

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN HER SHORT STORIES

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(Abstract)

Literary critics such as Henry Louis Gates and Barbara Johnson have already approached the issue of voice in Zora Neale Hurston's novels—especially in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, little attention has been directed to her short stories, despite the fact that they constitute an excellent ground to study the evolution of her narrative technique when considered chronologically. This paper responds to the need to fill that gap. I will show that between 1921 and 1942 Hurston creates successive narrative voices whose differentiating trait is the gradual approach to and eventual identification with the language of the folk. In doing so Hurston demonstrated that it was viable for the Afro-American writer to acknowledge the folkloric oral tradition as the foundation of a genuine Afro-American written tradition.

The representation of the Black voice in literature has always been a topic of debate among Afro-American writers. At the beginning of the twentieth century the stance in favor of the assimilation of black culture to white culture in order to work out the differences between blacks and whites—supported by Booker T. Washington, for instance—gave way to a new attitude in the early 1920s. Afro-Americans began to think in more positive terms about the past and there was a re-evaluation of their roots. The Harlem Renaissance artists, at the same time echoing and voicing this popular change in attitude, looked back at their origins and discovered the richness of black folklore and language.¹ Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling Brown, among others, considered these as irrefutable proofs of the artistic and intelligent spirit of the race. They intended to re-assert their culture and fight the existing stereotypes about the Afro-American, showing the true essence of their people. Afro-American folklore became their source of inspiration. This was clearly expressed by Wallace Thurman when, speaking about the contributors to *Fire!!*, he explained: “Hoping to introduce a truly Negroid note into American literature, its contributors had gone to the proletariat rather than to the

1. For well documented studies of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole see David Leverin Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900- 1950* (N.Y.: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981), and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971). Specific aspects of the Harlem Renaissance are dealt with in the following collections of *essays: The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: Ams Press, 1987), and *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*. Eds. Amritjit Singh, et al. (New York: Garland, 1989). On Harlem and Modernism see James De Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imaginalion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), and Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

bourgeoisie for characters and material, had gone to the people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin. “ (Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* 45)²

Given their attitude towards the value of popular black culture, there is little doubt that they would not have agreed more with Ellison when, years later, he argued:

What we have achieved in folklore has seldom been achieved in the novel, the short story or poetry. In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves, and we depict the humor as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing. (Lenz 3)

However, it was still hard in the early 1920s to accept black dialect as a written literary language when it had been discredited by a long tradition that used it for comic and disparaging effects. During the nineteenth century the popular minstrel shows had effectively worked in this direction. Nevertheless, Black English had been represented in literature by both white and black authors. Joel Chandler Harris had been praised by his accurate representation of the black dialects spoken in Georgia in the late nineteenth century. Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul L. Dunbar reached national popularity with their rendition of Afro-American folklore and dialect.³ Nevertheless, standard English was acknowledged as *the* written literary language, whereas black dialect had been relegated to the role of characterization for realism's sake or for parodic purposes. Black dialect did therefore appear in literature, but always within the frame of a standard voice. This presupposed the subordination of one kind of speech to another, as Wideman has argued:

[t]he frame implies a linguistic hierarchy, the dominance of one language variety over all others. This linguistic subordination extends to the dominance of one version of reality over others.” (80)

Despite the absolute lack of prestige of black dialect it became clear that it could function as a literary language, as in fact it did in folklore. This was noted by James Weldon Johnson when, though admitting that “dialect has only two main stops, humor and pathos” he added:

That this is not a shortcoming inherent in the dialect as dialect is demonstrated by the wide compass it displays in its use in the folk creations. The limitation is due to conventions that have been fixed upon the dialect and the conformity to them by individual writers. Negro dialect poetry had its origins in the minstrel traditions and a persisting pattern was set. When the individual writer attempted to get away from that pattern, the fixed conventions allowed him only to slip over into a slough of sentimentality. (Jones 58)

2. The magazine *Fire!!* was edited by Thurman in 1926 in association with Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, among others, and has become the New Negroes' manifesto, even more than the anthology *The New Negro* edited by Locke, which seemed too “main stream” to them.

3. See Holton.

Thus, dialect was established as a literary language only in the Afro-American oral tradition, whereas standard English dominated in the printed text. This status quo is called in question when nationalistic feelings demand that both literary languages be treated equally and that black experience be represented without the mediation of the whites' language that distorts reality. Such a nationalistic atmosphere emerges in the 1920's during the Harlem Renaissance, and later on with black cultural awareness in the 1960's and 1970's. These are periods of great experimentation in the black arts, and writers, conscious of the importance of the narrative voice, experiment with it.

