Reading Hurston Writing

"He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind." (Hurston, *Mules* 3)

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I have always been intrigued by Alice Walker's positioning of Hurston's two most popular works, *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, at opposite ends of an axis of authenticity. In her foreword to Hemenway's literary biography of Hurston, she notes that she would choose *Mules and Men* "because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings" (xiii). In this short statement, Walker sets out a fairly straightforward typology of genres: Novels offer us the authentic self, and ethnographies offer us authentic others. In the novel, we have access to, and in fact sometimes occupy, the interior of characters; in the ethnography, we access the interior of a group of others.

Such notions of inside and outside and especially how they relate to ideas about authenticity concern me both as a working folklorist in the field and as a teacher of folklore and literature in the classroom.[1] The ongoing critique and revision of the ethnographic project, mostly viewed in terms of authorship of representational texts and also in terms of how these texts instantiate and substantiate social-science authority, has focused our attention on the many failures of the ethnographic intention to get inside a community and/or its culture.[2] Examinations of Hurston's *Mules and Men* have contributed to this sense that the ethnographic project is doomed to failure. After all, if someone as close to her informants as Hurston was still forced to flee a fieldwork site, what does that say about those projects where the initial hermeneutical gap is all that much wider (see Dorst)?

On the literary side, Hurston's novel continues to be read mostly for its divisions as well. One of the early critical examinations of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* found that Hurston "weakened the plot by a careless shift of point of view" (Turner 107). More recent readings find that "the double-voiced utterance . . . [, the] text's central device of naturalization, [serves] to reinforce both Janie's division [of her self] and paradoxically the narrator's distance from Janie" (Gates, *Signifying* 209). Other readers, too, continue to focus on the eliding of the narrator and Janie in the novel. In a kind of response, or defense of Hurston and her most famous work, feminist critics have championed "Janie's healthier and questioning fragmentation" (Lubiano 136).

These readings, and many others like them, seek out images of unity and division. Indeed, such images, and their rhetorics, dominate critical examinations of Hurston's work, whether the considerations be by literary scholars or folklorists and anthropologists. These unities or divisions are then read against the background of African American history or culture as a cultural attribute or trope. In other words, Janie's achievement of a unified voice/self or of a divided voice/self is seen as appropriately representative of the African American experience.[3] In this way, Hurston is the ultimate insider: Her divisions and elisions are defended on the basis of their being representative of African American ways of speaking and/or of the African American experience itself. As John Roberts notes, "American folklorists have traditionally studied African American folklore as a course for generating statements about the black character and/or experience in the United States" (161). Ironically, Hurston's divisions become wholenesses of a different kind, standing in for the necessarily divided self of African Americana and of women in a society and culture that privilege the white and male.

In an effort to move our critical consideration beyond reified unities or divisions, the focus of this essay is on Hurston's interest in "a body and a self that cannot be bounded or contained" (Kawash 169). That is, I argue that one way to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men* is to see Hurston searching for the possibility of community without the boundaries of self and other. As a folklorist, I am drawn to this character of her work because it seems to explore an important dimension of the nature of identity and community and the relationships between the two, a dimension highlighted in the growing body of scholarship on the nature of dialogue and the dialogic nature of subjectivity.[4] What I like about pursuing this idea through Hurston's writing is that her work extends the concept beyond the realm of various forms of intertextuality and gives it a human face, a face that speaks, kisses, and eats—and perhaps also contains a god, as I will suggest in my conclusion.

In order to offer a reading of Hurston from such a perspective, my method will be to examine the various registers, or dimensions, in which images and acts of blurring or fusing occur. There are four dimensions I address here, each represented by a section of the essay. The first is the blurring of narratives or stories, where those stories are said to represent actual experience, with experience understood as underlying or constituting a distinct historical personality or individual. The second blurring or fusion occurs in the frames within which the narratives of *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* occur. The third instance of blurring can be found in the metaphors of kissing, which is tied closely to storytelling in both works, and in how bodies, and thus selves, become confused, intertwined. The fourth dimension in which blurring or fusing occurs is an extension of the previous one and arises in the image of eating, where one body figuratively and literally becomes part of another. Hurston further complicates the matter of eating since at the end of *Mules and Men* she conflates eating with narrating. My goal is to contribute to the growing body of literature that addresses not only Hurston's representations of the inner and outer lives of African American characters, be they fictional or nonfictional, but also to the textual strategies she, and others like her, deploy in so doing.

