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In Revue française d'études américaines 2018/1 No 154, pages 33 to 49
Publisher Belin

ISSN 0397-7870
ISBN 9782410014013
DOI 10.3917/rfea.154.0033

Article available online at
https://shs.cairn.info/journal-revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2018-1-page-33?lang=en

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Keywords

African American Modernism; Zora Neale Hurston; *Their Eyes were Watching God;* textual genesis; Black American folklore; montage; collage

Déplaçant l'accent mis sur la voix et le langage vers la genèse de la composition du texte et ses dissonances, cet essai explore comment Their Eyes were Watching God *(1937) de Zora Neale Hurston illustre, par son utilisation du matériau du folklore, une esthétique qui ressortit au modernisme africain américain ou « modernisme vernaculaire » et fonctionne comme critique du courant moderniste dominant. La construction et la composition du texte révèlent qu'il s'agit d'un collage et d'un montage aux « coutures » éminemment visibles. Une analyse du récit d'esclave de Nanny, de l'épisode de la mule de Matt Bonner, ainsi que la danse du feu dans les Everglades permet de montrer comment le modernisme de* Their Eyes *provient d'une intertextualité interne, inhérente au processus créatif de Hurston et aux différents genres qu'elle pratiquait. Il provient aussi, irréfutablement, de sa pratique du théâtre. Le roman, en prolongement du folklore noir, est comme lui « en train de se faire » ; il porte la marque de « la brusquerie des récits contés », une des « Caractéristiques de l'expression nègre » (1934).*

Is Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) a modernist text?[1] Lately, scholars have read Hurston's canonical novel as belonging to an alternative modernist mode, diasporic modernism (Pavlić 2002, 2004). Critics have further celebrated her anthologies of folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) for their pioneering staging of the "I"

1. The edition used is *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1977, abridged as *TE*. Excerpts from Hurston's other writings are quoted from Cheryl Wall's 1995 two-volume edition in The Library of America, abbreviated as LA *Novels* and LA *Folklore*.

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of the anthropologist in purportedly scientific texts (Domina, Hernandez, Eisen). Such a gesture is deemed "modern" for it blurs the boundaries between subject and object, between autobiography and essay, and in so doing effects a critique of the production of knowledge while probing the tensions of the self. Assessed via her own analysis and celebration of black expressive culture in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" and "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals" (1934) insofar as it exhibits angularity, asymmetry, imitation cum invention and dramatization, Hurston's modernism is often qualified as "alternative" (Sorensen 4). Moreover, written in seven weeks while she conducted fieldwork in Haiti (1936), *Their Eyes* also responds to the wider claims of a transculturalism that dialogues with Hurston's precise rendition of southern black folklore (Southerland, Lamothe, Pavlić, Jennings).

African American vernacular modernism

Amidst claims for a separate Afro-American modernism, one that would dialogue with, contradict and qualify Euro-American modernism, this essay explores the ways in which the novel exemplifies, through its inclusions of folk material and narrative segments belonging to other genres, an aesthetics akin to the technique of collage that is symptomatic of what, for want of a better formulation, I shall call African American vernacular modernism. It also poses the heroine's "self-revelation" as the irreducible modernity of black women's lives.[2] Keith Byerman defines vernacular modernism as combining some aspects of modernism, notably its interrogations of the foundations of culture, and the African American vernacular that "includes the conventional genres of folklore (tales, songs, beliefs, material culture) as well as performative aspects of storytelling, call-and-response, verbal contests and religious practices" (254).[3] Among major defining traits of Modernism as a historically defined artistic and cultural movement stands its claim on "otherness" as a clue to the "renewal" of a decadent, declining Western civilization. While the Irish Renaissance went back to Celtic mythology and folklore at the turn of the century, Picasso famously drew on African masks for inspiration.[4] The African-American artist taps his/her heritage and goes back to the folk and

2. See Leigh Anne Duck's argument that the celebration of "the folk" must be underlined alongside the main character's progress (266).

3. Michael Levenson's list of the characteristics of the movement are: "the recurrent act of fragmenting unities (unities of character or plot or pictorial space or lyric form), the use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty, the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment, all often inspired by the resolve (in Eliot's phrase) to startle and disturb the public" (3).

