

Lyin' her Way through Fiction:
Folklore and Fiction in the Work
of Zora Neale Hurston

Ficha Técnica

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*Lyin' her Way through Fiction:
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In memory of my grandparents and their African epic

For Gabriel

For my Parents

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, –
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise,
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Paul Laurence Dunbar
“We Wear the Mask” (1895)

I have never expected to get rich, and if I have served this nation and the world by digging out a few of its hidden treasures and thus enriched our culture, I have gained a great deal. I have had some influence on my time.

Zora Neale Hurston (1950)

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Preliminary Note

Aware that in a work of this nature there are limits to what one can do, I would like to give the reasons for choosing the works that were analyzed. The title of this work is evidence of the reasons that led me to choose some of Hurston's works and not others. Her works on or about folklore were my priority:

- her early works, including the short stories and the plays published during the period that became known as the Harlem Renaissance as well as the play written in collaboration with Langston Hughes;

- the two folklore anthologies published during her lifetime and the material that she wrote for the FWP, only published in 1999, as well as other folklore writings;

- her novels and autobiography, as well as any other work, non fiction or fiction, considered relevant to the works being analyzed and used to clarify or reinforce the analysis and study undertaken.;

The one exception to this rule is the play *Polk County*. It is analyzed due to its close similarities to *Mules and Men*, as well as due to the relevance of *Polk County* in the chapter on research included in Hurston's autobiography. It is her last play, written in collaboration with Dorothy Waring.

As Hurston's oeuvre is the focus of this work, quoting from her work has been central to the study undertaken. The references to Hurston's works will be placed in the text – the abbreviation of the work will be followed by the page number.

Abbreviations

Books

| | |
|------|--|
| DT | <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> |
| ETGC | <i>Every Tongue Got to Confess. Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States</i> |
| GGMW | <i>Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings from the Federal Writers' Project.</i> |
| JGV | <i>Jonah's Gourd Vine</i> |
| MB | <i>Mule Bone</i> |
| MM | <i>Mules and Men</i> |
| MMM | <i>Moses, Man of the Mountain</i> |
| SS | <i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i> |
| TE | <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> |
| TMH | <i>Tell My Horse</i> |
| LL | <i>Zora Neale Hurston. A Life in Letters.</i> |

Short Works

| | |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| AS | "Art and Such" |
| BC | "The Bone of Contention" |
| BD | "Black Death" |
| CC | "The Conscience of the Court" |
| CNE | "Characteristics of Negro Expression" |
| CRBS | "Cock Robin, Beale Street" |
| CS | "Color Struck" |
| DL | "Drenched in Light" |
| EA | "The Eatonville Anthology" |
| FM | "Folklore and Music" |
| FO | "The First One: A Play." |
| GSB | "The Gilded Six-Bits" |
| HA | "Hoodoo in America" |
| HFCM | "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" |
| HJC | "High John de Conquer" |
| JR | "John Redding Goes to Sea" |
| M | "Muttsy" |

| | |
|-------|--|
| MC | “Mother Catherine” |
| MF | “Magnolia Flower” |
| ONFI | “Other Negro Folklore Influences” |
| PNS | “The ‘Pet Negro’ System” |
| PC | “Polk Country: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp, with Authentic Negro Music.” |
| S | “Spunk” (short story) |
| SNS | “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals |
| Sw | “Sweat” |
| TL | “De Turkey and de Law” |
| UM | “Uncle Monday” |
| WWPWP | “What White Publishers Won’t Print” |

Others

| | |
|------|--|
| APS | American Philosophical Society Library |
| HUAL | Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Alain Locke Papers |
| FWP | Federal Writers’ Project |
| WPA | Workers Progress Administration |
| LC | Library of Congress |

Summary

It is the aim of this work to articulate the link between folklore and fiction in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. She was one of the first widely acclaimed black writers to assimilate folk tradition into modern literature. Through her ethnographies, plays and fiction, she focused on the day-to-day life of African Americans in the all-black town of Eatonville and in other all-black social spaces, as well as on “the Negro farthest down” in various labour camps in the South of the United States. Her work shows that black people created their own codes of social and cultural behaviour, honour and justice without worrying about white society. Much of Hurston’s life has been covered by mystery that is still being unveiled decades after her death. She was a productive and talented writer as can be seen from the seven books (four novels, two books of folklore, and an autobiography), essays, short stories, articles and plays that have been published, but the volume of her unpublished work remains unknown.

Hurston’s participation in the literary and cultural movement that became known as the Harlem Renaissance (that aimed to celebrate black heritage and aesthetics) was just the beginning of an intense and rich career which would last for almost forty years, as she was the only academically and professionally trained anthropologist/folklorist among the writers of the movement. The materials she collected are fundamental for some of her writings such as her folklore works, but also play an important role both in her short and long fiction.

Black dialect was the very substance of Hurston’s work; she knew that the simplest men and women had a wealth of images on their lips, ready to use if the setting was right. To preserve black cultural practices it was necessary to convey the vitality of black oral dialect in written form, transmitting the flexibility and fluidity of voice. Spontaneous image making was at the centre of rural black speech and Hurston proved to be a brilliant transcriber of dialect.

The short stories mark the beginning of Hurston’s career in fiction and play upon the ideas, issues and themes that would be at the center of her later works. The setting of most of the early short stories is almost inevitably the South, with Eatonville as the preferred microcosm. Folk culture roots are celebrated and preserved through the spirituality and sensibility of the characters that fill her stories. Hurston’s best-known short stories show male-female relationships in a domestic setting that is part of the black southern community.

The richness of black culture and black folklore was preserved by Hur-

ston's research and recording and, according to her, could only achieve full expression on the stage where it could be seen by many in its unadulterated form. Hurston wrote many plays, but very few got to be produced on the stage and few of her plays were published before her death.

Jonah's Gourd Vine is a fictional reconstruction of Hurston's parents' lives in the black community of Eatonville, Florida. She used her family's history and the folklore she retained from her childhood and from her research in the South to write this novel about black experience, focusing on black life, using rich black dialect and elevating black preaching to poetry.

Mules and Men makes innovative use of African American storytelling strategies, demonstrating how the presence of the ethnographer shapes what gets told and the meaning of what is told. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston is more than a passive transcriber of folktales. Trained as an anthropologist, having to keep a certain distance from the culture she analyzes, Hurston chooses her own particular method of presenting her fieldwork. She reveals the humorous and exotic side of black culture in the rural South, but also makes a complex analysis of race and gender in black life (in a veiled form). Hurston's second book of folklore, *Tell My Horse*, contains the material she collected in the Caribbean, namely in Haiti and Jamaica, and presents a critically reflected ethnographic study of Caribbean culture, politics and religion.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), a masterpiece of vibrant folk culture, also takes us to Eatonville, where the "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences" who sit on the porch of Joe Clarke's store watch life around them. Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life and her loves to her best friend, Phoebe, and through Phoebe, to the community to which she has just returned.

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston combines fiction, folklore, religion and comedy in an unusual and even provocative manner. She employs the familiar black folk preaching technique of equating Southern black history with the Biblical story of the Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery, and introduces commentaries regarding black cultural heritage and language into her story of Moses in order to reformulate notions about oppression, order, leadership, race, and cultural and political identity.

Dust Tracks on a Road is a valuable introduction to understand Hurston's identity, her social attitudes, her work and her contradictions, where she presents African American culture as rural and oral needing to be recorded before it disappeared.

To conclude, the reasons for Hurston's apparent obscurity during almost

two decades will be considered. Her work vanished from literary history due to shifting literary tastes; changing notions of value to racism and sexism were responsible for the neglect of her work but also the increasing importance of her contemporary male writers, namely Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Her posthumous reputation is quite different than the one Hurston had during her lifetime. Since the 1970s, when Hurston was “rediscovered” by Alice Walker, all her major works have been republished, her works have been included in various anthologies and are part of college reading lists.

Introduction

Culture is not a fixed condition
but a process: the product of
interaction between the past and present.

Lawrence W. Levine

Folklore is the boiled-down juice
of human living. It does not belong to
any special time, place, nor people.

Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first widely acclaimed black writers to assimilate folk tradition into modern literature. Through her ethnographies, plays and fiction, she focused on the day-to-day life of African Americans in the all-black town of Eatonville and other all-black social spaces, as well as on “the Negro farthest down” in various labour camps in the South of the United States. In her work she shows that black people created their own codes of social and cultural behaviour, honour and justice without worrying about white society.

Much of Hurston’s life has been covered by mystery that is still being unveiled decades after her death. She was a productive and talented writer as can be seen from the seven books (four novels, two books of folklore, and an autobiography), essays, short stories, articles and plays that have been published, but the volume of her unpublished work also remains a mystery. In the nineties, carbon copies of four sketches and six plays were found in the Library of Congress. These materials were submitted by Hurston for copyright protection between 1925 and 1944 and were accidentally discovered by researchers. But other discoveries, like the “forgotten” boxes of material that were held at the Smithsonian Institution for over two decades, have also contributed to focus attention on Hurston as a major writer, and to place her in the American literary canon.

Eric J. Sundquist states in *To Wake the Nations. Race in the Making of America* that “the line between folklore and literature is difficult to establish in

black oral narrative” (Sundquist 1993: 306). Long before Sundquist, Hurston was already establishing this and proving that oral tradition is the foundation of African American cultural expression. In the twenties Hurston seemed to be in the right place at the right time. She was born among the folktales, superstitions, jokes and lying sessions in Eatonville, the first incorporated all-black town, on the outskirts of Orlando, in Florida:

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that (MM 9).

Hurston did not publish any major work in the twenties because she was not interested in the topics her fellow Harlem Renaissance writers used in their works and which allowed them to publish for an eager audience as “the Negro was in *Vogue*”. Another important factor that influenced Hurston’s career during the late twenties and early thirties was her “relationship” with her patron, Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, which legally prevented her from publishing any of her research.¹

Hurston’s writing career can be linked with the different decades: in the twenties she wrote poetry (none of which has been published or is considered by the critics), short stories and plays; in the thirties she turned to folklore and the novel; in the forties she published her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and a novel about the white crackers, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, but mostly the forties and the fifties were marked by essays and non-fiction. In the fifties she also wrote novels that were not published.

Her reputation as a writer accompanied the changes in the American literary scene of the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, she was a “curiosity”, an “eccentric” who was able to collect and write down the dialect of her people to enable it to be preserved. Hurston as a woman and a writer was difficult to categorize into prescribed racial, social and artistic boundaries. Even though women did go out to enjoy themselves, most of them were not liber-

¹ Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason was a wealthy white woman who supported Indian Arts and African American Arts through the patronage system. She insisted upon being called “godmother” and supported financially several writers and artists who were encouraged to reveal and express their “primitivism”. This will be discussed further on in this work.

ated enough to drink or smoke in public. Respectable conscious black women were careful to avoid any outrageous behaviour that would stereotype them as low and sluttish. Women were also reluctant in promoting themselves boldly. All this turned Hurston into a scandalous topic. But this also led to criticism from fellow writers and friends like Alain Locke, Sterling Brown and Richard Wright who attacked her work harshly in reviews and articles, and accused her of having a lack of critical awareness. The accusations made by Richard Wright that she had “no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction” and that she continued to use “the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh,” led to attacks on Hurston, accusing her of being “nostalgic for the Jim Crow South” in the 1940s.¹ Since the late 1920s, various authors, historians and critics have implied that Hurston was a professional “folk” Negro who played the part required of her to satisfy important or rich white people who, she thought, could possibly help her career.²

In the analysis of Hurston's work, the aim is to show the value of Hurston's folklore works as the source for most of her fictional and non fictional works, namely the published plays, the novels, the autobiography, the folklore anthologies, the short stories and essays. Representative works from Hurston's canon were used to explore the vibrant and complex culture of African Americans through Hurston's lens with a special focus on how folklore and fiction intertwine in her art and in her life. She used her ethnography and fiction to present and explore important aspects of black culture in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. According to Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, “folklore functions to define an African American cultural identity” (1999: 3). Folklore and fiction are the two sides of Zora Neale Hurston: the anthropologist and the imaginative and creative storyteller. The importance of folklore to African American literature has been documented by many critics and can be traced back to the early literature by African Americans. Trudier Harris states that “African-American folklore is arguably the basis for most African-American literature” (Harris 1991: 2). Hurston is always seen as a chronicler of black life and folklore more than as an anthropologist. Even though there has been a great rise of interest in her work, little attention has been given to her status as a scholar of anthropology and this reflects the problems she faced to be accepted as a researcher – the result of being a black woman conducting fieldwork and reporting it in her own way.

¹ *New Masses*, October 5, 1937. (Gates and Appiah 1993: 16-17).

² Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*. 1971: 130. “Zora Neale Hurston seemed to thrive on this kind of dependency. Her character – or perhaps her style – made her into the exuberant oagan that pleased her white friends. Her Negro contemporaries saw her as ‘playing a game,’ using white folks to get what she wanted.”

Much of the criticism on Hurston has focussed on isolated individual works, namely on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I have tried to do a cross-reading of her works, more in terms of similarities and parallels than in terms of contrasts. Metaphors of horses and mules, recurrent motifs such as adultery and the far horizon, and characters such as Big Sweet and Joe Clarke can be found in her anthropology and her fiction. Works are discussed individually and whenever possible links or parallels are established with other works.

In spite of the difficulties documenting black speech and black folklore referred to by white folklore collectors and anthropologists, Hurston always incorporated Black English and Negro folkways in her work. To preserve black cultural practices it was necessary to convey the vitality of black oral dialect in written form, transmitting the flexibility and fluidity of voice. Black dialect was the very substance of Hurston's work; she knew that the simplest men and women had a wealth of images at their lips, ready to use if the setting was right. Spontaneous image making was at the centre of rural black speech and Hurston proved to be a brilliant transcriber of dialect.

The storytelling sessions and the lying contests are the source for much of the lore she collects – the community members are her informants – but her childhood and adolescence memories also become a source of material. She lived and conducted research in the work camps of the black sawmill workers, turpentine distillers and phosphate mineworkers and this experience enabled her to present a dynamic portrayal of the rural black life in the twenties.

Between 1927 and 1932 Hurston travelled to Florida, Alabama, New Orleans, Georgia and the Bahamas collecting the vast amount of material she would use for the rest of her life. In the American South she collected material that would enable her to organize various volumes of American folklore. In a letter to Langston Hughes she wrote:

My Plans: 1 volume of stories. 1 children's games. 1 Drama and the Negro 1 'Mules & Men' a volume of work songs with guitar arrangement 1 on Religion. 1. on words & meanings. 1 volume of love letters with an introduction on Negro love.¹

Over the years she would use the material repetitively (some tales collected in *Mules and Men* were recounted from Hurston's childhood and others were used in the stories she wrote before she went South to research), sometimes with slight changes, "constantly recycling her materials and frequently told a tale over again with a different ending on different tone" (Lowe 1994: 6). The

¹ Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, August 6, 1928. (Hurston 2002: 124).

intertextuality between folklore and fiction in Hurston's work is evident when characters, motifs or ideas show up in several stories, novels or folklore texts. The material she collected during her fieldwork appeared in various forms throughout the late twenties and early thirties: stories, plays, musical revues and academic articles. In the early thirties she organized her field notes for publication.

As Michael Awkward and Michelle Johnson stated, "even as we seek to understand Hurston's texts in the context of her anthropological setting, we must also situate her work within African American cultural experiences and the ideological perspectives that seek to explain them" (Awkward and Johnson in Kopley 1997: 289). Hurston's correct rendering of black colloquial voices was important to the authentic representation of the dialect of her characters. We do not expect Hurston's characters to speak "standard" English. Dialect is part of Hurston's identity as a writer. With Zora Neale Hurston folklore cannot be considered quaint and restrictive. She uses folklore and reproduces oral "language" in a way that cannot be considered "funny." During the first years of Hurston's career audiences were used to hearing it only in comic contexts, like the minstrel shows, or reading it in the work of Charles W. Chestnutt and in Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories. But Hurston used it in another context – writing about black life and culture in her contemporary America.

During the 1930s and 1940s when Hurston's work was being published, the most prominent African American author was Richard Wright. Wright wrote in explicitly political terms, using the struggle of African Americans in his work. He set out the blue print for African American writing, which would later be amended by others, namely Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes. Hurston's work went out of print and was not reprinted until the seventies because she leaves out the race problem and writes about the positive effects of black experience. Black people did not devote their lives to discussions of white injustice – they talked about it, but continued to practice their culture; life continued to be lived without constant reference to white oppression.

All direct participants in the awakening of black culture in the United States that became known as the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s and early 1930s were black but the movement was influenced by non-blacks, especially by Carl Van Vechten, and also by other white writers, patrons, promoters and publishers. Several older black intellectuals such as Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. DuBois helped black writers to establish contacts with potential patrons and white publishers. The general consensus around the Harlem Renaissance, also called "The New Negro Renaissance" or "New Negro

Movement,” is that it is thought to have begun in the early 1920s and ended in the Great Depression about 1930.

Apparently there was no common bond among members of the Harlem Renaissance besides a sense of community and the fact that all of them spent some time in Harlem and saw Harlem as the center of black literary activity in the 1920s¹. During the 1920s many whites were attracted to what they considered to be the exotic, strange and primitive aspects of Harlem. The whites visited the “black metropolis” in search of the entertainment offered in jazz clubs, cabarets and private parties. Some of the members of the Harlem Renaissance like Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher and Langston Hughes wrote about life in Harlem. Their works about New York’s black ghetto easily found a publisher and an audience. White readers were attracted to what they considered to be a “primitive” “nigger heaven” and black readers wanted to read about life in the black section of New York.²

Most of the criticism about Hurston’s work has focused primarily on her superb use of the African American dialect and folklore to examine various issues of her era. The initial critical emphasis on the way she used language has shifted to the issues that she examines in her work such as gender oppression, Jim Crow and domestic violence. Most of Hurston’s contemporaries focused on the need to end racial discrimination and injustice; Hurston, however, chose to address other issues that were often avoided by fellow writers. In the Introduction to the *Complete Stories* published in 1995 by Harper Perennial, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke state that Hurston’s “anthropological based narratives” and her character sketches like “Mother Catherine” show Hurston to be more interested in “human motivation” than in the “struggle for civil rights” (Gates and Lemke 1995: xi-xii). Hurston made no controversial statements about race matters and only approached the subject in an indirect way due to her dependence on white people who exerted considerable control over her fieldwork, her collection of folklore and on her work in general.

Hurston made a lifelong effort and commitment to preserve and represent African American culture and folklore as it is “with neither apology nor adjust-

¹ None of the Harlem Renaissance “members” were born in Harlem. “Of the leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Hurston and Arna Bontemps were products of the rural South, while Claude McKay and Eric Walrond were migrants from the West Indies. Langston Hughes arrived from small town Kansas, while Wallace Thurman emerged from an equally provincial back ground in Salt Lake City. Jean Toomer and Sterling Brown were raised in Washington, D.C., which in those days was a Southern city, in terms of its restrictive racial code. Rudolph Fisher grew up in Providence, Rhode Island, a provincial New England town. Only Countee Cullen was a native of New York.” (Bone 1975: 111).

² The title of Carl Van Vechten’s novel about Harlem is *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

ment” (Kaplan 2002: 51), but until recently she was only seen as a literary figure who produced literary texts. Lately, Hurston’s work has been studied in a new light – as the work of an anthropologist who collected folklore and produced various ethnographic texts; her role as a playwright still has to be analyzed in full. Her interest in theatrical and musical events concerning the folk suggests that she was aware that the stage was the way to promote and save her people’s cultural heritage.

Before Hurston, other writers had published African American folk forms, like Joel Chandler Harris and his *Uncle Remus Stories*, which white Americans had come to accept as part of American culture. By the 1930s, white Americans had come into contact with various images of blacks through fiction, the theatre and especially musical comedies. Musical comedies like *Porgy and Bess* or *All God’s Chillun* showed that African Americans had a rich storytelling tradition, an enormous sense of humor and a unique way of using language creatively.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Hurston did research on black culture in the South and wrote a number of short stories and some plays. Her first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* did not appear until 1934, *Mules and Men* appeared in 1935 and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her second novel, was published in 1937. Hurston was a controversial writer: to whites she opened a window on an exotic and fascinating way of life, but her black contemporaries attacked her as an opportunist who presented blacks as simple, rural and uncultured.

For Hurston, collecting folklore meant “diving” into all sorts of cultural activities of the community of black people of the South, mainly in her former hometown, Eatonville, in Florida, but also in the neighboring cities and in Louisiana. She danced, sang, heard and told tales and had a good time with the subjects of her research. Hurston claims her home in the South with an uncomplicated pride. Although she returned to New York intermittently during the late 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, she wrote and lived most of her life in her native state. Refusing to “pretty up” or denigrate the reality of lower-class black people’s lives, she gives an accurate portrayal of black people and their community in her work. With Hurston, gone were the days when dialect was associated with “ignorant, illiterate southern darkies” (Wideman in Kaplan. 2001: xvi).

All of Hurston’s novels and work draw upon her deep interest in folklore, particularly the folklore of the South, from her home state of Florida and her hometown Eatonville. According to Deborah G. Plant, “Hurston saw culture – her own culture – as the source of renewed Black national dignity and pride” (Plant 1995: 64). Hurston documents her culture in a way that nobody else

was doing in the twenties and the thirties as she identified with the rich oral culture of the rural black folk at the center of her anthropological and fictional work. Her interest was the rural, southern, illiterate black culture and she devoted a great part of her time and career to collecting, recording, documenting and saving that culture, showing white America how different black America was. In her article “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, Hurston attempts to document the distinctiveness of black culture. As one of the few collectors of black American folklore who have historical importance, the bulk of Hurston’s work on Southern rural communities provides important historical information about the beliefs, values and practices of an essential segment of the African-American population. While Hurston was growing up, the relevance of black culture was being discussed in black intellectual circles and the symbolism of African art was being discovered and called “primitivism.”

Black women critics like Hazel V. Carby have stressed the importance of examining the work of black women writers in their historical and social context. This applies to Hurston, for understanding the context in which she wrote is important to appreciate and comprehend different aspects of her writing and explains the disparities between her early works and her later ones. Writing during the Harlem Renaissance or during the thirties, when she was dependent financially on patrons or intellectually on Franz Boas, influenced her work in a different way than the writing she did during the forties when she was exchanging letters with Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and suffering setbacks in her private and professional life.

Major figures in the field of anthropology would have a great impact on Hurston’s view of life during her time at Barnard College in New York, but most relevantly, Franz Boas. This would influence her career as an anthropologist, folklore collector and writer. Part I of this work, entitled “Formalized Curiosity: Hurston and Black Folklore”, will refer to anthropologists and folklore collectors whose work influenced Hurston and who were relevant to the period during which she undertook her research trips to collect folklore and published folklore-related works. Her folklore works, including plays, essays and folklore collections and her participation in the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) will also be discussed in this section.¹

¹ The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was an ambitious New Deal Program created during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The WPA put the almost nine million jobless to work, building or repairing bridges, roads, highways and parks and creating murals, state guidebooks and undertaking folklore surveys among other things. On July 1, 1939, the name of the organization was changed to Works Projects Administration.

The Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was one of the five projects of the Works Progress

“The Eatonville Anthology” and *Mules and Men* can be considered key texts to understand all of Hurston’s writings: in both we find a representation of language and verbal art, of the folklore as well as a study of the social relations in African American communities of the 1920s and 1930s. These texts are valuable resources regarding the verbal art, the folktales, the customs and the history of African Americans. Hurston used the same material repeatedly in her work, as can be seen from a comparison of “The Eatonville Anthology” with her later works. Her childhood in Eatonville and the research she undertook in the South between 1927 and 1932 provided material that was expanded, reused and retold throughout her life, but especially in the twenties, thirties and forties. In *Mules and Men* Hurston shows that she was an insider to the culture, but that she can also have an outside view as an anthropologist.

In the Autumn of 1935 she joined the WPA Federal Theater Project and stayed for 6 months.¹ While working with the Project, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to collect folklore in the West Indies. By April 1936 she was in the Caribbean, collecting material for her second book of folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938). She stopped in Haiti and Kingston, Jamaica, proposing to make an exhaustive study of voodoo practices. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston’s book based on her folklore researching trip to the Caribbean, she makes a historical analysis of social inequalities regarding class, color and gender, and gives insider accounts of religious practices, interpreting the Voodoo beliefs and ceremonies in Haiti.²

Hurston’s frequent violation of “conventional” public behavior, such as smoking in public and openly speaking her mind, accounts for the way her public self was often denigrated. The “Roaring Twenties” was an era associated with jazz, improvisation and the wave of primitivism, but it was still a decade dominated by social and behavioural conventions, especially in regard to black women. Part II of this work, “Lying Sessions”: Folklore as Fiction” analyses the way Hurston used folklore to write fiction, fusing folklore with fiction, namely in the short stories, in the novels and in her autobiography.

In the 1950s, Hurston was practically ignored. She did not produce any major work. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., “the dark obscurity into

Administration (WPA). It began in 1935 to provide jobs for thousands of unemployed writers and anyone who could qualify as a writer. The WPA and the FWP will be discussed further in Part I, Chapter 4, of this work.

¹ The Federal Theater Project was another project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

² *Tell My Horse* was published with the subtitle *Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* and also with the subtitle *Voodoo Gods, An Inquiry*.

which her career then lapsed reflects her staunchly independent political stances rather than any deficiency of craft or vision” (Gates in Hurston 1990 [1935]: 288). Thirty years ago, Hurston’s work was largely out of print and her literary legacy alive only due to a handful of devoted readers. After the “rediscovery” by Alice Walker, and the publishing of her biography by Robert Hemenway, the revival of literary interest has been especially through her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but Hurston’s remaining work continued to suffer from the lack of scholarly interest.¹ Even today, *Tell My Horse*, *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* are works that are generally overlooked. A slow recuperation is now under way for the less known works, as scholars and critics make efforts to promote Hurston’s oeuvre and establish links between contemporary black (women) writers and Hurston’s legacy. Hurston’s work disappeared between the mid 1940s and the late 1970s and her posthumous literary resurrection in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a major American writer was partly as a result of the search of black women writers for a literary matrilineage that brought her to literary centre stage and eventually turned her into the canonical black foremother of contemporary black women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many others.

Since the 1970s, the writings of black women writers show Hurston’s impact – appealing to a wide audience that includes blacks and whites, women and men. Zora Neale Hurston’s work is now being sought out, republished and acclaimed, and there are various contemporary fiction writers branded by Hurston’s legacy. The fact that there are now many more black women scholars like Angela Davis, Hazel V. Carby and Paula Giddings analyzing and criticizing the work of black women writers has also largely contributed to the popularity and assessment of that work. Hazel Carby, for instance, acknowledges that her work “*Reconstructing Womanhood* embodies a feminist critical practice that pays particular attention to the articulation of gender, race, and class” (Carby 1987: 17). Carby indicates that woman novelists and writers of female slave narratives worked hard to erode the frontier between the feminine and the masculine, a frontier that should be acknowledged but not undermined by mere considerations of gender. Hurston is as much part of the history as all those artists that laid the foundation for a truly genial culture. In Ralph Ellison’s words:

The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded

¹ Robert Hemenway. *Zora Neale Hurston. A Literary Biography*. (1977). Robert Hemenway wrote Hurston’s first literary biography.

it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere. We can view it narrowly as something exotic, folksy or "low-down," or we may identify ourselves with it and recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience – not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture (Ellison 1964 [1953]: 172).

Hurston's work portrays the "exotic, folksy or 'low-down'", conveying an important part of the American of her time and beyond.

**Part I – “Formalized Curiosity”:
Hurston and Black Folklore**

Chapter 1

“Putting down roots”: Folklore and Culture

Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use.

Zora Neale Hurston

The correct way to look at African American culture is to consider it in the context of the whole of American culture, since it cannot be separately evaluated or understood. The African American has an unusual historical experience and occupies a peculiar position in American society. Enslaved, oppressed and segregated, the American Negro survived by having a distinct folk life and by preserving a culture which was created by the painful black experience in America and which expressed the spirit of the African American people.

The word folklore is a composite of “folk” which means “people” and “lore” which means “knowledge,” therefore the knowledge of the people. Levette J. Davidson defines folklore as “the popular heritage of a group held together by common interests. It includes legends, tales, songs, beliefs, homely wisdom, common ways of speaking, jests, games, festivals, music, dances, customs, crafts, folk arts, etc.” (Davidson 1969 [1951]: 1). Alan Dundes regards

folklore [as] distinguishable from so-called high or elite culture and from popular culture on a number of grounds [...]. In contrast, folklore is always in flux, always changing. Because of the factors of multiple existence and variation, no two versions of an item of folklore will be identical (Dundes 1990: 2).

Dundes focuses on the “multiple existence and variation” as “defining criteria of folklore” (Dundes 1999: 2-5). In the introductory essay to *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, Alan Dundes refers to the “ambivalent attitudes toward folklore [...] found among American Negroes” and also to the difficult

relationship between folklore and race pride” (Dundes 1999: 2).

Folk tradition is not just materials: a body of texts, beliefs, songs, stories. It involves behavior – performed interpretations of the world that influence action. Folklore functions to define an African American cultural identity. The use of expressive forms of African American folklore such as tales, legends, and songs has offered ways to question the content of what was claimed to be truth and to challenge the process of arriving at that truth. Folk magic represented continuity with Africa and provided the needed spiritual reference for the formation of cultural identity. Folklore was recognized as the site of cultural memory and a vast repository for creative expression.

Discussing Toni Morrison’s use of folklore, Trudier Harris writes:

She creates what I refer to as literary folklore. By “literary” I do not mean to pursue the argument developed by some folklorists that folklore is no longer folklore by the mere fact of its appearance in literature, that it ceases to be folklore because it has been lifted from the oral culture and is now in a static, objectified, nondynamic form. Since folklore can be recorded and collected, “written down,” so to speak, without violating its authenticity, I maintain that it can also be incorporated into literary texts without compromising its original quality (Harris 1991:7).

During the 1920s and 1930s there was a white fascination with the folkways of black Americans, but there were few African Americans trained as folklorists in the twenties, and few of those who documented black speech were themselves black.¹ African American writers who chose to reproduce the black dialect confronted an old myth: that the way the blacks spoke English reflected deficient intellectual capacities, a comic spelling and the lack of proper grammar. To recreate black dialect/speech black authors could perpetuate assumptions about black inferiority. They also had to face the misconception that the black American cultural heritage derived from white culture and that

¹ There are few critical studies or books that focus on the research and work of African American anthropologists and folklore collectors. *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology* edited by Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison in 1998 focuses on the careers of thirteen African-American anthropologists and is thus an important contribution to the field of African American studies and folklore, as it brings to public attention the almost ignored presence of African American anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Huff Fauset and Lawrence Foster, among others. African Americans writers also made important contributions to the field of African American folklore. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps edited *The Book of Negro Folklore* in 1958 which included Hurston’s “High John de Conquer”. James Weldon Johnson edited *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) and *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926), important volumes in the preservation of African American folklore.

the African roots were entirely lost and, therefore, lacked originality.

Hurston was against the nineteenth century “popular notion of the Negro as an inferior, superstitious, half-ignorant and servile class of folk”.¹ For her, “dialect as a sign of African American cultural strength. Dialect [...] is both a salvaged speech that pays tribute to those who have gone before and an index of what has been kept alive in the evolving cultural memory of song, folktale, and everyday language.” (Sundquist 1993: 305)

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, first published in Nancy Cunard’s anthology *Negro* in 1934, Hurston discusses “Originality,” “Dialect,” “Negro Folklore” and “Imitation” among many other features of the Negro. She refutes the idea that black expression was imitative: “every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. [...] Everything is acted out” (CNE 830). We learn that the Negro’s “interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures” and that “the will to adorn” of the Negro has done “wonders to the English language” (CNE 830-1). Gates argues that “for Hurston, the distinction between originality and imitation is a false distinction” (Gates 1988: 118). Hurston considers that “originality is the modification of ideas,” by which she means “re-interpretation”:

The Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country (CNE 838).

The same re-interpretation is pointed out by Eric J. Sundquist who asserts that “dialect might be the linguistic tool best able to show that the bondage of language can also be liberating” (Sundquist 1993: 306). Regarding Negro dialect, this author argues that it “was frequently defined by its highly ‘poetic’ style, a two edged characterization that usually indicated natural spontaneity on the one hand, and the lack of civilized traits of order and control on the other.” (Sundquist 1993: 305-6)

Various writers and critics have reflected upon the specificity of the cultural phenomenon in the United States. In 1997, Alice Walker, one of the most prolific contemporary American women writers, wrote her reflections regarding culture:

¹ William Stanley Braithwaite, “The Negro in American Literature”. Reprinted in Wintz 1996d: 15. Braithwaite analyses the development in the ways that white writers saw the Negro and makes “a survey [of] the achievement of Negro authorship.”

I thought, sitting there, of the word ‘culture.’ And because I am a gardener and grew up under the teachings of my mother, a gardener, and my father, a farmer, I considered what it means literally, in terms of health and growth. ‘Culture’ is something in which one should thrive, the body and spirit simultaneously. But in the United States of America, for so many of our people, that is not happening. Instead, like plants whose roots are sunk in poisonous soil, we find ourselves producing generation after generation of blighted fruit. And why is this? It is because the dominant culture, whose values are designed to encourage the full development of the white and the male only, and not even of the disadvantaged in those categories, leaves the rest of us unsupported, except in ways that are frequently injurious to us. It is also because many of us have forgotten or can no longer recognize our own culture at its healthiest. We no longer know that *it* is the soil we need in order to survive, in order to thrive.¹ (Walker 1997: 50).

Years before Alice Walker expressed her opinion, Nathan Irvin Huggins, a well known historian of the Harlem Renaissance, notes that during the New Negro period “it was argued” that

the Negroes’ importance to American culture [...] was that he provided its only genuine folk tradition. From the Afro-Americans had come a rich and complex folklore and music which was the most distinctively American contribution to world culture. While the Negro had been denied by both whites and sophisticated blacks, he was unconsciously pouring out, in his own entertainment and for his own soul’s needs, the raw folk materials upon which any American music or literature would have to rest (Huggins 1971: 72-3).

Hurston’s work shows that African American “genuine folk tradition” makes the difference. The experience of African Americans in the United States is different from that of whites and that difference is reflected in the literary texts, in spite of the similarities that exist between literature written by whites and that written by blacks. The problems that black writers had to face in the early twentieth century were related to the racial experience in the United States. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance was fecund in themes like race and race consciousness, but white writers of the period ignored these issues and were only interested in the “primitivism” of black culture.²

A good illustration is offered by John Edward Philips who analyzes the impact of African culture on whites in his essay “The American Heritage of White

¹ Alice Walker, “The Sound of Our Culture” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*.

² This is a central issue in Ralph Ellison’s classic essay “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”.

America” (Philips 1990: 225-239). Philips makes reference to an article “still unique in the literature” written by Melville Herskovits in 1935 and published in *New Republic* entitled “What Has Africa Given America.” What makes the Herskovits article “unique” is the fact that there are few studies focussing on the influence of African culture on white America. References to the influence of African culture on America usually make “America” synonymous with “African Americans.” Philips states that there are areas where cultural influence can distinctly be found such as in music, southern dialect speech, the etiquette of the South, Southern cuisine and religious behaviour. He concludes that there is evidence of “mutual influence”, and that “whites could benefit culturally from interaction with blacks” and *vice versa* (Philips 1990: 236).

Chapter 2

“Poking and Prying with a Purpose”: Folklore Collectors and Anthropologists

Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries.

Zora Neale Hurston

At the time of Zora Neale Hurston’s first folklore collecting expedition to the South, namely to Florida, that took place in 1927, not a single folklore department existed in American Universities, and collections of African American folklore by black collectors were practically nonexistent.

Lawrence W. Levine points out in his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, that contemporary historians of black folklore had to deal with the “censorship” of folklore collectors like Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson who “failed to publish ‘a great mass’ of their material ‘because of its vulgar and indecent content’ and that many of the songs they did print ‘have been shortened by the omission of stanzas unfit for publication’” (Levine 1977: 12). The material considered obscene was not published and, in most cases, was also not preserved, preventing examination or study by possible future students.

“Censorship” was not exclusive to folklore collectors. Hurston refers to it indirectly when she declared her first folklore-collecting trip unproductive. White folklore collectors also had to face the censorship of African Americans who were selective and careful when providing material to the collectors, white or black. The black folk altered the stories, deleted parts, changed the endings and selected the stories or songs that were “fittin’ fo’ a nice lady to write down.” These attitudes go back to slavery times when slaves were not allowed varied forms of expression and used music as a deceiving device,

singing songs incomprehensible to white listeners while commenting on the whites around them, demonstrating that whites had no control over their minds:

Got one mind for white folks to see,
'Nother for what I know is me;
He don't know, he don't know my mind.

White collectors faced the problem of being considered “outsiders looking in” while collecting black folklore because they found it difficult to penetrate the Negro World. In a letter to Locke dated June 14, 1928,¹ Hurston explains that she “wrote a short criticism of ‘Negro Workaday Songs’ to ‘Godmother’ in which she stated that “white people could not be trusted to collect the lore of others.” These thoughts were shared with friends in letters she wrote to Hughes and others, but never uttered in public. Hurston expresses concern that whites would appropriate and exploit black materials. “It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick – my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us.”²

When Zora Neale Hurston entered Barnard College in New York, as has already been mentioned, she came under the influence of anthropologists Franz Boas, Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Gladys Reichard. Hurston states in her autobiography that as a student at Barnard she “began to treasure up the words of Dr. Reichard, Dr. Ruth Benedict, and Dr. Boas, the king of kings” (DT 683).

Franz Boas, a German-American anthropologist, who dominated American anthropology, taught and inspired a generation of anthropologists, notably Margaret Mead, Melville J. Herskovits and Ruth Benedict.³ Hurston studied under the tutelage of Franz Boas at Barnard College and later continued her studies with him at Columbia University. Hurston’s association with Boas was partly responsible for her trip to her hometown of Eatonville in 1927 to do formal folklore research. Franz Boas became Hurston’s mentor and with him she learned to appreciate the cultural wealth of her community; the correspondence between the two evidences a formal but almost affectionate relationship and Hurston is said to have addressed him informally as “Papa Franz” (Boyd 2003: 115).

¹ Manuscript Division, The Moorland – Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington D.C. (Alain Locke Papers); Hurston to Locke, June 14, 1928. (Hurston 2002: 120).

² Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 20, 1928. (Hurston 2002: 126).

³ Frans Boas was a German-Jewish immigrant. He insisted that such factors as culture and learning and even diet have as much influence on human development as heredity.

Hurston's research was made possible through the sponsorship of a patron, a figure very common among writers and artists of the twenties.¹ Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy, eccentric, white, Park Avenue woman who supported Indian Arts and African American Arts, met Hurston in September 1927, probably through Alain Locke, who helped Mrs. Mason "discover" the writers or artists she wanted to support. She had been fascinated with the American Indian² and was enchanted with the "primitives."³ Immediately impressed with Hurston and convinced of her abilities to record and thus help to preserve African American folklore and culture, Mrs. Mason offered to subsidize Hurston's research trips to the South to collect folklore. An agreement was drawn up, witnessed, signed and notarized between Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason and Zora Neale Hurston on December 1, 1927.⁴ Mrs. Mason literally became the owner of Hurston's material and wanted her to express only the "primitivism" of black culture.⁵ Hurston had to "faithfully [...] perform her task [...] and not to make known to any other person except one designated in writing by said first party, any of said data or information."⁶ Mrs. Mason, who insisted upon being called "godmother", also supported Alain Locke, Langston Hughes⁷, Miguel Covarrubias, Claude McKay, Aaron Douglas, Louise Thompson and Richmond Barthé, who were encouraged to reveal and express their "primitivism". Mrs. Mason required strict obedience; most of them complied, but Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson eventually found the part too unbearable and broke away. Hurston, however, was able to play the primitive for several years.⁸ During the

¹ For further information on the patronage system in the twenties and during the Harlem Renaissance, see Story 1989: 284-295 and Kellner in Kramer 1987: 93-106.

² According to Hurston, Mrs. Mason "had lived for years among the Plains Indians and had collected a beautiful book of Indian lore" (DT 688).

³ Term used to refer to African Americans in the 1920s. This can be confirmed by reading Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1993 [1940]: 316).

⁴ Howard University, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-99, Folder 4.

⁵ As stated in the Agreement signed between Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason and Zora Neale Hurston: Hurston had to "to seek out, compile and collect all information possible, both written and oral, concerning the music, poetry, folk-lore, literature, hoodoo, conjure manifestations of art and kindred subjects relating to and existing among the North American Negroes, and to prosecute her search for said matters at the homes or gathering places of said negroes in the Southern tier of states of the USA." HUAL.

⁶ Agreement signed between Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason and Zora Neale Hurston, HUAL.

⁷ Hughes discusses his relationship with Mrs. Mason in the chapters "Patron and Friend" and "Not Primitive" of his autobiography, *The Big Sea*.

⁸ The contract lasted from December 1927 to March 1931, but Mason continued to

contract with Mrs. Mason, Hurston tried her best to live up to the expectations and terms of the agreement, but in-between she began to doubt her abilities as a writer and even proposed opening up a chicken business to supply “an exclusive mouth-to-mouth chicken specialist service” to the people of New York.¹ If she earned her keep, then she would “cease to be a problem.”

Initially Hurston was not allowed to reveal the name of her patron to anyone. The relationship between the two women was mainly conducted through letters. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston states that “there was and is a psychic bond between [them].” Hurston only visited Mrs. Mason when previously authorized by her. In the letters that she wrote to Mason, Hurston almost always referred to the work that she was doing, addressing Mason as “dearest Godmother,” “little mother of the primitive world,” and “the immaculate conception.”² Due to the contract signed between the two, Mrs. Osgood Mason owned the material collected by Hurston during the research trips financed by her and Hurston felt obliged to ask “the mother of primitives” for permission every time she wanted to show someone pieces of the material collected by her.³ Mrs. Mason encouraged a childlike dependency from those who benefited from her patronage, demanding loyalty and obedience, in exchange for financial support.

Hurston met Franz Boas and studied with him at Barnard College in New York, as has been mentioned before. One can see how important Boas became to Hurston by reading *Dust Tracks on a Road*. She refers to him as “the greatest anthropologist alive”, “king of kings” and “Papa Franz.” Boas introduced her to field research, encouraged her fieldwork, and directed her early collecting trips, recognizing the advantage of having a black researcher collecting black folklore in the South. Her tutelage under Boas shaped the research and sociological perspectives that gave her fiction its voices. During her first trip to the South, Franz Boas expressed dissatisfaction with Hurston’s reporting and collecting; he found it repetitive and encouraged her to be more “original” in her collecting.

Boas had control over her fieldwork, treated her as an aid or informant, and pressed Hurston to accept his interpretation of her material. In the letters referring to the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston does not assert her views directly, but postures as a disciple requesting permission to express her

support Hurston until the Autumn of 1932.

¹ Hurston-Mason correspondence, HUAL.

² The financial arrangement between Hurston and Mason almost reduced Hurston to “begging,” as can be seen in the letter dated April 27, 1931, in which Hurston asks for a pair of shoes.

³ Hurston to Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, October 15, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 231-235).

own conclusions. She is aware of Boas's power, but does not submit to it. In a letter written to Boas on March 29, 1927, Hurston expressed her concern for the future of African American culture: "His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture" (LL 97).

Hurston "was extremely proud that Papa Franz" trusted her "to go and do research in folk-lore" (DT 687). Boas encouraged Hurston to collect African American folklore because as a member of the community she could do much more than an outsider, especially a white outsider:

Miss Hurston [...] 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.¹

The correspondence between Franz Boas and Hurston shows that he interfered in her fieldwork, by telling her what to do in her research and also because he had the power to validate or dismiss the result of her research. In the letters between the two, Hurston appears to be asking permission before she states her conclusions.² She needed Boas to write the introduction to *Mules and Men*, as his approval would contribute largely towards the acceptance of her work. In a letter to Boas, Hurston justifies her mode of presentation in *Mules and Men* as being related to the publishing process:

Mr Lippincott [...] wants a very readable book that the average reader can understand, at the same time one that will have value as a reference book. I have inserted the between-story conversations and business because when I offered it without it, every publisher said it was too monotonous. Now three houses want to publish it. So I hope that the unscientific matter that must be there for the sake of the average reader will not keep you from writing the introduction.³

In letters to Franz Boas, Hurston insisted upon her scientific exactness. "Tried to be as exact as possible" and "keep to the exact dialect" were expressions that appeared in her letters. She told Langston Hughes that she only tampered with the material when the stories were unclear. Writing to Langston Hughes, Hurston expressed her wish to present authentic African American

¹ Boas in "Forward" to *Mules and Mules*, 3.

² Hurston to Franz Boas, April 21, 1929. (Hurston 2002: 137-138).

³ Hurston to Franz Boas, August 20, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 308).

folklore collected and presented without being tampered with, but this dream proved difficult to fulfil. ¹ It was only in 1935 that her first folklore volume, *Mules and Men*, was published. To make this collection of folklore accessible to all readers, Hurston had to interfere with the “story material.” The published version of *Mules and Men* presents Hurston as a participant observer, showing how she collected and how she participated in the life of the communities where she did her research to be able to collect the authentic folklore to give “a valuable picture of the life of the unsophisticated Negro in the small towns and backwoods of Florida.”²

Franz Boas played an important role in Hurston’s life and career, but there were others who were also important and influenced her work and in whom she confided. Robert Hemenway mentions that Franz Boas had an important impact on her training as a professional anthropologist and folklorist. As to the importance of Ruth Benedict in her life and career, Robert Hemenway observes that “as she came under the influence of Ruth Benedict, Gladys Reichard, and Franz Boas of Columbia’s anthropology department, her image of herself as a writer dimmed” (Hemenway 1977: 63). As to Melville J. Herskovits, very little is said about the work relationship with Hurston, which, according to Hurston’s letters, seemed to be quite important to her. The letters suggest that her interests in African American culture and in Jamaican and Haitian culture were shared with Herskovits. Herskovits wrote *Life in a Haitian Village* in 1936 – the book was published before Hurston undertook her research in the Caribbean and might have influenced her.

Ruth Benedict’s influence on Hurston is rarely recognized, but according to Gwendolyn Mikell, Benedict significantly influenced Hurston’s research on both African American and Caribbean culture (Mikell 1983: 27-35) The role that Benedict played in Hurston’s life has been overshadowed by the importance given to Franz Boas’s influence on Hurston and apparently on all his students. Hurston states in her autobiography that while a student at Barnard she “began to treasure up the words of Dr. Reichard, Dr. Ruth Benedict, and Dr. Boas” (DT 683). In a letter to Franz Boas in 1934, Hurston requests that he write the Introduction to *Mules and Men* and she also says that she “want[s] Dr. [Ruth] Benedict to read the Ms. and offer suggestions. Sort of edit it you know.”³ Hurston confided in and respected Benedict. Hurston’s letters to Benedict con-

¹ Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 30, 1929. (Hurston 2002: 138-140).

² Henry Lee Moon, Review of *Mules and Men*, *The New Republic*, Dec 11, 1935. (Moon in Gates and Appiah 1993: 10).

³ Hurston to Franz Boas, August 20, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 308-9).

tinue until 1947, the year prior to Benedict's death in 1948. Ruth Benedict took classes at The New School for Social Research and then studied at Columbia where she obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1923. Afterwards she taught anthropology at Barnard College, and became an assistant professor to Boas in 1931 and, in 1937, was appointed acting executive director of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University in New York. Benedict's experience with the Southwest Zuni Pueblo Indians is considered her formative fieldwork, but she researched and published widely. One might argue that Benedict's study of the Southwest Zuni Pueblo Indians could have exerted influence on Hurston's work, for as it is known both Native Americans and African Americans rely on storytelling as a strategy that helped bring into focus their respective cultural heritages.

In Melville J. Herskovits's case, also a student of Franz Boas and one of the most prominent personalities of American anthropology, it makes sense to acknowledge an influence of a different kind. During her stay at Barnard, Hurston studied Anthropometry¹ with Herskovits. He asked Hurston to measure the skulls of African Americans in Harlem. These measurements were then used to dispute ideas of racial inferiority. According to Robert Hemenway, Hurston would "take a pair of calipers and stand on a Harlem street corner measuring people's skulls" (Hemenway 1977: 63). In Hurston's letters to Herskovits there is always a wish to work with him as he is the "authority" on the American Negro.² During the twenties and the thirties there were various Anthropologists studying the American Indian³, but none, with the exception of Herskovits, were studying the Negro. Herskovits did research in Africa and among African Americans and in his book entitled *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), he argues that African culture persisted in the United States through slavery and differentiates African American culture from American culture of European origin. Herskovits's landmark argument in favor of the African origins of black American culture, presented in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, is backed by studies by J. Mason Brewer and Alan Dundes, but opposed by the work of Richard Dorson and others who argue that most of the African American tales derive from European or Asian traditions.⁴

Another renowned anthropologist studying at Barnard College and

¹ Human body measurements used in anthropological classification and comparison. See letter Hurston to Annie Nathan Meyer, Spring 1926? (Hurston 2002: 82).

² Hurston to Melville Herskovits, April 15, 1936. (Hurston 2002: 372).

³ Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and Elsie Clews Parsons, among others.

⁴ Later on in this chapter it will be shown that Joel Chandler Harris asserted the African origins of his animal tales and that Charles W. Chesnutt also supports this theory.

Columbia University was Margaret Mead. There she came under the influence of Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas, but there was apparently no contact between Mead and Hurston. Mead did extensive research in Samoa, New Guinea and Bali, mainly on child rearing. She pioneered the use of photography in anthropological research and published numerous books and articles, in areas which, however, bear little impact on Hurston's own research.

A different story is the relationship of Hurston with Otto Klineberg. They met through Boas when Otto Klineberg was researching the "mental characteristics" of ethnic groups. According to Boas, Klineberg was interested in the "special" musical ability of black people and needed Hurston's help in finding black communities in the South, especially in the New Orleans area where music and singing seemed to be a way of life. Due to the contract that Hurston had signed with Mrs. Osgood Mason, she was unable to assist Klineberg directly and could only help unofficially, by sending him a list of informants, but she also suggested sources and research subjects.¹

The anthropologist Jane Belo worked with Hurston in 1940 on a project collecting material on unusual religious practices in South Carolina and filming religious trances in the "sanctified" churches.² Belo was interested in Bali and particularly in Balinese religious ceremonies. Among Belo's publications are *Trance in Bali* and the book she edited, *Traditional Balinese Culture*, Hurston and Belo remained friends and correspondents for years. Hurston's letters to Belo in the late thirties and early forties are written in exuberant language, reflecting the deepness of their friendship.³

Before Hurston began her research of Negro folklore, Joel Chandler Harris attempted to record traditional black stories of his time in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880).⁴ The book presents Uncle Remus, a black rustic figure, a former slave, still faithful, who testifies to his love of the old days and shows a lack of desire for equal social rights. Uncle Remus, "an old time Negro," tells his folk stories and animal tales night after night to a little white boy, son

¹ Hurston to Otto Klineberg, October 22, 1929 and Hurston to Franz Boas, October 1929. (Hurston 2002: 151-152).

² Hurston's essay about the sanctified churches will be discussed further on in this work.

³ See, for example, Hurston to Jane Belo, December 3, 1938. (Hurston 2002: 416-417).

⁴ Originally published New York: D. Appleton, 1880. The Edition used in this work is Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*. Ed. Robert Hemenway. (1986). *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* is considered Harris's most important work – without it he would be a relatively unknown figure in American literary history. His works include *Nights with Uncle Remus*, *Daddy Jake, the Runaway*, *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit* (1907), *Told by Uncle Remus*, *Uncle Remus and the Little Boy* (1910), *Uncle Remus Returns* (1918) and *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* (1948).

of the plantation owner. Harris stated that the intention of his book “is perfectly serious” “not one tale nor any part of one is an invention of mine ... It may be said that each legend comes fresh and direct from the Negroes” (Harris 1986: 17). Harris befriended two slaves while learning the printer’s trade on Joseph Turner’s plantation.¹ The two slaves, “Uncle” George Terrell and “Old” Harbert, shared their repertoire of folktales with young Harris. In his Introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, Harris emphasizes that his “purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity” and insists that the language is “phonetically genuine.” When there was more than one version of each legend, he chose the “version which seemed to [him] to be the most characteristic” (Harris 1986: 39). Harris was known to use different and original techniques in his trips to collect black folk stories. He would paint his face black and learn black folk stories to be accepted as a participant in the storytelling sessions. This is also referred to in the Introduction to his work:

Curiously enough, I have found few Negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folk-lore included in this volume (Harris 1986: 45).

Harris’s use of dialect was fairly accurate and authentic, revealing his investment in the Uncle Remus character. Harris, a very shy man, apparently lost his shyness in the presence of black people during the storytelling sessions in which he participated, swapping stories and sharing the language. Even though he spent time and effort verifying the authenticity of the tales he collected and did not tamper with the stories in any significant way, critics insist that a white perspective taints Harris’s stories in Uncle Remus.