Hurston Lying

As noted above, the blurrings and confusions have been either problematic for readers or indicative of Hurston's work and the larger experi-

ence which she represents. Such trouble often requires readers to want to fix her in some way, to make static what Hurston represents as dynamic, to make whole what Hurston represents as fragmented. An example of this impulse to fix Hurston emerges in the context of *Mules and Men*, where her "lies" would seem to demand a corralling of their ability to undermine the text's authority and in the process undermine the coherence of the author herself. Hurston's ethnography of African American folklore and folkways was published in 1935. The book itself, as her biographer Robert Hemenway notes, was the product of a protracted effort by Hurston to get something into print that would appease her publisher's concerns about audience, her patron Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason's concerns over "soul," and the concerns of her mentor, anthropologist Franz Boas, about authenticity. The result was the inclusion of previously published materials on hoodoo, root doctors, folksongs, and folk belief that had appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* and that became the book's second half.[5] The core of the book for most readers, however, remains the book's first part, titled simply "Folk Tales," which consists of a narrative of her journey back to southern Florida, to Eatonville and to Polk County, in 1927-28.

Time represented in the narrative is not, as Hemenway and others have pointed out, the actual time of the fieldwork, since Hurston compresses two actual trips south into one fictional trip. Despite such manipulations, few literary scholars, folklorists, or anthropologists have questioned the actual veracity—that the events portrayed did in fact occur—of the narrative, except to point out that many of the tales in *Mules and Men* were already a part of Hurston's repertoire when she arrived in New York (Hemenway 166-67). For most folklorists, such reiterations only confirm the traditional aspects of such texts. There is, however, a reiteration that proves more troubling, one that has to do with the intimate relationship between the folkloric texts Hurston collected and the literary texts she wrote.

Having removed herself to Polk County, in *Mules and Men*, Hurston finds herself one evening under the tutelage of two residents, Jim Allen and Dad Boykin, concerning the proper way to eat a fish and to warm herself. The lesson runs two and a half pages in the text, but a shorter version of it can be provided here:

> "Sence you goin' stay heah ah'll edgecate yuh—do yuh know how to eat a fish—a nice brown fried fish?"
>
> "Yessuh," she answered quickly, looking about for the fish.
>
> "How?"
>
> "Why, you jus' eat it with corn bread," she said, a bit disappointed at the non-appearance of the fish.
>
> "Well, ah'll tell yuh," he patronized. "You starts at de tail and liffs off de bones sorter gentle and eats him clear tuh de head on dat side; den you turn 'im ovah an' commence at de tail agin and eat right up tuh de head; den you push dem bones way tuh one side an' takes nother fish an' so on 'till de end—well, 'till der ain't no mo'!"
>
> He mentally digested the fish and went on. "See," he pointed accusingly at her feet, "you don't even know how tuh warm yoself! You settin' dere wid yo' feet ev'y which way. Dat ain't de way tuh git wahm. Now look at mah feet. Dass right put bofe big toes right togethah—now shove 'em close up tuh de fiah; now lean back so! Dass de way. Ah knows up heap uh things tuh teach yuh sense you gointer live heah—ah learns all of 'em while de ole lady is paddlin' roun' out dere in de yard." ("Muttsy" 44-45)

This shorter version is found in the short story "Muttsy," which appeared in the August 1926 edition of *Opportunity*, six months before Hurston left for what would be the first of her two trips south to study African American folklore and folkways. Unlike the more clear cut plagiarism alleged in the case of Cudjo Lewis or the repetition of tale texts, this apparent reiteration reveals that an event that was supposed to have taken place within the context of anthropological fieldwork may very well not have taken place at all.[6]

The two scenes are too alike for the repetition to be simply a coincidence. In both a younger woman, a girl within the confines of the story, is taught by an older man or men how to eat a fish: " 'You start at de tail and leffs de meat of de bones sorter gentle and eats him clear tuh de head on dat side' " ("Muttsy") and " '. . . take yo' fork and start at de tail, liff de meat all off de bone clear up to de head' " (*Mules and Men*). Having established a classroom with this first lesson, the teacher, or teachers, go on to detail how to warm oneself: " 'Dass right put bofe big toes right togethah—now shove 'em close up tuh de fiah' " ("Muttsy") and " 'put yo' feet right close together so dat both yo' big toes is side by side . . . then you shove 'em up close to de fire' " (*Mules and Men*). What is the meaning of this repetition? Is it, as Arnold Rampersad suggests, that "she who had been living to some extent by her wits, by her imagination, by the 'lies' she created for her empowerment and salvation, as well as by her more structured, conventional disciplined intelligence as a college student, now had begun to see her personal predicament and her imaginative response to it in a broader historical and cultural sense" (xxi)? *Mules and Men* as an ethnography purports to represent reality directly, and yet it contains a scene which is clearly recreated and spliced into the text to great narrative effect, but at a cost to the one-to-one relationship that the narrative is supposed to have with the actual events of her fieldwork. In short, Hurston is lying.

