

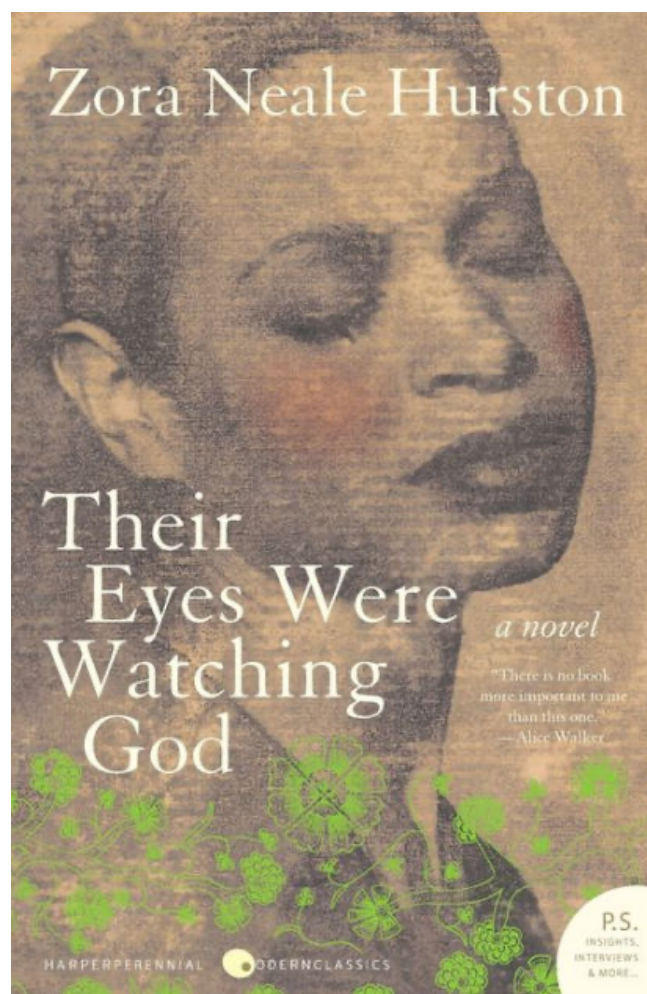
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in First-Year Composition

by Samantha Prillaman Conner



ZORA NEALE HURSTON, 2006. THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD. HARPER PERENNIAL MODERN CLASSICS

In 2022 Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, opens many gateways to critically thinking about themes such as race, gender roles, and identity. Many first-year students are exploring who they are as individuals, and many use their time in college to develop an identity outside of their parents' identity. I currently teach first-year composition at Radford University as a Graduate Teaching Fellow. Radford University is a rural, mostly white university in southwest Virginia. However, Radford University's student population is over one third students of color, a higher percentage than neighboring schools like Virginia Tech. Many students come from lower income families and choose Radford for its small-town environment and affordability. Radford University students are mainly women. Keeping these demographics in mind is important to understanding the reception of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in my first-year composition classroom.

Their Eyes Were Watching God follows the life of Janie, a Black woman from the South who experiences discrimination based on race and gender. She marries several men who each show readers how women are mistreated by their husbands and belittled by society. Though she is faced with discrimination based on her identity as a Black woman, Janie still holds onto her hope for independence and true love. The story is told through Janie's reflection on her life to her friend, Pheoby, which makes this a powerful novel to pair with feminist pedagogy due to the focus on reflection. Janie is developing her own ideas and identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, thus making this novel a great starting point for discussion, self-reflection, and writing in the FYC classroom.

Starting in small discussion groups allows students time to gain comfort with their peers and speaking in class, especially about controversial topics like race, gender, and sexuality. Starting with something like age discrimination and then moving into discussions of intersectionality of race and gender worked best in my classroom. Students are more inclined to talk about the experiences that Janie goes through in the novel because they can remove themselves from the equation initially. For example, students may bring up Janie's age as she is forced into her first marriage to Logan Killicks or they may talk about Hurston's purpose for writing *Their Eyes* in 1937. However, as they warm up to their peers and to me, they eventually become more comfortable relating the experiences of Janie to modern day issues concerning race and gender.

While teaching an emotionally-charged novel like *Their Eyes*, it is important to take notice of the zones of learning. I worked to keep students in the "stretch" zone, where they are learning but are not so overwhelmed that they shut down (Samu-Vissar). In this class, students were exposed to dialects different from their own, and ideas of racism, sexism, and sexuality, as well as comparisons of the novel to real-life events. The reason I use the word "possibly" when referring to my students' position in the "panic zone" is because I have no true evidence to present that suggests my students were uncomfortable talking about issues relating to gender roles, sexuality, or race. In fact, I received student writings that demonstrated respect and understanding of others' perspectives during our time

discussing the novel. However, these student writings and discussions demonstrating respect for one another and myself are no help in explaining why my attendance rates were so low and why students, particularly the male students, stopped turning in assignments after the first month of classes.

To explain in more detail, I taught two sections of FYC using the same syllabus incorporating Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into the curriculum. My 8:00 a.m. class was comprised of fifteen students, with only two males. My 9:00 a.m. class also consisted of fifteen students, seven of whom were males. After about a month of classes, I began noticing my male students were becoming less attentive in class and many stopped coming at all. In addition, all but three of my male students stopped submitting assignments.

