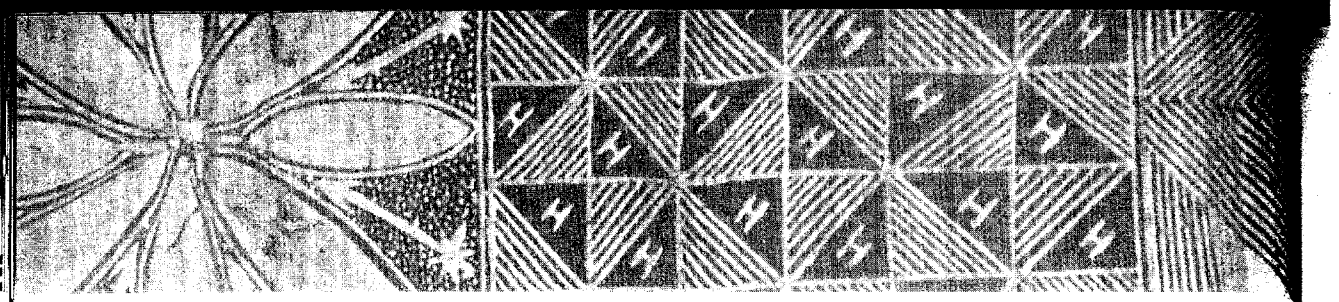

Black Feminism and the Challenge of Black Heterosexual Male Desire

Michael Awkward

After a brief respite in the 1970s and 1980s, when the socioeconomic plight of and the politics of artistically representing black women were at the forefront of our nationalist discourses, Afro-America has returned to a statistically justifiable emphasis on the topic that has been a preeminent concern throughout history: the victimized black male body, or what I have called elsewhere black-men-in-crisis. As we know all too well, although the percentages of black women in college and graduate and professional schools have increased significantly over the past two decades, these often-fatherless black males are only minimally more likely to pursue postsecondary education than they are to be relentlessly pursued by America's justice system in one form or another.

With few exceptions (particularly the work of some creative writers), generally self-described black feminist discourse remains unlikely to explore black masculinity except as a social, domestic, and intellectual force whose oppression of black women is energetic, self-conscious, and unremitting. Given the return of the black-male-in-crisis as preeminent concern, given Afro-America's historical (if sometimes ambivalent) fetishizing of black maleness, black feminism's capacity to impact black youth may be determined, in part, by how successfully it addresses the other side of the gender divide. Talk of "nonmonolithic masculinity," of a range of responses by individual or racialized men to patriarchal systems of oppression, is all the rage in mainstream feminism, which has

branched out productively into the realm of "gender studies" or, more specifically, "masculinity studies." If its goals continue to include the improvement of black females' lives, lived overwhelmingly alongside, and often dominated by, black men, black feminism might well come to see "nonmonolithic black masculinity" as a crucial topic and a way of encouraging potentially sympathetic men to live, work, and love in accordance with basic feminist principles. Three decades of contemporary black feminist writings and action have offered compelling insight into ways of assessing and, where necessary, moving beyond, received myths about strong black women, about the emasculation of black men, and about the dangers to black people generally of embracing mainstream views and values wholeheartedly. Still, in the realm of popular culture, at least, and, hence, in black youth culture, 1980s postfunk androgyny gave way to hip hop machismo, legitimizing aggressively patriarchal ways of being and foregrounding sentiments about black male victimization at the hands of whites—and of black women—that culminated in the Million Man March. Certainly, black feminism hasn't failed to pay significant attention to these developments and to recognize them as reactions against black women's social and intellectual progress. But it might do well, in addition, to observe the rifts between putatively homogeneous black men that these events have demonstrated.

At this point in my life and career, my own black feminist practice is informed by beliefs I have articulated elsewhere and to which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer below. I have argued that a black male feminism must "be both self-reflective and at least minimally self-interested," must, that is to say, never lose sight "of both the benefits and the dangers of a situatedness in feminist discourse."[1] But despite—or maybe even because of—such recognition, it is my strong sense that "given the persistence of pejorative meanings attached to black male subjectivities, if a feminist discourse informed by an acute awareness of such perceptions is not a risky venture, its social and intellectual contributions will be, at best, negligible."[2] Recognizing what they may feel is the remarkably consistent devaluations of (forms of) black masculinity by both white hegemony and black feminism, young or potentially sympathetic black men encountering black feminism must be able to find in it the possibilities for self-validation and self-affirmation.