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the writers who worked in such an experimental direction since the beginning of her career in 1921. Hurston's first literary efforts --those which inscribe her into the Harlem Renaissance-- came out in the form of short stories. Her choice of structure, themes and language gives evidence of her commitment to the folk. Since the beginning of her career as a writer Hurston tried to make the oral quality of folklore compatible with the written quality of the text. In her successive attempts at capturing the cadence of black speech and the rhetorical games characteristic of the black oral tradition, Hurston modified her characters' voices as well as the narrative voice, demonstrating that it was viable for the AfroAmerican writer to acknowledge the folkloric oral tradition as the foundation of a genuine AfroAmerican written tradition. It is not accurate, therefore, to state, as Sylvia Wallace Holton does, that by 1952, when Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published, there was no tradition of experimentation with a black narrative voice.

Hurston states her discomfort with the literary representation of black speech in her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" published in 1934. In this essay she differentiates between the Afro-American culture and its interpretation by "the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists." "Fortunately" --she says-- "we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself." (*Sanctified Church* 67). This is exactly what she did. As an anthropologist she listened and recorded the voice of the folk. As a writer she totally responded to Alain Locke's observation that the black poet came from the folk and had assumed his heritage. "Our poets" --argued in *The New Negro*-- "have now stopped speaking for the Negro --they speak as Negroes" (48).

It was Hurston's artistic premise that Black Aesthetics should be founded on the existing oral literary tradition rather than on a protest and propaganda basis. She felt that the AfroAmerican artist had been constrained to writing about one single subject: "The one subject for a Negro" --she pointed out-- "is the Race and its sufferings. . . So the same old theme, the same old phrases get done again *to the detriment of art.*" (Emphasis mine) ("Art and Such" 24). This kind of protest was against her nature. Hurston was for celebrating Afro-American life and culture, which she found in folklore, and against any posture --like that of complaining or protesting-- that could sound like the cry of the weak. As she put it: "I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature has given them a dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it" ("How It Feels to Be Colored Me" 153). On the other hand, and as Ralph Ellison has eloquently argued, "protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 107). Hurston does therefore protest with her folklore-based writing; and her protest is against the genteel tradition, the sentimental novel, and the imposition of cultivated standard English on the Afro-American literature that preceded her, besides protesting against Richard Wright's protest and social novel

which coexisted with her own work in time, and outlived her.

Hurston's short stories are her apprentice work as a writer. The short stories we set out to examine here span from 1921 to 1942. A study of the stories in the chronological order in which they were written shows Hurston's aesthetic experimentation over twenty years and her evolution toward a fiction which does not need the frame of standard English. Curiously enough, and contradicting Locke's ideas about carrying "the folk-gift to the altitudes of art" (48), the stories show that the narrative voice plays an important part in the assimilation of the written text to the oral performance characteristic of the Afro-American tradition, thus carrying art to the altitudes of folk-gift.

Hurston took her first steps in creative writing in Washington, D.C., while a student at Howard University. There she became a member of the campus literary society, *The Stylus*, founded by then and directed by Alain Leroi Locke, who was soon to become one of the fathers of the New Negro Renaissance. *The Stylus* published her first short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in 1921, and this opened her the doors of *Opportunity*, the magazine through which many of the young New Negroes came to public attention.

In "John Redding Goes to Sea," Hurston introduces in her narrative the theme of the child who dreams with leaving his or her little hometown and see the world. It will recur in her next story "Drenched in Light" and in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though in both these cases the *protagonist* is a girl. Later on Hurston would present this need of "aiming for the horizon" as autobiographical, introducing herself in the first part of her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* as the restless child who longs to expand her horizon. In "John Redding" the protagonist's dreams are repeatedly frustrated by his domineering mother. Tragically, he only succeeds in getting away from his village after dying in a storm, when his body is carried away by the river to the sea.

