Zora Neale Hurston, Biographical Criticism, and African Diasporic Vernacular Culture

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In her 2003 biography of Zora Neale Hurston, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, Valerie Boyd refers to Hurston as “Zora” throughout the book. This gesture of familiarity, even intimacy, extends similar gestures reaching back to Alice Walker’s acts of literary-filial devotion, chronicled in her 1975 *Ms.* magazine piece “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” which helped resuscitate popular and critical interest in Hurston’s life and works. Hurston’s writings set the stage for this intimate treatment, as she commonly employs a rhetoric of familiarity with her readers, from the authorial “I” of her ethnographic *Mules and Men* (1935) to that of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).¹ Furthermore, her expert and pioneering use of the African American vernacular, what she termed “the idiom—not the dialect—of the Negro” (Hurston, “Florida” 910), obscures the artifice of that endeavor, making it easy for readers to feel an unmediated access to the author behind the words of such novels as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The dazzling vernacular of her personal correspondence, which Carla Kaplan has made widely available with the publication of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (2002), has intensified this feeling of unmediated access. In sum, a combination of narrative, ethnographic, epistolary, critical, and biographical discourses has produced Hurston as a literary historical figure with whom her audience feels an intimacy as familiar as the vernacular with which she has been so strongly identified. However, an analysis of the numerous institutional entanglements of Hurston’s life and career reveals the degree to which the familiar, intimate, vernacular Hurston paradoxically emerges from conditions of textual production she often struggled against as a student, theatrical producer, performer, anthropologist, essayist, letter-writer, and novelist. Her posthumous reception and canonization continue to evade the range of discursive stances she aimed to achieve with regard to questions of African diasporic vernacular culture.

In a characteristic analysis at the intersection of biographical, ethnographic, and literary discourses, Françoise Lionnet-McCumber reads Hurston’s mapping of African diasporic culture through an invocation of Isis as Hurston’s symbolic alter-ego: “‘Isis’ is the wanderer who conducts her research, establishes spatio-temporal connections among the children of the diaspora, and re-members the scattered body of folk material so that siblings can again ‘touch each other’” (256). With her reliance on family metaphors (“children” and “siblings”), Lionnet-McCumber suggests

that Hurston's writings keep it all in the family, so to speak, an authentic African diasporic family circumscribed by "folk material." The allusion to Isis, though, intimates the problems with this reading: as a figure from ancient Egyptian religion, Isis belongs to a tradition claimed by European, Afrocentric, and Semitic origin stories (Colla 10-15). This historiographic overlap, which Hurston invoked throughout her career in the representations of Moses to be discussed below, reflects her project of cultural geography in a way unintended by Lionnet-McCumber and other critics who narrowly construe Hurston's affiliation with African diasporic folk material. Renewed attention to the same biographical, ethnographic, and literary terrain upon which such a critical position relies offers a more diversified portrait of Hurston's mapping of African diasporic culture, a mapping that relies on prolific transculturations as well as a folk or vernacular aesthetic crucially involved with textuality.

Numerous institutions enable and constrain Hurston's multidisciplinary project of representing "the idiom—not the dialect—of the Negro," from the backstages of Broadway to backwoods jook joints, from literary patronage and academic fellowships to the marketing departments of publishing houses. This essay traces how Hurston operates within multiple institutional, cultural, and formal processes of African diasporic cultural production in which vernacular modes of orality and textuality mutually constitute one another. This mutually constitutive relationship motors Hurston's trajectory through professional opportunities and obstacles, and it also appears as a key theme of her work. Hurston's private and public writings reveal how institutionally inflected crossings of orality and textuality inform a career-long mapping of African diasporic culture that exceeds the vernacular, folkish, and familiar.

Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), tells the story of an African American preacher, John Pearson, from his youth in Notasulga, Alabama, to his professional rise and fall in Eatonville, Florida. Narrative moments where orality and textuality intersect structure his story, culminating in his being called to the pulpit to mediate orally the written Word. Harryette Mullen connects this mediation to the formative dislocation of African American culture: "The Bible as sacred text and sublime speech, as the written record of a divine voice inspiring its authors to write and its readers to speak holy words, mediates the historical and mythic dislocation from primarily oral cultures to one in which literacy has the power of a fetish" (674). Mullen argues that "African-Americans, in the process of acquiring literacy . . . fuse the inspiring techniques of Christian prayer and biblical textuality with African traditions of oral and visual expressiveness" (686). Drawing on the work of scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson, she links African American practices of mediating between

visual signs and spoken words to precolonial African practices. Beginning with *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston's work is similarly attuned to mediations back and forth between text and speech in African and African diasporic cultures. Early in the novel, John leaves his poor hill-folk "over the creek" and migrates to Alf Pearson's plantation, where before Emancipation his mother was a slave and gave birth to John, allegedly fathered by Pearson. John's high-yellow complexion and strapping physique gain him a job—and the Pearson last name—straightaway. True to the European bildungsroman genre that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* transplants to the American South, Pearson also sends John to get lettered: "Well, you get over there in de A B C class and don't let me ketch you talkin' in school" (27). John develops a crush on fellow student Lucy Potts, and aspires to memorize and declaim texts as well as she does. With this art of "speaking pieces," Hurston showcases a form of oral performance interlaced with literacy that anticipates John's calling as a preacher.

