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A View of Dialect and Folklore in Hurston's *their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract- After long been rejected by harsh criticism, Alice Walker brings back credit to Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about a black heroine. Species from the south folklore is portrayed in black dialect echoing traditional literary voice. Our paper targets to analyse the linguistic and cultural diversity in the novel noticed between black dialect and Standard English of the narrator; plus an exposition to folkloric elements spelled out of the Southern black culture accurately reported by the novelist through Janie whose voice represents the actual situation of everyday life. Hurston, as most urban and rural African American writers, defies canonical literature and conventional literary representation; indeed, she succeeds to develop the skill of reproducing the ritualized vernacular contest, stories, games, entertainment and other popular habits. Grounded in a theory of cultural oral legacy, Hurston's novel is duplication of the black culture and dialect which have had an unmistakable influence on American society.

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I. THE NOVEL: THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

The novel exposes the true identity of a woman living in the 1920s and 1930s to trace the development of the African American woman of the time, "Hurston created the character of Janie during a time in which African-American female heroines were uncommon in literature. In 1937 when the novel was originally published, females experienced fewer opportunities than they do today. Hurston chose to portray Janie as a strong, independent woman, unlike most African-American females of the early nineteenth century. Perhaps Hurston characterized Janie as capable and courageous to empower her readers and to show them that opportunities do exist for all women; they just have to embrace them". (Cliffnotes). Hurston seems searching for herself in this novel, through Janie the prominent character who was compelled to marry three times and has no right to be what she is herself. She was obsessed to find true love. After she fails in her first marriage with the farmer Logan Killicks, she meets Joe Starcks who first seems ambitious and open minded. He took her to Eatonville, Florida but soon Janie's life was a jail freed from it at Joe's death. Finally Janie succeeds to know true love with Tea Cake who is twelve years younger than her. They share memorable times working together in the fields of Everglades before

the hurricane comes threatening the people's life. Since then Janie has known disruption with Cake who after his attempt to save her from a savage dog he was bitten and became aggressively ill with jealousy till killed by Janie in an attempt to protect herself and after she proves her innocence she turns back home to narrate her story to her best friend Pheoby Watson.

II. SOUTH BLACK DIALECT

Hurston masters the rural south black dialect which makes the novel's discourse idiomatic and individual through special use of grammar, vocabulary and tone. The use of black dialect with the narrator's Standard English creates uniqueness to the novel. She challenges to incorporate the standard and the dialect and endeavours to navigate "two distinct narrative traditions – a black oral tradition characterized by active interchange between responsive storytellers and participatory listeners, and a (written) Western literary tradition where, typically, the author composes and the reader reads in isolation from the author – and suggests her interest in infusing the American novel with expressive potentialities derived from Afro-American culture" (Awkward 1990:2) Highly recommended narrated sentences in front of choppy simple spoken utterances like in "Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song. 'What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls?'" (Chapter 1). The dialect is abundant in the whole novel in many instances like when Janie shows indifferent to the town gossip " 'Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth the trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to'" (Chapter1). Nanny, Janie's grandmother, uses explicitly the dialect when she warns from Men superiority "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," (Chapter2). Also the dialect is used by Jody when he mocks at Janie when she attempts to give few words on the occasion of Jody's new stature as the mayor of the town saying "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife dont know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'" (Chapter5).

Hurston uses particular phonetic spelling to capture the spirit of "Eatonville's Ebonics" to represent the prototype of southerners. The dialect pervades in the novel both in dialogue and narrative creating hunger to read more about these folk people of Eatonville and their speech accurately depicted by Hurston "It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the

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time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (Chapter1). The use of

dialect investigates other perspectives like, the Black free time to gossip, colour, customs purposefully put by Hurston to show a realistic vision of the black community, "such a novel, born of folklore and rooted in the oral tradition of storytelling, begs to be heard and discussed" (Guarrigues 2003:21). The following figure illustrates some dialectal words used by Janie (ibid: 23)

A Lexicon of Janie Dialect	
ah = I	dis= this
uh = a	dem= them
mah = my	'cept= except
yuh = you	'scuse= excuse
tuh = to	yo'= your
youse = you are	ole= old
dat = that	git= get
wid = with	mo'= more
kin = can	'cause= because
'bout = about	Lawd= Lord

These features are characteristic of regional speech and distinctive dialect, Hurston novel is a writing of oral art dealing with criteria of Negro art to offer what Henry Louis Gates (1988) has called "speakerly Text" to mean "a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition" (181). The following

table refers to a glossary of important idiomatic expression in purely black dialect which denotes Hurston's attachment to folk speech used as a technique to sound the black speech, though her novel is intended to be standard but looks exceptional within these chunks of speech.

