

# Zora Neale Hurston's Use of Location, Gender, and Language in the Folk Aesthetic: a Casebook

## Context

Zora Neale Hurston famously remarks in several of her texts that she “has a map of Dixie on her tongue.” On first reading, this quote seems to affirm popular culture’s reading of Hurston as a Southern folklorist. But to read her exclusively in terms of her regionalism and her oral tradition is to oversimplify Hurston and her aesthetic and anthropological projects. More to the point, to read her notion of “the folk” as representing only Southern blackness is to misread the larger scope of her project. Instead, we must rethink the way in which Hurston’s regionalism informed her sense of American nationalism, African American identity, and Pan-Africanism, as well as her role as both a creative writer and anthropologist.

## Purpose

The purpose of this casebook is to provide a pedagogical and research reference that provides suggestions and some possible readings of *Mule Bone* as a text, and Hurston as an individual, anthropologist, feminist, and author. In this casebook, we begin to reconsider the way in which Hurston uses “the folk” to authenticate black political movements, revisionary nationalisms, and transgressive aesthetics. In particular, we will be focusing on the way in which Hurston plays with geography, gender, and language to “signify on” race, class, and gender status quos. In the first section, “Eatonville: a Physical/Ideological Black Space,” we will explore the way in which Eatonville, Florida is at once located as the writer’s folk-y southern hometown and an alternative space for an idealized black imaginary community. In the second section, “Developing and Disputing Daisy,” we will look at the way in which Hurston focalizes gender as such an important element in black aesthetics to the extent that she falls out with her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries. And in the third section, “Power of the Word”: Zora Neale Hurston’s Use of Vernacular and Performativity in Women’s Social Negotiations of Respect,” we will connect the first two casebooks, relating the significance of black folk culture to aesthetic representations of gender through Hurston’s privileged use of the vernacular.

## Objective

Given this course map, students will:

- negotiate library materials found online, in the stacks, or in special collection archives
- read non-canonical Hurston texts like *Mule Bone*, “Bone of Contention,” and *Mules and Men*
- use different reading strategies for single texts in order to exhaust multiple meanings
- explore the way in which geography privileges certain places and spaces
- develop a broader context of the various intellectual movements that made up what has become known as the Harlem Renaissance
- interrogate the way in which gender can be a site of contestation for folk representations
- listen to the way in which language can modify representation and meaning

## **Eatonville: a Physical/Ideological Black Space**

### ***Introduction***

The first section of this casebook focuses on Hurston's use of her hometown of Eatonville, Florida as the site of African American folk culture in many of her works and how this is important in understanding the significance of Hurston's intersecting use of anthropology, literary aesthetics, and autobiography. It is critical to realize that Hurston set *Mule Bone* in a town that was populated and governed by a strictly African American population. This all-black setting of this play is her real hometown, which gives the text both autobiographical and anthropological elements in tandem with the racial commentaries she reveals through her use of diction and textual scenes. By combining these elements, we can conclude that Hurston is creating a commentary on African American life, while simultaneously writing herself and the folk into Florida history. By evaluating Hurston's use of the folk through geography, her own words, and historical information, we will provide the reader with a background of which to begin analyzing Hurston as a writer, anthropologist, feminist, and folk revivalist.

### ***Hurston: Writer, Anthropologist, Folklorist***

Zora Neale Hurston is important as an artist and anthropologist, and specifically as an artist who blended her anthropological field work with her literary work and vice versa. Hurston's writing was neglected in many aspects during her lifetime. People were not always receptive to her blending of genre, use of the folk, or especially her utilization of African American dialect in her work. Many believed that she was perpetuating negative stereotypes instead of providing a humorous anthropological/racial commentary as scholars now suggest. Unfortunately, the revival of her work for critical study did not take place until around 1975 when it was recovered by feminist scholars.

### ***Eatonville, Florida: in Hurston's Words***

In an unpublished manuscript for the Federal Writers Project, entitled *The Negro in Florida*, Hurston details many aspects of African American history in Florida. Among the various topics, Eatonville is described as a unique Negro town by Hurston herself (*The Negro in Florida* 120). The Federal Writers Project (FWP) aimed to support writers and the written word during the great depression compiling local histories, oral histories, ethnographies, children's books and other works.

Hurston explains that Eatonville's uniqueness lies in the fact that it is the only town that is completely owned and governed by African Americans. She claims that the town started when H.W. Lawrence, a white philanthropist from Maitland, donated a 27 acre tract of land to a group of African Americans for a town site. Mr. Lawrence later started a citrus farm, employing nearly the whole town. After the town was established, the citizens elected Joe Clarke, a local merchant as their first mayor (note that Clarke is also mayor in *Mule Bone*). Interestingly, Hurston's father was also mayor at one point (*The Negro in Florida* 131).

### ***Scholarly Criticism on the Use of Florida as a Space for African American Folk in Hurston's Work***

Below are some useful conceptions of how scholars perceive Hurston's use of Florida and Eatonville as a representative space for the African American Folk, from *Zora in Florida*, an edited collection by Steve Glassman and Kathryn Seidel (Gainesville, FL: U of Florida P), 1991.

Florida is a site for many of Hurston's works. Her writings create a vision of the Southern African American Folk, with Florida as its central point. Among her various books and short stories, some Florida settings include: Ocala, Eatonville, Orlando, and Pensacola.

Towards the end of her career, many critiqued Hurston because her work did not reflect the growing politicization of African American literature. More recently, scholars have proposed that her work suggests a strong awareness of black/ white relations and civilization (Glassman 30).