It is interesting to compare Harris and Hurston’s transcriptions of folklore with that of Newbell Niles Puckett, one of the early collectors of African American folklore, who published *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* in 1926.² He spent many years studying American Negro folklore, especially superstitions. Most of his information about hoodoo was collected while he pretended to be a hoodoo doctor. He associated blacks with humor, laziness and sexuality, and appears to associate folklore with the past and to identify the “folk” with the rural illiterate. White collectors like Newbell Niles Puckett and

¹ Turner published *The Countryman*, printed at his plantation “Turnwold”, situated in Putnam County.

² This work was his Yale University doctoral dissertation.

Harry Hyatt, author of the five-volume study, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft, and Rootwork* (1970), tended to regard conjure and hoodoo as “bizarre superstition and exotic folk custom” and to see the hoodoo man as a fraud, easy to expose by any rational individual (Billingslea-Brown 1999: 25). Puckett spent many years studying African American folklore, especially superstitions.

The same type of short sightedness applies to two of the most prominent collectors of the twenties, Guy B. Johnson and Howard W. Odum, authors of *The Negro and His Songs* (1926) and *Negro Workday Songs* (1926), who were unable to penetrate the “real Negro” experience. Guy B. Johnson, a social science researcher, began studying African American culture, including folk music and dialect, in the 1920s. His publication, *The Folk Culture of St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930) was the result of his research during the 1920s on St. Helena Island. During his stay there to collect tales, Johnson concluded that Negro children knew the tales and told them with skill, while older Negroes were reticent to tell the tales in front of outsiders. During the 1930s and 1940s his work focused, among other things, on African American folksongs and folklore, the John Henry legend, the folklore and language (Gullah) of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, and the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County.

According to Robert Hemenway, Hurston’s research in the late twenties “[exposed] the shallow inaccuracy of” Odum and Johnson, two white anthropologists (Hemenway 1977: 128). In a letter to Franz Boas, she comments on Odum and Johnson’s work saying that she had

been following the works of Odum and Johnson closely and [found] that they could hardly be less exact. They have made six or seven songs out of one song and made one song out of six or seven. There are instances of English ballads being mistaken for Negro songs. They have distorted by tearing segments from a whole and bloating the bit out of all proportion.¹

She doubted whether they were “serious scientists,” as, in her opinion, they presented inauthentic versions of folklore. In a letter to Alain Locke in 1928 she refers to *The Negro and His Songs* as “not so stupendous as the critics make out,” describing it as “inaccurate” and “misinformed.”² Commenting on the other work by the same authors, *Negro Workaday Songs*, she states in another letter to Alain Locke that “they evidently know nothing of the how folk-songs grow” and exemplifies her point of view.³ The difficulty of recording African

¹ Hurston to Franz Boas, October 20, 1929. (Hurston 2002: 150-151).

² Hurston to Alain Locke, May 1, 1928. (Hurston 2002: 118).

³ Hurston to Alain Locke, May 10, 1928. (Hurston 2002:118-120).

American dialect was pointed out by Odum and Johnson in their collection of black folk song. Howard W. Odum was the author of numerous widely respected scholarly articles and books on black folklore, and also published “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes.”¹

A very different approach to those of white male anthropologists is provided by Elsie Clews Parsons. She was a well-known sociologist and anthropologist of the first half of the twentieth century whose main interest was the Pueblo Indian culture of the American Southwest. Her tireless research on this subject lasted from the 1910s until her death in 1941, culminating in two volumes of *Pueblo Indian Religion* published in 1939. But Parsons also made extensive contributions to African American folklore, which include the 1917 collection of “Tales from Guilford County, North Carolina”, “Folklore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina” (1923), “Folklore of the Cape Verde Islanders” (1921) and “Ten Folk Tales from the Cape Verde Islands” (1917)². In her research in the South Carolina Sea Islands in 1919, Parsons found stories of slave magic deeply embedded in the oral tradition and considered the tales to be of “undoubted African provenience” (Levine 1979: 94). Like Guy B. Johnson, she also stated that the best informants were school children. She was well aware of the difficulties the folklorist faced when writing down the tales and lamented that “the characteristic emphasis of Negro tales, the drawl, and the tricks of speeding up, are difficult to indicate on paper” (Levine 1979: 89).

Like Parsons, Hurston did a good deal of field research. She worked with John Lomax and Alan Lomax, who were known for traveling the South researching, recording and collecting blues, folk songs, work songs and ballads, and contributing to the preservation of America’s rich musical heritage. During the thirties, John and Alan Lomax toured Texas prison farms recording work songs, ballads and blues from prisoners in the hope of finding material “untouched” by the modern world. The Lomaxes sought to record traditional songs and ballads that they saw as being endangered by the influence of the radio and by record players.

As the Federal Writers’ Project first folklore editor in 1936, John Lomax directed the gathering of narratives of former slaves. His involvement with the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration brought him into contact with writers in the field who introduced him to various performers

¹ *Journal of American Folklore*, 24, 1911. Another of his works that is not related to folklore is *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (1910).

² “Tales from Guilford County, North Carolina” (*Journal of American Folklore*, 30, 1917), “Folklore of the Cape Verde Islanders” (*Journal of American Folklore*, 34, 1921) and “Ten Folk Tales from the Cape Verde Islands” (*Journal of American Folklore*, 30, 1917).

important to his own research and to the collecting of old songs. The materials in the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. reflect his effort to document cultural traditions before they disappeared. Hurston collaborated with Alan Lomax in the research into southern black folklore by drawing up lists of informants and structuring questions to elicit the information. She went on a folklore collecting expedition with Alan Lomax and Mary Barnicle in 1935, mainly to record folk music for the Library of Congress. Her ability to win over the locals was emphasized by Alan Lomax. As he commented, she “talks their language and can out-nigger any of them” When John Lomax died, Alan Lomax continued his father’s work, recording and collecting blue and folk songs for the Library of Congress.¹ Alan Lomax’s main interest has remained the recording and documenting of folk music throughout the United States. Hurston, in her turn, criticizes Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, the anthropologist, for trying to influence Alan Lomax and because “she [was] trying to build herself a reputation as a folklorist thru the name of Lomax.”²

For various reasons black folklorists were scarce. J. Mason Brewer, Arthur Huff and Zora Neale Hurston were the only black scholars with professional training in the field of folklore, and Hurston was the only black woman folklorist doing fieldwork and collecting folklore.³ J. Mason Brewer was an African American folklorist from Texas and a contemporary of Hurston. Due to his extensive fieldwork and collecting, African American folklore evolved to new levels of maturity and complexity during the first half of the twentieth century. Brewer was responsible for the largest body of African American folktales ever documented, and like Zora Neale Hurston, he used black dialect unique to each region of study. His fieldwork took him all over the South, collecting folktales, “sayings,” proverbs and songs that would become indispensable to the survival of African American folklore. He published several volumes on African American folklore including *The Word on the Brazos: Negro Preacher Tales from the Brazos Bottoms of Texas* (1953), *Dog Ghosts and Other Texas Negro Folk Tales* (1958), *Worse Days and Better Times: The Folklore of the*

¹ The most famous archive of folklore in the United States is probably the Folklore Section of the Library of Congress.

² Hurston to John Lomax, Sept 16, 1935. (Hurston 2002: 359).

³ Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison edited *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology*, a work that “recovers some of the excluded voices of anthropologists whose scholarship has been hidden in the closet”. In the Introduction to *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology*, Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison give a list (17) of the African-American anthropologists who trained after World War I. According to them the list contains the majority of the “pioneers” in the field (1999: 21).

North Carolina Negro (1965) and *Humorous Folk Tales of the South Carolina Negro* (1945).

It should be pointed out that Levette J. Davidson in *A Guide to American Folklore*, a work that “concentrates upon the folklore of the English-speaking people of the United States” (Davidson 1969: 116-126, viii), includes an Appendix entitled “American Folklore Specialist, 1950 (an incomplete reference list)”. In “Negro Folklore,” one of the sections of the Appendix, Davidson mentions Melville J. Herskovits, J. Mason Brewer and Sterling Brown as the specialists on Negro culture, Negro anecdotes and Negro songs and poetry respectively (Davidson 1969: 123-124). Hurston’s absence is notorious. Equally notorious is the absence of Arthur Huff Fauset, one of the best known black folklore collectors of the twenties.

Arthur Huff Fauset was a teacher in the Philadelphia school system, one of the very few African American scholars with formal training in the field of black folklore, and “one of America’s first fully qualified anthropologists with black ancestry.”¹ Fauset, similarly to Hurston, saw the folklorist as a gatherer of folktales who gave the accurate versions without interjecting personal opinions. Fauset collected and studied folklore in the twenties. Like Zora Neale Hurston, Fauset was aware that “there [was] a strong need of a scientific collecting of Negro folk lore before the original sources of this material altogether lapse” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 241).

Fauset discusses Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories in his “American Negro Folk Literature” published in Alain Locke’s classic anthology of the Harlem Renaissance period, *The New Negro*. According to Fauset, Harris wrote the stories “based upon the original folk tales of the African slaves” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 238) and “let the world know that Negroes possessed a rich folk lore” which resulted in a “keener interest in the Negro and his lore” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 241), but he also points out that “the great storehouse from which they were gleaned is not confined to stories of the Uncle Remus type, but includes a rich variety of story forms, legends, saga cycles, songs, proverbs and phantastic, almost mythical, material” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 238).

In this article, Fauset is very critical of Harris’s work, considering his approach to Negro folklore to be “that of the journalist and literary man rather than the folk-lorist” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 238). Fauset describes the stories that appear in Harris’s *Uncle Remus. His Songs and Sayings* to be “misrepresentations”: “not folk tales, but adaptations,” the “dialect [...] is questionable”

¹ Arthur Huff Fauset was the brother of Jessie Redmon Fauset, writer of the Harlem Renaissance (Carpenter 1999: 225).

and presented a “highly romanticized” portrait of Negro life, resulting in the “misrepresentation of the temper and spirit of Negro folk lore” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 239, 241). Arthur Fauset questioned the authenticity of the dialect and the tales of the Uncle Remus stories, doubting “whether Negroes generally ever used the language employed in the works of Joel Chandler Harris” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 239). He goes on to say that *Uncle Remus* breaks with the tradition of the American Negro folk tale as the story teller plays an important role, instead of being impersonal. All the “incongruous elements [...] make it impossible to accept [the Uncle Remus stories] as a final rendering of American Negro folklore” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 240).

In the 1928 October-December issue of *The Journal of American Folklore*¹, Fauset published “Tales and Riddles Collected in Philadelphia”, but his work also includes “Folklore from the Half-Breeds in Nova Scotia”² published in 1925, “For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro” (1927), *Sojourner Truth; God's Faithful Pilgrim* (1971), his Master Degree thesis, eventually published as *Folklore from Nova Scotia*³ in 1931, and *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, his Ph.D. dissertation published in 1944.⁴ Early in his career as a folklore researcher, Fauset collected jokes about the Irish from Philadelphia blacks, and later concluded that they were also common in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, almost as common as Brer Rabbit tales. He researched the Negroes in the Nova Scotia region under the auspices of the American Folklore Society and Elsie Clews Parsons in 1923.⁵ In the Summer of 1925 he was in the lower South, especially in the Mississippi Delta Region collecting folklore. Also a protégé of Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, Arthur Huff Fauset contributed to *Fire!!* and compiled the “Bibliography of Negro Folk Lore” that appears in *The New Negro* which is a valuable aid to contemporary researchers of folklore (Locke 1992 [1925]: 442-448).

Someone that should be mentioned in relation to this brief excursion into Negro folklore is Charles W. Chesnutt who is generally regarded as being the

¹ *Journal of American Folklore* 41, 1928: 529-557.

² *Journal of American Folklore* 38, 1925: 300-315.

³ *Folklore from Nova Scotia*, a study of black oral tradition in Canada was published as Volume 24 of the *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*.

⁴ Published in 1944 by the University of Pennsylvania as Number 2 in the Brinton Memorial Series and Volume 3 of the publications of the Philadelphia Anthropological Society.

⁵ According to Carole H. Carpenter, Elsie Clews Parsons “shaped [Fauset’s] collecting, influenced its publication, and promoted its recognition through her patronage.” (Carpenter 1999: 225).

first African American author of short stories and novels. Chesnutt was born in North Carolina just before the Civil War and from an early age he wanted to get out of the segregated South. The career of a writer appealed to him and he contemplated southern black folk life as a possible literary subject. He also seemed to have been interested in collecting black spirituals, but neither of these activities was followed early on in his career, although he knew that they might be acceptable to people of the North, even if only out of curiosity. Chesnutt's interest in folklore is not only evident in his stories as they draw upon his knowledge of folklore, but also in the essay "Superstitions and Folklore in the South" published in 1901.¹ In this essay, his skepticism about black folk beliefs and specially "conjunction" stands out. According to Chesnutt, conjure "probably grew [...] out of African fetichism" and survives due to the "credulity of ignorance" and "absurdities of superstition" that are part of the "relics of ancestral barbarism" not yet shaken off by African Americans (Chesnutt 1901: 371-372). The essay also mentions the Uncle Remus stories, praising the way Joel Chandler Harris collected and presented his stories, noting that Harris paid little attention to stories about conjunction.

Chestnutt's *The Conjure Woman*², a collection of conjure stories, written according to the "publisher's specifications" was published in 1899. The editor Walter Hines Page played an important role in the whole publication process, insisting that Chesnutt write in black vernacular dialect and selecting the stories that were to appear in the book "from a much larger, and much more diverse, body of writing" (Chestnutt 1899: 2). Regarding *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt affirms that he took "considerable liberty" with the material and that it is mainly the result of his "imagination" acting upon "dormant ideas, lodged in [his] childish mind" (Chestnutt 1901: 372). This statement shows how Chesnutt "consciously fabricated tales" (Sundquist 1993: 298) and contrasts with Harris's folktales which were collected and maintained as close as possible to the original form, even though both Chesnutt and Harris were conscious of the fact that "no written record of dialect is entirely adequate" (Sundquist 1993: 307). *The Conjure Woman* unlike Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales does not show the ex-slaves' nostalgic longing for the slavery days. Slavery is presented or accepted as a historical fact, a system of domination and subjugation, but Chesnutt suggests that the slaves were never completely oppressed or powerless.

¹ Originally published in *Modern Culture*, Volume 13, 1901, 231-235. The bibliographical references mentioned here refer to the text published in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel. Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. (Dundes 1990).

² First published in March 1899 by Houghton, Mifflin and Company. The edition used is entitled *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*. (1993).

They had their ways of resisting, and practices like conjure helped them in their daily struggle. Chesnutt's fiction of black folk life conveys hidden messages behind an elaborate show of conformity.

Hurston's contemporary, Sterling Brown, was an influential African American teacher, poet, folklorist and literary critic, who incorporated black folklore and black dialect into his verse, as can be seen in his *Southern Road*, a book of poems inspired by folk sources. In his Review of *Mules and Men*, he praised Hurston's book for its simplicity, but objected to the lack of political awareness among Hurston's storytellers¹. He also criticized the book for giving an incomplete portrait of black life in the South; the misery and for not including the exploitation, the resentment so characteristic of the black South (Hemenway 1977: 219). Sterling Brown was known to portray black people and their experiences in a frank and unsentimental way.

A later collector of Black American folklore was Richard Dorson, author of *American Negro Folktales* and *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (1956), who published numerous works, but was not a contemporary of Hurston. When he started researching and publishing in the 1950s, Hurston had already "retired" from field trips and folklore research. His important contributions to the field of folklore include *American Folklore* (1959)², and *America in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present* (1973).³

Other less known collectors of folklore of the time include Lydia Parrish, who collected mostly Slave Songs in the Georgia Sea Islands, Dorothy Scarborough, who published *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* in 1925 and Katherine Dunham, a writer and anthropologist, considered a rival by Hurston.⁴

Beverly J. Robinson comments on the important contribution of the folklore collectors to the preservation of culture in her article "Africanisms and the Study of Folklore" noting that during slavery "the indigenous languages used by enslaved Africans to sing aboard ships or during their introduction to the New World went undocumented" (Robinson 1990: 214). The recording done at the time was "a result of non-Africans' documenting of the familiar, the understandable." The love that enslaved Africans had for singing and dancing

¹ February, 25, 1936.

² (1971 [1959]).

³ Richard Dorson, *America in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present* (1973). Dorson also edited the *Handbook of American Folklore* (1983) and *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (1972).

⁴ Hurston to Herskovits, July 30, 1936 (LL 384). See also Hurston to Herskovits, April 6, 1937. (Hurston 2002: 399-401). Hurston to Henry Allen Moe, July 6, 1937. (Hurston 2002: 403-4).

was associated with their childlike behavior and their illiteracy. The tales collected and recorded during the early slavery days were not considered to be of African origin, but mostly as having been “borrowed or learned from various groups of Native Americans or Europeans”.

The fact that collectors were not specifically looking for tales of African origin should be considered when analyzing this situation. Hurston’s work proves that singing, dancing, and tale telling are part of African American culture and certainly part of the African heritage of African Americans. She also shows that these cultural expressions have undergone adaptations to a new environment, but were certainly not “borrowed or learned from various groups of Native Americans or Europeans” (Robinson 1990: 214).

Chapter 3

“The spy-glass of Anthropology”: From Folklore to Fiction

I am just beginning to hit my stride. At first I tried to do too much in a day. Now I am satisfied with a few pages if they say what I want. I have to rewrite a lot as you can understand. For I not only want to present the material with all the life and color of my people, I want to leave no loop-holes for the scientific crowd to rend and tear us. ... I am leaving the story material almost untouched. I have only tampered with it where the story teller was not clear.

Zora Neale Hurston

As a child Hurston had lived African American folklore before she knew folklore as a “scientific field of research”. According to Robert Hemenway, Hurston did not portray the average scientific folklorist: “The type of reportorial precision required of the scientific folklorist bored Hurston; she was used to assimilating the aura of a place and letting that stimulus provoke her imagination”(Hemenway1977: 101-2). She worried that certain skills related with her people’s African past would disappear as the Negro was not “being kept pure. His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture.”¹

Zora Neale Hurston approached folklore collecting and ethnographic writing in an unusual manner. As a participating observer she demonstrated that the verbal skills of the African Americans were not reserved for the tale telling and lying sessions, but were in fact evident in everyday life in the interactions between the members of the community. She participated, observed and collected songs, jokes, folk tales, lore, sermons and numerous lines of “signifyin” which appear in all of her work, but mostly in *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell*

¹ Hurston to Franz Boas, March 29, 1927. (Hurston 2002: 97). She mentions a former slave who is a wood carver and “a powerful piece of conjure.”

My Horse (1938).¹ According to Langston Hughes “she was such a fine folklore collector, able to go among the people and never act as if she had been to school at all.” (Hughes 1993 [1940]: 239).

Hurston followed Boasian ideas regarding fieldwork; as a participant-observer she became part of the local communities to collect and analyze folklore texts, the oral history of the people, and everyday conversations. Like Arthur Huff Fauset, Hurston also showed concern regarding the disappearance of the “precious secrets of folk history” (Fauset 1992 [1925]: 241). She realized that time was running out and the folklore might be forgotten, so she explains to the store porch congregation in *Mules and Men* why she was recording the material from the lying sessions; to ensure that folk culture would not vanish with the death of the tellers, to preserve black folk culture and to share the culture with many people: “They are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late” (MM 14).

The folktales she collected were not merely the amusing stories she heard during her childhood or a cultural heritage of the slavery period, but something that was very much alive – “Negro folklore is not a thing of the past” – and that helped “her people” deal with a world full of inequalities. The telling of “lies” was itself a tradition that continued to voice as well as shape the ongoing life of the community: “it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories” (MM 10). Critics agree that Hurston had a deep understanding of African American folk culture and life, which contributed to her ability to capture the rhythms of black speech – Negro dialect was a way of rescuing the dignity of the speakers from decades of humiliation.

Hurston published “The Eatonville Anthology”² in *The Messenger* (September, October and November issues) in 1926. The “Anthology” does not conform to the narrative pattern that one would expect from a work of short fiction. It is comprised of fourteen sketches – folktales, jokes, anecdotes and childhood memories – which offer humorous commentary on the lives of residents in Eatonville, among which are Joe Clarke, the owner of the general store, Eatonville’s

¹ Signifyin’ is a way of encoding messages or meanings and can be considered “verbal duelling.” Signifying combines the three levels of storytelling: relating the story, exaggerating and lying. The storyteller consciously manipulates the narrative and the audience and “signifies” on them by tricking the audience with different levels of meaning.

² Heiner Bus points out that there is a “kinship” between Hurston’s anthology and Edgar Lee Master’s “Spoon River Anthology” (1915), regarding “the combination of place name and ‘anthology’” and “their view of small-town life as a feature of the past” (67). See Heiner Bus, “The Establishment of Community in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘The Eatonville Anthology’ (1926) and Rolando Hinojosa’s ‘Estampas del valle’ (1973) in *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature of the United States*. Ed. Genevieve Fabre (1988).

mayor and postmaster, Elijah Moseley and the incorrigible dog Tippy.

Her hometown, Eatonville, was used as a setting in several of her works – novels, autobiography, *Mules and Men*, *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, short stories and essays. The idea that is projected in Hurston's work is that Eatonville is not exposed to change or development and the life of the Eatonville residents is not changed by outside influence or hindered by white interference.

Hurston's narrative exists primarily to demonstrate forms of traditional oral narration and dialect illustrating her artistic use of cultural experience. Each brief (some only two paragraphs long), dialect-filled story is a separate tale; the narrator is a member of the community and blends authentic folklore and fiction to portray Eatonville, the small African-American community near Orlando in Florida. Eatonville is what links the different stories: "back in the good old days before the World War, things were very simple in Eatonville" (EA 818). The narrator identifies with Eatonville and its values;¹ the vocabulary used is plain and he uses irony. When the characters speak, Southern black dialect is used; the exception is at the end of the last sketch when the narrator ends by saying: "Stepped on a tin, mah story ends" (EA 825).

The tales include glimpses of a woman beggar, an incorrigible dog, a backwoods farmer, the greatest liar in the village, and a cheating husband. Most of the fourteen sketches open with a statement regarding a defining characteristic of the character: "Mrs Tony Roberts is the pleading woman"; "Sewell is a man who lives all to himself"; "Sister Cal'line Potts was a silent woman" (EA 813, 817, 822). There is no deep probing into the character's life, history or psyche – only enough to make the reader feel amused and entertained while moving from one sketch to the next, as if part of an authentic storytelling session on Joe Clarke's porch.

Some characters and situations recur in her work, like Joe Clarke (MM, TE, MB, EA), Daisy Taylor (MB, EA), Mrs. Roberts (EA, MB and as Mrs. Robbins in TE), Sykes Jones (EA, Sw) and the Brer Dog and Brer Rabbit tale (MM, EA), for example. The Eatonville folk are not only good, superstitious, humorous storytellers, but are also the source of folklore and local fiction for Hurston, the anthropologist, who identifies with the folk, the setting and the situations. The first sketch "The Pleading Woman" depicts Mrs. Roberts, a wife who begs the store owner for food, pretending that her husband does not provide enough food or money for her. Mrs. Roberts reappears in the play *Mule Bone* where she begs Joe Clarke for food for her children and herself.

¹ "The town winked and talked [...] The town smiled in anticipation [...] So the town waited." (EA 822-823).

Sketch V, “The Way of a Man with a Train” is about Old Man Anderson who is scared of the train and the sound it makes. This sketch is later partially reused in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* when John’s amazement at seeing a train for the first time is described.

Sketch IX focuses on Mrs. Clarke, Joe Clarke’s wife. She works in the store sometimes and her husband yells at her “every time she makes a mistake” (EA 817) and beats her. This sketch, describing Mrs. Joe Clarke, was developed years later into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937. The couple reappear as Janie and Jody, the Eatonville Mayor and his wife. Mrs. Clarke is also a character in *Mule Bone*. Joe Clarke is the most recurrent character in Hurston’s fiction, as on his porch most of the action takes place, if by “action” one refers to the “lyin’” and “storytelling”. Sketch X focuses on Mrs. McDuffy’s behavior in church – the church was almost as important as the porch, a place where the Negro’s cultural expression could be celebrated. She shouts in church and her husband beats and insults her because “there’s no sense in her shouting, as big a devil as she is.” And he cannot be convinced to stop beating her as “his fist was just as hard as her head” (EA 818).

Sketch XI “Double-Shuffle” celebrates Black musical folk traditions (parse-me-la) as does Hurston’s play “Color Struck: A Play in Four Scenes” (Parse-me-la and the cakewalk). The line ““You lak chicken? Well, then, take a wing””, the baskets with fried chicken and pies and the happy groups laughing and talking until the dance restarts, link the sketch to the play. In this sketch Hurston refers to the dancing in Eatonville which used to take place without music before the World War. The dancers would make the music by dragging their feet, shouting, and clapping their hands to the tune of “old, old double shuffle songs” (EA 819). In “The Head of the Nail,” the twelfth piece, Eatonville, the “town,” is the members of the community that have “collected” on the porch of the “store-postoffice as is customary on Saturday nights. The town has had its bath and with its week’s pay in pocket fares forth to be merry” (EA 821). The love triangle theme used here will later be reused in other fiction works: in “Sweat”, Delia and her husband Sykes and Bertha reflect Daisy, Crooms and Mrs. Crooms, characters in the twelfth sketch. The thirteenth piece “Pants and Cal’line” appears to be unfinished¹ and since it was not reprinted during Hurston’s lifetime, there is no corrected text and the story remains incomplete. However, the whole story is retold in *Dust Tracks on the Road* in a version about Hurston’s Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jim: “Aunt Caroline emerged [...] the

¹ Robert Hemenway explains in his Hurston biography that “a printing mishap caused the last segment, ‘Pants and Cal’line,’ to go incomplete, the printer or editor apparently losing part of the story.” (Hemenway 1977: 69).

axe was still over her shoulder, but now it was draped with Uncle Jim's pants, shirt and coat" (DT 574-5). "Pants and Cal'line" is also a source for Lucy and John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, as John was also fond of betraying Lucy with other women.

The "Anthology" closes with a Brer Rabbit tale, explaining why the dog and the rabbit hate each other, a tale that is also told in *Mules and Men*.¹ Asking whether someone prefers to be a "lark flyin' or a dove a settin'" (EA 824) is a question which will also be asked in *Mule Bone* (MB 146) when the two main characters, Jim and Dave, meet each other and Daisy outside town. Elements of fiction, folklore and humor merge in these amusing and colourful sketches with no central narrative line, except the fact that they are all set in Eatonville, Hurston's hometown.

In the "Anthology" the Eatonville residents "signify on" each other telling exaggerated tales about their fellow citizens. It combines the different elements of storytelling – story, exaggeration and "lying" – in a complex process in which the storyteller manipulates the tale and the audience by using different levels of meaning, "signifying on" them. "Signifying on," "playing the dozens," "specifying on" are expressions for situations in which African American people try to get an upper hand in a conversation or in storytelling through the use of words, showing their verbal skills in out-talking each other.

The sketches in the "Anthology" reflect Hurston's knowledge of the powerful sense of community found among small rural communities in the South of the United States. Storytelling plays an important role in these communities because it is the means by which a community and its customs and culture can be preserved through the telling of stories from generation to generation. Hurston was aware of the treasure that could be found in these communities and she worried that her/their culture could be lost forever. She was "weighed down by the thought that practically nothing had been done in Negro folklore when the greatest cultural wealth on the continent was disappearing without the world ever realizing that it had been there."²

Her concern with the preservation of African American culture is also present in *Mules and Men*, the collection of folklore organized after her research trips:

"Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y'all know a plenty of 'em and that's why Ah headed straight for home."
[...]

¹ *Mules and Men*, Part I, Chapter VII.

² Hurston to Thomas E. Jones, October 12, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 315).

“Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?”

“Plenty of people, George. They are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late’ (MM 13-4).

According to Robert Hemenway “‘The Eatonville Anthology’ [...] is pure Zora Neale Hurston: part fiction, part folklore, part biography, all told with great economy, an eye for authentic detail, and a perfect ear for dialect” (Hemenway 1977: 70). “The Eatonville Anthology” reflects all of Hurston’s future concerns and interests, combining a study of African American folklore, the preservation of history and culture, and a study of social relations and folk characters. Written in 1926, before Hurston’s folklore research trips to the South of the United States, the “Anthology” was put together from her childhood memories, giving a glimpse of the potential she would have years later as a collector and recorder of folklore.

Hurston’s first trip to collect folklore was sponsored by Carter G. Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Encouraged by Boas and a \$1,400 fellowship, Hurston decided to collect African-American lore, to record songs, customs, tales, superstitions, lies, jokes, dances, and games. Her first attempt at fieldwork failed because she “did not have the right approach” (DT 687). The rural southern black folk did not understand her because of her “Barnardese” intonations. She encountered some resistance, namely of the local black folk who suspected her motives and refused to cooperate. The local folk wanted to tell her about local success stories and did not want to tell tales or talk about issues that according to them only served to perpetuate stereotypes. After the first failed attempt, Hurston changed her approach.

The results of the first years of collecting were a great success and culminated in two articles that appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore*, “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” in the July-September 1930 issue and “Hoodoo in America” in the October-December 1931 issue. Years later, “Hoodoo in America” was revised and expanded to become the second part of her first folklore book, *Mules and Men*, the first collection of African American folklore published by an African American. Parts of the “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” would be used in *The Great Day*, Hurston’s folkloric production first performed in 1932. *The Great Day* would later be adapted by Hurston into other public performances with different titles.

In “Hoodoo in America” Hurston presented a report of some of the results of her second collecting expedition, taking up almost the entire October-De-

cember 1931 issue of *The Journal of American Folklore*.¹ According to Hurston, in the introduction to her article, “veaudeau is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs.” The American Negro uses the word hoodoo, which is “related to the West African term ‘juju.’” “‘Roots’ is the Southern Negro’s term for folk-doctoring by herbs and prescriptions” and can also “be used as a synonym for hoodoo” (HA 317).

Conjure and hoodoo are the terms used most frequently in the United States for African American folk practices in magic and folk belief in supernatural and sacred phenomena beyond an established religion. With correspondences to voodoo or vodun in Haiti, shango in Trinidad, candomblé and macumba in Brazil, santería in Cuba, and cumina or obeah in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean and West Coast of Africa, conjure and hoodoo contain a sacred dimension, a transcendent sphere of awe and untouchability derived from the features of spirit possession, altered states of consciousness, and spirit worship. These practices can also involve acts of healing, divination and the casting and “uncrossing” of spells and conjure works make use of curative herbs, roots, reptiles, insects, rituals, amulets, fetishes and oral and transcribed incantation. Jim Haskins, who has researched and written about hoodoo and voodoo, explains:

hoodoo is derived from *juju*, meaning conjure, but some theorize it may also be an adulteration of the term voodoo. Whatever its origin, the term referred to that body of magical practices that characterized black life in most of North America and was essentially interchangeable with terms used in British colonies in other areas, notably obeah in Jamaica.

[...]

Over the years the distinctions between voodoo and hoodoo have been blurred until they are commonly used interchangeably. [...] Hoodoo is a still more generalized term than voodoo and can be applied not only to complex, magical practices but also to simple medicinal procedures and even to superstitions (Haskins 1990 [1978]: 60-61, 87).

In “Hoodoo in America,” Hurston asserts that conjure/hoodoo developed “particularly in the city of New Orleans,” but whenever one finds Negroes in America there are “shreds of hoodoo beliefs and practices” (HA 318). Hurston explains the connection between hoodoo and religion, especially with the Catholic Church – “In New Orleans in addition to herbs, reptiles, insects, it makes use of the altar, the candles, the incense, the holy water, and blessed oil of the Catholic Church” (HA 318) – and mentions the difference between hoodoo

¹ *The Journal of American Folklore*, Volume 44, October – December 1931: 317-417.

in New Orleans (state of Louisiana) and Florida.¹ Hurston explains that the differences are linked to the fact that the island Negroes (from Haiti) “retained far more of their West African background than the continental blacks” (HA 318). This was related to slavery and the way slaves were treated in the islands – they remained together and families were not separated, on the other hand, on the North American Continent, “slaves were traded like live stock” and no attention was paid to “family ties” or “tribal affiliations.” As a consequence, island Negroes that arrived in Louisiana retained far more African rituals than “their continental brothers.” Another difference is associated with religion – Catholicism in New Orleans and lack of Catholic elements in Florida.

Hurston also explains how to become a hoodoo doctor and refers to Marie Leveau, a well-known hoodoo from nineteenth century New Orleans. The essay has a section on “Bahamian Obeah” “included [...] for comparative purposes [...] gathered on the island of New Providence” (HA 320). Conjure is called “obeah” in the Bahamas – “its West African name” and “is very drastically suppressed by law.” Hurston also mentions “the Zines” (our spiritualists), “hags” (witch and vampire), how “human sacrifice” is made and how “important organs of the dead body are used in obeah” (HA 321-2). The section “Hoodoo in the Southern States” mentions various hoodoo or conjure doctors. It starts with Marie Leveau, “the greatest hoodoo queen of America” (HA 326) and describes their routines and techniques. The hoodoo or conjure doctors are presented according to their religious affiliation. Towards the end of the article Hurston dedicates some pages to the “Use of the Dead in Conjure” (HA 397-400), tells some conjure tales and ends by enumerating the “Paraphernalia of Hoodoo” and the “Prescriptions of Root Doctors” for the different illnesses like Syphilis, Blindness or Poison (that was not necessarily swallowed, but could have “been put down for the patient”) (HA 416). As Hurston describes in a letter to Henry Allen Moe, “the greatest power of voodoo rests upon [the] knowledge” “of all the subtle poisons that Negroes know how to locate among the bush.”² Voodoo or hoodoo and its power will reappear in several of Hurston’s fiction works.

Nancy Cunard asked Hurston to contribute some folklore essays for Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology — 1931-1933* (1934), an anthology of African-American literature and art.³ Hurston complied with six essays: “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “Conversions and Visions,” “The Sermon,” “Mother

¹ New Orleans was the region chosen to be “settled by Haytian emigrees at the time of the overthrow of French rule in Hayti by L’Overture” (HA 318).

² Hurston to Henry Allen Moe, June 10, 1936. (Hurston 2002: 382).

³ Nancy Cunard (1896-1965) was an English writer, editor and publisher, political activist, and poet. The bohemian and traveller was heir to the Cunard shipping lines.

Catherine,” “Uncle Monday,” and “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals.” All six were subsequently published in the anthology.

“Characteristics of Negro Expression“ is the only text among Hurston’s oeuvre where she truly interprets ethnographic material, since in *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s first collection of folklore, she presents the tales as they are, but does not analyze or interpret them.¹ The central argument of “Characteristics” concerns imitation and mimicry among African Americans, but Hurston also presents a strange compendium of characteristics that explain why Negro verbal art and dialect differ from white people’s language (CNE 831), why Negro dancing is difficult for whites to learn (CNE 835) and also describes the jook (CNE 841-5). She explains that the “jook is the word for a Negro pleasure house [...] where the men and women dance, drink and gamble” (CNE 841). The importance of the “jook” in the development of Negro music derives from the fact that it is linked to the origins of the blues since “in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz” (CNE 841). Song, dance and theater are all found in the jook. She even sends a message “to those who want to institute the Negro theatre [saying] it is already established” as “the real Negro theater is in the Jooks and the cabarets” (CNE 845). Hurston also criticizes “the use of Negro material by white performers” calling it “unrealistic”. “The spirituals that have been sung around the world” are “no genuine presentation of Negro songs to white audiences” (CNE 845). “Musically speaking” the jook is the real source and “not one concert singer in the world is singing the songs as the Negro songmakers sing them” (CNE 845).

Other “characteristics” focused in the text are “Angularity,” “Asymmetry,” the “Will to Adorn,” “Negro Folklore,” “Culture Heroes,” “Originality,” “Imitation” and “Absence of the Concept of Privacy.” In this text, according to Deborah G. Plant, Hurston “traced Black people’s inclination toward dramatic oral expression to African oral tradition and communal life” (Plant 1995: 77).

In “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” as in “Black Death“ and in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston, according to Pamela Bordelon “focuses on the continuities between Africa, the slave experience, and African American religion” (GGMW 94).² Spirituals “are unceasing variations around a theme” and “like the folktales [they] are being made and forgotten every day” (SNS 869). The idea that “spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’” is refused by Hurston, instead she describes them as “Negro religious songs, sung by a group, and a group bent on expression

¹ Henceforth referred to as “Characteristics”.

² “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” were first published in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro. An Anthology* (1934).

of feelings and not on sound effects”, covering many subjects (SNS 870). The spirituals sung by concert artists to audiences “are the works of Negro composers or adaptors *based* on the spirituals” (SNS 870) and Hurston calls them neo-spirituals, adding that “this is no condemnation of the neo-spirituals. They are a valuable contribution to the music and literature of the world” (SNS 871).

Hurston describes the use of spirituals in church services. Spirituals are naturally linked to “the religious service [which] is a conscious art expression” (SNS 871). Hurston also explains “the lack of dialect in the religious expression” as being related to the conscious creation of the artist: “the dialect breaks through only when the speaker has reached the emotional pitch where he loses self-consciousness” (SNS 871). Religious worship is based on “a set formality” while “Sermons, prayers, moans and testimonies have their definite forms” (SNS 873), but may be ornamented without changing the form. The different fields of a religious service are characterized by “a lively rivalry in the technical artistry” (SNS 873). Like the telling of tales and “lies”, spirituals can only be produced in a communal effort. Decades before Dolan Hubbard published his work on the black sermon, Hurston was already analyzing “the intersection between black song and sermonic form.”¹

“Uncle Monday” and “Mother Catherine” were also published in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* anthology and deal with the power of hoodoo.² These stories focus on the power of the supernatural beliefs in African American culture that Hurston had already used in her short stories such as “Black Death” and “Spunk,” and to which she would return over and over again. “Uncle Monday” is the story of a hoodoo man that appeared in Eatonville one day. He was very old and no one knew “where he came from or who his folks might be” (UM 860). A mysterious man, he apparently had the ability to disguise himself as a great alligator and walk on the water of the lake. His conjure powers are explained by the townspeople by the fact that

he has the singing stone, which is the greatest charm, the most powerful ‘hand’ in the world. It is a diamond and comes from the mouth of

¹ The work is entitled *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (1994). According to Eric J. Sundquist, much of “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” is devoted to “Hurston’s extremely acute analysis of the intersection between black song and sermonic form, to the ‘tonal semantics’ that lie at the heart of black American expressivity as it was nurtured in the Afro-Christian church”. See Sundquist’s essay “‘The Drum with the Man Skin’: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*”. (Gates and Appiah 1993).

² “Uncle Monday” will reappear as a folk tale in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings from the Federal Writers’ Project* (Bordelon 1999: 114-118).

a serpent [...] and is the diamond of diamonds. [...]

Uncle Monday has a singing stone, and that is why he knows everything without being told. [...] Nobody thinks of doubting his power as a hoodoo man. He is feared, but sought when life becomes too powerful for the powerless (UM 863, 865).

He knows and understands things without being told by those who seek his help and obtains instant and durable results.

“Mother Catherine” is a hoodoo woman “who holds court in the huge tent” and with whom Hurston spent two weeks attending services and “seeking knowledge” (MC 855); Hurston describes some of the services. Mother Catherine “encourages originality.” She practices “sympathetic magic” and her “religion is matriarchal. Only God and the mother count. Childbirth is the most important element in the creed” (MC 859). “Mother Catherine was not converted by anyone” but received a call, after which “she consecrated her body by refraining from the sex relation, and by fasting and prayer” (MC 859).

Hoodoo and voodoo are subjects to which Hurston would return to over and over again as they constitute an important part of the folk beliefs of the American Negro. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, conjure is treated as powerful when Hattie Tyson hires the services of a conjure woman to kill John's virtuous wife Lucy and tie him to her; in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, hoodoo is the sacred source of Moses's godlike powers and he is considered a powerful and efficient hoodoo man; hoodoo will also appear in “Spunk,” “Black Death” and in the late 1950s she wrote a column on “Hoodoo and Black Magic” in the *Fort Pierce Chronicle*, a local black newspaper. This indicates that hoodoo/voodoo was a subject that she would return to over and over again.

Hurston collected folklore among African American communities in the South, between 1927 and 1932, namely in Eatonville, her hometown, in Polk County, in Tallahassee, in Mobile, Alabama, in turpentine camps, in lumber camps, in phosphate mines, and, the second part, a section on “Hoodoo” was collected in New Orleans.¹ *Mules and Men*, remains the primary expression of the extensive research she undertook in the South. Rather than present an anthology of the folktales she collected, Hurston integrates the tales into a narrative that features her and her travels in the South of the United States. The stories are contextualized in the daily events of the communities: the socializing in the storefront “lying” sessions in Eatonville, the church sermons, the storytelling in the turpentine camps of Florida and the entertainment in the “jooks.”² The

¹ During this time she was sponsored by Mrs. Mason.

² “The material presented is valuable not only by giving the Negro's reaction to every

tales and “lies” are told in dialect; the in-between description and narration by Hurston is in Standard English. Hurston’s ability as a transcriber of southern Negro folk dialect was acknowledged by her contemporary writers, such as Sterling Brown who pointed out that “Miss Hurston’s forte is the recording and the creation of folk speech.”¹

Hurston’s role in *Mules and Men* is that of a daughter of the community (Eatonville and the South) who left but came back to collect and record the tales and stories of her childhood. She is part of the ethnography; she writes about her fieldwork in the text, of the problems she encountered, like the life-threatening knife episode from which she was rescued by her friend Big Sweet. Studying her own community she is an insider to the community, and has easier access to the “lying” sessions and other information, and also understands the dynamics of the community. Unlike the traditional participant observer, Hurston engages and interacts with her informants, as Deborah Plant neatly points out:

Hurston’s participant-observer method of collecting the folklore published in *Mules and Men* creates an excellent vantage point from which the reader can view the theatrical dynamics of storytelling in the African American folk community (Plant 1995: 49).

Early critics viewed *Mules and Men* simply as a collection of folklore of rural black southerners, which allowed readers to see how African Americans acted when they were on their own. The tales were also valued as entertainment. Since Hurston’s work was discovered by Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway and Mary Helen Washington, *Mules and Men* has come to be valued as a work that celebrates Southern rural black life and culture and presents the reader with black creativity and spontaneity, even in adverse conditions.

Hurston is a character in the stories that serve as a framework to the tales in *Mules and Men*.² The informants are also characters in the stories – the reader hears the tales as they were told to Hurston. She lived among the people of the lumber, railroad and turpentine camps to be able to collect the folklore at the source. The problems that she, as a female researcher, had to face in the field while collecting folklore are also described by her in the folklore collections.

day events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions.” Franz Boas, Forward to *Mules and Men*.³

¹ Sterling Brown, Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in *The Nation*, October 16, 1937. Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 20-21. Nathan Irvin Huggins also praises Hurston’s “clear, uncluttered style and a keen ear for voice sounds and rhythms” (Huggins 1971: 74).

² The framed tale was not invented by Hurston. Charles W. Chestnutt framed tale-telling sessions in *The Conjure Woman* (1899).

Her presence as a participant observer in the work camps caused jealousy and rivalry among the women. Even though she was a southerner and an African American, her research was complicated by the fact that she was seen as a possible threat to the existing male-female relationships.

Hurston has been criticized for her decision to include herself as an active participant-observer and for centring the narrative on the “I” in her work *Mules and Men*. She describes her trip to collect folklore, her interactions with the folk, the problems she faces and even the options she takes in some more complicated social interactions, like recurring to a few “white lies” or disguises to avoid being treated as an outsider or to avoid violence. In Polk County, Hurston claims to be a “fugitive from justice,” a bootlegger “hiding out” to gain the confidence of the community who thought that “she must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind” (MM 63).

Reading *Mules and Men* as a collection of folklore is complicated by the style of narration and Hurston’s participation, at a time when, in the words of Robert Hemenway,

the scholarly folklorist of the thirties was expected to subordinate self to material in the interests of objectivity. The intent was to leave the emphasis on the folklore texts that were being added to the ‘body of knowledge.’ After describing the corpse, the folklorist could perform an autopsy in order to learn how the living organism functions. The cold text isolated on the page for scientific study, implied the living folk, but the folk themselves were secondary to the artefact collected (Hemenway 1977: 165-6).

Some scholars, especially those linked to anthropology and ethnography regard this placement of the self at the center in *Mules and Men* as an obstacle to accurate fieldwork and to the gathering of the material, as her active presence interferes with the whole process. Instead of only writing about others she also writes about herself, becoming more the active participant and less the outside observer. This is an aspect often pointed out by critics like John Edgar Wideman: “As folklore collector she’s not merely an outsider looking in, taking data away. She’s both writer and subject, an insider, a cultural informant engaging in self-interrogation” (Kaplan 2001: xviii).

As Hurston reveals in her folklore writings and in her novels, in Eatonville the collective memory has been carried into the collective present through the voices of the “men folks” who gathered on the porch of Joe Clarke’s store. “The women folks” were allowed to hear the “lies” but their participation was limited. With “the women folks”, Hurston shared common experiences

and common feelings. Hurston's ethnography and fiction traces the negative colonial identification of black women with animals that predominated during the centuries of chattel slavery and that, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, still endorsed black women's miserable social situation and their misuse as beasts of burden or social objec.

For Robert Hemenway, "'Mules and men' was a phrase that *signified* - - it had several meanings, many contexts" (Hemenway 1977: 222). The title *Mules and Men* focuses on southern culture and evokes the history of southern race relations between blacks and whites. Treated as mules during slavery, African Americans had to find and learn to appreciate the humanity in themselves that slave owners constantly and consistently tried to eliminate or suppress:¹ "Mules were bought and sold by massa just as slaves were. They were forced to work long hours just as slaves were" (Hemenway 1977: 222). Hurston was "among a number of writers who appropriated the colloquial analogies between slaves and mules" (Sundquist 1993: 373). The mule turns up frequently in Hurston's fiction and folklore (TE, BC, MB, TL), where the animal's lowly status, hard work and endurance are emphasized. "But the mule also represented admirable characteristics for a slave society: individualism, stubbornness, strength and unpredictability" (Hemenway 1977: 222).

The title is ambiguous, relating to race and gender: racial inequality leads to gender inequality as is demonstrated in Hurston's folk tales and through her fictional characters. Black men were "mules," beasts of burden during slavery, but in the South, in the early twentieth century they still remained "mules" during the day. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston returns to the theme of the mule, asserting that "de nigger woman is the mule uh de world," and stressing the fact that black men treated black women as mules. According to Rachel Stein, African Americans defied the treatment as "mules" through their songs, stories, dances and folk beliefs, redefining themselves as men or women (Stein 1997: 54). A different slant to the question is offered by Susan Edwards Meisenhelder who asserts in her critical study *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston* that Hurston's oeuvre stresses the unpredictability of the "mule": "mules are not simply brutalized beasts of burden who silently endure their slavish existence; they can often be "fractious" beasts who throw off their burdens and their riders or subtle tricksters who more slyly slip their halters" (Meisenhelder 1999: 35).

The portrayal of women in folklore collections and the images of women

¹ See Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Baby Suggs took runaway slaves, former slaves or descendants of slaves to the Clearing to help them come to terms with slavery and its consequences by teaching them to appreciate their bodies and their humanity as full human beings.

in folklore are sparse, and of black women, rare; when they do exist they are negative or stereotypical and seldom portrayed outside the sphere of the home or the church.¹ Hurston refutes this stereotyping; her folklore is a world of female-male relationships and of female competition for males. In *Mules and Men* there are not only male-female interactions, but also relationships between women, which were often of conflict due to competition for men and their wages. The conflict was expressed through verbal skills and life threatening insults. But there is also the complement of the sexes in the humorous manipulation of African cultural elements.

When she portrays the rural African American community – sawmill workers, turpentine distillers, phosphate mine workers or just porch-sitters – Hurston depicts the relationships and interactions between men and women of the community. Big Sweet is the woman character that stands out in *Mules and Men* and appears in several other of Hurston's works. Hurston met Big Sweet while collecting folklore among the workers of the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Loughman, Polk County, Florida. Big Sweet was the rough and tough woman that befriended and protected Hurston from the other women in the camp who were jealous of Hurston because she went out with the men and spent a lot of time with them collecting folklore. Big Sweet used folk language to assert a powerful self amidst a sexist and racist society. She was able to signify on Joe Willard, her lover, about the dangers of infidelity. After verbally outwitting an adversary, Big Sweet declared: "Ah got de law in mah mouth" and so does Lucy (MM 124, 174) and even the men recognize the value of a woman's word: "Don't you know you can't git de best of no woman in de talkin' game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got" (MM 34). In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston demonstrates her admiration for Big Sweet:

She was giving a "reading," [...] giving her opponent lurid data and bringing him up to date on his ancestry, his looks, smell, gait, clothes, and his route through Hell in the hereafter. [...] [and] broke the news to him, in one of her mildest bulletins that his pa was a double-humped camel and his ma was a grass-gut cow, but even so, he tore her wide open in the act of getting born, and so on and so forth. He was a bitch's baby out of a buzzard egg (DT 696).

The power of a woman's tongue runs across Hurston's work. "Ah got de law in my mouth" (Big Sweet in MM 124), "Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got" (George Thomas in MM 34), "Ah got de law in my mouth" (Lucy

¹ See Adrienne R. Andrews' article "Of Mules and Men and Men and Women: The Ritual of Talking B[]ack. (Andrews in Adjaye and Andrews 1997).

in MM 174) are ways of proving that the women have the verbal skills as power against men. John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is aware of this power. He is a big strong man, but feels small when his wife Lucy “tongue lash[es] him”:

Jes' 'cause women folks ain't got no big muscled arm and fistes lak jugs, folks claims they's weak vessels, but dass a lie. Dat piece uh red flannel she got hung 'tween her jaws is equal tuh all de fistes God ever made and man ever seen. Jes' take and ruin a man wid dey tongue, and den dey kin hold it still and bruise 'im up jes' ez bad (JGV 82).

The jook scenes of *Mules and Men* are full of dramatic actions that occur between the dancing, singing, piano music, card playing and talking. Non-verbal communication, such as the use of body language (hand movements and expressive eyes) to express one's self is the midst of the noise and the dancing, complements the use of the verbal language of intimidation, referred by Big Sweet as “bulldozin’”, especially by the women against other women (MM 145-150): “Ella *wrung her hips* to the Florida-flip game” and “Lucy came in the door with a *bright gloat in her eyes*” (MM 145).¹ Violence of woman against woman is a common occurrence in the jook, especially in rivalry over a man, as is the case of the confrontation between Big Sweet and Ella Wall and Lucy – Ella tries her best to get Joe Willard away from Big Sweet, using verbal techniques to intimidate Big Sweet – signifying, whispering and talking aloud – without directly confronting Big Sweet. Ella gets to be the center of everybody's attention and tries to ridicule Big Sweet by calling her “bigger-than-me” to which Big Sweet replies by calling her “storm-buzzard” (MM 147). Big Sweet understands quickly what their game is and prepares for a verbal and physical confrontation with the two women. The fight does not happen because the Quarters Boss shows up with a gun in his hand and expels Ella, who has no right to be there, threatening to send her to the Barton jail. Joe Willard, proud of the way Big Sweet faced the Quarters Boss, praises her: “You wuz uh whole woman and half uh man. You made that cracker stand offa *you*” (MM 148). Big Sweet does not change her behaviour in the presence of the Quarters Boss – she talks to him as she does to other members of the community, and refuses to hand over her knife to him. The Quarters Boss treats Big Sweet with a certain verbal caution, avoiding a verbal confrontation, an attitude commented at the jook: “She got loaded muscles. You notice he don't tackle Big Sweet lak he do de rest round here” (MM 148-9). However, with Ella he uses no caution – he expels her, yelling at her to go away and also takes her knife. Ella loses all her

¹ Author's italics.

“spunk” when the Quarters Boss speaks to her, only “mumbling threats” as she leaves. Her posture is of submission, while Big Sweet retains her position, refusing to submit: “Don’t you touch me, white folks!” (MM 148).

Being a woman, it was natural for Hurston to give more attention to the role of women in American culture than most of her fellow writers and folklore collectors. She portrays the condition of women in the United States through her folklore and her fiction. She objected to the portrayal of black men and women as trapped and distorted by racial discrimination. In *Mules and Men*, women – Big Sweet or Gold are hardened, suggestive, vulgar, dice-rolling and often knife-wielding women – could face men in verbal and physical conflicts. These women were witty and competitive, violent if other women interfered with or threatened their relationship with their men, but to Hurston, underneath they were still mules, trapped women, but with the strength to hold community and home together and contribute positively to the survival of their culture.¹ Hurston’s work was an important contribution to the study of women in folklore.

As has been referred to, Hurston embeds the tales in a social context: “the between-story conversation and business” were required to make the book less “monotonous” and readable to the general public, yet also “have value as a reference book.”² “The between-story conversation and business,” allowed Hurston to contextualize the tales, showing the social reality of the men and women who became her informants.

