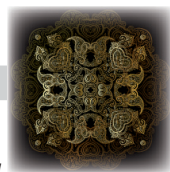


Minglings: Form, Style, and Theme in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*



Nicolas Tredell

“We’s uh mingled people” (Hurston 210). In chapter 16 of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), this is Janie Mae Crawford’s riposte to Mrs. Turner’s view that those of mixed race, like Janie and herself, should “class off” (Hurston 210), keep their distance from, African Americans, aim to become as indistinguishable as possible from the Whites. *Their Eyes* creates a world that acknowledges and celebrates the distinctiveness of African-American culture while recognizing that, like any culture, it will always involve mingling on ethnic, social, and cultural levels; and this mingling is inherent in the novel’s own form and style as well as being a central theme. *Their Eyes* is a mingled text that portrays mingled people and offers a model of a multiculturalism that registers both the difference and the interfusion of cultures, which are neither hermetically sealed from nor diluted by one another; a multiculturalism that is, to adapt Roland Barthes’s definition of a text, “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of [cultural scripts] blend and clash” (Barthes 146). This essay traces the cultural minglings in the form, style, and themes of Hurston’s multifaceted novel.

Generic Mingling

It is difficult to give a categorical response if asked what kind of novel *Their Eyes* is, to what genre we might assign it. In her introduction to the 1986 Virago edition, Holly Eley calls it “primarily a love story” and also “an account of a strong, intelligent (though uneducated) woman’s steps towards self-fulfilment” (Hurston vii). In generic terms, this latter definition would make Hurston’s novel a *Bildungsroman*, a story of (self-)education by life. Helen Carr’s 2011 *Literary Encyclopedia* entry partly echoes Eley, concluding that *Their Eyes* “is centrally about a black woman learning to find

her voice”—but here the final emphasis is less on self-fulfilment than on self-expression, on “finding a voice.” But the term “voice” sounds too singular, too individualized, when applied to Hurston’s novel, for one of the notable achievements of *Their Eyes* is that it makes audible a multiplicity of voices: There is indeed Janie’s voice and the voices, in dialogue and sometimes in free indirect discourse, of the significant others in her life, especially her grandmother, known as Nanny, and the three men with whom she enters, successively, into close relationships. These men are Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Woods, known as Tea Cake. There are also the collective voices of the communities in which she lives, in the Black township of Eatonville and “on de muck” in the Florida Everglades, voices accusing, asserting, gossiping, grumbling, interpreting, interrogating, narrating, praising, scolding, and summing up. In its multivocalism, *Their Eyes* is less like a *Bildungsroman*, which, whether in the first or third person, can tend towards a monologue in which the voice of the protagonist sounds the loudest, and more like the polyphonic novel, the text of many voices, defined by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Bakhtin).

Their Eyes further resembles Dostoevsky’s novels in that it has a pervasive metaphysical dimension, a reaching out, in its ideas and imagery, to an inclusive and transcendent vision of life and the world; this is not a matter of asserting, doctrinally or dogmatically, the existence of any supernatural reality but of recognizing an aspiration to transcendence which is inherent in the power of language to remake the world imaginatively. *Their Eyes* can also be read as a symbolic novel, with its bold imagery, particularly its use of personification, and as a melodrama, especially in its account of Tea Cake’s death and Janie’s trial for murder. Love story, *Bildungsroman*, heteroglossic text, metaphysical fiction, symbolic novel, melodrama: All these generic elements, and more, can be discerned in Hurston’s novel. Like the world it portrays, it is a mingled text.