Florida's African American population played a representative role. Hurston took a stance against African Americans who did not use their own cultural forms by using the folk as an influence and genre in many of her writings (which is a political statement in itself). By utilizing traditional African American folk forms, Hurston promoted the unique history and identity associated with African American culture (Glassman 35).

"Hurston sought to apprehend and inscribe ethnocentric messages of Folklore and music in her cultural patternings of the state" (Glassman 149). In doing so, Hurston sought to capture the unique contributions African Americans have made to society as a whole.

### ***Pedagogical Questions for Promoting Class Discussion and Thought***

- 1.) Do you think that Hurston purposely sets her stories in the South (Florida) as a means for creating a commentary on race relations?
- 2.) Eatonville is primarily an African American space in Hurston's stories (and at the time she was living there). What function does this play in her use/conceptualization of the folk?
- 3.) What do you make of Hurston's use of biographical elements in her work (i.e. Eatonville, real acquaintances, names, etc.)? How might these biographical elements contribute to her privileging of Folk traditions?
- 4.) What do you make of the gender representations in *Mule Bone*? How did you read the character of Daisy?

### ***Works Cited***

All sources can be located in the University of Florida Smathers Special Collections Library (<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/AAexhibit/manuscripts.htm>), including unpublished manuscript of *The Negro in Florida 1528-1940*.

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## ***Mule Bone* and Questions of “Authentic Folk” and the “Public Intellectual”**

### ***Introduction***

This section of the electronic casebook will focus on two interrelated topics: the notion that there is an “authentic folk” and the approach of the “public intellectuals” who invoke precisely that notion of “the folk” in their work. Regarding the latter, the choice to use the phrase “public intellectual” rather than just artist, writer, scholar, or politician in describing the Harlem intelligentsia is deliberate. First, on a more general level, it is impossible to think of these individuals as embodying one function within the New Negro movement; rather, to consider the function of the black artist, intellectual, or politician during the Harlem Renaissance is to recognize that each person’s activity--and as a result the way in which an individual represents (or creates art that represents) their race--is a negotiation of all of these functions. And second, especially with the case of Zora Neale Hurston, it is hard to type her as either a creative writer or a scholar, in part because her two “professional” fields as artist-writer and anthropologist-ethnographer are so closely linked in her self-identification and in her work, and to overlook one function would be to lose site of her overall project.

### ***Harlem Intelligentsia: Drama and Authenticity***

To begin, we must look at the popular notions of “authenticity” as they relate to “the folk” and more specifically to the idea of an authentic folk as it relates to drama, which for our purposes can be read as broadly as “theatre” or as narrowly as “comedy.” Having this historiographical context is critical: to know how Hurston and Hughes reconceived of a transgressive and “authentic” Negro theatre, we first must be aware of the critical discussion they were entering into.

- As early as 1918, W.E.B Du Bois wrote in *The Crisis* that the value for a sustainable African American theatre was invaluable for Negro--in his words, it can scarcely be overestimated. His aesthetic theory called for a self-sustained Afro-American theatre, underscoring his idea (where he is one of many critics) who felt that drama was the most crucial form of all of the arts for the future of black artistic development. Given this mindset, Du Bois made his theory praxis by helping to found Krigwa, a black theatre group in Harlem dedicated to drama that is “by,” “for,” “about,” and “near us.”
- Similarly, Alain Locke wrote that “despite the fact that Negro life is somehow felt to be particularly rich in dramatic values, both as folk experience and as a folk temperament, its actual yield, so far as worthwhile drama goes, has been very inconsiderable. In “The Negro and the American Theatre, he expanded this idea writing, “In the appraisal of the possible contribution to the American theatre, there are those who find the greatest promise in the rising drama of Negro life” (qtd. in Gates 15). This is because up until that time Negro influence on American drama had been negligible, in part because it has been “under the handicaps of second-hand exploitation and restriction to the popular amusement stage” (qtd. in Gates 15). For him, a black theatre arts would “transpose the possible resources of Negro song and dance and pantomime to the serious stage, envisage an American drama under the galvanizing stimulus of a rich transfusion of essential folk-arts” (qtd. in Gates 16).
- And the New Negro artists who would be Hurston’s and Hughes’ contemporaries seem to fall in line behind these two leading figures. Montgomery Gregory in “The Drama of Negro Life” notes that “the only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama for the Negro lies in the development of the rich veins of folk-tradition of the past and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of to-day” (*New Negro* 159). And Jesse Fauset in “The Gift of Laughter,” writes that the black man “has some peculiar offering which shall contain the very essence of drama” (*New Negro* 161). Importantly for our reading, Fauset locates this drama as specifically

comedy as a response to the "picture of the black American as a living comic supplement [as having been painted] to camouflage the real feeling and knowledge of his compatriot" (161).

So the question becomes: what is an "authentic folk" as it relates to drama and more specifically comedy? Gleaning from these public intellectuals, we can make a short-list: it is black written, produced, performed; it incorporates "folk-art" elements of Negro song, dance, pantomime; it incorporates the comedic language that is the essence of black vernacular; and it counters stereotypical white representations and perceptions of black actors, themes, plots, etc.

### ***Hurston and Hughes: Competing "Public Intellectualism"***

Moving on to the second idea of "public intellectualism," we must consider the ideas of an "authentic folk" and drama as an "authentic folk-art" representation with regard to Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and their comedy collaboration.

- Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" argues for the inherent value of black folk life as a resource for racial art. The "low-down folks, the so-called common element," he contends, "furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations" (*Double-Take* 41). If an artist were able to "escape the restrictions the more advance among his own group would put upon him," Hughes contends he would find "a great field of unused material" (41).
- And by and large, Hurston agreed. In 1935, she would write "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that would follow-up this sentiment she shared with Hughes. For an entry on "Drama," she wrote: "The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama...Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course" (*Double-Take* 61).

So in 1928, Hughes and Hurston decide to collaborate in the writing of a black comedy with the purpose of creating "real Negro art theatre." For both collaborators, "authentic folk-art" centered on language, especially the connection between folk culture and rural vernacular. But that stance was problematic when audience was considered: the problem of image when the rural vernacular is used is compounded by who is watching the play; for example, white and middle class black perceptions of that usage can lead to stereotypes or images of minstrelsy, vaudeville, or black stock characters. Regarding this issue, Joseph McLaren suggests that Hurston and Hughes considered these ideas but proceeded with their plan for *Mule Bone*, with the intention of writing "a new theory of black drama" that could overturn age old stereotypes" (22). The play and its vernacular, then, would present "ritualized or communal settings that are at the heart of devising a theory of black drama, one grounded in linguistic and communal patterns emerging from the African American context" (22). In short, Hughes and Hurston were of one mind in recognizing that vernacular could be used to elevate black culture despite the association with stereotypes and minstrelsy.

With *Mule Bone* in particular, Hughes and Hurston set out to balance folk comedy and social critique. Hurston's familiarity with class and linguistic contexts of Eatonville provided a setting and style that contribute to the authenticity of the play. And Hughes as the more formally experienced writer provided a more nuanced sense of drama stylization in the actual drafting and crafting of the play. Therefore, the folk characters, though laughable, are capable of resolving their internal conflicts because they are in political control of their community. So although the play is not a "realistic" replica of black life, it proves to be a humorous satire of class pretensions and romantic love.

## ***Developing and Disputing Daisy: A Chronology of Her Characterization in the Mule Bone Controversy***

### **Context:**

That's a tidy way of thinking about *Mule Bone* and the interrelation of authentic folk and public intellectualism. But that sort of analysis disregards the fact that Hurston's and Hughes' personal and collaborative theories didn't necessarily translate to praxis. In general, what would infamously become "The Mule Bone Controversy" was at root a product of different (and yet very similar) ideas of folk and art.

To think about the controversy regarding the collaboration of the public intellectuals in the writing of *Mule Bone* is necessarily to consider issues of folk, authenticity, and translation/language. But also critical to analysis of the rhetorical context of the controversy is gender. Until recently—Ruth T. Sheffey in 1987 and Rachel A. Rosenberg in 1999—scholars have debated the reason for the fall out between Hughes and Hurston all the while either trivializing or ignoring the key question of the representation the role of women in "the folk" and the shifting role of women in the comedy. This is a huge oversight especially because, given the critical history of *Mule Bone* as a revision of Hurston's unpublished short story "Bone of Contention," the most dramatic alteration of the short story in the writing of the play is the substitution of the Daisy character for the turkey as the object of dispute.

When we consider gender as a point of contention in Hurston's and Hughes' creation of "authentic folk art" and response to "public intellectualism," we necessarily think about the politics of location, of translation, and of gender with regard to the folk-tale and its tradition—and the ways in which both collaborators diverge in terms of their personal/political orientations.

### **Analysis:**

To flesh out the gender politics central to *Mule Bone*, it would be useful to look at Rosenberg's "Looking for Zora's *Mule Bone*: The Battle for Artistic Authority in the Hurston-Hughes Collaboration." This particular critical piece is important because it offers a timeline of *Mule Bone* drafts in which Hughes' and Hurston's work towards adaptation of Hurston's short story to their collaborative folk-comedy. What marks Rosenberg's work as distinct from the extensive scholarship on the *Mule Bone* controversy is that she suggests that the play became an impossible project first when Hughes forced the turkey of the short story to a woman and second when neither could agree on an acceptable way to characterize Daisy, the woman in the love triangle.

### **Timeline:**

*April 12, 1928*: Hurston initiated the *Mule Bone* collaboration with Hughes, proposing that he join her in creating "real Negro art theatre" (Rosenberg 80).

*(Interim 1928-1929)*: Hurston penned "Bone of Contention" (Rosenberg 83).

*Spring 1930*: Hurston and Hughes were living in housing provided by Charlotte Osgood Mason in Westfield, NJ. Hurston is famously remembered as having acted out all of "the male and female roles in a variety of voices. In terms of collaboration, both writers are presumed to have identified themselves as co-authors. (Rosenberg 81)

- Collaboration Process: notes in Hughes' hand, where he introduces transforming the "bone" into a woman and making the plot focus on a romantic triangle (Rosenberg 101)
- Here are the various versions of Daisy:

1. "new gal in town" who sings, dances, and wears fancy clothes (Rosenberg 87)
2. "seductress" who is antagonistic to community values (87)
3. "white ally" who brings white values and agendas to Eatonville (87)
4. "Harlem Daisy" who is Hurston's protest response to prior problematic characterizations of women as Other, subordinate, negative actor (88)
5. "published Daisy" who is the character in *Mule Bone* (88).

*May 1930:* Hurston leaves Westfield to go South, telling Hughes that she'll work on the trial scene of Act 2 (Rosenberg 90).

*Fall 1930:* Hurston copyrighted her own version of *Mule Bone* under her name only in October, and she solicited Carl Van Vechten's advice on her own version in mid-November (Rosenberg 90).

