious experience in such an unvarnished, indeterminate manner. It is significant as well that, while at Barnard College in the 1920s, Hurston studied with famed anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University. She once wrote of him, "Away from his office, Dr. Boas is full of youth and fun, and abhors dull, stodgy arguments. Get to the point is his idea. Don't raise a point which you cannot defend. He wants facts, not guesses, and he can pin you down so expertly that you soon lose the habit of talking all over your face. Either that, or you leave off Anthropology."²⁵ This gives additional context to Hurston's ethnographic approach, which, I would suggest, is also phenomenological and narrativial in a way that converges on issues of epistemology.²⁶ Concerning her early study of Black folklore in Florida, Alabama, and New Orleans, and her later study of African Caribbean folklore in the Bahamas, Hurston writes to Alain Locke in 1928 that "I am using the vacuum method, grabbing everything I see."²⁷ Furthermore, Hurston's examination of Black "culture heroes" like the Devil ("who is often smarter than God"), Jack, Stacker Lee, Smokey Joe, and Bad Lazarus, all of whom occupy degrees of prominence in the Black folk *narrative* tradition, leads her to conclude that the deep structures of Black folk culture are incompatible with Christian belief.²⁸ From a Hurstonian point of view, these deep structures "speak" for themselves; that is, they have a story to tell, and this is not to be ignored by researchers in their application of scholarly methods. Such application is a process that should, as much as possible, thoroughly account for cultural data as they are, not as researchers prefer to imagine them.

Hurston's penetrating insight into how devotees of Haitian Vodun understand the *loa* (Haitian mysteres, or deities) compellingly exemplifies this methodological standard:

Some of the other men of education in Haiti who have given time to the study of Voodoo esoterics do not see such deep meanings in Voodoo practices. They see only a pagan religion with an African pantheon. And right here, let it be said that the Haitian gods, mysteres, or loa are not the Catholic calendar of saints done over in black as

has been stated by casual observers. This has been said over and over in print because the adepts have been seen buying the lithographs of saints, but this is done because they wish some visual representation of the invisible ones, and as yet no Haitian artist has given them an interpretation or concept of the loa. But even the most illiterate peasant knows that the picture of the saint is only an approximation of the loa. In proof of this, most of the houngans [Vodun priests] require those who place themselves under their tutelage in order to become hounsi [Vodun initiates] to bring a composition book for notes, and in this they must copy the houngan's concept of the loa. I have seen several of these books with the drawings, and none of them even pretend to look like the Catholic saints. Neither are their attributes the same.²⁹

For Hurston, "paganism" is an insufficient analytical category for understanding the loa as they are understood by devotees. She strives for an understanding unmolested by the evolutionary, hierarchical presuppositions attending the age-old Christian/pagan binary. The fact that Hurston was researching Haitian Vodun with this in mind while simultaneously writing *Their Eyes* increases the probability that the novel's reflections on Black religious experience are strongly informed by the ethnophenomenological, narrational method that guided her fieldwork. This approach, so apparent in the 1938 book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, which is the product of Hurston's work on Haitian Vodun, very likely contributed to the reimagining of Black religious experience we find in *Their Eyes*. This reimagining carries methodological implications for the critical interface in Africana religious studies with spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires. These include a reconceptualization of the African diaspora that broadens critical recognition of the constellation of spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires existing within this diaspora, and the expansion of the critical vocabulary of Africana religious studies through constructive diasporic engagement.