In "John Redding Goes to Sea" the narrative voice that frames the story uses standard English, contrasting with the characters' speech. There is an exception, however, concerning the protagonist's voice, which evolves from vernacular to standard English after he has completed his formal education at school. Suffice it to compare his words as a little boy with his discourse as an adult. In the first case Hurston tries to transcribe the dialectal traits in John's pronunciation and syntax in the course of a dialogue with his father: "Mah ships, pa, . . . Ah throwed 'em in to go way off an' them ole weeds won't let 'em." (16). In the second instance John addresses his mother in quite a sophisticated standard English:

"Mamma," John began slowly, "It hurts me to see you so troubled over my going away; but I feel that I must go. I'm stagnating here. This indolent atmosphere will stifle every bit of ambition that's in me. Let me go mamma, please. What is there here for me? Why, sometimes I get to feeling just like a lump of dirt turned over by the plow --just where it falls there's where it lies-- no thought or movement or nothing. I wanter make myself something --not just stay where I was born." (17)

It is only by the end of his discourse that we can appreciate a certain relaxation in John's speech. The influence of the vernacular substratum emerges in the use of the double negative "no . . . nothing" and the intrusive "r" in "wanter." Furthermore, he uses the lyric language characteristic of vernacular speech when he compares himself with "a lump of dirt."

Nevertheless, a shift in John's language from vernacular to standard English has taken place. This movement indicates Hurston's struggle at the start point of her career with her own feelings about the role that Black English should play in Afro-American literature.

As a child John is presented as a sensitive boy gifted with the power of the word. He seems able to articulate his own feelings and those of others, as his father acknowledges when he says:

“Yas, son, Ah have them same feelings exactly, but Ah can't find no words lak you do. It seems lak you an' me see wid de same eyes, hear wid de same ears an' even feel de same inside. Only thing you kin talk it an' Ah can't. But anyhow you speaks for me, so whut's the difference?” (19)

Hurston appears to endow the protagonist with the role of the prophet whose mission is that of speaking for his people. However, in this her first story, Hurston seems unaware that by creating a character who rejects his cultural background by being skeptical about omens and witchcraft, and by speaking “the language of the lords,” John cannot become such a prophetic figure. Nevertheless Hurston insists on making of him a mythic hero by portraying him as a crucified Christ figure, floating dead down the river after the flood, at the end of the story.

The metaphoric language, characteristic both of Hurston's mature work and of the AfroAmerican oral tradition germinates in the figure of Alfred, John's father. He himself admits to his son “Ah talks in parables sometimes” (16). In his speech the ship becomes the symbol for the longing of the human being to be happy and the difficulties of this enterprise: “Oh, yes, my boy, some ships get tangled in the weeds” (19). Hurston would return to this symbolism in the well-known beginning of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board . . .”

It is Matty --John's mother-- , however, who better embodies the folk. Her speech is dialectal, and her life is dominated by the belief in conjure: “Cose you allus tries tuh know mo' than me, but Ah ain't so ign'rant. Ah knows a heap mahself. Many and manys the people been drove outa their senses by conjuration, or rid tuh deat' by witches” (16). The passion with which she transmits her convictions makes her the most believable character. Hurston gives credit to her, and to the Afro-American tradition that backs her, by allowing her premonitions to be fulfilled when her son dies.

At this early stage in her literary career Hurston seems confused by her intuitive knowledge about the value of the Afro-American folk tradition and language on the one hand, and her assimilation of the notions about the superiority of standard English on the other. Hence, the large space she dedicates in the story to the standard narrative voice, its sympathy for John, and the evolution of John's voice towards standard English.

In the following pages I shall give a brief account of the development of the narrative voice in Hurston's next short stories, to look then closer at “The Gilded Six-Bits,” the story that marks a definite turning point in the construction of an Afro-American narrative framework.⁴

Contrary to what we have seen in “John Redding Goes to Sea,” “Drenched in Light” (1924) does not contain more standard English than that spoken by a white couple and by the narrator. In this occasion, however, the narrative voice has less protagonism than in Hurston's first story due to the increasing importance of dialogue. As a result, Black English has more weight in the story.⁵

4. For a detailed study of Hurston's short stories see Fraile-Marcos.

5. All references to the short stories-except for those to “John Redding” and “The Bone of Contention”-are to the edition *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* ,

But the main difference between this and Hurston's first story is that in "Drenched in Light" the narrative voice becomes more informal. The narrator, for example, uses the Southern abbreviation "gator" for "alligator" --in contrast with "John Redding"'s narrative voice that uses the standard form. The narrator also reproduces expressions characteristic of Isis', the main girl character. In such occasions, the expressions appear in italics or between inverted commas: "*yee hoo* at the cows" (10), "chaws' of ribbon cane" (10), "'pot likker'" (11). In addition, the narrator recurs to onomatopoeic words to describe the grandmother's breath as she sleeps: "She breathed with a regular 'mark' intake and 'poosah' exhaust" (12); uses the colloquial "most" for "almost" in: "she could dance most anything she saw" (14); and the adverb "now" to introduce a subsequent explanation: "Now there are certain things that Grandma Potts felt no one of this female persuasion should do" (11).