My own position as a black male in feminism has led me, perhaps inevitably, to question the possibilities of ideological purity and, indeed, whether embracing feminism is any easier for women than for men at this particular moment in our history. And although I recognize the rights of black females

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Loving. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

to view black feminism as an empowering political tool of their own, I believe that because it is such a crucial element of Afro-American culture, it is, or at least can become, through dint of hard, self-conscious labor, mine, also. Like any other collection of sociopolitical perspectives, feminism shapes and is shaped by the people who utilize it, including—in my own case—a black man. Hence, I believe that because it has so thoroughly illuminated aspects of black women's situatedness in America and elsewhere, certain versions of black feminism might profitably begin to interrogate the nuances of black masculinity. Using an underread moment in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*[3] I want to explore briefly one issue that black feminism might help us successfully to illuminate: representations of the politics of black male heterosexual desire.

But for me, as a literary critic by training, someone in love with words and their associative uses and possibilities in exploring a necessarily individualized version of a historical moment, there's another question that's crucial to address, also: Is there a way that we can turn—or return—to the art of the black text, to provocative uses of words and sounds whose meanings we have, if not abandoned, largely ignored in our efforts to tease the liberatory or complicitous politics out of the works we explore and help to recreate? Such a turn, obviously, need not be accompanied by a rejection of textual confrontations and encoding of politics—art for art's sake has always been a mindless, socially irresponsible endeavor—but may provide me with a way of contributing to twenty-first–century struggles to broaden the social impact of black feminist insights.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is one of the handful of novels men and women of my generation had to come to terms with to define and refine our critical selves. I want to use it similarly here to help me to interrogate what we might call, echoing influential takes on female sexuality and cinematic spectatorship, respectively, the pleasures and dangers of the black male gaze. The paragraph with which I am concerned is offered during the course of Hurston's description of Janie's re-

turn to Eatonville in the first scene of the novel after she had stood trial for murdering her third husband, Tea Cake, in self-defense. Here, Hurston introduces the theme of judgment that resonates so clearly with her protagonist's court appearance, where she is evaluated, officially, by an all-white male judicial body and, unofficially, by white women, who she imagines might be sympathetic to the plight of a woman forced to kill a rage-filled husband.

More important for my purposes here, however, is the fact that she is judged by members of the black community who, despite the Jim Crow segregation from the white evaluators that reinforces their sense of racial powerlessness, see her just as a rabid Tea Cake does before she is forced to shoot him before he shoots her: as an ungrateful, possibly adulterous woman who believes that because of her light skin, well-preserved Nordic beauty, and firmly middle-class status, she is too good for him and, thus, for them. Indeed, the associations between a jealous Tea Cake's diseased, murderous rage and this larger community's attitudes are underlined when Hurston insists that, in the courtroom, the "colored people" were all against Janie, "pelting her with dirty thoughts. They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded."[4]

To move, as I am doing here, from this moment of murderous intraracial judgment to the pejorative "zigaboo" evaluations of Janie that introduce the novel allows the reader to understand why Janie sees her place as necessarily apart from, rather than as a part of, "the people" whom she'd earlier sought to join physically, emotionally, and discursively through the act of storytelling on the porch of her second husband's store. Indeed, however self-protective her decision, her choice to confine herself to her house, to reject involvement with the Eatonville community, is a response to its strategically limited readings of her. Despite a common "envy" that led to a "mass cruelty" that transcended gendered boundaries, the resultant "burning statements" and the use of laughter as "killing tools" trained on Janie, she reenters communal lore in specifically gendered terms. As driven by their desires as the men overseeing her return about whom I am primarily concerned here, "the women" look at her "faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance," hoping "she might fall to their level some day."[5] In this aggressively heterosexual polarization of male and female responses, if the women's critical gaze is determined by petty anxieties, jealousies, and fear of not measuring up to Janie's monetary status and attitudinal self-possession, the men's examination of Janie emphasizes, almost exclusively, her striking, even luminous middle-aged figure: "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye."[6]

