

# Slow Violence, Sacrifice, and Survival: Environmental Catastrophe as (Eco)Feminist Freedom in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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**Abstract** In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston makes visible 'slow violence' and 'sacrifice zones' to establish a feminist future for her protagonist, Janie. The novel shows a fictional rendering of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, a storm that Janie survives. In this article, the Author contends that Janie's survival of the storm – her surmounting of 'slow violence' and bypassing of sacrifice in the 'sacrifice zone' – emboldens her to overcome patriarchal violence at the novel's conclusion. Hurston expresses a gendered writer-activism critiquing not only environmental racism, but the intersectional battles of Black women experiencing environmental and patriarchal violence.

**Keywords** Ecofeminism. Slow violence. Sacrifice zones. Intersectionality. African American Studies. Harlem Renaissance. Ecocriticism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Theory and Methods. – 3 Analysis and Discussion: 'The Muck'. – 4 Analysis and Discussion: The Storm and Janie's Survival. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

What does survival look like in the face of environmental catastrophe? This paper examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the contemporary theoretical frameworks of 'slow violence' and 'sacrifice zones', as outlined by Rob Nixon and Ryan Juskus. Many scholars, such as literary critic Mary Jane Lupton, agree that Hurston's novel is, foremost, a story of survival, in which Hurston's protagonist, Janie Crawford, overcomes toxic masculinity in her three romantic relationships and asserts freedom for herself (Lupton 1982, 47). But what if we add the environment to the equation? The novel is also a fictional rendering of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, an actual historical travesty that disproportionately affected the Black community living in Belle Glade, Florida, better known in the novel as 'the muck', a muddy space in which laborers harvested vegetables for profit (Hurston 2006, 131). Importantly, Janie survives the storm, allowing an ecofeminist message to arise. Janie supersedes the hurricane, much like she overcomes her three toxic relationships in the novel. Through Janie's survival, her ability to surmount the storms in her life, both physically and metaphorically, Hurston puts the power in the hands of the female. Reading the text, and the story of survival, through the lenses of slow violence and sacrifice invites fresh insights about Janie's survival. Janie is already a victim of patriarchal violence - a theme the novel traces enough - but the addition of environmental violence that explicitly targets the Black Floridian community creates the effect of a one-two-punch. While Janie must overcome patriarchy to truly be free, she must too supersede slow violence and bypass sacrifice. In this manner, Hurston adds a third layer to the intersectional battles Black women encounter - one distinctly tied to the environment. Through Janie's survival, Hurston ultimately establishes a feminist future for Janie, one only made possible by transcending violence, on both patriarchal and environmental fronts.

## 2 Theory and Methods

This essay engages with contemporary environmental theory and feminist scholarship and, chiefly, how these otherwise disparate fields might converge. Kimberlé Crenshaw's pioneering concept of 'intersectionality' is of utmost importance to this essay. As Crenshaw defines it, intersectionality refers to the "double bind of race and gender", in which overlapping identities (in Crenshaw's case, race and gender) intensify the discrimination one encounters (Crenshaw 2004). In a similar spirit, this essay also follows literary critic John Claborn's proposition for an 'intersectional ecocriticism', an

intersection of ecology and environments. In his book *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1845-1941*, Claborn argues that

identities are forged out of their historical, structural, and (for the ecocritic) environmental embeddedness. It is when one becomes conscious of these interlocking oppressions that identity becomes a politics. (Claborn 2017, 11)

This essay concerns Janie's 'environmental embeddedness' as a Black laborer in the muck, in addition to her positionality as a woman. In Hurston's novel, Janie encounters both racial and gendered forms of oppression. She is a victim of environmental discrimination - especially slow violence, as the Author will explore further - as a member of the Black community living in the Everglades. Janie additionally suffers the fate of being a woman in the novel's time and place, facing ill treatment from her three male lovers throughout the novel.