Mingling in Style

The style of *Their Eyes* mingles epic, biblical, romantic, realist, and vernacular modes and is peculiarly rich in imagery. For example, it employs potent similes and metaphors drawn from nature that echo both folkloric sources and, without seeming stale or stereotyped, medieval, Romantic, and Renaissance poetry. Modernism had made such imagery suspect—for example, T. S. Eliot's great Modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) employs it tentatively, qualifying it with a sense of irony and inevitable disappointment. To give one telling instance, the poem's "hyacinth girl," an intimation of lyric and erotic promise, stills the tongue and blinds the eyes, collapsing into the desolate image of a waste and empty sea (Eliot 1974; Part 1, lines 36-42). Hurston, writing a decade or so after the high moment of Modernism, does not hedge her bets in this way. For instance, when Janie prepares to tell her story to Pheoby at the start of chapter 2, the vision that she aims to convey is rendered by an arboreal simile: "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (Hurston 20). This image is not seen as illusory or ironic. Characteristically for Hurston, it also mingles with other vital stylistic elements: the anaphoric repetition of the three phrases starting with "things"; the echo, in "things done and undone," of the "general Confession" in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662): "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done"; the alliterative matching of "Dawn"—both a natural phenomenon and a poetic token—with "Doom", with its implications of death, destruction, and both human and divine judgment. Such mingling of associations and implications is typical of the richness and audacity of Hurston's prose.

Janie's image of her life as "a great tree in leaf," seen from the perspective of her forty years, contrasts with and challenges an image her grandmother used when she told Janie, then sixteen, of her troubled family history, scarred by racist and sexual violence: "us colored folks is branches without roots" (Hurston 31). The image of Janie's life as a tree affirms that she does have roots, and the story

that she tells Phoeby—and the novel Hurston is writing—aims to reveal and reformatify these.

Their Eyes makes an early connection between nature imagery and erotic efflorescence: In chapter 2, the sixteen-year-old Janie becomes fascinated by a blossoming pear tree in the backyard of the house to which she and her grandmother have moved and its development entrances her: “[f]rom barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom” (Hurston 23). The two sentences that follow alternate with a series of urgent interrogative adverbs—“How? Why?” “What? How? Why?”—followed by a sentence that seems a variation on and development of John Keats’s idea of “unheard melodies” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” with its injunction: “Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone” (Keats 209; stanza 2, line 14): “This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears.” But the next sentence has everything to do with the nose: “The rose of the world was breathing out smell” (Hurston 23). In this metaphor, Hurston shows a capacity for producing concentrated imagery that reunites, at least momentarily, the “dissociated sensibility” that T. S. Eliot had located in Tennyson and Browning, who “do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose” (Eliot 1941, 287). In Hurston, the odor of a rose becomes the odor of the world and of an experiential intensity in which the philosophical and the sensuous combine (because the image contains, in a way difficult to paraphrase or express abstractly, an *idea* of the world grasped through the *senses*). The pear tree, the bees and flowers, even the flies who, echoing the Gospels of St. Luke (17:27) and St. Matthew (24:38), are “tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage” (Hurston 24)—all these combine to produce a sense of expectation that is undoubtedly erotic but that also echoes the act of creation as envisaged in Genesis and in the aesthetics of Romantic poetry: Janie is “[w]aiting for the world to be made” (Hurston 25). Here Hurston is closer to William Blake than Sigmund Freud: Libido is not the propellant but the portal of epiphany.

Their Eyes sometimes combines the evocation of natural phenomena and events with personification; and, as with natural

imagery, it uses personification with a boldness and scope unusual in a twentieth-century text written in the wake of Modernism. Hurston's personifications are on a gargantuan scale. In chapter 8, for example, as Joe is dying, Janie starts to think of Death:

Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come. Been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then. (Hurston 129)

In this sustained, extended metaphor, Death is vast and stands largely outside spatial or temporal markers, the comforting grammatical anchors of “where” or “when” or “then.” *Their Eyes* will evoke “Him-with-the-square-toes” again at the start of the penultimate chapter, chapter 19, when He has returned to his roofless and sideless house after a mass culling by the Old Testament means of a flood in which Hurston, elaborating boldly and biblically on her earlier description, envisions Him as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation (6.2): “His pale white horse had galloped over waters, and thundered over land” (Hurston 249).