At first, I attributed this decline in male attendance and assignment submission to my male students existing within the "panic zone." I thought they were upset about our discussions about women's sexuality, traditional gender roles, and masculinity. These are big, controversial topics for any student to encounter, especially during their first semester of college. However, I assigned a journal activity to allow students to reflect on their feelings about discussing topics such as feminism, gender roles, masculinity, race, sexuality, etc. Here are some of the responses that I received from the male students whose attendance had dropped:

Male student A: "Personally, I am very comfortable with talking about sexuality, sex and race in the classroom. As someone who is very comfortable in how they identify, others' opinions don't really affect me that much when it comes to gender and sexuality."

Male Student B: "I would not feel discomfort talking about those various topics in the classroom. Like I said before, I feel like everybody should have a wide understanding of gender, sexuality, and race, because learning about it can possibly help you in the future. I was always taught to always keep an open mind when learning about difficult topics in the world. I enjoy learning about those things and getting to know more about History."

Male Student C: "I do not really handle my discomfort, but if a teacher would ever call on me, I would just suck it up and say my opinion then just stay quiet the rest of class because I would see people give me a nasty look because it is not what society wants me to believe. I truly feel like nowadays if you do not believe what society does then you are just automatically wrong. I know in classrooms it is like a safe space but if I did ever have to say my opinion to the class no one would say anything, but I would see people look at me in a weird way and judge me from across the class. I would not mind if I talked about my opinions on things in a paper that only you would see, but I would not like to share in front of the class."

Male Student D: "In the classroom I have mixed opinions about talking about race, gender, and sexuality in the classroom. At some points when talking about the topic I feel fine like talking about the history. I can go for a while when we go through the timeline of how the movements started, important people, and specific points in time. When it comes to talking about personal experiences or even trying to relate my own situation to a topic I do not feel as comfortable. I do place in the middle of the political spectrum, but there are a lot of things I just don't have a strong opinion on. I would not want to say something that could possibly upset someone or even have a debate due to the fact I really wouldn't have to many points on the topic."

Overall, these responses show students want to experience respect in the classroom and learn about perspectives different from their own. Male Student A has an understanding that sometimes misinformation happens and that is okay. Classroom discussions seem to be a place to learn for this student. Male Student B agrees with Male Student A and possesses a respect for learning and an open mind. Male Student C has some reservations about discussing controversial topics in class but has no problem discussing these topics on paper for various writing assignments. Though Male Student C is comfortable sharing his opinions on paper, he enters the "panic zone" when asked to share ideas and opinions aloud in whole group discussions. Lastly, Male Student D does not like to participate in controversial discussions about race, gender, sexuality, etc, but his reasoning shows respect for others' feelings as well as his own. Male Student D could easily enter the "panic zone" if conflicting ideas are brought to the table. It will be especially important for this student to understand that working through ideas as a class is a part of learning within the "stretch zone." These excerpts from their journal assignment show promise for classroom discussions and writings within the "stretch zone," though Male Students C and D have the potential to enter into the "panic zone" during whole group discussions.

My final evaluations revealed that the Southern Black dialect use in the novel was the primary cause for the low attendance and assignment submission drops, not the discussions about race and gender. The aspect of reading difficulty alone may have been causing students to enter the "panic zone." There is also the possibility of unconscious bias related to understanding her Southern Black dialect. In retrospect, students were more uncomfortable with the dialect and content than I realized even though I started with the age discrimination discussions. Though they may have felt some discomfort at times, I made sure to use antiracist teaching strategies based on Ibram Kendi's definition of an antiracist: "An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences – that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group" (Kendi 20). As a white female instructor, I needed to be sure I was not "speaking for" BIPOC individuals. It was important for me to be able to hold class

discussions that did not alienate any student and did not allow room for racial discrimination.

Though I prepared for code switching lessons before the semester began, I did not see dialect as a possible "panic zone" at first. One way to incorporate discussions of dialect into the classroom and help students understand Hurston's reasons for writing the majority of *Their Eyes* in a Southern Black dialect is to assign journal entries relating to code switching. Keeping these assignments low stakes allows students to experiment with their writing and ideas without the fear of being "wrong." Journal entries allow students to reflect on their own experiences using their own language. We then discuss as a whole group why we think Hurston uses a Southern Black dialect. Many students say, "Because it's where she's from," but with slight guidance I can move students towards thinking about how these Southern Black voices were often silenced. Some students presented hidden "panic zones" as they would sometimes refer to the Standard English dialect as "proper," so I was sure to explain why no dialect is "proper," in an effort to end the subtly racist comments. We end our whole group discussion with the idea that by incorporating dialect into *Their Eyes*, Hurston is giving a voice to those who did not have one. I bring this idea up often as we read through the novel in the following weeks. Finding common ground through discussions of dialect and code switching brings students together though they may be different.

Hurston's novel teaches students that it is acceptable to keep their own identities in their writing. While some of their values may be challenged, the use of antiracist and feminist pedagogical strategies helps students to remain in the "stretch zone" as they explore new ways of thinking. The journal responses from my male students show promising open-minded individuals who want to learn and respect others, but have reservations about voicing their opinions in class. By teaching the importance of code-switching in conversation with this novel, students learn to think critically about and respect the identities of those who may be different from them.

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