4. On the link to the Irish Renaissance, see Locke's introduction to *The New Negro* anthology (1925, 114).

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folk material from another position: it is *his/her* cultural roots that need to be probed to renew a culture that had marginalized and ostracized it in the first place.[5] Houston Baker's double formulation for the Harlem Renaissance as *sui generis* discursive strategies, that he designates as "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery," summarizes the power play central to any definition of black artists' productions in the twenties and the thirties (xvi). Yet even if one, like Baker, argues for its singularity, African American modernism must be placed alongside American modernism; it must be thought at the fraught intersection of the Harlem Renaissance, itself an unstable category, and of a Euro-American modernism with which it comes in contrast, conflict *and* correspondence (Hutchinson, North, Gosselin). One could also venture an always already "modernist" stance for the African American text since the qualities of mainstream modernist productions coincide with the very traits of African American expressive culture. Toni Morrison ironically remarked that black women, who have always worked, have had to deal with "post-modern" problems since the nineteenth century and earlier, thus bringing to the fore the biases, if not the outright racism, inherent in the categories of "modern" and "post-modern" (Gilroy 1993, 178).

Given Hurston's desire to use folklore material for artistic purposes and her last patron's express interdiction to do so, the "modernism" of her novels is the fruit of a willed transgression, a rupture that is a show of power, the mastery of a new form—to use the first half of Houston Baker's formula—that claims and flaunts its own experimental character. On December 8th, 1927, she signed an employment contract with her third patron, Mrs. Mason, who retained rights to the material collected and stopped her from using it for "commercial purposes" (Hemenway 1977, 110). Only when freed from the constraints of patronage did Hurston turn to fiction. Yet these constraints had made her self-conscious about the use of black folklore in her creative work (Hemenway 1990). When one looks at the text itself, her use of this material must be seen as both an unmediated quotation of genuine culture and an attempt at integrating this material into the textual economy of the novel—narration, plot, characterization, description, etc.—without distorting the original thrust of the source. This combination, an encounter between two or more genres, the folktale and the novel, is thus a variation on what Mikhail Bakhtin defined as "novelization" (1981). The ways in which Hurston's writing "novelizes" folklore thus mark it as modernist. In Bakthin's analysis, the novel, a new form, transforms the other set genres, like the epic; it makes them more flexible, introduces open-endedness into rigid, set literary forms. In *Their Eyes*, the primacy of context over text and heteroglossia may be said to work both ways since the two genres

5. Michel Feith makes a similar claim in his article "The Syncopated African" (2001, 62). See also Carr and Cooper for a critique of the link between modernity and Modernism.

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interact and often share similar traits: just as the narrative segments transform or reflect back on folk lore, the context of black culture infuses Janie's text and the third-person sections. Likewise, the polyglot nature of the black text of the lore troubles Janie's own expression, just as much as her own voice incorporates the text of the folk (Gates 1988, 192). Her voice and the narrator's, as they emerge from these narrative segments, and the text in so far as it is imbued with the poetics of the folk (Holloway 1987; Raynaud 2001), articulate this generic confrontation of the novel and the folk.

Hurston's *Their Eyes* is indeed made up of fragments of texts that she actually collected: proverbs, cosmogonic myths, animal fables, and African American rituals, such as the dozens. Its construction betrays that it is a montage and a collage with highly visible seams.[6] She was even criticized for doing so in the early reviews and analyses of the novel, such as Darwin Turner's (106). Hurston is "quoting" the lore, "recycling" folk material, in a movement not so different from the appropriation and transformation of material she located at the heart of African American communal religious expression: " [Spirituals], even the printed ones, do not remain in their original form. Every congregation that takes it up, alters it considerably." (LA, *Folklore* 869). Indeed, she used excerpts of tales and folklore material that she had collected on her field trips and, for some of them, that had appeared elsewhere—in "The Eatonville Anthology" (1926), *Mules and Men*—and altered them to suit the construction of her narrative, to develop her characters and articulate her story. Yet the novel, in part as a result of this "recycling" technique, has often been deemed to be devoid of plot.[7] This incorporation is thus modern on at least two accounts: first, for its inclusion of folklore material (content) and second, because of the hiatus created between narrative developments that contribute to the "readability" of the novel and fragments that often take the shape of highly dramatized dialogues or easily distinguishable separate segments (form) lifted from her field notes. What can be seen as unsmooth, "jagged," dissonant, "not ironed out" is precisely what can and should be salvaged as modern.[8] The foregrounding of the text's formal qualities enables to see it as a "speakerly" (Gates 1988) and "writerly" production and to shift the emphasis on textuality, i.e. aesthetics and poetics. Hurston herself was not pleased with the outcome: she wished she could write all of her novels again, but added: "perhaps it is just as well to be rash