In chapter 18, as the weather builds towards the storm that will unleash the flood, Hurston's personifications convey, with compressed power, the cosmic scale of the disturbance. Again, her figures are gigantic: “Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands” (234). We are close to the mighty tumult of *King Lear*. Personification also drives home in a sentence the force of the oncoming flood: “The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel” (239). This gives the sense of an animistic universe that contains powers mightier than those of human beings, which may evoke a collective quasi-religious awe. But there is a key paragraph that takes on Old Testament biblical tones and moves

beyond animism to culminate in the clause that gives Hurston's novel its title:

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (Hurston 236)

The initial personification of the wind in this paragraph as a triply furious being, part of a pantheon of moody deities, mounts into an apprehension of one tremendous entity, modeling, in microcosm, the move from polytheism to monotheism, from the fear of gods to the fear of God. Here Hurston is interpreting the experiences not only of Janie and Tea Cake, but also, and indeed more centrally, the collective feelings of all those in their fragile shanties fearfully awaiting the full force of the storm. The repetitions of the third person plural pronoun "they" and of the possessive determiner "their" emphasize this collective aspect. Hurston's use of "they" and "their," here and elsewhere in the novel, and (in the case of "their") in its very title, demonstrates the extent to which *Their Eyes* is about collective as well as individual experience.

Their Eyes gives voice to collective oral discourses: the discourse of the inhabitants of the Black township of Eatonville, the discourse of those working "on the muck" in the Florida Everglades. These form a substantial element of *Their Eyes*, with the narrative voice falling silent, as it were, to let the words of the people carry and amplify the story. These discourses give the sense of human beings constantly making and remaking their world in language: in anecdotes, images, observations, and stories. These makings and remakings are by no means always benign. For instance, when Janie returns to the township in the first chapter of the novel, envy, "stored up from other times," spills out in a verbal form of "mass cruelty" (Hurston 10), and the rendering of this in direct vernacular speech without any attributions to specific speakers strengthens the sense of a powerful vox populi, a voice of the people rather than of distinct individuals:

What she doin' come back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?— Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?— Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?— Thought she was going to marry?— Where he left *her*?— What he done wid all her money? (Hurstons 10)

Here, the common voice, itself a product of mingled discourses, deprecates two other forms of mingling, across classes and across ages. That voice shows that collective discourse is a form of both bonding and exclusion: It bonds together those who broadly share a set of values and attitudes but excludes those who appear to deviate from those values and attitudes.

Another example of collective discourse without any attribution to specific speakers—except that, in this case, they are all male—occurs near the end of the novel, in the penultimate chapter, chapter 19, when Janie, after her acquittal on a murder charge, hears the men talking, unaware of her presence, around the front of the boarding house where she is staying and claiming that she escaped conviction and punishment because she was an attractive woman and because she did not kill a White man. Thus we have opinions such as “Aw you know dem white mens wuzn't gointuh do nothin' tuh no woman dat look lak her” and the view that women of color “kin kill up all de mens dey want tuh, but you bet' not kill one uh dem. De white folks will sho hang yuh if yuh do” (Hurstons 280). In one respect, the idea that a White-dominated society perceives the killing of a White person as a worse crime than the killing of a person of color is valid: In Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas's inadvertent killing of the young White woman Mary Dalton arouses far more outrage than his slaughter of the young African-American woman Bessie Mears. But the men's view in *Their Eyes* is also deeply sexist: Janie's acquittal is supposedly due to her attractiveness and to a prevalent idea that women of color can kill men of color with an impunity they would not enjoy if they killed White men. In chapter 19 as in chapter 1, the collective voice is not benign, and there is a mingling

of attitudes, some of which may be justifiable, others of which may be unquestioned prejudices.

Other examples of collective discourse in *Their Eyes* are attributed to specific speakers, though these speakers are individualized primarily by direct vernacular speech rather than narrative description. In chapter 6, for instance, Sim Jones, Sam Watson, Oscar Scott, Jeff Bruce, and Amos Hicks, sitting on the porch of Joe Starks's store (which is the town forum at least for its menfolk), discuss Starks once he has gone back into the store. A vivid mingling of views of Starks occurs. For instance, Jones says Starks is "too exact with folks" and that "all he do is big-belly round and tell other folks what tuh do"; Scott complains that "You kin feel a switch in his hand when he's talkin' to yuh [...] Dat chastisin' feelin' he totes sorter gives yuh de protolapsis uh de cutinary linin'"; Jeff Bruce calls Starks "uh whirlwind among breezes"; Sam Watson acknowledges "We bend which ever way he blows" but affirms "us needs him" (Hurstons 78); Amos Hicks dislikes the way "he talks tuh unlettered folks wid books in his jaws" (Hurstons 79). Given Starks's standing in the town, the porch discourse is a microcosm of the political process by which a leader, at local and national level, is assessed, debated and judged. But it is significant that, at this time and place, this process excludes women's voices although women may be the object of discussion; the men on the porch, partly because of their aversion to certain aspects of Starks, are sympathetic to Janie but register her relative silence and read it—inaccurately—as a sign of a harmonious marriage: "She sho don't talk much. De way he rears and pitches in de store sometimes when she make uh mistake is sort of ungodly, but she don't seem to mind at all. Reckon dey understand one 'nother" (Hurstons 79).