Lies, the emic (insider's) term for storytelling of all kinds, are of course the subject of Hurston's study in the first section of *Mules and Men*. Within the community of the ethnography's story, the term is the umbrella rubric for all fictions. Hurston announces upon her arrival, " '. . . Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y'all know plenty of 'em and that's why Ah headed straight for home,' " to which the inhabitants of Eatonville respond, " 'What you mean, Zora, them big old lies we tell when we're just sittin' here on the store porch doin' nothin'?' " (8). The term also marks the dictionary sense of *lie*: " 'Y'all sho must not b'long to no church de way y'all tell lies' " (96). This explicit discussion of lies—that is, these admissions that truth in tale collecting or telling is at best suspended—meets, however, resistance in the body of literary criticism of Zora Neale Hurston's work. Those who have an investment in Hurston, including African American literary scholars and proponents of some Afrocentric ideologies, and who regard Hurston as a cornerstone for either critical or creative practices, have dispensed with the lying character of her work, fixing it, in the sense of making it stable and whole.

Hurston's aesthetics refuses easy resolutions and easy explanations.

Such an enterprise can be seen in the textual buttressing added with each edition of *Mules and Men*: the original preface by Boas; Rampersad's 1990 foreword and Gates's 1990 afterword; the Introduction, Folktales section, and Hoodoo section (added at the publisher's request) in the original; and the Bibliography and Chronology of 1990. The effect of such textual buttressing is to call into question the authenticity of the text which is being propped up. Robert Stepto, in his analysis of such structuring devices in published slave narratives, notes that such authenticating documents threaten to subsume texts and turn the core narrative into an "authenticating document for other, usually generic, texts, e.g. novel, history" (180).

For the slave narratives, authenticating documents were called upon to assure readers that the tale was true and often that it was the work of its attributed author—in short, assuring

readers that they held in their hands a direct link to both the horrors of slavery and the humanity of the ex-slaves (whose humanity was proved by the written words). In the case of Hurston, we have Boas's preface to assure us that the work is scientific, the publisher's addition to make the work more substantial, and the 1995 additions to position Hurston as a central figure in African American literature both as a source of authentic black folk life and as a novelist in her own right. But the cost of such fixing is high: The fluidities in Hurston's texts are either quelled or, worse, emptied.

Hurston Framing

In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston provides her readers, just as she does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a frame with which to understand the work as a whole—though perhaps it would be better to say a frame with which to hear. In both, human subjectivity, in the texts through which we understand it, is dialogically constituted to the extent that sometimes readers are at a loss to know who exactly is speaking. And that would seem to be the point. I am arguing that to explore these dialogical structures, both in their representation and in their function as discursive strategies (such as framing), is to suggest an alternative way to read Hurston. Articulating this scheme would confront the elisions of speaking subjects in the two texts by Hurston but would avoid such interpretations that reduce the narrative arc to tales of shifts in points of view, of community, of schizophrenia, or of a failure to speak.

In discussing the content of *Mules and Men*, Hurston herself notes in the introduction that "folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds" because "the Negro . . . is evasive" (2). In referring to the subject of her study in the third person, through the conventional "he" or "they" for "the Negro" or "the Negroes," she establishes a triangular system of pronoun reference, conventional and comfortable to the reader who is used to being "you," the author being "I," and the anthropological subject, or other, being "they." Several sentences later, however, she collapses the triangle, when the pronoun reference shifts and Hurston includes herself by making the first-person plural: "You see we are a polite people."[7] With this, Hurston elides and allies herself with her subject of study and leaves the reader outside and alone as the singular "you" of the sentence. This elision complicates what has gone before, since the second-person pronoun itself has already occurred twice, once in quotes when Hurston herself receives permission to go do fieldwork, "I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folklore,' " in the very opening line of the book, and once by way of explanation in a direct and intimate address to the reader, "now I'm going to tell you." With the introduction of the first-person plural, however, everything changes, and that shift takes effect when she relates "the theory behind our tactics" (3). What follows is quoted but with no attribution to any particular speaker:

> "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 toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song." (3)

To whom does the "I" refer now?[8] What is its relationship to the imputed narrator of the text, Zora Neale Hurston? Who is inside the quotes? Outside? What function do the quotes serve if they do not mark off, frame, speaking subjects? This referential conundrum would seem to be the key to both *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both of which have confounded readers with their shifts

and elisions of register and perspective.

