

Paradoxical Outcomes of Crisis in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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A state of crisis exerts great power over societies because, as Milton Friedman declared, crises are able to “produce... real change” (qtd. in Klein 6). However, change is a broad concept that encapsulates the slight difference as well as the radical overhaul. Therefore, in the broadest sense, crisis can result in the reinforcement of the status quo as well as the emergence of new, alternative systems. When a society or a community experiences a crisis, there is an opportunity for a “fresh start” (Klein 4). However, there is also the potential for a conflict between two opposing sides who both desire “crisis to prepare the ground” (Klein 11) for change. Those in positions of hegemonic power before the crisis would use the situation “for the restructuring of domination” (Invisible Committee 13). Those on the fringes of society, the radicals and the outcasts, would use the crisis’ destruction of the old order to impose a new, different one that would shift the balance of power. These dual, competing potentials converge at ground zero of a crisis. Structurally, this paradox manifests itself in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the opposing narrative modes of circular repetition and linear progression. Where the narrative of Janie, the novel’s protagonist, becomes circular, repeating cycle of crisis followed by a reinforcement of domination and back again to crisis, the novel presents the side of domination. In contrast, the narrative which guides Janie and her African American peers is also at times linear, moving from crisis to crisis without regression or repetition, which structurally implies a possibility for progress that does not reinforce past domination but moves toward a new potentiality for egalitarian, “commun[al]” living (Invisible Committee 101-102).

The contrast between linear and circular narratives in Hurston has been explored by Ryan Simmons and Jurgen C. Wolter. Simmons aligns the linear narrative with “traditional Anglo-American authority patterns” (Simmons 181). Wolter is in agreement with Simmons on this issue (Wolter 239). Both scholars write that linear narratives follow a didactic Western tradition, feeding the story to the audience without space for their participation or input, thus making it inherently the form of hegemonic interests (Simmons 181-184; Wolter 235). In this way, Simmons and Walter participate in a school of thought that believes the linear narrative of history is told by the dominant figures or victors in a way that discounts the power of marginal populations. In contrast, they both explore the circular narrative as aligned with the more egalitarian and participant forms of oral slave narration (Simmons 181-183; Wolter 233-236). However, Simmons misses the bigger picture of circular and linear progression as trajectories emerging from crisis situations in the novel. Wolter, on the other hand, sees the circular pattern as significant in perpetuating continued domination in Janie’s relationships, but ignores the positive linear progression of the African-American community of Eatonville (Wolter 239-241). The extent of his focus on linearity consists of “incremental” (Wolter 241) increases in the pages devoted to each of Janie’s relationships, and the level of violence exhibited by each successive man (Wolter 241). I am proposing that crisis and domination be considered in relation to both the circular and linear narratives of the novel at the level of Janie’s personal relationships as well as in regards to the community of Eatonville. Taken in the most literal sense, the very concept of a circular narrative, such as the cycle of dominating men in Janie’s life, is indicative of a return in the wake of crisis to the old forms of domination, strengthening them by repetition. Circularity is a pattern of stagnancy. There is no movement beyond the cycle of domination. In contrast, a

linear trajectory, such as Hurston's broader narrative of the emancipation of southern slaves and their establishment in society from that point onwards, must progress towards something.

Linearity is therefore open at every point of crisis to new and increasing potentialities.