Widely contested in the critical scholarship is just how much agency Janie truly has. Is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a feminist text, or not? Compared to some of Hurston's other female characters, such as Daisy, the "town vamp" of Hurston's 1930 play *De Turkey and de Law*, or the women who face abuse in Hurston's 1926 "The Eatonville Anthology", the Author maintains that Janie has a solid amount of self-determination (Hurston 2008, 134). Lupton argues in her aptly titled "Zora Neale Hurston and the Survival of the Female" that the novel is "a novel of life, power and survival", a camp the Author stands by, for the most part (Lupton 1982, 47). Mary Helen Washington, on the contrary, argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "represents women's exclusion from power" (Washington 2000, 27). One example of this "exclusion" is Janie's initial exploration of her "growing maturity", her growth and development as a woman mediated at the hands of men (29). As Washington argues, with reference to the pear tree representing sexuality from the novel's opening chapters:

Janie's image of herself as a blossom waiting to be pollinated by a bee transforms her figuratively and literally into the space in which men's action may occur. She waits for an answer and the answer appears in the form of two men, both of whom direct Janie's life and the action of the plot. (30)

Even though Janie attempts to claim sexual agency for herself, and evolve into womanhood by her own conviction, her course is ultimately determined by "every man's wish", as it were (Hurston 2006, 1). While just one instance of the perverse agency Janie encounters, Janie's "status as an object" (which, the men speaking about Janie on the Eatonville storefront porch amplify) remains persistent throughout

the novel (Washington 2000, 30). Washington's framing of 'Janie-as-object' also follows the line of thinking proposed by Jennifer Jordan, who argues that, contrary to what many critics think, the novel is not a "black feminist" text; ultimately, Janie's "struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied" (Jordan 1988, 108). For Jordan, the novel rather "exposes the domestic bliss of middle-class America as an empty dream", which, the Author might add, situates Hurston's novel in a wider context of tragedy and American modernism, chiming with the rhetoric of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or even William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (108). In any event, for Washington and Jordan, Janie is not as free as she might appear on the surface. Perhaps there is room for nuance, however. While Jordan and Washington's assertions are entirely valid, and Janie's agency is slippery at best, the Author believes that the environmental framing, and slow violence, especially, provides a window through which to examine the power Janie truly holds in the novel. Inserting the Author himself into the debate, the Author considers in this essay how Janie overcomes the narrative obstacles rooted in patriarchy (as outlined by Washington and Jordan) and eventually achieves that 'power and survival', returning to Lupton, but only by first overcoming slow violence.

It will be useful to spell out exactly what the Author means by 'slow violence' at the start of this essay. Foremost, the laborers in Hurston's novel emerge as victims of environmental racism, what sociologist Robert Bullard considers

any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race. (Bullard 1993, 23)

Environmental racism springs from slow violence, a term that literary critic Rob Nixon pioneers in his influential *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. For Nixon, slow violence is a drawn-out, seemingly invisible process in which "different kinds of disaster produce unequal heft" (Nixon 2011, 3). These 'disasters', such as the hurricane in Hurston's novel, are "slow moving and long in the making", the product of governmental policies that inflict harm on "disposable" - often historically marginalized - populations (4). To "make visible" the slow violence that Janie must overcome, as Nixon would wish, Hurston presents a fictional account of the 1928 storm (5). In this case, Hurston blurs "the boundaries of ethnography and fiction", as both a novelist and anthropologist herself (Fassin 2014, 1). Retroactively advancing Nixon's call, Hurston makes visible slow violence in a gendered dimension.

It is important to mention that literary critic Daniel Spoth, in his article "Slow Violence and the (Post)Southern Disaster Narrative", already identifies that Janie, Tea Cake, and the other inhabitants of

the muck are victims of slow violence. This essay expands Spoth's analysis by considering Hurston's intersectionality as a feminist-writer-activist, showing how slow violence emboldens Janie to claim her (feminist) freedom at long last. Spoth uses Nixon's framework to challenge the "myth of the embedded Southerner" that has persisted in Southern fiction critical scholarship (Spoth 2015, 145). The "embedded Southerner" refers to the idea that Southern subjects, despite opportunities to venture away from home, "nonetheless choose the simple comforts of the local over the wide world" (145). Hurston's novel "deconstructs" the "premises" of the "embedded Southerner" (146-7). As Spoth argues, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The land itself becomes as disposable as its residents following the hurricane; deprived of their means of making a living in the Everglades, the surviving workers – including Janie and Tea Cake – simply move elsewhere. In contrast to literary narratives of stability and stasis that often link the people of the South irrevocably to their landscapes, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents this same link as tenuous and able to be swiftly severed. (151)

For Spoth, slow violence invites new avenues for thinking about Southern fiction – the mobility of bodies becomes inextricably tied to their disposability. When intersecting with slow violence, the "multicultural, migratory South" extant in the critical scholarship displays that "the more unmoored and liberated the historical subject becomes, the more opportunity for that subject to become disposable" (152). Despite the dispensability of Black bodies both in both Hurston's novel and the actual historical event of the hurricane, adding intersectionality to the mix shows us that a kind of female survival from the 'dispensability' inherent in the slow violence – at least for Janie – is a possibility.

