

Eatonville: The Real Town and its Image in Social Memory

--On the works of Zora Neale Hurston

Human history knows many towns that sprang out of nowhere, experienced their golden age, and then were safely gone. There are, however, other cities, which seem to have existed forever, although they were not too favored by fate. They led a quiet and measured life, sometimes breaking through the invisible curtain that separated them from the rest of the world, leaving behind only an artistic image, the general view of which was not connected with its counterpart. One of these towns is Eatonville, Florida.

Most notably recognized as the home of folklorist, anthropologist, and writer Zora Neale Hurston, Eatonville is one of the nation's oldest surviving African-American communities. Following the Civil War, "free" Africans settling in the area worked primarily as farm hands clearing land or helping in the construction of nearby Maitland, a white township. Two of these individuals, J. E. Clark and Allen Rickett, had come to Florida with the intention of establishing an independent black community, and they found Maitland, a community more tolerant than most to their cause, to be the ideal locale for their town. Maitland itself was founded by three white veterans of the Union army, one of whom was Captain Josiah Eaton. The Eatonville town site was purchased from Eaton in 1887 and named in his honor. Two years after the town's inception, the *Eatonville Speaker* ran the following headline: "Colored People of the United States: Solve the Great Race Problem by Securing a Home in Eatonville, Florida, a Negro City Governed by Negroes."<sup>1</sup> Some historians describe Eaton as a humanitarian, who sought to assist Africans in achieving "self-governance," while others say his primary motivation was to keep them out of Maitland while maintaining access to their labor. For us, this is not so important, and this issue will be discussed further, of course, by other historians. Now, in this paper I will try to understand the phenomenon that Eatonville, an actually existing city, was for many people a kind of fictional settlement for African-Americans of the 20th century.

In order to achieve this objective, I will examine the following same texts, from which, in fact, the spread of that image began: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "The Eatonville

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kathmanduk2.wordpress.com/2008/02/27/black-history-month-all-black-towns/>

Anthology,” both written by Zora Neale Hurston. She was one of the brightest lights of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. An occasional collaborator with Langston Hughes and a rival of Richard Wright, Hurston was considered by many to be the pre-eminent black female writer in the country. Her work was everywhere, in major magazines and on bookshelves. She consulted on screenplays for Hollywood.

Her best-known work is a novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which captures the culture of a working-class black community. It tells the story of thrice-married Janie Crawford who lives in the small, black Florida town of Eatonville. In real life, Hurston herself, like the heroine of her novel, largely connected her life with this town, even calling it her place of birth in her autobiography; in fact, that is not really true: Zora Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama. Despite this, this example shows how close her connection to this small but distinctive town was.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a household picture of the town is reconstructed, from its administrative structure to everyday relationships. Also, the origin of the settlement is unfurled (which in the future in the social memory will be transferred to the real settlement).

The first mention of Eatonville occurs in the fourth chapter, when the main character, Janie, meets her future husband Joe Starks: “But when he [Joe Starks] heard all about ’em makin’ a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves.”

In the course of the story we witness the construction of the city, and that gives us a complete picture of how it functions from within. Upon arrival, Joe Starks and Janie find that Eatonville represents just another provincial town, of which there are so many in the vast American continent, and its only otherness was that it was given the status of the first incorporated all-black town. As Hurston writes herself: “It was early in the afternoon when they got there, so Joe said they must walk over the place and look around. They locked arms and strolled from end to end of the town. Joe noted the scant dozen of shame-faced houses scattered in the sand and palmetto roots and said, “God, they call this a town? Why, ’tain’t nothing but a raw place in de woods.”

Later, Joe Starks becomes the first mayor of the city, and his shop is the center of public life in Eatonville, always full of life and where the news and gossip are discussed: “The store itself was a pleasant place if only she [Janie] didn’t have to sell things. When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and

see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to.”

In general, as seen, for example, from the quotation above, Eatonville is not an ideal place, considering that we are looking at it through the eyes of the protagonist of the novel. Her position in society, even though it is high, does not give her an opportunity for self-fulfillment and suppresses her:

The store itself kept her with a sick headache. The labor of getting things down off of a shelf or out of a barrel was nothing. And so long as people wanted only a can of tomatoes or a pound of rice it was all right. But supposing they went on and said a pound and a half of bacon and a half pound of lard? The whole thing changed from a little walking and stretching to a mathematical dilemma. Or maybe cheese was thirty-seven cents a pound and somebody came and asked for a dime's worth. She went through many silent rebellions over things like that. Such a waste of life and time.

Despite this, in the course of further development of the story, Jenny nevertheless finds her happiness in Eatonville, and although it is not specifically connected with the city, but with a man (with Tea Cake, to be exact). Janie and Tea Cake find a lot of places for leisure in the settlement, in addition to the store terrace:

Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea Cake and Janie gone to a dance. Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie's yard and seeding the garden for her. Chopping down that tree she never did like by the dining room window. All those signs of possession. Tea Cake in a borrowed car teaching Janie to drive. Tea Cake and Janie playing checkers; playing coon-can; playing Florida flip on the store porch all afternoon as if nobody else was there. Day after day and week after week.

