THE BLUES AESTHETIC IN \textit{TEWWG}'

\textbf{Spotlight Text: Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston}

\textbf{Literary Research Questions}

1. What qualifies a “true American” music? What is the “problem” of music? What makes music universal? Why is this significant when understanding the role of music through textual descriptions and literary analysis?

2. How is “the muck,” in Zora Neale Hurston’s \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, a symbolic and physical space for the production and appreciation of music? (Consider the backgrounds of the workers and the social class developed in the fields. How might this comment on the universality of (African) American music?)

3. Within \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, there are five main spaces where sound exists: (1) under the pear tree, (2) when Nanny decides Janie must get married, (3) when Starks lights the street lamp, (4) whenever Tea Cake is around Janie, and (5) when the hurricane is approaching. What role does reciprocity play within the sound-oriented scenes in this text? Why is reciprocity or dual existence significant? (Think about double consciousness.)

4. How does Hurston’s text and writing style exemplify a Blues aesthetic?

5. Consider the use of three in the text. Janie has three marriages. Her family history (as documented in the text) focuses on three generations of women. Pianos at the jook “live three lifetimes in one.” The man playing on the muck before Tea Cake takes over only knows “three pieces.” Even the Christian view of God, an undertone in this text and title, harkens back to the “three-in-one” analogy. Why is this significant? Think about the rhetorical triangle applied to both literary and musical productions.

6. What role does self-revelation play? How does music scaffold revelation in the story?

7. A dividing characteristic between the Romantic era of literature and the subsequent Realist and Naturalist decades rests in the role and view of Nature. What role does ‘Nature’ play in the production of music? (Consider the descriptive qualities within the hurricane scenes in Hurston’s text.) How might ‘Nature,’ in all its forms, both tangible and intangible, enable a universality in music/sound/compositions?

8. What is the difference between singing and making music? Is there a difference?
Tracking the References: The Basis of my Thought Process

Another potential avenue for this essay is to hone in on a close-reading of the text and moments of sound in the text to better understand the complexity of music, self, and other within an African American socio-historical context. Each generation of women in Janie’s family is hindered and traumatized by institutionalized forms of power (slavery, education, and marriage). Nanny, the concubine of Master Robert on a slave plantation, claims, “‘Freedom found me wid a baby daughter’” (Hurston 22). Leafy, Janie’s mother, the daughter of Master Robert and Nanny, is raped by her school master at the age of seventeen resulting in the birth of Janie. Each generation, like three movements in one composition, haunts the next. Throughout the text, Janie is seeking self-revelation, which she ultimately finds when Tea Cake enters her life around the age of forty. However, the keen reader will realize that his entrance is foreshadowed and connoted by Janie’s experience at the age of sixteen beneath the pear trees listening to the erotic music of blossoms and singing bees. The narrator interjects, “With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! … Where were the singing bees for her?” (Hurston 15). This is the first section in which music is linked to Janie’s personal thoughts. Though there are brief encounters with song in her progression to meeting Tea Cake, the vast majority of music-making (versus song-singing) enters when she moves from Eatonville to the ‘Glades. The “muck,” or the cabins and fields where seasonal workers come and go, becomes the ultimate jook. It becomes a physical space where people of all backgrounds come together in the working class and produce music together. The class distinctions and the issues with “mingled folks” seem transcended by the existence of music and common work. Nonetheless, it is the music of Nature, preceding the hurricane, that best articulates the universality of music. Defying a one-stance view of Nature and music, Hurston’s text complicates a simple binary understanding of the relation between self and other, black and white, as well as between the connotative quality of Nature and musical production. Though it would be easy to write off this text as a metaphor for the devil-powers of Blues music (you play the Blues, you will get rabies and die), the message is more complex and tangled. While the end result is traumatic and devastating, it is the vivacious quality of music and the Blues that provided Janie two years of true love, escape, and revelation (a vantage-point she would have never otherwise had). Though Amiri Baraka underscores “the secular nature” of the Blues aesthetic, Hurston’s frame history and link between love, self, God, and the Blues, further develops the scope of the Blues aesthetic. To understand the Blues, one must love deeply and lose deeply. One art.