“MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY”:
ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S HIDDEN DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE FOURTH DAY OF APRIL 2016

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

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OF

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BY

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ABSTRACT

“‘Making a Way Out of No Way’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Hidden Discourse of Resistance” explores how Hurston used techniques she derived from the trickster tradition of African American folk culture in her narratives in order to resist and undermine the racism of the dominant discourse found in popular literature published during her lifetime. Critics have condemned her perceived willingness to use racist stereotypes in her work in order to pander to a white reading audience. This project asserts that Hurston did, indeed, don a “mask of minstrelsy” to play into her reading public’s often racist expectations in order to succeed as an academic and as a creative writer. At the same time, however, she crafted her narratives in a way that destabilized those expectations through use of sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant points of resistance. In this way, she was able to participate in a system that was rigged against her, as a woman and as an African American, by playing into the expectations of her audiences for economic and professional advantages while simultaneously undermining aspects of those expectations through rhetorical “winks,” exaggeration, sarcasm, and other forms of humor that enabled her to stay true to her personal values.

While other scholars have examined Hurston’s discourse of resistance, this project takes a different approach by placing Hurston’s material in relation to the publishing climate at the time. Chapter One examines *Mules and Men* in the context of the revisions Hurston made to her scholarly work to transform her collection of folktales.
into a cohesive book marketed to a popular reading audience. Chapter Two focuses on Hurston’s often-maligned anthropological travel book, *Tell My Horse*, as it forms a counter-narrative to the sensational and surreal travelogue by William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*. Chapter Three analyzes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* alongside DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy* to demonstrate how Hurston resists the dominant narrative of black womanhood by creating a strong and self-affirming female role model.
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INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the publication of Zora Neale Hurston’s most well-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright penned a scathing review in which he accused Hurston of “voluntarily continu[ing] in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” (Wright 25). He denies any complexity in Hurston’s work, claiming that the “sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (25).

Wright criticized Hurston’s writing because the material she did choose to include—themes of a woman searching to find her own voice and sexual identity, and a storyline set in rural, Southern, mostly all-black communities—did not deal directly in the bitterness of racial oppression that Wright himself made a central theme of much of his work, a bitterness that Hurston found distasteful, calling the stories of *Uncle Tom’s Children* “so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live” (“Stories” 32). Wright saw no message in Hurston’s work because she did not replicate the anger that dwelled in his own work, and she appeared to him to favor laughter over rage. He also found fault with Hurston’s choice to focus on the “quaint” aspects of
African-American culture, an implicit reference both to the Southern folk culture she spent her life living in, studying, and writing about and to her focus on a woman’s quest for self-fulfillment. To call this folk culture “quaint” suggests that such traditions and practices were old-fashioned, and definitively not of the modern world of the “New Negro.” Furthermore, his dismissal of her central theme as “quaint” because it involved a woman’s quest underscores the attitude that women’s concerns were “domestic issues” and inappropriate material for serious literature.

Wright was not the only of Hurston’s black male contemporaries to find fault in her writing for her perceived focus on the “quaint” aspects of life. Alain Locke expressed a similar view in his 1938 review of Their Eyes in the Urban League’s journal, Opportunity, in which he called Hurston’s focus on folklore a condescending oversimplification of African American culture (Boyd 307). Several years earlier, Sterling Brown had critiqued Mules and Men for being “socially unconscious” and portraying Southern blacks as “easy-going and carefree” when they should have been “more bitter” to be “nearer the total truth” (qtd. in Hemenway 219). Taken together, these critiques of Hurston’s material show the common disregard that many of her (largely male) contemporaries had for her voice and her vision.

Hurston’s willingness to use what many of her contemporaries saw as racist stereotypes of African American culture formed the basis of much of the criticism leveled against her during her career. Wright’s accusations set the tone for decades of Hurston criticism, which have focused on the role of white patronage in her work and her reputation as a lively and humorous guest at many Harlem social functions—a character trait that helped her make a name for herself early in her career and at the height of the
Harlem Renaissance. As Susan Meisenhelder notes, both Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes memorialized this aspect of Hurston’s personality in their memoirs of the Harlem milieu. Thurman depicted Hurston in his satirical novel *Infants of the Spring* as Sweetie Mae Carr, a woman who is popular with white audiences and patrons because she “lives up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be” (qtd. Meisenhelder 1).

Likewise, Hughes wrote of her in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, as being paid by whites “just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them…. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect ‘darkie,’ in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naïve, childlike, sweetly humorous, and highly colored Negro” (185). These depictions helped to solidify Hurston’s legacy as a carefree entertainer who easily performed blackness for an enthusiastic but naïve white audience. The result, as Meisenhelder argues, has been the persistence of the belief that Hurston was “a flamboyant rather than a meticulous writer, a scribe of cultural conditions rather than a social critic” (2). Serious consideration of her work as carefully crafted social critique has been a relatively recent phenomenon in Hurston studies.¹

The thrust of these criticisms is threefold. Firstly, they fault Hurston’s concentration on folk culture and, specifically, the tradition of humor she employed both in her lively storytelling sessions as well as in her writing. Secondly, they dismiss her emphasis on issues central to a woman’s perspective as “quaint” and peripheral to the

¹ Hurston’s work had fallen out of favor during her lifetime, leaving her to die in relative obscurity while working as a maid. She was buried in an unmarked grave as a welfare recipient of the state of Florida, and countless private papers were lost or destroyed when her home was cleaned out. Very little scholarship on Hurston existed before Alice Walker “discovered” *Mules and Men* while researching for an article in 1970 (Walker xi). While Walker’s “discovery” of Hurston encouraged a new respect for Hurston’s talent and her focus on African American folklore and folk culture, a level of discomfort still exists in reconciling Hurston’s work with the method of financing that made it possible. Many, like Wright, hold that Hurston’s participation in primitivist discourse and the lack of bitterness in her depictions of Southern African American folk culture constitute her participation in the minstrel tradition by parodying the culture for the amusement of her white audience and for her own financial gain.
topics these critics believed worthy of literary examination. Lastly, they lambast her for catering to a white audience. These three elements are indeed central to Hurston’s writing: her persistent attention to and respect for the traditions of black folk culture; her unapologetic focus on women as central characters in her texts; and her controversial and at times troubling concern for appealing to a white audience, either for financial gain or personal reward. Rather than cater to the political demands of the “race leaders” of the New Negro movement, Hurston espoused her own—sometimes unfavorable—political ideas based on her own perspective, experiences, and sometimes self-serving interests.

In doing so, Hurston repeatedly employed techniques of the trickster figure of black folk tradition in both her personal interactions and her narratives to advance her own self-interests as well as her own political agenda for “racial uplift.” This trickster tradition enabled Hurston to “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick,” to use a folk saying that she was fond of repeating. In other words, she was able to participate in a system that was rigged against her, as a woman and as an African American, by playing into expectations of her audiences for economic and professional advantages while simultaneously undermining aspects of those expectations through rhetorical “winks,” exaggeration, sarcasm, and other forms of humor that enabled her to stay true to her personal values.

Furthermore, Hurston firmly established herself within an African-American modernist tradition that, as Houston Baker defines it, blended “class and mass” by combining “[formal] poetic mastery” with “deformative folk sound” (93). In brief, Baker drew his conception of formal mastery (or the “mastery of form” as he phrases it) from the ability of black thinkers, performers, and writers to speak through the mask of
minstrelsy—not to participate blindly in the minstrel tradition as Wright had accused Hurston of doing, but to use the minstrel mask as a “mnemonic ritual object that constituted the form that any Afro-American who desired to be articulate—to speak at all—had to master” (22). Such minstrel tropes enabled these black thinkers and artists to receive recognition and reward from white “gatekeepers” and allowed a way forward, “leading to the growth and survival of the nation” (37). Booker T. Washington, to whom Baker points as having written the handbook that models this mastery of form (Up From Slavery), recognized the financial reward such linguistic performance could garner: “he struts minstrel stuff so grandly,” Baker argues, that Andrew Carnegie has “no choice but to lay twenty thousand [dollars] on him” to pay for the library at Tuskegee (41, 32-33). Thus, such mastery of form was necessary for black thinkers and artists to gain a foothold towards “racial uplift.” Hurston’s participation in the “mastery of form” was what led Wright to accuse her of participating in the minstrel tradition. She employed sounds and scenes in her writing that donned a “mask of minstrelsy” to fulfill certain expectations that rural black folk “sound” and “act” in certain ways to fit a mold of “authenticity.” However, her utilization of this mask is also what enabled her to get her work published and to earn money from patrons and fellowships to continue her creative endeavors, issues which I will examine in greater detail below.

The “deformative folk sounds,” on the other hand, come from what Baker calls the “sound and space of an African ancestral past” (56). The “dynamics of deformation,” he explains, dictate that those who have an “indigenous” claim to the material “comprehend [it] more fully than any intruder” (i.e. someone without an “indigenous” claim to it) (51). We see this in Hurston’s writing through her possessive claims of
ownership over the folk material that she collected and employed in her writing. She not only saw the usage of this folk material by white artists and writers as “grabbing our stuff and ruining it” (“To Langston Hughes,” 20 Sept. 1928), but also accused fellow African American writers, such as one-time friend Langston Hughes, of wrongfully claiming ownership of “her” material.\(^2\) The deformative displays we see in Hurston’s writing show the possessiveness she felt over her folkloric material, even as she utilized formal mastery to help herself advance professionally and financially.

Hurston’s mastery of form, her donning of the “mask of minstrelsy” in her writing, enabled her to succeed as an academic and as a widely-published creative writer. Additionally, she mastered the poetics of the black folk tradition she championed, employing linguistic techniques that created a cross-current of resistance against the minstrel mask she simultaneously employed. In order to succeed commercially, Hurston had to know how to satisfy the “chauvinistic tastes” of her white audience, including those who controlled the publishing market as well as patrons, like Charlotte Osgood Mason, who financially supported her research and writing at various points in her career. Despite Hurston’s awareness of this segment of her reading audience, her work was not single-mindedly focused on “cutting capers” to make them laugh, as Wright had claimed. Rather, she crafted her narratives in a way that played into her reading public’s expectations while also destabilizing those expectations through sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant points of resistance—a technique that continues not the tradition of minstrelsy, but rather derives from the African American folk tradition of the trickster.

\(^2\) Hurston’s friendship with Hughes famously exploded over competing ownership rights of *Mule Bone*, a play they had planned and worked on together for several years. I will discuss this contentious episode in more detail in the Conclusion.
In her article “High John the Conquer,” Hurston describes the trickster figure of African American folktales as the inspirational model who “helped the slaves endure [conditions] when and where the work was hardest, and the lot the most cruel” (922). The stories gave faith and hope, and most importantly for Hurston, laughter in the face of dehumanizing misery. In her study of the subversive resistance in Hurston’s work, Susan Meisenhelder observes that Hurston “rarely addressed race in ways that might offend white readers; instead, she adopted a more subversive strategy, often donning the mask of ‘the colorful darky’ to gain entry into mainstream publishing circles while submerging treatment of controversial themes” (4). Importantly, in Meisenhelder’s reading, Hurston did not leave out dealing with controversial themes of racial injustice, but rather submerged it, primarily through her use of humor.

By submerging resistance beneath humor, Hurston was, in essence, highlighting what she saw as the true spirit of the African American folk tradition. She emphasized the creative manipulation of language in her articles on folk traditions (including “High John de Conquer” and “Characteristics of Negro Expression”), describing it as “the will to adorn”—a dressing up of language that “satisfies the soul of its creator” (“Characteristics” 24). John Lowe, in his study of humor in Hurston’s work, has suggested that Hurston’s use of “unconventional and unexpected verbal combinations” answers Ezra Pound’s modernist directive to “Make It New” by “combining the resources of Afro-American folklore with her own fictional agenda” (288-289). Humor was central to Hurston’s literary vision because it made the language “new” by placing “traditional” African American folk language at the vanguard of modernity. Use of language in this way encapsulated the irony that folk traditions, believed by the general public to be dying
out in the face of modernization, were actually in a constant state of newness. Or, as Hurston herself puts it in reference to songwriting: “I find there is a new birth of creative singing among Negroes. The old songs are not sung so much. New ones are flooding everywhere” (“To Franz Boas,” 20 Oct. 1929, 150).

Moreover, Wright’s accusation that Hurston used humor solely to cater to the amusement of a white audience ignores the powerful role of humor and the trickster figure more generally in African American folk culture. In the collection of folklore that Hurston compiled while traveling through the South, about half of her material is made up of jokes and tales that use exaggeration, irony, metaphor, and misdirection as sources of humor. Often it is through use of humor that the trickster slave is able to take advantage of his master in order to avoid punishment, gain reward, cause trouble for his master, or cause a combination of any or all these effects. An example of this use of humor can be seen in one of the folktales Hurston included in her essay “High John de Conquer.” In this story, Old Massa has a suspicion that his slave John is stealing and eating his pigs. Not satisfied to simply observe John in the act of slaughtering a pig, Old Massa hopes to entrap John by catching him in the act of eating it. With the smell of roasted pig filling the air around his cabin, John is able to avoid punishment from Old Massa through his linguistic prowess. John insists that the meat in his pot is “a little old weasly possum.” When Old Massa demands a taste, John serves him with the disclaimer that “I put this thing in here a possum, but if it comes out a pig, it ain’t no fault of mine.” The audacity and implied innocence of the claim is such that Old Massa can barely contain his laughter. Instead of whipping John, he rewards him and the entire community of house servants by throwing them a pig roast (“High John” 926-27). Through his
linguistic magic trick of suggesting that possum may become pig, John avoids punishment, gains reward for himself and his entire community, and causes trouble for Old Massa through depletion of his pig stock. However, part of the humor lies in the unlikeliness of this scenario every playing out in real life. The storyteller, using her own linguistic prowess, is in a way able to rewrite history with a narrative that gives the cunning slave access to some element of control over his life—control that slaves rarely had, but that was within reach for the “New Negro” generation of Hurston and her peers.

This type of a trickster tale invokes a hidden narrative of resistance by celebrating John’s use of self-parody and his invocation of minstrel tropes to avoid punishment and gain reward. John plays dumb regarding the contents of his pot, parodying the stereotype of African Americans as ignorant. He also plays on the stereotype that African Americans are prone to belief in magic, as his disclaimer implies a belief in the possibility that a possum could be magically transformed into a pig by forces beyond his control. By making himself look a fool in the eyes of Old Massa, he in turn makes Old Massa look the fool to an outside observer aware of this tradition of trickery. To such an observer, the underlying lesson of the tale is that a subordinate can invoke minstrel tropes and humor to gain advantage from the ruling class when direct confrontation would meet with physical harm or even death. Simultaneously, an audience tuned in only to the minstrel tradition may point to the same story as evidence of what they believed to be the innate ignorance and childlike innocence of the black slaves, and use it to defend a system of paternalism and oppression. This example demonstrates how a single story can don the “minstrel mask” to cater to the expectations of an audience who believed such minstrel
tropes to be a sign of authenticity while concurrently resisting those expectations by shifting the control from the hands of the master to those of the slave.

While Hurston could and did write with a distinct awareness of the expectations of a white audience, she was also capable of catering to the expectations of a black audience, and did so on numerous occasions. Michael North, in his analysis of Hurston’s narrative technique, demonstrates Hurston’s “sublime indifference to white opinion as a way of redeeming black folk culture from its popularized and vulgarized white versions,” as evidenced by her portrayal of the cakewalk in her play “Color Struck” (177).

Traditionally, the cakewalk was an act of pageantry by black slaves imitating their white masters in a performance for those white masters. Minstrel shows often employed a cakewalk scene in which white actors masked black to imitate black slaves imitating their white masters. Hurston collapsed this kaleidoscope of racial masquerade by eliminating the white gaze altogether from her cakewalk scene. In “Color Struck,” black characters perform the cakewalk for a black audience, in a play penned by a black author and submitted to a writing contest hosted by a major black organization.³

Despite this rejection of the white gaze in “Color Struck,” Hurston was, in most of her writing, acutely aware of the power and control a white audience had in American culture. She was eager to gain its attention for economic advantage and perhaps, too, for a personal sense of satisfaction in being perceived as the expert and the living embodiment of black folk culture. Hurston had spent a significant portion of her career earning financial rewards and career advancement opportunities from white institutions and individuals. Most notable was her relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy

³ Hurston submitted “Color Struck” to the 1925 literature contest hosted by Opportunity, the magazine sponsored and run by the Urban League for the advancement of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century.
white New Yorker who hired Hurston to travel south to collect black folklore and document religious and spiritual practices on Mason’s behalf. The legal ownership rights that Mason asserted over the material kept Hurston obligated to her for years, as Hurston crafted her writing to meet Mason’s approval and withheld publication of her material as Mason saw fit. In return, Hurston had several years of financial stability thanks to Mason’s monthly stipend disbursements. While this was arguably the most impactful patron relationship Hurston had, it was not her first. In grade school, she was rewarded for her skillful and charismatic reading of a story from Greek mythology by two visiting missionaries, white women who gifted her with donations of numerous books and clothes (*Dust Tracks* 47-53). And among the number of influential people Hurston met at the 1925 *Opportunity* Awards was Annie Nathan Meyer, a well-connected white woman who rewarded Hurston’s talents (perhaps spurned on by a series of flattering letters) with admission into Barnard College.

Beyond the financial advantages she gained from these relationships, all evidence suggests Hurston enjoyed the attention and special privileges she received from them as well. These relationships all followed the pattern of the childhood experiences that she wrote about in her essay “How It Feels to be Colored Me.” This essay describes how white visitors who passed through her town would give “generously of their small silver” to hear young Zora “‘speak pieces’ and sing” and watch her “dance the parse-me-la” (826-27). Rather than feel constrained or offended by the demands of these early “patrons,” Hurston declared that it “seemed strange” to be paid for her performances since, “I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop” (827). Because of the financial realities that confronted her daily, Hurston not only accepted but conceivably
enjoyed the idea that the majority of her funding would have to come from wealthy white patrons and foundations, and that the manuscripts she sold would be published by white-owned and run publishers. After all, as this story shows, Hurston thrived in the role of being perceived as an expert interpreter and performer of her culture. Doing this as her primary source of income as an adult hardly seems to have been a stretch for her.

These relationships with white patrons seem to have been more rewarding than those with her black neighbors, who, she notes in “How It Feels,” “gave me no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county, everybody’s Zora” (827). This vignette from her childhood is telling, as it shows the financial reward and personal recognition she eagerly received from white passersby and the disapproval her performances met with among members of the black community, a community who begrudgingly accepted young Zora as one of its own in spite of her penchant for performing in front of an eager, white audience. Notably, Hurston had difficulty maintaining stable financial relations with black institutions throughout her life. Her position at Bethune-Cookman College in 1934 was short-lived and gave her little freedom to actually direct the drama department she was hired to run (Boyd 252). She fared little better at North Carolina College for Negroes when she joined the staff in 1939. She complained to the president that she was assigned only one class and demanded an extensive overhaul of available courses specializing in drama. The president, however, was put off by Hurston’s unconventional lifestyle and her ready willingness to bend and break the college’s strict morality rules. Her tenure lasted only six months (Boyd 340-341). As these two incidents show, lack of funds at black-owned and run institutions was only part of Hurston’s problem in
maintaining relations with them. Ultimately, she was unwilling to bend to the strict moral codes that many of these institutions enforced—codes that were in place to essentially contradict the stereotypes (reinforced by the minstrel tradition) that African Americans were morally reprobate by nature. Hurston—a modern woman of great passion who was married and divorced three times and had at least one lover out of wedlock—was not one to have her life constrained by institutional codes of morality.

Placing Hurston’s work within the context of the motivating forces in her life helps to reveal how talented she was at developing her texts with a keen awareness of audience and the commercial landscape into which she was entering with publication. As is evidenced by her letters and in her published work, she was adept at saying what she believed people wanted to hear. However, as seen in her John and Old Massa story discussed above, Hurston was also adept at infusing her words with multiple meanings. Even while saying what her benefactors wanted to hear, Hurston seems to have often spoken with a wink and a laugh just below the surface. Many letters she composed to Mason are filled with hyperbolic praise designed to stroke what one can only assume was a highly inflated ego. One letter begins: “Darling Godmother,⁴ the sun is shining beautiful and golden and my heart rises to do honor to it and to the God and Guardmother in the Twelth [sic] Heaven” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 9 Mar. 1931). Another letter, composed within days of the first, opens with similar sentiments: “Darling Godmother, the Guard-mother who sits in the Twelth [sic] Heaven and shapes the destinies of the primitives. This is another day and therefore another thought of you. There is no sun to warm me, so I must stand at my window and look towards the east to

⁴ Mason insisted that her beneficiaries call her “Godmother.”
warm my heart” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 10 Mar. 1931, 212). Notably, Hurston composed these letters during the time she was fighting with Hughes, also a recipient of Mason’s funding, and she was in negotiations to publish her manuscript for *Mules and Men*, material that Mason legally owned. Hurston must have felt it imperative to stay in Mason’s good graces at this juncture, and therefore no amount of flattery was too great.

Occasionally, too, Hurston let slip some brutal honesty, and was known for talking behind the backs of the patrons and mentors whose financial and professional support she depended on. In these moments of spitefulness or at times when word got back to these patrons and mentors about something she had said or tried to do covertly, she was effusive in her “non-apologies,” often claiming she was trying to do what she thought was best or that the offended audience simply misinterpreted her words. For example, Hurston had offended Mason when she published “How It Feels” without the patron’s consent and when she criticized white anthropologists as being untrustworthy in “collect[ing] the lore of others” (“To Alain Locke,” 14 June 1928, 121). To mend her relationship with Mason, Hurston appealed to Alain Locke, one of Mason’s closest advisors, to intercede on her behalf. Although she claimed to have explained everything on both accounts to Mason herself, Hurston covered her bases, so to speak, by writing to Locke, whom she knew would speak to Mason again. In this letter, she calls Locke her “ally” and proceeds to clarify the misunderstandings. “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” she explains, was published because she was trying to pay off a debt and “I had no money” (“To Alain Locke,” 14 June 1928, 120). She explained that Mason was offended by her comment on collecting lore because “somehow she felt that I included her in that

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5 At the time, Hurston was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and Mason was living almost directly across Central Park on the Upper East Side.
category” of untrustworthy white people, and “I was so sure we understood each other that I didn’t say present company excepted. I am too sorry but can’t see how I could have avoided it” (“To Alain Locke,” 14 June 1928, 121). By claiming she couldn’t have avoided the offense, she is offering a non-apology to Mason through Locke, believing that he, as her ally, would speak on her behalf to help mend her relationship with Mason. Conceivably, however, Hurston was happy to publish her article and meant it when she said white collectors could not be trusted, based on the criticisms she leveled at white folklorists. Her only apology, then, was for Mason’s discovery that she had breached their contract and her subsequent fear that Mason would use this offense as grounds to withdraw her funding.

While her relationships with individuals waxed and waned throughout her life depending on how useful those relationships were to her at any given time, Hurston was indisputably dedicated to Southern black folk culture throughout her career. She grew up as a participant in the culture, having spent her formative years in Eatonville, Florida, a “pure Negro town” whose “heart and spring” was the front porch of Joe Clark’s store, where townsfolk gathered to gossip, joke, and tell stories (Dust Tracks 3, 61). When she traveled north to pursue an education in anthropology at Barnard College, she focused her studies not on the Native American cultures in which her mentors specialized, but on African American folk culture—a field which she, along with Melville Herskovits, pioneered. Her studies and fieldwork helped her expand and deepen the material she wove into her creative writing, enriching the characters and communities that formed the heart of her stories.

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6 See Chapter 1 for a more detailed examination of these criticisms.
Her body of work focused specifically on the linguistic creativity and humor that she saw as key elements within African American folk culture. Much of her early work was centered around the folklore she collected as part of her anthropological fieldwork, in which she included not only folktale stories and trickster tales, but also jokes, games, songs, and linguistic competitions such as “the dozens.” Her fictional works incorporated this material into the fabric of the communities and the characters she created. Her stories often involved conflicts between the sexes, wherein strong women used linguistic prowess in lieu of physical strength to negotiate the unequal power relations they faced when confronting husbands, fathers, and lovers. Linguistic creativity also came into play in the detailed depictions she included in her work of the linguistic art of religious ceremonies, including Christian sermons and the invocations and chants of Vodou ceremonies and hoodoo rituals. Throughout her body of work, Hurston maintained an admiration and respect for the role of verbal humor, believing that humor and the ability to laugh in the face of misery were largely responsible for enabling African Americans to retain their humanity in spite of the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and Jim Crow era oppression.

The post-Reconstruction, pre-Civil Rights era in which Hurston and her contemporaries lived was a pivotal time in the history of American race relations. Because they felt representations of African Americans had a stronger political impact during this period, Wright and other writers lashed out at work they saw as presenting unfavorable depictions. Movement leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois argued that black writers should exhibit the humanity of African Americans in order to promote social uplift of the race. Both the NAACP, which Du Bois oversaw for a period of time, and the
Urban League published magazines to act as forums to further this agenda. Hurston, however, was among a cohort of writers who advocated for creative freedom in their writing rather than being obligated to write for an established political agenda. Together, this group founded *Fire!!*, a magazine described by collaborator Langston Hughes as being dedicated to “the idea…that it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past…and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing, the *Crisis, Opportunity*, and the *Messenger*—the first two being house organs of inter-racial organizations, and the latter being God knows what” (Hughes 183). Intending to rile audiences from complacency, contributors included two pieces condemned as sexually lewd in the first and only issue. As a result, Hughes reported, “none of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with *Fire!!*” (184). Du Bois “roasted it” in a review in the *Crisis*, and in general, Hughes concludes, “*Fire* had plenty of cold water thrown on it by the colored critics,” while “white critics…scarcely noticed it at all” (184). This lack of support from the African American intellectual establishment and the magazine’s lack of appeal to a wider white audience helped contribute to its quick downfall. Although the writers and artists collaborated seamlessly on the magazine’s production, it was financially unstable from the outset. Each founder had agreed to contribute $50 towards printing costs. However, only three could actually afford the sum, leaving Wallace Thurman, the head editor, $850 in debt to the printer. The $1 cover price was too hefty for their Harlem audience, and as sales floundered, hundreds of copies were destroyed in a literal fire in the basement of the apartment building where they were stored (Boyd 134-135). This

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7 Hurston was a founding member of this literary magazine along with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, Countee Cullen, John Davis, Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennet, and Lewis Alexander.
failed endeavor exemplifies the very real financial difficulties that black writers like Hurston faced when stepping outside the established forums for publication within the black community and not seeking financial support from the white community.

These establishment leaders as well as many notable writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston’s contemporaries, were well-educated and hailed from large Northern cities. As such, they rejected the idea that the rural Southerner was representative of the race, as evidenced by the criticisms Locke, Brown, and Wright leveled against Hurston. This distancing of urban Northerners from rural Southerners was due in part to the Great Migration, a movement of millions of African Americans from the rural plantation land where they, their parents, and/or their grandparents had lived and worked as slaves. They left to escape both the economic depression that fell particularly hard on the South in the years following Reconstruction and the harsh conditions of tenant farming imposed on black field hands who chose to stay and work the lands of the former plantations. Migrants traveled to cities seeking employment in industrial labor and hoping for a better life. To separate themselves from the rural folk life they left behind, many distanced themselves from the linguistic marker of Southern dialect and ceased participation in folk practices.

A large reason these new urban blacks were eager to shun Southern folk culture had to do with the way American popular culture depicted these traditions and mannerisms. Blackface minstrelsy had hit an all-time high of popularity around the turn of the century, and while this entertainment was on the decline by the 1920s, primitivist depictions of blacks on the vaudeville stage were still going strong. Many African American performers participated in these primitivist depictions in order to work onstage.
By contrast, white modernists latched onto this primitivist discourse as a way to reinvigorate the language and art of what they saw as a stagnant and dying European artistic tradition. The minstrel tradition depicted stereotyped imitations of black culture, with white and black actors wearing blackface makeup and depicting African Americans as stupid, slow, and lazy, preferring to eat and tell jokes instead of work. Women were mammy-type caregivers, or screeching harpies who henpecked their husbands. The Jim Dandies who traveled to the urban centers of the North were untrustworthy swindlers out to take advantage of their innocent, childlike rural cousins. Petrine Archer-Shaw, in her research on representations of black cultural expression by white artists, asserts that these stereotypes were less derivative of any actual perceptions of black culture than they were “merely [a cover] for white America’s inadequacies” and “a foil through which white America could act out and laugh at its own anxieties about living up to the high expectations that its ‘new-world’ democracy and civilization promised” (40). Thus, through the minstrel tradition, whites displaced all their insecurities and anxieties about modernity onto blacks, saddling them with the stereotypes that contained all the negative baggage of white American culture. Furthermore, such performances continually reestablished white supremacy by dehumanizing African Americans and ridiculing black cultural practices.

Similar appropriations of African American cultural forms were developing in literature. Avant-garde white European and American writers were answering Ezra Pound’s dictate to “Make It New” in response to the perceived cultural stagnation resulting from the death and destruction caused by the First World War on one hand, and the increasing mechanization ushered in by the Industrial Revolution on the other.
British, Irish, and Anglo-American modernist writers frequently appropriated cultural forms from so-called “primitive” cultures, particularly those with African roots. Use of black dialect was attractive as a “new” and different means of expression. Susan Gubar, exploring the legacy of the minstrel tradition in white-authored American literature, argues that “black language practices—as they had been encoded by earlier (often white-authored) texts—offered an irresistible strategy for revitalizing the stale conventions of traditional forms” (135). William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound were among the notable white modernists who experimented with the use of African American dialect or writing from the perspective of black characters. In fact, this experimentation with themes, characters, and language dealing with or mimicking African American cultural elements was central to what we now consider the modernist movement.

Just as minstrel stereotypes were more accurately depicting white American insecurities and fears than they were characterizations of any African American cultural forms, such primitivist discourse is also self-referential for the white writer. In their primitivist depictions of African Americans and plays at racial masquerading, white writers were, in essence, speaking over and speaking for African Americans in a way that asserted dominance and control over representations of black culture. Furthermore, white writers’ use of primitivist language enabled them to speak outside the scope of what literary tradition had deemed appropriate. As Toni Morrison has argued in *Playing in the Dark*, this veneer of blackness freed white performers and writers from the rules of social mores. Just as on the minstrel stage white performers in blackface “could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able
to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture” (66).

This engagement with the primitive was attractive to the modernists because it symbolized a vitality and innocence seen as lacking in the industrialized, post-war era. These cultures, not of European descent, were presumed by Social Darwinists to have “missed” evolution and thereby avoided the social decay brought on by industrialization. In the U.S., as Gubar points out, “the Negro…had become in the white mind a symbol of natural spontaneity, healthy exuberance, physical rhythms, the genuine or authentic” (135). Thus black culture—and specifically Southern rural folk culture, valued for its seclusion from the “contaminating” influence of white “civilization”—was embraced by white American modernists as the antidote to cultural decay. The “salvation” embodied in the appeal to primitivism was, of course, purely a construct of the white modernist imagination. As Morrison explains, “The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (17). In other words, this primitivist discourse said less about the cultures it depicted than it did about the desires and fears of the culture that employed it.

This primitivist discourse, although derived from white America’s self-absorbed view of American society and race relations, had very real implications for African American writers, just as the minstrel tradition did for African American performers. In order to gain employment in the popular vaudeville theater, black actors often participated in the minstrel tradition, with some, like Bert Williams, even performing in
blackface. The acceptance of these roles on the part of black actors “stemmed from a historical imperative whereby blacks learned to perform to white needs in order to survive in white societies” (Archer-Shaw 43). Such performance of white expectations could literally be a matter of life and death, even in the post-slavery era when blacks, especially those living in the rural South, faced the looming threat of lynching if they were perceived to be acting “out of line.” On stage, the performances could be demeaning, but also profitable.

Two of the best-known black vaudeville performers were Bert Williams and Josephine Baker, both of whom actively participated in the performance of these minstrel stereotypes on stage. Both, however, recognized these depictions as roles necessary to their success and often portrayed them in exaggerated ways that pointed towards self-parody. As Archer-Shaw asserts, “This parodying of themselves was one of the few forms of entertainment available to blacks in vaudeville and burlesque theatres” (42). In the case of Williams, self-parody meant literally blacking up his face to participate in blackface minstrelsy, while Baker often played either the primitive ingénue, scantily clad and dancing wildly, or the socialite whose thin veneer of civilization always cracks to reveal the savage lurking just below the surface. Their participation in these stereotypes was the reason for their success, however, and in order “to advance, they would have to remain minstrels … bring[ing] to life the stereotypes already promoted” in popular culture (49). Even as they gained fame and fortune, their roles rarely varied from the minstrel and the primitive.

However, even within their seeming confinement to these minstrel stereotypes, both Baker and Williams were remarkably subversive as well. The self-mockery
exhibited by Williams and Baker demonstrates how one can participate in the dominant discourse of American racism while subtly resisting and undermining it in ways that are not immediately apparent to those not looking for such resistance. James C. Scott defines this resistance as the hidden transcript of a subordinate group that critiques the power of the ruling class through indirect means. These hidden transcripts may be spoken or performed openly in front of the ruling class—in the form of “rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater” (xiii)—but are crafted in such a way that the speaker cannot be punished for insubordination. Thus, the resistance takes forms that either “disguise the message [or] disguise the messenger” (139). In the latter, the messenger may be shielded by the guise of anonymity, as in the telling of folktales, rumors, and gossip, where the speaker is only one link in a long chain of communication that has no clear origin. In the former, the message itself may be disguised by euphemism, insinuation, pauses, or gestures that signify only to those who already know their meaning.

On the stage, performers like Williams and Baker may have actively employed this second avenue. Williams, by insisting on performing in blackface, was symbolically donning a mask for his performance. The makeup signified his awareness of the role he played, and that this role was not a depiction of his authentic identity as an African American man. Baker, on the other hand, was known for her exaggerations of performance. Contorting her body to portray a knock-kneed, cross-eyed country bumpkin, Baker embodied not an actual figure of the rural South, but an exaggeration of the stereotypes about black Southerners. In other photos, she poses in her infamous banana skirt, with her buttocks protruding and her breasts exposed, exaggerating the raw
sexuality imposed on the naked savages assumed to be living in the jungles of Africa. Like Williams donning a mask of burnt cork, Baker disguises herself in exaggerated poses and revealing costumes in order to play the role expected of her for commercial success.

African American writers like Hurston found themselves in circumstances similar to those faced by Baker and Williams and had to choose whether or not to participate in the primitivist discourse that permeated American popular culture at this time. While for white writers, the use of dialect liberated them from the stifling demands of established literary conventions, the use of dialect was for black writers, according to scholar Michael North, “a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural repression that followed emancipation” (11). Furthermore, the dialect employed by white writers invoked all the stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy, which, Gubar explains, depicted blacks as “the ignorant, stumbling, bumbling fool [who spouted] ungrammatical malapropisms” (135). That black writers would be resistant to invoking such stereotypes through the use of dialect should come as no surprise. Rather, Gubar observes, many early twentieth-century African-American writers “exhibited a kind of hypercorrect conventionality” in their rhetoric in order to “offset a damaging view of black intellectual inferiority” (136, 135).