Their Eyes offers no simple, abstract celebration of collective discourse; it demonstrates its vivacity and vernacular richness but also shows that it can be oppressive, prejudiced, and unfair; it implies, however, that it is, in the human world, inescapable, a form of mingling that humans constantly practise and that fosters, for better and worse, perceptions, evaluations, and actions.

Mingling as Theme

Janie is a mingled person although that mingling was enforced, the result of sexual violence during and after the American Civil War. Her mother was of mixed race, the issue of a White master's exploitation of an African-American female slave, Janie's grandmother, as the Confederacy moved towards defeat with the fall of Atlanta to General Sherman in 1864. This coupling produced a baby of color "wid gray eyes and yaller hair" who would become Janie's mother (Hurston 33-4). Janie herself was conceived when a school teacher raped her seventeen-year-old mother, who afterwards, deeply traumatized, turned to drink and staying out late, and eventually disappeared, leaving her grandmother to rear her daughter.

In early childhood, Janie mingles, unconscious of her ethnic difference, with the four grandchildren of the White Washburn family, to whom her grandmother acts as Nanny. Like a miniature Whitman, an infant image of an all-inclusive America, she contains multitudes, a spectrum of identities from A to Z. As she tells Phoeby, "Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (Hurston 21). She only learns of her visible ethnic difference from a picture of the family taken by a traveling photographer: When she fails at first to see herself in the image, Miss Nellie points her out and she experiences a shock of recognition, exclaiming "Aw, aw! Ah'm colored! [...] But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest" (Hurston 21). This provides an intriguing variation on the scenario of the "mirror stage" outlined by the French revisionist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, which posits a moment at which an infant, seeing its mirror image, recognizes, or more properly misrecognizes, itself as a unitary being (Lacan 75-81): in *Their Eyes*, a photograph serves as a mirror at a later stage of childhood and the unity Janie-Alphabet perceives, of herself as "colored," is also a marker of difference—and, in the longer term, of a fragmentation that comes, not from some unavoidable and universal splitting of the subject but from her mixed ethnic and social identity and her many names.

When Janie goes to school wearing the clothes and hair ribbons given her by Mrs. Washburn, she is teased and excluded. This motif of exclusion is, of course, familiar in the female and male *Bildungsroman*—think, for example, of the eponymous protagonists in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50). But Hurston complicates it, making it both richer and more exacerbating, by interweaving an ethnic dimension which is not that of a clearly demarcated otherness but of a mixed, mingled identity that partly differs from and partly resembles the normative ideas of Whiteness or Blackness prevalent at the time: The girl of many names who mingled unwittingly with the Whites becomes a cross-cultural compendium who perturbs the eyes that watch her and the voices that try to define and judge her.

Janie grows up in a culture in which the ownership of land and property is a crucial marker of independence, an idea that descends from the writings of the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. As Janie's grandmother tells her: "Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folks' yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillun at school" (Hurston 37). When she fears that a young man like "shiftless Johnny Taylor" (Hurston 25) may seduce sixteen-year-old Janie in her first fine careless rapture of erotic awakening, she pressures her granddaughter into marrying Logan Kilicks, who looks to Janie "like some ole skull head in de grave yard" (Hurston 28), because he supposedly offers security with "his often-mentioned sixty acres" of land (Hurston 38). But security is not enough: Once married, Janie cannot love or desire him and finds him physically repellent. Nanny reiterates the material advantages of the match: "Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land on de big road" (Hurston 41). Kilicks embodies a cultural stage in which property is an inert possession, its owners devoid of dynamism and drive.