Throughout the entire courtship of John and Lucy, we encounter the interplay of writing and the oral tradition. When John goes to help his mother and stepfather "over the creek," Lucy writes flirtatious rhymes in her letters to him:

Sweet Notasulga, Chocklit Alabama
Date of kisses, month of love, Dere John,
you is my honey. I won't never love nobody else but you. I love choir practise now. Sugar is sweet, and lard is greasy, you love me, don't be uneasy.

Your darling,
LUCY ANN POTTS. (45)

In his literary biography of Hurston, Robert Hemenway explains how rhyming like this belongs to "a traditional mode of verbal lovemaking among southern rural black folk, very possibly African in origin. . . . Certain formulas and rhymes were set, others improvised at the moment" (155). While Hurston dramatizes scenes of John and Lucy's "verbal lovemaking," she also shows how members of a folk community textualize their own oral traditions. This sort of textualization anticipates and, by virtue of its inclusion in the novel, self-reflexively comments on Hurston's own writing career. It also suggests ways in which folk communities can operate back and forth between oral and written traditions rather than dwelling in an imagined mode of pure orality.

Nonetheless, in the world of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, literacy pays: "There was no doubt about it now. John was foreman at Pearson's. His reading and writing had improved to the degree where Alf could trust him with all the handling of supplies" (85). Hurston's novel demonstrates a continuity here with the African American literary tradition in which mastering letters represents a survival strategy, offering the literate African

American opportunities not made available to his or her unlettered peers. John's improved literacy gives him access to more money, power, and responsibility in white-dominated socioeconomic institutions. However, as Hurston dramatizes the changes to the socioeconomic structures of the South at the end of World War I, textuality will serve a goal celebrated in the African American oral tradition—outwitting white power: "Do what they would, the State, County and City all over the South could do little to halt the stampede. The cry of 'Goin' Nawth' hung over the land like the wail over Egypt at the death of the first-born. The railroad stations might be watched, but there could be no effective censorship of the mails" (151). As the white power structure of the South tried legal and illegal means to stop the Great Migration for better jobs, more money, and perhaps some relief from Jim Crow, writing helped the African American population put one over on whites, performing one of the classic functions of the black oral tradition. In this, it echoes the numerous interminglings of orality and textuality in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the first book published by an author who would become famous for being "true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness" (Gates 168). What Hurston suggests, though, is that even before she wrote, black folks had been writing that text.

Jonah's Gourd Vine relies heavily on the actual lives of Hurston's parents. John and Lucy Pearson are models of John and Lucy Hurston; in fascinating ways, though, they are also models of Hurston herself. Hurston and others represent Zora Neale Hurston as a figure of orality mediating between the vernacular and textuality, creating for herself personal, artistic, and professional opportunities which, in turn, motor further mediations between orality and textuality. Hurston's career negotiates expectations and limitations that reflect institutionalized discourses about race, the vernacular, and writing that she variously depends on, plays with, and resists. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for example, she presents her first experience of literary patronage. One afternoon, two young white ladies visit Hurston's Negro school:

So we took our readers and went up front. We stood up in the usual line, and opened to the lesson. It was the story of Pluto and Persephone. It was new and hard to the class in general . . .

Then it came to me. I was fifth or sixth down the line. The story was not new to me, because I had read my reader through from lid to lid, the first week that Papa had bought it for me . . .

Some of the stories, I had reread several times, and this Greco-Roman myth was one of my favorites. I was exalted by it, and that is the way I read my paragraph. (591)

The young Zora's oral rendering of the written text of a Greco-Roman oral myth earns her the praise of the white visitors, who invite her to lunch with them the next day at their hotel. They ask her to do some more readings, after which they present her with a cylinder full of pennies. Over the next weeks and months, Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Hurd send Zora, among other things, "Gulliver's Travels, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales" (594). While ancient myth and folk tales had been part of the children's literature canon since the nineteenth century, one must pause at the preponderance of such literature in the patronage packages. Perhaps, Hurston might be suggesting subtly, Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Hurd see in young Zora, as a later patron would, "a wonderful child of nature who was so unspoiled" (Boyd 194). A blend of condescension and Herderian romanticism, this was a common nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitude toward not only the collective Greek and Norse creators of the mythology and folklore passed on to Hurston, but also toward African Americans, as Hurston well knew. At the same time, Hurston's enthusiasm for written versions of oral-derived mythology and folklore falls in line with her work as anthropologist, folklorist, and writer. She emphasizes this life-long continuity in her autobiography while dodging the condescending implications possibly at work in her patrons' gifts. Hurston nonetheless figures herself, even at such an early stage in her life, at the intersection of oral and written traditions, institutionalized expectations, and her own affinities and abilities.