This relaxation on the part of the narrator's speech constitutes Hurston's first step in the search for an Afro-American narrative voice.

In "*Spunk*" (1925) dialogue is predominant, and the men gathered in the store's porch often become the narrators of the action, leaving very little space for the narrative voice. This narrator speaks standard English, in deep contrast with the characters' Black vernacular. Joe Kanty's nervousness, for example, is reported in two different ways. On the one hand, the narrator's objective, descriptive voice: "He stood there silent for a long moment staring blankly, with his Adam's apple twitching nervously up and down his throat" (2); on the other, the lyric and hyperbolic language of one of the characters intending to have a comic effect: "his lips started to tremblin' and his Adam's apple was galloping up and down his neck like a race horse. Ah bet he's wore out half a dozen Adam's apples since Spunk's been on the job with Lena" (4). By the end of the story, however, the narrative voice recalls very slightly the metaphoric language characteristic of the black characters. Thus, speaking about Joe Kanty's father's presence at Spunk's funeral, the narrative voice explains how Jeff Kanty "stood leering triumphantly down upon the fallen giant as if his fingers had been the teeth of steel that laid him low" (8). However, immediately after this, the story comes to an end with a couple of paragraphs that stand as an example of the most objective narrative voice:

The cooling board consisted of three sixteen-inch boards on saw horses, a dingy sheet was his shroud.

The women ate heartily of the funeral meats and wondered who would be Lena's next. The men whispered coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey.(8)

Though, even in this occasion, the narrative voice comes close to the oral language due to the use of the expression "cooling board" to refer to the board on which Spunk's corpse lies. With this phrase, which is a coinage peculiar to the Southern dialects of the United States,⁶ the narrative voice is characterized as dialectal, too.

"*Muttsy*" (1926) introduces the urban setting of Harlem in Hurston's fiction and intends to introduce Harlem slang too. The traditional narrative voice contrasts with the characters' black urban speech. Pinkie is a young black girl who has just arrived in Harlem from Eatonville, the rural South and, surrounded by Harlem men, she is reported to be "embarrassed that she did not understand their mode of speech" (25). The author recurs to

and will be cited parenthetically.

6. See Carver 103- 104.

pointing explicitly at the difference between Pinkie's rural black speech and the urban slang of the Harlemites.

Also in this story the narrative voice distances itself occasionally from standard speech: Only once, at the beginning of the story, does the narrator recur to a poetic language, when Fewclothes is introduced by means of a metaphor: "Fewclothes burst through the portieres, a brown chrysalis from a dingy red cocoon, and touched the player on the shoulder" (19).

In another occasion, the present participle suffix "-ing" appears as "-in"-- "Pinkie's hair was slippin' down" (27)--, indicating that the narrator's pronunciation might be akin to that of the black characters.

Besides, the narrator comes closer to Pinkie's feelings in two occasions by means of free indirect speech, represented first through the use of a direct question --"and flight but where? Nowhere" (24)--, and then by means of deictic words-- "She would not wake tonight. Tomorrow, maybe, the job would come and freedom" (31). The broken syntax of this last sentence is characteristic of oral speech, where improvised additions to one's discourse --like "and freedom"-- are the result of an afterthought.

"Muttsy" contains, therefore, some of the most representative elements of Hurston's narrative technique, though she does not exploit them yet.

With "*Sweat*" (1926) Hurston starts exploring a little more thoroughly the possibilities of free indirect speech, becoming the first Afro-American writer in doing so. The narrative voice gets closer to Delia's feelings. Its proximity to the main character is manifested through the use of interjections-- "After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. AMEN" (42)--, exclamatory sentences-- "Things had come to a pretty pass!" (41), "Dog days!" (46)--, and a tone of uncertainty and hope transmitted through the reiteration of the adverb "perhaps"-- "Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry!" (49). The narrative voice experiments a shift of perspective leaving its objectivity aside and sympathizing with the protagonist to the extent of adopting her point of view. The narrative voice is now only one step away from the language used by the black characters.