In order to make sense of these elisions, we need to turn our attention momentarily to a more focused consideration of such instances of language use, one account of which is offered by sociolinguistics.[9] The referentiality of the "I" in everyday discourse is of course indexical; that is, it is achieved through a contiguity between an utterance in which the "I" occurs and the speaker of the utterance (Benveniste 218). The first- and second-person pronouns share this indefinite referential value in contrast with other kinds of nouns: Proper nouns have definite references; common nouns refer to a fixed notion and are capable of being realized in a particular object; and third-person pronouns in most discourse are anaphoric—that is, they refer to a previously mentioned person or group of people.[10] In the case of "I" and "you," referentiality is entirely contextual, each trading off first- and second-person status as part of the flow of conversation: I am the "I" for the length of time that I am speaking, whereupon I become the "you" of my correspondent's speech. An example would be Sam and Lige's debate in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which begins:

> "And then agin, Lige, Ah'm gointuh tell yuh. Ah'm gointuh run dis conversation from uh gnat heel to uh lice. It's nature dat keeps uh man off of uh red-hot stove."
>
> "Uuh huuh! Ah knowed you would going tuh crawl up in dat holler! But Ah aims tuh smoke yuh right out. 'Tain't no nature at all, it's caution, Sam." (60-61)

The "I," here the "Ah" of dialect, is shuttled back and forth as the conversation (a conversation about conversation) unfolds, and in this particular instance the two referenced individuals, Sam and Lige, become less important than the give and take of "I" and "you," when by the second page of the dialogue, composed of short, cracking remarks, the reader no longer knows who is speaking. Such a dyadic conception of the "I" begins to unravel the layers of complex references taking place in the quoted speech of Hurston's introduction to *Mules and Men* at the start of this essay. The relationship between the "I" that begins the introduction and the " 'I' " of the quotation is between the referential "I" and the quoted "I" of discourse, which is not speech itself but speech reported. What is important about the "I" of reported speech is that it begins to reveal the complexity of the "I" of discourse and acts as an interesting pivot point in opening out our understanding of the mobility that the "I," usually the marker and foundation of identity, can possess.[11]

To put things a bit more broadly, there is in the "I" of discourse a wider range of referentiality available than at first glance, and Hurston's work takes full advantage of this range. Consider, for instance, the two ways we typically report speech in English: by indirect quotation, "He said that he was going," and by direct quotation, "He said, 'I am going.' " In the case of the latter statement, we understand that the "I" of the embedded clause to refer back to the "he" of the main clause; this co-referentiality of the two pronouns occurs when the "he" is replaced by the "I." Indirect quotation allows a speaker to maintain the usual referential values within an embedded clause, while direct quotation is freed from such duties and becomes available for co-referential use—the possible effects of which are most notable in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In effect, the "I" of reported speech "entails a kind of play acting on the part of the speaker of the utterance, who regards himself as momentarily taking on the role of the third-person referent" (Urban 33).[12] This can be seen much more clearly if we extend this realm of play even further out into the realm of dequotation, where the speaker takes on the "I" of another for an extended segment of discourse. The most obvious example of such an instance would be the theater. When Walter in *A Raisin in the Sun* halfway through the play

says, "I gotta go," we understand that the actor will not be leaving the stage, but that the "I" spoken is internal to the discourse of the play.

At the farthest end of the spectrum, there is a kind of referentiality which folklorists and anthropologists have perhaps experienced more readily than they have analyzed it in linguistic or literary terms, but which plays some role in Hurston's work: the "I" which is not the speaker taking on the speech of another but a non-ordinary self speaking through the subject. I am referring of course to cases of possession or trance. The central focus of the second section of *Mules and Men* features Hurston's initiation into a group of hoodoo practitioners. Such an intiation features this hyperbolic assumption of the "I." That is, in Yoruban American religions like Candomblé, Santería, and Voodoo, gods enter the heads of initiates and priests and speak through them to others gathered for the ceremony. This displacement of the ordinary "I" from the body of the speaking subject is but one end of a continuum of permutations within Hurston's work where the boundaries between bodies and selves are constantly tested and reformulated.