Following classical tropes of the African American literary tradition, *Dust Tracks on a Road* links the quest for literacy and institutions of literary production to northern migration. Eventually, she secures a place for herself at Howard University, where her textualization of rural black oral traditions will promote her even further north. She publishes her first story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in the *Stylus*, Howard's major literary journal. Set in Eatonville and full of its proverbs, idioms, and conjure, the story caught the attention of Charles S. Johnson, founder of the magazine *Opportunity*: "He wrote me a kind letter and said something about New York. So, beginning to feel the urge to write, I wanted to be in New York" (*Dust Tracks* 682). Illustrative of the often ironic interwovenness of oral and written cultural production, even though "the urge to write" propelled her to New York, before long she was known as a "raconteur" and "story-teller" of "bodacious charm" (Boyd 99). At rent parties and swank affairs at A'lelia Walker's "Dark Tower," *Opportunity* award-dinners, and literary salons, Hurston regaled listeners with her Eatonville inheritance and personal verve. Hemenway offers a potent suggestion about this aspect of Hurston's life: "Hurston was engaged in a more-or-less conscious process of bringing Eatonville folklore to a wider audience during the Renaissance

years. Arna Bontemps indicated that those who knew her during the twenties were not at all surprised by some of the tales in *Mules and Men*. They had heard them before during Zora's tale-telling feats at parties" (79). In a sense, then, Hurston prepared her audience orally to receive her forthcoming literary work. During the Harlem Renaissance, members of this audience were often the very cultural gatekeepers who evaluated her literary productions: Jessie Fauset, literary editor of the *Crisis*, Charles S. Johnson, founder and editor of *Opportunity*, enthusiasts, patrons, and promoters such as Carl Van Vechten, Fannie Hurst, Annie Nathan Meyer, and Alain Locke. By performing her Eatonville-inspired folkloric material, setting it in the full complement of voice and gesture, improvisation and spontaneity, Hurston enhances its future appreciation. Perhaps, then, when editors and people with access to publishing institutions read her material, it resonated with their memories of its richly dramatic presentation. Johnson published her stories "Drenched in Light" and "Spunk"; Locke included "Spunk" in *The New Negro*; and Hurst and Meyer enabled Hurston's studies at Barnard College. Hurston's savvy self-presentation as a figure of orality (in person and in print) worked to influence the institutions of literary reception to which she was subject.

Subsequent to her studies with Franz Boas at Barnard, Hurston's work in anthropology echoes and extends this dynamic interplay between the oral and the written. Her writings use oral traditions to textually frame the continuities of African diasporic culture. She writes in *Tell My Horse* about "Brother Anansi, the Spider, that great culture hero of West Africa who is personated in Haiti by Ti Malice and in the United States by Brer Rabbit" (296). A moment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reiterates Hurston's approach to articulating an African diasporic cultural geography through oral and performative traditions. In the Muck, the Everglades work camp where Janie and Tea Cake spend the bean-harvesting season, a group of Bahamians perform the African-derived jumpin' dance. When the whole work camp performs it one night, Hurston links textually this Afro-Caribbean dance to African American culture through a folktale about Big John de Conquer: "How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne" (149). "The culture hero of the American Negro folk tales," Big John de Conquer prompts a ring-shout, a performative tradition that for Hurston, and Paule Marshall after her, is a cipher of African diasporic culture (Hurston, "Florida" 884). Migratory labor, dance, and storytelling combine to identify a new cultural geography.

While using oral and performative traditions to articulate an African diasporic cultural geography, Hurston does not circumscribe this geog-

raphy as exclusively African, oral, or performative. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she explains the delight she brings to the musical theater troupe she traveled with as lady-in-waiting: "In the first place, I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. They were all northerners except the orchestra leader, who was from Pensacola. It was not that my grammar was bad, it was the idioms. They did not know of the way an average southern child, white and black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names" (651). The editorial politics of writing race during wartime, as Hemenway notes, constrained Hurston's autobiographical freedom of expression, encouraging her to embrace integrationist positions and paper over national political problems (276-78). The "map of Dixie" Hurston draws in this passage, which uses the vernacular to delineate an interracial southern cultural geography, should be suspect. However, in the 1940s Hurston read extensively in folklore and linguistics, concluding that many of the linguistic "characteristics of Negro expression," such as "the will to adorn," form part of an interracial southern heritage. In a private letter of 1947, she writes of the South:

You find the retention of old English beliefs and customs, songs and ballads and Elizabethan figures of speech. They go for the simile and especially the metaphor. As in the bloom of Elizabethan literature, they love speech for the sake of speech. This is common to white and black . . . [T]he agrarian system stabilized in the South by slavery slowed down change and lack of communication aided this retardation, and so the tendency towards colorful language that characterized Shakespeare and his contemporaries and made possible the beautiful and poetic language of the King James Bible got left over to an extent in the rural South. The double descriptive and all of that. (Zora 559)

Hurston perceives that this reading of southern orality "naturally lessens the stature of the Negro as a contributor to American culture." Ironically, though, she exposes a certain way of celebrating the African American idiom as a product of the minstrel tradition: "from the influence of the black-face minstrels, anything quaint and humorous has been attributed to the darkies" (558).

