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**Variations Around a Theme: The Place of Eatonville in
the Work of Zora Neale Hurston**

by

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of Philosophy in English**

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston is a complicated figure whose work has always aroused contradictory responses. During her lifetime she was often more readily appreciated by white readers who enjoyed her boisterous accounts of apparently unthreatening 'Negroes', than by other African American writers who felt that she pandered to white stereotypes, simplifying the black experience and the black psyche. Neglected for several decades, Hurston was again brought to the attention of literary and cultural critics in the late seventies by Robert Hemenway and Alice Walker, who published seminal reconsiderations of her work. Since then Hurston has become a central figure, not only in the African American canon, but also in the mainstream, becoming, to paraphrase the critic Hazel Carby, a veritable industry in her own right. Yet she remains a writer who evokes mixed responses. For some she is an exemplary Womanist and an uncomplicated role model. For others, though, she is a reactionary individualist who offers her readers little more than escapism and unexamined nostalgia. Particularly contested is the sort of African American space Hurston describes in her work. Centred on the all-black town of Eatonville, it has seemed to some an ideal space worth recovering for the potential it possesses for sustaining a model of authentic African American life. For others though, it has seemed an irrelevant and reactionary retreat from the complexities and realities of twentieth century life and an ideal, which has little relevance for an increasingly urban black population. In this thesis I intend to examine more closely the space and place that Hurston creates in order to argue that the Eatonville of her texts is more complex and ambiguous than either of these accounts allow.

Preface

In the last twenty-five years Zora Neale Hurston has become an African American icon. Resurrected in the late seventies by writers such as Alice Walker and Robert Hemenway,¹ she has emerged as a central figure in a revised American and African American canon; a 'quintessential feminist and Womanist'² who has not simply restored 'funkiness and folk roots to black women's discourse',³ but also brought back to a dispersed, increasingly disparate ethnic group, a sense of themselves as a discrete, authentic 'bodacious'⁴ community.

In general, re-evaluations of Hurston's work have positioned her intellectually, culturally and geographically, not in the 'Nigger Heaven' of Harlem in which she had gained notoriety as the self-styled 'Queen of the niggerati', but in its virtual antithesis; Hurston's rural hometown Eatonville, Florida. Explaining her political, artistic and cultural ethos as the result of the years she spent there enjoying the sort of innocent childhood that African Americans are supposed to have been denied, critics have

¹ Alice Walker began 'looking for Zora' in the mid seventies, publishing 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View' and 'Looking For Zora' in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1983; rept. London: The Women's Press, 1984), pp.83-92; 93-116. Robert Hemenway published his autobiography of Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* in 1977 (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977, rept; London: Camden Press, 1986). Since then she has become a substantial presence in the field of African American studies. For a comprehensive account of the explosion of interest in Hurston see Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph's *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

² Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p.1.

³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women', in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Shari Benstock (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 63-89, p.83.

⁴ Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View', p.85.

presented this 'pure Negro town' as a 'matrix', a 'source of inspiration', and an 'eden'⁵ (sic) which brought into being Hurston's apparently indomitable sense of 'racial health' and made possible her expressions of 'complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings'⁶ which were 'so colored', that all around them 'pale[d]' by comparison.⁷

These critical responses are in a sense inevitable. After all, the majority of Hurston's books are grounded in this 'pure Negro' town.⁸ 'The Eatonville Anthology', *Mules and Men*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* all evoke it and although *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is set in North Africa, echoes of the Eatonville folk can still be heard in the communal voice of the gossipy Israelites. Even *Dust Tracks on a*

⁵ Hemenway, p.277; Michael Awkward, 'Introduction', to *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. by Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.1-18, p.1; Steve Glassman, 'Introduction', to *Zora In Florida*, ed. by Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: Florida University Press, 1991), pp.iix-xv, p.x.

⁶ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View', p.85.

⁷ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', *The World Tomorrow*, May 1928, rept. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, compiled by Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp.826-829, p.829. Of course there have been other autobiographical accounts by women which describe periods of pre-racialised innocence similar to those Hurston conjured up in numerous books and essays. In fact the striking similarities between Hurston's representation of her coming-into-consciousness and Harriet Jacobs' in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861, rept. in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr., & Nellie McKay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp.209-245), suggests that Hurston may have been 'signifying' on this narrative by reproducing it in her own. For passages from Harriet Jacob's narrative which describe how she was 'shielded' from her status as a slave until she was six years old (*op. cit.*, p.211), only learning of her powerlessness on the occasion of her mother's death, find their way into Hurston's narratives, Janie Crawford, for example, finding out that she 'wuzn't white' when she was 'round six years old' (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York, 1938, rept. London: Virago, 1987), p.21), while in 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', Hurston presented herself as 'suffer[ing] a sea change' when her mother died, becoming a 'little colored girl' when she is sent to Jacksonville (1928; rept. in *Hurston*, pp.826-829, p.827). The difference between Hurston's use of this trope and others' however, is that in other narratives innocence is presented as a form of, albeit benign false-consciousness the result of protective mothers who shield from their daughters their true existence. In Hurston's work however, the notion of essential blackness, and all that it signifies is dismantled. For blackness is not hidden in Eatonville. Rather it does not signify, having no symbolic power in the space in which she is raised.

⁸ Those that did not tend to be disregarded as ineffective, 'poor' and over-ambitious. See Hemenway, pp.246-307; Walker, 'Looking for Zora', pp.89-91.

Road which charts Hurston's journey away from her home town, dwells in Eatonville for over fifty pages.⁹

Furthermore, Hurston's own self-portraits generally orientated themselves through references to Eatonville. She repeatedly wrote of herself as a woman whose emotional and cultural home was literal rather than literary; a woman whose identity was so embedded within an 'exclusive' and self-sufficient 'colored town' that she had no need either to slough off an 'old' degraded 'Negro', or to be born again into a 'New' Harlem-based 'Race'.¹⁰ Thus while she was generally reluctant to pin herself down to any one group - repeatedly undercutting affiliations by asserting her intellectual and cultural independence, 'I have no race, I am *me*'¹¹ - she regularly distinguished herself from the rest of the Harlem crowd by flaunting the extent to which she possessed and was possessed by a unique 'colored' community:

Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town (...). I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the country - everybody's Zora.¹²

⁹ There are exceptions of course. As their titles reveal, 'Book of Harlem' and 'Story in Harlem Slang' focus upon the places Hurston was inhabiting during the twenties and are filled with characters who are a world away from those who inhabit Eatonville's front porches; characters, in fact, who have rejected the South, preferring, as the saying goes, to be a 'lamppost on Lennox Avenue than the mayor of Atlanta' (Sterling Brown, 'The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955)', in *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cary Wintz (Houston, Texas: Rice University Press, 1996), pp.203-217, p.209). In these stories Hurston seems to have been flexing her muscles, and proving her 'ear', rather than seriously engaging with and attempting to represent urban cultures.

¹⁰ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.826.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.829.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.826-7.

Since the seventies however, Eatonville has become important in Hurston scholarship, not simply as the backdrop to Hurston's life and work, but also as a symbolic space; a spiritual and cultural home which seems so 'pure', undiluted, unassimilated and 'black'¹³ that it liberates both its vicarious and its actual occupants from what Gloria Wade-Gayles has described as the 'narrow circle of humiliation for blacks' which whites have 'expertly drawn'.¹⁴ When in her essay 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary tale and a Partisan View', Alice Walker described how her relatives were transformed through reading Hurston's texts, for example, she was revealing how a 'fixed, unitary, and bounded'¹⁵ Eatonville transcended time and space. She was relating how a reading of *Mules and Men* reminded her own dispersed, geographically and culturally 'disengaged' folk of their forgotten history, reconnecting them to it, and creating an 'expressive relationship to the past' which restored the sense of community they had lost:

When I read *Mules and Men* I was delighted. Here was this perfect book! The "perfection" of which I immediately tested on my relatives, who are such typical black Americans (...). Very regular people from the South, rapidly forgetting their Southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, listening to each other read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained.¹⁶

¹³ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.89.

¹⁴ Gloria Wade-Gayles, *Pushed Back To Strength: A Black Woman's Journey Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p.139.

¹⁵ Pierre Nora, cited in 'No Place Like *Heimat*: Images of Home(land) in European Culture', by David Morley and Kevin Robins in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, ed. by Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), pp.3-32, p.5.

¹⁶ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.84.

For writers such as Alice Walker, Deborah Plant and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, therefore, Hurston's value has been that she created out of the 'Eatonville of her youth', a mythical land, 'immune to time and place'; a 'garden of Eden',¹⁷ and a 'monument' which reminds African Americans how they 'kept (...) going through centuries of white oppression', and teaches them how they can continue to make themselves at home in an inhospitable land.¹⁸

Even critics who have been less enthusiastic about Hurston's elevation to the position of 'star'¹⁹ in the African American canon, have tended to accept this view, so that while they dispute the conclusions more sympathetic critics have reached they do not investigate the interpretations they are based upon.²⁰ Though writers such as Hazel Carby and Michelle Wallace contest the political usefulness of Hurston's Eatonville, therefore - arguing that it is oppressive rather than liberating, creating an ideal African American identity which is unavailable and also undesirable for a more urban population - they begin from the same premise, sharing the assumption that the Eatonville of Hurston's books is a utopia; a virtual 'Atlantis'.²¹

¹⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Myth and History: Discourse of Origins in Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou', in *Analysis and Assessment, 1980-1994* ed. by Cary Wintz (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), pp.11-24, p.13. See also Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on its Own Bottom*.

¹⁸ Walker, 'Anything We Love Can Be Saved', in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.45-50, p.45.

¹⁹ Plant, p.3.

²⁰ See for example, Michelle Wallace, 'Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston? Critics Carve Up the Legend', in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), pp.172-186; Hazel Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston' in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. by Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.71-94.

²¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Myth and History', p.23.

While I agree that Eatonville has come to function as a rather oppressive, monolithic symbol of authenticity, I intend to argue that the 'essential', 'aesthetic' Eatonville such critics as Hazel Carby have discredited is one which has been constructed primarily by Hurston's fans, rather than Hurston herself.²² In this thesis, therefore, I shall show that a careful consideration of all of Hurston's books reveals that there is not one definitive Eatonville in her work but rather several, competing, discordant Eatonvilles which, taken together, constitute neither the 'paradise' of Walker's account, nor the 'booby prize of (...) romanticized marginality' of Michelle Wallace's.²³

Before beginning this thesis, however, I should, perhaps, reveal the space out of which I am working. When I began this project it was with the intention of using Gaston Bachelard's notion of 'eulogised space' in order to illuminate Hurston's own fictional spaces.²⁴ Enchanted by the last few pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which seemed to me to conjure up precisely the sort of romantic, nostalgic space Bachelard had evoked in *The Poetics of Space*, I felt that his theory of space and place would provide an apt and useful discourse for thinking about Hurston. Encouraged after reading Houston Baker Jr's *Workings of the Spirit*, by Baker's own adoption of phenomenologist ideas, I ploughed ahead.²⁵ Whilst revising my work however, I

²² Steve Glassman, *Zora in Florida*, p.xi.

²³ Michelle Wallace, 'Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity', in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp.52-67, p.61.

²⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Paris, 1958; rept. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

²⁵ *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women Writers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp.38-68. Baker uses Bachelard as a starting point that leads him to incorporate the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida. Aware of the problems of applying these Eurocentric heavy weights to African American women's texts he creates a complex and sophisticated defence of theory. The other side of this argument is equally well articulated in Barbara Christian's 'The Race for Theory' in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), ed. by Padmini Mongia, pp.158-172.

became increasingly aware that Bachelard's ideas were at best insufficient for explaining Hurston's use of space, and at worst inappropriate. I became increasingly convinced that my admittedly rather casual adherence to his theory was restricting rather than enhancing my understanding of Hurston's work, encouraging a top-down methodology that distorted rather than described her subtly diverse books.

There are several reasons for this. The first and most compelling, is that of history. When I began this project I justified my use of a European theory within an African Americanist thesis by claiming a sort of intellectual internationalism. Insisting that I was simply making use of a European theory in order to concentrate more clearly on African American writing I claimed that all such theories were simply tools which could and should be used to open up even the most culturally and historically specific texts. Since then however, I have come to the conclusion that history matters. For though there is an illusion of parity between Bachelard's 'felicitous spaces'²⁶ and Janie Crawford's singing, sobbing bedroom, this is an illusion that quickly evaporates on closer inspection. For although all space is constructed and Bachelard's felicitous space is as fictional as anything Hurston conjured up, Bachelard's model was based upon an experiential, historical world which supported his right to such a benign space and to the humanity it inculcated. Simply being 'guarantee[d] place',²⁷ not only in Bachelard's topology, but in his world. Hurston, on the other hand, could take neither 'being', nor place for granted for the rootedness that Bachelard evoked was not available to her; the conditions required for such an attachment to place having actively

²⁶ Bachelard, p.xxxv.

²⁷ This is something Edward Casey also takes for granted in *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.x.

been denied African American for centuries. Consequently the 'felicitous spaces' she imagined were conjured up in spite of the world she inhabited rather than because of it and as a result they were fragile, provisional, and always aspirational.

The second reason for the unsuitability of this model is that Hurston's work is so unpredictable, paradoxical and improvisational that one theoretical model simply will not fit all of her books. Constantly moving between genres, forever shifting her position and her focus Hurston always resisted theoretical 'pigeon-holes',²⁸ defying generalisation. In order to do justice to Hurston's diversity therefore, I realised that what I required was a series of inter-connected, flexible methodologies that would enable me to take her books 'duck by duck'.²⁹ Thus while elements of Bachelard's ideas remain in my arguments (in Chapter Two in particular), elsewhere other theories of space, place and identity appear. Henri Lefebvre is implicitly present³⁰ informing the way I imagine space as both constructed and constructing. So too is Doreen Massey, Micheala di Leonardo, Barbara Johnson, and Hazel Carby.³¹ Alice Walker is also an enduring presence; my work developing out of a prolonged engagement with hers. Most importantly however, I am influenced by Hurston herself; her ability to 'hit a straight lick with a crooked stick' inculcating in this thesis interpretations that are provisional, improvisational and always on the look out for 'big old lies'.³²

²⁸ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott, 1942; rept.in *Hurston*, pp.557-807), p.581.

²⁹ This is the term Hurston uses in "My People! My People!" to counter racial groupings and to describe the integrity of individuals: 'Light came to me when I realised that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them' (*Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Hurston*, pp.719-733, p.731).

³⁰ I have been particularly influenced by Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Paris, 1974; rept. London: Blackwell, 1995).

³¹ A full list of the texts that have influenced my readings is included in my bibliography.

³² Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Hurston*, p.557; *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935; rept. in *Hurston*, pp.1-268), p.13.

Introduction

Although Zora Neale Hurston published little during the Harlem Renaissance's hey-day she was one of its most prominent figures.¹ After arriving in New York in 1925 with no job, no friends, and no money but with lots of 'hope',² Hurston had quickly established herself as a prominent figure within the new artistic movement. A regular at Carl Van Vechten's salon and a friend of most of the movement's central figures, she had soon secured for herself a place within its 'inner circle'.³ Yet while her short stories won her literary credibility in these early years, her contribution to the Renaissance often seems to have been as literal as it was literary - her flamboyant enactment of a subversive, rebellious southernness which seemed so 'colored' against the 'sharp white background'

¹ Generally the Harlem Renaissance has been described as taking place between two historical markers; the end of the Great War and the beginning of the Depression. Langston Hughes, for example, wrote that it reached its peak just before the economic crash that sent 'Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the hill toward' its antithesis, 'the Works Progress Administration' (*The Big Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940; rept. London: Pluto Press, 1986) p.223). There have always been dissenting voices however. In 'The New Negro In Literature (1925-1955)', for example, Sterling Brown argued that the term Negro Renaissance only had validity 'when considered to be a continuing tradition' (rept. in Cary Wintz, ed. *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1996), pp.203-218, p.204), and more recent critics have agreed with Brown's judgement. Richard J. Powell and David A. Bailey, for example extended the dates of the movement to include works completed in 1938 in their recent *Rhapsodies in Black* exhibition (organised by the Hayward Gallery in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. and the Institute of International Visual Arts, London). Academics such as Cary Wintz have also persuasively argued that these dates - 1919 to 1929 - are artificial and unhelpful. In fact, suggesting that the Harlem Renaissance was essentially a 'psychology' Wintz argues that it lasted as long as belief in it lasted - the movement continuing for as long as the generation of writers who came to fruition through it 'consciously identified with it' (*Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston, Texas: Rice University Press, 1988), p.2). While I would not dispute this I would suggest that there were two waves within the movement and that the more optimistic, more bohemian first wave, that was centred in Harlem and that was to some extent made possible by the economic boom, had ended by the time that Hurston began to publish; replaced by one which was far less willing to credit Hurston's world view. Whether one considers the end of the movement to have been 1929 or the mid thirties however, the dates of Hurston's books - 1934, 35, 37, 38, 39, 42 and 47 - place her right at the end of the movement.

² Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in Hurston, p.682.

³ Cary Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.88.

of Fifth venue salons bringing her acclaim,⁴ making her seem an embodiment of the spirit Langston Hughes would celebrate in his cultural declaration of independence:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame (...). We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs (...). We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁵

Thus while with stories such as 'Sweat' and plays such as 'Color Struck' she certainly contributed to the literary development of the period, it was as an extraordinary personality that she was often remembered. Although, in his autobiography, Langston Hughes was ambiguous in his presentation of Hurston, rather spitefully questioning her 'authenticity' by alluding to her relationships with whites, he nevertheless allows Hurston to emerge as an emblematic and charismatic figure; a woman whose body functioned as a corporeal page upon which a subversive 'fearless', 'dark-skinned' southern self was inscribed:

Of this 'niggerati,' Zora Neale Hurston was certainly the most amusing. Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books - because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself (...). She was full of side-splitting anecdotes,

⁴ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.828

⁵ Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.1267-1271, p.1271

humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as the daughter of a travelling minister of God.⁶

Hurston was, at least for a time, 'in vogue', therefore, a 'sacred black cow'⁷ not only to her Barnard peers and 'white friends', but also to her New Negro cohorts. Thus her ironic, radical voice, as the 'daughter of a travelling minister of God' combined with others of the *Fire!!!* inner circle in order to represent 'the birth of that state of mind that was the Harlem renaissance':⁸

FIRE... weaving vivid hot designs upon an *ebon* bordered loom and satisfying
pagan thirst for beauty unadorned - the flesh is sweet and real - the soul an
inward flush of fire - on fire in the furnace of life blazing...

"Fy-ah,

Fy-ah, Lawd,

⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, p.239. Rather than actually stating his opinion of Hurston, Hughes hid catty accusations behind counterfeit compliments: 'To many of her white friends (...) she was a perfect 'darkie,' in the nice meaning they give the term - that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro' (*Big Sea*, p.239). Furthermore, he used Hurston's popularity against her, trivialising her literary accomplishments and obscuring her influence - he fails to mention, for example, that the ironic term 'niggerati' was one that she, not he, coined. However, Hughes may well have had an axe to grind. He had once been close to Hurston, even accompanying her on one of her research trips in the South. However their friendship failed to survive an attempted collaboration (for a full account of the 'Mule Bone' story see Hemenway, pp.136-157). This tendency to 'read' Hurston as a rather open book is not confined to Hughes however. There are other, more disturbing accounts in which Hurston is reduced to a sign. In his correspondence with the German ethnologist Erich von Hornbostel, for example, Melville Herskovits described the way in which he had 'observed' the 'motor behaviour' of Hurston, which was in his opinion, 'typically Negro'. At this time Hurston was a graduate student at Columbia working for Herskovits, collecting data for him by measuring Harlem heads. Yet it is clear that rather than a student she is perceived by him as a subject - as useful as data as the Harlemites she was more literally measuring. Clearly then Hughes was not the only one who preferred, as Alice Gambrell states, to 'read' Hurston's body, rather than her books (*Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.108. Herskovits' correspondence is repeated, without comment in Walter Jackson's 'Melville Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture' in *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality*, ed. by George Stocking (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1986), pp.104-111, p.107).

⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in Hurston, p.683.

Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!”⁹

When Hurston did start publishing books, then, she did so as one of Harlem’s leading lights and her books were taken more seriously than Hughes suggests. Extraordinarily prolific, making up for her slow start by producing five books in as many years, Hurston was published by the well established J.P. Lippincott Company and reviewed not only in Harlem-based papers but also in more mainstream, international journals and newspapers; the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Yorker* as well as *Opportunity*. Her books generally sold well too. In England, for example, *Tell My Horse* earned back her publishers their \$500 advance within a week.

Hurston’s work was never really taken as seriously by her contemporaries however and her books failed to secure from her fellow New Negroes the sort of unequivocal support her personality had received. While, at parties, ‘every one’ (sic) was always ‘glad when Zora shone’,¹⁰ in the literary pages of the New York magazines her fellows were less willing to allow Hurston, or the form of blackness she so ‘amusing[ly]’ represented, to dominate. Although some of her fellows would later change their minds - Sterling Brown re-appraised Hurston in 1955, for example, declaring *Mules and Men* to be ‘a first class collection of Negro yarns’ that had been ‘well worth’ waiting for¹¹ - in general reviews of her work were critical. Before long her books were being dismissed

⁸ Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.82.

⁹ *Fire!!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*. Vol.1, no.1. (rept. Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Richard Bruce, ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’, in *Fire!!!*, p.36.

¹¹ Brown, ‘The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955)’, in *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, p.209.

as 'too easy-going and carefree'; too committed to what Richard Wright would describe as 'that safe and narrow orbit (...) between laughter and tears' within which popular fictionalised African Americans had always been contained.¹²

In part this disapproval was the result of Hurston's bad timing. For although Hurston's books were an extraordinary articulation of the original spirit of the Renaissance - her representations of an un-integrated community embodying the spirit of cultural independence Hughes had laid claim to - they arrived too late for many of Hurston's contemporaries. By the time that Hurston began to publish her literary circle had disintegrated and the audience which had heretofore enjoyed her evocations of a 'voluptuous' African American world, had dispersed.¹³ The anarchic spirit of *Fire!!!*¹⁴ had gone up in smoke as the stock market crashed, the 'vogue' for Negroism passed, and the 'racial mountain' had proven itself as large and insurmountable as ever, held in position by Jim Crow laws which prevented the movement's declarations of independence from becoming anything other than aesthetic. A new vision of life which was finding its most significant expression in the work of the up-and-coming Richard Wright was beginning to dominate; a brutal, apocalyptic vision which challenged the relevance of the New Negro declarations and questioned the achievements of their decade.

¹² Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.1380-1388, p.1381.

¹³ Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed by Nancy Cunard; rept. in *Hurston*, pp.830-846, p.833.

¹⁴ By the time that Hurston was publishing her major novels for example, Hughes had left America for a tour of the Soviet Union, China and Japan, while both Thurman and Fisher were dead.

As early as 1931, Alain Locke had begun to express his sense of discontentment; wondering whether, 'after all', the Renaissance had been, not a spontaneous expression of independence, but rather a fad choreographed by 'professional exploiters' who had taken advantage of the period's 'inflation and overproduction'.¹⁵ Three years later, James Weldon Johnson interpreted Dorothy West's search for a new generation of even 'younger Negro writers' as a sign of the movement's failure. To him her quest suggested 'a degree of disillusionment and disappointment for those who a decade [before, had] hailed with loud huzzas the dawn of the Negro literary millennium'.¹⁶ Others were becoming disillusioned too and although Locke remained hopeful - his perspective leading him to view the movement as simply one 'phase' of African American 'cultural development' which would lead to a new, 'truly sound' renaissance - these others were less optimistic.¹⁷ In the last few pages of his autobiography, for example, Langston Hughes conveyed a bitter sense of betrayal as he described the fickleness of so-called 'sophisticated New Yorkers' who, having tired of 'Negroes' and all things primitive, had turned to 'Noel Coward', leaving 'colored actors (...) hungry', and colored writers without publishing contracts and patronage.¹⁸ By the end of the thirties then, he had come to the conclusion that the movement had been a sham; a 'gay and sparkling (...) surface' which had masked a much darker reality; a show put on largely for the benefit of 'generous' 'Nordics' which had failed to reach any of those who really mattered:

¹⁵ Locke, 'This Year of Grace', cited in Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.223.

¹⁶ James Weldon Johnson, 'Foreword,' *Challenge 1* (1934), cited in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* by Houston A. Baker Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.9.

¹⁷ Locke, 'This Year of Grace', p.223.

¹⁸ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, p.334.

I don't know what made any Negroes think that [the race problem had been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley] - except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any.¹⁹

While these writers disputed the value of the movement, however, they tentatively agreed that what was required of them in this less hospitable world was a 'revision of basic values', 'a penitential purgation of spirit', and a 'wholesale expulsion of the money-changers from the temple of art'.²⁰ Although the level of their commitment to left wing politics varied, these jaded, not-so-New Negroes decided that they needed to reject what Richard Wright would describe as 'all that art for art's sake crap'²¹ and engage in a more formally political, 'responsible' aesthetic.²² They decided that what they, and the 'hungry ones' of Harlem²³ needed was a 'protest literature' which would take as its subject the 'non-theatrical, non-intellectual' black urban masses who had been victimized by the Harlem vogue.²⁴ Beginning again, with a new politics and a new commitment to the social responsibilities of the artist, writers like Hughes turned away from bohemianism and embraced Marx: 'Words have been used too much to make people doubt and fear. Words must now be used to make people *believe and do*.'²⁵

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.228.

²⁰ Locke, 'This Year of Grace', p.224.

²¹ James Baldwin remembering Richard Wright in 'Alas Poor Richard', *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964; rept. London: Penguin, 1991), pp.149-176, p.161.

²² Locke, 'This Year of Grace', p.223.

²³ Hughes, from 'Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria', reprinted in *The Big Sea*, pp.321-323, p.321.

²⁴ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, p.228.

²⁵ Hughes, cited in Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.204.

As a committed individualist, and a decidedly 'theatrical' personality Hurston was inevitably opposed to this cultural and political shift of consciousness and suspicious of this sort of blatant consciousness-raising. In her political life she had always refused to toe any consistent line or to sacrifice her individualism for the good of any political group. Considering mass movements of any kind to be exploitative and cowardly - encouraging an abdication of 'individual responsibilities' - Hurston had always championed 'individualistic flights' over 'sheepish' political and cultural 'unison'.²⁶ To her protest novels were not individual expressions of political consciousness but rather anonymous regurgitations of already second-hand stories which infantilised both the writer and reader. Hurston's review of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* exemplifies her view:

In the other three stories the reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hate and nothing else. Mr Wright's author's solution, is the solution of the PARTY - state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one's self. And march!²⁷

It was not just the content that Hurston objected to in protest literature, however, but also the style. Holding 'the will to adorn' to be a central characteristic in African American expression she objected to the 'stark-trimmed phrases' that political writing seemed to demand, seeing this as the language of the 'Occident'; 'too bare

²⁶ Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' in *Hurston*, p.833.

²⁷ Hurston, 'Stories of Conflict', *The Saturday Review*, April 2, 1938, rept. in *Hurston*, pp.912-3, p.913.

for the voluptuous child of the sun'.²⁸ Employing this sort of primitivist language at a time of extreme hardship, it is easy to see why Hurston's political views were dismissed. Yet her point was serious and salient. She considered the ornamental prose of the 'primitive' Negro to be political within itself - the act of adding 'action' to words which had not 'evolved in' the African American but rather had been 'transplanted on his tongue', representing a sophisticated form of cultural and linguistic resistance. In her mind African American verbal ornamentation created what Karla Holloway has called a 'cultural mooring place' which redressed the balance destroyed by the experience of slavery, wresting back from whites, authority over the 'Word'.²⁹ To throw away the 'hieroglyphics' of the folk idioms in favour of 'PARTY' polemic was for Hurston, to throw away the core of African American dissidence. Thus she refused either to turn as others were, to urban, proletarian, blatantly political fiction, or to listen to those who requested of her 'social document fiction' (dismissing Locke, after he made this remark for example, as a 'malicious, spiteful little snot').³⁰ Instead she held to *Fire!!!* exoticism and dramatic New Negro hyperbole and continued to write of the 'magnificence, beauty, poetry and color' that she considered to be constituent of 'the common run' of 'Negro' life.³¹

Although this commitment to the subversive potential of the vernacular now seems radical, in her own time it compromised Hurston, and her work was soon being

²⁸ Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *Hurston*, p.833.

²⁹ Karla F.C. Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.1.

³⁰ Alain Locke, Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for *Opportunity*, cited in *Hurston*, p.972; Hurston to James Weldon Johnson, 1937, cited in *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.116.

³¹ Hurston to James Weldon Johnson, Apr. 16, 1934; rept. in Hemenway, p.193.

written off as passé.³² Her continuing concentration on a 'happy and healthy' South that was almost completely bereft, not only of whites, but also of the effects of white domination, made her seem irrelevant.³³ At a time of political unrest, civic violence, increasing hardship and deep political and cultural alienation, her evocation of an apparently benign American landscape seemed naive, if not dangerous. Thus, as the decade wore on and she became increasingly (and often wilfully)³⁴ alienated from both her contemporaries and the new generation of writers who were beginning to dominate, her poetics and politics began to be attacked.

In this period, however, it was not only her politics and aesthetics that were challenged but also her status as an authority on the South. Of course Hurston had always had to struggle in order to convince 'Negro crusaders and their white adherents' that African American life in the South could be as 'comfortable, contended', 'opulen[t] and educate[d]' as it was supposed to be in the North. She perpetually combated firmly entrenched preconceptions in order to convince her readers that 'all Negroes in the South' were not 'living under horrible conditions'.³⁵ Yet, as she was the only real southerner in the 'niggerati' she had been able to establish for herself a degree of authority, using her pedigree almost to fence off certain parts of the South, making them her literary property.³⁶ While some of her

³² Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.195.

³³ Even in her preface to the HarperPerennial edition of *Dust Tracks*, for example, Maya Angelou struggles to find anything of value in Hurston's work, the lack of 'ugly incident' implying, in her eyes, a lack of authenticity (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), pp.vii-xii, p.x.

³⁴ Profiled in *Twentieth Century Authors*, for example, Hurston deliberately distanced herself from the Renaissance, and in fact any black writers, listing as her favourite authors Anatole France, Gorky, Shaw, Dickens and a number of other white male writers.

³⁵ Hurston, 'The "Pet Negro" System', *The American Mercury*, May 1943, rept. in *Hurston*, pp.914-921, p.917.

³⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, p.719.

contemporaries had questioned the authenticity of a South entirely innocent of any 'atrocities',³⁷ they had given Hurston a fair hearing in these early years, her side of the southern story convincing those, such as Langston Hughes, for example, that the South was a more complex space than they had imagined.³⁸

Once Richard Wright appeared on the literary scene, however, Hurston's authority was compromised. For, raised in the South, Wright appeared as a direct challenge to Hurston's view. Born not into a proud, 'fully-incorporated', pioneering Negro town, but into a 'Mississippi nightmare',³⁹ Wright had grown up in the sort of 'shacks and sharecroppers' South that Hurston had spent her career trying to discredit:

I had been born on a plantation [yet] I was astonished at the ignorance of the children I met. I had been pitying myself for not having books to read, and now I saw children who had never read a book (...). I saw a bare, bleak pool of black life and I hated it.⁴⁰

As a result his view of the South, and of America as a whole was fundamentally different from Hurston's. Failing ever to feel at home, he presented not only the

³⁷ In his review of *Mules and Men*, for example, Sterling Brown had questioned the complete lack of bitterness in Hurston's book. Having collected folklore himself he was concerned that Hurston had excised the 'bitterness' he had witnessed. Yet although he concluded that *Mules and Men* would have been closer to the 'total truth' if it had portrayed the 'smouldering resentment so often characteristic of the black South', he still commended it as a valuable contribution. Twenty years later he would go even further, dropping his criticisms and praising the book as 'a first class collection of Negro yarns, gaining from the author's being both insider and trained folklorist' (Brown, 'The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955)', in *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, p.210).

³⁸ After accompanying Hurston on a research trip to the South in 1927, for example, Hughes admitted that he was 'amazed' by the fact that the villagers Hurston introduced him to were 'colored, poor and happy' - all states of being which were supposed to be mutually exclusive in the South (cited in Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol 1 1901-1941: I Too Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.153).

³⁹ James Baldwin, 'Alas, Poor Richard', *Nobody Knows My Name*, p.165.

South, but all of the United States as hostile and belligerent; a place inimical to 'Negroes', constituted in order to maintain its unwelcome black population in a state of perpetual cultural, intellectual, financial and spiritual enslavement. In Wright's imaginative world, even the American landscape colluded with whites in order to alienate its black inhabitants. In *12 Million Black Voices*, for example, he characterised the 'New World' as full of obstacles – 'rocky boundaries and steep cliffs' - which mirrored the 'white wall' that hemmed African-Americans in. He presented it as a disabling 'psychological island' controlled by 'Bosses' and 'Lords' who refused to allow African Americans to settle in even the most limited sense, not only extending their labour, but also consigning them at the end of seemingly endless days to precarious temporary shelters; 'unpainted wooden shacks' which, sitting 'casually and insecurely on the red clay', acted as a constant reminder of their alien status.⁴¹

While Hurston filled her novels and essays with characters which seemed to rejoice in their ability to make themselves at home therefore, Wright emphasised alienation, debilitating disorientation and dislocation, describing his black men as 'whirling atoms' that hovered above a land which repelled them.⁴² While in Hurston's work, all places and spaces had the potential to reflect an enduring, playful and subversive African American culture back to itself; everywhere being a potential home – 'I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem city, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library (...) Peggy Hopkins

⁴⁰ Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, p.156.

⁴¹ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Viking Press, 1941; rept. Thunder's Mouth, 1995), pp.25-30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.25.

Joyce on the Boule Mich has nothing on me.⁴³ In Wright's books, the landscape militated against such confident 'snootiness', streets functioning, not as performance spaces upon which an ironic, carnivalesque 'aristocratic manner' could be acted out, but rather as disorientating labyrinths which diminished rather than amplified his sense of self, causing him to 'run', 'dodg[e]' and 'hide', rather than 'saunter':

I've got to hide, he told himself. His chest heaved as he waited, crouching in a dark corner of the vestibule. He was tired of running and dodging. Either he had to find a place to hide, or he had to surrender. A Police car swished by through the rain, its siren rising sharply. They're looking for me all over.⁴⁴

His books, which evoked a brutal, hostile, 'bare and bleak' landscape,⁴⁵ therefore, appeared as a direct challenge to Hurston's crumbling credibility, discrediting the 'voluptuous' vision of the South she had built her reputation upon and denying both the seriousness and sincerity of her pronouncements. Before long the argument that was central to her work and politics - that the image of the North as a more liberated space was a fantasy - was being dismissed as a 'publicity wisecrack',⁴⁶ and as 'arrant and even vicious nonsense'⁴⁷ propagated by an 'egomaniac'.⁴⁸

⁴³ Hurston, 'How It Feels To Be Colored Me' in *Hurston*, p.155.

⁴⁴ Richard Wright, 'The Man Who Lived Underground' (1942), rept. in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.1414-1450, p.1414.

⁴⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, p.156 The extent to which Wright threatened Hurston's authority can be detected, perhaps, in Hurston's scathing review of Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. For although he was a young novice and she was established and well published, Hurston was merciless in her dismissal of his lack of 'understanding and sympathy' ('Stories of Conflict', in *Hurston*, p.912).

⁴⁶ Roy Wilkins, assistant executive secretary of the NAACP, cited in Hemenway, p.289.

⁴⁷ Roy Wilkins, responding in the New York *Amsterdam News* in 1943, to an interview Hurston gave to the *New York World Telegram* in which she was quoted as stating that 'the Jim Crow system works'. Afterwards Hurston claimed that she had been misquoted yet the fact that Wilkins was willing to believe what he read, reveals the degree to which relations between Hurston and many other African American intellectuals had deteriorated (See, *Hurston*, p.974 and Hemenway, p.289).

⁴⁸ Harold Preece, cited in *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick* by Susan Edwards

Because these two views of the South were diametrically opposed, and because African Americans were still engaged in a struggle to define themselves as a coherent, political and cultural body, Wright's and Hurston's representations could not co-exist. A definitive 'Black' was required, as well as a definitive black space, and as 'revolutionary usefulness' had become the 'principle measure of artistic merit',⁴⁹ the 'darker', angrier Wright, whose archetype was not a wandering woman but rather a 'man on the corner with a machine gun',⁵⁰ seemed more compelling, more 'real'.⁵¹ While in the twenties Hurston's determinedly optimistic view of the world had caught the imagination of her northern fellows therefore, in the thirties, surrounded on all sides by poverty, unemployment, inter and intra-racial violence it began to seem unbearably bourgeois and irrelevant. It had little to say to writers who were engaging with a financial, social, cultural and political crisis. Thus, as a result, Hurston was dismissed for being insufficiently angry, insufficiently political, and finally, 'insufficiently black'.⁵² Her novels, her folklore, her politics and her personality all came under attack. Accused of 'artful candor and coy reticence',⁵³ she was effectively written off as a white man's lackey (the fact that she measured heads

Meisenhelder,, p.176.

⁴⁹ Dana McKinnon Preu, 'A Literary Reading of *Mules and Men*, Part 1', in *Zora in Florida*, pp.46-61,p.50.

⁵⁰ Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p.ix. Of course this conclusion was only reached because of an inability to perceive the sexual politics of Hurston's work as politics. Janie Crawford, after all, is as effective a wielder of firearms as any of Gayle's more macho rebels.

⁵¹ Addison Gayle's judgement that Wright's era was an 'age of truth' compared to the Harlem Renaissance's 'age of ambiguity' is indicative of the way in which Wright's view of America was validated (*The Way of the New World*, p.xx).

⁵² Dana, McKinnon Preu,, p.50. Even when Wright's influence waned, succeeded during the sixties by writers such as Larry Neale and Sonia Sanchez, the commitment to 'functional' and 'collective' writing that he had pioneered remained (Maulana Karenga, cited in Houston Baker Jr., 'The Black Art Movement, 1960-1970', in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.1791-1806, p.1796.

⁵³ Darwin Turner, *In a Minor Chord* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p.91.

for Franz Boas is mentioned twice in Hughes's autobiography and it prefaces a number of accounts of her),⁵⁴ a woman who exploited not only herself, 'play[ing] the part of minion with fulsome abandon'⁵⁵ but also her 'folk', using them as a stepping-stone to another, more elevated white world. Arna Bontemps' review of her autobiography, which casts doubt upon her character as well as her literary ability, is axiomatic and it set the tone of Hurston criticism for twenty years:

Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America - she ignores them. She has done right well by herself in the kind of world she found.⁵⁶

Thus when accounts of time began to be written Hurston was often reduced to one of Wright's 'French poodles' that 'went a-begging to white America'.⁵⁷ Written off as an egomaniac who 'fed on the patronizing admiration of the dominant white world',⁵⁸ her appearances in the salons of wealthy whites were endlessly replayed as evidence of her inauthenticity:

It is impossible to tell from reading Miss Hurston's autobiography who was being fooled. Her Negro associates were led to believe that she was putting on an act. If that is so, by the time she wrote the story of her life, she had become the act.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *The Big Sea*, p. 239; p.296.

⁵⁵ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p.151.

⁵⁶ Arna Bontemps, 'From Eatonville, Fla. to Harlem', cited in Hemenway, p.56.

⁵⁷ Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.1380-1388, p.1380.