6. For an analysis of the "collage aesthetics" of the Harlem Renaissance, see Farebrother.

7. She herself recognized one: "The plot was far from the circumstances […]" (LA, *Folklore* 750).

8. See Hurston's description of the spirituals: "The harmony of the true spiritual is not regular. The dissonances are important and not to be ironed out by the trained musician. The various parts break at any old [odd?] time." (LA, *Folklore* 870).

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and foolish for a while" (LA, *Folkore* 717). Her rush to write resulted in a mode that, because of her reverence for her material, retained and exposed the heterogeneity of the folklore when integrated into the matter, the manner, the structure and the economy of the novel.

Within the limited scope of this essay, I will only address three occurrences of the inclusion of discrete elements and folklore material: Nanny's oral slave narrative the episode of Matt Bonner's mule, and the fire dance on the Muck with its references to John de Conquer, before turning to a more general assessment of the effect of these inclusions.[9]

Mules, Men and Women

Critics have singled out as Nanny's "slave narrative," a long segment that belongs to another genre than the novel: "Old Nanny sat there rocking Janie like an infant and thinking back and back. Mind pictures brought feelings and feelings dragged out *dramas* from the hollows of her heart" (*TE* 32, italics mine). What follows is indeed a first-person account of Nanny's slave experience: the jealousy of her mistress when she finds out that the child Nanny has borne is the slave master's, the threats of whipping and physical torture, Nanny's flight at night in the swamp with her baby at the breast. She stays hidden until Sherman's army frees them, but has to wait until "the Big Surrender at Richmond" (*TE* 36) to enjoy total freedom. Nanny may be referring here to Sherman's March to the Sea, a grand raid from Atlanta to Savannah from mid-November to the end of December 1864. She also includes the final events of the Civil War: Grant's capture of Petersburg and Richmond in early April 1865. After President Davis and his entourage abandoned Richmond and fled south by train, the retiring soldiers were under orders to set fire to the city which eventually surrendered. These historical references, together with allusions to the Haitian revolution, are woven into the text to create Nanny's voice. Grounding the voice of the folk in personal memory and history, they come into correspondence with the more collective text of the lore and with the writing of African American history. Nanny's story exemplifies the episodic structure of the slave narrative as a literary genre, its programmatic core: the jealous mistress, corporal punishments,

9. Other discrete elements of folklore are: the cosmogonic myth (*TE* 29), the dozens Janie plays with Joe (*TE* 122-123), the episode of Mrs. Tony Robbins (*TE* 113-115), a variation on Mrs. Tony Robert or "The Pleading Woman" from the "Eatonville Anthology" (Hurston 1995 59-60), signifyin' rituals, including a courtship ritual, on the store porch (*TE* 999-108), a creation myth (*TE* 138-139), a prayer-poem (*TE*, 73), a ribald song (*TE* 232). I have voluntarily limited the list to segments or verbal rituals. A number of expressions in the dialogues and in the third-person narrative segments of *Their Eyes* are borrowed from Hurston's folklore works (see Holloway 1987; Raynaud 2001).