The hurricane's disproportionate effects on the Black community, in both life and death, also invite us to read the muck also as a 'sacrifice zone', a term proposed by scholar Ryan Juskus (Juskus 2023, 1).<sup>1</sup> As Juskus contends, "sacrifice zones" are "semi-industrial areas... where a dangerous and sometimes lethal brand of racial and economic discrimination persists" (12). In them, "environmental harms are disproportionately concentrated" (20).

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**1** Juskus forthrightly states that a 'sacrifice zone' is a corrective of Nixon's 'slow violence' (specifically, a more optimistic iteration of 'slow violence' that values a "pursuit of life" over "hatred of one's enemies" (Juskus 2023, 21). The Author thinks both terms work together in Hurston's novel. The muck is a localized place that becomes a site of sacrifice for the Black people who live, labor, and die there. The muck's inhabitants, however, are still victims of slow violence, as the poor state planning of the "racialized space" indicates (Parrish 2016, 245).

Hurston's novel differs in part from the framework Juskus provides but retains its core tenets. Juskus conceptualizes sacrifice in terms of industries destroying sacred spaces or wielding toxic effects on land. The muck, which the storm eventually overtakes, is the workers' final resting place, the site of sacrifice. Juskus maintains that

environmental injustice is better theorized as 'slow sacrifice', a political ecology of life and death, the goal of which is to concentrate death in some places so that other places might experience full, sustainable life. (3)

"Concentrat[ing] death" in the space where the Black people work, the muck is clearly a sacrifice zone. Although Janie faces 'slow sacrifice' in the presence of the storm, she can bypass this sacrifice and stake out her freedom, because she ultimately survives. Hurston's exposition of slow violence and the sacrifice zone, then, stresses the magnitude of what Janie must - and, indeed, does - overcome to truly become free. Hurston consequently leaves restorative potential for Janie's survival - a distinctly female survival.

### 3 Analysis and Discussion: 'The Muck'

The first obstacle Janie must overcome to achieve her freedom is the slow violence and sacrifice present in the muck, where she spends her days near the end of the novel. Hurston presents the muck, at its inception, as a space of possibility and hope for the Black community inhabiting it. But what, exactly, is the muck? Janie and her lover, Tea Cake, travel to the muck - a muddy, agricultural space in the Everglades - in search of economic opportunity (Hurston 2006, 191). As Spoth argues, this area "represent[s] autonomy and financial security for themselves and the other migrants" (Spoth 2015, 148). Here, then, the physical and built environments converge. The line between nature and culture becomes ever more elusive in this space; the natural world (the muck) helps culture (the people, their capital gain) thrive. Tea Cake describes the muck as a space where

dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness. (Hurston 2006, 128)

All the muck's workers are Black, and they perform agricultural labor - picking beans, specifically - by hand. And the land is perfect for cultivation; Janie considers the ground

so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer came just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. (Hurston 2006, 129)

The earth, both 'rich' and 'black' (not unlike the people who labor there) is bountiful for the workers, who came "from east, west, north, and south" (Hurston 2006, 131). These "hoards" of workers traveled to Florida, full of "hopeful humanity", to start their lives anew. Hurston's third person narrator describes these people as "chugging onto the muck", personifying the very machines they will soon become as they pick beans and make easy money. Hurston also identifies the workers with the land, on which they depend their livelihoods; the rich, black earth - and, consequently, its economic potential - is "clinging" to the workers, subsuming their identities (131). Hurston, too, romanticizes the muck by calling it "wild", which, for Claborn, calls to mind the nineteenth-century novel, the bogs trod by Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* (Claborn 2017, 105). The muck, as a swamp community, is also an example of what literary critic Steve Mentz calls "brown", an ecocritical allegory (Mentz 2014, 193). In an "ecothery beyond green", Mentz proposes that 'brown', even though it is a color that we might find unpleasant, is crucial to ecocriticism. For Mentz, 'brown' represents "the color of intimate and uncomfortable contact between human bodies and the nonhuman world", which is exactly what Hurston illustrates with the workers (human bodies) identifying themselves with their labors on the muck (the nonhuman world) (193). "Swamps" (brown) too are "sources of food, fuel, and other biotic matter" for all kinds of living organisms, despite their unattractive outward appearance (199). While sticky and unpleasant on the surface, the 'brown' muck is a source of life and restoration for the people who live and labor there.