These ideas about the linguistic history of the South do not exactly mark a rupture with Hurston's earlier writings. She resists consistently positing notions of a vernacular culture exclusive of racial diversity or textual interactions. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* represents an African American folk community deftly engaged in writing rhymes and "speaking pieces." The back-and-forth play of orality and textuality in Eatonville recurs in Hurston's thoughts about Elizabethan language: "the songs and ballads and Elizabethan figures of speech . . . simile and especially the metaphor . . . the tendency towards colorful language that characterized Shakespeare

and his contemporaries . . . made possible the beautiful and poetic language of the King James Bible” (559). In other words, Hurston argues that the oral culture of Elizabethan England shapes the literature of that period, which through drama and religion recirculates back into English and (through colonization) American oral culture. In the rural South, furthermore, this process of recirculation is extended through figures of orality such as the preacher, who, like John Pearson, mediate back and forth between the King James Bible and the vernacular culture of black and white communities. Hurston thereby provides a model geography of European, African, and American language attentive to the recursive transculturations that propel the interweaving of oral, performative, and textual traditions in the African diaspora.

Through efforts such as these, Hurston promotes what VèVè Clark has labeled “diaspora literacy.” Big John de Conquer’s appearance at the jumpin’ dance shows how oral traditions serve Hurston’s project of diasporic recognition, recognizing shared cultural features across the African diaspora while simultaneously attuned to the distinct transculturations constitutive of diasporic difference. And yet we should hesitate for a moment at the term diaspora *literacy*. As discussed above, audiences were watching and listening to Hurston early in her career as much as they were reading her:

Her folktales and personal anecdotes seldom had been dramatized for the black artists of Hurston’s acquaintance. In fact, few of the literary participants in the Renaissance knew intimately her rural South. Langston Hughes had arrived in New York for the first time after a midwestern childhood and a summer in Mexico . . . His friend Arna Bontemps was from California. Wallace Thurman had arrived from Utah via the University of Southern California. [Countee] Cullen was from New York; Jean Toomer was from Washington, as was [Bruce] Nugent. (Hemenway 61)

Hurston’s role as a figure of orality in the Harlem Renaissance, a role enabled by the literary accomplishments that drew her to New York, rekindles enthusiasm for and recognition of African American folk traditions. This anticipates the diasporic recognition she promotes in her books. However, that books would come to mediate vernacular culture to her audiences comments ambivalently about Hurston’s relationship to the interplay of textuality and the vernacular. On the one hand, her oral performances advance her written literary and academic pursuits. On the other hand, they imbricate her in institutional relationships that interfere with her mediation between oral and written cultural production.

Hurston’s oral and performative talents won her the admiration and

support of her faculty advisor Professor Franz Boas and her literary patron “Godmother” Charlotte Osgood Mason. Both encouraged Hurston’s work in the rural South collecting folklore. Her affiliation with each, though, marked Hurston in ways that constrained and shaped her recording and recirculation of folk material. In her autobiography, she stages multiple scenarios in which her access to institutions of literacy—the university and literary patronage—enable her field work and yet threaten to cut off her access to vernacular culture:

My first six months [of collecting] were disappointing. I found out later that it was not because I had no talents for research, but because I did not have the right approach. The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was all right. But, I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, “Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?” The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads. No, he had never heard of anything like that around there. (*Dust Tracks* 687)

Likewise, in her essay “High John de Conquer,” Hurston introduces us to Aunt Shady Anne Sutton:

“Of course, High John de Conquer got plenty power!” [she] bristled at me when I asked her about him. She took her pipe out of her mouth and stared at me out of her deeply wrinkled face. “I hope you ain’t one of these here smart colored folks that done got so they don’t believe nothing, and come here questionizing me so you can have something to poke fun at. Done got shamed of the things that brought us through. Make out ’tain’t no such thing no more.” (925)

Hurston illustrates the generational tensions surrounding her own marked access to metropolitan institutions of literacy.

Similarly, her access to the financial resources of those institutions mark her as an outsider, threatening once again her ability to collect folk material. In *Mules and Men*, she arrives at a work camp in Polk County:

They all thought I must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind. They were accustomed to strange women dropping into the quarters, but not in shiny gray Chevrolets. They usually came plodding down the big road or counting railroad ties. The car made me look too prosperous. So they set me aside as different. And since most of them were fugitives from justice or had done plenty time, a detective was just the last thing they felt they needed on that “job.”