The ability of a teller depends on how much humor he can included in the tale. Humor is intimately related to laughter and is thus at the core of the folktales who aim to entertain the listeners at storytelling sessions. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder notes that “black humor is richly multifaceted, reflecting a wide range of emotions” (Meisenhelder 1999: 16). Hurston had substantiated this idea in *Mules and Men*:

The brother in black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind.
His laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, anger, grief,

¹ The role of women and the battle between the sexes have been discussed by many critics and scholars such as Cheryl Wall, “*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston’s Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment,” *Black American Literature Forum* (Volume 23, Number 4, Winter 1989), Pearlle M. Peters, *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston’s Fiction, Folklore, and Drama* (1998); Roger D. Abrahams “Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women,” “Sweat.” Zora Neale Hurston. Ed. Cheryl Wall (1997); Pearlle Peters, “Women and Assertive Voice in Hurston’s Fiction and Folklore,” *The Literary Griot* (Volume 4, N° 1 and 2, Spring/Fall 1992) Diana Miles, *Women, Violence & Testimony in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003).

² Hurston to Franz Boas, August 20, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 308).

bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple pleasure or any other of the known or undefined emotions (MM 64-65).

In the Introduction to *Mules and Men* Hurston comments that there is a complexity behind the apparent simplicity as “the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive [...] and offers a feather-bed resistance [...] [with] a lot of laughter and pleasantries” (MM 10). The idea of the “mask” as a form of manipulation is presented in several of Hurston’s works – “Daddy Mention,” “Spunk” (the play) – but the most detailed description appears in her essay “High John de Conquer” originally published in the October 1943 issue of *American Mercury*. In this essay she explains the power of High John, a hope-bringer, who personified power back in slavery times. Frequently disguising himself “as the laugh-provoking Brer Rabbit” to fool Old Massa, he was known for “hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick” (HJC 923). High John/Brer Rabbit denounced domination and offered spiritual resistance and spiritual victory to enslaved African Americans. Compared to King Arthur of England, “he has served his people, and gone back into mystery again. And, like King Arthur, he is not dead”, but considered by Hurston to be “the source and soul of our laughter and song” (HJC 922):

John will never forsake the weak and the hopeless, nor fail to bring hope to the hopeless. That is what they believe, and so they do not worry. They go on and laugh and sing. Things are bound to come out right tomorrow. That is the secret of Negro song and laughter (HJC 931).

The “legendary root of black conjure and luck,” High John is personified as a mythic figure that accompanied Africans on the Middle Passage and was endowed with sacred properties (like the trickster figures of the animal tales), “making him an incarnation of the voice that ‘has evaded the ears of white people’ and borne up black people” (Sundquist 1993b: 51). He provides his folk with spiritual sustenance and secret powers, “including the signifying power of black laughter and black song” (Sundquist 1993b: 51-52). “High John de Conquer” is about imagination, creativity and justice.

Although she begins *Mules and Men* by narrating the events in grammatically correct English, as she enters the domain of the folk tale tellers her voice assumes the patterns of dialect inherent to her informants’ speech. Hurston employed her own voice in order to document the differences between the written and the oral. In this text there are seventy folk tales that range from “Ole Massa” and John tales to animal tales through which the men fantasized

about how slaves obtained their freedom and how work came about. Deborah Plant points out that the treasures retrieved by Hurston of African American oral culture are of the utmost importance as "these texts offer insight into that which the African American soul lives by and that which Hurston's soul lived by. The lore, replete with survival and resistance strategies, adaptation skills, and coping mechanisms, also conveys the lessons of hope that renew the spirit and sustain the soul" (Plant 1995: 45).

Hurston chose to return to her native Eatonville to collect folklore "because [she] knew that the town was full of material and that [she] could get it without hurt, harm or danger [...] [since] it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories" (MM 10). In *Mules and Men*, she narrates that, as she entered Eatonville, the first thing she saw was the store porch and she "was delighted. The town had not changed. Same love of talk and song" (MM 13). Hurston immediately fitted into the Eatonville social life. She heard tales and was invited to a toe-party.¹ The storytelling sessions took place on the store porch where men told lies. Gold, an Eatonville woman enters the male-dominated storytelling world of Joe Clarke's porch to tell the tale of how God "gave out color" and "how come [they] are black" (MM 33-34).² In reporting Gold's tale, Hurston showed that female dominance was possible in a male-dominated setting and that black southerners could tell a race-related joke even at their own expense. In Eatonville Hurston recorded several tales: "How the Church Came to Be Split Up," "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men," "How Jack Beat the Devil," but when she heard about Polk County she knew she had to go there.

The context in the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company camp in Polk County gives an insight into the situation of the black workers. Hurston decides to go out with the "swamp-gang" to collect tales as "they lied a plenty while they worked" (MM 68). Hurston's day with the swamp-gang begins at dawn as she describes how the camp awakes at the sound of the voice of the "shack-rouser," who makes sure that they "don't keep the straw-boss waiting" (MM 69). When they arrive at the meeting place, the swamp boss was not there. The waiting leads the men to speculate about what may have caused the delay. The

¹ One of the girls at the party describes the toe-party: "Well, they hides all the girls behind a curtain and you stick out yo' toe. Some places you talke off yo' shoes and some places you keep 'em on, but most all de time you keep 'em on. When all de toes is in a line, sticking out from behind the sheet they let de men folks in and they looks over all de toes and buys de ones they want for a dime. Then they got to treat de lady dat owns dat toe to everything she want." (MM 20)

² This tale is also told in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

foreman tells them that the logging has been suspended, but sends them to the mill to “see if they need [them] over there” (MM 71).

Tale telling is part of life in the camp. On the way to the mill they swap tales, beginning with one about the meanness of the bosses because the foreman did not give them the day off. Hurston did not participate in the storytelling during her outing with the men; she narrated the tales as an omniscient observer. The next tale is an “Ole Massa” tale set in slavery days. In the tales about John and “Ole Massa,” John “was too smart” and almost inevitably ends up making a fool of “Ole Massa” using different “resistance strategies.”

In “Ole Massa and John Who Wanted to Go to Heaven” (MM 72-74), “Ole Massa” tried to fool John after he heard him “beggin’ de Lawd to come git him in his fiery chariot and take him away.” John outwitted “Ole Massa” and ran away. Other “ole Massa” tales follow as they walk to the mill.

“The First Colored Man in Massa’s House” (MM 80-82) is a tale about a white man who describes to the slave certain aspects of his house and barn, playing with the black man’s superstitions and taking advantage of the apparent subservient behavior and ignorance of John, the slave. John hides behind the mask of ignorance but as “he never forgot nothin’ you told him,” he can not be fooled. John set fire to the cat while he was smoking; the cat ran to the barn and set it ablaze; the “Jackass” started kicking the hay and fodder around. John, who never forgot anything, went to call “Ole Massa” and in “Massa’s” words tells him what has happened: “‘I done famed the ‘vaperator and it caught de round head ad set him on fire. He’s gone to de mound and set it on fire, and July the God dam is eatin’ up everything he kin git his mouf on’” (MM 81).

“Ole Massa” was sleepy and did not understand a word John said. John finally tells him what has happened, in clear language, proving that he is not the ignorant slave “Ole Massa” takes him for: “‘Aw, you better git up out dat bed and come on down stairs. Ah done set dat ole cat afire and he run out to de barn and set it afire and dat ole Jackass is eatin’ up everything he git his mouf on’” (MM 82).

In other “Ole Massa” tales, the white master is depicted as more superstitious than the slave such as in “How the Negroes Got Their Freedom” (MM 83-85) and “God an’ de Devil in de Cemetery” (MM 88-89). Telling and hearing John and “Ole Massa” tales allows black men to experience spiritual freedom even when being defined as mules by white society. Tales form acts of resistance and show “the iron will needed [by the slaves] to resist domination and dehumanization” (Plant 1995: 46). While working the tales concern work and labor relations, slavery, the meanness of bosses, the origins of work. On their

time off, the camp sings, dances and tells tales. During their leisure time, tales about animals and the Devil prevail.

To the people of Polk County and Eatonville the tales, the lies are part of their life; they do not consider them to be “culture,” or better said, they do not accept the rift between ordinary life and culture. Hurston responded to the necessity to preserve black cultural practices. The depiction of life in the rural South demonstrates Hurston’s talent for observation and analysis as well as a cute ear for presenting the results in the style of the folk – but the style of the folk is manifestly qualified by the writers own style.

Part II of *Mules and Men* takes us into the world of hoodoo. Hurston recounts her experiences with various hoodoo practitioners in less than a quarter of the book. This hoodoo section is “recycled”: parts of this section had already appeared in the article “Hoodoo in America” published in 1931. New Orleans is the “hoodoo capital of America.” Hoodoo or Voodoo (“as pronounced by the whites”), with “thousands of secret adherents,” “started way back there before everything” and “is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion” (MM 183). After some introductory notes on hoodoo, Hurston links New Orleans with Haiti and Africa. She explains that people are secretive about their beliefs: “believers conceal their faith. Brother from sister, husband from wife. Nobody can say where it begins or ends. Mouths don’t empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing” (MM 178).

Hurston wished to experience hoodoo rites and was initiated into hoodoo in the French Quarter (the Vieux Carre, where Marie Leveau had lived and died) in New Orleans under the guidance of Luke Turner, a self-proclaimed nephew of Marie Leveau.¹ Her experiences with Luke Turner were extraordinary; the initiation rite she underwent with him was described in detail by Hurston (188-193). After the initiation rite, Hurston “studied under Turner five months and learned all of the Leveau routines” (193). The subsequent chapters show Hurston’s deepening immersion in hoodoo under the tutelage of various practitioners (Frizzly Rooster) or master conjurers. She underwent other initiation rites with other hoodoo doctors, but did not describe them in full; instead she explained some routines and gave some of their prescriptions. In Chapter VI of Part II, Hurston informs the reader that she “want[s] to relate the following

¹ Marie Leveau (1794-1881) was a quadroon who is also believed to have had some Indian blood. This free woman of color “made the practice of voodoo a commercial venture, putting it firmly on a paying basis. She also Romanized voodoo practice, adding to traditional voodoo paraphernalia statutes of Catholic saints, prayers, incense, candles, and holy water. [...] Because of the influence of Marie Laveau, Saint John the Baptist became the patron saint of voodoo in New Orleans” (Haskins 1990 [1978]: 60-61).

conjure stories which illustrate the attitude of negroes in the Deep South towards this subject” (MM 215).

Her research of hoodoo gave an insider’s view of these mystic practices: in New Orleans she was initiated into the “sympathetic magicians” community with an intricate ceremony. Hurston described her reactions to the events she participated in, instead of providing objective descriptions of voodoo and conjure rituals in New Orleans. Her hoodoo section was considered a disappointment by many, because its contents were almost identical to the material that she published in “Hoodoo in America.”

To Boas, Hurston’s folklore material in *Mules and Men* “throws into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life.”¹ *Mules and Men* was severely criticized by Hurston’s contemporaries for its exclusion of certain non fictional elements of the Southern Negro experience: exploitation, terror, misery and bitterness. But Alan Lomax, an expert on American folk culture, regarded the text as “the most engaging, genuine and skilfully written book in the field of folklore” (Hemenway 1977: 92).²

Zora Neale Hurston understood that the importance of African American culture went further than Florida and New Orleans or the South; to further grasp the importance of African American history and culture she went to the Caribbean – Bahamas, Haiti and Jamaica – as part of her fieldwork and research. Hurston’s second book of folklore, *Tell My Horse*, contains the material she collected in the Caribbean, namely in Haiti and Jamaica and presents a critically reflected ethnographic study of Caribbean culture, politics and religion. *Tell My Horse* is pure anthropology as it interprets the complex spiritual world that Hurston had already glimpsed in New Orleans; and it is historical in the sense that it describes social and political life and, in certain cases, makes reference to history (colonialism and Haiti’s difficult racial history).

Hurston gives vivid descriptions of her role as a participant in the daily life of Haitian and Jamaican society. Interestingly enough, her role in *Tell My Horse* is that of the outsider, the anthropologist and not of the insider that she was in *Mules and Men*. Hurston reports folklore practices which differ substantially from those referred in *Mules and Men* as being practiced in the South of the United States. Hurston does more than discuss folklore; the sections on

¹ Franz Boas, “Forward” to *Mules and Men*, 3.

² But Hurston was also accused of “offer[ing] new evidence of widespread ignorance and superstition.” See B.C. McNeill in the Review of *Mules and Men* published in the *Journal of Negro History*, April 1936, Nr 212: 323-225. Reprinted in Cronin. 1998: 42.

Jamaica and Haiti consider problems of race, gender, class and politics. Another difference between Hurston's two books on folklore is that in *Tell My Horse* dialect was hardly used. Hurston included little bits of Jamaican Creole here and there, but translates them into Standard English (TMH 282-3). In *Mules and Men*, she understood and spoke the dialect of the southern Negro, but did not speak Jamaican Creole fluently. Therefore, most of the stories in *Tell My Horse* are recounted in Standard English. In Chapter IV, "Night Song After Death," Hurston hears "duppy stories" told during the nine days after a burial. As an old man explained to Hurston, a duppy is "the thing that gave power to [the] parts" that remain after someone dies,

the most powerful part of any man. [...] when a man is alive, the heart and the brain controls him [...] but when the duppy leaves the body, it no longer has anything to restrain it and it will do more terrible things than any man ever dreamed of. The duppy is much too powerful and is apt to hurt people all the time. So we make nine night to force the duppy to stay in his grave. (TMH 313).

The stories are interesting but do not compare to the lying sessions of Polk County. Hurston must have had difficulties in deciding how to present her Caribbean material. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston, the anthropologist and literary writer, contextualized or framed the tales in their social and cultural environment. In *Tell My Horse*, as in *Mules and Men*, Hurston did not use formal research techniques expected of a scientist; no citations and no cross-reference are made, even for the material presented in the chapters on politics and history – all information was based on hearsay or personal accounts that she heard from her informants. *Tell My Horse* is also written in the first person, and although it is considered non-fiction, Hurston employed her literary and folkloristic skills whenever the occasion arose. An example occurs in Chapter X, "Voodoo and Voodoo Gods," which begins like this: "Dr. Holly says that in the beginning God and His woman went into the bedroom together to commence creation. That was the beginning of everything and Voodoo is just as old as that" (TMH 376). *Tell My Horse* can be compared to *Mules and Men* in that it was also written in a style to reach a wider audience, so that the common reader and not only the anthropologists and others scholars could read and understand it. It balances between anthropology and fiction as Hurston tries to demystify Voodoo. Robert Hemenway defines this clash between fiction and anthropology as "vocational schizophrenia" which began earlier on in her career and which "called for a compromise between her college career and her literary interests.

[...] Holding both worlds together was her commitment to the folk experience and the artistic forms it generated” (Hemenway 1977: 63-4).

The title of the book refers to the Haitian belief that Guedé, the peasant God, “mounts” a subject (a horse) and speaks through him/her after uttering the phrase “Parlay Cheval Ou” (tell my horse). This “spirit possession” gives the subject the freedom to speak to rivals and/or superiors in a tone that normally would not be used:

Guedé is never visible. He manifests himself by “mounting” a subject as a rider mounts a horse, then he speaks and acts through his mount. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the loa until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the “horse” does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden.

“Parlay Cheval Ou” (Tell My Horse), the loa begins to dictate through the lips of his mount and goes on and on. Sometimes Guedé dictates the most caustic and belittling statements concerning some pompous person who is present. A prominent official is made ridiculous before a crowd of peasants. [...] On several occasions, it was observed that Guedé seemed to enjoy humbling his betters (TMH 495).

The book is divided in three parts, “Jamaica,” “Politics and Personalities of Haiti” and “Voodoo in Haiti.” Gwendolyn Mikell wrote in her article “When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston’s Haitian Anthropology” that

Tell My Horse does not plunge into an exploration of culture in Haiti; rather it takes us on a winding journey through rural Jamaica, examining racial attitudes, religious and death rituals, male-female relationships and the position of women in Caribbean society (Mikell 1982: 223).

In the first chapter of Part I, entitled “The Rooster’s Nest,” she emphasizes the unnaturalness of the colonial social relations at the time of her visit to Jamaica. Jamaica “has its social viewpoints and stratifications which influence so seriously its economic direction” and is characterized as “two per cent white and the other ninety-eight per cent all degrees of mixture between white and black, and that is where the rooster’s nest comes in” (TMH 279). Hurston is disgusted by the class and gender oppression and by the racism of light-skinned mulattoes toward blacks in Jamaica as color lines seem to be drawn between black and any shade of mulatto.

The aspiration to whiteness requires the denial of black family, black ancestors and, therefore, black mothers who bore children to white or light

skinned mulatto fathers. English paternity is mentioned, emphasized, while black maternity literally disappears:

When a Jamaican is born of a black woman and some English or Scotsman, the black mother is literally and figuratively kept out of sight as far as possible, but no one is allowed to forget that white father, however questionable the circumstances of birth. [...] Black skin is so utterly condemned that the black mother is not going to be mentioned or exhibited. You get the impression that these virile Englishmen do not require women to reproduce. They just come out to Jamaica, scratch out a nest and lay eggs that hatch out into "pink" Jamaicans. [...] It is so arranged in Jamaica that a person may be black by birth but white by proclamation. That is, he gets himself declared legally white (TMH 281-2).

"White by proclamation" is an option for mulattoes with money, status and some white blood, who get to be "white on the census records and colored otherwise" (TMH 281). Black ancestry and heritage are eliminated.

In the chapter "Women in the Caribbean" Hurston concentrates on the harsh effects of colonialism upon black women and on the roles of black women in society. The chapter focuses on the fate and the oppression of women who "are inferior to all men by God and law down there" (TMH 327). She traces the sexual abuse and abject poverty suffered by Afro-Caribbean black women back to the colonial denigration of them as "donkeys" (mules) fit only to serve as beasts of burden or as sexual objects:

If the [woman] is of no particular family, poor and black, she is in a bad way indeed in that man's world. She had better pray to the Lord to turn her into a donkey and be done with the thing. It is assumed that God made poor black females for beasts of burden, and nobody is going to interfere with providence. Most assuredly no upper class man is going to demean himself by assisting one of them with a heavy load. If he were caught in such an act he probably would become an outcast among his kind. It is just considered down there that God made two kinds of donkeys, one kind that can talk. The black women of Jamaica load banana boats now, and the black women used to coal ships when they burned coal (TMH 327).

Following or copying the European constructions of black women as animals, or more precisely, beasts of burden, the women were forced to "do the same labours as a man or a mule." Women had to "load banana boats", or do other heavy labour, like transporting loads up and down mountain paths, or breaking rocks into gravel (TMH 327) as "everywhere in the Caribbean

women carry a donkey's load on their heads and walk up and down mountains with it" (TMH 328).

Poor black women have no legal or social status which makes it possible for men to treat women as disposable sexual partners to be seduced, used and abandoned as men have no legal obligations to women below their rank. Hurston refers several tales of black women who found themselves in this situation whose lives were destroyed. Voodoo offers black women a means of resistance through the spiritual sphere as they can momentarily stop being donkeys. The treatment of women as donkeys or beasts of burden has its equivalent in *Mules and Men* and in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where women were exposed as the mules of the world.

The second part of this book concerns "Politics and Personalities of Haiti" mentioning doctors, politicians, the "liberators of Haiti" and the chaotic political and social climate of Haiti. She arrived in Haiti two years after the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) had ceased. Hurston narrates episodes related to the actions of power-hungry politicians who had ruled Haiti since 1804, date of the independence from France. The key historical incidents are related to her by Haitians, mainly from the upper classes. She recounts episodes of Haitian history as experienced and told by the people. Historical veracity is not verified as it was irrelevant in this creation of a cultural background, before she "dives" into Voodoo.

Among the subjects that Hurston chooses to focus are the "habit of lying" and the cruelty of Haitians. Zora Neale Hurston disliked the unreliability and habitual untruthfulness she experienced among the Haitians considering "that this art, pastime, expedient or whatever one wishes to call it, is more than any other factor responsible for Haiti's tragic history" (TMH 346). She also refers the cruelty of Haitians towards animals that impressed her and mentions specific examples. In her opinion the upper classes are also to blame for this practice, since "they do rule the country and make the laws. If they were conscious of the cruelty of the thing they would forbid it:

The Haitian people are gentle and lovable except for their enormous and unconscious cruelty. It is the peasants who tie the feet of chickens and turkeys together and sling the bundle over their shoulders with the heads of the fowls hanging down and walk for miles down mountains to the markets. The sun grows hot and the creatures all but perish of thirst and they do faint from their unnatural and unhappy position. [...] There are thousands of donkeys in Haiti whose ears have been beaten off in an effort to hurry them.

I have seen horses raw from their withers to their rumps, scalded by saddles and still being worked (TMH 347-8).

The story of “the Black Joan of Arc” is part of Chapter VIII. The “Black Joan of Arc” was Celestina Simon, daughter of the General Francois Antoine Simon who became President of Haiti in 1908. The General is described as “ignorant and boorish” who was put into the palace “as a device” by his “advisors.” However the “‘advisors’ had not reckoned with [...] Celestina Simon and Simalo, the goat” and the President “was not as manageable as anticipated.” The General “was a great follower of the loa, and [...] Celestina was his trusted priestess” (TMH 361). He had climbed up the “military ladder from the most humble beginnings” with the help of Celestina and Simalo, the goat, who was “married” to Celestina.

The upper classes were astonished and fearful of the “voodoo services and ceremonies held in the national palace” (TMH 362). All went well until Simalo’s heart was broken by the divorce from Celestina, brought about by her father who had the hope of marrying Celestina to “a man of position and wealth” (TMH 363). Celestina was kept in her bedroom until the divorce was completed. Simalo soon died of grief or was killed and was given a Christian burial without the priest’s knowledge that he was a goat. The President grieved the loss of Simalo and lost the palace a few months after the death of the goat, because Celestina’s powers disappeared after she broke her vows. There were several uprisings which the President and his daughter could not control, so he went into exile to Jamaica. Celestina survived and “pronounced a terrible curse against the man whose victorious army drove Simon from power” (TMH 366). When President Simon’s successor, Leconte, was killed when the palace was blown up, the people “said it was the power of Celestina still at work (TMH 366).

The third part of *Tell My Horse*, “Voodoo in Haiti,” presents Hurston’s research into Afro-Caribbean voodoo religion adapted from the religion brought to the islands by enslaved blacks.¹ At the time of her research voodoo was a religion mostly practiced by black lower classes, while upper class believers tried to hide their faith from westerners and each other.² In voodoo, men and women

¹ Voodoo is the Caribbean transposition of the African religion vodun. Hoodoo/Voodoo/conjure are, according to critics, different names for the same thing.

² In the 1930s, Voodoo was the unofficial religion of Haiti, but by the end of the decade it was driven underground. Voodoo was regarded in the 1920s and 1930s as a cult of superstition that involved serpent worship and orgies. In 2003, Voodoo was given new powers, when President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, gave the practice official religious status. (New York Times, April 11, 2003).

have the same authority and the worshipers can participate in the ceremony, feed the loa, undergo spirit-possession or just dance. Voodoo is a religion that is always undergoing transformations and evolving: new loa are created, new rites and new subjects are added to the ceremonies.

Zora Neale Hurston explains that “Voodoo is a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces” (TMH 376). In Voodoo, men and women have equal power – mambos and hougans, the priestesses and the priests, have equal authority and in certain ceremonies, even share authority. Borders are crossed in Voodoo with male and female exchanging roles – there are no defined lines, either of color, class or gender. Sexual and class hierarchy are abolished when women find a spiritual framework that allows them to talk back, to deny treatment as beasts of burden or sexual slaves, to contest all that the colonial ideology had defined for them. Their bodies are seen in a positive way as they become horses “mounted” by a spirit or loa. In the voodoo ceremonies the participants/worshippers are active, taking part in most practices, undergoing spirit possession, and dancing. Natural elements are important in Voodoo as the sacred and the natural interpenetrate, using water and fire, and holding ceremonies in natural settings, such as waterfalls and water springs, sacred trees or stones, as “in Haiti spirits inhabit the heads of streams, known as sources, the cascades, and the grottoes” (TMH 500).

Hurston describes Voodoo as a complex religion with “deep meanings.” Many scholars who have studied it, have not been able to grasp its complexity. She describes the importance of Damballah, “the highest and most powerful of all the gods” (TMH 381), Erzulie Freida, the essence of female power, “the female counterpart of Damballah,” “the pagan goddess of love” (TMH 383), and also explains the difference between Rada gods and Petro gods: “the Rada gods are the ‘good’ gods and are said to have originated in Dahomey; the Petro Gods are the ones who do evil work and are said to have been brought over from the Congo” (TMH 377). Voodoo is linked to Africa, since it was brought from Africa by the slaves and adapted to the conditions in Haiti. Some mambo and hougans serve both the Rada and the Petro Gods and cannot control which spirits will appear when called. Hurston wanders in and out of voodoo ceremonies to gather the necessary information for her research.

In the chapter entitled “Archahaie and What It Means” (the longest chapter in the book), Hurston gives an account of what she experienced in the voodoo ceremonies that she attended, and describes some ceremonies, partially or completely, even though she does not describe her own initiation. “Archahaie is the greatest place known in Haiti for Voodoo,” but also “the most dreaded

spot in all Haiti for Voodoo work” (TMH 402, 455). Hurston went to Archahaie to the Hounfort of Dieu Donnez St. Leger who “lives in a compound like an African chief,” with a large number of people. She was allowed “to attend all of their ceremonies and in making explanations” (TMH 403), and conducted through the rites and taught the songs of the services. Hurston praises Dieu Donnez for his intelligence and gentleness, saying that “there is nothing primitive about the man away from his profession” (TMH 415).

Hurston also tells the reader about the secret societies of human flesh eaters, variously known as the “Cochon Gris, Secte Rouge” and the “Vin-brindingue” (TMH 483) and about the world of zombies. The secret societies were believed to come out at night, take to the country roads wearing red robes and killing those they encountered. According to rumors, some secret societies were cannibalistic. Hurston attended or watched one ceremony of the Sect Rouge (TMH 485-493), described in the chapter with the same title, where she also describes the fate that befalls “the adept who talks” (TMH 493).

In the chapter entitled “Zombies,” Hurston tries to prove the existence of zombies, giving as evidence her empirical observation and the photographic record of Felicia Felix-Mentor. She saw Felicia when she went to the hospital at Gonaives with “permission to make an investigation of the matter” (TMH 469). Felicia was a woman found walking twenty nine years after her death, who led her to believe that zombies exist:

I had the rare opportunity to see and touch an authentic case. I listened to the broken noises in its throat, and then, I did what no one else had ever done, I photographed it. If I had not experienced all of this in the strong sunlight of a hospital yard, I might have come away from Haiti interested but doubtful. But I saw this case of Felicia Felix-Mentor which was vouched for by the highest authority. So I know that there are zombies in Haiti. People have been called back from the dead (TMH 457).

Zombies “are the bodies without souls. The living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again” (TMH 456). Zombies are created as an act of revenge. A Houngan causes someone to fall suddenly ill and appear dead by giving him/her a zombie poison. After the burial the body is dug up by the houngan’s followers or voodoo practitioners and brought back to consciousness with the use of an antidote, but retains no will power. The victim remains under the control of the person who drugged him/her. Zombies are thus the perfect realization of the slave condition. They are put to work from morning to night and they do not have the will power to protest or leave.

The boundary between life and death are blurred when zombies are discussed. Hurston describes some cases of zombies, but the case of Felicia is the most detailed and the one that she was able to verify personally, a “dreadful [...] sight of [...] wreckage” which “was too much to endure for long” (TMH 469).

Hurston discusses with two white doctors the reasons for the existence of zombies. They admit that zombies may be created by secret African drugs that destroy parts of the brain:

It was concluded that it is not a case of awakening the dead, but a matter of the semblance of death induced by some drug known to a few. Some secret probably brought from Africa and handed down from generation to generation. These men know the effect of the drug and the antidote. It is evident that it destroys that part of the brain which governs speech and will power. The victims can move and act but cannot formulate thought (TMH 469).

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert in the essay “Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie” points out that

zombification continues to be perceived as a magical process by which the sorcerer seizes the victim’s *ti bin ange* – the component of the soul where personality, character, and volition reside – leaving behind an empty vessel subject to the commands of the bokor.¹

Regarding the reasons for the “zombification,” Paravisini-Gebert cites Wade Davis who undertook “anthropological research into the ethnobiology and pharmacopoeia of zombification [...] to demystify a phenomenon long believed to be solely the result of sorcery and black magic.” (Paravisini-Gebert 1999: 38). The results were published in his two books on the subject, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness* (1988), and are summarized by Paravisini-Gebert in the essay referred to above:

Zombification, far from being the result of arbitrary sorcery performed by the bokor for his own personal gain, Davis contends, is a “social sanction” administered to those who have violated the codes of the secret society known as the *Bizango*, “an important arbiter of social life among the peasantry,” a force “that protects community resources, particularly land, as they define the power boundaries of the village” (Paravisini-Gebert 1999: 38).

Wade Davis dedicates some pages of his book, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, to Zora Neale Hurston and her work on hoodoo and voodoo (Davis

¹ Published in Fernandez-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 1999: 38.

1986: 206-211). He mentions that it was Hurston's "spirit of adventure combined with a passionate desire to continue her investigations and promote vodoun as a legitimate and complex religion that drew [her] to Haiti" (Davis 1986: 208). Describing some of her activities and incidents that she was involved with in Haiti, he praises the fact that she was able "to put together an astonishing portrait of the Haitian secret societies" (Davis 1986: 209), and also the fact that she "rather remarkably, describes what she could not have realized was the primary method of zombification" (Davis 1986: 209), referring to the description of the punishment inflicted upon the adept of a secret society who talks (TMH 493).

Gwendolyn Mikell, in her analysis of Hurston's work on the Caribbean, questions her descriptions and her explanations of this "extremely personalized religion" pointing out that there are gaps in *Tell My Horse*:

We hear the words, but we do not know what roles these rituals play in the social lives of Haitians. [...] She sought to demonstrate the internal coherence and logic of Voodoo itself, not to examine its outward characteristics and functions in Haitian society (Mikell 1982: 227).

Whilst the hoodoo practiced in the United States generally involves sympathetic magic, revenge or protection work, voodoo rites in Haiti are presented like a religious ceremony and not like a doctor-patient relationship as in hoodoo. In Voodoo, the Gods are worshipped in ceremonies that involve many participants not necessarily looking for a favor from the deity. Compared with Hoodoo in New Orleans, Voodoo was more complex and difficult to grasp. The Hoodoo practiced in New Orleans was almost a commercial activity revolving around the buying and selling of objects (snake skins and dolls) and love potions and killing from a distance. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston included recipes collected in New Orleans, that ranged from "To Break Up a Love Affair," "To Kill and Harm" to "To Make People Love You" (MM 258). Hurston explains in *Tell My Horse* that her work on Voodoo is incomplete:¹

This work does not pretend to give a full account of either voodoo or voodoo gods. It would require several volumes to attempt to cover completely the gods and Voodoo practices of one vicinity alone. Voodoo in Haiti has

¹ For more information or background on voodoo see Jim Haskins, *Voodoo & Hoodoo. The Craft as Revealed by Traditional Practitioners* (1990 [1978]); Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1998 [1946]); Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), *Sacred Possessions. Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (1999); Laennec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (1995), Donald J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995) and Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (1959).

gathered about itself more detail of gods and rites than the Catholic church has in Rome (TMH 397).

From 1957 to 1959 Hurston wrote a column on “Hoodoo and Black Magic” for the *Fort Pierce Chronicle*, proving that Hoodoo or Voodoo was a subject that she returned to, over and over again.

Tell My Horse was not as successful as *Mules and Men* during Hurston’s lifetime and even today is still largely overlooked by readers, scholars and critics. Robert Hemenway attributes the failure of the book to the fact that Hurston was not successful as a “political analyst or travelogist” and that “she reports a good deal of public gossip as accepted fact” and gives “superficial descriptions of West Indian curiosities” (Hemenway 1977: 249). According to Lillie P. Howard, it is understandable that *Tell My Horse* “did not sell well. Not only is it tedious in too many places but it often passes off village gossip and “hear-say” as facts, thereby drawing fire from some anthropologists.” (Howard 1980: 159).

And Darwin T. Turner downgrades Hurston’s aims in *Tell My Horse*:

Although she had proposed a study of the voodoo of Haiti and the West Indies, she produced instead a travelogue of her experiences, her reactions to the people, and her descriptions of the country. Such travelogues attain significance only if they have been prepared by political scientists or sociologists capable of evaluating their experiences (Turner 1971:118).

But Hurston’s contributions to the study of voodoo cannot be underestimated. She was the first person to photograph a zombie. She described her emotion in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: “My greatest thrill was coming face to face with a zombie and photographing her. This act had never happened before in the history of man” (DT 711). She did not tell the secrets of Voodoo, because as an initiate and a practitioner she had to abide by its secrecy laws of “profound silence” (MM 178). Her work on Haitian Voodoo is cited or suggested as further reading in the works of Laennec Hurbon, *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy*, and in the volume edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert entitled *Sacred Possessions. Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*. In *Voodoo & Hoodoo. The Craft as Revealed by Traditional Practitioners*, Tim Haskins cites Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and her article “Hoodoo in America” as sources of his work. Haskins refers to Hurston’s work, namely “examples of evil conjure,” “rite involving a doll,” “rite for a woman who wanted to make a man love her” (Haskins 1990 [1978]: 62-64, 116-117, 189-190), and points out that she is “the most reliable” of the “students of voodoo” (Haskins 1990

[1978]: 62). Rachel Stein considers *Tell My Horse* “a pioneering study of Afro-Caribbean society and religion, notable [...] for Hurston’s biting analysis of the harsh effects of colonialism upon black women and for her presentation of Afro-Caribbean Voodoo religion as countering these oppressive social relations” (Stein 1997: 54).

Hurston did not complete her research in the Caribbean. She became suddenly ill and fearing death left her research and sought the help of the American consulate in Port-au-Prince. After her initial recovery she travelled to the south of Haiti and spent some time recovering and sightseeing. Robert Hemenway affirms that “Hurston was convinced that her illness and her voodoo studies were related” (Hemenway 1977: 248). In a letter to Henry Allen Moe, Hurston writes that she had “had a violent gastric disturbance,” which led her to believe that she would “never make it.” As a trained researcher and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston was ready to risk her own health and well-being – one might wonder at the drive behind her need to pursue knowledge of a transcendental kind. From this point of view her study of Hatitian voodoo is almost a demand of origins.

According to Sw. Anand Prahlad, Hurston’s “folklore work is highly literary.” (Prahlad 1999: 567). *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* are not only collections of folklore, they are also works of literature where folklore and fiction come together. Hurston’s work, especially her folklore, refutes the racial stereotypes that were common when she started writing and publishing, stating that there was an African American culture and that it was no less aesthetic than the dominant white American culture of the time. The accusations that she pandered to the white pursuit of the primitive with her depictions of “happy darkies” and her characterizations of blacks could not be further from the truth. Rachel Stein confirms this when she writes that “Hurston’s fiction and folklore traced the roots of African American resistance within the folk culture of the rural South” (Stein 1997: 53-54). Early on in *Mules and Men* Hurston explained how the Negro “offers a feather-bed resistance [...] presenting “the theory behind [their] tactics:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song (MM 10).

Hurston published the two volumes of folklore-related material already mentioned here, that she had gathered in the late twenties and early thirties,

but a third folklore manuscript languished, possibly because she had come to resist the editing that would “smooth” her tales. *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* spent thirty years in a basement storage room at Columbia University and twenty more at the Smithsonian Institution and were finally published with the title *Every Tongue Got to Confess. Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States*¹. This volume of folk tales was edited by Carla Kaplan in 2001, and “provide[s] a fascinating, verdant slice of African-American life in the rural South.” The tales published here are all part of the undated manuscript, apparently prepared for publication by Hurston. The tales were collected between 1927 and 1930, at the same time as the tales that appear in *Mules and Men* and some of the tales appeared in both books. The stories are organized by subject and presented in the vivid and true sound of black vernacular. One of the main differences between the two books of folklore – *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* and *Mules and Men* – is the amount of contextual narrative in the latter; in *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* the tales are presented solo, without being put in a context, and the source of the tale is given at the end of the tale.

3.1 Hurston as Dramatist: Performing Folklore

Hurston’s role as a playwright has not received much attention from the critics and scholars of her work. Her first theatrical experience was in 1915-16 when she worked as a maid in the Gilbert and Sullivan troupe.² In the twenties she studied drama while at Howard University and during the first two decades of her career Hurston was enthusiastic about playwriting and producing shows. Evidence of this is the number of plays copyrighted during this period and Hurston’s involvement in various other projects. Her letters written during the period also show her interest in the stage. Hurston’s theatrical output began in 1925 with *Spears* and lasted until 1945.³ Her plays celebrate black culture and its performative nature, centering on African American communities with little

¹ Some of the material presented in this volume was previously published in the two volumes of the Library of America.

² DT, Chapter VIII, “Back Stage and the Railroad”, especially 648-665.

³ *Spears* was submitted to the *Opportunity* literary contest at the same time as “Color Struck.” “Color Struck” won second prize in the drama division and *Spears* won an honourable mention at the 1925 contest. *Opportunity* was the official magazine of the National Urban League. *Spears* was originally published by *The X-Ray: The Official Publication of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority* in December 1925 while Hurston was at Howard University. “The First One. A Play in One Act” was submitted to the *Opportunity* literary contest in 1926.

or no white presence. In 1997, several of Hurston's play manuscripts resurfaced at the Library of Congress when they were discovered by a retired librarian¹ and "Spears" was discovered by Wyatt Hourston Day, an African American manuscript collector.

The richness of black culture and black folklore was preserved by Hurston's research and recording and, according to her, could only achieve full expression on the stage where it could be seen by many in its unadulterated form. Hurston wrote many plays, but very few got to be produced on the stage and few of her plays were published. Her plays, with few exceptions, have received little critical attention, due to the fact that, until recently, most of their manuscripts appeared to be lost and were not published during her lifetime.

The first all-black Broadway musical and probably the most successful all-black review to open on Broadway in the twenties was *Shuffle Along*.² Written by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey L. Lyles, with music and lyrics by the vaudeville team of Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, it opened in 1921 with an all-black cast (LL 172) and had over 500 performances. Among the performers who played in this musical were Josephine Baker, Florence Mills and Paul Robeson. The show featured the first realistic African-American love story. Until *Shuffle Along*, love scenes between blacks had been a stage taboo or simply debasing caricatures. *Shuffle Along* laid the foundation for public acceptance of African-American performers in other than "burlesques" roles. The musical showed impressive dancing and displayed the Cakewalk, but was still in the line of the minstrelsy and vaudeville "reinforc[ing] the stereotype of black people as happy-go-lucky, overly sensual bodies" (Bass and Gates 1991 [1931]: 17).

Several white shows about blacks were produced after *Shuffle Along* – like *Porgy and Bess*, *The Green Pastures*³, *All God's Chillun* and *Four Saints in Three Acts*⁴. Other black dramas, written by white playwrights are *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill and *In Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green. *Porgy and Bess* is the best-known of these works and was probably inspired by *Shuffle Along*. *Porgy and Bess*, completed in 1935, was a project by George Gershwin, Ira

¹ These play manuscripts were published in *From Luababa to Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress*. Eds. Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell (2005). The typescripts of the plays are held at the Library of Congress American Memory site: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>.

² Aubrey Lyles and Flournoy wrote the book and Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle wrote the score.

³ A play about Sunday school stories from the Old Testament in the idiom of rural Negroes of the time written by Mark Connelly.

⁴ Originally a lyric drama written by Gertrude Stein, it became an opera with an all-black cast and music by composer Virgil Thomson.

Gershwin, Dubose Heyward, and Dorothy Heyward, with 700 pages of music.

George Gershwin read the novel *Porgy* –about the African-American “Gullah” culture of South Carolina – written by Dubose Heyward in the twenties, the book that was the source for the theater play authored by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy Heyward. Only in 1934 did George and Ira Gershwin together with Dubose and Dorothy Heyward collaborate on what was to become the opera *Porgy and Bess*. They spent several weeks in Charleston, South Carolina, where George Gershwin and Dubose Heyward observed the customs of the local people and listened to their music. The “Gullahs” became the prototypes of the Catfish Row residents. The opera has a popular repertoire, containing Jazz, Blues and folk elements. The play with an all-black cast tried out in Boston and opened in New York on October 10, 1935, but was not truly successful during George Gershwin’s lifetime.¹

In November 1926, Hurston published her one-act play “Color Struck. A Play in Four Scenes” in *Fire!!*, a play that has received much critical attention and was possibly staged at the Negro Art Theatre of Harlem.² A year later, in 1927, “The First One. A Play in One Act” was published in *Ebony and Topaz. A Collectanea*, edited by Charles S. Johnson.³ *Mule Bone. A Comedy of Negro Life* was written by Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes in 1931, but only published in 1991.

Hurston’s first play, “Color Struck,” exposes a conflict based on excessive color consciousness in the African American community.⁴ Written in the black vernacular of the American South, the action takes place “twenty years ago and present,” in an all-black environment – “A Southern City.” This four scene play begins with a group of laughing men and women boarding a Jim Crow railway car in Jacksonville to go to St. Augustine to attend the annual cakewalk contest.⁵ Black people from all over Florida are to participate in the event. John and Emma are the favorites: “John and Emma gointer win it nohow. They’s

¹ For years *Porgy and Bess* was frequently performed in Europe where it was acclaimed. In 1940 a slightly revised version was presented at the Theatre Guild and the work seemed to finally earn approval in the United States. *Porgy and Bess* represented George Gershwin’s most ambitious creation and his favourite composition. George Gershwin’s complete work was again heard on an American stage in 1976, in Houston and, finally, in 1985, fifty years after the first production, the “folk opera” was performed by New York’s Metropolitan Opera Company.

² Hurston to Annie Nathan Meyer, November 10, 1925. (Hurston 2002: 69).

³ Reprinted in Wintz 1996b.

⁴ “Color Struck” is an ambiguous term in black communities for “the intraracial color consciousness” (Hemenway 1977: 47).

⁵ See the train scene in DT, “My People, My People” to compare the use and reuse of material in Hurston’s work.

the bestest cakewalkers in dis state” (CS 7). However, when the two finally board the train, they are arguing and Emma accuses John of flirting with Effie:

JOHN. It was Emmaline nearly made us get left. She says I wuz smiling at Effie on the street car and she had to get off and wait for another one.

EMMA. (*removing the hairpins from her hat, turns furiously upon him*). You wuz grinning at her and she wuz grinning back jes lake a ole chessy cat! (CS 8).

The argument has to do with shades of skin color: Emma is a dark-skinned woman who accuses brown-skinned John of being interested in light-skinned Effie. Emma is very jealous and does not believe that John prefers her to Effie or any other light colored girl. John insists on his love for Emma and tries to constantly demonstrate it, but Emma obsessive jealousy will eventually destroy her relationship with John.

Scene two takes place in the dance hall in St. Augustine where people are gathering for the cakewalk contest. The cakewalk is a performative dance and cultural event that was originally a slave imitation of the master's ballroom dancing. Eric J. Sundquist refers that the cakewalk dates back to slavery times:¹

The cakewalk, though it had borrowed white elements from the outset, [...] was a dance with clear African American and shadowy African origins. [...] Although the cakewalk could be performed as a burlesque of black freedom and cultural integrity, it derived [...] from the distinctive survivals of the slave culture – the work songs, dance, spirituals, and verbal and material arts in which African retentions, a consciousness of resistance to white subjugation, and the creation of a new African American culture were uniquely combined (Sundquist 1993: 276-7).

In Hurston's play, the cakewalk is just a black rural dance. People are enjoying themselves, eating, talking and laughing as “very good humor prevails.” Again Emma is overtaken with jealousy when “Effie crosses to John and Emma with two pieces of pie on a plate.” Effie offers the pie to the couple: “Y'll have a piece uh mah blueberry pie – it's mighty nice! (CS 10), but Emma “freezes up instantly” and does not accept the offer, because they “got cocoanut layer-cake.” John accepts the pie, trying to compensate for Emma's rude behaviour and pleads with Emma to “be nice,” but Emma becomes more hostile: “Naw, you done ruint mah appetite now, carryin' on wid dat punkin-colored ole gal.” She accuses John of being “hog-wile ovah her cause she's half-white!” (CS 10).

¹ For more details about the Cakewalk and its implications, see Sundquist 1993: 276-294.

In the meanwhile, Joe Clarke, the mayor of Eatonville, had already asked the men to get their partners for “de gran’ march.” The “Pas-me-la” contest is announced “from beyond curtain;” it is heard but not seen. The Master-of-ceremonies announces that the “Great Cake walk will begin.” He starts calling the couples to the floor. When John and Emma are called, she refuses to go and tries to convince him not to participate because she does not want him to be near “all them girls” (CS 11). John is determined to take part in the Cakewalk contest, even if it has to be without Emma; he and Effie become a couple for the contest. Emma is bitter and disappointed and more color conscious than ever: “Oh – them yaller wenches! How I hate ‘em! They gets everything they wants –.

[...]

Oh, them half whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jogs – everything. The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones (CS 11).

The Cakewalk contest takes up Scene III, which is very short and with very little dialogue. All the participants are gathered in the Dance Hall with the exception of Emma who is sitting alone, motionless behind the curtains. The cakewalk takes place and John and Effie win the contest.

The fourth and last scene occurs “in the present,” twenty years after the cakewalk contest. The setting is “the interior of a one-room shack in an alley” (CS 12). The shack belongs to Emma, who lives there with her light-skinned and very ill daughter. John arrives, still loving and compassionate, eager to see Emma, whom he still loves. His wife has died and now he wants to marry Emma. Emma remarks that his wife must have been “some high-yaller dickty-doo,” but John replies that “she was jus’ as much like you as Ah could get her.” There is no light in the shack and John insists that Emma light a lamp, but she thinks that they “don’t exactly need no light, do we, John, tuh jus’ set an’ talk?” (CS 13). John lights the lamp and looks about the room; he sees the poverty, but wants to take Emma to “Philly” where he lives and has a nice house. He means to make her happy.

“A groan from the bed” announces the presence of someone else in the room. “Ill at ease,” Emma tells John that that is her “chile” who is ill. Emma tries to hide the girl, but John sees her hair and her face and that she is almost white. Instantly John calls the girl “our child.” He suggests that Emma should get a doctor since “[their] daughter is bad off.” After agreeing to marry him, Emma finally goes for the doctor. She soon returns without the doctor and accuses John of lust for her daughter Lou Lillian. Emma alienates John as she

is just as obsessed with color as ever. John is disappointed with Emma and leaves the shack:

JOHN. (*slowly, after a long pause*). So this is the woman I've been wearing over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can't believe any one else could love it! (CS 14).

The white doctor arrives to see Emma's daughter, but he is too late to do anything for her. He tells Emma that she should have gone to fetch him sooner. Emma remains in the shack alone with her dead daughter. Her color prejudice is responsible for all the unhappiness in her life – she lost John and her daughter. Twenty years were not enough for her “to see the light.”

“Color Struck” is rich in dialect of the South, demonstrating that early on in her career, Hurston already knew how to capture the language of the folk. Color prejudice or color consciousness as a theme or motif is present in other Hurston's works such as *Tell My Horse*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and in “How It Feels To Be Colored Me.” Hurston denied that she was color conscious in “How It Feels To Be Colored Me,” but there is evidence that in her revues she preferred to use darker skinned performers to mulattos. In a letter to Mason, regarding the performers of *The Great Day*, Hurston says:” I have a fine black girl as contralto soloist, and a lovely black girl as soprano. This baritone is a dark brown also. No mulattoes at all.”¹

Color is also the central theme in Hurston's play about the biblical story of Noah's curse on his youngest son, which resulted in Ham and his descendants being cursed to be the servants of mankind forever. “The First One. A Play in One Act” is a reinterpretation of the biblical Ham legend in an African American context.² The play takes place in the Valley of Ararat, three years after the Flood. Noah and his family (wife, three sons, Shem, Japheth and Ham, and their wives and their children) have gathered to commemorate, at sunrise, the third year of their delivery from the flood.

This play was the first attempt by Hurston to dramatize biblical stories but in this play she uses Standard English and not black dialect.³ The play opens with Noah and his family waiting for Ham, the youngest son, his wife

¹ Hurston to Mason, October 15, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 233).

² Genesis 9, 18 – 28.

³ *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), “The Fire and the Cloud” (1934), the unpublished stories “The Seventh Veil”, “The Woman in Gaul” and Herod the Great (the novel Hurston worked on for years and until her death).

and his son, to begin the celebration. Ham arrives, playing “a rude stringed instrument” and dancing. Mrs. Shem criticizes Ham for not bringing a proper offering and accuses him of “do[ing] naught but tend the flock and sing!,” while his brothers Shem and Japheth “work always in the fields and vineyards” (FO 54). Mrs. Japheth also displays contempt and jealousy: “Still, thou art beloved of thy father [...] he gives thee all his vineyards for thy singing, but Japheth must work hard for his fields” (FO 54). The commemoration ceremony takes place – they recall the flood and their deliverance.

After the ceremony, they eat and drink “vigorously.” Noah commands them to “Dance! Be glad! Bring wine!” and tells “Ham smite thy harp of ram’s thews and sing!” Ham complies and “plays on his harp and capers about singing.” Noah gets drunk to “forget water – it means death, death!” Noah is upset by the memories of “bodies floating, face up!” (CS 54). He “reels drunkenly toward the tent door” and finally “sprawls just inside the door.” Mrs. Shem is irritated with Ham’s attitude as he is able to grab the fruit before his brother Shem, as “he seizes all else that he desires.” When Ham, drunk, laughs about his father’s nakedness, she “exultantly” sees this attitude as an opportunity to attack the favorite son: “the young goat has fallen into a pit!” Mrs. Shem and Mrs. Japheth jealous of Ham “who needs only to smile to please” Noah, quickly find a way to poison Noah against Ham.

When Noah is awakened by his sons and finds out that his “nakedness [has been] uncovered” he curses “the one who has done this thing,” without knowing that it was Ham: “His skin shall be black! [...] Black! He and his seed forever. He shall serve his brothers and they shall rule over him” (FO 55). Part of the “punishment” is that Ham shall have none of Noah’s goods and also that he shall be a servant to his brothers. After Noah, who is still drunk, utters his curse his family is “terrified”: “Black! He could not mean black.” Noah is again forced to wake up from his drunken state by Mrs. Noah, but remembers no curse. He “unspeak[s] the Curse,” but it is too late (FO 56). The family sense that “the curse is too awful for him.” Ham realizes he is black and is repelled by everyone except his wife and his son, who is also black. Noah banishes Ham and his family so that they “may see [his] face no more” (FO 57). Ham leaves to go “to the sun” and cynically “curses” those who stay to “remain with [their] flocks and fields and vineyards, to covet, to sweat, to die and know no peace” (FO 57). Ham like Hurston does not seem to feel “tragically colored” as he “go[es] to the sun,” and exits “happily singing” (FO 57).

“The First One” is not set in the South of the United States and the characters are not African American folk, but this play already reveals Hurston’s

interest in African American folklore, which she developed in *Mules and Men*, *Tell My Horse* and other folklore-based writings, as has been mentioned before.

A common and recurring element in these plays and is the “nce” motif. “Color Struck” presents black dance in a southern folk context -- the Cakewalk contest is at the center of the play and is the reason for the characters’ trip to St Augustine. “The First One” presents Ham’s dancing as a source of jealousy by his brothers and their wives. Two of the main characters of *Mule Bone* -- Daisy’s suitors -- are a male song-and-dance team who perform for white people. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston describes Negro dancing as “dynamic [...] [and] realistic suggestion” with “every posture giv[ing] the impression that the dancer will do much more” (CNE 835-6). The importance of “Asymmetry” is also emphasized as “a definite feature of Negro art” (CNE 834). “It is the lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes” (CNE 835). Dancing was an important activity for the African American community: at the “jooks,” on “pay-day”; dances were held by the fires to the sound of guitar music (MM 63-4). It was also an occasion for “standing around and woofing and occasionally telling stories” (MM 64).

Hurston was involved in two white-authored black dramas: *Fast and Furious* and *Jungle Scandals*. She wrote some scenes for *Jungle Scandals* (cancelled before the first performance) and was “responsible for the book of ‘Fast and Furious.’”¹ The musical revue *Fast and Furious* opened on September 15th, 1931, at the New Yorker Theatre and closed after only seven performances due to bad reviews and financial difficulties. Hurston contributed four of the thirty seven sketches: “The Football Game” (“Forty Yards”),² “The Poker Game” (“Poker!”), “The Courtroom” (“Lawing and Jawing”), and a version of “Woofing.”³ Hurston participated in the sketch “The Football Game” as a cheerleader (Cole and Mitchell. 2005: xiii). But this collaboration made Hurston unhappy as can be seen from the comments made in her letters to Mrs. Mason regarding her participation in the shows: “they take all the life and soul out of everything and make it fit what their idea of Broadway should be like.”⁴ Hurston worried because the producers “squeezed all Negro-ness out of

¹ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, July 23, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 221-2).

² Between brackets is the title with which the sketch was copyrighted.

³ These sketches are part of the group of Hurston’s manuscripts which appeared in 1997.