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the flight, and the conclusive "free at last." The major difference with the slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), lies in the oral quality of the text. Nanny's written oral testimony reads rather like the oral narratives collected by the WPA arts project. The following excerpt from Matilda Hatchett's narrative, collected in Arkansas in the nineteen thirties, that describes the Civil War, may be usefully compared to Nanny's telling:

> The Secesh wouldn't go far. They would just hide. One night there'd be a gang of Secesh, and the next one, there'd come along a gang of Yankees. Pa was 'fraid of both of 'em. Secesh said they'd kill 'im if he left his white folks. Yankees said they'd kill 'im if he didn't leave 'em. He would hide out in the cotton patch and keep we children out there with him. Ole mis' made him carry us.[10]

Nanny's story runs as follows: "Dat mornin' on de big plantation close to Savannah, a rider come in a gallop tellin' 'bout Sherman talkin' Atlanta. Marse Robert's son had done been kilt at Chickamauga." (*TE* 32). In June 1935 Hurston had travelled south, with Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, to record work songs for the Library of Congress. She became a member of the Florida FWP unit that aimed to produce the Florida volume in the American Guides series and, among other things, interviewed former slaves in April 1938.[11] She returned to Florida in 1939 to record songs for the Library of Congress and the Folk Arts Committee of the WPA. The segment is oral history rather than novelistic material; its inclusion creates a long break in the third-person narration. Moreover, the emphasis on the authenticity of the black vernacular contrasts with the written slave narratives aimed at a white audience.

The end of Nanny's telling marks the end of the chapter and her last words—she likens herself to a "cracked plate" (*TE* 37)—resound with the actual fragmentation of the text, the jumps in the story, the rhythm of the novel. Chapter four also ends on a "crack": "They [Janie and Jody] […] saw the sun plunge into the *same crack* in the earth from which the night emerged" (*TE* 55, emphasis mine). Likewise her soul emerges from its hiding place (*TE* 192) and is convened at the end of the novel (*TE* 286). The "kissing" darkness turns into "a monstropolous old thing" (*TE* 19)[12] at the end of chapter one. At another chapter ending, similarly, the moon

10. Samuel S. Taylor conducted this FWP, WPA, interview in Arkansas. http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/asn18.htm#28 These Arkansas narratives were collected from 1936 to 1938.

11. Wall first published these notes as *Works-in-Progress* for The Florida Negro, LA, *Folklore* 875-911. Pamela Bordelon further edited *Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project. Go Gator and Muddy the Water* in 1999.

12. The urban dictionary defines "monstropolous" as: "Of or pertaining to monstrosity. A growing forgetfullness, that grows in proportion and size, comparable to that of a monster."

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rises (*TE* 151). Thus, the novel's chapter endings follow a certain pattern: more often than not they introduce an abrupt break ("Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" [*TE* 44]); they coincide with death (*TE* 135, 202, 206) and mourning ("grief," *TE* 143, 281), but also with Tea Cake's celebration of Janie's beauty (*TE* 165) that contrasts with Joe's sonorous slap (*TE* 124). Chapter lengths vary enormously, with chapter fifteen being only three-page long, and breaks within chapters are marked by a succession of dots (*TE* 74, 97). *Their Eyes* is thus formally and visually a broken-up narrative, divided into twenty chapters, themselves at times internally divided. This formal feature creates an inner rhythm that comes into correspondence with the discrete units punctuating the narration. These units of direct discourse, criticized for "impeding the plot" (Gates 1988, 196 and 200), contribute rather to a different aesthetics precisely in their opposition to narrative commentary.

The story of Matt Bonner's yellow mule appears in chapter six when Janie, now married to Joe Starks, works in the store and enjoys listening to the stories ("crayon enlargements of life") told by the porch sitters Sam, Lige, Walter and Matt himself. Brazzle's mule of segment VII in "The Eatonville Anthology" prefigures this mule story and lingers as a trace (cf. Cornell, Benesch).[13] The first exchange about the mule lasts three pages and is in the shape of a dialogue with limited indications. It is framed by Matt's departure and a summary of what the various "mule talk" stories were about. That section leads to a development on Janie's desire to join in and her being bored by the various tasks she has to perform in the store. The next development consists in the "matter of the yellow mule": it tells the story with dialogue and development of how Joe Starks eventually bought the mule to free it. Once Jody has liberated the mule, the now idle animal grows if not fat, at least fatter, and dies; it is dragged out of the town with Jody in his capacity as Mayor delivering a eulogy over the carcass, followed by Sam who imitates Reverend Pearson.