1. Circular Narratives as Narratives of Domination in Janie's Relationships With Men

The narrative pattern of Janie's relationships with men is decidedly circular, and exemplifies the way in which circularity fortifies systems of domination. Janie's relationships are inherently about domination as each "raises the question of who or what controls Janie's life" (Wolter 239). From the outset, Janie's romantic relationships are framed as cyclical, a concept which is primarily addressed by Wolter (Wolter 238-241). In his analysis of the novel, Wolter contends that the cycle begins with Johnny Taylor (Wolter 240). However, the circular narrative pattern is in place before his arrival. Janie's crisis of sexual awakening occurs with the virginal opening of "the first tiny bloom," (Hurston 10) and progresses with the seasonal cycle of nature to the full "creaming in every blossom" which she relates to "a marriage" (Hurston 11). The natural cycle then culminates in the crisis of death or orgasm—the little death in popular French euphemism—that leaves her "limp and languid", but full of "impatience" to begin the cycle again (Hurston 11). This is the narrative pattern which Janie's subsequent coupled relationships follow. The initial crisis of her sexual awakening is answered by the appearance of Johnny whom she is subconsciously looking to as an escape from her Nanny's domination (Hurston 12; Wolter 240). However, he is easily defeated by Nanny's authority and sent away, leaving Janie once again under her power (Hurston 12-13). Through marriage, Nanny's authority is transferred to Logan Killicks, whom Janie associates with death and "de grave yard," (Hurston 13) thus completing one natural cycle. Janie's marriage to Logan is "clearly [a] relationship... of

domination” (McGowan 111; Wolter 240-242). It is a domination which was passed from Nanny to Logan, and through this process it is strengthened. While Nanny merely controlled Janie by putting limitations on her behaviour, (Hurstons 11-13) Logan’s domination is emotional and economic. He crushes Janie’s spirit, killing her “first dream” (Hurstons 25) of a positive outcome from the crisis of becoming a woman. He also controls her economically through labour, forcing her to “serve” (McGowan 110). Their relationship reaches its crisis when he seeks to further his domination by making her work in the fields with a mule (Wolter 242).

At this moment Jody appears, full of promise for a new, less domineering form of relationship. He speaks to Janie of “change and chance” (Hurstons 29). Formally, the start of the new cycle of domination is signalled by his referring to her in the language of birth and new beginnings, remarking that Janie appears “hardly old enough to be weaned” (Hurstons 28). The early “bloom” (Hurstons 32) of their love corresponds with Janie’s hope for a new, more egalitarian form of romantic relationship. However, the narrative being cyclical, Janie is doomed to repetition and strengthened domination before their relationship has even soured. The narrator expresses both her renewed hope for a new potential and the doomed, circular fate that is destined to result as Janie leaves with Jody, stating: “[h]er old thoughts were going to come in handy... but new words would have to be made... to fit them” (Hurstons 32). Indeed, in spite of Janie’s recurring hope, Jody repeats the cycle which amplifies the level of domination that a man exhibits over her. McGowan equates this to the shift of further economic domination from competitive to monopoly capitalism, with monopoly being the more domineering form (McGowan 112). Ultimately, Jody’s cycle of control ends with the crisis of his death (Hurstons 86-87).

At Jody's funeral, Janie is already beginning the cycle again; beneath her "black folds [are] resurrection and life" (Hurston 88). This leaves her vulnerable to the final strengthening of domination in the novel. Tea Cake arrives on the scene during her period of hope and "resurrection" (Hurston 88) to impose his will upon her more thoroughly than Nanny, Logan, or Jody ever could. McGowan acknowledges that while many readers view the relationship with Tea Cake as progressive and away from other systems of domination, such a reading is problematic due to the disturbing domination and physical violence he inflicts on Janie (McGowan 110). Tea Cake finds that "whip[ping] her reassured him in possession" (Hurston 147). The use of "possession" here emphasizes the concept of domination and control through ownership. Particularly, Janie's acceptance of this abuse is a sign of how Tea Cake operates within the cycle to increase man's domination because she is willingly subjecting herself to his control (Hurston 147-153). McGowan agrees that Tea Cake's power over Janie is the greatest of all because their "relationship... extends and strengthens the hold of domination... [so that] Janie no longer even recognizes the domination" (McGowan 111) as such. Thus, Tea Cake strengthens the cycle of domination so much that he controls Janie's perceptions of herself, her life, and their relationship so that she no longer resists when others take her power away from her.