Colloquialisms	Meanings
Ah been feelin' dat somethin' set for still-bait	In other words, she is saying that she's feeling like she's the target of the community disapproval, like a bait on a hook that can't move or wriggle as a worm might do.
All them dat's goin' tuh cut de monkey	in other words, if everyone has finished acting silly.
before de ornery varmit could tack	a sailing and boating term, consistent with the strong wind that was blowing during this episode. To a sailor, "tack" means to turn the bow to the wind. The mule wasn't fast enough to turn and run into the wind in pursuit of the children.
bucked each other	beat and/or challenged each other.
cold-cocked her a look	looked her straight in the eyes.
crazy as a betsy bug	a variation of "crazy as a bed bug," an insect of a family (Cimicidae) of wingless, bloodsucking hemipteran insects, especially the species (<i>Cimex lectularius</i>) with a broad, flat reddish-brown body and an unpleasant odor that infests beds, furniture, walls, and so on, is active mainly at night, and may transmit a variety of diseases.
dat ole forty year ole 'oman	a reference to Janie; the remark, by a woman, about a woman, is made out of spite and envy. Although Janie is 40 years old, she is still an attractive woman, much to the annoyance of the women.
Don't keer how big uh lie get told, somebody kin b'lieve it	Tea Cake believes that the size of a lie has nothing to do with whether some people will believe it.
fetid	having a bad smell, as of decay; putrid.
flivver	a small, cheap automobile, especially an old one.
Give it uh poor man's trial	A poor man takes any respectable job he can get and does his best with it.
goosing	a sudden, playful prod in the backside
hard of understandin'	Pheoby will want a detailed explanation to be sure that she understands all that Janie says.

a huge live oak tree	an evergreen oak.
in and through Georgy	living in and passing through the state of Georgia.
kissin' yo' foot	acting more like a servant than a husband and an equal
knocked up	pregnant.
a lost ball in de high grass	The townspeople love baseball; not only do they like to watch it, but they also like to play it. The field where they play has tall, uncut grass, and fly balls are often lost and the game delayed while both teams search for the ball.
Love is lak de sea . . . it's different with every shore	Hurston uses the simile to explain that love is different for everyone who experiences it.
meriny skin	like browned-egg-white meringue; a complexion color.
a mink skin . . . a coon hide	one thing looks pretty much like something else until both can be studied carefully. No one can understand what Janie's life was like with Tea Cake or with Joe until each is examined carefully.
never hit us a lick amiss	never beat or spanked the children when they didn't deserve it.
No Matt Bonner with plow lines	Plow lines control an animal. Now that the mule is dead, he will no longer be hitched to the plow.
pickin' my box	playing my guitar.
quart of coon-dick	cheap moonshine or bootleg whiskey
rub board . . .	The old-fashioned galvanized or glass washing board was in common use before washing machines became economically available
run our conversation from grassroots to pine trees	We've gone as far as we can go with this conversation — from minor matters to larger issues. Hurston has used other expressions like this to indicate limits and extremes in conversations
Say you started tuh Miccanopy but de mule . . .	Miccanopy is a small community northwest of Eatonville. The man didn't really know where he was going.
school out . . . high bush and sweeter berry	take more time to look around and think about what you want to do. Picking a good husband is compared to knowing what part of a berry bush has the sweetest fruit.
twelve o'clock whistle	Jacksonville is a railroad town, and railroad shops usually had loud whistles that sounded at regular times during the day.
two hundred dollars inside her shirt	Janie is following some basic wisdom shared by wise women: Always have enough money on hand for your fare home — no matter who your date is.
uh butt-headed cow	a stubborn animal that won't do what its owner wants it to do.
uh mite too previous	In this particular colloquialism, "previous" means "a little too early."
watchin' de job	watching and waiting for Tea Cake to die.
Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight	trading insults, usually in a predictable way, but the insults are based on exaggeration of personal traits and involve derogatory statements about members of each other's family — often, someone's mother.
You got me in de go long	opening for a proposal of marriage. Janie has captivated Tea Cake, and he will "go long" through life with her.