The following scene is that of the buzzards, led by the Parson, the white-headed leader of the group, performing the last ritual, an obvious parody of church funeral services:

> "What killed this man?"
> The chorus answered, "Bare, bare fat."
> "What killed this man?'
> "Bare, bare fat."

13. The story is told as "The Bone of Contention" (LA, *Novels* 968-978) and *De Turkey and de Law*, the play she copyrighted in October 1930 when she broke up her collaboration with Hughes (Hurston 2001, 131-190).

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"Who'll stand his funeral?"
"We!!!!!"
"Well, all right now."
So he picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on.

(*TE* 97)

At this point, the novel incorporates a dialogue between animals that grows out of the previous seemingly realistic scene, yet transcends it. It self-reflexively comments on the Eatonville community with Joe Starks as its leader and the store porch sitters as chorus performing a funeral rite. The figurative dimension of the passage, constitutive of African American culture, must be salvaged as "modern" in this deployment of three distinct successive moments that build correspondences and parallelisms in both a cumulative and repetitive movement, a structure akin to incremental repetition at the heart of song making.[14] The mule stories of the sitters are followed by the story of the mule integrated into the narrative pattern of the novel; then comes the Mayor's mock eulogy, Sam's parody of a sermon, and the final transcendence of the realistic plane through the juxtaposition of the animal allegory. The narrative chronologically moves forward beyond the time of the story into the future of the community; consequently, the narrative thread (*diegesis*) has to be taken up at the moment of Joe's return from the burial. The introduction of that element thus disrupts and qualifies the novel's chronology, its narrative sequence.

The mule itself and the presence of the buzzards facilitate the passage from the realistic conventions of the depiction of the community to the animal allegory that heightens the irony at the core of the parody. Joe Starks, who has just delivered a mock eulogy in what is a mock funeral with a mock sermon, is now superseded by "the Parson," his double and his superior in the animal world; conversely, the mule is called a "man" by the buzzards. This exchange between the animal and the human realms is prefigured by the following remark, in the shape of a chiasmus: "It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not." (*TE* 76). Emancipation (the freeing of the mule) and citizenship (the animal becomes a citizen of Eatonville) lead to the animal's death. It is indeed a bitter satire of Joe's megalomania, heralded by the comparison between the mule and himself at the beginning ("[the mule] was next to the Mayor in prominence" [*TE* 85]), followed by his being derisively likened to Abraham Lincoln, and eventually his being eclipsed by the leader of the buzzards, as symbol of

14. Hurston explains in her recordings that this is the way songs are created and transformed (1999, 169).

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death and life's vanity.[15] It is a scathing comment on Reconstruction and its failure. The gradual incorporation of the animal world into the telling both remains in keeping with folklore material and weaves a symbolic network that reflects back on Joe Starks's stance. The picking of the mule's eyes qualifies the title of the novel itself. Similarly, the mad dog that bites Tea Cake during the hurricane, and infects him with rabies, belongs to an aesthetics that transcends the constraints of realism. These animals—metaphors, or rather totems (*the* mule, *the* buzzard, *the* dog, *the* alligator, etc.)—are transferred from the animal tales of the folklore, where animals talk,[16] onto the narrative that they endow with a figurative and magical dimension in keeping with their function in the original material.

Telling stories "'cause [s]he kin act 'em out"[17]

On top of deriving from its links to other texts of the African American canon such as *Cane* (Gates 1984, 290), the modernism of *Their Eyes* comes from another, this time internal, intertextuality, one inherent in Hurston's creative process and her proficiency in different genres (ethnographic record, drama, short and long fiction). The novel bears the traces of the succession of vignettes that made up "The Eatonville Anthology" and the genesis of its production can still be read into the final outcome.[18] This previous production, first published as installments in *The Messenger* (1926), made up of a series of short profiles, anecdotes and memorates, remains as deep textual structure, as does its genre, the anthology (North 175-195). The links between this text as source and the novel contribute to the traceable presence of folklore material and consequently to the text's heterogeneity: Joe Clarke, the actual black mayor of the all-black town of Eatonville and store-owner, becomes Joe Starks in the novel, and Mrs Clarke, a "soft-looking middle aged woman" from section IX, is the source of the development on Jody and Janie in *Their Eyes.* Mrs. Tony Robbins (*TE* 113-115) is a thinly veiled variation on Mrs. Tony Robert or "The Pleading Woman" (Hurston 1995, 59-60). The voices of the folk in their "literal" translation, i.e. displacement from field notes to the text, their being processed in/as the novel, are still heard almost untouched. Indeed, the folklore processed—folklore as process—shows