In general, based on these and many other descriptions, we can reconstruct a more or less complete picture of how Eatonville lived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Life was not perfect: there were joys and sorrows, moments of happiness and sadness, but despite this, there is something in the novel of Zora Hurston, that has been forcing readers for already 70 years now to fall in love with this place every time we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Another work is "The Eatonville Anthology" (1926); with its title, it is easy to guess what is going on here. Consisting of 14 small sketches about the life of the town and its residents, the story paints nothing less than a utopia of a certain village, whose model is clearly the image of Eden that to some extent is a much different picture to what is shown in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Of course, in this city, crimes occur sometimes, but they are so small that there is no reason to pay serious attention to them, especially as the punishment for them is expulsion (well, isn't it an Eden, indeed?)

Stories told by Zora Hurston, look so comical in their awkwardness, that it is hardly possible to believe that the place where they occur is not fictional. For instance, in the first segment entitled "The Pleading Woman," Mrs. Tony Roberts begs for food for her family. First she begs for meat from Mr. Clarke who is annoyed, because he knows that her husband is a good provider, and she does not need to beg. She then visits various homes until she has collected everything she wants for the day. Apparently, Mrs. Roberts is never satisfied with what she is given. The narrator explains that the next day her begging continues.

Or, in another sketch, "Tippy," Zora Neale Hurston focuses on "the most interesting member" of Sykes Jones's family, the dog. Tippy has been sentenced to death several times for a variety of food theft crimes. Despite these threats, it manages to remain skinny, alive, and friendly.

These two fragments represent only two of fourteen drawings by Hurston in "The Eatonville Anthology." In contrast to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, here we do not see a detailed description of the social structure of the city, but, on the other hand, our understanding deepens even more to the daily life, that was given to us in a comic vein. One can hardly say exactly (at least without a detailed survey) to what extent the sketches narrated by Zora Neale Hurston are true, but you must admit that all of these, undoubtedly, contributed to the formation of the artistic image of Eatonville, torn away from the place and from time in the social memory.

In contrast to real historical events or topoi, which eventually are transformed into images of themselves and, often, are very different from what they were in the beginning, but, nevertheless, save the link with history; in the ordinary consciousness Eatonville seems to have lost this connection. Existing on the arrow of time at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, this town, thanks largely to its most important singer, Zora Neale Hurston, is seen only as a fictional scene in her works.

The reason for this, in my opinion, lies in the fact that the world that was described by her occurred to be more attractive than the real Eatonville. No matter how good this town is in our

world, in the universe of Hurston it will still look like an unattainable ideal of equality and moral freedom. It became a curtain dangling in nowhere "place of memory" for African Americans, who are seeking their identity.

On the other hand, the reason that the fictional but not real Eatonville occurs as the locus of African-American identity for many people is because of the deepest detailing of all life aspects in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. If in *Their Eyes Are Watching God* she builds the social structure of the town, in "The Eatonville Anthology" she fills it with images that are extremely attractive for learning about the social memory of people. Because as many of them do not really know that the real Eatonville exists, the effect of constructing a fictional "place of memory" increases many times.

### *American Student Comments on Anton's Paper*

Hi everyone!

My name is Anton Panov and I'm a 3rd year student of the RSUH. I am studying history here and I would like to present you a kind of different view on Zora Hurston's Eatonville. My essay is not intended to be the last authority and gives only the first sketches of a big future research on the formation of the Eatonville's image in social (collective) memory. I would like to hear your views on the productivity of such work, as well as comments, suggestions, and criticism of the essay.

Best,

A.P.

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Hello Anton!

loved your essay! My favorite part about this piece is that its clear to see the research you put in to it. It's strange (funny or sad I can't quite decide) that I live so close to Eatonville yet I know so little about it. You would think living close to such an iconic town I would know every detail about it, in all honesty I probably know more about Russia than Eatonville haha. I really liked your opening paragraph, it really grabbed the reader in, making them want to read more of what you had to say. The over all fluidity of the piece is great as well, especially considering English is not your native tongue. Good work!

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Hello Anton,

I truly thought you wrote a magnificent piece. Your in-depth knowledge and research was fantastic, but I was especially drawn to your excellent structure. In a sense, your piece flowed very well. Considering English is not your native tongue, I also found the piece to be a wonderful display of your abilities to not only comprehend literature, but to describe what you've comprehended vividly and seamlessly. You've truly done a fantastic job, and thank you for sharing it with us.

All the best,

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Hello, Anton!

I agree wholeheartedly with Will. Your command of the English language is profound and eloquent. The flow and structure of your paper was absolutely seamless, and the overall content was insightful. I can relate to Irene; I live near Eatonville, yet know so little about it. Your writing is informative and clearly the result of much research,

planning, and dedication.

Thank you for sharing it with us!

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Anton,

Your paper is very well written! My favorite part is when you state that "No matter how good this town is in our world, in the universe of Hurston it will still look like an unattainable ideal of equality and moral freedom." The paper tells what Eatonville means to African Americans and how its ideas effectively motivated the people who lived there.

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Thank you all guys for your comments and compliments! I really tried to do my best in a short time as I was very busy recently. I still hope you can point out my flaws and give me some helpful remarks.

And by the way I'm coming to Zora! Festival this winter so I hope we'll see each other!

Anton