While the category "African diaspora" may not have been a consistently explicit subject of interest in Hurston's work, the suggestion in *Their Eyes* that Black religious experience is phenomenologically receptive to spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires and their distinctly organized cosmologies comports well with contemporary scholarship. According to historian Colin Palmer, any academically responsible analysis of the modern African diaspora associated with the transatlantic slave trade must be grounded in a careful study of Africa, given that "Africa . . . remained

very much alive in the receiving societies as the various ethnic groups created new cultures and recreated their old ways as circumstances allowed.”³⁰ Yet Palmer urges avoidance of the homogenizing possibilities in the idea of an African diaspora, stating that “if a general nomenclature is needed for peoples of African descent living in the Atlantic basin, it should emerge from their complex and unique internal experiences, their sinews and deep structures.”³¹ Palmer’s warning is heeded in a study by Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley wherein they contend that the African diaspora is a “process” and “condition” that is “always in the making.” As such, the African diaspora can be “made” and “unmade.”³² When we consider what Hurston suggests in *Their Eyes* about Black religious experience, along with the historically grounded but dynamic theories advanced by Palmer, Patterson, and Kelley, there should be little question as to the appropriateness of entertaining another reconceptualization of the African diaspora.

It makes sense that, as historians, Palmer, Patterson, and Kelley would conceive of the African diaspora in terms of temporally bound events, periods, processes, and conditions. While certainly not ahistorical, Hurston’s reimagining of Black religious experience nevertheless implies a reconceptualization of the African diaspora that particularly stresses the latter’s spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological valences. These valences help constitute entire epistemological repertoires with their own cosmological apparatuses. This means that theorists of Black religious experience need not proceed along Christianizing trajectories, for there exists a veritable panoply of alternatives offering insight into human beings’ relationship with the spiritual dimension.

Some of these repertoires are found in the indigenous cosmologies of the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria, the BaKongo of the Republic of the Congo and northwestern coastal Angola, and the Akan of central and southern Ghana. Some other examples include the cosmologies of Haitian Vodun; Cuban Santería; Bahian Candomblé; Myal, Obeah, and Kumina in Jamaica; and Surinamese Winti.³³ These African continental and diasporic repertoires share in common an emphasis on accessing meaningful knowledge through actively sustained relationship with spiritual power. This relationship often finds expression in the form of (1) ancestral veneration, which involves reverent acknowledgment of the tutelary, ethical role played by spiritual ancestors within the communities of their descendants; (2) ceremonial spirit manifestation, wherein a deity visits a community, typically through a trained human medium, to impart knowledge; (3) divination, a highly technical procedural system of communication with spiritual power for practical ends such as childbirth, strong health, and professional success; (4) ritualized offerings of libation, food, and other

items to specific deities; and (5) herbalism, a type of medicine that uses the natural, spiritually rooted properties in various plants, mainly for the purpose of bodily healing.³⁴ Hurston's reimagining of Black religious experience signals a methodology inclined to reapproach the opacity of this experience through constructive phenomenological investigation. The investigation would probe the meanings ensuing from various expressions of the actively ongoing human-spirit relationship so central in African and African-derived cosmologies. Some possible questions are as follows: What does the special importance of sacrifice (*ẹbọ*) and ancestral veneration in Yorùbá cosmology indicate regarding how the human-spirit relationship is understood from a Yorùbá perspective? How might the BaKongo concept of *kindoki* (ambiguous spiritual power) be engaged as a heuristic resource in the theoretical articulation of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience? What apprehensions of reality underlie the practices of divination (*ebisadze*) among the Akan and spirit manifestation (*incorporar, manifestar*) in Bahian Candomblé? How might the concept of *kone-sans* (intuitive knowledge of people, human suffering, and healing) in Haitian Vodun be brought into epistemological conversation with Black religious experience?³⁵ Exploration of these questions is of course beyond the scope of this essay. They are thus proposed for researchers to address further as they may. The questions also segue into the second methodological implication of Hurston's reimagining of Black religious experience—namely, expansion of the critical vocabulary of Africana religious studies through constructive diasporic engagement.