⁴ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, August 14, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 224).

everything¹ and she did “not consider either of the revues as great work.² But the experience taught her “a lot about the mechanics of the stage” which was important for her playwriting.³

Mule Bone. A Comedy of Negro Life is the three-act comedy that has received the most attention through the years. Written between March and June 1930, it is the result of a controversial and contentious collaboration between Hurston and Langston Hughes, and was the reason for a literary quarrel between the authors. The play is based on “The Bone of Contention,” a story written by Hurston during her Howard days. *Mule Bone* started out as a project by Hurston and Hughes to liberate black drama from the stereotypical minstrel musicals and the sentimental problem dramas. It was to be the “the first real Negro folk comedy” (Hughes 1940: 334). Already in April 1928, Hurston had written about her plans for a “new, the real Negro art theatre.”⁴ They decided to write the play after Hughes met Theresa Helburn of the Dramatists Guild who “complained that practically all the plays about black people offered to the guild were serious problem dramas” (Hemenway 1977: 137). She also pointed out the need for a “real comedy.”

This play was never published during Hurston’s lifetime because of an infamous dispute over its authorship concerning artistic integrity that fatally wounded the relationship between Hurston and Hughes.⁵ The quarrel also prevented the play from being produced during the authors’ lifetime. Most of the critics focus on the quarrel that ended the collaboration between the authors and prevented the play from being produced, rather than focusing on the play itself. Hurston’s letters give her version of the story and Hughes version appears in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and in his letters.

Hughes acknowledges that the play was based on Hurston’s story, but writes that

Together we also began to work on a play called *Mule Bone*, a Negro folk comedy, based on an amusing tale Miss Hurston had collected about a

¹ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, September 25, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 226).

² Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, July 23, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 222).

³ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, September 25, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 227).

⁴ Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 12, 1928. (Hurston 2002: 115).

⁵ After Hurston’s death, Hughes published the third act in *Drama Critique*, Spring 1964: 103-107. The full text was published for the first time in 1991 by George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “to coincide with its world premiere [...] at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Why the *Mule Bone* Debate Goes On,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1991: 5.

quarrel between two rival church factions. I plotted out and typed the play based on her story, while she authenticated and flavored the dialogue and added highly humorous details (Hughes 1940: 320).

Hurston was bitter about the dispute and related her version of the incidents regarding Langston Hughes and the *Mule Bone* episode to Mrs. Osgood Mason: "He knows full well he hasnt one word in all that script. He knows that the plot is mine, the dialogue mine. He has nothing, nothing there except the suggestion 'Zora, lets write a play.'" ¹

Hughes gives his (short) version of the *Mule Bone* dispute at the end of his autobiography *The Big Sea* in the chapter entitled "Literary Quarrel." (Hughes 1993 [1940]: 331-334) He gives details of how his "first literary quarrel" came about. While in Cleveland, Hughes went to see the Gilpin Players and after the performance while talking with the director, Rowena Jelliffe, he found out that "she had just received an excellent folk comedy by a talented young woman named Zora Hurston" (Hughes 1940: 331). ² After hearing the title and the description, he concludes that "it was the same play Zora Hurston and [he] had worked on together" (Hughes 1940: 332). He tried to contact Hurston by phone and letters and eventually she replied by letter stating that she was going to "have a heart to heart chat about this play business." ³

Hurston's reasons for avoiding Hughes and refusing to finish the play with him and her bitterness about the whole thing seem to be related with the typist's role in the whole process.⁴ She does emphasize, however, that "it was [her] story from beginning to end. It [was her] dialogue; [her] situations." At the end of the letter in a "P.S." she affirms: "I don't think that you can point out any situations or dialogue that are yours." She submitted the play for copyright in her name only on the 29th of October 1930 after making some minor changes to the script. The title of the play was changed to *De Turkey and de Law. A Comedy in Three Acts*.⁵

Apparently Hurston did not know that the play was in Cleveland. She

¹ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, May 17, 1932. (Hurston 2002: 256).

² "America's oldest theatre group." This theatre troupe worked with Rowena and Russell Jelliffe in Cleveland. The Jelliffes were a white couple who lived and worked among the Cleveland black community.

³ Hurston to Hughes, January 18, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 201-204).

⁴ Louise Thompson was hired by Mrs. Mason to work for Hughes and Hurston, typing the play.

⁵ Published for the first time in 2005 in *From Luababa to Polk County. Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress*. Cole and Mitchell (eds.).2005.

had given it to Carl Van Vechten to read and he sent it to Barrett Clark of the Theatre Guild without her knowledge.¹ Clark then contacted Mrs. Jelliffe to ask if the Gilpin Players would be interested in producing it. The whole production episode is confusing: Hurston authorized the production, and then withdrew authorization after finding out that Louise Thompson had been in Cleveland. The *Mule Bone* production was cancelled and that was the end of “the first real Negro folk comedy” and the end of a long friendship.² It really became “A Bone of Contention.” When Hurston published her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* in 1942 – two years after the publication of *The Big Sea*, Hughes’s autobiography – she did not mention Hughes or the *Mule Bone* quarrel.

Even though they quarreled, and Hughes states in his autobiography that “[he] never heard from Miss Hurston again” (Hughes 1940: 334), Hurston wrote to Mrs. Mason a year later saying that she had received a letter from Hughes the day before, saying that he had been in Jacksonville with her brother and his wife and that they “had entertained him magnificently.”³ Years later, during the unfounded molestation episode, when Hurston faced prosecution on a morals charge, she would turn to Hughes as a character witness.

Mule Bone shows that Hurston knew how to preserve and highlight black culture through the use of black language and folklore. It is the story of two friends who quarrel over a turkey that one of them has shot and which the other has stolen. “The Bone of Contention” begins by presenting Brazzle’s mule, an “old, rawbony and mean” animal, referred to as “His Yaller Highness.” One day the mule died and the whole town attended the “dragging out” of the mule to the “edge of the cypress swamp.” “Three years passed” and the mule’s “bones were clean and white,” but the mule remained with them in song and story as a simile, as a metaphor, to point a moral or adorn a tale” (BC 968). In Hurston story, Jim Weston hits Dave Carter on the head with the “hock-bone of Brazzle’s ol’ mule” (BC 972) to steal the turkey that Dave had shot. Dave

¹ Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 14, 1930. In this letter she states that she and Hughes “started out on the idea of the story” But that then she “started all over again while in Mobile and this is the result of [her] work alone.” (Hurston 2002: 193).

² Robert Hemenway dedicates a chapter of his Hurston biography to “Mule Bone” (136-158) where he narrates the known factors of the quarrel between Hurston and Hughes.

Arnold Rampersad, Hughes’s biographer, examines the quarrel in *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I*. Reprinted in *Mule Bone. A Comedy of Negro Life* by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Bass and Gates (eds.) 1991: 189-209.

Hughes also wrote a long explanation of the entire “Mule Bone” episode to Arthur Spingarn on January 21, 1931. Reprinted in *Mule Bone. A Comedy of Negro Life* by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston (Bass and Gates 1991: 229-239).

³ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 21, 1932. (Hurston 2002: 242).

“wants uh warrant took out fuh Jim Weston” (BC 971). The quarrel quickly reaches the public domain with Methodists and Baptists accusing each other and giving opinions about the verdict that should be passed out. Joe Clarke, the mayor, decides to set the trial for three o'clock the next day at the Baptist Church as it was “the largest meetin' place in town.” Clarke is interested in expelling Jim from the town because he suspects that Jim has been stealing his hens. The quarrel soon becomes the reason for “a religious and political fight [as] Dave was a Baptist, Jim a Methodist, [the] only two churches in the town” (BC 973). Rev. Simms, Methodist, becomes Jim's defense “lawyer” and the Baptist leader, Elder Long, represents the prosecution.

Before the trial begins the audience, especially the women, swap insults and threats and almost become involved physically. The trial begins with Jim Weston being “charged wid ‘ssaultin’ Dave Carter [...] wid a mule bone, and robbin’ him uh his wild turkey” (BC 975). Jim admits hitting Dave, but says “it wasn't no crime.” Rev. Simms' defense is based on the statement that “you got tuh have a weepoon befo' you kin commit uh ‘ssault [and that] it aint in no Bible dat no mule bone is a weepoon, an' it aint in no white folks law neither” (BC 976). Elder Long, the Baptist leader, has to prove that the mule bone is, in fact, a weapon. He begins by calling the attention of the defense and the audience to the wound on Dave's head: “Ah jus want you all tuh take a look at his head. Anybody kin see dat big knot dat Jim put on dere.” He tries to prove that the mule bone is “a weepoon cause it hurt'im” (BC 977). Long then proceeds to prove by the Bible that Jim is guilty: It says heah in Judges 15:16 dat Samson slewed a thousand Philistines wid de jaw-bone of a ass” (BC 977). Simms objects to the fact that the Bible mentions as ass and not a mule. But Elder Long establishes the connection:

And now dat bring us to de main claw uh dis subject. It sho want no ass, but everybody knows dat a donkey is de father of every mule what ever was born. Even little chillen knows dat. Everybody knows dat dat little as a donkey is, dat if he is dangerous, his great big mule son is mo' so. Everybody knows dat de further back on a mule you goes, de mo' dangerous he gits. Now if de jawbone is as dangerous as it says heah, in de Bible, by de time you gits clear back tuh his hocks hes rank pizen” (BC 978).

Long proves, by the Bible, that it was crime and asks ‘dat Jim be run outa town fuh ‘ssaultin Dave wid a deadly weepoon an' stealin' his turkey while de boy wuz unconscious” (BC 978).

In *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, the community is at the center

of the play as Saturday afternoon activities are taking place on the store's front porch: the community comments the male-female relationships, especially the love triangle; the women go into the store to buy groceries, and the men tell jokes and stories and play checkers and card games. On the porch the sitters show their verbal talents, telling stories and holding lying contests, or simply signifying to others. When a porch sitter asks Elder Simms about his wife, Simms reply that "she's feelin' kinda po'ly today" starts a lying contest:

VOICE: (*Whispering loudly*) Don't see how that great big ole powerful woman could be sick. Look like she could go bear huntin' with her fist.

ANOTHER VOICE: She look jus' as good as you-all's Baptist pastor's wife. Pshaw, you ain't seen no big woman, nohow, man. I seen one once so big she went to whip her little boy and he run up under her belly and hid six months 'fore she could find him.

ANOTHER VOICE: Well, I knowed a woman so little that she had to get up on a soap box to look over a grain of sand.

[...]

LIGE: (*Continuing the lying on the porch*) Well, you all done seen so much, but I bet you ain't never seen a snake as big as the one I saw when I was a boy up in middle Georgia. He was so big couldn't hardly move his self. He laid in one spot so long he growed moss on him and everybody thought he was a log, till one day I set down on him and went to sleep, and when I woke up that snake done crawled to Florida. (*Loud laughter.*)

FRANK: (*Seriously*) Layin' all jokes aside though now, you all remember that rattlesnake I killed last year was almost as big as that Georgia snake.

[...]

VOICE: (*Derisively*) Gimme that lyin' snake. That snake wasn't but four foot long when you killed him last year and you done growed him ten feet in a year (MB 74-5).

Simultaneously, a political dispute emerges as Elder Simms arrives at the store and expresses his desire to unseat Joe Clarke as Mayor, while children play African American folk games like "chick-me, chick-me Cranie-Crow" in front of the store (MB 63). Jim Weston and Dave Carter arrive at the porch. The two men, Jim, a guitar player, characterized by the authors as being "slightly arrogant, aggressive [...] ready with his tongue," and Dave, a dancer, a "soft, happy-go-lucky character, slightly dumb and unable to talk rapidly and wittily" form a singing and dancing team that usually plays for white audiences (MB 45). They have been playing "for white folks at [a] party" (MB 79). Daisy commends the pair on their music-making, leading Jim to the reply: "Yeah, child, we'se

been playin' for the white folks all week. We'se playin' for the colored now" (MB 89). Jim makes a distinction between the audiences; playing for "white folks" is very different from playing "for the colored." The "colored" folks of the community share with the pair a knowledge of songs and dances that becomes evident when the two perform for Daisy: "some of the villagers join in song and others get up and march around the porch in time with the music. [...] There is dancing, treating and general jollification. Little children dance the parse-me-la" (MB 84).

The turkey of "The Bone of Contention" is replaced by a woman, Daisy, in *Mule Bone*. The partners and friends quarrel on the store's front porch over Daisy Taylor, a girl that works as a domestic servant for a white family. Jim hits Dave on the head with a mule bone that was lying on the ground. The mule bone had been brought to the store porch by Joe Lindsay earlier and identified as the "hock-bone of Brazzle's ole yaller mule" (MB 53). The mule had been dead for a while, but continued to be part of the men's conversation on the store porch as they remembered the mule as having an attitude. The "draggin' out" of the mule to the swamp gathered more people than the "last school closing" (MB 54). When Jim, Methodist, hits Dave, Baptist, on the head with the mule bone, the community takes sides according to their religion, with the exception of Joe Clarke, who being a Methodist, sides with Dave.

Act two consists largely of the trial held at the Macedonia Baptist Church (transformed into a court-house) and set to begin at three o'clock on a Monday. The rivalry between Baptists and Methodists continues when Deacon Lindsay encounters Sister Taylor on the way to the trial. Sister Taylor and Sister Thomas do not answer Rev. Childers when he greets them. Lindsay questions them about it and an insult ritual begins, showing that women can put aside their passivity and inferior status in the community being very capable of challenging men verbally:

LINDSAY: (*Angrily*) What's de matter, y'all? Cat got yo' tongue?

MRS. TAYLOR: More matter than you kin scatter all over Cincinnatti.

LINDSAY: Go 'head on, Lucy Taylor. Go 'head on. You know a very little of yo' sugar sweetens my coffee. Go 'head on. Everytime you lift yo' arm you smell like a neet of yellow hammers.

MRS. TAYLOR: Go 'head on yo'self. Yo' head look like it done wore out three bodies. Talkin' 'bout *me* smellin' – you smell lak a nest of grand daddies yo'self.

LINDSAY: Aw rock on down de road, 'oman. Ah don't wantuh changes words wid yuh. Youse too ugly.

MRS. TAYLOR: You ain't nobody's pretty baby, yo'self. You go ugly I betcha yo' wife have to spread uh sheet over yo' head tuh let sleep slip up on yuh.

LINDSAY: (*Threatening*) I done tole you I don't wante break a breath wid you. It's uh whole heap better tuh walk off on yo' own legs than it is to be toted off. I'm tired of yo' achin' round here. You fool wid me now an' I'll knock you into doll rags, Tony or no Tony.

MRS. TAYLOR: (*Jumping up in his face*) Hit me! Hit me! I dare you tuh hit me. If you take dat dare, you'll steal uh hawg an' eat hi hair (MB 105).

The verbal duel between Baptist Sister Lewis and Methodist Sister Taylor takes place in the Macedonia Baptist Church just before the trial starts. They signify to each other despite the failed attempts of Mayor Clarke and the town Marshall, the young Lum Boger, to stop the dialogue and the threats. Domestic life is the inspiration for playing the dozens:

SISTER TAYLOR: Some folks is a whole lot more keerful 'bout a louse in de church than dey is in dey house. (*Looks pointedly at Sister Lewis*)

SISTER LEWIS: (*bristling*) Whut you gazin' at me for? Wid your popeyes lookin' like skirt ginny-nuts?

SISTER TAYLOR: I hate to tell you whut yo' mouf looks like. I thinks you an' soap an' water musta had some words. Evertime you lits yo' arm you smell like a nest of yellow hammers.

SISTER LEWIS: Well, I ain't seen no bath tubs in your house.

SISTER TAYLOR: Mought not have no tub, but tain't no lice on me though.

SISTER LEWIS: Aw, you got just as many bed-bugs and chinces as anybody else. I seen de bed-bugs marchin' out of yo' house in de mornin', keepin' step just like soldiers drillin' (MB 110-1).

The trial begins with Jim admitting to hitting "ole Dave wid de mule bone, but I ain't guilty uh nothing" (MB 131). Elder Simms, for the defense, also focuses on the fact that Jim "ain't done no crime" (MB 134). His intervention to prove Jim's innocence by the Bible and "white folks law" is almost identical to the one in "The Bone of Contention" (BC 976, MB 134-5). Elder Childers, Baptist, intervenes, trying to prove that an assault was committed. Referring to the Bible, he mentions Judges 18:18 and Samson's slewing of the "three thousand Philistines wid de jaw-bone of an ass" (MB 136).¹ Simms tries to oppose Childers since the case being judged has nothing to do with an ass, but Childers continues eloquently trying to prove the family links between an ass and a mule, concluding that

¹ Here the reference to the Book of Judges 18:18 is incorrect. Judges 15: 16 referred to in "The Bone of Contention" is the correct reference: "And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and he took it, and slew a thousand men therewith." In the play *Mule Bone* the biblical story is manipulated and the number of people that were slain rose to "three thousand."

de further back you gits on uh mule de more dangerous he gits an' if de jaw-bone slewed three thousand people, by de time you gits back tuh his hocks, it's pizen enough tuh kill ten thousand. [...] Brother Mayor, Jim didn't jes 'lam Dave an' walk off ... he 'ssaulted him with de deadliest weepoon there is in de worl' an' left him layin' unconscious. Brother Mayor, he's uh criminal an' oughter be run outa dos peaceful town!" (MB 137).

Act three is entirely taken up by the love triangle Jim, Daisy and Dave and takes place on the railroad tracks outside Eatonville in the direction of Maitland. Jim is leaving town and contemplating his future when he encounters Daisy and then Dave. The men find out how Daisy has been trying "to be nice" to both of them, taking food to Jim while he was "incarcerated" in the barn and rubbing Dave's head. The men try to prove how much they love Daisy. A verbal duel and lying contest begins, with each trying to outtalk the other:

JIM: Wait a minute, Daisy. I love you like God loves Gabriel ... and dat's His best angel.

DAVE: Daisy, I love you harder than de thunder can bump a sump ... if I don't ... God's a gopher.

[...]

DAVE: I'd buy you a whole passenger train ... and hire some mens to run it for you.

[...]

JIM: [...] I'd buy you a great big ole ship ... and then, baby, I'd buy you a ocean to sail yo' ship on (MB 144-5).

Daisy finally chooses Jim, but when she suggests that he work as a "yard man" for her white folks and "throw dat ole box away," he re-35es that he "wasn't brought up wid no spade in [his] hand ... and ain't going to start it now" (MB 150). When she turns to Dave he also demonstrates his refusal to work: "I'd say dat box was too heavy for me to fool wid. I wouldn't tote nothing heavier than my hat and I feel like I'm 'busing myself sometime totin' dat" (MB 151). Jim and Dave both suddenly reject Daisy who leaves them both saying that neither of them has to have her as she has many other suitors. Jim's reply is that she should "go git [her] one them mens whut don't mind smelling mules ... and beating de white folks to de barn every morning!" (MB 151-2). Dave and Jim return to town together, with the intention of standing up to anyone who tries to enforce the banishment:

DAVE: [...] Look here, Jim, if they try to keep you out dat town we'll go out to dat swamp and gits us a mule bone a piece and come into town and boil dat stew down to a low gravy (MB 152).

Daisy's demand that the man who marries her must work for her employers as a yard man is not accepted by Jim and Dave, and serves to reconcile the two friends.

The central themes of the play are introduced in Act One: the relationships between men and women, especially the love triangle Dave, Daisy and Jim; the rivalry between Baptists and Methodists and the political issues between May or Clarke and Elder Simms, regarding the need for a jail and the fact that Clarke has been Mayor forever.

At the beginning of the trial, Dave is apparently confused, revealing that the idea of the trial must have been imposed on him: "How come I can't talk wid him? Known him all ma life" (MB 119). Jim realizes that they have been pawns in a religious and political dispute: "You niggers just tryin to get us messed up on some kind o' mess. Dave knows I ain't meant to hurt him" (MB 119). As in "The Bone of Contention," the quarrel between Jim and Dave is unimportant. The religious and political rivalry is really the issue.

As in most of Hurston's works, whites are physically absent from the play, but their presence is apparent throughout the play: Jim and Dave earn their living playing for white folks; Daisy works for a white family; Jim's father was hanged by white folks; and during the trial the "white folks law" is evoked several times.

The plays begins on a "Saturday afternoon and the villagers are gathered around the store" (MB 48). Saturday is a day away from work and away from white people. The Eatonville inhabitants rest on the store porch, tell lies, play checkers and card games and comment on the lives of those who come to the store or pass by the store porch. There are depictions of folk life, storytelling situations, lying contests and signifying occasions in *Mule Bone*, but there is not a folktale like we find in *Mules and Men*.

In the article "The Folk, the Blues, and the Problems of *Mule Bone*," Lisa Boyd comments on the difficulties of staging *Mule Bone* in the 1990s, sixty years after it was written. The play was produced in 1991 at the Lincoln Center Theater and "it received reviews which were more negative than positive [as] the modern audience was [...] far removed from the experience of the play itself" (Boyd 1995: 34). For the stage production, the play underwent several changes to be "made more innocuous for the 1991 production" (Boyd 1995: 34). Henry Louis Gates Jr. mentions the "exclusive use of black vernacular as the language of drama" as the cause for anxiety in the production of the play.¹

¹ Henry Luis Gates Jr., "Why the Mule Bone Debate Goes on [Review of *Mule Bone*]" in *New York Times*, 10 February 1991: 5. Reprinted in *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston* (Cronin 1998: 225).

Frank Rich wrote a negative review of the performance of *Mule Bone* staged in 1991 considering it “watered down and bloated by various emendations” and “not even a scrupulously authentic representation of what Hughes and Hurston wrote, fragmented and problematic as their aborted collaboration was” (1998: 230, 229). However, he did see some of Hughes and Hurston’s original goals in the stage production:

On occasion – rare occasion – this rendition does make clear what Hurston and Hughes had in mind, which was to bring to the stage, unfiltered by white sensibilities, the genuine language, culture and lives of black people who had been shaped by both a rich African heritage and the oppression of American racism. [...] *Mule Bone* surely succeeds in creating startling, linguistically lush folk comedy that nonetheless reflects the tragic legacy of slavery (Rich 1998: 230).

Henry Luis Gates Jr. uses W. E. B. DuBois’s words to characterize *Mule Bone* as “a revelation of life ‘behind the veil,’” that “portrays what black people say and think and feel – when no white people are around” (Gates 1991: 226). He sees no reason for the controversy around the performance of the play since the authors tried to “create a work that would undo a century of racist representations of black people”:

Hughes and Hurston develop their drama by imitating and repeating historical black folk rituals. Black folklore and Southern rural black vernacular English served as the foundation for what they hoped would be a truly new art form. It would refute the long racist tradition, in minstrelsy and vaudeville, of black characters as ignorant buffoons and black vernacular English as the language of idiots, of those “darkies” who had peopled the American stage for a full century before *Mule Bone* (Gates 1991: 228).

Hurston’s desire to launch a “real Negro art theatre” is mirrored in the shows that she produced that included drama, “native” dance and music gathered during her folklore expeditions. Her most successful production of original Negro folklore was *The Great Day*. This revue opened in New York at the Harold Golden Theatre on January 10th, 1932. Consisting of a collection of spirituals and folk music, it was a show ... loosely structured around a single day in the life of a railroad work camp” (Hemenway 1977: 177-8). Hurston funded the production herself. It received good reviews and had many performances,

touring throughout the country, but was financially unsuccessful.¹ *The Great Day* also had performances at the New School for Social Research and the Vanderbilt Hotel in New York City. Hurston used “real Negro folk music”² and “untampered-with Negro folk material” “so that people may see what [Blacks] are really like.” *The Great Day* (1932) had a flattering response, reported in a letter that Hurston wrote to Mrs. Osgood Mason:

George Antheil, the French composer, paid me the compliment of saying I would be the most stolen-from Negro in the world for the next ten years at least. He said that this sort of thievery is unavoidable. Unpleasant, of course, but at the bottom a tribute to one’s originality.³

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston states her intentions regarding concerts: “I had no intention of making concert my field. I wanted to show the wealth and beauty of the material” (701). Much of the basis for the script of *The Great Day* may be found in *Mules and Men*. Before publishing any major folklore work, *The Great Day* was Hurston’s attempt to bring pure black folk culture with authentic folk characters to theatrical audiences.

In 1933, “The Fiery Chariot”, a one-act play was added to *The Great Day*, and the show was renamed *From Sun to Sun*. “The Fiery Chariot” was based on the tale “Ole Massa and John Who Wanted To Go To Heaven” (MM 72-4). *From Sun to Sun* also depicted life at Florida railroad camps combining dialogue with “native” music and dance. It was presented throughout Florida with the title *All De Live Long Day*, at Rollins College,⁴ in Eatonville, in various other Florida cities and at the National Folk Festival in St. Louis, Missouri. At the end of 1934 (November 23rd and 24th) Hurston put together and directed a “Folk Concert” in Chicago entitled *Singing Steel*. *Singing Steel* was modeled after *The Great Day* and *From Sun to Sun* (LL 312n). In 1939 “Hurston stages two productions of folklore from *The Great Day* in Orlando in association with the FWP under the title *The Fire Dance* (LL 779). *The Fire Dance*, which included a “Bahamian Dance”, was performed as “part of the Works Progress Administration ‘National Exhibition of Skills’” (Mitchell xiv). Until now no

¹ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 14, 1932. (Hurston 2002: 241); (Hurston 2002: 777).

² Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 6, 1933. (Hurston 2002: 277); Hurston to Edwin Osgood Grover, June 8, 1932. (Hurston 2002: 259).

³ Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, October 15, 1931. (Hurston 2002: 231-5).

⁴ During Hurston’s time Rollins College was an all-white educational college in Winter Park, Florida.

written texts for *The Great Day*, *From Sun to Sun* (with the exception of “The Fiery Chariot”), *All De Live Long Day*, and *Singing Steel* have surfaced, and only the program notes are available for study, making reproduction practically impossible. And as Lynda Marion Hill points out in her study *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* “having available documentation of staged productions is essential not only to be able to write a thorough historical account but to reproduce the play, in writing or on stage” (Hill 1996: 201).

Having been trained as a folklorist, Hurston joined the Federal Theater Project of the Works Progress Administration in 1935. She was hired as a drama coach for Harlem and worked on the project for six months. Despite her vast experience with the theater, she did not get a major role in the project and left when she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In 1944, Hurston completed her last play, *Polk County: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp, with Authentic Negro Music*, a musical comedy in three acts based on folk material she had collected. Hurston wrote in collaboration with Dorothy Waring¹ (copyrighted in 1944), but the comedy was never produced on stage.² The play was based on the material that Hurston collected and that also appears in *Mules and Men*. As in Hurston’s other works, *Polk County* is not concerned with the social and political ramifications associated with Black life in the South.

Polk County is set in the quarters of the Lofton Lumber Company, an African American sawmill community in the primeval woods of South Central Florida in the 1930s. It depicts the daily routine of the workers on a sawmill camp, “the cradle of the blues and work songs” (PC 281). It is a story of friendship, jealous rivalry, true love and strong sense of community; a story about rural hardworking men, but also about the women, strong spirited black women “seldom good looking, intelligent or adjustable” (PC 281): Big Sweet (also a character in MM), generous and quick-tempered, described by a mill worker as “two whole women and a gang of men”; Ella Wall (also a character in MM), Big Sweet’s rival, a tough talking hoodoo woman who carries a pistol; and Leafy Lee, a pretty shy newcomer protected by Big Sweet.

At the beginning of the play after the men have been awakened and are discussing the fact that Nunkie cheated on Lonnie at cards, Big Sweet enters to immediately rough up Nunkie, a gambler, who has cheated Lonnie out of his money. Big Sweet explains that Lonnie is sensitive and cannot deal with

¹ Dorothy Waring was a wealthy white woman, married to a theater producer.

² *Polk County A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp, with Authentic Negro Music* was produced for the first time in April 2002 by the Washington D.C. Arena Stage..

fighting and demands that the money be returned. Big Sweet “protects” Lonnie because he is a dreamer who spends his time identifying with John de Conquer. Between signifying (“they going to tote you through three yards – this yard, the churchyard, and the graveyard”) and threats (“I’m going to kill him!”) she manages to get the money just as the Quarters Boss shows up to find out what was happening. After he expels Nunkie, he confronts Big Sweet with the fact that she had “been lamming folks a mighty heap round here” (PC 297), when he is the one that “gits paid to keep order in these here quarters” (PC 296). Other members of the quarters try to justify Big Sweet’s behavior and use of violence as having to do with the need to “keeps a lot of ‘em from cutting the fool and going to jail” (PC 298) and because “some folks is too biggity and imposing” and Big Sweet “just don’t like to see nobody bulldozing the place and running the hog over other folks” (PC 297). The Quarters Boss mocks saying that “Big Sweet ain’t never done a thing but praise the Lord. Her mouth is a prayer-book and her lips flap just like a Bible” (PC 297).

Guitar playing and singing follow to be stopped abruptly by Dicey’s sudden attack on My Honey, the guitar player, whom she considers to be her sweetheart. She does not accept the fact that he does not want to be with her and is determined to harm him. The fight is stopped by Big Sweet who removes the knife from Dicey’s hand. Dicey is angry and threatens to get “a new, big knife” and “to make [...] a graveyard of [her] own” (PC 304). As Hurston explains in the beginning of Act One,

the women ar misfits from the outside. Seldom good looking, intelligent, or adjustable. [...] They too pack knives. No stigma attaches to them for prison terms. In fact, their prestige is increased if they have made time for a serious cutting. It passes for bravery – something to give themselves a rating in their small world (PC 281-2).

Leafy Lee, the young slim mulatto with refined manners arrives at Polk County from New York City “to learn to sing the blues right” in “the cradle of the blues and work songs.” She is taken under the wing by Big Sweet who promises to protect, help and guide her in her new life. They become friends and swap experiences and knowledge, despite the differences between them, in behaviour, beliefs and origins. My Honey and Leafy fall in love and decide to get married properly. Dicey feels scorned and accuses Leafy of being “color struck” and a “half dead-looking yeller gal” and threatens to “take [her] knife and go ‘round the ham bone looking for meat [...] [and] slice her too thin to fry” (PC 335).¹

¹ This episode is autobiographical and is reproduced in the PBS Video *Zora Is My Name*,

Big Sweet's social dominance challenges the Quarters Boss' authority. He is determined to expel her from the sawmill and gets help from Big Sweet's rival, Dicey, who tells him that Big Sweet is responsible for all the trouble around the quarters. Big Sweet's threatened eviction leads her to want to fix things before she leaves, like getting Leafy and My Honey properly married, so that they can leave. After an attempted revenge undertaken by Dicey with the help of Ella Wall on the day of Leafy's marriage to My Honey, all ends well when the Quarters Boss appears and realizes who the real trouble makers are.

Polk County draws heavily on *Mules and Men*, suggesting that Hurston's collaboration in the play was dominant. It has episodes which mirror the situation of Hurston's escape from violence and Polk County in *Mules and Men*. Written in the Southern black vernacular speech, *Polk County* shows Hurston's control of verbal art, her rich use of language and metaphor. The play is filled with music and songs performed by the men and women of the camp – the title theme of the play is “Polk County Blues.”

In her work Hurston concentrated on the roles of black women in their communities, as can be seen in her folklore collections and in some of her plays analysed here. In *Mules and Men*, the African American folktales show that women can settle a score through spiritualism and voodoo, but also through signifying or using force, as is the case of Big Sweet, Hurston's friend and protector in Polk County, who shows that women are roughened characters who fight to hang on to or to “protect” their men (MM, PC).

Hurston viewed folklore as devoid of time or space and inherent to every culture. *Mules and Men* was a valid and vital contribution to black folklore then and now. It captures, to use Hurston's words, the world of the “Negro farthest down” through the use of his imagination and his culture. Even though critics are not very flattering towards Hurston and her work, we have to acknowledge her contribution to African American and American culture. Hurston used her inherited culture and the knowledge she acquired through studies to salvage the culture of her people from oblivion, proving that “research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and that they dwell therein” (DT 687).

Nathan Irvin Huggins, author of *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) is one of the critics that argue that Hurston's work lacks quality. He recognizes Hurston's ability to transcribe the language of the folk as she was “gifted with a clear, uncluttered style and a keen ear for voice sounds and rhythms” (Huggins 1971:

which will be discussed further on in this work.

74), but is not very flattering when he considers Hurston's work as a folklorist: "Zora Neale Hurston [...] was far less pure in her handling of folk materials. [...] [Joel Chandler] Harris, at least, had told authentic folktales, while the line between Zora Hurston's mind and her material was never clear" (Huggins 1971: 74-5).

Other critics, however, have reflected upon the relation of literature and folklore in Hurston's work. Michael North notes that "it is difficult to say whether she fictionalized her ethnographic reports or whether her fiction had always been in part the product of ethnographic collecting" (North 1994: 187). Hurston seems to have agreed with Langston Hughes's statement that the "low-down folks" can "furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work" as they would be at the basis of all her fictional and non-fictional work (Hughes 1996: 408-412). Hurston's theatre dramatizes episodes from her own life, being thus deeply autobiographical. Even the stories taken from the Bible are a kind of spiritual autobiography revealing Zora Neale Hurston's concern with color issues, marginality and other social issues of the time. It does not seem far-fetched to claim that the plays are structured as a theatrical illustration of Hurston's cultural legacy as is acknowledged, for instance, by Lynda Marion Hill, in her study about Hurston's interest in the theatre entitled *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (1996).

Chapter 4

“A sampling of life”: The Florida Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration

In folklore, as in everything else that people create, the world is a great, big, old serving-platter, and all the local places are like eating-plates.

Zora Neale Hurston

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) comprised five projects known as “Federal One”: the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), the Federal Theater Project (FTP), the Federal Arts Project (FAP), the Federal Music Project (FMP) and the Historical Records Surveys (HRS).¹ The FWP was the Roosevelt Administration and the New Deal’s answer to literary and artistic unemployment in twenty-six states. Strongly supported by Mrs. Roosevelt, the project began on September 1935 to provide jobs for thousands of unemployed or poor people, writers and anyone who could qualify as a writer such as teachers, journalists, historians or lawyers, as well as an assortment of supporting staff such as secretaries and clerical workers.² Following a policy of “hiring free of discrimination”, this government “patronage” of the arts continued until 1943.³ As the project continued into the late thirties, the director was powerless to stop increasing criticism by reactionary Congressmen who were intent on shutting down the Project. In October 1939, the Project’s federal economic sponsorship ceased and the project survived four more years on funds provided by the states, ending in 1943.⁴

¹ <http://www.cobroward.fl.us/library/bienes/lii10204.htm>. Internet. Accessed on 2005-01-03.

² In certain circumstances, the definition was flexible: “writers” were actually people who had typing skills and could write correct English. Being unemployed or on the “dole” was the main criterion for employment in the FWP, and with few exceptions, anonymity was deemed essential.

³ This was an aim difficult to achieve in many states.

⁴ The unpublished materials of the Federal Writers’ Project were housed in the Library

One of the earlier goals of the WPA Writer's Project was to produce "a series of state guidebooks that offer[ed] a flavorful sampling of life in the United States."¹ The out-of-work writers and other unemployed white-collar workers were integrated into the FWP with the assignment of recording and documenting the personal histories of ordinary people. The writers of the FWP carried out interviews to record stories and folklore in cities, towns, neighborhoods and rural communities all across the United States. Aspiring writers like Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Dorothy West, Richard Wright and Saul Bellow were hired in the early thirties by the WPA.² These writers eventually became part of American literary history and their field research probably influenced their later writing, but most Federal Writers remained unknown. The project of hiring black writers to dig into the nation's African American roots failed in Florida due to racism and paternalism in the Jim Crow South. Hurston had a previous experience with the WPA. In October 1935 she joined the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem not only because she needed a job, but also because the stage was an appropriate vehicle for the affirmation of black lifestyles.³ She left the project six months later because she received a Guggenheim grant to study Voodoo and Obeah practices in the West Indies (Bordelon 1999: 13).

Other well-known writers also participated in the project, like Arna Bontemps, who was a supervisor on the Illinois Project and Sterling A. Brown who

of Congress and "forgotten" until recently. They are in the Library of Congress manuscript Division and are part of a larger collection titled *The U.S. Work Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project and Historical Records Survey*. The materials from the Federal writers' project span the years 1889-1942 and cover a wide range of topics and subprojects. The Federal Writers' holdings consist of correspondence, memoranda, field reports, notes, graphs, charts, preliminary and corrected drafts of essays, oral testimony, rural and urban folklore, life histories (first person narratives), a collection of authentic narratives of former slaves about life during the period of Slavery based on interviews undertaken throughout the United States and other Negro source material gathered by project workers. Well over one-half of the materials in this group are related to the *American Guide* – the general title for the state guides, which remain the Federal Writers' Project best-known undertaking.

For more information and details on the FWP see Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writer's Project 1935-1943* (1973).

¹ *The Federal Writers' Project*, Library of America, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2004/12/14 and 2014-03-17.

² Ralph Waldo Ellison (1914-1994); Margaret Walker (1915-1998); Dorothy West (1907 – 1998); Richard Wright (1908 – 1960); Saul Bellow (1915 –). Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and many other aspiring writers served literary apprenticeships on the Federal Writers' Project.

³ Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939). <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftwpa.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2005/12/29 and 2014-03-17.

was appointed by Alsberg national editor of Negro Affairs. In his book about the Federal Writers' project, *The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writer's Project 1935-1943* (1973), Jerre Mangione states that Sterling A. Brown "outlined an ambitious editorial program whose general intent was to produce a portrait of the Negro as an American through a comprehensive survey that would depict his past and present cultural and sociological situation" (1973: 258).

The aim of the WPA was to publish the material collected by the Writer's Project in anthologies that "would form a composite and comprehensive portrait of the various groups of people in America".¹ The FWP prepared guides for every state and territory, which contained essays on its people, history, town histories, architecture, geography, commerce, flora and fauna, climate and folklore. These guides became the FWP's most exhaustive accomplishment. *The Florida Guide* entitled *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* was published in 1939² and "was a quirky, unusual and informative examination of the state as it existed up to 1939" with the purpose of "equip[ing] the traveler with a portrait of Florida that was simultaneously educational, insightful, revealing, and entertaining."³

The first full-time folklore editor of the FWP, Benjamin A. Botkin, was an enthusiast of the gathering of life histories and "encouraged Federal writers to listen for characteristic speech patterns and vernacular language".⁴ John A. Lomax also collected and edited material relating to folklore within the Federal Writers' Project.

During the thirties, Hurston had to face the racism, sexism and politics of the supervisors of the WPA, who refused to put her in charge of editing *The Florida Negro*, the collection of essays that was part of the FWP. Despite being the most published writer on the Florida FWP and the only trained African American folklorist in the South, Hurston was not offered a supervisory or an editorial position, but was rather forced to accept a relief position.⁵ She joined the project in April 1938 in Jacksonville as part of the Florida FWP's Negro

¹ *The Federal Writers' Project*, Library of America, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2004/12/14.

² Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration for the State of Florida, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*. American Guide Series (1939).

³ James A. Findlay and Margaret Bing, "Touring Florida Through the Federal Writers' Project", <http://www.co.broward.fl.us/library/bienes/lii10213htm>. Internet. Accessed on 2005/02/27.

⁴ *The Federal Writers' Project*, Library of America, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2004/12/14.

⁵ At the time Hurston had already published short-stories, plays, and the books *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Tell My Horse* (1938).

Unit. The State Director in Florida was Carita Doggett Corse, a historian and published author on local history “interested in Negro history” (LL 541).¹ Corse was Hurston’s supervisor during the time that Hurston worked for the Federal Writers’ Project in the Negro Unit and they shared a “cordial relationship”. In a letter to Carita Doggett Corse, dated December 3, 1938, where Hurston apologizes for not delivering her work on time, she calls Corse “Boss” and writes in a submissive way as she did a decade earlier with Mrs. Osgood Mason suggesting a special connection between them: “You might have been a little proud of your pet darkey. Yes, I know that I belong to you” (LL 418).

Hurston stayed for almost a year and a half and collected material for the guide on Florida and for the book on “The Florida Negro”. Florida had a strong legacy of folk culture, various sources that could produce valuable material for the right researcher. Some of the stories and songs that Hurston collected during the FWP as part of *The Florida Negro*, which remained in manuscript until recently published by Pamela Bordelon as *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers’ Project* (1999)² “The Florida Negro” manuscript was finally published in 1993 as *The Florida Negro: A Federal Writers’ Project Legacy*. It “synthesized information on all aspects of local life, with folklore being one category” (Hill 1996: 77). All of Hurston’s writings for the book were excluded from the final manuscript. Participating in the “Negro Book” of Florida gave Hurston the freedom to write without the state guidebook rules. Pamela Bordelon emphasizes the importance of the writings presented in *Go Gator*, pointing out that “they demonstrate [Hurston’s] vitality and continued commitment to studying various aspects of African American folklore, history, and daily life” (Bordelon 1999: xi).

She began her contribution with an essay on folklore and music, using her background as a folklorist and anthropologist and her never-ending creativity to write “Go Gator and Muddy the Water,” also published with the title “Folklore and Music.”³ In “this essay, Hurston discusses the origins of folklore and “offers a creative analysis of folklore’s development and the people’s need to create it” (Bordelon 1999: 68). The essay opens with a paragraph that gives a definition of folklore:

¹ In 1939, the FWP in Florida changed its name to Florida Writers’ Program.

² Some parts of *Go Gator* were previously published by the Library of America in the volume of Hurston’s works entitled *Zora Neale Hurston. Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (1995).

³ Pamela Bordelon, “Go Gator and Muddy the Water”(1999: 68-88); published as “Folklore and Music” in *Zora Neale Hurston. Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (1995: 875-894); also published as “Folklore and Music” in *Frontiers. A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol XII, nr 1, 1991: 183-203. The page references in the text are of The Library of America edition.

Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries. (FM 875)

In between practical references to folklore, Hurston writes key sentences that help to define folklore in a unique Hurstonian way:

In folklore, as in everything else that people create, the world is a great, big, old serving-platter, and all the local places are like eating-plates. Whatever is on the plate must come out of the platter, but each plate has a flavor of its own because the people take the universal stuff and season it to suit themselves on the plate. And this local flavor is what is known as originality (FM 875).

Collecting folklore in Florida is Hurston's priority as it "is still in the making [...] in this sort of cultural delta" (FM 875). She explains that Florida is rich in folklore material "because the state attracts such a variety of workers to its industries" (FM 875). Hurston asserts that "folklore is the first thing that man makes out of the natural laws that he finds around him [making] folklore the art of the people before they find out that there is such thing as art, and they make it out of whatever they find at hand" (FM 875-6).

The first folklore element to be analyzed is song and its development – Hurston focuses on the blues, on Negro working songs and folk songs, giving examples of all types of songs mentioned in her exposition. A section entitled "Folktales" follows, in which she describes the evolution of prose and gives some examples: "like song, prose grows from the short and often pointless tale to the long and complicated story with a smashing climax. [...] A single incident, or even a vivid description, is often offered as a story" (FM 880).

"Big John de Conquer" and "Daddy Mention" are the two last sections of this essay. Big John de Conquer is recurrent in Hurston's work: she included Big John tales in *Mules and Men* and in October 1943 published an essay entitled "High John de Conquer" in *The American Mercury*. According to Hurston, "Big John de Conquer is the culture hero of the American negro folk tales" (FM 884). He is cunning and easily outsmarts Ole Massa, God and even the Devil. Big John de Conquer "is the success story that all weak people create to compensate for their weakness. He is the projection of the poor and humble into the realms of the mighty" (FM 884). Referring that Daddy Mention is the "new folk hero" in the Florida prison camps, she considers him "another incarnation of Big John de Conquer." Both are "wish-fulfillment projections" (FM 875). Daddy Men-

tion, as a folk hero, is as important to convicts in Florida prison camps as Big John de Conquer was to the slaves. He is a “wonder-working prisoner” whose “unusual power of omnipresence” leads listeners to think that he is “perhaps a legendary figure,” even though many prisoners claim to have known him (FM 889).¹ The prisoners told tales of Daddy Mention’s escapes and how he outwitted the prison guards and walked right out of prison carrying a log.

“Daddy Mention” and “Father Abraham” were published for the first time in *The Sanctified Church. The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston*. Pamela Bordelon refers in her short introduction to the “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” essay (Bordelon 1999: 68-69) that three essays included in *The Sanctified Church*, namely “Daddy Mention,” “Father Abraham” and “Cures and Beliefs” were listed “as Hurston’s work when in fact they are the work of other federal writers” (Bordelon 1999: xii).² Apparently the Daddy Mention tales “were the work of black federal writer Martin Richardson” who went to one of Florida’s largest prisons and conducted interviews to collect the tales. She explains the inclusion of the tales in the volume of Hurston’s FWP writings: “Hurston was impressed with the tales as a prime example of the hero cycle unfolding. Using the editorial license afforded her in compiling ‘Go Gator,’ she included them as well as some of Richardson’s commentary about them.” (Bordelon 1999: 69) As to the two other essays referred by Bordelon as being the work of other FWP writers, she explains:

J. M. Johnson produced the intriguing profile of the well-known faith healer Father Abraham. The original field copy for “Cures and Beliefs” proves Viola Muse wrote the essay, which became a chapter of *The Florida Negro: A Federal Writers’ Project Legacy* (1993) (Bordelon 1999: xii).

The three essays mentioned by Bordelon as having been authored by other FWP writers could have been written by Zora Neale Hurston, as her writing and expressive style can be recognized in the referred essays. However, the possibility that she only edited the material handed to her by the true authors has to be considered.³

¹ The “Folklore and Music” essay, published in Hurston’s *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* of the Library of America, only includes four paragraphs in the section “Daddy Mention”. Further references to the “Daddy Mention” section will be from the “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” essay published in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers’ Project* edited by Pamela Bordelon (1999), identified as GGMW followed by the page number and included in the text.

² The essays are part of *The Florida Negro: A Federal Writers’ Project Legacy*. (McDonough 1993).

³ For a discussion of Hurston’s oral and written dialect features in *Mules and Men* and

“Other Negro Folklore Influences” was originally part of the essay on folklore and music, but Hurston decided to separate the two into different essays. “Folklore and Music” published in Hurston’s *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* presents the two essays under this title, but in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water* Pamela Bordelon presents this essay separately (GGMW 89-93), explaining that it “complements and extends Hurston’s earlier fieldwork done in south Florida and in the Bahamas in the 1920s” (Bordelon 1999: 89). In this essay Hurston affirms the strong African influence that can be found in Bahamian culture and “links African American and Bahamian cultures with their African past” (Bordelon 1999: 89). In “Other Negro Folklore Influences” Hurston compares Bahamian music and dance with that of the American Negro and considers “Bahamian music [...] more dynamic and compelling than that of the American Negro and the dance movement more arresting” (ONFI 90). This is explained by the fact that “the Bahamian [...] has had much less contact with the white man than the American Negro” (ONFI 90). As a result, Bahamian cultural expressions “are infinitely nearer the African,” while American Negro culture has been influenced by the daily contact of the slave with the white master and his family (ONFI 90).

“Art and Such” was written for *The Florida Negro*, probably as an answer to Sterling Brown and Richard Wright’s negative reviews of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.¹ In this article Hurston reflects about the art of the Negro. She “takes into consideration that only three generations separate the Negro from the muteness of slavery, and recognizes that creation is in its stumbling infancy” (AS 905). The reason for the non-development of the “art and such” was that “certain ideas came that have seriously affected art creation” (AS 906). These “ideas” were closely related to the surge of “Race Leaders” and the way they faced life in the years after the end of the Civil War and during the early twentieth century. These “Race Leaders” “stand around and mouth the same trite phrases, and try their practiced-best to look sad” and have never “done anything to improve education, industry, invention, art and [have] never [...] uttered a quotable line” (AS 908). This “Race attitude” has affected the “art and such.” The poet or artist is not free to create what he wants but is constantly

Their Eyes Were Watching God, see Lori Ann Garner, “Representations of Speech in the WPA Slave Narratives of Florida and the Writings of Zora Neale Hurston”, *Western Folklore* 59, Nr 3 / 4, Summer 2000. 215-231. In this article, Garner also focuses on the FWP’s use of written dialect in the transcriptions of the interviews made with former slaves.

¹ Sterling Brown wrote the review in *The Nation*, October 16, 1937. Richard Wright wrote the review in *New Masses* on October 5, 1937. Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 20-21, 16-17.

reminded by his “background” that he “ought [...] to be singing of [...] sorrows” because “that is what is expected of [him]” (AS 908). As pointed out before, Hurston criticizes this attitude that leads writers and poets to repeat the same theme over and over again. She considers it “the line of least resistance and least originality” that does not see the Negro as an individual, but only “as another tragic unit of the Race” (AS 908).

Regarding literature in Florida, Hurston points out two names: James Weldon Johnson and her own. When referring to herself, Hurston mentions that she “won critical acclaim” for “an objective point of view” and for “the telling of the story in the idiom – not the dialect – of the Negro” (AS 910). Favorable reviews of her first book, the novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) are referred – a few sentences which could also be said in relation to most of Hurston’s work: “The characters in the story are seen in relation to themselves and not in relation to the whites as has been the rule. To watch these people one would conclude that there were no white people in the world” (AS 910). Ending this essay Hurston affirms that “It is not to be concluded from these meager offerings in the arts that Negro talent is lacking. There has been a cruel waste of genius during the long generations of slavery. [...] One may expect some noble things from the Florida Negro in Art in the next decade” (AS 910-11).

“The Sanctified Church” was written for the religion chapter of *The Florida Negro*, but not included in the final draft of the manuscript.¹ In this essay Hurston states that “the sanctified church is a protest against the highbrow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth” (SC 901). She emphasizes that “*the whole movement of the Sanctified church is a rebirth of song-making! It has brought in a new era of spiritual-making*” (SC 902). She refuses the notion that the “spirituals are the Negro’s ‘sorrow songs,’” considering that “the Sanctified Church is a revitalizing element in Negro music and religion” (SC 903). It has a service that is “really drama with music” and incorporates “the expression known as ‘shouting’” that can be identified with the “African ‘Possession’ by the Gods” (SC 902). Song and dance are always linked in African American religion. Pamela Bordelon affirms, in her introductory paragraph to the essay, that “Hurston was one of the first anthropologists to recognize in the sanctified churches the clearest reflection of African American folk culture” (Bordelon 1999: 94).

In the Bibliographical Essay included in the book, Pamela Bordelon writes extensively about Zora Neale Hurston and the WPA activities of the

¹ First published in *The Sanctified Church. The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (1981).

FWP (Bordelon 1999: 3-49). According to Bordelon, Hurston met national director Henry Alsberg in June 1938 when she visited the FWP headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹ Alsberg saw in Hurston “editor-material” that could be used in the Florida project and wrote to Florida Director Carita Doggett Corse “suggest[ing] that Hurston be put in charge of editing *The Florida Negro* (Bordelon 1999: 16). He also suggested a raise in Hurston’s salary. The Florida office did not follow Alsberg’s suggestion “that Hurston be made an editor” – in the South, placing an African American in a supervisory position would probably have caused a racial incident. In a letter to Henry Alsberg dated May 23, 1939, Carita Doggett Corse refers to Hurston as “Negro editor of the Florida Project” with “an intimate knowledge of folk song and folklore sources in the State”, but apparently the position was never made official in Florida and remained so until Hurston left the FWP.² In 1937, Stetson Kennedy, a folklore collector, joined the FWP in Florida and was put in charge of folklore, oral history and ethnic studies. Kennedy had collected folklore while he was in College, so Benjamin Botkin “recommended [that he] be put in charge of the Florida folklore collecting although [he] was only twenty-one at the time.”³ In the essay “A Florida Treasure Hunt” he remembers his work in the WPA and the recording of Florida folksongs in the 1930s. Hurston is referred to as an “outstanding folklorist.”⁴

The FWP seems to be the bridge between Hurston’s early and later career.⁵ It meant new research and more material from field research that could lead to new writings. Hurston used material gathered during her FWP experience in her later works. As a FWP interviewer she visited a turpentine camp⁶ and “[rode] through the woods with John McFarlin, a turpentine woods rider in the employ of the Aycock and Lindsay Company of Cross City” (Bordelon 128). Later she used the material and information gathered during this experience in her book *Seraph on the Suwanee*, as we will see.

¹ Henry Alsberg was the first director of the FWP and previously an editorial writer and foreign correspondent.

² Carita Doggett Corse to Henry Alsberg, May 23, 1939. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/flwpa:@field\(DOCID+cor005\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/flwpa:@field(DOCID+cor005)), accessed on 2004/12/28.

³ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpahtml/ffpres01.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2004/12/28.

⁴ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpahtml/ffpres01.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2004/12/28.

⁵ Hurston’s work is divided in this work into early career – the twenties and the thirties, and later career – the forties and fifties.

⁶ Turpentine camps were isolated and known for their terrible working conditions and lawlessness, places where abuses and atrocities were committed.

Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* does not reveal anything about her time on the Federal Writers' Project and many Hurston scholars are of the opinion that Hurston was secretive about it because it was relief work for the government or because she was ashamed of the mistreatment by the FWP, since she went on relief when she was already a published writer and an experienced folklorist, but was, in fact, hired as a "junior interviewer."¹

The Federal Writers' Project ended the notion that "American folklore [was] the almost private preserve of scholars who, with few exceptions, dealt with it formally as part of a remote past. [...] The Project [...] broke down the barriers of academic formalism by stressing the contemporary aspects of American folklore" (Mangione 269). The Florida Project members collected a large number of manuscripts on beliefs and customs, folk literature such as tales, legends and jokes, history, music, dances and oral histories, but most of its material remained untouched for almost six decades – not even the renewed scholarly interest in Zora Neale Hurston could remove it sooner from its "dormant" state.

¹ See Hurston 2002: 179-182.

Part II
“Lying Sessions”: Folklore as Fiction

Chapter 1

“When the Negro was in Vogue”: The Harlem Renaissance

This was the era in which was achieved the Harlem of story and song; the era in which Harlem's fame for exotic flavor and colorful sensuousness was spread to all parts of the world; when Harlem was made known as the scene of laughter, singing, dancing, and primitive passions, as the center of new Negro literature and art.

James Weldon Johnson

The Harlem Renaissance was, as assessed before, a large and diverse movement in African American literary history that stretched “from the close of the First World War to the immediate post-Depression years” (Lewis 1997 [1979]: xv). This awakening was primarily a literary and intellectual movement that, according to Nathan I. Huggins, brought about “a channeling of energy from political and social criticism into poetry, fiction, music, and art” (Huggins 1976:9). Historical, social and economic factors helped to generate this organized, self-conscious phase that lasted for a decade and fostered a growing mood of racial confidence and protest: the founding of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History; W.E.B. DuBois his “Talented Tenth” concept and the attempt to eliminate “Old Negro” stereotypes and introducing the “New Negro.”¹

The industrial needs of the First World War and the weaning of European migration to the United States lured thousands of Negro peasants and laborers

¹ Factors like the end of the First World War and the return of the victorious black soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment to Harlem on February 17, 1919; the great migration from the South to the North in search of jobs and a better life and the economic prosperity during the 1920s helped fuel the phenomenon that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

There are various dates for the beginning and end of the movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. This will be discussed later on in this Chapter.

from a life of poverty in the South to one of steady employment in the North. Many left the South willingly, feeling pressured by “poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest”¹ while others migrated based on promises of industrial or domestic employment. Yet, the northern communities did not always welcome the new inhabitants. Alain Locke views the population shift known as the Great Migration as “a deliberate flight not only from the countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (Locke 1925: 6), which can “be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize [...] a chance for the improvement of conditions” (Locke 1925: 6).

The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North brought people looking for social and economic freedom into big cities like New York and Chicago, where they hoped to escape the poverty and violence of the South. The migration of thousands of blacks from the rural South to northern cities reflected and produced a renewed race consciousness, but life was far from easy in the North. The impersonal cities of the North were not quite the land of promise they had expected; there African Americans also had to face employment discrimination and other equal rights issues. They became disillusioned with the living conditions, health and education conditions, and the condition of the labor market was getting worse as the years following the war saw employment opportunities dwindle due to the reduced need of war supplies.

Soldiers back from the First World War hoped that the sacrifices they made for their country would win them some measure of respect and equal treatment in society. But the end of the war led to extraordinary violence being inflicted upon blacks as whites were uneasy as to how blacks were going to adjust to post-war life. The Summer of 1919, called the “Red Summer” by James Weldon Johnson ushered in the greatest period of interracial strife the United States had ever witnessed. Race riots occurred in twenty-five cities throughout the USA, some of them ending in terrible lynchings and even in the public burning of Negroes, some of them still alive. The causes for the race riots were many, among them the quest of whites and Negroes for jobs and housing, since the Negroes were moving into neighbourhoods hitherto occupied only by whites.

Harlem quickly became the physical embodiment of New Negro consciousness and a “race capital” (Locke 1996: 101), a place where blacks from throughout the Diaspora would come together to express the “deep feeling of race” and to “seiz[e] upon its first changes for group expression and self-deter-

¹ Alain Locke, “Harlem” in *Survey Graphic*, March 1925, Volume VI, Number 6. Reprinted in Wintz 1996a: 101.

mination” (Locke 1925: 11, 7). This awakening led to an outpouring of literature, art and music that defined a new age in African American cultural history.

Several Harlem related movements appeared in the early twentieth century. In 1910, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was formed by a group of white radicals and black leaders to work for the abolition of all forced segregation, equal education for white and black children, the complete enfranchisement of the Negro, and the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. *The Crisis: A Record of Darker Races*, edited by W.E.B. DuBois was the official publication of the NAACP and its first issue came out in November 1910. In 1911, the National Urban League appeared in New York to “open new opportunities for Negroes in industry and to assist newly arrived Negroes in their problems of adjustment in the urban centers”. *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, edited by Charles S. Johnson, began publication in January 1923. The most significant mass movement to appear in Harlem in the twenties was the “Back to Africa” movement of the Jamaica born Marcus Garvey. Garvey had the ability and charisma to reach the masses and the essence of his message was that black was superior to white and that the destiny of the Negro race lay in Africa, not in America. He began the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914. The weekly *Negro World* helped to spread Garvey’s ideas. His attempt to build black pride through the exaltation of blackness gained him followers among the demoralized blacks in urban ghettos all over the country.

The choice of Harlem as the center for the development of the movement that came to be known as Harlem Renaissance was not random since New York was the cultural capital of the country and offered the proximity to the publishing world that was crucial to the writers of the movement.¹ The white patronage from downtown contributed to the careers of black artists like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Miguel Covarrubias, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas and Richmond Barthé.² The 1920s were also the time of the Jazz Age and the interest of whites in Harlem and the Renaissance were related to the fascination they had with Harlem street life and nightlife, the exoticism or “primitivism” of

¹ Black communities in cities like Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston and others experienced similar literary and dramatic activity.

² Critics like Nathan Huggins, Addison Gayle and Harold Cruse argument that the Harlem Renaissance was inspired, dominated and corrupted by white patronage. David Levering Lewis in his study of Harlem in the twenties *When Harlem was in Vogue* states that “white capital and influence were crucial, and the white presence, at least in the early years, hovered over the New Negro world of art and literature like a benevolent censor, politely but pervasively setting the outer limits of its creative boundaries”. (1997 [1979]: 98).

African American culture. Some African American writers explored this active and participating interest in Harlem nightlife:

Another Harlem is savored by the few – a Harlem of racy music and racier dancing, of cabarets famous or notorious according to their kind, of amusement in which abandon and sophistication are cheek by jowl – a Harlem which draws the connoisseur in diversion as well as the indiscriminating sightseer. This Harlem is the fertile source of the “shufflin’” and “rollin’” and “runnin’ wild” revues that establish themselves season after season in “downtown” theaters. It is part of the exotic fringe of the metropolis (Locke 1996: 101).

Langston Hughes refers to the presence of whites in Harlem repeatedly in his autobiography *The Big Sea*: “White people began to come to Harlem in droves” filling the “little cabarets and bars” and “star[ing] at the Negro customers – like amusing animals in a zoo” (Hughes 1940: 224-225).¹ Fiction writer and physician Rudolph Fisher satirized the vogue for Harlem nightlife in an essay “The Caucasian Storms Harlem”² published in 1927 where he writes about his return to Harlem after an absence of five years. He decides to go to a cabaret at around midnight and “suddenly became aware that, except for the waiters and members of the orchestra, [he] was the only Negro in the place.” In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” published in *The Nation* in 1926,³ Langston Hughes points out that “until recently [the black artist] received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people” (410). However, in spite of “sharp criticism and misunderstanding” from his own people, the Negro artist may yet benefit from the white interest in Harlem and Negro culture during the twenties:

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor (Hughes 1926: 411).

In literature a remarkable and diverse body of work was produced by authors such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois,

¹ The third section of the autobiography is entitled “Black Renaissance”.

² First published in the *American Mercury*, Volume XI, August 1927. Reprinted in Huggins 1976: 74-82.

³ Reprinted in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance. 1920-1940*. (Hatch and Harmalian 1996: 408-412).

Rudolph Fisher, Arna Bontemps, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, George S. Schuyler, Eric Walrond, Sterling Brown, Walter White, Gwendolyn Bennett, Willis Richardson and Helene Johnson. Between 1905 and 1923 few Negro novels were published, but during the 1920s and 1930s major American publishers, giving African American writers a national coverage never seen before published over twenty novels. The writers or participants of the Harlem Renaissance did not have a consistent aesthetic or a "Renaissance" style. Their work ranged across varied genres that portrayed the Negro race seriously. The incorporation of folk speech and folk forms such as spirituals, gospel and blues is a hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance.¹

Magazines, journals and literary quarterlies, both black and white, like *The Crisis*,² *Opportunity*,³ *The Messenger*, *Stylus* and *Fire!!*⁴ encouraged young black writers to make stimulating literary contributions to the florescent creating activity of the movement of the black American arts that Alain Locke was trying to develop. Literary contests launched the careers of promising young Negro writers, poets and dramatists. The *Opportunity* literary contest gave Zora Neale Hurston the contacts and publicity she needed. Her short story "Spunk" was awarded second prize as was her one act play "Color Struck." According to the "Editorials" of *Opportunity*,⁵ "the purpose of *Opportunity*'s literary contest" was among many other things

to stimulate and encourage creative literary effort among Negroes; to locate and orient Negro writers of ability; to stimulate and encourage interest in the serious development of a body of literature about Negro life; ... to encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors and about Negro life.

¹ An important sourcebook for the social-literary history of the period is *When Harlem was in Vogue* by David Levering Lewis (1997 [1979]), but there are several other interesting works like Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (1971).

² Journal published by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

³ Journal published by The National Urban League.

⁴ Only a sole issue of the rebel literary quarterly *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* appeared in 1926. Created by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, John Davis, Aaron Douglas, Richard Bruce and Gwendolyn Bennett, it was a literary magazine that rejected a bourgeois conception of art in favor of a proletarian-based approach to it. See the chapter in Hughes' *The Big Sea*, "Harlem Literati," for his version of the issues relating to *Fire!!*, 233-241.

⁵ *Opportunity*, Volume 2 September 1924, Number 21. Reprinted in Wintz 1996a: 215.

But there were other literary contests such as the Crisis prize, the Amy Spingarn Prizes in Literature and Art¹ and the Du Bois Literary Prize. The *Opportunity* and *Crisis* contests, with their Awards dinners, their distinguished guests, their renowned judges and news coverage stimulated writing and contributed to the careers of writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Arthur Huff Fauset and others. Other periodicals like *Survey Graphic*, *New Masses*, *American Mercury*, *The Nation* and *Modern Quarterly* also encouraged writers by publishing their work.

In March 1925, Locke edited a special Harlem issue of the *Survey Graphic*² entitled “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro” and it was here that the phrase “New Negro Movement” first was used consistently to characterize the cultural and intellectual activity of the Negro in the 1920s. Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (1925) is an expansion of the Harlem issue of the *Survey Graphic*. Presenting different facets of Negro life, *The New Negro* contained a broad range of material that included short stories, poems, one play, essays on aesthetic, historical and sociological subjects and illustrations by Aaron Douglas and Winold Reiss.

W. E. B. Du Bois did not see the Harlem Renaissance as positively contributing to the advancement of Black culture. In the article “The Negro College” published in *The Crisis* in August 1933, he gives his opinion about the Renaissance:³

Why was it that the Renaissance of literature which began among Negroes ten years ago has never taken real and lasting root? It was because it was a transplanted and exotic thing. It was a literature written for the benefit of white people and at the behest of white readers, and starting out privately from the white point of view. It never had a real Negro constituency and it did not grow out of the inmost heart and frank experience of Negroes; on such an artificial basis no real literature can grow (DuBois 1986:1014).

Cary D. Wintz, the editor of the seven volumes *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*, confirms W.E.B. DuBois argument, and argues that

The Harlem Renaissance was a self-conscious movement. That is, the writers and poets who participated in the movement were aware that

¹ “The prizes are offered to persons of Negro descent in order to encourage their aptitude for art expression.” *The Crisis*, October 1924, Volume 28, Number 6. Reprinted in Wintz 1996a: 320.

² March 1925, Volume VI, Number 6.

³ Reprinted in Huggins 1986: 1010-1019.

they were involved in a literary movement and assumed at least partial responsibility for defining the parameters and aesthetics of the movement; black scholars and intellectuals were also aware of the Harlem Renaissance (even if they railed against it) and attempted to define the movement in terms both of literature and the political and social implications of that literature. While it was self-conscious, the Harlem Renaissance lacked a well-defined ideological or aesthetic center. It was more a community of writers, poets, critics, patrons, sponsors, and publishers than a structured and focused intellectual movement. It may be best conceptualized as an attitude or a state of mind [...]. The men and women who participated in the movement shared little but a consciousness that they were part of a common endeavor – a new awakening of African American culture and creativity; other than that what bound them together was a pride in their racial heritage, an essentially middle-class background, and the fact that all, to a greater or lesser degree, were connected to Harlem at the time that Harlem was emerging as the cultural, intellectual, and political center of Black America (Wintz 1996a: x).

Women contributed actively to the Harlem Renaissance in notable ways, but their full participation was shadowed by social factors that excluded or limited their role. Anti-female prejudice was inherent in the whole of society and unequal treatment of women came from men in influential positions, such as is the case of Alain Locke, a Harvard trained Ph.D., a Rhodes scholar and Howard University philosophy professor. Locke was “a certified misogynist” who customarily “dismissed female students on the first class day with the promise of an automatic grade of C” (Lewis 1979: 96). Locke was accused of “partiality toward young males,” but his behavior toward Zora Neale Hurston was an exception: he liked and recommended her to Charles Johnson as a promising student writer at Howard University (Lewis 1979: 96). One of the ways in which women contributed to the period was through the refinement of their traditional domestic role: parties were given by hostesses, both black and white,¹ with famous guests of all classes coming together and black writers and artists of all generations coming into contact with sympathetic white writers,² editors, publishers³ and other white celebrities.

Women’s status in the Harlem Renaissance can be further illuminated

¹ A’Lelia Walker, Regina Anderson, Ethel Ray Nance.

² Edna St. Vincent Millay, Waldo Frank, Vachel Lindsay, Rebecca West, Carl Van Vechten, Sinclair Lewis.

³ Among the publishers were Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*, and Alfred A. Knopf Jr. who published *Poems by Countee Cullen* and *Langston Hughes*. Carl Van Vechten convinced editors and publishers of his acquaintance into publishing the work of young Harlem writers.

by other literary factors: the three main writers of the movement – Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay – had made their reputation as poets. Most of the notable women writers of the Renaissance were poets – Jessie Fauset, Helene Johnson, Anne Spencer, Gwendolyn Bennett, Effie Lee Newsome and Gladys Mae Hayford – and only Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston were not writing verse. During the Harlem Renaissance only Larsen, Hurston, Bennett, and Fauset published fiction.¹

The movement that became known as “the Harlem Renaissance was the most significant event in African American literature and culture in the twentieth century” and had an impact on all arts is probably the only touch point among all scholars and critics of the period (Wintz 1996a: ix). The attempts made to circumscribe the boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance reflect the difficulty in identifying the beginning or end of a movement. While some scholars apply the term strictly to the twenties, others are much more “elastic,” the only certainty being that the movement cannot be dated as if extended from one precise point on the calendar to another.

In the “Series Introduction” to the seven volume set entitled *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*, Cary D. Wintz affirms that “it is difficult to pinpoint the chronological limits of the Harlem Renaissance” (Wintz 1996a: x).² According to Cary Wintz, the literary period known as the Harlem Renaissance begins with the publication of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in 1923 “when African American writers and intellectuals began to realize that something new was happening in black literature” and extends “well into the 1930’s” (Wintz 1996a: x).

For David Levering in *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1979), the Harlem Renaissance has “its authentic beginnings in 1919, with soldiers returning from the Great War” and ends in 1934 or 1935 with the riot in Harlem (Lewis 1979: xxviii).

In *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), Nathan Irvin Huggins marks the begin-

¹ When one thinks of the women of the Harlem Renaissance, one does not think of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey or Ida Cox. Yet these women enjoyed tremendous success in the music world during the same years that the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance published their books, poems and short stories. Blues singers expressed the disillusionment with Harlem and other northern cities that migrants had begun to feel: low wages, poor working conditions, lack of opportunity and family problems; the South, on the other hand, was linked with home, family and communal ties (Bessie Smith, “Dixie Flyer Blues”). Historians and critics like Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson identified the south with economic exploitation, social degradation and political oppression.

² An important contribution to African American Studies is this seven volume set entitled *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940* edited by Cary D. Wintz and published by Garland Publishing in 1996. The series “reprint[s] articles and other materials that will delineate a clear picture and foster an understanding of the Harlem Renaissance (Wintz 1996a: xi).

ning of the Harlem Renaissance “at the close of World War I” and associates it with the 1920s, stating that “When the decade of the 1930s opened, the innocent Harlem Renaissance ended” (Huggins 1971: 302).

Cheryl A. Wall mentions two “literary markers of the Harlem Renaissance”, the publication of two significant anthologies: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* published in 1922 marked the beginning of the movement and *The Negro Caravan* edited by Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee and published in 1941 marked the end.

Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea* (1940) refers to “the 1920’s [as] the years of Manhattan’s black Renaissance” beginning with *Shuffle Along, Running Wild*, and the Charleston.” *Shuffle Along*, a show that was written, performed and produced by African-Americans, opened in New York in the summer of 1921.¹ The “Negro vogue in Manhattan [...] reached its peak just before the crash” of the stock market in 1929. (Hughes: 1940, 223) Henry Louis Gates Jr. places the end of the New Negro Renaissance “circa 1930” (Gates 1993: 155).

A different point of view is given by John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom. A History of Negro Americans*. He states that “the Harlem Renaissance that began shortly after the close of World War I continued into the sixties” (Franklin 1974 [1947]: 393). In the chapter entitled “The Harlem Renaissance” he also writes that “gradually the scope of the Harlem Renaissance came to be the whole of the United States [...] turning the literary and cultural aspects of the New Negro Movement [...] national before the end of the twenties” (Franklin 1974 [1947]: 383-4).

The general consensus seems to be 1919 or 1920 – the artistic renaissance is thought to have begun after the march of the 369th US Infantry Regiment through Harlem in 1919 or after the start of the Prohibition in 1920. The twenties are generally associated with the Harlem Renaissance and the explosion of creative activity seems to have ended abruptly in 1929 after the crash of the stock market.

¹ This musical comedy became the most popular show in New York in 1921 and was such an extraordinary success that the New York run lasted more than a year.

Chapter 2

“Jumping at the Sun”: Early Career

During the early and middle years of her career Zora was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself. Her work, so vigorous among the rather pallid productions of many of her contemporaries comes from the essence of black folk life.

Alice Walker

Like many black Southerners, Hurston migrated to the North to continue her education and achieve spiritual independence, since economically she had been on her own for a while, working different jobs, the last of which had been as a lady’s maid in a traveling Gilbert and Sullivan theater company. Unlike the common black migrant, the message that Hurston’s autobiographical work conveys, is that she apparently recovered quickly from the culture shock – her adjustment to the urban North must have been facilitated by her previous stays in Jacksonville and by her tours with the theater company while working as a lady’s maid. After all, she was finally reaching to the far horizon, making her childhood dreams come true.

She continued her education first at Morgan College in Baltimore and then at Howard University in Washington, D.C., two institutions then known for their all-black student body. The resistance black migrants found in the areas of housing and unemployment did not befall her seriously; instead she would use her “migrant” status to her advantage when she moved to New York – she rapidly found out that it could be synonymous with “exotic” and “primitive” in Harlem, New York. She could easily play the “primitive” as her “natural spontaneity had not been crushed by the forces of modern industrialism” (Bone 1975: 127). Hurston was proud of her southern rural origins and enjoyed displaying publicly the cultural wealth she carried with her. Hence the rural setting of all of her fictional works.

Hurston’s writings reflect the “nostalgia for the rural South [...] strong

among the black migrants” who found that the North was not the Promised Land they had expected (Bone 1975: 133). Robert Bone states that the “authors of the Harlem Renaissance shared [...] a crucial sentiment: *Negro life is better*” (Bone 1975: 136). Hurston did not prove that “*Negro life is better*” – she did not make comparisons, but simply demonstrated that Negroes had a life (different from that of white people) and lived it according to their cultural values and beliefs. She did not write “stories exposing the corruption of the white world and exalting the virtue of the black” (Bone 1975: 136). She wrote about the black world as she saw, knew and lived it in the rural setting of the Southern United States. Robert Bone credits Hurston with the rescue of the vernacular from distortion and neglect (Bone 1975: 140).

Critics like Mary Helen Washington have commented on the versions of black life presented by major black writers, meaning male, who do not reflect on the culture, history, imagination, thoughts, life of black people, but focus mainly on the life of isolated individuals and their encounters and experiences with white people. They tell us about the humiliation, suffering, degradation and oppression that African Americans have to undergo and forget that they also know how to have a good time,; that they laugh, cry and live, in spite of the white world and the horror it may suggest.

The literature produced by the Harlem writers “embraced” by the publishers did not represent the experience of ordinary people or give a complete portrait of Harlem. Authentic black storytelling and dialect came from the common black folk and was associated with ignorance, perpetuating images the black intelligentsia were trying to forget.

Wallace Thurman, an artist from the Harlem Renaissance caricatured Hurston in *Infants in the Spring* as a vampish young woman, Sweetie Mae Carr, taking advantage of the many kinds of assistance available to Negroes who were “in vogue”:

Sweetie May was a short story writer, more noted for her ribald wit and personal effervescence than for any actual literary work. She was a great favorite among those whites who went in her Negro prodigies. Mainly because she lived up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be. It seldom occurred to any of her patrons that she did this with tongue in cheek. Given a paleface audience, Sweetie May would launch forth into a saga of the little all-colored Mississippi town where she claimed to have been born. Her repertoire of tales was earthy, vulgar and funny. Her darkies always smiled through their years, sang spirituals on the slightest provocation, and performed buck dances when they should have been working. Sweetie May was a master of southern dialect, and an able raconteur, but she was

too indifferent to literary creation to transfer to paper that which she told so well. The intricacies of writing bored her, and her written work was for the most part turgid and unpolished. But Sweetie May knew her white folks (Thurman 1998 [1932]:148-9).

The characterization of Sweetie May continues in the next paragraph with Sweetie May justifying her behavior. “Being a Negro writer these days is a racket and I’m going to make the most of it while it lasts. Sure I cut the fool. But I enjoy it, too” (Thurman 1998: 149). Among the things she does to get “support” and “help” from whites is finding “queer places for whites to go in Harlem – out of the way primitive churches, side street speakeasies” (Thurman 1998 [1932]: 149). Sweetie May takes advantage of her popularity during the “Negro literary renaissance”.

It is easy to see that a parallel can be established between Sweetie Mae Carr and Zora Neale Hurston. Thurman died in 1934, the year of publication of Hurston’s novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Until the publication of *Infants in the Spring* in 1932, Hurston had only published short stories and plays. Sweetie May’s “ultimate ambition” was “to become a gynecologist”, Hurston was on her way to become the only African American anthropologist of the South, but Sweetie May’s personality calls to mind Hurston’s: both went to Columbia University, both were masters of southern dialect with a big repertoire of tales, both came from all-colored towns of the South and both knew how to “act” among white folks, to mention just a few of the common characteristics.

Among the judges at the *Opportunity* dinner awards on May 1, 1925 were best-selling novelist Fannie Hurst, play writer Eugene O’Neill, Barnard College trustee and philanthropist Annie Nathan Meyer, writer Carl Van Vechten and wealthy African American heiress A’Lelia Walker.

Annie Nathan Meyer, author, philanthropist, trustee of Barnard College found Hurston captivating and offered her the chance to attend Barnard College in New York.¹ When Hurston registered at Barnard to finish the work she had started at Howard University, a college color barrier was crossed, allowing Hurston, in her own words, to become “Barnard’s sacred black cow.” Since Hurston’s grades did not allow her to apply for a scholarship, Meyer and Hurston began desperately looking for funds and contacting everyone they thought could help. Eventually, with the help of Meyer, Hurston got together the tuition money, but she still had to find work to pay the rest of the college expenses and survive. Between attending classes and studying, Hurston had

¹ *Mules and Men* is dedicated to Annie Nathan Meyer: “To My Dear Friend Mrs. Annie Nathan Meyer who hauled the mud to make me but loves me just the same – Zora Neale Hurston”.

to find odd jobs such as being a manicurist in a black-owned barbershop and working as a waitress or as a maid.

Hurston met Fannie Hurst at the awards dinner but the relationship did not develop at that time. It was Annie Nathan Meyer who wrote to Fannie Hurst asking for funds to finance Hurston's school year at Barnard College. Hurst invited Hurston to tea and soon Hurston was working as her secretary and living in Hurst's apartment. There are no references in Hurston's letters to the financial arrangement between her and Fannie Hurst. This "working arrangement" only lasted for about a month, but the friendship continued to grow. Calling her the "world's worst secretary" whose "shorthand was short on legibility, her typing hit-or-miss, mostly the latter, her filing, a game of find-the-thimble," Hurst fired Hurston, but they remained friends and confidantes. Hurston remained in Hurst's employ "for about a year" "in the capacity of chauffeur." They traveled together extensively and exchange correspondence during Hurston's travels. In a memorial essay to Hurston, Hurst writes of their meeting and relationship (Hurst 1961: 17-21). She describes Hurston as "an effervescent companion" with a "sense of humor" and "a blazing zest for life" (Hurst 1961: 22-23) with a "dialect [...] as deep as the deep south." (Hurst 1961: 21). Hurston was aware of the fact that "cultivating a relationship" with Fannie Hurst would value her career and she acknowledged that the friendship with Hurst was important to her and helped her "at a critical time"¹ as "Fannie was generous with her introductions, both to her celebrity friends and editors" (Kroeger 1999: 124). However, from the letters Hurston wrote to Hurst, and despite the familiarity and friendship that existed between them, there were boundaries that were never crossed. Hurston begins her earlier letters with "Dear Fannie Hurst" and her later ones begin with "Dear Miss Hurst", showing that she did not treat Hurst informally as "Fannie". The financial disparities between Hurst and Hurston reflected the racially divided times and did not disappear when Hurston became a publicly acknowledged folklorist and writer.

After Hurston's death, friends like Carl Van Vechten and Fannie Hurst were confused by the fact that she chose not to contact them on her final years.²

¹ Hurston to Fannie Hurst, March 16, 1926. (Hurston 2002: 85).

² "That she died in poverty and obscurity was because for a decade at least she had deliberately removed herself from the large group of us who felt puzzlement and still do." *In* Fannie Hurst, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Personality Sketch." (Bloom 1986: 23). This will be further developed in Part II, chapter 3.

2.1 Short Fiction: Early poetic efforts

As has been mentioned before, Hurston was the only academically and professionally trained anthropologist/folklorist among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The materials she collected interpenetrate in many of her works not only in her folklore works, but also in her theatre plays and in her short and long fiction.

One of her first literary works was the 1919 poem, “Home”, which shows Hurston’s nostalgia for Eatonville (Boyd 2003: 82). It is one of her earliest known works, but she would soon give up poetry and try to find her voice in other genres. The short stories mark the beginning of Hurston’s career in fiction and reveal the ideas, issues and themes that would be at the center of her later works. The setting of most of the early short stories is almost inevitably the South, with Eatonville as the preferred microcosm. Folk culture roots are celebrated and preserved through the spirituality and sensibility of the characters that inhabit her stories. Her best-known short fictions show male-female relationships in a domestic setting that is part of the black southern community. Hurston uses the short story “to validate and authenticate the black folk experience” (Howard 1980: 56).

Zora Neale Hurston’s literary career began with “John Redding Goes to Sea,” a short story published in 1921 in *Stylus*. This first fictional work is a story of ambition, dreams deferred and determination that result in death. Many of the features that would appear in her later works such as the male-female conflicts, all-black rural setting, and references to conjuring and superstition are employed here. Hurston uses dialect and metaphors that would be fully explored in later works, especially those written after her research period in the South.

John Redding has dreams that are continually curtailed by others, first by his mother and then also by his wife. He has a vivid imagination and “his thoughts would in spite of himself, stray down river to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world” (JR 930). John’s mother explained his differences through some “spell” or “conjuration,” that had been cast on him but he “was [just] an imaginative child [...] fond of day-dreams” (JR 925). John created a fantasy world in which he could travel to his heart’s content. Living near the river, “the little brown boy loved to wander down to the waters edge, and, casting in dry twigs, watch them sail away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world and [...] [he] wanted to follow them” (JR 925). But “some ships get tangled in the weeds” (JR 933). John grew “to manhood, playing, studying

and dreaming” and never went beyond the river (JR 927).

John's mother, Matty, “a small wiry woman with large eyes [...] watery and weak” (JR 927), saw John's wish to travel, to go to sea, as the result of “travel dust” placed in her yard by the Witch Judy Davis on “the very night John wuz bawn [...] tuh make him walk ‘way fum [her]” (JR 927). Any conversation about the possibility of John travelling to fulfil his dreams would make Matty weep as “her son's desires were incomprehensible to her” (JR 928).

John's father understood his dreams and ambitions and identified with them. As a boy, he had also had dreams, but never followed them. Many times father and son “sat on the fallen log at the edge of the water and talked of John's proposed travels. He had encouraged his son” (JR 931) and tried to explain to his wife John's urge to travel:

Matty, a man doan need no travel dust tuh make ‘im wanten hit de road. It jes' comes natcheral fu her man tuh travel. Dey all wants tuh go at some time or other but they kain't all get away. Ah wants mah John tuh go an' see cause Ah wanted to go mah self. When he comes back Ah kin see them furrin places wid his eyes. He kain't help wantin' tuh go cause he's a man chile! (JR 927).

John eventually marries “Stella Kanty, a neighbor's daughter” making Mrs. Redding happy with the thought that he would settle down and forget about going away. But soon “John began to saunter out to the gate to gaze wistfully down the white dusty road; or to wander again to the river as he had done in childhood” (JR 930). John's wish to travel returned a few weeks after the marriage as he felt “hometied” and “grew silent and pensive.” Stella was affected by his “indifference and made his life miserable with tears, accusations and pouting” (JR 930). John decides to talk to Stella about his wish to travel, trying to make her understand that he couldn't “Stifle that lounging for the open road, rolling seas, for peoples and countries [he] ha[d] never seen.” His mother soon joined Stella and the women “took up arms against him” (JR 931). His father intervened and took John's part.

One day John tells his family that he has the possibility of joining the army and travelling the world, but again his mother refuses to give her consent and curses him. John is beaten, and decides to put off the project of traveling for a while. His father, Alfred, noticing that John did not react to Mrs. Redding's furious outburst, takes him to the river. John explains to his father how he feels: “I feel that I am just earth, *soil* lying helpless to move myself, but thinking” (JR 933). Father and son are close friends who identify with each other. They

demonstrate their mutual affection by sitting with each other and talking about their dreams. Alfred even goes as far as physically demonstrating his affection for John: “Alfred threw an arm about his son’s neck and drew him nearer but quickly removed it. Both men instantly drew apart, ashamed for having been so demonstrative” (JR 933). Few parent-child relationships appear in Hurston’s fictional works. When such relationships are presented in Hurston’s work, there is difficulty or shame surrounding them.

That evening the Redding household was gloomy. After supper the women sat on the porch and the men under the Chinaberry tree as if “the family was divided into two armed camps” (JR 934). Later that night, Mr. Hill, the white “builder of the new bridge that was to span the river” came to the house to ask the men to help secure the new bridge against the bad weather that was expected in forty-eight hours. John went to help fortify the bridge.

During the night the weather changed: “the breeze freshened, growing stiffer until midnight when it became a gale” (JR 936). Alfred, Matty and Stella sat quietly listening to the storm and the wind until “a screech-owl alighted on the roof and shivered forth his doleful cry” (JR 936). This “new element of terror” was “a sho’ sign uh death.” Half way through the night the wind stopped and it started to rain heavily. At daybreak, when the rain stopped, Alfred, feeling uneasy, went to the bridge. He found that the river had risen beyond its banks, “sweeping away houses, great blocks of earth, cattle, trees – in short anything that came within its grasp. Even the steel framework of the new bridge was gone” (JR 937). John Redding had disappeared. Finally, a man was seen floating downriver on a piece of timber – it was John Redding. The storm had thrown John off the bridge. Alfred was distraught, but he stopped the rescue-party from retrieving John’s body from the river: “Leave my boy go on. Doan stop ‘im. Doan’ bring ‘im back for dat ole tree to grin at. Leave him g’wan. He wants tuh go. Ah’m happy ‘cause dis mawnin’ mah boy is goin’ tuh sea, *he’s goin’ tuh sea.*” John Redding was finally going to sea, “piloting his little craft on the shining river road, [he] floated away toward Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world – at last” (JR 939). In death, John realized his dream.

The short story “Drenched in Light” appeared in *Opportunity* in December 1924.¹ In this story Hurston uses materials from her own experience – Isis Watts, the main character resembles the young Zora described in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.² The story describes a day in the life of Isis Watts – an eleven year old motherless black girl who is not tragically black and poor, but is “drenched

¹ Also published with the title “Isis”.

² See Lowe 1997: 63-66.

in light.” Isis spends long hours sitting on the gatepost looking down the road toward the horizon (as young Zora did), and also likes to run up and down the road to Orlando, waving to the travellers passing through. She has a problem with discipline, according to her grandmother who calls her a “limb of Satan” (DL 940), “hellion,” “lil’ hasion”(DL 941), and “lil’ limb” (DL 947).

Being a creative and imaginative girl, Isis is always in conflict with Grandma Potts, an old traditional woman, who believes in punishing Isis for anything that is not done according to her principles. Isis is always getting into trouble: she tried to shave her grandmother’s “whiskers” while she was taking her afternoon nap; she gave the puppy a swim in the dishpan while she was washing the dishes and she took “Grandma’s new red tablecloth” and wore it as a Spanish shawl. The little girl is filled with good intentions that are not appreciated by others. She tried to shave Grandma because she believes that “no ladies don’t weah no whiskers if they kin help it. But Gran’ma gittin’ ole an’ she doan know how to shave like me” (DL 942). Grandma tries her best to discipline Isis and turn her into a lady, since “there are certain things that Grandma Potts felt no one of this female persuasion should do – one was to sit with the knees separated, ‘settin’ brazen’ she called it; another was whistling, another playing with boys, neither must a lady cross her legs” (DL 941).¹ Isis defies her grandmother whenever she has the opportunity: her aim is to live life having as much fun as possible and anything can be used with that intent since her imagination is never-ending.

Isis takes Grandma’s new tablecloth and uses it as a shawl to dance at the barbecue. She is saved from a severe punishment by Helen, the white woman, who was impressed by the gypsy dance Isis performed. Helen and the two men who accompany her pass through town on their way to Maitland. They see the barbecue and “the brown dancer” with the gifted feet. After finding Isis in the creek scared of the beating Grandma had in store for her, Helen takes Isis back and asks Grandma Potts if Isis can accompany her to her hotel to dance for her as she “want[ed] brightness and this Isis is joy itself, [as] she is drenched in light!” (DL 947). Grandma, “with pride in her voice,” quickly grants permission, allowing Isis to accompany Helen. The fact that Grandma agreed so quickly to let Isis accompany Helen can have two readings: she was proud because Isis was invited due to her vivacity and talent, or she was proud because a white woman requested Isis’s presence and she was pleased to comply. Isis, however, is simply happy because she “felt herself appreciated” and going with Helen

¹ In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston says that “it was not lady-like for girls to play with boys” (DT 585).

will prevent Grandma from punishing her. Helen simply “want[s] a little of her sunshine to soak into [her] soul” (DL 948).

Hurston wrote “Drenched in Light” from her childhood memories. The story is autobiographical in different ways.¹ Hurston identified with Isis: Isis’s hometown can easily be identified as Eatonville and Potts was Hurston’s mother maiden name, so Grandma Potts was probably a reference to Hurston’s maternal grandmother.² Zora, the child, like Isie, also had a vivid imagination: she enjoyed sitting on the gatepost and watch the travellers go by and wave to them. In “Drenched in Light,” “the little brown figure perched upon the gate post looked yearningly up the gleaming shell road that led to Orlando, and down the road that led to Sanford” (DL 940); in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora “used to take a seat on top pf the gate post and watch the world go by. One way to Orlando ran past my house” (DT 589); and in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston mentions that her “favorite place was atop the gate post” (HFCM 826). Jim Robinson, one of the white cattlemen, that was particularly fond of Isis calls her “Snidlits,” (DL 940), the same name that the “grey-haired, white man who had helped [Hurston] get into the world” called her, as he considered Zora “a hell of a name to give a child” (DT 585-6). Hurston like Isis was independent and proud of herself: being black and poor did not take away her vitality and happiness. John Lowe considers that “Drenched in Light” fits into Hurston’s attempts of creating and correcting her past: “Isie’s impropriety, her ‘spunk,’ her courage, her humor, and, above all, her creativity shows us what Zora was then” (Lowe 65).

The message that Hurston wrote into “Drenched in Light” stating that Isis does not feel “tragically colored,” but is, in fact, a happy black little girl is repeated in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” where Hurston affirms:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife (HFCM 827).

¹ Deborah Plant also focuses on the autobiographical characteristics of “Drenched in Light” (1995: 158).

² Potts is Lucy’s maiden name in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and Isis is the name of Lucy and John Pearson’s youngest daughter.

According to Robert Hemenway, "'Drenched in Light' was Hurston's calling card on literary New York [...] [and] also a statement of personal identity" (Hemenway 1977: 10).

The award-winning "Spunk" was first published in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* in 1925. The story revolves around the courageous sawmill worker Spunk Banks, the sexy Lena and her coward husband Joe Kanty. The community, represented by the men sitting on the porch of the general store, plays an important role, as it incites Joe into seeking revenge against Spunk for having conquered Lena, Joe's legal wife.

The setting, though unnamed, is apparently Eatonville. Spunk Banks is known for his audacious attributes both at work and in his personal life:

a giant of a brown-skinned man, [...] he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool – *nothin'*! He rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts 'round wid another man's wife – jus' don't give a kitty. When Tes' Miller got cut to giblets on that circle-saw, Spunk steps right up and starts ridin' (S 949).

At the beginning of the story, Spunk is already with Lena and the whole village knows about the relationship. Joe, "timid 'bout fightin,'" is incited by the men in the store to go after Lena and Spunk, who have gone into the woods. The men at the store comment the situation as well as the fact that in a previous encounter Joe demanded the return of his wife, but Lena chose Spunk over Joe. The men also talk about Joe's lack of courage to face Spunk. Joe shamed by the town gossip, decides to follow the couple to demand, once again, Lena's return. He attacks Spunk with a razor and is killed by Spunk, apparently in self-defence. Spunk explains that Joe "sneaked up an' tried to kill [him] from the back." Spunk had a brief trial, but "walked out of the court house to freedom again" (S 952).

Spunk and Lena set up house to live together right after Joe's death and are planning to get married. However, the appearance of a black bobcat at their house makes Spunk becomes nervous: he is convinced that Joe has returned from the dead to haunt him. The men of the village now consider Joe Kanty to be braver than Spunk, since he went after Spunk with a razor knowing that Spunk had a gun. Spunk starts to lose his steady hand at the sawmill, claiming that somebody is pushing him into the saw. He is killed by the saw at the mill convinced that Joe was responsible: "It was Joe, 'Lige – the dirty sneak shoved me [...] he didn't dare come to mah face [...] but Ah'll git the son-of-a wood louse soon's Ah get there an' make hell too hot for him. [...] Ah felt him shove me [...]" (S 954).

This short story shows Hurston's mastery of dialect and also her capacity for describing how the community has the power to intervene in and affect the individual's life. The natural or supernatural death of Spunk is not discussed by the villagers – they quickly put aside their memories and opinions of Spunk who lay on a “cooling board [that] consisted of three sixteen-inch boards on saw horses, [with] a dingy sheet [as] his shroud” (S 954). The giant had fallen like any mortal and now “the women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered who would be Lena's next. The men whispered coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey” (S 954).

“Magnolia Flower” was also written in 1925 and is a tale about courage and the triumph of love over evil. A river tells a brook the story of an ex-runaway slave, Bentley, a “large and black and strong” man, who built a big house on the banks of the Savannah River. He married Swift Deer, a Cherokee woman and they had a daughter, Magnolia Flower, whom Bentley loved very much. Bentley's “heart [...] was iron to all but Magnolia Flower” (MF 35), but to everyone else he was known for his “terrible anger and violence” (MF 36). He grew wealthy and built a school so that his daughter could learn to read and write. Magnolia and the schoolteacher, a light-skinned young man, fall in love. John, the schoolteacher, decides to ask Bentley for Magnolia's hand in marriage, but Bentley refuses and is enraged by the request. He imprisons John and wants to hang him the next day. He also locks his daughter up and insists that she marry someone who will give him very dark black grandchildren. Bentley “hated anything that bore the slightest resemblance to his former oppressors. His servants must be black, very black or Cherokee” (MF 35). Magnolia gets help from Ham to escape, retrieves the key to the room where John is held from her father's trouser pocket and the couple flee by boat. Bentley is furious when he discovers that they have escaped and threatens to hang Ham and Swift Deer instead, but he dies from anger as “rage had burst his heart at being outwitted by a girl” (MF 39),

“Black Death,” “Mother Catherine” and “Uncle Monday” are stories about the power of hoodoo and also about the justice, that draw “on the supernatural beliefs that were part of black American culture, a mixture of Christian and hoodoo beliefs and practices” (Patterson 2005: 97).

“Black Death” was submitted to the *Opportunity* magazine contest in 1925. This story about hoodoo and the power of justice, and the triumph of good over evil, recounts the tale of a powerful hoodoo doctor in Eatonville. The story is similar in contents to “Uncle Monday,” but the characters have other names and the curses are also slightly different, proving Hurston's recurrent use

of the same material. The geographical setting is once again Eatonville and the nearby town of Maitland. Beau Diddely works as a waiter at the Park House Hotel in Maitland where Docia Boger is a chambermaid. Docia is a young, pretty brown girl, who falls in love with Beau and gets pregnant. When her mother finds out and confronts him, he insults Docia calling her a “woman out of the gutter” (BD 204) and refuses to marry her. He then “bad-mouths” her, telling “the other waiters how that piece of earth’s refuse had tried to inveigle, to coerce him into a marriage” (BD 205).

Mrs. Boger is heartbroken with her daughter’s suffering and weeping and wants vengeance. She decides to take care of the situation, seeking the help of Old Man Morgan, the village hoodoo doctor, who lived near Blue Sink, the bottomless lake. Morgan does not allow her to tell her story, but immediately asks her about her choice of weapons: “How do yuh wants kill ‘im? By water, by sharp edge, or a bullet?” (BD 206) She chooses to shoot him and as she “gazed hard into the mirror, she “saw Beau walk to the center of the mirror and stand looking at her, glaring and sneering” (BD 207). She pointed the gun at the mirror and “saw the expression on Beau Diddely’s face change from scorn to fear” (BD 207). Mrs. Boger fired the gun, paid Morgan for the service and ran away. The next day Eatonville awoke to the news that Beau had fallen dead while “making love to another chamber-maid,” while he bragged about Docia. He “clasped his hand over his heart, grew rigid, and fell dead.” The Coroner’s verdict was death from natural causes – heart failure” (BD 207). Mrs. Boger and Docia left Eatonville and the daughter was able to forget this sad episode and rebuild her life and marry well.

In this story Hurston recalls the importance of Africa in the cultural beliefs of the American Negro:

Africa reached out its dark hand and claimed its own. Drums, tom, tom, tom, tom, beat her ears. Strange demons seized her. Witch doctors danced before her, laid hands upon her alternately freezing and burning her flesh, until she found herself within the house of Morgan (BD 206).

About “Black Death,” Tiffany Patterson asserts in her recently published work entitled *Zora Neale Hurston and the History of Southern Life* that it

affirms both a black woman’s right to pursue justice and the local cultural knowledge that African Americans could draw upon to protect themselves in a hostile world [and]is [...] also about codes of honor. The honor of a young woman and her family has been violated by an outsider, and the family’s honor must be vindicated” (Patterson 2005: 96).

“Muttsy” (1926) is Hurston’s attempt to write about Harlem, but with Eatonville in mind. Beginning with references to music – “the piano in Ma Turner’s back parlor stuttered and wailed” (M 19) – the story details the arrival in New York of a timid girl from Eatonville. Pinkie Jones arrives in New York with little money, no lodging and no friends. At the ferry landing she is given directions to Ma Turner’s place, a disreputable house in Harlem, owned by Forty-dollars-Kate, a former prostitute. As she enters Harlem Pinkie falls prey to “Ma Turner’s back parlor.” The difference between southern rural culture and northern urban culture is visible in Pinkie’s innocence: she does not know that the place is a brothel and she does “not understand their mode of speech” (M 25).

Pinkie immediately dislikes Ma Turner – she reminds her “of the Wolf in *Red Riding Hood*” (M 20). Ma’s appearance also disgusts her as “back in Eatonville, Florida, ‘ladies’, especially old ones, didn’t put powder and paint on their faces” (M 20). Pinkie feels uncomfortable, “shut in, imprisoned, walled-in with these women who talked of nothing but men and the numbers and drink, and of men who talked of nothing but the numbers and drink and women” (M 31). Pinkie wants to find a job and Muttsy, the title character, promises to help her, but time passes and Pinkie finds no job. Muttsy Owens, a gambler tries to seduce Pinkie, but she is not easily seduced and resists until he marries her, agreeing to give up his gambling life. Pinkie disliked the gambling business and appreciated a working man, so Muttsy becomes “foreman of two hundred stevedores” (M 35). A month later he rejects respectable life and returns to gambling.

Pinkie, like Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (during her second marriage), gets married and achieves respectability and economic security, but loses her individualism. Muttsy, like Jody Starks (TE), means to place his girl on a pedestal. This is no indication that Pinkie will live happily ever after, since Muttsy returns to gambling, an activity she despises.

This tale of Harlem night life focuses on blues, dancing and gambling, which are present in the background of the story and establish a link with the notion of primitivism made so popular by whites during the 1920s. Ma Turner’s place is expressive of Harlem of the twenties: smoky, crowded, sometimes chaotic environments, smelling of liquor, where Southern and Northern culture and dialect come together as a result of the Great Migration. “Muttsy” evokes the vibrant and exuberant life of Harlem made popular in various novels, such as in Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*.

In November 1926, the first and only issue of the radical experimental quarterly *Fire!!* appeared. The magazine, “devoted to younger Negro artists”, was a project of seven individuals: Harvard Law school student John P. Davis was the magazine’s business manager, Richard Bruce Nugent handled distribution, Wallace Thurman was the editor and the others were the editorial board, collected material and contributed their own writing (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett and Helene Johnson). Other contributors were Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Richard Bruce and Aaron Douglas who drew the red-and-black cover. The participants in the project were interested in presenting “authentic” black literature in which the masses of black people could find themselves and their communities. The project was short-lived. Hurston contributed her play “Color Struck” discussed in Part I of this work and the short story “Sweat.”

“Sweat” (1926) is a short story where Hurston once again portrays the marriage problems of a black couple. Set in Eatonville, the story shows how the hard work (“sweat”) of Delia is counteracted by the hatred of her adulterous husband, Sykes Jones, who started beating her brutally after two months of marriage. Delia, a religious washerwoman, “had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh” (Sw 957). Sykes never held a steady job, but the fact that Delia supports them by washing white people’s dirty laundry disgusts him. Delia has endured Sykes’s cruelty and his infidelity for most of the fifteen years of marriage. He always ran after other women and openly flaunted his extramarital affairs. His current mistress is a woman named Bertha, a big, fat “black greasy Mogul [...] [who] couldn’t kiss a sardine can [...] threw out de back do’ ‘way las’ yeah” (Sw 959). The contrast between Delia and Bertha is evident as Delia is described as having a “poor little body” with “thin, stooped shoulders” and “bare knuckly hands” (Sw 956). Delia has slaved over whites’ laundry to earn a living for fifteen years; she alone has paid for the house and the expenses, and now Sykes promises to give the house to his mistress, Bertha. To scare off his wife, who is terrified of snakes, he first tries taunting her with his snakelike bullwhip. When the “long, round, limp and black” whip falls across her shoulders and slithers along the floor beside her, she is so frightened that “it softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move” (Sw 955). When Sykes kicks and steps on the white laundry that Delia was sorting and threatens her, she revolts and for the first time “struck a defensive pose” (Sw 957). She signifies on Sykes defying him and tells him that she is not moving out of the house she paid for so that his mistress can move in:

“Naw you won’t,” she panted, “that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin’ with aint comin’ heah to pile up on *mah* sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin’ on this place, and Ah’m gointer stay right heah till Ah’m toted out foot foremost” (Sw 957).

After this Delia feels indifferent to Sykes. She seeks comfort in her faith during desperate times that enable her “to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband.” Folk wisdom also helps her as she realizes that “whatever goes over the Devil’s back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing” (Sw 958). Biblical allusions are included to describe Delia’s suffering and shame:

Delia’s work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia’s house to call Sykes out to her at the gate” (Sw 961).

Sykes plays another practical joke, this time with foul intent: he pens up a six-foot rattlesnake in a box outside the kitchen door, another attempt to drive Delia from the house. When Delia asks him to kill the snake he replies ironically: “Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin’ uh de kin’ – fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin’ but die. Taint no use uh you puttin’ on airs makin’ out lak you skeered uh dat snake – he’s gointer stay right heah tell he die” (Sw 962). Delia confronts her husband because he refuses to remove the snake from the kitchen door. Sykes insults Delia’s looks and her newly found courage leads her to “talk back” without fear, surprising and silencing him:

“Well, Ah’m glad you does hate me. Ah’m sho’ tiahed uh you hangin’ ontuh me. Ah don’t want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo’ rawbony laigs an’ arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. Tou looks jes’ lak de devvul’s doll-baby tuh *me*. You cain’t hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin’ you fuh years.”

“Yo’ ole black hide don’t look lak nothin’ tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo’ big ole yeahs flappin’ o each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don’t think Ah’m gointuh be run’way fum mah house neither. Ah’m goin’ tuh de white folks bout *you*, mah young man, de very nex’ time you lay yo’ han’s on me. Mah cup is done run ovah” (Sw 963).

As Cheryl A. Wall points out, “in ‘talking back,’ Delia is practicing a cultural behaviour that Hurston records frequently in both her fiction and

folklore” (Wall 1997: 8). Sykes knew that Delia’s routine on Sunday evening included sorting the clothes using the hamper in the bedroom. As a final resort, he tries to kill his stubborn wife by placing the deadly snake in the clothes basket. Delia sees the snake and “horror and terror” fill her as she “turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear” (Sw 945). She escapes the poisonous fangs by running to the kitchen and then to the yard and hiding in the hay barn. She was paralyzed with fear and “went to sleep – a twitchy sleep – and woke up to a faint gray sky” just as Sykes was arriving from his night with Bertha (Sw 965).

Sykes, however, will have a different fate. After he gets home he waits a few minutes before entering the house. He tries to find matches to light the lamp, but there are none as he had taken them to Bertha’s place. He goes into the dark bedroom and hears the “whirr” of the rattler. “The rattler is a ventriloquist” Hurston explains in the story (Sw 965), so Sykes is confused about the whereabouts of the snake. He jumps onto the bed where the reptile lies coiled and the rattlesnake bites him. Delia refuses to warn or even help him, having finally understood how deadly his hatred of her has become; she watches him with “his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope” (Sw 966). She deliberately shows herself to him, so that he knows that she found out about his attempt to kill her. She makes no effort to help or comfort him in his last moments. Delia also decides not to seek help – “Orlando with its doctors was too far” (Sw 967).

As in several of Hurston’s stories, the woman is strong, proud, and independent; the man does not appreciate these strengths because he feels emasculated and dependent. Sykes attempts to prove his masculinity by cruelly abusing verbally and physically his wife. The community, represented by the sitters on Joe Clarke’s store porch, is conscious of the couple’s marital problems: they sympathize with Delia because they know that she is a hardworking woman and that Sykes is a no-good womanizer who likes to show off his mistress. The townspeople comment on how despicably Sykes treats Delia who “wuz ez pretty ez a speckled pup [...] fifteen yeahs ago,” saying he had “beat huh ‘nough tuh kill three women let ‘lone change they looks” (Sw 959). This mistreatment is described by general-store owner Joe Clarke who uses a sugar-cane metaphor to ironically explain that men like Sykes will never be decent towards their wives:

“Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it ain’t in ‘im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wif lak dey do a joint uh sugarcane. It’s round, juicy, an’ sweet when dey gets it. But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an’ grind an’ wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat’s in ‘em out.

When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hanging after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way" (Sw 959).

Hurston reinforces this narrative action of Sykes's horrible abuse of Delia with the traditional symbolism of the snake to represent evil in the world.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933) is one of Hurston's best short stories (Hemenway 1977: 188; Howard 1980: 69) and is the one most frequently anthologized. Like many of Hurston's works, it is filled with the rural southern black dialect and explores marriage, seduction, infidelity and the final victory of love. The story is set in Florida of the 1920s in a "Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G and G Fertilizer works for its support" (GSB 985). Missie May, young and pretty, and Joe Banks have a happy and joyful wedding — she has her wifely duties like keeping an immaculate home, cleaning, washing, ironing and cooking his favorite food and preparing his bath, and Joe works hard on the night shift at the fertilizer plant to provide for both of them.