Hurston’s engagement with primitivist discourse, those elements that Wright saw as continuing the minstrel tradition, seems on the surface to run counter to this movement towards “hypercorrect conventionality.” However, Hurston’s modernist voice becomes more apparent when examining her writing through the lens of Houston Baker’s “mastery of form.” By employing the mask of minstrelsy, Hurston used language familiar to and
comfortable for a wider, and whiter, audience. Playing into these expectations enabled Hurston not only to have her work published but also to maintain financially beneficial relationships with patrons and funding organizations. Doing so also, perhaps counterintuitively, enabled Hurston to make a stronger claim of authenticity – that her work was more accurately representative of the folk culture she was writing about. As Baker explains, the very identity of what “blackness” meant at this time was intricately tied up with the tradition of minstrelsy: “To be a Negro, the mask mandates…one must meld with minstrelsy’s contours” (20). Thus, to flat out contradict the expectations created by the minstrel tradition and carried through into the primitivist discourse of modernism would have undermined Hurston’s claim that she had captured the authentic spirit of Southern black folk culture. To speak from behind a minstrel mask, however, does not equate to participating in the minstrel tradition. According to Baker, an effectively modern African American literary voice “give[s] the trick to white expectations, securing publication for creative work that carries a deep-rooted African sound” (49). In other words, the African American tradition of modernism combined use of the minstrel mask (“mastery of form”) with an “African sound” (“deformation of mastery”), in essence meeting the expectations of the white American reading audience while also honoring longstanding African and African American expressive traditions.

My project demonstrates how Hurston wove a hidden narrative of resistance into her major works in such a way that they can be read as engaging in primitivist discourse while simultaneously undermining the racism implied by such primitivism. While I am indebted to Susan Meisenhelder for her groundbreaking analysis of resistance in Hurston’s work, I will take a different approach by examining Hurston’s material in
relation to the publishing climate at the time. In chapter 1, I will examine *Mules and Men* in the context of the revisions Hurston made to her scholarly work to transform her collection of folktales into a cohesive book marketed to a popular reading audience. By examining her revisions in language and substance, I will show how profoundly aware she was of the expectations of her audience and how she manipulated her language to meet those expectations while simultaneously undermining them. The second half of my study will shift to placing Hurston’s work in the context of similar narratives by white writers who achieved commercial success by employing primitivist discourse. By juxtaposing Hurston’s work against these texts, I will highlight the tools of resistance Hurston employed that come to light when placed against such decidedly un-ironic uses of primitivism. Chapter 2 will focus on Hurston’s often-maligned or ignored anthropological travel book, *Tell My Horse*, as it forms a counter-narrative to the sensational and surreal travelogue by William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*. Both texts center on Haiti as the locus of the most exaggerated stereotypes of black identity, including overt sexuality, brutality, and mysticism. In chapter 3, I will analyze *Their Eyes Were Watching God* alongside DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy*, a text adapted by George Gershwin into his famous opera, *Porgy and Bess*. By doing so, I will challenge Wright’s accusation that Hurston’s novel is not addressed to a black audience by exposing the moments her hidden transcript is visible when set against *Porgy*, which was most definitely composed to satisfy the expectations of a white audience.

By situating Hurston’s texts within the political climate in which she lived and worked, we can better appreciate the skill with which she was able to employ the techniques of the trickster to allow for multiple and simultaneous interpretations of her
narratives. This legacy has led to an abundance of contradictions in interpreting her work. However this inability to pin her down or easily pigeonhole her work has kept an increasing number of admirers returning again and again to her stories.
Chapter 1
Visions and Revisions: The Shaping of *Mules and Men*

While Zora Neale Hurston was living in Polk County, Florida, collecting material that would form a significant portion of *Mules and Men*, her “Godmother” and patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, mailed her a copy of one of Howard Odum and Guy Johnson’s popular collections of Southern black folk songs, *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926). As Mason was sponsoring Hurston’s trip in order to collect material on her behalf, one can only assume that Hurston felt a certain amount of pressure to measure up to both the content and the acclaim of that book in the eyes of her patron. She admits, “I was almost afraid to read it, fearful lest they had beat us to it in the matter of songs” (“To Alain Locke,” 10 May 1928, 119). Hurston had already read Odum and Johnson’s earlier work, *The Negro and His Songs* (1925), which she found to be “inaccurate” and “misinformed” (“To Alain Locke,” 1 May 1928). Likewise, Hurston found the newer collection to also have many issues with accuracy. She criticized the authors for mistaking one song as “eight or ten [different] songs” and miscategorizing another as a “negro work song” when it “should have been under the head of adaptation” because of its roots as an English ballad (“To Alain Locke,” 10 May 1928, 119-20). Essentially, the fault Hurston found in their work is due to their unfamiliarity with what they were observing. This unfamiliarity not only led to inaccuracies in their transcriptions, but also ignored any variation in performance style including gestures, pauses, or inflections that could have
communicated a hidden discourse of resistance against the presence of these white collectors. The root of Hurston’s objections was deeper than the offense she took at these inaccuracies, however. Ultimately, Hurston objected to the sense of ownership these white collectors asserted over Southern black folk material that she felt she knew and understood better than anyone else in the field because she had grown up immersed in these songs and stories. This sense of possessiveness she felt over the material led her not only to condemn others’ appropriation of it, but also to assert time and again that she was the most qualified to collect, understand, and share this material.

Receiving such recognition as the rightful “owner” of this material was an uphill battle for Hurston. Odum and Johnson were considered leading authorities on the subject at the time, unfamiliar though they may have been with the material and its modes of transmission. Both were esteemed professors at the University of North Carolina who specialized in African American folk culture. Odum, in particular, was notably “concerned about racial problems in the South,” according to Lynn Moss Sanders, who has studied the use of folklore as an agent of social change. Odum, she argues, “believed folklore studies, by increasing understanding of a culture, could effect social change” (62). His research “emphasized objective studies of the Southern way of life” with the hopes that this material could be used “as a basis for improving social and living conditions in the South” (63). Such noble intentions, however, could not bridge the gap of understanding between what he saw and how he interpreted it.

While Odum may have been well-intentioned, he was in the company of many other white male collectors who had little to no training and questionable levels of respect for the African-American folk culture they mined for material. The most popular book of
African-American folklore at the time was still Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus* collections. However, many new collections were published in the 1920s, and most of them were written by amateur sociologists, including Ambrose E. Gonzales, a journalist and son of a plantation owner who compiled *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (1922); South Carolina physician E.C.L. Adams, who published both *Congaree Sketches* (1927) and *Nigger to Nigger* (1928); and Newbell Niles Puckett, the only trained sociologist of this group, who wrote the most comprehensive collection of hoodoo and conjure beliefs at the time, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926). Despite his professional training, however, Puckett employed less than professional collecting methods, as he “masqueraded as a hoodoo doctor” and, consequently perhaps, “tended to see the conjure man or root doctor as a cunning con man” and the folk remedies as “laugh[able]” (Hemenway 87, 92). And although his work contains “worthwhile information,” Carolyn Morrow Long contends, it is overall “flawed by the attitude of amused condescension that was typical of white southerners of his time” (xxiv). The combination of a lack in professional training with the implicit condescension that many whites had towards black culture marred the reliability of many folklore collections at the time.

Furthermore, the material of all white collectors, whether well-intentioned or not, was implicitly undermined by the seemingly insurmountable racial barrier which

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1 Harris’s first collection was published in 1880, but several variations were published over the next several decades, including *Uncle Remus Returns* (1918), which added new tales along with illustrations by popular artists A.B. Frost and J.M. Condé (Harris).
2 “Conjure” serves as an umbrella term for the supernatural beliefs of the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. “Hoodoo” refers specifically to the practice of using roots and herbs for medicinal or spiritual purposes, commonly practiced in the Southern United States.
3 See Patrick B. Mullen’s *The Man Who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore* (40-61) for a deeper discussion of Puckett’s biases and suspect collecting techniques.
inhibited open and honest communications between black informants and white collectors at the time. As Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway argues, “white collectors, no matter how earnest, liberal, kind, sympathetic, and well meaning, were always—by definition of race—outsiders looking in” (89). And while they seemed to have had a relatively open field for publication of black folk material, their collections were marred by “interpretations twisting the material beyond recognition” or “eccentric collecting techniques [that] led to artificial contexts for the lore” (87). Hurston saw Odum and Johnson’s work as inaccurate not only in the interpretations, but also in the very material they collected. And while she never spoke out directly against Puckett, her practice of collecting hoodoo material by becoming initiated into the practice, as I discuss in more detail below, implicitly critiques Puckett’s “eccentric technique” of masquerading as an already-initiated hoodoo doctor.

Such inaccuracies both in content and in interpretations of the material led Hurston to assert that “white people could not be trusted to collect the lore of others” (“To Alain Locke,” 14 June 1928, 121). She lamented to friend Langston Hughes how “these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it” (“To Langston Hughes,” 20 Sept. 1928). That she lays claim to the material as “our stuff” indicates the sense of ownership she felt over it, an ownership based on being one of the few black collectors at the time and the only one with Southern roots. Hurston’s sense of ownership over the material is based in that identity, and what she ultimately published from the folkloric

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4 Hemenway notes that some amateur collecting had been done by African Americans, including William Wells Brown and Charles Chesnutt, both fiction writers, and the Hampton Institute’s black folklore society, which conducted surveys on the customs of its students (86). Arthur Huff Fauset, the only other African American with anthropological training on par with Hurston’s in the 1920s, collected a number of animal tales that allowed him to critique and expose the implicit racism of Harris’s Uncle Remus tales. However, as a native-born New Jerseyan, Fauset “experienced problems penetrating to the roots of the southern folk experience” (90).
material she collected in *Mules and Men* is infused with this sense of ownership. In it, she combined folklore with a narrative that gives the storytelling context and crafted the narrative in such a way that she, too, is engaging in the African-American folk tradition of weaving a hidden narrative of resistance into what has long been considered merely a collection of folktales.

Before she arrived at the final structure used to shape *Mules and Men*, Hurston produced a series of texts that played with the same material in a variety of forms. Some were published in her lifetime—"The Eatonville Anthology" (1926), “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver” (1927), “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” (1930), and “Hoodoo in America” (1931)—while one whole collection of stories was published posthumously as *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (2001). These texts fall into three general categories: folktale transcriptions, academic studies, and creative writing. “The Eatonville Anthology” and *Every Tongue* are both composed of folktales and stories that stand alone with no narrative and no explanations or scholarly analysis. “Cudjo,” “Dance Songs,” and “Hoodoo in America” were each written for an academic audience—the former being published in Carter G. Woodson’s *Journal of Negro History* and the latter two in the *Journal of American Folklore*. *Mules and Men* stands on its own as Hurston’s creative endeavor to “present the material with all the life and color of my people,” but with “no loop-holes for the scientific crowd to rend and tear us” (“To Langston Hughes,” 30 Apr. 1929). By comparing the work she included in *Mules and Men* against these earlier published and unpublished versions, I will demonstrate how Hurston asserted her claim on the material by contextualizing folk stories, songs, and cultural practices but withholding explanations and interpretations at
key moments in her text in order to reinforce the idea that an outsider to this culture could never really know and understand the significance of these practices like she, an insider, could.

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Hurston’s “Eatonville Anthology” represents her earliest formalized attempt at melding the folklore of her lived experience with her artistic imagination. By the time it was published in 1926, Hurston had established a reputation for herself as an entertaining and dramatic storyteller at parties. She had already been courted for material by Charles Boni, one of the preeminent publishers of material from Harlem Renaissance writers, including Alain Locke’s popular anthology, *The New Negro*. She lamented at the time that she was unable to take advantage of the opportunity since she had “so little time what with making a living and everything” (“To Annie Nathan Meyer,” 22 Feb. 1926?). Only a few months after rejecting Boni’s offer, however, “The Eatonville Anthology” was published in Wallace Thurman’s journal, the *Messenger*. The collection was, no doubt, relatively easy for her to produce, as it contains many of the stories that Hurston was known to tell at parties, and in fact gives the reader, in Hemenway’s estimation, “the impression of sitting in a corner listening to anecdotes” (69).

The form that Hurston chose for the “Anthology” was one with no connecting narrative or theme. It is a collection of short tales wherein each can stand on its own. It also seems to have been the model for the form Hurston used for the collection of material published as *Every Tongue Got To Confess*, which, as I explain in greater detail below, is an example of what she sent to Boas during her initial drafting of the material that would later be revised into *Mules and Men*. Hemenway asserts that this form
represents “Hurston’s most effective attempt at representing the original tale-telling context” because it combines “[t]raditional tales…with contemporary anecdotes and imaginative fiction improvised for the moment” (70). However, as Cynthia Ward questions, “to what extent does a transcription written entirely in a decontextualized, univocal monologue and addressed to a silent, passive audience reproduce oral context?” (307). Ultimately, what Hurston produces in *Mules and Men* is a rejection of this style as representative of the “original tale-telling context” as evidenced by her decision to add a narrative voice, a move she considered to be putting the folktales “back into their natural juices” (in Kaplan 288). Rather than being representative of an “original” context, such disjuncture between tales more resembles the scholarly training that Hurston received at Barnard, wherein the anthropologist is expected to observe and record rather than narrate. However, it lacks the analysis that scholarly studies would have been expected to contain.

Hurston’s first published attempt at an article that contained such analysis was “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver,” a remarkable failure from an academic standpoint as it has since been exposed as containing an extensive amount of plagiarism. This article was a report that Hurston completed for Carter G. Woodson from the material she collected during her first anthropological expedition in 1927. Woodson, the director of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, had provided the funding for this trip after being petitioned by Hurston’s mentor, Franz Boas. While Boas had sent Hurston with specific instructions to focus on “the form of diction, movements, and so on” of those transmitting folktales (qtd. in Ward 308), Woodson was simultaneously requesting very specific, content-oriented material. He had requested at one point, for example, that Hurston consult “court records [to investigate] the transactions of
Jacksonville’s black-owned traction company in the early 1900s” (Hemenway 95). She had produced another report for him on “the black settlement established at Saint Augustine” which was “simply a transcription of records pertaining to the settlement…found in Florida archives” (95-96). In this context, it is less remarkable that “Cudjo” wound up containing so much plagiarized material. Hemenway exposed this plagiarism in his 1977 biography of Hurston, relying on the discovery by linguist William Stewart that nearly three-quarters of Hurston’s article consisted of “shameless plagiarism from a book entitled Historic Sketches of the Old South…by Emma Langdon Roche” (96-97). Hemenway explains Hurston’s plagiarism as “an unconscious attempt at academic suicide” with an underlying desire to be caught and thus released from the tedium of “capturing exactly the dialect in which the tale was told, the precise notations of the folksinger’s music, or the nuances of style in the tale-teller’s performance” (99).

This belief that Hurston maintained a stubborn resistance against her academic training has become an entrenched thread in Hurston studies, resurfacing in arguments that assert the underlying resistance found in her narrative form of Mules and Men symbolizes a rejection of Boas and his scientific dictate of maintaining objectivity and distance from the culture being observed. For example, D.A. Boxwell asserts that Hurston’s text demonstrates how she “successfully broke free of her mentor’s dictates that the ethnographer distance herself from her subjects” (615). And Lori Jirousek argues that Hurston “complicates the [Boasian] notion of objectivity” by creating “a hybrid text that is more than/other than ethnography” and “actually inserts subjectivity in the cause of greater accuracy” (418-419). Karen Jacobs interprets the “observed absence of

5 The Jacksonville Traction Company operated the largest municipal streetcar system in the state of Florida at the time (Mann).
interpretation and analysis in Hurston’s ethnographies” as evidence of the possibility that “Hurston was simply resistant to what amounted to the self-reflexive interpretive enterprise demanded by Boasian methods and actively preferred to let her subjects speak for themselves” (336). All three of these scholars assume Boas was the figurehead of oppression for Hurston, and that the threads of resistance found in her text were leveled against him. However, such interpretations of Hurston’s relationship with Boas as a contentious one ignore the fact that she never expressed any anger or negativity towards him in her personal letters. Furthermore, Hurston continued to work with and consult with him over the next several years, even begging him to write the preface for *Mules and Men* and attempting to pursue a PhD in anthropology under his direction, an enterprise that was thwarted by a lack of funding rather than a lack of interest.

A more credible explanation for her plagiarism comes from biographer Valerie Boyd, who suggests that it was Hurston’s “way of getting back at Woodson for arbitrarily slicing her pay and cutting into her research time by having her do his dreck work” (153). This assertion is substantiated by Hurston’s less-than-complimentary attitude towards Woodson and his tedious demands on her time. Upon discovering that Woodson shorted her money out of her final paycheck from the Association, Hurston fumed in a private letter, “I hate that improperly born wretch” (“To Langston Hughes,” spring/summer 1927). Hurston’s opinion of Woodson didn’t improve with time, as evidenced by her reaction when he invited her to speak at a meeting of the Association in 1929. She found

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6 Hurston was known for her candor in airing grievances against friends and associates. Most notable is the breakdown of her friendship with Langston Hughes when she believed he was attempting to subvert her claim on (or diminish her potential profit from) the play *Mule Bone*, on which they collaborated. I discuss this rift in their friendship in more detail in the Conclusion. For more on the public nature of this dispute, see Henry Louis Gates’s “A Tragedy of Negro Life” and the collected materials in Harper Perennial’s publication of *Mule Bone* (2008).
Woodson’s address to be “a pandering to the popular palate” by “[d]ishing up the old race superiority stuff and dragging emperors, queens, statesmen, wholesale into the colored race” (“To Ruth Benedict,” spring 1929?). She went on:

I was so shocked at Dr. Woodson’s 45-minute flapdoodle fling that I was ashamed to admit I was working for the Association…. I told him how I felt. I simply could not betray Dr. Boas by becoming a soap-box orator to flatter the bishops and elders out of coin. I told him Dr. Boas was the most scientific Anthro. on earth and I must stick to facts so he didn’t want me to say a thing after that. (“To Ruth Benedict,” spring 1929?)

The fact that she defended Boas and his teaching principles further goes to show that any resistance she evinced during her 1927 collecting trip was geared towards Woodson and not Boas. Whatever the motivation, the result is that her collecting trip conducted under Woodson’s strict directives produced uninspired and literally unoriginal work.

Hurston’s other two published articles, “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” and “Hoodoo in America,” and the material from Every Tongue were composed during the time that Hurston was under contract with Charlotte Mason. While “Dance Songs” was published with Mason’s permission (Boyd 204), Hurston indicated that the publication of “Hoodoo” was one of the reasons that Mason cut off her funding. As she explained in a letter to Ruth Benedict, editor of the journal in which “Hoodoo” was published, “Nothing from Mrs. Mason anymore because I gave the conjure material to the Folk-lore Society. I dont [sic] care” (“To Ruth Benedict,” 23 Feb. 1933). Relations with Mason seem to have already been on the decline by the time the article was published, so it is unclear if the publication really caused the rift that Hurston seems to imply.

While Mason was a generous patron of several artists of the New Negro movement, her contributions did not come without strings attached and the level of
control she asserted over her beneficiaries’ work often ruffled some feathers. Mason viewed her patronage as a spiritual mission, even insisting that her beneficiaries call her “Godmother,” and believed that “black people—if they’d only be their ‘savage’ selves—could save whites from the aridity of civilization” (Boyd 157-158). With this spiritual mission in mind, Mason, as Ralph Story argues in his study on the role of patronage in the Harlem Renaissance, “had specific ideas about black folk and black art” that she expected to be confirmed in the artists she financed (285). Noted scholar of modernism Arnold Rampersad has described Mason as “[v]olatile in personality, contemptuous of European rationalism and radically devoted to the idea of extrasensory communication, and a champion of the notion of the artistic and spiritual superiority of the darker races” (Foreword xx). In order to ensure artists lived up to her expectations, she “exercised considerable control over all her protégés and frequently interfered artistically” (Boyd 173). Mason’s editorial hand was both artistic and spiritual in nature and certainly not devoid of “the kind of racial arrogance she claimed to abhor in practically every other white person she met” (174). The ways in which she interfered varied, ranging from asserting editorial rights to giving or withholding permission for certain projects. For example, she was known to have required artist Aaron Douglas to “withdraw from major commissions that affronted [her] sense of what was proper for a black artist” (173). She asserted so much control over Langston Hughes that she would “ask [him] to answer only her letters, pressure him to change the title of his novel, [and] try to select a composer for one of his earliest plays” (Story 285).

Hurston actively played into Mason’s expectations by refusing to “mask the blackness” in her voice and eagerly performing dances, stories and songs for
“Godmother’s” amusement (Boyd 157, 193). Her letters to Mason were often overly effusive, addressing her as “Darling my God-Flower” and praising her for the “white light of God you would diffuse into soft radiance for the eyes of the primitives” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 18 May 1930). Hurston’s feelings towards her patron were notably complex, and it is unclear how much of her rhetoric was self-serving flattery and how much of it was sincerely meant. As Carla Kaplan, editor of Hurston’s letters, notes, “Hurston insisted that her love and devotion [for Mason]—despite whatever insults she suffered—were genuine” (Letters 49). Likewise, Mason’s attitude toward Hurston was not clear-cut. As Kaplan argues, “It is fair to say that Mason supported Hurston’s energy and recognized her brilliance. But it also must be pointed out that she curtailed Hurston’s ambitions” and kept her work from being published until the 1930s, after the height of public interest in black culture had passed and it was difficult to make financial profit from book sales in the midst of the Depression (49).

Mason’s relationship with Hurston was pointedly different than the relationships she had with other Harlem Renaissance artists. While Mason gave most of her beneficiaries a monthly allowance, for which they were required to submit a monthly expense report (Boyd 158), she had specific contractual guidelines for Hurston, whom she had hired as an employee rather than supported as an artist. The contract Hurston signed in order to receive Mason’s generous funding stipulated Mason’s proprietary rights over all the material Hurston collected and placed a gag order on Hurston’s ability to publish anything without Mason’s consent. The materials that Hurston sent to Mason while she was on the road were literally locked up and held in a safe deposit box (Hemenway 130). As per the detailed contract between them, Hurston was to act as “an
independent agent” of Mason, as Mason was unable to do the collecting herself “because of the pressure of other matters”; Hurston was “to return and lay before” her all material she had collected while under Mason’s employ (qtd. 109-10), allowing Mason “to preserve proprietary rights over the results of Hurston’s labor” (110). This stipulation gave Mason an incredible amount of sway over Hurston, as she threatened—sometimes explicitly, but always implicitly—to hold Hurston’s material hostage if the writer failed to accommodate her desires for the material.

Mason’s motivations for keeping such a tight lid on Hurston can only be guessed. As Hemenway asserts, the contract seems to show that Mason “was not about to subsidize Hurston’s independent development” and that “she felt arrogantly certain that Zora Neale Hurston could not be trusted to know best what to do with” the material she collected (109-10). Unlike others whose work Mason subsidized, “Hurston was not funded to concentrate on her own work; instead she was an employee—a hired hand” (emphasis in text, Boyd 159). The numerous restrictions that Mason placed on Hurston’s time and the way she insisted that Hurston focus her energy on compiling the collected material speak to Mason’s attitude that Hurston was an employee responsible for producing a report from an extended collecting trip, not crafting a creative work of art. Coincidentally, however, this designation seems to have financially benefitted Hurston in the long run, as she was kept on Mason’s payroll long after the patron gave up on black artists in the first years of the Depression, calling them all “a lost cause” (Boyd 203).

Because Mason maintained proprietary rights over all of the material that Hurston collected while under contract, she was able to use that leverage to influence both what Hurston collected as well as how she prepared the material for publication. For example,
Mason insists that “the dirty words must be toned down” (“To Langston Hughes,” 15 Oct. 1929) in the folktales. Alain Locke, who often acted as Mason’s spokesperson to Hurston, suggested she was “not definite enough about some of the religious cults of New Orleans” and urged her to return to New Orleans to accumulate more information about them (“To Langston Hughes,” 15 Oct. 1929). However, as influential as Mason could be, Hurston repeatedly demonstrated that she could play into Mason’s expectations while also pushing back on her overbearing control through a certain amount of subterfuge. While Locke was insisting, on Mason’s behalf, that Hurston return to New Orleans, Hurston decided instead to sail to Nassau without telling anyone of her departure and “without giving Godmother the opportunity to object” (Dust Tracks 192-93). When at the end of her first contract with Mason in 1929 Hurston made arrangements with Franz Boas to assist Dr. Otto Klineberg with a Columbia research project in New Orleans, Mason forbade the work. She insisted that Hurston focus all her attention on finalizing her work as per their contract and reminding her that “she, Godmother, still had legal control over all the collected material” (Boyd 189-90). Consequently, Hurston wrote her regrets to Klineberg, saying, “I find that I am restrained from leaving the employ of my present employers” (“To Otto Klineberg”). However, upon arriving back in New Orleans, she informed Boas, “If Dr. Klineberg will come on, I will give him all the assistance possible. Perhaps just as much as if I were entirely at liberty” (“To Franz Boas,” Oct. 1929). Hurston was able to subvert Mason’s demands thanks to her physical distance from New York, as well as her active willingness to lie and withhold information.
Another example of Hurston’s ability to subvert Mason’s control over her occurred when Hurston wrote to Mason that she was in need of a new car while traveling. Upon receiving the request, Mason “simply exploded,” accusing Hurston of being “extravagant” and taking her funding for granted (“To Langston Hughes,” winter 1929/30). Still driving her old car, Hurston was faced shortly thereafter with a costly repair and took it upon herself to negotiate for the purchase of a new one. While Mason did forward funds to pay for the car, she did so with sharp criticism of Hurston, asking, “Why couldn’t Negroes be trusted?” (“To Langston Hughes,” winter 1929/30). Hurston chafed under the insinuation that she was incapable of determining what was best for her situation. Having a trustworthy vehicle was of the utmost importance to her in the field, as she was dependent on it for transportation and safety. Traveling by train at this time was out of the question for her, as “the Jim Crow coaches were poorly lighted, poorly ventilated, and sometimes perilous for women traveling alone” (Boyd 143). Furthermore, the car could provide her safe sleeping quarters when segregated motel rooms could not be found and gave her easy, fast means of getting away in potentially violent encounters (145). Mason, a rich white woman safely enshrouded in her uptown Manhattan apartment, could not have imagined the hardships that Hurston faced traveling in the segregated South at a time when lynchings were hitting an all-time high. It is not surprising, then, that Hurston was frustrated by Mason’s meddling, declaring, “It destroys my self-respect and utterly demoralizes me for weeks” (“To Langston Hughes,” winter 1929/30). However, despite her scuffle with Mason over the car, she still wound up with the new and dependable one she needed.
Hurston further subverted Mason’s restrictions by withholding information from her and maintaining secret correspondences. She frequently forwarded “juicy bits” of material to Hughes for him to use creatively in his work (“To Langston Hughes,” 17 Mar. 1927). She justified this sharing of information by saying, “Godmother asked me not to publish and as I am making money I hope you can use them” (“To Langston Hughes,” 8 Mar. 1928, 114). Beyond sharing anecdotes and bits of dialect with Hughes, she also seems to have withheld some important information from Mason, such as meeting a woman who had remembered being brought from Africa in a slave ship. This woman was supposedly older than the more famous and often interviewed Cudjo Lewis, whom Hurston had met and written about previously. She told Hughes, “Found another one of the original Africans, older than Cudjoe [sic]…but no one will ever know about her but us” (“To Langston Hughes,” 10 July 1928). Why she chose to keep this meeting secret from Mason is unknown, but as Boyd suggests, it indicates “the precariousness of their relationship” (171) and Hurston’s growing awareness that she needed to protect herself and her material from Mason’s control in order to ensure she retained enough creative material to sustain her writing for years to come. Furthermore, Hurston sent chunks of material to Boas, requesting his scholarly advice on the content as well as the interpretations of the material she made. All of this she did with the caveat that he keep the correspondence completely confidential. She confided to him that despite the contractual mandate of silence, “It is unthinkable, of course, that I go past the collecting stage without consulting you, however I came by the money” (“To Franz Boas,” 27 Dec. 1928). She kept her correspondence with Boas secret from all of her friends and associates, not even writing to confidante Langston Hughes about it. Perhaps this
overabundance of caution was to ensure sustained collaboration with Boas without fear of Mason’s interference.

It was through this continued correspondence with Boas that the papers published as *Every Tongue* were found. The manuscript that was published was found among the papers of a friend and associate of Franz Boas. It is likely that this version came from Boas’s files, which were stored in a basement at Columbia where they were most likely mixed together with his associate’s papers by accident (Kaplan, Introduction xxviii-xxix). Hurston wrote to Boas in October 1929 that the volume of folk stories she had collected was “complete,” and that she was “as exact as possible” in writing them down as they were told to her, keeping “to the exact dialect as closely as I could, having the story teller to tell it to me word for word as I write it…. [T]he writing down from the lips is to insure the correct dialect and wording so that I shall not let myself creep in unconsciously” (“To Franz Boas,” 20 Oct. 1929, 150). Presumably, then, the version she sent to Boas, if this is the version we see published in *Every Tongue*, is shaped with the scientific accuracy she assumed her mentor expected of her.

Her attention to dialect can be seen in variances in spelling between the stories of different informants. Some stories are written with word endings shortened and colloquial pronunciations reproduced as closely as possible: “There uster be a woman dat went to de prayin’ groun’ every evenin’ jestez soonez she come from de fiel’” (*Every Tongue* 170). As Hurston herself described the distinct aspects of the dialect, the “possessive s is dropped. The auxillary [sic] verb to be is missing. The plural is lacking” (“To Franz Boas,” 20 Oct. 1929, 151). Other tales in *Every Tongue* are written in Standard English with conventional spelling: “Once there was an old woman who went off once on a train
with her little grandson and she didn’t have the fare for the little boy” (207). These differences in spelling and narrative styles support Hurston’s claim that she tried to stick as closely as possible to the informant’s voice and storytelling style.

Additionally, and aside from the shifts in dialect, most of the stories in Every Tongue have common elements that indicate an oral transmission, such as run-on sentences strung together with multiple conjunctions and subordinate clauses: “I seen [a horse] so poor until de man drove him up in town in front o’ de post office, an’ got ‘im letter and went round one side of de horse to read it in secret, looked roun’—twuz uh man on de other side de horse read’ de letter fast as he wuz” (126). This type of sentence structure is common in oral transmission, as the speaker strings the elements of the story together to create an impact. A sentence crafted for written transmission is less likely to have these run-on elements, and may also contain more complex constructions as the eye absorbs information differently than the ear.

These types of sentence constructions virtually disappear in her revision of the material into Mules and Men. As scholar Lori Ann Garner argues, this linguistic shift is evidence of Hurston’s awareness of the differences between effective written communication and oral communication. Although Hurston maintained the use of dialect in her writing in order to “convey the complexity of African-American dialects of English, she also employs certain devices that are not entirely believable as oral communication and which only work in the context of written literature” (221). Rather than scientifically transcribe oral speech patterns, Hurston made use of dialect in Mules and Men as “an artistic construction of speech,” thus constituting “a form of performance in itself” (222). By examining how Hurston performs language in Mules and Men as
compared to the language used in *Every Tongue* and “Hoodoo in America,” we can better understand the impact such changes make on our understanding of the material.

For example, one of the stories that Hurston includes early on in *Mules and Men* is within a collection of preacher tales inspired by a group gathering within earshot of the church. In one tale, a preacher is faced with a congregation of ruffians in a “split-off” church, one in which the “members had done split off from a big church because they was all mean and couldn’t git along wid nobody” (22). The congregation refuses to say “Amen” or to kneel down when called to do so. Out of desperation, the preacher brings in a guest preacher, one with “a good strainin’ voice” and a reputation for gaining converts. After two weeks of preaching, this guest preacher, frustrated by the reticent congregation, has the sexton lock the doors of the church and pulls a gun on the congregation demanding that they bow down. They do so, even the sexton whose wooden leg makes it difficult for him to kneel. For extra effect, the preacher “fired a couple shots over they heads and stepped out de window” behind him. The congregation sets off running within the building and “carried dat church buildin’ twenty-eight miles befo’ they thought to turn it loose” (23).

Hurston retained the core of the story from the version printed in *Every Tongue*, as told by Joe Wiley, one of her more prolific informants from Magazine Point, Alabama. However, there are some notable and significant differences. First and foremost, there is a difference in the dialect in which the story is written. As can be noted from the excerpts above, ends of words are dropped (“strainin’” and “buildin’”) and the “th” sound is occasionally replaced by the shortened “d” (“dat” instead of “that” and “de” instead of “the”). However, the narration of Joe Wiley’s version, as in many of Wiley’s stories
contained in Every Tongue, is copied down in more standard English (“I attended a
meeting” and use of “the” instead of “de”). Compare, for example, the differences in the
following descriptions of the church building. In Joe Wiley’s description, “the church had
only one door and one window, and the window was in the pulpit behind the preacher” (42). Hurston changed the dialect in Mules and Men to reflect a more stereotypical
Southern African American vernacular pronunciation: “It was a narrer church wid one
winder and dat was in de pulpit and de door was in de front end” (23). Because Hurston
claimed to have kept the dialect as close to the original as possible in the tales she sends
to Boas, it’s telling that she chose to change the dialect for the version published in Mules
and Men. She may have been trying to preserve the typical dialect of the region, even if
this particular informant did not have such a strong accent. However, she may have also
been playing into the expectations of her publisher or reading audience that the dialect be
“authentic” even if that authenticity merely replicated the stereotypes of the speech
patterns rather than the actual variances between regions and individuals in spoken
dialect.

Further changes Hurston made to the story indicate her awareness of conventions
of successful written tales versus those transmitted orally. She shifted the placement of
descriptive details in the written story, as meaning is made differently between oral
stories, which exist temporally, and written ones, which exist spatially. Wiley’s oral
version incorporates description through direct juxtaposition, such as when he places the
detail about the sexton’s leg being wooden after a piece of unrelated dialogue in which
the preacher asks the sexton to lock the door and bring him the key: “So he did, the
sexton being peg-legged” (42). In written form, this detail suggests causality—the sexton
locked the doors because he was peg-legged. In her retelling, Hurston crafted the story so that it flows better in a written form, giving it a narrative arc with important details woven in early to give dramatic resonance later in the story. The detail about the sexton having a wooden leg is included towards the beginning in Hurston’s version, appearing alongside the above quoted physical description of the church: “It was a narrer church…. Dey had a mean ole sexton wid a wooden leg” (23). There is more or less a straight line of narration through Hurston’s version of the tale, one which builds to the dramatic crescendo. Whereas Wiley’s version creates a mood, Hurston’s crafts symbolism. In her version, the sexton becomes a symbolic element as a fixture of the church building and perhaps even a living extension of it.

The dramatic conclusion of the preacher pulling a gun on his congregation brings further differences between the two versions of the tale. Wiley foregrounds the sexton’s reaction to being forced to kneel with an invocation to his wife: “If my wife is in this church, tell her to come to me please; if she ain’t got time to come, tell her to send me them keys” (43). His prayer is one of seeking escape. In her retelling, Hurston had already set up a correlation between the sexton and the physical building through the description detailed above. She reiterates this connection when the preacher demands that the congregation kneel. She eliminated the sexton’s prayer for his wife’s help, and focused instead on his bending his unbendable knee: “Therefo’ dat sexton bent dat wooden leg and bowed down” (23). This detail reinforces the correlation between the sexton and the church (both the physical building and the congregation) as all seem to be unbendable, until the gun-wielding preacher is able to bend them.
The changes that Hurston made to the story make it more readable for an audience unused to the meaning-making qualities of angularity and juxtaposition as employed by the oral storytelling tradition of African American folk culture. She retained the “juices” of the story, translating its humor from an oral tale-telling atmosphere to a written one. In doing so, she did more than simply revise oral tales into a written format. By inserting her narrative voice and shaping the stories and material to fit into a written context, Hurston was both participating in the folk telling tradition and demonstrating how folklore was not a stagnant thing to be collected, but rather was a living, thriving tradition that adapted to the modern context.