This article and other previously mentioned works shed light on some of the ways Black literary fiction can serve a critical discursive role in Africana religious studies. The critical role of such fiction in theorizing Black religious experience is understudied and therefore remains a major frontier for research. But Hurston's reimagining of Black religious experience in *Their Eyes* suggests more than this frontier; it also stimulates reflection on the analytical language applied to Black religious experience. In other words, Hurston's reimagining creates an opportunity to reassess the critical vocabulary deployed in scholarly treatments of this experience. Hurston leads us to ask whether the critical vocabulary of Africana religious studies is adequate for understanding Black religious experience and, if not, how this vocabulary could be expanded.

In Hurston's corpus, we detect vectors by which a response to these inquiries may be crafted. As observed above, Hurston, in her book *The Sanctified Church*, is dissatisfied with presumptive language that would describe Black folk culture as essentially Christian in attitude, thought, and practice. The problem for Hurston is that language of this kind is simply out

of step with her data, which creatively reimagine figures like the Devil and God in a manner scandalous to conservative Christian doctrine and sensibilities. From Hurston's methodological purview, the development of a critical vocabulary for the study of Black folk culture would be profitably guided by "transdisciplinary" exploration of the deep epistemological structures of this culture, not by Christian dogmatism.³⁶ Hurston strikes a similar note in her earlier referenced ethnophenomenological discussion from *Tell My Horse* concerning the presence of Catholic saints in the symbolism of Haitian Vodun. She is quite clear that language like "pagan" and "Catholic calendar of saints done over in black" is not especially helpful. Initiates and priests of Haitian Vodun regard these saintly images as little more than imperfect "approximations" of Haitian loa. To briefly quote Hurston again: "Most of the houngans require those who place themselves under their tutelage in order to become hounsi to bring a composition book for notes, and in this they must copy the houngan's concept of the loa. I have seen several of these books with the drawings, and none of them even pretend to look like the Catholic saints. Neither are their attributes the same."³⁷ The vocabulary of Haitian Vodun is not the vocabulary of Roman Catholicism. Hurston understands this, and hence her analysis is pitched toward a linguoculturally literate engagement with Haitian Vodun that can assist other researchers in fashioning a dynamic critical vocabulary for examining and interpreting this tradition in conversation with devotees. As a seminal contributor to the methodological lineage that makes possible the relatively new field of Africana religious studies, Hurston would likely be in agreement with the following path charted for the field by Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks:

ARS [Africana religious studies] should develop transdisciplinary rationales for studying religious traditions and experiences that bind individuals together and provide orientation for navigating life within community. With reference to continental Africa, we have in mind here a proliferation of studies attentive to ethnic/cultural/linguistic/kinship/caste and other structures of identity that diversify what we know about the Ibibio, Mandingo, Kongo, Rund, Gikuyu, Xhosa, Tswana, Shona, and other continental peoples. In so doing, ARS will move beyond disparate reflections or intermittent roundtables on the scholarly mistakes of past studies of African religions; it will devise replicable as well as distinct research agendas that are no longer burdened by Western theoretical and disciplinary regimes or the devout translator's Euro-Christian template.³⁸

Although Hurston's *Tell My Horse* does not focus on an African continental tradition per se, it gestures methodologically in the direction set forth by Stewart and Hucks. Furthermore, the fact that *Tell My Horse* appeared the year following the publication of *Their Eyes*, which, as we said before, was written in Haiti, makes it reasonable to understand both texts as in some measure reflective of Hurston's methodological purview vis-à-vis Black religious experience and spiritually based African-derived epistemological repertoires such as that found in Haitian Vodun.