15. A character named Cliff tells a story about the Hawk and the Buzzard in *Mules and Men* (LA, *Folklore* 116). Hurston stated in her fieldwork that the crow from the West Indies or Africa is a buzzard in the United States.

16. "Talking Animal Tales" comprises a separate section of *Every Tongue Has Got to Confess*, 227-230.

17. See LA, *Novels* 54-55.

18. For a genetic critical reading of *Dust Tracks*, see Raynaud 1992, 1997.

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through in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Hurston's first novel, and her second, which more "successfully" (depending on what critics privilege) incorporates this material, can still be viewed as retaining the authentic quality of the fragments, if not whole, yet with their core intact, their performative dimension not tampered with.[19] The irony inherent in modernism, the double take, the distance, the distancing, are produced by the very qualities and "quantities" of the material quoted. Moreover, the heroine's denial of participation in the rituals reproduces this division in the text itself. The heterogeneity, the jaggedness, the angularity, function as a critique of what passes for a novel. Janie's being forbidden to enter the men's performance of the lore is doubled by the otherness of the lore and what in it exceeds or cannot be assimilated in the novel's codes and manner.

Together with remnants of previous writing that she repeatedly produced on demand, *Their Eyes* also harbors the marks of Hurston's actual work as a playwright. Indeed, the script of *Mule Bone*, co-authored by Hughes and Hurston, contains a dramatization of the Eatonville material that finds its way in *Their Eyes*. The episode of the pleading woman is staged as an exchange between Mrs. Jake Roberts and Joe Clarke (Hughes 1991, 50-52) and the courtship ritual performed by the young men in Hurston and Hughes's play (144-147) re-appears in *Their Eyes* with some exchanges reproduced almost verbatim. Her desire to organize concerts with the musicians and dancers she had met in the South, the Bahamas, and Haiti, similarly finds an outlet in the text. Hurston wanted to be successful at producing spectacles: "She considered the stage to be the only medium truly conducive to presenting the forms of expression that she saw ritualized in everyday life" (Hill xxxii). Her collaboration with Hughes on the writing of *Mule Bone* may thus give a clue to her resolution to give to her audience as unmediated an experience as possible, one that Eisen labels "primitive modernism."[20] The short story "Spunk" published in *Opportunity* in 1925 and its adaptation to the theater in 1935 can also throw light on how performativity in *Their Eyes*—writing that is meant to be acted out on a stage—struggles with other moments and modalities of the narrative—writing as access to the characters' psyche or the third-person narrator's comment on the action or the setting. Such a tendency is evident on page 107 where Hurston introduces the characters' words following theatrical conventions: "Dave: 'Well all right, less prove dis thing right now. […] How much time is you willin' to make fuh Daisy?' Jim: 'Twenty yeahs!'" This scene is a shortened version of a passage in Act 3 of

19. A PhD thesis on Hurston and Morrison, defended after this article was written, takes its cue from this approach. See Blanc 2017.

20. Eisen underlines Hurston's "foregrounding of the performative and contiguous, rather than an essentialist, idea of the primitive" (57) in opposition to O'Neill.

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Mule Bone when Jim and Dave engage in a courtship ritual, trying to outdo each other to win Daisy's favors (Hughes 1991, 146). The ending of the play has the two friends reconciled and a dejected Daisy rejected. The formal presentation of the exchange illustrates Hurston's comment: "A common way of telling a story is to dramatize it" (1999, 76), that is followed by a short theatrical dialogue in her manuscript for *The Florida Negro*.