Hurston had not always seen folklore as a living tradition. During her first collecting trip under the direction of Boas and Woodson in 1927, she stressed to Boas, “It is fortunate that [this material] is being collected now, for a great many people say, ‘I used to know some of that old stuff, but I done forgot it all.’ You see, the negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation, being kept pure. His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture” (“To Franz Boas,” 29 Mar. 1927). To Locke, she insisted, “We are just in the knick of time too, for I find its greatest era is about forty years in the past” (“To Alain Locke,” 15 Oct. 1928). In both these instances, she was expressing a concern common to anthropologists and folklorists at the time that modernity—and specifically exposure to what was seen as a stagnant European culture—would cause the subject culture to be lost or corrupted by the contact. Hurston captured the typical stance in her comparison above, in which Native American culture was seen as being more easily preserved because of the physical remove from European and white American influence by their placement on reservations.
However, Cynthia Ward has identified a key shift in Hurston’s perspective between this 1927 trip and the 1928 trip funded by Mason. During the earlier trip, Hurston’s attitude as shown in her letters to Boas and Locke indicate she retained a perspective of folklore as a material object; the meaning of which is to be found in the content of the narrative, which can only remain authentic or “pure” to the extent that it is free from outside influence—and which must be “collected” and preserved before it is lost. More than just a linguistic failure to adapt to the people she was studying, Hurston’s initial approach exhibited a bias from her adopted civilization that regarded art as an object and “primitive” culture as static. (307)

It was not until Hurston fully embraced Boas’s directive that she focus on the “manner of rendition” rather than the content that she came to the realization that folklore was not in danger of dying out but was constantly being remade (308). We can see her tone shift in her letters to Hughes, as she began to insist that the material she was collecting contained “very good modern stories” (“To Langston Hughes,” 8 Mar. 1928, 112-13) and that “Negro folk-lore is still in the making—a new kind is crowding out the old” (“To Langston Hughes,” 12 Apr. 1928, 116). She, herself, was participating in this modernization of folklore by incorporating folk elements, including mannerisms, figures and patterns of speech, and regional dialect in the narrative frame of *Mules and Men*, as well as restructuring the folklore within it to be suitable for a written rather than oral form. Thus, *Mules and Men* is not simply a collection of folklore but was a new and modern folkloric creation from Hurston’s own perspective and imagination.

Modern though it may have been, Hurston faced a challenge in getting her work published once Mason had given her permission to do so. By the time she was preparing her material for publication, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression, which eliminated many funding opportunities for black writers and signaled “the beginning of
the end for the ‘vogue’ in African American arts” (Kaplan, Letters 161). Publishers were only interested in Hurston’s folklore in a form that incorporated a narrative framework that contextualized the stories. In some of her earlier references to revising the material for publication, still under the guidance of Mason, she explained that Harry Block, a senior editor at Knopf, has advised her to “rewrite the conjure material into a geographical and chronological narrative, and put in the religious material according to place and time, instead of making it something apart…. He says that he can do nothing until I have done my narrative [and] that I had no book, but notes for a book” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 10 Mar. 1931). This emphasis on her collected materials being “notes” rather than a book echoed the commentary provided by Alain Locke, writing to Hurston on behalf of Mason: “[Godmother] thinks it would be a mistake even to have a scientific tone to the book, so soft pedal all notion of too specific documentation and let loose on the things that you are really best equipped to give—a vivid dramatizing of your material and the personalities back of it” (qtd. in Boyd 194-95).

Luckily for Hurston, this advice seemed to mesh with her penchant for storytelling. She had already established her reputation within the Harlem Renaissance crowd with the popularity of her short stories, not her academic pursuits. Block’s insistence that she insert a narrative and Locke’s claim that her value lay in her “vivid dramatization” were almost certainly drawn from her reputation as a creative writer. By insisting that Hurston insert a connecting narrative, one which dramatizes the material, they were essentially asking her to actively participate in a cycle of creation in which the old—that which other anthropologists of the dominant discourse feared was disappearing
thanks to the proximity of modern (white) culture—is made new for that modern audience.

These demands from Locke and Block that Hurston insert her narrative voice into her work also suggest that her voice was needed to translate and contextualize this material for a wider American audience, one unfamiliar with and in part resistant to acknowledging the genius and modernity of Southern black folk culture. Hurston in particular was in a special position to do this, as she had a foot in both the old and the new, as she was well-versed in the traditional folklore she heard growing up in the rural South and was equally well-versed in the academic language of the university she learned at Barnard and saturated in the modern zeitgeist of New York City. However, she was apologetic about the revisions to her scholarly mentors, explaining to Boas that her original manuscript was “too technical for the average reader” and that Lippincott, the company who eventually did publish her manuscript, “required [her] to do something more acceptable for public reading” (“To Franz Boas,” 23 Oct. 1934). To Ruth Benedict, she explained, “they want it done, not for scientists, but for the average reader. Hence the lack of documentation and the inter-story dialogue” (“To Ruth Benedict,” 1934?). It is questionable how sincere she was in these apologies to Boas and Benedict. Conceivably, she was merely trying to stay in their good graces as she was still, at this point, open to the possibility of pursuing her PhD and connections with Boas and Benedict would serve her well in that pursuit. And although she expressed a concern that the book retain “value as a reference book” (“To Franz Boas,” 20 Aug. 1934) that “leave[s] no loop-holes for the scientific crowd to rend and tear us,” her ultimate goal was to preserve “all the life and color of my people” (“To Langston Hughes,” 30 Apr. 1929), making narrative
revisions in a way that “put [the folktales] back into their natural juices” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 22 Jan. 1934).

Her belief that folklore was still in the making is underscored by her crafting of *Mules and Men* as a piece of modern folklore itself. The book, in its revised form, was to stand apart from attempts being made by white anthropologists to collect African American folklore. It “was meant to counter the inauthentic versions of folklore Hurston saw everywhere around her. Hurston wanted to present an authentic African American folklore, not something doctored to suit either dominant aesthetics or stereotyped notions of black culture” (Kaplan, *Letters* 52). Furthermore, her narrative voice infuses the text with this modern sense of folklore being still in the making. She not only replicated folklore material, but engaged with it and remade it in her own voice, thereby adding in the “natural juices” as they flowed through her. In doing so, she also engaged with the same feather-bed resistance that the storytellers employed to keep outsiders at a remove.

She explains this idea of “feather-bed resistance” in the opening pages to *Mules and Men*:

>T]he 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. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. (2-3)

By examining the revisions she made of her more scholarly productions, including the work published in *Every Tongue* as well as her article “Hoodoo in America,” for their publication in *Mules and Men*, we can see not only how she infused the material with her own voice but also how she laced it with her own “feather-bed resistance” to confuse, misinform, and misdirect her reading public even while maintaining a scholarly commitment to her source material.
Despite Hurston’s uncertainty in how Boas would react to this revised form, Boas agreed to write the preface for *Mules and Men*, and in it, praised Hurston’s ability “to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life” and thereby adding significantly to “our knowledge of the true inner life of the Negro” (xiii). However, Hurston herself seems to hint at various points in her text that her allegiances, so to speak, are more strongly tied to preserving the integrity of the community she was observing (and of which she was a member) rather than to satiating the curiosity of the (white) reading public. These hints are evident in her introduction, as she shifts her pronoun usage from the third person—“And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive”—to the first person—“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” (2). From the very opening of her book, Hurston is warning her audience that she is giving them something to satisfy their curiosity, but that they will never know how true that information might be.

She goes on to explain that the “theory behind our tactics” is to “set something outside the door of [the] mind” to satisfy the white man’s desire to “always…know into somebody else’s business” (3). Tellingly, she reiterates her point in terms of *writing*: “He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind” (3). Given that she was collecting stories that were being told orally, the fact that she cast this sentiment in terms of “writing” rather than “telling” suggests that this warning is self-referential. Hurston explicitly warns her readers that her writing is meant to satisfy their curiosity without betraying everything that is on her mind, or in other words, without telling all she knows,
either about the motivations of the people she encountered or the full meanings behind
the material she included. So while she may display the material in plain sight for her
readers, they may not understand the full meaning of it.

By withholding interpretation of the material she included, Hurston reinforced the
outsider status of her reader. She presented only the exterior display of words and actions
(“you can read my writing”) while hiding the interior motivations and deeper cultural
significations (“you sho’ can’t read my mind”), which has the effect of reinforcing her
own insider status (“I know something you don’t know”). For example, Hurston included
footnotes throughout *Mules and Men* to define certain words or phrases. However, she
frequently refrained from giving any in-depth analysis or explanatory etymology. When
she did give more than a simple definition, her explanations didn’t go further than a
surface-level clarification. At one point, a character tells another to go ahead with his
story, even though it’s already familiar to most of the audience: “go on an tell it, Lonnie,
so yo’ egg bag kin rest easy” (84). Hurston footnotes this expression with the following
explanation: “So you can be at ease. A hen is supposed to suffer when she has a fully
developed egg in her” (84 note 3). Hurston’s footnote translates the expression without
giving an explanation as to why a comparison with a hen would be appropriate in this
context.

Hurston reiterates this sentiment of reserving an insider knowledge against what
is explained to an outsider audience in her essay “High John de Conquer” (1943), in
which she explains: “It is no accident that High John de Conquer has evaded the ears of
white people. They were not supposed to know. You can’t know what folks won’t tell
you. If they, the white people, heard some scraps, they could not understand because they
had nothing to hear things like that with” (923). Scholar Catherine A. John’s interpretation of this passage, that the “heavily coded and symbolic…[s]trategies of survival and resistance are handed out in plain sight of the oppressor and taken for pleasantries” (176), can also be applied to Hurston’s structure in *Mules and Men*. As Susan Meisenhelder observes, Hurston “[makes] no controversial statements and, in fact, offer[s] little explicit analysis” in *Mules and Men*, thereby “play[ing] a role eminently acceptable to whites: lovable, entertaining, and intellectually mute” (16). However, even while engaging in these surface-level pleasantries, Hurston “adopted a strategy of masking social conflict and critical commentary with humor,” thus hiding her social critique in plain sight and enabling her to “convey her commentary without asking permission or offending her mentors” (16-17). If, however, Hurston was really trying to hide the social commentary in her work, why would she have so explicitly discussed these techniques of hidden discourse in “High John” and in her opening explanation in *Mules and Men*? By making these open declarations, Hurston had positioned herself as a reliable interpreter for her audience—one who, as Boas had assumed in his preface to *Mules and Men*, would rip through the feather-bed resistance on behalf of her readers. Arguably, however, Hurston gave just enough explanation to satisfy her readers’ curiosity and leave them believing, as Boas did, that she was fully disclosing the “true inner life” of herself and her subjects. As a result, *Mules and Men* is not merely a weaving together of fictional narrative and a scholarly collection of folklore. Rather, the entire collection of folklore is interpolated through Hurston’s voice and is thereby recast into a modern, literary form that invokes the same subversive discourse of the very folktales she includes.
Many of the folktales that Hurston includes in *Mules and Men* can be read as containing transcripts of resistance, especially those contained in the Polk County section. In examining the tales told by the workers at the lumber camp in Polk County, David G. Nicholls argues that Hurston uses this section to demonstrate how “workers use folklore as a form of resistance to the company’s considerable power over their lives” (472). On the day that Zora, Hurston’s persona in the book, joins the men of the lumber camp to record stories as they work, they experience a rare delay in the start to their work. The white foreman informs the logging crew that they won’t be going into the forest because of a scheduling conflict with the transportation. Instead of giving them the day off, the foreman sends the workers to the mill. On the way, the workers exchange tales on the meanness of bosses, demonstrating a “collective discourse of resentment for the straw-boss in this camp and…across the South” (Nicholls 473). In addition to these tales of meanness, the workers also tell tales that “encode lessons about how to resist mastery” through the use of linguistic performance and passive resistance such as “[d]eliberate literal-mindedness, lying, and foot-dragging” (474). The workers themselves employ the foot-dragging tactic as they make their way towards the mill, with Joe Willard protesting, “Wait a minute, fellows, wese walkin’ too fast. At dis rate we’ll be there befo’ we have time to talk some mo’ about Ole Massa and John” (Hurston, *Mules* 72). Thus, the workers demonstrate they have taken such lessons of resistance to heart as they passively undermine the dominance the foreman and the company have over their lives. While this foot-dragging plays into the stereotype that had been perpetuated by minstrel depictions of blacks as inherently lazy and needing constant supervision to prevent malingering on the job, it is an effective form of resistance whereby the worker
can use the stereotype to his own advantage, effectively “stealing” his wages from his 
boss through inefficiency.

Despite his effective reading of resistance in the workers’ tales and actions, 
Nicholls dismisses Hurston’s own role in crafting it by taking her claim to be merely a 
collector at face value. He argues that “Hurston’s contribution in *Mules and Men* was not 
so much to write a book about herself and her own struggle for power…but to transcribe 
the ‘hidden transcript’ of resistance that obtained in the performance of folklore on the 
job” (477). However, Nicholls ignores how Hurston’s manipulation of the folklore and 
the crafting of the narrative show her engagement in the very folk traditions she was 
writing about. She was actually participating in the tradition as a vibrant, living practice, 
not merely transcribing it as an artifact of a dying culture.

This participation can be seen in the tales that Hurston chooses to include as well 
as how she chooses to present them within the narrative frame. While the tales 
themselves may include very subversive material, Hurston often frames them in an 
innocuous setting, as listeners receive the tales as jokes or passing a good time rather than 
as a call to arms. One particularly subversive tale is placed in the mouth of a young boy, 
up past his bedtime and participating in the tale telling session to prove how grown up he 
is. The story he tells is one in which the slave John, Massa’s favorite, takes advantage of 
Massa’s greed and tricks him into killing first his favorite horse, then his grandmother, 
and finally himself. However, in order to achieve this outcome, John must sacrifice his 
own horse, his own grandmother, and nearly loses his own life. The story begins with 
Massa threatening to kill the horse he gifted to John because John keeps beating Massa’s 
horse. John retorts, “Massa, if you kill my hawse, Ah’ll beatcher makin’ money” (42).
When Massa does kill the horse, John takes its hide into town, claiming to be a fortuneteller and using the horsehide as his divination tool. As payment for his successful fortunetelling, John earns a total of five sacks of money, five horses and a saddle, five head of cattle, and six sheep. Massa, seeing John’s success, kills his own horse and tries, unsuccessfully, to make money off of it by selling its hide. In the next episode, Massa kills John’s grandmother because John has been driving her around in Massa’s carriage. John buries his grandmother and makes money in the same way as before, taking the horsehide into town as his fortunetelling prop. Massa, thinking John had made money off of his grandmother’s corpse, kills his own grandmother and tries to sell her corpse in town. Realizing that everyone now thinks he’s crazy, Massa returns home to kill John as punishment for making him kill his own grandmother. Massa stuffs John in a bag to drown him in the river, and then runs to get weights for the bag. John, meanwhile, bribes a “toad frog” to release him from the sack, and substitutes a tortoise. Massa drowns the sack, with the tortoise inside, and is shocked to find John back at the house with a new horse and more money earned from fortunetelling. Massa, still thinking he can replicate John’s success, asks, “Reckon if Ah let you throw me in the river, Ah’d make all dat?” to which John replies, “Yeah, Massa, Ah know so” (45). John carts Massa down to the river in a sack, making sure not to forget his own weights, and tosses him in: “And dat wuz de las’ of ole Massa” (46).

Neither the child’s audience nor the narrator comment upon the subversive lesson of this story, but it is significant as is the fact that it is told by a child. John is able to use his gift of language to enrich himself and affect his own freedom. He has wisely identified Massa’s weaknesses—his greed and his sense of superiority—and has
manipulated them to his own benefit. His reward does not come without sacrifice, as he loses both his horse and his grandmother. But the sacrifices seem to be worth the reward as the horse is easily replaced and his grandmother is perhaps in a better place after a lifetime of toil and a brief moment of ease being driven around by John in Massa’s carriage. The fact that it is a child who tells the story adds emphasis to this lesson. Here is a new generation learning how verbal skills can be used to effect change, and demonstrating how adeptly he has learned that lesson by successfully telling a story that earns him acknowledgment and praise from the community.

As Susan Meisenhelder argues, Hurston “[conveys] her cultural messages not by explicitly analyzing folktales but by embedding them in a social context,” and it is within the social context of the frame that we can see Hurston’s own resistance to dominant discourses of race and gender (17). For example, Meisenhelder analyzes the context of a tale-telling session in which the men and the women tell differing stories of love and courtship. After being hassled by his wife for spending too much time around Zora, Jack gives a “speech about love” in which he relates the headaches caused by dating three women simultaneously (Hurston, Mules 35-36). Shug, one of the townswomen listening to Jack’s speech, counters with a tale involving three men competing for the hand of one woman, one that the men ridicule her over because, they claim, “It’s always more’n three womens after every man” (37). Meisenhelder argues that while Shug’s tale involves “heroic feats” which “might seem simply another mythic story of heroic black deeds,” the context of the battle between the sexes in which Hurston places it “more accurately demonstrates the women’s use of folktales to elevate their status” (29). In other words,
Shug is asserting her own dominance in the community through effective storytelling, trumping Jack’s story with a story of female empowerment.

Shug’s tale of male competition for a woman’s hand in marriage takes on further significance when we analyze the changes that Hurston made to it when incorporating it into *Mules and Men*. This story is contained in *Every Tongue* as having been told by Lonnie Barnes.\(^7\) This version is a relatively concise story, wherein a father agrees to give his daughter in marriage to the suitor who “does the quickest trick” (160). Each trick is then briefly described and the story concluded decisively upon the performance of the most impressive trick, “So he got de girl” (161). The daughter’s role is peripheral to the story, functioning only as the frame for the competition. The decision-making falls to her father, not to her. When all of the suitors “asked for her at de same time,” the father “didn’t know what to do, so he said: ‘I’ll give her to the one dat does the quickest trick’” (160). The three tricks seem to be relatively unrelated: the first clears a field and grows corn in time for breakfast, the second goes for water and catches it “before it hit the ground,” and the last shoots a gun and catches the bullet to “give it to de girl’s pa” (161).

Shug’s version in *Mules and Men* is longer and much more descriptive and notably gives more agency to the daughter being courted. The daughter is portrayed as a real person, with her physical beauty described in terms that glorify the darkness of her complexion: “Dis was a real pretty girl wid shiny black hair and coal black eyes” (39).

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\(^7\) In Hurston’s list of sources for this collection, there is a Mannie Barnes listed, but no Lonnie Barnes. They may be the same person, with one version being either a nickname or a misprint. Mannie Barnes is listed as a sawmill hand from Mississippi (262). While it is conceivable that Lonnie was Mannie’s wife, the common usage at the time was as a man’s name. According the Social Security Administration, Lonnie as a woman’s name was relatively rare while its masculine usage was significantly more popular. Hurston’s edits to the story between the *Every Tongue* version and that which she included in *Mules and Men* would take on even more significance if she had changed the teller’s sex from male to female. However, because this change cannot be proven with certainty, I will focus my analysis on the textual clues that Hurston adds to the story in her crafting of it for *Mules and Men*. 
Although each of the men asks her father for his permission, the girl has the ultimate decision about which one to marry. When she can’t make up her mind, her father sets up the competition. Furthermore, the tricks are repositioned and reframed to accumulate towards creating a meal, a task which traditionally fell to the women in the house. First, the water is collected because “the first [suitor] got up seen it wasn’t no water in de bucket to cook breakfas’ wid” (39). The field clearing is repositioned to the second suitor, who plants and grows “green peas for dinner” (40). The final suitor not only shoots off a gun, but also aims to kill a deer and thus provide meat for the table. In this way, the tale is shaped around an inherent domesticity, shifting the emphasis to the daughter and framing the masculine competition as the means for determining who “will make her the best husband,” not merely a forum for the men to show off their skills.

* * *

While much attention has been paid to the hidden discourse of the folktales Hurston incorporated into *Mules and Men*, the second part of the book, dealing with hoodoo traditions in New Orleans, is more often ignored. This section is frequently brushed aside as being merely a reprint of her scholarly article “Hoodoo in America,” which had been published by *The Journal of American Folklore* four years prior to the publication of *Mules and Men*. However, closer examination of the differences between these two versions of the material show how Hurston subtly obscured and undermined the veracity of the hoodoo material, taking for granted that her reading audience doesn’t know what it’s missing.

Hurston’s original manuscript for the book did not include this material on conjure, and repeated references to a “conjure book” she was working on imply she was
working on a volume, as detailed in her August 6, 1928 letter to Hughes, consisting fully of the conjure material she collected through the American South, including New Orleans and quite possibly the Bahamas and Honduras. She had met with Faustin Wirkus, self-proclaimed king of the jungle island of La Gonâve off the coast of Haiti, and talked of plans she made with him to compile a comparative volume of conjure practices of blacks in the American South and those of the Caribbean (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). Although Carla Kaplan, editor of Hurston’s collected letters, suggests that this “conjure book” is a reference to Hurston’s second anthropological book, Tell My Horse (1938), Hurston hadn’t yet traveled to Haiti and Jamaica (a trip she would take in 1936-1937), and so couldn’t have been compiling her work on this subject matter yet. I believe this reference was to a different manuscript altogether, which remains unpublished and quite possibly lost or destroyed.

While Hurston expressed a desire to write the definitive book on conjure practices, she was notably obscure about what she learned from the hoodoo practitioners under whom she studied in New Orleans and surrounding areas and was very private about her own experiences with hoodoo. A detailed examination of her manipulation of the material originally published in “Hoodoo in America” also shows the level of her resistance to outing practices involving conjure beliefs, which were often held up to ridicule in popular culture and were surrounded by mystery because the practices were illegal and practitioners were actively persecuted. In her article, Hurston briefly explains, “Hoodooism is in disrepute, and certain of its practices forbidden by law” (319). She was much more candid in her private letters, as she described the roadblocks she encountered in finding and studying some of the various hoodoo doctors. When in New Orleans, she
traveled to a neighborhood across the river from the city because she had heard it contained a lot of hoodoo activity. However, she found it to be “as dead as Babylon. It seems that police activities is [sic] responsible for the removal” (“To Langston Hughes,” 15 Oct. 1928). While traveling in the Bahamas, she was unable to meet with a renowned practitioner because “see the Govt. is prosecuting [obeah] men (hoodoo doctors) pretty strenuously at present and my man found he was under suspicion so he went to one of the outer islands to lie low till things calm down” (“To Langston Hughes,” winter 1929/30).

Thus, the secrecy with which the religions were practiced is understandable, as is Hurston’s reluctance to name the practitioners under whom she studied.

Although Hurston changed the names of the practitioners between “Hoodoo in America” and *Mules and Men*, there is also evidence to suggest that neither source documented the actual names of the practitioners. For example, in a letter to Langston Hughes, she referenced a “‘doctor’ Redmond” from Bogalusa, LA, who “[n]ever allows the patient to tell him one symptom [sic]. Looks at them and prescribes. Clientele mostly white” (“To Langston Hughes,” 22 Nov. 1928, 132). This description suggests Redmond corresponds to Dr. Samuel Jenkins in *Mules and Men*, who can “glance at people without being asked or without using his cards and making the most startling statements that all turned out to be true…. Let me state here that most of his clients are white and upper-class people at that” (226-27). Beyond changing his name, she had also changed his location, moving him from Bogalusa, a town located over an hour north of New Orleans, to Marrero, a suburb of the city located just south across the river. The only possible equivalent that can be found in “Hoodoo in America” is a Doctor Barnes, who is also from Marrero but has no psychic abilities (390). Presumably, Hurston’s correspondence
with Hughes is the most reliable source of the three, as she had no reason to think Hughes would betray her sources. She even goes so far as to include the addresses of practitioners she had visited in her letters to him. Both “Hoodoo” and *Mules* were written for publication, and would have perhaps opened her sources up to prosecution if they had been accurately identifiable.

The conjure material that Hurston published in her article “Hoodoo in America” seems to have been much more thorough and detailed than that which was rewritten for publication in *Mules and Men*. While it is likely that Hurston chose not to include the whole truth of what she learned in the article, for reasons I explain below, it is far more inclusive than the version published in her book. A comparison of the two versions against each other shows how Hurston further inscribes a hidden transcript of “feather-bed resistance” into *Mules and Men*. While “Hoodoo in America” seems to be a faithful and scholarly transcription of the lessons she learned and experiences she had while studying voodoo and hoodoo in New Orleans, the Bahamas, and the Southern states, Hurston seems to have left out or sidestepped just enough to keep the article from being a practitioner’s manual. For example, she frequently referenced materials, such as “bad vinegar” or “Four Thieves vinegar” without explanation of what makes this vinegar different from any other. She also wove in several bits of information that seem to serve as warnings for those who may try to replicate the routines on their own, such as her claim that, “People are different and what will win with one person has no effect upon another” (388). This statement suggests that certain conjure rituals may fail, even if routines are followed exactly. Furthermore, she writes, “Anything may be conjure and nothing may be conjure, according to the doctor, the time and the use of the article”
Thus, the objects used in the conjure are of less importance than the doctor and the circumstances in which they are used.

Hurston altered something in just about every routine she copies from “Hoodoo in America” to its printing in *Mules and Men*. Sometimes the changes are minor, such as in one routine for causing a person to become swollen, wherein the practitioner is instructed to “[b]urn nine candles each day for nine days” in the article (368), but the instructions are altered to burning “one each day for nine days” in the book (211). The difference in wording is slight, but amounts to a difference of 72 candles, which, if one believes in the power of the ritual, could potentially have major repercussions in its outcome. Other changes seem to have the implication of major consequences, such as a routine she transcribed for bringing about a death. For one, the color of the candles is different – black candles are lit on the altar in *Mules and Men*, and in “Hoodoo in America,” the color is blue. This difference is slight, however, as according to the descriptions of color significance (included in both texts), blue can be used “[f]or success and protection (for causing death also)” while black is “[a]lways for evil or death” (“Hoodoo” 414; *Mules* 280). While both reference bringing about death, Hurston explained only in the article that the blue candles are lit specifically for protecting the practitioners from the spirit of death while invoking it to cause death in another party: “Burn blue candles during all this work to shield you from the spirits who will kill you if you are not shielded” (363). She changed the source of the protection in *Mules and Men* from the candles to a “crudely carved figure of Death” which is “placed upon it [the main altar] to shield us from the power of death” (210). While these changes seem to be minor, the oversight of not protecting oneself from the spirit of death while doing death work could be perceived as
having pretty severe consequences. Again, these revisions raise the question of Hurston’s intentions in changing this information. If done purposefully, it could signal not only a disregard for the safety of any readers who attempt to perform these routines on their own, but even a willful endangerment of such readers who do so. The specificity of the instructions seems to invite the reader to regard the book as an instruction manual. What is also notable about the differences of these two descriptions is the increasingly sensationalized language that Hurston employed in Mules and Men. Regardless of the ritual significance of the blue candles, black is more commonly associated with death and “black magic” in American popular culture and thus was more meaningful for the popular audience Hurston was addressing in Mules and Men. She adds to this sensational quality in the book by including the “crudely carved” figurine to represent death and by embellishing her explanation of the beef brain that the routine calls for. The instruction in “Hoodoo in America” requires the practitioner to place a beef brain on a platter and surround it with hot peppers. It includes no explanation of the significance of either the brain or the peppers. However, Hurston adds in the book version that the peppers are “to cause insanity and brain hemorrhages.” She also adds that Pierre, the doctor conducting this ceremony, slept “Every night for ninety days…in his holy place in a black draped coffin” (211). These ideas of causing brain hemorrhages and sleeping in coffins evoke sinister connotations that Hurston completely left out of her more scholarly version of the material.

As Hurston was a storyteller with a keen awareness of the expectations of her audience, this sensationalizing of her hoodoo material for Mules and Men was undoubtedly done with a deliberate hand to fit in with the tenor of the existing popular
literature on conjure practices.\(^8\) By contrast, the audience for “Hoodoo in America” was a scholarly one, as the *Journal of American Folklore* was targeted towards folklorists, anthropologists, and other academic specialists. This audience would expect Hurston to maintain a scientific distance from the material, so her article downplayed her thoughts and reactions to the rituals she participated in, such as her initiation rituals and the black cat bone ritual, examined at length below. The popular audience for *Mules and Men*, on the other hand, expected sensationalism. The distance Hurston maintained in “Hoodoo” would likely have been met with boredom or disinterest by this audience. The details that Hurston added to the material is still tame by comparison to popular texts like Robert Tallant’s *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946). Unlike these popular texts, Hurston’s material maintains an air of respect for the conjure practices described, and furthermore, invites the reader to approach the religion with caution and perhaps fear.

This invocation of fear is one of the key elements of resistance that can be found in the practice of what had developed as the religions and spiritual practices of enslaved peoples, including hoodoo, Vodou, and Obeah.\(^9\) Conjure practitioners were frequently consulted in situations where the clients had no other recourse for justice or revenge. One of the examples that Hurston gives in *Mules and Men* involves a woman who seeks help to ensure that the courts appropriately punish a white man who had shot and seriously wounded her husband. Because of the perpetrator’s standing in the white community, the woman fears “he’s going to be let loose soon as the case is tried” (218). She seeks help from the hoodoo doctor because she needs “[s]omebody that can hit a straight lick with a

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\(^8\) The sensationalism of material published on conjure material is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.

\(^9\) Vodou (or Vodun), a practice I examine in greater detail in Chapter 2, is the accepted academic spelling of the conjure religion practiced in Haiti. Obeah is a conjure religion found most commonly in Anglophone Caribbean nations, including the Bahamas.
crooked stick” (218). In other words, she needed the roundabout path of conjure to straighten out the Jim Crow justice system that was biased against her husband because of his race. Thus, this routine allows an otherwise disempowered populace to elicit a certain amount of control over a situation that seems to be so utterly out of their control.

Hurston further developed an aura of fear around the practice of hoodoo as she related her own experiences with some of the initiations and routines, such as her description of acquiring a magical black cat bone needed to produce invisibility. Such invisibility was necessary as “[s]ome things must be done in deep secret, so you have to walk out of the sight of man” (Mules 220). This secrecy no doubt protected the practitioner from prosecution, but also could conceal sometimes unsavory routines that were purported to make bad things happen. The ritual for acquiring a black cat bone is referenced twice in “Hoodoo in America.” The first reference is buried within a list of other relatively mundane routines, and is described briefly and with matter-of-fact language: “You have to catch a black cat in the evening and boil him and close the lid down on the pot tightly. At twelve o’clock at night you pass every bone through your mouth till you get to the bitter bone, and that’s the one. You have to sell yourself to the devil first. Then you can walk out of the sight of man” (387). The second reference is one of three routines she transcribes from a practitioner in Mobile, Alabama. The routine described is similar to the previous one, although it is slightly more detailed in calling for “the oil of a heifer’s hind foot” and “the splinters where a thunderbolt has struck a tree” (396). The purpose of the routine is the same; however, this second version has an addendum that the bone “will also fix you so the white folks will never deny you” (396). Hurston makes no claim in “Hoodoo in America” that she herself has performed the
black cat bone routine. However, the description of her experiencing it in *Mules and Men* forms one of the most dramatic scenes of the Hoodoo section. If she did, in fact, perform the ritual, it’s curious to note this subtle aside that one of the powers it gives is to not be denied by white folks. One may wonder if Hurston found this particularly attractive given her sometimes fraught relationship with her patron, Charlotte Mason.

The version of the ritual written into *Mules and Men* combines elements of both of the above, and brings in other details that are nowhere to be found in “Hoodoo in America.” Hurston also added in a narrative of personal experience that is both specific and vague. For example, when describing the process of boiling the cat alive, she provided specific details of the cat as “terrified, trembling…. He screamed three times, the last time weak and resigned” (221). The pot was “roomy” and the fire was “vigorously alive.” However, when she shifts to describe her own psychic experiences, the narrative becomes vague: “Maybe I went off in a trance. Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don’t know. Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don’t know. I don’t know” (221). In this way, she instills fear in the reader, but withholds exactly the experience she goes through, allowing the description to break down into simply not knowing. She concludes the experience by fast-forwarding to her return home: “Before day I was home, with a small white bone for me to carry” (221). She does not attempt to claim to have the power of invisibility because of the bone, and never describes having used it. These elisions allow readers to make their own conclusions, however. If they believe her story, then she possesses the
power of invisibility. If they don’t believe her, they are left with no basis by which to accuse Hurston of making false or unbelievable claims.

Another notable scene from *Mules and Men* is Hurston’s description of her initiation by Luke Turner. While this initiation is described in both the book and in the article, the differences between the two help to demonstrate Hurston’s recasting the material for *Mules and Men* in more sensational, and with this scene, more sexualized language than in her academic article. When Turner agrees to take Hurston on as a student, he does so only after a “dazed silence” and “a long period of waiting” (198). However, the description is much more detailed in “Hoodoo in America,” wherein the doctor’s name is Samuel Thompson. In this version, she sits with Thompson in front of his altar in silence for an hour, after which “he rose and put the sacred snake skin about his shoulders and stood behind me with his hands upon my head…. After a while I forgot my fears, forgot myself, and things began to happen. Things for which I can find no words, since I had experienced nothing before that would furnish a simile” (358). Thompson speaks directly to an unseen presence, affirming that he will communicate instructions to Hurston about her initiation rites, then leaves her with the instruction, “Sit there until you feel to move” (358). After a while, she felt compelled to leave, but before doing so, she explains, “it occurred to me to light a candle and I did so” (358). These descriptions of communication with a higher power and her own acting on impulse, seemingly being influenced by the spirit world, were all left out of *Mules and Men*.

The book text also leaves out the details of her nine-day preparation for the initiation, writing only that the “details do not matter” outside of arriving at Turner’s house “possessed of the three snake skins and the new underwear required” (198). By
contrast, the article provides a detailed description of how she came to possess the snake skins, which take on symbolic importance: “At a little curio shop in the Vieux Carre I found the skins—a king snake, a rattlesnake, and a moccasin. There were others, but I selected these” (358). Upon presenting them to Thompson, she writes, “Samuel was most joyful when he saw what I had brought. ‘Oh, you have got the right ones. I did not say what skins to see if the spirit would tell you’” (358-59). This implication that Hurston was guided by the spirits, both in her lighting of the candle before leaving, as described before, and here by choosing the correct snakeskins, is completely left out of *Mules.*

What *Mules and Men* does do, however, is to jump straight into the description of the initiation ceremony, which required Hurston to lie naked, face-down on a sofa for three days. She describes the snakeskins she had procured being made into garments for her: “One was coiled into a high headpiece—the crown. One had loops attached to slip on my arms so that it could be worn as a shawl, and the other was made into a girdle for my loins. All places have significance” (199). This description is far more sexually suggestive than the one given in “Hoodoo in America,” which states only that, “My sacred garments were made, including the crown” (359). With one snakeskin wrapped as a shawl around her breasts and another as a girdle around her loins, the description in *Mules* paints an image vaguely suggestive of a Josephine Baker costume.