Furthermore, Janie does not escape Tea Cake's domination after his death. His domination is so powerful that Janie does not break free of the cycle and become self-sufficient. She is entrapped by Tea Cake's domination in the form of the "horizon... a great fish net" (Hurston 193) as she dies from the venom he implanted in her (Hattenhauer 51-52). Being the cause of her death is his ultimate gesture of domination over her life (Hattenhauer 46-52). Janie does not get a chance at a life in which she is her own master because Tea Cake infects her. This is the ultimate degree of

control, and demonstrates the way in which each cycle – which moves from crisis by awakening or death to hope, then the hard reality of domination and back again – increases domination over Janie. That is, circular narratives are the manifestation of the way in which hegemonic forces – in this case the patriarchal interests of men and capitalism – exploit the space after a crisis to increase their level of domination.

It is not surprising the unit of the couple is at the center of the domination-strengthening circular narrative. The couple is identified by The Invisible Committee as a broken social mode which strengthens the domination of the capitalist system over its subjects (Invisible Committee 40-42). As a unit of relation itself, the couple encourages repetition in the form of serial monogamy. The anonymous collective behind *The Coming Insurrection* is in accord with what Hurston portrays in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the subject of the couple as a repetitive cycle of domination. They write about the way the couple begins with hope, but ultimately fails as it is just another outcropping of the hegemonic capitalist system which means to dominate all its subjects (Invisible Committee 41-42). The couple, being an established mode of dominating relation destined to repetition, cannot possibly be used to express an alternate potentiality after a crisis. The couple's "return is nothing but a deepening of the prevailing separation" (Invisible Committee 40) between people, and thus the hegemonic powers over them. The only way the couple can offer "new arrangements, new fidelities" (Invisible Committee 42) is in the "decomposition" (Invisible Committee 42) of its repetition. Thus circular narratives, particularly those enmeshed with the couple, cannot help but reinforce old systems of domination and suppress new potentialities.

2. Linear Narratives as Narratives of Alternate Potentialities in Eatonville

However, Hurston offers a narrative of potentiality where the larger community of Eatonville is concerned. Curiously, the narrative of Eatonville and its part in the history of the emancipation is linear in its form. By linear, I mean that one event leads to another with allowance for occasional regression back to past systems, but predominantly moving forward in new ways to form new systems. Each event or crisis and the shift(s) that follow are complete unto themselves and not part of a repetitive cycle. Of course, history is largely regarded as linear in the Western tradition. Because of this association between linearity, history, and the hegemonic interests present in Western historical narratives, many critics write that the linear narrative mode is one of domination (Wolter; Simmons). However, when considered at the level of the African American community of slaves and residents of Eatonville, linearity at least provides opportunities out of crisis which do not necessarily have to escalate domination.

The initial crisis of the linear portion of the novel is the briefly mentioned American civil war (Hurston 16-17). Nanny implies that new potentials have emerged after the abolition of slavery, telling Janie: “Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams... But nothing can’t stop you from wishin’” (Hurston 16). The implication is that from the crisis of slavery and its abolition white domination was weakened, opening up new spaces for non-hegemonic advancement. These new possibilities manifest themselves in the formation of the all-black, “free” (Hurston 35) community of Eatonville on donated land (Hurston 37). The residents live together in collective harmony more-or-less, free from the domination of white slave-owners (Hurston 28, 35-37). However, the linear narrative continues onwards from this initial crisis outcome. Jody Starks, whose identity is more closely aligned with hegemonic capitalism than his minority racial position, creates a new crisis in fledgling Eatonville by framing the lack of a

Mayor as detrimental, saying: “No wonder things ain’t no better” (Hurstons 35). Thus, Jody’s created crisis undoes the communal nature of Eatonville, where “nobody” (Hurstons 35) tells the other what to do. He undoes Eatonville’s equality and the corresponding alternate potentialities along with it. Jody capitalizes on the situation by instituting a hierarchical system of capital domination, whereby he is the center of power and material wealth as Mayor, store, and land-owner (Hurstons 42). This shift from communal potential back to hegemonic hierarchy is marked by the shift in Jody’s title from the egalitarian “Brother Starks” (Hurstons 42) to the “sharply defined” (Invisible Committee 33) self required for systems of dominance as “Mayor Starks” (Hurstons 43). Thus, the alternate potentiality of the first crisis was destroyed by the second. However, it is important to note that this is not a cycle but a sequence of events/crises with different outcomes building in a linear progression.