- Hurston's Versions: *De Turkey and De Law*: Hurston's revised play, where the artistic collaboration between Dave and Jim is eliminated and the turkey hunt is reinstated as the "inciting incident" (Rosenberg 101).

*January 1931:* Hughes attempts to reestablish his authorship credit and artistic control of the play. Hughes' Revisions:

- Hughes combines copy of Hurston's draft of Act 2 with the collaborated copies of Acts 1 and 3, and sends it to the Library of Congress to be copyrighted under both of their names (Rosenberg 101).
- Hughes completes the "final draft" of *Mule Bone* for the Gilpin Players, retaining Acts 1 and 3 from the Spring 1930 collaboration and eliminating the turkey that Hurston used in Act 2 (Rosenberg 101).

Based on this timeline and our notion of the politics of translation, here is what we can discern:

- Hughes' notion of a writer as protest-figure, therefore, should consider the social conditions of his black public, where inequities of segregation and racism must be contested. And to get that message across, it was the function of the artist-writer to write and produce a text that could reach a diverse enough of an audience to successfully get that message across. In Hughes' personal/political opinion, then, such a task required the modernization of the "folk tale" to a staged romantic-triangle comedy; gender must be situated in a hierarchy of values, where the status of women was subordinated to race issues.
- Hurston used "the folk" and folk traditions to transform and to strengthen the black community from within rather than writing about a black middle class with whom both the Harlem intelligentsia and a white audience might respond to better. Hurston, therefore, was even more transgressive than her contemporaries (Hughes for example) because of the way she liked to "authentically" maintain the folk-tale and because her notion of the folk necessarily challenged gender norms in addition to class, religion, and race.
- Gender is important in the drafting of *Mule Bone* given that each author's personal politics informed the way in which they approached Daisy as character, Daisy as political actant, and Daisy as "the folk."
- Gender is important in the *Mule Bone* controversy given that gender politics informed the way in which Hurston and Hughes butted heads regarding Daisy's characterization, the way in which gender stereotypes informed the two authors' interactions in the dispute, and the way in which the Harlem intelligentsia tended to side with Hughes as his (male-centered) aesthetics proved more in line with popular New Negro discourses.

And given these points, here are the questions we need to further consider:

- How is Daisy as character a "protest figure" in Hughes' notion of "authentic Negro drama"? In Hurston's variation?
- What is the place and the function of women in "the folk"?

## Zora Neale Hurston's Use of Location, Gender, and Language in the Folk Aesthetic: a Casebook

- How can (or cannot) Hurston's regionalism translate into a national movement? How can (or cannot) the city of Eatonville function as an ideal New Negro space--in terms of transgressive gender norms, governing structures, and folk traditions--given the Harlem intelligentsia's oversimplification of Hurston's southern personal and aesthetic politics?
- Can a turkey translate into a woman, and vice versa?

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## **“Power of the Word”: Zora Neale Hurston’s Use of Vernacular and Performativity in Women’s Social Negotiations of Respect**

### **Overview:**

This section of the electronic casebook will focus on gender and language as a means of discussing *Mule Bone* and *Mules and Men*. In these texts, Hurston emphasizes women’s use of vernacular and the performativity of folk culture to reflect social rituals and negotiations of respect in the male dominated spaces. Through signifying and participation in storytelling, women construct their social identities. This section also develops Hurston’s use of language as an anthropologist and how she negotiates her way into the white, male academic establishment of anthropological discourse.

### **Context:**

Before discussing examples of strong female characters from these works, it may first be helpful to explore the context of folk verbal culture, social ritual, and signifying. Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* and Hurston’s essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” give insight into the role of the “verbal duel” as a public form of expression and negotiation. *Speak So You Can Speak Again* includes an audio clip from an interview with Hurston which may also inform the role of signifying or, as Hurston refers to it, “putting your foot up.” (Listen to audio clip “About Using Dialogue/Collecting Folklore” from *Speak So You Can Speak Again*).

### **Women’s Use of the Vernacular:**

After establishing a foundational understanding of the role of vernacular in folk culture, it is possible to see how this process is of particular importance to women. While women in folklore tend to fall into stereotypical, subordinate roles of domesticity or the “fallen woman” in the folk sermon, *Mule Bone* and *Mules and Men* both provide excellent examples of women who demonstrate their power, and claim to economic resources, by using the vernacular in male dominated spaces, such as in the courtroom or at the fishing pond.

#### **From *Mule Bone*: Sister Taylor and Sister Lewis**

Sister Lewis: (*to men holding Mrs. Taylor*) I don’t see how come y’all won’t let old Lucy Taylor a loose. Make out she so bad, now. She may be red hot but I kin cool her. I’ll ride her just like Jesus rode a jackass.

Sister Taylor: Dat ain’t nothin’ but talk. You looks lak de Devil before day, but you ain’t so bad; not half as bad as you smell (113).

#### **From *Mules and Men*: Big Sweet, Ella Wall, and Gold**

Big Sweet to Joe Willard:

“And speakin’ ‘bout hams,” cut in Big Sweet meaningly, “if Joe Willard don’t stay out of dat bunk he was in last night, Ah’m gointer sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar-cure *his* hams.”

Joe snatched his pole out of the water with a jerk and glared at Big Sweet, who stood sidewise looking at him most pointedly.

“Aw, woman, quit tryin’ to signify.”

“Ah kin signify all Ah please, Mr. Nappy-chin, so long as Ah know what Ah’m talkin’ about.”

"See dat?" Joe appealed to the other men. "We git a day off and figger we kin ketch some fish and enjoy ourselves, but naw, some wimmins got to drag behind us, even to de lake."