A Concluding Word

In many ways a product of the violently modernizing crucible of the Atlantic world, the question of Black religious experience and its opaque epistemological contours is far from settled, and may never be, given the unfettered pace of globalization and cross-cultural exchange in the twenty-first century. In the foregoing article, I engage this complexity not as a conundrum whose solution is close at hand, but rather as an opportunity to highlight the often-untapped insight present in the unique corpus of Zora Neale Hurston. I argue that the value of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* penetrates the sphere of religious theory, and that a careful reading of particular passages in the novel points to *disruptive wonderment* and *sacred silence* as motifs underscoring the integral status of epistemological opacity in Black religious experience. Moreover, the manner in which the novel encodes these motifs implies the phenomenological receptivity of Black religious experience to spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires originating outside the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Additionally, the passages examined from *Their Eyes* indicate a reimagining of Black religious experience carrying methodological importance for research in the field of Africana religious studies that explores epistemologies embedded within African and African-derived cultural systems. This importance is linked to a reconceptualization of the African diaspora that encourages critical recognition of spiritually based African and African-derived epistemological repertoires existing within the diaspora, and to further development of the critical vocabulary of Africana religious studies via constructive diasporic engagement. The African and African-derived epistemological repertoires mentioned are associated with such regions as southwestern Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, northern Angola, central and southern Ghana, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica, and Suriname. In addition, the interdisciplinary methodological orientation evident

in Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and her reimagining of Black religious experience in *Their Eyes* are compatible with innovative transdisciplinary proposals made very recently in Africana religious studies that are conducive to enlarging the field's critical vocabulary by way of diasporic intercourse.

Hurston's legacy for the study of Africana religions is difficult to measure. It is regrettable that her corpus is not widely mined by scholars in the field, particularly those specializing in Black religious cultures. I see no reason to exclude Hurston from the pantheon of great American cultural theorists, which includes giants like W. E. B. DuBois, Katherine Dunham, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and James Baldwin, to name only a few. Hurston's singular ability to think within and through the farthest recesses of Black folk and African Caribbean life in an arresting, transdiscursive way is pivotal to the critical articulation of Africana humanity. Thus, the neglect of Hurston in Africana religious studies leaves this field at a significant deficit. Looking forward, Africana religious studies stands only to benefit from a complete reversal of such neglect.

Notes

1. The term *New Negro* is associated with early twentieth-century philosopher Alain Locke, whom many credit as the father of the Harlem Renaissance. See Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 3–18.
2. For a sense of this breadth, see Zora Neale Hurston, "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver," *Journal of Negro History* 12 (1927): 648–63; Hurston, "Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas," *Journal of American Folklore* 43 (1930): 294–312; Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317–417; Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1938); Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1939); Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *Negro Digest* 8 (April 1950), 85–89; Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981); and Hurston, *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
3. See, for instance, chapters 6 and 7 in Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995). Additionally, see Daphne Lamothe, "Vodou Imagery, African-American Tradition and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Callaloo* 22, no. 1 (1999): 157–75; and Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). See also chapter 2 in Barbara D. Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

4. The Fon are a West African ethnolinguistic group concentrated historically in the Republic of Benin, formerly the kingdom of Dahomey.
5. See, for example, Sigrid King, "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 4 (1990): 683–96. Also, see Klaus Benesch, "Oral Narrative and Literary Text: Afro-American Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Callaloo*, no. 36 (1988): 627–35.
6. See, for example, Nellie McKay, "'Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51–70; William M. Ramsey, "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Literary Journal* 27, no. 1 (1994): 36–50; Sharon Davie, "Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993): 446–59; and Joseph R. Ugo, "'The Tune Is the Unity of the Thing': Power and Vulnerability in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Literary Journal* 23, no. 2 (1991): 40–54.
7. Representative texts include Josiah U. Young III, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003); Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003); and Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). In many respects, exploration of secular Black literature as data germane to the study Black religious life builds on the foundation laid in the 1930s by sociologist Benjamin E. Mays. See Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1938).
8. Dwight Hopkins explores Black fiction in a manner circumscribed by the Judeo-Christian presuppositions of Black liberation theology. In an analysis of *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved*, all novels written by Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, Hopkins proclaims, "Admittedly, Christianity does not consistently serve as the explicit primary location for divine spiritual presence in Toni Morrison's novels. Still, the liberating appearance of God's spirit in non-Christian revelations, through story, complement God's spiritual descending upon the decisive Christian revelation of Jesus the Christ. . . . God, as a result, grants a unique revelation in Jesus the Christ as well as a general revelation in all of creation." Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 83.
9. One finds in Hurston's novel other passages and motifs that can also be examined in relation to the argument I develop in this article. However, for purposes of space and conciseness, I have here narrowed my analysis. I offer a more wide-ranging treatment elsewhere. See chapter 4 in "'Life Is War': African Grammars of Knowing and the Interpretation of Black Religious Experience" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 2012).