There is one more innovation in "*Sweat*" relative to the narrative voice. The poetic language assumed by the narrator is a reflection of the characters' metaphoric black speech. For Hurston "the Negro's greatest contribution to the language" is "the use of metaphor and simile" (*Sanctified Church* 51). According to her, the Afro-American does not speak English but interprets it: "His interpretation of the English language" --Hurston argues-- "is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another" (*Sanctified* 49). The narrator of "*Sweat*" illustrates this facet of black English with his/her own words when talking about Delia's married life: "She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood" (41).

Although the next short story --"*The Bone of Contention*"-- was first published in 1991, Hurston must have written it after a trip to Florida in 1927 in search for black folklore. The story itself is based on a folk tale that was also the inspiration for the play *Mule Bone*. Hurston could not suspect by then that this story would literally become the bone of contention between Langston Hughes and herself.⁷

7. Hughes and Hurston's dispute over their unfinished play *Mule Bone* is well documented in George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates's 1991 edition of the play.

At first sight, the narrator's voice seems to be standard English, in contrast with that of the characters. However, the narrator identifies himself at the beginning as a member of Eatonville's black community when, speaking about the stubborn mule that has just died, he reports himself as taking part in the action that followed:

We left him on the edge of the cypress swamp and returned to the village satisfied that the only piece of unadulterated meanness that the Lord had ever made was gone from among us forever. (28) (Emphasis mine)

However, after a closer look we find out that the identification of the narrative voice with those of the black characters is more subtle than what could be suspected. The similarity with Black English is not revealed by means of phonetic transcription, nor through the vocabulary, but through the metaphoric use of language characteristic of the various rhetorical games found in Afro-American folklore.

Thus, the mule figure triggers the narrator's metaphoric and hyperbolic language characteristic of the ritual Afro-American activity known as "lying." The description of the animal goes as follows: "The mule was old, rawbony and mean. He was so rawbony that he creaked as he ambled about the village street with his meannes shining out through every chink and cranny in his rattling anatomy" (27). Then, the narrative voice continues detailing in the same metaphoric vein what happened with the dead mule, providing the narration with a sort of epic character: "The fallen gladiator was borne from the arena on his sharp back, his feet stiffly raised as if [in] a parting gesture of defiance" (28). The same metaphoric language is used to describe the men gathered in the porch: "Joe Clarke's store porch was full of chewing men. Some chewed tobacco. some chewed cane, some chewed straws, for the villager is a ruminant in his leisure" (28).

After the first section the dialectal voices of the black characters are predominant.

It is very likely that at the moment in which Hurston wrote the story she was already thinking of an adaptation of the popular folk tale to a play, because the third section reminds us constantly of the directions given by a playwright. The narrative voice, for instance, gives precise instructions as to what the characters must do. Such is the case with the sentence: "Mutual glances of despisement and gloating are exchanged across the aisle" (33), where the tense has changed from the past to the present, giving then way to a dialogue among the characters, who are introduced, like in plays, by their names:

Wize Anderson (Meth) Look at ole Dave Tryin' to make out Jim hurt his head! Yuh couldnt hurt a Baptist head wid a hammer-- they're that hard.

Brother Poke (Bapt.) Well, anyhow we dont lie an' steal an' git run outa town lak de softhead Meth'dis niggahs. (33)

Next, the narrator announces "Enter His Honor at this moment" (34), using again the tone characteristic of a playwright's directions.

The rather timid attempts to achieve a black narrative voice emerging in the previous stories are bolder in "*The Gilded Six-Bits*" (1933). The two main characters, Missie May and Joe, are the protagonists of a love story turned sour by Missie's infidelity to Joe, her husband, when she lets herself be seduced by Slemmons, a stranger that pretends to be rich and important, in order to get his gold coin. When Joe discovers them he realizes that the gold Missie has sold herself for is not but a gilded half-dollar. The affair is followed by a period of inarticulate sorrow and repentance on Missie's part and silenced

grief and unforgiveness on Joe's. Despite the situation, the couple manages to have a baby and his birth signals the return of love and happiness to the family. Eventually Joe gets rid of the gilded six-bits that were the symbol of Missie's treason and buys some candy kisses with them. The story closes with Hurston's irony pointing at the inaccuracy of the stereotypes held by white Americans about Afro-Americans when a white clerk comments: "Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em'" (68.). In one sentence Hurston is able to "Signify"⁸ upon a long tradition of American literature that discredits Afro-Americans by representing the black race through characters that aren't but fools. In the end the love ritual that commenced the story is restored, and we envision a future of harmony and understanding.