Hurston Kissing

These blurrings of self and other in terms of speech and body, and the intertwining of two pairs, are developed very clearly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Discursively, the elisions occur as above when registers of two voices commingle. Metaphorically, the elisions occur in the image of kissing. The text begins with a grand and eloquent play on Douglass's famous apostrophe—when he stands upon the Potomac and addresses the ships that travel freely up and down the river—and through the return of its protagonist Janie to her hometown, which parallels the opening frame of *Mules and Men* with Hurston's return to Eatonville. As Janie walks home, she is watched by "sitters [that] had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human." The speech that follows immediately is unattributed to any particular individual and is tumbled into one diverse paragraph, again paralleling *Mules and Men*. After Janie passes and the speakers acquire names, her friend Pheoby sets off to Janie's house to find out what has happened. She leaves one porch for another; more importantly she leaves the front porch of public speech, as seen throughout the novel, for the back porch of intimate speech, where " 'mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf,' " as Janie notes (6).

This is an especially important statement in the text, as many readers have pointed out, because it establishes not only a different ethic of speaking and community, as most analyses have focused on, but also a different understanding of the nature of discourse and its relationship to subjectivity. In reply to Janie's statement above, Pheoby says, she will " 'tell 'em what you tell me to tell 'em' " (6), which in effect is an exact account of what must happen: Pheoby can only report to others what Janie has in turn reported to her, in effect re-using Janie's words, words that have already been in Janie's mouth. Janie responds with a series of images of kissing as well as eating: " '. . . people like dem wastes too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about,' " " 'If they wants to see and know, why they don't come kiss and be kissed?' " and " 'Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years' " (6-7). The progression occurs from a critical description of unknowing interaction, to a call for exchange, to knowing intercourse. As immediacy increases, so does knowledge, or as Janie states at the end of the novel, "you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (183). More importantly, the knowledge itself is built on the speech that passes between Janie and Pheoby. Janie

says, " 'So tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it' " (7). What follows this statement is all reported speech, if we follow the frame, which will jump us from the back porch to Janie's story.

It is in Janie's last statement, in the sentence that is the actual edge of the frame, that one kind of elision of speaking subjects occurs: "Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked" (7). Like the elision or confusion of speakers that frames *Mules and Men*, where the "I"/"Ah" cannot be attributed to any particular speaker outside of Hurston, and yet as quoted speech is marked off from the narrative proper, the narrative and quoted voices are conflated through a mixing of speech registers. The outermost edge of the frame is the very formal speech, as indexed by diction and syntax, that begins the chapter with an abstraction: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board." The quoted speech, written in "Ah" dialect, registers in print with statements like, " 'Well, Ah see Mouth-Almighty is still sittin' in de same place. And Ah reckon they got me up in they mouth now.' " But what should we make of the sudden appearance of a word like *monstropolous* when it does not appear in dialogue? My suggestion is that Hurston is signaling to the reader that the two narrators, the outside narrator who seems able to look into events as they transpire in the present and the past without appearing in the narrative itself and the inside narrator who is Janie herself as she sits on the back porch telling her story to Pheoby, are not to be assumed to be distinct, just as Pheoby's later narration of Janie's telling will not be distinct.

While certainly Pheoby's telling will be her own, she will have no choice but to recur to certain words, certain phrasings, and certain passages of Janie's story in order to tell the story itself. This kind of recursion is of course exactly what Bakhtin means by dialogism when he notes that the "speech of such narrators is always *another's speech* . . . and in *another's language*" (313), and yet Bakhtin is only describing this at the level of character, especially character-narrators, and author. In Hurston we are dealing with two levels: Pheoby and Janie, as well as Janie and narrator. Michael Awkward has also noted these two levels of narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Just as Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell her story to the town's hostile female community, she allows the text's omniscient narrator—whose sensitive rendering of Janie's tale makes it apparent that she shares Janie's afrocentric and feminist inclinations—to tell her Afro-American feminist story to a potentially hostile reading public" (13). In this analysis of Hurston's mixture of narration, Awkward's observation about the handing down of stories underscores that, while narration occurs richly in Hurston's text, the place of its address is constantly exchanging hands and voices. Awkward anticipates the courtroom scene, which invites so much controversy because the only knowledge we have of what Janie testifies to is in what has been called free indirect discourse (cf. Gates, "Afterword" and *Signifying*), what I am simply here calling reported speech.[13]

Indeed, the courtroom scene would seem to be the litmus test for anyone attempting to offer a reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but most efforts seem to focus on trying to explain away what should be a troubling moment in the text. One response to such efforts would be to say that Hurston's own abilities as a novelist and as a folklorist provided her with an acute ear for the verbal traditions of the communities she studied. Another response, rather than arguing about Hurston's attention to the importance of testifying in the novel, would suggest that the question of verifiability of Janie's testimony precisely highlights such forms of speaking as playing the dozens, woofing, and sermonizing.[14]

Thus the courtroom scene must be accounted for by two traditions: one, the dominant ideological system of legal testimony in which the truth must be articulated and established, and, two, the African American verbal tradition of testifying (cf. Smitherman).