A similar disjuncture exists in the descriptions of the clothing she dons after her three-day fast. In both versions, her body is painted with symbols by the small company present, and afterwards, she is dressed by them. In “Hoodoo in America,” Hurston is “dressed in the new clothes, stockings, underwear, dress and veil” (359), evoking a bridal image with full dress and veil. However, in *Mules,* her clothing is limited to only “the
new underwear and a white veil was placed over my head, covering my face” (200). This description is much more sexualized, as she is dressed only in underwear with her face obscured by the veil. Whatever Hurston’s reasons were for revising her material in this way, the effect of those decisions is twofold. First, in both the initiation and the black cat bone ceremony, the *Mules and Men* text places an emphasis on danger and sexuality. It highlights Hurston’s dedication to her research, as she willingly placed herself in uncomfortable situations and faced them with a strong resolve, never backing down from circumstances that many of her contemporaries would have run from. Secondly, the text highlights how she in particular had been chosen by the community of practitioners as well as by the spirits themselves. She emphasized during her initiation with Turner that “none may wear the crown of power without preparation. *It must be earned*” (*Mules* 198). She went through great lengths to prove to the reader than she had endured the preparation and had earned the trust and respect of the hoodoo community in ways that no other anthropologist at that time had done.

The changes that Hurston made to the hoodoo material included in *Mules and Men* have a similar effect to the changes she makes to the folklore material. She is crafting the material in her own voice, establishing herself as a participant in folklore and a knowledgeable practitioner of hoodoo. While she seemed to be offering up an unmitigated “insider’s view” of this material to her readers, she incorporated various tactics which undermine the reader’s ability to fully understand and reinforce her own usage of feather-bed resistance. Such insider’s knowledge of the culture, as emphasized in her initiation with Turner, cannot be given; rather, it must be earned. The reader has
done nothing to earn the knowledge, and therefore is in a position to be actively tricked by the material.

Such trickery is reinforced by Hurston’s concluding parable. She tells the story of Sis Cat, who is tricked into releasing the rat she had caught for dinner because the rat questions her manners of not washing her face and hands before eating. Although she “was mighty hongry…she hate for de rat to think she ain’t got no manners” and lets go of the rat in order to wash her face, thus allowing the rat to run away. Sis Cat learns her lesson, however, and upon catching a second rat who questions her manners, she insists, “Oh, Ah got plenty manners…. But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards” (245-46). Hurston then concludes by placing herself in the position of the predatory cat: “I’m sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin’ my manners” (246). The implication is that she has just tricked and eaten up a victim, with the only potential victim having been her reader.

Taken in consideration with Hurston’s opening remarks—”He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind”—this thinly veiled threat of gobbling up the reader reinforces the division between insider and outsider. As an outsider, the reader can never truly know and be a part of this folk culture of which Hurston herself claims ownership. All of the surface-level explanations and definitions have given the reader no deeper understanding the lessons and the significance of these folktales and cultural practices. By not fully understanding the culture, the audience cannot effectively take possession of it. Like Odum and Johnson, the audience will perennially misunderstand and misread what it sees and hears even though one may believe he truly “knows.” And
like High John of folk legend, Hurston has used her mastery of language to trick the audience into being satisfied because it still doesn’t fully know what it’s missing
Chapter 2
Conjure and Colonialism: Hurston in Haiti

When Zora Neale Hurston traveled to the Caribbean in 1936, she had planned to divide her year of funding equally between Jamaica and Haiti, with the six months she was to spend in Haiti dedicated to collecting information on the local religion of Vodou. After only a few months in the country, she had collected so much material that she realized her writing project was “so huge and complicated that it flings out into space more fragments than would form the whole of any other area except Africa” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 390). Consequently, she petitioned the Guggenheim Foundation, which had provided the funding for her trip, to renew her fellowship for a second year, thus enabling her to return to Haiti to “finish what [she had] begun” (392). She was granted the renewal and did return to Haiti upon receiving the funds in the summer of 1937. Only two months into that return trip, however, she experienced an

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1 “Vodou” or “Vodun” (pronounced Vo-DOU or Vo-DUN) are the modern accepted terms for the religious practice in Haiti, differentiating it from the related but distinct practice that developed in New Orleans, commonly spelled “voodoo” (pronounced VOO-doo). Voodoo is more familiar to English-speakers, particularly Americans, as it gained popularity through pop culture and horror books and films, while Vodou or Vodun is the preferred terminology within academic settings, connoting a more serious consideration of a religious practice. As noted previously in Chapter 1, “hoodoo” refers specifically to the practice of using roots and herbs for medicinal or spiritual purposes, commonly practiced in the Southern United States and “conjure” serves as an umbrella term for the supernatural beliefs of the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. (See Long xvi for more information on these distinctions.) Hurston uses “hoodoo” as a marker of all African American practices, and “voodoo” for the Haitian practice. “Obeah” references the conjure practices of the Bahamas. (See Chireau 35-57 and Simpson 51-110.)
illness so severe she feared for her life. Convinced that this illness was brought on by someone who disapproved of her interest in Haitian affairs, she backed off her controversial research and fled the country. The illness changed more than her travel plans. She thoroughly altered her plans for the publication of the material she had collected, vastly diminishing the amount about Vodou she had planned to include. Furthermore, this trip was her last fieldwork expedition, and essentially marked the end of her career as an anthropologist.

Hurston had set out on this collecting trip with great enthusiasm, hoping to bring to fruition a project she had spent nearly a decade planning. However, her brush with death, combined with her publisher’s disinterest in a lengthy scientific study and the success of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), deflated her excitement and made the production of *Tell My Horse* (1938) a tedious obligation she described as “hanging over my head [and] ruining my entire life” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 21 Feb. 1938). Her initial plan was to research and write a detailed study of the cultural and religious practices of the African diaspora in the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, aspiring even to travel to West Africa in search of the practices from which she believed these traditions of the diaspora originated. Her driving motivation behind this study was to prove the legitimacy of these belief systems as religions no more magical or superstitious than Christianity itself was. Her study was ultimately limited geographically because of the difficulty she faced in securing adequate funding for travel.

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2 While Hurston was on the payroll for the Florida division of the Federal Writers’ Project in 1938, the year after she returned from Haiti, she did very little new fieldwork for the FWP. On occasion, she traveled to towns neighboring her home in Eatonville and sent various folktales and songs, most likely culled from her extensive existing collections, to the Florida Project’s headquarters when prompted. However, she spent the bulk of her time while on the FWP payroll writing her fourth book, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, published in 1939 (Boyd 313-319).
That the project culminated in the production of a book that covered only two of the countries she had hoped to visit is a testament to the role limited access to money played in Hurston’s life. Furthermore, her ultimate reluctance to publish all the conjure material she had collected during her travels demonstrates not only her fear, but also her respect for the secrecy surrounding the practice of these religions, secrecy necessitated by the active prosecution of practitioners by law enforcement in nearly all of the countries in which they were found.

In spite of the respect that Hurston apparently had for these Afro-Caribbean religious practices and cultures, *Tell My Horse* does invoke the primitivist and imperialist discourse common to much writing about Afro-Caribbean cultures during this time, particularly in writing about Haiti. However, it does so in a way that challenges the expected conventions of this discourse, which becomes apparent when placing *Tell My Horse* within the context of existing popular American representations of Haiti, such as William Seabrook’s sensationalist travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929), Faustin Wirkus’s autobiography *The White King of La Gonave* (1931), and the film *White Zombie* (1932), directed by Victor Halperin and starring Bela Lugosi. Hurston’s relationship to this dominant narrative was complex. On the one hand, she actively participated in this primitivist discourse when describing certain elements of Caribbean culture, particularly government corruption and the rampant misogyny she witnessed while traveling. She was, after all, a modern American woman and though black, was not an automatic insider to black Caribbean culture the way she was in the black American folk culture of the South. On the other hand, however, Hurston recognized similarities between cultural practices within the African diaspora. Certain cultural traditions of the black communities
in the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Haiti bore strong resemblance to those she knew from black American folk culture, similarities she attributed to the shared cultural ancestry born in West Africa and developed through the centuries under conditions of slavery across the Americas and the Caribbean. So even while Hurston at times participated in primitivist and even imperialist language, she also employed some of the same trickster techniques found in the tales and narrative structure of *Mules and Men* to destabilize and undermine it. Hurston’s descriptions of Vodou, notably the one area she consistently refrained from using primitivist and imperialist language, emphasize the elements of resistance in this religion and demonstrate how it capitalizes on mystery and fear to enable an oppressed people to push back against a violent and lethal ruling class.

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Although *Tell My Horse* is the book on conjure Hurston published, it is not the conjure book she had originally planned to write. By examining Hurston’s letters and funding applications through the 1920s and ‘30s, we can trace the development of her interest in producing a comparative study of religious practices, specifically those related to conjure, across the African diaspora. Hurston’s interest in conjure is evident from her travels through the American South, and specifically the time she spent in New Orleans. She became aware of cross-cultural influences upon meeting a community of Bahamians in South Florida and observing similarities between their practice of obeah and the hoodoo rituals of rural African Americans she encountered throughout the South. She identified the differences between rural hoodoo practices and the voodoo of New Orleans as having resulted from the influence of Haitian immigrants settling in and around the Louisiana city in the years surrounding the Haitian Revolution. And as her time in New
Orleans shows, her interest in conjure was both scientific and personal, as she herself seems to have believed in and practiced it.

Hurston had first expressed a desire to produce a book focused on religion in 1928, while collecting material for what would become *Mules and Men.* In 1931, she began to reference work on what she called her “conjure book.” She inevitably included some of this material in her article “Hoodoo in America,” published in that year’s October edition of the *Journal of American Folklore (JAF).* Presumably, however, Hurston had more material than what was contained in that article, as she again referenced working on the “conjure book” after having finished the article. According to biographer Robert Hemenway, Hurston had completed the article in March 1931 (133). But in September, six months later, Hurston referenced a publisher interested in having “first choice” on her “conjure book” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 25 Sept. 1931, 228). Since “Hoodoo in America” had already been slated to print the next month, this book must have been distinct from the material contained in that article. It must also have been different from the conjure material published in *Mules and Men,* as that had been adapted from the article as per the publisher’s request and contained hardly any new material.

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3 In a letter to Langston Hughes dated August 6, 1928, Hurston references a plan to produce 7 volumes from the material she collected while traveling through the American South, one of them being focused on religion. She had written this letter upon her arrival to New Orleans, proclaiming, “I have landed here in the kingdom of Marie Laveau and expect to wear her crown someday—Conjure Queen as you suggested” (“To Langston Hughes,” 6 Aug. 1928). So while it is not clear at this point if Hurston intended to include conjure in her religious studies, the fact that she was actively interested in Laveau and had already collected conjure material from the Bahamas, Florida, and Alabama, suggests that religion would be inclusive of hoodoo and voodoo beliefs.

4 See “To Langston Hughes,” 18 March 1931; “To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 18 Apr. 1931 and 25 Sept. 1931, 229. Carla Kaplan, editor of Hurston’s letters, footnotes these references to a “conjure book” as early drafts of *Tell My Horse.* However, *Tell My Horse* focused primarily on the material Hurston collected in Jamaica and Haiti from 1936-1937, making it unlikely she was drafting this manuscript five years prior.
While certainly not inclusive of all the conjure material she had collected, “Hoodoo in America” does demonstrate the beginnings of Hurston’s idea for a comparative study of conjure practices across the diaspora. The opening paragraphs of this article reference the connection between Haiti and the Gulf states, and particularly the city of New Orleans, as it was “these regions that were settled by the Haytian emigrees [sic] at the time of the overthrow of French rule in Hayti” (318). Having not yet traveled to Haiti herself, Hurston instead included her material from the Bahamas “for comparative purposes,” substantiating the importance of this nation’s conjure practice through its connection to Haiti: “In the Bahamas, conjure is called by its West African name—obeah. The Bahamas look to Hayti as the mother of obeah, but Cat Island of the Bahamas is not without fame” (320). Hurston had been inspired to visit Nassau in 1929 after meeting Bahamians in South Florida and noticing similarities between their folktales and cultural practices and those of the black Americans. Convinced that because there were “so many [Bahamians] in America that their folk lore definitely influences ours in South Fla.,” she traveled to the islands on a collecting expedition in order to “contrast [their folk lore] with ours” (“To Langston Hughes,” 15 Oct. 1929). Thus, even in these early stages, Hurston had begun to draw lines of influence and connection between the Caribbean and the United States, while also recognizing the connection of both to West Africa.

Hurston’s interest in Haiti, specifically, was increased after meeting Faustin Wirkus. Wirkus, a U.S. Marine stationed in Haiti during the American military

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5 This was a common spelling in Hurston’s time.
6 It is interesting to note Hurston’s conflation of the Vodou practiced in Haiti with Obeah, which was mainly found in Anglophone countries of the Caribbean. While both are conjure traditions derived from West African religious practices, each was a distinct product of specific historical conditions, differences that Hurston was only just beginning to discover.
occupation of the island, had risen to popularity in 1929 with the publication of William Seabrook’s travelogue *The Magic Island*, in which he is introduced as “the white king of La Gonâve.” He embraced this royal title, and used it for the title of his autobiography, published only a few months prior to Hurston’s “Hoodoo in America.” Hurston sought out a meeting with Wirkus, no doubt inspired by his reputation as having spent a significant amount of time living amongst the Haitians on La Gonâve, an island set just offshore from Port-au-Prince. It took her several months of trying before securing a meeting with him, during which time she even reached out to Ruth Benedict, professor of Anthropology at Columbia University and editor of the *JAF*, for her help: “I have tried to get in touch with Mr. Workus [sic], the man I spoke of in connection with Hayti & La Gonave [sic]. He does not seem to be around much or the people where he lives are uncommunicative…. Perhaps you can succeed where I have failed” (“To Ruth Benedict,” winter/spring 1932). When the meeting finally took place in April 1932, Hurston reported to Benedict that the two discussed their respective experiences in the Bahamas and Haiti and “found that we had traces of the same thing and decided that we should do a comparative work on the West Indies and the U.S. on conjure” (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). Furthermore, she urged Benedict to meet with Wirkus and petitioned her for financial assistance either from Columbia or “any private individual” to finance a return trip to the Bahamas to aid in research for this comparative work, as she had “scarcely scratched the surface” during her time there (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). However, this collaboration with Wirkus seems never to have come to fruition, nor did Hurston receive any funding through Benedict for a return trip to the Bahamas.
In the same letter to Benedict in which Hurston proposed this collaborative study, she was also trying to lay the groundwork for what she hoped would be a positive recommendation from Benedict for an application to the Guggenheim Foundation to support international travel. The letter contains a postscript informing Benedict of her plans to apply to the foundation, saying, “If I can get it, I shall do my ‘foreign’ work in the West Indies, Bahamas, St. Martinique & perhaps a month or two of Hayti” (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). However, according to biographer Valerie Boyd, Hurston’s official application to the foundation, submitted a full year later, lists her travel destination as the Gold Coast of West Africa, where she planned “to explore the African roots of hoodoo and other black American cultural practices” (250). Her application proposed a treatment of the collected material similar to what she had done with her American folklore material, producing texts “both scientifically and in a moderated form for the general public” (qtd. 251). The foundation, however, rejected Hurston’s application for the 1934 fellowship cycle. Benedict, perhaps responding to the inconsistencies of Hurston’s travel plans and no doubt demonstrating a general lack of respect for the young scholar, penned a less-than-complimentary letter of recommendation, accusing Hurston of having “neither the temperament nor the training to present this material in an orderly manner” (qtd. 252). Benedict was not alone in her disapproval, as several other letters were submitted on Hurston’s behalf that expressed a lack of faith in her scholarly abilities (252).

The disappointment Hurston faced from this rejection was tempered by an invitation she received shortly thereafter from the Rosenwald Fund to apply for a fellowship to support her doctoral studies in anthropology. Because no course of study
for specializing in black culture yet existed, Hurston and her mentors spent some time deliberating what the best program and course would be for her, specifically whether to continue at Columbia under the direction of Franz Boas or to attend Northwestern University to work with Melville Herskovits, one of the only scholars specializing in black cultural studies at the time and a “world authority” on fieldwork in Haiti (Boyd 268). While it was settled that Hurston would continue working with Boas, her course of study had input from Herskovits, who had laid out an itinerary for Hurston’s travel to Haiti in order to “explore the origins of hoodoo” (269). When the Rosenwald funding was revoked—the fund’s director cited Hurston’s “over-zealousness in her own behalf [and] her lack of tendency to serious quiet scholarship” (qtd. 270)—Hurston retained this plan to travel to Haiti for her second application to the Guggenheim Foundation, submitted in December 1935 (284).

Between the time of losing the Rosenwald funding and her second application to the Guggenheim, Hurston’s professional aspirations shifted significantly towards creative writing. The Rosenwald fiasco undermined her confidence in academia, as she declared, “I have lost all my zest for a doctorate” (“To Edwin Osgood Grover”). Her second application to the Guggenheim Foundation stressed that her scientific collection of folk material would be used “to personally produce or create fiction…that shall give a true picture of Negro life…at the same time that it entertains” (qtd. Boyd 285). Her application also shows a specific interest in studying conjure practices, as she proposed conducting “a study of magic practices among Negroes in the West Indies” (qtd. 286). This second application to the Guggenheim Foundation was approved. Not only had Hurston published *Mules and Men* by the time this application was submitted, she also
requested letters of recommendation from much more enthusiastic supporters, including well-known writers Fannie Hurst and Carl Van Vechten as well as Edwin Osgood Grover, a professor at Rollins College who had helped Hurston stage one of her musical reviews to a local Florida audience (Boyd 285). Importantly, she asked neither her mentor Franz Boas nor JAF editor Ruth Benedict for recommendation letters in this cycle. Both her emphasis in her application on producing creative fiction and her choice of recommenders suggest that Hurston was rejecting a continued pursuit of academic anthropological study.

Despite this distinct emphasis on creative writing, Hurston still held onto the idea of publishing two versions of the material she collected: one a scientific study and the other a creative endeavor written for a popular audience. After receiving the fellowship, she wrote to Henry Allen Moe, her advisor at the Guggenheim Foundation, that she hoped to produce two texts: “one for anthro. and one for the way I want to write it” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 26 Aug. 1937). This emphasis placed on what she wanted to do versus the obligation she felt towards anthropology underscores the division she felt between the obligations that science placed on her material and the feeling she had that a work of fiction would be best suited to produce that “true picture of Negro life” that she hoped to create. However, these two texts never came to fruition, as her publisher, Lippincott, squashed her plans for producing two volumes from the material she collected in the Caribbean. It was Lippincott who previously insisted that Hurston combine her scientific work with a creative narrative in Mules and Men. With her work in the Caribbean, Lippincott again pressured Hurston to produce a single volume of material that was neither all fictional nor purely scientific. As Hurston described it, the publisher
was holding her to her original plan for the material, with the book being “half and half Jamaica-Haiti” and “[n]ot strictly scientific work, but burning spots from the ensemble” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 389). In other words, her publisher wanted a text that resembled the manuscript for *Mules and Men*, which used narrative to string together anthropological material. *Tell My Horse* did not, however, have the same charm nor success as *Mules and Men*. The end product was neither a sound anthropological text nor was it presumably the text as Hurston really wanted to produce it.

Beyond the restrictions of her publisher, Hurston’s own desire to continue working with conjure material declined dramatically after the sudden life-threatening illness she experienced in Haiti. She had what she described as “A VIOLENT GASTRIC DISTURBANCE,” one that sickened her so badly that, she claimed, “for a whole day and a night, I thought I’d never make it” and she was subsequently bedridden for two full weeks (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 July 1937). According to Valerie Boyd, when Hurston visited the American consul to ask him to safeguard money for her return trip to the U.S., he was so “shocked by her condition, he insisted she convalesce at his home” (299). While she had suffered from intestinal problems off and on throughout her life, this particular bout was worse than any she had experienced before, and she seems to have believed that this one was brought on as a repercussion of her research: “It seems that some of my destinations and some of my accessions have been whispered into ears that heard” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 July 1937). She feared the possibility that such an illness could recur, and writing again to Guggenheim advisor Moe, she pleaded, “I know that I could not survive a repetition of alimentary infection and so if conditions warrant it, with your permission, I shall do my polishing on American soil” (“To Henry Allen Moe,”
6 July 1937). Moe responded immediately, assuring her, “You have complete liberty to return to the United States whenever you wish and I should urge you, if your health is in question, to take no chances at all” (qtd. Boyd 300). Consequently, Hurston began making plans to cut her trip short and returned to the U.S. within two months, making her second trip to Haiti a total of only four months long.

The assumption that her illness was related to “ears that heard” about her collecting work suggests she believed she had been poisoned. She was well aware of the various poisons that were used by Vodou practitioners, poisons that they could “slip…undetected into the food of those they wished to harm or scare—including foreigners who might go off and say bad things about Haiti” (Boyd 300). And while she never openly declared her belief that she had been poisoned, she hinted at the possibility in both *Tell My Horse* and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In the former text, Hurston describes an exchange between Zora, her narrator counterpart, and a couple of doctors at the hospital where she is introduced to a real-life zombie. The doctors explain their suspicion that zombification is caused by a drug that produces “the semblance of death,” so that the zombie is not awakened from the dead but rather is buried alive and then resurrected (196). When Zora expresses her desire to discover what drug is being used, the doctors warn her against such snooping: “Dr. Legros said that perhaps I would find myself involved in something so terrible, something from which I could not extricate myself alive, and that I would curse the day that I had entered upon my search” (196). The furthest her search goes, according to the narrative, is her introduction by the doctors to the real-life zombie. Whether the real-life Hurston stopped her searching at that point can only be guessed. However, her poisoning episode, which was not specifically
mentioned in *Tell My Horse*, suggests that perhaps she hadn’t. Hurston’s emphasis in *Dust Tracks* on the medicinal secrets of Vodou suggests she knew more, or was at least aware of the existence of more, than she detailed in *Tell My Horse*. *Dust Tracks* contains only three paragraphs on Haiti, with one dedicated to her zombie encounter. Of Vodou, she says only that its ceremonies were “both beautiful and terrifying” and its beliefs were “[no] more invalid than any other religion” (205). She concludes that “if science ever gets to the bottom of Voodoo in Haiti and Africa, it will be found that some important medical secrets, still unknown to medical science, give it its power, rather than the gestures of ceremony” (205). That her limited retrospective on her time in Haiti is concluded with this nod towards the scope of medical knowledge contained in Vodou further substantiates the possibility that she was poisoned by some “secret” drug and that the fear of it stuck with her over time.

The idea that Hurston could believe that she had been conjured is not farfetched. As is evident from her writing, she had a sincere belief in conjure practices and a strong respect for the medicinal knowledge contained in rootwork. While studying in New Orleans, she reported to friend Langston Hughes that she had been “getting on with the top of the profession. I know 18 tasks, including how to crown the spirit of death, and kill” (“To Langston Hughes,” 20 Sept. 1928). She later assures him, “Yes, I WILL conjure you too, but only for good luck” (“To Langston Hughes,” 22 Nov. 1928, 131). Several years later, when her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason fell ill, Hurston informed her, “Promptly at twelve oclock [sic] last night I set the altar for you and asked the powers invisible for your health in fire…. At six A.M. and again at twelve I shall set the altar for you” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 10 Oct. 1931). Such sincerity in her desire
to help her friends through conjure further reinforces the sincerity with which she approached all of her conjure studies and no doubt helped to prove as much to the practitioners under whom she trained. While studying in Haiti, she declared, “I have not been converted locally, tho [sic] I am not a christian [sic] either” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 391). Such honest belief was inevitably what gained her the acceptance and trust of these necessarily secret communities in the first place.

This honest belief would also account in large part for the secrecy she ultimately upheld by limiting the Vodou material she eventually published. As Wendy Dutton observed in her study of Hurston’s treatment of Vodou, “As an initiate and practitioner, [Hurston] had vowed to uphold voodoo’s strict secrecy laws” (133). Dutton points to the unanswered questions with which the reader leaves Tell My Horse as evidence of Hurston’s desire to “keep the world she found of voodoo to herself, keep it close and keep it safe” (149). Thus, Hurston’s act of self-preservation—keeping quiet out of fear for her life—can also be read as an act of preserving an important and powerful piece of black culture and of keeping it safe from the prying eyes of a white American culture with a history of exploiting, even exterminating, that which it found to be inferior to itself. In truth, Hurston’s affliction may or may not have been caused by poison; however, the fact that she believed it was should not be dismissed. In fact, if she believed she had been poisoned by people who feared that she would write bad things about Haiti upon her return to the U.S., that belief may very well have been strong enough to dramatically shift the focus of this comparative study on conjure that had been years in the making for Hurston.
Even though her illness dissuaded her from publishing the definitive study on the conjure practices of the black diaspora that she seems to have originally hoped to produce, Hurston was still under an obligation to the Guggenheim Foundation, which sponsored her travel, and to her publisher, to whom she had pitched the idea of a book on the Caribbean, to actually produce a text derived from her time in Jamaica and Haiti. Every indication from her letters and from the way she dismisses the book in her own autobiography points to her production of *Tell My Horse* as an obligation rather than a passion. Once Hurston had returned to the U.S. to begin writing, she tarried in New York to promote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, released in September 1937, and began planning a “Negro Folk Concert” for mid-December. Two weeks before the scheduled concert date, however, Hurston abruptly canceled the show, explaining to Van Vechten, “My publishers insist that I finish my book on Haiti immediately. Consequently, I do not find the time to work on the concert at the moment” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 1 Dec. 1937). The decision, however influenced by her publishers, was also financial. She moved back to Eatonville to focus on writing and escape the distractions of New York, explaining, “I could not stay in New York until I had made some more money. And I knew that I could get some as soon as I hand in the script for the book on Haiti” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 21 Feb. 1937). Being nearly 20,000 words short of her contracted length in mid-February, Hurston felt that “the tail end of the book hanging over my head was ruining my entire life” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 21 Feb. 1937). She finished the manuscript within a month, and wrote an effusively happy letter to Van Vechten, proclaiming, “Hooray, Carl!! The book is finished and in the hands of the typist! Soon I will have a publisher’s check and be on my way to New York…. Three more hoorays!!!”
(“To Carl Van Vechten,” spring 1937). The joy she expressed seemed to be tied more to finishing an obstacle and collecting her pay rather than wrapping up a prized manuscript.

The lack of enthusiasm that infused Hurston’s writing of *Tell My Horse* after her experience with this perceived poisoning is displayed by her curbing of the amount of material she seems to have originally intended to include on Haitian Vodou. In January 1937, after only four months into her first trip to Haiti, Hurston outlined her plan for the book in a letter to supervisor Henry Allen Moe. This letter essentially functioned as her application to renew her Guggenheim fellowship for a second year to fund an extension of her time in Haiti as well as support her during the composition process. The differences between this outline and the final published version are noteworthy. While the Jamaica section of *Tell My Horse* covered the outlined material almost exactly, the material on Haiti underwent a dramatic shift in focus. In her outline, Hurston had only two main points for Haiti – zombies and “Haitian gods and demi-gods,” with the details for the latter taking up more than 50% of the entire outline. Her plan included descriptions of thirteen different loas (Vodou deities), as well as overviews of “sacred places and stones” and ceremonial flags associated with each loa and an explanation of the roles of the houngans (Vodou priests) (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 389-90). Nowhere in the outline nor in her letter did she intimate any desire to write about the political realities of Haiti or the American Occupation. In fact, none of the material from Part II of *Tell My Horse*, “Politics and Personalities of Haiti,” was included in this outline. She wrote only of the wealth of material on Vodou she had collected within only

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7 Hurston changed only the order of the Jamaican material slightly and added a short chapter criticizing the misogyny she observed. It is important to note that Hurston never returned to Jamaica prior to writing the published manuscript, so by the time she composed this outline for Moe, her thoughts on Jamaica must have been pretty well set.
four months, claiming she was “flooded with so much [material] that [an] ordinary volume of 100,000 words could only cover the subject by being very selective and brief” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 390-91). With such a wealth of information on Vodou, why upon writing the book did she insist on including material on politics and personalities that has arguably been done better and more thoroughly elsewhere? In fact, as Leigh Anne Duck asserts, “it seems unlikely that she had intended to address Caribbean politics to the extent that she finally did” because of the focus on “ethnographic and aesthetic writing” she maintained in so much of her other work (142). Given her abrupt shift in intentions towards her conjure material, it is highly likely that she was filling up space in her contractually obligated word count to purposefully limit the amount of Vodou material.

What Hurston did produce with *Tell My Horse* was a remarkable failure in terms of a definitive study of conjure practices. For the copious amount of material she claimed to have collected in her letter to Henry Allen Moe, she dedicated only half of her book to the topic—only a fraction of the 100,000 words that she claimed would have been an inadequate amount of space. By her own definition then, she was both selective and brief with the conjure material published in *Tell My Horse*. Moreover, the political content she included in place of her conjure material has been criticized as “reactionary, blindly patriotic, and consequently, superficial” (Carby 87). Robert Hemenway called her political analysis “naïve,” and asserted it displayed “a chauvinism that must have infuriated her Haitian hosts” (249). He also deemed the book a stylistic failure, describing it as her “poorest book, chiefly because of its form” (248). Despite the seeming failures of this text, however, *Tell My Horse* accomplishes some remarkable feats. While it did
not constitute a definitive study of conjure, it did present conjure in a respectful and nonracist way—something unique to this time period. Hemenway acknowledges that the book “consistently treats voodoo as a legitimate, sophisticated religion” (249). Wendy Dutton notes that Hurston sought to “demystify voodoo” (138). To that end, she did “ground-breaking work on zombies and was, in fact, the first person to photograph a zombie” (136). Furthermore, Hurston displayed the ways in which Vodou was used as a hidden discourse of resistance against the oppressive ruling class, as well as against the American occupational forces.

* * *

In order to understand Hurston’s display of resistance to the existing narrative of Vodou and the primitivizing accounts of Haiti, one must first understand the climate in which she was writing. Hurston first arrived in Haiti only two years after the end of the American military occupation, an occupation that spanned two decades and flooded American popular culture with sensational accounts of cannibalism, human and animal sacrifices, and sexual orgies, all practiced under the name of Vodou. Such accounts, according to Dutton, helped to “[reinforce] the perception of Haitian peasants as primitive, or, more precisely, savage, largely through distortions of voodoo” (140). Dutton cites both *Cannibal Cousins* (1934) and *Black Baghdad* (1933) as examples of texts on Haiti spawned from the years of occupation and containing sensational accounts that reinforced the already established stereotypes of Haiti with which Hurston had to contend. Both of these texts were written by John Houston Craige, a Marine who served in the occupying forces and used his firsthand experiences to market the stories as true
accounts of his time in Haiti. However, both books are largely made up of rumors, gossip, and conjecture, designed to titillate and horrify rather than inform.

William Seabrook, however, had already established the conventions for writing on Haiti when he published *The Magic Island* (1929). Seabrook was a journalist and travel writer who “achieved fleeting celebrity” with the publication of this book, his exposé on “the voodoo cults in backwoods Haiti that introduced the zombie to presumably civilized audiences” (Rood 352).8 His role in introducing the zombie to American audiences was magnified by the premiere of the film *White Zombie* (1932), which used his text as a resource both for scenes in the film as well as in its promotional material. Furthermore, Seabrook’s text brought fame to Faustin Wirkus,9 who was in turn inspired to publish his autobiography, *The White King of La Gonâve* (1931), the title of which was copied from one of Seabrook’s chapter headings. Seabrook described Wirkus as having “realized that dream” of boys and men to “hold undisputed sway on some remote tropical island” as he was “actually and literally crowned a king by the natives” of the island of La Gonâve (*Magic Island* 171). While Wirkus’s story was first introduced to the American public by Seabrook’s text, the vignette was reprinted in various magazines and news outlets in the United States so that, as Seabrook claimed in his introduction to Wirkus’s autobiography, “within a few months after publication of the original material,

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8 Seabrook capitalized on the success of *The Magic Island* by traveling to the jungles of Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa to confirm rumors of the cannibalism practiced by some tribes there. When he demanded that a local tribe feed him a ritualistic dinner of human flesh, they substituted ape meat. The disappointed Seabrook traveled to Paris, where he acquired human body parts from cadavers supplied by friends in medical fields, and prepared the meat himself in order to write a detailed account of its flavor (Rood 352-53). This experience is telling as it highlights the lengths writers like Seabrook went through to confirm rumors of savagery, only to be disappointed because such savagery was, by and large, spawned from the imaginations of those living in “civilization” and projecting their hedonistic desires onto “primitive” cultures.

9 This is the same Faustin Wirkus with whom Hurston had met in 1932 seeking an opportunity to collaborate on a study of diasporic conjure practices across the Caribbean and the American South.
while perhaps a hundred thousand people had heard of Seabrook and voodoo, at least ten million people had heard of Wirkus and La Gonave [sic], had seen his photograph, had been fascinated by the story of his tropical kingdom, and had wanted to hear more about it” (Preface xii).

When Hurston met Wirkus in 1932, shortly after the publication of his autobiography, she was no doubt familiar with his story and was perhaps one of those “ten million” who wanted to hear more. Wirkus perhaps thought the partnership advantageous because of Hurston’s connections within the academic community since, Hurston claimed, he was “most eager” to meet with Benedict (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). Hurston informed Benedict that Wirkus had “some motion-picture films of dances and two conjure ceremonies that I want you to see…. He wants to do more of that kind of thing and needs directions as he has no formal preparation for the work” (“To Ruth Benedict,” 17 Apr. 1932). This statement implies that Wirkus either wanted to do more filming of these types of performances or to develop what he already had into something significant. In fact, Wirkus did produce a short film entitled *Voodoo* (1933) probably derived from this footage, as a review of the film describes it as including “[s]hots of Voodoo ceremonies in the West Indies, supposedly the only ones ever made” (“Voodoo”). Wirkus was likely inspired to produce this film by the release of *White Zombie*, with the hope that his anthropological footage of Haitian cultural practices could ride the wave of its popularity. *White Zombie* (1932) was a horror movie starring Bela Lugosi, set in Haiti and playing upon the American fascination with the supposed “black magic” of the island nation. While the film itself is more about a love triangle than about Haiti, the American occupation serves as a backdrop and the concept of the zombie
serves a pivotal function in the plot. The central couple, Madeline and Neil, plan to be married at the Haitian sugar plantation owned by Charles Beaumont, who has promised Neil a job running his cane production facility. Beaumont is himself in love with Madeline and contacts local Vodou practitioner Murder Legendre (Lugosi) for a potion that will turn Madeline into a zombie and give him complete control over her. Legendre, in true villain style, poisons Beaumont and zombifies Madeline in order to claim her for himself. Madeline is saved when Neil enlists the help of the Christian priest, Dr. Bruner, who provides an antidote for her zombification, and the couple flees the island together.

The film relied heavily on references to Seabrook’s novel in its publicity material in advance of the release. As film scholar Jennifer Fay explains, “the advertising in the press books (written by United Artists’ publicity department and sent to all theaters) directs audiences to the literature on Haiti written during American military rule, including The Magic Island, passages of which the film and posters conspicuously quote” (83). The promotion for the film greatly played on the American fascination with Haiti as a primitive jungle island where all sorts of dark magic was performed. The publicity material sent to theaters in advance of the film’s premiere encouraged them, as quoted by Fay, “to ‘hire several negroes’ to beat ‘tom toms’ while adorned in ‘tropical garments.’ ‘Every once in a while have them cut loose with a couple blood-curdling yells. Be sure they simulate the Negro rhythms as heard in the first reel of the picture’” (84). Such performances were also to be accompanied by the display of “supposed artifacts of magic” (84), all reinforcing sensational and primitivist ideas of Haiti and Vodou.