Colloquialisms in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: adopted from ClifNotes.

These colloquialisms extracted from the novel give detailed account about people's thoughts and talks and Hurston's heavy use of dialect brings praise to her from the African American poet and novelist Sherley Anne Williams (1978) who says « to characterize her diction solely in terms of exotic 'dialect' spellings is to miss her deftness with language. In the speech of her characters, black voices - whether rural or urban, northern or southern - come alive. Her fidelity to diction, metaphor, and syntax... rings, even across forty years, with an aching familiarity that is a testament to Hurston's skill and to the durability of black speech" "Foreward." p. ix. The figurative language in the whole novel echoes the non-standard dialect representative of black folk language and shows us that Hurston captivates the dialect and celebrates the folk culture to echo the evolving black culture in America.

III. ZORA NEAL HURSTON'S INTRODUCTION TO BLACK FOLKLORE

With the aim to outline the future of African American existence in society, Zora Neale Hurston and many others like Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, in the times of Harlem renaissance between 1920s and 1930s, reflected the roots of oral traditions of African slaves in America in the form of stories and fables, music and slave narratives. Hurston's own words about her close contact with the treasure of black heritage are evident when she says: "I was glad when somebody told me, 'you may go and collect Negro folklore'"¹. She admires this heritage when she says "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by." (idem). She considers folklore as the essence of existence defining it as "boiled-down juice of human living" (Hurston 1999). Being an obedient student to the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston travels to the south of the United States and the Caribbean region to collect the folklore and record the speech of the rural illiterate people of African descent. This is why "not surprisingly, the novel she reputedly crafted in just seven weeks is laced with legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs and local lore about the weather, plants, and animals of the south" (Garrigues 2003:21).

Hurston as a folklorist finds no difficulty to gather those stories, sayings and songs preserved orally by her people to make it much known to her. Her acquaintance with the black culture enables its stamp in her works exposing a variety of religious, spiritual and sorrowful songs usually performed by slaves, uttered

from their mouths often painful -"weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men." (Dubois 1903). Telling stories is frequent in black folklore as depicted by Hurston; some stories often tricksters' tales advice people to be more vigilant and less arrogant, and others dealing with animal characters like rabbit, fox, and spider.

Signifying or verbal word play is significant marker in black culture. It is a manipulation of figurative language in the form of allegory where the meaning is indirect. In addition to popular games like playing the dozen which is a type of signifying basically relied on an exchange of insults. Through these elements and others, Hurston raises awareness about the availability of black folklore and its influence on American stories. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a sampling of Hurston's glamorous works in supporting a strong movement whose aim is to install the Negro identity as an influential African American one.

IV. FOLK TALES

The novel itself is a story about storytelling. The main story is told by Janie about her search for love in her fourth relationships with first her nanny and then her three husbands always disappointed by them. Janie's grandmother, being herself a former slave, contributes to the formulation of stories about slavery and civil war; she highlights the issue of sexual inequality hoping that things will change with her granddaughter "Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you." (Chapter2). Also, the stories are told by people set in the porch the "porch sitters" near to Joe Starcks' crossroads store, the gathering place for Eatonville's men and women, where Janie admires listening to them in spite of Jody discouragement to her because he considers the folk people as 'trashy'; "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people." (Chapter 6). The stories are reported in the form of conversation, related to events or people passing to and fro the porch. The gossipers prefer to speak about women passing near to them like talking about a beautiful girl called Daisy Blunt, Daisy is walking a drum tune. You can almost hear it by looking at the way she walks. She is black and she knows that white clothes look good on her, so she wears them for dress up. She's got those big black eyes with plenty shiny white in them that makes them shine like brand new money and she knows what God gave women eyelashes for, too" (Chapter 6). All the rest of the single men have crowded around Daisy by this time. She is parading and blushing at the same time. The novel in a whole is a retelling of the past. Also funny stories are held to entertain about Matt Bonner's mule who is subject of mockery by the folk people teasing their friend who unfriendly treats his animal. The

¹ Zora Neale Hurston says, in the Introduction to her volume, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935.

peoples' mockery at Bonner increased at the mule's loss outside the store. The town members also make fun of Bonner and the mule cadaver when the birds eat its carcass. Furthermore, a woman begging more food to her chicken was subject of scorn when Joe gave her small piece of pork.