⁵⁸ Harold Preece, cited in Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick*, p.176.

⁵⁹ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.133.

Until the late seventies - or more precisely 1975 which, according to Lorraine Rose was a 'banner year' for Hurston's reputation⁶⁰ - her work was not seriously considered. Although her name continued to appear in accounts of the Renaissance, it was her personality and its perceived faults that dominated. She was excluded from the burgeoning African American canon because she seemed to represent to a new generation an ideology and a way of challenging white norms that had proven itself dangerously inadequate. Her life, as it was recounted both by herself and others seemed, through its easy association with benevolent whites and acceptance of un-mediated patronage, polluted by an unhealthy integration of white values. For all of the *Fire!!!* Group's declarations to the opposite, Hurston's behaviour seemed very much concerned with white opinion and with white approval.

In the seventies, however, as the Black Arts Movement came increasingly under attack for positing a rather monolithic sense of blackness that was almost entirely working-class, male and aggressively nationalist, Hurston's stand concerning mass movements began to resonate with a relevance it had previously lacked. After the 'decade [of] death',⁶¹ the merits of any kind of nationalism began to be questioned and newly emerging feminist and womanist critics began to explore the possibilities of other political and literary models. A new generation of critics, writers and artists therefore, began to 'excavate the past'.⁶²

⁶⁰ Roses and Randolph, *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, p.183.

⁶¹ This is Alice Walker's description of the sixties in 'Saving the Life that Is Your Own', *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp.3-14, p.5.

⁶² Barbara Christian, 'Literature since 1970', *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp.2011-2020, p.2012.

Considering the academy to have canonised 'as *literature*' a body of texts which, as Valerie Smith has written, were written by and in the interest of a 'white, male elite', both feminist and African Americanist critics began the 'archaeological work' of rediscovering and reinterpreting 'overlooked and misread women and black writers'.⁶² In their attempts to force the academy to recognise their own exclusion, however, both feminist ['mostly white'], and African American ['mostly male']⁶³ critics began to perpetuate against black women the 'same exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars'.⁶⁴ Impelled 'by a desire for closeness and mutual identification'⁶⁵ to construct a woman-centred community, for example, white feminists soon proved themselves 'blind (...) to any womanhood that [wa]s not white womanhood'.⁶⁶ Perceiving their own experiences as normative they created both an alternative canon and an idea of womanhood that either absorbed women of colour by arguing that the experience of sexism negated all other differences,⁶⁷ or simply ignored

⁶² Valerie Smith, 'Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'', in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. by Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1989; rept. London: Routledge, 1990), pp.38-47, p.39.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.39-40.

⁶⁴ Deborah McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986), pp.186-199, p.187.

⁶⁵ I. M. Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by L. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.310-321, p.311.

⁶⁶ Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, pp.168-185, p.169.

⁶⁷ In 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', for example, Elaine Showalter claimed that women's experiences as women eclipsed any other experiences, creating an ahistorical community based on sameness: 'women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space', (Showalter in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.9-36, p.27).

them.⁶⁸ Thus, after nearly two decades of feminist literary digging and the publication of 'thousands and thousands of books, magazines, and articles' devoted to the subject of women's writing, scarcely a 'fraction of those pages' were concerned with the lives or literature of women of colour.⁶⁹

On the other hand, more interested in the 'solitary, literate adventures of Douglass *et al*' than the 'more muted achievements' of such women as Harriet Jacobs, male African American scholars just as frequently excised black women from their literary histories. Although names such as Phillis Wheatley, Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston occasionally cropped up in the African American literary histories which were beginning to be compiled during the sixties and seventies, more often than not they were marginalised, evoked only as a benchmark against which the efforts of black men could be measured. Unsympathetic to the feminist agenda which was often woven into these women's writings and unwilling to credit as relevant the sexual as well as racial oppression which was often evoked as fundamental to black women's experience, influential critics such as Houston Baker Jr., David Levering Lewis and Nathan Huggins often dismissed as superficial complex texts that sought to represent this

⁶⁸ The most obvious example of a feminist refusal to respond to black experience is Patricia Meyer Spack's book, *The Female Imagination*. This is a book which concentrates exclusively on Anglo-American women and which defends its bias by recourse to a sort of white guilt-ridden liberalism that refrains from 'construct[ing] theories about experiences [the critic has not] had'; an excuse which Alice Walker summarily dismissed with the observation, 'Spacks never lived in nineteenth century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontes?' (cited in McDowell, p.187).

⁶⁹ Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', p.170.

experience,⁷⁰ condemning both the books and the experiences they described to remain 'beneath consideration, invisible, unknown'.⁷¹

As a result, considering both the Black Arts Movement and mainstream feminism to have been guilty of 'critical acts of omission and condescension'⁷² newly emerging African American women critics began to investigate for themselves the work of black women still forgotten or dismissed. Looking for a way out of the Black Arts impasse which famously struggled to place women in any other position than 'prone', and searching for literary or historical women who might provide models of black womanhood that would exceed such stereotypes as the Mammy, Sapphire or Aunt Jemima, they mined their own literary history, resurrecting figures who could together constitute a genealogy to rival the degraded one they had inherited.

The re-discovery and valorisation of Zora Neale Hurston was central to this movement and in many ways she was an ideal figurehead. Fitting in with many of the new trends - her work prefiguring a new generation's interest in the local, the vernacular and folk culture - she seemed ideally placed to be heralded as the avatar of a newly recognised form of African American consciousness, and was welcomed as a role-model and

⁷⁰ See, for example, Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *Black Literature in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), which proceeds as though Margaret Walker was the first African American woman ever to publish. See also David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*.

⁷¹ Barbara Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism', p.168. There were exceptions, of course. In *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America*, for example, Addison Gayle considered Hurston as a pivotal writer who 'link[ed] the new man with the old', creating 'robust men and women who achieved grandeur [and] status (p.155), and although some of his statements were rather 'old school' - in his appraisal of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, for example, he described Lucy as 'a delectable morsel'(174) - some of his judgements were radical: 'The race, Miss Hurston might have amended Du Bois' statement, will be saved by its liberated black women'(175). See also, Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (rept. Kennikat Press, Inc./Port Washington, New York, 1968).

⁷² Valerie Smith, p.40.

antecedent. Presenting in her books images of black women which exceeded stereotypes, dispelling romantic as well as brutalised accounts in favour of complicated and subtle women-centred representations, the resurrected Hurston seemed to begin the work of filling in the void that often represented the black woman.

It was not only her work that served as an inspiration to many however, but also her life, for Hurston was an exceptional woman whose achievements cannot be overestimated and whose courage, audacity and humour was extraordinary (throughout her adult life, for example, she convinced everyone that she was a full ten years younger than her actual age). In fact her achievements, the sense of which is sometimes lost under the weight of academic criticism, are worth dwelling upon. At the centre of two of the most radical intellectual movements of the period - the Boasian revolution being as crucial to modern anthropology as the Harlem Renaissance was to the African American literary tradition - she was an extraordinarily prolific writer, producing one play, two anthropological studies, four novels and an autobiography in thirteen years. Along with her *Fire!!!* cohorts, she was instrumental, not only in channelling African American art away from Eurocentric genres towards a literature based upon the cultural forms of those she famously labelled 'farthest down',⁷³ but also, in Walter Benn Michaels' words, in transforming 'folk culture into racial heritage', creating narratives through which an 'autonomous racial identity [was] authenticated and, through the process of authentication, created.'⁷⁴

⁷³ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, p.689.

⁷⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.93.

What seemed to make Hurston so popular with a new generation of women, however was not simply that she conjured up in 'sensual' narratives a newly autonomous, 'audacious' ancestry, but also that she embodied it, enacting as well as describing what Alice Walker has called 'black delight'.⁷⁵ For, apparently un-intimidated by any of the extraordinary circumstances in which she found herself and determined to make no concessions to appease the racist and classist sensitivities of others, Hurston seemed, uniquely in the history of African American intellectuals, 'complete, complex, *undiminished*' and above all '*black*'.⁷⁶ Unafraid to make, often quite literally a spectacle of herself she was a woman who revelled in rather than disguised her difference, experiencing her blackness as something which augmented, rather than diminished her sense of self. Rather than a 'silhouette' or a 'dark shadow', or indeed anything which required the presence of white 'light',⁷⁷ she presented herself as a 'dark rock', that existed prior to and independently of the 'thousands of white persons' which constituted the norm; a rock that was not only impenetrable and infallible - 'When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again' - but also singular and singularly impressive, especially when compared to the amorphous 'creamy sea' of white identity which everywhere surrounded her:

Among the thousands of white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon and
overswept, but through it all, I remain myself.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Richard Bruce's poem 'Shadow' rept. in *Black and Unknown Bards: A Collection of Negro Poetry* (Kent: The Hand and Flower Press, 1958), p.33.

⁷⁸ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.828.

Sure of herself and of her ability to endure waves of potentially engulfing whiteness therefore, Hurston was a writer who refused either to accept her cultural and political invisibility or retreat 'underground' as writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison had done.⁷⁹ Instead she was a woman who forced her way onto the 'national stage' and insisted that her white neighbours took note, flaunting the physical and metaphysical 'pigmentation' she possessed, using it to dismiss her anonymous neighbours as culturally, emotionally and even sexually, 'pale':

[W]hen I sit in the drafty (sic) basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes (...). This orchestra grows rambunctious (...). I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow, and my body is painted blue (...) the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back to the veneer we call civilisation with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly (...). He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* colored.⁸⁰

Rediscovering Hurston therefore has for many African American critics been akin to rediscovering themselves, making them aware of themselves as the descendants of an

⁷⁹ See Wright, 'The Man Who Lived Underground', *op. cit.*; Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Glooancz, 1952; rept. London: Penguin, 1965).

⁸⁰ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.828.

'inventive, joyous, courageous and outrageous people' and reconnecting them to a forgotten South. As Walker's essays have suggested, Hurston's work has provided even the most 'regular' of readers with an alternative landscape; a space and time in which it is possible to imagine oneself as 'undiminished'; a 'paradise' of 'beauty and spirit'.⁸¹

Of course it is not only African American readers who have been imaginatively transported in this way. White American and Europeans (myself included) have also come under Hurston's spell and as a result of this wide appeal she is now a 'secured presence in the academy', *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being taught in a wide variety of course in both American and British Universities.⁸² In fact, in less than thirty years Zora Neale Hurston has become both a 'star', that walks 'brightly among us',⁸³ and, perhaps inevitably, a 'veritable industry'.⁸⁴ Thus while in 1971, when Robert Hemenway was beginning to research his biography of Hurston she was virtually unknown, only one of her books being still in print, by 1978 a University of Illinois reprint of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had become so profitable that Harper and Row refused to renew its leasing contract and began reprinting the work themselves.⁸⁵ By the 1990s all of her major works had been republished and several anthologies which included previously unpublished material had been produced. Authoritative

⁸¹ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.84.

⁸² Of course this absorption of this one text into the canon and the academy is not unproblematic. The fact that *Their Eyes* is often read in isolation implies tokenism, and, even more worryingly, critical and political displacement - this book being somehow an easier black text to take on than one more engaged with the realities of urban African American life. Having taught *Their Eyes* myself in a predominantly white University I have been alarmed by the extent to which the racial politics of the novel have been elided by students keen to empathise with Janie as a 'universal' (racially neutral) character. Carby's interrogation of Hurston's position within the academy begs the question, is her popularity and acceptance by the mainstream a covert way of continuing to exclude more disturbing, more angry black literary voices from the classroom; a way of avoiding scholarly consideration of continuing black realities.

⁸³ Lillie P. Howard, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), p.175.

⁸⁴ Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk', p.72.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72.

editions of her work had been collected in two Library of America Volumes, and a plethora of critical books, articles, dissertations, children's books and plays that critique, study and celebrate this 'star'⁸⁶ had been produced. This 'industry' had even spread beyond the bookshops. Orlando now has a Zora Neale Hurston Building, and a Harlem Renaissance themed Bed and Breakfast establishment in Charlotte has a Zora Neale Hurston room.⁸⁷

Hurston is, as Hemenway states in his biography, a literary artist 'of sufficient talent to deserve intensive study, both as an artist and an intellect'.⁸⁸ She is also a vital figure in the African American literary tradition, functioning as an archetype and an anchor for the literary ancestry that black women writers have needed to establish.⁸⁹ Yet neither her talent nor her temerity are enough to explain this explosion of interest in her work, her life and her personality. There is something else at work here that has created an almost universally admired 'pioneer'⁹⁰ out of a complex, contradictory often confusing woman who was, while still alive, as likely to arouse contempt - 'a hundred-carat handkerchief head' - as respect - 'a black nationalist born before her time'.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Howard, p.175.

⁸⁷ This is information gleaned from <http://i.am/zora>, one of the many Zora Neale Hurston web sites. Bewailing the explosion of current interest in Hurston in her essay, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk', Hazel Carby wryly awaits 'one further development: the announcement of a Hollywood movie' (*op. cit.*, p.72). She may not have to wait long. The Hurston web site reveals that Oprah Winfrey has bought the rights to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

⁸⁸ Hemenway, p.xviii.

⁸⁹ c.f. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Afterword to *Mules and Men* (New York: J. P. Lippincott, 1935: rept. Harper & Row, 1990), pp.287-297.

⁹⁰ Carby, p.72.

⁹¹ An acquaintance and a friend cited in Hemenway, p.xiv. A handkerchief-head, of course, is, in Hurston's own words, 'a sycophant type of Negro; also an Uncle Tom' ('Glossary of Harlem Slang' in *Spunk: The Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Turtle Island Foundation, 1985: rept. London: Camden Press, 1987), pp.91-96, p.93).

Hazel Carby has suggested possible reasons for this 'current thirst' for 'Zora' in her essay, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk'.⁹² Clearly suspicious of the way in which Hurston has been co-opted by the literary industry and made to represent a 'positive, holistic' form of black life, Carby suggests that the current interest in Hurston is a sign of political dis-ease rather than racial health, the critics who perpetuate it falling for what she describes as Hurston's 'colonial imagination' in much the same way that white readers had when Harlem and Hurston were last in vogue - both audiences preferring 'exotic' romanticism to the reality of ghettos, race riots, and 'large parts of America under siege'. In her analysis, Hurston has little to offer readers other than a politically retrograde fantasy of blackness that simply reproduces the colonial fantasies of nineteenth century whites. In her view the model Hurston offers is exclusionary, elitist and incommensurate with an increasingly diverse, urban group:

I would like to suggest that, as cultural critics, we could begin to acknowledge the complexity of our own discursive displacement of contemporary conflict and cultural transformation in the search for black cultural authenticity. The privileging of Hurston at a moment of intense urban crisis and conflict is, perhaps, a sign of that displacement (...). Has *Their Eyes Were Watching God* become the most frequently taught black novel because it acts as a mode of assurance that, really, the black folks are happy and healthy?⁹³

Certainly Hurston has been celebrated in this way. In fact it was Hurston's ability not only to present past African American people as 'complex' and '*undiminished*' but also

⁹² Carby, p.72.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.77; p.89-90.

to create new generations of 'happy and healthy' black folks that writers such as Alice Walker considered to be her most valuable contribution to African American culture. Until Carby and others began to raise questions about the political efficacy of such transformations, the fact that Hurston seemed to have 'distilled' a fictional African American identity and space which was 'outside of history'⁹⁴ was a reason for celebration rather than censure; the apparent timelessness of this cultural essence being the quality which made it so portable and so politically useful.

I would suggest however, that this reading, which has undoubtedly dominated Hurston's renaissance, is one that simplifies her texts and elides the contradictions and complexities they contain. I would suggest that the 'aesthetically purified version of blackness' that Hurston is said to have created is a product of Hurston's posthumous admirers, rather than Hurston's books; a composite 'blackness' which has been pieced together through selective readings of often expurgated texts.⁹⁵ For Hurston's own representations of blackness and black space were far from pure. They were in fact, complex, contradictory and even confused so that although, on occasion she was

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁹⁵ Of course it is not surprising that the critics who orchestrated Hurston's resurrection tended to gloss over the problems her work presented them with. Stimulated by disgust at the way in which both Hurston and her work had been neglected - 'throw[n] (...) away' not only by white academics but also by her own 'people' - readings by critics such as Alice Walker, Karla Holloway, Marjorie Pryce and Hortense Spillers were self-consciously 'partisan' attempts to overthrow the 'misleading, deliberately belittling, inaccurate, and generally irresponsible attacks' which had marginalised Hurston's work, and increase awareness of her 'genius' (Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', pp.3-14. See also Holloway, and Pryce and Spillers, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Urbana: Indiana University Press, 1985). Because they were engaged in a degree of consciousness-raising, these critics were more interested in authenticating texts that they considered politically sound and culturally useful, than in exposing their inconsistencies. Thus they tended to simplify and censor moments in Hurston's narratives which might disrupt their sense of Hurston as an unequivocal 'star'. More recent, but still rather 'romantic' interpretations of Hurston's work include Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985); Jacqueline de Weever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1992); Anna Lillios, 'Excursions into Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville' in *Zora In Florida*, pp.13-25.

undoubtedly guilty of simplification and romanticisation, presenting her rural African American folk as 'primitive minds (...) quick to sunshine and quick to anger',⁹⁶ in general her sense of the 'folk' and the space in which they resided was complex, class-conscious and constantly shifting. Interpretations which posit Hurston as an 'uncolonized African', an 'African American queen' or even a 'cultural revolutionary',⁹⁷ are therefore ones in which the lines of authority 'run from present to past'. They are interpretations which dispense with aspects of her work, identity and politics which fail to match up with 'present dispositions', and which sacrifice complexity, resistance and idiosyncrasy for the sake of continuity.⁹⁸ They are readings which ignore the ambiguous, contingent, hap-hazard, 'miscellan[eous]' models of identity Hurston evoked - 'I feel like a brown bag (...) propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow'⁹⁹ - in favour of those that were unchanging, apparently infinite and always centred on the porch in Eatonville - 'I could see a group on the store porch. I was delighted. The town had not changed. Same love of talk and song'.¹⁰⁰

The 'cultural critics' Carby evokes therefore, have revised a 'Hurston' in order to fit the history they needed to create. They have made her represent not only a first step in a 'historical sequence',¹⁰¹ that leads inevitably to Womanism, but also an analogous woman who reinforces present sensibilities by resembling them; Hurston becoming, in such readings, less a literary mother than an ideological sister, the genealogical

⁹⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, p.689.

⁹⁷ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', pp.83-91.

⁹⁸ Steven Knapp, *Literary Interest* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.114.

⁹⁹ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.829.

¹⁰⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.12.

¹⁰¹ Knapp, p.112.

generations collapsing as she is pulled into a 'solidarity of sisterhood' in which all African American women 'of the past, present and future' are bound together by the same, in Carby's words, 'aesthetically pure' vision.¹⁰²

Some critics have begun to read Hurston more critically,¹⁰³ and yet, in many ways, particularly outside of the Academy, the sorts of readings I have described above continue to dominate. Thus while in the last few years academic critics have begun not only to pay more attention to the complexities and contradictions of her books but also to reconsider those which had heretofore been considered beyond the pale,¹⁰⁴ recent

¹⁰² This is most evident in Walker's essays. In 'Zora Neale Hurston', for example, Walker not only states that Hurston would have been more 'at home' in the sixties, when 'everyone understood that black women could wear beautiful cloths on their beautiful heads and care about the authenticity of things 'cullud' (*op. cit.*, p.89), but also collapses time, shifting tenses so that even the most specific historical events become signs of Hurston's similitude. Notice in this passage how Zora is absorbed into a timeless 'we' and how Hurston's past merges first with Walker's present and then, through the evocation of a projected 'survival' with an imagined African American future: 'In her dependency, it should be remembered, Zora was not alone - because it is quite true that America does not support or honor us as human beings, let alone as blacks, women and artists. We have taken help where it was offered because we are committed to what we do and to the survival of our work'(91). This tendency towards analogy is evident in other work too; Gloria Wade Gayles *Letter to our Ancestors*, for example, which absorbs not only Hurston, but also Sojourner Truth, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Fannie Lou Hamer. In this work, despite the fact that these women are evoked as ancestors, the way in which Wade-Gayles reproduces their characteristics through her own language obscures differences between them and makes them fit her own sense of what is authentic. Like Walker, then, when Wade-Gayles 'ressurrects' Hurston, it is in order to recreate her as she wants her to be (slim, financially independent, in a community of women) rather than as she actually was: Hurston /I want to resurrect you /the way you were /when you shook up the patrons /and the writers /and the world /with your feisty genius (...) I want to remove /the pounds and the lies /and set you up somewhere anywhere you want to be /with money /happiness /baaad hats /and a hundred Pheobes /holding your hand (*International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*, Vol. 1, *Moving beyond Boundaries* ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (London: Pluto Press, 1995), pp.145-150, p.148).

¹⁰³ See, for example, Francoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women'; Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁴ Recent responses to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for example, rarely ignore the violence of characters such as Tea Cake, or treat the book, as Steve Glassman does, as a 'normal' love story (*Zora In Florida*, p.xi). Similarly recent essays on Hurston seldom dismiss such 'troubling' texts as *Tell My Horse* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as simply 'discomfiting', or avoid consideration of the difficult questions they raise by writing them off as inauthentic.

dramatisations of Hurston's work and life - dramatisations which reach a much wider audience - have continued to contain little complexity or subtlety.¹⁰⁵

The problem with this rather uncritical infatuation with what Steve Glassman has called 'the Zora mystique'¹⁰⁶ is that it is in danger of creating what might be called Hurston-fatigue. Swamped by scores of interpretations, representations and imitations of Hurston, readers and writers are beginning to express irritation at the continuing and continuingly exclusive 'vogue' for 'Zora'. Thus although Hazel Carby suggests that Hurston's 'star' status may be short-lived, implying that, contingent upon the continuing interest of large, profit-based publishing conglomerates, Hurston's renaissance may prove as unstable as Harlem's, the most significant threat to Hurston's status may be the number of increasingly disaffected academics who are beginning to express their impatience with the Hurston fad. For tired of academics jumping on what they clearly feel to be their band wagon - Carby's jibe at what she describes as the 'Gates/HarperPerennial monopoly' of Hurston's work betraying the extent to which she feels female African Americanist territory to have been colonised by the mainstream¹⁰⁷ - and frustrated by ahistorical readings which idealise Hurston as the ultimate African American woman, women are beginning to abandon Hurston. Suspecting that her presence on a wide variety of university modules and reading lists precludes others - the incorporation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* representing a

¹⁰⁵ *Zora Is My Name*, for example; a PBS broadcast which fused Hurston as a historical character with her *Mules and Men* folk in an uncomplicated celebration of southern folklore.

¹⁰⁶ Introduction to *Zora in Florida*, p.xi.

¹⁰⁷ The obverse of this, however, is a 'backlash' instigated by some black male academics who, Trudier Harris reports, are 'feeling compelled to teach courses these days on 'Black Male Writers', as though they are now a beleaguered minority. ('What Women? What Canon? African American Women and the Canon', in *Speaking of the Other Self: American Women Writers* ed. by Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp.90-95, p.90).

token gesture rather than a serious attempt to address black literature and history - African American academics and teachers are beginning to wonder whether she has done more harm than good. Trudier Harris's impatience with what might be called the Hurston industry, of example, is palpable. Having written on Hurston herself, she now regrets the proliferation of books on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In fact Harris sympathises with a colleague who is 'so sick of teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that she is just going to take it out of the syllabus for a couple of years'.¹⁰⁸

In her essay Carby implies that more critical readings of Hurston's work would diminish her standing and lead critics to recognise her for what she was, a 'reactionary, blindly patriotic (...) colonial [and] imperial' writer.¹⁰⁹ I would like to suggest however, that a fuller reading of Hurston's work which, rather than dismissing difficult passages, essays and texts, directly addressed them, would reveal a more complex, more interesting writer.

In this thesis therefore, I intend to unpack Carby's assumption that what Hurston's work primarily evokes is an 'aesthetically purified version of blackness' by demonstrating that rather than a 'pure' space containing a stable, unchanging, picturesque folk, the Eatonville Hurston describes in her work is a contested place containing a highly unpredictable people. In my first chapter I will concentrate on *Mules and Men* and show that, rather than reducing her 'folk' to anthropological ciphers, Hurston used her ethnographic project to challenge simplistic assumptions about African American 'inner

¹⁰⁸ Harris, 'What Women? What Canon? African American Women and the Canon', p.91.

¹⁰⁹ Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk', p.75.

li[ves]'.¹¹⁰ I shall show how, moving in and out of an anthropological persona, as well as in and out of a series of black spaces Hurston complicated the idea of homogenous African American identities and spaces.

In my second chapter I will explore the way in which, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston used Eatonville and its surrounding spaces in order to problematise the notion of home that she had taken for granted in her previous book. Examining all of the spaces that her heroine inhabits, from the Washburns' yard to the 'shack' (194) on the edge of Lake Okechobee,¹¹¹ I shall demonstrate the way in which Hurston used these spaces as a series of obstacles that her heroine must work through; presenting them as spatial embodiments of 'warped' ideologies that Janie must learn to reject.

In my final chapter I shall investigate Hurston's last representation of Eatonville in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Concentrating on the shift in perspective that takes place, moving Hurston out of the body of the folk into a position of antagonistic isolation, I shall explore the ways in which Hurston reluctantly demonstrates the limitations of this space. I shall also describe the ways in which Hurston problematically releases 'blackness' from its connections to time and place, and describes it as a 'spirit' which can be performed in any space.

It is not my intention to suggest that Hurston's work is immune to simplification, however. In fact, in all of the following chapters I will demonstrate how a desire for

¹¹⁰ Franz Boas, 'Forward' to *Mules and Men* in Hurston, p.3.

¹¹¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1939, rept. London: Virago, 1987), p.194.

what might be called transparent, innocent space infects all of Hurston's work, creating a nostalgia for precisely the sort of 'aesthetically pure blackness' Carby refers to. Yet I intend to argue that this desire is continually thwarted in her books by places and people that simply will not simply submit to her nostalgic gaze. Above all then, I intend to argue that despite the repeated tendency in Hurston's work to evoke an African American timelessness – 'I was delighted. The town had not changed' – her representations of Eatonville undermine this project, ultimately replacing the sort of 'sheepish'¹¹² homogeneity evoked in such statements as 'same love of talk and song',¹¹³ with an undisciplined 'dissonance'.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Hurston, 'Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals', in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. by Nancy Cunard, rept. in *Hurston*, p.871.

¹¹³ Hurston, *Mules and Men* in *Hurston*, p.13.

¹¹⁴ 'Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals', in *Hurston*, p.870.

'Slipping into Neutral' in *Mules and Men*

The first book that I shall consider was also Hurston's first.¹ Simultaneously a 'travelogue, a political analysis, a conventional ethnography, part legend and folklore with art criticism and commentary thrown in',² it is a complex and intriguing book, and yet, until recently, it has remained 'underdiscussed';³ taken seriously by neither anthropological nor literary readers.

When it was first published in 1935, *Mules and Men* was widely reviewed and well received by the 'general audience' Hurston had been encouraged to foster.⁴ The *New York Herald Tribune Weekly*, the *New York Times* and the *Saturday Review*, for example, published reviews that commended the book for its 'black magic and dark laughter', welcoming it as the best thing 'since *Uncle Remus*'.⁵ More partisan readers, however, tended to be more sceptical. Despite Hurston's efforts to have her work taken seriously,⁶ anthropologists tended to interpret it as a 'mere collection' of

¹ *Mules and Men* was beaten into print by the speedily completed *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, yet it was conceived of, researched, and written between 1929 and 1932. It was, however, subject to a lengthy process of revision and was not published until October 1935.

² Deborah Gordon, 'The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston', in *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, ed. by Marc Manganaro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.146-162, p.154.

³ Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. p.159.

⁴ In a letter to Boas dated August 20th, 1934 Hurston revealed that she had been advised to make *Mules and Men* a 'very readable book that the average reader can understand' (cited in Hemenway, p.163).

⁵ Anonymous review from the *Saturday Review*, Oct. 19, 1935, cited in Hemenway, p.218; Lewis Gannett, review in the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly*, Oct. 11, 1935. It is interesting to note the extent to which Boas' language is picked up and repeated in these reviews - the reference to *Uncle Remus*, for example, as well as the statements concerning Hurston's 'intimate' style. See Zora Neale Hurston: *Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp.10-16.

⁶ In the letter to Boas cited above, Hurston demonstrated that she was keen for Boas to endorse her book as a serious study. Although she had agreed to tone down the 'scientific matter' she was clearly

folklore rather than an ethnology and thus, though they occasionally used it as a source - Herskovits, for example, used its Hoodoo sections to substantiate his claims in *The Myth of The Negro Past*⁷ - they failed to take it seriously as an academic document. African American literary critics also tended to be more cautious than their white counterparts and although several reviewers admired its artistry and energy, influential writers such as Sterling Brown,⁸ Arna Bontemps and later, Richard Wright, condemned its politics and questioned its authenticity: '*Mules and Men* should be more bitter; it would be nearer the total truth.'⁹

Since the thirties, the judgement that *Mules and Men* is a problematic text has tended to prevail and as a result it has tended to be overlooked, rarely appearing in either anthropological or literary accounts. Although it was carefully analysed in Robert Hemenway's literary biography, it was treated as a minor work, and while Alice Walker celebrated it in her pioneering essay 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View', describing it, in fact, as 'the perfect book', it eventually lost out to the even more 'perfect' *Their Eyes*: '*There is no book more important to me*

eager to assert the seriousness of her project and to authenticate the passages which remained amid the 'between-story conversation and business' (cited in Hemenway, p.163).

⁷ Herskovits, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990; rept. New York, 1941).

⁸ Brown's review of *Mules and Men* set the tone for Hurston criticism for many years and he is often cited as an authority. What is rarely acknowledged however is the fact that he tempered his views and to an extent, changed his mind in later years. For while in 1935 he wrote of *Mules and Men* as an engaging but ultimately flawed book, by 1955, when he was called upon to reflect on the Renaissance, Brown cited it as a major work; 'a first class collection of Negro yarns (...) worth waiting for' (Brown, 'The New Negro in Literature, 1925-1955', in *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cary Wintz, p.209).

⁹ Sterling Brown, cited in Hemenway, p.219. Not all African American reviewers questioned the authenticity of Hurston's 'folk' however. Henry Lee Moon of the NAACP for example praised it as a 'valuable picture of the life of the unsophisticated Negro'. Yet as he was a Northerner with no experience of these 'unsophisticated' types, his judgement has tended to be ignored (Hemenway,

than this one.¹⁰ On the whole, then, it has remained a marginal text, eclipsed by the more polished, and more obviously literary novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In the field of anthropology, this reluctance to engage with this text has been explained as the result of its hybridity; the fact that it straddles two ostensibly very different discourses, fiction and anthropology. Because it combines creative writing with a sort of ethnographic reportage which demonstrates rather than diagnoses African American culture, it has been deemed 'too subjective' by traditional anthropologists who value 'neutral, tropeless discourse'¹¹ as the ultimate sign of the 'professional' writer.¹²

In the last ten years a new generation of radical anthropologists has begun to reject

p.218).

¹⁰ Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.86, emphasis Walker's. Other examples of this tendency to concentrate on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* abound. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pegamon, 1985), Susan Willis's *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), and Carla Kaplan's *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing in Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, 'Fieldwork in Common Places', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp.27-50, p.27.

¹² James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), p.535. Radical ethnographers have begun to suggest that this is an inadequate explanation. Arguing that, at least since the twenties ethnographers have been experimenting with literary styles, even on occasion inventing 'autobiographies' of Native American Informants in order to raise questions about the authenticity of anthropological narratives (see *American Indian Life*, ed. by Elsie Clews Parsons (1922, rept; Lincoln, 1991)), such writers as Alice Gambrell, Deborah Gordon and Garciela Hernandez have suggested that Hurston's exclusion from the anthropological canon has had more to do with her ethnicity than her literariness (see for, example, Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Deborah Gordon, 'The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston'; Garciela Hernandez, 'Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality: Zora Neale Hurston's Experimental Ethnographies', in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp.146-162. For a discussion of the problems black anthropologists face in authenticating their work see M. Nazif Shahrani's 'Honored Guest and Marginal Man: Long-Term Field research and Predicaments of a Native Anthropologist', in *Others Knowing Others: Perspectives On Ethnographic Careers*, ed. by D. Fowler & Donald L. Hardesty

these interpretations and reappraise Hurston's work. Writers such as Deborah Gordon, Garciela Hernandez and Gwendolyn Mikell¹³ have begun to reinterpret her as an exemplary proto-postmodern anthropologist¹⁴ who used ethnography to disrupt, rather than reproduce demeaning stereotypes:

Hurston's style does not eschew the ethnographic monograph, but utilizes the posture of objectivity in order to make counterclaims to previous representations of African-Americans.¹⁵

Although Hurston's reputation is improving however, she is still very much on the margins of anthropological discourse and while it has become politically correct to object to her continuing exclusion and gesture towards her importance, she seldom

(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp.15-67.

¹³ See for example, Deborah Gordon, 'The Politics of Ethnographic Authority'; Garciela Hernandez, 'Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality'; Gwendolyn Mikell, 'When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston's Haitian Anthropology' in *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture* 43 (Sept. 1982), 218-30; Elizabeth Jane Harrison, 'Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Hunter Austin's Ethnographic Fiction: New Modernist Narratives', in *Unmanning Modernism*, ed. by Harrison and Shirley Peterson (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), pp.44-58; Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference*, *op. cit.* For an exploration of the reasons why Hurston has failed to be canonised by anthropologists see Deborah Gordon, 'The Problems of Ethnographic Authority', and James Clifford, *Routes*, pp.535-536.

¹⁴ Although this desire to adopt Hurston as a fellow postmodernist suggests a lack of historical specificity and an attempt to contemporise Hurston, Gordon, Hernandez and Gambrell have been careful to read Hurston's intertextuality and hybridity as her response to historical factors rather than as a transcendence of them. Gordon and Gambrell in particular describe the ways in which Hurston used literariness in order to negotiate a discipline in which, 'under more usual circumstances' she would have been studied, rather than studying (Gambrell, p.104). I would like to suggest that editorial pressures might also have contributed to Hurston's decision to relinquish the academic style she had previously relied upon. It is clear from her letters that Hurston was under some pressure to make her narrative less 'monotonous' and more accessible to the 'general reader'. (Hurston to Boas, Aug., 20, 1934, cited in Hemenway, p.163). Although there is not the space to explore this issue in this thesis, it seems to me highly significant that Hurston's manuscript was judged in such a way. As Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out ethnographies are often 'boring' ('Fieldwork in Common Places', p.29), yet it is difficult to imagine editors urging Boas, or Herskovits or Benedict to tone down the intellectual content of their books or to liven them up with amusing 'incidents' (Hurston to Boas, in Hemenway, p.163). It seems clear, therefore, that Hurston was subject to a pressure to entertain that simply did not apply to her white Barnard fellows and that this, as much as her intellectual negotiations, informed her narrative style.

¹⁵ Deborah Gordon, 'The Politics of Ethnographic Authority', p.155.

makes it into the main body of anthropological texts.¹⁶

Ironically, while until recently anthropologists have cited the literariness of *Mules and Men* as the reason for its marginalisation as a 'limited native ethnograph[y]',¹⁷ literary critics have tended to consider its anthropological elements to be its most serious weakness. For although when it was first published, African American readers were generally untroubled by Hurston's anthropological connections, the 'New Negroes' being themselves 'vigilant consumers' of the sort of progressive anti-racist research Boas and his students were attempting,¹⁸ later critics have been more suspicious of anthropology. Since the sixties, in fact, when the politics of anthropology began to be investigated by radical anthropologists such as Dell Hymes,¹⁹ literary critics have increasingly discredited this science as fundamentally racist; an academic discipline which has functioned as the intellectual arm of colonialism, developing 'alongside and within' colonial and imperial powers, masking and naturalising their economic and political goals through a pose of 'humanistic concern with people'.²⁰ Increasingly understood, particularly by those who have themselves been 'objects of observation (...) experimentation (...) manipulation',²¹ as a discipline which, while it creates for whites a 'cosy, ahistorical

¹⁶ Although in *Routes*, for example, James Clifford refers to Hurston in a footnote, describing the erroneous way in which she has been marginalised, he fails to examine her work himself (pp.535-6).

¹⁷ Clifford, *Routes*, p.535.

¹⁸ Michaela di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.51. For a full exploration of the connections between the New Negro philosophy and Boas see W.E.B. DuBois, 'The Future of all Africa Lies in Socialism' in *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Paschal (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 250-264; Faye Harrison, 'The Du Boisean Legacy in Anthropology' in *Critique of Anthropology* 12, no.3 (1992), 239-260.

¹⁹ See, for example, Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1969).

²⁰ Dell Hymes, 'The Use of Anthropology', in *Reinventing Anthropology*, pp.3-79, p.51.

²¹ Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), p.81.

humanism'²² consigns blacks to 'conceptual prison', anthropology has come to be seen by many as 'bankrupt'.²³ Similarly, the anthropologist has come to be seen as an intrusive, politically suspect figure; a person who, despite protestations to the contrary, secures rather than complicates racial divides.²⁴ In the work of such writers as Edward Said, Trinh Minh-Ha and Vine Deloria Jr., in fact, 'anthropologist' has become a straight forward 'term of abuse':²⁵

Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market. McNamara created the TFX and the Edsel. Churches possess the real world. But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists.²⁶

Already tainted with the accusations of racial treachery that had grown out of her acceptance of patronage and apparent willingness to play the 'happy ducky' for white friends therefore, Hurston's connection with what had come to be seen as a racist white discipline had added grist to her detractors' mill, supplying them with formal evidence of her apparently 'colonial imagination'.²⁷ Consequently the work Hurston produced while under the tutelage of Boas has caused her defenders considerable problems.

²² di Leonardo, p.61.

²³ Deloria, p.100.

²⁴ For a full account of the way in which anthropologists have been virtually (and often deservedly) demonised see di Leonardo, pp.30-52.

²⁵ Ioan M. Lewis, *Arguments with Ethnography: Comparative Approaches to History, Politics and Religion*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology Vol 70 (London: Athlone Press, 1999), pp.ii-xiii, p.ix.

²⁶ Deloria, p.78.

²⁷ Carby, p.79. Hurston's willingness to measure the heads of Harlemites for Herskovits, for example,

This is particularly the case because, although he rejected prevailing racist social evolutionary assumptions, bringing to anthropology a relativism it had previously lacked, the Forward Franz Boas wrote to accompany and authorise Hurston's text betrays exactly the sort of cosy humanism that post-colonial literary critics have objected to, reading more like the work of an old armchair colonialist than a militant modernist. 'Patronizing, voyeuristic, exclusionary, and (in the light of the complicated ironies that suffuse Hurston's prose) just plain wrong,'²⁸ it exposes the inadequacy of his relativism and the limitations of his 'colonial' science rather than exemplifying his intellectual boldness. Filled with paternalist language - which renders it more reminiscent of a notice of authenticity than of a scholarly preface²⁹ - it is peppered with statements that not only diminish Hurston's status but also that of the 'Negroes' she describes. Referring, repeatedly and unquestioningly to an homogenous, definable black 'inner life', it evokes an essential, ahistorical blackness which is deemed interesting only in so far as it functions as a 'fixed, static' point of comparison to the 'complexities, contradictions' and 'self-ironies' of the Occidental self³⁰ that is represented here by the student of cultural history.