"You don't figure Ah was draggin' behind you when you was bringin' dat Sears and Roebuck catalogue over to my house and beggin' me to choose my ruthers. Lemme tell *you* something, *any* time Ah shack up wid any man Ah gives myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got the law in my mouth" (161-2).

Ella Wall to Big Sweet:

Ella Wall snapped her fingers and revolved her hips with her hands.

"I'm raggedy, but right; patchy but tight; stringy, but I *will* hang on."

"Look at her puttin' out her brags." Big Sweet nudged me (192).

Gold to Gene:

"You ain't no big hen's biddy if you do lay gobbler eggs. You tryin' to talk a big wood when you ain't nothin' but brush" (24).

*Mules and Men* also provides another example of a woman using vernacular slightly differently—by contributing to the telling of folklore. Mathilda Mosely's "sassy" tale on sexual politics, "Why Women Take Advantage of Men," is particularly important as it challenges the under-representation of women in folklore, as well as the typically misogynistic connotation that accompany male-told folk stories.

Note: For other examples of female representation in the folk, consult Hurston's collection and performance of folksongs on *Speak So You Can Speak Again*, such as "Dat Ol' Black Gal." Many of these performances are also openly available from the Florida Memory Project ([http://www.floridamemory.com/Collections/folklife/sound\\_hurston.cfm](http://www.floridamemory.com/Collections/folklife/sound_hurston.cfm)).

For discussion and criticism on women's use of the vernacular, consult Adrienne Andrews's article "Of *Mules and Men* and Men and Women: The Ritual of Talking B[ ]jack" and Cheryl Wall's "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." Wall's exploration of Big Sweet and Mosely's characters is particularly important in establishing that through language and contributions to folklore, "Women become subjects of their own discourse rather than the objects they generally are in the discourse of black men and white men and women" (667).

Wall also raises another point in "*Mules and Men* and Women" which could develop into a possible class discussion question.

## Question 1

Big Sweet certainly challenges female images of domesticity. She's rough and boisterous, fights with card deals in the jook, and carries a knife. Hurston notes: "Big Sweet didn't mind fighting; didn't mind killing and didn't too much mind dying" (192). After she tells off a white Quarters Boss, Joe Willard tells her "You wuz uh whole woman and half uh man. You made dat cracker stand offa you" (195). At the same time, she can "talk sweet" just as much as she can "talk smart." Hurston acknowledges a strong affection for Big Sweet: "I couldn't leave Big Sweet even if the fight came. She had been too faithful to me" (193).

Wall claims Big Sweet's "fierce conduct enhances her value as a woman" while embodying an "androgynous ideal" (670). What about folk culture might support an androgynous female as ideal or why might this be a desirable quality? Is this image validated or challenged by depictions of women in other texts we've read?

## ***Hurston's Use of Language and Anthropology:***

It is also possible to connect the social ritual of verbal negotiation and the vernacular to Hurston's role as an anthropologist. *Mules and Men* represents the first book-length work of anthropology by a black woman. Working in a predominately male-dominated field and under the guidance of "Papa" Franz Boas, Hurston's work and acknowledgment in the field of anthropology is certainly significant. As D.A. Boxwell points out in "'Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*," Hurston's close proximity to the Eatonville setting and her presence in the text itself would have challenged many anthropological conventions of the time which preferenced scientific objectivity and unintrusive detachment.

As an Eatonville native, the opening passage of *Mules and Men* still demonstrates her self-consciousness as she approached the male space of Joe Clark's porch with her "Barnard English" and northern education. However, Hurston quickly inserts herself as an active participant in the story and collector of folklore. Her close proximity and presence in the text challenges the anthropological conventions as she uses folk language, dialect, and the inclusion of strong women to negotiate her presence in anthological discourse. Boxwell subtly suggests that through her unconventional technique Hurston "signifies" on the predominately white, male academic establishment of anthropological discourse and the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia.

While Hurston's use of Eatonville, as an isolated, black community, has been viewed as an ideal setting for exploration of the folk, it has also prompted criticism. This presents another topic to facilitate class discussion:

### **Question 2**

Hurston's critics debated her success as an anthropologist, including Alain Locke. While he considered *Mules and Men* a piece of "rare native material and local color," he criticized Hurston for neglecting to place the work in a larger social context, and claimed that the folk should "exist not only the history and in the realm of the aesthetic, but also in the present and in the social space of the southeastern US" (qtd. in Duck 265). Another writer, Sterling Brown criticized Hurston's lack of "social responsibility" and national consciousness in *Mules and Men*, writing that if the work "were more bitter it would be nearer the total truth."

What do you think about the "isolated" setting of the text (Eatonville as an all-black community)? Is the text truly absent from white oppression or the social or political issues facing African-Americans at the time? Does this challenge the authenticity of the text or Hurston's credibility as an ethnographer?

### **Works Cited**

- Andrews, Adrienne R. "Of *Mules and Men* and Men and Women: The Ritual of Talking B[!jack]." *Language, Rhythm, and Sound: Black Popular Cultures in the Twenty-first Century*. Eds. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. 109-120.
- Boxwell, D.A. "'Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*." *African American Review*. 26.4 (1992): 605-17.
- Duck, Leigh Anne. "Go there tuh know there": Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk." *American Literary History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. 265-294.
- Hill, Lynda Marion. *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*. Washington.: Howard UP, 1996.