Every Saturday Missie May eagerly awaits her husband so that they can perform their payday ritual: he lovingly throws his week's pay in silver dollars into the doorway of their cabin to announce his homecoming. The "ring of singing metal on wood" (GSB 985) brings Missie May to the front door. Joe then hides and waits until Missie May finds him to begin a ritual of hide and seek. She finds the candy kisses and the presents that he has bought for her and that he has hidden in his pockets. Their marriage is full of play, participation and love experience. The happiness is expressed in the playful verbalizing and "play-fight" which symbolizes their mutual love and affection: "for several minutes the two were a furious mass of male and female energy. Shouting, laughing, twisting, turning, tussling, tickling each other in the ribs; Missie May clutching onto Joe and Joe trying, but not too hard, to get away" (GSB 986). Missie May succeeds in her attempt to dominate Joe and search his pockets and the ritual continues with the playful verbal battle that follows:

"Missie May, take yo' hand out mah pocket!" Joe shouted out between laughs.

"Ah ain't, Joe, not lessen you gwine gimme whateve' it is good you got in yo' pocket. Turn it go, Joe, do Ah'll tear yo' clothes."

"Go on tear 'em. You de one dat pushes de needles round heah. Move yo' hand Missie May."

"Lemme git dat paper sack out yo' pocket. Ah bet its candy kisses."

"Tain't. Move yo' hand. Woman ain't got no business in a man's

clothes nohow. Go away.”

Missie May gouged way down and gave an upward jerk and triumphed.

“Unhhunh! Ah got it. It ‘tis so candy kisses. Ah knowed you had somethin’ for me in yo’ clothes. Now Ah got to see whut’s in every pocket you got” (GSB 986).

Missie May searches all of Joe’s pockets and finds “chewing gum, the cake of sweet soap, the pocket handkerchief,” that were “bought for the sake of this friendly battle.” The pockets which symbolize the playfulness and intimacy between the couple will later become the symbol of the gap that will exist between them after the betrayal, as there were “no pockets to rifle” (GSB 993). Friendly combat celebrates their love and illustrates the equality of their roles in the marriage. “Reciprocity abounds in their life of domestic tranquillity” as Wilfred D. Samuels sees it, with Missie May keeping the house “clean and beautiful” and Joe “show[ing] his appreciation and commitment by bringing home his weekly earnings” (Samuels in Cronin 1998: 248).

After dinner Joe tells Missie May to dress up because they are going to the new ice cream parlor owned by Otis D. Slemmons, a well-dressed woman-chaser from “spots and places – Memphis, Chicago, Jacksonville, Philadelphia” (GSB 988) who has recently arrived in town. Joe’s insistence on talking about Slemmons’s attractiveness and his possessions, and the fact that he takes Missie May to the ice cream parlor to show how pretty and attractive she is, play a major part in Missie May’s infidelity. Even when she seems unimpressed, Joe insists on Slemmons’s attributes:

“Aw, he don’t look no better in his clothes than you do in yours. He got a puzzlegut on ‘im and he so chuckle-headed, he got a pone behind his neck.”

Joe looked down at his own abdomen and said wistfully, “Wisht Ah had a build on me lak he got. He ain’t puzzlegutted, honey. He jes’ got a corperation. Dat make’m look lak a rich white man. All rich mens is got some belly on’em (GSB 988).

Missie May’s continuing refusal to find Slemmons impressive and attractive leads Joe to describe Slemmons’s material possessions. Sporting “a five-dollar gold piece stick-pin, and [...] a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain and [a] mouf [...] jes’ crammed full of gold teethes” (GSB 989) Slemmons leads Missie May to betray her simple and peaceful husband. Missie May, until then a happily married woman, is seduced by “an aggressive, pretentious, smooth-talking, city entrepreneur from Chicago who flaunts his superficial pos-

sessions and his dalliance with women” (Jones 1992: 316-324) Joe, a simple and peaceful rural man, is the opposite of Slemmons, who is a man of the city with an adventurous spirit, easily moving from one place to another.

One day, the plant closes down and the workers are sent home. Joe unexpectedly arrives early that night and finds Slemmons in bed with Missie May. Slemmons shows his fear and suddenly loses all his posture. Joe hits Slemmons, who flees, leaving behind the “golden watch charm.” Missie May, unhappy and weeping, pleads for forgiveness because she just wanted to give the gold – – “gilded six-bits” – – to Joe. She was unfaithful due to her love for Joe – she wanted to get him the material possessions that he saw in Slemmons and desired. Missie’s aim was to make Joe happy: she did not find Slemmons attractive, but his apparent wealth suddenly became appealing. Missie May regrets having betrayed Joe, because she loves him “so hard.” She is conscious of her uncertain future.

After three months of abstaining from any marital intimacy with his unfaithful wife, and keeping the gold coin in his pocket as a reminder of the betrayal, Joe “polite [...] but aloof” returns to marital relations. He leaves Slemmons’s gilded half-dollar under the pillow to show his disgust with Missie May’s earlier conduct. She finds the coin and a “thought came clawing at her. He had come home to buy from her as if she were any woman in the long house” (GSB 994). Missie May discovers that the gold half-dollar is in fact gilded, proving that Slemmons gold dollars were elusive, just as his behavior was illusory and deceptive. In this text, Slemmons is criticized for showing off middle-class standards, rejecting his color, projecting what Hurston wrote in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” that is, that “self-despisement lies in a middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro” (CNE 838). Slemmons acquired a different language – for example, the inventive use he makes of the word “forte” – and different habits which are not found in the rural black south.

Some time after the incident, Missie May discovers that she is pregnant and Joe also sees that she is “makin’ feet for shoes” (GSB 995). After the birth of a baby son – “de spittin’ image of” Joe, the proud father returns to the candy store for the first time in almost a year and uses the gilded half-dollar to buy candy kisses for Missie May, showing, finally, his forgiveness. Her husband’s forgiveness and the birth of her son, who resembles her husband, saves Missie May from destruction.

The reestablishment of their relationship occurs when “the ring of singing metal on wood” returns to the Banks home. Joe once again throws his week’s pay (now of fifteen silver dollars and an improvement on the earlier nine dol-

lars) in the doorway, and his wife pretends to reproach him in the exact manner as she did at the beginning of the story, assuring the reader that the marriage has survived the test. Infidelity almost ruins the Banks's marriage, but renewed love, suggested by the birth of their child, saves it. Total reconciliation takes time since the marriage has to be rebuilt on new foundations. With the family expanding, the wounds are healing as the couple carry on living and showing, once again, their affection and love for each other.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" has more depth than some of Hurston's other stories; the characters are more developed; and its dialect has much of the texture apparent in the novels. Chinn and Dunn refer that "a complex blend of folklore, history, and fiction provides the foundation for "The Gilded Six-Bits" (Chinn and Dunn 1996: 790). The story gives a realistic portrayal of life in a black southern town or settlement: the geographical setting is Eatonville, but the historical details are also correct, since, according to Chinn and Dunn, there was a "fertilizer plant outside of town," more precisely in "the neighboring town of Forest City about four miles by road west and north of Eatonville" (777). Other "geographic details lend the story a sense of authenticity" as "between Forest City and Eatonville lies Lake Lotus" which is perhaps the lake mentioned in the story that Joe passes on his way home from work (Chinn and Dunn 1996: 777).

Blurring the boundaries between folklore and fiction, Hurston makes a further contribution to the writing of the history of a people. Her talent for using folklore and dialect is visible in "The Gilded Six-Bits"; she used both in the creation of this story of love, betrayal and forgiveness. The story contradicts the belief that money brings happiness. Joe and Missie May were almost corrupted by Slemmons's big city and materialistic values, but the simple rural community values prevailed and they were able to return to their real values, now enriched with the knowledge that their ordeal has strengthened their relationship. The innocence and purity present earlier in their marriage has been replaced by a maturity gained through the silent suffering of both of them. Hurston shows that materialism can affect a marriage in different ways: In "Sweat," it resulted in hate, verbal abuse and domestic violence which ended in death; In "The Gilded Six-Bits," it interfered with a solid love-based relationship that was strong enough to recover.

Lillie P. Howard establishes a link between "The Gilded Six-Bits" and the massive migration of Southern blacks to the Northern states and cities that occurred early in the twentieth century. Like the coin that Joe took from Slemmons, "the promises of the city [...] were often gilded." Like Slemmons, "the city [...] promised hope and opportunity," but like Slemmons it could all be

fake: “the land of opportunity became a vicious jungle, and blacks were thrown back upon themselves” (Howard 1980: 70).

Hurston published several works that deal with marriage and its problems, such as jealousy, violence, hatred, lack of trust and infidelity.¹ Howard mentions “certain characteristics [Hurston] considered essential to a successful marriage – courage, honesty, love, trust, respect, understanding, and a willingness to negotiate differences” (Howard 1980: 71). When women are “at fault” in Hurston’s works, they are punished and “made to suffer,” but men have a different fate. Lillie Howard argues that “a flawed man is obviously less forgivable in the Hurston world than a flawed woman” as “in the unsuccessful marriages, the male is always eliminated, i.e., killed – an unusual and hard fate – and the woman is left intact, available, as it were, for another, hopefully happier marriage” (Howard 1980: 71). The major difference between Missie May (GSB) and Lena (S) regarding infidelity is the fact that Missie May’s betrayal appears to have remained unknown to the community, while Lena publicly demonstrated her love for Spunk and disrespect for her husband.

“The Gilded Six-Bits,” published in *Story* in August 1933, played an important role in launching Hurston’s career as a novel writer. When Bertram Lippincott, the publisher, impressed with her story wrote to Hurston inquiring whether she was writing a novel. She was not but replied that she was working on a novel (Hemenway 1977: 188). This was not true, but she rapidly started writing *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, which was published in May 1934.

In 1934, Hurston published a very short story based on a biblical legend entitled “The Fire and the Cloud” in Dorothy West’s *Challenge* magazine. Hurston had already used biblical legends in an African-American context in “The First One: A Play,” written in 1927, an early example of her fascination with recreating Old Testament stories. In 1934, five years before the publication of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston’s interest in an Afro centric interpretation of the Bible manifested itself when she published “The Fire and the Cloud,” a story where Moses sits near his grave on Mount Nebo and reflects on leadership, explaining to a lizard how, amidst strife and tribulations, he delivered the Hebrews from bondage. This story parallels the end of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* where Moses meets an ancient talking lizard on Mount Sinai, the “keeper of memories.” This satirical Old Testament story focuses on black racial oppression rather than Hebrew suffering, using a mixture of black idiom, biblical language, colloquial English and expressions drawn from southern rural experience.

¹ “Sweat,” “The Gilded Six-Bits,” “Spunk,” *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

Hurston wrote very few short stories after she started to write novels. In a sense it was as if she had first used the short story as a workshop for the art of the novel. The short story "Cock Robin, Beale Street" was published in the *Literary Messenger* in July 1941. The story told in the form of an animal tale illustrates well the "signifying" – talking a lot but never getting to the point. Uncle July spent his pay without his wife's knowledge. When An't Dooby questions him about the pay, he attempts to make her forget the subject by starting to tell the story of Cock Robin. An't Dooby is not amused or confused by Uncle July's signifying as can be seen from her reaction to the story: "Humph! [...] Old coon for cunning; young coon for running. Now tell me whut you done wid your wages. I know you been up to something. Tell me! You and your Mucky-Ducky-Beetel-Bugs!" (CRBS 74).

"The Conscience of the Court" was her last original short story. It was written in 1950 and published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, a story about the quality of justice, but also about integrity and altruism. Laura Lee Kimble, a black domestic worker, has been "charged with felonious and aggravated assault" and "premeditated murder attempt" as well as the use of "obscene and abusive language" (CC 162). Laura appears in court without a lawyer, believing that having or not having a lawyer will not interfere in her sentence. The victim, Clement Beasley was severely beaten by Laura and suffered various injuries. In court, Beasley tells his version of the story. He had lent Laura's employer, Mrs. Clairborne six hundred dollars. On the day that he went to the house to collect the money, he found out that Mrs. Clairborne had left and saw Laura packing away the silver. He returned the next day with a van and tried to seize the furniture. It was then that Laura attacked him and beat him almost to death.

Laura is then called to give her testimony on the witness stand and tells the jury that she does not know whether she is guilty or not, but that she will tell her story and let them decide if she is guilty or not. She confirms that Mrs. Clairbone had made the loan to pay for Tom Kimble's funeral and that she had gone to Miami Beach to "refresh herself and rest up her nerves" (CC 168). She explained that she only attacked Beasley after he tried to enter the house forcefully to remove the furniture and hit and kicked her, and that she did it to protect the house that she had been entrusted with. She almost tells the story of her life – her marriage to Tom who also worked for Mrs. Clairborne's family and her life long devotion to her employer, whom she has known since birth. After hearing Laura's side of the story, the judge tells the court that he has "the note made by Mrs. J. Stuart Clairborne with the plaintiff" (CC 175) and that the due date of the loan is more than three months away. The court feels insulted by

Beasley's action and the Judge takes the opportunity to accuse him of attempting "burglary with forceful entry and violence and, when thoroughly beaten for his pains, brazenly calls upon the law to punish the faithful watchdog who bit him while he was attempting his trespass" (CC 175). The judge expresses his respect for Laura and everyone in court congratulates her on her integrity. She then returns home where "like a pilgrim before a shrine, she stood and bowed her head [and] entered and opened all the windows with a ceremonial air (CC 176-7).

Henry Luis Gates and Sieglinde Lemke write in the Introduction to *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories* that the general theme of her short stories includes

the focus on the nature of justice, either attained by hoodoo, as in Docia's case, or by a desire for love, as in Magnolia's case, or due to personal abilities, such as Isis's joyous, beautiful, and sunny self or Laura's integrity and loyalty. The concern for justice beyond race, class, or gender seems to be at the center of so very much of Hurston's fiction and her fascination with myth." (Gates and Lemke 1995: xxi)

The Harlem Renaissance artists represented urban black middle class culture, presenting a picture for a white audience to identify with. Hurston's subject during the Harlem Renaissance years and the decade that followed was "the Negro farthest down" – the rural southern blacks and their activities and culture, a subject northern black readers would find difficulty in identifying with. The themes of the short stories would later be developed in her four novels and in her plays.

Hurston has received recognition mostly for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but her early short works cannot be ignored as they played an important part in launching her career, even before she started collecting folklore. The recording of folkways and gathering of folk materials complemented her knowledge of the people that she had already used in her short stories.

2.2 Novels

Langston Hughes, co-writer of the play *Mule Bone*, who for years was also supported by Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, Hurston's "Godmother", affirms in his autobiography *The Big Sea* referring to Hurston that "[I]n her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of

whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. [...] To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie'" (Hughes 1940: 239).¹ Langston Hughes traveled through the South with Hurston in her car and learnt a great deal about black folk culture, language and customs from her. To Wallace Thurman, Hurston "knew her white folks" and performed according to the occasion.

Hurston claims in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that the notion for *Jonah's Gourd Vine* had been in her head since 1929 but "the idea of attempting a book seemed so big, that I gazed at it in the quiet of the night, but hid it away from even myself in daylight." She wanted to tell a story about "a man," but "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem." The race problem did not interest her as she was "thoroughly sick of the subject." (DT 713). Hurston started writing her first novel only after J. B. Lippincott asked if she was working on a novel. This interest led Hurston back to Florida where she wrote *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in four months. The novel was published in 1934. Zora Neale Hurston first shows us her love and interest in Eatonville, the folk and folk culture, in her short stories written and published in the twenties. But her preference for a rural Southern black setting will continue in her first two novels. Eatonville is the setting of her earliest childhood memories, where she grew up, where she learnt the value of community, and to where she returned to collect Negro folklore.

Hurston's first book-long literary effort, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, is a fictional reconstruction of Hurston's parents' lives in the black community of Eatonville, Florida. It focuses on a black preacher, incorporates sermons and prayers and reflects the author's fascination with black folk speech – it is full of folk expressions and folk beliefs and an excessively metaphorical black language. She used her family's history and the folklore she retained from her childhood and from her research in the South to write the novel. It is a novel about black experience that focuses on black life, uses rich black dialect and elevates black preaching to poetry. In her persistent blurring of boundaries between folklore and fiction, between art and life, Zora Neale Hurston anticipates some of the most influential trends in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century culture.

Set in various parts of Florida, this novel centers around John Buddy Pearson, a likable but exasperating character. Though a Baptist minister, John all too frequently feels the temptations of life tugging at his sleeves. He spends

¹ Nathan Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) also states that Hurston deliberately played the role of the simple childlike primitive and depended financially from an elderly white woman, Mrs. R. Osgood Mason.

his Sundays in the pulpit as a holy man, but he spends the rest of the week living an adulterous life. Hurston wrote to James Weldon Johnson on April 16, 1934 regarding her first novel and the main character:

I have tried to present a Negro, preacher who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit. [...] I see a preacher as a man outside of his pulpit and so far as I am concerned he should be free to follow his bent as other men. He becomes the voice of the spirit when he ascends the rostrum.¹

The African-American religious man was, in the words of W.E.B. DuBois, “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist” (1986: 494). John Hurston certainly embodied the preacher as described by DuBois, who sees this figure as having originated in the African priest or Medicine-man. As “the chief remaining institution” “of the former group life”, the Priest or Medicine-man

Appeared “[early] on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church. (DuBois 1986: 497-8).

In this novel as in other works, Hurston links African American religious tradition to the African tradition. This is illustrated by the passage that takes place during the barbecue held on the Pearson plantation after the cotton picking, when the workers decide to dance to the sound of handclapping:

“Hey you, dere, us ain’t no white folks! Put down dat fiddle! Us don’t want no fiddles, neith no guitars, neither no banjos. Less clap!”

So they danced. They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins – the drum – and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it. The great drum that is made by priests and sits in majesty in the juju house. The drum with the man skin that is dressed with human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone

¹ Hurston James Weldon Johnson, April 16, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 298).

and speaks to gods as a man and to men as a God. Then they beat upon the drum and danced (JGV 29).

Eric Sundquist argues that “John Pearson [...] embodied most of the traits of cultural leadership that DuBois had enumerated, even as he glaringly displayed the faults and sins apparent in the autobiographical figure” (Sundquist 1993b: 41).

The impact of the black sermon upon black communities has been the subject of several studies. In his book-long study of the black sermon, Dolan Hubbard argues that “the black sermon in its emphasis on liberation and true Christianity is offered as a corrective to an inadequate history in which black people need not exist, except as beasts of burden” (Hubbard 1994: 4). John Pearson, like most black preachers of the early twentieth century and like Hurston’s father, was semiliterate, but his speech was pure oral poetry. Hence, the success of his “Dry Bones” sermon, which made the congregation forget that they wanted to replace him: “The church was alive from the pulpit to the door. [...] He brought his hearers to such a frenzy that it never subsided until two Deacons seized the preacher by the arms and reverently set him down. Others rushed up into the pulpit to fan him and wipe his face with their own kerchiefs” (JGV 132). The new preacher brought to the church to be tried out as a replacement for John Pearson was the Rev. Felton Cozy. He also gave a sermon, but was unable to win over the hearts of the congregation. His sermon lacked poetry and was too race-related – it did not capture the parishioners’ attention, as is illustrated by the passage in which the Rev. Felton Cozy rose and told the church goers that “‘furthermo’, Ah got uhnother serus job on mah hands. Ahm a race man! Ah solves the race problem. One great problem befo’ us tuhday is whut is de blacks gointer do wid de whites?’” (JGV 133) The response was not as satisfactory as expected, for some parishioners considered “‘dat wan’t no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture’” (JGV 134).¹

As part of the African American expressive culture, the black preacher’s sermons project the voice of the community and, like the folk tales, enable the congregation to challenge the reality imposed on them by the dominant white culture. Improvisation, spontaneity, symbolism, and even signifying characterize a sermon, but “the dynamic interplay between the preacher and the congregation has much to do with the composition of a sermon” (Hubbard 1994: 8). Different preachers produce different sermons and the “sermonic formula or

¹ This failure is explained by Dolan Hubbard in his study of the African American sermon: “at the heart of the black preaching lies authoritative proclamation and joyful celebration, not rational persuasion” (Hubbard 1994: 17).

mode” also varies.

The black preacher’s importance in African American culture can be traced back to slavery times and even to Africa. Black folk religion was the backbone of the slave community, and the black preacher has influence among the slaves. The black preacher’s message provided spiritual and emotional freedom to the slaves: real preaching by black preachers meant sermons free of white influence, as well as prayers and songs that enabled the slaves to affirm their human dignity and hope for freedom. The verbal power and poetry of the preacher expressed in the sermon empowered the followers to free themselves from psychological bondage and defy the white man’s domination. Rev. John Pearson’s verbal artistry is evident in “The Wounds of Jesus” sermon: the sermon is full of imagery – like the parallel between John and the damnation train –, dialect and intonation, ending with a call for repentance.¹

Jonah’s Gourd Vine is a novel about a man who starts out on the wrong side of the creek, but who will rise to a position of power, to become a preacher. The plot narrates John Pearson’s attempts to live this double life in a community where ministers are supposed to be above the common man and thus above reproach. John Pearson is based on Hurston’s father, the Reverend John Hurston, a physically and emotionally powerful figure in the household and a charismatic figure in the community. There are many autobiographical references in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*: John Pearson’s life resembles that of Hurston’s father, both are from Alabama and cross the creek, where they meet a girl named Lucy Potts, the maiden name of Hurston’s mother, both go to Eatonville and become a carpenter and then a preacher, both marry women of questionable reputation soon after the death of their wives and both die in an automobile accident. The death scene from *Dust Tracks on a Road* involving Hurston’s dying mother is also narrated in her first novel. John Hurston became a Baptist minister and an important element in the governing of the black township of Eatonville, but his relationship with his youngest daughter, Zora, was always difficult due as their personalities clashed. The religious elements in Hurston’s fiction were apprehended in her father’s house in Eatonville.²

Early in the novel, John Pearson’s life is altered when his stepfather expels him from home. His mother tells him to go to the Pearson plantation

¹ James Weldon Johnson’s book, *God’s Trombones* (1927), pays poetic tribute to the old-time Negro preacher, revealing him as a folk figure of dignity and eloquence. Johnson, however, rejected the use of Negro dialect in the sermons as comic and derogatory. Hurston was certainly aware of the existence of Johnson’s book when she wrote *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* in 1934.

² This will be discussed when *Dust Tracks* is analyzed.

across the creek and ask for work. By crossing the creek, John is entering a new world where black children go to school, where black people wear shoes all the time and where “marse” has long been substituted by “mister.” As one “little girl snorted, ‘Marse Alf! Don’t y’all folkses over de creek know slavery time is over? [...] Folks whut wuz borned in slavery time go ‘round callin’ndese white folks Marse but we been born since freedom. We calls ‘em Mister. Dey don’t own nobody no mo’.” (JGV 15)

John Pearson’s amazement continues when he sees a train for the first time: he “stared at the panting monster for a terrified moment, then prepared to bolt” (JGV 16). Throughout the novel, John will be associated with the train – both are strong and powerful. John boards a train for the first time when he flees Pearson’s place after being charged with assault and theft. He was so impressed that “he forgot the misery of his parting from Lucy”:

To him nothing in the world ever quite equalled that first ride on the train. The rhythmic stroke of the engine, the shiny-buttoned porter bawling out the stations, the even more begilded conductor, who looked more imposing even than Judge Pearson, and then the red plush splendour, the gaudy ceiling hng wih glinting lamps, the long mournful howl of the whistle. [...] He marvelled that just anybody could come along and be allowed to get on such a glorified thing. It ought to be extra special. He got off the train at every stop so that he could stand a piece and feast his eyes on the engine. The greatest accumulation of power that he had ever seen (JGV 88-89).

The Rev. John Pearson’s last sermon about the wounds of Jesus at the Zion Hope Church mentions a damnation train. The train which he saw for the first time as he began a new life will be the cause of his death – hence the association is inevitable.

John’s insatiable desire for women begins when he leaves his mother’s house and realizes that girls like him. He meets Lucy Potts, an eleven year old girl, and immediately falls in love with her. From then on, his life is oriented by his love for Lucy and by his wish to marry her, which finally happens when she is fifteen. They settle on the Pearson plantation, where John is the foreman. Lucy soon find out that her husband is a womanizer. Conscious of John’s lack of responsibility regarding his family and his duties, she becomes the protective power behind John. Alf Pearson, the owner of the plantation, senses the importance of Lucy in her husband’s life, and tries to end John’s adulterous life, telling him to get rid of Big ‘Oman (his mistress) and take care of Lucy: “‘you damn rascal! that girl you married is as smart as a whip and as pretty as a peckled pup. She’s making a man of you. Don’t let her git away” (JGV 72).

But Mr. Pearson soon realizes that John's philandering is an impediment to his work and may interfere with his family life. As he tells Lucy, "'you oughta take a green club and frail John good. No matter what I put in his way to help him along, he flings it away on some slut. You take a plow-line and half kill him'" (JGV 76).

Susan Meisenhelder characterizes "John Pearson [as] a 'natural man,' sexually vigorous and verbally powerful" (Meisenhelder 1999: 37). Lucy knows about his constant adultery, but is silent in her suffering. Early on in the marriage, young Lucy soon finds out that John's promises of love and happiness are not taken seriously and she asks him about his extramarital affairs, but he repeatedly answers that he loves her: "'Whut make yuh fool wid scrubs lak Big 'Oman and the rest of 'em?'" to which he replies, "'Dat's de brute-beast in me, but Ah sho aim tuh live clean from dis on if you 'low me one mo' chance.'" (JGV 75) This promise does not stop John from abandoning Lucy physically and spiritually throughout their life together. John is jealous and possessive of Lucy, "'Ahm de first wid you, and Ah means tuh be de last. Ain't never no man tuh breathe in yo' face but me'", but he admits his lust for other women: "'Don't tell me 'bout dem trashy women Ah lusts after once in uh while. Dey's less dan leaves uh grass'" (JGV 95). This analysis is intended to focus on the character's weaknesses. As such, John Pearson embodies the carnality of the black male, while Lucy represents the steadfast nurturing role of the black woman upon whom the community is built.

The title *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is explained in a letter that Hurston wrote to Carl Van Vechten:

Oh yes, the title you didn't understand. (Jonah 4:6-10) You see the prophet of God sat up under a gourd vine that had grown up in one night. But a cut worm came along and cut it down. Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone. The book of a thousand million leaves was closed.¹

¹ Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, February 28, 1934. (Hurston 2002: 290-291).

Jonah 4: 6-10: 6. And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. 7. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. 8. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, *It is better for me to die than to live.* 9. And God said to Jonah, *Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.* 10. Then said the LORD, *Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night.*

Lillie Howard states that “Lucy is a gourd vine to John, rescuing and protecting him from the harsh realities of life” (Howard 1980: 81). Lucy is the backbone of the marriage. When the family joins John Pearson in Eatonville, it is Lucy who finds an appropriate house and tells John that being a carpenter is a good work option. She also tells him that Eatonville is the right place to bring their children up since “dey won’t be seein’ no other kind uh folks actin’ top-superior over ‘em and dat’ll give ‘em spunk tuh be bell cows theyselves, and you git somethin’ tuh do ‘sides takin’ orders offa other folks. Ah ‘bominates dat.” (JGV 93-94). Lucy also insists that they buy their own house, while John Pearson is pessimistic about the idea: “Dat’s uh bigger job than Ah wants to tackle, Lucy. You so big-eyed. Wese colored folks. Don’t be so much-knowin’” (JGV 94). When Isis, their youngest daughter contracts typhoid and faces a near death situation, John unable to deal with the situation, leaves Lucy to take care of the sick child alone. He stays away for a week in the company of his mistress and when he returns he finds out that Isis has survived and is recovering:

So John fled to Tampa away from God, and Lucy stayed by the bedside alone. He was gutted with grief, but when Hattie Tyson found out his whereabouts and joined him, he suffered it, and for some of his hours he forgot about the dying Isis, but when he returned a week later and found his daughter feebly recovering, he was glad. He brought Lucy a new dress and a pineapple (JGV 101).

Deep in his heart, John Pearson is aware of his failure as a husband. His talent as a preacher somewhat redeems his failings in the domestic sphere. When he is called to preach, John feels that it is vocation: “‘Brothers and Sisters, Ah rise befo’ yuh tuhday tuh tell yuh God done called me tuh preach.’ [...] ‘He called me long uhgo, but Ah wouldn’t heed tuh de voice, but brothers and sisters, God done whipped me tuh it’” (JGV 95). To Lucy, he acknowledges that it is easy to preach since the words come flowing: “‘Lucy, look lak Ah jus’ found out whut Ah kin do. De words that sets de church on fire comes tuh me jus’ so. Ah reckon de angels must tell ‘em tuh me’” (JGV 96). But ever in such role, Lucy guides and instructs John on how to behave and gain the respect of his congregation:

“God don’t call no man, John, and turn ‘im loose uh fool. Jus’ you handle yo’ members right and youse goin’ tuh be uh sho ‘nuff big nigger.”
[...]

“Naw, you wouldn’t hear no complaints ‘cause you treatin’ ‘em too good. Don’t pomp up dem deacons so much. Dey’ll swell up and be de

ruination of yuh. Much up de young folks and you got somebody tuh strain wid dem ole rams when dey git dey habits on. You lissen tuh me. Ah hauled de mud tuh make ole Cuffy. Ah knows whuts in 'im.

“Don’t syndicate wid none of ‘em, do dey’ll put yo’ business in de street.” Lucy went on, “Friend wid few. Everybody grin in yo’ face don’t love yuh. Anybody kin look and see and tell uh snake trail when dey come cross it but nobody kin tell which way he wuz goin’ lessen he seen de snake. You keep outa sight, and in dat way, you won’t give nobody uh stick tuh crack yo’ head wid.” (JGV 96-97).

The people of Eatonville make jokes about John Pearson and his wife, recognizing that Lucy is the power behind the man. He is “‘uh wife-made man,’ Moseley retorted amid boisterous laughter, ‘if me and him wuz tuh swap wives Ah’d go past ‘im so fast you’d think it wuz de A.C.L. passin’ uh gopher’” (JGV 98).

John is a good preacher, but his womanizing behavior is always being reproached. Lucy protects and supports John, even in situations caused by his adultery, but he fails to understand the objections of his parishioners and refuses to live the life they prescribe for him. Worried about his public image, Lucy confronts him regarding Hattie Tyson, his latest mistress, telling him the rumours that she heard in church – people are demanding that he either leave Hattie or stop preaching (JGV 102). She then advises him on how to act, telling him, “John, now don’t you go ‘round dat church mealy-moufin round dem deacons and nobody else. Don’t you break uh breath on de subjick. Face ‘em out, and if dey wants tuh handle yuh in conference, do dere totin’ uh high head and Ah’ll be right dere ‘long side of yuh” (JGV 102). To end the problem, she suggests that instead of preaching the “Passover Supper,” he should preach a sermon on himself. With the power of John’s voice the sermon was a success, ending in a “concerted weeping” (JGV 105).

In the domestic space, Lucy is verbally stronger and assertive, contrasting with John who becomes verbally weak. In his church or in the public sphere, John is the black folk preacher, “a big nigger,” strong and verbally aggressive, able to stir audiences with sermons that made the congregation recognize his power and his ability. In her final days, Lucy verbally confronts John regarding Hattie Tyson – for the first time he slaps her, an action that he immediately regrets and which will haunt him for the rest of his life. John’s reply to her accusations is aggressive, calling her “uh hold-back” that is “always sick and complainin’” (JGV 109). Her husband’s failings, notwithstanding, she goes on protecting him, even if she senses that sooner or later he will have to pay for his actions:

“After all dese years and all dat done went on dat Ah ain’t been nothin’ but uh stumblin’-stone tuh yuh. Go ‘head n, Mister, but remember – youse born but you ain’t dead. ‘tain’t nobody so slick but whut they kin stand uh ‘nother greasin’. Ah done told yuh time and time uhgin dat ignorance is de hawse dat wisdom rides. Don’t git miss-put on yo’ road. God don’t eat okra.

[...]

“Ah ain’t goin’ tuh hush nothin’ uh de kind. Youse livin’ dirty and Ahm goin’ tuh tell you ‘bout it. Me and mah chillun got some rights. Big talk ain’t changin’ whut you doin’. You can’t clean yo’self wid yo’ tongue lak uh cat” (JGV 109).

Lucy knows that her life is coming to an end. She tells Isis that after she dies she wants her to have the bed and asks Isis to prevent certain death rituals from being carried out.¹ On her death bed, Lucy worries about her youngest daughter and talks to her, instructing her youngest daughter to get all the education possible and reminding her that even if she has spunk, the world is a difficult place:

“member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat’s de onliest way you kin keep out from under people’s feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin’. [...] You got de spunk, but mah po’ li’l’ sandy-haired chile goin’ suffer uh lot ‘fo’ she git tuh de place she kin ‘fend fuh herself. [...] Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self. Do, you’ll be dying befo’ yo’ time is out. And, Isie, uh person kin be killed ‘thout being struck uh blow” (JGV 110).

She is again the nurturer who avails herself of her own experiences to warn Isis against the traps of a black woman’s life. She admonishes her to avoid such traps. To get married, Lucy had abandoned school for the love which paid her so poorly. She is dying before her time, probably killed by a hoodoo doctor. Summarizing her life to Mrs. Mattie Clarke, Lucy says: “‘Ah done been in sorrow’s kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin’ kin touch mah soul no mo’” (JGV 112). Sensing her mistakes, she will, however, put them to use, accepting the role of the guide in which she fulfils her true vocation as a nurturer.

¹ This scene resembles what happens before Lucy Hurston’s death in *Dust Tracks*: She exhorted her daughter, Zora, to jump at the sun, and asked her to prevent certain pre-death rituals from being carried out, like removing the pillow from under her head at the moment of passing. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* has many autobiographical references, with Isis resembling little Zora Hurston until her mother’s death.

With Lucy's death John feels free of guilt and three months later is married to Hattie Tyson, a "lowdown woman" who likes "mens and likker" and who "under-braided the piece of John-de-conquer root in her stiff black hair" (JGV 117). John's second marriage reveals his weakness and his vice. Without Lucy to counsel him, John "was tired unto death of fighting off the struggle" (JGV 119). One day, seven years after Lucy's death, John "wakes up" and does not remember marrying Hattie: "Look lak Ah been sleep. Ah ain't never meant tuh marry you. Ain't got no recollection uh even tryin' tuh marry yuh'" (JGV 120).

John Pearson only realizes how important Lucy was in his life after she is dead. He blames and despises Hattie for losing his children, for tearing up his church and for the whiskey bottles around the house. From then on, the marriage was made up of mutual accusations and John's physical violence against Hattie. She had no intention of helping him become "uh big nigger" (JGV 122) and he blamed her for the slap he gave Lucy: "'you made me do it. And Ah ain't never goin' tuh git over it long ez Ah live.' [...] So after that he beat her whenever she vexed him. More interest paid on the debt of Lucy's slap" (JGV 123). Hattie complains to the parishioners about John's behaviour and some are receptive to her complaints and readily plan the overthrow of the preacher.

As part of the African American folk tradition, hoodoo is the recourse used by Hattie to keep John tied to her. Hattie goes to Dangie Dewoe, the hoodoo doctor, who tells her what to use, what to do and when and where to do it. Even before Lucy's death, Hattie was already consulting with the hoodoo doctor (JGV 106-107), and both of them probably had something to do with Lucy's untimely death. As Lucy suspected and told Isis, "'uh person kin be killed 'thout being struck a blow'" (JGV 110). The nature of hoodoo as a source of black magic is central to the relationship of John Pearson to Hattie, and is another angle of the story that brings to the foreground the preacher and the woman as nurturer.

John finds out that Hattie is a hoodoo practitioner that "b'lieves in all kinds uh roots and conjure" (JGV 135) and that Hattie has been "hoodooin'" him: He finds "a miscellany of weird objects in bottles, in red flannel, and in toad-skin" (JGV 135). He is furious and beats his wife violently. John divorces Hattie, but refuses to defend himself or give witness in Court, explaining to his faithful friend, Hambo that his reasons have to do with the way white people see black people. This scene resembles the beginning of *Mules and Men*, where Hurston writes about "feather-bed resistance," referring that there are certain things that white people don't have to know about. Hambo wanted to help John by testifying in his favour, but John refused the witness:

“Ah wanted tuh git up dere and talk some chat so bad ‘til de seat wuz burning me. Ah wanted tuh tell ‘bout de mens Ah’ve knowed Hattie tuh have. She could make up uh ‘scursion train all by herself. Ah wanted tuh tell de judge ‘bout all dat conjure and all dem roots she been workin’ on you. Feedin’ you outa her body – .”

“And dat’s how come Ah didn’t have ‘em tuh call yuh. Ah didn’t want de white folks tuh hear ‘bout nothin’ lak dat. Dey knows too much ‘bout us as it is, but dey some things dey ain’t tuh know. Dey’s some strings on our harp fuh us tuh paly on and sing all tuh ourselves” (JGV 140).

As predicted by Lucy, John’s fall as a preacher was a consequence of his own character. After his sermon on the wounds of Jesus, he felt that he was not “fitted tuh preach de gospel,” so he stopped preaching. His life deteriorated and was soon wasted.

His second gourd vine is Sally Lovelace, a widow from a neighboring town for whom he works as a carpenter. He marries her, as she, like Lucy, considers him “too big uh man” and offers him protection, but once again his weakness will be his doom. Finally he will meet his destiny, when, driving his new car back to Sally, he is hit by a train (JGV 176).

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston narrates episodes from her family life in Eatonville, the narrative novel grounded in her childhood recollections. Her knowledge of Negro dialect and customs already used in her short stories and essays pervades her memories and the richness and vitality of the language stand out in the novel. Reviews about her book inevitably praised the language and made references to the powerful black characters. However, Estelle Felton, in her review of Hurston’s first novel, published in *Opportunity* in August 1934, comments that “her style at times falls flat” and that certain episodes, such as John’s fight with Bud, Lucy’s brother, are too sudden and unnecessary to the development of the plot. This reviewer also finds “plot construction and characterization” disappointing and criticizes Hurston for “not attempt[ing] to maintain any connection between her characters whatever,” painting caricatures of people instead of painting people.¹ She does, nevertheless, praise Hurston regarding other aspects of the novel, such as the last sermon of John Pearson. Reviewers of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* seem to agree on one point – Hurston’s ability to capture “the lusciousness and beauty of the Negro dialect.”² Margaret Wallace in a review published in *The New York Times Book Review*, on May

¹ Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 4-5.

² Andrew Burris in a review published in *The Crisis*, June 3, 1934. Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 7.

6, 1934, points out Hurston's "excellent rendition of Negro dialect."¹ Andrew Burris, another reviewer, finds "that there is much about the book that is fine and distinctive, and enjoyable," but overall reports "that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is quite disappointing and a failure as a novel."² Hurston has been criticized for failing to produce a work in which the parts all work together to produce a unified whole. In spite of these problems, as Robert Hemenway remarks, "although the sum may be less than the parts, the parts are remarkable indeed", and the novel presents "a series of linguistic moments representing the folklife of the black South" (Hemenway 1977: 192).

Hurston's attempt to integrate material from her research into her fiction is evident in all of her novels and autobiography. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is no exception – she makes a series of observations on the roots of folk song and dance in which she tries to intertwine autobiographical and fictional facts with material from her fieldwork, linking folklore with fiction. The next passage occurs when John first reveals his preaching qualities. His "good strainin' voice" is compared to the African drum which "talked" in a code, sending messages: "He rolled his African drum up to the altar, and called his Congo Gods by Christian names" (JGV 76).

Hurston was criticized by the black male literary community of the time like Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright and Sterling Brown who condemned her for using Black dialect and considered her work as being "too pastoral, too black, too colonized, too sassy or too outrageous" and not at all concerned with race issues (Cronin, 1998: 2). Often the criticism would be more evident in the reviews of her works. The reviews of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and specially those written by Richard Wright, Sterling Brown and Otis Ferguson show a negative point of view in regard to Hurston's work referring to it as "too complex and wordily pretty and even dull" which "deserve[d] to be better" (Ferguson 1998: 77-78).

Sterling Brown in his Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which appeared in *The Nation* states that Hurston does not give much attention to the people who go to the muck to work short-time jobs, but dedicates most of the novel to life and activities in an all-colored town, Eatonville, where the "pressures of class and caste" do not bother the inhabitants.³ But *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also received positive reviews. Sheila Hibben in "Vibrant Book Full of Nature and Salt" refers to the novel as a "lovely book – sensitive

¹ Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 8-9.

² Reprinted in Gates and Appiah 1993: 7, 6.

³ *The Nation*, October 16, 1937.

book” written by “an author who writes with her head as well as her heart” and who “is not too preoccupied with the current fetish of the primitive” (Hibben 1998: 73-74).

In her personal life, Hurston was criticized by some of her contemporaries for assuming on the role of “the colorful darky” so as to be accepted into the publishing world and to raise funds for her research. In his Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* entitled “Between Laughter and Tears” published in *New Masses*, Richard Wright criticizes Hurston for the lack of bitterness in a novel that “is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy” and for using a “minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh.”¹ According to Wright “Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction” and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “carries no theme, no message, no thought.”

Wright’s fictional work contrasted with Hurston’s: instead of suffering black characters who were victims of violence and racism, psychologically oppressed and lacking joy and hope, Hurston gives us black people living in a world apart from racism and injustice who enjoy laughing, “lying”, celebrating and living. She does not focus exclusively on the tensions resulting from the Jim Crow Laws in the South. Hurston repaid Wright’s comments by informing the readers of the *Saturday Review of Literature* in the Spring of 1938 that *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Richard Wright’s first published book, had “lavish killing” “enough to satisfy all black males”.

Alain Locke’s review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* published in *Opportunity*, in January 1938, considers the book as “folklore fiction at its best” but accuses Hurston of “oversimplification”: “when will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly – which is Miss Hurston’s cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?”² A survey of the previous year’s “Literature by and about the Negro” infuriated Hurston and led her to call the review “a conscious fraud” and to affirm that Locke knew nothing about Negroes and Negro life. This shows how her work was misunderstood and often ignored due to the fact that her fiction did not directly deal with interracial problems. Reviewing *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Locke called it “caricature instead of portraiture.” Hurston met Alain Locke while a student at Howard University. Their relationship began with his support and patronage but deteriorated quickly. Early in this relationship, Hurston sought Locke’s advice and counsel, but

¹ *New Masses*, October 5, 1937: 22, 25. (Cronin 1998: 75-76).

² January 1st, 1938 (Gates and Appiah 1993: 18).

later on in life she felt that he was unable to understand or appreciate her literary themes and style.¹

Their Eyes Were Watching God, a masterpiece of vibrant folk culture, was written “under internal pressure in seven weeks” (DT 717), while Hurston was researching the religious practices in Haiti. This novel also takes us to Eatonville, where the “tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences” who sit on the porch of Joe Clarke’s store watch life around them. It is a story within a story. Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life and her loves to her best friend, Phoeby, and through Phoeby, to the community to which she has just returned.

The black woman, in Hurston’s novel, finds her authority as storyteller both by her ability to evoke her past, and by making storytelling itself serve as a connection between kissin’-friends”. Folk language, folkways and folk stories work symbolically in the novel toward the character’s integrity and freedom. Those characters whose self-esteem and identity are based on illusion and false values are alienated from the black folk community, and, conversely, those, like Janie herself, who struggle against those self-alienating values toward a deeper sense of community, experience wholeness.

Grounded in the oral tradition of Southern blacks, from the gossip about Janie by the “mouthy” Eatonville community to the tales about Big John the Conqueror by “the great flame-throwers” in the Everglades, the plot begins nearly twenty—four years after the events that Janie will narrate have taken place. When Janie returns, after nearly two years, in “muddy overalls” to the curious, gossipy community of Eatonville, the stage is set for her to tell her close friend Pheoby, with whom she has “been kissin’ friends for twenty years” about the events leading to her return.

Hurston’s mixture of points of view and time gives her more latitude to introduce farce, a mock-heroic funeral and folktales into the narrative. A closer look at the relationship between Nanny and Janie reveals that the implied author philosophically and emotionally identifies with her protagonist’s rejection of her family as she pursues love and adventure.

The main character of the novel is Janie Killicks Starks Woods and it’s her story that we read about – her capacity to fascinate men, her sometimes startlingly brutal treatment of two husbands, her blameless slaying of a third, her restoration of this third to life in her memory and commemoration of him

¹ According to Ralph D. Story: “Some of the tensions between black creative artists and their older black intellectual peers were sparked by the issue of artistic freedom and whether the black art they created did more harm than good for the black masses.” (Story 1989: 294).

by planting seeds. The dramatic tension in the narrative occurs between the efforts of Janie Mae Crawford, the heroine, to fulfil her dreams as a “coffee-and-cream” complexioned rural woman, and the conventions of a male-dominated, lower middle-class society that frustrates the realization of her romantic vision of love and fulfilment until she meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods.

The narrative begins not on the individual level, but on the general and universal:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men (TE 175).

The second paragraph establishes that the use of ‘man’ and ‘men’ in the opening lines was not simply impersonal and general. Hurston indicates a specific contrast between man's aspiration for the tide to bring in his wish – and his consequent luck or despair – and woman's creative capacity to shape a vision of the world and act by it:

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly (TE 175).

Even at the level of the universal, men and women are different, and the hallmark of the female is vision and creativity – first expressed not through the body but through the imagination. In the sense that the ‘dream’ of the woman orders all aspects of experience at once, her vision is synchronic, as opposed to the diachronic perspective of those who wait for the tide (time) to bring in their goals.

The third paragraph narrows the focus to a specific, individual woman and establishes the relationship of the beginning to the time of all that is to be narrated:

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung open wide in judgement (TE 175).

The cycle of death and resurrection is implied with the language; the opening phrase of the third paragraph deliberately recalls the “In the beginning”

of Genesis, but this beginning follows the burying; the burying of a husband, of a life, of a dream. For another three pages she remains simply “the woman”, exuding psychological strength and sexual vitality. She walks to her gate undisturbed by the watching eyes, an apotheosis of ripeness and plenitude. Her vitality is a triumph of life over death. The novel begins after all its major events except the telling of the tale have been concluded – its structure is cyclic as the story of death and revival it records. Even the key imagery of the beginning, the voyage to the horizon, is repeated in the end.

Grounded in the oral tradition of Southern blacks, from the gossip about Janie by the “mouthy” Eatonville community to the tales about Big John the Conqueror by “the great flame-throwers” in the Everglades, the plot begins nearly twenty-four years after the events to be narrated have taken place. With Janie’s confident, content return after nearly two years to the curious, gossipy community of Eatonville, the stage is set for her to tell her close friend Pheoby, with whom she has “been kissin’ friends for twenty years” about the events leading to her return.

As darkness falls and Janie prepares to tell her friend Pheoby – the symbolic representative of the community – what she has learned on her journey, the third-person omniscient narrator enters to make explicit that Janie’s story is at once her own and an unchanging pattern in human experience: “Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked” (TE 180).

The narrative technique of these lines is a guide to the strategy employed throughout the novel. The setting is the conversation between old friends, and the reader is invited to attend with Pheoby’s ears and trust. But the narrator is not Janie. Hurston uses an omniscient point of narration and the narrator of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a person of folk wisdom and rich black experience who is able to represent the minds and speech of Pheoby, Nanny, Janie, and “old buzzard Parson” in turn, integrating all into a vision of experience. It is this implied author who narrates the flashbacks which compose the main text.

The departure from present time is introduced in the second chapter as “Pheoby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story. So she went on thinking back to her young years and explaining them to her friend” (TE 182). Janie’s account has been narrated in her own words to Pheoby up to this point. Now the words “thinking back” signal that the narration will abandon the narrative “frame” and third-person direct discourse and will return, as a flashback, to the setting of Janie’s prior experience. The lines which immediately follow represent the interior consciousness of Janie at sixteen. Her nature is symbolized by the

blooming pear tree, a powerful symbol of female fertility. The pear tree with its leaves and blossoms becomes the image of Janie's sensuality as well as her desire for completeness as "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" (TE 181).

The text is an indirect discourse of the psyche, fraught with the experience and expressed in the vocabulary and symbolism of the omniscient narrator. Much of the remainder of the chapter is narrated interior monologue, both Nanny's and Janie's, with third person description incorporated at intervals of a few pages.

Dorrit Cohn establishes that

free indirect style is found in the first-person novel only when the emphasis is entirely on the experiencing self, when the narrating self is thus unstressed, indeed not presented [...] This empathy with the past stage of the self is in my opinion one of the prerequisites for free indirect style in the first-person novel (Cohn 1978: 308-9).

Most of the literary explanations of free indirect style today agree in assuming that the essence of free indirect style lies in the dual view of the events from the perspective of the narrator and from that of a fictional character. Free indirect style in the first-person narrative has been considered only as a means of rendering thoughts and perceptions. It can also occur, however, as a technique for the rendering of speech, but within a first person narrative situation, only the narrator's own thoughts can be reproduced by this method. In contrast, free indirect style within a first-person narrative situation can also be used to reproduce the speech of other characters, since the horizon of knowledge of the first-person narrator is not restricted with regard to the rendering of speech.

The authorial voice comes close to fusing with that of the main character, Janie, who is presented from the third-person perspective. The first instance occurs at the outset of the text, where one is struck by the lack of distance between the language of the black folk-characters and that of the authorial voice. Then, at the end of the first chapter, as we get ready to hear Janie tell her story to Pheoby, we see "Janie" and not "I." We are faced with a third person focus on "Janie" instead of a first-person narration at the beginning of the second chapter.

The interjection of description has the effect of reminding readers of the narrative voice, and it is periodically accompanied by re-entry of the oracular tone with which the novel began. An example appears at the end of the third chapter: "So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she

began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly" (TE 194). She measures time by the seasonal succession of blooming, growth ("green time"), harvest and pollination, and she is so much at one with the fertile cycle of vegetation that she understands the very language of the seeds: "She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to the failing seeds" (TE 194). She also knows that "God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up" (TE 194).

This context enables the reader to link Janie's gaze towards "way off" in the next lines with the horizon which is introduced at the beginning of the novel and which becomes her robe at the end. Such imagery also frames the search Janie begins for meaning and fulfilment in her life as a quest to define what is meaningful and permanent in adult human experience: "the familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (TE 194).

Raised until six in the backyard of "the quality white folks" for whom her grandmother worked, Janie awoke at the age of sixteen to a dream of perfect marriage and perfect sexual fulfilment:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage. She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (TE 183).

After spending a spring afternoon watching bees pollinating a blossoming pear tree – the symbol of love, marriage and procreation – Janie's longing to find the right "bee for [her] blossom" is interrupted by the force of historical oppression in the person of Nanny, the grandmother who has raised her and who has experienced much suffering, first as a violated and abused slave, then as the mother of a daughter lost to her through rape and despair. Here as in other works, Hurston depicts a culture in which the experience of slavery is still an active memory. Nanny's philosophy is a survivor's response to racist and sexist exploitation. She speaks her wisdom to Janie as soon as she perceives her grandchild's sexual awakening:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. [...] 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 (TE 186).

But Janie believes that the desire for romantic fulfilment culminates in marriage: "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (TE 193). Nanny, however, does not entertain such notions and replies:

Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say that bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat (TE 193).

In her fear for Janie's sexual vulnerability, and feeling that her time was coming to an end, Nanny is determined to get Janie well married, so she persuades her to marry Logan Killicks, a man who owns sixty acres. It is to be, as Nanny puts it, a marriage of "protection," (TE 186) and thus a good one in spite of Janie's abhorrence of Killicks' body and her complete absence of feeling for the man. Nanny's experiential wisdom compels this match because she fully understands that biological vulnerability threatens her granddaughter's life. Inasmuch as black female desire for freedom is doubly prohibited in a white patriarchal society, Nanny substitutes social and financial security for that prohibition, and refuses to understand Janie's vision of marriage: "If you don't want him, you sho oughta. 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 right on de big road" (TE 193).

Life has taught Nanny the necessity of postponing her "dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do" in order to survive (TE 187). For this reason, she encourages Janie to hold on to her dream, depicted here as female sexual desire, while simultaneously postponing its realization with the demand that she marry Killicks who represented economic security, marital legitimacy and a measure of protection from dependence on whites or exploitation by them. Such a marriage was the greatest goal that slave-born Nanny could imagine for the beloved child who was the issue of rapes of both mother and grandmother by white and black men. Despite Nanny's hopes that life with Logan Killicks would spare Janie the mule's burdens, which Nanny associated with black

women in a men's world, Logan seeks precisely to command his wife's labor when he cannot dictate to her spirit. After the wedding ceremony, Janie sees marriage with growing apprehension, while from Nanny's perspective marriage means keeping this dreamer "safe in life" (TE 187). Killicks did not offer joy, romance, sexual desire or understanding and certainly not creativity, imagination or a means to envision a meaning for experience that transcended sixty acres and a mule. The image of the black woman as the mule of the world becomes a metaphor for the roles that Janie repudiates in her quest for self-fulfilment. For Janie, development of autonomy requires her apparent separation from Nanny, both physically and emotionally.