An example of this 'life' and 'restoration' is Hurston's presentation of the muck as a space of celebration, even a multicultural utopia. Accompanying the Black community on the muck are Indigenous Floridians, Caribbean immigrant workers, and poor white people. Importantly, as Claborn contends, Hurston infuses the muck with symbolic meaning; it is an elusive space where the social order melts away, at least in part. Claborn argues that

the swamp also becomes a site that combines multiethnic solidarity with - albeit modest - forms of ecological agency. (Claborn 2017, 105)

This 'solidarity' - and agency, through which the laborers become witness to their own pleasure - is best exhibited at the end of the long work day, in which the workers spend their evenings "dancing", "laughing", and "singing", without a care in the world (Hurston 2006, 131).

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The muck is a place in which the laborers can build their lives, take delight in their day-to-day experiences, and secure prosperous futures for themselves.

Despite its potential for economic prosperity, the muck is, ultimately, a site of environmental catastrophe, the result of a pervasive slow violence (Nixon 2011, 5). The novel concludes with a devastating act of God, a hurricane that kills most of the (predominantly Black) workers living in the muck, a distinctly “racialized space” (Parrish 2016, 245). Black workers in Belle Glade – the real-life muck – were hit the hardest by the storm due to improper state planning of the lakefront region. As journalist Eliot Kleinberg narrates in his book *Black Cloud: The Great Florida Hurricane of 1928*, state planners built a cheap (and improperly and unsafely constructed) dam around Lake Okeechobee and encouraged settlement there. Most of these settlers, accounting for “at least half of the more than 8,000 people living in the towns around the big lake”, were Black people, many of whom were migrant farmers, like Hurston’s characters (Kleinberg 2003, 15).<sup>2</sup> In any case, while the storm itself is a quick, momentary event (which is *not* slow violence, by Nixon’s terms), slow violence (such as government policies, encouragement of predominantly Black settlement in the muck by state planners) created the conditions for the hurricane (the ‘disaster’, as Nixon would put it) to wreak particular, localized havoc on the Black community in the muck, a kind of violence that Janie must eventually supersede.

#### 4 Analysis and Discussion: The Storm and Janie’s Survival

Janie’s survival of the storm preempts her ability to overcome patriarchy at the end of the novel. First, Hurston describes the storm in masculine terms to symbolize Janie’s survival of both patriarchal and environmental aggression, perhaps an intersectional amendment to Nixon’s slow violence concept. Nixon writes that

the narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (Nixon 2011, 15)

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the Seminole community, who also occupied the muck, were the first to leave when they discovered a storm was brewing; as one man says, “going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming” (Hurston 2006, 154). Here, Hurston exposes a knowledge gap between the Indigenous epistemologies of the land’s original inhabitants and the workers who emigrated to work in the muck. In fact, the Indigenous knowledge supersedes slow violence, at least in part, because it overcomes the ‘improper state planning’ in the region – the Seminole people could, at the very least, physically remove themselves from the disaster.



Reading slow violence in Hurston's novel emboldens us to witness 'sights unseen'; the intersectional battles against Black women that include a discrimination tied to the environment. When the storm finally hits, "it woke up old Okeechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed" (Hurston 2006, 158). The storm eventually intensifies, "and the lake got madder and madder with only its dikes between them and him", returning to the poor construction Kleinberg outlines (Hurston 2006, 159). As the narrator states,

The monstropolous beast had left his bed... He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel. (Hurston 2006, 206)

Hurston personifies the lake as a male embodiment, a supernatural, masculine 'monster' and 'beast' that relentlessly 'rolls' and overtakes everything in sight. Claborn argues that

This personification of the storm inadvertently underscores its tendency to amplify or exploit inequities already established by Jim Crow, segregation, and the legacy of slavery. (Claborn 2017, 15)

The Author is interested in how the storm's personification as male "amplif[ies] or exploit[s]" inequalities against women, raising the feminist stakes.