10. Informed by the work of David Davis and Clyde Taylor, I distinguish between Euro-American modernity, with its Christian imperialist moorings, and other modernities—such as those that may be described as African, Black Atlantic, or transatlantic—ensuing from Euro-American and other forms of enslavement. Reflecting on the practice of slavery from antiquity to the twentieth century, Davis writes, “In a sense, slaves were the world’s first ‘modern’ people. . . . The modernity of the slave lay in his continuing marginality and vulnerability, in his complete and ambiguous bonding to a social group.” David B. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 14. In an unpublished essay, Clyde Taylor writes this of transatlantic modernity:

Another modernism crept under the radar simultaneously with euromodernism, mainly in the West Atlantic, among the subjects of European colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Peoples and nations passing through genocide, enslavement, dislocation, racialization, and conflicts of emancipation and anti-colonialism underwent as it were a laboratory experience of modernity. They were framed in the world outside themselves as “lineageless men,” people who belonged to nobody. They were stamped with a condition described as “social death,” void of relations to society, law, history, family relations, religion, education, neighborhood ties, custom, or anything that could be respected and passed on as an inheritance.

The struggles of these populations and societies to recover degrees of wholeness produced cultural and artistic expressions clearly modernist in every sense of the term; but their distinguishing feature is that they arose carrying the burden of debasement from Europeanisms, from monotheism to euromodernism. The fact that this modernism often expressed itself in forms of huge popularity, as Carnival, tango, blues, jazz, calypso, samba, hip hop, Cumba, son, reggae, and too many dances to enumerate, caused much of its social-historical significance to be mistaken as popular culture. What is missed is the drive within these sometimes anonymous creations to re-establish the humanity of accused people and societies. Little separates these rooted vernaculars from dedicated, emergent artists reaching for prestigious worldly recognition. The recovery of their humanity under such circumstances within forms that embrace and fertilise modernity composes one part of its singularity. The capture of the world’s imagination, providing much of its formulae for celebrations of human variety, makes this modernism remarkable.

I call this cultural re-creation pagan modern as a description of the amercement (what James Baldwin called dues) these populations and societies were placed under, and the stylish fashion by which they threw off this historical burden, from the last half of the nineteenth century forward.

- Clyde Taylor, "Pagan Modern: The 'Something Else' of Transatlantic Culture," unpublished essay, 2013, 1–2. It seems possible that Taylor would place Hurston's literary and performative art under the "pagan modern" rubric.
11. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group, 1999), 211.
 12. For major studies on some of the varying expressions of Black religion in North America, see Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Joseph R. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973); George E. Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Chireau, *Black Magic*; Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Tracey E. Hucks, *Yorùbá Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012). For an even more recent study of the integral relationships between colonial Atlantic empires and different formations of Black religion, see Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
 13. Long, *Significations*, 188, 29.
 14. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), 215–17.
 15. Hurston, *Sanctified Church*, 56; Hurston, *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, 171–72, 60.
 16. Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 230. Journalist and cultural critic Valerie Boyd has written a more recent biography of Hurston. See Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003).
 17. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 86.
 18. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), 183–84.
 19. *Ibid.*, 146–50.
 20. *Ibid.*, 150–51.
 21. *Ibid.*, 165–67.
 22. *Ibid.*, 167–69.
 23. *Ibid.*, 169.
 24. Taylor, "Pagan Modern," 1–2.
 25. Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 140.
 26. For a recent study that from a literary perspective explores how ethnographies of Haiti produced by Hurston and anthropologist of dance Katherine Dunham challenged the methodological boundaries of ethnography, see Serena I. Volpi, "Body, Time, and the Others: African-American Anthropology and the Rewriting

