

# Twentieth-Century Fiction I

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# review

proletarian fiction

is *Their Eyes?* (working class? collective? agitational?)

Hurston and the “youth” of the Harlem Renaissance

vindication of African-American culture

dilemmas of the “racial mountain” (Hughes)

and the American Museum of Unnatural History

(danger of: *primitivism* à la Stein? Richard Wright’s claim)

dialect anew

the Standard narrator and the characters’ vernacular

Janie’s vernacular and Janie’s free indirect discourse

# free indirect

Janie noted that while he didn't talk the mule himself, he sat and laughed at it.... Joe would hustle her off inside the store to sell something. Look like he took pleasure in doing it. Why couldn't he go himself sometimes? She had come to hate the insisde of that store anyway. That Post Office too. People always coming and asking for mail at the wrong time....

But Joe kept saying that she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted her to use her privileges. That was the rock she was battered against. (54)

# free indirect

At the newel post Janie whirled around and for the space of a thought she was lit up like a transfiguration. Her next thought brought her crashing down. He's just saying anything for the time being, feeling he's got me so I'll b'lieve him. The next thought buried her under tons of cold futility. He's trading on being younger than me. Getting ready to laugh at me for an old fool. But oh, what wouldn't I give to be twelve years younger so I could b'lieve him!

(105)

# language and power

“Folkses, de sun is goin’ down. De Sun-maker brings it up in de mornin’, and de Sun-maker sends it tuh bed at night. Us poor weak humans can’t do nothin’ tuh hurry it up nor to slow it down. All we can do, if we want any light after de settin’ or befo’ de resin’, is tuh make some light ourselves. So dat’s how come lamps was made.” (45)

# language and power

Davis chanted a traditional-prayer poem with his own variations....

Mrs. Bogle's alto burst out in:

*We'll walk in de light, de beautiful light  
Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright  
Shine all around us by day and by night  
Jesus, the light of the world*

They, all of them, all of the people took it up and sung it over and over until it was wrung dry, and no further innovations of tone and tempo were conceivable.

(45–46)

# language and power

But sometimes Sam Watson and Lige Moss forced a belly laugh out of Joe himself with their eternal arguments. It never ended because there was no end to reach. It was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason.

...

“Whut is it dat keeps uh man from gettin’ burnt on uh red-hot stove—caution or nature?” ...

“How is de son gointuh be before his paw? Nature is de first of everything. Ever since self was self, nature been keepin’ folks off of red-hot stoves.”

(63–65)

# language and power

“Mouth-Almighty is still sittin’ in de same place.” (5)

“I god, where’s de Mayor?” (34)

# language and power

“Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!” (14)

# discussion

Nanny's story: what does it say about power?

How do relations of power work within the story? How are they connected to speech?

Now consider: how does power work in the relation between narrator (Nanny) and narratee (Janie)?

# oral tradition...?

She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (89)

# who will speak?

It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life.

Franz Boas, Foreword to *Mules and Men* (1935)

# who will speak?

Once Sis Cat got hongry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat 'im. Rat tried and tried to git loose but Sis Cat was too fast and strong. So jus' as de cat started to eat 'im he says, "Hol' on dere, Sis Cat! Ain't you got no manners atall? You going set up to de table and eat 'thout washing yo' face and hands?"

Sis Cat was mighty hongry but she hate for de rat to think she ain't got no manners, so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone.

*Mules and Men, end (1935)*

# who will speak?

So de cat caught herself a rat again and set down to eat. So de Rat said, “Where’s yo’ manners at, Sis Cat? You going to eat ‘thout washing yo’ face and hands?”

“Oh, Ah got plenty manners,” de cat told ‘im. “But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards.” So she et right on ‘im and washed her face and hands. And cat’s been washin’ after eatin’ ever since.

I’m sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin’ my manners.

*Mules and Men, end (1935)*

# who will speak?

When it was all done she stood in front of Joe and said, “Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. ’Tain’t everybody would have thought of it, ’cause it ain’t no everyday thought. Freein’ dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you....”

Hambo said, “Yo’ wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat befo’. She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts.”

# who will speak?

“Leave heah, Janie. Don’t come heah—”

“Ah knowed you wasn’t gointuh lissen tuh me. You changes everything but nothin’ don’t change you—not even death. But Ah ain’t goin’ outa here and Ah ain’t gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo’ you die.”

(86)

# who will speak?

She was full of pity for the first time in years....She thought back and forth about what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man. Then thought about herself.

(87)

Tea Cake wasn't strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life. Look how she had been able to talk with him right off!

(99)

“Evenin, Mis’ Starks. Could yuh lemme have uh pound uh knuckle puddin’\* till Saturday. Ah’m sho tuh pay yuh then.”

“You needs ten pounds, Mr. Tea Cake. Ah’ll let yuh have all Ah got and you needn’t bother ’bout payin’ it back.”

(98)

\*A beating with the fist. (98 n)

**Discussion:** what is the significance of this footnote?  
Why is the connection between happy speech and violence  
flagged here?

# next

finish the novel

no commonplacing required

*optional:* read Alice Walker, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (Sakai)