In the thirties Hurston was busy trying to establish herself as a dramatist, a vocation she nurtured from the beginning of her career: her play *Color Struck* won in 1925 an award at the *Opportunity* contest and was subsequently published in *Fire!!* (1926). She was also deeply involved in the production of concerts and musicals. As early as 1930, the writing of *Mule Bone* tragically led to her falling out with Hughes. In 1931 she appeared in a Broadway production, *Fast and Furious*, and then worked on *Jungle Scandals*; both ventures were unsuccessful. She then formed a theater group to stage her play *The Great Day* that was performed several times, retitled *From Sun to Sun* and *Singing Steel*, in various locations over the next three years. In 1932 Walter White invited her to participate in the opera *Batouala*, based on René Maran's novel, along with Paul Robeson. In a letter to her patron, Mrs. Mason, dated September 28th, 1932, she wrote: "I depart for the South to chisel out a figure in art. I want it to have all the rhythm, harmony, asymmetry of an African sculptured figure" (Kaplan 274). In 1934 she talked to the President of Fisk University to start a drama school. She joined the Harlem unit of the Federal Theater Project in 1935. The folklore sections and, of course, the dialogues of *Their Eyes* must be read with her plays in mind. In a letter to Hughes she describes her project of a "real Negro art theater" where she will, with him, "act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive 'bama nigger" (Kaplan 115). *Their Eyes* indeed contains the record of the spectacle of fire dancing in the setting of the Everglades that she staged with her Bahaman dancers. It appears on the programs of "original Negro Folklore" as taking place "In the Palm Woods" towards the end of the show (Hurston 2008, 364 and 367). On the Muck, these dancers are called "Saws" (short for Nassaus) and the migrant workers look down upon them. Yet the novel explains how they gradually accept the dancers in their midst and even share in their entertainments. The Bahamans "quit hiding out to hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn't laugh at them as they feared. Many of the Americans learned to jump and liked it as much as the "Saws." So they began to hold dances night after night in the quarters, usually behind Tea Cake's house." (*TE* 146). Their inability to heed the threat of impending disaster is couched in the repeated scenes of the fire dance and the jumping dance, performed after work. The novel here records the dances that Hurston collected in her several visits to Nassau, in the Bahamas, in 1929. She wanted to trace the influence of the island's African

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heritage on the material (music, songs and dances) that she had encountered in Southern Florida.

That scene also incorporates a summary of the tales about High John de Conquer that she had collected in the twenties:

> Most of the great flame-throwers were there and naturally, handling Big John de Conquer and his works. How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all the angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne. Then everybody but God and Old Peter flew off on a flying race to Jericho and back and John de Conquer won the race; went on down to hell, beat the old devil and passed out ice water to everybody down there.
>
> (*TE* 232)

The passage is exemplary of the mixture of free indirect speech and narration that rescues the oral quality of the tales, the performativity of language, while the narrator takes over in standard English. Big John de Conquer, "the culture hero of the American Negro folk tales" (Hurston 1999, 78), is a mythic figure from the times of slavery, a whisper, an inside thing to live by ("It helped the slaves endure" [Hurston 1995, 140]) who outwits God and the Devil. He is a superior being who transcends worldly and heavenly matters, a hope bringer, and a trickster. As Hurston explains in a 1943 article, written to help booster the war effort and twisted to answer her editors' wishes, John de Conquer plays his tricks of making "a way out of no way." In *Their Eyes*, placed before the description of the hurricane, the reported performances amount to an invocation of an otherworldly creature in the face of disaster. They conjure the power of black culture to survive and help survive, even in apocalyptic circumstances, against all odds: "[John de Conquer] is the projection of the poor and the humble into the realms of the almighty" (Hurston 1999, 76). He is also the name of a root, said to have been brought back from Africa, that Hattie Tyson uses to trick John in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*: "[S]he combed her hair and under-braided the piece of John-de-conquer root in her stiff black hair" (LA, *Novels* 109). In the novel's economy his mention is also a recurrence of an earlier moment when the men on the store-porch debated over the respective merits of caution or nature (*TE* 100). The spirited exchanges shifted at the end to John de Conquer's natural strength and to the sitters' desire to tell "lies" about him: "Nature and salt. Dat's whut makes up strong man lak Big John de Conquer. He was uh man wid salt in him. He could give uh flavor to *anything*" (*TE* 104).