The interest of the story lies on Missie and Joe's psychology and emotions, revealed to the reader indirectly through their own language and silences and through the narrator's voice, as we are about to see.

The narrative voice changes in the course of the story acquiring different tones. Instead of the third person narrative produced by an impersonal narrator, as was usual in Hurston's first short stories, the reader comes across a multiplicity of voices which articulate the black characters' diverse feelings and experiences. Thus, besides the narrator's omniscient standard voice ("It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G and G Fertilizer works for its support") we find a highly poetic and metaphorical voice, as well as a voice that uses free indirect speech as a means of empathizing with the characters' emotions. Its language gets closer to colloquial speech and may adopt black English traits. Let us examine the following paragraph:

That was the best part of life --going home to Missie May. Their whitewashed house, the mock battle on Saturday, the dinner and ice cream parlor afterwards, church on Sunday nights when Missie outdressed any woman in town-- all, everything was right. (61)

This is undoubtedly the third person narrative voice. However it is possible to notice several "anomalies" which make us aware of the change the narrative voice is undergoing at this point. For instance, the paragraph begins with the deictic "That" which refers cataphorically to the next appositive sentence, whereas the last sentence ("all, everything was right") refers to what has been said before. "That," contrary to what we find here, can only have an anaphoric reference in "normal" speech. Its extraordinary cataphoric reference in the example above may have a logic explanation if we see it as a translation of Joe's thoughts in direct style --"This is the best part of life"-- to the indirect style characteristic of the narrative voice, which, in this case seems to be reproducing Joe's words and stream of consciousness--[Joe thought] That was the best part of life." Hence that the confusion of expression we observe in the narrative voice is not the narrator's confusion, but Joe's. The narrator's language becomes less standard under the influence of Joe's language. This paragraph marks therefore the beginning of a gradual evolution of the narrative voice toward the black speech used by the characters.

We find more examples of free indirect discourse in "The Gilded Six-Bits" when Joe returns home earlier than usual and finds out that his wife is in bed with Slemmons, the

8. In the sense that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. attributes to the term in *The Signifying Monkey: Signifyin(g) as a metaphor for textual revision.*

owner of the ice-cream parlor, for whom he had shown so much admiration. Hurston goes on creating the illusion that we are overhearing the character's thoughts when she materializes Joe's bewilderment through the narrator's questions and through the eventual attempt to explain the racket coming from the couple's bedroom in: "What? Robbers? Murderers? Some varmint attacking his helpless wife, perhaps" (62). The direct questions and the non-assertive adverb "perhaps" are the manifestation here of free indirect discourse.

The narrative voice turns at this climactic point into a poetic, even mythical voice, which describes the stillness of time after Joe's realization of what is going on in his own bedroom. This poetic voice gives a biblical dimension to the scene by comparing Joe's weakness to Samson's. Missie's betrayal is thus indirectly equated with Delilah's.

The great belt on the wheel of Time slipped and eternity stood still. By the match light he could see the man's legs fighting with his breeches in his frantic desire to get them on. He had both chance and time to kill the intruder in his helpless condition--half-in and half-out of his pants--but he was too weak to take action. The shapeless enemies of humanity that live in the hours of Time had waylaid Joe. He was assaulted in his weakness. Like Samson awakening after his haircut. So he just opened his mouth and laughed.

The match went out and he struck another and lit the lamp. A howling wind raced across his heart, but underneath its fury he heard his wife sobbing and Slemmons pleading for his life. Offering to buy it with all that he had. "Please, suh, don't kill me. Sixty-two dollars at the sto' gold money." (62)

The treatment of the narrative voice in "The Gilded Six-Bits" anticipates the narrative technique that Hurston develops in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published four years later, where the author fully realizes the rhetorical strategy that Gates calls "the speakerly text." This strategy consists of the interaction of both black and white speeches so as to create a third language that moves in between these two. The speakerly text therefore contains both forms of speech, "a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical, privileged black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other hand" but is neither one (*Signifying Monkey* 174).

Contrary to Hurston's first tendency to allow more space for dialogues, as she does in "Spunk," "The Gilded Six-Bits" is dominated by the narrative voice. But this is a voice resonant with the characters' voices. Sometimes the narrator assumes Missie May's point of view and sometimes her husband's.