When she realizes that love does not automatically follow upon marriage and that Killicks completely lacks imagination, Janie leaves him to marry Joe Starks, a man with plans who represents for her, if not "sun-up and pollen and blooming trees", an opportunity to reach out for "change and chance", for the "far horizon" (TE 197, 213). This is a marriage of "power and property", the second traditional choice for women in their hopes for alliances with men. With material prosperity and social status comes patriarchal authority. Joe Starks intends to be the "big voice" in the all-black town of Eatonville. Joe keeps Janie for himself, will not let her speak in public, will not let her show her hair, drives her away from other people, guards her from herself with a proprietorial jealousy that finally alienates her completely. The pedestal of property and propriety to which Joe raises Janie becomes a straitjacket to her, particularly when it involves her exclusion – both as speaker and as listener – from the tale-telling sessions on the store porch and at the mock funeral of a mule. When Janie is invited to say a few words – and thus exercise the independent power of language and imaginative invention – Joe rudely pushes her aside, saying "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh wonian and her place is in de home" (TE 208).

As with Killicks, Janie ultimately sees Starks for what he is: a disgusting heap of melting, sagging flesh. This marriage, like her first, is decomposition rather than the making of life. Janie hates her husband's world of bourgeois economics, but from which she benefits; she desires to escape from that world so that she might shape a more meaningful identity. As Starks lays on his deathbed, Janie, having finally found her own voice, gives him her view of their twenty years of life together:

"Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind

had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me. [...] All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice – dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you" (TE 244-5).

During two materially rewarding, but emotionally barren marriages Janie finds she can have “an inside and an outside” (TE 233), that she can sit and watch “the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating herself before Jody”, but all the time “she herself is setting under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair”.

Janie searches the mirror analyzing her self after Joe's death. What she sees is a handsome woman, who has survived two marriages, with a mature self ready to go “rollicking with the springtime across the world” (TE 246). She burns her head rags, the symbols of Jody's need to impress his authority upon her, withdraws into herself, and waits, mockingly, as she receives and disregards proposals for yet another preposterous marriage.

She had married two men who represented her grandmother's and society's ideas of success. Both husbands owned or acquired property, were much older than Janie, and conventional in their thinking, the second husband even went so far as to group women with “chilluns, and chickens, and cows,” all helpless beings who need a man to think for them and guide them. Killicks was jealous of her youth, Starks of her beauty; and every black man in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* lusts after Janie. They lust after her color and her long hair, never once thinking of the pain her mother and grandmother must have endured for her to have these qualities. The looks that Janie didn't choose cause her isolation and also her confusion when she realizes that the same men who idolize her looks are capable of totally separating her looks from her self. Their only and true interest in her is lust-related, just like that of the white men of the time would have been.

The third man in Janie's life, Tea Cake, is a choice made not out the need for protection, power or property, but out of the sheer sweetness of love shared on equal terms. He is, at last, “the bee to [her] blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring” (TE 261). Janie's selection of Tea Cake breaks all the standard rules of relationship between men and women. They scandalize Eatonville as he is much younger than Janie, has no money while she is a rich widow, and is a drifter, while she owns a house. The community, which serves as a gossipy chorus promoting material caution, finds nothing but fault with him, and accuses him of being after Janie's money. Her answer to Pheoby is that her relationship with Tea Cake “ain't no business preposition, and no race after property and titles, Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way,

now Ah means tuh live mine” (TE 267). Tea Cake affirms his lack of interest in her money when he tells Janie that “Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear the same” (TE 279).

But Janie, whose horizons as a young woman had been filled with things when she wanted people, and who is finally in a position to choose freely and wisely, marries Tea Cake for his gifts of play and laughter, sensual pleasure and inclusion in a shared life. Their time together in the wild utopian zone on the muck in the Everglades, which importantly blurs the distinction between public and private in their joyous membership of a working community, is a life of equality, one of the most exquisitely imagined good marriages in literature, complete in its satisfactions of mind and body, of work and discipline.

The success of their union is symbolized by the way in which Janie shares in the fun times of both her man and her community as she works alongside Tea Cake in the bean fields. Tea Cake reverses the image of the black-woman-as-mule for Janie – he invites her, rather than demanding that she work and abstain from the folkways of her people. The section of the novel dedicated to Tea Cake and Janie’s love affair emphasizes Janie’s blossoming, the development of her independence as well as of her sensuality, as “her soul [finally] crawled out of its hiding place” (TE 279).

According to Jerome E. Thornton,

In the world of African American fiction, the African American protagonist always seems to be on the move away from conventional materialism and social pretenses associated with black bourgeois life back to a black heritage. This journey usually takes the protagonist to “the Bottom” (Thornton 1990: 735).

The Bottom is important because it is symbolic of the rootlessness, or chaos, associated with the African Americans’ struggle to find identity, meaning and order in their lives. The imagery of the Bottom symbolizes the deep richness of the African American’s racial heritage. African American writers describe the Bottom in profuse images of nature – soil, water, air and plant imagery.

Whereas Janie’s other husbands had wanted to restrict Janie’s participation in life, Tea Cake encourages her to enjoy it to the fullest. There are no forbidden areas. The two give and take equally and, for Janie, getting to the horizon seems imminent. He tells Janie that they are “gointuh do somethin’ crazy. [...] We goin on de muck”, a place where “folks don’t do nothin’ down dere but make money and fun and foolishness” (TE 279). The place Tea Cake

calls "de muck" is similar to that paradoxical "place" in much of African American fiction which becomes both a physical and a symbolic setting where the African American protagonist finds authenticity, a place rightfully called the Bottom. Thus Janie descends into the abyss of the African American culture and tries to absorb it, rather than succumb to the demoralizing capitalistic and bourgeois influences of black society. For Janie "de muck" is the "place" where she can combine subjective freedom with objective fact. Going on "de muck" allows Janie to be both a free individual and a member of the social group. Janie emerges from the depths of her black community offering a sharp contrast to the stereotypical strong "Mama" figure that dominates much of the African American and American literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. She becomes liberated and fulfilled by a process of self-definition and emotional identification with self and one's culture by going "home".

The ending of the novel is a mixture of tragedy and of further visionary understanding; for the paradisiacal world cannot be infinite. As the first stirrings of jealousy intrude into the lovers' lives, Tea Cake strikes Janie. The now violated idyllic world is devastated by a hurricane that indirectly leads to Tea Cake's being bitten by a rabid dog. He is later shot by Janie as he tries to savage her in the rage of his terminal illness. Tea Cake undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a mad dog of jealousy and possession. Tried and acquitted for his murder, Janie returns to the town in which she lived with Sparks, proud and serene in her memory of having really lived, despite the wreckage of a utopian love on the same rock of male jealousy that has deformed the love of all her husbands. Her memories of the best in Tea Cake sustain her. "He would never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. [...] She called in her soul to come and see" (TE 333).

Janie does not see her life as tragic; she sees it as full and rich. It is essentially this message that she brings back to her community that self-fulfilment, rather than security and status, is the gift of life: "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (TE 333).

It is only by returning alone to the town which had so nearly defeated her, by telling her story to Pheoby Watson and transforming Pheoby's life, that Janie's tale gains its final meaning. In shabby overalls, her hair cascading down her back, Janie in Eatonville is an image of an option never before dreamed of, much less given flesh. Neither cramped nor bitter, she goes beyond the rigid

limits that resistance can define and establishes a new incarnation of freedom and possibility. Janie's life gains its final meaning not from her relationship with Tea Cake, but from the change this relationship and Janie's survival of her loss make for Pheoby and for the entire town.

When Pheoby responds, "Lawd, [...] Ah done growed ten feet higher from just listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam (her husband) take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize you in mah hearin'." (TE 332), a sense of growth and change, a sense of dissatisfaction with the given are combined in Pheoby's words with a resolution to pursue a different course of action. In a sense what Janie has done is transform the quotidian rites of a black woman's passage through the world into a series of figures or images that are so resonant that they catapult Pheoby into new consciousness. Janie's revealed images become occasions for Pheoby to both read and write the world in new and liberating ways.

Finding her authority as a storyteller turns Janie into a profound influence on Pheoby, who promises as Janie begins her story to report her narrative to others. One generation of storytellers bequeaths her power to the next. Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell the porch sitters about her life with Tea Cake, implicitly recognizing that there she, too, will become part of their folklore, because, as she explains, "Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (TE 179). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* recreates the tradition of female friendship and shared understanding and heals the lingering impact of separation imposed by slavery and sexism.

Janie will plant a packet of garden seeds in remembrance of Tea Cake, for "the seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else" (TE 331). Tea Cake's restoration need not wait for the seeds to grow, however, for Janie's memory, vision, and imagination are the powers which confer rebirth. Janie sees a resurrected Tea Cake in her own memories. He is the incarnation of vision, and he has become spirit: "Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was [...] Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (TE 333).

In her first two marriages, Janie suffers due to the stereotyped values role associated with black womanhood. Her journey to the Bottom is motivated by a desire to escape from the discomforts of sexism in a particular African American cultural context. When Janie's second husband, Jody Starks, publicly announces that Janie is "uh woman and her place is in de home" (TE 208) she realizes how desperately she wants to get away, not only from Jody, but from the sexist attitudes embedded in his elitist position as the first black mayor,

postmaster and owner of the variety store in the black community of Eatonville.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is thus a compelling evocation of black experience marking an important shift in the portrayal of women's desires in marriage and outlining a utopian vision of the possibilities for love between men and women.

The novel's theme is Janie's search for identity, an identity which finally begins to take shape as she throws off the false images which have been thrust upon her because she is both black and woman in a society where neither is allowed to exist naturally and freely. Hurston uses two images from nature to symbolize Janie's quest, the horizon and the blossoming pear tree. The horizon suggests that the search is an individual quest; the pear tree in blossom suggests a fulfilment in the union with another human being. Janie describes her journey to find herself in a language that reflects the black folk traditions.

Relating the story of her sexual and marital adventures to Phoebe, Janie shows that her three marriages constitute a quest for identity and for an ideal balance of honesty to self and satisfaction in relation to others. The frame of the narrative, of a woman listening to a woman, emphasises the female roles as active moral agent and judge. The novel examines the ethical implications of the main choices offered to women through marriage and the ways those choices are perceived by the women who make them. In rejecting the legacies of slavery, the systems of illegitimate inheritance imposed on black society, the subordination of the female to the male, Janie reorganizes her world and redefines the trajectory of its relationship to the values located in both whiteness and maleness. Janie represents development and maturation, the unpacking of multiple layers of domination and oppression operating upon the woman of color. She realizes that male domination exists in a world where the porch and the swapping of tales belongs to the men, where men view wives as property. She goes through three marriages, but in the process she earns her freedom to speak, to express her own female self, her independence from subjugation, and her acceptance of her own life. Janie affirms herself because she has the courage and the verbal techniques to position herself in something other than a dependent relationship. Janie's strength lies in her recognition of power in language and the ability to speak for oneself. In telling Janie's story of learning to love her self, Hurston exposes the value and the costs of being fully female in a society that oppresses on the basis of race and gender, while introducing a discourse on female autonomy, agency and power.

Janie is both humiliated and angered by the attempts of her first two husbands to win her with materialistic gifts and to make her subservient to them.

Thus the dramatic tension of the novel takes place on two levels: Janie has to resist both male domination – “somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows” (TE 232) – and the empty materialism of white culture in order to get to the horizon.

Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods assumes a heroic stature by her struggles for self-definition, for autonomy, for liberation from the illusions that others have tried to make her live by or that she herself has submitted to. Moreover, she is always the aware voice, consciously undergoing the most severe tests of that autonomy. Janie is unable and unwilling to identify with the historic slavery and sexual exploitation of her female ancestors.

Choosing to mix third-person omniscient, dramatic, and first-person modes of presentation, the implied author begins the frame story in the first chapter with the omniscient narrator metaphorically setting the mood, introducing the theme, and dramatizing the conflict between her enlightened, independent central character and the inhibiting conventions of her folk community. Hurston’s mixture of points of view and time gives her more latitude to introduce farce, a mock-heroic funeral for the yellow mule, and folktales into the narrative. A closer look at the relationship between Nanny and Janie reveals that the implied author philosophically and emotionally identifies with her protagonist’s rejection of her family as she pursues love and adventure in her quest of identity. A sense of enlightenment allows Janie to pull in her nets and live at peace with the knowledge that her trials have given her. She has won that inestimable prize of all great questors – wisdom.

Hurston claims for women not only equality and freedom, but courage, pleasure and also the right to make mistakes. Janie’s joyous life with Tea Cake is neither easily won nor permanent. Here the moral vision is one of tentativeness, of the elusiveness of good, as well as of its dependence on the experience of the individual within a given social setting. Hurston understands the fragility of personal choice and the damage to values imposed by historical forces.

Janie is a black woman burdened with the disadvantages that American society has imposed, being black and a woman, but the novel is an account of a strong, intelligent, though uneducated woman’s steps towards self-fulfilment. It is full of observations of manners, idioms and human styles that comprise the ethos of black life in America. Janie’s struggle goes beyond the personal. Its significance is enhanced because Hurston connects Janie to the potential power of creation. She is all humanity attempting “to climb to painless heights from [a] dung hill” (TE 236), a “mud-ball” like the rest of the people, but trying valiantly “to show her shine” (TE 247). Seeking the horizon, she is in search

of the uncontainable root of *communitas*: “people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her” (TE 247). Knowing “things that nobody had ever told her”, she understands “that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up” (TE 194) and desires to appropriate that power in her life.

What she has learned – the “light” or illumination she has found in experience – is that personal, unpossessive, mutually-affirming love which celebrates the rich values of black experience and seeks to satisfy no exterior standard of values is a sufficient end for life itself. Janie has achieved, at the end, a sense of peace and reconciliation: “So Ah’m back home agin and Ah’m satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons” (TE 332). Each person must work out his own salvation. As Janie warns Pheoby:

“Love is ak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore [...] Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there [...] Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (TE 332).

Janie is an individualist who audaciously rebels against social conventions and rejects family in pursuit of her romantic personal interests, dreams and development, rather than being a traditional poor black woman who respects and accepts male and female roles. Janie is alienated from both the legitimate and the spurious middle-class values of the black community. She rejects the economic security that Nanny and most black women dream of as a cornerstone of marriage. For Janie romance is more important than finance in marriage, and common folk is less inhibited and pretentious than middle-class people.

Their Eyes Were Watching God may be a celebration of heterosexual love, but Hurston manipulates narrative strategies to ensure that the male is eliminated and the female liberated. The novel is a powerful affirmation of life, of physical and spiritual fulfillment. Its power is in its language, its vividly emotional, folksy, often heart-rending descriptions of the day-to-day yearnings of a woman who wanted more than a house and “respectability.” As if proving that “only the Negro author could portray the Negro best” (Gates and Appiah 1993: 59), Hurston produces “authentic” Southern black dialect, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* becomes, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr.,

the first example in our tradition of the “speakerly text”, by which I mean a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition

[...] The speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seemed to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features. (Gates and Appiah 1993: 165)

Their Eyes Were Watching God has been called “a classic of black literature, one of the best novels of the period.” It is a tribute to self-assertion and black womanhood, the story of a young black woman in search of self and genuine happiness, of people rather than things, the story of a woman with her eyes on the horizon.

Their divergence notwithstanding, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* anticipate *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, a novel that provocatively combines fiction, folklore, religion, and comedy (Howard 1980: 113). Darwin T. Turner calls it Hurston’s “most accomplished achievement in fiction”; Robert Bone says it is a “brilliant allegory” in the picaresque tradition; and Robert Hemenway refers to it as “one of Hurston’s two masterpieces of the late thirties” and “one of the more interesting minor works in American literary history.”

The book is a bold, problem-ridden reworking of the Moses legend. Hurston’s Israelites appear to be American blacks, and Moses is a hoodoo man. The abundant humor these changes generate frequently clashes with the solemnity of the subject. Hemenway was prompted to call the book a “noble failure.” Hurston, writing to Edwin Grover, to whom she dedicated the book, admitted: “I have the feeling of disappointment about it. I don’t think that I achieved all that I set out to do. I thought that in this book I would achieve my ideal, but it seems that I have not reached it yet but I shall keep trying.”¹ Hurston was never satisfied with her work as can also be seen from a letter she wrote to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings regarding her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*: “I am not so sure that I have done my best, but I tried. I need not tell you that my goal still eludes me. I am in despair because it keeps ever ahead of me.”²

Neglected by the critics and considered the most ambitious book or a failure depending on the critic; *Moses, Man of the Mountain* has been praised for its blend of African American folklore, wit, and humor with the universal folk hero popularized in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The novel depends heavily on the biblical narrative and on the account of the first-century historian Flavius

¹ Hurston to Edwin Osgood Grover, October 12, 1939. (Hurston 2002: 422-423).

² Hurston to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Fall/Winter 1948. (Hurston 2002: 575-577).

Josephus. Moses is recognized as the great law-giver, the founder of modern Judaism and appears in Hurston's novel with multiple roles: he is turned into a very special hoodoo man, a conjurer, the possessor of nature's secrets, a priest, a messenger of God and the leader of the nation of Israel. Hurston would include Biblical allusions in many of her fictional and non fictional works.

Moses, whether he was an Egyptian or a member of the tribe of Levi, has been linked with African religious tradition for centuries promising the enslaved African-Americans a communal release from their oppressors. The common heritage of enslavement in a foreign land, far from their native home and the fact that slaves were forced by cruel owners and masters to work, led African-Americans to identify with the Hebrews. Moses's life and actions reminded African Americans of their own fate and the fate of their ancestors: unusual birth, exile and growing up in a foreign land away from family and community, undergoing great trials and tests, and acquiring the spiritual knowledge and the power to influence the community's destiny. Blacks easily identified with the Jews of the Bible – African Americans too had been forcefully deported, and they too aspired to a homeland, a promised land (for the slaves the country north of the Ohio River where Negroes were free).

The Bible has an important role in the African American literary tradition. One of the strongest motivations for slaves to learn to read was so that they might study the Bible themselves for messages of hope, since they "believed just as strongly that God would deliver them from bondage as he had the biblical children of Israel" (Raboteau 1997: 100). Biblical stories with themes of God helping the oppressed became part of the oral tradition of the slaves. However, the story that captured the African American's imagination was "the story of biblical Israel's enslavement and exodus from Egypt [...] The Exodus story was the most significant myth for American black identity, whether slave or free. [...] Black Americans were Israelites in Egypt" (Raboteau 1997: 101), "a chosen people" that would be led from Egyptian bondage, through the Wilderness, to the Promised Land. Moses is not only the figure who guided the Hebrews out of Egypt, but also the cultural and folk hero who will deliver southern blacks to a "land flowing with milk and honey."

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston fills in the gaps left open by the Bible and history, for example regarding his childhood and youth. She acknowledges that the "worship of Moses as the greatest one of magic is not confined to Africa. Wherever the children of Africa have been scattered by slavery, there is the acceptance of Moses as the fountain of mystic powers" (MMM 337). Moses appears in African American folklore and there are ref-

erences to him in black spirituals and slave songs.¹ Several spirituals referred to the journey to freedom and songs such as “We Shall Overcome” distinctly show that slaves aimed at freedom on this earth. Moses as a lawgiver and great emancipator was immortalized in the spirituals and numerous songs devoted to his heroic deeds. Spirituals permitted the simultaneous display of individual and communal creativity and expression. The stories about Moses in the African-American folklore provided southern blacks with an assurance that God delivered the enslaved and punished oppressors in this world and in the next. Slaves saw Moses as the leader of the chosen people, just as the black preacher was a leading figure to slaves. The black preacher displayed courage and heroism, even in situations of extreme violence against him. Moses had worried about leading the Israelites to freedom, and black preachers delivered elaborate but clear sermons trying to make their followers understand that only a united community could bring about the end of enslavement. The preacher in the black community teaches the community the means of protesting against oppression and selects key Bible passages for African-Americans to identify within their quest for freedom.

The folk stories and the folk beliefs helped African-Americans to confront and survive the violence of the American South. Worship, religious life and folktales were a means of mentally escaping slavery and Jim Crow Laws and of dealing with the hardness of life. As Lawrence W. Levine affirms,

the slaves’ expressive arts and sacred beliefs were more than merely a series of outlets or strategies; they were instruments of life, of sanity, of health, and of self-respect. Slave music, slave religion, slave folk beliefs – the entire sacred world of the black slaves – created the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and were the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery (Levine 1977: 80).

The adaptation of Bible stories to his situation was a potential outlet for the slaves’ individual feelings. Slaves saw a similarity between their situation and that of the children of Israel narrated in the Old Testament, and drew inspiration from those events. The Egyptians stripped the Hebrew slaves of any religious legacy so as to make them more submissive just as African-American slaves were forced, though unsuccessfully, to give up ancestral histories, language, religious and cultural practices. Hebrew women hoped to give birth only to female babies because the Pharaoh ordered the death of all newborn sons while enslaved African-American women suffered each time they gave

¹ See Levine (1977), especially the chapter entitled “The Sacred World of Black Slaves”.

birth because they knew that they would soon be separated from their babies. The desperation was greater when a girl was born because "slavery was terrible for men, but far more terrible to women" who could be abused physically and emotionally by the slave owners. Moses's killing of an Egyptian overseer fulfilled many of the Southern blacks' silent wishes before Emancipation when they felt the overseer's lash, and after Emancipation, when they had no choice but work for cruel bosses and suffer oppressive work conditions.

Parallels can be established between the Hebrews and African-Americans in the South, before and after Emancipation. Moses led his people out of bondage and spiritually he helped African-Americans to leave the American South's violent Jim Crow practices, "delivering them" to a Promised land that could be the northern bank of the Ohio River or Eatonville, Hurston's all-black hometown, fulfilling the African-American quest for freedom and literacy. In seeing their destiny as a repetition of the Exodus, slaves and African-Americans after Emancipation found hope and purpose for their lives.

Hurston's interest in the rewriting biblical legends in an African-American context first manifested itself in 1927 when she wrote *The First One: A Play*, an early example of her fascination with recreating Old Testament stories. In 1934, Hurston's interest in an Afrocentric interpretation of the Bible resulted in the sketch/short story "The Fire and the Cloud" which parallels the end of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* where Moses meets an ancient talking lizard on Mount Sinai, the "keeper of memories".

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston employs the familiar black folk preaching technique of equating Southern black history with the Biblical story of the Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery, and introduces commentaries regarding black cultural heritage and language into her story of Moses in order to reformulate notions about oppression, order, leadership, race, and cultural and political identity. The legend of the mystical leader and folk hero of the Bible is adapted to African-American folklore, with a few significant departures from the biblical narrative. In Hurston's novel, Moses is Egyptian, and therefore African, rather than a Hebrew, a man with conjuring and magical powers, a practitioner of hoodoo, "the fountain of mystic powers" and a hope-bringer; and his oppressed Hebrew followers become African-Americans. Moses changes his rod into a snake and who has the power to change water to blood, to cause plagues and bring leprosy on Miriam and death to Aaron. The idea of Moses as hoodoo man was prefigured in *Mules and Men* (MM 177), where Moses learns hoodoo from Jethro, the "great hoodoo man". When Moses goes up Mount Sinai the people comment: "he can walk out of sight of

men. He got the black cat bone and snake wisdom. He's a two headed man. He ain't like nobody else on earth." (MMM 543), just as before we were told that "Jethro was still his master in magic but Moses steadily closed the gap between them" (MMM 441).

Hurston's Moses explored the secrets of conjuring from early childhood in the Pharaoh's palace: he asked the priests about the magic they perform, spent time in the libraries and most important, he had in Mentu, the attendant of the royal stable, a teacher who introduced him to the world of African folk legends and African-American folklore which includes black folk beliefs, stories about talking animals, like the monkey, and stories about how the world was created.

Talking animals are common in African mythology and African-American culture. The animal tales – such as Mentu's parable about the old lizard that is too weak to catch flies or catch females which contains valuable wisdom – provided amusement to Moses but later on in life he will use comic folktales to teach the Hebrews valuable lessons. Before the battle with the Amalekites, Moses uses a folktale about rabbits and frogs that also appears in *Mules and Men* to explain the importance of the upcoming conflict:

Right now these Israelites are just like a passel of rabbits. You know, Joshua one time the rabbits all met together in a convention and decided to kill themselves because nothing looked up to them and nothing was scared of them. So they all headed for the river to drown themselves. They hopped like an army down to the river bank. But just before they got to the river there was a marsh that the rabbits had to cross and while they were crossing it they ran over some frogs and the frogs hopped up crying, 'Quit it! Quit it!' so the rabbits said to one another, 'These frogs are scared of us. We don't need to kill ourselves no more because something in the world is scared of us. Let's go on back home.' So they went on home happy again (MMM 525).

Hurston's narrative abounds in signifying, such as when two camel drivers signify on each other in a verbal comic duel using animal imagery, the comparison of Joshua to a "young rooster", folk expressions such as "giving orders to men with whiskers" and humor throughout the novel.

Moses, Man of the Mountain is profoundly rooted on the biblical narrative, but Hurston's narrative adds an interesting slant to the known facts about Moses. Hurston's description of Moses as a victorious general of the Pharaoh's army was an idea she probably got from the first-century historian Flavius Josephus, but the colorful description of Moses' childhood and adolescence and his affection for the illiterate but wise stableman Mentu, who talked to and about the animals as if they were human, came from her vivid imagination, since

there is scant information about Moses's early years. Moses's childhood is not mentioned in the biblical narrative, but not in Hurston's version, where we are told that Moses was a wise, inquisitive and imaginative child who enjoyed studying and learnt tales from Mentu. There are other departures from the biblical story. God as a character seldom appears in Hurston's novel. He appears to Moses as the burning bush, to the Hebrews as a pillar of fire, and talks to Moses and dictates the Ten Commandments to him. Aaron's death, Joshua's leadership and Moses' fake death constitute major differences from the biblical narrative: Moses climbs Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land and the Hebrew camp and, while there, realizes that he will not be crossing the Jordan with his adopted people; he kills Aaron, grants leadership to Joshua and prepares a grave and fakes his own death to preserve the mythic figure the people have made of him and to protect the sanctity of his laws.

In this novel Hurston establishes a parallel between Aaron and Miriam and socially ambitious blacks who show a tendency to reveal their folk origins in a moment of forgetfulness. While Moses becomes less Egyptian and "gets [more] natural" with the Hebrews as time goes by, revealing humility, austerity of personal lifestyle, and reluctance to separate himself from the common people, Aaron gets "stiffer", becoming proud and elitist in his role as the nation's head priest. Miriam, like Aaron, shows her hunger for power and position and, above all, both want to be attributed a part in the leadership: "'Yes, that no-count Egyptian come with his mealy mouth and talk me and Aaron into bringing you off. We was the ones that done all the work because he ain't one of us sure enough'" (MMM 544). Her jealousy of Zipporah is racially oriented, calling Moses's wife as "that dark complected woman" and "black Mrs. Pharaoh," "all dressed up [...] like King Pharaoh's horse" (MMM 555). Miriam's racist attitude towards Zipporah reminds us of Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when she says: "Look how dark her skin is. We don't want people like that among us mixing up our blood and all" (MMM 556).

Critics have different and contradictory opinions about the importance of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. The author herself admitted that she was not totally happy with it and even though many reviewers liked it, "Intriguing and the most ambitious of Hurston's works," "masterpiece of the late thirties", "a noble failure" are comments made about a novel that fascinates the devoted readers of Hurston's legacy.

Robert Hemenway refers to *Moses, Man of the Mountain* as "one of the most interesting minor works in American literary history" (Hemenway 1977: 260) and also "a noble failure" because "the author could not maintain the fusion

of black creative style, biblical tone, ethnic humor, and legendary reference” (Hemenway 1977: 270-271). Presenting a mixture of colloquial English and of black dialect, especially the dialect of the rural black South, the book is a burlesque of the Book of Exodus recasting the prophet in a new role. Hurston expropriated the story of the Jews’ redemption under Moses and presents it as the contemporary life and struggles of African-Americans. In spite of its problems, however, the novel is often compelling and deserves serious critical attention.

Chapter 3

“Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick”: Later Career

During her later life she became frightened of the life she had always dared bravely before. Her work too became reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid.

Alice Walker

From the early 1940s throughout the 1950s Hurston shows a progressive disappointment and bitterness as she was betrayed by both white and black people. During the 1940s, Hurston wrote no folklore, but an “autobiography”, articles for newspapers, political essays, some short stories and a novel about the white crackers, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. And in the 1950s, her letters confirm the personal and political resistance and controversial political ideas of her published works. These two decades were also the worst in terms of health for Hurston. She had various problems: gall-bladder infection, stomach and intestinal ailments, malaria, pneumonia and tonsillitis.

The relationship between Hurston, Carl van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff, lasted for many years as can be seen from the letters exchanged between them. The van Vechten's, friends to the Harlem “niggerati”, sponsors of many black artists, were making connections for them with publishers and sponsors and contributing to the success of the Harlem Renaissance during the twenties. Hurston wrote to Carl Van Vechten on almost every important occasion of her life and discussed almost everything with him. Van Vechten also made himself an instant mentor to Hughes, introducing him to the publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Hughes developed close affectionate ties to his “overbearing” patron, who had an obsession with black cultu. This obsession led him to publish *Nigger Heaven* in 1926. The novel with this controversial title was the most influential novel, by a white writer - - it established the image of the Negro as primitive, but it also outraged people of color, few of whom read beyond the cover. This highly criticized novel was, according to some critics and the

larger African-American audience, an exploitation of the exotic “singularities” of black life.

The correspondence exchanged between Hughes and Van Vechten shows their mutual interests, but also focuses on other contemporary subjects or makes comments about fellow writers such as about Zora Neale Hurston’s temperament. Van Vechten had endless enthusiasm for Hughes’ writing.¹ In the years after he ceased writing fiction, Van Vechten took hundreds of portrait photographs that are a valuable record of famous, prominent and striving people of color. It was through his role as a photographer that Van Vechten made an important contribution to the Harlem Renaissance “legacy.” His photographs of Hurston and other Harlem writers and artists captured the spirit of the times and are harbored in various collections such as the Carl Van Vechten Papers, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, and the Carl Van Vechten Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress.

Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, sold well when it was published in 1942, unlike the previously published novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Hurston found the autobiographical form difficult and “did not want to write it at all, because it is too hard to reveal one’s inner self, and still there is no use in writing that kind of book unless you do.”² According to Robert Hemenway, the autobiography “often appears contradictory” as it was “written self-consciously with a white audience in mind” and “probably harmed Hurston’s reputation” (Hemenway 1977: 278, 276). Referring certain guidelines of the Black American autobiography, Robert Hemenway, calls it a “unique genre”:

Black autobiographers usually are people who have forged their identity despite attempts to deny them a sense of personal worth; the tension between individual and stereotype, between what one thinks of himself and what white society expects him to be, grants special energy to the autobiographical prose. The author, having escaped the self-deception and self-defeat that whites have hoped to impose, speaks from a position of privilege and responsibility; the autobiographical account is presumed to contain both lessons for black people – how to combat racism, how to affirm the self – and indictments for whites (Hemenway 1977: 278).

Carla Kaplan describes *Dust Tracks on a Road* one of the “most unself-revealing autobiographies ever written” (Kaplan 2002: 436). Hurston’s

¹ On the relationship and letters of Van Vechten and Hughes, see *Remember Me to Harlem. The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten (1925-1964)* (Bernard 2001).

² Hurston to Hamilton Bolt, February 11, 1943. (Hurston 2002: 478).

autobiography is a controversial account of her own life but is also an authentic testimonial of the autobiographer's posture in life. She reads almost like a character from her fictional work in that she is determined not to shrink it to an account of the "the Negro problem." Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers in "Zora Neale Hurston: A Negro Way of Saying," the Afterword to the Harper Perennial edition of Hurston's books that "we can understand Hurston's complex and contradictory legacy more fully if we examine *Dust Tracks on a Road* [...] [where] she did make significant parts of herself up, like a masquerader putting on a disguise for the ball, like a character in her fictions" (DT 294). As if confirming this statement, Phillip A. Snyder points out in his essay "Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks: Autobiography and Artist Novel*" that *Dust Tracks on a Road* is "a title that privileges the traces, rather than the substance" (Snyder 1998: 174). *Dust Tracks on a Road* is not only the story of Hurston's individual life; it is also the story of the community of Eatonville and of a daughter of that community that left to grow and learn, but returned to save its rich expressive culture from oblivion.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour interfered with the writing, leading to revising and deleting parts of the manuscript. The material her publishers insisted she leave out of the book includes biting statements on race relations, democracy and America. The chapter dedicated to friendship was also deleted by the publisher.¹ She was a black author in a white publishing world, subject to the constraints of the editors who were themselves subject to the constraints of a predominantly white audience who did not want to be offended or reminded of the "sins" of their fathers.

Much of the folk material included in the autobiography has been previously used in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and in *Mules and Men*, and is here skilfully reused to avoid direct repetition. Other tales mentioned here appear in other works such as "a man who turned into an alligator for my amusement" (DT 611) and "one old woman [...] went fishing in Blue Sink late one afternoon and did not return" (DT 612) which appear in the short story "Uncle Monday". In a sense repetition is congenial to the oral tradition to which Zora Neale Hurston is so much indebted to.

Hurston portrays herself as a talented and serious-minded artist. Her survival strategies included the black oral vernacular of the American South and her individualistic spunk. Signifying was one of her verbal resources but also a defensive strategy to confront her intellectual battles. An assertive personality and a mastery of essential communication skills contributed to her

¹ Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 2, 1942. (Hurston 2002: 467).

individualism, instilled in her by her mother and by the “white man who had helped [her] get into the world” (DT 585) during her upbringing in the all-black community of Eatonville.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, we find the reasons for Hurston’s posture in life as well as her ideological stand. Issues like womanhood and race interpose the identity testimonial of this Eatonville daughter. She was a voracious quester, undaunted by limits, such as those imposed by society at large on persons of her race and gender. At the time, hers was not an age of affirmative action, but by her actions, Hurston affirmed the value of her life. The PBS Video *Zora is my Name* based on Hurston’s life and work depicts this statement in an explicit way. The material used in the video is from *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Mules and Men*. The production is autobiographical, but also relies on the “autobiographical account of her adventures, the documentation of Southern black folkways,” her folklore collection *Mules and Men* (hooks 1990: 142). The video celebrates Hurston’s life being, at the same time, an evocative depiction of the rural South of the 1930s and 1940s. It tells the story of Hurston’s life through storytelling, music and theatrical performance in a way she would have appreciated. According to Lynda Marion Hill, “*Zora is My Name* celebrates the world view rendered in her folklore texts and her commitment to community. It attempts to explain why Hurston worked, ‘so every one would know they had a history and a culture to be proud of’” (Hill 1996: 192).

Hurston reveals in her autobiography that her imagination developed very early in her childhood when she began making up stories: “when I began to make up stories I cannot say. Just from one fancy to another, adding more and more detail until they seemed real” (DT 606). The daughter of Eatonville was probing to know and the far horizon was the limit to her curiosity and imagination. She rebelled against the fact that color and genre were impediments to her reach for freedom. Once, before Christmas, Hurston asked her father for “a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles” (DT 584). Her father’s reaction was explosive: “‘A saddle horse! [...] It’s a sin and a shame! Lemme tell you something right now, my young lady; you ain’t white. Riding a horse! Always trying to wear de big hat!’” (DT 584) Her grandmother also “worried about [her] forward ways a great deal. She had been a slave and to her, [Hurston’s] brazenness was unthinkable” (DT 585). Hurston’s mother, however, excused and understood her daughter’s behavior, her stories and her “lies”: “Mama never tried to break me. She’d listen sometimes, and sometimes she wouldn’t. But she never seemed displeased” (DT 607).

Her mother Lucy was a woman who spoke her mind and beat her hus-

band in the verbal confrontations at home. Lucy, like Hurston, understood that language was empowerment and was never overwhelmed by her husband since “the one who makes the idols never worships them”:

I used to notice how Mama used to snatch Papa. That is, he would start to put up an argument that would have been terrific on the store porch, but Mama would pitch in with a single word or a sentence and mess it all up. You could tell he was mad as fire with no words to blow it out with. He would sit over in the corner and cut his eyes at her real hard. He was used to being a hero on the store porch and in church affairs, and I can see how he must have felt to be always outdone around home. I know now that that is a griping thing to a man – not to be able to whip his woman mentally (DT 620).

Hurston's assertiveness came from her mother, but her verbal creativity, her love for the folk tale and her gift for storytelling derive from the storytelling and lying contests, almost performed exclusively by men, which are part of her cultural heritage. As she writes in the chapter “Figure and Fancy, “the store porch was the most interesting place that I could think of. I was not allowed to sit around there, naturally. [...] But what I really loved to hear was the menfolks holding a ‘lying’ session. That is, straining against each other in telling folk tales. God, Devil, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Sis Cat, Brer Bear, Lion, Tiger, Buzzard, and all the wood folk walked and talked like natural men” (DT 599, 600, 601).

The description of Lucy Hurston's death in *Dust Tracks on a Road* parallels the death scene of Lucy Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The details are very similar in both books: “I could see the huge drop of sweat collected in the hollow at Mama's elbow and it hurt me so. [...] I think she was trying to say something, and I think she was trying to speak to me” (DT 617) and “Great drops of sweat stood out on her forehead and trickled upon the quilt and Isis saw a pool of sweat standing in a hollow at the elbow [...] [and] she thought that she tried to say something to her as she stood over her mother's head” (JGV 113). As already mentioned, the mother in both books, instructs the youngest daughter, Isis (JGV) and Zora (DT) to stop certain passing rituals from being carried out: “I was not to let them take the pillow from under her head until she was dead. The clock was not to be covered, nor the looking-glass. She trusted me to see to it that these things were not done” (DT 616) parallels the request made by Lucy Pearson, “And Isie, when Ahm dyin' don't you let 'em take de pillow from under mah head, and be covering up de clock and de lookin' glass and all sich ez dat. Ah don't want it done, heah? Ahm tellin' you in preference tuh de rest 'cause Ah know you'll see tuh it” (JGV 111). Both books also refer

to the mother's feather bed that was given to the daughter Isis/Zora and usurped by the step-mother when she moved into the father's house (JGV 110; DT 633), and to the dispersion of the siblings following the mother's death.

The theme of motherhood, or mother/daughter structures, that frequently appears in contemporary women's literature is not found in Hurston's fiction, with the exception of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. In her autobiography Hurston remembers her mother's exhortation to her children to "jump at the sun". Black women distribute knowledge and mother wit to their children and Hurston acknowledged her mother's legacy throughout her life. Hurston is evasive and sketchy about the years following her mother's death. She mentions few episodes between her mother's death and until she started working as a lady's maid for an actress of the Gilbert and Sullivan company: the school in Jacksonville, the fight with her step-mother, her first job as an upstairs maid and baby sitter for a white family and the sexual harassment she endured while working for another white family.

Hurston's father is described as a "tall, heavy-muscled mulatto who resolved to put down roots" (DT 567).¹ Rev. Hurston was born near Notasulga, Alabama, and "his grey-green eyes and light skin stood out sharply" (DT 568). As an "over the creek nigger" John and his family were landless and "lived from one white man's plantation to the other" (DT 567). He met Lucy Ann Potts of a land-owning family in church and they got married a few months later. Lucy's mother never accepted John as her son-in-law and always referred to him as "dat yaller bastard" (DT 569, 607). John eventually went to South Florida and settled in Eatonville. His family followed a year later and they "lived on a big piece of ground with two big chinaberry trees shading the front gate" (DT 571). The house had eight rooms, lots of fruit trees and a five acre garden. Until Lucy's death the children always had enough to eat and a roof over their heads, but after that the family disintegrated – John remarried and the children left home for school or to live with Lucy's family or friends. Hurston writes that her father "had been miserable over the dispersion of his children" (DT 985). He was killed in an automobile accident during Hurston's first year at Morgan Academy. Years later Hurston would encounter her brothers Bob, a doctor, and Ben, a pharmacist and drug store owner, and feel reconnected to her siblings for the first time since her mothers's death:

It was a most happy interval for me. I drove back to New Orleans to my work in a glowing aura. I felt the warm embrace of kin and kind for the

¹ As referred to before, John Pearson of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is modelled after John Hurston.

first time since the night after my mother's funeral, when we had huddled about the organ all sodden and bewildered, with the walls of our home suddenly blown down. On September 18, that house had been a hovering home. September 19, it had turned into a bleak place of desolation with unknown strangers creeping upon us from unseen quarters that made of us a whimpering huddle, though then we could not see why. But now, that was all over. We could touch each other in the spirit if not in the flesh (DT 685-6).

The autobiography details Hurston's life in Eatonville and afterwards, including school, work, college and career, but a part of the book is dedicated to the thematic handling of love, religion, friendship, and race matters. In the chapter "The Inside Light – Being a Salute to Friendship" Hurston reflects on the values of friendship and expresses her gratitude towards several people: Mrs. R. Osgood Mason (the last of her prophetic visions), Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fannie Hurst, Amy Spingarn, Jane Belo, James Weldon Johnson and his wife, Walter White and several others. The chapter ends with a description of Hurston's adventures in California with her friend Katherine Edson Mershon, who insisted on showing her all the state of California. Concluding "that trying to go through life without friendship, is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee," Hurston says: "I can say that I have had friends. Friendship is a mysterious and ocean-bottom thing" (DT 803).

White presence in her life was limited while she was growing up: the "white man of many acres and things" who arrived during her birth and cut her umbilical cord with his knife; the strangers who drove past her house in their "heavenly chariots" and gave her rides out toward the horizon; a pair of ladies who visited her school and were so impressed by her reading aloud that they presented her with the first real books she ever owned and a hundred new pennies. Around white people, as a child and as an adult, Hurston was her natural folksy self as she spoke and dramatise her blackness and southern rural black roots.

She won the Saturday Review \$1000 Anisfield-Wolf Award for *Dust Tracks on the Road*'s contribution to "the field of race relations" even though most critics regard it as a book with a "raceless posture". It is also in her autobiography that Hurston refused a racial group label: skin had nothing to do with "what was inside people. So none of the Race clichés meant anything anymore." (DT 731) She clearly shows that she was all in favor of the individual. She ends chapter twelve "My People! My People!" of her autobiography saying "There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different that there is no possible classification

so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My people!" (DT 733). This chapter is dedicated to discussing the Negro and issues of the race that confused Hurston as a child: race prejudice – exists “not only in America, but also wherever two races meet together in numbers.” (DT 786); race pride – responsible for “more suffering in the world than religious opinion” (DT 783); race solidarity – a “fiction” (DT 785) and concludes that “As soon as I could think, I saw that there is no such thing as Race Solidarity in America with any group. It is freely admitted that it does not exist among Negroes” (DT 721).

In the Appendix to *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in the essay entitled “Seeing the World as it is”, the chapter with which Hurston originally meant to conclude the book, she comments on power and politics, firmly stating that she “see[s] Negroes neither better nor worse than any other race. Race pride is a luxury I cannot afford” (DT 783). In a letter to Countee Cullen, Hurston writes: “Why don’t I put something about lynchings in my books? As if all the world did not know about Negroes being lynched! My stand is this: either we must do something about it that the white man will understand and respect, or shut up. No whiner ever got any respect or relief.”¹ Fannie Hurst in “A Personality Sketch” about Hurston states that in spite of her “lack of identity with her race,” Hurston’s “rich heritage cropped out not only in her personality but more importantly in her writings”.² As she wrote in “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” Hurston did “not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.” She was “not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes” (HFCM 827). She wrote about characters who laugh and cry and work and love essentially who were above all universally human. As she wrote in her autobiography: “From what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race problem. I was and am thoroughly disinterested in that subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-do, regardless of his color” (DT 713).

The chapter “Religion” reveals Hurston’s “questing and seeking.” Being a preacher’s daughter and with a mother “superintendent of the Sunday School,” she “naturally was always having to do with religious ceremonies [and she] even enjoyed participation at times; [she] was moved, not by the spirit, but by action, more or less dramatic” (DT 756). She liked watching converting ceremonies baptisms and funerals “because it was high drama” (DT 759). Her “misty fumes of doubt” were not cleared as she grew up. She finds that she “know[s] a

¹ Hurston to Countee Cullen, March 5, 1943. (Hurston 2002: 482).

² The Yale University Library Gazette 35, no. 1, July 1960. Reprinted in Bloom 1986: 23.

great deal about form, but little or nothing about the mysteries [she] sought as a child" (DT 763). She concludes that "people need religion because the great masses fear life and its consequences," but to her "organized creeds are collections of words around a wish" and she "feel[s] no need for such" (DT 763-4).

As argued by Gates and substantiated by this thesis, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a valuable introduction to understand Hurston's personality, her social attitudes, her work and her contradictions. As Darwin T. Turner stresses in his Introduction to the autobiography, "the picture which she chose to paint of herself was that of a fearless, defiant fighter whose father feared the consequences of her impudence; of a woman, loved by whites and feared by blacks; and of an American who transcended the petty conflicts of interracial issues."¹ *Dust Tracks on a Road* has also been described as an auto-ethnography by Francoise Lionnet, a woman critic who insightfully shows how, relying back on the culture of her community Zora Neale Hurston was able to provide a testimonial of cultural difference under the cover of the portrayal of her own individual life spelt in capital letters and striving to illustrate the divinity and value of singular humanity.

Hurston read Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *Cross Creek* (1942), which impressed her, and struck up a correspondence with the novelist. Hurston's friendship with Rawlings resulted in Rawlings's publisher, Scribners, taking an interest in Hurston's work. By May 1947 Hurston had sold Scribners the option on a new novel, later called *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which was published on October 11, 1948. Hurston's readers were in for a surprise: *Seraph on the Suwanee* was about white folks. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten, Hurston wrote about her intention "of breaking that old silly rule about Negroes not writing about white people"²

Hurston was the first black novelist of the "Renaissance" group to write and publish a "white novel", the story of a southern white woman and her family. Set in various parts of Florida, *Seraph on the Suwanee* focuses on the misunderstanding and the failed marriage between Arvay and Jim Meserve, "both [...] unable to reveal their 'inner selves' to the other" (Kaplan 2002: 443). Hurston used the fieldwork and research that she carried out on the turpentine workers for the Florida Federal Writer's Project to write this novel about the Florida crackers and their hard road to financial success. "Turpentine," written in 1939 and published in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water*, narrates a day in the

¹ Darwin T. Turner, Introduction to *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1969: iv.

² Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 2, 1942. (Hurston 2002: 467).

life of turpentine woods Foreman John McFarlin. The short text describes the different tasks are attributed to the men that work under Foreman McFarlin and some of the processes for getting the gum.

The novel is concerned with the psychological development of an individual, mainly the sexual complexes of Arvay Henson, a white woman who has problems facing reality. Arvay feels that nothing good is ever going to happen to her because she does not deserve it. The story of golden-haired and blue-eyed Arvay who believes herself ugly and unworthy of love (SS 613, 620), contains echoes of Hurston's earlier work, especially *Color Struck*. Arvay, born to a poor white "cracker" family, falls in love with a handsome fallen aristocrat, Jim Meserve, who "rapes" her – for Arvay this is an act of ecstatic, binding possession – and marries her. Feeling ever more convinced of his innate superiority and tormented by her failure to live up to his perfection – "she had tried and tried but she did not fit in" (SS 845) –, she comes to hate him almost as much as she hates herself. The novel narrates their life together, a life of personal misunderstandings and "the long, long road to travel" until true love triumphs and they find real happiness, "fullness," and peace together (SS 919).

Jonah's Gourd Vine and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* present a world in which white people exist only as flickering shadows, but here is a vivid sense of their oppressive presence. Hurston limits the presence of whites to a few characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (the white judge, jury and group of women at Janie's trial) and introduces a notion that will be expanded in her essay "The 'Pet Negro' System" published in *The American Mercury* in May 1943. Asserting that "there are more angles to this race adjustment business than are ever pointed out to the public" (PNS 914), Hurston explains how the "Pet Negro System" works:

The South has no interest, and pretends none, in the mass of Negroes but is very much concerned about the individual. So that brings us to the pet Negro, because to me at least it symbolizes the web of feelings and mutual dependencies spun by generations and generations of living together and natural adjustment. It isn't half as pretty as the ideal adjustment of theorizers, but it's a lot more real and durable, and a lot of black folk, I'm afraid, find it mighty cosy.

The pet Negro, belove-ed, is someone whom a particular white person or persons wants to have and to do all the things forbidden to other Negroes (PNS 915).

As a novel about white people, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, has no prominent black characters, but the "pet Negro" described in "The 'Pet Negro' System"

is depicted here. Black people live under the domination of Jim Meserve as does his wife, and he exercises racial and sexual domination throughout the novel. Joe Kelsey is a friend of Jim's from the turpentine camps who enjoyed singing the blues. Jim "had made a friend out of the Negro, or the Negro had made a friend out of him, one or the other" (SS 637). Joe Kelsey is described as "a reddy brown Negro, ugly as sin, but with the best-looking smile that Jim had ever seen on a man. It always lit him right up. It always made Jim feel like playing and joking. Just seeing Joe put him into a playful mood" (SS 638). Jim, even though he is "resident head of the camp" avoids bothering Joe about work not well done:

[Jim] had spotted a few cups that Joe had not cleaned well, but he didn't care too much. That was not so good for the company, but he was not going to kick up a fuss with Joe Kelsey about it all, because somehow, he liked the man tremendously (SS 637-8).

Joe excuses his behavior "point[ing] out his family worries, the slick and tricky way that moonshine likker had a way of slipping up on him" (SS 638), but Jim sees it otherwise: the problem is in the Saturday nights when Joe spends all his money "on likker and women." Joe replies telling Jim, "if you ever was to be a Negro just *one* Saturday night, you'd ever want to be white no more'" (SS 639). With Charlie, another Negro at the turpentine camp, Jim is harsh and does not worry about finding fault with his work.

Susan Meisenhelder provides an interesting analysis of the black characters and their relationship with whites in the novel (Meisenhelder 1999: 113-115). This scholar points out that "Jim's effect on the black characters in the novel is equally pernicious and insidious" since "black characters are domesticated and diminished" (Meisenhelder 1999: 113). In the novel, Joe says "we Meserves'll look after one another" (SS 828) and little Belinda, Joe's daughter, affirms "I'm Miss Arvay's little girl" (SS 703), showing that the black people living in Jim Meserve's world identify with his family. All of Jim's jobs and business involve the participation of black workers: the turpentine collecting, the "likker" still, the citrus groves, the cleaning of the swamp, the development project, and the shrimping business. Jim uses one of the cradles of black folk culture, the jook, to get information about the citrus growing:

Jim, knowing nothing about citrus-fruit production [...] had finally decided that since the colored men did all of the manual work, they were the ones who actually knew how things were done, and how he had taken up

around the jooks and gathering places in Colored Town, and swapped stories, and stood treats, and eased in questions in desperate hope, wondering if his money would hold out until he could get a footing, and how he had finally gotten information which landed him his job (SS 665-6).

According to Susan Meisenhelder, another example of white “appropriation and exploitation of black culture [is] also echoed in Kenny’s (Jim and Arvay’s son) seemingly harmless appreciation and popularization of Joe’s music” (Meisenhelder 1999: 114). Kenny has learnt music along the years with Joe, a blues player and singer and has been strongly influenced by Joe. When Kenny decides to make a living playing that music, Arvay finds it strange since she had “been hearing the darkies picking boxes ever since [she had] been old enough to know anything” (SS 781), but it is the first time she hears anyone saying that they will make a living playing that music. Jim, however, sees that there is a possibility of Kenny profiting from the rich black musical tradition that he learnt from Joe. As he explains to Arvay,

[Kenny] claims that white bands up North and in different places like New Orleans are taking over darky music and making more money at it than the darkies used to. Singers and musicians and all. You do hear it over the radio at times, Arvay. Kenny claims that it is just a matter of time when white artists will take it all over. Getting so it’s not considered just darky music and dancing nowadays. It’s American, and belongs to everybody. [...] He aims to be te first one to make it something for the public, and he might be right for all we know (SS 781-2).

Jim’s influence over Joe leads the black man to buy “two lots in Colored Town.” When Arvay finds out about the “likker” business, she blames Joe for it and began “short-talking Joe everytime that she had occasion to speak to him” (SS 705). Joe decides to leave “the little house in the grove” and move to town, where “he had the shell of a six-room house thrown up on his lots and moved into the unfinished house” (SS 705). He also bought himself a car and started living and behaving like a “Heavy-set Daddy.” This behavior deteriorated his relationship with his wife Dessie and destroyed “a healthy black identity” distancing him from his cultural roots (Meisenhelder 1999: 115). Hurston attempts to portray racial harmony and there is a general tranquillity between blacks and whites – the ideal relationship between white farmers and colored help. This situation of harmony is also reflected on the shrimp boats between white and black workers and their foremen. Once again Hurston avoids the general tendency of the Negro novelists of the forties – she does not show concern for the

condition of black people in American society, nor does she include race matters.