The modernist aesthetics of the novel in so far as it relies on the juxtaposition of fragments with minimal transition devices bears the mark of Hurston's early theater, notably her first unproduced plays such as the experimental musical "Meet the Mamma" (1925) or "Cold Keener" (1930),

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devised as a succession of short pieces. "Cold Keener" is indeed made up of several short acts, such as "Filling Station," "Cock Robin," "Heaven," or "Mr. Frog," "linked only by their differences" (Birney in Hurston 2008, 75). The title may refer to one meaning of the term: a motley assortment of things, which reflects back on the variety of the genres that *Their Eyes* incorporates and the heterogeneity of its make-up. Just as these plays consist in a succession of short scenes with abrupt changes of setting, Barbara Johnson's 1984 analysis of the rhetoric of *Their Eyes* and her definition of metonymy as relying on contiguity, i.e. juxtaposition whereas metaphor relies on similarity, finds a correlative in the gesture of placing next to each other the "texts" of the folk, the collective repertoire, and writing that attempts to account for character development and narrative progress. Metonymy thus becomes the deep structure of the composition of the novel, just as it helps explain Janie's self-division. Inherited from the earlier forms of Hurston's plays,[21] it evidences a serial character that she also stated defined black music: "There is always rhythm, but it is *the rhythm of the segments*. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is used to *the break in going from one part to another*" (LA, *Folklore* 835, italics mine).

The heterogeneity between material borrowed from the folk and the novel's narrative is reverberated in the ambivalence between the vernacular (black voice) and standard English (Gates 1988). This diffraction is itself echoed by characters (Janie, Nanny) who speak like the folk in the dialogues while a probing of their inner selves relies on metaphors and highly poetic images ("mind-pictures") that exemplify the willed hybridity of the narrator's language (Raynaud 1997). The overall structure of the novel, framed as a dialogue between Janie and Phoeby with the presence of a chorus (the store porch), makes it dependent on call-and-response, hence on dialogism and performance: it is a "play of voices" (Gates 1988, 191). Locating in dialect-informed free indirect discourse (FID), beyond the use of direct and indirect speech, as Gates has done, the specificity of Hurston's text, its innovative strategy, may help understand her solution as a third term between "a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical privileged black oral tradition and […] a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition" (1988, 174). However, turning the lens towards the novel's inner intertexuality, the unassimilated refractory fragments of other texts—located elsewhere in Hurston's output and hence "recurring" here—also accounts for the persisting unadulterated presence of the folk and its voices. These "quotations" transform and trouble the novel itself, its narrativity, its

21. Eisen speaks of "a wide-ranging *collage* of contemporary black life" (67, italics mine).

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realistic conventions, thanks to their own codes and to the lingering presence of their original context. Heterogeneity rather than division is thus the hallmark of the text. It is a willed gesture that preserves the folk's myriad expressions while the novel in Janie's and the other characters' voices also exhibits the metaphorical language of the folk.

Hurston describes several times the way in which she collected folklore, notably how she could render some of the songs verbatim, when she was working with Alan Lomax (1999, 171). She learned them by heart and repeated them until her informants told her that she had got them right. The fragments of direct discourse included in *Their Eyes* bear the quality of her "interpretation": i.e. her performances or renditions of the lore; they conjure up her own taking part in dances and plays. Janie cunningly learns to tell stories in the same way as Hurston did: "She got so that could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (*TE* 134). *Their Eyes* could be said to preserve in its make-up Hurston's live renderings as she recorded them: the text "retains" the sound of her and her informants' voices that perform the work songs, the blues songs, the prayer-poem, and tell "lies"; it relays it and juxtaposes it to the narrative commentaries. The novel is thus an extension of Negro folklore: just like it, "it is in the making" (Kaplan 116) and it bears the mark of the "abrupt story telling" that is one of the "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (Kaplan 115).

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