It is Joe Starks who offers an alternative: an urban culture has shaped him—he is "cityfied" (Hurston 47)—and he dresses in style. He is "a seal-brown color but he acted [towards Jamie] like

Mr Washburn,” head of the White family with whom Janie spent her early childhood, “or somebody like that” (Hurstons 47). He has assimilated elements of White culture—“[b]een workin’ for white folks all his life”—and he is thrifty: “[s]aved up some money—round three hundred dollars” (Hurstons 47). But unlike Logan Killicks, he embodies a culture that is both entrepreneurial and civic-minded; he is prepared to spend money to gain money and he sees his opportunity for both profit and power in the all-Black townships that were being established in the United States. Janie holds back from Joe for a long time because he does not incarnate immediate sensuous delight but innovation, risk, and delayed gratification, a contrast that Hurston conveys, characteristically, in imagery drawn from nature: “he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance” (Hurstons 50). But in the end Janie opts for far horizon.

Joe takes Janie to Eatonville in Florida and quickly establishes himself as its leading citizen (Hurstons’s fictional town has the same name and location as the real town where she herself was born and lived until the age of nine and where her father was mayor). He buys land and swiftly sells portions of it at a profit, demonstrating the alchemy of capital to Janie, who is “astonished to see the money Jody had spent for the land come back to him so fast” (Hurstons 66). Already familiar with the function and procedure of committees, he sets one up in the town to “get things movin’ round here” (Hurstons 58). He becomes mayor and establishes a store with a post office, which irritates the embodiment of “the average mortal,” Amos Hicks, who “wasn’t ready to think of colored people in post offices yet” (Hurstons 63). As Starks affirms, the store is the place in which commercial and civic concerns combine:

“Ah figgers we all needs uh store in uh big hurry [...] uh store right heah in town wid everything in it you needs. ‘Taint uh bit uh use in everybody proagin’ way over tuh Maitland tuh buy uh little meal and flour when they could git it right heah [...] And then agin uh store is good in other ways. Ah got tuh have a place tuh be at when folks comes buy land. And furthermo’ everything is got tuh have uh center and uh heart tuh it, and uh town ain’t no different from nowhere else. It would be natural fuh de store

tuh be meetin' place fuh de town." (Hurstons 64, 65)

As the last sentence indicates, the store is also the place where nature and culture fuse. The store porch does indeed become the town meeting place, the place where people watch, observe, comment, and debate, where we hear the collective discourse of the people on which we have already remarked.

At the store opening, Joe stresses that, in order to move on, the town must incorporate and have a mayor, two requirements that are duly accomplished, with Joe himself almost immediately beginning his mayoralty. The combination of commercial and civic culture Joe embodies is epitomized when he sends off to Sears, Roebuck and Company to buy a street lamp and invests the illumination of "[d]e first street lamp in uh colored town" (Hurstons 73), with high and holy ceremonial and celebration, involving prayer, hymn singing, and feasting.

By implementing key elements of entrepreneurial and civic culture, Joe effects a transformational change in Eatonville, turning it from a loose and provisional assembly into a town while gratifying his own desire for power and profit. But in one respect he is as inert and old-fashioned as Logan Killicks: his view of the role of women. When it is suggested, at the store opening, that Janie make a speech to follow her husband's, he puts her firmly and publicly in her place: "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurstons 69). Talking privately in bed after the street lamp ceremony, Janie tells Joe that being Mr. and Mrs. Mayor "keeps us in some way we ain't natural wid one 'nother. You'se always off talkin' and fixin' things, and Ah feels lak Ah'm jus' markin' time." When Joe retorts that "Ah told you in de very first beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you," Janie is gripped by a "feeling of coldness and fear," of being "far away from things and lonely" (Hurstons 74). The culture of the incorporated town cannot incorporate Janie's aspirations and desires to be something other than a bloated reflection in her husband's grossifying mirror. The

far horizon Joe once seemed to promise has shrunk to the confines of a stifling domestic space summed up in Gothic imagery that recalls Edgar Allan Poe: “Ah’d sit dere wid de walls creepin’ up on me and squeezin’ all de life outa me” (Hurstons 169).