While Boas uses the space Hurston offered him to argue against stereotypical images

is often repeated as evidence of her treachery.

²⁸ Gambrell, p.105. See also, Houston A. Baker Jr, *Workings of The Spirit*, pp.82-3; Barbara Johnson, *World of Difference*, p.182.

²⁹ Nineteenth century accounts of black life authored by black writers were regularly authenticated by prefaces in which white authority figures assured the reader of the accuracy of the account they were about to read, and of the verity of the author's ethnicity.

³⁰ Alice Gambrell suggests that despite Boas' radical intentions, his work and the work of his most influential students - Benedict, Mead, Herskovits - reproduces the 'native' as a fixed and static self devoid of the sorts of complexities and self-ironies that distinguished their own, cosmopolitan identities (Gambrell, p.185).

of African Americans,³¹ valorising Hurston's book as a successful corrective to inaccurate accounts of the 'social life of the Negro',³² the language he uses to express these sentiments suggest an underlying tendency to homogenise African Americans as childlike, secretive exotics who seem, with their endless 'songs', 'sayings' and 'magic' to do nothing but play. While on the one hand he suggests that the culture Hurston has reported on is complex and modern - 'the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition[s]' - on the other he implies that it is primitive and immutable; at once comfortingly familiar and excitingly 'other':

[Hurston] entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them
(...) Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanour by
which the Negro [hides...] his true inner life. (xiii)

Drawing a clear line between the - it is implied - illiterate, barely self-conscious Negro and the (white?) educated sophisticated 'student of cultural history', Boas not only reasserts the subject/object divide that so much of his work attempted to dismantle. He also contaminates Hurston, infecting her and her text with his own apparently 'imperial vision'.³³ For, taking it for granted that she shares the 'genius for pure objectivity' (687) that detaches him from all cultures, Boas separates Hurston from the mass of interchangeable, corporeal Negroes who seem so locked into their 'homely' world, and includes her within an elite of select, distinguished,

³¹ Hurston's publishers Lippincott suggested that Boas might write an introduction and this was fully supported by Hurston who wrote to Boas herself in the hope of persuading him (see Hemenway, pp.163-4).

³² Preface to *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1935), rept. in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), pp.1-268, p.3. All further references will be included parenthetically within the text.

disembodied students whose perceptions are all-encompassing and whose interests are purely theoretical: 'it throws into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life'. Associating her with this abstract academic world in which the history of slavery in America is calmly denoted as a 'peculiar amalgamation' Boas sullies Hurston's return to the world of her childhood, presenting it as an exercise in deception and a violation of trust rather than an act of service. Introducing her as a student working, not for the good of the folk - setting down their oral culture 'before it's too late' (14) - but for anonymous academics, his Forward implicates her in a form of racial treachery as she uses the colour of her skin to insinuate herself into spaces which were specifically created in order deflect this sort of intellectual voyeurism; 'she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanour by which the Negro excludes the White observer' (3).

At first literary revisionists such as Robert Hemenway and Barbara Christian seemed unwilling to challenge Boas's interpretation and although they defended Hurston's book, they did so tentatively, all too aware of its perceived political shortcomings. Judging it as a minor work, limited by its anthropological associations, they interpreted it as a text which failed to reach the 'esthetic (sic) resolution (...) that characterised' her 'two', novelistic, 'masterpieces'.³⁴ Arguing that anthropology was 'too restrictive a form' for Hurston,³⁵ hindering her development as a writer by

³³ Carby, p.87.

³⁴ Hemenway, p.187. See also Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists*, pp.56-58. Christian is less dismissive of Boas than Hemenway, yet she shares his sense that Hurston was 'restrict[ed]' by anthropology and quickly turns her attention to the novels in which 'the vitality of [Hurston's] material' was given free reign (p.57).

³⁵ Christian, p.58.

weighing her down with political and aesthetic problems which, in her fiction she easily negotiated, they implied that *Mules and Men* suffered from intellectual 'entanglements'.³⁶ Although they acknowledged Hurston's initial interest in the science - Hemenway, for example, stated that 'one cannot overemphasise the extent' of her early commitment to anthropology³⁷ - they also suggested that this interest was unhealthy, undermining Hurston's natural intelligence and causing her to 'struggle' with material which, once she abandoned anthropology, would pour out of her in a 'flood of language and emotion (...) tenderness' and 'passion'.³⁸

More recently critics have rejected the interpretation Boas's Forward proffers and questioned the sincerity of Hurston's anthropological pose. Rather than absolving Hurston's involvement with Boas by representing it as the result of a sort of false-consciousness which was corrected and by her eventual decision to 'conceiv[e] of herself as a creative writer - even when writing about folklore',³⁹ writers such as Houston Baker Jr., Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, Beulah S. Hemenway and Sandra Dolby-Stahl have begun to question that Hurston was ever committed to anthropology.⁴⁰ Re-evaluating *Mules and Men* as a 'radically alternative' narrative,⁴¹ that was 'literature rather than ethnography through the clear intention of its

³⁶ Hemenway, p.185.

³⁷ Hemenway, 'Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthology' in *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. by Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, pp.314-330, p.329.

³⁸ This is how Hemenway describes Hurston's writing of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a book which, unlike *Mules and Men*, was written in 'seven straight weeks', with 'little need for revisions' (Hemenway, p.230-231).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.160.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Houston Baker Jr., *Workings of the Spirit*; Sandra Dolby-Stahl, 'Literary Objective: Hurston's Use of Personal Narrative in *Mules and Men*', in *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. by Gloria L. Cronin (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), pp.43-52; Beulah S. Hemenway, 'Through the Prism of Africanicity: A Preliminary Investigation of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*', in *Zora In Florida*, pp.38-45; Dana McKinnon Preu, 'A Literary Reading of *Mules and Men*, Part 1', in *Zora In Florida*, pp.46-61; Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick*.

author',⁴² they have suggested that Hurston used the anthropological project not to 'conceptuali[se] black folklore' or 'hypothesiz[e] about racial characteristics' for an academic audience,⁴³ but rather to 'fan' for her black readers 'a quintessential' and radical 'African spirit down dark lanes of time'.⁴⁴

My own reading of *Mules and Men* is informed by these recent interpretations. Like Baker and Meisenhelder I read it as a narrative of negotiations through which Hurston establishes for herself a space to conjure up a more subversive, fluid Negro culture than anthropology had traditionally allowed. However, rather than dispensing with the anthropological dimensions of Hurston's narrative arguing, as these critics have, that having 'turned the trick' on Boas, she repudiated the 'rescue mission' she had been assigned,⁴⁵ I shall trace the way in which Hurston continued to slip in and out of an anthropological persona in order to construct and then deconstruct the essentialist idea of African American space evoked in Boas's Forward.⁴⁶

At first glance the introduction to *Mules and Men* appears to be one of the most ingratiating pieces of writing Hurston ever published. With its excessive humility – 'Mrs. Osgood Mason (...). The world's most gallant woman' (12) - its quiescent

⁴¹ Baker, *Workings of the Spirit*, p.97.

⁴² Sandra Dolby-Stahl, 'Literary Objective', p.45.

⁴³ Hemenway, p.159.

⁴⁴ Baker, p.97. Baker's reading of the relationship between Boas and Hurston is particularly problematic. Dismissing Boas as 'a German Jewish scholar' he argues that the folk-tale Hurston retells in this introduction - a tale which draws on demeaning Jewish stereotypes - is an attack on Boas. In his rush to defend Hurston, therefore, he either fails to see, or chooses to overlook the racism articulated in Hurston's tale, simply reproducing its anti-Semitism in his own text (*Workings of the Spirit*, pp.82-3).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.89-97.

⁴⁶ It is not my intention to suggest that Hurston is signifying on this Forward however, as I am of course conscious of the fact that although it precedes Hurston's own narrative, Boas' was written after *Mules and Men* was completed. I am suggesting, however, that Hurston creates a form of dialogue with conventional 'white' ethnologies that fetishised bounded, primitive spaces.

passivity - 'I was glad when somebody told me, "You may go and collect Negro folk-lore" - its wide-eyed folksiness - '[Folk-lore] was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it'(9) - it seems uncomfortably servile; the work of a 'literary climber' rather than an ur-womanist.⁴⁷ Presenting its narrator as a cultural innocent recently emerged from her cultural 'crib' and as an entirely defenceless woman who has been intellectually awakened by a Northern education, it seems to be an introduction which supports rather than challenge Boas's patronising Forward, justifying his presentation of Hurston as little more than a 'charming', and charmingly subservient 'Miss':

It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that. (9)

Although it seems distinctly un-academic, and unlike any of the narrative personae her fellow ethnologists evoked, the problematic happy and naive 'native' protagonist that Hurston summons up in this introduction can be read as an attempt to make use of the 'self-nativising' strategy that Boas and his students were experimenting with at this time.⁴⁸ This strategy, instigated by Boas and made famous by such writers as Melville Herskovits and Ruth Benedict⁴⁹ was developed as part of a radical attempt

⁴⁷ These were terms used by Harold Preece in his review of *Mules and Men* for *Crisis*, 43 (1936), p.374, cited in Hemenway, pp.221-222.

⁴⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.107.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Herskovits' essay on Harlem in Locke's *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), and Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.,

to unsettle the self/other divide anthropology had historically guaranteed. Intending to effect a 'destructive analysis of the familiar'⁵⁰ by 'portraying the alien as the familiar',⁵¹ it was a method that aimed to provoke in the reader a reflection not only on the culture under examination but also '(and more critically)' upon the reader's own. This strategy was, as Alice Gambrell points out, 'undeniably daring'.⁵² However it was also as entrenched in what Hazel Carby has called the 'colonial imagination',⁵³ as any of the strategies it was intending to replace. For, involving a 'complicated kind of cross-cultural ventriloquism' in which the ethnographer adopted 'the voice of one who is not white',⁵⁴ it not only assumed, but also required the ethnographer to be white. In order to have any power the 'self-nativising' pose had to begin in the space reserved for 'civilised' whites.

What the first few paragraphs of her introduction demonstrate, therefore, is Hurston's attempt first to de-nativise, and then re-nativise in order to claim for herself the authoritative space usually reserved for whites. Presenting herself as one of Boas's humble Negroes, then as one of his enlightened students, and then finally as a Negro once more, she attempts to appropriate a strategy designed to dignify ethnic 'others' and unsettle otherwise unselfconscious whites. She attempts, in a sense, to make her book function as a literary equivalent of Jacksonville, making her (white) readers as

1935).

⁵⁰ This was Edward Sapir's term for the process of using ethnology in order to expose universal 'primitivism'. Radical in intent - its purpose being to disrupt the binaries which hold the self/other, occident/oriental dichotomies in place - this strategy can result in a reactionary ahistoricism and a cosy pseudo-humanism, in which, as Michaela di Leonardo states, 'questions of history and power on both poles of the contrast' are erased (*Exotics at Home*, p.61).

⁵¹ Geertz, p.107.

⁵² Gambrell, p.106. The limitations of 'self-nativising' are fully explored in Gambrell's *Women Intellectuals, Modernity, and Difference*, pp.99-124.

⁵³ Carby, p.79.

⁵⁴ Gambrell, p.104.

uncomfortably conscious of their ethnic identity as this town had once made her: 'I left Eatonville (...) as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl (...) guaranteed not to rub nor run'.⁵⁵

From the beginning, however, Hurston seems to sense the inadequacy of this model and to resent the narrative hoops it makes her jump through. The first sentence is a paraphrase of Psalm 122⁵⁶ - a fact that suggests a critique of the paternalist attitudes of the Barnard 'Kings' beneath a show of acquiescence - and as the introduction develops Hurston's nativism hardens into something much less humble than her first description suggests. The cuddly, domesticated character of the first page - a character who, with its childish vulnerability and apparent transparency poses no threat - recedes to be replaced by a considerably more unpredictable, unfathomable narrator who will resist rather than reveal:

And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive (...). We smile and tell [our questioner] something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. (10)

Clearly, Hurston has, by this point, had enough of playing the 'Zip Coon' - donning

⁵⁵ Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.826-7.

⁵⁶ Barbara Johnson points this out in 'Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston', in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp..

black face in order to write as black writing as a white writing as a black.⁵⁷ Rejecting the idea implied by the self-nativising strategy that blackness is only meaningful as a way of highlighting whiteness, Hurston seems, not simply to cast off the black face she had initially donned, but also the anthropological project itself. Positioning herself unequivocally with the 'evasive' Negroes, she satirises the idea that white 'questioner[s]' are ever equipped to learn anything from their chosen 'people' and turns the idea of primitive transparency on its head. As her account develops momentum it appears that it is the natives who occupy the position of sophisticates - analysing, theorising and manipulating - the anthropologists who function as intellectual infants:

The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

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

This is not the last time that Hurston evokes anthropological tropes. However, from this point on it becomes impossible to read any of her set-pieces straightforwardly.

⁵⁷ In *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997; rept. London: Papermac, 1997), Ann Douglas describes the way in which black performers who wanted to make their living on the stage were forced to become what were called 'Zip Coons', and imitate, 'with variations, the white performers playing, and distorting blacks (p.75).

The warning, that what we will read amounts to little more than a Swiftian tale-of-a-tub remains, unsettling interpretation.⁵⁸

After summarily dismissing this 'white man' however, it comes as a surprise to read at the end of the introduction Hurston's apparently obsequious tribute to her other patron, the 'gallant' Mrs. Mason. Excessively humble and childlike in its acknowledgement of her financial and emotional support, this paragraph not only evokes a degree of indebtedness that seems incongruent in a chapter centrally concerned with establishing intellectual independence, but also implies a rather degrading political naiveté and emotional immaturity. For while this woman was dismissed in others' accounts as a manipulative primitivist⁵⁹ - such writers as Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson concluding that her generosity masked fundamentally racist desires - Hurston's acknowledgements suggest that, awed by the wealth she 'personified',⁶⁰ she was happy to turn a blind eye to Mason's prejudices; not simply thanking her, but also adopting her as a parental accompaniment to 'Papa'

⁵⁸ Of course this is not the only possible explanation for Hurston's tactics in this introduction. In fact these passages can be read as Hurston's attempt to authenticate her work, her 'native' knowledge serving both to question others' accounts and validate her own.

⁵⁹ Mrs. Mason has appeared in memoirs of these years by contemporaries and erstwhile friends of Hurston, as an over-bearing, manipulative, even racist woman, who played at being patroness in order to surround herself with exotics. Louise Thompson, for example, came to feel that this woman was merely 'indulging her fantasies of Negroes' by inviting them to her penthouse and expecting them to 'be primitive' (Hemenway, p.284). Even Langston Hughes, who was considerably more reticent in his criticism - failing to name her in his memoirs, for example - came to the conclusion that she was racist, wanting him to be Africa, when he was actually 'Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem'; her apartment, not a place of 'light and help and understanding', but a beautiful, seductive 'trap' (*The Big Sea*, p.324). However although many of the writers who received money from Mrs. Mason became disillusioned with her, many also claimed a sort of psychic connection with her. Cheryl Wall points out in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* that private correspondence of renaissance figures shows that Alain Locke and Hall Johnson also adopted Mason as a spiritual mother (p.154). It should also be remembered that Hurston named Mason, against her express wishes. Thus her acknowledgments are as defiant as they are humble.

⁶⁰ Hemenway, p.108.

Boas - 'Mrs. Mason liked for me to call her Godmother':⁶¹

I wish to make acknowledgements to Mrs. R. Osgood Mason of New York City. She backed my falling in a hearty way, in a spiritual way, and in addition, financed the whole expedition in the manner of the great soul that she is. The world's most gallant woman. (4)

Yet, once again, another interpretation is possible; one that judges this statement to be ironic rather than humble, a sign of Hurston's tricksterism rather than her capitulation to Park Avenue excess. Reading these acknowledgements as part of a narrative which has already celebrated duplicity and established a tension between superficial and deeper meanings, for example, Barbara Johnson and later Houston Baker Jr. have cast doubt on the sincerity of the tribute, arguing that the words Hurston uses to 'celebrate' her patron's largesse have accumulated negative associations through the preceding passages so that by the time they are applied to Mason they serve to critique rather than pay homage to this powerful woman.⁶² Coming immediately after a story which recounts the theft of large amounts of 'soul' which God had intended to distribute when 'men got to grow strong enough to stand it'(3), these critics have implied that Hurston's description of Mason as possessing of a Great Soul is more satirical than deferential. In fact they have interpreted it as an accusation rather than a celebration, presenting the patroness as a greedy fugitive from biblical justice who dispenses that which does not morally belong to her rather

⁶¹ Hurston, 'My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience', in *Hurston*, 935-936, p.935. The fact that this statement is made in the only one of Hurston's essays to refer directly to 'humiliating' experiences speaks volumes.

⁶² c.f. Barbara Johnson, 'Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston', in

than a benevolent, selfless woman.

It is not only through these structural 'shifts and reversals' that Hurston establishes a distance between herself and her patron, however.⁶³ She also uses language in order to open up an uncontaminated ideological, literary and geographical space in which to write her book. For while on the surface, her declaration of thanks appears to cement a physical bond between the two women - Mrs. Mason, if not bodily, then metaphorically 'catching' Hurston 'as she falls' - the cumulative effect of the images Hurston conjures up is to create the sense of an ever-widening and increasingly unbridgeable gap between this woman, the world she occupies and Hurston herself. Presenting herself as dynamic, youthful and profoundly mobile, always speeding through space - 'pitch[ing] headforemost (...) rocking (...) hurry[ing]' even 'falling', she distinguishes herself as intrinsically 'other' to the grand but conservative Mrs. Mason who, so patently 'of New York City' lacks Hurston's energy, independence and above all, mobility. As she rushes away from the metropolis as fast as her Chevrolet will carry her, 'speeding down the straight stretch' which leads away from the capitalised city towards a world beyond the experience of this 'great' but constrained 'soul', she asserts her geographical, intellectual and emotional independence, making it clear that, mobile where Mason is stationary, poor where she is rich, artless where she is encumbered, and even black where she is white, Hurston is her patron's antithesis, not a part of her 'great soul' at all, but rather a subversive stray fragment, determined to go her own way. Consequently the Eatonville she speeds towards is all her own.

World of Difference, pp.; Houston Baker Jr., *Workings of the Spirit*, pp.82-85.

⁶³ Barbara Johnson, p.325.

At first, however, Hurston seems to use the space that she has cleared for herself simply in order to reproduce the sort of safe, simple, stereotypes her patron enjoyed. Presenting Eatonville as an 'ethnographic utopia'⁶⁴ in which 'primitives' go about their lives with 'utter (...) sincer[ity]' she seems to be following a script that could have been written for her by imperious Mason.⁶⁵ Surveying the village from the safety of her Chevrolet she presents it as a bounded, quantifiable, archaic and romantic space in which a playful people exist in easy equanimity with an environment which nurtures them; a 'manageable unit', in anthropological terms, in which a traditional people carry on doing their traditional things, 'oblivious to the alien observing presence'.⁶⁶

So I rounded Park Lake and come speeding down the straight stretch into Eatonville, the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jail-house. (4)

This neat, quantifiable little town seems, as Hurston rushes towards it, an African American idyll; a place out of time and space which exists in a sort of perpetual present - "I was delighted. The town had not changed"(7). Just as there has always been and always will be 'five lakes', so the rhythm of the narrative suggests, there will always be the same number of croquet courts serving a timelessly stable population of 'three hundred brown skins'. Life here is certain and secure, an endless

⁶⁴ Clifford, *Routes*, p.21.

⁶⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in Hurston, p.689.

chain of long days punctuated by rituals that are repeated time after time, by the same people in the same spaces. Thus when Hurston re-enters the space, minutes rather than years seem to have passed, the same group on the same porch playing the same game of 'Florida Flip' suggesting that nothing has changed.⁶⁷

As I crossed the Maitland-Eatonville township line I could see a group on the store porch (...). Same love of talk and song. So I drove on down there before I stopped. Yes, there was George Thomas, Calvin Daniels, Jack and Charlie Jones, Gene Brazzle, B. Moseley and "Seaboard." Deep in a game of Florida-flip. (13)

Hurston's first encounter with these reassuringly predictable folk only reinforces the primitive spell she has cast on the village. Crowding around her car, excited by what would seem to be an unusual event - the arrival of one who has journeyed beyond the town's limits - Eatonville's population seems as warm, harmonious and charmingly parochial as her brief introduction had suggested. Though there is an uneasy moment, in which a suddenly insecure Hurston wonders whether, perhaps, her Northern education has changed her more fundamentally than she cares to admit - 'for a moment it looked like they had forgotten me' (13) - Hurston's concern proves unfounded and the folk welcome her back as its enduring 'heart-string' (13), the

⁶⁶ Pratt, 'Fieldwork in Common Places', p.43.

⁶⁷ Of course the town is radically changed. When Hurston left Eatonville, as her autobiography makes clear, she had little status and no access to the store porch which functions as the town's centre. When she returns to her hometown, on the other hand, with a diploma, a Chevrolet and a remit to collect folk-lore, she is treated as a celebrity and instead of having to linger inconspicuously around the edges of the store porch she is welcomed into its centre. Thus, to an extent, when Hurston celebrates 'George Thomas, Calvin Daniels, Jack and Charlie Jones, Gene Brazzle, B. Moseley and 'Seaboard's'(7) continuing game of 'Florida-flip' as a sign of profound and reassuring continuity it is the difference in their behaviour rather than any similitude that actually delights her. The sexual

whole village functioning very much as the 'crib' she had described: 'Armetta made me lie down and rest while she cooked a big pan of gingerbread' (14).

Rather than an example of unexamined nostalgia and politically retrograde romanticism however, Hurston's artfully constructed entrance represents a very subtle series of negotiations which authorise her admittance into a discipline in which, under more usual circumstances 'she would herself' (...) have occupied the position of the *native*'.⁶⁸ For in presenting Eatonville as an 'ethnographic dream'⁶⁹ - a place which welcomes, rather than resists the anthropologist's presence and which therefore requires none of the complicated problematic negotiations that other more hostile places demanded - Hurston turns herself into a 'dream' ethnographer; a woman who is both inside and outside, who can easily insinuate herself into the culture she is describing while retaining the power to analyse, measure and describe. Refuting the idea that the ideal ethnographer is one who studies a culture other than her own, she demonstrates that her ethnicity is a bonus rather than burden, ensuring a welcome that other anthropologists could only dream of: "Hello, heart-string," Mayor Hiram Lester yelled (...). "You back home for good, I hope"(13).

In order to establish the sort of intellectual distance that was deemed essential for an ethnographer, and demonstrate that the degree of intimacy she shares with these folk is not one that will cloud her judgements,⁷⁰ Hurston also uses her entrance subtly to

politics of this space is an issue I shall return to in Chapter Three.

⁶⁸ Alice Gambrell, p.104.

⁶⁹ Pratt, p. 31.

⁷⁰ For an account of how people of colour have had their work discounted on the grounds of the lack of intellectual distance and objectivity, see M. Nazif Shahrani, 'Honored Guest and Marginal Man: Long-Term Field Research and Predicaments of a Native Anthropologist', in *Others Knowing Others*:

differentiate herself from her natal community. Rather than declaring this difference herself however, and risking in the process her claim to undiluted and unmediated 'negroism', she allows her folk to articulate it for her, their welcome simultaneously affirming her status both as an insider and an outsider - just one of the neighbours and a very special individual. For while Hurston claims that her return will be unlikely to excite much interest - 'I'd still be just Zora to the neighbours' (9) - her homecoming is an occasion which animates the whole village. To them she is not just 'Lucy Hurston's daughter' (9) after all. Rather she is a local hero; a woman whose fame is clearly a source of pride - 'We heard all about you up North' (13). When the most powerful man in the community - given his full title here, Mayor Hiram Lester - 'hurrie(s) up the street' to greet her, she manages to convey to the reader a sense of her exceptional standing within the community without having to relinquish her academically requisite claim simply to be one of them:

"Hello, boys," I hailed them as I went into neutral.

They looked up from the game [of Florida Flip] and for a moment it looked as if they had forgotten me. Then B. Moseley said, "Well, if it ain't Zora Hurston!" Then everybody crowded around the car to greet me.

"You goiner stay awhile, Zora?"

"Yep, several months"

"Where you gointer stay, Zora?"

"With Mett and Ellis, I reckon."

"Mett" was Mrs. Armetta Jones, an intimate friend of mine since childhood

and Ellis was her husband. Their house stands under the huge camphor tree on the front street.

“Hello heart-string,” Mayor Hirma Lester yelled as he hurried up the street.

“We heard all about you up North. You back home for good, I hope”. (13)

Having established her credentials, however, Hurston immediately changes tack and the ‘ethnographic dream’ she had conjured up collapses. For though, from a distance the folk had been presented as charmingly acquiescent, happily providing Hurston with a picturesque scene, at close quarters the Eatonville folk prove diverse and undisciplined. Despite the fact that they seem to have been waiting for Hurston’s return – holding themselves in a kind of stasis, waiting for her to bring them back to life - they prove to have voices, opinions and lives of their own and thus, almost as soon as she is out of the car they begin contesting Hurston’s statements and changing her plans.

The first character to disrupt the fantasy Hurston has constructed is George Thomas. ‘[D]oubtful’ of the validity of Hurston’s ‘mission’, he questions the credibility of her words - “Aw shucks (...) Zora, don’t you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing”(13). At first this exchange seems to expose a far from ‘neutral’ Hurston who, rather than shaking off the ‘glamor of Barnard College’⁷¹ and easing herself into the town, seems to pull rank on her folk, using her association with an exotic and alien North to dominate this Doubting Thomas. Having devoted most of her introduction to positioning herself as one of the ‘neighbours’ - moving, as the introduction

⁷¹ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, in *Hurston*, p.687.

progresses from a Barnard 'I' to a southern, Negroid 'we' - she therefore seems to pull back from this mutuality, withdrawing her allegiance and aligning herself with a very different community:

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

"Aw shucks," exclaimed George Thomas doubtfully. "Zora , don't you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing. Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?"

"Plenty of people, George. They are lot more valuable than you might think. *We* want to set them down before it's too late". (13-14)

It is George, however, who has the last word, and his response to Hurston's rather pompous statements - 'too late for what?'- deflates her arguments, rendering her project ridiculous. Though she proceeds with her plan, immediately organising a time when the 'boys' can congregate and tell their tales, George's judgements remain:

"Too late for what?"

"Before everybody forgets all of 'em."

"No danger of that. That's all some people is good for - set 'round and lie and murder groceries". (14)

The Eatonville folk therefore, reveal themselves to be rather less manageable than Hurston's opening descriptions led us to believe. Though they have promised to

assemble at Armetta's house, for example - 'We'll all go down and tell lies and eat ginger bread' (14) - they change their plans at a moment's notice, the excitement of Hurston's arrival being eclipsed by the prospect of a 'toe-party' at Wood Bridge. As the party demonstrates, Eatonville is a force to be reckoned with; a spirit as well as a space and an anarchic party waiting to happen:

When we got [to Wood Bridge] the party was young. The house was swept and garnished, the refreshments on display, several people sitting around; but the spot needed some social juices to mix the ingredients. In other words, they had the carcass of a party lying around up until the minute Eatonville burst in on it. Then it woke up. (19)

After this initial, brief description of the place and its people, Hurston turns her attention to the tales and the store-front gatherings which occasion them and just as the people of Eatonville proved more vital, spontaneous and adventurous than her early descriptions suggested, so the tales they tell are dynamic and vigorous. Rather than the light-hearted childish stories Hurston implied she had cut her teeth on - 'from the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut'(9) - the tales and the sessions which occasion them are aggressive, competitive and full of paradox. In this 'crib of Negroness', abuse is hurled, sexual prowess is scorned, strength doubted, and relationships derided. The nurturing gentleness suggested in Hurston's first cradle metaphors is entirely absent, replaced instead with 'war'-like (33) rites which have the townspeople figuratively circling around each other, looking for weaknesses and exploiting them to the full:

“Whut you gointer do? Bennie demanded. “Whut you gointer do? (...) De monkees got me, now whut you gointer do?”

“Ah ain’t got you to study about, Bennie Lee. If God ain’t payin’ you no mo’ mind than Ah is, youse in hell right now. Ah ain’t talkin’ to you nohow. Zora, you wanter hear dis story?”

“Sure. Shug. That’s what Ah’m here for.”

“Somebody’s gointer bleed,” Bennie Lee threatened. (41)

There are many divisions - over who is blackest, oldest, wisest - yet the most sustained battle is between men and women. For having settled the question of racial divisions - ‘God hollered “Git Back! Git Back!” And they misunderstood Him and though He says “Git Black,” and they been black ever since’(34) - the folk have turned to the more intimate question of sexual difference. Thus many of the stories centre on battles between men and women as both sexes vie for domination. Although most of the storytellers are men a few women enter the space and defend their corner. Struggling against the misogyny of many of the tales, which either ignore women or position them as at the mercy of men who have all the ‘strength and all de law and all de money’(34), Shug, Armetta and Mathilda for example, hold their own against the men, defending their knowledge and insisting that they be heard. Thrusting themselves into a conversation which would otherwise exclude them, they tell their own tales of sexual wars, using stories to make a virtue out of their exclusion from the economic world, asserting their domination over a domestic space which the men scorn but cannot live without:

And dat's why de man makes and takes. You men is still braggin' 'bout yo strength and de woman is sittin' on de keys and lettin' you blow off till she git ready to put de bridle on you. (38)

The violence and animosity of this talk, with its mumbled threats and deliberately inflammatory language is contained within the ritual of tale-telling, however, and does not spill out, disrupting other spheres. The strongly expressed desire of individuals to assert themselves and have their view of the world authorised, never becomes physical. 'Wars' are avoided as peacemakers step in, egos are mollified as tales are eventually received and relationships are cemented as balances are struck. The anarchic competitiveness of the sessions are ultimately surmounted by the easy familiarity that they all share, the knowledge for example, that they should not heed Bennie Lee's blood thirsty threats:

Bennie threatened. Nobody paid him any mind (...). [He] tried to ask his well-known question but the coon dick was too strong. He mumbles down into his shirt bosom and went to sleep. (41)

During these passages, Eatonville as a physical space recedes. The characters and the imaginary worlds they conjure up fill the narrative space, leading Hurston and the reader on imaginative 'flights'⁷² that leave the experiential world behind. When Hurston does turn her attention back to the physical space she is occupying then, it

⁷² Hurston, 'Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals', in *Hurston*, p.871.

signals that she has exhausted the imaginative possibilities of this particular cultural space. Her return to the porch signifies her retreat both from the tales and the tale-tellers. Drawing back from the crowd which she now observes in an at least partially professional manner - 'I listened [to the spiritual] with one ear, while I heard the parting quips of the story-tellers with the other'(56) - she seems to revive the rather distanced pose she had previously eschewed and figuratively places Eatonville back in its cognitive box. Evoking the landscape in such a way as to render the population insignificant - the mumbling, yawning folk being over-shadowed by the considerable more monumental 'heaven-rasping oaks' - she diminishes the sense, hitherto carefully drawn, of their differences and renders them virtually indistinguishable as they slope off to bed. Watching from her elevated position on the front porch, listening to the 'ole spiritual' that emanates from the nearby church, she presents them as slipping back into the 'sleepy' reverie which she had, for a while, roused them from:

Johnnie Mae yawned wide open (...). Then everybody else found out that they were sleepy. So in the local term they went to the "pad"(...). I sat on the porch for a while looking towards the heaven-rasping oaks on the back street, towards the glassy sliver of Lake Sabelia. (56-7)

Once again the town becomes a timeless place in which the same rituals are enacted across time:

The young'uns [were] playing the same games that I had played in the same

lane years before. (57)

While she remains engaged with the culture she is recording, setting aside her correspondence, for example, in order to enjoy a group of children's boisterous games, she begins to resurrect the sense of herself as an intellectual outsider. When describing the 'exciting' games that are taking place before her, for example, she briefly contextualises that which she is witnessing, subtly categorising, for the first time, the material she is recording:

With the camphor tree as a base, [the children] played "Going 'Round de Mountain." Little Hubert Alexander was in the ring (...). I tried to write a letter but the games were too exciting.

"Little Sally Walker," "Draw a bucket of water," "Sissy in de barn," and at last that most raucous, popular and most African of games, "Chirck, mah Chick, mah Craney crow". (57-8)

In a sense this retreat into a more conventional anthropological persona describing a more conventional 'native' space is inescapable, for Hurston had somehow to extract herself from the place and its people. 'There was a limit to the money' Mason was willing to spend on Hurston's project (176),⁷³ and although Eatonville was 'good', 'it [was] not enough'(58) to satisfy either Hurston or her gallant 'back[er]'(12). Yet simply to move on regardless of the town's wishes - they wanted her to stay, after all, 'back home for good, I hope' - would be to cast doubt on the allegiance to the folk

⁷³ Hurston makes this comment later in the book, in order to justify her transition into the study of Hoodoo.

that she had based her anthropological authority upon and undermine the defiant intellectual independence she had established for herself. It would suggest that she was, after all an albeit 'unusual'(3) academic lackey obediently fulfilling the task that had been handed down to her - "You may go and collect folk-lore"(9). In order to retain her integrity, therefore, and justify her departure Hurston had to demonstrate that Eatonville had its limitations.

Having prepared the case for her departure, however, Hurston shrugs off responsibility for it. Engaging with the Eatonville 'boys' one more time, she conjures up a final scene in which the folk finally direct and sanction her speedy exit. Having hinted that she needs more than they can provide, Hurston leaves it to Charlie Jones and Bubber Mimms to state that she 'ain't at de right place' and that she should leave:

"Course, Zora, you ain't in de right place to git de bes' lies. Why don't you go down 'round Bartow and Lakeland and 'round in dere - Polk County? Dat's where they really lies up a mess and dats where dey makes up all de songs and things lak dat. (58)

Rather than proving her disloyal therefore, her exit consolidates her commitment to the folk, her departure presented as their, rather than her will: 'If Ah was you, Ah'd drop down dere and see. It's liable to do you a lot uh good' (58). Just as her entrance was an ethnographer's 'dream' therefore, so is her exit, the community articulating its limitations so that she does not have to. Instead she simply listens to their advice

and does as she is told:

A hasty good-bye to Eatonville's oaks and oleanders and the wheels of the Chevvie split Orlando wide open - headed southwest for corn (likker) and song. (61)

Following Charlie and Bubber's advice then, Hurston proceeds to a place that exceeds her hometown in every way. The virtual antithesis of Hurston's hometown Polk County is unquantifiable. Containing a transient rather than a settled population, it defies generalisation and resists categorisation. Whereas Eatonville seemed to spring spontaneously from the landscape into which it was embedded - the 'huge camphor tree' (13) remaining as its 'base'(57) - Polk County is a space that battles against nature rather than harmoniously existing within it. Consequently though weeds spring up everywhere, littering the landscape and encouraging new dangers - 'Jus' look at de trash and dirt! And it's so many weeds in dis yard, Ah'm liable to git snake bit at my own door' (92) - but there are otherwise few signs of natural growth; no trees to provide guavas or anything else which might support the population and encourage an attachment to, or investment in the space. As a result, while women like Mrs. Allen battle in order to create a sense of home, most of the population remains uncaring and uninterested in the terrain, dismissing the weeds and the 'trash' as the responsibility of others.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Not all of the county is this harsh, however. Hurston spends a brief period 'in the phosphate country around Mulberry' which is run by a company that provides decent housing, a hospital and school. She finds there a 'cheerful' community of children who, because the mining company will not employ them, are free to present Hurston with 'a mass' of tales (*Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, pp.153-170).

“Grandma (...) youse just shacking in one of their shanties. Leave de weeds go. Somebody’ll come chop ‘em some day”. (93)

While Eatonville appeared as a place of cleansing, where pagan baptisms were daily enacted in the bright, natural water - a space which purged Hurston of her city-self - Polk County is pollutive, ‘blowing smut against the sky’(59), obscuring vision, clouding judgement and breeding hostility and resentment. It is a dangerous place populated by anonymous crowds whose histories and relationships are, unlike the Eatonville folk, complicated and often obscure; ‘Babe’s’ son, for example lives with his grandmother, while Mrs. Allen’s brother-in-law is curiously ‘temporary’(60).

It is also an unnaturally colonised space with boundaries that are artificially imposed both upon the natural landscape and the people who reside there. Not only are there arches which mark the entrances, and asphalt to mark the thoroughfares, there are also signs, ‘all over’ which remind the workers that they can lay no claim to it as it belongs not to the inhabitants, but to the ‘Everglades Cypress Lumber Company, Lougham, Florida’:

[There were] signs all over that this was private property and that no one could enter without the consent of the company. (59-60)

It is then a quite nakedly exploitative space created in order to contain and control a disempowered, fugitive population. Yet for all this, it is an intoxicating place where the ‘water drink lak cherry wine’ (58) and Hurston revels in the dangers it presents.

After the transparency of the domesticated Eatonville which succumbed immediately to her charms the reticence of the Polk County community seems 'glamorous' (63), and Hurston is excited by the challenge it sets her to prove herself worthy of admittance. For Polk County does not immediately welcome Hurston as one of its own or even recognise her as one of 'their kind' (10). In fact, formed out of a disparate collection of individuals who are not tied to each other in any way other than financial need, the Polk County community's collective identity is based on behaviour rather than blood so that being black here is not enough to guarantee acceptance. Whereas in Eatonville the community's historical, cultural and genealogical roots ensured that blood ties superseded all others - behaviour being nothing more than sham-polish which could easily be rubbed off in order to reveal the true, enduring, hereditary self - in the profoundly rootless Polk County 'outside show' is the only available indicator of character and the only basis for judgement:

"Miss, you know uh heap uh dese hard heads wants to woof at you but dey skeered."

"How come, Mr. Pitts? Do I look like a bear or a panther?"

"Naw, but dey say youse rich and dey ain't got de nerve to open dey mouf."

I mentally cursed the \$12.74 dress from Macy's that I had on among all the \$1.99 mail-order dresses. (66)

Inhabiting an undiluted world of 'every man for himself' in which '[p]ersonal benefits' all too often 'run counter to race lines' the Polk County community have

repudiated the idea that 'the Negro race [is] one band of heavenly love',⁷⁵ and replaced simplistic ethnic solidarity with a more discriminating community which judges newcomers on their behaviour rather than their blood-ties, so that the histories that count are those which tell of self-willed actions and adventures rather than accidents of birth:

[D]uring the Christmas holidays of 1926 [Babe] had shot her husband to death, had fled to Tampa where she had bobbed her hair and eluded capture for several months but had been traced thru (sic) letters to her mother and had been arrested and lodged in Bartow jail. (63).

While in her hometown her Northern clothes and Barnard mannerisms were mere ephemera, decorating an abiding essential self, in the work camp her 'shiny gray (sic) Chevrolet'(63) and her '\$12.74 dress from Macy's'(66) constitute her identity. They are the signs that tell the community who she is and where she has come from: 'The car made me look too prosperous (...) They all thought I must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind'(63). Thus, in order to be accepted Hurston must concoct a story in order to be 'taken in'(63) which replaces the continuity and constancy of her Eatonville history with radical alienation and desperation:

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 Miami. So I was hiding out. That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. (63)

⁷⁵ Hurston, 'Spiritual and Neo-Spirituals' in *Hurston*, p.871; 'My People! My People!', *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, pp.719-733, p.721; *Ibid.*, p.731.