After Joe's discovery of his wife's betrayal with Slemmons, the narrator adopts Missie's point of view. The narrative voice becomes emphatic through the repetition of double negatives and the appearance of a direct question: "Never no more breakfast to cook; no more washing and starching of Joe's jumper-jackets and pants. No more nothing. So why get up?" (63). Free indirect discourse is used once more in order to provide a sense of proximity to the characters.

After the incident with Slemmons the relation between the couple seems to have come to a standstill. Though Missie discovers that Joe still needs her--he does not tell her to leave, and Missie behaves as a dutiful wife--he is unable to forgive her. During almost one year Missie May puts up with Joe's contempt, hoping that her repentance will eventually lead to Joe's forgiveness. Her feelings are once more perceived by the reader through the narrator's use of free indirect discourse. The morning after the incident Missie is remorseful

but hopeful: "No need to die today. Joe needed her for a few more minutes anyhow.... She didn't deserve a thing and good Joe was letting her cook some breakfast" (64). The deictic "today" and the informal adverb "anyhow" expressing a concessive idea clearly reveal the use of free indirect speech, whereas the modifier "good" indicates affection and subjectivity, and points at an obvious syntony of feelings between character and narrator.

The silence that characterizes the couple's relationship at this point is broken with Missie's announcement that they are going to have a baby, but Joe's doubts that the child will be really his prevent him from forgiving his wife. The stalemate is eventually put an end to with the birth of a boy child and Joe's mother confirmation that "he sho' is de spittin' image of yuh, son."

The boy's birth signals the beginning of the third section of the story. The narrative voice loses importance. It becomes an objective voice that leaves room for dialogue. Both free indirect discourse and the poetic tone that came to characterize the description of the passing of time disappear, while vernacular speech prevails and closes the story. Happiness is restored.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" shows a narrative voice that works its way from standard to, what we might call, a "partial transcription" of vernacular English, since the black English traits that we find in the narrative voice are due to the narrator's partial assimilation of the characters' speech by using the technique of free indirect discourse and the rich imagery found in black speech. But whatever the proximity of the narrator to the characters' voices has been, by the end of the story the narrator is reasserted in his/her standard voice:

Back in Eatonville, Joe reached his own front door. There was the ring of singing metal on wood. Fifteen times. Missie May couldn't run to the door, but she crept there as quickly as she could. (68)

Therefore, Hurston does not overcome the standard English framework yet, although the effort on the narrator's part to express the characters' silenced feelings in their idiom is very significant.

Despite the importance that literary critics such as Karla Holloway and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. rightfully assign to Hurston's technique at this point in her career, Hurston herself went farther than providing the narrative voice with some black traits.⁹ In her last stories Hurston makes the frame of standard English disappear and creates instead a frame in black vernacular.

In "*Cock Robin Beale Street*" (1941) Hurston uses the technique of a tale-within-a-tale, and the story presents two narrators. The narrative voice that frames the story is clearly colloquial, although it is not represented with as many black traits as the speech of the rest of the characters: "Uncle July was mad clear through. A'n't Dooby could tell by the way he threw down the load of kindling in the corner behind the kitchen stove." After the first couple of sentences it assumes Aunt Dooby's point of view and is tinged with her black dialect: "Anyhow, if he wasn't really mad, he was letting on like it. It was an off day with her and she didn't feel like no fussing, so she started in right away to head him off" (69). Dialogue follows, and Uncle July narrates Cock Robin's true story, becoming, therefore, the second--but more relevant, since it takes charge of the story--narrative voice. His vernacular language fills the tale:

9. See Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* and Karla F.C. Holloway's *The Character of the World*.

"Going 'round letting on dat Cock Robin was a bird! Jest heard Miz Pendleton reading out of some kind of a book how Cock Robin was a real-true bird wid feathers on him and got kilt wid a arrow. Hit's a sin and shame! Tain't a word of it so! I knowed Cock Robin well--was right dere when he got kilt wid a forty-four, and was at de funeral." (70)

So, Hurston has moved from a standard narrative voice which at times echoes the characters' black speech in "The Gilded Six-Bits", to a narrative voice--Uncle July's--that shows no trace of standard English in "Cock Robin Beale Street." Uncle July embodies the traditional oral voice of the Afro-American storyteller. Comparing his role as a narrator with that of the men in Clarke's porch in "Spunk," July's ownership of his tale is absolute. His narration is never interrupted by the first narrator, whose only function was to introduce July and Dooby to the reader at the beginning of the story.