I took occasion that night to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive from justice, “bootlegging.” They were hot behind me in Jacksonville

and they wanted me in Miami. So I was hiding out. That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. I was taken in. (63)

The marks of class difference acquired in the North (her Chevrolet and Macy's dress) cast suspicion on Hurston, but she wins folks over with her quick wit and charisma. She sponsors "lying" contests "announced by a notice at the post office promising four prizes for the four best lies" (Hemenway 111). The fact of a written notice at the post office that "brought a wide response" comments neatly on the mixed population of lettered and unlettered individuals in the community, as do many of the folktales themselves, such as "How to Write a Letter" (Hurston, *Mules and Men* 43-44). Other ways of acquiring folk material often require her to spend a lot of time with men, who, as critics Cheryl Wall and Mary Helen Washington note, participate to a greater extent than women in performing African American oral traditions documented by ethnographers and other collectors ("Changing" 80-81; 98-99). This gendered imbalance puts Hurston in conflict with a woman named Lucy, the ex of guitar player Slim, a major source of Hurston's material. Big Sweet, Hurston's friend and protector on the job, explains the situation to her: "She mad 'cause Ah dared her to jump *you*. She don't lak Slim always playing JOHN HENRY for you. She would have done cut you to death if Ah hadn't of took and told her" (145). In numerous ways, then, Hurston's affiliations with metropolitan institutions of literacy—which enjoin and enable her to collect oral traditions—expose her to generational, class, and gender conflicts that threaten to disable her access to those traditions.

Hurston's literary and academic pursuits put a question mark over her own authenticity as a member of the folk community. By driving her Chevrolet and collecting folklore throughout the rural South, she exhibits suspicious signs of difference and consequently risks offending elders she respects, alienating herself from a community she feels she belongs to, even jeopardizing her life. Ironically, the precise question of authenticity motivates her quest to document African American vernacular culture. Complaining about the condescending folklore collections of certain of her white peers, she writes to Langston Hughes: "It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick—my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us" (Zora 126). After returning from her collecting expeditions in the South and the Bahamas, Hurston chose two media in which to redress degrading renditions of black folk traditions: anthropology and the theater. Her simultaneous efforts to establish theatrical and anthropological careers ran Hurston up against institutional contradictions surrounding questions of race, orality, and textuality that by her own terms

resulted in the failure of both careers. By the terms of posterity, however, this scene of failure has been reevaluated as a success, testifying to Hurston's role in anticipating and influencing new institutional orientations and desires.

When Hurston returned to New York, she successfully published "Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas" and "Hoodoo in America" in the academically prestigious *Journal of American Folklore*. These scholarly essays exhibit the participant-observer methods of anthropology innovated by Boas and others at Columbia University in the early twentieth century. However, Hurston struggled with the bulk of the material she collected in Florida. Technically, like all her material collected during 1928 and 1929, it belongs to her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who financed Hurston's expedition under the terms of a contract giving her discretion over the use of the material. While preparing the manuscript, which went through several revisions but eventually became *Mules and Men*, Hurston received a letter from Locke writing on Mason's behalf: "She 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). Aside from wrestling with scholarly protocols, Mason's wishes, and her own voice, Hurston contemplates using this material to pursue theatrical ideas that had been percolating for a while: "Did I tell you before I left about the new, the *real* Negro art theatre I plan?" she writes to Langston Hughes. "Well, I shall, or rather *we* shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive 'bama nigger. Just that with naive settings" (Zora 116). Hurston conceives a folk theater that will "show what beauty and appeal there was in genuine Negro material, as against the Broadway concept" (*Dust Tracks* 701). Through her own frustrating experiences writing skits for the Broadway revues *Fast and Furious* and *Jungle Scandals*, Hurston knew first-hand the obstacles at the production end of presenting "real," "genuine Negro material."

With the financial support of "Godmother" Mason, Hurston presented *The Great Day*—a folk production that reenacts a whole day in a Florida work camp, culminating in a Bahamian Fire Dance—at the John Golden Theatre in New York on 10 January 1932. "Despite the critics' unstinting praise," Boyd writes, "*The Great Day* was not picked up by a deep-pocketed producer and Godmother was sorely disappointed by the box office receipts. Hurston, too, was displeased by the financial figures" (231). Hurston had been trying to put herself on independent financial footing for a few years at this point. As the curtain fell on *The Great Day*, she found herself over six hundred dollars in debt to Mason. Hurston had believed