Zora Neale Hurston's Use of Location, Gender, and Language in the Folk Aesthetic: a Casebook

Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Writing" in *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 61-74.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Speak, So You Can Speak Again*. Beck & Mayer, 2004.

Wall, Cheryl. "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum*. 23.4 (1989): 661-680.

## Aesthetics and Zora Neale Hurston: An Annotated Bibliography

**Andrews, Adrienne R. "Of *Mules and Men* and Men and Women: The Ritual of Talking B[Jack]." *Language, Rhythm, and Sound: Black Popular Cultures in the Twenty-first Century*. Eds. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. 109-120.**

Andrews explores the tradition of verbal assertiveness and gender relations in *Mules and Men*. She argues that verbal skill in the public arena which challenge domesticity as the space of the black woman in folklore is the way women construct their social identity. This verbal negotiation, or "signifying," is most used to validate respect and demand fair treatment from men or used in competition with other women over men and their economic resources. Andrews uses Big Sweet, both in her interactions with Joe Willard and Ella Wall, as an example of the female conquest of respect in the male realm through language and the folk technique of "verbal dueling."

**Boxwall, D.A. "'Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*." *African American Review*. 26.4 (1992): 605-17.**

In "Sis Cat' as Ethnographer," Boxwell supports *Mules and Men* as a truly persuasive work of ethnography. He places Hurston's work in the context of the anthropological conventions of the time, particularly the philosophy held by her mentor, Franz Boas, that the anthropological observer should be objective and un-intrusive. He highlights Hurston's violation of these stipulations and argues that her authorial presence in the text not only serves the authenticity of the work, but supports a wholly African-American "re-interpretation" of ethnography. Using the concluding folktale of the book, "Sis Cat," Boxwell reinforces the significance of Hurston's presence as a black woman excelling in a predominately white, male discourse.

**Carme, Manuel. "Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of an African-American Theatre of the Black Word." *African American Review* 35 (2001): 77-93.**

In "Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of an African-American Theatre of the Black Word," Carme explores the way in which both authors negotiated the tensions of translating an oral tradition to a written text and then to a performed comedy. For Hughes and Hurston, the question of dialect became a question of language's signification: what non-standard English could connote in terms of racial and national politics; what vernacular could allow for in the production of an African American literary tradition; and how a pairing of non-literary and literary voices could authenticate not only them as writers but also "the folk" as a recovered (and viable) cultural space. Carme asserts that precisely these stances--despite the fact that *Mule Bone* was never performed or published in the writers' lifetimes--succeeded in the formation of cultural consciousness (if not the beginnings) of modern "Black Aesthetics."

**De Jongh, James. *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.**

In *Vicious Modernism*, De Jongh maps the cultural, aesthetic, political, and economic geography of Harlem as a site of modern, modernized, and modernist re-invention. He imagines this New York City neighborhood as a locus for black, national, and black national cultures. With black Harlem as a motif, de Jongh explores the way in which the neighborhood proved at once as an imaginary locale in the mind of its activists, artists, and politicians and a symbolic force that shaped that intelligentsia.

**Duck, Leigh Anne. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk" in *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2007. 115-145.**

Duck's "Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk" explores the way in which Hurston's temporal conception of the folk--that it is necessarily processional--informs both her southern regionalism. In turn, the writer suggests that this play with space and time allows Hurston to write in a sort of alternate modernism that challenges Anglo-American high modernism and northern New Negro elitism and thereby gives voice to an otherwise marginalized southern, black perspective.

**Glassman, Steve and Kathryn Seidel, Eds. *Zora in Florida*. Orlando, FL: U Central Florida P, 1991.**

A collection that aims to cover the major phases of Hurston's Florida life. Essays range in content, but tend to take a historical-sociological approach. As mentioned by the editors, no effort was made to impose any critical orientation as the serious critical study of Hurston has only become prevalent in the past two decades. Topics range from Hurston's politics, use of flora and fauna, voodoo, the Florida Negro, and various biographical elements.

**Hill, Lynda Marion. *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*. Washington: Howard UP, 1996.**

Hill's text explores and justifies Hurston's use of drama as the most effective way to link the performativity of black culture with language. The introduction presents a biographical context to establish Hurston's idea of drama as the cornerstone of black culture and connects the repeated, ritualized behavior of the culture to her use of para and extra-linguistic communication. Hill also acknowledges how the social drama is "stage" upon which performers negotiate respect of their public image and individual survival. She acknowledges the indirect nature of signification as a link between the oral and written discourse of folklore and Hurston's successful interpretation of cultural codes and behaviors through the use of both verbal and non-verbal expression.

**Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia & New York: Harper Collins, 1935.**

A collection of African folklore, composed by Hurston through accounts from Florida and Louisiana. Hurston relates many stories and has a glossary in the back containing songs and potions. Hurston aims to revitalize African traditions by illustrating stories that condemn American injustice, make fun of stereotypes such as African American ignorance and laziness, and show many positive stories of hard working, shrewd peasants.

**Hurston, Zora Neale. *The Negro in Florida 1528-1940*. Prop. of Jacksonville U: Xerox copy for UF, 1975.**

A work by Hurston for the Federal Writers Project in Florida. It records slave history, Florida history of African Americans, Folklore, and Voodoo. She also includes a list of notable Florida African Americans and notable African American towns in Florida such as Eatonville and Pensacola.

**Hurston, Zora Neale. *Speak, So You Can Speak Again*. Beck & Mayer, 2004.**

This audio CD features excerpts from interviews with Zora Neale Hurston and clips of her performing traditional folk songs she collected on her anthropological studies in Florida.