For one, nature in literature is usually personified as female, yet Hurston's writing here is subversive of that norm. Art historian and critic Suzaan Boettger outlines in her article "In the Missionary Position" that women, "across time and cultures", have been symbolically associated with nature - and all its irrationality and unpredictability - and men with culture (Boettger 1994, 251-3). To this end, nature in art, literature, and culture is often represented as Mother Nature, who is both life-giving - connecting to the woman's ability to procreate - but all the same, has the power to destroy. By describing the storm as *masculine*, however, Hurston subverts the nature/culture paradigm and raises the stakes for what Janie can overcome. Hurston therefore presents an ecofeminist message: Janie overcomes the storm, much like she overcomes the toxic relationships in the novel. The storm, who grows "madder and madder" as he rolls through the landscape of the muck, is not unlike Janie's three romantic interests, who mistreat Janie in the text (Hurston 2006, 159). To this point, the storm is an iteration of what literary critic Margaret Cohen considers "white water", the kind of water that symbolizes "the deadly power of the violent and dangerous forces harbored by waterside spaces fully unleashed" (Cohen 2006, 656-7).

For Cohen, white water is “not only a dangerous space but a dangerous time, a representation of time as crisis” (658). It carries “the impending threat of death”, a reality Janie had to face in her romantic relationships (658). Overcoming the masculine-coded storm sets the stage for Janie to stake out her own survival against the patriarchal violence she suffers throughout the novel.

Crucially, the storm’s masculine connotation also takes on a divine dimension; Hurston underscores how the storm happens at the hand of *God*, another male embodiment. Janie, however, does not entirely resign herself to God’s destructive capabilities; she converses with – and even questions – God after the storm and therefore begins to assert survival in the patriarchal landscape. As Janie ruminates on the storm after it passes, she looks “hard at the sky” and interrogates God:

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...Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn’t exactly pleading, it was asking questions. (Hurston 2006, 178; emphasis in the original)

Janie displays a sort of ambivalence toward God; her mind grows increasingly free and less willing to submit to masculine authorities. She questions God, but she does not necessarily succumb to him. She puts up her arms in ‘a desperate supplication’, but only ‘for a minute’. Janie does not stoop to ‘pleading’ with God, but rather, asks ‘questions’. Janie sees herself as someone who can converse with God, someone perhaps on the same level as him. Janie’s equal footing with God reflects, at least in part, Hurston’s own connection to “African American freethought”, the rejection of theodicy and the belief that “there was likely no just God looking out for [the] interests” of Black people, who experienced so much suffering (Cameron 2016, 237). Hurston herself was a doubter of Christian religion, and this doubt penetrates her text, consciously or not (241). While Janie does not fight God, and ‘could only ache and wait’, which parallels her resignation in her relationships with Logan Killicks, Joe Stoddard, and Tea Cake, she does not completely give up questioning. While the storm, which God enables to happen, is another form of male power against Janie, albeit a divine one, Janie nevertheless creeps toward a metaphorical survival in her refusal to surrender fully to God.

Despite this glimpse at survival, however, even in death do the ramifications of slow violence persist. If slow violence “might well include forms of structural violence”, according to Nixon, structural racism persists in the aftermath of the storm (Nixon 2011, 11). In Hurston’s fictional retelling of the event, Tea Cake must “clear the

wreckage in public places and bury the dead”, but Black bodies are sacrificed to make space for memorializing the few white people who perished (Hurston 2006, 170). The white people are to receive coffins while, for the Black people, Tea Cake must “sprinkle plenty quick-lime over ‘em and cover ‘em up” (171). As the inspector instructs Tea Cake,

don’t lemme ketch none uh y’all dumpin’ white folks, and don’t be wastin’ no boxes on colored. (171)