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10 Americans were permitted to own land in Haiti only after the U.S. military took control and the Haitian constitution was rewritten to favor American business development (see Farmer 77-89).
While tales of zombies had reached American audiences prior to the release of *White Zombie*, this movie is credited with establishing this “monster” in the American psyche. It was the first zombie movie ever made and set the tone for what has become a popular sub-genre of American film culture, one which Hurston had sought to discredit at its outset. The film’s production company even claimed proprietary rights over the word “zombie” and filed a copyright lawsuit in 1936 claiming to “have invented the zombie…and thus have legal ownership of the concept” (Fay 84)—this despite the film’s heavy borrowing from Seabrook’s novel. In fact, as Fay demonstrates, the film’s depiction of the sugar mill was distinctly “modeled after Seabrook’s description of the real HASCO, the Haitian-American Sugar Company that in 1932 was owned by American interests” (86). The film depicts the machines of the sugar mill being “powered entirely by undifferentiated ‘human’ labor,” and not until after “one of the workers falls into the sieve and is quietly processed with the rest of the harvest” does the camera reveal “the faces of the undead…as they slowly push the millstone like mules” (86). By “suspending our knowledge of the worker’s revivified state, the film intentionally conflates deadening, low-wage, factory work with work performed by zombies” (86). This theme of zombification being tied to low-wage work, or more closely to slave labor, is replicated from Seabrook’s own description of zombies, which focuses on the rumored employment of zombies by HASCO. Hurston also addresses this connection between zombification and slave labor in *Tell My Horse*, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The zombie vignette that Seabrook wrote for *The Magic Island*, upon which the setting for *White Zombie* was based, depicted a man and his wife who maintained a crew
of zombies employed by HASCO in its cane fields. The man supervised the work of his zombies and collected wages from the company on their behalf. The zombies were kept in a state of deprivation, as they subsisted on a small amount of food and needed no creature comforts. The work conditions echoed the days of slavery, when black Haitians were forced to labor with no financial remuneration and were kept in harsh living conditions. In Seabrook’s story, this state of zombie enslavement could have persisted in perpetuity had the wife not ruined the zombies by showing them a bit of compassion.

Being tasked to oversee the crew during a Mardi Gras celebration, the wife took pity on the zombies and gave them each a cookie. The cookies, however, contained salt, the taste of which broke the spell of zombification. Consequently, the zombies returned to their graves and “claw[ed] at the stones and earth to enter it again; and as their cold hands touched the earth of their own graves, they fell and lay there, rotting carrion” (99).

The very idea that zombification was possible throws Seabrook’s narrator into an existential crisis. Upon contemplating the possibility that “magic” could raise the dead from their graves, he muses: “I had seen so much previously in Haiti that was outside ordinary normal experience that for the flash of a second I had a sickening, almost panicky lapse in which I thought, or rather felt, ‘Great God, maybe this stuff is really true, and if it is true, it is awful, for it upsets everything.’ By ‘everything’ I meant the natural fixed laws and processes on which all modern human thought and actions are based” (101). To keep his sense of the rational world from unraveling, the narrator finds a scientific equivalency to make sense of the dead look of the zombie he meets face-to-face. He calls to mind the look of a lobotomized dog he had encountered, which had been “alive, but its eyes were like the eyes I now saw staring” (101).
The final word on zombies in the book is given by a medical doctor, a man described as a “pragmatic rationalist” with the best “scientifically trained mind” in all of Haiti (103). This doctor’s explanation, however, comes neither from medicine nor science, but from the official criminal code of Haiti. He reads a passage dealing with “the employment…of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged…. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows” (103). However, such an explanation provides no rational understanding of the cause of zombification. It only shows that the legal system acknowledges such a practice exists.

We must rely on his coincidental explanation of lobotomy and know that the problem is big enough to have been codified by the Haitian justice system. Hurston, approaching the question of zombification from a more scientific angle, sought out an actual medical explanation based on her knowledge of the existence of root medicines and poisons—an issue I will discuss in more detail below.

In addition to bringing the idea of zombies to American popular culture, Seabrook also popularized the story of Faustin Wirkus, who claimed to have been crowned king by the inhabitants of the island of La Gonâve off the coast of Port-au-Prince. Seabrook described the crowning of Wirkus as having been the result of a strange coincidence, framed as destiny by a superstitious population of natives. According to Seabrook’s version of events, a man named Soulouque rose to power in 1848, crowning himself Emperor of Haiti and taking the title “Faustin I.” When Faustin I met his demise in a failed attempt to invade Santo Domingo, “an old blind soothsayer…predicted Faustin would some day miraculously return” (173). Thus when U.S. Marine Sergeant Faustin
Wirkus arrived, having been named by the priest who baptized him, the inhabitants of the island accepted him as “Li té pé vini (he who was to come)” (174). Thus, Wirkus’s ascendancy to the “crown” is welcomed, demonstrating a predilection on behalf of the “savage” natives to desire and respect a white man arriving from abroad to rule them. In this way, the tale of Wirkus mimics the propaganda espoused when the American troops arrived, claiming to establish order for the betterment of the Haitians, who were, by implication, incapable of governing themselves.

The respect that the Haitian inhabitants of La Gonâve show Wirkus can be read as a metaphor for the response Seabrook and others anticipated from the Haitians during the occupation. Seabrook’s narrative describes how various inhabitants of the island dote on Wirkus. During one journey through the jungle, a woman “seized Wirkus’ hand, covered it with kisses, tried to drag him from his horse, and failing in this, began tugging at the reins” (180-81). Rather than bask in the glow of her affection, Wirkus is annoyed by the attention—a response cast as modesty, although it also seems to indicate the level of his impatience for the perceived ignorance of this woman and her son. Her affection is in gratitude for Wirkus’s having helped her son, a miller whose mill had been destroyed several times by flood waters. Wirkus had advised him to move the mill further up the hill and borrow money to purchase an American-supplied engine to run it, rather than rely on the free power of the river water. The miller did so, but after the engine repeatedly failed, he decried it as faulty. However, Wirkus ascribed blame not to the engine but to the shoddy workmanship of the miller’s brother, “who believed himself to be a mason [but] built the concrete base out of true, and the belt kept flying off” (181). Wirkus fixed the foundation for the mill engine, but in doing so terrified the unsuspecting
miller. The miller himself described the episode to Seabrook, explaining that when Wirkus arrived to inspect the engine, “He seized a crowbar and we thought he would destroy the engine, but he smashed only its base, and then he went away, telling us nothing, heaping on our heads awful curses” (181). While the outcome was beneficial—the foundation was rebuilt and the engine, which the miller had borrowed money to purchase, began working properly and ensured the mill would continue in operation—Wirkus’s interaction with the Haitians belies his underlying assumptions that they are both liars (the brother was not a “real” mason) and are either incapable of understanding or are unworthy of an explanation for why the engine kept failing (presumably, the inhabitants of this remote and isolated island did not have much experience working with American engines).

Wirkus’s reaction also demonstrates a quality commonly depicted among the Marines serving in Haiti, that of his copious use of foul language and his predilection towards violence. Hurston also addresses this issue in Tell My Horse, though as I will demonstrate below, her tone is much more disparaging than Seabrook’s. Seabrook described Wirkus as having been able to “outcurse and outfight any tough baby…in the whole service” (175). His first encounter with Wirkus involves the “king” reprimanding four Haitian gendarmes under his command who were negligent in their assignment to keep cows off the airfield landing strip. Their failure was not for lack of trying, however, as Seabrook had described how “four or five cows loped out from the mangrove tangle” as the plane he was in taxied across the runway, “with negroes screaming, running, trying to head them” (176). The language Wirkus uses to reprimand them is both racist and demeaning: “Ou fait goddam macacq, ou vi goddam macacq, ou mourri goddam macacq;
ou p’r aller joiend’ rade macacq cinq jou’” (177), which Seabrook translates in the text as “literally: You made (were born) goddamned monkey, you live goddamned monkey, you will die goddamned monkey; so go join monkey-clothes (prisoner-stripes) five days” (177). Not only does Wirkus dehumanize the Haitians by calling them “monkeys,” but he also heaps upon them an exceedingly severe punishment by imprisoning them for five days for failing to appropriately herd cattle. Furthermore, Seabrook’s translation of the Haitian Kreyol renders the language ungrammatical and childlike, as any language might sound literally translated with no regard for idioms and variances of grammatical structure.

Beyond this praise for Wirkus, specifically, Seabrook’s narrative also extols the virtues of the American Marines who brought “constructive changes” to Haiti, including “excellent roads, sewers, hospitals, sanitation, stabilized currency, economic prosperity, and political peace” (127). These material improvements, however, are not what Seabrook has deemed to be the most important American contributions to Haiti. Rather, the “most interesting and pervasive” contribution was “the belated lesson in race-consciousness which we have been at pains to teach the Haitian upper classes” (127). After over a century free from slavery, the Haitian upper class had acquired land, money, and education and had developed their own “aristocratic tradition,” all of which led them, in Seabrook’s estimation, to have “somehow forgotten that God in His infinite wisdom had intended the negroes to remain always an inferior race. Indeed [there were some] who were proud of being Haitian, proud actually of being negroes” (127). Beating down this pride and “teach[ing] these people their proper place” is what Seabrook identified as having been “one of the most difficult problems of the American occupation” since “the
Haitians have refused to accept this lesson graciously” (128). And while “this needful reform has not been quite so successful as the stamping out of malaria...notable progress has been made” (129).

By the time Hurston visited Haiti in 1936, the publicity from Seabrook’s story and the film *White Zombie* had produced a notable backlash from the Haitian government in the form of a crackdown on the practice of Vodou and the American desire to publicize it. A retrospective column in *The Hollywood Reporter* described Haiti in 1933 as “just about all washed up so far as pictures are concerned on the subject of ‘Voodoo.’ It seems that Haiti is more than just a bit sensitive on the point and, instead of realizing the potential tourist value of playing up the voodoo idea, heavy penalties are imposed by the government on natives attempting to hold voodoo ceremonies” (Gwynne). The article goes on to report that the filming of *White Zombie* “was ordered stopped by the president himself. And if that celebrated Marine, Faustin Wirkus tries to make another picture on the subject, he’s liable to wake up in a Paradise he never dreamed of” (Gwynne). Facing this level of resistance from the Haitian authorities, Hurston no doubt needed to tread carefully in her own investigations.

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On the surface, *Tell My Horse* falls in step with the primitivist discourse that these narratives had established, casting the American Occupation as beneficial to the island nation and reinforcing the belief that Haitians were helpless savages without American influence and guidance. Hurston’s first chapter on Haiti is often cited as evidence of Hurston’s imperialist tendencies, as it includes a fictional prophecy that foretells the arrival of the American Marines as the bringers of peace to the troubled country. The
section echoes the structure of the biblical Revelations as it introduces the various signs and symptoms leading up to the arrival of this outside force:

Your freedom from strife and your peace shall come when these symbols shall appear. There shall come a voice in the night. A new and bloody river shall pour from a man-made rock in your chief city. Then shall be a cry from the heart of Haiti—a great cry, a crescendo cry. There shall be survivors, and they shall have a look and a message. There shall be a Day and the Day shall mother a Howl, and the Howl shall be remembered in Haiti forever and nations beyond the borders shall hear it and stir. Then shall appear a Plume against the sky. It shall be a black plume against the sky which shall give fright to many at its coming, but it shall bring peace to Haiti. You who have hopes, watch for these signs. Many false prophets shall arrive who will promise you peace and faith, but they are lacking in the device of peace. Wait for the plume in the sky. (65-66)

The chapter goes on to define the historical events which comprise the symbols delineated by this fictitious prophecy, culminating with the “plume in the sky” from the smokestacks of the U.S.S. Washington bringing American Marines: “a black plume with a white hope” (72). Hurston inverts the symbolism here, as black smoke is typically a sign of fire and thereby destruction. Here, black brings hope and peace. She also inverts the racial symbolism, as it is not a peace brought through the black Haitians, but rather through the whiteness of the American troops. The American occupying force is depicted not as one of imperialism, but rather of salvation. Perhaps Hurston did believe that the U.S. Occupation brought hope to the politically unstable island nation. After all, the Occupation brought with it some tangible benefits: roads, bridges, and hospitals were built; banks were stabilized with financial backing from the U.S. government; commercial growth was supported; and the Haitian government was protected from insurrection. Furthermore, in light of her near-death poisoning experience, Hurston may

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11 These “improvements” were, by and large, made in order to support American interests in the country, effectively displacing Haitian self-rule with American-run finance and industry, as well as propping up a
have believed Haiti was in need of some “civilizing” influence to redeem itself from these “savage” tendencies.

However, it is clear as well that Hurston did not blindly agree with all elements of the American mission or the effects it had on Haitian culture. As Leigh Anne Duck suggests, this chapter ought to be read within the context of its title, “Rebirth of a Nation,” an allusion to the D.W. Griffith film, Birth of a Nation (1915). The film, as Duck notes, had been rereleased in the 1930s, with plans for a remake (138). With such correspondences seeming to be more than just coincidence, Duck asserts, “it seems certain that [Hurston] was signifying on this tremendously successful and influential film. Her [chapter] title, reminding readers of a film that celebrated white supremacist violence, renders her optimistic assessment of the occupation ironic” (138). In fact, Hurston’s narrative is infused with this type of irony throughout her depictions of the American occupation and the lasting effect it had on the Haitians. This irony becomes more obvious when placing Hurston’s text alongside a narrative like Seabrook’s, whose praise for advancements brought by the Americans, including a greater level of “race-consciousness” among Haitian elites, was decidedly un-ironic.

The first and most striking example is Hurston’s engagement with the zombie figure. As cited above, Hurston claimed that her encounter with a real-life zombie was the most thrilling thing she had ever experienced. However, unlike her encounter with Big Sweet in Polk County, Florida, which she wrote about at length in both Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road, she described her zombie encounter only in Tell My Horse, dismissing the opportunity to revisit it in Dust Tracks by saying only that “the puppet government that served the interests of the U.S. However, that is not to say that the Haitians didn’t see any benefit from them either. Roads and hospitals were generally appreciated, though the “stability” of government and finance were rightfully controversial.
matter has been so publicized that I will not go into details here” (Dust Tracks 205).

Whatever her motivation for sidestepping further discussion of her zombie encounter in her autobiography, Hurston was surely aware it was a subject audiences would have expected to read about in any text on Haiti at the time, especially given the popularity of White Zombie.

With her zombie encounter in Tell My Horse, Hurston sought to provide a more substantive, if not more scientifically accurate, explanation of zombification. Beyond seeing a zombie with her own eyes, just as Seabrook claims to have done, she provided empirical evidence: a photograph. In fact, it is the taking of this photo that Hurston kept highlighting as the epitome of her encounter. The limited amount of material she did choose to include in her autobiography on the matter included her statement that “my greatest thrill was coming face to face with a Zombie and photographing her” (Dust Tracks 205). This photograph provided the empirical proof that her encounter was an authentic one. Likewise, her description of the encounter in Tell My Horse emphasizes empirical proof: “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” (182). Here she, on one hand, has replicated the circumstances of the encounter that Seabrook had: she must see and interact with a zombie. But while he sees and attempts to converse, Hurston is completely immersed in her sensory experience: she sees, touches, hears – then photographs. Her description is one of seeing this zombie as a real being, a human being with a name and a story, both of which she provides in her narrative. Ultimately she replaces “zombie” with “Felicia Felix-Mentor,” humanizing the nameless, faceless workers of Seabrook and White Zombie. Furthermore, she provides
social context not by quoting from the penal code but by seeking explanation for why zombies were created and what the social significance of their existence was.

Her informants, however, are a nameless multitude, not a specific practitioner. When she “asked how the victims were chosen,” the response comes from the “many [who] told me that any corpse not too old to work would do” (182). She reinforced this voice of the people by including descriptors such as “everybody agrees,” “some contend,” and “others say” (183). Thus, the voice of authority is the voice of the people. Because she has no individual expert who will explain the process to her, she must rely on the consensus of the people. From them, she gathered a description of the ceremony through which a zombie is created. While derived from rumor and hearsay, the description maintains an assertively authoritative voice: “First he is carried past the house where he lived. This is always done. Must be” (183). Hurston provided a description of the religious ceremony that accompanied the creation of zombies, and included several tales involving rumors of their appearances, before building up to her own close encounter at the hospital in the mainland city of Gonaïves under the direction of the Director-General of the Service d’Hygiene, Dr. Rulx Léon. She concludes in her discussion with Dr. Léon that zombification is “not a case of awakening the dead, but a matter of the semblance of death induced by some drug known to a few…. It is evident that it destroys that part of the brain which governs speech and will power” (196). Although she cannot identify the exact drug that would cause this semblance of death, her explanation relies much more strongly on scientific evidence and logic than did the associative conjecture of Seabrook that linked zombification to a canine lobotomy.
Just as zombies in Seabrook’s text and in the film *White Zombie* inhabit the space of low-wage or slave labor, so too are the zombies in the tales Hurston includes in her book connected to slave labor or, more often, the slave-wage economy ushered into Haiti by American imperialism. Hurston notes the fear that upper class Haitians had regarding zombification was not a fear of death but rather the fear of being ripped from a “life surrounded by a degree of fastidious culture” and “set to toiling ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast, unclothed like a beast, and like a brute crouching in some foul den in the few hours allowed for rest and food. From an educated, intelligent being to an unthinking, unknowing beast” (181). All of the elements that Hurston describes the upper class Haitians fearing were the actual conditions of many poor Haitians toiling in the fields and factories during the time period that Hurston visited. Thus the fear of zombification is symbolic of the fear of poverty and the deep-seated fear of being cast into slavery.

Beyond this discussion of zombification, Hurston’s text shares other similarities with Seabrook’s. Hurston travelled to the island of La Gonâve because “William Seabrook in his *Magic Island* had fired my imagination with his account of The White King of La Gonave [sic]. I wanted to see the Kingdom of Faustin Wirkus” (134). However, as she admitted in a private letter to Moe, her supervisor at the Guggenheim Foundation, what she found upon traveling there was that “Seabrook made [Wirkus’s] royalty out of whole cloth. But I like Workus [sic] and so I shall say nothing about it on my return” (“To Henry Allen Moe,” 6 Jan. 1937, 391). From this brief explanation, it is difficult to judge why Hurston chose not to publically criticize Seabrook’s description of Wirkus’s “kingdom” or Wirkus himself. Perhaps she feared that such criticism would
bring her bad publicity at a time when she was just beginning to see commercial success from her books. As noted above, Wirkus and Seabrook were both still quite popular. Including positive references to both in her narrative may have been, in her mind, commercially advantageous, while she may have perceived that directly criticizing them would be detrimental. Furthermore, the fact that she made this admission to Moe could have been her way of trying to ensure he would renew her funding for a second year by implying her experience was more “authentic” than Seabrook’s, and therefore, that her narrative would be more “authentic” as well. In other words, her criticism of Wirkus and Seabrook to Moe may have been as politically motivated as her decision to “hide” her critique of them in the final version of her narrative.

So while she did not undermine Wirkus’s story directly in Tell My Horse, she did present a narrative about La Gonâve that indirectly undermines Wirkus’s character and the entire Marine mission in Haiti. Most notably, Hurston includes a description of a sergeant of the Garde d’Haiti who had served alongside the U.S. Marines. His being a sergeant in the Garde echoes Wirkus’s rank of sergeant in the Marine Corps. Hurston also makes a point of saying she met this sergeant at Anse-à-Galets (136), the same town where Wirkus was stationed (Seabrook 178). This sergeant’s language also remarkably resembles the foul mouth of Wirkus, as Hurston noted, “I kept hearing ‘Jesus Christ!’ and ‘God Damn!’ mixed up with whatever he was saying in Creole” (Tell My Horse 136). When Hurston “facetiously” names him a “black Marine,” he takes the title to heart: “‘I am a black Marine. I speak like one always. Perhaps you would like me to kill something for you…. Jesus Christ! God Damn! I kill something’” (137). His language, especially the repetition of “God Damn,” echoes Seabrook’s depiction of Wirkus. Furthermore, his
insistence that he prove himself by offering to kill something for Hurston implicitly echoes the savagery of the American Marine presence in Haiti—supposedly a peace mission, but one that saw repeated brutalization of Haitian civilians and anyone who resisted the American presence. In this way, Hurston’s narrative subtly adjusts the lens of the primitive, focusing it not on the inhabitants of La Gonâve, as Seabrook had done, but rather back onto the occupying American Marines.

While Hurston does seem to have been critical of the presence of the American Marines, particularly the violence they inflicted on the Haitians and the culture of violence they left behind as embodied by this black Marine on La Gonâve, her text in general seems to support the American imperialist project behind the occupation. Nothing seems to have been barring Hurston’s ability to publish a text that overtly condemned American foreign policy—she was not receiving federal funding, nor was she under the thumb of a domineering patron like Charlotte Mason. Furthermore, she was quite outspoken in the press about American domestic issues with which she disagreed, including Jim Crow discrimination, the integrations of schools, and the Communist Party. So it is likely she believed that the American Occupation was mostly beneficial to Haiti. However, her text occasionally vacillates between criticizing the primitivism of the Haitian people and criticizing the racist stereotypes that the government had used to justify its “modernizing” mission. For example, when Hurston chose to include an episode in Tell My Horse that dealt with the introduction of modern technology to a

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12 In fact, Henry Allen Moe, Hurston’s supervisor at the Guggenheim Foundation, overtly objected to Hurston’s calling him “Busha”—the Jamaican slang term for “boss.” Carla Kaplan noted that Moe responded to this nickname with a letter in which he “refused to be called ‘bossman’—in any language—insisting that the fellows are the ‘bosses’ of their own research” (Kaplan, Letters 386 note 1).
13 See, for example, her articles “Crazy for this Democracy,” “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix,” and “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism.”
remote and “primitive” village, this episode seems, on the surface, to replicate the attitude that Seabrook and Wirkus exhibited toward the miller, dismissing the local inhabitants as unintelligent or lazy. Hurston only refutes this stereotype through juxtaposition and implication. Her vignette did not take place on La Gonâve like Seabrook’s, but rather in the remote mountain village of Accompong in Jamaica. Hurston’s description of Accompong is strikingly similar to Seabrook’s of La Gonâve, however. According to Seabrook, La Gonâve was “the most primitive and untouched by civilization in the whole West Indies” (171). Similarly, Hurston’s Accompong, located at the top of a mountain in the interior of the island, was settled “before the Pilgrims landed on the bleak shores of Massachusetts” and while Massachusetts grew into “a whole civilization and the mightiest nation on earth,” Accompong retained its thatched huts and “remained itself” with the “whole thing [being] very primitive” (22-23). While Colonel Rowe, the governor of the town, “wished to bring things up to date,” Hurston’s narrative asserts that his people have not modernized because they have “a great deal of lethargy…and utter unconsciousness of what is going on in the world outside” (23). As proof of their primitivism, Hurston pointed to the lack of stoves in the village, necessitating that all the “cooking, ironing and whatever else is done, is done over an open fire with the women squatting on their haunches inhaling the smoke” (23). Contrary to the supposed “lethargy” of the people, these women exhibit quite a bit of industriousness and fortitude. Additionally, Hurston’s contribution to “modernizing” the village also demonstrates the hardworking nature of its inhabitants. Her initial idea of buying a stove, an “imported luxury” no one in the village could afford, is perhaps the quintessential demonstration of lethargy, as it seeks out the easiest possible method of accomplishing a
task with the least amount of personal strain. (This suggestion also seems to echo Wirkus’s mandate that the miller purchase an American-made engine to run his mill.) In Accompong, the stove had to be built from scratch, rather than purchased. Hurston designed a stove to be built from rock, cement, and tin, and the men of the village came together to build it (23). Even Colonel Rowe’s grandchildren were enlisted to gather rocks. With the whole village taking part, “in a day the furnace-like stove was built” (24). Such industriousness directly undermines her earlier assertion that the people were lethargic and disinterested in modernization. While Hurston seems to have been reluctant to overtly contradict the popular stereotypes and racist assumptions that she included in her text, the disconnect between what her narrative overtly says and what her juxtaposed examples show goes a long way in destabilizing those assumptions, perhaps influencing the reader to internally question the veracity of such assumptions.

She does, however, include one chapter that does overtly seek to undermine the very definitions that Americans had about race. While whiteness and blackness seem to be mutually exclusive categories in American society, Hurston demonstrated the permeability of the race line as it was exemplified in Jamaican culture. In discussing the colonial relationship between Jamaica and England, she wrote that “in Jamaica it is the aim of everybody to talk English, act English and look English” – the first two being as easy to accomplish as “put[ting] a coat of European culture over African culture” (6). With regards to looks, however, “it is next to impossible to lay a European face over an African face in the same generation” (6), thus highlighting the ease by which the colonized may take on the appearance of the colonizer’s culture, but insinuating that racial identity is more difficult to subvert. However, in Jamaican societies, it is not
impossible to subvert one’s racial identity, at least on paper. The Jamaicans had a legal loophole whereby blacks could become “white by proclamation” (7). Here, Hurston clarifies this racial terminology: “When I used the word black I mean in the American sense where anyone who has any colored blood at all, no matter how white the appearance, speaks of himself as black” (7). This seemingly offhand clarification actually highlights the arbitrariness of the racial categories in the U.S.—that race does not necessarily correlate to appearance. Thus, it is just as slippery as the Jamaican system whereby one can be legally proclaimed white in government records no matter how dark in complexion. She further highlights the arbitrariness of the American color line by relating a vignette of an African-American university president who “precipitated a panic in Kingston” upon visiting the Rockefeller Institute there (8). Because he was “quite white in appearance…, the ‘census white’ Jamaicans assumed that he was of pure white blood” (8). So when, after being asked to say a few words in front of the “swank” crowd, he began his speech, “‘We negroes—’…[s]everal people all but collapsed” in response to his self-identification as black (8). The fact that he did not consider himself white in America despite his very white appearance stands in stark contrast to the practice of dark-complexioned Jamaicans being legally proclaimed white. Such a juxtaposition makes both the American and Jamaican ideas of “whiteness” and “blackness” devoid of substantive meaning.

This idea of racial identity is further complicated when the narrative shifts to Haiti. While elsewhere, Hurston has written about fellow African Americans commenting on the lightness of her complexion, she very solidly considered herself to be a member of the black community. In Haiti, however, her complexion and her social status as an
American separated her from the poor black Haitians who comprise the majority of the country’s population. In Haiti, she was given accommodation by upper-class mulattos, was invited to the homes of American whites, and was dubbed a “ti blanc”—literally a “little white person”—by the black Haitians whose services she employed. When she traveled to La Gonâve, her arrival was announced in advance by a crew member on her boat: “The captain told the crew to announce our arrival. He took a conk shell and stood up on the prow and blew several mingled rhythms and tones, ‘Tell them two ti blancs (unimportant whites or mulattoes) are coming.’ The crew blew again and sat down as the sun was rising” (135). Thus, the captain has sent two signals to the port: not only telling them a boat was arriving, but also that two “ti blancs” were aboard, thereby distinguishing them from the black crew. Presumably, this information was important to the port so that appropriate accommodations could be made. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates that the line between mulatto and white is indistinct, differentiated only when wealth was involved, as “grand blanc” was the term used for a rich or politically important white person. This distinction between mulatto and black is absent in Seabrook’s text, which subscribes to the “one-drop rule” that Hurston had effectively undermined in her first chapter.

Similarly, Hurston undermines the significance of gender norms, as her identity as an American seems to override her gender identity and positions her outside the gender

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14 Although “mulatto” is an antiquated term that has fallen out of favor in the U.S., it is a term that Hurston uses throughout her material on Haiti to distinguish the colorism and class distinctions commonly found there. As she explains, “First it was the Haiti of the masters and slaves. Now it is Haiti of the wealthy and educated mulattoes and the Haiti of the blacks.... The mulattoes began their contention for equality with the whites at least a generation before freedom for the blacks was even thought of. In 1789 it was estimated that the mulattoes owned at least ten per cent of the productive land and held among them over 50,000 black slaves” (73). I retain use of the word “mulatto” here to mark this history of colorism and class division in Haiti.
norms in both Jamaica and Haiti. Her American-ness overrides her female-ness, and as a result, she was treated more as a man than a woman. For example, in Jamaica, Hurston is given a curry goat feed, a masculine eating ritual which “has never been done for another woman” (11). By honoring Hurston with this ritual, the Jamaicans are regarding her outside the normal gender relations of the island. Her position as an American, and as a career anthropologist, places her on the masculine end of the spectrum. Though her identity as a career-based woman allows her entry into rituals that would otherwise be closed off to her, one young Jamaican man views it as a disgrace: “He let it be known that he thought that women who went in for careers were just so much wasted material. American women, he contended, were destroyed by their brains” (16). Such intellectualism, he argues, ruin both the women and the men by distancing them both from knowing “the function of love in the scheme of life” (17). According to this young man, Jamaicans retained their vitality because of the gender roles played by men and women that encouraged female sexuality and attendance to men’s sexual needs. As a result, he claims, “Jamaica was prepared to teach continental America something about love” (17).

Hurston refutes this man’s derision of women in the workforce not in her direct conversation with him, but rather in the final chapter in the Jamaica section, which focuses more generally on “Women in the Caribbean.” While Hurston seems to be critical of the misogyny she finds in Jamaica, as exemplified above, this chapter exposes her own critique of American attitudes towards women: “The majority of men in all the states are pretty much agreed that just for being born a girl-baby you ought to have laws and privileges and pay and perquisites…. The majority of the solid citizens strain their
ears trying to find out what it is that their womenfolk want so they can strain around and try to get it for them” (57). This primarily stands in contrast to Hurston’s even more incisive criticism of Caribbean misogyny, in which, she asserts, “It is not that they try to put you in your place, no. They consider that you never had any” (58). While the chapter goes on to exemplify the way in which women were systematically stripped of any self-determination in Jamaica, Hurston’s opening comments about American women still resonate. Her own life is evidence that women in the U.S. were most certainly not handed any and everything their hearts desire, as she had to struggle and strain just to make ends meet through most of her life.

Throughout this chapter, however, Hurston repeatedly adopted a seemingly sarcastic tone regarding the double standards that Caribbean men and women were held to. Her description of the practice of polygamy is voiced in the tone of its defenders: “If one woman is protected in breaking into her husband’s arrangements and regulating his pleasures, what is to hinder the others? The thing might become general and that would be a sad state of affairs! No, selfish, jealous wives must be discouraged” (58-59). This sarcasm returns after Hurston relates two stories in which women were taken advantage of by men, their lives ruined while the men are protected by social customs. In telling the fate of one of the women, she concluded, “She is still around Kingston drinking too much and generally being careless of herself. But what becomes of her in unimportant. The honor of two men has been saved, and men’s honor is important in the Caribbean” (61). The conclusion to the second tale echoes the first: “The allegedly unvirtuous wife hid around a year or two and died. Perhaps she suffered some but then he was a man and therefore sacred and his honor must be protected even if it takes forty women to do it”
Given the content of the stories, one is hard-pressed to believe that these sentiments reflected Hurston’s own opinions. Clearly, she is mouthing the justifications given by her Jamaican informants. She undermined such justifications through the use of juxtaposition as she displayed the horrid conditions of the women alongside the justifications, thus making obvious her sarcasm.

Another important distinction between classes, particularly in Haiti, went beyond skin color and gender; in fact, it was the language itself. Not only did the ruling class in Haiti speak a different language (French) than the peasantry (Kreyol), but even within the Kreyol-speaking populace, different methods of communication were used that were incomprehensible to those not fluent in it. For example, in the boat scene when Hurston was traveling to La Gonâve, the crew communicates with the port through use of the conch shell. This method of long-distance communication was common in Haiti, and accounts of the Haitian Revolution include references to conch-shell messages used to organize rebel troops across vast distances and over mountainous terrain without tipping off enemy forces. In Hurston’s account, the conch shell messages would have been incomprehensible to her as an outsider had she not heard the captain’s orders. Beyond these unspoken methods of communication, Hurston was also at a disadvantage with the dominant spoken language in Haiti. Upon her arrival to the island, she had only a school-level education in French and no experience with Haitian Kreyol. She did make a determined effort to learn Kreyol during her time there, though while her dedication to learning these languages is clear, she often travelled with a translator nonetheless. In fact,

15 During her days at Barnard, Hurston had taken several French classes, in which she was motivated to improve by classmates who regularly made fun of her accent. In a letter to friend and patron Annie Nathan Meyer, Hurston declared, “I knew getting mad would not help any, I had to get my lessons so well that their laughter would seem silly” (“To Annie Nathan Meyer,” 10 Nov. 1925).
the companion she described in the above account travelling with her to La Gonâve came along specifically because he was fluent in Kreyol, and because he had connections and “knew where to find a boat” (134). Hurston was in Haiti only ten months, so it is not surprising, then, that she was not fully fluent in either the languages or the customs of the country. The language barrier alone was enough to keep her from integrating as effectively into Haitian society as she was able to do with ease in Polk County, Florida and in the voodoo culture of New Orleans.

Although Hurston lacked direct fluency in the language, she did have an advanced understanding of the social dynamic between an oppressive ruling class and a subjugated underclass. In Haiti, this issue had been compounded further by the recent presence of an American occupying force. *Tell My Horse* provides, in part, a folk narrative of Haitian politics, giving voice to an illiterate and often unheard peasant class. Hurston emphasized the division in Haiti between those who can read and write, and those who cannot. The illiterate majority had little to no voice in the political system nor did they have a say in how their history was told. Hurston laid blame for the country’s lack of democracy on the illiteracy of the people, as “it is more difficult to discover the will of the majority in a nation where less than ten per cent of the population can read and write…. There is no concept of the rule of the majority in Haiti. The majority, being unable to read and to write, have not the least idea of what is being done in their name” (74-5). This situation of a large portion of the population being “unheard” in political situations was reminiscent, however, of the majority of the African American population in the U.S. Thanks to Jim Crow laws that prevented many blacks from voting, the will of a large percentage of Americans was being ignored as well. Illiteracy was also not uncommon
among African Americans at the time, especially among the rural Southern communities that Hurston traveled through during her fieldwork.

Much of the narrative of Tell My Horse is composed of the folk versions of history that Hurston had collected in Haiti, mimicking her style in Mules and Men in which she lapsed into folktales without a named informant. In Tell My Horse, her folk informants remain largely unnamed, signaled only by phrases such as “people say” or “it is said.” These signals communicate the orality of these transmissions. As James C. Scott has argued, “The great bulk of lower-class cultural expression has typically taken an oral rather than a written form. Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that make them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance” (160). The anonymity that Hurston has provided these informants in her text gives them protective cover, while also universalizing the folk perspective. On the other hand, all of the informants that Hurston did name in her text were important members of the community and were often white or mulatto. For example, these informants included Colonel Rowe, the village leader of the Maroons at Accompong in Jamaica; Dieu Donnez St. Leger, the houngan (high priest) in Archahaie, Haiti and his Mambo (high priestess) Madame Isabel Etienne; Dr. Rulx Léon, a renowned doctor and scholar who served as the Director-General of the Service d’Hygiene (195); and Dr. Reser, a white naval officer from Missouri who runs the “state insane asylum at Pont Beudet” (246). All of these individuals held positions of power within either the government or the community.