**Kaplan, Carla. Ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.**

The full compilation of Hurston's personal correspondence. An interesting historical record and insight into the life of a great African American novelist. Many letters are addressed to other

important members of the Harlem renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, W.E.B DuBois, Carl Van Vechten, and countless others.

**Krasner, David. *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002.**

Krasner's *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* focuses on the way in which New Negro artists used performance as at once transgressive social, political, and artistic acts. Through the use of performance, the intellectuals, artists, and politicians associated with the Harlem Renaissance (or at least familiar with its cultural precepts) could counter what had become stereotypical representations of black life, Southern culture, and primitivism. Krasner further notes that modernists like Zora Neale Hurston revised the term "performance" so as to extend the term beyond mere "play-acting," so that their language, lore, and signifying could speak to alternative modernist discourses, all the while working through issues like double-consciousness and double-audience.

**Lowe, John. "Hurston, Humor, and the Harlem Renaissance" in *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994. 341-182.**

In this essay, Locke notes the way in which Hurston's humor was a transgressive trope that proved transgressive especially with respect to her gender and race and the way both intersected in her modernist aesthetic.

**McLaren, Joseph. "Folk Comedy in Collaboration: The *Mule Bone* Affair" in *Langston Hughes: Folk Dramatist in the Protest Tradition, 1921-1943*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997.**

In "Folk Comedy in Collaboration: The *Mule Bone* Affair," McLaren argues that Hughes and Hurston--individually and collaboratively--offer an alternate perception of the "folk" in literature and in praxis. In opposition to their contemporaries who seemingly cater to white audiences and/or black middle class values, these artists write in a "protest tradition," where the vernacular, stereotypes, and comedy offer transgressive texts and subtexts to challenge not only white hegemonic discourses, but also what was becoming a standardized black literary practice.

**Nathiri, N.Y. Ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman and Her Community*. Florida: Orlando Sentinal Communications Co., 1991.**

In this text, Nathiri discusses her knowledge of Hurston and Hurston's contributions to her community from first hand experience. Nathiri introduces Hurston from the viewpoint of one of her peers in her hometown of Eatonville. A Collection of essays on Hurston's life and impact are then presented.

**Pavloska, Susanna. "Zora Neale Hurston's Ethnological Fiction" in *Modern Primitives: Race and Language in Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. 75-98.**

In "Zora Neale Hurston's Ethnological Fiction," Pavloska uses Bakhtin's notions of dialogism, heteroglossia, and carnival to unpack Hurston's language. More specifically, by reading *Mules and Men* as having two distinct voices--one literary-authorial, the other ethnographic-anthropological--Pavloska demonstrates the way in which both her intellectual communities and her publishing house shaped the way in which Hurston thought about, wrote about, and dialogued with her Eatonville community.

**Sorensen, Leif. "Modernity on a Global Stage: Hurston's Alternative Modernism." *MELUS* 30.4 (Winter 2005): 3-24.**

Sorensen in "Modernity on a Global Stage: Hurston's Alternative Modernism" suggests that Hurston's work challenges the tradition conception of Anglo-American modernism. In particular, he argues that Hurston's particular treatment of identity, globalization, and modernity "[posits] black folk culture as a rival alternative modernity" and not as "a partial, lacking, or failed modernity" (4). Through her use of ethnography--and through her alternative style of negotiating narration and observation, personal experience and fact--Hurston writes a modern discourse that underscores the way in which "the folk" shapes culture and modernity and not vice versa. And in that way, Sorensen suggests that the collecting of folk tales was neither a challenge to an older (or alternative) civilization nor an attempt to preserve primitive folk traditions; rather, Hurston's ethnographic collection authenticates black culture and affirms its formative role in the creation of other modernisms.

**Rosenberg, Rachel A. "Looking for Zora's *Mule Bone*: The Battle for Artistic Authority in the Hurston-Hughes Collaboration." *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 79-105.**

In "Looking for Zora's *Mule Bone*: The Battle for Artistic Authority in the Hurston-Hughes Collaboration," Rosenberg offers an alternative reading of the fall-out between these two "New Negro" artists. Expanding on the work of Ruthe T. Sheffey, Rosenberg offers a timelines of *Mule Bone* drafts in which Hughes' and Hurston's work towards adaptation of Hurston's short story to their collaborative folk-comedy. What marks Rosenberg's work as distinct from the plethora of scholarship on the *Mule Bone* controversy is that she highlights the problem of collaboration as an issue of translation. In short, Rosenberg suggests that the play became an impossible project first when Hughes forced the turkey of the short story to a woman and second when neither could agree on an acceptable way to characterize Daisy, the woman in the comedy's love triangle. And in this reading, the gender, racial, and aesthetic politics that had previously been attributed to two opinionated artists clashing over "ownership" now specifically converges on the "authentic" body of Daisy.

**Wall, Cheryl. "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum*. 23.4 (1989): 661-680.**

Wall demonstrates how the women in *Mules and Men* move from the subordinate position delegated them in traditional folklore to a position of expressive creativity and empowerment. She parallels the conquest of Big Sweet, both verbally and physically, to Hurston's movement and acquired respect in the male-dominated world of storytelling and performativity established in "Characteristics of Negro Expression." Wall claims that through women's "sass," particularly Big Sweet's and Mathilda Moseley's, women gain power as the "subjects of the discourse rather than the objects they generally are in the discourse of black men and white men and women" (667).