that “real, genuine Negro material” could establish her economically. It seems clear, though, that she misapprehended her theatrical market. Dance historian Anthea Kraut suggests: “Given how easily her representation of diaspora could be subsumed by entrenched notions of black bodies as wild, uncivilized Others, the complex relationship between African, Caribbean, Southern rural, and Northern urban black vernacular idioms that Hurston set out to portray may well have remained largely invisible to spectators in the early 1930s” (444). The primitivist discourse confronts Hurston in two ways here: as a waning and unreliable popular trend for potential white audiences and as a source of anxiety for potential black audiences. Kaplan comments: “It was one thing to perform black folklore to white audiences who found it new and exciting. It was altogether another thing to stage black folklore in a black context with audiences experiencing various scenarios as overly familiar, embarrassing, or belittling” (179). It seems Hurston could not or would not adapt her material in ways that would attract large audiences or “deep-pocketed producers.”² Hurston’s failure to sustain a “*real* Negro art theatre” forced her into a precarious artistic and economic position. Both for self-promotion and to promote her artistic ideas, she produced variations on *The Great Day* (also titled *From Sun to Sun* and *Singing Steel*) numerous times, throughout Florida and in Chicago and St. Louis. However, the economic failure of Hurston’s theater of diasporic recognition, her attendant debt to Mason, and Mason’s own ideas about how the black vernacular should be circulated led Hurston away from scholarly, oral, and performative recirculations of the black folk tradition and shaped the Hurston who has become so crucial to the literary canon today.

While Hurston labored to transfer the oral and performative material of African diasporic culture to the oral and performative context of the stage (mediated through writing and choreography), Mason insisted on the textualization of this material, relying on the archival endurance of the printed word. In her contract arranging for Hurston’s repayment of the six-hundred-dollar debt, Mason writes: “In all that you do, Zora, remember that it is vital to your people that you should not rob your books, which must stand as a lasting monument, in order to further a commercial venture” (qtd. in Boyd 232). The institution of patronage is not the only institution that influenced Hurston’s textualization of black oral traditions in *Mules and Men*. Hurston explains the marketing directives of her publisher, Bertram Lippincott, to Boas:

[Lippincott] wants a very readable book that the average reader can understand, at the same time one that will have value as a reference book. I have inserted the between-story conversation and business because when I offered

it without it, every publisher said it was too monotonous. Now three houses want to publish it. So I hope the unscientific matter that must be there for the sake of the average reader will not keep you from writing the introduction. (Zora 308)

The editorial directives imposed upon Hurston in her own day become the very things her future readers celebrate. In a typical critical gesture, one critic lauds Hurston for avoiding the trappings of scholarly anthropology: "Rather than presenting classifications and analysis, she describes how various factors shape the way the collection is formed, including her patronage, her education, her position in relation to intersections of race, gender, and class, and her allegiance to African-American culture as well as to her training in anthropology" (Ellis 159). Balancing Mason's desires for antischolastic primitive authenticity and Lippincott's market-oriented editorial strategies, Hurston manages to "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick" (Hurston, *Jonah's* 231).³ However, the prehistory of the final manuscript reveals how institutional constraints and expectations impose the innovations that will later be praised by reformers of the disciplines of ethnography and folklore.⁴

In light of these institutional constraints and expectations, Richard Wright's feeling that "Hurston *voluntarily* continues . . . the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh" (17) appears both right and wrong. Hurston did not quite "voluntarily" compose *Mules and Men* the way she did; however, the pressure brought to bear by Mason and Lippincott echoes the limitations imposed by white producers and audiences on African American art that Wright collectively aligns with minstrelsy. In an essay that seeks to recuperate somewhat Wright's critique of Hurston, Hazel Carby comments:

In returning to and recreating the [Eatonville] of her childhood, Hurston privileges the nostalgic and freezes it in time. Richard Wright, in his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, accused Hurston of recreating minstrelsy. Though this remark is dismissed out of hand by contemporary critics, what it does register is Wright's reaction to what appears to him to be an outmoded form of historical consciousness. (79)

Carby considers Hurston's "representation of African-American culture as primarily rural and oral . . . [to be a] discursive displacement of contemporary social crises," namely "the migration of black people to cities" (76). However, Hurston's rendering of the Great Migration in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* stages a rural, southern African American population dynamically intermingling orality and literacy. As the white power structure attempts

to restrict their freedom of movement, blacks employ institutions of literacy such as the US mail to dodge those restrictions, incorporating textuality into the vernacular tradition of putting one over on the white folks. Throughout her work, the rural culture Hurston represents is rich with practices that intermesh orality and textuality: preaching texts, writing rhymes, speaking pieces.