The community's suspicion is not entirely annulled by Hurston's tall tale however and though it convinces enough of the women of the job to give her access to the pay-night dance, it does not so easily win the confidence of the men, who continue to 'fend [her] off' (64). In order to convince the hardened 'woofers' of her trustworthiness she must demonstrate a deep experience and knowledge of this dissident African American life. She must put on 'a show' and do what she and all those she considers to be authentic folk, love to do, perform;⁷⁶ earning respect and proving her authenticity by dancing the community's dances, singing their songs and accepting the 'woofing' of even the most aggressive 'fellows':

The folk around the fire laughed and boisterously shoved each other about, but I knew they were not tickled (...)

"Ma'am, whut might be yo' entrimmins?" [a pencil-shaped fellow] asked with what was supposed to be a killing bow.

"My whut?"

"Yo entrimmins? Yo entitlum?"

The 'entitlum' gave me the cue, "Oh, my name is Zora Hurston. And what may be yours?"

More people came closer quickly.

"Mah name is Pitts and Ah'm sho glad to meet yuh" (...)

Pitts began woofing at me and the others stood around to see how I took it (...)

⁷⁶ Hurston, unpublished version of 'My People, My People!', appendix to *Dust Tracks*, in *Hurston*, pp.773-781, p.780.

“Mr. Pitts, are you havin’ a good time?”

(In a prim falsetto)”Yes, Ma’am,. See, dat’s de way tuh talk tuh *you*.”

I laughed and the crowd laughed and Pitts laughed. Very successful woofing.

(67)

As Hurston is only able to gain access to the group’s inner life by throwing off the influence of her education and re-inhabiting her more ‘natural’, natal self, she begins to discard much of what she accrued through city life. Along with the ‘carefully accented Barnardese’,⁷⁷ which she dropped as she entered Eatonville’s boundaries, Hurston sets about dispensing with the fancy clothes which here function as a sign, not only of difference but also of outside interference - these being dresses for which Mrs. Mason has most probably paid:

I mentally cursed the \$12.74 dress from Macy’s that I had on among all the \$1.98 mail-order dresses. I looked about and noted the number of bungalow aprons and even the rolled down paper bags on the heads of several women. I did look different and resolved to fix that no later than the next morning. (66)

Stripping herself of these garments Hurston rids herself of all residual external influences and, putting herself literally in the hands of the Polk County workers, submits to their very physical codes of behaviour. As a result the community rapidly and enthusiastically embraces her:

⁷⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, in *Hurston*, p.175.

I started to sing the verses I knew. They put me on the table and everybody urged me to spread my jenk, so I did the best I could (...) By the time that the song was over, before Joe Willard lifted me down from the table I knew that I was in the inner circle. (68)

Of course the one Mason-funded possession Hurston chooses to retain is the indispensable car. Giving her a mobility and freedom of movement denied all the others on the camp, the car, like the fancy dress, marks her apart, yet it is a privilege which she is not willing to relinquish. For while Hurston was passionate about the culture she was raised in, and evangelical about distinguishing it from less authentic, 'pale' copies - 'There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere'⁷⁸ - she clearly had no desire to return to such a, in many ways, limited world. Instead of abandoning the car along with the accent and clothes, she cleansed it of associations of indebtedness and external powers by allowing it to become communal property. Relinquishing it temporarily to the folk who use it to pursue their own entertainment, Hurston finds a way of allowing it to remain within this space without the taint of patronage. Showing it to have been co-opted by 'James Presley, Slim' and just about 'everybody', Hurston ensures that the car is incorporated into the group's identity, becoming a sort of signature of Hurston and her supporting cast:

After that my car was everybody's car. James Presley, Slim and I teamed up and we had to do "John Henry" wherever we appeared. We soon had a

⁷⁸ Hurston, 'Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals', in *Hurston*, p.871.

reputation that way. We went to Mulberry, Pierce and Lakeland. (67-8)

Once she has infiltrated the space and convinced everyone of her authenticity therefore, Hurston returns to the job of collecting folklore, using her band of men and her 'John Henry' theme tune to stimulate lying sessions. Though the 'wistful' Charlie and Bubber first performed 'John Henry' on an Eatonville porch it belongs in Polk County. Initially sung to Hurston as an example of Polk County's difference, Bubber had performed it in order to illustrate how rich, exciting and different Polk County was from the 'playground' that he inhabited. Telling the tale of a miner who chooses to kill himself rather than be worked to death by the 'Captain' and his drill however it does more than demonstrate this space's richness. It also reveals a brutality and hostility towards the white world that was entirely absent in the playful Eatonville:

John Henry driving on the right hand side,
Steam drill driving on the left,
Says, 'fore I'll let your steam drill beat me down
I'll hammer my fool self to death,
Hammer my fool self to death. (233)

Just as this song is more severe and desperate than those that are recounted in Eatonville, so the tales that Hurston collects are much more dark. For the differences of circumstance and of surroundings have a profound effect on the stories that are recounted and the squabbling angels and clownish ministers of Eatonville give way to ambiguous, anarchic figures who battle with devils, bears and, of course, 'Ole

Massa', rather than each other. Whereas, as befitted a segregated, domestic space that kept itself apart from the white world, the Eatonville stories generally concerned themselves with intra-racial conflicts with 'Massa' making only an occasional appearance then, the Polk County tales are filled with confrontations with white power and white law. For in this place such power is palpable, existing, not as an abstract concept that can be set aside, but as an unavoidable reality, its agents infiltrating all spaces:

The Quarters Boss stepped in the door with a .45 in his hand and another on his hip. Expect he had been eavesdropping as usual. (149)

As a way of redressing the balance and empowering themselves the folk tell stories which are filled with characters whose cunning, strength, ingenuity and courage outstrip that of their masters. Communicating an abiding lack of respect not only for white men and women but also white lives, Polk County's sardonic tales ridicule the world they spy on, revealing that it is not only the bosses who eavesdrop but also slaves who sneer at such transparent characters as the desperate 'Miss Pheenie':

Yuh know Ole Master had uh ole maid sister that never had married. You know how stringy white folks necks gits when dey gits ole. Well hers had done got that-a-way and more special cause she never been married.

Her name wuz Miss Pheenie and Ole Marster had uh daughter so there wuz young mens round de parlor and de porch. All in de sittin' chairs and in de hammock under de trees. So Miss Pheenie useter stand around and peer at

‘em and grin lak uh possum - wishin’ she could git courted and married.

(166)

Though the tales are lively, however, they cannot really compete with the ‘drama’(140) that is daily life in the work camps, and large sections of the narrative are given over to descriptions of the conversations, competitions and confrontations which take place between larger-than-life women such as Babe Hill, East Coast Mary and Big Sweet. Although Hurston’s permanent ‘gang’ is all men, the people who really dominate this section of the narrative and distinguish themselves as distinct individuals are women. The men are impressive enough, forming, for example, an extraordinary tableau in the swamp - ‘they do a beautiful double twirl above their heads with the ascending axe before it begins that accurate and bird-like descent (...). It is a magnificent sight to watch the marvellous co-ordination between the handsome black torsos and the twirling axes (68)’ - they are, as this description suggests, largely indistinguishable; more interesting and imposing as a whole than as individuals.

The women on the other hand are extraordinary, dominating the space and bestowing upon it its unique character. They are the ‘lights around whom the glory of Polk County surge[s]’(60). ‘Sullen’ Babe Hill, who killed her husband, ‘fled to Tampa (..) bobbed her hair and eluded capture for several months’(63), sets the standard. Dangerous, exciting, independent, she dominates the first few pages on this section, her exploits establishing the rules by which this community plays:

Negro women *are* punished in these parts for killing men, but only if they exceed the quota. I don't remember what the quota is. Perhaps I did hear but I forgot. One woman had killed five when I left that turpentine still where she lived. The sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely.

(63)

Babe Hill, Big Sweet East Coast Mary and Tookie Allen are then bold, independent, thoroughly modern women (note the bobbed hair), with a strong physical and sexual presence that fills the space and dominates the narrative. Femme fatales, they are adventurous figures who literally and figuratively get away with murder, providing some of the most tense and exciting scenes of the whole narrative:

Ella Wall flung a loud laugh back over her shoulder as she flourished in. Everybody looked at her, then they looked at Big Sweet. Big Sweet looked at Ella, but she seemed not to mind. The air was as tight as a fiddle string.

Ella wrung her hips into the Florida-Flip game (...) Lucy came in the door with a bright gloat in her eyes and went straight to Ella. So far as speaking was concerned she didn't see Big Sweet, but she did flirt past the skin game once, overcome with merriment (...) Big Sweet exploded. (145)

Ultimately in fact, these women prove too big for Hurston. Though she presents herself elsewhere as wily, courageous and capable of looking after herself, in Polk County these knife-wielding women defeat her. Compared to them she is little more than a 'child' playing at dressing-up; just 'Little-Bit' to the ferocious Big Sweet. As a

result, once she becomes embroiled in their violent games Hurston must leave for she has no defence against their razors and fists:

Curses, oaths, cries and the whole place was in motion. Blood was on the floor. I fell out of the door over a man lying on the steps, who either fell himself trying to run or got knocked down. I don't know. I was in the car in a second and in high just too quick. (174-5)

Once again Hurston circumvents the problem her departure presents by having the folk sanction it. Just as in Eatonville her friends encouraged her to move on and leave for the places Charlie and Bubber can only dream of, so in Polk County Big Sweet and Jim Presley virtually bundle her into her car, insisting that she save herself and go on her way:

I didn't move but I was running in my skin. I could hear [Lucy's] blade already crying in my flesh. I was sick and weak (...) Jim Presley punched me violently and said, "Run you chile! Run and ride!"(174)

The next section of Hurston's book is marked out as quite different from that which had preceded it. Given its own subheading - 'Hoodoo' - and separated off as a distinct 'Part Two' it is formally introduced as a discrete narrative devoted to a distinct subject. The first few paragraphs of this new section challenge this division however as Hurston's description of her arrival in New Orleans recalls her two previous entrances, evoking already familiar rhythms and suggesting that, instead of

encountering a radically different subject, the reader is about to experience more of the same. Just as she had slowed on her approach into Eatonville - 'slipping into neutral' after 'speeding down the straight stretch' - and 'sauntered' into Polk County after her 'hasty good-bye' (61), so she tiptoes into New Orleans, calming herself after her last speedy exit and preparing once again to enter a new space:

Winter passed and caterpillars began to cross the road again. I had spent a year in gathering and culling over folk-tales. I loved it, but I had to bear in mind [... that] I had done nothing about hoodoo.

So I slept a night, and the next morning I headed my toe-nails toward Louisiana and New Orleans in particular. (176)

Consolidating this bridge between this section and those which preceded it Hurston begins with a folktale, gently easing the reader into this world of 'magic spells and mighty words' (176) by telling the sort of story which might have been recounted on an Eatonville porch. Beginning with her own version of the 'are you sitting comfortably' motif Hurston launches into a tale which conjures up such mythical beings as Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and transports the reader into a time and space 'before everything':

Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.

The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made. And now, god is leaning back taking a seventh day rest (...).

That's what the old ones said in ancient times and we walk it again. (176-8)

However this initial gentleness is deceptive as is any hint of repetition, for this tale marks the beginning of a very different section which turns its attention away from the public performances of tale-telling rituals to the private revelations of hoodoo practices, moving away from an illuminated and celebrated world which 'pass[es]' easily over peoples' 'mouths'(61), towards a darker, more mysterious one which even the sceptical speak of reluctantly - 'She stopped short and nodded her head apprehensively towards the window'(179). It marks an entrance into a world in which the physical hazards of Polk County with its knife-wielding women are eclipsed; overshadowed by the unearthly powers of men and women who conjure up almost Promethean horrors:

"Ah've seen a woman full of scorpions."

"Oh it kin be done, honey, no effs and buts 'bout de thing. There's things that kin be done. Ah seen uh 'oman wid uh gopher in her belly. You could see'm movin' 'round in her. And once every day he'd turn hisself clear over and then you could hear her hollerin' for more'n a mile. Dat hard shell would be cuttin' her insides. Way after 'while she took down ill sick from it and died. Ah knowed de man dat done dat trick. Dat wuz done in uh dish of hoppin-john". (179)

This is a far more complicated space than any Hurston had previously encountered. Eatonville and even the violent Work Camp were relatively transparent spaces and

Hurston was able to insinuate herself relatively easily into both. With little in either space that she needed to learn, Hurston had simply to put aside her New York dresses and her New York ways in order to be accepted. New Orleans however, is a much more difficult space to negotiate and Hurston finds herself in need of directions. Without help she cannot negotiate either the physical or metaphysical space and so she asks, where to go, who to see, what to do. Turning to guide books, maps, and teachers she strips herself of all pretence of prior knowledge and, instead of projecting an air of confidence and worldliness she re-invents herself as an enquiring, innocent, thoroughly persistent child, who not only pesters all around her with questions - 'I asked (...) and asked (...) I asked everywhere' (182) - but also stubbornly refuses to be appeased:

I asked Turner to take me as a pupil (...) He asked me to excuse him as he was waiting upon someone in the inner room. I let him go but I sat right there and waited. When he returned, he tried to shoo me away by being rude. I stayed on (...) He all but threw me out, but I stayed and urged him. (182)

The world explored in this section is not only complex however, it is also serious; too preoccupied with the momentous job of settling disputes, righting wrongs and fixing enemies to bother with the 'business of amusing itself' (160) that so animates the previous spaces. Encountering on a daily basis 'desolation, pestilence and death' (188) and dealing constantly with wretched people in desperate circumstances the men and women who occupy the hidden 'inner rooms' (182) of New Orleans have little need for the sort of recreational performances which distinguished Eatonville

and Polk County. With enough drama to satisfy their innate 'love [of] a show'⁷⁹ they require few 'crayon enlargements':

This particular day, a little before noon, came Rachel Roe. She was dry with anger, hate, outraged confidence and desire for revenge (...). If [her former lover] were dead she could smile again, yes. (222-3)

Registering this fundamental difference through her prose Hurston forgoes the casual 'bodaciousness' of the early chapters in favour of a more serious, sombre narrative style. Delving into the intense hidden world of the Vieux Carre with its two-headed doctors, swampers and conjure queens Hurston transforms her narrator from a lively, outspoken woman, full of 'quick comeback[s]'(63) into a contemplative, earnest novice willing to humble herself, bide her time and persevere in her quest for knowledge:

Now I was in New Orleans and I asked. They told me Algiers, the part of New Orleans that is across the river to the west. I went there and lived for four months and asked (...) I did a lot of stumbling and asking. (182)

Hurston's transformation into a serious-minded even pious investigator seems to have been part of her attempt to dignify hoodoo as a serious religion and rescue it from the vulgar, trivial representations which circulated widely at this time. For regularly appearing in Broadway shows and sensationalist novels as a primitive

⁷⁹ Hurston, from 'My People, My People!', in *Hurston*, p.779.

superstition, 'Voodoo' was generally evoked only in order to titillate white audiences. Often bloodthirsty, always sexual, these representations tended to ridicule African American beliefs while consolidating ideas of blacks as essentially savage, presenting them as in the thrall of a dark and degenerate obsession that had migrated to America from uncivilised African shores. Hurston's new, cool, authoritative tone therefore registered her contempt for the 'laughable' 'ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction' and for the salacious New Yorkers who lapped them up: 'Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing. There are no moon-worshippers among the Negroes in America'. (178)

The undisguised contempt expressed in the first few pages of this new section marks an abrupt end to the albeit ambiguous relationship Hurston had heretofore established with the uninitiated reader, dispelling once and for all any sense of continuity. For while in earlier chapters Hurston had seemed to allow 'the student of cultural history' to ride along with her, in this section Hurston bluntly dismisses him, ridiculing his misconceptions and admonishing him for his self-regard and arrogance. Thus while Hurston had teased 'the white man' for his inability to resist African American 'laughter and pleasantries' (10) in Part One, the failure of whites to look beyond the caricatures of popular culture in Part Two is derided by a narrator whose patience seems suddenly to have run out and, for the first time the ignorance and intolerance of whites is directly alluded to:

Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of

secret adherents. (176)

This is not the only way in which the narrator communicates her disgust with white representations of African American spirituality however, for Hurston also draws on scientific conventions in order to disorientate her white reader and make her point. Under cover of a dispassionate ethnographic persona she treats the Christian religion to the same sort of disrespect that hoodoo has suffered, matter-of-factly presenting it as a rather derivative superstition which had developed out of considerably less 'civilised' foundations. Restating conclusions she had drawn while researching an article for the *Journal of American Folklore*, that had judged Christian traditions to be metaphorical representations of more 'primitive' rituals - 'baptism is an extension of water worship as a part of pantheism just as the sacrament is an extension of cannibalism'⁸⁰ - Hurston reminds the reader of the apparently uncivilised origins of his own, more respected religion and demands that he draws comparisons. When read carefully even the apparently innocuous passage which summarised the beginnings of hoodoo and which I cited above, challenges white American norms by subjecting them to scrutiny. For while in isolation the folktale seemed benign - a comfortingly familiar introduction to a dramatically different subject - when considered as the climax of Hurston's contextualisation of hoodoo it reads as a relativist deconstruction of the sanctity of the Christian church, the shared founding myth of hoodoo and the bible - 'God (...) leaning back taking a seventh day rest' (176) - demanding that Christians recognise the pagan roots of their own religion. Presenting hoodoo almost as a palimpsest, underwriting the Christianity which has

⁸⁰ From a letter to Boas, Apr. 21, 1929, in Hemenway, p.125.

attempted to smother it Hurston forces a re-examination of the origins of the more respectable religion and complicates ideas of the primitive,⁸¹ suggesting that, while hoodoo resonates with the 'powers of Africa' (176), both religions fundamentally beat to the same drum.⁸²

[Hoodoo] adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself. Such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles. And the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism. (176)

Yet this frustration with 'laughable' popular misconceptions is not the only reason for Hurston's more serious tone; as ever, 'white actions' are not the sole stimulus for black lives or writing.⁸³ Her changing narrative style also reflects her own investment in this 'theology'. For although Hurston had to prove herself in some way in order to be accepted by the previous communities she investigated, in New Orleans she has to work considerably harder for admittance to the 'private' (183) world of hoodoo is not casually bestowed: rather '*it must be earned*' (188, emphasis Hurston's). While in the work camp all Hurston had to do to prove her worth was to climb up onto a table and very publicly 'shake [her] jenk', therefore, in this space she has to show herself willing to submit, quietly and unquestioningly to a series of physically and

⁸¹ This clearly exercised Hurston. In 1927 for example, she wrote to Boas full of excitement in the hope of validating the ties she felt herself to have uncovered : 'Is it safe for me to say that baptism is an extension of water worship as a part of pantheism just as the sacrament is an extension of cannibalism? (...) Might not the frequently mentioned fire of the Holy Ghost not be an unconscious fire worship. May it not be a deification'(Hemenway, p.125).

⁸² Hurston to Boas, Apr.21, 1929 in Hemenway, p.125.

⁸³ Hurston cited in 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Negro Way of Saying', by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Afterword to *Mules and Men* (New York: Lippincott, 1935; rept. Harper & Row, 1990), pp.287-297, p.291.

emotionally demanding solitary trials:

I was made ready and at three o'clock in the afternoon, naked as I came into the world, I was stretched, face downwards, my navel to the snake skin cover, and began my three day search for the spirit that he might accept me or reject me according to his will. Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men. (189)

Humbling herself before the 'cold' and unfriendly Turner, begging him to 'enlighten [her] ignorance' (183) and submitting to his will Hurston paid quite a price for her passport into this secretive world. Putting herself in the hands of this stranger and surrendering herself to gruelling initiation tests she invested heavily in the rituals that others so often derided and was clearly proud of the status she finally achieved. Robert Hemenway suggested in his biography that there was no 'phony (sic) pathos in *Mules and Men*';⁸⁴ there was no false modesty either. Hurston had not only been welcomed into this exclusive community, she had also become central to it and she clearly had no intention of allowing the reader to underestimate what this meant:

One day Turner told me that he had taught me all that he could and he was quite satisfied with me. He wanted me to stay and work with him as a partner. He said that soon I would be in possession of the entire business, for the spirit had spoken to him and told him that I was the last doctor that he would make;

⁸⁴ Hemenway, p.123.

that one year and seventy-nine- days from then he would die. He wanted me to stay with him to the end. It has been a great sorrow to me that I could not say yes. (195)

Hurston's obvious belief in and respect for hoodoo creates a problem however, for in order to authenticate her membership within this closed, secretive community she must follow its customs and, '[m]ouths don't empty themselves' in hoodoo 'unless ears are sympathetic and knowing'(178). Thus, while the outspokenness and quick-wittedness of her narrative persona proved on the Eatonville porches and in the Polk County Jook joints that she was allied to the folk she was describing, in New Orleans such talkativeness is the sign of the outsider. In order to demonstrate her allegiance to the world of hoodoo she must demonstrate reticence, taciturnity and concealment for 'profound silence' is that which distinguishes those who really belong from those who, unable to keep quiet spuriously 'claim some knowledge or link' (182) with the conjure aristocracy. While previously she had managed to exemplify the folk's ways without jeopardising them - creating for them, in fact, the larger audience they craved - in the beleaguered world of hoodoo she must choose between her duty to the believers and her obligation to the faithless readers.

'Profound silence', however, would be a rather problematic skill for a folklorist to acquire and of course Hurston does not suddenly become speechless. Rather she records in detail the paraphernalia, ceremonies and spells of hoodoo and recounts the stories she hears in confidence, repeating Turner's tale for example, which tells of the infamous Marie Leveau: 'she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great

communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked upon the waters to the shore. As a little boy I saw her myself (184). Yet, in keeping with her new role as a hoodoo doctor, she maintains a certain aloofness by gradually retreating from the narrative becoming a distant figure who relays increasingly scant information. Though she names other two-headed doctors, for example, she protects their integrity by presenting them through vague and strangely flat descriptions which fail to substantiate them, keeping their characters, if not their names, outside of the public domain. In this way characters such as Kitty Brown who might otherwise have rivalled Big Sweet as compelling personalities are scarcely defined, their relationship to Hurston summed up in a few inadequate sentences: '[Kitty Brown] is squat, black and benign. Often when we had leisure, she told funny stories' (222).

Similarly, though she records the minutiae of the ceremonies, listing what was worn, what was eaten, what was said, Hurston generally omits the spiritual transformations that give hoodoo its power. She covers her professional tracks and bolsters her anthropological reputation by claiming that 'the details' of these transformations 'do not matter' (189). Yet she also makes it clear that they are what metamorphose these rituals into profound religious experiences. Without them the ceremonies, costumes and chants are meaningless, of no more value than 'a college diploma without the four years' work' (188):

And what is this crown of power? Nothing definite in material. Turner crowned me with a consecrated snake skin. I have been crowned in other

places with flowers, with ornamental paper, with cloth, with sycamore bark, with egg shells. *It is the meaning, not the material that counts* (188 emphasis added).

The 'material' Hurston bombards us with, therefore, does not ultimately 'count'. She has kept to her side of the bargain and remained as taciturn as her teacher, protecting her own integrity and guarding the uniqueness of her experiences:

This preparation period is akin to that of all mystics. Clean living, even to clean thoughts. A sort of going into the wilderness in the spirit. The details do not matter. (189)

After several chapters of increasingly cursory and detached descriptions Hurston brings her narrative to a close with a throw-away ending which seems to signal her final abandonment of the reader and decision fully to 'cross over'⁸⁵ to the intensely private world of 'the southern Negro' (3). For having reached the end of her investigation she makes no attempt to bring her narrative to a coherent close, signing off instead with a tale which appears out of nowhere, alienating, rather than finally orientating the reader. Though she has only recounted one folk tale since leaving Polk County she suddenly reverts to the irreverent tone which characterised her earlier chapters and, with an incongruent story which is entirely disconnected from that which has preceded it, abandons the text and the reader:

⁸⁵ Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, p.78.

Once Sis Cat got hongry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat 'im. Rat tried and tried to git loose but Sis Cat was too fast and strong. So jus' as de cat started to eat 'im he says, 'Hol' on dere, Sis Cat! Ain't you got no manners atall? You going set up to de table and eat 'thout washing yo' face and hands?'

(...) 'Oh, Ah got plenty manners,' de cat told 'im. 'But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards.' So she et right on 'im and washed her face and hands. And cat's been washin' after eatin' ever since.

I'm sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin' my manners. (246)

Breaking the rhythm of the rest of her text Hurston not only leaves the reader in a kind of limbo with the journey into 'the homely life of the southern Negro' left incomplete but also, as Barbara Johnson and Houston Baker Jr. have argued, 'turns the trick' upon the gullible reader by calling into question the narrator's motives and sincerity, and finally satirising any reader who has swallowed whole the preceding chapters. In *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women Writers*, Baker reads the ending as an ironic dismissal of the prying white reader - a sign to all that they have ultimately been the dupe of Hurston's own, highly sophisticated signifying. In fact he suggests that she uses the ending to leave curious readers with little besides a grinning face, reminding them in the process that she is not Boas's 'rat' at the end of the piece, having confessed all to the cultural enemy, but rather 'Sis Cat', 'washin' her face and 'usin' her manners (246):

The last line of *Mules and Men* (...) signifies the full performative or mythomantic possession by spirit of a person who knows she has undone the traditional manners (and means) of accomplishing a classic. She knows at the close of her work that she has refused to craft a compendium of “Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices” that would satisfy dry, scholarly criteria of anthropology. Hence, she tacitly slips the yoke that even the eminent Franz Boas seems to put on her (...) “turn[ing] the trick” on a limited anthropology.⁸⁶

This final about-face certainly has a powerful impact on the way the rest of the text can be read, for in dismissing the reader as the dupe of a sophisticated ethnic joke Hurston makes a mockery of any attempt the ‘student of cultural history’ might make to learn from her narrative. In fact, refusing to draw conclusions herself, and discouraging the reader from responding to her narrative she problematises the very idea that there is anything to be learned; that so-called ‘primitive’ cultures can function as palliatives for industrialised societies which feel that they have lost touch with their essential selves.

Yet, in a sense, this abrupt and unexpected tale represents the text’s failure rather than its apotheosis, for at one level it is simply another ‘get-out’ device which Hurston uses to avoid examining the ambiguities of her position in relation to the folk she is representing. Like the rather contrived exits from Eatonville and Polk County which fairly transparently side-step the problems inherent in Hurston’s status

⁸⁶ Houston Baker Jr., *Workings of the Spirit*, p.96.

as a simultaneous insider/outsider, this tale allows Hurston to opt out of a considered analysis of her spatial and cultural negotiations, and what they have produced. Thus while on one level it is an accomplished demonstration of tricksterism, on another it is also an intellectual retreat and Barbara Johnson is right to ask, 'Who, in the final analysis, has swallowed what. The reader? Mrs. Mason? Franz Boas? Hurston herself?'⁸⁷

Finally however, whatever the answer to this question, Hurston creates a very private book which, despite the suggestions of transparency and accessibility that have appeared throughout the narrative, evokes an inaccessible space. Metaphorically slamming the door in the reader's face in the last few lines, Hurston undoubtedly withdraws the invitation to join her on her adventures, re-buttons the 'chemise' she had promised to discard and turns her back on her audience. Dropping all sign of the 'smiling acquiescence' that her narrator had seemed to embody she rejects the anthropological 'probe' (10) she had been given by the Northern doctors – men and women who are now the only real 'strangers' (10) in the book. Finally then she rejoins her 'home folks' (9) which now include, not simply the people of Eatonville, but also a chain of African Americans who form with their own 'capital' (176), and an alternative black America.

⁸⁷ Barbara Johnson, 'Thresholds of Difference', pp.327-8.

'Four Walls Squeezing Breath Out': The Limitations Of Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Like all of Hurston's books, when *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published it was criticised by her Harlem contemporaries for its tendency towards 'oversimplification' - its failure to 'banish' the 'entertaining pseudo-primitives' that white readers generally lapped up.¹ Most famously, it was lambasted by Richard Wright in *New Masses*; decried for its lack of 'theme', 'message' and 'thought', castigated for its creation of characters who Wright considered to 'swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears'.²

Alive to the radical implications of the sexual politics articulated within the novel, however, subsequent feminist and womanist critics refuted Wright's interpretation and celebrated *Their Eyes* as a groundbreaking proto-feminist articulation of a traditionally occluded black female subjectivity.³ Arguing that Wright failed to

¹ Alain Locke, *Opportunity*, June 1, 1938, rept. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, p.18.

² Wright, *New Masses*, October 5, 1937, rept. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, pp.16-17, p.17. Hurston had her revenge, however. Reviewing Wright's first book, *Uncle Tom's Children* for *The Saturday Review*, she defended herself by accusing him of relying upon a very different, but equally inadequate stereotype - that of the south as a 'Dismal Swamp of race hatred'. In fact she goes even further than Wright, denying him even the dignity of developing his own 'hopeless' conclusions, suggesting instead that his ideas are the result of 'stories' the communists had been 'passing around' ('Stories of Conflict', *The Saturday Review*, April 2, 1938, rept. in *Hurston*, pp.912-3, p.912.

³ See, for example, Alice Walker, 'Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life', 'Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View' and 'Looking for Zora', *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, pp.3-15; 83-92; 93-117; Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985); Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Critical Biography*; Karla Holloway, *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

comprehend the significance of the novel because, for him, sexual politics simply did not count, they reinterpreted this book as a 'classic (...) in the Afro-American canon'; a novel which produced 'the first authentic black female voice in American literature'.⁴ Almost as soon as *Their Eyes* was established as a 'quasi-canonical' text however,⁵ critics began to revise their previous enthusiasm and question the conclusions they had so eagerly reached. In "I love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands": Emergent Female Hero', for example, Mary Helen Washington questioned the extent to which *Their Eyes* could be read as an affirmation of black female subjectivity. Recalling, through her title, Alice Walker's unequivocal celebration of this book – '[It is] as necessary to me and to other women as air and water'⁶ – Washington suggested that such readings were inadequate, failing to take into consideration the extent to which Hurston actually refused to bestow upon her heroine the 'articulacy' she was supposed to possess. Taking issue with the idea that the novel 'celebrate[d] a woman coming to self-discovery and that this discovery [led] her ultimately to a meaningful participation in black folk traditions', Washington suggested that self-discovery did not 'lead Janie to power' but rather to 'self-division and to further acquiescence in her status as object'.⁷

⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, 'Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words', in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, pp.98-109, p.98.

⁵ Anne DuClille, 'The Occult of True Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies', in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helen Meglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp.21-56, p.24.

⁶ Alice Walker, 'Saving The Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life', in *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp.3-14, p.7.

⁷ Mary Helen Washington, "I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands": Zora Neale Hurston's Emergent Female Hero', in *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960* (New York, 1987, rept. London: Virago Press, 1989), pp.237-254. See also Barbara Johnson, 'Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*', in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Methuen & Co., 1984), pp.205-220.

Since then, critics have continued to contest the political merits of *Their Eyes*.⁸ While Henry Louis Gates Jr. has constructed a sophisticated defence of the narrative strategies employed within the text, arguing that through a subtle blend of third and first person narratives Hurston merges 'Janie's idiom' with the dominant narrative voice until Janie 'almost silences the initial level of diction of the narrator's voice',⁹ Michelle Wallace has taken issue with the relevance of this voice, arguing in 'Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Female Creativity', that the supposed 'authenticity' of Hurston's black female voice is oppressive rather than liberating, effectively 'silenc[ing]' black women whose experiences were urban rather than rural, northern rather than southern.¹⁰ What I am interested in in this chapter however, is not voice but rather space,¹¹ for just as *Their Eyes* is a novel about the quest for self, for fulfilment, for self-expression,¹² it is also one about the

⁸ See for example, Houston Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Michelle Wallace, 'Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston? Critics Carve Up the Legend', in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), pp.172-186; Hazel Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston', 71-94.

⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, p.211 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also, Cheryl Wall, 'Zora Neale Hurston's Travelling Blues', in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, pp.139-199.

¹⁰ Michelle Wallace, 'Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Female Creativity', in *Reading Black/Reading Feminist*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr., pp.52-67, p.59.

¹¹ Other interpretations which focus upon the acquisition of voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* include, Barbara Johnson, 'Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*', and 'Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston', rept. in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp.155-171; 174-182; Sally L. Kitch, 'Gender and Language: Dialect, Silence, and the disruption of Discourse', *Women's Studies* (1987), 66-78; Karla Holloway, *The Character of the Word* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Missy Dehn Kubitschek, "Tuh de Horizon and Back": The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black American Literature Forum* (Spring 1989), 683-97.

¹² See, for example, Lonnell E. Johnson, 'The Defiant Black Heroine: Ollie Miss and Janie Mae - Two Portraits from the 30's', *The Zora Neale Hurston Forum* (Fall 1986), 26-31; Gay Wilentz, 'Defeating the False God: Janie's Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*', in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, ed. by Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp.25-33; Jule Roemer, 'Celebrating the Black Female Self: Zora Neale Hurston's American Classic (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*)', *English Journal* (Nov. 1989), 70-73; Myung Ja Kim, 'Zora Neale Hurston's Search for Self: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*', *Black American Literature Forum* (Winter 1990), 683-97.

search for home, for an environment that 'seem[s] (...) right'; a place 'where [Janie is] meant to be'.¹³

Ernesto Laclau has stated that places are neither neutral spaces that simply house the individual, nor mere 'medium[s] through which social life is produced and reproduced'.¹⁴ Rather they are constructs which actively 'constitute the sentient individual',¹⁵ organising relationships, conditioning responses and dictating movement. In Hurston's early work the relationship between individuals and the spaces they occupied was perfectly balanced. In *Mules and Men* in particular Hurston had demonstrated that she had constituted Eatonville as surely as Eatonville had constituted her. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* however, this equilibrium is disrupted and instead of nurturing and empowering its heroine the spaces the novel conjures up oppress and constrain her, 'squeezing her breath out'; 'trampl[ing] and mash[ing her] down'.¹⁶ Consequently Janie Crawford's desire for expression is also a desire for an expressive space; one which she would be able to fill with her own 'thoughts' and possess as fully as it possesses her:

Ah'm back home agin and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' (...).

¹³ Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1934; rept. London: Virago, 1987), p.176.

¹⁴ Cited in 'Spatial Structure' by D. Gregory, in R.J. Johnston *et al*, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.450-487, p.451.

¹⁵ 'Introduction: The Politics of Place', by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.1-21, p.9.

¹⁶ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott, 1937; rept. London: Virago, 1987), pp.130-133. All further references will be included parenthetically within the text.

It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom. (284)

What I am centrally concerned with in this chapter therefore, is the way in which Hurston's search for the horizon is simultaneously, a search for home.

In *Mules and Men*, the location and meaning of home was taken for granted. Situated in a particular place - just 'below Palatka',¹⁷ to the east of Maitland - and filled with a particular people, home was where and 'who' you came from. It was a 'first place', 'familiar ground', a 'native village' in which Hurston knew 'everybody was going to help'. It was a natural 'pure' space which represented a perfect synthesis between man and nature; a wholesome transparent place in which entirely congruent physical, mental and social spaces 'overlap[ped]',¹⁸ producing a unique, enduring and 'felicitous' place.¹⁹ Home was a space in which elements that are usually 'apprehended separately' intermingled,²⁰ the natural landscape, the architecture and the population all combining to create a metaphysical 'crib'. Hurston's description of the 'city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools and no jailhouse' was one in which nature and man were perfectly intertwined. It was a place in which the man-made structures complimented rather than competed with the natural forms, creating a society in which the only requisite 'court' was for croquet.²¹ It was an unproblematic place of origins; fundamentally a place that inculcated 'familiarity and ease', 'nurture

¹⁷ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.10.

¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.11.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* p.xvi.

²⁰ Lefebvre, p.12.

²¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.12.

and security', and which confirmed and consolidated one's identity:²² 'I knew that [to the 'home folks'] (...) I'd still be just Zora'. Moreover it was a place which kept alive the past; a physical site of memory which provided a reassuring sense of continuity and a reminder of Hurston's enduring genealogical as well as locational roots: 'I was just Lucy Hurston's daughter, Zora'.²³

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* however, home is not so easily comprehended or situated. Boundaries are ambiguous, points of origin are obscure, and communities are transient and unpredictable. In this book physical places are not so innocent; spatial and cultural 'pur[ity]' are not so easy to find. The Eatonville of *Mules and Men* that had seemed the centre of a 'quasi-magical' power,²⁴ fulfilling all of the biological and emotional needs of its population and creating a communal spirit that was palpable and portable - 'they had the carcass of a party lying around up until the minute Eatonville burst in on it. Then it woke up' - is replaced in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a town that has been imposed upon the landscape, manufactured by an individual whose motives are suspect.

In *Their Eyes*, therefore, Hurston turns the world of *Mules and Men* upside down, creating a landscape which rather than inculcating confidence, 'crushes' individualism. Denying her heroine the spatial and emotional roots she had conjured

²² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1977), p.159.

²³ *Mules and Men*, in Hurston, p.9.

²⁴ Lefebvre, p.29. Lefebvre of course, is interested in dismantling the ideology of transparent, natural space which Hurston draws upon in *Mules and Men*.

up for herself²⁵ - presenting Janie as a woman born not in a 'crib of Negrohood' but rather in a white woman's back yard,²⁶ the 'shameful' offspring of a man and a woman who have both 'run on off'²⁷ - she creates a woman with no 'familiar ground' either to 'leave, or to 'hurr[y] back to;²⁸ a woman without a useful past or - despite Nanny's efforts - a predictable future. Thus in this book, home becomes an aspiration rather than an assumption; something to journey towards rather than something, rooted in one's past, which can be taken for granted. In this chapter, therefore, I shall investigate the spaces Janie moves through in her almost metaphysical journey 'home'.

Of course Hurston's narrative actually begins, not in the degraded time and place of Janie's birth, but rather in Eatonville at the moment of her heroine's return.²⁹ Establishing her within a comfortable, relatively private space that functions as a

²⁵ Of course the extent to which Hurston really enjoyed these emotional and physical attachments is questionable. She did, after all, leave; a fact that she leaves unexamined in the rather nostalgic *Mules and Men*. I shall investigate the extent to which the cultural encumberedness she celebrates in *Mules and Men* is a product of emotional and physical distance rather than proximity in my final chapter.

²⁶ Of course Hurston was not born in Eatonville either. Although she asserted as much throughout her career, she was in fact born in Notasulga, Macon County, Alabama, in 1891.

²⁷ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: J.B.Lippincott Co., 1937; rept. London: Virago Press, 1986), p.36. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²⁸ *Mules and Men*, in Hurston, pp.9-10.

²⁹ This is not of course, Hurston's first fictional representation of Eatonville. Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* also included a version of her hometown. Although the spaces evoked in this novel are interesting, however, they are also uneven, Hurston still struggling at this point to detach herself from the material and find a way of investing the places she described with symbolic power. When Hurston describes the character based on her mother entering Eatonville, for example, she presents her as a previously lost child returning home: 'Lucy (...) seemed to herself to be coming home. This was where she was meant to be. The warmth, the foliage, the fruits all seemed right and (...) the smell of ripe guavas was new and alluring but somehow did not seem strange' (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, p.98). Yet, throughout the rest of the novel Hurston presents this as a place in which 'Lucy' is alienated, frustrated and finally killed. Similarly while the 'dark' side of Eatonville, which is dominated by Lucy's antithesis 'An' Dangle Dewoe' is powerfully evoked, it is insufficiently incorporated into the narrative to have any real symbolic power. While her hut, which 'squat[s] low and peer[s] at the road from behind a mass of Palma Christi and elderberry'(p.199) certainly forms an intriguing 'other' to Lucy's fruit-filled 'five acre plot', this opposition remains undeveloped, both the space and the mysterious woman disappearing from the text almost as soon as they appear.

refuge from the 'judgment[al]' outside world, Hurston initially presents Janie within a home of sorts:

[Pheoby] found [Janie] sitting on the steps of the back porch with the lamps all filled and the chimneys cleaned.