- of Ethnographic Conventions in the Ethnographies by Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brunel University London, 2014).
27. Zora Neale Hurston to Alain Locke, October 15, 1928, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
 28. Hurston, *Sanctified Church*, 56–57. The 1981 edition of *The Sanctified Church* includes writings Hurston produced in Florida while working with the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression. The WPA was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the mid-1930s as part of his New Deal program. One of Hurston's primary responsibilities involved contributing to a guidebook for the state of Florida as well as an accompanying text entitled *The Florida Negro*. Eileen O'Malley Callahan, "Notes for a New Edition," in Hurston, *Sanctified Church*, 5–8. It should also be noted that Hurston's folkloric research in southern Gulf states was both sponsored and inhibited by Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white New Yorker who insisted that Blacks were "emotionally and aesthetically superior to whites, but inferior in other ways." Hurston's contract with Mason required that, upon completion of her research, she "return and lay before [Mason] all of said information, data, transcripts of music, etc. which she shall have obtained," and that Hurston not "make known to any other person, except one designated in writing by said first party any of said data or information." Carla Kaplan, introduction to Hurston, *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, xxvi; contract between Charlotte Osgood Mason and Zora Neale Hurston, December 8, 1927, Alain Locke papers, Moorland-Spingarn Center, Howard University, quoted in *ibid.*, xxvi–xxvii; contract between Zora Neale Hurston and Charlotte Osgood Mason, quoted in *ibid.*, xxvii.
 29. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 114.
 30. Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Journal of Negro History* 85, nos. 1–2 (2000): 30. While encouraging scholars to specify others, Palmer identifies five main African diasporic streams spanning roughly a 100,000-year period. In this historical model, the stream resulting from the transatlantic slave trade is relatively recent, and was followed by a fifth stream that began in the nineteenth century and continues today (*ibid.*, 27–29). In the early 1960s, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued against the existence of significant African cultural survivals among Blacks in North America. See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964). Frazier was countered decades earlier by Jewish anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who argued robustly in favor of African cultural survivals. See Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941).
 31. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," 31.
 32. Tiffany R. Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 11.

33. For further reading, see Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bântu-Kôngo: Tying the Spiritual Knot; Principles of Life and Living* (Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001); Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yorùbá, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kólá Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, U.K.: Iroko Academic, 2006); Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Jacob K Olúpòná, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
34. This list is informed by Dianne Stewart's list of commonly shared "foundational characteristics" among African continental religions. She maintains that these characteristics can "be observed in the religious traditions of Caribbean Africans up to the present day." Stewart's list of characteristics includes "(1) a communotheistic . . . understanding of the Divine, which corresponds with a community of venerated deities and invisible beings; (2) ancestral veneration; (3) possession trance and mediumship; (4) food offerings and animal sacrifice; (5) divination and herbalism; and (6) an entrenched belief in neutral mystical power." Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 24.
35. Thorough discussion of topics closely related to these questions can be found in Buakasa Tulu Kia Mpansu, "Le Discours de la Kindoki ou Sorcellerie," *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 4, no. 11 (1972): 5–67; Wándé Abímbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976); Brown, *Mama Lola*, 356; Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008): 60, 71; Harvey, "Life Is War"; and Luis Nicolau Parés, *The Formation of Candomblé: Vodun History and Ritual in Brazil*, trans. Richard Vernon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
36. Here I reference the idea of the transdisciplinary scholar as defined by Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks. Of this idea they write, "The transdisciplinary scholar transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem. She responds to the

problem-based questions driving her research as opposed to unidisciplinary questions and predispositions that impose limits upon her conceptual options based upon her principal discipline's preferred methods, theories, and tools. Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals." Dianne M. Stewart Diakit  and Tracey E. Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 28–77.

37. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 114.

38. Stewart and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 62.