The one exception to this pattern is Joseph, Hurston’s “yard-boy” who lives with his wife and baby in the basement of the house she rents in Pacot. Through him,
Hurston’s narrator counterpart, Zora, learns about the Secte Rouge, a secret society that held a reign of terror over the people. Joseph had performed a ceremony in his living quarters that involved burning things to create a very unpleasant smell. Zora, annoyed by the smell, got “good and angry about the thing” and “called down to Joseph and demanded to know what on earth was going on” (201). She demanded he come into the main house to explain himself, but he refused: “He said not to be angry, please. But cochon gris (gray pigs) qui mang’ moun (who eat people) were after his baby….He was not going to open his room door until daylight” (201). The next morning, he explained to her that “he had seen figures in white robes and hoods, no, some of them had red gowns and hoods, lurking in the paraseuse (hedge) the night before. He thought the cochons gris knew that he had a very young baby and they wanted to take it and eat it” (202). She responded by taking his words literally, saying, “I have never seen a grey pig” and “hogs do not go about in robes of any sort” (202). It is difficult to believe that Hurston, the writer, actually took a literal interpretation of the man’s words, especially after she has already chided her American readers for being too quick to take the symbolism of Voodoo “too literally” (113). However, by taking Joseph’s words literally here, Zora has taken on the role of the disbelieving reader who is unfamiliar with metaphoric language. This is the same response one would expect from a member of the ruling class. Zora’s exchange with Joseph was silenced by the arrival of “an upper class Haitian” who had come to breakfast with Hurston (202). She described the “fantastic explanation that Joseph had made” to her visitor, seeking a more logical explanation for Joseph’s actions from this upper class, and presumably educated, person. Rather than respond to her question, the man excused himself from her presence and sought out Joseph, calling him
“every kind of a stupid miscreant. He ended his tirade by saying that since Joseph had been so foolish as to tell a foreigner, who might go off and say bad things about Haiti, such things, he was going to see that the Garde d’Haiti gave him a good beating with a coco-macaque” (203). Thus, by not recognizing the antagonistic relationship between the upper and lower classes in Haiti, Zora caused great injury to her informant. Because it seems highly unlikely that Hurston herself would misinterpret the metaphor of the gray pigs or would ignore the class tensions between a yard-boy and a mulatto visitor, this exchange may itself be read metaphorically, demonstrating why Hurston would be resistant to naming her peasant-class informants.

Furthermore, this exchange demonstrates how belief in Vodou functioned as a double-edged sword, assisting in the oppression of the Haitian peasantry while also functioning as a tool used by the peasantry to fight back against the oppressive upper classes. Here, the cochons gris formed a disembodied, and therefore omnipresent, threat to Joseph and his family, one that could threaten their physical safety and well-being. His freedom of movement was restricted and he was effectively kept prisoner in his own home because of his fear—fear that the upper-class mulatto visitor was eager to stoke with his own threats of physical violence from the Garde d’Haiti. The “guardians” of the state, who were entrusted to keep civic order, also keep the power structure in place by functioning as the arm of oppression for the Haitian elites. Thus, the Garde d’Haiti and the cochons gris function as two sides of the same coin: one visible and state-sanctioned, the other invisible and thereby creating a persistent state of terror. Hurston, no doubt recognizing this persistent threat and imbalance of power, protected the identities of the black peasantry by presenting them as a nameless, faceless mass in her narrative and
giving them voice only through disembodied rumors. For example, the story of the assassination of President Leconte is related through several different versions. Hurston compiled a more or less authoritative version by “talking to people and asking questions and they kept on telling me things. So I came to hear from many people a story that was the same in all the essential points” (105). Thus, the “authoritative” version of the story is an amalgamation of the various nameless, faceless voices of the folk.

The “truth,” then, of these tales does not necessarily correspond to factual truths of a history book. Hurston even made a point of explaining that “the most striking phenomenon in Haiti to a visiting American” is the “habit of lying!” This, she laments, “is more than any other factor responsible for Haiti’s tragic history” (81). However “lying,” in African American oral tradition, corresponds to storytelling. In *Mules and Men*, for example, one storytelling session is introduced by George Thomas assuring Zora, “you come to de right place if lies is what you want. Ah’m gointer lie up a nation” (19). Furthermore storytelling is the method that Hurston had identified in her application to the Guggenheim Foundation, as quoted above, as being the pathway to depicting the “true picture of Negro life.” In this light, the exact details of Laconte’s assassination matter less than the stories the people tell about it. The tales become the living history of the Haitian people—those who cannot read and write, but are active participants in a strong and lively oral history. Hurston’s role in writing this book was to capture the character of the people, which explains her reliance on a wide range of unnamed sources. By transcribing these nameless voices, the stories become the voice of the people as a whole, rather than this or that individual informant. Her narrative technique replicates a
patchwork quilt where she is the quilter who artistically ties together scraps of stories and information she picks up along her journey.

This theme of “truth” is found at the core of Hurston’s description of Vodou, as well. To introduce the religion to her readers, Hurston provided an allegory: the question “What is the truth?” is asked ritualistically in a Vodou ceremony in which “the Mambo, that is the priestess…replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth” (113). Here, again, “truth” is not anything to do with an objective “reality,” but rather a deeper, subjective understanding of “creation and life” (113). This definition of “truth” alongside Hurston’s warning that the symbolism of Vodou, like that of any other religion, should not be taken “too literally” (113), rejects attempts to read Hurston’s narrative literally, as well. In a sense, this can be read as an instruction to look beneath the surface for a deeper, symbolic truth. Such “hidden” messages are a response to the oppressive conditions that bring hidden narratives into existence. As James C. Scott has explained, “For good reason, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque” (137). Hurston had spent years refining her awareness of hidden narratives of resistance in the folktales and jokes of African American communities, and she was well aware that the social hierarchy she found in Haiti had similar nuances to her experiences in the Jim Crow South. Furthermore, as evidenced by the vignette concerning Joseph and the cochons gris, she was aware of the dangers that her informants faced by talking to her. Her own intestinal affliction proved that she, too, was not immune to the dangers of talking. All of these dangers added up to a hostile
environment in which “truth” could not be spoken openly, but needed to be disguised within metaphor and informants protected by anonymity.

Within the practice of Vodou, ceremonies and rituals are structured in a way to give outlet to a hidden resistance. This resistance can take many forms as, Scott asserts, “subordinate groups have developed a large arsenal of techniques that serve to shield their identity while facilitating open criticism, threats, and attacks. Prominent techniques that accomplish this purpose include spirit possession, gossip, aggression through magic, rumor, anonymous threats and violence, the anonymous letter, and anonymous mass defiance” (140). The practice of Haitian Vodou incorporates nearly all of these elements, especially as it is described in Hurston’s narrative. Furthermore, both gossip and rumor had formed the backbone of American understanding of Vodou. Seabrook’s text is filled with rumor, including the vignette described above that served to “prove” the existence of zombies. Hurston’s text also deals in rumor, as her nameless informants speak disembodied “truths.” Hurston herself experienced the anonymous violence, as evidenced by her belief that she had been poisoned for asking too many questions. All of these elements help to produce an atmosphere of fear surrounding the practice of Vodou.

What is particularly important, however, when considering the role of Vodou in *Tell My Horse*, is spirit possession. After all, the title itself is a signifier of spirit possession, and possession specifically by the loa Guedé. Guedé, Hurston explains, is “the deification of the common people of Haiti…. He belongs to the blacks and the uneducated blacks at that” (219). Additionally, he is the “manifestation [that] comes as near a social criticism of the classes by the masses as anything in all Haiti” and this social criticism comes in the form of this “god of derision” (219-20). In Guedé, one finds
similarities to the African American figure of High John de Conquer, who provides inspiration to the oppressed through use of linguistic word play to speak resistance through humor. Guedé also uses humor, as “he bites with sarcasm and slashes with ridicule the class that despises him” and oppresses those who worship him (220). This loa manifests himself by taking possession of a human body, or “‘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…. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the ‘horse’ does and says things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden” (220-21). “Tell My Horse” (“Parlay Cheval Ou,” in Kreyol) is the opening statement as “the loa begins to dictate through the lips of his mount” (221), thus acting as the signifier that the person has been “mounted” and should not be held responsible for his or her actions.

Such spirit possessions play an important role when the person being possessed belongs to an oppressed group. In fact, belief in spirit possession often coincides with oppression. Scott examines spirit possession within the context of hidden discourses of resistance, explaining that such “cults of possession…frequently offer a ritual site at which otherwise dangerous expressions of hostility can be given comparatively free rein” (141). Therefore, the spirit possession may act as an opportunity to air one’s grievances without fear of reprimand, as “a woman seized by a spirit can openly make known her grievances against her husband and male relatives, curse them, make demands, and, in general, violate the powerful norms of male dominance…. Because it is not she who is acting, but rather the spirit that has seized her, she cannot be held personally responsible for her words” (141). The voice of the spirit, thereby, gives weight to the demands, demands that may have otherwise been ignored thanks to the power dynamic at play.
Furthermore, the spirit gives immunity from harm, as to ignore or punish the speaker would essentially be to cause affront to the spirit.

In Haiti, Guedé is the loa of the underclass. Thus, those whom he “mounts” frequently voice grievances against the ruling class, such as in this scenario that Hurston describes:

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. It is useless to try to answer Guedé because the spirit merely becomes angry and may reprove the important person by speaking of some compromising event in the past in the coarsest language or predicting something of the sort in the near future to the great interest of the listening peasants who accept every word from the lips of the horse of Guedé as gospel truth. (221)

The power of the possession comes not only in the act of speaking grievances directly to the offender or oppressor but also in the act of voicing them in front of an audience. The official is embarrassed by the insults of “Guedé” and will continue to be embarrassed as word of the scene spreads through rumor and gossip transmitted by the crowd of witnesses to the entire village, and potentially beyond. This strategy plays upon fear, but unlike threats of physical violence, this fear plays upon one’s reputation and social standing.

It is significant that Hurston chose to title this book *Tell My Horse*, invoking this signifier of spirit possession. The title suggests she was possessed by the spirit of Guedé and this narrative is his voice speaking through her, thus insinuating that she herself cannot be held responsible for its contents. By abdicating responsibility, Hurston symbolically frees herself from any repercussions that could have resulted from publishing this material. Perhaps she feared further retribution from those she believed
had poisoned her in Haiti for asking too many questions. On the other hand, perhaps she
wanted to distance herself from taking responsibility for a manuscript she no longer
wished to write. Furthermore, pointing to Guedé, the loa of the Haitian peasantry, as
being responsible for speaking through her suggests that she has given voice to the
silenced masses so that they, in the form of Guedé, may speak through her to the
American people.

Such presumptions, however, are problematic. She cannot abdicate responsibility
for having written this text. If she really felt that claiming possession by Guedé would
have saved her from the perpetrators of her poisoning, she wouldn’t have changed her
original plans for the content of the text. She fulfilled her responsibility for writing the
text, following through on her contract, instead of scrapping the work altogether and
risking the loss of future publications with Lippincott. Lastly, and most troubling, is the
presumption that the Haitian peasantry could have found a voice through her. This
assertion speaks to possession of another kind, the kind of possession claimed by a
colonizer who arrives in a foreign land and claims to know and understand that culture so
well she can speak for the people there. This attitude is the same that Hurston herself
complained of regarding white collectors who traveled through the American South
collecting folklore from blacks there. Hurston could not claim membership to Haitian
culture the way she could with African American folk culture simply because of a shared
African ancestry. Presumably, the Haitian peasantry felt the same way about her coming
in and “stealing their stuff” as she had felt about white collectors coming to “steal her
stuff.” If she was poisoned in Haiti, perhaps it was the result of this kind of territorial
dispute. Ultimately, the “voiceless” Haitians had a voice after all, and it was not Hurston’s place to take possession of it.
Chapter 3

“You got tuh go there tuh know there”: Authenticity and the Audacity of Hope in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In her application for funding from the Guggenheim Foundation, Hurston asserted her aspiration to produce fiction that gave “a true picture of Negro life” (qtd. Boyd 285). While she went on to use the bulk of the Guggenheim funding for scientific research on the folk traditions and conjure beliefs of the African diaspora in Jamaica and Haiti, she dedicated seven weeks while living in Haiti to writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. On a personal level, the novel was a method of coping with her break-up from Percival Punter, with whom she had a relationship that she had described as “the real love affair of my life” (*Dust Tracks* 255). The end result of the novel went beyond a simple love story, though. It painted a picture of black folk life as she had perceived it while traveling through the South to conduct anthropological fieldwork, displaying the social politics at play in a small-town community while also contextualizing the types of folk tales she included in her earlier work within the goings on of everyday life. Furthermore, this novel was the introspective journey of a black woman in America that was, in many ways, a more honest portrait of Hurston’s own internal struggles than her autobiography. In this way, Hurston achieved her goal of painting a “true picture of Negro life.”

However, as is evident by Richard Wright’s acerbic review of *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s portrait, while it may have formulated a “true” picture, was not a “full” picture
of black life in America. Wright criticized Hurston’s “narrow” focus on the “pure simplicity” of “the Negro folk-mind,” and, ignoring the psychological complexity of the main character’s journey of self-discovery, condemned the novel as a simple love story with “no theme, no message, no thought” (25). Both her focus on rural folk-life as well as her emphasis on a black woman’s life-long journey towards autonomy and self-realization were deemed as insignificant in Wright’s eyes.

Wright was not alone in his assessment of a black woman’s psychological journey as insignificant. In fact, the novelty of a story depicting the trials and tribulations of a black woman being published in 1937 should not be minimized. As Sherley Anne Williams noted in her forward for the 1978 edition of Their Eyes, the portraits of black women in American literature, well into the mid-twentieth century, were limited by the stereotypical images of, on the one hand, the ham-fisted matriarch, strong and loyal in the defense of the white family she serves (but unable to control or protect her own family without the guidance of some white person), and, on the other, the amoral, instinctual slut. Between these two stereotypes stood the tragic mulatto: too refined and sensitive to live under the repressive conditions endured by ordinary blacks and too colored to enter the white world. (20)

Hurston’s Janie is, notably, neither a matriarch nor a slut, and despite being the offspring of two generations of black women who were raped by white men, she is not a tragic mulatta figure either. Furthermore, the woman Janie becomes after her long journey of self-discovery is one who is physically and mentally strong, and confident in her sexuality but unwilling to love a man more than she loves herself.

Just as Janie does not fit into the expected roles for a black woman, neither does the rest of the town fit into the ways a black community was often portrayed as reliant on the interventions of white people. The insular black communities that form the core of the
book’s setting do not seek assistance from, nor are they persistently persecuted by, any white community. These communities are segregated from white influence, demonstrating the elements that Hurston had argued were the positive side of segregation. Reacting against the Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Department of Education, Hurston condemned the “belief that there is no greater delight to Negroes than physical association with whites,” asking, “How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?” (“Court Order” 956).¹ Within her novel, the black community shows no great desire to be associated with whites, just as the white community does not seek the company of the blacks. And although the presence of the white community looms in the background, inserting itself into the lives of the main characters in a few moments of the plot, it is by and large ignored in their day-to-day concerns.

Both of these aspects made Their Eyes a unique narrative at the time it was written and published. As such, its very existence is an act of resistance, because of both its suggestion that African Americans could have rich and complex inner lives and interpersonal relations without the influence or oversight of whites as well as its assertion that a black woman could live a life wherein she was neither “de mule uh de world” (14) nor a “pretty doll-baby…made to sit on de front porch” and be waited on like the white

¹ Hurston’s stance on school integration, as expressed here, was problematic, to say the least. Hurston herself had benefitted tremendously from an integrated school system. As the first black woman admitted to Barnard College, she was able to make connections to the powerful people who would launch her career, to say nothing of the superior education she received that helped to form the foundation for much of her work. In fact, she so appreciated the benefits she received as a result of her Barnard education, she even asserted in “How It Feels to be Colored Me” that “Slavery was the price I paid for civilization…. It was a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it” (827). Furthermore, Hurston had very little luck maintaining employment at the many black colleges where she was either hired or had applied to teach. Despite her seeming nostalgia for Eatonville, her all-black hometown, Hurston did not seem to be cut out for or gain any satisfaction from complete segregation between the races. Thus, her sentiment expressed here was either reactionary and purposefully inflammatory, or incredibly short-sighted.
mistress of a plantation (28). The radicalness of these assertions can be seen even more clearly by placing them within the context of *Porgy* (1925), arguably the most popular narrative of a Southern black community during the 1920s and 1930s, as evidenced by its transformation into a hit play and, later, into what has been hailed as the first American opera, George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. By paying particular attention to the paths taken by the main female characters and the roles played by the peripheral white communities in these two novels, I will demonstrate how Hurston’s text expands the horizons available to black characters in American literature and, in doing so, undermines the dominant discourse that sought to maintain Jim Crow era race relations by glorifying a mythical Golden Age of slavery.

Responding to the popularity of texts like *Porgy*—white-authored literature centered on African American characters—Hurston penned an article for the *American Mercury* in 1934 titled “You Don’t Know Us Negroes” that judged this trend to be the “oleomargarine era in Negro writing” (1). The article was never published, which as biographer Valerie Boyd asserts, “may have saved Hurston some friendships” (267), as the piece was overtly critical of some very popular authors at the time.² Margarine, Hurston explains in her article, “is the fictionalized form of butter [with] a taste that paraphrases butter…. In short, it has everything butterish about it except butter” (1). Her analogy corresponds to her critique that these popular stories about African Americans

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² Included in her critique was what Boyd calls a “covert (if thinly veiled) swipe” at friend and former employer Fannie Hurst’s novel *Imitation of Life* (1933). The storyline depicts a white woman’s business relationship with her black maid, whose light-skinned daughter controversially runs away to pass for white. Boyd points to the passage in the article in which Hurston references “mammy cut tales” being printed in “popular magazines” and “wonder[s] whether the author actually believes that his tale is probable or whether he knows it is flapdoodle and is merely concerned about the check” (“You Don’t Know” 3). The word “flapdoodle,” Boyd contends, calls to mind the “flapjacks” that formed the business of Hurst’s two main characters, and Hurston’s “mention of popular magazines—of which Fannie Hurst was the top-dollar queen—read like daggers expertly aimed at her former boss” (Boyd 267).
“made out they were holding a looking-glass to the Negro [but] had everything in them except Negroness” (1). She does, however, make an exception for a handful of white authors she calls “earnest seekers” who avoided the “rules and regulations of this Margarine Negro” writing by refusing to engage in the expected minstrel-derived stereotypes (4, 2). Of all those “earnest seekers,” she identifies DuBose Heyward as the one who has “come nearest the true inside of Negro life,” asserting he is “positively startling in his accuracy at times” (4). However, Heyward and every other white writer seeking to discover the interior lives of African Americans were necessarily “halted only by the barrier that exists somewhere in every Negro mind for the white man” (4). This barrier is built with the “feather-bed resistance” that Hurston describes African Americans offer up to white seekers. In this article, she defines feather-bed resistance by saying, “We are a polite people. So we say something, and usually what we say is what is expected of us, rather than the truth. The Indian resists curiosity with silence, but we offer the feather-bed resistance. That is, the probe enters, but never comes out. Gets smothered under irrelevant detail and laughter. The questioner leaves us feeling very pleased with him or herself” (3). It is not in the best interest, in Hurston’s opinion, for the African American community to satisfy the curiosity of white “seekers” with the full truth of their interior lives because, she explains, “we…know that nothing pleases [the white man] more than to find out what he thought all along was the truth” (3). Hurston argues that the

3 Other authors Hurston names as falling outside these stereotyped conventions include Julia Peterkin, T.S. Stribling, Paul Green, and E.C.L. Adams (whom she does not name, but refers to as “that author of the ‘Congaree Sketches’”). Valerie Boyd read this article as a response to Fannie Hurst’s publication of *Imitation of Life*, which garnered her much attention for its depiction of a white woman’s business relationship with her black maid and a controversial depiction of one of the maid’s daughters running away to pass for white (Boyd 267).

4 Hurston reused almost the same language in *Mules and Men*, as discussed in Chapter 1. Hurston had submitted this article for publication a year prior to the book’s publication.
black man should “mold…an image” of himself to distract the white man’s interest so that he will “seize [that image] and drag it away,” leaving the black man free to “say your say and sing your song” (3-4).

By weaving a hidden discourse of resistance into her literary work, Hurston was able to produce a double text—providing a surface-level narrative to distract the interest of curious seekers by giving them a glimpse at what they expect to find in the interior lives of African Americans, while also providing a path of resistance to the dominant narrative and a spark of hope for those who could see it. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston presented a picture of colorful folk life within a Southern African American community. But she also combatted the negative implications of a storyline like *Porgy’s* that sought to keep the Southern black folk community paralyzed in a “Golden Age” of slavery-like oppression. While Heyward’s Bess has no self-control or autonomy, Hurston’s Janie learns how to function within the oppression of her marriage to Joe Starks in a way that preserves her sense of self and, ultimately, she learns how to express that self and love that self more than anyone or anything else in her life. Where Heyward’s text holds a community in stasis, Hurston’s shows growth; and while *Porgy* ends in despair, *Their Eyes* ends with hope. I will first give some background on the production and popular reception of *Porgy*, before going on to show the way Hurston formulated *Their Eyes* with many of the same surface-level features contained in *Porgy*, but with vastly different contexts and implications that ultimately contributed to subverting and resisting the dominant racist discourse that *Porgy* invoked.

*Porgy* was DuBose Heyward’s first attempt at writing a novel. Thanks in large part to his connections among the Southern literary scene—he was a founding member of
the Poetry Society of South Carolina—Heyward saw the novel not only published quickly after completion, but also serialized in a major industry journal and heralded by numerous reviews in major newspapers and magazines. These reviews praised *Porgy* as an “authentic” portrait of a Southern black community. As Ellen Noonan notes in her book-length study of *Porgy and Bess*, reviewers overwhelmingly praised it as “a fine character study of a Southern negro,” “a magnificent novel of Negro life,” and “a realistic picture of everyday life” (qtd. 41-42). One reviewer declared that “nothing finer has occurred in American literature since ‘Uncle Remus’” (qtd. 41), while another asserted that “Porgy may be counted as the Negro’s contribution to American literature” (qtd. 42). Within a few months it “topped the *Chicago Tribune’s* best-seller list and was checked out from the Chicago public library more than any other book except one” (39). Within a year, Heyward had sold motion picture rights to Cecil B. DeMille’s production company, and Paul Robeson was signed to star as the title character (Alpert 40-41). The play version debuted as the opening show of the distinguished Theatre Guild’s 1927-1928 season (48, 52).

By the time the storyline was adapted into George Gershwin’s enduringly famous opera, *Porgy and Bess*, it had become a standard cultural touchstone. The opera’s opening night in October 1935 drew a who’s who of celebrities for its audience. Hollis Alpert, in his history of the opera, describes the producers as having been “besieged with requests for tickets for weeks on end. Newspaper and magazine editors, noting the importance of the occasion, dispatched both their theatre and their music critics” (Alpert

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5 Despite the star-power behind the production, the film was never made. The project was canned by the company’s head of sales, who determined the storyline and the all-black cast would never play in Southern movie houses (Alpert 41). A short time later, Al Jolson had offered to buy the film rights for the play version of *Porgy*, but again the production never came to fruition, likely because of the stock market collapse in 1929 (71).
Celebrities from “theatre, music, films, finance” and “society” filled the seats, including notable actors such as Joan Crawford and Katherine Hepburn, novelist Fannie Hurst (also a close friend of Hurston’s), and publishers Condé Nast and Harold Ross, to name only a few (3). The show ran for just a few months, but its 124 performances on Broadway were a “hitherto unheard of” run for an opera (123).

The popularity of the story in its various forms as a novel, play, and opera, is a testament to the thirst American audiences had for what they considered to be an authentic depiction of black folk culture. When Gershwin’s opera debuted, it “was one of the very few serious theatrical works to feature a story that revolved around black characters,” and as a result, “white producers, critics, and audiences generally understood it to be an accurate depiction of black life” (Noonan 3). That understanding was furthered by the deliberate marketing of the opera “as a true-to-life depiction of southern black life and musical sound” (7). Heyward’s insistence that African American singers and actors be cast, rather than white actors performing in blackface, further enhanced the seeming authenticity of the material. This effusive praise of the “authenticity” of Porgy is based in part on the character development of the story, which was drastically more complex than the minstrel show figures that formed the basis of white depictions of black characters previously. Rather than sticking to static minstrel figures, author DuBose Heyward gave his characters a certain amount of emotional depth. The central love story of the novel shows both Porgy and Bess growing and changing as they fall in love. Porgy was, in fact, one of the first novels to be written by a white man that portrayed dynamic black characters with any real emotional depth.
Additionally, reviewers often cited Heyward’s background as further proof for his claims of authenticity. He was a native Charlestonian from a prominent family considered to be part of the high society elites of the town. His family had amassed a significant amount of wealth during slavery, but had lost much of its fortune during the Civil War and Reconstruction. As Noonan explains, by the time Heyward had grown into a young man, he was obligated to take on a variety of paid work to provide financial support to his family. Much of this early work experience placed him in positions where, even as a teenager, he “exercised authority over black workers and customers” (26). These positions included “collecting burial-insurance payments in Charleston’s black neighborhoods, …supervising black laborers on his aunt’s plantation [and working] as a cotton checker and timekeeper for a steamship line” (26). All of these positions brought him into close contact with the people who served as his inspiration for the characters of *Porgy*. These experiences bolstered Heyward’s claim of authentically speaking for the black community of Charleston in the eyes of his reviewers and his largely white audience. However, as evidenced by the positions of authority he held over black workers who were, no doubt, considerably older and more experienced, Heyward was never on equal footing with them, and his position of power surely influenced their behavior in his presence. The innate sense of superiority Heyward felt shows itself in his text. The very fact that he felt entitled to speak for the black community of Charleston demonstrates his arrogance.

In an article published just months before the release of *Porgy* (and published in the same magazine the novel was serialized in), Heyward provides an overview of Southern literature, focusing solely on white authors and praising several contemporary
white writers for their portrayals of Southern black life, written with “honesty and fearlessness” (qtd. Noonan 31). He insisted “it is high time that the Negro produced his own literature” while ignoring their already existent contributions to the field (qtd. 32). In fact, within his role at the Poetry Society of South Carolina, Heyward quashed an announcement of the release of Society member Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. Toomer had joined the Society by mail from out of state, not disclosing that he was African American to the admissions board. When Heyward and another founding member discovered that Toomer was black, they deleted the announcement, “[f]earing that the Poetry Society would be discredited by the disclosure of a black member” (32). *Porgy* reflects Heyward’s hypocrisy in arguing for “fearlessness” in writing about African Americans while simultaneously acting in ways that demonstrate a great amount of fear about being perceived as being an associate of a black poet. His novel demonstrates, on the one hand, black characters who have more depth and realism than the minstrel tropes most commonly used at the time, while on the other, still engaging in a narrative that reinforces a racial hierarchy and advocates for the continued suppression of African Americans.

The story centers around Porgy, a crippled beggar who lives in a segregated black community living in Catfish Row, a tenement house in Charleston, South Carolina. The opening scene shows Porgy divvying up his begging earnings into a pile for savings, a pile for basic necessities, and a pile for gambling. He is skillful with the dice in the Friday night craps game, much to the dismay of the story’s antagonist, Crown. In contrast to the lame and self-effacing Porgy, Crown is “bestial”—a muscular stevedore who works on the docks, loading bales of cotton for export. He is physically intimidating, with
a booming voice and a quick temper. When he suspects a fellow gambler of cheating, he attacks, murdering the man with his cotton hook.

This murder sets the story into motion, as Crown flees town to avoid arrest and his companion, Bess, now left on her own, wanders into town and finds shelter with the humble and stable Porgy. Bess is a woman who is highly susceptible to suggestion, displaying no self-control or self-determination. She is an alcoholic, a cocaine addict, and a prostitute. Under Porgy’s influence, she sobers up and remains faithful to him, until a chance encounter with the fugitive Crown, who swears he will reclaim her when the cotton harvest comes in. While Bess desires to stay with Porgy and be a “good” woman, she admits that she cannot resist Crown. Porgy swears to defend her, and stays true to his word by murdering Crown when he comes for her one night. Instead of ending with Porgy and Bess living on happily together, the novel shifts to a tone of despair when the two are separated upon Porgy’s arrest—not for the murder of Crown, but for fleeing a summons to identify Crown’s body at the morgue. Bess, rudderless during the five days of Porgy’s brief incarceration, leaves town with a group of sailors who lure her with alcohol onto a boat headed for Savannah. Porgy, aged and saddened by the experience, settles back into his quiet, lonely life of street-corner begging.

The problem with the story being taken as an authentic depiction of the lives of African American Charlestonians, as Noonan argues, is that at its core the story “promoted a vision of African Americans in the South that was sentimental and paternalistic” (15). The interactions between whites and blacks in Heyward’s novel show the blacks’ deference to the authority of the whites. While resistant to the intrusion of whites into their private quarters, such resistance is passive. They remain quiet rather
than confrontational. Ultimately, the characters are complacent with the segregation and inequality of the Jim Crow South. While the novel, Noonan argues, does acknowledge the social and economic hardships faced by blacks “under the heel of Jim Crow,” especially the economic limitations of women and an unfair justice system, the story’s “ultimate message rejects the possibility of positive change on Catfish Row” (23-25). This message is reinforced by the novel’s conclusion that keeps Porgy and all his fellow inhabitants of Catfish Row in the status quo. Despite the passions that infuse the novel, no one changes position and conditions are neither improved nor diminished, ultimately, by the passing of time.

By locking his characters into an idyllic stasis, Heyward essentially presents an argument against the Great Migration, in which tens of thousands of African Americans fled the rural South with hopes of bettering their social and economic positions in the industrial cities of the North. The argument is embodied by the one character Heyward included in his story who had made the migration to New York and returned to Charleston. That character is Sportin’ Life, who makes his entrance into the story wearing “sky-blue, peg-top trousers, yellow spats, and…a scarlet bow-tie [with] an immense paste horseshoe” and commenting on the “good-lookin’ white gals” in town (49). His colorful, tailored clothing represents a style popularized in Harlem, and his sexually suggestive comment on white women reveals the racial intermixing occurring in Harlem night clubs. Both are out of place in the context of Catfish Row, where incomes are too meager to afford dress clothes, and a black man who merely looks at a white women, let alone makes verbal overtures to her, may be subject to physical violence or murder at the hands of a lynch mob.
Sportin’ Life, as his name indicates, is a player. He literally plays by participating in gambling games, but he also figuratively plays with the minds of the inhabitants of Catfish Row. His appraisal of Charleston’s white women is met with admiration from his male audience, drawing an accusation from Maria, the arbiter of justice in the community, that he is corrupting the “decent country mens” of Charleston by filling them “full ob talk wut put money in de funeral ondehtakuh pocket” (50). She ascribes this corrupting influence to fact that those who have traveled to the North have forgotten their “place” in the hierarchical system of racial segregation: “De fus t’ing dat dem nigger fuhgit is dat dem is nigger” (50). The implication of Maria’s accusation is that the liberal ideas of financial gain and racial equality are unwelcome in the South and are bound to be met with lynchings. Beyond stirring up “trouble” by influencing Southern blacks to forget their “place,” Sportin’ Life is also a drug dealer, who entices Bess to give up Porgy’s gambling winnings to pay for cocaine, and as a result, she sacrifices what limited respectability she had established by living with Porgy after she attacks another woman and is thrown in jail for disorderly conduct.

There is no place for Sportin’ Life in Catfish Row, and he is forcefully expelled from the community by Maria. After seeing the havoc his drugs have played on Bess, Maria proclaims she “knows” Sportin’ Life—he is a “damn, dirty, dope-peddler, wreckin’ de homes ob dese happy niggers!” (105). After beating and threatening to kill him if he returns, Maria “placed a foot in the small of his back [and] catapulted him once and for all out of Catfish Row and the lives of its inhabitants” (106). As Sportin’ Life is a symbol for northern migration and all of the implicit hope of progress and change for African Americans from the Jim Crow segregation and oppression, his expulsion from
Catfish Row is essentially a symbol of the expulsion of change from Heyward’s idealized “Golden Age.”

Hope for the inhabitants of Catfish Row comes not from the economic gain promised by migration to industrial cities but through paternalistic intervention by the local white community. Alan Archdale is representative of this supposedly positive influence of the white community. He is enlisted by Serena Robbins, the wife of the man murdered by Crown at the start of the story, to help free Peter, who is held in custody as a “material witness” until Crown can be captured (35). Archdale intervenes as the lawyer for the Rutledge family, who “owned half the slaves in the county” (53), including Serena’s father. Part of Archdale’s responsibilities include “look[ing] after their colored folk for them” (53). Archdale is able to secure Peter’s release, not by going through the courts, which would have taken “no end of time,” but by paying a ten-dollar bond to a man who “has an arrangement with the magistrate” (53-54). While presumably meant to show the kindness and sense of responsibility of former slaveholding families still had towards the progeny of their former slaves, this scene reinforces the unjust system that held the black community in subjugation and poverty.

Peter is imprisoned by an unfair law that allowed him to be held merely because he could identify Crown. The white police officers who are sent to investigate the murder of Robbins treat Peter roughly, accusing him immediately of killing Robbins. One even draws his gun on the old man in order to intimidate him into admitting he witnessed the murder. As a result of his arrest, Peter’s horse, by which he earns a living, and all of his material possessions are repossessed by his creditors (35-36). Furthermore, Porgy, dependent on Peter for transportation, also suffers, his savings dwindling as he has no
means to get to his begging post (39). Thus, all the material gain that Peter and Porgy have accumulated through hard work and careful savings is squandered thanks to an unjust justice system. Additionally, the solution for Peter’s release lies far outside the means available to any of the inhabitants of Catfish Row. Ten dollars is an incredibly large sum for individuals who are quite literally scraping together pennies in order to sustain their day-to-day existence. Serena, for example, has no burial insurance for her husband. So when he is murdered, she must beg for spare change from her neighbors to pay the twenty-five dollar burial fee. The community gives what it can from the “slender margin [of funds] between daily wage and immediate need” (26), but comes up a full ten dollars short by the time the undertaker arrives to bury the body. He generously agrees to complete the burial at his own expense, allowing Serena to pay off the remaining ten dollars in weekly installments from the small margin of profit she earns each week.

Without the bail money supplied by Archdale on behalf of the Rutledges, Peter would have been subject to the lengthy process of the justice system. In the nearly two months that Peter is imprisoned, all of his belongings, including his horse and his furniture, are repossessed since all were being paid for on a weekly installment plan (35). Rather than simply resume payments upon his release, he is required to sign new contracts, “which had started him off again on the eternal weekly payment” (54). Had he spent even longer in prison, it is likely that his furniture would no longer have been available for re-purchase and his “ancient beast” of a horse may have died, leaving him unable to afford a younger, healthier replacement horse. Furthermore, Peter’s spirit and health have been negatively affected by his imprisonment. When he is released, his “shoulders drooped, and his grip on actualities seemed weakened” (54). That he does not
become seriously ill seems a small miracle considering the state of the prisons, which Heyward describes as providing poor living conditions vulnerable to spreading “tuberculosis, or one of a hundred nameless and communicable diseases” (79). Bess, who is imprisoned only ten days, nearly dies from her exposure to disease. Thus, it is possible that Peter could have died in prison before being processed through the justice system without the funds to post bail. Archdale’s knowledge of how to circumvent the system shows just how much the system is stacked against both African Americans and the poor. Without assistance from Archdale, Peter—innocent of any wrongdoing—would be left to simply wither away in jail.