This novel has been largely ignored by Hurston scholars and critics even though it reiterates some of Hurston's characteristic themes like a woman's assertiveness and maternal bond. Janet St. Clair points out that "critics of black literature are disappointed because Hurston abandons her racial heritage and her literary commitment to black folk culture in creating white protagonists" (St. Clair 1998: 198). But a parallel can be established between the female protagonists, Janie (TE) and Arvay (SS), as "*Seraph on the Suwanee* is finally the thinly veiled story of a woman who resists victimization, throws off oppression, chooses the burden that she will carry, and takes it up with courage, dignity and delight" (St. Clair 199). Arvay achieves self assertion only towards the end of the novel, when by affirming her individual identity, she is finally able to demonstrate her unconditional love for her husband. Jim Meserve's statement about women brings to mind an affirmation by Jody Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Jody says: "Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chicken and cows" (TE 232), while Jim's statement is linked to the domestic sphere:

Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for (SS 621).

The parallel between the two works illustrates that, after all, independently from other considerations, the plight of black and white women was similar – both had to struggle to assert their rights and to be regarded as equal to their men.

During the forties Hurston was enthusiastic about undertaking a trip to Honduras with her friend and ship's captain, Fred Irvine, to find the "lost city of the Mayas up the Petuca River."¹ In her letters, she had expressed disillusion and a desire to leave the country. Hurston went to Honduras in 1947-8: "I shall always be grateful to Honduras, though for it has given me back myself", she wrote in a letter to Maxwell Perkins.² But on her return to the United States, she had to face a trial that almost cost her her life.

¹ Hurston to Jane Belo and Frank Tannenbaum, October 18, 1944. (Hurston 2002: 523). See also Hurston to Jane Belo and Frank Tannenbaum, October 14, 1944, and Hurston to Jane Belo, October 1, 1944.

² Hurston to Maxwell Perkins, May 20, 1947. (Hurston 2002: 549).

In September 1948 Hurston was involved in a morals scandal over an alleged relationship with a ten-year-old boy in a New York City apartment building. The emotionally disturbed boy accused her of sexual molestation. The Children's Society filed charges and Hurston was arrested and indicted. Her arrest and the charge of sodomy or sexual molestation brought against her received headline publicity in the black press after a court employee spilled the news to one of the city's black newspapers. The morals charge coincided with the publication of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. The papers quoted portions of the reviews of her novel to further sensationalize the story. The charges were dropped due to the lack of evidence and the contradictory stories told by the "supposed victim," and because there was evidence that she was absent from the country on a folklore trip collecting during the time the "supposed amorous encounters" occurred, but the harm had been done and people considered her guilty. The case was dismissed but her career and her spirits were irrecoverably hurt. In a letter to Fannie Hurst written in the "Fall/Winter 1948," Hurston's despair with the situation is noticeable:

Your thrust of light reached me in my cave so dark and deep that it seems that all the suns of the universe cannot light it up.

I swear to you, by anything and all things that I hold sacred that not one word of this foul and vicious lie is true. It is against everything in my soul and nature.

[...]

However, both my race and my nation have seen fit to befoul me with no excuse whatsoever. [...] And do not forget that this foul thing did not happen to me in the Deep South, but in the enlightened New York City [...] now my soul is dead, and I care about nothing anymore.¹

The experience was devastating. Disappointed, betrayed, humiliated, sick, Hurston contemplated suicide. The accusation and the publicity around the whole episode harmed her irreversibly and her faith in people, especially in her own fellow black people, decreased considerably.

After this incident, Hurston lost her vitality and verbal spunk. She wrote and published only non-fiction articles and essays. The articles show a very specific political intent that was not visible in the years prior to the incident. After the morals charge, Hurston cut off almost all of her communications with her friends and did not return to New York City. She tried to eliminate this traumatic incident by retreating to Florida, the place that always helped her

¹ Hurston to Fannie Hurst, Fall/Winter 1948. (Hurston 2002: 574).

regain her old energy. Afterwards she lived in relative obscurity in Florida on scant money and whatever dignity she was able to salvage. She worked several jobs, including as a maid in Miami, and labored over several books and essays. She did not publish any further books, but had several projects that were not considered publishable.

Hurston became increasingly conservative in her political and social views during the last decade of her life. Her apparent indifference to politics and racial politics changed drastically in the 1950s. She devoted more time to political writing and political controversy, writing political essays and working on political campaigns. She also embraced journalism as an activity and her most known contribute to this area is her coverage of the sensational Florida murder trial in 1952-3 for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In the case against her, Ruby McCollum, a black woman, was accused of killing her white lover, a prominent member of society. Even the work to which she dedicated more time and effort, *The Life of Herod the Great* (first century BC), was related to politics.

During her last decade, Hurston published a few articles in various periodicals such as "I saw Negro Votes Peddled" published in the *American Legion Magazine* in November 1950, and "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" published in the *American Legion Magazine* in June 1951. In this last article, Hurston expressed antagonism toward communism and American communists. Other articles in which she expressed her points of view were considered too reactionary and too conservative for the times. She became more intolerant and supported white conservatives, writing a favourable profile of Robert Taft, the Ohio senator candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. Her letter to the editor of the *Orlando Sentinel* (October 11, 1955) opposing the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown vs Board of Education* asserts her views on individual freedom. She was harshly criticized for opposing this anti-segregation ruling. These are, however, the bare facts to which we, contemporary readers, have access – the true motives behind the narrow-mindedness of her last years are difficult to grasp, as this period of her life lies in deep shadows and very little may be assessed from the scant information available.

During the later part of her life, political statement and posturing played a bigger role than they did earlier on, and are probably related to her "disappearance" from the literary scene during the last years of her life. After publication of her last book in 1948 and until her death, politics would consume her life.

Among her unpublished works are *Barracoon* and the *Life of Herod the Great*. *Barracoon*, the book-length manuscript to be published in 2005, is a

“semi fictionalized” account based on the information she gathered during her visits to Cudjo Lewis¹ and was written in 1931. Hurston met Cudjo in 1927, on her first research expedition to Mobile, Alabama, financed by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, during which she collected material for Franz Boas and Carter G. Woodson. She spent three months associating with Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the last-known slave ship to bring African slaves to the United States in 1859, the “Chlotilde.” She did extensive research on Kossula after interviewing him: regarding his life in Africa, how he was taken into slavery, his voyage to the United States and the sadness of not knowing what had happened to his family after he was taken captive. At the time that Hurston interviewed Kossula she was beginning her career as a researcher collecting in the field. She was, as Lynda Marion Hill says, “in the process of learning while collecting information on distinctive characteristics of black culture” (Hill 1996: 69). In October 1927, Hurston published her fifteen-page essay “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver” in the *Journal of Negro History*. In his literary biography of Hurston, Robert Hemenway reveals that

Hurston’s essay about Cudjo Lewis is 25 percent original research and the rest shameless plagiarism from a book entitled *Historic Sketches of the Old South*. Written by Emma Langdon Roche, published in New York by the Knickerbocker Press thirteen years before Hurston’s essay. (Hemenway 1977: 96-97)²

According to Hemenway her plagiarism “remained detected” until 1972 when it was discovered by the linguist William Stewart. Hurston did not commit plagiarism again and became a major folklore collector and novelist. She describes her meeting with Cudjo Lewis in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (DT 707-11) and how the details regarding his capture shocked her. She describes her conclusions regarding the slavery myths in the United States:

One thing impressed me strongly from this three months of association with Cudjo Lewis. The white people had held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true and exploited us. But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw, was: my people has *sold* me and the white people had bought me. That did away with all the folklore I had been brought up on – that the white people had gone to Africa, waved a red handkerchief at the

¹ *Barracoon* is an extension of her fifteen-page essay “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver” published in the *Journal of Negro History* in October 1927. The manuscript is among the Alain Locke Papers, at the Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University.

² Robert Hemenway discusses this subject in pages 96-101.

Africans and lured them aboard ship and sailed away. I know that civilized money stirred up African greed. That wars between tribes were often stirred up by white traders to provide more slaves in the barracoons and all that. But, if the African princes had been as pure and as innocent as I would like to think, it could not have happened. No, my own people had butchered and killed, exterminated whole nations and torn families apart, for a profit before the strangers got their change at a cut. It was a sobering thought (DT 708).

Lynda Marion Hill considers that “Hurston’s encounter with Kossula influenced her perceptions of herself” (Hill 1996: 61). Cudjo Lewis story is an example of the personal narratives that would be collected years later by the WPA and FWP.

Hurston spent many years busy writing a story about “the 3000 years struggle of the Jewish Peoples for democracy and the rights of man” under the title *Life of Herod the Great*. Her penchant for historical subjects would surface again in this work. The story of the life of Herod the Great was an obsession that accompanied her for many years, “the central driving project force during the last creative period of her life.”¹ In a letter to Margrit de Sablonière, Hurston wrote: “I am attempting a LIFE OF HEROD THE GREAT. You will wonder about my choice, but he was a great and influential character of his time, and the answer to what is going on in Europe, Asia, and America lies in that first century B.C.”² Publishers, such as Scribner’s and Harper and Brothers, rejected the manuscript and Burroughs Mitchell found the book disappointing.³

After Hurston died, a deputy sheriff saved the four-hundred-page Herod manuscript from being burned by a welfare-home janitor who had been instructed to destroy Hurston’s personal effects. The manuscript, which is among Hurston’s papers at the University of Florida Library, was badly damaged by the fire; but one surviving part was published in 1985 as an appendix to *Spunk: The Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* with the title “Herod on Trial.” This part presents the trial of Herod and the encounter of Herod with the high priest Hyrcanus and other priests who accuse him of murder.

The last decade or so of Hurston’s life was not as successful as the previous decades. Though Hurston continued to write novels, they were all rejected because they lacked the quality of her published works. She moved away from the folklore material and “the Negro farthest down” she had used in most of

¹ Bob Callahan, Foreword to *Spunk: The Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (1987).

² Hurston to Margrit de Sablonière, December 3, 1955. (Hurston 2002: 743-744).

³ Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, August 12, 1955. (Hurston 2002: 741-742).

her fiction works.¹ Hurston's letters reveal several writing projects, of which no manuscripts have been found. Hurston's whole life was characterized by restlessness, but her last decade was defined by a need for peace and domesticity, for a "spot on earth [that] feels like home."² Her letters to her literary agent, Jean Parker Waterbury, describe her enthusiasm about returning to Eau Gallie and the house where she wrote *Mules and Men*, taking care of her pets, tending the garden and feeding the birds.

¹ *Mrs Doctor*, a novel about wealthy African Americans, was rejected by Lippincott in September 1945. *The Lives of Barney Turk*, a novel about the story of a white Florida youth's adventures in Central America and Hollywood, written in 1949-50, was rejected by Scribner's in October 1950. Little is known about this work and the whereabouts of the manuscript are unknown: it was either destroyed in the fire after Hurston's death or is still packed away somewhere waiting to be discovered.

The novel *The Golden Bench of God*, a story about hairdressing entrepreneur and art patron Madame C.J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire, was rejected by Scribner's. Madame C. J. Walker was Sarah Breedlove Walker (1867-1919), who started out as a poor washerwoman and became a very wealthy businesswoman due to the hair-straightening processes and "preparations" invented by her. Hurston probably wrote it in early 1951, as can be seen from the letters that she wrote to her literary agent, Jean Parker Waterbury "Madam Walker, who pioneered the hair-straightening business had one [piano]. The characters and plots are my own devising, but I have followed the history of the business pretty closely except that there was no white man in it to my knowing"(Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, March 7, 1951. LL 647-9). There are further references to this novel in several letters written during 1951 (LL 655, 667, 675).

² Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, July 9, 1951. (Hurston 2002: 663).

Chapter 4

“My People! My People!”: Hurston, the legacy and the critics

Of the various signs that the study of literature in America has been transformed, none is more salient than the resurrection and canonization of Zora Neale Hurston. Twenty years ago, Hurston's work was largely out of print, her literary legacy alive only to a tiny, devoted band of readers who were often forced to photocopy her works if they were to be taught.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

The literature concerned with the Negro's humanity and cultural citizenship of the twenties and thirties gave way to literature showing an image of the black man as an inarticulate savage for whom rape and murder were a nearby inevitable means of expression, as in Richard Wright's *Native Son* published in 1940. The 1940s also saw the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement that lasted until the 1970s and appeared to associate Southern Black folk culture with slavery and segregation.

By the 1950s Hurston had left New York and “retired” to Florida where she became a writer of newspaper articles and essays while trying out numerous other jobs. During this decade, writers such as Richard and Wright Ralph Ellison gained importance in the American literary scene, while Hurston's work went out of print and she faced serious financial problems.

The sixties were the years of the climax of the Civil Rights Movement with the focus being set on politics and political leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. The strong period of the aesthetic of racial pride emerged in the seventies, bringing Hurston's writings into the limelight, thanks to a rising group of African-American women writers.

In the years before her death, her works had been out of print, and the literary world was being dominated by such male giants as Richard Wright,

Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Fortunately, however, a few readers kept Hurston's work alive, and in the 1970s this interest mushroomed into a coterie of Hurston followers. Comprehensive appraisal came in 1977 with Robert Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* which offers a favorable assessment of her literary career and tries to explain her enigmatic personality. Praising her work as a celebration of black culture, he concludes that her failure to achieve recognition in her lifetime reflects America's poor treatment of its artists in general and its black artists in particular. Before the biography was published, Robert Hemenway wrote a detailed and analytical essay entitled "Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthology in 1972, that was included in Bontemps's *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*," with the intention of "stimulat[ing] further interest in her art," while acknowledging "that it is a white man's reconstruction of the intellectual process in a black woman's mind" (Bontemps 1972: 190-214).

The critical acclaim awarded Hurston's writings since the 1970s has allowed readers to discover what Alice Walker finds: a "sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings."¹ She honors Hurston's genius as a black woman writer and delights in her dynamic personality: "Zora was funny, irreverent (she was the first to call the Harlem Renaissance literati the 'niggerati'), good-looking and sexy." While doing research for one of her stories, Alice Walker read *Mules and Men* – this autobiographical-oriented work introduced Walker to the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Hoodoo was responsible for the literary link between Walker and Hurston. In 1973, Alice Walker's efforts, to have Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave recognized, were crowned with success and paralleled her quest to have Hurston's work acknowledged as an important contribution to the African American literary tradition. As a tribute to Hurston's inspiration, Walker had a gravestone placed upon the grave with the following inscription:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON
 A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH
 1901 – 1960
 NOVELIST, FOLKLORIST
 ANTHROPOLOGIST

The epitaph does not sum up a life that was so rich, so full and so productive. Zora Neale Hurston was a strong-willed woman who generated conflict as

¹ Writing in the Foreword to Hemenway's biography.

she tried to impose her will on others. She found it difficult to maintain personal relationships and personality clashes proliferated during her career. Two known failed marriages and a failed or frustrated love affair were part of her emotional life. A long and very close relationship with Langston Hughes broke up due to her determination to maintain control of her career.

Attacked by Wright and ignored by his literary heirs, Hurston has, nevertheless, deservedly been reinstated in the canon of modern American literature and thanks to the recent critical readings of Hazel Carby, Nellie McKay, Mary Helen Washington and Deborah McDowell, to name just a few of her critical readers, her reputation is growing.

Until the 1980s, the world of African American literature was dominated mainly by men, while the black female experience was fundamentally ignored. Before the twentieth century no black woman writer was considered a major figure in the black literary scene, even though one can think of some women's names that have contributed to the history of African American literature like Pauline Hopkins, Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson, to mention just a few.

The differences between the works of black female and male writers date back to the beginning of the African American literary tradition. The largest production of texts by African Americans in the nineteenth century consisted of slave narratives, and the differences in the texts written by men and by women are evident. The slave narratives follow a "masterplan" in that they all have certain things in common, like the hardships of slavery, the need to present testimonials to prove the truthfulness of the narrative, the flight to the North, or Freedom at last, but the contents and themes vary from male to female writer.

The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), respectively authored by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, are regarded as good examples of the genre. They capture the reader's imagination by combining literary skill, protest against slavery, didactic statements and rhetoric for the abolitionist cause. There are, however, substantial differences between the two narratives. Regarding style, structure and contents, Douglass's narrative is an eloquent protest against slavery where he demonstrates his skills as a cultured and rational writer, while also analysing and commenting on his life as a slave and his escape to the North. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written and published under the pseudonym Linda Brent, is no less of an eloquent protest, but it offers a female perspective of slavery by emphasizing the importance of family, namely the bond between the slaves and their children and by analysing the condition and suffering of the female slave as a slave and a woman.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the appearance of writers like Anne Spencer (1882-1976), Dorothy West (1909-1998), Nella Larsen (1891-1964), Jessie Fauset (1882-1961), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935), Georgia Douglas Johnson (1886-1966) among others, but the critical works and general history of the Harlem Renaissance give the impression that the “New Negro Movement” only found contributions from male writers. Zora Neale Hurston seems to be the “eccentric” who received some recognition, but, as said before, until the late 1970s most of her work was neglected. Being contemporaries to main stream black male writers had a negative effect on the work of African American women writers. Before black women’s fiction found its place side by side with male writers, African American women artists like the poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), who received a Pulitzer Prize in 1950, and the playwright Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), who became known in the late fifties mainly for her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), were already acknowledged as prominent artists. But they were the exception. The lack of attention that black women writers received in the second half of the twentieth century is a reflection of their time, a time when black male writers such as Richard Wright (1908-60),¹ Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison (1914-94)² and James Baldwin (1924-1987), received critical acclaim as major novelists and essayists.

Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison published regularly and their works remained in print, while the works of their contemporary women writers were read by a small audience and were quickly out of print. The writers who enjoyed the widest reputation were those who appeared in print most frequently and whose names were most commonly mentioned in African American periodicals and weeklies. These writers were men.

This tendency seems to have traveled through the decades and affected critics like Robert B. Stepto who chose to write mainly about male writers in his book *From Behind the Veil. A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1991 [1979]). Here all the titles of the chapters seem to lead to studies of works by black male writers. Few references are made to female writers like Zora Neale

¹ Black American novelist, short-story writer and social critic. *Native Son* (1940) is the novel which won him recognition. He also wrote *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941) an illustrated folk history of American blacks, *Black Boy* (1945), an acclaimed autobiography and its sequel, *American Hunger* (1977); the novels *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958); other works include *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1936), *Eight Men* (1961), *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957), *White Man, Listen!* (1957).

² Black American novelist, essayist and short-story writer. His reputation depends largely on *Invisible Man* (1952), a central text of the twentieth century African American experience. *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) are two collections of some of his essays on literature, American culture and black music. He also left an incomplete second novel.

Hurston whose *Their Eyes is Watching God* “is quite likely the only truly coherent narrative of both ascent and immersion” (Stepto 1991 [1979]: 164). Stepto analyzes *Their Eyes* in a little more than two pages (Stepto 1991 [1979]: 164-167), comparing Hurston’s novel to *Invisible Man* and *The Souls of Black Folk* and pointing out “the one great flaw in *Their Eyes*” (Stepto 1991 [1979]: 166). He concludes that “*Their Eyes* as a narrative strategy [...] directs us most immediately to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” (Stepto 1991 [1979]: 166). In this case, the tables are turned over, for it is Zora Neale Hurston who becomes the invisible woman, particularly among the African American writers and critics.

The problem the Negro writer had to face to get into the publishing world was an issue treated by various writers in essays published in black magazines and newspapers. Hurston wrote the essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950) where she comments ironically on the financial problems that affect the Black writer. ¹ If the story “involves racial tension” it will sell well and “publishers are in the business to make money”. The publishing industry was not interested in a novel or a work that did not focus on the “race problem” for it did not appeal to the white audience.

Hurston’s work shows that she did not ignore the race issues that dominated the African American literature of the time. She was well aware that, for her work to be accepted for publication, she had to disguise the racial and social issues with humor, wit and ambiguity so as not to offend editors and white readers, even though publishers “sponsor[ed] anything that they believe[d] [would] sell”, specially if “the story or play involve[d] racial tension” (WWPWP 951).

The dilemma of a double audience was a problem that all Negro writers who wanted to get into mainstream publishing had to face. James Weldon Johnson in “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” states that the Negro writer has to face a special problem that “of the double audience [...] an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view”. He concludes that “the sincerity and soundness of the Negro writer’s work are vitiated whether he poses for white or black” and the solution to the problem is the making of a common audience out of white and black America (Johnson 1996: 247, 251).

To critique the white world overtly would mean the risk of alienating powerful white figures who controlled the publishing world and the patronage system. Depending on the “patronage” of whites for publishing and even working purposes became a common practice for black writers ever since

¹ First published in *Negro Digest* 8, April 1950: 85-89.

Phillis Wheatley published her poems in 1773.¹ Critics like Nathan Huggins, Addison Gayle and Harold Cruse argument that the Harlem Renaissance was inspired, dominated and corrupted by white patronage. David Levering Lewis in his study of Harlem in the twenties *When Harlem was in Vogue* states that

white capital and influence were crucial, and the white presence, at least in the early years, hovered over the New Negro world of art and literature like a benevolent censor, politely but pervasively setting the outer limits of its creative boundaries (Lewis 1979: 98).²

Hurston apparently enjoyed playing the “colorful”, perfect and loveable “darky” who liked to entertain the white world with her tales (Hughes 1940: 239). Langston Hughes wrote that Hurston was the most amusing of the “niggerati”, a term coined by Wallace Thurman to refer to the Harlem literati. According to Hughes, Hurston was the “perfect book of entertainment in herself” (Hughes 1940: 239). But this image of a lovable, entertaining and apparently intellectually mute character was also the mask she used to gain access to the mainstream publishing circles because the white man “can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind” (MM 10). Publicity was essential and precious to black artists and they competed with each other to be seen and heard at social events and book parties

In her Introduction to *Mules and Men* Hurston describes how blacks wear and use a “mask” to their advantage when dealing with whites:

The Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. (MM 10)

She exploited the fact that she was treated as a “pet Negro” by whites. In fact, in many of the folktales she relates, there is self-conscious “racial ma-

¹ When Phillis Wheatley’s poems were published in 1773 in Britain, they included various testimonials from prominent people and from her master to prove their authenticity. This was to become the convention for publishing slave narratives, in the years that followed. In the early twentieth-century, African American writers did not need testimonials to authenticate their work but they still had depended on white support to reach the publishers and the reading public. First slavery, then racial discrimination, interfered with the artistic freedom of black writers.

² Ralph D. Story shares the same opinion in the article “Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance: You Get What You Pay For”, *CLA Journal*, Volume XXXII, Nr 3, March 1989: 284-295.

nipulation” by black people. In the essay “Negro Authors and White Publishers” James Weldon Johnson continues to focus on the problem of the Negro writer, but is more critical of the publishing world stating that

leading white publishers have set a standard which Negro writers must conform to or go unpublished; that this standard calls only for books depicting the Negro in a manner which tends to degrade him in the eyes of the world; that only books about the so-called lower types of Negroes and lower phases of Negro life find consideration and acceptance (Wintz 1996b: 297).

He goes on to refer published “books depicting Negro life on the upper levels or shedding a favorable light on the race” and “those depicting Negro life on the lower levels”. The essay ends in a positive note of equal opportunity: “Negro writers who have something worth while to say and the power and skill to say it have as fair a chance today of being published as any other writers” (Wintz 1996b: 297).

In the winter of 1950-1951, Zora Neale Hurston moved to Belle Glade, Florida. In the spring she wrote to her literary agent that she was penniless. It was becoming embarrassing, “having to avoid folks who have made me loans so that I could eat and sleep. The humiliation is getting to be much too much for my self-respect, speaking from the inside of my soul. [...] to look and look at the magnificent sweep of the Everglades, birds included, and keep a smile on my face.”¹ The infrequent sale of a magazine article brought temporary relief, but over the next ten years Hurston worked at odd jobs. She lived in a one-room cabin she had purchased in Eau Gallie, while her stomach ailments and money problems made this period difficult. In 1956 Hurston found work as a librarian at Patrick Air Force Base but was fired in 1957, ostensibly for having too much education for the job; in December 1957 she became a reporter for the *Fort Pierce Chronicle*, the local black weekly; and in 1958 she did some substitute teaching at Lincoln Park Academy, the black public school of Fort Pierce. These frequently humiliating jobs did not daunt Hurston’s spirit. On 29 October 1959, after suffering a stroke, Hurston was forced to enter the Saint Lucie County Welfare Home. She died there of hypertensive heart disease on 28 January 1960 and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Garden of the Heavenly Rest, the segregated cemetery at Fort Pierce. She died in poverty, and a collection had to be taken up to pay for her funeral. Hurston had lived a rich life.

The year 1970 seems to be the turning point in the contributions of Afri-

¹ Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, March 7, 1951. (Hurston 2002: 649).

can American women writers and critics to the American literary scene. Major writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones, published or edited their first work in 1970. Critical acclaim of contemporary women writers has demanded attention to their heritage and has shown the interest in the search for the literary foremother, the “ancestor,” celebrated by Morrison in her works. The ancestor are “benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison 1992: 326).

Two contemporary women writers deserve particular attention – Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 for her whole oeuvre, the first African American writer to receive such a distinction. In the essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison commented that in her writing she tries “to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken”, that is, she tries to incorporate into her fiction “the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well” (Morrison 326). As probably the major writer of the late twentieth century, Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), the Pulitzer Prize winner *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1991) *Paradise* (1996) and *Love* (2003). She focuses on various issues, like female friendship, African American folk heritage, slavery and motherhood and black modernity.

Alice Walker is a somewhat younger and controversial writer of the late twentieth century. Her first book *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* came out in 1970. She has published widely, *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and focuses on diverse issues like poverty and family violence in the American South, domestic violence and father-daughter rape, a lesbian relationship and the female genital mutilation. Walker also published several essay collections, including the well-known *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1982).

The nineties would bring about a “boom” in Hurstonian scholarship. The University of Florida set up a Zora Neale Hurston Fellowship in Anthropology; the City of Orlando, Florida, acknowledged Hurston's accomplishments by naming a city building after her. Hurston's books have not been out of print since the eighties and collections of her short stories, essays and folk tales have been posthumously published. The manuscript *Barracoon* based on the story of Cudjo Lewis is due to be published soon. The publication of some of her letters, a new biography and various critical works has pushed her name into

the foreground of American literary studies. The publication of the two-volume edition of her collected work by the Library of America awards Zora Neale Hurston the status of a classic author within the American literary canon. *Zora Neale Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* is the title of Hurston's biography for children published in 1994.

But there are also various websites, associations,¹ the Eatonville festival,² a museum,³ a school,⁴ a library,⁵ a Zora Boulevard⁶, journals,⁷ awards and prizes,⁸ and a stamp⁹ all in her honor. The establishment of the Hurston/Wright Foundation¹⁰ in September 1990 links Zora Neale Hurston and her legacy to that of her old enemy and contemporary writer, Richard Wright. Hurston and her work was deeply rooted in African American history and Eatonville still presents itself as "deeply rooted in African American History", the "oldest surviving incorporated black municipality" "possess[ing] a rich traditional culture immortalized in the works of native daughter Zora Neale Hurston".¹¹

Critical studies about the Harlem Renaissance pay little attention to women, but recent studies have tried to fulfill the inadequacies of other works.

¹ The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. (P.E.C.) is a non-profit tax-exempt corporation. The P.E.C programs and services are made possible by grants from sources such as the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding is provided by United Arts of Central Florida, Inc., Orange County Government and from corporations, organizations and individuals.

The Zora Neale Hurston Society was founded in 1983.

² The Annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities that takes place in Eatonville, Orlando, Florida, always on the last weekend of January.

³ The Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts was established in 1990 "to provide a place in the heart of the community where the public can view the creative work of artists of African descent".

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston Elementary School, 13137 SW 26th Street, Miami, FL 33175, Miami-Dade County.

⁵ Zora Neale Hurston Branch Library, St. Lucie County, Florida.

⁶ Zora Blvd is in Eatonville, Orlando, Florida.

⁷ The Zora Neale Hurston Forum.

⁸ Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, Hurston/Wright Award, Zora Neale Hurston Prize.

The American Folklore Society recognizes outstanding achievement in the field of folklore by awarding five major prizes. Most of these prizes are named for remarkable folklorists. The Zora Neale Hurston Prize is given every year to a graduate or undergraduate student for the best work in any medium – including but not limited to papers, films, sound recordings, or exhibitions—on African American folklore.

⁹ In 2003 the US Post Office edited a 37 cent stamp to honor Hurston. See appendixes.

¹⁰ <http://hurston-wright.org>

¹¹ <http://www.flheritage.com/magazine/eatonville.html>. Internet. Accessed on 2003/01/02.

Gloria T. Hull in a book entitled *Color, Sex and Poetry. Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1997), focused only on three women poets of the Harlem Renaissance, who also wrote in other forms: Alice Dunbar-Nelson (short stories, editorials and newspaper articles), Angelina Weld Grimké (drama and short fiction), and Georgia Douglas Johnson (unpublished essays and short fiction). These writers belonged to the older generation born before the turn of the century and already had a reputation when they became part of the Renaissance in the 1920s. Very few references are made to Hurston and these are more personal than professional: the use of a false birth date and the way Hurston behaved in public, smoking and promoting herself.

Deborah G. Plant exposes the critical ambivalence that from the start marked Hurston's literary production, noting that "whereas today her work is considered by most critics to be authentic, profound, and seminal, a positive celebration of African American life, earlier critics considered her work to be nonserious, "folksy," outdated caricature" (Plant 1997: 65).

Among the recent important contributions to the Hurstonian scholarship is Carla Kaplan's insightful collection of Hurston's correspondence, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (2002), which puts together letters written by Hurston from the 1920s until her death in 1960. In addition to the letters that span almost 40 years of Hurston's life, there is the Foreword by Robert E. Hemenway, with information about Hurston's background and her literary and personal relationships, introduction chapters to every decade, several pages of photographs, a chronology of her life, a glossary providing details about people, institutions and foundations linked to Hurston, a selected bibliography, and, finally, the letters arranged in chronological order with useful notes that clarify any doubts that the reader might have. The letters show her excitement and her despair, but specially the strength of her personality.

Valerie Boyd's biography, *Wrapped in Rainbows. The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003) is a detailed and interesting account of Hurston's life. Valerie Boyd intertwines her text with that of Hurston's: citations from her works, published or not, and from her letters are visible throughout Boyd's biography.

The renewed interest in and subsequent canonization of Hurston has been, as much as anything else, an aesthetic and political choice that corresponded with specific social movements--e.g., feminism and the quest for ancestors to speak to the emergent African American feminist and/or womanist discourse. From the nineties and until now, there has been an increased interest in the work of Zora Neale Hurston on the part of scholars and critics, which is reflected in the vast number of books and articles written about Hurston's work.

Controversies always surrounded Hurston's work. In the Preface to *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. reflects on the fact that "Hurston is the most widely taught black woman writer in the canon of American literature" and concludes that "while a significant portion of her readership is sustained by her image as a questioning, independent, thoughtfully sensual woman," it is "her command of a narrative voice that imitates the storytelling structures of the black vernacular tradition" that plays the most important role in captivating readers (Gates and Appiah xii). This is confirmed by *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men*, but mainly by the popularity of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's masterpiece, that incorporates the black vernacular into the tradition of the American novel.

Zora Neale Hurston fulfilled Ralph Ellison's statement in his well known essay written in 1953, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity":

Negro Writers and those of the other minorities have their own task of contributing to the total image of the American by depicting the experience of their own groups. Certainly theirs is the task of defining Negro humanity, as this can no more be accomplished by others than freedom, which must be won again and again each day, can be conferred upon another. A people must define itself, and minorities have the responsibility of having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still forming American people. (Ellison 1995 [1953]: 43)

Hurston's writings confirm another statement by Ralph Ellison written in 1963 in the essay now entitled "The World and the Jug," in which Ellison reacts to an essay by Irving Howe entitled "Black Boy and Native Sons." Ellison's initial reaction led Howe to reply and also to a second reaction from Ellison, from which the passage that follows is quoted. Refusing Howe's notion that "'Negroness' [is] a metaphysical condition [...] a state of irremediable agony which all but engulfs the mind" (Ellison 1995 [1953]: 130-1), Ralph Ellison gives his view of "Negroness" that is also different from that "of the exponents of *negritude*," pointing out that

It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstance and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of the larger American culture. Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation

and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in justification of that betrayal. [...] It has to do with a special perspective on the national ideals and the national conduct, and with a tragicomic attitude towards the universe (Ellison 1995 [1953]: 131).

Hurston's view of life was, to put it mildly, tragicomic – “I am not tragically colored.” She had claimed – “I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood” (HFCM 827). Speaking of slavery and its effects upon her life, she admits that, although she is constantly reminded that she is the grand-daughter of slaves, she considers it a tragedy of the past. And if slavery “is the price [she] paid for civilization”, she has every intention to move on and not “keep look[ing] behind and weep” (HFCM 827). Hurston has “no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored.” Discrimination astonishes her – “*How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company?*”¹ It is the self-awareness revealed by this string of assertions that provides the key to a better understanding of the woman and the writer.

¹ Author's italics.

Conclusion

I can say that I have had friends. Friendship is a mysterious and ocean-bottom thing. [...] You will find that trying to go through life without friendship, is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee. It is a whole lot of trouble, and then not worth much after you get it.

Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale went about and didn't care too much how she looked. Or what she said. Maybe people didn't think so much of that. But Zora Neale, every time she went about, had something to offer. She didn't come to you empty.¹

C. E. Bolen

From the mid 1920s until the end of the fifties, Zora Neale Hurston was the most prolific and accomplished black woman writer in America. During that period she published seven books, many short stories, magazine articles, and plays, she gained a reputation as an outstanding folklorist and novelist. She called attention to herself because she insisted in leading her own quest in asserting her own identity at a time when blacks were being urged to assimilate to white standards in order to be accepted by white society. Hurston, however, saw nothing wrong with being black: "I do not belong to that sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal." Indeed she felt there was something so special about her blackness that others could benefit just by being around her. Her works, then, may be seen as manifestos of selfhood, as affirmations of blackness and of the positive aspects of black life. Hurston's pride in being black is evident in all her works. She was aware that African culture had influenced African American culture and continued to do so. This knowledge, along with a childhood spent in the all-black town of Eatonville, contributed to the shaping of her artistic vision.

¹ Words by C.E. Bolen at Hurston's funeral (Hemenway 1977: 348).

Hurston was the only trained folklorist of the Harlem literary movement to undertake the task of gathering, recording and studying African American folklore and projecting it into her literature. She worked in multiple fields – fiction, folklore, journalism, music, dance, drama – yet, when she died in January 1960 in the Saint Lucie County Welfare Home in Fort Pierce, Florida, where she had lived for a few months, she was out of money, her books were out of print and she, herself, out of personal communication with her usual friends and acquaintances. For the last twelve years or so of her life, she secluded herself voluntarily in Florida, away from New York and all the “literary circles.” After her death, she was buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce.

Her posthumous reputation is quite different than the one Hurston had during her lifetime. Since the 1970s, when Hurston was “rediscovered” by Alice Walker, all her major works have been republished, her works have been included in various anthologies and are part of college reading lists. She is the subject of conferences¹, doctoral dissertations, critical works and documentaries.²

Her personal correspondence shows the emotional intensity that she put into important moments of her personal life and career. In the letters composed to white people, she writes what she believes they want to hear, being flattering and sometimes even submissive. In a contradictory and flamboyant style, she signed letters as “your devoted Pickaniny” and played the “perfect darky” – she was not impersonating the minstrel figure, but rather “acting” a part to achieve her goal. Her letters and her work show her intensely imaginative responses to the specific social, cultural and literary pressures she experienced as a black woman writer during her life time. But Hurston was also outspoken and controversial, especially on racial issues. Fiercely proud of black folk traditions and culture, she wrote about “the Negro farthest down,” a passion irksome to the 1920s Harlem literati striving to prove intellectual parity with whites. She glossed over inequities between the races and later even opposed the landmark 1954 desegregation decision. As black writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin heralded a new era of black fiction, Hurston’s aesthetic voice would be lost in the clamor.

The reasons for Hurston’s “true” use of dialect and folklore are linked to the fact that she grew up in the first incorporated all-black town of Eatonville,

¹ The Zora Neale Hurston Society organizes an annual conference at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD, since 1983.

² “Zora is my Name,” is a teleplay (1990) by Ann Wallace and American Playhouse based on the play “Zora is my Name”, starring Ruby Dee (1983).

Florida, and, as a folklorist, was concerned with the authentic possibilities of black voice. Her folklore works are filled with color, folklore, “hearsay,” personal accounts and unanswered questions. And even if Hurston wrote for the benefit of white people, it was a literature that reflected the genuine experiences of Negroes through the creative use of dialect with its rich and expressive language. *Mules and Men* makes innovative use of African American storytelling strategies, demonstrating how the presence of the ethnographer shapes what gets told and the meaning of what is told. The result of Hurston’s research in the Caribbean, published as *Tell My Horse* is finally being recognized. *Tell My Horse* and *Mules and Men* remain an invaluable resource for students and researchers of African American folklore.

The sheer accumulation of scholarship in the last quarter of century and the recent publication of some of her unpublished works like *Mule Bone. A Comedy of Negro Life* (1991) co-authored with Langston Hughes, *Go Gator and Muddy the Water. Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers’ Project* (1999), *Every Tongue Got to Confess. Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States* (2001) and her recently recovered play manuscripts in *From Luababa to Polk County. Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress* (2005) are important writings that can be used to further unveil Hurston’s authentic identity and are valuable contributions to African America culture.

Forty years after her death Hurston’s works are part of the canon of Women’s Writings, of African American Studies, and of American Literature. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is read all over the world and has been translated into various languages, as were some of her books during her lifetime.¹ Her role as foundational ancestor to generations of black women writers like Toni Morrison and Alica Walker, and even to black male writers has been acknowledged.²

Instead of lamenting the fate of Negroes and criticizing discrimination directly, Hurston celebrated the cultural expressions that were, according to her, characteristic of the Negro, such as imagination, creativity, memory, rhythm, song and joy of life. Hurston fought off poverty and financial insecurity all her life and ended in relative obscurity in her “native” Florida. Less than two decades after her death, however, her work witnessed a revival that is still in

¹ For example, translated into Spanish with the title *Sus Ojos Miraban a Dios* (1995), but also into French and German. A text based on Hurston’s autobiography was translated into Spanish with the titled *Zora Hurston Y El Arbol Sonador* (2001) by Esther Sarfatti for children aged 4–8.

² David Haynes acknowledges that he was influenced by Hurston in the writing of his novel *Somebody Else’s Mama* (1995).

process. Her legacy is her writing and the important role she played in paving the way for future generations of African American writers.

Zora Neale Hurston's indebtedness to the Southern culture comes to the foreground in all her works. Her fiction celebrates the Negro folk in the natural setting – how they lived and loved, how they felt and acted. She ignores economic and racial exploitation, not because she felt that it did not exist, but because Black people in the South of the United States had other priorities and were not constantly worrying about such forms of exploitation. The protest in Hurston's fiction was difficult to detect for readers of the 1930s and 1940s, used to more direct and less subtle "protest" literature like that of Richard Wright. Her folklore and her fictional writings recorded the treasures of African American oral culture showing her remarkable command of language and her uses of literary dialect. In such features, we, readers of contemporary literature, find the source of our permanent involvement with the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston. Her legacy, acknowledged by the fellow writers, is a testimonial of the enduring power of imagination in a life devoted to the transmission of African American culture and to the preservation of what in that culture is valuable for any human being.

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Appendixes

Appendix I

Zora Neale Hurston – A Chronology

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1891 January 7 | Born in Notasulga, Alabama, the fifth of eight children, to John Hurston, a carpenter, sharecropper, and Baptist preacher, and Lucy Potts Hurston, a former school-teacher. |
| 1892 (?) | Hurston family moves to Eatonville, Florida. |
| 1901 January 7 | Zora usually claimed this as her birth date. |
| 1902 (?) | Impresses two white ladies who visit her grade school, and they give her first books. |
| 1904 | Her mother, Lucy Potts, dies. |
| 1905 | Father remarries. Hurston leaves home – goes to Jacksonville, Florida. |
| 1910 January 7 | Claimed this was her birth date on her second marriage license. |
| 1916 | Works for Gilbert and Sullivan troupe as a maid. |
| 1917 September | At 26, begins high school at Morgan Academy (a junior division of Morgan State University) in Baltimore. |
| 1918 June | Graduates from Morgan Academy. |
| 1918 June-August | Works as a waitress in a nightclub and a manicurist in a Black-owned barbershop that serves only whites. Enrolls at Howard University |
| 1918-1919 | Attends Howard Prep School. |
| 1919-1924 | Attends Howard University and meets Alain Locke. Earns less than two years of credits. |
| 1920 | Receives an associate degree from Howard. |
| 1921 | Publishes her first story, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” in <i>Stylus</i> , The Campus Literary Club of Howard University. |
| 1924 December | Publishes “Drenched in Light,” a short story, in <i>Opportunity</i> . |

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| 1925 January | <p>“Under the Bridge” and “The Ten Commandments of Charm” published in the 1925 issue of <i>X-Ray</i>, a yearbook published by the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority.</p> <p>Arrives in New York, jobless, just as the Harlem Renaissance begins to crest.</p> <p>Publishes “The Hue and the Cry about Howard University” in the <i>Messenger</i>.</p> |
| May | <p>Wins <i>Opportunity</i> contest with “Spunk” and her play <i>Color Struck</i>; Judges include Fannie Hurst and Eugene O’Neill. Publishes “Spunk” in the June 1925, <i>Opportunity</i>. Her play <i>Spears</i> won an honourable mention.</p> |
| July | <p>“Meet the Mamma: A Musical Play in Three Acts” registered for copyright.</p> <p>Writes “Magnolia Flower”</p> |
| | <p>Begins working for Hurst as a “secretary”.</p> <p>“Spears”, a play and “Black Death,” a story, were also submitted to the <i>Opportunity</i> contest and won honourable mention.</p> |
| 1925-1927 | <p>Receives scholarship from Annie Nathan Meyer and attends Barnard College, studying anthropology.</p> |
| 1926 | <p>Studies with Franz Boas, father of anthropology, at Columbia University.</p> <p>“Spears” published in the 1926 issue of <i>X-Ray</i>.</p> <p>Publishes “The Eatonville Anthology” in <i>The Messenger</i>.</p> |
| January | <p>Publishes “John Redding Goes to Sea” in <i>Opportunity</i>.</p> |
| July | <p>Organizes <i>Fire!!</i> with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman.</p> |
| August | <p>Publishes “Muttsy” in <i>Opportunity</i>.</p> |
| September | <p>Publishes “Possum or Pig” in the <i>Forum</i>.</p> |
| November | <p>Publishes only issue of <i>Fire!!</i> featuring her story “Sweat.”</p> |
| 1927 | <p>Publishes <i>The First One</i>, a play, in Charles S. Johnson’s <i>Ebony and Topaz</i>.</p> |
| February | <p>Goes to Florida on her first collecting trip to collect folklores sponsored by Carter G. Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.</p> |
| May 17 | <p>Marries Herbert Sheen, her Howard boyfriend, in St. Augustine, Florida.</p> |
| October | <p>Publishes story of black settlement in St. Augustine and the story “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver” in the <i>Journal of Negro History</i>.</p> |

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| September | Discusses patronage with Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason |
| December | Signs contract with Mrs. Osgood Mason, returns to the South to collect folklore. |
| 1928 January | Separates from Sheen, briefly reunites with him, files for divorce. |
| March | Moves to Polk County, Florida. |
| May | Publishes "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" in the <i>World Tomorrow</i> . Receives her Bachelor of Arts from Barnard. Goes to New Orleans to collect hoodoo folklore. |
| 1929 | Starts revising the folklore manuscript in Florida. |
| 1930-1932 | Organizes the field notes that become <i>Mules and Men</i> . |
| 1930 May-June | Works on the play <i>Mule Bone</i> with Langston Hughes. |
| October | "De Turkey and de Law: A Comedy in Three Acts" (Hurstons' version of the Mule Bone story" registered for copyright. "Cold Keener, a Revue" registered for copyright. |
| 1931 | Publishes "Hoodoo in America" in the <i>Journal of American Folklore</i> . "Sermon in the Valley", a monologic play is produced by the Gilpin Players. Production repeated in 1934 and 1949. |
| | Four comical sketches "Forty Yards", "Lawing and Jawing", "Poker" and "Woofing" registered for copyright. |
| January | <i>The Mule-Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts</i> by Hurston and Langston Hughes registered for copyright. |
| February | Breaks with Langston Hughes over the authorship of <i>Mule Bone</i> . |
| July 7 | Divorces Herbert Sheen. |
| September | Writes for a theatrical revue called <i>Fast and Furious</i> . |
| 1932 January | Writes and stages a theatrical revue called <i>The Great Day</i> , first performed on January 10 on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre; works with the creative literature department of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, to produce a concert program of Negro music. |
| 1933 | Writes "The Fiery Chariot," a one act play. |
| January | Stages <i>From Sun to Sun</i> (a version of <i>Great Day</i>) with the title <i>All De Live Long Day</i> at Rollins College. |
| August | Publishes "The Gilded Six-Bits" in <i>Story</i> . |

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| 1934 | Publishes six essays in Nancy Cunard's anthology, <i>Negro. An Anthology</i> : "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals", "Conversations and Visions", "Shouting", "The Sermon", "Mother Catherine", "Uncle Monday" and "Characteristics of Negro Expression" |
| January | Goes to Bethune-Cookman College to establish a school of dramatic arts "based on pure Negro expression." |
| May | Publishes <i>Jonah's Gourd Vine</i> , originally titled <i>Big Nigger</i> . It is a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. |
| September | Publishes "The Fire and the Cloud" in <i>Challenge</i> magazine. |
| November | <i>Singing Steel</i> (a version of <i>Great Day</i>) performed in Chicago. |
| 1935 January | Makes an abortive attempt to study for a Ph.D in anthropology at Columbia University on a fellowship from the Rosenwald Foundation. She seldom attends classes. |
| 1935 | Goes South with Alan Lomax and Mary Barnicle on a Library of Congress folk-music recording expedition. |
| June | "Spunk", a three act play, registered for copyright. |
| August | Joins the WPA Federal Theatre Project in Harlem as a "dramatic coach." |
| October | <i>Mules and Men</i> is published. |
| 1936 March | Travels in Jamaica and Haiti. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study West Indian Obeah Voodoo practices. |
| April-Sept | Researches in Jamaica. |
| 1936 Sept– March 1937 | Researches in Haiti; writes <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> in seven weeks. |
| 1937 May | Returns to Haiti on a renewed Guggenheim Fellowship. |
| September | Returns to the United States. |
| September 18 | <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> is published. |
| 1938 Feb-March | Writes <i>Tell My Horse</i> . |
| April | Joins the WPA Federal Writers Project in Florida collecting folklore. Starts fieldwork with anthropologist Jane Belo. |
| October | <i>Tell My Horse</i> is published. |

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|------------------------|---|
| 1939 | Publishes "Now Take Noses" in <i>Cordially Yours</i> . |
| June | Receives an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Morgan State College. |
| June 27 | Marries Albert Price III in Florida. |
| Summer | Hired as a drama instructor by North Carolina College for Negroes at Durham; meets Paul Green, professor of drama, at the University of North Carolina. |
| November | <i>Moses, Man of the Mountain</i> is published. |
| 1940 February | Files for divorce from Price, though the two are reconciled briefly. |
| Summer | Works with Jane Belo on a research project in Beaufort, South Carolina. |
| 1941 April – July | Writes <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> . |
| July | Publishes "Cock Robin, Beale Street" in the <i>Southern Literary Messenger</i> . |
| Oct 1941 – Jan 1942 | Works as a story consultant at Paramount Pictures, Los Angeles. |
| 1942 July | Moves to St. Augustine. Collects folklore. Publishes "Story in Harlem Slang" in the <i>American Mercury</i> . |
| September | Publishes a profile of Lawrence Silas in the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i> . |
| 1943 November | <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> is published. Purchases the <i>Wanago</i> , a twenty-year-old, thirty-two-foot houseboat and lives in Daytona Beach. |
| February | Awarded the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Race Relations for <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> ; appears on the cover of the <i>Saturday Review</i> . |
| March | Receives Howard University's Distinguished Alumni Award. |
| May | Publishes "The 'Pet Negro' Syndrome" in the <i>American Mercury</i> . |
| November | Divorce from Price granted. |
| 1944– 1945 | Spends time living on her houseboat on Florida rivers. |

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| 1944 January | Collaborates with Dorothy Waring on the musical comedy script, <i>Polk County</i> . Publishes “The Last Slave Ship” in <i>The American Mercury</i> . Marries James Howell Pitts of Cleveland. |
| June | Publishes “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience” in the <i>Negro Digest</i> . |
| October | Divorces James Howell Pitts. |
| December | <i>Polk County: A comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with authentic Negro Music in Three Acts</i> registered for copyright. |
| 1945 | Writes <i>Mrs. Doctor</i> ; Lippincott rejects it. Buys the houseboat <i>Sun Tan</i> in Daytona Beach. Experiences health problems. |
| March | Publishes “The Rise of the Begging Joints” in the <i>American Mercury</i> . |
| December | Publishes “Crazy for This Democracy” in the <i>Negro Digest</i> . |
| 1946 | Research trip on a shrimping boat. Returns to New York, works for Republican congressional candidate. Candidate loses. |
| Dec 1946 – Mar 1947 | Lives cold and alone in an apartment on 124th Street. |
| 1947 | Publishes a review of Robert Tallant’s <i>Voodoo in New Orleans</i> in the <i>Journal of American Folklore</i> . |
| May 1947 | Goes to British Honduras to research black communities in Central America; writes <i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i> ; stays in Honduras until March 1948. |
| 1948 September | Returns to New York. Falsely accused of molesting a ten-year-old boy and arrested. |
| October | <i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i> published. |
| 1949 | Embarrassed by headlines about court case, becomes depressed and suicidal. |
| March | Molestation case against her is dismissed as groundless. Travels to the Bahamas. |
| 1950 March | Publishes “Conscience of the Court” in the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i> , while working as a maid in Rivo Island, Florida. |

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| April | Publishes "What White Publishers Won't Print" in the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i> . |
| 1950 | Works as a maid in Miami. |
| November | Publishes "I Saw Negro Votes Peddled" in the <i>American Legion</i> magazine. |
| 1951 January | Moves to Belle Glade, Florida. |
| June | Publishes "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" in the <i>American Legion</i> magazine. |
| December 8 | "A Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft" (the 2nd republican she campaigned for) is published in the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i> . |
| 1952 | Hired by the <i>Pittsburgh Courier</i> to cover the Ruby McCollum case. Experiences health problems. |
| 1954 | Takes a public stand against desegregation – writes opposing Brown vs Board of Education Supreme Court decision on segregation. |
| 1955 | Her book <i>Herod the Great</i> is rejected. |
| 1956 May | Receives an award for "education and human relations" at Bethune-Cookman College. |
| June | Works as a librarian at Patrick Air Force Base in Cocoa Beach, Florida. |
| 1957 | Moves to a small cabin in Fort Pierce, where she grows her own food and publishes articles in the local newspapers. |
| 1957-59 | Writes a column on "Hoodoo and Black Magic" for the <i>Fort Pierce Chronicle</i> . |
| 1958 | Works as a substitute teacher at Lincoln Park Academy, a black school near Fort Pierce. |
| 1959 Early | Suffers a debilitating stroke. Applies for welfare. |
| October | Forced to enter the St. Lucie County Welfare Home. |
| 1960 January 28 | Dies in the St. Lucie County Welfare Home of "hypertensive heart disease"; buried in an unmarked grave in the segregated Garden of Heavenly Rest, Fort Pierce. |
| 1973 August | Alice Walker discovers and marks Hurston's grave. |

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| 1975 March | Alice Walker publishes “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” in <i>Ms.</i> , launching a Hurston revival. |
| 1977 | Robert E. Hemenway publishes <i>Zora Neale Hurston. A Literary Biography</i> . |
| 1993 | Fort Pierce builds the Zora Neale Hurston Branch Library. |
| 1996 | Hurston becomes the fourth African-American and the fifth woman to be published in the distinguished <i>Library of America</i> series. |

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Appendix II

A Checklist of Writings by Zora Neale Hurston

Abbreviations used

HUAL Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Alain Locke Papers

JWJYale James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

HCUFia Hurston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Florida Library

CSJFisk. Charles S. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Library

LCAFS Library of Congress, Archive of Folk Song

LCZNHPLibrary of Congress, The Zora Neale Hurston Plays

FHSP Florida Historical Society Papers, University of South Florida Library

Books¹

Jonah's Gourd Vine. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1934. Reprinted, with an introduction by Larry Neal, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1971. Manuscript in Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library.

Mules and Men. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935. Reprinted, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. Reprinted with an introduction by Darwin Turner, New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Their Eyes Were Watching God. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937. Reprinted, Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1965. Reprinted, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. Reprinted, Urbana: University of Illinois

¹ Arranged in a chronological order.

Press, 1978. Manuscript in JWJYale.

Tell My Horse. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1938. Manuscript in JWJYale.

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Lost Novels

Mrs. Doctor
 The Golden Bench of God
 The Lives of Barney Turk
 The Life of Herod the Great