**West, M. Genevieve. *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture*. Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2005.**

Part biography, part literary analysis, West's book examines the way in which Hurston's life experiences and intellectual and artistic training marks her as distinct both within American academia and the Harlem intelligentsia. Though she is quick to point to the similarities between Hurston and her contemporaries like Hughes, Du Bois, and Locke, West also makes sure to note that Hurston was even more transgressive than these liberal-minded men because her notion of the folk necessarily challenged gender norms in addition to class, religion, and race.

## Selected Images

Selected images are courtesy of Smathers Library Special Collections (<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/AAexhibit/manuscripts.htm>).



Hurston at [the Federal Writer's Project](#), which funded writers during the great depression.



**Gabrielle Brown and Rochelle Harris in Eatonville, FL.**



Gathering of people in Eatonville, Florida.

## The Fabulous Zora Neale Hurston!

The Rebellious Novelist, Pioneering Folklorist and Spellbinding Raconteur of the Harlem Renaissance Died in Obscurity in 1960, but Now She Has Become the Center of a New Cult

By Jacqueline Trescott

RENNY COLLEGE students are picking up a 40-odd novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," embracing its author, Zora Neale Hurston, and book's heroine, Janie, as models for these thinking times.

Identically Hurston, the most prolific black woman writer, a woman who died in near-obscurity and poverty, a woman who was only consistent in the parts, postures and ideas, is the center of a cult. The New York literary scene in the 1920s and the writer was one of the most controversial and lonely characters of those tumultuous times and this woman from a remote town set the pace, sometimes she set it, both a social and intellectual force in the group known as the Harlem Renaissance. Probably in a very witty lot, she proclaimed herself "Niggerati," and entertained entire parties with it. "wrote her biographer, Robert E. Hemenway, stressed a need for a 'natural' art that did not rely on the world, that was true to one's instincts of the voidism hesitated to follow a whim."

lomb, her head wrapped in African cloth or a flannel over her eyes, Hurston would dance on a floor, throw herself on the floor to make a her bedroom door on her guests and write it. She felt comfortable experiencing a voodoo ritual with lumberjacks, writing for the *American*, bringing gospel singers into the Park zone, a white patron or knocking out some pass in the elevator.

is generated a movement. A group of Washington writers have dedicated a current exhibition on in T. Daniel Library to her. Roger Rosenblatt, mist, has placed "Eyes," along with Milton's id Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" on a sign for Jimmy Carter.

of Illinois Press recently published the first edition and a paperback reissue of "Eyes." The first both were 4,000 copies. "That's an unusual number both would be good sellers because of the n. Robert Hemenway's book sold 1,000 copies of publication," said one editor. A Hurston novelist and poet Alice Walker, will be published The Feminist Press. A new edition of "Mules and Men" book of folklore, will be published this diversity of Indiana Press.

Howard and Yale Universities and the University of Chicago have acquired Hurston materials—all in the last two years. Said Laura Mount of Florida at Gainesville, "For 10 years the pa-

er's cemetery in 1971, observed, "We are ready for her complexity. We are ready for someone who was herself and never held back." Larry Neal, the director of the D.C. Commission on the Arts, wrote the introduction to two of Hurston's hardback reissues in 1971 and an unproduced screenplay based on "Eyes." Neal said, "She was a very free, exciting, intelligent woman. The times are now kind."

Born at the turn of the century in a rural, all-black Florida community, Hurston grew up in a large family. All her life she was energetic, open and daring, following her mother's advice to "jump at de sun." As a teenager she worked as a maid to an actress and landed at Howard University in the early 1920s. There she turned to writing. By the time Hurston reached New York in 1925, she was known as a gifted writer, and a spellbinding raconteur. She was also a pioneering anthropologist of black folklore, studying at Barnard College with the famed scientist, Franz Boas. Her first novel, "Jonah's Gourd Vine," was published in 1924, and before she died in 1960 she published two books of folklore, four novels, an autobiography, a score of short stories, essays and newspaper articles, two plays and some musical librettos.

Talent was her asset, not beauty. She once wrote, "... my face looking like it had been chopped out of a knot of pine wood with a hatchet on somebody's off day . . ." She was a plain-looking woman, with a broad nose, retreating eyes, high cheekbones and freckles.

Yet her ordinary looks are hardly ever mentioned. She is remembered for her flamboyance. Often she wore slacks and boots in a day when neckties were just dropping and hems rising, often a Fall Mall was dangling from her lips.

She could be outrageous—coining words like "Niggerati" for the contemporary black writers and spokesmen, "Negrotarians" for the racial uplift proselytes and "Asaturpianus" for the stuffed-shirts. Her opinions, as well as her actions, were frequently at odds with the other blacks in literary circles. She would go to a Harvard College alumni meeting, and jump up on the table, hiking up her chignon skirt, and demonstrate how blacks shoot craps in turpentine camps. When the novelist Fannie Hurst asked Hurston, who briefly worked as Hurst's secretary, to pose as an African princess so they would be served in a segregated restaurant, Hurston acquiesced. Afterwards, Hurston said, "I didn't know a good meal could be so bitter."

To study voodoo, she underwent initiation by followers of the famed Madame Leveau in New Orleans. Hurston fasted for 69 hours, lay naked on a couch with a snake skin on her navel and had, by her own account, five psychic experiences. "In one, I strode across the heavens with lightning flashing from under my feet, and grumbling thunder following in my wake," she recalled. Still, she moved with ease at the salons of writers and patrons, Carl Van Vechten and Nancy Cunard, and didn't think anything of stopping a brother on Lenox Avenue and

Article by Jacqueline Trescott, "The Fabulous Zora Neale Hurston!" (*Washington Post*, May 21, 1978).