While Peter’s situation and his poverty are pitiable because he is an old man caught up in an unfair system, other characters who have sought to raise themselves above the abject poverty and enter into the middle class are depicted by Heyward as unsavory and eager to take advantage of others. He describes the undertaker, who arrives while Serena is trying to raise the funds necessary to bury her husband, as a “short yellow negro” with a “low, oily, and penetrating voice” (27). His entrance causes a “rude interruption,” and his “air of great importance” suggests his sense of superiority to the inhabitants of Catfish Row (27). Despite his voice being “penetrating,” he speaks only in a whisper, asking Serena how much money she has collected (28). Being a full ten dollars short, Serena falls to her knees, “clutching the man’s hand between both of hers” while her “scream shrilled wildly” (28). The undertaker’s response shows he is not a cruel, uncaring, or even greedy person. He explains that the coffin and the carriage will cost him twenty-five dollars, an explanation which demonstrates that he is charging her only the cost of the product and services rendered without any markup for profit. That he
agrees to incur ten-dollars’ worth of upfront costs, allowing Serena to reimburse him on an installment plan, shows that he is sympathetic to the plight of a poor widow but presumably needs to keep himself in business by recuperating the costs.

The only other black businessman that Heyward includes is Frasier, a lawyer Porgy encounters who has reached out to Archdale for legal assistance. Like the undertaker, Frasier exhibits “an air of great importance” with the “threatening gaze” he throws at Porgy when taking it upon himself to shoo the beggar off of Archdale’s doorstep (61). Although Frasier has no “official sanction of the State” for practicing law, he “had voted the democratic ticket in the dark period of reconstruction, when such action on his part took no little courage” (61). By voting democratic, he had voted against the interests of his race, aligning his loyalty to the white “aristocracy” and placing himself as their “pet negro.” His reward for betraying the interests of his people is the sanction to command their legal affairs. Frasier oversteps his authority, however, when he takes it upon himself to grant divorces amongst the black community when it was still illegal to do so in the State of South Carolina. Although Archdale advocates on his behalf, he does so with a great deal of patronizing language. He calls the prosecutor’s office to plead for a dismissal of the case, explaining that Frasier is “perfectly innocent of any deliberate wrongdoing. Yes, of course; it would be serious if he were responsible; but you know no one takes old Frasier seriously” (65). Thus, the matter is dismissed, with the promise that Frasier cease and desist issuance of his divorce decrees, simply because the matter is not to be taken seriously. The very idea of a “serious” black lawyer is deemed absurd and unworthy of the time or effort needed to prosecute any misdoing.
The weakness and vulnerability of the inhabitants of Catfish Row are central to the storyline. Archdale and other members of the social elites made up of former plantation owners take it as their responsibility to look out for the poor blacks of Catfish Row, protecting them from unscrupulous and immoral members of the black middle class like Frasier. However, even they are powerless to help Catfish Row in the face of “Destiny,” as depicted by the hurricane that slams Charleston in a dramatic moment of the text. This hurricane scene does very little to drive the plot forward, but does quite a bit to show the weakness and vulnerability of the inhabitants of Catfish Row, replicating in nature what they face daily living under the thumb of Jim Crow. Notably, the storm is described not as spontaneous, but as systematic. It “proceeded about its business” in a “studied manner…. It clicked off its moves like an automaton,” controlling the “tides and winds” with “invincible precision” and a “preconceived plan” (116). Just like the justice system in which Peter is a powerless cog within an oppressive machine, the hurricane methodically undermines any sense of control the inhabitants of Catfish Row may aspire to have over their lives. This methodical undermining of self-determination is not a fluke, but rather “is Destiny working nakedly for the eyes of man to see” (116). Such an appeal to “destiny” implies that the death and destruction caused by the storm are unavoidable.

The greatest loss incurred in the storm is the destruction of the fishermen’s vessels, the “Mosquito Fleet,” which leads to the deaths of both Jake and his wife, Clara, and the subsequent abandonment of their newborn child to Bess. While the fishermen seem to have acted out of necessity by working up to the last minute before the storm in order to capitalize on an influx of fish, the narrative actually suggests the men are exhibiting masculine hubris and greed. In advance of the storm, Jake, a boat captain
respected for the “skillful and daring hand” with which he commanded his ship (110),
laughs away a fellow sailor’s prediction that the “Septumbuh storm due soon” will drive
the fish off to calmer waters (108). Contrary to the sailor’s warning, the ships bring in a
record haul the day before the storm begins. The haul is so large that the market is glutted
and “the fishermen vied with each other in giving away their surplus cargo, so that they
would not have to throw it overboard” (110). When the weather becomes “unsettled” the
next day, the fishermen are still eager to sail, seemingly ignoring the principles of supply
and demand economics. Jake ignores his wife’s pleas that he remain on land, being “full
of the business in hand, and besides, he was growing a little impatient at his wife’s
incessant plea that he sell his share of the ‘Seagull’ and settle on land” (111). Thus, the
insistence to sail is driven neither by necessity or economics, but by a show of
masculinity. In fact, the men exhibit a level of carefree braggadocio as they set sail on the
morning the hurricane hits, letting fly “bursts of loud, loose laughter” even while “it was
inconceivable that the men could put out, in the face of unsettled weather…and exhibit
no uneasiness or fear” (112). In this context, their behavior seems illogical, born out of an
almost animalistic instinct to display their “manliness” in the face of a force beyond their
control. One cannot help but reflect on the similarities between the fishermen’s daring
and that of Sportin’ Life, who dares to fly in the face of the methodical system of racial
oppression by (metaphorically) “whistling” at a white woman, or Frasier, who dares to
“rewrite” the law to suit the cultural customs of his community. If the self-determinacy
displayed by Sportin’ Life and Frasier are exhibitions of manhood, they are expelled from
the narrative—and, by extension, the community of Catfish Row—as effectively as the
fishermen of the “Mosquito Fleet” are obliterated by the hurricane.
The humanity of the characters is repeatedly undermined by the narrative, as they are described as being subject to animalistic instincts over which they seem to have very little control. When Crown attacks Robbins at the start of the novel, he is transformed from a “gladiator” (20) into a beast who “crouches” and “snarls,” his cotton hook transformed into “a prehensile claw” (22). The two grappling men become prehistoric, primitive characters as “[d]own, down, down the centuries they slid” and a “heady bestial stench absorbed all other odors” (22-23). After another craps game, when Bess is led into temptation by Sportin’ Life and forks over Porgy’s winnings in exchange for drugs, she, too, is transformed into an animal by following her instinctual desires. The narcotic turns Bess “insanely malignant,” and with “convulsive hands” and “[w]ide, red-lit eyes,” she attacks a woman who implies that Porgy stole her husband’s money in the game through unfair use of “conjer, or…loaded dice” (72). In the fight that ensues, Bess becomes “a maddened woman [who] whirled like a dervish and called horribly upon her God, striking and clawing wildly” (73). In both of these scenes, the craps games function as the gateway to the primitive, as Bess, Crown, and Robbins are each transformed into wild animals, easily sloughing off the trappings of civilization.

While Porgy is involved in both of these craps games, he has a gentleness and a predisposition towards “something Eastern and mystic” (17) that protects him from great swings of emotion. Furthermore, his being a “cripple” and unable to walk protects him from the aggression of others. So while Crown throws the dice by “scoop[ing] them fiercely into his great hand, and swearing fouly at them,” Porgy “[takes] them up tenderly…in his muscular, slim-fingered hand” and softly sings to them, “Oh, little stars, roll me some light!” (21). The tenderness with which Porgy is portrayed is accentuated
by its contrast against the bestiality with which Crown is depicted. It is this innate tenderness which saves Porgy from quick flashes of temper. His one act of violence in the story, the murder of Crown, is premeditated and done quietly, in the dark and behind closed doors. Furthermore, it is not done as an act of vengeance, but as an act of compassion for Bess. Only by killing Crown can Porgy save Bess from being stolen away by him and drawn back into a life driven by her most base instincts.

Unlike Porgy, who is sympathetic because he is thoroughly unthreatening to the racial hierarchy that structures the lives of those on Catfish Row, Bess demonstrates how incapable she—and, by extension, other members of her race—are at successful self-determination in the face of primitive temptation. When Bess arrives on Catfish Row, she is “extremely drunk and unpleasant to look upon” (46). Her face is disfigured by an “ugly scar [that] marked her left cheek, and the acid of utter degradation had etched hard lines about her mouth” (48). Furthermore, her arrival is a direct result of the disappearance of Crown, who fled to elude arrest after murdering Robbins. Without a man, she is a ship without a harbor. When she first latches onto Porgy, she does so because he “gits good money fum de w’ite folks” (48) and presumably can support her. Evidently, Bess has made a habit of taking up with men for money, as evidenced when she is approached at the market by “one of the river men who had known her in the past” who “hailed her too familiarly” by propositioning a rendezvous for that night (67). This lifestyle, and her habit of giving “faint, cryptic smiles that always made men friends and women enemies for her” (67), functions as the catalyst for the other women on Catfish Row to snub her presence. Bess is in fact repeatedly ignored or otherwise socially snubbed by the women on Catfish Row. Serena Robbins, the character embodying religious zealotry, “look[s]
through” Bess when arriving to their door and speaks past her to deliver news directly to Porgy (49). Serena refuses to believe Bess is capable of bringing happiness to Porgy, and insists she can only be managed by a rough man like Crown: “Dat ‘oman ain’t de kin’ tuh mek man happy. It tek a killer like Crown tuh hol’ she down” (55). While she is being snubbed by the townswomen, she returns the gesture by refusing to acknowledge them or give their snubs power. She spends her time hidden away with Porgy in his living quarters, and when she does appear in public, she “pass[es] them as though they did not exist” and holds “an air of cool scorn” in their presence (56). As much as she seems to need a man to moor herself to, she seems content without the friendship of women.

However, Porgy’s influence on Bess is a positive one, and the changes in her character soften the resistance that the other women on Catfish Row hold against her. Her body physically softens as she, presumably, gains weight and detoxes from her previous drug and alcohol use: “Her gaunt figure had rounded out, bringing back a look of youthful comeliness, and her face was losing its hunted expression.” As a result, her sense of self-pride is “heightened, and, in her bettered condition forced a resentful respect from her feminine traducers” (66). While the resentment of the women slowly diminishes, Bess finds her first friend in the rough and gruff cook Maria, and greatly values the friendship that grows between them. When Bess is arrested for drug use and disturbing the peace after attacking a woman who accuses Porgy of cheating at dice, it is Maria who visits her at the prison. Maria is driven there by her love for Porgy, whom she regards as a son (79), but forgives Bess her weakness for dope, blaming the drug dealer who had given it to her instead. Maria’s parting words—”Yuh do right, Sister. But ef dat yalluh nigger come tuh Catfish Row again—leabe him fuh me—dat’s all!” (80)—express
a solidarity with Bess and place her under the same protective impulse she feels for Porgy. The encounter leaves Bess smiling, as she explains, “Yuh done hear um call me ‘Sister,’ ain’t yuh? Berry well den. Dat mean me and she is frien”’ (81). Thus, her association with Porgy has brought her her first female friend, and therefore, brought her closer into the community of Catfish Row.

By the time the community takes its annual excursion to “Kittiwar” (Kiawah) Island, Bess actively inserts herself into the community by insisting on helping Maria with the manual labor: “I gots a ready hand wid bundle…. I want a job. Does yuh want a han’ wid dem package, or not?” (96). Even though Maria suspects that Bess’s disappearance on the island has to do with Crown, she again forgives Bess her lack of self-control and blames the influence of Crown for Bess’s indiscretion. Even Serena, who has been so hard against Bess during her time on Catfish Row, seems to soften towards her presence, as she doubts Maria’s belief that Bess “still run wid dat nigger [Crown]” and insists that Bess “goin’ stay wid Porgy, ef she know wut good fuh she” (103). Bess more thoroughly becomes enmeshed in the community when the hurricane threatens the town, and she takes to comforting Clara, whose husband had set sail on a fishing trip that morning (113). In fact, her comforting of Clara is profound enough that Clara places her infant child in Bess’s care when she sets off to the dock in search of the remains of her husband’s ship (125). When Clara is washed away by the surf, Bess takes ownership of the child. Her rebuff of Serena’s implicit offer to take the child in transforms her utterly, as the “old defiance” in her eyes is replaced by “an inflexible determination, and behind it, a new-born element in the woman that rendered the scarred visage incandescent” (128). It is this “incandescence” that cows Serena, and she relinquishes her claim on the
infant to Bess. This recognition of Bess as the rightful caretaker of the child fully cements her place within the community.

Ultimately, however, that sense of community and even her newfound motherhood cannot save Bess from her basest instincts. It is only a man who can hold her down, and when Porgy is arrested for refusing to appear at the coroner to identify Crown’s body, she is again a ship adrift. In the five days he is absent, Bess quickly unmoors herself, being “berry low in she min’ cause she can’t fin’ out how long [Porgy] is lock up fuh” (157). With the mildest of suggestions from a former lover, Bess is convinced to “tek er swallow ob licker” and quickly gets drunk with a “gang” of “half a dozen of de mens” who “carry she away on de ribber boat” bound for Savannah (157).

While her community was strong in Porgy’s presence, Bess is left on her own once Porgy is taken from Catfish Row. No one intervenes in her abduction, and when the sailors send word to Maria about where they’ve taken Bess, no one is sent to recover her. Porgy sits passively in receiving the news, transformed by it into a suddenly very old man.

In the end, Bess cannot rise above her primitive nature. She must have Porgy actively near her in order to keep her in line and protect her from sex, drugs, and alcohol. Implicitly, this is the same role that whites play in the lives of the Catfish Row community: the influence of the close proximity to whiteness keeps the African Americans in their “place.” While some whites may abuse that power, as we see in the roughness of the police officers and debt collectors, others demonstrate the “ideal” relationship between the races, as Archdale comes to the aid of Serena and Peter with the kindliness of an indulgent father. Thus, the “authenticity” of the storyline and its characters claimed by reviewers of the novel, and later the play and opera, only served to
reinforce existing racist stereotypes. It reassured audiences that segregation and paternalism were in the best interest of poor black communities like the one depicted as inhabiting Catfish Row because, it implies, people like Bess, Porgy, and Crown are, like children, mentally incapable of acting in their own best interest.

These were the kinds of racist stereotypes that Richard Wright saw when looking at the surface-level storyline of Their Eyes Were Watching God. He saw only the depiction of “the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in the pure simplicity” (25). He saw nothing that contradicted or spoke back to the kind of racist message contained in Porgy and other popular stories about Southern black communities published in this era. As Rosemary Hathaway has argued, “Wright was concerned precisely about the novel’s potential appeal to touristic readers—those (‘white folks’) who would read the novel as a sort of guidebook to the (pre)modern Negro and take away from Hurston’s novel exactly what they expected to find there in the first place” (174). However, as Hathaway goes on to argue, Hurston does not provide a simple guidebook to her reader. A number of disruptions keeps the “touristic reader” at arm’s length from the text. For example, while Hurston presents a number of folktales within the novel, her “deliberate omission of ethnographic explanation or analysis thereby excludes the unknowing (touristic) reader from fully understanding what is going on” and thus she “prevents these materials from being ‘mistranslated’ or coopted” (177). In this way, Hurston is protecting her material from those who might divorce elements of its content from the overall narrative arc.

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6 Hathaway defines “touristic reading” as the practice of “impos[ing] a predetermined cultural awareness on a text and an author; the interaction between the text and the reader thus results in cultural ascription, the projection of an authentic cultural identity onto a group by ‘outsiders’ to that group” (169).
Much of the folklore content in *Their Eyes* is presented on the front porch of Joe Starks’s store. In fact, the first speech cycle made on the porch references the speech-giving tradition without providing any anthropological interpretation. Tony Taylor stands on the porch and begins a speech to welcome the Starks to town and praise Joe for opening the store: “Brother Starks, we welcomes you and all dat you have seen fit tuh bring amongst us—yo’ belov-ed wife, yo’ store, yo’ land—” (39). But he is cut off by the laughter of the crowd and ridiculed by various audience members for not knowing how to make a speech properly. As Lige Moss explains to Tony, “Youse way outa jurisdiction. You can’t welcome uh man and his wife ‘thout you make comparison about Isaac and Rebecca at de well, else it don’t show de love between ‘em if you don’t” (40). While everyone in the crowd agrees with Lige’s reprimand, the omniscient narrator leaves out any explanation as to why this comparison is necessary. The reader who is not already schooled in these oral traditions comes away from the text no wiser about the significance of the Biblical reference. However, as Cynthia Bond explains in her analysis of this passage, it is the form, not the language, that creates meaning in this setting: “Lige understands that communicating what is ‘meant’ is not the object of speeches, figurative rhetoric is the object of speeches” (207). In other words, it is not the specific Biblical allusion that matters, but the act of referencing the figurative trope. Thus, in order to make a “good” speech, one must be educated in the formal conventions of the community and meet the expectations of the audience.

Hurston, as the author, is also aware of needing to meet formal conventions with her rhetoric. Her written language, however, is distinct from the conventions of the oral traditions she depicts in this scene and throughout the novel. She plays with the
expectations of her audience by sometimes giving readers what they want and, at other
times, neglecting those desires. One example of this pattern is her inconsistency in
explaining the cultural traditions she depicts. She gives no explanation in the speech-
giving scene described above. However, in other moments she does, such as when Sam
Watson and Lige Moss engage in their “eternal arguments.” Here, the narrator explains,
“It never ended because there was no end to reach. It was a contest in hyperbole and
carried on for no other reason” (59). Similarly, when the young men on the porch jostle
for the attention of three young women by making extravagant promises and declarations
of love, everybody laughs because “[t]hey know it’s not courtship. It’s acting-out
courtship and everybody is in the play” (63). These explanations, however, are merely
show, communicating very little substance. Like the figurative rhetoric of the speech,
these traditions of verbal play have deep roots and serve important functions in African
American folk tradition. As I have argued in earlier chapters, this linguistic work play
provides a valuable practice arena for speaking resistance against oppression through
humor. The cursory explanation that the narrator of Their Eyes provides elides the
element of resistance implicit in these verbal competitions, so that the reader who is not
already aware of the social implications of this tradition learns nothing from the narrative
explanation. Rather, that reader sees only the surface-level reference to play, which only
serves to reinforce his expectations that nothing serious happens in this Southern folk
culture.

What could Hurston’s motivation have been for constructing a multi-layer text,
allowing her “touristic readers,” arguably the largest portion of her reading public, to see
a text that conformed to their preconceived notions of Southern black folk culture? In
part, this choice was no doubt motivated by Hurston’s ambition to make a living off of her writing. She knew she had to cater to the interests of the American reading public in order to get published and to sell books. However, by weaving this subtext of resistance into her work, she was embodying the traditional role of the trickster—ultimately giving the “last laugh” to those who could read between the lines. In this way, Hurston could both have her cake and eat it, too, as she provided her publisher with a text that seemed to replicate the conventions of the genre popular at the time, while also staying true to the humanity and humor she valued in Southern black folk culture.

There are several instances of surface-level similarities between *Their Eyes* and *Porgy* which exemplify how Hurston employed touchstones of the genre while writing them in such a way that she ultimately reverses the implications of those touchstones as they were found in texts like *Porgy*. As noted above, the role of the white community in *Porgy*’s Charleston circumscribes the lives of the inhabitants of Catfish Row. The system created by that white community is stacked against the interests of Catfish Row, but the only avenue they have to fight against such injustice is through the benevolent aristocracy, as represented by Archdale. On the contrary, the white community in *Their Eyes* has very limited influence over the lives of the characters living in the all-black town of Eatonville or on the Muck in the Everglades. This is not to say there is no awareness of the oppressive racial hierarchy that pervaded the U.S. during the Jim Crow era. After all, it is Joe Starks’s driving ambition to be a “big voice” that drove him to Eatonville, a town that, he explains, “colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” to be independent from all those areas in which “de white folks had all de sayso” (27). However, beyond inspiring Joe to essentially self-segregate, the white community has no
direct influence over his actions once he arrives in Eatonville. There is, however, an influence from the idea of whiteness that pervades Joe’s actions and attitudes, which I examine in greater depth below.

At the end of the novel, an all-white court and jury both prosecutes and then acquits Janie for the murder of Tea Cake. Notably, both the jury and the audience in the courtroom are made up of people who “wore good clothes and had the pinky color that comes of good food. They were nobody’s poor white folks” (176)—a description reminiscent of Heyward’s Charleston elites embodied by the kindly lawyer Archdale and the wealthy family he represents. But while these people have an influence over whether or not Janie would be held accountable in the court of the white law, they have no say over the verdict handed down by the court of public opinion made up by her and Tea Cake’s community from the Muck. This voice may be silenced by the court—Sop-de-Bottom speaks out “anonymously from the anonymous herd” and is immediately silenced by the judge: “If you know what’s good for you, you better shut your mouth” (177-78)—but it is the one Janie feels she must appease before departing from the Muck, which she does by inviting the entire community to the lavish funeral she hosts for Tea Cake. In their eyes, she is not deemed innocent by the court proceedings, but rather by the display of her mourning at Tea Cake’s funeral, where all expense has gone towards putting Tea Cake to rest “royally” on a “white silken couch among the roses she had bought” with “a brand new guitar…in his hands” (180). Importantly, Janie spends the money only on Tea Cake, as she wears “[n]o expensive veils and robes” but opts instead to wear her overalls (180), thus drawing attention away from herself and placing it all on Tea Cake to express
her devotion to him. Janie’s innocence is declared by the community because of her
loving display of devotion, not because of the white court proceedings.

As mentioned above, the direct influence of the white community plays much less
of a role than the indirect influence it has over the characters. This indirect influence is
seen in the ways certain characters embrace aspects of white culture to assert superiority
over other members of the black community. This attitude can be seen in Logan
Killicks’s criticism of Janie when he thinks her refusal to work a plow is a sign that she
thinks she is socially superior to him: “You think youse white folks by de way you act”
(29). However, Joe Starks, in his ambition to become a “big voice,” most thoroughly
embraces this attitude by invoking elements of white culture to assert his superiority over
the town of Eatonville. In Joe’s social climb, superiority is achieved through economic
success and the display of economic superiority takes the guise of Southern white
aristocracy. As Susan Meisenhelder argues in her reading of Their Eyes, Joe “strives
simply to usurp the white man’s place at the top of the social ladder” (65). He builds
himself a big house, painting it “a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white
that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpool’s wore” (44). In
other words, he paints his house to replicate the houses of important members of the
white community. The house, in its position, its size, and its color, makes the rest of the
town look “like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house’” (44). Furthermore, he
takes to using a “gold-looking vase” that is nice enough to be a parlor display piece as his
spittoon, giving Janie a “lady-size spitting pot…[decorated] with little sprigs of flowers
painted all around the sides” (44-45). Such ostentatious displays of wealth cause more
than just a class divide between the Starks and the rest of Eatonville. As the narrator
explains, “It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a ‘gator. A familiar strangeness” (45). This division is insidious because it is a class divide which takes the guise of a racial divide, placing “whiteness” in line with “affluence” and “blackness” with “poverty.” In Joe Starks’s mind, success cannot be achieved without mimicking whiteness.

Joe’s mimicking of whiteness goes beyond his ostentatious display of wealth, and shows itself in the distribution of labor. As Nanny explains to Janie early on in her life, there is a hierarchy of labor based on race and sex: “de white man is de ruler of everything...[s]o 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” (14). When Joe Starks becomes the “big voice” of Eatonville, he distributes his labor accordingly. Joe delegates labor to the men of the town to clear paths for roads (38), to cut a tree for the light pole (42), and to dig a drainage ditch in front of the store (44). The last of these labors got the townsfolk “murmur[ring] hotly about slavery being over” even while “every man filled his assignment” (44). Once Joe has established himself as the “big voice” in town, he throws his load of physical labor to the other men of town as he presides over the work and makes speeches. Once the store is up and running, Joe passes off to Janie the responsibility of tending to customers. Janie is repeatedly divided from the community life on the porch of the store by needing to tend to customers inside. Whenever the townsfolk were gathered on the porch, “Joe would hustle her off inside the store to sell something” (51), thus keeping Janie isolated and working as a “mule.” However, the
power dynamic between Joe and the rest of the townspeople keeps Janie psychologically isolated from the townspeople, as well: “The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn’t get but so close to most of them in spirit” (44). By being married to Joe, she holds the paradoxical position of being both too “high” and kept as “the bell-cow” of the herd of women (39), and too “low” as Joe’s “mule.”

Ultimately, Joe’s pretense of superiority is destroyed when Janie ceases to participate in holding him up. Janie takes her stand against Joe after he accuses her of being too old—and thus, past her usefulness as either a pack animal or a trophy piece. Her insult—”When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (75)—not only robs Joe of his illusion of power, but also ridicules him in the eyes of the town. If his wife can no longer respect and honor him, how can the rest of the town? As a result, Joe sees that Janie has “cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They’d look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them” (75). This loss of the town’s respect is what finally causes Joe to wither and die. As Meisenhelder has argued, Janie’s “final allusion to sexual impotence” reveals Joe’s character as “an empty model of male identity” (68). In other words, mimicking the social oppression modelled by the white community is not a viable option, in Hurston’s eyes, for black masculinity. Furthermore, if Joe symbolizes this embrace of white culture as superior, then implicitly, Joe’s death suggests that once the black folk community stops admiring white culture as the ultimate standard by which to measure itself, then its influence will wither and die like Joe.
In contrast to the power dynamic at play in her relationship with Joe, Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake begins with an emphasis on their equality. As Dale Pattison has argued, Janie and Tea Cake are described as participating on equal grounding in their games: “she and Tea Cake participate ‘beside’ one another” thereby “allowing [their] relationship to flourish in the absence of the pervasive gender politics that have plagued Janie’s [prior] relationships” (16). In their relationship, Janie is not made to sit and be admired, nor is she made Tea Cake’s mule of labor. Rather, they talk equally and openly, and most importantly, they play and joke and laugh. This lack of hierarchy, and consequently lack of oppression, in their relationship is echoed by the community they find on the Muck when they move to the Everglades. Here, the ground is both fertile and dark: “Ground so rich that everything went wild…. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too” (123). Meisenhelder interprets this passage as Hurston’s symbolic depiction of “the flowering of black people possible outside white influence” (70). This land is “hidden” from the rest of the world by the rows of wild cane lining the roads, which symbolically hides the community from the cultural influence of the white community. Furthermore, the richness of the soil, and implicitly the black folk culture growing upon that soil, is powerful enough to “fertilize a Kansas wheat field.” The imagery Hurston chose here is striking: Kansas is in the geographic center of the country, just as whiteness is central to the country’s cultural image of itself. Furthermore the imagery of wheat in its paleness contrasts sharply to the darkness and blackness of the South Florida soil. The community on the Muck is also an egalitarian one, echoing the relationship of Janie and Tea Cake. There are no big white
houses to keep Janie separate, and rather than the store porch—a place of commerce where Janie served as Joe’s mule—the community gathers on the doorstep of Janie and Tea Cake’s cabin, where the music, storytelling, and gaming is uninterrupted by work (127).

This community is not purely utopian, however. Like Joe ruining the potential utopia of the all-black Eatonville with his pretensions towards being a “big voice” in the style of an aristocratic white man, the potential utopia of the Muck is marred by the influence of the “color struck” Mrs. Turner, who does not work as a field hand but owns a popular “eating house” that thrives off the business of the field laborers. Mrs. Turner takes a fancy to Janie because of her “coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair” (134), both of which approach the beauty standards of the white community. Mrs. Turner takes pride in her own “slightly pointed” nose, her “thin lips,” and her “buttocks in bas-relief” (134), all of which are European-like features. She encourages Janie to leave her dark-skinned husband, saying, “Us oughta class off” and “lighten up de race” (135). Furthermore, she believes, “If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin’ us back” (135). Mrs. Turner’s sentiments are a reflection of a strain of thought that light-skinned blacks should “pass” for white, and that such passing would eliminate the race problem by creating a single race. Furthermore, Mrs. Turner believes that “somehow she and others through worship could attain her paradise—a heaven of straight-haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs” (139). That this admiration is cast as “worship” echoes the worship that Joe Starks expected Janie and the townspeople to have for his power and his material possessions.
Just as Janie ultimately rejects Joe’s demands for worshiping the hierarchical power structure modeled after Jim Crow racism in which one man actively oppresses others to gain respect, Janie rejects Mrs. Turner’s worship of a European-based beauty standard. She counters that “We’se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks” (135), thereby implying that family ties override any difference in shades of color. She also counters Mrs. Turner's assurance that the whites would “take in” blacks so long as they looked white enough: “Ah don’t figger dey even gointuh want us for comp’ny. We’se too poor” (135). Janie’s response turns the discussion from one about race to one about class, effectively countering Mrs. Turner’s assertions that one’s looks could allow one to “class off,” when “class” comes down to economics, not merely physical appearance.

While Janie puts Mrs. Turner’s thoughts out of her mind, Susan Meisenhelder points to this moment as the turning point in Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake. It is directly after Tea Cake overhears Mrs. Turner urging Janie to leave him for her brother that Tea Cake beats Janie. Meisenhelder reads this violence as having “a very different motivation and a very different effect” from the previous fight the couple has that follows Janie’s jealousy of Tea Cake’s flirtations with Nunkie, a fellow field hand: “Fundamentally manipulative and coercive, the beating is calculated to assert his domination of Janie” (72). As Tea Cake explains to Sop-de-Bottom, “Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss” (Their Eyes 141). Rather than being his equal partner, Janie becomes his pawn, demonstrating “his rejection of Janie’s equality and his acceptance of an identity she has fought to reject” (Meisenhelder 73). Tea Cake’s decline and eventual death are the result of his following this path towards a greater awareness of
and concern about the influence of the white community, which begins to show itself more and more in the build-up to the arrival of the hurricane.

The role of the hurricane takes on even greater significance when contrasting the role it plays in Hurston’s novel as compared to the role of Heyward’s hurricane in Porgy. Where in Porgy the hurricane was “Destiny” come to squash the display of masculinity by the fishermen, in Their Eyes, the hurricane functions as the great equalizer among men. As in Porgy, the build up to the arrival of the hurricane in Hurston’s novel dwells on the complexity of the choice to evacuate from a low-income position. Just as the fishermen in Porgy claim they needed to head out to sea in order to capitalize on the influx of fish, the workers on the Muck refuse to follow the lead of the Native Americans’ evacuation from the low lands by refuting their circumstantial evidence—“Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming” (146)—with capitalist necessity: “Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, must be, wrong. You couldn’t have a hurricane when you’re making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were” (147). Because the crops are growing and prices are good, the temptation of living within the here-and-now outweighs the caution for the future. The people working on the Muck are “ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor” (125). They pour in from all regions of the South, on beat-up feet and in beat-up cars. They worked hard, and earned “good money…So they spent good money” (126). However, their minds are firmly in the present: “Next month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with the present” (126). In a life of working in desperation, saving money for the future is difficult and uncertain. The more money one saves, the more easily it can be stolen. Furthermore, nothing can ensure their lives from
one year to the next. Therefore, when crop prices are good and the laborers are making good money at the harvest, it is unfathomable for them to walk away from their pay.

Rather than follow the lead of the Native Americans (Tea Cake argues, “Indians don’t know much uh nothin’, tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own dis country still.”), the black laborers choose follow the lead of their white employers: “You ain’t seen de bossman go up, is yuh? …De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey ouldta know if it’s dangerous” (148). This line of reasoning assumes those in power are the ones with the greatest knowledge. Meisenhelder reads Tea Cake’s sudden concern with the decisions of the “white folks” as evidence of his shift in character, as it “indicates both acceptance of white superiority and an uncharacteristic concern for money” (74). In the face of evacuating ahead of the flood, Tea Cake is more concerned with preserving the insurance papers and grabbing the money “out de dresser drawer” (Their Eyes 152) than holding onto his beloved guitar, which he throws away in the flood waters (153). Furthermore, the white men believe they have been able to overpower nature by building dikes to control the waters of Lake Okeechobee. The engineering gives a false sense of security, so that when the hurricane arrives and begins to disturb the lake waters, “The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster [the lake] in his bed” (150). There is even the sense that the “bossman” is capable of ordering nature to do his bidding, and may “have the thing [hurricane] stopped before morning anyway” (150). Although such power is not to be believed literally, the sentiment demonstrates the level of power the “bossman” has over the lives of the day laborers he employs.
The hurricane’s arrival contradicts the stated assumptions about the knowledge of both the Native Americans and the whites. Despite being in power and having taken the land away from the Native Americans and enslaved the blacks, the whites are just as vulnerable to the power of nature as everyone else, regardless of skin color. Once the storm hits, the power of nature is replaced by the hands of God: “Ole Massa is doin’ His work now” (150), implying that in the eyes of God, all men are equal. Furthermore, in the face of confronting the work of God, the racial hierarchy collapses: “The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God” (151). Here, God is the ultimate “master,” displacing the white man from his falsely claimed position of power.

When the hurricane arrives on the Muck, it breaks down boundaries, both literally and figuratively. In the midst of the storm, Lake Okechobee, now personified, breaks down the levees penning him in: “He seized hold of his dikes…; uprooted them like grass and rushed on” (153). Furthermore, as Meisenhelder observes, the storm also figuratively “dissolves boundaries between the human and the natural” (75). The walls of the house, for example, no longer divide human from animal, as a “baby rabbit, terror ridden…squatted off there in the shadows against the wall” (Their Eyes 151), cowering in the same manner as the humans who “huddled closer and stared at the door” (150). Furthermore, the boundary between land and sea is erased when the flood waters rise (Meisenhelder 75), as there are “[s]tray fish swimming in the yard” and the water is “full of things…that didn’t belong in water” (Their Eyes 152, 156). Meisenhelder goes on to argue that “when these boundaries are erased, so are racial distinctions” (75). White people and black people alike are forced from their homes. While some whites try to
maintain the racial hierarchy even in the midst of the storm, by having “preempted that point of elevation” at a nearby bridge (Their Eyes 156), they are no more sheltered from the wind and rain than everyone else. Racial boundaries are even further disintegrated in the aftermath of the storm when men, both black and white, are forcefully enlisted by armed men to “clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead” (162). The guards demand that each body is examined to separate the white from the black. The whites are to be buried in coffins while the blacks are to be relegated to a mass grave. However, death has further blurred the already tenuous line between white and black, and “Nobody can’t tell nothin’ ‘bout some uh dese bodies, de shape dey’s in. Can’t tell whether dey’s white or black” (163). And while the guards determine that hair texture should function as the ultimate identifier of race, the conditions of the bodies make it unlikely that any attempt to segregate them racially in death is truly feasible. The continued enforcement of racial segregation is made blatantly ridiculous by the circumstances. The ridiculousness is further cemented by Tea Cake’s commentary that “They’s mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment…. Look lak dey think God don’t know nothin’ ‘bout de Jim Crow law” (163). By enforcing segregation even in death, Tea Cake implicitly suggests that the white man is attempting to again usurp the power of God. If Jim Crow segregation were a God-given mandate, there would be no need physically to separate the bodies, and God would separate the souls. That the white man must maintain control, even in death, suggests the ultimate limits of his powers.

Unlike the hurricane in Porgy, which in the guise of “Destiny” enforces the subjugation of the poor black community by destroying the crew of fishermen for daring to try to prove their manhood, Hurston’s hurricane functions as “the symbolic destroyer
of white power” (Meisenhelder 74), both as it destroys white engineering pretensions that it could tame the power of nature and as it forces its sense of cultural superiority onto the black community. As Meisenhelder argues, those characters “whom Hurston paints as ethnically secure and immune to Mrs. Turner’s influence, survive” while those “who look to the white world for answers, placing their trust in its power and failing to appreciate the storm’s” are the ones who perish (74). This contrast is emphasized when Janie, confident in her ethnic identity, kills Tea Cake, who has grown insecure and jealous. More than just a function of “killing off” the white cultural influence, Janie’s killing of Tea Cake is also the culmination of Janie’s personal journey towards self-empowerment. By paying attention to the subtleties of Janie’s journey, one can see, as Dale Pattison suggests, how Hurston “comments on the potential for productive social change made available by [Janie’s] ability to create and sustain spaces of empowerment” (10).