This horrifying passage chimes with the historical context of the work. Kleinberg contends that while white Floridians received proper burials, Black victims were tossed in a trench at the “informal black cemetery” (Kleinberg 2003, 228). Ultimately, Black muck workers are expendable. They do not receive proper burials due to structural racism that privileges white bodies. Claborn considers this moment an instance of the “cycles of environmental inequities” that permeate Hurston’s narrative (Claborn 2017, 13). Here, too, is where Mentz’s ‘brown’ ecology takes on a grim, deadly dimension. As Mentz writes, “brown ecology describes a melancholy insight, that the living can never escape mixture with the nonliving” (Mentz 2014, 206). The muck after the storm becomes a “great expanse of water like lakes – water full of things living and dead” (Hurston 2006, 165). In life and in death, the Black laborers are connected to the muck; the dead bodies and the living bodies intersect in the swampy space. In this burial scene, or lack thereof, Hurston makes visible slow violence yet again – as a kind of structural violence, here – a violence nearly impossible for Black characters to overcome. Yet perhaps we can consider Janie’s survival of the storm as another kind of ‘life’ imbued within the *mélange* of ‘living and dead’. It is by the storm’s very destruction that opens the door for Janie to embark on a future of liberation.

While the storm is destructive, it empowers Janie to stake out a feminist future for herself. At the novel’s conclusion, Janie shoots, and kills, Tea Cake, who attempts to bite her while in a rabid episode, after being bitten himself by a wild dog during the storm (184). Janie’s shooting of Tea Cake is crucial to her survival of patriarchal dominance; Tea Cake abuses Janie both physically and emotionally throughout the text, and she must kill him to become free. When Janie ends up on trial for murder, the jury sets her “free”, from literal imprisonment and her abusive relationship with Tea Cake (188). Importantly, Janie does not take credit for killing Tea Cake; rather, she claims that the storm – and the slow violence/sacrifice embedded within it – did. As Janie plans Tea Cake’s burial, she “wanted him out of the way of storms” since “the ‘Glades and its waters had killed him” (Hurston 2006, 189). For Janie, if not for stormy “waters”, Tea Cake never would have encountered the rabid dog that bit him. Absolving herself of killing Tea Cake and framing him instead as a casualty of a

flawed system of slow violence, Janie presses on toward her freedom.

The next step toward achieving her freedom is Janie's ability to resist - or, at the very least, counteract - the slow violence against the Black Floridian community by giving Tea Cake a proper burial and venerating his otherwise victimized body. Different from the Black bodies strewn about the muck after the storm, the lucky ones sprinkled with quick-lime, Tea Cake

slept royally on his white silken couch among the roses [Janie] had bought. (Hurston 2006, 189)

His friends surround him at his burial; they "filled up and overflowed" a parade of sedans toward his grave (189). Further, "the band played, and Tea Cake rode like a Pharaoh to his tomb", painting Tea Cake as a regal figure and venerating his sacrifice (189).

In the face of collective violence, Hurston offers us a moment of collective renewal and the possibility of resistance to slow (and structural) violence. While Black bodies were formerly cast aside, the Black body now becomes the center of attention, a site of veneration and remembrance. Washington writes that Tea Cake "exists in death in a far more mythical and exalted way than in life", which, vitally, is at the hand of Janie (Washington 2000, 36). She preserves his memory in such a way that counters the slow violence that attempted to hold him inferior. Now that Tea Cake is officially sent to the afterlife, and the nail is in the coffin (both literally and figuratively), Janie now holds the freedom to stake out possibilities for herself and become a witness to her own, personal self-determination.

In order to truly be free, however, Janie must ultimately flee the sacrifice zone; only then can she no longer be a victim of slow violence. That does not mean Janie does not experience a kind of 'solastalgia' in her departure from the muck, and her consequent departure from Tea Cake. Finding her freedom, then, is not an entirely pleasant time for Janie. Philosopher and environmentalist Glenn Albrecht defines 'solastalgia' as

The pain or distress caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the lived experience of negative environmental change. It is the homesickness you have when you are still at home. (Albrecht 2019, 200)

Janie feels a 'homesickness' for her relationship with Tea Cake, which she mourns alongside the environmental distress. In her lived experience of negative environmental change, Janie experiences 'pain' and 'distress', not only at her 'sense of desolation' connected to the muck, which was her 'home and territory' for the time being. She also mourns

the loss of Tea Cake. Hurston captures this sentiment in her final description of the muck, in which she intertwines patriarchal and environmental violence. Janie plans her departure from the muck because

the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn't there. So it was just a great expanse of black mud. (Hurston 2006, 191)