"Hello, Janie, how you comin?"

"Aw, pretty good, Ah'm tryin' to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outa mah feet." She laughed a little. (14)

Beginning at the end therefore, Hurston commences her narrative with a depiction of a woman physically, emotionally and psychologically 'at home'. Yet the journey Janie is forced to make in order to reach this comparatively safe place unsettles this felicity. For before she reaches her lamp-lit home Janie has virtually to 'run the gauntlet'³⁰ by passing through her hometown. Right from the beginning then, Hurston demonstrates that Janie is an isolated figure; not the community's 'heart-string' but rather a woman the townspeople reject and exclude.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown (...). They sat in judgement (...).

"What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? - Where's dat blue satin she left here in? (10)

³⁰ A term used by Hazel Carby in 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston', p.82.

Rather than diminishing the extent to which Janie can be said to be 'at home' however, the townspeople's envious hostility serves to secure it, their reaction to her confidence simply shifting the level at which it is experienced. For while the townspeople are, at the most simplistic level 'at home' their collective response to Janie's return demonstrates that, in every other respect they are profoundly alienated both from themselves and their culture. Describes as mere receptacles during the day - 'tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences' who are at the mercy of 'the bossman'(10) – their inability to welcome Janie reveals that they are people who fail to possess themselves even once the 'sun and the bossman' have gone (10). Compared to Janie who, with her unconventional clothes and 'great rope of black hair swinging to her waist' (10-11) is fundamentally at peace with herself, walking past the porch with a confidence and a composure that none of them can match, they appear profoundly lost; a folk which, having lost any meaningful connection with the world outside itself has turned in upon itself with an almost cannibalistic intensity:

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. (10)

As soon as she has established Janie as a proud, defiant and independent woman at home in the world she assuredly claims for herself, however, Hurston returns her heroine to a degraded time and place which, marked by absence and lack, seems to represent the antithesis of home: 'Ah ain't never seen mah papa (...) Mah mama

neither (...). Mah grandma raised me. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de back-yard and dat's were Ah wuz born'(20). Denying her heroine the luxury of a 'crib of Negroism', Hurston describes Janie's childhood home as a place of cultural isolation in which she learns to experience herself as an absence; the ersatz-plantation that is the 'premises' reducing her to a dark anonymous shadow among more vivid, individuated whites:

[A] man come long takin' pictures and without askin' anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us (...). [W]hen we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'. (21)

Although Hurston sets up such an interpretation, however, she also seems to resist it. In what would seem to be a defence of this racially mixed space she allows Janie to describe this back-yard as an unselfconscious space within which colour was an irrelevance: 'all of us played together and dat's how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin' but Nanny, 'cause dat's what everybody on de place called her' (20). Thus although she describes Janie's birthplace in terms which bear comparison with her mother's - the house in the back-yard echoing the cabin on the plantation - the equally compelling insistence that Nanny works 'wid' rather than *for* the 'quality white folks' makes such a connection problematic. Likewise, although the narrative reveals that Janie was made to realise that she was 'colored' in this white space - a

photograph impressing upon her that she was not 'jus like de rest' (21) – Janie insists that it was the 'knotty head[ed] gal named Mayrella'(22) who made this difference count. Thus while Janie is bullied, it is for her social connections with white people, rather than her biological connection to black people, the 'knotty-headed' children excluding her in a way that the Washburns' would never dream of:

[Mayrella] would pick at me all de time and out some others up tuh do de same. They'd push me 'way from de ring plays and make out they couldn't play wid nobody dat lived on premises'. (22)

Yet despite Janie's claims to the contrary, the scenes that take place in the Washburns' yard reveal a power imbalance which make it a damaging place for a black girl to be. For while she and the white children 'play together' in what seems to be a happy colour-blind gang - 'dem three boys and us two girls' (20) - this playfulness masks the Washburns' refusal to respect the discrete identities of Janie and her grandmother. The high-handed way in which they disregard the Crawford name, casually re-naming Janie as well as her 'Nanny', reveals that fundamentally, while Janie has failed to perceive her own blackness, this is all that the Washburns see, the nickname they choose for Janie neatly summing up their refusal to differentiate between 'dark' children: 'Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names' (21). As Michael Cooke has stated, 'to have a name is to have a means of locating, extending and preserving oneself in the human community'. It is to have an answer to the question 'who?' 'with reference to ancestry, current status, and particular bearing, with reference to a

full panoply of time'.³¹ The Washburns' refusal to respect either Janie or her Nanny's name is a sign therefore, of their refusal to include their two tenants within their own 'human community' and it is of little wonder that, denied even her own name, Janie has to ask of her white superiors, 'where is me? Ah don't see me' (21).

Although Nanny eventually moves Janie off the 'premises', this identity crisis is not the reason she gives. In fact Janie's mistaken identification with the white children - an identification which threatens to develop into self-loathing, "Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!"(21) - suits Nanny just fine. For Nanny considers blackness to be a state of degradation; a sign in women at least, of profound powerlessness. For her, to be black and a woman means to be 'de mule uh de world' (29); to be without rights, status or boundaries of any kind. It is to be infinitely accessible, without the power to resist even the most unwanted of advances. To be a black woman therefore, is for Nanny to be 'doom[ed]' to 'harm and danger' (27) and to be part of an inexorable chain of violence:

Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. (31)

The only way that Nanny can imagine putting an end to this sexual inheritance is by separating Janie from her past, and placing her above 'trashy nigger[s]'(27) on the

³¹ Michael G. Cooke, 'Naming, Being, and Black Experience' *Yale Review* 67.2 (1977), 167-86, p.171.

sort of 'high ground'(32) that she associates with whites. Consequently, for her, Janie's identification with the Washburn children is a positive development, creating an emotional as well as physical distance from her race, and therefore, from her degraded destiny. What disturbs this woman then, leading her to 'figger' that 'it would be mo' better [for Janie] if [they] had uh house' (22), is not the behaviour of the white children, but rather that of the blacks who 'teas[e]' Janie ''bout livin' in de white folks back-yard'. For these envious jibes remind Janie of her apparently disgraceful genealogy and drag her back into the history Nanny wants to leave behind. In fact they transform the meaning of Janie's physical and physiognomical proximity to the 'white folks' by making her 'looks' and her location function as a sign of degradation rather than elevation:

De chillun at school got to teasin' me 'bout livin' in de white folks back-yard.
Dere wuz a knotty head gal name Mayrella dat useter git mad evry time she
look at me (...). So she would pick at me all the time and put some others up
tuh do de same (...) they'd tell me not to be takin' over mah looks 'cause they
mama told 'em 'bout de hound dawgs huntin' mah papa all night long (...).
Dey made it sound real bad. (22)

Nanny finds her own piece of land and builds her own cabin then, not because she wants to put an end to Janie's mistaken identification with white people, but because she wants to preserve it; their removal to what the 'knotty-headed' children will understand as a black space putting an end to the jibes that are intended to remind Janie that above all else she is 'colored' (21).

The cabin that her grandmother builds in order to protect Janie therefore, is no more a spiritual home than the house in the back-yard. Created in order to prevent Janie from coming to the conclusion that she is 'just like de rest' (21), it is a constricting, unimaginative place within which Nanny and the 'twisted' world view she represents can dominate. While it has a garden which seems to offer some respite - the blossoming pear tree to some extent functioning as an alternative to Nanny's 'ancient' joyless ideology - it is essentially a house devoted to the rejection of the natural world; a space dominated by a very different kind of tree:

Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered. The cooling palma christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head with a white rag had wilted down and become part and parcel of the woman. (26)

Of course, as this passage suggests, Nanny fails. Her 'ancient power' is rendered ineffective over time. Despite the fact that she morbidly clings to an idea of Janie as a suckling child - 'rocking' her 'like an infant', for example, holding her 'tightly to her sunken breast' (29) - Janie's sexual development is inevitable and eventually, led by 'pollinated air' (25), she finds her way out of the front door, down the 'front steps' and towards the 'front gate' (25). After years, the narrative implies, hidden in the back of the dark and dull house, Janie propels herself into a new and exciting world:

She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (25)

Nanny's immediate response to her failure is simply to find a replacement for herself and a more secure place for Janie. Recognising that neither she nor the house she has built has the power to contain her granddaughter Nanny arranges a marriage, relocating Janie to a new, even more isolated and sexless place and a new, equally 'stifling' relationship.

In choosing Killicks as a suitable husband for Janie, Nanny is passing her on to a man whose philosophy closely resembles her own. Similarly informed through the experience of slavery, he shares Nanny's grim fatalism and fatigue, as well as her sense that all black men and women can do is pick up and 'tote' the load 'de white man throw down' (29). Physically they are also similar, both appearing to Janie as unnaturally ancient remnants of another age who should already have met with the 'square-toed one' (134). Just as Nanny is described through images of subterranean decay so Killicks appears deathly; a Zombie-like presence which is 'hangin' round' long after he should have expired: 'He look like some ole skull-head in de grave yard' (28).

In one sense however, Killicks exceeds Nanny, for while her 'power' was limited to the inside of the house - the natural world continuing to blossom regardless of her

efforts - his loathsome sterility is shown to extend beyond the walls of his house, infecting the whole of his 'often-mentioned sixty acres' (38) turning it into a 'lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been' (39).

The life that Janie endures in this place is inevitably as sexless as Nanny had hoped. Nothing thrives; certainly not the love Janie desires. For as lacking in sexuality as Nanny, his 'stump' signifying the premature demise of his sensuality as surely as Nanny's 'sunken' breasts, Killicks is no 'bee man' and his house is no home. Inevitably then, Janie begins to gravitate towards the front gate, moving, as she did on Nanny's 'lil piece uh land' (22) towards the road, 'looking for answers' (24) that the deadened spaces she has been forced to occupy cannot provide.

It is while she is here, 'in a place in the yard where she could see the road', that Janie encounters Joe Starks. A 'cityfied, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts' (47) he is 'dazzling enough for the world' and Janie is instantly attracted to him. Still influenced by Nanny's vision - still suffering, perhaps, from the disappointment she expressed at the fact that was 'colored' - she is drawn to what she perceives to be his confident, authoritative, 'white' manner. Thus though his skin is very definitely dark - a 'seal-brown color', in fact - Janie is able to overlook it, concentrating on the 'sham polish'³² which in her 'beglamed' (25) eyes seem to mitigate his darkness:

³² This is the word Hurston uses in *Mules and Men* to satirise the sort of 'cityfied' behaviour Janie seems to lap up (*Hurston*, p.10).

He whistled, mopped his face and walked like he knew where he was going. He was a seal-brown color *but* he acted like Mr. Washburn or somebody to Janie. (47)

While Janie is impressed, instantly responding to his 'white' characteristics by demonstrating her own – arranging herself so that her 'heavy' long hair 'fall[s] down' (47)³³ - Hurston ensures that the reader is less 'dazzled'. Satirising Starks' speech by mimicking its patterns, employing a form of free indirect discourse that reveals just how inflated his own ideas of himself are, she renders Starks and his ambitions completely transparent:

Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Georgy. Been workin' for white folks all his life. Saved up some money - round three hundred dollars, yes indeed, right here in his pocket (...). It had always been his wish and desire to be a big voice and he had to live nearly thirty years to find a chance. (48)

Consequently, when Eatonville is evoked as Starks' dream destination - 'when he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be' (48) - its potential is immediately tainted. For while it seems to offer an escape from the stifling world of Nanny and Killicks, representing a modern, self-

³³ Janie is not completely blind to his faults, of course. After several days of listening to how he intends to be a 'big ruler of things' (49) she begins to 'pull back'. Indeed, when she does decide to go

confident alternative to the outdated, servile world they inhabit, it lacks from the beginning the mythic quality it exuded in Hurston's earlier books. Introduced through Starks' 'big' mouth and intertwined with his charmless ambitions, it is instantly contaminated by the power-hungry dreams he maps upon it:

De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin'. He was glad he had his money all saved up. He meant to git dere whilst de town wuz yet a baby. He meant to buy in big. (48)

When Starks and Janie finally arrive in Eatonville therefore, it appears as the antithesis of that which was depicted in *Mules and Men*. Embryonic rather than fully formed, a dead-end rather than the centre of the world it is a collection of a dozen 'shame-faced houses' (56) situated in what seems to be an inhospitable landscape rather than a 'lush cultural' and environmental 'delta'.³⁴ In fact, to the newly arrived Joe and Janie it seems disappointingly familiar. For rather than setting this space apart from those which had preceded it, Hurston describes it in ways that recall the former spaces, ensuring that instead of a radically new space, Eatonville appears contiguous; of a piece with the limited imaginative and experiential landscapes Nanny and Killicks had established. The 'shame-faced' houses for example, which are 'scattered in the sand' among 'palmetto roots' recall Nanny's dreary perception that 'colored folks [are] branches without roots' (31), while Starks' comment that the

with him it is as a response to Killicks verbal cruelty rather than Starks' promises.

³⁴ 'Folklore and Music', written for the Florida Federal Writers' Project, *The Florida Negro*

town is little more than a 'raw place in the woods' echoes Janie's response to Killicks' sixty acres: 'It was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been' (39).

Almost immediately, however, Hurston disrupts this sense of barrenness and bareness by conjuring up - almost out of nowhere - a sudden sign of life; two men and a 'huge *live* oak tree' (57, emphasis added). Straight away these men, 'sitting on their shoulder-blades' (57), seem to represent a way of being in the world which is the antithesis of that espoused by Nanny, Killicks and now Starks: a way of being in fact, which seems a comic reprisal of Janie's original organic *weltanschauung* - the oak tree taking the place of Janie's blossoming pear:

Two men who were sitting on their shoulder-blades under a huge live oak tree almost sat upright at the tone of his voice. They stared at Joe's face, his clothes and his wife.

"Where y'all come from in sich uh big haste?" Lee Coker asked (...).

"You and yo daughter goin' tuh join wid us in fellowship?" the other reclining figure asked. "Mighty glad tuh have yuh". (57)

Leaning against the tree, behaving more like the languid inhabitants of a 'Diddy-Wah-Diddy'³⁵ than pioneers they are not the radicals Starks had expected. Hapless, rather easily impressed bumpkins - '[they] almost sat upright at the tone of [Starks']

(unpublished), 1938, printed in *Hurston*, p.875-894, p.975.

³⁵ 'This is the largest and best known of the Negro mythical places (...). It is a place of no-work and

voice' (57) - they are men in search of an easy life rather than something 'to crow over' (48). Yet their very lack of ambition is refreshing after several pages of Starks' 'big' talk and their meandering, lackadaisical conversations suggest an entrance if not into a new physical space, then certainly into a new discursive one - their lively, multi-layered above all humorous dialogue replacing and displacing the monologues which, until this point, had dominated the text. For like Shakespearean fools they engage in an innocent-seeming conversation that subtly satirises Starks' pretensions, knocking both him and his suddenly 'proud' wife down a peg or two:

"You and yo' daughter goin' tuh join wid us in fellowship?" the other reclining figure asked. "Mighty glad tuh have yuh. Hicks is the name. Guv'nor Amos Hicks from Buford, South Carolina. Free, single, disengaged." "I god, Ah ain't nowhere near old enough to have no grown daughter. This here is mah wife."

Hicks sunk back and lost interest at once.

"Where is de Mayor?" Starks persisted. "Ah wants tuh talk wid him."

"Youse uh mite too previous for dat," Croker told him. "Us ain't got none yit."

"Ain't got no Mayor! Well, who tells y'all what to do?"

"Nobody. Everybody's grown". (57)

This resistance, however, is short-lived and these men soon loose their anarchic edge,

no worry for man and beast. A very restful place where even the curbstones are good sitting-chairs' (Hurstons, 'Negro Mythical Places', in *The Florida Negro*, 1938, printed in *Hurstons*, 894-5, p.894).

quickly proving themselves to be as susceptible to Starks' 'big voice' as Janie had been. Almost 'sitt[ing] upright' at the sound of his voice their heads are quickly turned by his vision of what they might under his influence become, and they soon capitulate to his will. Thus what little self-possession they initially displayed - 'Everybody's grown' - deteriorates and the veracity of their bold statement of independence is challenged by what follows it; the assertion of maturity undermined by an example of childish inattentiveness:

"Nobody [tells us what to do]. Everybody's grown. And then agin, Ah reckon us just ain't thought about it. Ah know Ah ain't'."

"Ah did think about it one day," Hicks said dreamily, "but then Ah forgot it and ain't thought about it since then". (58)

As the narrative continues therefore the postures these men had assumed when stumbled across by Starks and Janie prove prophetic. Initially propped up by a 'huge oak tree' (57), they reveal themselves to be in dire need of something, or someone to lean on, and though they get up from their recumbent positions, relinquishing this organic crutch and 'sauntering over to where Starks was living' (59), they soon begin to lean on Starks instead:

"Brothers and sisters, since us can't never expect tuh better our choice, Ah move dat we make Brother Starks our Mayor until we kin see further."

"Second dat motion!!!" It was everybody talking at once, so it was no need of putting it to a vote. (69)

The amusing nonchalance of the town and its inhabitants which had seemed refreshing after the compulsion of Nanny, Killicks and Starks therefore, becomes tainted by the realisation that it was inspired not by stoicism or an alternative form of ethics, but rather by apathy and hapless passivity coupled with an alarming lack of confidence in the black community. It becomes apparent that men such as Hicks and Croker have settled for a 'shame-faced' shanty-town because they have accepted themselves as dependants, acquiescing to a notion of second-class status in a way that prevents them from imagining, let alone striving for, racial or spatial equality:

It troubled [Hicks] to get used to the world one way and then suddenly have it turn different. He wasn't ready to think of colored people in post offices yet. He laughed boisterously.

"Y'all let dat stray darky tell y'all any ole lie! Uh colored man sittin' up in uh post office!" He made an obscene sound. (63)

Lacking the imagination to envisage any alternative to a world in which life is circumscribed by what they imagine 'white folks' will allow - [they] ain't goin' tuh 'low him tuh run no post office' (63) - they need a 'burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged individualist'³⁶ like Starks even to conceive of using the gift of Eatonville to create a permanent sense of place and a uniquely African American home. However, just as the townspeople's sense of the town's possibilities is informed by the white world, so is Starks', and although he has the capacity to dream of a world in which

black people are more than 'mules', his vision is as limited as theirs - contained within what Homi Bhabha has described as the colonial dream of 'inversion'. While, unlike Hicks who cannot even conceive of 'colored people in post offices' (63), he can imagine a space in which black people care for and control themselves therefore, Starks is unable to think outside of the racist binary which had historically locked African Americans in place. Thus all of his imaginings of freedom are focused upon a materialist fantasy of replicating white power structures in order to place himself, rather than a white man, at the top. His dream is simply to 'set himself up in the settler's place'³⁷ and re-enact plantation life with himself as the 'massa' and his beautiful, pale wife as the untouchable mistress, symbolising and displaying his power through her person:

No sooner was he all set up as the Mayor-post master-landlord-storekeeper, than he bought a desk like Mr. Hill or Mr. Galloway over in Maitland with one of those swing-around chairs to it (...). He bought a little lady-size spitting pot for Janie to spit in. Had it right there in the parlour with little sprigs of flowers painted all around the sides. (75-6)

Thus Starks sets about transforming Eatonville from an undefined, virtually empty space into an ersatz plantation and a town which on every level will reflect to himself and to all its occupants, his power. Without regard for the natural landscape, or any pre-existing structures, Starks asserts his presence on the generally unresisting terrain

³⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Hurston*, p.567.

³⁷ Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', Forward to *Black Skin*,

and townspeople so that, before long, the town resembles 'servant's quarters surrounding [his] big house' (75). Structuring and formalising every aspect of this village's life, Starks creates an economic hierarchy by building a store, formalises communication by installing a Post Office and introduces the notion of surveillance by installing street lights:

De place needs buildin' up, Janie, Ah'll git hold uh somebody tuh help out in de store and you kin look after things whilst Ah drum up things otherwise (...). Ah got too much else on mah hands as Mayor. Dis town needs some light right now' (...). 'Tain't no use in scufflin' over all dese stumps and roots in de dark'. (70)

While Eatonville grows under Starks' domineering hand, developing from a cluster of houses to a 'big and rushing' town (66), Janie dwindles. For although she had at first relished the idea of being segregated from 'trashy people' - Nanny's influence ensuring that she stepped happily into the 'high ruling chair' that was Starks' hired rig, enjoying the prospect of being treated like 'rich white folks' (57) - Janie soon discovers that there is a difference between being 'classed off' and being empowered. Thus while she is treated like the ultimate 'Mistis' by the townspeople - 'She couldn't look no mo' better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England' (67) - she soon discovers that such status imprisons rather than liberates her. For though she sits on a 'ruling chair' (74), she controls nothing, everything in her life being subject to Starks' 'own terms' (113):

Janie loved the conversation [on the store porch] and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people. "You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god". (85)

Increasingly excluded by Starks, therefore, who only values her as a symbol of his success and a silent recipient of his increasingly self-important monologues - 'he (...) thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts' (70) - and held aloof by the town who think that because she 'sle[eps] with authority' she possesses it (74), Janie retreats from both the town and the text. Thus while Starks seems to expand into the space, the authority he is granted making him the centre of everything, his 'big heh, heh laugh' (85) echoing around the town, Janie recedes into silent acquiescence, 'press[ing] her teeth together and learn[ing] to hush'(111).

In both Nanny's yard and Killicks' sixty acres, Janie had always managed to retain a degree of independence. Encouraged by the natural world that had infiltrated these otherwise 'deathly' spaces to imagine alternative spaces that were not controlled and contained by these limited people, she had always found a way out of their worlds. Drawn by the bees in Nanny's backyard, Janie had made her way to the front gate; encouraged by the 'springtime' (46) that reached her in Killicks' barn she had wandered towards the road. In Eatonville, however, Janie is unable to find anything to support her fragile self for it is not only people that Starks dominates but also the landscape.

Having realised early on that in order to control people he would have to control space, Starks had, from the moment he arrived in Eatonville, set about systematically taming the environment; making nature 'bow (...) down to him' (80) so that eventually the people would. From the beginning he had used natural resources to symbolise his authority, usurping the sun with 'de first street lamp in uh colored town' (73), replacing the 'huge live oak' that once formed the centre of the town with his store and laying waste to trees simply in order to impress upon the town his 'positions and possessions' (79):

He sent men out to the swamp to cut the finest and he straightest cypress post they could find, and kept on sending them back to hunt another one until they found one that pleased him. (71)

Inevitably then, the 'big house' he builds, purportedly for Janie, is the most artificial structure within the book, designed precisely in order to deny any organic connection with the natural world. Gravity-defying, with two stories which dwarf the more level-headed buildings which surround it, painted 'in and out' a manufactured, unearthly white, it is a mass of complex, ornate and artificial limbs - 'banisters and such things' - which disguise the organic origins of its materials, separating it from everything around it. Literally a 'show-house' designed always to be on display - the impersonality of the white paint reflected in the contents which are carefully chosen in order to impress - it is little more than a stage upon which Starks can perform his self-allotted role as a 'big ruler' (49):

And different from everybody else in the town (...) he painted it - a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W.B.Jackson and the Vanderpool's wore. (75)

Internally too, the house is complex and artificial, disrupting natural functions and formalising the life that is lived within it. Divided into a multitude of rooms which seem radically dis-connected from each other it is a disorientating place which leaves those within it feeling inexplicably uncomfortable - 'It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them' (76). Alienating and disjointed this is a house in which natural order is disrupted. The 'spirit of the marriage' for example, leaves the bedroom, replaced by its antithesis - 'something (...) like a Virgin Mary image in a church' (111), and fecundity quits the kitchen too; replaced this time, not by a saint but by a 'kitchen-dwelling fiend' which transforms food into a 'scrochy, soggy, tasteless mess'(112).

This defiance of the natural world not only denies Janie the escape routes she had always relied upon, however, but also the symbols through which she comprehended her life and her self. For turned into raw material for Starks' egotistical American Dream, the trees that had functioned as organic metaphors for Janie's developing emotional life lose their symbolic power. Consequently, with no sign of the springtime she had used to support her sense of self, Janie retreats into an imaginary world of eternally blossoming trees. Trapped in Starks' 'gloaty, sparkly, white' house (75), disguised in 'silken ruffles' as an elevated 'bell-cow' (66), she divides herself in

two sending a 'shadow of herself' to the store and to Jody, 'while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes' (119).

On the whole Janie's strategy of self-division is negative, encouraging her to remain like a 'rut in the road', living 'between her hat and her heels (...), soaking up urine and perfume with the same indifference' (118-9). Yet it is not entirely detrimental for it has the effect of immunising her from the passing of time and widening the gap between Starks and herself so that she is easily able to outwit and outlive her husband. As a result while Starks deteriorates – seeming to fade before Janie's eyes: 'One day she noticed that Joe (...) wasn't so young as he used to be. There was already something dead about him (119) – Janie retains an almost magically youthfulness. Ironically then, the spiritual and emotional withdrawal that threatens to lock Janie into a miserable life with Starks actually protects her from the temporal ruination which devastates her husband, allowing her, when Starks dies, to pick up where she left off and resume her life with a still youthful body and the added bonus of money in the bank. Rendering her immune to the years that have passed then, the trick of self-division keeps her safe allowing her to rest like a Sleeping Beauty until a prince comes out of the (Vergible) Woods to save her:

Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she'd better look. She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the

kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. (135)

Once she has disposed of her husband however, Janie only gradually begins to stir from her sedated state. Alone in the house that had oppressed her for so long she seems to be in no hurry to make any drastic changes. Happy for a while to enjoy the freedom that widowhood seems to have bestowed upon her she remains luxuriously soporific.

Despite the fact that Starks is gone, however, Eatonville continues to function as an oppressive space. For unlike Janie the town misses its 'Little Emperor' (136) and although when he was alive the townspeople had often muttered dissent, disgruntled by the 'white' ways which often made them feel as though he had 'a switch in his hand' (78), they had been well and truly 'cowed' by him, in awe of what he possessed and what he represented. Thus, though he dies, his influence remains and the town continues to be dominated by his 'twisted' ideology (138). Thus, while alone in her inherited house Janie begins to examine the thoughts '[s]he had never expressed' (112), finally coming to terms, for example, with feelings for her grandmother which she had hidden 'under a cloak of pity' (138), the town fails to engage in any such self-examination and so hypocrisy and envy continue to dominate. The 'well-wishers' for example, who attempt to woo the rich widow are nothing of the kind. Instead they are prospectors, taking up the 'challenge' (139) that Janie's property represents. They are men eager to step into Starks' shoes, coming to Janie with speeches that are reminiscent of his own condescending (though more

effective) attempts at courtship:

“Uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing,” she was told over and again. “Dey needs aid and assistance. God never meant ‘em tuh try tuh stand by theirselves. You ain’t been used tuh knockin’ round and doin’ fuh yo’self, Mis’ Starks. You been well taken keer of, you needs uh man”. (139)

The freedom that Janie finds she enjoys in Eatonville after Starks’ death therefore, is of a very limited kind. She tries to establish herself anew by ridding herself of the garments that Starks had pressed upon her in order to signify his possession of her; just as she discarded the apron which had tied her to Killicks, so she burns the headscarves Starks made her wear. Yet while she feels herself to have been transformed the town fails to acknowledge any difference in her, the only ‘change people [see] in her’ (137) being the thick braid of hair which now swings down her back in defiance of Starks’ wishes. Otherwise, and despite the fact that she feels as though she can ‘do as she please[s]’ (137), all she actually manages to do is spend a little more time on the porch and a little less time in the store. Despite Starks’ death then, she continues to occupy the same space in the town and in the town’s collective mind. She is still the occupier of the ‘gloaty’ white house, the possessor of shiny spittoons, and the owner of the store. Securely associated with the possessions which imposed upon others Starks sense of being, she is still, therefore, very much married to the Mayor (In fact, the rash of suitors who come calling do so, not because she is considered free, but precisely because she is still associated with the power, influence and money of the ‘big ruler’ (49)). She attempts to wriggle out of the authoritative

space she finds she has inherited by passing on tasks which overtly pronounce her status and her continuing difference; she leaves the job of rent-collecting, for example, to her young helper. Yet, despite her squeamishness concerning her position as the community's primary capitalist, she fails to make any real, structural changes and allows all of the economic formations instigated by Starks to remain in place. Janie may be a more humble exactor of payment then – 'She almost apologised to the tenants the first time she collected the rents' (141) - but she is just as effective.

Ironically, the slight changes she does make to her daily routine serve to imbed her even more firmly within Starks' American Dream. Sitting on the porch, enjoying the flattering though transparent advances of Eatonville's most eligible bachelors, and revelling in the comparative freedom, material comfort and social status that Jody's legacy has bestowed upon her, Janie is finally shown to be 'reaping the benefits' of life by the side of a 'big ruler of things' (49). It takes his own death to accomplish it, therefore, but Starks does finally provide Janie with the life he had promised her; a life in which she has the time and space to 'sit on de front porch and rock and fan' herself like a 'pretty doll-baby' (49):

She kept the store in the same way except of evenings she sat on the porch and listened and sent Hezekiah in to wait on late custom. She saw no reason to rush at changing things around. She would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased. (137)

Remaining in Eatonville therefore, Janie remains locked within Starks' ideological

and physical space and so it takes an outsider in the form of Tea Cake, to awaken her from Starks' dream and remind her of her earlier, horizon-hungry self. Vergible Woods is, as his name suggests, a liminal figure. He is an example of what Houston Baker has described as a 'symbolic animal' whose 'whole orbit' is freedom;³⁸ a marginal man whose difference from the Eatonville folk exposes the limitations and the pretensions of the town, destabilising its, and as a result, Starks' centrality. With the names of other places tripping off his tongue - 'Orlandah' (162), Hungerford (168), Dixie (158), Jacksonville' (174) - Tea Cake reintroduces the perspective lost through Starks' spatial and psychological manipulations, returning Eatonville to what it really is, not a world, as Starks, with his 'Ah God' rhetoric had suggested, but simply one small town amongst many others. Not recognising the townspeople's inflated view of this place as something 'to crow over' (48), Tea Cake is a character who opens up the horizon once again, drawing attention to roads which scarcely seemed to exist before his arrival, and now lead off all in directions. Functioning as a sort of anthropomorphic gateway, his whole body exuding the possibilities of travel - 'crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took' (161) - he presents Janie with a way off of the porch and the perch upon which she had 'nearly languished tuh death' (172), back on to the road towards 'change and chance' (50).

His difference from the other inhabitants of Eatonville is instantly felt. He enters Starks' store like a celluloid gunslinger swaggering into a saloon, a handsome stranger with a 'sly grin' (144) and a flirtatious manner. Just familiar enough not to

³⁸ Houston Baker, Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.160.

be threatening - Janie feels that she has seen him before - he is sufficiently exotic in what has become a very mundane space to engender excitement and stimulate a pleasurable contained sense of danger. Walking into a dull scene which has Janie, still lacking at this point any creative outlet, 'making aimless pencil marks on a piece of wrapping paper' (144), Tea Cake instantly introduces the notion of free time, self-indulgent pleasure and liberating recklessness.

He asks for cigarettes. The first character to do so, this request and the exchange which follows it has enormous erotic energy. Notwithstanding Janie's teenage kiss and her seduction by Jody - this is the first example of phallic eroticism of the novel, and it leaves Janie, 'glowing':

"You got any smokin' tobacco?"

She opened the glass case. "What Kind?"

"Camels."

She handed over the cigarettes and took the money. He broke the pack and thrust one between his full, purple lips.

"You got a lil piece uh fire over dere, lady?"

They both laughed and she handed him two kitchen matches out of a box for that purpose. It was time for him to go but he didn't. (145)

This initial exchange registers more than sexual excitement, however. It also introduces to the reader the central characteristics that this interloper will bring to the post-Starks Eatonville, and Janie. The first of these is an ease concerning physical

pleasure which has since the arrival of Starks, been entirely absent – Janie’s elevation on to Jody’s hired ‘high, ruling chair’ (54) on the eve of their wedding, marking the point at which physical self-consciousness replaced more spontaneous pleasures. Suffering from no such division, and declining from participating in the ‘race after property and titles’ (171), Tea Cake has little in the way of material possessions and as a result, the narrative rather simplistically suggests, he experiences life in a more direct and sensual way. With his body as his only resource, providing all profit and all pleasure, he perceives himself as a whole rather than a collection of parts; a ‘glance from God’ (161) rather than a ‘mouth almighty’. As a result he seems physically to expand where the other characters - Janie included - contract, filling space with an exotic physical presence which lingers even after he has gone:

So much had been breathed out by the pores that Tea Cake still was there. She could feel him and almost see him bucking around the room in the upper air.
(163)

The second element Tea Cake introduces to Eatonville is a new casualness concerning money. Buying cigarettes, an item which is associated with pleasure and suggests a certain decadence, Tea Cake establishes a use of money which has so far been entirely absent from the novel. Until this point, money has been connected not with pleasure, but with work, accruement and power. It has functioned primarily, as Janie’s timorousness concerning the collection of rents revealed, as a tool for subjugating others. If it was spent on luxurious items, as in the case of Starks’ ostentatious spittoons, it was in order to increase status rather than pleasure: ‘And

then he spit in that gold-looking vase that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front-room table. Said it was a spittoon just like his used-to-be bossman used to have in his bank up there in Atlanta' (76).

For Tea Cake, however, money is still simply a token; a convenient system of exchange through which labour can be transformed into leisure. Accrued through gambling, it is as easily spent as it is won. Squandered on such inessential items as cigarettes, cinema tickets, and even 'high heel slippers and a ten-dollar hat' (166), its status is once more reduced to a means, rather than an end:

He never had his hand on so much money before in his life, so he made up his mind to see how it felt to be a millionaire. They went out to Callahan round the railroad shops and he decided to give a big chicken and macaroni supper that night, free to all. (183)

This use of money illustrates an alternative perspective of time and space to that which has dominated in Eatonville since Starks' arrival. For Starks time was, like everything else, a 'mathematical dilemma'(86); something to be measured, calculated and saved up. Entirely concerned with investment, Starks' early ambition to be of some importance had translated into an obsession with saving and withholding pleasure. Thus the 'benefits' he had promised Janie during their courtship, like the home he had vowed to build, were postponed as private contracts were relegated in favour of public ones:

“Thinkin’ ‘bout buildin’ right away?” [Tony asked].

“I god, yeah. But not de house Ah specks tuh live in. Dat kin wait (...). Ah figgers we all needs uh store in uh big hurry”. (64)

Dedicated to a perpetual present and paying little attention to the future, Tea Cake’s ideology on the other hand, inculcates a determination to enjoy life rather than to protect oneself against it; to spend time as well as money. Fundamentally opposed to the bourgeois ethic of postponed gratification, he represents an ideology which turns its back on the future, resolving instead to live in a form of eternal present largely free from responsibility.

With no concept of the future, Tea Cake is at ease not only with time, money and physicality, but also with himself, never striving, as all the Eatonville inhabitants seem to, to be other than he is. Lacking ambition he accepts himself, ‘mad habits’ (186) and all, and expects others to do the same. Content within himself he is also comfortable wherever he is, and able to make any and every space his natural home. While Starks was never at ease anywhere, appearing vulnerable and exposed even on his own death bed where he huddled, ‘like some helpless thing seeking shelter’ (131), Tea Cake is able to make any space accommodate him, including the recently deceased Starks’ store. Filling even this previously irksome space with his confident charisma he transforms it into a place of playfulness and light:

It was time for him to go but he didn’t. He leaned on the counter with one elbow and cold-cocked her a look (...). “How about playin’ you some

checkers? You looks hard tuh beat". (146)

In fact, in one day he is able to introduce not only games into this work place, but also the previously excluded natural world which, for the first time is able to assert itself, transforming the claustrophobic, deathly space which had for years 'kept [Janie] with a sick headache' (86) into one filled with air and light and which exudes harmony and well-being:

He tipped his hat at the door and was off with the briefest good night. So she sat on the porch and watched the moon rise. Soon its amber fluid was drenching the earth, and quenching the thirst of the day. (151)

What Tea Cake primarily represents, though, is a form of freedom as yet unrepresented within the novel. For though Starks had offered the prospect of foreign places, his journey was, from the beginning circumscribed by a materialist ideal that was fundamentally inimical to Janie's sense of self (for his property-driven dream would always entail the felling of Janie's metonymic pear tree, this being in Jody's eyes, just one more natural resource available to make manifest "Ah God's" vision – "Where's de closest saw-mill?"). Tea Cake's journeying on the other hand is driven not by ambition but by limitless curiosity and a desire for novelty. A drifter tied to no one place, he generates a sense of rootlessness which is freed from Nanny's negative assertions, and suggestive of a more liberating, carefree life. Following Tea Cake, Janie, whose movements have always been circumscribed by very limited geographies – Nanny's yard, Killicks' kitchen, Starks' store - expects to experience

greater physical and emotional freedom. Promised a wider, more expansive world in which people evade rules and please themselves, organising the space they inhabit to suit their own needs, Janie resurrects the notion of journeying, and physical movement as an end in itself; 'somethin' crazy' through which the only thing that is 'made' is 'fun and foolishness' (192).

It is ironic therefore, that this restless pair never get any further than the Everglades. For while this seems a much freer place - located within a natural world which offers a plethora of physical pleasures - it is actually as contained as Eatonville and as riven with inter-communal strife. Thus what Janie eventually experiences in this new, unsettled space is a form of human behaviour which replicates that found in each of the spaces she has already inhabited. Despite the fact that on the 'muck' the community is held together by emotional rather than financial dependency, therefore, true community remains a distant prospect.

At first though, the Everglades seems to hold the possibility of a radically different form of life with an alternative and ideal community. A liminal space, hovering between the boundaries of 'civilised' and wild territories, neither swamp nor firm land, occupied by ethnically diverse, radically disconnected people, the 'muck' is initially represented as an almost carnivalesque space and a geographical extension of Tea Cake's own identity. Here old rules, regulations and modes of behaviour have no place. 'New words' (55) are required in order to function in this space - not least because Janie is at last expected to join in with the telling of 'big stories' (200) - and so too are new skills, new ways of relating to others, and even new clothes - 'What if

Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes?’ (200). Initially then, the Everglades seems to represent a fundamentally egalitarian space in which all of the divisions of Eatonville are healed and all unnatural hierarchies are dismantled.

Brobdingnagian in its proportion, this landscape literally and figuratively dwarfs people, unifying the disparate people who assemble there by bringing them down to size, reducing their scale and status and outlawing artificial ‘Ah gods’. Dressing alike, working together, living in similar accommodation, the people who gather on the muck seem to achieve a communal ideal in which relationships are founded upon more meaningful premises than social class. A form of natural selection structures relations and the people themselves choose their own cultural leaders so that when individuals begin to stand out, as Tea Cake does, his place becoming the centre of the social world, it is through an entirely organic process, emanating from rather than disrupting, the natural order of things:

Tea Cake’s house was a magnet, the unauthorised centre of the ‘job’. The way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night. (197)

Initially then, this is a space in which none of the structures created by Starks hold sway. Beyond the control of any man it is a place in which neither architectural nor ideological edifices can find purchase, shrugged off by a land that seems to resist cultivation of any kind. It is a place in which people, rather than nature, must give

way:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilised a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (193)

This space is presented as a virtual playground in which everything is a game and even work offers an opportunity for fun. A holistic space which requires full immersion and the relinquishing of former identities it is one in which adults can re-discover their childish selves and learn to have 'fun together' (196) once more. An innocent space, protected from a corrupt outside world by virtue of its own natural boundaries - the 'wild cane (...) hiding the rest of the world' - it is one in which people are free to drop their own defences and be 'petal open' with one another.