Janie's courtroom testimony is also, however, a case of reported speech nested within reported speech. That is, we already understand, and will shortly be reminded at the novel's end, that the narrative itself is being narrated on a back porch. This moment of narrative reflexivity, of narrating a narration, can go two ways. If it embarks upon a course of retelling what has already been told, then it threatens to begin an infinite narrative regression. That would be nonsensical to Pheoby, the imputed listener, and we would only read in order to understand how Janie represents herself within the context of legal testimony. What Hurston gives us is just that: an instance of reported speech that emphasizes that meaning, far from being given or even mediated, is co-constructed. Hurston highlights:

> *She tried to make them see* how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn't get rid of the dog and live. He had to die to get rid of the dog. But she hadn't wanted to kill him. A man is up against a hard game when he must die to beat it. *She made them see* how she couldn't ever want to be rid of him. (178; emphasis added)

The phrases *make/made them see* underline the presence of an audience, actually several audiences: Sop-de-Bottom and the others in the balcony, "the white women" in the gallery, and the jury itself. Questions about whether or not Janie speaks, and thus has developed a voice or a mature self/subjectivity, because they concern themselves with the confirmation of character through speech, ignore the fact that Janie is doubly speaking at this point in the text: She is narrating her own narration. There are, in effect, two Janies: narrator Janie and narrated Janie.[15]

Anthropologist and linguist Jane Hill notes, "The problem of the voice in speaking directs us to inquiry as to how the self should be understood" (109). A wide field of inquiry has arisen around the intuition, usually inspired in some way by Bakhtin, that individual consciousness is constituted through a *choice* of voices.[16] *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would seem to be in agreement. Everywhere in the novel, speech is doubled and redoubled; bodies are intertwined in kisses; and the self itself has multiple sites, as when at the very end of the novel Janie calls "in her soul to come and see" (184).

Hurston Eating

In the turn toward the study of vernacular forms in the study of African American literature, African American ways of speaking, vernacular tropes and devices, have become an alternate code for understanding blackness differently from the Black Aesthetic Movement's essentialist notions of black experience equaling black self. Whereas earlier a text's authenticity or place within the canon might be evaluated on the basis of its representation of the African American experience, which might include playing the dozens, now texts are analyzed for how they themselves invoke or deploy these forms as structuring devices of their own discourse. The power of *Mules and Men* has therefore been as a measuring stick or a reference resource when one has needed to evaluate the authenticity of other texts. Rarely has the book received the kind of close reading that might reveal its own devices and structures. This would seem especially important since, with *Mules and Men*, we have before us a text composed of texts about texts. That is, *Mules and Men* is an ethnography of speaking in a community where

speaking itself is a subject of speech, as when John French prefaces a lie with, " 'Ah got to say a piece of litery [literary] fust to git mah wind on' " (47).[17] These vernacular texts take on certain "vernacular dimensions" by being in dialect that is contained in dialogue. That is, the vernacular comes to us as reported speech, and it is here that we encounter the confusing dimensions of discourse within a Hurston text. Where we would expect distinctions to be drawn between ethnographer and the subjects of her study, we find a mixing of subjectivity, "the way we tell it."

Within the text of *Mules and Men* perhaps a week passes in the collecting of lies, but Hurston notes in the beginning of the second section of the book "I had spent a year in gathering and culling over folk-tales" before she decides to head her "toenails toward Louisiana and New Orleans in particular" (183). Once arrived, she again encounters the same blank text put outside the door for the intruder who comes to take without taking part in the community. Marie Leveau's nephew, Luke Turner, makes her wait and wait, and only by being persistent and coming again and again does she get Turner eventually to talk to her. Her education begins with a kind of cosmological tale that engenders the figure of Marie Leveau: " 'Time went around pointing out what God had already made. Moses had seen the Burning Bush. Solomon by magic knowed all wisdom. And Marie Leveau was a woman in New Orleans' " (192). Marie Leveau is beautiful and she is "one of the Creole Quadroons," but she does not heed any of the calls to hoodoo until "one day a rattlesnake come to her in her bedroom and spoke to her." The rattlesnake is the beginning and begetting of her power. At the same time, the snake is an index of her end:

> "The rattlesnake that had come to her a little one when she was also young was very huge. He piled great upon his altar and took nothing from the food set before him. One night he sang and Marie Leveau called me from my sleep to look at him and see. 'Look well, Turner,' she told me. 'No one shall hear and see such as this for many centuries.'
>
> "She went to her Great Altar and made great ceremony. The snake finished his song and seemed to sleep. She drove me back to my bed and went again to her Altar.
>
> "The next morning, the great snake was not at his altar. His hide was before the Great Altar stuffed with spices and things of power. Never did I know what become of his flesh. It is said that the snake went off to the woods alone after the death of Marie Leveau, but they don't know. This is his skin that I wear about my shoulders whenever I reach for power." (194)

The source of power, it is also the snake that "lives in a hole right under God's foot-rest" that tells Moses "God's making words . . . the words of doing and the words of obedience" (184). Similarly, the crown of power that eventually signals Hurston's full entrance into this particular community of hoodoo practitioners is "a consecrated snake skin" (198), an entrance that occurs after she has spent three days, "stretched, face downwards, my navel to the snake skin cover" of the couch (199).

The snake is a common figure of potency, of course, but the lineage it engenders here is a bit different. The snake speaks both to Moses and to Marie Leveau, but the latter keeps the snake, continuing to pay tribute to it both by giving it its own altar (metaphysical) as well as by feeding it (physical)—for it has fed her in turn. Just as consumption becomes embodied, Hurston's body meanwhile is pulled into discourses of inscription and initiation: The snake is stuffed with spices upon its death; Hurston drinks the blood of the other practitioners and they drink her blood. But it is not a total consumption: The snake's skin is left; Hurston drinks only blood. Thus, identity is established not by the usual view that things are either wholly outside or inside, which depends upon a line between self and other as clearly made as the analogous line between

bodies—and that is what is so fascinating. In Hurston, even that which is normally what we think of as the ultimate demarcation of our individual subjectivity, our skin, is actually a complicated negotiation. The snake's power is in its skin, which Luke Turner wears, thereby occupying the space of the snake. Hurston lies prostrate upon the snake skin until the power in one passes to the other, the confirmation of which is in the consuming of her fellow initiates' blood, just as they consume hers. The eating of bodies undermines the concept of stable and independent subjectivity, as one body becomes part of another and changes it in some way. That would seem to be the orality underlying Hurston's text, composed of oral tales, of boasting (the mouth enlarging the body), of woofing (the mouth projecting the body both figuratively and literally), of kissing, and of eating.

The more usual view of incorporation or internalization is of transcendence, as two things combine to make a greater whole, and yet one critic has read the first section of *Mules and Men* as an allegory for the inevitable failure of the ethnographic enterprise, where transcendence (of the hermeneutic circle) is achieved through immanence (becoming part of the community's circle): "We see in this text a disruption of identity rather than a closure, the necessary result of the radical inauthenticity that is the eternal and inescapable scandal and dilemma of participant-observation fieldwork" (Dorst 311). But that is to take *Mules and Men* at face value, a dangerous presumption when the text is filled with problematic protagonists: They lie. Instead, it is possible to read Hurston as casting herself a role in *Mules and Men* in order to avoid the problem of introjecting others into herself (authentic ethnography) or projecting herself into others (the novel of authenticity), because "both processes require a stable sense of a difference between inside and outside, which therefore need identification" (Kilgour 210). Hurston undermines this stability allegorically in such images as the sharing of blood and discursively by using *we*. They are instances at different levels of the same thing, the continuity of bodies.

The irony here is that the policing of the body, in effect the policing of desire, has taken place and continues to take place in the critical reception of Hurston's work, "where a tendency of criticism until recently has been to 'make sense' in a way that meant . . . plugging up all the textual gaps and holes" (Kilgour 241). This can occur within a text, such as when critics worry about Janie not speaking in the courtroom scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or whether or not the "I" of *Mules and Men* communes with the other characters, but it can also occur across texts, such as when critics plug the gap between the texts of the two books by making one an expressive text and the other a reference text (of expressions). For example, Henry Louis Gates develops his notions of speakerly texts out of the content of *Mules and Men* in order to examine and understand the form of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When Hurston repeats certain "oral" textual practices in the novel that are also contained within her ethnography, she is "authentic."