"*Story in Harlem Slang*" (1942) is subtitled "Jelly's Tale," and has an eminently oral character. The narrative voice is not distinct from that of the black characters who speak in Harlem slang. It opens the story giving an impression of immediacy because it is addressing an interlocutor; a listener, rather than a reader. So, the narrator starts saying: "Wait till I light up my coal-pot and I'll tell you about this Zigaboo called Jelly. Well, all right now. He was a sealskin brown and papa-tree-top tall . . ." (82). In this case the narrator does not become one of the folk, he *is* clearly one of the folk.

This syntony between the narrator and the black characters is underlined by the use of free indirect speech. The scene where Sweet Back concludes that his pal Jelly has no money, because if he had he would have invited him for dinner, is an example of the narrator's use of free indirect speech. The reader witnesses Sweet Back's thoughts, not through his own words, but through the narrator's: "If Jelly really had had some money, he might have staked him, Sweet Back, to a hot. Good Southern cornbread with a piano on a platter. Oh, well! The right broad would, or might, come along" (85). It is clear that the narrative voice shares the same language with the characters.

The use of a black narrative voice that makes use of Afro-American rhetoric strategies helps to render Jelly and Sweet Back's experiences, in this case, as they have lived and felt them. Creating a black narrator, Hurston makes an effort, in Holloway's words, "to re-create, through the word, the experiences of a culture" (*Character* 97).

Harlem is also the stage of Hurston's story "*Book of Harlem*" (1985). The very title intends to underline the written character of the work, in contrast with the story that we have just analyzed. It also evokes the sacred text of the Bible trying to emulate its structure with the use of glosses and versicles. This is an example of the glosses and their corresponding versicles:

26. He lodged with Toothsome, and trieth to make the females of Harlem, but is scorned by them. 28. One frail biddeth him sit upon a tack" (75).

26. And when he had come unto the place, he lodged himself with Toothsome, and was glad.

27. And each evening stood he before the Lafayette theatre and a-hemmed at the knees that passed, but none took notice of him.

28. Moreover one frail of exceeding sassiness bade him go to and cook an radish, and seat himself upon a tack, which being interpreted is slander.(78)

As it becomes clear from this example, Hurston experiments in this story with a language that is a mixture of the solemn biblical language and the Harlem slang. She even goes further, mixing the names, places and events in the Bible, with their parallels in contemporary history. Thus, Babylon is New York, the extreme drought in the land of Hukum refers to Prohibition, and Mandolin, the main character, becomes the prodigal son of the parable leaving his father's house to go to Babylon, despite the good reasons his father uses to retain him: "Why dost thou crave Babylon when Gussie Smith, the daughter of our neighbor, will make thee a good wife? Tarry now and take her to wife, for verily she is a mighty biscuit cooker before the Lord." (77), to what Mandolin answers: "What care I for biscuit-cookers when there be Shebas of high voltage on every street in Harlem? For verily man liveth not by bread alone, but by every drop of banana oil that drippeth from the tongue of the lovely" (77). These strategies produce a comic effect that is accentuated by the character's adventures.

In "Book of Harlem," like in "Story in Harlem Slang," the narrative voice does not differ from that of the rest of the characters.

After the study of Hurston's short stories written between 1921 and 1942 three phases of experimentation with the narrative voice may be differentiated. Her first story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," probably influenced by the prescriptions of the time, maintains that the proper voice for the narrator is standard English, and going even further, backs the intended superiority of the black main character with his partial "conversion" into standard speech.

In her next stories Hurston works toward a progressive proximity of the standard narrative voice to the characters' black speech, but the definitive turning point is "The Gilded Six-Bits," where standard speech and black English are mixed in the free indirect discourse characteristic of the narrative voice. At the same time, the lyrical voice used by the narrator confirms his/her absorption of the Afro-American style.

Finally, Hurston identifies the narrative voice in her last stories with the voice of the folk. By doing this, she achieves two main goals. First, the Afro-American experience is more directly and freshly conveyed, and second, the subordination of Black English to standard English disappears and black dialect becomes a literary language. It stops being solely the language of orality to enter the realm of textuality. The narrative voice becomes thus a key element in the self-assertiveness of the Afro-American literary tradition.

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