The Dreams of the Oppressed

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[Assignment: Write a four-page paper which responds to the film "Paris Is Burning" (viewed in class) by relating its important themes to similar or corresponding elements in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God.]

"Nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will" (Hurston 15). This quotation from Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, expresses one of the main themes that the novel shares with the film Paris Is Burning. Both the novel, which follows a woman's search for happiness and satisfaction in the 1930's, and the film, which depicts the lifestyle of black, homosexual gangs in New York City in the 1980's, express the clear idea that everyone, no matter how oppressed, has dreams and goals which he or she strives to achieve. The characters in both the novel and the film display similar aspirations and dreams, deal with their prejudices in much the same way, and ultimately use remarkably similar means to attain these goals.

Initially, characters in both works express the need to fill a specific void in their lives. In the novel, Janie searches to find the love that she never felt as a child from her grandmother. Janie resents her grandmother, who robbed her of her childhood and dreams by forcing her to marry the rich, yet cruel Logan Killicks. Janie is told that her financial and social security are more important than the love that is her dream. Needless to say, Janie never finds love in her stifling marriage to Killicks, who treats her more as a farm hand than as a wife. The old man continually stifles her sense of self-respect by making comments to her, such as, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (30). Janie eventually leaves Killicks to marry the abusive Joe Starks, but instead of freedom Janie is further degraded with constant remarks by her husband, such as, "She's a woman and her place is in the home" (41). Finally, Janie meets Tea Cake Woods who makes her feel special and with whom she falls in love. It is at this point that Janie says, "Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (108). It is in her friendship and subsequent marriage to Tea Cake that Janie feels like a complete, important person and finds the love she has been searching for. When Tea Cake teaches Janie to play checkers, a luxury that Starks never allowed, she finds "herself glowing inside" because finally, "Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (92). Janie later speaks of the influence Tea Cake had on her life when she tells him that he has "made somethin' outa her" (158).

Similarly, the men in Paris Is Burning turn to the gangs, or "houses" to find the love and sense of belonging that is missing in their relationships with their biological families. For example, one of the members of the House of Xtravaganza mentions that his house mother, Angie Xtravaganza, gives him birthday gifts, a luxury that he never
received from his real mother. In the same manner, a friend of one of the ball walkers who helps him prepare for the balls, commented that it "helps to have someone in your corner saying 'you can do it'" (Paris Is Burning). The friend provides the moral support that is so essential and that had been missing from the man's earlier relationships. Also in the film, Pepper Labeija mentions that when his parents discovered that their son was a cross dresser, they ostracized him and even burned his clothing. Pepper's subsequent position as the "mother" of the House of Labeija, however, allows him to feel like a part of a family, and also to pass that comfort along to other "children" who are dealing with a void within themselves because they lack a sense of belonging and love, emotions that normally come from a strong family relationship.

In both works, certain characters respond to prejudice and oppression by playing the part of an "acceptable" member of society. In the novel, for example, Daisy Blunt is described as a black woman who "knows that white clothes look good on her, so she wears them for dress up" and has hair with "a kind of white flavor" (63-64). She is black, but she dresses and acts like the more accepted white woman because when she does, she is positively rewarded by the men who ignore the other black women present. As Ms. Hurston writes, Daisy is "like the piece of string out of a ham. It's not ham at all, but it's been around ham and got the flavor" (64). Similarly, when her second husband dies, Janie feels more sense of release and freedom than she does grief, but "she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see" (83). Janie knows that to go against what the townspeople expect to see would mean further gossip and ostracism.

The film also contains characters who play the role of the acceptable person. For example, at one point Pepper Labeija notes that to actually become a woman is, in his opinion, "taking it too far" (Paris Is Burning). Pepper denounces the act of becoming a woman, yet he himself dresses in women's clothing because that is what brings him the fame and power within the "house" system which is so important to him. Similarly, in the balls themselves there is a contest to judge which gay man is the best at "acting straight." This competition is important, because for homosexuals living in an unaccepting world it is essential to their safety that no one from the outside world know that they are gay. Therefore, to avoid ostracism, the characters play the acceptable roles of straight men for the outside world.

In both works there are also characters who strive, not only to act a role, but to actually become what is seen as the "acceptable." In the novel, the best example of this is Mrs. Turner who, although black herself, "look black folk as a personal affront to herself" (136). "She was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness" and "didn't cling to Janie Woods, the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristic" (138-139). Mrs. Turner cannot stand to be a part of the oppressed black race, so she strives to be white by joining in the oppression of blacks. In the same way, in the film, the greatest wish of both Octavia Saint Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza is to become "real women" through sex-change operations. To society, being a woman is more acceptable than simply dressing as one. In addition, at one point in the film, the goal of all minorities is stated as being "to live and
look as well as a white person" (Paris Is Burning). In this way Venus mentions that his greatest assets are his "white features," and Octavia admires the "red, hot beautiful hair" and features of the white supermodel Paulina Porascova (Paris Is Burning). Both men feel that by becoming women, and more specifically white women, they will fit into society better than as black, homosexual men who dress and act like women.

(5) Finally, both works express a great deal of respect towards women. One, though not expressed directly, emphasizes the journey of one incredibly strong and courageous woman who endures physical and mental abuse as well as social degradation, to follow her dreams and reach her ultimate goal of love and fulfillment. The other follows a group of men who, in striving to be themselves in a society that cannot or will not recognize their way of life, show an enormous respect for women. This is evident in their portrayal of women, but also in their entire way of life. For example, in each of the houses, there is a "mother" who runs the "family." She "has the most power and gets the most respect" of anyone in the house"(Paris Is Burning). The dream of many of these "children," then, is to become, either permanently or temporarily, one of these women who are so honored in their society.

"We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have learned to survive" (Paris Is Burning). This attitude, while spoken in the film Paris Is Burning, is depicted in both the documentary and in Zora Neal Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. The lives of both Janie and the numerous characters in the film illustrate the fact that everyone, despite his/her social status, has dreams that he or she strives to reach. Janie, as a black woman, and the "children" of the houses, as black homosexual men, are continually ostracized and oppressed for being members of what society deems to be the lowest of the social classes. Yet, through all of their abuse and ordeals they continue to hold fast to their ultimate goals and never give up striving to make those dreams reality.