Critics, though, commonly interpret Hurston to posit oral language as the mark of African diasporic cultural authenticity. Discussing Hurston's rendering of Moses, for example, John Carlos Rowe writes: "My own view is that Hurston reinterprets Moses in an origin story about the magic of language that will link together the traditions of writing and orality that respectively organize Euroamerican and African-American cultures" (122). In Rowe's exegesis of Hurston's Moses, he identifies Euro-American culture with writing, African and African diasporic culture with orality. Yet Hurston's own words belie this simple mapping. We have already read her comments about Elizabethan oral culture and its determinative effect on English and southern language and literature. Here is what she writes about Moses in *Tell My Horse*:

All over the Southern United States, the British West Indies and Haiti there are reverent tales of Moses and his magic. It is hardly possible that all of them sprang up coming in contact with Christianity after coming to the Americas. It is more probable that there is a tradition of Moses as the great father of magic scattered over Africa and Asia. Perhaps some of his feats recorded in the Pentateuch are the folk beliefs of such a character grouped about a man for it is well established that if a memory is great enough, other memories will cluster about it, and those in turn will bring their suites of memories to gather about the focal point, because perhaps, they are all scattered parts of the one thing. (378)

As Hurston suggests, the Pentateuch represents merely one textualization of oral traditions relating to Moses. Emerging in Palestine between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE, the Pentateuch selectively compiled orally and textually transmitted stories current in the region (Mellor 1-44; Van Seters 309-12). It was assembled by Hebrew scribes in royal courts with cultural, commercial, and political ties to Egypt, Nubia, and Saba, an Amharic-language kingdom stretching across the Horn of Africa and Arabia (Shaw 313). Hurston's geographical orientation, then, not only presumes African writing by way of the ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Amharic scripts, but also suggests lines of narrative transmission along which Moses stories may have circulated both orally and textually, in and out of Africa. Furthermore, "a tradition of Moses as the great father of magic scattered over Africa and Asia" should immediately call to mind the

crucial role of Musa (the Arabic name of Moses) in the Islamic tradition. He appears in both the Qur'an and the Hadith. By the eleventh century, Islam and its texts had reached the Niger and Senegal Rivers and syncretically interacted with a variety of West African cultures and communities (Hiskett 19-43). Islamic traditions brought Arabic literacy to West Africa centuries before the slave trade began forcibly transferring Africans, some of whom were educated and literate Muslims, to the Americas.⁵ While the Islamic injunction to acquire literacy may not have been practiced universally, numerous forms of mediation between the written and spoken word evolved surrounding the Qur'an, the Hadith, and forms of religious practice.⁶

This historical exegesis of Hurston's Moses alongside contributions by Africanist scholars such as Eileen Julien warns against constructing Africa as exclusively oral (24). Even in precolonial times, African orality was irretrievably intermeshed with textuality, as Thomas A. Hale argues (1-16, 30-46). And as Mullen shows, even in regions less affected by Islam, Africans read and wrote scripts and signs. Thus, many Africans likely brought to the Americas sophisticated modes of mediating back and forth between orature and scripture, implanting the sort of dexterity at mediating between the written and the spoken word seen in Mullen's account of preachers and visionaries. Hurston shows not only visionaries and preachers, but many members of the African American community participating in the back-and-forth play of oral and written cultural production. In "Spirituals and Neo-spirituals" she writes:

Contrary to popular belief [the spirituals'] creation is not confined to the slavery period. Like the folk-tales the spirituals are being made and forgotten every day. There is this difference: the makers of the song of the present go about from town to town and church to church singing their songs. Some are printed and called ballads, and offered for sale after the service at ten and fifteen cents each. Others just go about singing them in competition with other religious minstrels. The lifting of the collection is the time for the song battles. Quite a bit of rivalry develops. (869)

These songs, even the printed ones, do not remain long in their original form. Every congregation that takes it up alters it considerably (869). Parallel to the practices of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Irish balladeers,⁷ African American religious minstrels also print, recirculate, and innovate the spirituals. This extends a recursive cycle of oral material entering the textual domain, and textual material entering the oral domain. Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African American spirituals appropriated and revised written Protestant hymns, which had emerged out of an English culture whose oral and textual lineages were

inextricably interwoven. The religious minstrels, or balladeers, Hurston describes merely extend an already extant African American tradition of interweaving orality and textuality.

In a series of enthusiastic letters to Langston Hughes, Hurston conveys their specific roles in a process that illustrates how popular and developed is the practice of mediating back and forth between oral and textual cultural production in the southern African American community of the 1920s and 1930s:

In every town I hold 1 or 2 story-telling contests, and at each I begin by telling them who you are and all, then I read poems from "Fine Clothes." Boy! they eat it up. Two or three of them are too subtle and they don't get it. "Mulatto" for instance and "Sport" but the others they *just eat up*. You are being quoted in R.R. camps, phosphate mines, Turpentine stills etc. I went into a house Saturday night (last) and the men were skinning—you remember my telling you about that game—and when the dealer saw his opponent was on the turn (and losing consequently) He chanted

"When hard luck overtakes you
Nothing for you to do
Grab up yo' fine clothes
An' sell em to-ooo-de Jew Hah!!"
(slaps card down on the table)

The other fellow was visibly cast down when the dealer picked up his money. Dealer gloating continued: "If you wuz a mule
I'd git you a waggin to haul—
But youse *so* low down-hown [?]
you aint even got uh stall."