Nanny raises Janie with the metaphorical shadow of her mother, Leafy, hanging over her. Leafy’s character flaws echo those seen in Heyward’s Bess. After she is raped by Janie’s father, Leafy begins “drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights,” and takes to wandering, unable to stay put in any one place for too long. Nanny even wishes death on her daughter just so she could be “at rest” (18-19). To protect Janie from following in Leafy’s footsteps, Nanny pushes Janie into marriage as soon as she becomes a “woman”—that is, shows a sexual interest in boys by kissing Johnny Taylor at the gatepost (11). While Janie encounters the kiss willingly, Nanny sees it as an act of violence, as she witnesses Johnny not kissing but “lacerating” Janie (11)—an image of violence reminiscent of the brutal rape that Leafy suffered that left her “crawlin’ [home] on her hands and knees” (18). By marrying Janie off to Logan Killicks, Nanny seeks to
protect her from the violence of public opinion and sexual abuse: “Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face. And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you” (19). To Nanny, who never experienced it herself, marriage is a barrier between a woman and the world around her. But as we have seen the fault of barriers in the face of the hurricane, external barriers are not the answer in the world Hurston constructs in Their Eyes. Strength must be built from the inside, not protected by forces outside oneself.

In fact, none of Janie’s three marriages protect her from the outside world. But within each marriage, she learns a little bit more about how to best protect herself. In the scene of Janie’s sexual awakening, she believes that marriage is the equal giving that she sees in the union between a bee and a flower. In the vision that drives her desires throughout the novel, Janie “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!” (10-11). Janie, observing this, feels “a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid” (11), a response that is often read as Janie achieving orgasm through masturbation. Tellingly, Janie spends the rest of her life seeking the “bee to her blossom.” However, what is often overlooked is the essential act of self-fulfillment in this scene. Even the bee is only the agent of cross-pollination. It is the “dust” that the bee carries that is what the blossom’s calyxes arch to meet. When Janie arises, “seeking confirmation of the voice and the vision” (11), she begins an external search for the voice and vision that ultimately came from within her. The “personal answer” she seeks (11) must ultimately come from within. But just as the tree must rely on the bee to carry its
pollen, Janie must find her personal answer through the catalyst of her marriages with men.

Janie’s grandmother arranges her marriage to Logan Killicks when Janie is only seventeen. The marriage is explicitly about protection, as Nanny declares she has spent her life “guidin’ [Janie’s] feet from harm and danger” and fearful of her impending death, she wants Janie to be protected from a life of financial instability and sexual promiscuity (13). Janie agrees to marry him, even though the “vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (13), and she stays with him until Nanny dies, allowing her to “rest easy” with the arrangement she had made for Janie’s safety. In this union, Janie learns that “marriage did not make love,” and knowing this kills her “first dream” that marriage was synonymous with love (24). With this important lesson under her belt, Janie “became a woman” (24). It is when Killicks threatens to turn Janie from a woman into a work mule that she leaves him for Joe Starks. Janie meets Joe when Killicks has travelled to a nearby town ‘tuh see a man about uh mule” (25). She determines to leave him when he attempts to keep her in line by insulting her and her family, and insinuating that no other man would trust and keep her (29). When she leaves Killicks, she is determined to make a change, “[e]ven if Joe was not there waiting for her” (31). But because Joe is waiting there, she travels with him because he “spoke for far horizon” even though he “did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” (28). Thus begins Janie’s journey to the horizon, as she must travel far before returning to herself.

Although Joe takes her to the horizon, she does not find the fulfillment of either a loving relationship nor a strong community there. Janie had been physically isolated during her time with Logan Killicks, moving only between the kitchen and the barn.
Once she moves to Eatonville as Joe Starks’s wife, she is again kept isolated, only this time by social mores rather than by physical distance. When Janie first arrives to Eatonville, she does so as the wife of Joe Starks, a domineering and ambitious man who quickly becomes the town leader. By having seed money to buy land, he turns an easy profit by selling smaller parcels to others and sets up a store to supply the townspeople with goods. At the grand opening of the store, Janie makes her debut in the public eye. As everyone is coming to the event “sort of fixed up,” Jody wants to ensure Janie is the most nicely dressed of them all. In her store-bought “wine-colored red” dress with “silken ruffles,” she stands out easily against the townswomen’s homemade “percale and calico” ones. The impression she makes is solidified when one of the men honors her in his speech as being higher than royalty: “She couldn’t look no mo’ better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England” (39). Satisfied that Janie looks the part, Joe enforces her distance from the townsfolk by silencing her voice and her autonomy. When the townspeople ask for “uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks,” Joe interjects himself and dismisses the idea, saying “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothing lak dat” (40-41). What Joe has married her for is, in fact, her looks. He’s clear about it when he courts her away from Logan Killicks, saying “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (28). While in their actual marriage Jody asks more from Janie than just sitting on the porch, the job he sets her to—managing the store—puts her in an even more prominent position of being observed, as the activity of the town is generally centered around the store’s porch. As Joe rises higher up the economic ladder in Eatonville and arouses more and more
resentment from the townspeople around him, that resentment is easily transferred onto Janie. Joe continually keeps Janie voiceless and without agency in her interactions with the townspeople, so her identity is closely tied with his in their eyes. Not only is she referred to as “Mrs. Mayor Starks,” thus having her individual identity elided by her marriage, but she also absorbs his authority by her proximity: “She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind” (44). The division that Joe erects between Janie and the townspeople eventually becomes insurmountable for Janie, as “She couldn’t get but so close to most of them in spirit” (44). Thus, Janie is isolated from the community around her while at the same time she becomes more isolated from Joe within her marriage.

Just as Killicks had insulted Janie in his effort to “keep” her, so too does Joe insult her in his effort to keep her in her place. After Joe publicly insults her intelligence one day in the store for misplacing an order receipt, Janie begins “thinking about the inside state of her marriage” (67). She has learned that she cannot fight back against Joe’s verbal abuse as he “wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (67). Not only is this marriage unequal, but Joe needs a public display of its inequality. Thus, the “spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor” (67). No longer is their marriage any semblance of a private union as symbolized by the sexual activity of a bedroom. Rather, it is on display in the parlor, all formality and politeness. As a means of self-preservation, Janie divides herself into an inside self and an outside self. Within her inside self, she keeps “a host of thoughts…and numerous emotions” that she “packed up and put away in parts of her heart where [Joe] could never find them” (68). Importantly, these emotions are not killed off or smothered. Rather she
preserves them, as she preserves her ability to think and love, and she keeps them to herself. Just as her experience under the pear tree acts as sexual self-fulfillment, here she learns intellectual and emotional self-fulfillment. Thus, she “had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (68). This division of self shows her learning a key element: self-preservation while living under oppression. She must show an acceptable face to her oppressor, while keeping her thoughts and emotions to herself.

When Joe threatens that division between her outside display and her inner self by “talkin’ under people’s clothes” with his insult about her physicality (75), she stands up for herself so forcefully, her words essentially kill him. His insult, which describes her “rump hangin’ nearly to yo’ knees,” is interpreted by observers as being as harsh as if “somebody snatched off part of a woman’s clothes while she wasn’t looking and the streets were crowded” (74). It is an invasion of privacy by exposing the parts of a woman that are meant to be hidden from public. In this way, Joe has threatened Janie’s division of self as he threatens to expose what she has worked hard to keep private. Being so threatened, she fires back in-kind, hurling an insult that verbally castrates him and “rob[s] him of his illusion of irresistible maleleness that all men cherish” (75). From that point, Joe literally withers away and dies in a state of insecurity and paranoia.

In the days after Joe dies, Janie prepares herself for her next stage in life. She comes to the realization that when she ran away with Joe, she expected that “her great journey to the horizons [was] in search of people,” but she was derailed in her quest and had “run off down a back road after things” (85). It is not until after she takes off on her second quest, with Tea Cake, that she finds the human connections she longed for as a girl. When she arrives in the Everglades with Tea Cake, Janie rejects the assumption that
she is “too good to work like the rest of the women,” the mentality that Joe had forced upon her during her time in Eatonville. As a result, their house is “full of people every night” (127). Furthermore, she is no longer relegated to the outskirts when they gather to tell stories and hold “big arguments” on the porch. Instead, she is able to “listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to” (128). No longer does Janie long for company from afar. In the Everglades, she is surrounded by and is solidly a part of it.

However, this newfound community is no utopia for Janie. Even before Mrs. Turner introduces insecurity into Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake, Janie cannot be confident that Tea Cake is the bee to her blossom. When she wrestles with the possibility that he is, she can only see the surface of things: “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps” (101, emphasis mine). Ultimately, what she finds is that he is not, cannot be, the answer for her. He is manipulated by outside forces, and infected by them, just as he is infected by rabies. In the end, he winds up just as paranoid as old Joe Starks, fearing that Janie will leave him for Mrs. Turner’s brother.

As Janie feels her safety is increasingly threatened by Tea Cake’s growing paranoia, she carefully plans for the moment in which he will physically threaten her. Meisenhelder describes the scene as a series of actions that are “methodical, knowledgeable, and deliberate” as Janie, finding the pistol under Tea Cake’s pillow “whirls the cylinder to make sure his first three shots will be blanks” and then moves the rifle to a hiding place in the kitchen where it is easily accessible to her (88). When Tea Cake threatens her with the pistol, Janie responds both instinctively and calmly: “The
pistol snapped once. Instinctively Janie’s hand flew behind her on the rifle and brought it around…. She broke the rifle deftly and shoved in the shell as the second click told her that Tea Cake’s suffering brain was urging him on to kill” (174-75). After Tea Cake pulls the trigger of the pistol a third time and the empty chambers have all been clicked past, Janie knows she must shoot and she does. Importantly, this methodical preparation is disguised in the narrative, as “Hurston camouflages female aggression against sexual oppression in this scene through the use of romantic elements…. To do so, she depicts the internal struggle in Janie’s mind between one woman tempted to protect her lover whatever the cost and another who protects herself from aggressive threat even in the person of her beloved” (Meisenhelder 88). Hurston must disguise this resistance against oppression for the same reasons she disguises the resistance in all her novels: to slip past the radar of those in her audience who are actively committing oppression, registering only enough to create an unease without being able to place a certain finger on why.

More importantly, however, for those who are able to see the subtext of resistance, Hurston’s text offers inspiration and hope. Janie’s story ends with her friend Pheoby declaring “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’” (183). Meisenhelder asserts that this “story of a black woman’s struggle to define herself as neither mule nor white woman is…there for the Pheobys in Hurston’s audience who are looking for hope and models of female resistance” (90). Part of the lasting legacy of Their Eyes Were Watching God, and all of Hurston’s oeuvre, is that it has inspired the Pheobys of her audience, just as Sherley Anne Williams had declared it inspired her with a new model of black femininity. Janie is neither the matriarch as displayed by Heyward’s Maria, nor the slut of his Bess. She is
not the tragic mulatta, but the woman who loves herself above all others. When Janie instructs Pheoby that “you got to go there tuh know there” (183), Hurston can be seen as instructing the Pheobys of her readership to make the journey to find themselves, throwing off the yoke that keeps black women as the mule of the world and traveling to the horizon of their own selves to find their individual identities and to love that self above all others.
Conclusion

“Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick”: The Legacy of Zora Neale Hurston

Throughout Hurston’s publishing history, she faced challenges from multiple fronts that threatened her ability to be a self-supporting writer—a difficult career goal for many but especially difficult for a black woman who hit her creative height in the midst of the Great Depression. In addition to the economic deprivations that most Americans experienced during the 1930s, Hurston also contended with Jim Crow discrimination that severely limited economic opportunities for African Americans and pervasive misogyny that limited those opportunities for women. That Hurston was published at all is a testament to her strength of character. She persevered in the face of numerous obstacles, finding ways to succeed even when all the odds seemed to be stacked against her.

A large part of her success came from her astute awareness of her audience and her ability to meet its expectations. However, even while bending to meet these external demands, Hurston exhibited an obsessive level of control over her material. Because she was so fiercely determined to be in total control of her work, the fact that she wrote to meet the expectations of her audience should not be misconstrued as her willingness to sacrifice her vision or her message to meet the demands of any publisher or patron. Rather, her method of meeting these expectations, which were always a path towards economic stability in her eyes, employed the techniques of the trickster. The trickster could say one thing while meaning another, or to use one of Hurston’s favorite sayings,
could “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick.” Hurston approached her writing like High
John de Conquer, the trickster hero of African American folk legend, who was known for
“[f]ighting a battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within”—a
war he won “in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the black man
whole and free” (“High John” 924). So, too, was Hurston herself fighting a battle without
an outside show of force. Her battle involved having control over how African American
folk culture was portrayed to a generally white audience. To win that battle with her soul
“whole and free,” she upset the power structures of the racial hierarchy by manipulating
the expectations of her audience in order to maintain control over her material even in the
face of cultural oppression.

By keeping her battle hidden, she won no respect from the likes of Richard
Wright, who favored open and explicit confrontation and faulted Hurston’s work for not
being obvious with its struggle. However, she did earn funding for many years from the
likes of Charlotte Mason. Mason, who insisted that the artists she funded call her
“Godmother,” demanded a show of the primitive from the artists she sponsored and
financially rewarded them for their performances. She was, by all accounts, an imposing
woman. Langston Hughes received years of funding from her and reflected on the power
she held over her beneficiaries in his memoir: “Great wealth had given to a woman who
meant to be kind the means to power, and a technique of power, of so mighty a strength
that I do not believe she herself knew what that force might become. She possessed the
power to control people’s lives—pick them up and put them down when and where she
wished” (242-43). When Hughes was “put down” by Mason, an episode he describes as
one of the most traumatic events of his life, he was left debilitated, unable to eat or sleep
for weeks (244-47). In his estimation, Mason had grown unhappy with his work because “[s]he wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did” (243). Although Hughes had met Mason’s demands for years and was one of her favorite beneficiaries—Mason had called him her “blessed child” and “a golden star” (qtd. Boyd 158)—he had come to a place where he could no longer meet her demands. Because he did not “feel the primitive” inside, Hughes could not—or had decided he would not—continue to meet Mason’s expectations to prove his “authenticity” as a black poet.¹

Hurston, by contrast, seemed to have no qualms about playing the primitive for Mason. Even though, as Valerie Boyd points out, Hurston “certainly did not care for everything Godmother said or did,” she understood that it was usually in her best interest to “[tell] Godmother what she wanted to hear” because that “kept the checks coming” (195-96). So when Hurston was summoned to Mason’s Park Avenue apartment upon her return from her expedition through the South, she willingly performed the tales, songs, and dances she had collected (193). And when, in one story told by Louise Thompson, Mason gifted Hurston with “an exotic dress,” Hurston telephoned to report that the dress looked “stunning” before hanging up to laughingly tell Thompson “she would not think of wearing such a thing” (Hemenway 139). This anecdote gives a glimpse at the layers of performance Hurston was capable of. By understanding and responding to Mason’s expectations, Hurston was able to retain funding from Mason long after other beneficiaries had been cut off. Additionally, Hurston got the “last laugh” as she was able

¹ Furthermore, as Robert Hemenway notes, Hughes was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the economic disparity he saw between Mason’s aristocratic lifestyle and the working class struggling to survive as the Depression set in (139).
to manipulate Mason, a woman whose wealth and social status gave her exponentially more power than Hurston would have ever been able to access as black woman who had grown up in relative poverty.

This skillful manipulation permitted Hurston to deflect and extend Mason’s demands on her time. For instance, when Mason, growing impatient with Hurston’s delay in producing a finished product from her Southern folklore material, pressured her to finish the manuscript in time for her birthday, Hurston responded by instead sending a “fawning letter” (Boyd 195). The rhetoric of the letter is overwrought, praising Mason as “God’s flower” who “gives out life and light” and declaring, “How much of the white light of God you would diffuse into soft radiance for the eyes of the primitives, the wise ones would have stood awed before your cradle and brought great gifts from afar” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 18 May 1930). As Boyd argues, these compliments were “almost certainly tongue-in-cheek” but were “cleverly concealed…under a sugary sheen” (195). By playing into Mason’s ego, Hurston could be assured her sarcasm went undetected, with the joke being “beneath” Mason as it hovered “just below the reach of her condescension” (195). Perhaps it was this access to feeling like she had control over someone with much more social power than herself that fed Hurston’s desire to perform for a white audience. She could manipulate and destabilize the expectations of this audience, seeming to give it what it wanted while giving herself, and anyone else who understood the joke, the last laugh.

Hurston characterized this willingness to perform as something that came naturally to her. In “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” she describes the payment she would receive for entertaining the white visitors who passed through her town when she
was a child: “They like to hear me ‘speak pieces’ and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop” (152-53). Through statements like this, Hurston seemed to be portraying herself as someone who naturally embodied the “primitive” that Hughes could not feel naturally within himself. This idea is further substantiated later in “How It Feels” when Hurston describes her instinctual response to the “primitive fury” of a jazz orchestra: “I dance wildly inside myself: I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeoww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way” (154). The similarity between the language that Hurston used in this article, written while she was still tight within Mason’s circle, and Hughes’s reminiscence of his falling out with Mason is striking and no doubt reflects Mason’s influence on both writers.

Hurston and Hughes, however, also had a strong influence on each other, and their divergent attitudes on performing the primitive for Mason and for their wider audiences led to the disintegration of their friendship in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called “the most notorious literary quarrel in African-American cultural history” (5). While this feud was fed in no small part by Mason’s meddling in their lives and work, it also shows the fierce level of control Hurston tried to retain over her material. Despite the generosity she displayed by sharing material with Hughes over the course of several years, she lashed out when she feared she might lose control over the production of the material as well as what she saw as her fair share of the revenue it would generate.

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2 This scene appears several times in Hurston's work. She included a version of it in her autobiography (Dust Tracks 45-46) and, notably, fictionalized it in her short story “Drenched in Light” (1924), her first story to be published on a national scale.
Having met at the 1925 *Opportunity* awards where both won prizes for their literary work, Hurston and Hughes formed a fast and tight friendship that lasted just over five years before collapsing over proprietary rights to *Mule Bone*, a folk comedy they had spent years discussing and working on together. Hurston first referenced their idea to work on a collaborative theater piece, originally conceived of as an opera, in a letter she wrote to Hughes to report on her very first meeting with Mason in 1927—a meeting that Hughes, who had already been receiving funding from the patron, orchestrated. Hurston reported, “She likes the idea of the opera, but says that we must do it with so much power that it will halt all these spurious efforts on the part of white writers” (“To Langston Hughes,” 21 Sept. 1927). Implicit in Mason’s endorsement is her belief that Hurston and Hughes could produce a show with such “authenticity” that it would demand greater authority than the popular stage shows of the time, which were being written by white writers and were depicting African American folk culture through the use of archetypes set forth by minstrel and vaudeville traditions.

Shortly after this meeting, Hurston signed a contract with Mason that provided funding for her to travel across the South collecting African American folk material on Mason’s behalf. During her time traveling, Hurston maintained a constant stream of communication with Hughes. This correspondence, Robert Hemenway noted, “provides an unintentional documentary of the expedition” (115). It also reveals the level of deceit that Hurston was capable of sustaining. The contract that Hurston signed to fund her expedition gave Mason proprietary rights over all the material Hurston collected on her travels. However, Hurston frequently shared “juicy bits” of material with Hughes, a practice she had begun during her first trip south under the funding of the Carter G.
Woodson fellowship (“To Langston Hughes,” 17 Mar. 1927). She forwarded a number of stories and jokes to Hughes, saying, “if you want them you can use them for yourself and its O.K. by me. Godmother asked me not to publish and as I am making money I hope you can use them” (“To Langston Hughes,” 8 Mar. 1928, 114). Her offer shows her acknowledgement that Mason was restricting her own ability to publish the material and also demonstrates her desire that the material not go to waste by sitting in Mason’s archives.

During her travels, Hurston continued to write to Hughes about her plans for “real Negro art theatre” in which “I shall, or rather *we* shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive ‘bama nigger” (“To Langston Hughes,” 12 Apr. 1928, 116). This seemingly minor correction of “I” to “we” perhaps betrays the deep sense of ownership Hurston felt over the material—a sense of ownership that Hughes noticed as well. At one point, Hurston had to reassure Hughes that she was not planning to leave him out, as she explained, “Of course, you know I didn’t dream of that theatre as a one-man stunt. I had you helping 50-50 from the start. In fact, I am perfectly willing to be 40 to your 60 since you are always so much more practical than I” (“To Langston Hughes,” 1 May 1928). These declarations of split ownership fed the subsequent distrust that exploded during their dispute over *Mule Bone*, when Hurston ultimately reneged on her offer to split ownership of their work.

Meanwhile, Mason was not enthusiastic about this collaboration, although it is unclear why. Perhaps she felt that working on the drama was not a productive use of Hughes’s time when she was financing him to write poetry. Or perhaps she felt that Hurston could not be trusted to best utilize the folk material that Mason legally owned.
Hurston, in a letter to Alain Locke, explained that Mason “was very anxious that I should say to you that the plans—rather the hazy dreams of the theatre that I talked to you about should never be mentioned again. She trusts her three children [Locke, Hughes, and Hurston] to never let those words pass their lips again until the gods decree that they shall materialize” (“To Alain Locke,” 16 Dec. 1928). Presumably the “decree of the gods” would be made by Mason herself.

Despite Mason’s disapproval of the project and Hurston’s oath to “never mention it again,” Hurston continued to discuss the project with Hughes. Only a few months after her letter to Locke, Hurston wrote to Hughes that she had “some dandy theatrical ideas for us to work out” (“To Langston Hughes,” 3 Apr. 1929). She followed up this reference with a second letter in which she was more detailed about her vision of the project:

Do you want to look over what I have on our show? Let’s call it “JOOK” that is the word for baudy house in its general sense. It is the club house on these saw-mills and turpentine stills. Then we can bring in all of the songs and gags I have. Shall we work on it at once? I am willing if you are. I know that G. [Godmother] would never consent for me to do so, so you will have to take it all in your name. (“To Langston Hughes,” spring/summer 1929)

As is evident from Hurston’s declaration that Hughes should take full credit for the production, this strategy constituted Hurston’s attempt to circumvent Mason’s publishing restrictions. It also shows the genuine sense of ownership Hurston felt over the material, as she seems to have had no qualms about ignoring and actively evading Mason’s legal restrictions. If she felt this sense of ownership over the material in spite of Mason’s legal claim to it, then it should come as no surprise that she would continue to assert that ownership against Hughes when she felt it was within her best interest to do so.

Once Hurston returned to New York from her collecting expedition in the spring of 1930, Mason had her whisked out of the city to stay in a rooming house down the
street from Hughes in Westfield, NJ—a small, quiet town where both could write without the distractions and temptations of big city life. Given such easy access to each other’s company, however, they almost immediately launched into writing the drama they had been dreaming of collaborating on together for so long. With the help of Louise Thompson, whom Mason had hired as a typist for the writers, Hurston and Hughes drafted acts one and three, and parts of act two within a month (Hemenway 138). Hurston abruptly left New Jersey to travel south again that summer, promising to complete act two while traveling and to reconvene in the fall with Hughes to polish the material into a finished product (138).

However, Hurston never did reconvene with Hughes later that year. Rather, according to Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad, she actively avoided him after she left Westfield and ignored his messages when he “begged her to resume work on their play” (“From The Life” 196). Hughes claimed that he heard no more about the play until January 1931 when it was brought to his attention by Rowena Jelliffe, the director of Cleveland’s Gilpin Players, one of the mostly highly respected amateur black theater groups in the country (197). Jelliffe mentioned to Hughes that her company had just been offered “a very amusing play…called Mule Bone” that had “just been turned down by the Theatre Guild in New York” (Hughes 247). Knowing that this was the play he and Hurston had collaborated on and confused as to why this unfinished product would be suitable for production, Hughes repeatedly tried contacting Hurston for explanation. In his autobiography, he claims, “I tried to telephone Miss Hurston, but could not reach her. I wired her, but got no answer. I wrote her three letters and finally she replied from New York” (247). Hughes goes on to paint Hurston as a petty and selfish partner, who wanted
to take full ownership of the play because she felt, in Hughes’s estimation, “I would only take my half of the money and spend it on a girl she didn’t like. Besides, the story was her story, the dialogue her dialogue, and the play her play—even if I had put it together, and she didn’t want me to have any part in it. Girls are funny creatures!” (248). Although drawn from Hurston’s own letter to Hughes, this rationale accuses Hurston of trifling jealousy and succumbing to what he saw as the natural inconsistencies of “girls.”

What Hughes does not seem to have considered, however, is Hurston’s legitimate concerns over publically collaborating on a project with Hughes at that particular point in time. It was during the period that Hurston “disappeared” from Hughes’s life that Hughes’s relationship with Mason was falling apart. As Rampersad explains, “Hughes’ disappointment at Hurston’s departure from Westfield was completely overshadowed near the end of May, however, by the collapse of his friendship with Godmother” (“From The Life” 194). During the course of their break in relations, Mason had accused Hughes of wasting her money because he was not producing any valuable work while she continued to support him (194). Hughes felt so repentant about “wasting” Mason’s money that he “offered to settle all financial accounts” with her, even borrowing $200 from Carl Van Vechten to do so (195). As a result of the stress he felt from the severing of his relations with Mason, Hughes was plagued for the rest of the year with physical ailments: “a chronic toothache, tonsillitis, an upset stomach” (196). He had traveled to Cleveland to live with his mother while he had his tonsils removed in early 1931,

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3 At the time of this episode, Hughes was 29 and Hurston was passing as 30. She was actually 40, though, having subtracted 10 years off her age in order to finish high school. This inconsistency in her age was not revealed until after her death. Whether she was 30 or 40, however, Hughes’s calling her a “girl” was unnecessarily demeaning.
spending the last of his money on the operation and claiming, “certainly I felt better as soon as the last penny left from Park Avenue was gone” (Hughes 247).

All through the second half of 1930, Hurston avoided Hughes, which enabled her to distance herself from the tension between Hughes and Mason. While she cut off communication with Hughes, she wrote sporadically to Mason, assuring the old woman that she was working hard to shape the material from her fieldwork into a complete volume. In November 1930, she wrote Mason a letter declaring, “I am trying to get some bone in my legs so that you can see me standing so that I shall cease to worry you. I don’t want all your worry and generosity to go in vain” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 25 Nov. 1930). It seems to be no coincidence that Hurston addressed the same issue over which Mason had broken off relations with Hughes and tried to assure Mason that her monthly stipend was not being squandered. After all, Hurston’s contract gave her $50 a month more than the stipend that Hughes had been receiving and she had not yet finished a manuscript from the material she collected during her fieldwork. Essentially, Mason had been supporting Hurston for nearly two years without any significant results aside from all the field notes that Hurston had sent during her travels. Hurston had to prove her worth to her patron.

During this time, in October and November 1930, Hurston also began to claim the work she and Hughes had done on *Mule Bone* as her own. She filed for a copyright on the play in October 1930, inserting the second act that she had drafted without Hughes’s input and claiming sole authorship of the entire play (Hemenway 140). Additionally, she informed Mason she was writing a play, telling her in late November, “I have spent the last four days re-writing the first act and polishing it up a bit” (“To Charlotte Osgood
Mason,” 25 Nov. 1930). She also sent the entire manuscript to Carl Van Vechten, claiming, “Langston and I started out together on the idea of the story I used to tell you about Eatonville, but… I started all over again while in Mobile and this is the result of my work alone” (“To Carl Van Vechten,” 14 Nov. 1930). Unbeknownst to Hurston, Van Vechten forwarded the play to a reader he knew at the Theater Guild. The reader, certain that the Guild would never produce it, forwarded it to the Gilpin Players to see if they would be interested in it (Hemenway 140). When Hughes heard from Jelliffe at the Gilpin Players that she wanted to produce the play, Hurston legitimately had no idea it had been circulated so widely.

In early 1931, around the time that Hurston traveled to Cleveland to meet with Hughes and Jelliffe to iron out permissions to have the play produced, Hurston’s language and her actions show the desperation she must have felt for Mason to see her as a victim of Hughes’s desire to edge in on her work. She claimed to Mason, “I am not using one single solitary bit in dialogue, plot nor situation from him and yet he tries to muscle in” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 20 Jan. 1931 lib. dated). Additionally, she forwarded to Mason several pieces of correspondence between herself and Hughes to support her claims. On the same day she composed a letter to Hughes promising to “write Godmother a letter leaving you in a white light” (“To Langston Hughes,” 20 Jan. 1931), she instead wrote to Mason that Hughes was “a little pathetic in his wish to make up with you…. Langston is weak. Weak as water” (“To Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 20 Jan. 1931, 208). While the letter included a half-hearted suggestion the Hughes could be brought “back into the fold” (208), the thrust of the letter seemed to try to prove that Hughes was
easily susceptible to the suggestions of friends who saw Mason as a negative and domineering force in his life (209).

While Hurston had originally traveled to Cleveland to meet in person with Hughes and Jelliffe to discuss the Gilpin Players’ production of the play, she squashed the entire production by the time she returned to New York. According to Hughes, Hurston flew into a rage when she discovered Louise Thompson had been in town. Hurston had written to Hughes that she resented the promises he had apparently made to share profits from the play with Thompson, protesting that “nobody has in the history of the world given a typist an interest in a work for typing it. Nobody would think of it unless they were prejudiced in favor of the typist. Not that I care what you give of yourself and your things…. But I do object to having my work hi-jacked” (“To Langston Hughes,” 18 Jan. 1931). Hughes interpreted this accusation as proof that Hurston was jealous of his friendship with Thompson. However, it could equally be read as Hurston fearing that others were trying to steal ownership of and unfairly profit from her work, taking credit for the material that she had used Mason’s money to collect—material that Mason still technically owned, thanks to the terms of their contract.

Although Hurston had at one time been friends with Thompson, that friendship seems to have ended by the time Hurston fled Westfield in the summer of 1930. In her letters to Mason, Hurston accused Thompson of being the “bad influence” on Hughes that had led to the breakdown of his relations with Mason. Perhaps Hurston was trying to preserve good feelings between Mason and Hughes by placing all the blame on Thompson. Thompson was already in bad graces with Alain Locke, and presumably Mason as well, as Locke had taken it upon himself to “quietly and maliciously [kill]
Louise Thompson’s chances for a job...at Howard University by describing her as indigent” (Rampersad, “From The Life” 202). Hurston’s impulse to throw all the blame for Hughes’s wayward tendencies onto Thompson seemed to be a safe bet, no matter what her own personal feelings towards Thompson were. In the end, however, Thompson did not absorb all the blame, and the relationship between Mason and Hughes was fully severed. Seeing Hughes fall so easily out of favor with Mason and being unable to control the old woman’s feelings on the subject, Hurston inevitably questioned the vulnerability of her own relationship with Mason. After all, the underlying detail in this entire disagreement that led to the implosion of Hurston’s friendship with Hughes was that Mason still contractually owned all of the material that Hurston had spent years collecting. Not only did Hurston have to prove her worth to Mason in order to justify her own monthly stipend after Hughes’s had been cut off, she also had to stay in Mason’s good graces in order to retain her access to this material. If Hurston attempted to publish material without Mason’s permission, she may have been subject to litigation. In light of this complication, Hurston had little choice but to do everything in her power to maintain her relationship with Mason until ownership of the material was legally transferred to Hurston. Unfortunately, she had to sacrifice her friendship with Hughes to do so.

By all accounts, Hurston was legitimately sorry for the loss of Hughes’s friendship. Carl Van Vechten reported to Hughes that in the midst of their fight, Hurston had visited him and “cried and carried on no end about how fond she was of you, and how she wouldn’t have had this misunderstanding for the world” (“Van Vechten to Hughes”). And while Hughes publically disparaged Hurston’s character for her role in the fiasco in his autobiography, published in 1940, Hurston excluded Hughes entirely
from her own autobiography, published only two years later in 1942. So although she may have withheld anything good she had to say about him, she notably refused to say anything bad either—publically, at least. Furthermore, when Hurston was falsely accused of child molestation nearly two decades later, she asked Hughes for “a testament of her good character” (Rampersad, “From The Life” 206), indicating that in spite of the *Mule Bone* debacle, she valued his friendship and believed that he still valued hers, even though they never did mend their friendship.

Ultimately, Hurston killed her friendship with Hughes because she loved her material—the product of years of labor and the embodiment of her career aspirations—more than she loved him. Just as Janie sacrifices Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because she loves herself more, so too did Hurston put her dreams above all else in her life. She lied and deceived and performed—showing people in her life who held power over her what they wanted to see because it was a way for her to get what she wanted. She may not have achieved the level of success she dreamed of during her lifetime, but her legacy had been a lasting one. We are, in part, still reading her work today because she loved herself above others and fought to have her voice heard no matter the cost.

It is important to note, however, that none of Hurston’s novels were published during the years she was under Mason’s control. What little she did publish had to be approved by Mason or else she would risk arousing the old woman’s wrath, as happened with her publication of “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” While Hurston successfully assuaged Mason’s anger on a number of occasions, often engaging Hughes and Locke as mediators on her behalf, the limitations that Mason’s oversight imposed hampered
Hurston’s creative output. Much of her energy during this time, when not in the field collecting folklore, was poured into staging theater productions, which she believed would prove her financial worth to Mason by establishing a steady revenue stream. None of her productions turned a sustainable profit, however, and Hurston wound up owing more than she ever earned from them.

Once Mason had cut her off—a decision driven on one hand by the financial uncertainty caused by the Great Depression, and on the other, by Mason’s rapidly declining health⁴—Hurston began publishing creative fiction again. Within months of Mason’s ending communication with her, Hurston wrote “The Gilded Six-Bits,” which was her first piece of fiction to be published in nearly eight years (Boyd 244). Three months later, she had completed the manuscript for her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (247). From there, the books seemed to just pour out of her, as she proceeded to publish a total of six novels over the course of the next eight years. Even as Hurston’s productivity blossomed once she was out from under Mason’s thumb, the lessons she learned about anticipating her audience’s expectations and balancing those against her own fierce self-interest are still evident in much, if not all, of her work. Those are the qualities that we see contrasting against each other in Hurston’s texts, as she used the humor and creativity of African American folk culture to destabilize the expectations much of her audience had—expectations that had been formed from a tradition of minstrel archetypes. In doing so, Hurston melded folk culture into modernity and helped to change the direction of mainstream American perceptions of African American culture in literature.

⁴ Although Mason lived until 1946, she ceased communication with Hurston in 1933 when, at 79 years old, she was hospitalized with a broken hip (Boyd 243-44).
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BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth A. Kalos-Kaplan specializes in twentieth-century American literature. Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in French at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. After graduation, she moved to France, where she taught English as a Foreign Language at a secondary school in the Franche-Comté region. She earned a Masters of Arts degree in English at Tulane University in 2006, and continued her Ph.D. studies at Tulane while teaching a variety of undergraduate composition, business writing, and survey literature courses on campus and online. During a leave of absence from her graduate studies following Hurricane Katrina, she spent five years working in nonprofit administration, first as an office manager and grant writer for a volunteer service corps and then as the administrative director for a nonprofit law office and advocacy group. She currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana with her husband, Michael.