We see, in this passage, Hurston's metaphorizing of Janie's body, her strategic poeticizing of the male gaze. Certainly, it isn't the men who imagine grapefruits, plumes, and pugnacity. Hurston is simultaneously recording and translating masculine desire in a way that renders it, if not more palatable, perhaps, to some readers, then more imaginative, more consistent with the rich black vernacular she constructs to record and reflect Janie's own discursive mastery despite the dictatorial mandates of her grandmother and second husband that she regard the black masses from a position "on high."[7] Unlike Nanny, however, Hurston is not protecting her protagonist from the often-dehumanizing effects of masculine desire, but offering an instance in which desire—female and male—

is instantiated and in which the accompanying male desire is seen as no more problematic than the female contempt. Whatever we might say about female jealousy as it is manifested in the beginning of the novel, Hurston's is not merely—maybe not even primarily—a condemnatory representation of the black male gaze and, hence, black male heterosexual desire. Indeed, physical confinement proves unsuccessful as a way of containing, controlling, or constructing desire throughout the novel, because the imagination—in the case of the gendered gaze here—remains free and sufficiently lucid to pursue its own agenda. If Janie is confined in and by her clothes (and their imagined absence) to others' readings of her, those readings are, indeed, as potentially expansive as the sea, the horizon, and the pear tree, the central metaphors of *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

In its concern with confinement and its escape, this scene recalls, with a difference, Joe Starks's forcing Janie to cover her "great rope of black hair":

> This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. . . . Joe never told Janie how jealous he was. He never told her how often he had seen other men figuratively wallowing in it as she went about things in the store. And one night he had caught Walter standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing. . . . He felt like rushing forth with the meat knife and chopping off the offending hand. That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store. That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others.[8]

For Starks, Janie clearly isn't an expansive sign, an endlessly readable figure, but an object with which he can do whatever he desires, including dictating that she cover aspects of her appearance and slapping her to "assure himself in possession."[9]

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But what does it mean that the contemporary reader on whom, like Pheoby, Hurston (and, by extension, Janie) seems to be depending for "a good thought"—and notice, again, the emphasis on judgment in Hurston's formulations of intraracial desire—is, in response to Janie's glorious reappearance in Eatonville, constructed as figuratively luxuriating over her attributes or, like Joe, desiring, metaphorically, at least, to protect Janie from the "dirty thoughts" that emanate from the imagination that produces the heterosexual black male gaze? What sorts of thinkers, of gender-inflected reading subjects, are we if those responses constitute the full range of our interrogations of black male desire?

Hurston insists that we—female and male readers—notice Janie, that we marvel at her well-preserved frame, her "firm"-ness, her freedom. She is free, in part, because she refuses to confine herself or see herself con-

fined by others' limited interpretations of her expansive possibilities and, hence, meanings. We are not, in the capacity of expansive thinkers, doomed by our varied gendered, racialized, or class rage like Joe who, in the scene where she rhetorically demasculinizes her second husband by insisting that he looks like "de change of life," figuratively "snatch[es] off part of [her] clothes while she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded."[10] Indeed, we can transcend, or at least incorporate into our ideological analyses, our own readings of Janie in ways that see her as more than we have ever imagined.

To say simply that the heterosexual black male gaze is bad, that desire is oppressive, is, at this point, to move us nowhere. For black feminism to remain like Hurston's "movin' sea," which Hurston compares to love;[11] to be prepared for its contemporary challenges, including its much-stated desire for womanist racial wholeness, we need to acknowledge that desire and imagine metaphors, similes, ways of engaging it that make it what we need it to become, too. And in the face of black patriarchy's aggressive reemergence in the black popular culture that helps to shape the perspectives of our students and our children, we must do so without reducing it to a single, static, self-confirming thing.

Notes

1. Michael Awkward, "A Black Man's Place," in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 96.
2. Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 8.
3. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; reprint New York: Perennial, 1991).
4. Ibid., p. 176.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 16.
8. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
9. Ibid., p. 67.
10. Ibid., p. 74.
11. Ibid., p. 182.