So you see they are making it so much a part of themselves they go to improvising on it.

For some reason they call it "De Party Book." They come specially to be read to & I know you could sell them if you only had a supply. I think I'd like a dozen as an experiment. They *adore* "Saturday Night" and "Evil Woman," "Bad Man" "Gypsy Man"

They sing the poems right off, and July 1, two men came over with guitars and sang the whole book. Everybody joined in. It was the strangest & most *thrilling* thing. They played it well too. You'd be surprised. One man was giving the words out—lining them out as the preacher does a hymn and the others would take it up and sing. It was glorious!" (Zora 121-22)

Hurston often found herself as a mediator between oral and textual cultural production among the literati in New York. Usually, though, she reproduced the oral traditions of Eatonville and the African diaspora for literate audiences. The scene she communicates here, however, places her in a different role. She brings *Fine Clothes for the Jew* to the "job" and finds

herself amazed: "It was the strangest & most *thrilling* thing." The fluency, the ease, the naturalness with which the community appropriates and improvises on Hughes's poetry suggests, in fact, that mediating between the written and the spoken word is an institution itself. Hurston recognizes in their practice of mediation the same techniques used by a preacher: "One man was giving the words out—lining them out as the preacher does a hymn and the others would take it up and sing." This scene witnesses two reversals: on the one hand, Hurston has come *to* "the folk" bearing products of the literary avant-garde (products based, of course, on the popular art of the blues). On the other hand, this band of migrant laborers has expertly appropriated the preacher's techniques of mediating textuality to "the folk."

These reversals reiterate the interwoven dynamics of textuality and orality that mark Hurston's participation in and depiction of African diasporic culture. Just as they cut across social worlds of the African diaspora, they also move beyond the boundaries of that diaspora. The preacher's masterful mediations between orality and textuality, which since W. E. B. Du Bois have been associated with practices emanating out of West Africa, have also been thought to derive from the "out-lining" techniques of Puritan clerics. Not one to shy away from overdetermined transculturations, Hurston revisits these rhetorical practices in her historical novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), in which the Afro-Semitic Moses must parlay his mastery of the Midianite book of magic into the courtly language of the Pharaonic court and the vernacular language of the Israelite folk.

Hurston's suggestive mapping of African and African diasporic culture repeatedly highlights such pluralistic interweavings of orality and textuality. Forays into her manuscript histories, private letters, and less popular novels thereby expand the familiar portrait of Hurston as the authenticity-driven Isis "re-membling" the fragments of African diasporic vernacular culture. This metaphorization of Hurston as a healing goddess, furthermore, projects a radically cohesive authorial agency at odds with a historical figure subject to myriad institutional expectations and social contradictions. Yet the cozy intimacy her major works project obscures the evident traces of such conflicted processes of literary production as well as Hurston's own attempts at discursive diversity. The overpowering effectiveness of her textualization of the vernacular, in conjunction with exigencies and pieties fueling the institution of literary historiography, has engendered a readerly desire for and sense of familiarity with Hurston. These have been constitutive of the revived popular and critical interest in her life and work. While wrapping Hurston in an aura of familiarity and intimacy, they have also produced a portrait of the artist that keeps her hidden in plain sight.

Notes

1. While this essay explores Hurston's rhetoric of familiarity with respect to the reader, in "Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography," Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo traces Hurston's shifting rhetorics of familiarity with respect to the communities she investigated in her anthropological work.
2. The material could make money, though. Hall Johnson appropriated Hurston's choreography and costumes in his enormously successful *Run, Little Chillun!* He also excised the "complex and heterogeneous vision of diaspora" (Kraut 446).
3. Reflecting Mason's desires, Hurston recounts: "I must tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down. She is altogether in sympathy with them, because she says truthfully, they are utterly sincere in living" (*Dust Tracks* 689).
4. See, for example, James Clifford and George E. Marcus.
5. On Islam and New World slavery see Ala Alryyes (41-54). See also João José Reis.
6. Michael Gilsenan presents the complex mediations between orality and literacy characteristic of Muslim practices: "Islam, which means submission to God, is constructed upon what Muslims believe is a direct Revelation in Arabic from God: the Quran. This recitation or reading, for that is what the word *Quran* means, is the miraculous source of the umma, the Islamic community. It is the Word. And the conception and communal experience of the Word in prayer, in study, in talismans, in chanting of the sacred verses, in *zikr* (Sufi rituals of remembrance), in the telling of beads, in curing, in social etiquette, and in a hundred other ways are at the root of being a Muslim" (15-16).
7. See G. D. Zimmermann (12). Hurston, who once wrote, "I read every bit of Irish folk material that I can get hold of," may have been aware of this practice of the Irish balladeers (qtd. in Lowe 37).

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