All these stories and the way they are told represent a rhetorical orientation of oral literary tradition crafted by Hurston through different speakerly voices of the interplay between individuals in the Negro community.

V. PLAYING THE CHECKERS

Playing is usually a feature of folk culture inherited from generations to another. It is exposed in the novel at the meeting of porch sitters gathered around the table for the game but also playing is a leisure time to talk and tease. In chapter 6, Jody asks Janie to bring the checkers to play with Sam "You gettin' too moufy, Janie," Starks told her. "Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers. Sam Watson, you'se mah fish." This is an idiomatic expression to mean a good catch because Jody has the intention to beat Sam at checkers — that is catch him like a fish on his hook. Playing the checkers is represented again between Janie and her third husband Tea Cake who allowing her to share the game is a sign of independence for the woman and a hint that Cake is the lover she seeks unlike her former two husbands who represent the patriarchal world of Hurston.

VI. FOLK SONGS

In chapter 11, Cake plays the guitar with Janie "Evenin', folks. Thought y'all might lak uh lil music this evenin' so Ah brought long mah box." "Crazy thing!" Janie commented, beaming out with light. Also in chapter 13 there are titles of songs as in the following passage "after a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was. Then whoever it was started to singing "Ring de bells of mercy. Call de sinner man home. Her heart all but smothered her... He walked on in with a guitar and a grin. Guitar hanging round his neck wit ». Many songs, characteristic of Negro expressions are repeated in Chapters: 2-5-6-9-10-14. Others are abundantly found in her Anthropological Works and Folklore Collections: *Mules and Men* (1935), *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938), *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folktales from the Gulf States*. Carla Kaplan, ed. (published 2003).

VII. HURSTON THE FOLKLORIST

Hurston shows as a prominent folklorist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, proved along the use of rich indigenous dialect for her native rural Florida and the

Caribbean. She speaks simply about her folks' ordinary life in that depressed America, she says "We goin' on de muck." "Whut's de muck, and where is it at?" "Oh down in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness. We must go dere." (Chapter 13). To succeed her novel, she investigates the folklore in several regions beyond United States to lead Her ethnographic work about black communities. She states her data in her book *Tell My Horse* (1938) and pursue her admiration to her black people weaving the songs, stories, and other colours of folklore "Dat mule uh youn, Matt. You better go see 'bout him. He's bad off." "Where 'bouts? Did he wade in de lake and uh alligator ketch him?" "Worser'n dat. De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some ohters had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh wash board...Yeah, Matt, dat mule so skinny till de women is usin' his rib bones fuh uh rub-board, and hangin' things out on his hock-bones tuh dry." (chapter 6). Hurston's aim was to present the prototype of the new Negro as no more submissive but rather self assertive and racially conscious. Her mission as an anthropologist was not at all easy especially that "African American folklore had received no scholarly attention before this time, and Hurston appeared to be an ideal researcher, as an African American raised in the Deep South, she understood its traditions. Yet, Hurston soon discovered that collecting the folklore was no easy task" (Litwin 2010:48). Though the use of dialect in the characters' speech seems difficult, Hurston ventures to use it being aware of its treasure and reflection of reality, "as an anthropologist and a writer, Hurston believed that the jokes, stories, and songs she witnessed needed to be reported exactly as she had heard them. Anything less would misrepresent or dilute their distinctive sound. The author's careful use of Eatonville's regional speech animates her characters while serving, at the same time, to make them more believable. Janie, Joe, Tea Cake, and the others are authentic and vital literary versions of the real porch-sitters of Eatonville" (ibid 54-55).

Being a speakerly text, it is a benefit to be read aloud and is recommended in most high colleges of America. Hurston uses folklore as a tool of literature and structured her novel out of this premise to highlight the rich verbal rituals caring less of any political profit nor of financial one, she sinks in a reservoir of tasteful folktales and dialect and underlines the price slavery pays for the sake of civilization. Proud of being the spokeswoman of her own people, she attacks all the negative stereotypes about the Negro, and passionately believes in the merits of folklore.

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