Although it is clear from the beginning that the Everglades is an agricultural, commercial space, owned and controlled by white landlords, the language Hurston uses sublimates this reality, suggesting an unstructured free space in which crops spring 'volunt[arily]' from the earth, rather than a place of capitalist exploitation: 'Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place' (193). Making much of the natural abundance of the place - the heavily stressed

‘wildness’ of the landscape suggesting not only plenitude but also freedom from white human interference - this is presented at first as a place in which there are few traces of the capitalist world which sustains it; no technological machines, no elaborate structures and only rarely, a bossman. Instead, everything is primitive and rustic; the houses are ‘shacks’, the boats, dug-outs. It is a space then, detached from real, historical space and time and from economic and social complexity. Initially free from financial pollutants, for example, it is a place in which money, in the form of wages, rents and gambling stakes exists only as a form of pocket money, doled out to the children of the ‘muck’ in order to fund the ‘dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing’ (197) that goes on every night.

Another side to the Everglades experience is present from the beginning however; one which has nothing to do with fun and everything to do with desperate economic need. Contained between passages which eulogise the space as the perfect setting for those such as Tea Cake and Janie who seek only novelty and adventure, are descriptions of a more desperate people for whom the muck is not a playground but a very serious place of work:

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoes following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south (...) tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers (...). People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (196)

For these people the Everglades is a nightmarish place of manipulation and exploitation which feeds upon poverty and inculcates despair; an almost Darwinian space which lacks any effective support system and allows only the fittest to survive. Weighed down literally by the possessions which hang off of their wagons – ‘skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes’ - and also figuratively, by the burden of dependants, Hurston describes people who lack the health and youth of Tea Cake and Janie (to say nothing of her three hundred in the bank), having been beaten down by a harsh and relentless life on the road. Encumbered people who represent the antithesis of Tea Cake, these are drifters whose ‘permanent transience’ (196) is far from romantic, and whose inability to conceive of a settled future is a sign of their powerlessness rather than their freedom. Life lived in an eternal present for these people does not mean one in which work and play are fused together into one harmonious, physically and emotionally satisfying whole - a life in which a lack of plans registers a refusal to postpone pleasure. Rather it means one in which the lives of dependants cannot be secured; one in which the problems of the present will stretch across space and time securing an inheritance for their children which will only consist of continuing ugliness, ignorance and poverty. Even those ‘with no attachments’, who pay in order to sleep around a fire, appear in distinct contrast to the sophisticated slummers Tea Cake and Janie, their mobility stimulated by physical need, rather than psychological desire.

This disturbing side to the Everglades is at first sublimated by the force of Tea Cake’s personality and Janie’s wishful thinking so that, having registered its

presence, the narrative quickly moves on, returning to the more youthful, independent crowd that congregates on Tea Cake's front step, 'always laughing and full of fun too' (196). Thus these people fade from the novel and no mention is made of them or their implied fate again. Yet, even without the continuing presence of these people, the community which unfolds within the Everglades is not one devoid of difficulty or unpleasantness and the early optimism of the opening paragraphs soon begins to give way as the muck becomes an increasingly problematic, complex space.

The complexity that Hurston decides to describe however, is not economic and those who disturb the tranquillity are not the 'ugly' poor, but rather individuals who, carrying the prejudices of the outside world with them, infect this space with their bigotry, creating divisions and inter-communal conflict. This otherwise ideal, pastoral space, therefore, turns out to be dominated by the sort of people Janie has always been surrounded by; people such as the gossips of Eatonville, who attempted to divide the community and 'class her off' (169).

In the Everglades such people are concentrated in the twisted form of Mrs. Turner. In contrast to Janie, whose ideological and spiritual purity is ironically represented through her pale beauty, Mrs Turner is truly ugly, a disfigured, sexless woman whose body stands as a physical sign of her warped and sterile ideology. Having absorbed the notion of white supremacy she introduces the concept of racial class into this otherwise homogenous community, polluting the innocent, 'baby breath' (229) air with her bigoted beliefs:

“Ah can’t stand black niggers. Ah don’t blame de white folks from hatin’ ‘em ‘cause Ah can’t stand ‘em mahself. ‘Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid ‘em. Us oughta class off (...). If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin’ us back”. (210)

Mrs. Turner is of course swiftly dealt with. Making little impact on Janie – who suddenly seems to have developed a degree of race pride: ‘Booker T., He wuz a great big man’ (212) – she is presented as an unambiguous hate-figure and before long the community bands together in order to expel her:

Somehow or other Mrs. Turner fell down and nobody knew she was down there under all the fighting, and broken dishes and crippled up tables and broken-off chair legs and window panes and such things (...). Mrs. Turner got up off the floor hollering for the police. Look at her place! How come nobody didn’t call the police? (225)

Yet in one way Mrs. Turner has a significant effect on the way in which the novel develops. For while she fails to introduce race-hatred into the community, she does manage to encourage a display of misogyny, creating the circumstances in which Tea Cake beats Janie and revealing a gender divide which, until this point had been disguised under androgynous overalls and the amorphous ‘muck’. Through her interference, therefore, Mrs. Turner causes Tea Cake to demonstrate that he is not so

different from Janie's previous husbands after all. For just as they had made her wear domestic accessories in order to signify her attachment to them, so Tea Cake forces Janie to display his possession of her, making her 'wear' bruises as a public sign of her loyalty – "you sho' is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom told [Tea Cake]. "Uh person can see every place you hit her" (218).

It is not only the community that begins to lose its 'shine' (139) therefore, but also Tea Cake, and it soon becomes apparent that, in her pursuit of a 'perfect bee-man' Janie has again over-estimated her lover and the possibilities he represents. For Tea Cake does not offer a real alternative to the world of Nanny, Killicks and Starks, but simply a temporary way of avoiding that world. He represents a perpetual and fragile arrested adolescence that resists maturation and requires, rather than obviates, external authority. Despite his appearance of complete independence and freedom from constraint it becomes apparent as the swamp section develops that he is embedded within the white world, relying upon its structures to sustain him in his reckless lifestyle. Thus, although he performs flamboyant acts of subversion, publicly flaunting a disregard for authority, 'romping and playing behind the boss's back' (199), for example, in times of crisis he proves himself enslaved to the authority he flirts with, but never directly challenges:

"Hello Tea Cake."

"Hello 'Lias. You leavin', Ah see."

"Yeah man. You and Janie wanta go?"

"Thank yuh ever so much, Lias. But we 'bout decided tuh stay (...). You ain't

seen de bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now (...). You better stay heah, man". (230)

This unthinking capitulation to an unspoken white authority demonstrates that Tea Cake's determination to live in the present is not a considered response to the limitations and frustrations of bourgeois ideology after all. Rather it is the result of an internalisation of white notions of superiority and a willingness to remain within the carefully constructed and maintained 'playgrounds' the white masters provide. Ultimately then, it seems that Tea Cake is not so unique after all. He is another Hicks or Coker; a childlike chancer whose games are licensed by the fact that white people will run the post offices, and the towns, and the work camps.

This deterioration of Tea Cake's status is registered in the narrative, as Starks' was, by the fading of his voice. Initially distinct from all others it disappears in the hurricane section beneath the weight of a generalised free indirect discourse. As his thoughts and actions become increasingly indistinguishable from those of the community, which, through its condonement of Tea Cake's violence towards Janie has shown itself to be untrustworthy, so his voice loses its independence. Echoing the opinions of the unindividuated communal voice his thoughts are infected by a bigoted majority opinion so that the alliances he made with other ethnic groups are abandoned – "[Indians] don't always know. [They] don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else de'y own dis country still" (231). His previous difference shows itself to have been little more than the bluster of the truly powerless; a show of confidence masking vulnerability in the face of a greater, external authority. As this

passage develops it seems that the Gods to which Tea Cake's eyes are trained reside not in the heavens, but rather in the even more powerful white world:

The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry (...). The bossman might have the thing stopped before morning anyway. (234)

As both Tea Cake and the space he has idealised begin to lose their innocence, Janie retreats from them both to the 'shack' (194) which she has made her home, and which, situated on the edge of the camp, seems to offer protection from these polluted influences. Having outgrown her husband, and learned all of the lessons both he and the muck have to offer, Janie begins, imaginatively at least, to move on, looking for new experiences and new role models. Having learned the lesson of how to 'utilize [her]self all over' (169), she outstrips the man who had seemed, in Starks' store the epitome of physical prowess, beating him at his own game:

The thing that got everybody was the way Janie caught on. She got to the place she could shoot a hawk out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake. (196)

Soon Janie also surpasses Tea Cake in her ability to understand and value the ways and beliefs of the still-marginalised peoples of the muck; the Bahaman workers and the Seminoles. At first Tea Cake had seemed at home with these people. In fact his willingness to engage with their otherwise maligned cultures was presented as one of

his most engaging characteristics; the trait that made him a 'magnet' (199), attracting both Janie and most of the people of the muck. As this section of the novel develops and the hurricane approaches however, it becomes apparent that the "Saws" are only interesting to Tea Cake as amusing and exotic 'others' who fill the space around his shack with 'compelling rhythms' (207). Rather than engaging with their cultures, therefore, it becomes apparent that he simply fetishises them, taking the elements which suit his philosophy, and discarding the rest: 'Indians are dumb anyhow, always were' (229).

Janie on the other hand, carefully cultivates a relationship with these reserved people. Not satisfied with the stereotypes which inform Tea Cake's lazy and disastrously misguided thinking, she is intrigued by them and their behaviour, perceiving them as possessing of an organic form of knowledge which she once experienced and which other, less segregated ethnic groups have lost. Although her contact with the Seminoles is minimal - she only speaks to them as they are leaving - the narrative links her to them, implying that she shares with them an intuitive, physical and unmediated sensitivity towards the natural world. Thus, as they make their way on to high ground, having understood the signs that nature offers them, so Janie finds herself intimately affected by these same signals. Although at this point, her mind is controlled by Tea Cake's influence, restraining her from going east like the Indians, rabbits and possums with whom she more naturally identifies therefore, her body is not, responding to the portents so assuredly that she is forced to 'le[ave] the field and [go] home' (229).

Increasingly then, Janie's awakening self is influenced not by African American customs but rather by other, more esoteric cultures who share her sense of the symbolic power of the natural world. It is the 'Saws' and Seminoles therefore, who complete the work of restoring Janie's confidence and dignifying her organic vision. For when the storm arrives and both the Seminoles' and Janie's intuitive selves are born out, their intimate relationship to the natural world, which had until this point seemed rather irrelevant, impacting little on the experiential world, begins to be dignified with a new gravitas.

Janie not only begins to respect her own organicism, through their example however. She also learns to dignify her own silence. From the beginning of the novel Janie has been denied the right to speech. Forced into a stunned silence by Nanny's sermon, Killicks' accusations and finally Starks' 'big talk', she has spent the majority of the novel 'press[ing] her teeth together' (111) and going through 'silent rebellions' (86). Until this point, however, Janie's reluctance to 'sp[eak] out' (70) has been presented as troubling. Demanded by others, rather than volunteered – 'mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat' (69) - her silence has, throughout the book, seemed a sign of her capitulation to the will of others rather than an expression of free will. Until this point it has been the moments in which she has broken her silence and 'thrust herself into the conversation' (117) that she has seemed powerful, devastating Starks, for example, with one well chosen remark:

"You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it

but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life."

(...) Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. (123)

Yet the introduction of the Seminoles and the Bahamans into the narrative suggests a different interpretation of Janie's silence. For compared to the empty talk of so many of the African American characters, their recalcitrance seems increasingly dignified; increasingly apposite. Rather than passing 'nations through their mouths', 'sit[ting] in judgement' (10) or unwittingly revealing their bigotry through casual speech - "Ah can't stand black niggers" (210) - the Bahamans and the Seminoles allow their actions to speak for them, creating a sophisticated form of non-verbal communication which is shown to be far more eloquent than anything the blacks can muster. The Bahamans, for example, express themselves through dance and drums, creating narratives out of the 'living, sculptural, grotesques' (229) of their own bodies. The Seminoles are even more pointedly silent. Refraining from expressing themselves even through movement, everything about them is discreet, reticent and private. Radically disconnected from the other groups who exist on the muck they seem to inhabit their own, intensely private space that they protect through a significant spatial and cultural distance from all others. Making no attempt to establish cross-cultural communication they seem weary of whites and blacks alike and therefore must be entreated to utter even the briefest of remarks:

This time [Janie] asked where they were all going and *at last* one of the men answered her.

“Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming” (229, emphasis added).

The Seminoles’ reluctance to speak and implied lack of faith in the ability of outsiders to listen is of course justified as their warnings are ignored and the hurricane does arrive. As a result their silence is conveyed as dignified, mature and wise. Compared with the childish ‘big-talk’ of the African American community, it is presented as profoundly expressive and a sign of strength rather than weakness. Thus later, when Janie walks down the Eatonville street, silent except for a dignified ‘good evenin’ (11), her muteness registers power rather than passivity, and thus she is easily able to disarm the porch sitters who had their ‘killing tools’ sharpened and ready:

Nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her. (11)

The silent movements of the Seminoles also offer an example of an alternative way of functioning within space. Not tied to a permanent place, but not restlessly seeking an ideal space either, these people are not controlled by the physical world. Carrying everything they need with them, they are depicted as profoundly self-possessed and therefore nomadic, rather than migratory; permanently travelling across the landscape in response to its own natural rhythms, rather than scouring the land, like so many of the African American characters, in search of the something that they feel to be

missing from their lives - money, work, or just fun and foolishness. Distinct from the African Americans whose rootlessness, at least as it was expressed by Nanny, was tragic - a manifestation of radical spiritual and physical incompleteness - the Seminoles are sustained by a psychological sense of themselves which is not contingent upon any geographical place. What their example offers, therefore, is a notion of 'at-homeness' which transcends space and time and which can be replicated anywhere and at any time; an example which allows Janie to bring an end to her own restlessness and settle in a house which she can now imaginatively transform:

Ah'm back home agin and Ah'm satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom. (284)

At the end of the novel, then, it is the Seminoles whose example allows Janie to withstand the formal and informal trials she is forced to undergo in the Everglades courthouse and Eatonville street, and return to her house with a transformative sense of space and of home. Rescuing the notion of an ideal community existing in harmony with the natural world after it has been sullied by the Everglades and Eatonville experience it is these people who sanction Janie's original organic vision, and who possess, at the end of the novel, the mark of true, ethnic authenticity, the ability fully to live in the natural world.

This authenticity is sustained, however, because Hurston declines from subjecting these groups to the same scrutiny she had applied to African American folk. For, introduced only at the very end of the Everglades section, neither the Bahamans nor the Seminoles emerge as anything other than dark eroticised shadows which can be seen on the horizon or by the flickering light of camp fires. Un-individuated, existing purely as a group so complete and contained that they defy any dissembling gaze, the Seminoles in particular are presented from a physical and perceptual distance thereby remaining inaccessible, 'foreign', and ideal in their transcendent 'otherness'.

So she was home by herself one afternoon when she saw a band of Seminoles passing by (...). They were headed towards the Palm Beach road and kept moving steadily. About an hour later another party appeared and went the same way. Then another just before sundown. (228)

Exoticised through this narrative distancing, these cultures are drastically simplified and disturbing elements within them, which might make them less ideal, are left unexamined. The nomadism of the Native Americans, for example, is romanticised rather than investigated and as a result the complex history of oppression and dispossession which made this form of life a necessity is left out of account. Also ignored is the physical vulnerability of these people who, owning no land of their own, are forced to rely upon the good will of white landlords for their livelihood.

Even the problematic sexual politics of the culture is ignored. The Seminole woman Janie watches from a distance but never attempts to communicate with (women who

are the real 'mules' of the text), are not the 'Indians' she chooses to identify with. 'Stolid' figures, whose role is simply to follow, 'like burros' (228), the men that lead them, they offer a far less romantic image of nomadism. In fact they stoically endure a form of life which Janie has, throughout the book, endeavoured to escape.

The extent to which Hurston engages with these cultures is therefore strictly limited and as a result the example they offer Janie is imaginary rather than real, the product of a romantic imagination, rather than experiential fact. Thus they are not real role-models at all, and Janie is not a real disciple. Rather she appears as a sort of cultural tourist picking out the more picturesque elements of the cultures and incorporating them into her own; satisfied with a view of them which is brief, partial and, as the almost comically stereotypical report of their speech displays, loaded with pre-conceptions – 'Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming' (239). In the last few pages of the book then, Janie does not actually emulate them, but instead merely mimics a romanticised idea of their ideology in the shelter of her comfortable Eatonville home.

She returns to Starks' house, therefore, under the guise of a more holistic, natural woman who has liberated herself from the artifices of bourgeois society by internalising the ways of the most authentic of people, those 'farthest down'. On foot, dressed in overalls, and with her long hair swinging down her back, she shows every sign of having abandoned the unimaginative ethics that Eatonville adheres to and freed herself from the physical, emotional and spiritual constraints which have until this point oppressed her. No longer mindful of the opinions of others she is presented as defiant, articulate and self-sufficient; a wise woman with a magnificent tale to tell:

“Lawd!” Pheoby breathed out heavily, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie” (284).

Yet this defiant pose is fundamentally contingent upon the fact that she is not one of those farthest down; not a disinherited Seminole, nor a migrant Bahaman, but rather a land owner and a woman of means. Her intellectual and imaginative autonomy is primarily a result, not of her anthropological investigation of other cultures but rather the financial independence which funded both her field trip and her triumphant return. Without it she might have returned to Eatonville in the same pitiful state as the ill-used Mrs. Tyler, ‘broken and [with] her pride gone’, her feet not ‘strong’ but rather ‘bent and griped [and] work-worn’ (178). For all her worldly-wise rhetoric, therefore, Janie returns with a scarcely more developed sense of self than she left with. Still emotionally dependent on a man who had proved himself violent, jealous and otherwise inadequate, the Janie who sits on her back porch is almost indistinguishable from the Janie who loitered under her grandmother’s tree. All that she has learned is to make do with the ‘kiss of memory’ (286) and stay away from the front gate, as the ‘golden dust of pollen’ (25) which transforms shiftless boys into ‘glorious beings’ rarely rests very long on ‘breath-and-britches’ men (26).

In some ways, in fact, Janie seems to have regressed. Although her sexuality is flaunted as she saunters down the Eatonville street, what she returns with is a determination to satisfy herself through a form of infantile auto-eroticism which, while hung upon images of heterosexual love, is actually divorced from it. An idealised, selectively remembered Tea Cake prances around in the bedroom but

‘flesh and blood figure[s]’ (112), like the rest of adult society, are expelled. The space she creates for herself at the end, therefore, recreates the one that she experienced under the pear tree and she comes full circle. A more secure and permanent structure than a mere tree, the house, in this re-imagining becomes intimately bonded to the natural world it had been built in order to defy. No longer recognisable as the building that Starks erected, it becomes, in the last few pages of the book, an unbounded, mystical space which embodies rather than expels life; a home which bestows contentment and facilitates ‘passive happiness’ (163):

Janie mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire (...). Now, in her room, the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feelin’ of absence and nothingness. She closed in and sat down. Combing road-dust out of her hair. Thinking (...). Here was peace. (285-6)

This space though, is intensely private, maintained only through its absolute exclusion of everything and everyone else. Even the ‘kissin friend’ Pheoby is denied entrance, shut out as securely as the rest of the town. Janie’s tale may have had an impact upon her listener, making her dissatisfied with her lot and leaving her determined to make changes in her everyday life – ‘Ah means to make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this’ (284) - but, told in private, it fails to impact upon the larger society which remains as vituperative as ever. Eatonville is not changed, therefore, by Janie’s return and, retreating to her back porch with her memories and packet of seeds, Hurston’s heroine seems to recognise this, and reconcile herself to it.

Finally, then, Hurston fails to resolve the problems her text raises. Wrapping up the novel in the last few paragraphs in highly figurative, abstracted language which, echoing the novel's opening lines, evoke a sense of completion, inevitability and spiritual transcendence, she distracts attention away from the fact that Janie's newly constructed space and self is wholly imaginary; her new life simply another subtly effected escape. The rhetoric which suggests the completion of an epic quest towards self-discovery masks the fact that although Janie seems to return to Eatonville with a new, more confident knowledge of herself which has enabled her to establish a true home, she actually inhabits a fantastic space as divorced from reality as any of her previous day-dreams. Despite the repeated statements of having grown – 'ten feet higher' at least (284) - and developed through her experiences – 'Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin (...) live by comparisons' (284) - her final imaginings reveal that the only thing she has really learned from her experiences is that her fantasy life and reality are incompatible and so she retreats from the experiential world into one which is revised and romanticised. Truly, at the end, Janie proves herself to be one of Hurston's archetypal women for whom, 'the dream is the truth' (9).

Hurston refuses to acknowledge, then, the consequences of her own narrative. In order to allow Janie a romantic end the house to which she returns is transformed. The 'gloaty' building which was so strongly identified with Starks and which seemed a prison-house for Janie is scarcely recognisable in this final section. No longer divided, seeming to revolve around an all-encompassing bedroom, it bears no

relation to that which Janie previously occupied, and happily left. Tea Cake is similarly transformed, his brutality and bigotry sublimated by language that metamorphoses him into Janie's ideal 'bee-man'. Despite the fact that the text has shown the impossibility of full sexual and emotional union between a man and a woman in a world in which fundamental inequalities hold sway, Hurston hangs onto an ideal of heterosexual romantic love by rehabilitating Tea Cake, wiping out all memory of him as a rabid madman with a safely domestic image of him, on the final page, buzzing around the room, 'prancing around' Janie 'with the sun for a shawl' (286).

Thus transformed, there is no need for Janie to disassociate herself from him. Previously Janie had figuratively annulled her marriages by reclaiming her former, maiden self; stripping her body of the garments that her husbands used to signify their possession of her. Leaving Killicks, for example, she had recreated herself as a new, virgin bride by turning a walk down the road into a walk down the aisle: 'She untied [the apron] and flung it on a low bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet' (54). Similarly, while emotionally divorcing herself from Starks she had drawn on an even earlier and more innocent self, effecting an even more drastic resurrection by imagining herself as a pagan child, 'rollicking with the springtime across the world' (137). Yet in having so spectacularly disposed of Tea Cake Janie seems to experience no need to separate herself from him. Having killed him in order that he can still function for her as an erotic ideal she therefore clings to the signs of him that cover her body: 'No expensive veils and robes for Janie this time. She went on in her overalls' (281).

Ultimately then, despite the flowery prose and Janie's own pronouncements – 'Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine' (171) - Nanny's vision is born out; the world is brutal, and men do use women's bodies 'to wipe [their] foots on' (27). Furthermore, if they are to remain safe from harm, women require if not high' then certainly private 'ground' (52). Janie eschews the old woman's ambition, and, through her tale and her fantasy life, distances herself from it. Yet she accepts the protection of elevated space, refraining only from transforming it into a 'pulpit'. Ultimately, therefore Janie refutes the notion of society and societal responsibility that her grandmother, despite her materially-fixated philosophy, embraced. Considering those around her incapable of hearing any 'great sermon about colored women sittin' on high', she declines the opportunity to lead and educate her community and retreats into silence. Having achieved not only a room, but also a home of her own, she literally turns her back on those around her and resolves to sit in her house and 'live by comparisons' (284).

‘A Jagged Hole Where My Home Used To Be’: *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Although Eatonville was problematised in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it was retained as an albeit reduced refuge to which one could return certain of finding at least one friendly face and a degree of private, homely space. The next time that Eatonville appeared however, it was denied even that possibility, becoming in *Dust Tracks on a Road* a dark comfortless place filled with backward-looking, dismal people; an undistinguished hick-town rather than a distinct and discrete place. In this chapter I shall investigate the reasons why Hurston abandoned the comfortable, comforting Eatonville of her earlier books in favour of one that was ‘drab’, ‘dull’ and ‘timid’, and examine why she chose to transform her position within it from a ‘heart-string’¹ to a spiritual and emotional stranger; a woman who was not, in any meaningful way, a ‘real part of the town.’²

A lot had happened in the six years between the completing of *Their Eyes* and the appearance of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Hurston had married, divorced, taught, travelled and received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. She had recorded songs and stories for the Library of Congress, collected folklore, written reviews, joined the Federal Writers’ Project as an editor, and started work as a story consultant for *Paramount Pictures*.³ Finally, she had published two books in two years; a novelistic

¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.13.

² Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1942; rept. in *Hurston*), pp.561-808, p.621. All further references will be included parenthetically in the text.

³ For an account of Hurston’s work for the FWP see Christopher D. Felker’s ‘Adaptation of the Source’: Ethnocentricity and ‘The Florida Negro’ in *Zora in Florida*, pp.146-158.

subversion of a biblical story entitled *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and a book of folk-lore entitled *Tell My Horse*.

In some ways *Moses, Man of a Mountain* represented a logical development for Hurston, expanding upon ideas that she had already explored in short stories such as 'Bred and Born to Sunday School'.⁴ Thus although this was her first full-length biblical allegory, it was not her first attempt to incorporate Judeo-Christian myths into her work in order to re-write biblical stories 'in African American terms and idioms.'⁵ In one important way, however, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* represented a departure for Hurston. For rather than describing a folk at home in the world – as familiar with their surroundings as with themselves – *Moses* explored what it was to be part of an exiled community, living a fragile existence on the margins of powerful and often hostile communities:

The Hebrews had already been driven out of their well-built homes and shoved further back in Goshen. Then came more decrees (...). [T]hey found out that they were aliens, and from one new decree to the next they sank lower and lower. So they had no comfort left but to beat their breasts to crush the agony inside.⁶

This interest in exile and what it meant to be a long way from home first arose in *Tell My Horse*, the book that Hurston wrote just one year before *Moses*. Because it deals

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston cited in Bob Callahan's Foreword to *Spunk: The Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Turtle Island Foundation, 1985; rept. London: Camden Press Ltd. 1987), pp.ix-xiii, p.ix.

⁵ Deborah E. McDowell, 'Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines', p.viii.

⁶ *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, p.3.

with a space outside of the United States and a long way from Eatonville, I shall not be discussing it in full. However before moving on to *Dust Tracks on a Road*, which was the next and last of Hurston's books to evoke her hometown, I will briefly explore *Tell My Horse* for what it reveals about Hurston's changing perspective. For it is my contention that the interest in exile and homelessness which was allegorised in *Moses* and which eventually dominated *Dust Tracks on a Road*, began in the Caribbean where Hurston experienced - or at least, for the first time admitted to experiencing - a profound sense of alienation and abjection. Before moving on to her autobiography therefore, I shall investigate the ways in which Hurston was forced to recognise the limits of the 'cosmic' identity she had heretofore laid claim to, and relinquish her pose as a universal woman physically and spiritually at home in any place.

In *Mules and Men* Hurston had boasted that New Orleans rivalled Haiti as a rebellious, subversive space, 'keep[ing] alive the powers of Africa' within the boundaries of America.⁷ She had also made much of the very un-American opacity of the place with its dead ends, false trails and beguiling evasiveness:

Now I was in New Orleans and I asked. They told me Algiers, the part of New Orleans that is across the river to the west. I went there and lived for four months and asked. I found women reading cards and doing mail-order business in names and insinuations of well-known factors in conjure. Nothing worth putting on paper. But they all claimed some knowledge or link with

⁷ *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.176.

Marie Leveau. From so much of hearing the name I asked everywhere for this Leveau and everybody told me differently (...). All agreed that she had lived and died in the French quarter of New Orleans. So I went there to ask.⁸

Though she had stressed the extent to which she was new to this location and unsure of the territory - 'I did a lot of stumbling and asking before I heard of Luke Turner' - Hurston had also emphasised the fact that, on a more profound level this spiritual space was already familiar to her; New Orleans was a novelty but hoodoo was not. She had already 'seen things happen' in Florida and had found her first mentor there: 'Eulalia, who specialised in Man-and-Woman cases'. Thus though she admitted that she needed directions in order to negotiate New Orleans's geographical space she suggested that she was never intellectually or spiritually disorientated. As a result the resistance she met and the complexities she struggled with excited rather than disturbed her, increasing her interest and bolstering her determination to penetrate the 'cold' disinterested exteriors of those like Luke Turner who tried to 'shoo [her] away'. With unswerving confidence therefore, she had been able to invade this closely guarded space, requiring only 'three trips' and three paragraphs to ingratiate herself into Turner's 'inner room' and swap fruitless wandering in Algiers for a seat 'before the soft coal in [Turner's] grate':

Turner again made that gesture with his hands that meant the end. Then he sat in a dazed silence. My own spirits had been falling all during the terrible curse and he did not have to tell me to be quiet this time. After a long period

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.182.

of waiting I rose to go. "The Spirit say you come back tomorrow," he breathed as I passed his knees. I nodded that I had heard and went out.⁹

In *Tell My Horse* however, Hurston's foreignness was not so easily surmounted, as it was experienced not simply by others, but also by Hurston herself. For though Hurston had implied that this move into the Caribbean was a logical extension of the work she had begun in New Orleans - her journey simply moving her closer to the 'powers of Africa' she had uncovered in *Mules and Men* - she soon discovered that these islands were not simply more 'majestic'¹⁰ versions of America's Hoodoo capital, but rather radically different spaces which contained often threatening cultural extremes. Thus while in *Mules and Men* Hurston had been able to immerse herself into the communities she had studied, confident that the differences between herself and the 'primitive[s]'¹¹ were superficial - the result of nothing more than a few department store dresses and an academic vocabulary - in *Tell My Horse* she found that the differences between her herself and the Caribbean folk were much more deep-rooted. Furthermore she discovered that these differences of opinion were not ones she was willing to overlook as they pertained to an identity that she was reluctant to relinquish.

The most significant difference Hurston found to exist between herself and the Caribbean folk was their attitude towards women. She discovered that the cultures of Jamaica and to a lesser extent Haiti, denigrated both blackness and femaleness as signs of intellectual, spiritual and social inferiority. Consequently she concluded that

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.180-183.

¹⁰ *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1938; rept.in *Hurston*), pp.269-556, p.282.

these were cultures in which the black woman, as the point at which these two elements converged, was all but erased, positioned as an absence that had to be covered over or covered up:

When a Jamaican is born of a black woman and some English or Scotsman, the black mother is literally and figuratively kept out of sight as far as possible (...). You hear about "My father this and my father that, and my father who was English, you know," until you get the impression that he or she *had* no mother. Black skin is so utterly condemned that the black mother is not going to be mentioned nor exhibited. You get the impression that these virile Englishmen do not require women to reproduce. They just come out to Jamaica, scratch out a nest and lay eggs that hatch out into 'pink' Jamaicans.¹²

In her previous books Hurston had raised the question of the status of black women within North American society. Creating characters whose views of the world were determined by an assumption of women's powerlessness she had articulated the idea that women were figurative 'mules', carrying the burdens that frustrated black men placed upon them: 'de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see'.¹³ In general however, Hurston had raised this notion only in order to disparage it. Presenting it as the controlling metaphor for Nanny's ideology in *Their Eyes Were*

¹¹ *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in Hurston, p.689.

¹² *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, p.282.

Watching God, for example, Hurston had discredited it as a cruel and ‘twisted’ falsehood fabricated by an embittered woman.¹⁴ Describing it as a hangover from the ‘dark years of slavery’ which perpetuated a slave mentality, Hurston had implied that it was a ‘sapping vice’ which plagued African Americans.¹⁵ In the Caribbean however, Hurston encountered a world in which ‘mule of the world’ was not simply a metaphor but rather an accurate description of the position of black women whose physical, ideological and economic loads were tangible:

If [a woman] is of no particular family, poor and black, she is in a bad way indeed in that man’s world. She had better pray to the Lord to turn her into a donkey and be done with the thing. It is assumed that God made poor black females for beasts of burden, and nobody is going to interfere with providence (...). It is just considered down here that God made two kinds of donkey, one kind that can talk. The black women of Jamaica load banana boats now, and the black women used to coal ships (sic) when they burned coal.¹⁶

Crucially, this sexism was not something Hurston simply observed. Rather, it was something she experienced time and again. Almost as soon as her narrative begins, for example, she describes herself as under attack. ‘[L]ounging in the summer house’

¹³ *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *op.cit.*, p.29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.138; p.264. In ‘Zora Neale Hurston’s Travelling Blues’, Cheryl Wall argues that Hurston takes this connection between women and mules more seriously, pointing out, for example, that Janie consciously identifies herself with the mule which the townspeople mock in *Their Eyes* (*Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, pp.139-199, p.181). Although this is a persuasive argument I would argue that the fact that it is Nanny who articulates this link, and who encourages Janie to humble herself before men like Starks, implies that it is a false supposition; part of Nanny’s inability to see black women as anything other than property.

¹⁵ *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, p.787; p.783.

of a newly married couple, she recounts how she was made to listen to casually expressed condemnations of 'occidental' women:

[A] young man of St. Mary's dropped in. I do not remember how we got around to it, but the subject of love came up somehow. He let it be known that he thought women who went in for careers were just so much wasted material. American women, he contended, were destroyed by their brains (...) He felt it was a great tragedy to look at American women whom he thought the most beautiful and vivacious women on earth, and then to think what little use they were as women.¹⁷

Because this criticism affected her personally Hurston clearly felt compelled to abandon any show of academic disinterestedness and interrupt this 'young man'. Thus rather than allowing him to express his 'blasphem[ous]' opinions, and record them as an example of the culture's chauvinism she sits up straight in her chair and directly challenges his beliefs:

I had been reclining on my shoulder blades in a deck chair, but this statement brought me up straight. I assured him that he was talking about what he didn't know.¹⁸

Realising that her scorn has failed to dent his confidence, Hurston continues to harangue this man, chasing after him as he attempted to leave and, using a figure of

¹⁶ *Tell My Horse*, p.327.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.288.

speech that turns the sexual stereotype he has established on its head, 'carrie[s] him back':

Saying [that Jamaica could teach America something about love] he left the summer house and strode towards his car which was parked in the drive. But he could not say all that to me and then walk off like that. I caught him on the running board of his car and carried him back.¹⁹

Ultimately however, Hurston shrugs off the importance of this exchange. After turning this man into a joke by implying that she has physically overpowered him she suggests that he failed to provoke her. Adopting the pose of an unperturbed sophisticate who rather archly simulates naivety she evokes a supreme superiority: 'we had a very long talk. That is, he talked and I listened most respectfully'. Yet, despite her ironic gestures, Hurston was clearly affronted by this man's claims and so she has her revenge. While she allows him to have the last word, she secures for herself the last laugh, for while he is shown to lose his head during this exchange- his 'vehemence' getting the better of him - she coolly manages to turn the argument to her advantage, effectively putting him to work as an anthropologist's informant:²⁰

Before he drove away he had told me about the specialists who prepare young girls for love (...) I asked to be shown, and he promised to use his influence in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.288.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.288-90.

²⁰ For a description of nineteenth century anthropologists' use of informants, who were members of the community under investigation, see James Clifford, *Routes*, pp. 20-21.

certain quarters that I might study the matter at close range.²¹

In the most unlikely of twists, therefore, Hurston ends this argument in which she has been rather humiliated - 'I was cut short (...) he snorted scornfully (...) [h]e snorted again and went on' - by persuading a man who was fundamentally opposed to women's careers to help advance her own.²²

While Hurston attempts to play down the importance of this exchange, presenting it simply as a prelude to a more useful anthropological encounter however,²³ it is crucial, for it reveals a fundamental shift in Hurston's ethnographic strategy. Previously Hurston had based her folkloric success on her ability to ease herself into the communities of those 'farthest down' and gather the 'treasuries of material' they had 'just seeping through their pores'.²⁴ She had boasted, in *Mules and Men* of her unique ability to insinuate herself into even the most hostile cultures and 'prove that [she] was of their kind': 'By the time that the song was over (...) I knew that I was in the inner circle'.²⁵ In *Tell My Horse*, however, faced with a culture which not only objected to her project - 'the Haitian elite (...) have become sensitive about any reference to Voodoo (...) because the people who have written about it (...) have not known the first thing about it' - but also to her self - 'wisdom-wise western women,

²¹ *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, p.290.

²² *Ibid.*, p.290.

²³ In fact, this encounter is rather unconvincing. Communicated through a bizarre combination of clichéd sentiments, overblown language, suspiciously long passages of reported speech and more formal summations, there is little to convince the reader that Hurston was there at all: 'The girl [who is being 'prepared for love'] swoons again and is revived. But she is in a twilight state of awareness, cushioned on a cloud of love thoughts. Now the old woman talks to her again. It is a brief summation of all that has been said and done for the past week' (p.291-2).

²⁴ *Dust Tracks* in Hurston, p.689. This is how Hurston described the wealth of material she failed to collect in her first research trip; a failure which stemmed precisely from the fact that she had yet to learn 'the right approach' (*Dust Tracks*, in Hurston, p.687).

afraid of their function in life, are so tiresomely useless!' - Hurston was unable simply to merge with the crowd. Instead she had to develop another narrative strategy and construct another 'people' with which she could align herself.²⁶

Ironically, considering the delight she generally took in exploding the notion of a 'united' race²⁷ and separating herself from the general run of 'Negroes' - 'I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief'²⁸ - this strategy involved Hurston in drawing on her status as an American, and more specifically an 'American Negro' abroad. Thus rather than metamorphosing herself into a passive, silent, uneducated 'young, young' Caribbean ideal, Hurston clung to her difference, presenting herself as the representative of an amorphous American 'we' which, despite rather pompous statements to the contrary, implicitly stood for all 'that [was] wise and best'.²⁹ Resisting the repeated attempts of Jamaican men to debase her identity as a thinking black woman therefore, Hurston bolstered her identity by aligning herself with what she presented as a more enlightened time and place. Positioning herself at the head of a veritable army of right-thinking Americans, she disguised her isolation by presenting herself as the representative of a sort of patronising collective eye/I that surveyed the curious scene the Jamaicans presented:

The situation presents a curious spectacle to the America Negro. It is as if one stepped back to the days of slavery or the generation immediately after

²⁵ *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.67.

²⁶ *Tell My Horse*, in *Hurston*, p.479; p.288.

²⁷ *Dust Tracks*, in *Hurston*, p.785.