Janie’s relationship with Joe deteriorates to the point where, provoked by her husband, she administers the devastating public insult that humiliates him for ever in the town’s eyes: “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (Hurstons 123). Joe declines towards death and although Janie feels pity for him at the end they are never reconciled. But, in accordance with his civic and commercial dominance, he has the finest funeral that Orange County’s African Americans have ever witnessed. After his death, Janie continues to keep the store but is oppressed by what seems to be a truth universally acknowledged: that a wealthy widow in possession of property must be in want of a husband. The collective voice of the town tells her repetitively: “Uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing [...] Dey needs aid and assistance” (Hurstons 139)—a further example of how collective discourse can prove constricting and oppressive. But Janie likes “being lonesome”—“This freedom feeling was fine”—and her suitors “didn’t represent a thing she wanted to know about. She had already experienced them through Logan and Joe” (Hurstons 139-40).

A man twelve years younger than herself, who represents a different kind of culture, will reshape her life once more: This is Vergible Woods, known as Tea Cake. In contrast to Logan Killicks, he owns no property and in contrast to Joe Starks, when she first met him, he has no money. As Hezekiah Potts, the delivery boy, tells Janie, “Dat long-legged Tea Cake ain’t got doodly squat” (Hurstons 156). Tea Cake is a cheerful, relaxed, playful wanderer; a guitar player and sometimes a gambler; but he seems, crucially, to be closely associated with a transcendent vision of nature, recalling Janie’s epiphany as a sixteen-year-old:

He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (Hurstons 161)

It is fitting, in the symbolic economy of the novel, that Janie goes off with Tea Cake to work “on de muck” in the Florida Everglades “where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs” (Hurstun 192). In an association that goes back to ancient Egypt and the Black silt generated by the annual inundation of the Nile, “the muck” is the source of fertility and growth. But it is not idyllic: Hurston’s description of those coming to find work anticipates the account of migrants coming from Oklahoma to California in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), published two years later. Once again we see Hurston’s stress on collective experience, the emphasis on “they”; we can also observe the mingling of descriptive prose with colloquial discourse—“It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you”:

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (Hurstun 196)

Significantly for the theme of mingling in *Their Eyes*, “the muck” is a soil in which ethnicities mingle; as Mrs Turner says “Ah never dreamt so many different kins uh of black folks could colleck in one place” (Hurstun 209). This appals Mrs Turner but her observation helps to provoke Janie to make the affirmation with which this essay began: “We’s uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks” (Hurstun 210). “The muck” also has space for Native Americans and “Saws”—the Bahamian workers (Hurstun 207). Relationships between these different groups are not always easy but they do find a way of coexisting.

Through Tea Cake and her experiences with him “on de muck,” Janie is able to reconnect culture and nature in her own

life. But nature proves a sublime, dangerous force with the flood that devastates the area, killing many people, and the dog bite Tea Cake sustains while trying to save Janie and himself from drowning that turns him rabid and leads to Janie shooting him in self-defense and standing trial for murder. After her acquittal, she returns to the point at which *Their Eyes* begins—she goes back to Eatonville and starts telling Pheoby the story that expands into the mingled multiple narratives of Hurston's magnificent novel.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and transl. Caryl Emerson. Introduction by Wayne C. Booth. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 8. U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image-Music-Text: Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath*. Fontana, 1977, pp. 142-48.
- Carr, Helen. "Their Eyes Were Watching God." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 01 July 2011. www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=8257
- Eliot, T. S. "The Metaphysical Poets." In *Selected Essays*. Faber and Faber, 1941.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land* [1922], In *Collected Poems*. Faber and Faber, 1974.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Introduction by Holly Eley, afterword by Sherley Anne Williams. Virago, 1985.
- Keats, John. *Poetical Works*. Edited by H. W. Garrod, Book Club Associates, by arrangement with Oxford UP, 1979.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" [1949]. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Transl. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. Norton, 2006, pp. 75-81.
- "The Order for Morning Prayer." *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662). <http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/daily/morning.html>

Copyright of Critical Approaches to Literature: Multicultural is the property of Grey House Publishing Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.