Tea Cake is emblematic of patriarchal violence and the muck, now a space of desolation, is an object of environmental violence. Janie must leave the muck, then, to fully assert her freedom from these two closely connected bodies. The muck, once an ideal space of possibility and simultaneously the site of slow violence and sacrifice, is now nothing but 'black mud', devoid of its symbolic power. Returning to *Prismatic Ecology*, Levi R. Bryant argues that "black" (in terms of ecology) "has connotations of despair and abandonment, fitting for...the ecological circumstances we find ourselves in today" (Bryant 2014, 291). 'Black' also, fittingly, "draws attention to issues of race, minoritization, and second- and third-world countries, underlining how these groups are often disproportionately affected by climate change" (Bryant 2014, 291). The 'black' swamp, existing now on its own terms, is a melancholy reminder of the sacrifice Janie's community endured. The space is now haunted by the memory of Tea Cake, but also by the slow violence that, despite the many lives it took, remains invisible. In Bryant's terms, the 'black' "presents an image of the universe that is indifferent to our existence", an extension of the policies that crafted the conditions for slow violence in the first place, or even Tea Cake's feelings toward Janie, to push the symbolism even further (291). It becomes imperative, then, that Janie flee the space altogether, physically distancing herself from the space of environmental catastrophe (the muck). Only then can Janie at last claim freedom for herself.

Janie leaves the muck at the end of the novel and returns to Eatonville, finding her freedom at long last. The novel's final words are especially indicative of the freedom Janie now has. Even in the fact of death, Janie has now achieved a liberation - perhaps even a rebirth - that stands separate from patriarchal violence. Literary critic Iain Twiddy writes in his 2012 book, *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, that in elegy, "death is natural...in line with the season pattern and rebirth" (Twiddy 2012, 4). Taking a cue from Twiddy, we might read the conclusion of Hurston's novel as an elegy, in and of itself, an elegy to the old way of life, in which patriarchy reigns dominant. If we consider death as 'rebirth', the storm and the death that ensues causes Janie to be reborn, rebirthed, into a feminist future. In the novel's iconic closing passage, Janie

pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net...so much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (Hurston 2006, 193)

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Of course, the novel begins with the line “ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board...they sail forever on the horizon” (1).

The opening passage prefigures that men will reign dominant in the novel, an idea that Janie subverts in her own ability to claim freedom at the text’s conclusion. The horizon that once held the wishes of men now belongs to Janie. And, perhaps most vitally, Janie’s claiming of nature’s horizon also displays a mastery over the environment and the power it holds, what Boettger might consider an “assertive act” that challenges the nature/culture gender binary (Boettger 1994, 248). While almost a victim of environmental catastrophe, Janie overcomes this violence by assuming a kind of agency over the natural world. No longer will men *or* the environment determine her course of action; Janie is now the guide to her own life. Having survived many storms, both physical and metaphorical, throughout her journey, Janie is now free to claim her own horizon and “pull in” a new future. Hurston therefore envisions a feminist future for Janie, one that hinges on the Black woman’s survival of both patriarchy and racially targeted environmental distress (Hurston 2006, 193).

## 5 Conclusion

Hurston shows us that Black female survival is made possible, even in the wake of environmental catastrophe. The words ‘freedom’ and ‘free’ appear twenty-two times in the novel, underscoring the importance of freedom to Janie’s journey. Janie finally achieves that freedom and survival – what Lupton calls “the survival of the female” so crucial to the novel – post-storm (Lupton 1982, 52). Although Janie is a victim of patriarchal violence in her romantic relationships, and environmental violence as a laborer in the muck, Janie’s survival of the storm emboldens her to survive patriarchy, too, and ultimately stake out freedom for herself. While Janie encounters “exclusion from power” throughout the novel, Hurston importantly reclaims agency for Janie, at the text’s conclusion, which her survival of the storm pre-emptly (Washington 2000, 27). Hurston is indeed a ‘writer-activist’ for the Black Floridian community upon which she writes, by exposing the slow violence these people encountered and framing them as victims of slow sacrifice. In this manner, Hurston emerges as a feminist-writer-activist, who makes visible slow violence to bring attention to the intersectional battles of Black women like Janie, who are victims of patriarchal violence and environmental racism. In the end, while not all-encompassing, slow violence and sacrifice, as critical frameworks, offer new possibilities for understanding Janie’s survival. Janie fundamentally can surmount storms both physical and metaphorical in her life, *en route* toward a liberatory future.

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