²⁸ 'How It Feels To Be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.826.

surrender when Negroes had little else to boast of except a left-hand kinship with the master (...). The pendulum has swung way over to the other side of our American clock.³⁰

In her determination to distinguish the American Negro as the antithesis of the chauvinistic Jamaicans Hurston inevitably simplified and romanticised the place that her profoundly reasonable narrator hailed from. Consequently the America of this book is virtually unrecognisable from that which had appeared in her previous books. The problems that Hurston had obliquely addressed in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, are no longer recognised as part of the landscape. 'Color-struck' characters like Mrs. Turner have given way to individuals who value their ethnic identity; silenced, powerless women like the young Janie Crawford have turned into beauty queens; bullying men like Starks have been replaced by solicitous beaux who buzz around these queens like bees in search of a bloom:

[T] thing that binds [the States] together is the way they look at women, and that is right too. The majority of men in all the states are pretty much agreed that just for being born a girl baby you ought to have rights and privileges and pay and perquisites. And so far as being allowed to voice opinions is concerned, why, they consider that you are born with the law in your mouth, and that is not a bad arrangement either. The majority of the solid citizens strain their ears trying to find out what it is that their womenfolk want so they can strain around and try and get it for them, and that is a *very* good idea and

²⁹ *Tell My Horse*, in *Hurston*, p.280.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.280-1.

the right way to look at things.³¹

One should not, perhaps, take statements such as these too seriously, for in a sense they are designed to mock Western as well as Caribbean conceits. In fact rather than a defence of American values these pronouncements can easily be read as satirical attacks on occidental narratives - Hurston's cliché-ridden prose mocking the sexist, racist and imperialist discourses of conquest and exploration. In this sense her opening paragraph can be interpreted as one that takes the well-worn association of land with women's bodies to a very funny extreme:

Jamaica, British West Indies, has something else besides its mountains of majesty and its quick, green valleys. Jamaica has its moments when the land, as in St. Mary's, thrusts out its sensuous bosom to the sea. Jamaica has it's "bush".³²

Yet still, Hurston's presentation of herself as the representative of an idealised America is an important one that cannot simply be dismissed as ironic. As Hemenway states in his biography, Hurston had been disturbed by her experiences in Haiti and there is evidence to suggest that, in comparison with the dangerous and often 'terrible' Caribbean, America had come to be seen by her as a place of safety; its representatives the people she turned to when troubled. When shaken by a 'gastric disturbance' which she understood to be the result of voodoo 'whisper[ings]', for example, the home of the American consul was the safest place she could think of

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.326, emphasis Hurston's.

³² *Ibid.*, p.277.

and she asked to be carried there as soon as possible.³³ Furthermore, after this frightening experience she 'backed off from continuing the intense research' and began to make plans to leave. As Hemenway rather melodramatically states, '[s]he had gone deeply enough into the Caribbean night'.³⁴

However, after completing her research and relinquishing her ties with those, geographically at least, 'farthest down', Hurston returned to the United States to find herself similarly alienated, for the country she returned to was not of course, the safe straightforward one she had conjured up in Port au Prince. It was not a country united by its esteem for women, its broadmindedness concerning race or its tolerance of difference and it was patently not a nation that uniquely and consistently possessed 'the right way to look at things'.³⁵ Instead it was a divided and divisive country, largely indifferent to the rights of women and minorities, clinging to racist laws that made a mockery of its claims for democratic supremacy. Rather than a vigorous, enlightened, independent nation it revealed itself to be a hypocritical, profoundly un-democratic power with the 'brown specter' of Jim Crow at its corrupt heart.³⁶

The patient has the small-pox. Segregation and things like that are the bumps and blisters on the skin, and not the disease, but evidence and symptoms of the sickness (...). As for me, I am committed to the hypodermic and the serum (...) for complete repeal of All Jim Crow Laws in the United States once and

³³ c.f. Hemenway, p.247.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.248.

³⁵ *Tell My Horse*, in *Hurston*, p.280.

³⁶ 'How it Feels to be Colored Me' in *Hurston*, p.828.

for all.³⁷

However neither was the world of the 'American Negro' as stable and secure as she had claimed. In fact, while the white world which Hurston returned to seemed to be clinging to 'the days of slavery',³⁸ refusing to dispense with laws which denied African Americans the equality they had been promised - 'The Hurstons have been waiting eighty years (...) I want it here and now'³⁹ - the world of the 'niggerati' seemed to have changed beyond recognition. A new wave of young black artists with different allegiances, different agendas and even different locales had superseded the New Negroes. Writers like Richard Wright and Arna Bontemps who, as Cary Wintz points out, 'never really identified with or felt themselves to be part of the Harlem Renaissance'⁴⁰ were challenging the authority of their antecedents. With a form of politics which contradicted everything Hurston believed in - 'state responsibility for everything (...). And march!'⁴¹ - and a style of writing which she abhorred - 'not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass' - they were in the process of dismissing their predecessors as readily as Hurston and her *Fire!!!* cohorts had dismissed theirs, asserting their own ascendancy by pouring scorn on those they replaced. Richard Wright, for example, condemned the 'facile sensuality' of Hurston's prose, derided what he perceived to be her lack of seriousness and honesty and castigated her politics: 'Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues (...) the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that

³⁷ 'Crazy For This Democracy', *Negro Digest*, Dec., 1945; rept. in *Hurston*, pp.945-949, p.947-8.

³⁸ *Tell My Horse*, in *Hurston*, p.280.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.947.

⁴⁰ Cary Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, p.3.

⁴¹ Hurston, 'Stories of Conflict', in *Hurston*, p.913.

makes the “white folks” laugh’.⁴² Similarly Ralph Ellison rejected her work as little more than ‘calculated burlesque’ which ‘did nothing’ for African American fiction.⁴³ As a result Hurston found that she was marginalised not only in the segregated white world which continued to humiliate and harass her,⁴⁴ but also in the African American one she had once dominated. Thus while early on in her career Hurston had claimed that it was ‘exciting to hold the centre of the national stage’, revelling in the fact that ‘for any act’ she would ‘get twice as much praise or twice as much blame’,⁴⁵ in the years between *Tell My Horse* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* she had to confront the fact that she was no longer at the ‘center of the national stage’⁴⁶ or the heart of every party.

By the time she came to write *Dust Tracks on a Road* therefore, the advantages of claiming a national or ethnic identity had eroded and as a result she retreated from the ostentatiously ‘American’ narrative persona she had developed in order to deal with the strategic difficulties cultural chauvinism had created in *Tell My Horse*. Yet, after developing in the Caribbean, a narrator who had distinguished herself through opposition to a generalised ‘other’ Hurston seemed to have been unable to relinquish this extreme form of individualism, clinging to it as a ‘richer gift’ than the ‘easy generalization’ she used to indulge in (782). Consequently, rather than simply

⁴² Richard Wright, Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *New Masses*, Oct. 5, 1937, rept. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, pp.16-17, p.17.

⁴³ Ellison, ‘Recent Negro Fiction’ cited in ‘Lines of Descent/Descenting Lines’, by Deborah E. McDowell, p.ix.

⁴⁴ Hurston rarely admitted to the ways in which the white world abused her. An essay written for the *Negro Digest* entitled ‘My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience’ hints at the sort of everyday prejudice she suffered, as does an episode recounted by Bertram Lippincott in Hemenway’s biography which describes the blatant rudeness of waiters and fellow diners in a New York restaurant who were objecting to Hurston’s presence (see Hemenway, p.303).

⁴⁵ ‘How It Feels to be Colored Me’, in *Hurston*, p.826.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.827.

realigning herself with her Eatonville folk and resuming the more local persona of her earlier books, Hurston continued her retreat, presenting herself in *Dust Tracks* as almost entirely alone; a woman 'in a world of vanished communion with [her] kind' (598). The narrator of *Mules and Men* therefore, who, while not limited by her natal community, had been formed through it, gave way in *Dust Tracks* to one who was an isolated, alienated figure; a woman who was fundamentally at odds with her community:

The village seemed dull to me most of the time. If the village was singing a chorus, I must have missed the tune. (589)

Disillusionment with the state of the nation and disapproval of a new generation's politics certainly explains some of the radical expressions of individualism that found their way into this book. However it does not adequately explain why Hurston should have suddenly turned on the community that had raised her and which until this point, she had credited with forming her. It does not explain why, after insisting for two decades that she was essentially an Eatonville girl, more fully at ease in her 'native surroundings' than in any of the more cosmopolitan places she had since visited,⁴⁷ she should suddenly choose to represent herself as profoundly alienated from this place and its people. In order to find reasons for this one must investigate what else had changed and what it was about the genre of autobiography which made it impossible for Hurston to replicate the pastoral, 'delight[ful] Eatonville of *Mules and Men*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Mules and Men*, in Hurston, p.9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13.

From the beginning *Dust Tracks on a Road* was a troubled book. When Bertram Lippincott had suggested to her that she write an autobiography Hurston had declined. Disgruntled by what she took to be a suggestion that her writing career had peaked and that all that was left for her to do was to write her memoirs she had turned down the offer, only changing her mind after assurances that what her publishers had in mind was one tranche of what would eventually be a multi-volume work.⁴⁹ Hurston's unwillingness was not only the result of a bruised ego however. In a letter to Hamilton Holt, written just a few years after the publication of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston had recalled another reason for her reluctance: 'I did not want to write it at all, because it is too hard to reveal one's inner self'.⁵⁰ Consequently her disinclination towards the project did not simply disappear when she accepted the commission. Rather it wove its way into the resulting text creating a narrative that at times seems designed to offend.

What is most problematic about this book, however, is not that it is bad-tempered, but rather that all of its ire seems to be directed at African Americans. While Hurston tied herself up in knots trying to understand and explain the apparently bigoted beliefs of white men and women, for example, even including a footnote in order to explain that 'nigger', in her experience, did not always mean black – 'The word Nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race' (586) – she steadfastly refused to understand or empathise with any African American convictions that did not fit with her own. Turning on "[Her]

⁴⁹ c.f. Howard, *Zora Neale Hurston*, p.41.

⁵⁰ Hurston to Holt, Feb. 1, 1943, cited in Hemenway, p.278.

People!” for example, she glibly denied that African Americans had been subject to any particular socio-political pressures or limitations. Ridiculing self-proclaimed ‘better-thinking Negro[es]’ as men and women who ‘pac[ed] a cage that wasn’t there’(731), she denied that African Americans suffered from any particular prejudice, suggesting that their failure to ‘rise’ was due not to oppressive practices but rather to a lack of ‘especial talents’. Refusing to acknowledge the potential political benefits inherent in adopting a ‘race’ identity, she casually wrote off a whole generation of African American activists:

People made whole careers of being “Race” men and women. They were champions of the race: “Race consciousness” is a plea to Negroes to bear their color in mind at all times. It was just a phrase to me when I was a child. I knew it was supposed to mean something deep. By the time I got grown I saw that it was only an imposing line of syllables, for no Negro in America is apt to forget his race. “Race Solidarity” looked like something solid in my childhood, but like all other mirages, it faded as I came close enough to look at it. (720-1)

In her original manuscript, however, Hurston’s criticisms were not aimed exclusively at African Americans. In chapters such as ‘Seeing the World As It Is’ she had also poured scorn on white politicians, pointing out the atrocities that had been carried out in the name of democracy. However, written in 1941 and due for publication soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and America’s entry into the Second World War, these opinions had been deemed inappropriate and unacceptable.

Unwilling to present readers with a book which so derisively satirised militarised American nationalism - 'we (...) consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own' - and which compared the Allies' colonialism with that of the National Socialists, Hurston's publishers had directed Hurston to 'eliminat[e]' these chapters.⁵¹ As a result the passages which extended her critique of nascent African American nationalism by aggressively denouncing the United States' foreign and domestic policy were censored,⁵²:

All around me, bitter tears are being shed over the fate of Holland, Belgium, France, and England. I must confess to being a little dry around the eyes. I hear people shaking with shudders at the thought of Germany collecting taxes in Holland. I have not heard a word against Holland collecting one twelfth of poor people's wages in Asia (...). What happens to the poor Javanese and Balinese is unimportant; Hitler's crime is that he is actually doing a thing like that to his own kind. That is international cannibalism and should be stopped. He is a bandit. That is true, but that is not what is held against him. He is muscling in on well-established mobs. (792)

Of course while Hurston's attack on WASP hypocrisy was neutered by nervous editors her assault on African American conventions were left untouched. Concerned

⁵¹ A Lippincott editor had written on one of the pages of Hurston's manuscript, 'suggest eliminating international opinions as irrelevant to autobiography'. Cited in Hemenway, p.288.

⁵² Essays such as 'Seeing the World as it is', 'My People! My People!' and 'Inside Light' which unequivocally express Hurston's feelings on racism, colonialism and patronage have in fact become available to the general reader only recently, published as appendices to the Library of America edition of *Dust Tracks* fifty three years after they were written.

not to offend its target white audience, Hurston's editors appear to have given little thought to its black readers. Consequently, though all of Hurston's criticisms of white politics were excised - white America represented in the final draft by a big-hearted southern gent rather than a Washington 'mobster'⁵³ - her equally vitriolic attacks on the failings of African America remained. Whole chapters which raged against Negro shortcomings were included despite the fact that those which balanced and contextualised the criticisms within them had been cut.

While the skewed racial politics of this book can be explained as the result of editorial interference however, its contrary identity politics are less easy to explain. For this is a book which not only rejected conventional political narratives but also literary ones, repudiating the autobiographical models which African American writers had developed in order to resist racist categorisations in favour of a white 'Western' one. Defying literary and political expectations and disregarding the emerging African American canon, Hurston presented herself not 'as a member of an oppressed group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members' but rather as an 'isolated maverick' who developed in spite of, rather than because of her society. Refusing, as ever to acknowledge, let alone 'communicate' what 'whites ha[d] done' to her in her life she also eschewed the opportunity autobiography purportedly gave her to 'fill in' the obvious 'blanks of America's self-knowledge' which facilitated continuing racism.⁵⁴ Rather than using her autobiography to establish a self which, representing her ethnic group would challenge racist assumptions, therefore, she conjured up an idiosyncratic, contradictory voice that belonged to herself alone.

⁵³ 'Seeing the World As It Is', appendix to *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Hurston*, pp.782-795, p.792.

⁵⁴ Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press,

African American critics had rejected such a voice because they had believed that it would encourage white readers to abandon responsibility for the fate of blacks as a whole and concentrate instead on ahistorical, individual 'Pet Negro[es]'.⁵⁵ In a sense the validity of their judgement was born out by the responses Hurston's book stimulated, for almost without exception white critics congratulated Hurston for raising herself above what they clearly felt was the uninteresting and irrelevant question of racism. Praising the book for its 'humor, color, and good sense',⁵⁶ such critics as Phil Strong and Beatrice Sherman not only used the book as a stick to beat other black writers with - 'the race consciousness that spoils so much Negro literature is completely absent here'⁵⁷ - but also as evidence of the ideological health of the nation. Hurston's autobiography, they suggested, demonstrated that the freedom of opportunity (white) America prided itself on - the right to cast off one's origins and pursue happiness - had long been extended to African Americans. Her success, they implied, demonstrated that the only thing that prevented Negro participation in the American Dream was their own refusal to relinquish a debilitating collective victim identity; their refusal, then, to cast off their ethnicity and take part in a very different kind of 'race': "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!"⁵⁸ If Hurston had been able to get off 'to a flying start' they implied, why not all African Americans:

1974), pp.2-3.

⁵⁵ This is a term used by Hurston to denote a person obsessed with whiteness. It is also the title of the 1926 play that she published in the first and only edition of *Fire!!!*

⁵⁶ Phil Strong, *Saturday Review*, Nov. 28, 1942, rept. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, pp.30-32, p.30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.31.

[Miss Hurston] gives one chapter to "My People" - perhaps the most sensible passage on the subject that has ever been written. She agrees with Booker T. Washington that if the stuff is in you it is likely to come out and that if it isn't it doesn't make any difference whether you are white, black, green, or cerise.⁵⁹

Inevitably then, African Americans were far more critical of this book, receiving it as evidence of Hurston's unreliability and untrustworthiness; her willingness to play up to prejudices of whites:

Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America - she ignores them. She has done right well by herself in the kind of world she has found.⁶⁰

By the seventies, however, the critics who had 'resurrected'⁶¹ Hurston had begun to take issue with accusations such as these, pointing out for example the fact that, despite being a critically acclaimed novelist and essayist Hurston still lacked a secure and regular income and could therefore scarcely be accused of having 'done right well by herself'. However, while they were eager to defend Hurston's character these critics continued to struggle with this 'unfortunate book'.⁶² Finding it 'discomfiting',⁶³ failing to find in it the desire for a 'psychic, intellectual, emotional'

⁵⁸ 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.827.

⁵⁹ Strong, p.31.

⁶⁰ Arna Bontemps, "From Eatonville, Fla. to Harlem", in Howard, p.41.

⁶¹ Alice Walker, 'Anything We Love can be Saved', p.38.

⁶² Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p.91.

⁶³ Hemenway, p.276.

and 'physical' bonding with other black women that they tended to look for,⁶⁴ writers such as Robert Hemenway, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou generally dealt with it by dismissing it as an important work, judging it to be less authentically autobiographical than *Their Eyes*; less representative of her feelings towards her folk than *Mules and Men*. Even Alice Walker who was most passionate about Hurston's other work, declared it to be the 'most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote.'⁶⁵

For many of these critics *Dust Tracks* was unfortunate not only because it refused to conform to other African American autobiographies, but also because it complicated their image of Hurston as an archetypal Womanist. Not simply different from the body of texts which fostered the notion of a communal self, but actually defiant of it - Hurston representing such communality in the few places she finds it as the result of limited lives and limited minds - *Dust Tracks* threatened Hurston's suitability as a 'spiritual and cultural godmother'.⁶⁶ For it replaced the more likeable 'Zora' of the early essays and novels with a conservative, contrary, fiercely individualistic woman who seems to have been willing to do anything in order to draw attention to herself; even playing the degraded role of 'Pet Negro' in order to secure the attention of glamorous whites.

⁶⁴ Lorraine Bethel, "This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition" in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. by Gloria T.Hull, Patricia Bell Scott & Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), pp.15-22, p.17.

⁶⁵ Maya Angelou struggles to find positive things to say about *Dust Tracks* in her introduction to the HarperPerennial edition (New York, 1991), pp.vii-xii. See also Hemenway, pp.273-313 and Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', pp.90-91.

⁶⁶ Jo Anne Cornwell, 'Searching for Zora in Alice's Garden: Rites of Passage in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Walker's *The Third Life of Granger Copeland*', in *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*, ed. by Lillie P. Howard (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp.98-101, p.98

I was the only Negro around. But that did not worry me in the least. I had no chance to be lonesome, because the [theatrical] company welcomed me like, or as, a new play-pretty. (651)

The early Hurston who, with her flamboyant clothes, uncompromising performances and overwhelming self-confidence had wiped out a history of degradation, intimidation and invisibility seemed to have metamorphosed into an isolated woman who would rather pay homage to white patrons than any of the folk whose lives she had built her career upon. While Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes get only the briefest of mentions, for example, the 'extremely human', extremely rich Mrs. Mason is described in full - her 'psychic' link with Hurston eclipsing all others:

[T]here was and is a psychic bond between us. She could read my mind, not only when I was in her presence, but thousands of miles away (...). She would invite me to dinner at her apartment, 399 Park Avenue, and then she, Cornelia Chapin, and Miss Chapin's sister (...) would hem me up and give me what for. When they had given me a proper straightening, and they felt that I saw the light, all the stresses would vanish, and I would be wrapped in love. (688)

This book seemed to reveal then, a woman who had willingly swapped the crib of negroism for a more luxurious birthplace - "Keep silent", Mrs. Mason would 'lacerate' Hurston, "Does a child in the womb speak?"(688).

Within problematic passages such as these however, there are subtle undercurrents that

suggest a more irreverent, less humble Hurston. Just as passages within *Mules and Men* can be unpacked to reveal an irony that belies the surface meaning, so the more troubling of this text's statements can be dismantled to reveal more ambiguous meanings. Applying the same method Barbara Johnson and Houston Baker Jr. developed in order to unravel Hurston's acknowledgements in her earlier book, for example, the passage cited above can be read as a critique rather than a celebration of Mrs. Mason. For just as in *Mules and Men* Hurston deflated her patron's largesse by presenting the possession of a Great Soul as a negative rather than a positive attribute, so in this paragraph Hurston reveals the shallowness of Mason's claims to 'pagan[ism]'. While she begins her apparent celebration of this woman with a reference to her deep appreciation of 'Indian beauty and restraint', she ends it by suggesting a love of money which is incompatible with such 'pagan[ism]'. In fact she implies that in Mrs. Mason's Park Avenue apartment money has taken the place of love, 'gleaming silver' being the only thing this 'cramped' 'stern', 'lacerat[ing]' woman truly 'appreciates':

I would be wrapped in love. A present of money from Godmother, a coat from Miss Chapin, a dress from Miss Biddle. (688)

Even Hurston's allusion to herself as a 'play-pretty' for the group of travelling actors cited above is more ambiguous than it first appears. In fact it can be read as an example of a sophisticated literary tricksterism which 'turns the trick' on the reader. For while her narrative seems at first to draw readers towards a racial answer to the question of why the group welcomes her so enthusiastically - 'I was the only Negro around' - she immediately refutes this conclusion, disingenuously proffering an answer that has

nothing to do with race. Thus the reason her friends find Hurston so amusing is revealed to be due to her geographical rather than her ethnic origin. She is an exotic 'other' to them not because she is coloured (for in fact in this passage she is not black but 'young and green'), but rather because she has 'the map of Dixie on [her] tongue' (651):

They were all northerners (...). They did not know of the way an average southern child, white and black, is raised on simile and invective (...). They teased me all the time just to hear me talk. (651-2)

It is moments such as these that critics such as Claudine Raynaud, Françoise Lionnet and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have recently concentrated upon in an attempt to rehabilitate this book and incorporate it within the Hurston canon.⁶⁷ Reminding us of the crucial fact that *Dust Tracks* was written for an audience which Hurston knew to be white and felt to be prurient, for example, Fox-Genovese has suggested that rather than an incoherent and poorly plotted series of set-pieces designed to amuse white readers, this book represents an extended, deliberately erratic and obfuscating performance of 'feather-bed tactics' which simulated intimacy but actually kept the reader at arm's length. Fox-Genovese states that '[t]here is nothing in *Dust Tracks* to suggest that Hurston trusted her readers'⁶⁸ and with that in mind one can read this memoir as one in which the 'real' Zora was withheld, Hurston sending out a pseudo-persona to distract

⁶⁷ See for example, Claudine Raynaud, 'Autobiography as a 'Lying' Session: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*', in *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. by Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker Jr. (Greenwood, Fla.: Penkevill Publishing, 1988), pp.111-38; Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women', *op. cit.* See also Paola Boi, 'Zora Neale Hurston's *Autobiographie Fictive*: Dark Tracks on the Canon of a Female Writer', in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African-American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.191-200.

the prying, ill-informed reader. 'I'll put this play-toy in [the reader's hand]' Hurston therefore seems to be saying, 'and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song'.⁶⁹

While these readings rescue *Dust Tracks* from the accusations of minstrelsy which had plagued it by crediting Hurston with 'deliberate evasiveness' and 'wilful duplicity' in her dealings with whites,⁷⁰ they do not explain why Hurston should have turned on her own hometown, transforming it from the playful, reassuring 'playground' it was in *Mules and Men* to the 'jagged hole' it becomes in *Dust Tracks*. Nor do they explain why Hurston should have chosen to convert her Eatonville folk from happy-go-lucky characters to a parochial, intolerant, highly conventional collection of individuals who cling to their communality for fear of change and the outside world. It does not elucidate, therefore, why the enviable folk of *Mules and Men* should have reappeared, just eight years later, as 'slave-ships in shoes' (635).

One possible reason for this decision to re-cast her childhood as a time of isolation and cultural estrangement may have been the material circumstances which she found herself in when writing this book; circumstances which seemed designed to impress upon her her physical and financial dependency. For though, lacking a secure income and permanent house of her own, Hurston was used to living in temporary places - working out of friends' apartments, rooming houses and hotels in such diverse locations as Florida, Westfield, Haiti and Ile de la Gonave - generally she lived and worked alone, using the physical and emotional distance she was in the

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'My Statue, My Self', p.194.

⁶⁹ *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.10.

habit of securing for herself in order to sort through thoughts which otherwise 'swell[ed] up in [her] like a jeenie (sic) in a bottle'.⁷¹ Even when working under the auspices of the demanding Mrs. Mason, Hurston had managed to maintain a degree of physical freedom by keeping her distance. On the road and out from under Mason's watchful eye with a car, an allowance and a permit to follow her nose, Hurston had been able to create for herself a healthy and creative illusion of self-reliance, independent in the crucial day-to-day sense of being able to choose where to stay, for how long, and with whom. The groveling letters to Mrs. Mason must have seemed a small price to pay for the license it gave her to drive alone around America, enjoying a degree of freedom which would have been unusual enough for a black man, let alone an unescorted black woman.

While writing *Dust Tracks*, however, things were very different and Hurston was much less free. She had been ill with malaria and was, as ever, short of money and so had accepted Katharine (sic) Mershon's invitation to join her in California. Although this offer seems to have been made with the best intentions, Mershon being a 'good friend' to Hurston and a 'person of immense understanding' (800), this rich woman's largesse had the effect of constricting rather than liberating Hurston, making her feel her indebtedness more vividly than she ever had while in the pay of Mrs. Mason. A recently restored chapter of *Dust Tracks* entitled 'Inside Light' reveals that although Katharine Mershon had no desire to control Hurston's writing, she did have considerable interest in controlling Hurston's life, expecting a return on her investment in the form of obedience and acquiescence:

⁷⁰ Fox-Genovese, p.178.

⁷¹ Hurston to Henry Allen Moe, July 6, 1937 cited in Hemenway, p.248.

One day she said to me off-hand, “You ought to see a bit of California while you are out here.”

(...). At first I thought it was to give *me* some pleasure, but I soon found out it was the gleeful malice of a Californiac taking revenge upon a poor defenceless Florida Fiend. (801)

In the version of *Dust Tracks* that was published in Hurston’s lifetime, Mershon and California make only the briefest of appearances. Yet in the aforementioned chapter which has recently been published as an appendix to the Library of America edition, Hurston lets rip, describing, albeit with her tongue firmly in her cheek, how Mershon took advantage of her physical and financial dependency, ‘ambushing’ her and taking her on an endless tour of the West Coast:

I began to notice a leer in her eye! This woman had designs on me. I could tell that from her look, but I could not feel what it was. I should have known. I should have been suspicious, but I was dumb to the fact and did not suspect a thing until I was ambushed. (801)

Infantilised by the dominant Mershon who clearly rejoiced in the opportunity Hurston’s convalescence provided her with to guide her otherwise street-wise companion, Hurston was forced to submit to her patron’s will. Reduced to the position of an ignorant child she was forbidden even to comment on the scene which was unravelling before her from the back of a speeding car, her efforts to interpret the landscape rejected by her

‘malicious’ friend: ‘Oh, no!’ Katharine grated (...) You haven’t half seen it, but you are going to’ (802). Although Hurston conveys this role reversal with humour her frustration at her powerlessness is palpable:

“Now, I shall take you to see Northern California - the best part of the state,” my fiendish friend gloated. “Ah, the mountains!”

“But, I don’t care too much about mountains,” I murmured through the alkali in my mouth.

“You are going to see it just the same (...). You are going to see California and like it - you Florida Fiend”.(802)

For the first time in her writing life then, Hurston found herself denied the driving seat and forced to occupy not the position of guide which she previously delighted in - the ‘map’ on her tongue making her a natural leader – but rather that of passenger. With no expertise, no special knowledge and nothing to bring to the experience other than quiet obeisance she found that she was expected to be passive and polite in the back. Thus she presents herself as a helpless marionette whose strings are tightly held and whose body is artfully manipulated into the required contortions:

Next thing I know we would be loping up some rough-back mountain and every hump and hollow would be pointed out to me (...) all I had to do was to sit in the back seat of the Buick while Katharine twisted my head from side to side (802).

The payback of patronage can clearly be sensed in these passages as the usually

outspoken Hurston bites her tongue and allows herself to be thus manipulated - 'I (...) held my peace (...) I wanted to be polite [... I] kept from exploding'. (802)

It was not merely being the object of this woman's benign bullying which caused Hurston distress, however, but also the fact of being on unfamiliar territory which she could not seem to make sense of. Hurston had generally represented herself as at home everywhere. 'Everybody's Zora',⁷² she had made much of the fact that she was welcomed wherever she went, as much at home, and as much a part of the landscape on the front porch in Eatonville, in the inner rooms of New Orleans, or on the streets of New York:

I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library.⁷³

California however, represented a space that bore no relation to anything she had experienced before. Defying perspective and refusing to lie still or acquiesce either to Hurston's controlling eye or cartographic tongue it would not allow itself to be mapped out like Eatonville and New York. Instead it reared up, withstanding her attempts to surmount it, almost bucking her off its back:

To my notion, land is supposed to lie down and be walked on - not rearing up, staring you in the face. It is to (sic) biggity and imposing. (803)

⁷² Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.155.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.154.

Unable to make sense of this Brobdingnagian space Hurston dismissed it as an unnatural place, barren and almost devoid of life, inhabited only by parasitic, almost mutant 'Californiacs'. In fact the only strategy she developed in order to cope with the landscape was to fantasize about destroying it and 'fix[ing] it' so that it could be human, or at least, Zora sized once more:

The minute I get to be governor of California, I mean to get me an over-sized plane and spirit-level and fix this state so it can be looked at without rearing back. EPIC nothing! LEVEL! Level California! And do I mean LEVEL!!! (803)

It is possible that some of this aggression found its way into *Dust Tracks*. Unable to do anything about California, Hurston may have 'levelled' Eatonville instead, stripping it of any 'epic' pretensions by insisting upon its workaday banality: 'My soul was with the gods and my body in the village (...) I wanted to be away from drabness and to stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle' (597). However although it is possible to find reasons for Hurston's changing tone in her life, blaming it, as Walker does for example, on a timidity born out of poverty - '*Being broke made all the difference*'⁷⁴ - the most compelling explanation for Eatonville's transformation has less to do with external factors and more to do with internal ones. For in writing an autobiography Hurston was required to recall a time in which she was not Eatonville's 'heart-string' but rather its bugbear; a lively, imaginative, intelligent young woman in a place that valued only 'meek and mild (...) girl babies' (575-7). It is my contention therefore, that the town and folk of *Dust Tracks* are so radically different from those which had preceded them

⁷⁴ Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.90.

because, in this unwillingly written book, Hurston was remembering a time in which her position in relation to them was radically different.

In earlier accounts Hurston had been able to celebrate Eatonville because she had focused upon race. Presenting her hometown as a space in which racial identities had circulated free of the associations which had been attached to them in the larger world, she had, in essays such as 'How It Feels to Be Colored Me', and in books such as *Mules and Men* been able to validate Eatonville as a space that enabled its inhabitants to develop unaware of what blackness, in the world outside the town's boundaries, signified. In *Dust Tracks on a Road* however, Hurston was unable to avoid recalling that, while her community had protected her from the fact that she was 'a little *colored* girl' (621), it had gone to some lengths to impress upon her the fact that she was 'a little colored *girl*' (emphasis added), and someone, therefore, who should accept her lowly position, renounce all desires and ambitions and make herself of service to the group:

I was growing and the general thought was that I could bring in something. This book-reading business was a hold-back and an unrelieved evil. I could not do very much, but look at so-and-so. She was nursing for some good white people. A dollar a week and most of her clothes. People [like Hurston] could not afford to sit around on school benches wearing out what clothes they had. (635)

In *Mules and Men* Hurston had been able to avoid this fact. Surveying Eatonville from the elevated position of an independent professional woman whose successes had been the talk of the town - 'We heard all about you up North. You back home for good I

hope'⁷⁵ - she had been able to elide the question of gender. Avoiding engaging with the community in any but the most superficial way she had resisted delving into any aspects of Eatonville life which might have complicated the picture she wanted to present, or expose the exclusive nature of the vaunted porch. Using houses simply as places to sleep and to eat - 'somehow I got home and to bed and Armetta had made Georgia syrup and waffles for breakfast' - Hurston had confined herself to the public spaces of the town, her whole Eatonville experience taking place outside on the porches, in the lanes between the houses, on the road, or under the 'mothering camphor tree'. Internal spaces like internal lives had been left out of account. In fact the only house to be described at all was one that stood outside of the town's limits in a neighboring village that lacked 'Eatonville's feeling of unity', and even this was a performance rather than a private place; a shell of a house 'swept' of all signs of domesticity and decorated with items which encouraged not intimacy but 'display':

The house was swept and garnished, the refreshments on display, several people sitting around (...) Eatonville burst in on it. Then it woke up.⁷⁶

A few years later in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston had begun to describe a more complex Eatonville. Investigating interior spaces and exposing domestic lives she had revealed some of the town's chauvinism. However in this novel the growing masculine domination of the public places and the subsequent confinement of women in more regimented, private spaces had been presented as an aberrant development; the unnatural consequence of Starks' interference. Thus it was not Eatonville and its people

⁷⁵ *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.23; p.18; p.19 .

that had oppressed Janie, but rather her intimidating husband - a man who wanted to play bull to Janie's 'bell-cow'.

Furthermore in this novel Hurston had, to a certain extent rescued Eatonville by overruling Starks and transforming Janie's position within the town. Allowing her heroine to wrest power from her husband by signifying on his 'manhood' and symbolically claiming it for herself, Hurston had empowered Janie, enabling her to take possession of the porch, the house and the store. As a result when, after dispensing with another husband, Janie had returned to Eatonville she had been able to re-enter the space in much the same way that the Hurston of *Mules and Men* had done, with knowledge, experience and confidence that exceeded anything the town could lay claim to.

In both *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes*, therefore, Hurston had ultimately evaded the problem gender presented. Creating protagonists who, by virtue of their experience and independence - 'Hurston' with her car and allowance, Janie with her house and inheritance - had freed themselves from their allotted roles and transcended their sex, she had created a space in which gender was little more than a natural obstacle in life's 'helter-skelter skirmish'.⁷⁷ In *Dust Tracks* on the other hand, her gender was not so easily side-stepped, for though Hurston herself continually challenged it - making references throughout the text to her likeness to her father⁷⁸ - the town was possessed of a much more fixed idea of what it signified. Thus while in *Tell My Horse* Hurston had

⁷⁷ 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.827.

⁷⁸ These references are ambiguous of course. In fact, although Hurston claims that she 'looked more like' her father 'than any child in the house', she also casts doubts on her paternity. Stating, rather mysteriously that 'it seems my father was away from home for months' before her birth, and adding, 'I have never been told why', she seems to hint that the moment of her birth was not the only time that her father was absent (577). Rather than a suggestion to be taken seriously, I would suggest that this is

imagined an America in which 'girl bab[ies]' were feted - born to 'have rights and privileges and pay and perquisites'⁷⁹ - in *Dust Tracks on a Road* she was forced to recall one in which they were lucky to be allowed to live, the primary instinct of fathers being to 'tie [girls] in a sack and drop [them] in the lake' (577).

Looking back on her childhood then, Hurston was unable to avoid the fact that from the moment she was born her gender was paramount, dictating how she would be received and what her position would be. She was unable to avoid acknowledging that in the eyes of not only the folk but also 'her folks' (577), her gender was her primary characteristic; the most significant thing about her and the reason why, before even setting eyes on her, her father took against her:

I did hear that he threatened to cut his throat when he got the news. It seems that one daughter was all that he figured he could stand. My sister, Sarah, was his favorite child, but that one girl was enough. Plenty more sons, but no more girl babies to wear out shoes and bring in nothing. (577)

In her last major work, therefore, Hurston was called upon to revisit a temporal, geographical and emotional place in which she was disempowered, disenfranchised and often disgraced. She had to re-live the years in which she had learned that a woman's place in this community was far away from the glory of the store porch that was the town's heart and spring. She had to describe what it was to be an ambitious young

Hurston's way of taking revenge on her father, diminishing his stature by suggesting that he is a cuckold.

⁷⁹ *Tell My Horse*, in *Hurston*, p.326.

woman in what was essentially a 'MAN'S world'⁸⁰ and acknowledge the fact that the only way a woman could be present within this world was as the subject of a man's fallacious tale:

One afternoon my oldest brother was on the store porch with the men. He was proudly stroking two or three hairs on his top lip. A married man in his late twenties was giving him some advice about growing a big, thick mustache (sic). I went inside. When I was coming out, I heard something about getting his finger wet from a woman and wiping it on his lip. Best mustache-grower God ever made. (601)

In a sense, however, Hurston does anything but acknowledge this fact, for although the effect of the sexual politics of the town is immediately apparent Hurston repeatedly pulls her punches. Apparently unwilling to turn upon her own culture the analytical eye she had used to survey the sexism of Caribbean culture, she refuses to interpret either herself or her community as sociological types. Thus, rather than describing the injustices she experienced in general terms she goes to extraordinary lengths to personalize them, making them the fault of individuals rather than the culture as a whole. Filling her narrative with malevolent women who stalk the early chapters like wicked characters in a fairy tale, for example, she presents her culture's attempts to domesticate her as the individual acts of a series of embittered 'village dames'. Her grandmother is presented as a vindictive, disappointed old woman who will do anything to control her - 'Luttee' (she lisped). "You hear dat young'un stand up here and lie like

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p.328.

dat? And you ain't doing nothing to break her of it? Wring her coat tails over her head and wear out a handful of peach hickories on her back-side! Stomp her guts out! Ruin her!'(606-7) - the women of the village are shown to be creepy shadows whose appearance foretell death - 'I noted a number of women going inside Mama's room and staying. It looked strange' (616) - and John Hurston's second wife becomes a proverbial step-mother, manipulating her husband against his own 'kinfolks':

Papa had married again. That hurt us all, somehow. But it was worse for Sarah, for my step-mother must have resented Papa's tender indulgence for his older daughter. It was not long before the news came back that she had insisted that Papa put Sarah out of the house. That was terrible enough, but it was not satisfactory to Papa's new wife. Papa must go over there with a buggy whip for commenting on the marriage happening so soon after Mama's death. Sarah must be driven out of town. (623)

Even her father is presented as an independent man whose prejudices are inherent rather than cultivated, for while Hurston describes his chauvinism – making it, in fact, *his* primary characteristic – she never links his ideology to any others'. Rather than exploring his sexism as the result of historical, economical and political factors she presents him as a 'baby' who lacks guidance; a too-free spirit rather than a sociological type whose actions can only adequately be explained by the 'Old Maker':

In reality, my father was the baby of the family. With my mother gone and nobody to guide him, life had not hurt him, but it had turned him loose to hurt

himself (...). Old Maker had left out the steering gear when He gave Papa his talents. (685)

Of course this retreat into fairy-tale motifs can be explained as an attempt by Hurston to dignify and dramatize her life - the antipathy of these vivid characters serving to secure her specialness. Yet there is more at stake here than what Hemenway has called Hurston's 'considerable ego'.⁸¹ What might be called her political 'mission' is also threatened by her memories. For Hurston had always sought to valorize her culture by presenting it as the antithesis of 'pale'⁸² white culture. Presenting Eatonville as a 'pure' Negro space which, through its separateness had inculcated a distinct, almost anti-European culture – both the architecture and the cultural forms contained within it more closely resembling the 'Africa veldt'⁸³ than anything Anglo-Saxons had constructed – she had argued that African American culture had developed apart from the hegemonic forms that surrounded it. Although she acknowledged that one of the primary characteristics of Negro identity was imitation, she had always argued that African Americans had created out of this mimicry a culture that was essentially counter-hegemonic, 'bound by no rules'.⁸⁴

If she had investigated her community's chauvinism however, Hurston would have had to relinquish this sense of independence and admit that in important ways her ethnic community was simply a copy of the white world that surrounded it. Ironically, then,

⁸¹ Hemenway, p.283.