Therefore, because the narrative of Eatonville is linear, it is not long before a new event comes along to continue the progression of history. Specifically, the crisis of “[t]he Little Emperor,” (Hurstons 88) Jody Starks’, death is an opportunity to move beyond his domination. Although it is possible that another man could have risen up to fill the void in the hierarchy left by Jody – which would imply a narrative or circularity instead of linearity – Hurstons’s narrator implies that Eatonville emerges from the crisis on the side of alternate potentialities. When Janie returns amongst them “they” (Hurstons 1) are gathered together, talking in “words... without masters...[,] altogether like harmony in a song” (Hurstons 2). This implies the breakdown of hierarchical, hegemonic authority amongst them in favour of a collective cooperative way of living. Even when the narrator’s use of the collective “they” (Hurstons 1) ends in favour of the use of individual names, (Hurstons 2) they are not divided into units of domination like “family,

school, [or] union” (Invisible Committee 102). Their relation to one another is that of an alternate potentiality, a “commune” (Invisible Committee 101). They “define themselves... by the density of the ties at their core[,]” (Invisible Committee 102) as Pheoby does in introducing herself into the conversation not as a black woman, former slave, or capitalist subject, but as Janie’s “best friend” (Hurstons 3). After the death of Jody Starks, Eatonville becomes a site of alternate potentialities for communal living and new self-definition relative to one another rather than other arbitrary categories. Thus, its citizens have progressed. They are no longer slaves to white men or to Jody Starks’ hierarchy. Instead, they have realised an alternate way of being that doesn’t repeat or strengthen old structures of domination. In this way, the linear narrative of Eatonville is ultimately the narrative of potential.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship and popular attention to crisis and the structures of domination at work in creating and exploiting crises, particularly by Naomi Klein and *The Invisible Committee*, have given us a renewed means to discuss these issues. Particularly, the time is ripe to examine texts of the past through the lens of crisis and the paradoxical opportunities that arise out of it. To this end, this paper has explored the way in which Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* formally expresses the dual potentials of restructured domination and new potentialities emerging out of crisis. Much scholarly attention has already been given to Hurston’s text because of the complex ways in which domination, potential, circularity, and linearity manifest themselves throughout. Both conclusions to crisis are formally manifested in the text, coinciding and interweaving with one another through the narrative modes. Although one could assume that because circularity is the narrative mode of most African-American

folklore and linearity is the narrative mode of Western history, the former would coincide with egalitarian modes and the latter with domination that is not the case in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie's relationships repeat in a formal cycle – which mirrors the movement of the seasons – from crisis to false hope, domination, and back again to crisis. Scholars agree that the completion of each cycle through each new man strengthens and increases the systems of domination which have hold over Janie (Hattenhauer; McGowan; Simmons; Wolter). These systems of domination are economically representative, but that is not as significant as the form of circularity itself. At the level of form circularity hinges upon repetition which itself strengthens domination. That Janie keeps going back to men with hope that the cycle can produce something other than further domination is the symptom of erroneous beliefs. Alternate potentialities cannot be established after a crisis in a circular narrative form because the form itself does not allow for anything but domination. Instead, Hurston's text explores linear narrative as a form of escape from the cycle of domination and towards alternate potentialities. Linear narrative manifests itself in the broader portion of the narrative, the story of Eatonville, running parallel to Janie's cycles of increasing domination. In the wake of crisis, Eatonville moves along a linear path of history, which allows for the emergence of new potentials and possibilities as well as new dominations. Ultimately, Jody's death is the crisis which allows Eatonville to become a commune, thus exchanging the old systems of domination that rely upon hierarchy and hegemony in favour of new egalitarian potentialities.

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