⁸² 'How It Feels to be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.825.

⁸³ Hurston, writing on Eatonville for the WPA in *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p.362.

⁸⁴ 'Spiritual and Neo-Spirituals', in *Hurston*, p.870.

precisely because she wanted to retain a sense of Eatonville as a cultural 'crib' within which an invaluable, enviable culture circulated, Hurston was forced to deride it. Unwilling to undermine her culture she was forced, by her own logic, to undermine her people and reject her 'race' in order to save the possibilities of the place.

In order to retain the spirit of her culture in this book, Hurston divided the town in two, creating a mythical, ancestral Eatonville that could be presented as embodying a 'pure' cultural spirit, and a contemporary town that could be dismissed as housing a degraded generation that had lost its connection to what had seemed a promised land. Before she even described her own birth therefore, Hurston inscribed within the text her town's genesis, demonstrating in the process, what Eatonville could and should have been.

The book begins then with a lush description of Eatonville's beginnings and an evocation of an almost Edenic world. Temporally re-locating the 'five lakes (...) three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas'⁸⁵ of *Mules and Men* into a quasi-mythic world which 'whirled on in the arms of ether' (562), Hurston begins her autobiography with heroic and colourful tales of 'great struggle[s]' that rival the Norse Tales which had so impressed her as a child. Great names are evoked and great battles - the 'wilds of Florida' reverberating to the 'clash of battles among men':

The names of Oglethorpe, Clinch and Andrew Jackson are well known on the white side of the struggle. For the Indians, Miccanopy, Billy Bow-legs and Osceola. The noble Osceola was only a sub-chief, but he came to be recognised

⁸⁵ *Mules and Men*, in *Hurston*, p.12.

by both sides as the ablest of them all. (562)

Prefacing her description of the Eatonville she knew as a child with an unpolluted one of the distant past Hurston dignifies her 'birthplace' by describing a 'sensuous world' in which the 'naked emotions' which will only vicariously be experienced by her contemporaries manifested themselves in actions rather than words; 'anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks' (599) creating a 'primeval' world in which the strong prospered and the weak 'died miserably' (562):

The sensuous world whirled on in the arms of ether for a generation or so. Time made and marred some men. (562)

While this opening section presents a dynamic, colourful Eatonville however, it is not without its problems. For Hurston's tale of her hometown's beginnings seems to celebrate, not the Negroes who eventually inherited the space, but rather the restless white 'frontier seekers' who happened upon it during their travels. Thus although the chapter begins with an assertion of Eatonville as a uniquely black space - 'I was born in a Negro town (...) a pure Negro town - charter, mayor, council, town Marshall and all' (561) - the sense of Eatonville as a space which African Americans have created for themselves recedes as the chapter continues; replaced by a depiction of it as a gift from generous whites to a still virtually enslaved Negro population. Almost immediately then, it is presented as a town which represents not African American independence and spirit but rather WASP liberalism and white fortitude:

Now, these founders (...) had thrown their weight behind the cause of Emancipation. So when it was decided to hold an election, the Eatons, Lawrences, Vanderpools, Hurds, Halls, the Hills, Yateses and Galloways, and all the rest including Bishop Whipple, head of the Minnesota diocese, never for a moment excluding the Negroes from participation. (565)

This problem is compounded by the fact that it is the white rather than the black characters that dominate the fictional space Hurston creates. For in this chapter which celebrates heroic action the Negroes are curiously passive: the helpless pawns of the two opposing armies. Compared with the fearless white founders who risk 'their lives and fortunes that Negroes might be free' and the romantic Native Americans who ferociously defend their space, the black members of the community who quietly 'simmer (...) down' and await instruction, seem apathetic and even indolent: 'a Negro town? (...) It was too vaunting for their comprehension'. Although towards the end of the chapter the 'muscular, dynamic Georgia Negro' Joe Clarke makes his entrance, injecting an element of ethnic ambition into the otherwise lethargic space, there is no black character to rival the swashbuckling 'three [white] adventurers' (565) who turn the settlement of this land into a boys-own romance:

It all started with three white men on a ship off the coast of Brazil. They had been officers in the Union Army. When the bitter war had ended in victory for their side, they set out for South America (...) to find new frontiers. (561)

Compared to these fearless frontiersmen and the rich, powerful and charismatic

WASPS who succeed them and turn the backwater into a centre of 'wealth and fashion', the black settlers who are brought in to do the clearing work make scarcely any impact on the reader's imagination. Hurston does not dwell upon who they are, or where they were 'found'. They simply exist on the margins of the narrative, and on the outskirts of the great estates, insignificant in comparison with the whites that command them. When Hurston does finally turn her attention to them their circumstances do not evoke any sense of independence, but rather one of continuing slavery and while she attempts to differentiate them from their enslaved antecedents by asserting their improved conditions and the congenial nature of the work - 'No more back-bending over rows of cotton; no more fear of the fury of Reconstruction. Good pay, sympathetic white folks and cheap land, soft to the touch of a plow' (564) - the spatial organisation of the place so strongly suggests an ersatz plantation that this special pleading is relatively ineffective. For while the white estates 'flourished' the Negroes set up their homes in 'hastily built shacks around St. John's Hole' (564):

The Negro women could be seen every day but Sunday squatting around St. John's hole on their haunches, primitive style, washing clothes and fishing, while their men went forth and made their support in cutting new ground, building, and planting orange groves. (564)

In many ways then, this is a 'discomfiting' beginning;⁸⁶ a chapter filled with images which provoke comparison with demeaning orientalist narratives, apparently doing little to challenge Eurocentric ideas of African American as childlike, exotic

⁸⁶ An adjective Hemenway uses to describe *Dust Tracks* as a whole (p.276).

primitives. As a result it is easy to dismiss it as the result of what the critic Hazel Carby has described as Hurston's 'colonial imagination'.⁸⁷ Yet there is an element of irony contained within these descriptions which subtly critiques white behaviour, suggesting a less 'color-struck' Hurston. For when one looks closely at the descriptions of the apparently awesome whites with their 'wealthy homes, glittering carriages' and 'blooded horses' (563), it is possible to detect a layer of cynicism which judges these fashionable folk to be fools who present not a glamorous display which all around must inevitably aspire to, but instead a ridiculous exhibition. For when compared to the black folk who fit easily into the natural landscape these 'well-dressed folk' present 'a curious spectacle in the swampy forests so dense that they are dark at high noon' (564) and though it is the Negro women who, squatting by the lake in what seems to be the most natural of habitats, seem to constitute a picturesque scene - they 'could be seen' by any voyeur, 'every day except Sunday' - it is the white people who actually form a 'spectacle':

And there on the shores of Lake Maitland rose stately houses, surrounded by beautiful grounds. Other settlers looked in from upper New York State (...) and the private coaches of millionaires and other dignitaries from North and South became a common sight on the siding, Even a president of the United States visited his friends at Maitland. (563)

Furthermore, though the whites are powerful, controlling the work force of the area by their command of economic resources and dominating the landscape with their

⁸⁷ Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk', p.80.

stately homes, this is a power and a position which, even before the black community surprises them with its bid for independence, seems tenuous and likely to be short-lived. For while the black population has settled into the life of the primeval forests, the land 'softening' under their ploughs allowing them to make homes for themselves, the rich whites remain estranged and alienated upon the landscape, perching parasitically upon the newly cleared terrain which threatens nightly to devour them and return to its original state:

The terrain swarmed with the deadly diamond-back rattlesnake, and huge, decades-old bull alligators bellowed their challenge from the uninhabited shore of lakes. (563)

Thus while the land welcomes its black inhabitants, allowing the transplanted Africans to return to a (romanticised) version of their earlier life it defies the whites, ensuring that they never 'settle' or fully inhabit the space they have fought over. Inevitably then the black folk take possession of the land, asserting a sort of natural right that seems to be sanctioned by the heavens:

The whole lake country of Florida sprouted with life – mostly Northerners, and prosperity was everywhere. It was in the late eighties that the stars fell, and many of the original settlers date their coming "just before, or just after the stars fell". (566)

Having established Eatonville's birth Hurston turns to her own, quickly

demonstrating that it is not only the 'stars' that have fallen since the 'late eighties', but also the 'folk'. For in describing her birth Hurston simultaneously demonstrates the death of the Eatonville ideal. After presenting this town's original inhabitants as ideal African Americans who simultaneously embodied both the primitive organicism of a romanticised Africa and the pioneer spirit of a 'bustling' America - squatting on their haunches, 'primitive style' at one moment, making 'history' by founding the first Negro town the next - Hurston brings us down to earth with descriptions of individuals who are scarcely recognisable as the inheritors of this 'pure Negro' (561) space. Showing little sign of their connection to the spontaneous, unencumbered folk who once washed, fished and planted around St. John's Hole, they are immediately cast in a negative light; characterised more through lack than through any positive attribute. Unimaginative and 'drab' (596) they are uninteresting 'regular people' who have relinquished the 'burly, boiling hard-hitting, rugged-individualis[m]' (567) of their ancestors for a rather timid, superstitious collectivity. Afraid of 'forward ways' (589) and of 'spirit' of any kind - the perceived threat of lynching crippling them despite the complete absence of white 'enmity'⁸⁸ - they form a community which is 'dull (...) most of the time' (589).

Likewise the space these people inhabit is scarcely recognisable as the place their predecessors had established. The wild and 'potent', 'primeval forests' are shown to have been domesticated – tamed by a folk who prefer strawberry patches and peach

⁸⁸ Just as she scorned this fear in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, depicting Janie's nanny's anxieties as 'twisted', so in this book she fails to take it seriously. Undoubtedly this attitude was informed by Hurston's decision to 'turn [her] back on the past' and cut her and her race loose from the 'dark years of slavery' ('Seeing the World As It Is', in *Hurston*, p.787). Unfortunately, rather than dignifying blacks as equals, this dismissal of history often encouraged white readers to erase the 'dark years' completely, and blame blacks for their own beleaguered status.

plantations to the adventure of lush woods – and the lake, which once provided sustenance and aesthetic pleasure has been abandoned in favour of ‘asphalt’.⁸⁹ Rather than a secluded settlement which, encircling a lake ‘as round as a dollar, and less than half a mile wide’ (564), inculcated an organic sense of unity, therefore, Eatonville is shown to have become a virtual thoroughfare which frustrates rather than generates any sense of community. Rather than a cluster of dwellings which are united through a focus point that they all share - in this case the ‘Hole’ that is in fact a ‘beauty spot’ (564) - her hometown is presented as little more than a string of unconnected houses that squat haphazardly along Highway Number 17; a space which, rather than inculcating a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance seems designed to remind its inhabitants of their insignificance and marginality:

One way to Orlando ran past my house, so the carriages and cars would pass before me (...) I kept right on gazing at them, and “going a piece of the way” whenever I could make it. (589)

As the narrative develops however, this ostensible architectural randomness is shown to be deceptive, masking a rigid form of spatial organisation. It soon becomes apparent that, rather than a dull but benign cluster of houses thoughtlessly ‘scattered’ along the highway, Eatonville is a distinctly ordered space. Yet, rather than a village organised around an organic ‘heart’ (599), it is a town that has at its centre Joe Clarke’s porch.

⁸⁹ Hurston, in *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, p.364.

The 'most interesting place that [Hurston] could think of' (599), this porch is a place that seems to offer an escape from the 'drabness' that seems to characterise the rest of the town. Unlike all of the other structures that militate against adventure, constraining the imagination by replacing 'the tasks of Hercules' with mundane duties - '[r]aking back yards and carrying out chamber pots' (595) - the porch seems actively to encourage people to relinquish their workaday selves and 'act like [the] gods' (595) their ancestors seem to have been:

Men sat around the store on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next one through their mouths. The right and the wrong, the who, when and why was passed on, and nobody doubted the conclusions (...). There were no discreet nuances of life on Joe Clarke's porch. There was open kindnesses, anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks, but all emotions were naked, and nakedly arrived at. (599)

However, as this passage suggests, and others confirm - 'I really loved to hear the menfolks holding a "lying" session' (601) - the 'heart and spring of the town' (599) was exclusively male. Women were allowed to 'st[an]d around' the porch 'on Saturday nights' and listen to themselves being 'glorified' (599), but this was the only role they were allowed to play. Children, of course, were also barred, yet while Hurston's brother could look forward to the day when, having grown 'two or three hairs on his top lip' he would be allowed to take his place in this macho space - 'One afternoon my oldest brother was on the store porch (...). A married man was giving some advice about growing a big, thick moustache' (600) - all that she could

anticipate was becoming one of the off-stage women that the men summarily ignore:

The wives, of the story-tellers I mean, might yell from backyards for them to come and tote some water, or chop wood for the cook-stove and never get a move out of the men. The usual rejoinder was, "Oh, she's got enough to go on (...) Pay her no mind"(601).⁹⁰

This spatial segregation is problematic not only because of the effect it has on Hurston's life, but also because of the effect it has on her life-story. For, having admitted that she was expected to remain with the other women in Eatonville's backyards, slopping out the 'pots' that the more dynamic men 'pee in' (567), Hurston could not easily demonstrate her own 'especial talents' (731). Denied access to the performance spaces of the town and isolated by way of her gender from the cultural forms which form its 'heart', she was left with little space to act out her difference and make manifest the 'feeling of difference' she laid claim to (597).

Hurston solved this problem by creating within her narrative a space that was unaffected by Eatonville's small-minded chauvinism and which therefore allowed her both to develop free of the restraints her gender would otherwise have placed upon her and perform an active, vital role in her own narrative. This space is the five

⁹⁰ Of course, in a sense Hurston's invisibility is a bonus, enabling her to develop the skills that she will depend upon in her career as an anthropologist. Yet a sense of frustration is palpable. While the statement which follows the passage cited above - 'I went on inside' - seems designed to dignify Hurston, for example - the brevity of the sentence implying that she is uninterested and unimpressed by her brother's promotion - it also articulates an anger which is intensified by the fact that, when the 'menfolks' do notice her presence, they greet it with a humiliating silence which amplifies her exclusion: 'I emerged from the door and the porch fell silent' (601). As this episode ends in violence (though typically, this violence is enacted by someone other than Hurston), her sense of albeit sublimated rage is palpable; 'Later on, I asked my brother what they were talking about, and he

acres that form her mother's garden, and unlike the rest of Eatonville, which seems 'dusty' and barren,⁹¹ it is an oasis of colour, perfume and good 'things to eat':

We lived on a big piece of ground with two big chinaberry trees shading the front gate ... (sic) Cape jasmine bushes with hundreds of blooms on either side of the walks (...). There were plenty of orange, grapefruit, tangerine, guavas and other fruits in our yard (...). We had a big barn, and a stretch of ground well covered with Bermuda grass. (571-2)

Presided over by a mother who, while sharing some of Eatonville's views – the idea, for example, that 'it was not lady-like for girls to play with boys' (585) - generally had little time for 'village customs' (589), this yard is presented as a free space within which Hurston can 'jump at de sun' (572). Isolated from the rest of the town by virtue of the trees that form a natural boundary, Hurston describes it as a space that allowed her to forget her marginal status and her gender; a space, therefore, within which she could take centre stage:

I used to take a seat at the foot of [the "loving pine"] and play for hours without any toys. [The tree and I] talked about everything in my world. Sometimes we just took it out in singing songs for hours (...). I began to make up stories (...). Just from one fancy to another, adding more and more detail until they seemed real. (606)

slapped me all over the place'.

⁹¹ 'How It Feels To Be Colored Me', in *Hurston*, p.826.

Sectioning off this piece of land as an innocent, transparent, fundamentally natural space within which none of the artificial ideological and spatial divisions of the town held sway, Hurston was able to explain how she had been able to develop without ‘squinch[ing] her spirit’ (570). Using it as a performance space – a naturally occurring porch upon which she could rehearse the story telling which would eventually elevate her above the community – she was able to demonstrate her psychic, emotional and ideological independence that would lead her to disregard the folk and their parochial beliefs:

“[D]on’t stand in dat doorway gazing out at [the white folks] neither. Youse too brazen to live long.”

Nevertheless, I kept right on gazing. (589)

However, as soon as Hurston’s mother dies and her protection is lost Eatonville begins to emerge as a force to be reckoned with. The centre of power shifts and the town quickly begins to insinuate itself into the space Lucy Hurston had so rigorously defended. Clustering around the house, ‘talking in low tones’ and ‘sipping up the drama’ of Lucy’s premature death, the prurient townspeople begin to shift the furniture and move the clocks, looking glasses and pillows so that the house ceases to be Hurston’s home. The ‘physical aspects’ of the world her mother had created begin to disintegrate, ‘chang[ing] a world’ and Hurston is left at the mercy of ‘village dames’ who seem almost to embody ‘Death’:

I noted a number of women going inside Mama’s room and staying. It looked

strange. So I went on in. Papa was standing at the foot of the bed looking down on my mother who was breathing hard. As I crowded in, they lifted up the bed and turned it around so that Mama's eyes would face the east (...). And now, Death stirred from his platform in his secret place in our yard, and came inside the house.

Somebody reached for the clock, while Mrs. Mattie Clarke put out her hand to the pillow to take it away. (617)

Hurston describes the next few years as a Dickensian hell in which the community takes advantage of her vulnerability and punishes her for her erstwhile 'brazenness' - 'One of the most serious objections to me was that (...) I *still* did not know how to be humble' (635, emphasis added). Finding 'comfort nowhere', her 'wordless' misery inciting only impatience in those who were supposed to be caring for her, she presents the townspeople's actions as vindictive attempts to humiliate and 'smother' her. Though she makes some attempt to explain their apparent heartlessness - 'I was not comfortable to have around' (636) - the general tone of the passage is one of bitterness and betrayal; Hurston using free indirect discourse to reveal the cruelty generated by her guardians' lack of understanding:

People who had no parents could not afford to sit around on school benches wearing out what clothes they had (...) A child in my place ought to realize I was lucky to have a roof over my head and anything to eat at all. (635)

Hurston implies then that this callousness was personal, the townspeople behaving in

this way simply because Hurston, with her unconventional 'dreams' made them uncomfortable - 'this book-reading business was a hold-back and an unrelieved evil' (635). Implying that an easier, more conventional personality (the 'meek and mild' Sarah perhaps) would have received more sympathy and more 'room' to grieve Hurston attempts to de-politicise her experiences – presenting them as peculiar to her, rather than representative of others. However, despite her efforts it is clear that the heartless demands the community made were motivated not by an antipathy towards her individual identity, but rather by an inability to see Hurston as an individual at all. To the townspeople, as the following passage demonstrates, she was simply a young woman who, like all other young women, should relinquish her ambitions, smother her 'impulses' and assume the role that the community had reserved for her:

I was growing and the general thought was that I could bring in something. This book-reading business was a hold-back and an unrelieved evil. I could not do very much, but look at so-and-so. She was nursing for some good white people. A dollar a week and most of her clothes. (635)

What makes this period so difficult therefore, is that, after years of being encouraged 'at every opportunity' to think of herself as transgressive individual for whom the sky was the limit - 'Mama exhorted her children (...) to "jump at de sun." We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground' (572) - Hurston was suddenly being treated as a conventional young woman, whose duty it was to keep her feet firmly on the ground and concentrate on the roof over her head, the food in

her stomach, and the Dollars in the pockets of those who had been forced to support her. After years of being regarded as a prodigy whose talents were to be encouraged with gifts of money and books,⁹² she was suddenly reminded that, like all 'girl babies' (577), she was little more than a burden.

Of course Hurston does not submit to this pressure. Preferring 'self-support' (636) to the sort of 'sickly' domestic dependency the other women of the village are shown to have settled for she leaves as soon as she is able. Yet while it is apparent that the chauvinism of the town has driven her out - the townspeople being unable to 'conceive of' a female role that is not intrinsically 'humble'(635) - Hurston draws back from stating as much, ultimately presenting her departure as an obligation rather than a choice; the result of a 'rod of compellent' that had been 'laid to [her] back' (634) rather than the dubious sexual politics of the town. Though she admits that the town added to her 'misery', refusing her the comfort of books, for example, and allowing her only 'vagrant peeps' into a scholastic light, she finally depicts her frustration as the product of metaphysical rather than socio-political pressures.

Hurston does this in two ways. Firstly, she calls on the 'pilgrim' persona she had established for herself earlier on in the book. Reminding the reader of the 'visions' she had previously experienced by recalling the language of these 'pronouncements',⁹³ she asserts herself as a woman whose destiny is out of her

⁹² See, for example, the chapter entitled 'The Inside Search' in which Hurston recounts the admiration of Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Hurd', *Hurston*, pp.591-594.

⁹³ Critics have generally shied away from judging these visions. In his analysis of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for example, Robert Hemenway skirts the issue by stating, 'Did the visions occur? Probably' (*Zora Neale Hurston*, p.283). However it seems to me that they might have been part of an elaborate joke. Before Hurston recalls them, for example, she describes herself, first as eating a 'big raisin' that

hands. Thus when the 'vagrancy' - which was ever-present in both Hurston's intellectual nomadism and in her preliminary wanderings - begins 'in reality' (634), she is able to present it as the result of a force of nature far more powerful than anything Eatonville can muster. Consequently, though she admits that leaving Eatonville gave her some pleasure - 'It was a glorious feeling when it came' (636) - she is able to assert that it was an event that was forced upon her and which was therefore tragic rather than treacherous:

But the way! Its agony was equally certain. It was before me, and no one could spare me my pilgrimage. The rod of compulsion was laid to my back. I must go the way. (634)

Secondly, resurrecting the wanderlust motif which she had scattered throughout the early chapters of her text, Hurston lays claim to a nomadic identity which aligns her not with the Eatonville women who must stay at home in the service of others, but rather with the men who are allowed to 'meander' at will (570). Despite the fact that by this point in the narrative, she has been abandoned by her father, Hurston leads us back through a series of narrative signposts - 'my vagrancy had begun' (634); 'I wanted action' (585); 'It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like' (583) - to an original moment in which a paternal legacy was prophesied:

I just took to walking and kept the thing a'going. The strangest thing about it

she finds on the ground, and then settling down to sleep in some cool shade. The allusions to Alice in Wonderland are unmistakably, disrupting the overblown seriousness of the passage that follows it

was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods all alone, following some inside urge to go places. This alarmed my mother a great deal. She used to say that she believed a woman who was an enemy of hers had sprinkled “travel dust” round the doorstep the day I was born. That was the only explanation she could find. I don’t know why it never occurred to her to connect my tendency with my father, who didn’t have a thing on his mind but this town and the next one. That should have given her a sort of hint. Some children are just bound to take after their fathers in spite of women’s prayers.

(580)

Melding the empowering, nurturing femininity her mother represented with the spirit of adventure that the men of Eatonville seemed to embody therefore, Hurston collapses the gender divide that the town had established and presents herself as transcending rather than rejecting the folk and the space they inhabit. Claiming full possession of the characteristics that she originally presented as ‘pure Negro’ she paradoxically proves her fidelity to the spirit of the place by abandoning its physical actuality. In this way she presents her bold departure into an unknown world as a confirmation of her connection with the black and white ‘frontier-seekers’ (562) who had settled the land and established the community rather than an abandonment of them. Consequently, while her contemporaries continue to embody ‘dreariness and lack of hope and blunted impulses’ (645), Hurston pronounces herself an ‘adventurer’ incarnate:

I took a firm grip on the only weapon I had – hope, and set my feet. Maybe everything would be all right from now on. Maybe. Well, I put on my shoes and I started. (665)

Having ‘set [her] feet’ away from the town, Hurston suggests that she never looked back. Although she soon abandons the chronological description of her development in favour of discrete essays she uses the next few chapters to describe a series of spaces which take the place of Eatonville; spaces which function in fact as surrogate homes for the orphaned ‘waif’ (685), embracing her in a way that her ‘Birthplace’ had failed to do. In ‘Back Stage and the Railroad’,⁹⁴ for example, she describes the way in which she was taken in by a theatrical company that not only adored her – ‘it seemed that I was necessary to everybody’ – but also empowered her, actively encouraging her to take possession of the sorts of spaces she was more usually denied: ‘I was welcome in everybody’s coach seat’ (653). Similarly in ‘School Again’,⁹⁵ Hurston describes the way in which she quickly became ‘knee deep’ first in the Hughes family and then in Barnard’s Department of Anthropology, where she exchanged the perfidious John Hurston for a father to end all fathers, the ‘King of Kings’ (683):

That man can make people work the hardest with just a look or a word, of anybody else in creation. He is idolized by everybody who takes his orders.

We call him Papa, too. One day, I burst into his office and asked for “Papa

⁹⁴ *Dust Tracks*, in *Hurston*, pp.635-665.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.666-686.

Franz” and his secretary gave me a look and told me I had better not let him hear me say that. Of course, I knew better, but at a social gathering of the Department of Anthropology at his house a few nights later, I brought it up.

“Of course, Zora is my daughter. Certainly!” he said with a smile. “Just one of my missteps, that’s all”. (683-4)

Despite the fact that she actually maintained contact with her hometown throughout the rest of her life - raising funds for its school,⁹⁶ often living nearby and, most obviously, returning there to collect folklore in 1927 – Hurston decided to erase the town from the rest of her account of her life. Though she described reunions that healed the familial rifts that had resulted from her determination to pursue her own ambitions, she refrained from re-establishing her links with the community as a whole. As a result, by the end of the book, Eatonville has come to function as the point ‘farthest down’ (689) against which her achievements can be measured; the ‘depths’ from which she almost miraculously came:

I had been admitted to the American Folk-Lore Society. Later, when I was in the field, I was invited to become a member of the American Ethnological Society, and shortly after the American Anthropological Society (...) to me these honors meant something, insignificant as they might appear to the world. It was a long step from the waif of Eatonville. (684-5)

Yet, by the end of the book, Hurston seems to effect an imaginative return to the place

⁹⁶ In 1942 Hurston tried unsuccessfully to interest Ethel Waters in performing in a benefit concert for Eatonville’s Hungerford School. See *Hurston*, p.973.

and the people she seemed to have abandoned; to the 'time and place' which, despite her earlier protestations, is finally recognised to 'have have had their say' (561). Circling back to the beginning, returning to the sort of lyrical, quasi-mythical language she had evoked in the first few paragraphs, Hurston conjures up a sense of physical and emotional reparation by evoking the 'kinfolks and skinfolks' which, until this point had been submerged beneath a series of larger-than-life white characters. In her last paragraph therefore, she suggests that she is not a waif after all, but rather a woman embedded in a 'living' (769) culture:

My kinfolks, and my "skinfolks" are dearly loved. My own circumference of everyday life is there. (769)

Reconstituting herself as a woman embedded within an encompassing folk, Hurston is able to relinquish the cynicism that had marked the intervening chapters and adopt a more 'mellow' tone. Transcending the divisions that her narrative so forcefully articulated by returning to a distinctly romantic lived experience, she is able, in her last paragraph to suggest that she is finally, at home: 'I can (...) [g]et mellow and think kindly of the world' (769).

Yet the problem of Hurston's place within this now abstract community remains. Unsure of an audience and untrusting of company – 'I can sit around and write for myself, if for nobody else' (768) - she is unable to effect a physical return. She must remain isolated, protected by the books that are evoked as far the most reliable companions. The 'happy ending' that she conjures up for herself, therefore, is distinctly

fragile, requiring an intellectual evasion of the cultural issues she has described and a physical withdrawal from the political, economic and social world. Thus, just as she elided the contradictions her fictional world had exposed in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by isolating her heroine from her own 'skinfolks', so in this text Hurston steps down from the figurative porch the book has represented and wanders back into her own kitchen. Papering over the cracks that her own narrative has revealed with portentous metaphysical prose therefore, Hurston ultimately retreats like Janie Crawford, into a private world of solipsistic imaginings:

All the while my days can be a succession of coffee cups. Then when sleeplessness of old age attacks me, I can have a likker bottle snug in my pantry and sip away and sleep. (769)

Although there is evasion in this last paragraph, however, there is subversion too. The last sentence, which seems on the surface a mere extension of Hurston's rather unconvincing rhapsody on inter-racial 'fellowship', contains a considerably less benign sentiment. For after describing her white readers as 'godly demons' who are a 'few hundred generations' away from 'breed[ing] a noble world', Hurston's suggestion that they all may meet in the next world 'at a barbecue' becomes rather ambiguous. Although on one level it reinforces Hurston's claim to be among her "skinfolks", the barbecue evoking African American customs, on another its evocation of fire is just enough to suggest that what Hurston is coding into her summation is a declaration that she will see all those who do not look 'just like' her, in 'Hell' (769).

At the last moment therefore, the shadow of a less 'mellow', 'kindly' Hurston appears behind the proverbial 'kissing-friend'; a woman who, having been unable to make herself at home in a world which clearly has no place for 'bodacious' women, determines to hang on the 'red-hot tongs of Hell' she has so loving 'fondled' and induce discomfort in her 'fellow[s]'. Finally then, what we are left with, is not a harmless 'very old' woman who intends to 'think kindly of the world', but rather another 'Sis Cat', waiting to pounce.

CONCLUSION

Although *Dust Tracks on a Road* was the last of Hurston's books to evoke her hometown, the dismal Eatonville it presents is not the one that has prevailed since her renaissance. Instead, those who have wished to preserve Hurston's 'genius' have canonised a more benign representation authenticating, not the troubled, rigidly gendered space of the later book, but rather the 'legend[ary]' Eatonville of *Mules and Men*.¹ Flying over Florida in 1971, 'Looking for Zora', for example, Alice Walker wanted and expected to find a city which, give or take a few guavas, was the same as the one described in the opening pages of Hurston's book of folklore:

I wake up just as the plane is lowering over Sanford, Florida, which means I am also looking down on Eatonville, Zora Neale Hurston's birthplace. I recognise it from Zora's description in *Mules and Men* (...). Of course I cannot see the guavas, but the five lakes are still there, and it is the lakes I count as the plane prepares to land in Orlando.²

Having 'lived' with Eatonville in her imagination 'for such a long time'³ Walker was determined, just as Hurston had been forty years before, to find that 'the town had not changed'.⁴ Thus as soon as she enters this 'settlement' she begins to create links, tying the town of her imagination and that of 'Zora's book' to the space she is experiencing: 'I stand at the counter [in Eatonville City Hall] looking down on [the

¹ c.f., Alice Walker, 'Zora Neale Hurston', p.86.

² Walker, 'Looking for Zora', p.94.

woman behind the desk], the first Eatonville resident I have spoken to. Because of Zora's books, I feel I know something about her'.⁵

Of course Walker is too subtle a writer to allow her own projections to remain unexamined and as a result these elements of wish-fulfilment are tempered with a layer of irony. Walker reveals, for example, that there is little sign of Hurston in the town. Her family has moved on and most of her contemporaries are long gone, 'Mrs. Moseley [being] about the only one still living who might remember her'. Crucially even those who remain are shown to have little interest in Hurston; her books are not taught in the schools and none of the town's inhabitants demonstrate any of the passion concerning her work that Walker exudes:

Mrs. Moseley is out of her car (...). "I'm eighty-two years old, you know," she says. "And I just can't remember things the way I used to. Anyhow, Zora Neale left here to go to school and she never really came back to live. She'd come here for material for her books, but that was all. She spent most of her time down in South Florida (...). I read some of her books a long time ago, but then people got to borrowing and borrowing and they borrowed them all away."

"I could send you a copy of everything that's been reprinted," I offer. "Would you like me to do that?"

³ Walker, 'Looking for Zora', p.94.

⁴ *Mules and Men in Hurston*, p.13.

“No,” says Mrs. Moseley promptly.⁶

In fact, although Walker begins her essay with an extended reference to *Mules and Men*, she also evokes the more ambiguous Eatonville of *Dust Tracks*. She includes her accomplice’s discovery, for example, that many of the town’s folk more closely resemble the parochial, conventional people of Hurston’s autobiography than the generous community Walker hopes for: “Many of the church people around here (...) thought Zora pretty loose. I don’t think they appreciated her writing about them”. Yet ultimately the town of ‘Zora’s’ ‘legend[ary]’ book endures. An ‘old, good-looking’ authoritative friend of Hurston, who stands as a surrogate father for Walker, and, implicitly, for her text - lays such accusations to rest, declaring ‘with great heat’ that Hurston was the town’s heart-string after all:

“She *didn’t* have a pauper’s funeral! (...). Everybody around here *loved* Zora.”⁷

Although Walker’s essay is a sophisticated blend of nostalgia, desire, irony and aspiration which self-consciously alerts the reader to the fact that what the author is mapping onto the Florida landscape is a space that only really existed in Hurston’s imagination, it is an essay which finally affirms this space rather than querying it. Thus although, from the beginning Walker warns us that she is unwilling to

⁵ Walker, ‘Looking for Zora’, p.95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.97.

relinquish the Eatonville of her 'imagination' - 'I can hardly believe it will be found existing in its own right'⁸ – by the end of the essay the abstract and experiential Eatonvilles coalesce, sealed as one by Hurston's enduring presence: 'I (...) yell "Zora!" and my foot sinks into a hole'.

Other attempts to map Hurston's fictional Eatonville onto its physical namesake, however, have tended to be less self-conscious and less ironic. The Eatonville Festival, for example, which was founded in 1990 is an annual event that seems to be dedicated to the project of 'restoring' Eatonville and its community to that which had been memorialised by Hurston's 'mighty fiction quill'.⁹ Linked to the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community Inc., this Festival is one that uses what Michael Awkward has describes as a 'good vibes' methodology¹⁰ in order to return an expurgated 'Zora!' to an '[a]historic community'¹¹ and create an uncomplicated space that 'the spirit can move around in'.¹² It is a Festival therefore, that is not only dedicated to the erasure of the present in favour of an idealised past, but also to the erasure of the complex, difficult Hurston of *Dust Tracks* in favour of the 'Magical Zora' of *Mules and Men*.¹³

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95; p.112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94.

⁹ Ruthe Sheffey, founder of the Zora Neale Hurston Society, Forward to *All About Zora: Views and Reviews by Colleagues and Scholars*, ed. by Alice Morgan Grant (Winter Park, Florida: Four-G, 1991), pp.iv-viii, p.vii.

¹⁰ Awkward cited in Tuzylina Jita Allan, *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics: A Comparative Review* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), p.12.

¹¹ N.Y. Nathiri, 'Introduction', to *Zora! Zora Neale Hurston and Her Community*, compiled and ed. by Nathiri (Orlando: Sentinel Communication 6, 1991), pp.12-20, p.18.

¹² Jo Anne Cornwell, 'Searching for Zora in Alice's Garden', p.98.

¹³ Sheffey, p.vii.

The more troubling facets of Hurston and Eatonville that these idealisations elide refuse to go away however, and the book produced to record the festival's events entitled *Zora! Zora Neale Hurston and Her Community*, is an uneasy mixture of fact and fantasy. A montage of photographs taken during the 1991 festival, for example, includes a picture of a frail Louise Thompson Patterson touring the grounds in a golf cart. Clearly included in order to establish a link with Hurston's past, and to absorb into Eatonville more cosmopolitan elements of Hurston's life, this picture evokes division rather than communion. For Hurston famously fell out with Patterson during the writing of 'Mule Bone', and the two were never reconciled.

Just as the sight of Patterson unsettles the dominant account, so the voice of one of Eatonville's residents disturbs the communality the festival strives for. Cited in Nathiri's introduction to *Zora!*, Mrs. Geraldine Otey reminds the reader of the hostility Hurston presented herself as experiencing in *Dust Tracks*. Recalling the way in which the Eatonville community failed to recognise themselves in Hurston's books Mrs.Otey problematises the claim made in Nathiri's title, that Eatonville was, in any way, '*her community*' (emphasis added):

[Hurston] wasn't that popular around here because she tried to write about local people and they resented the way she tried to picture them.¹⁴

¹⁴ Nathiri, p.18. In 'Excursions into Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville', Anna Lillios uncovers a more extreme form of hostility towards Hurston. Interviewing Annie Davis, the step-daughter of Armetta Jones, she learns that Hurston had been threatened with a gun. Quoting Davis Lillios writes, '[Hurston] jumped up and left. She ran in the house, got her bag and left. If she hadn't, [Moseley] was going to kill her' (*Zora in Florida*, pp.13-27, p.26).

It is easy to imagine that Hurston would actually have enjoyed these signs of discord, even if they were at her expense. It is clear from her work that although she often fell for the fantasy of synthesis – using a rather unconvincing holism in order to paper over the tensions within her work – she also revelled in ‘a bit of rivalry’,¹⁵ finding in disunity and irregularity ‘the boiled-down juice of human living’.¹⁶ I would like to suggest in these last few paragraphs therefore, that the ‘renovated’¹⁷ Eatonville that has been mythologised by writers such as Walker and Nathiri misrepresents, not only Hurston’s work, but also the spirit behind the work, creating ‘sheepish unison’ out of the ‘dissonance’ Hurston strove to communicate.¹⁸

In this thesis I have read these three texts separately and in a chronological order. Describing the very different circumstances through which each of these books were written I have shown how different genres and different times produced diverse texts and multiple, often contradictory ‘Eatonvilles’. In my first chapter I demonstrated the way in which Hurston used Eatonville to play with traditional anthropological tropes, finally ‘hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick’¹⁹ by producing a text which frustrated rather than forwarded a problematic anthropological project. In my second chapter I described the way in which Hurston inverted Eatonville, presenting it as a place to flee from rather than ‘speed’ towards.²⁰ Finally in my third chapter I

¹⁵ Hurston, ‘Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals’, in *Hurston*, p.869.

¹⁶ Hurston, *The Florida Negro* (unpublished), 1938, printed in *Hurston*, 875-911, p.875.

¹⁷ This is the word Hurston used to describe spirituals that had been ‘tampered with’ in ‘Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals’, p.871.

¹⁸ ‘Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals’, p.870.

¹⁹ This is the expression Hurston used to describe Eatonville’s incorporation in *Dust Tracks*. She writes, ‘Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. The town is not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else’ (*Hurston*, p.561).

²⁰ *Mules and Men* in *Hurston*, p.12.

explored the ways in which Hurston struggled to deal with the inadequacies of this space, while still holding on to an albeit idealised sense of its possibilities.

In a sense, however, my thesis has imposed an order upon Hurston's books and Hurston's 'Eatonvilles' that I now want to disrupt. For although, for the sake of clarity I have discussed these three texts separately, what I now want to suggest is that these three versions of Eatonville should be read and considered synchronically; perceived as different perspectives coalescing in one - virtual - space rather than discrete, diminishing entities. As 'discord', according to Hurston, 'is more natural than accord',²¹ I would like to suggest that rather than attempting to locate an authentic 'Eatonville' (and inevitably an accompanying authentic Hurston), and privileging this one over the rest, all three competing, contesting representations should be held together as 'unceasing variations on a theme'.²² This cultural space could therefore be understood as a 'locus of contradictions';²³ simultaneously a sexist, class-ridden community and a timeless idyll; a collection of houses 'scattere[d] by a hard road that 'bursts through on its way from US 17 to US 441', and a 'generous' town that contains a culture's 'heart'.²⁴

²¹ 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' in *Hurston*, 830-841, p.840.

²² 'Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals', p.869.

²³ Hazel Carby uses this expression in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelist* in order to describe what she considers black feminist criticism should be (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). I would like to suggest that the Eatonvilles of Hurston's work should be read in the same way; 'as a problem not a solution (...), a sign that should be interrogated' (p.15).

²⁴ Hurston, in *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration for the State of Florida (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p.362.

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