To put it slightly differently, Hurston criticism puts Hurston in the limelight by casting her work as the context that supports, if it does not explain, other texts, by fixing Hurston's texts in a particular way in order to interpret other texts on their basis of an accurate reflection of dimensions found in Hurston. In terms of how such a system of referentiality operates within Hurston criticism, in *Mules and Men* the emphasis in a reading is typically placed on the overarching context of Hurston's narrative, which in effect is a weaving together of the various contexts for each of the text's texts. These contexts are allowed to stand in for a reality, and their nature as texts themselves, composed by Hurston years after the field experience and under certain pressures from both her

publisher and her own desire to reach a broad audience, are suppressed. In the meantime, when a work like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is examined, readers tend to make Hurston herself the context for other forms of African American textual production. Instead of supplying the ground, Hurston becomes the ground. It is a difficult and confusing operation, but one that has become common practice.

Working with texts like Hurston's, in which textmaking is foregrounded, and is so often associated with allusion (comparison and indirection) and illusion (veiling), it is difficult to use any critical metaphors but those she offers us for understanding her. And these are metaphors of incorporation, but an incorporation that is always taking place. As we watch scenes shift across texts and change in relation to the new text and context, we can only think of the body *composed*. At the very end of *Mules and Men*, in fact, Hurston offers us a scene in which she composes herself via the tropes of signifying and eating:

> 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?"
>
> Sis Cat was mighty hongry but she hate for de rat to think she ain't got no manners, so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone.
>
> So de cat caught herself a rat again and set down to eat. So de Rat said, "Where's yo' manners at, Sis Cat? You going to 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. (245-46)

Unlike other tales found in *Mules and Men*, however, this tale is not set off from the narrative itself: It is not indented and it is not set in smaller type. In addition, the dialect ending of *-in'* for *-ing* takes place outside the quotes, not inside, locating the vernacular voice, the voice that floats between regular and non-regular forms, also in the text of the main narrative. As Jane Hill notes, such "lexical interaction can commit one voice to participation in a premise established by another . . . through the echo or repetition of words" (123). With the closing simile, Hurston leaps across the usual pairings and rockets from composer of the outermost textual shell to directly within a "lie." As she sits there like her proverbial cat, we have to wonder: Have we just been eaten?

Hurston Possessed

That Hurston's work can bear the weight of so much analysis, as seen in the sheer accumulation of scholarship in the last twenty-five years, is a testimony, in some way, to the number of faces she has presented to be kissed. In saying this, I am suggesting that the uses to which Hurston is put by critics, as I have outlined above, are often at odds with her folkloric and ethnographic appreciation of the multiplicity of human subjectivity. Such multiplicities, or fluidities, can be seen in the mutability of voices in pronoun reference and in the mutability of bodies in the images of kissing and eating. Both pronoun reference and the images of kissing and eating play a prominent role in the frames Hurston uses to set up the narratives of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men*. Both works are frame narratives, narratives embedded within other narratives, normally allowing, as Gérard Genette notes, "the narrator time to position [her] voice" (46). But voice becomes problematic in texts where

tongues are in other mouths and the question of who is speaking cannot easily be determined. As I warn my students, it is dangerous to take Hurston at face value, not for what lies behind the face (that would suggest that truth lies inside) but *because* so often that face is pressed up against another, intertwined, or lacerated, as Janie's grandmother would say, in a kiss.

In the opening scene of his ethnography of Candomblé practices in Bahia, Brazil, Jim Wafer describes being asked by a goddess to kiss her. Smiling coquettishly, she asks, "Have you never kissed a woman with a moustache before?" In fact, the literal reality of Wafer's situation is that he is being asked to kiss a man, for that is whom the goddess Yusha is occupying. In the African American religions of Candomblé, Voodoo, and Santería, upper-level initiates have gods seated in their heads. During certain ceremonies, the gods fully possess the individual, and when that individual speaks, the person does not speak for him- or herself. The individual speaks as the god. This is the "I" of possession that I alluded to earlier in this essay, and it occupies one end of the spectrum of the "I" of discourse that the indexical "I," the I that refers to the speaker as herself, anchors at the other end.

The voice of the possessed speaker dislodges one of the foundations of authenticity which seeks to ground experience in a particular, historical individual whose synthesis of his or her experiences produces a unique voice. That just isn't what the metaphysics of possession is about. It is my firm belief that the metaphysics of possession reinforced Hurston's aesthetics of performance. She was a great performer, as Langston Hughes notes in his autobiography: "To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie.' " He goes on to observe, "But Miss Hurston was clever, too. . . . That is why she was such a fine folklore collector, able to go among the people and never act as if she had been to school at all" (239). Hurston, Hughes confirms, could perform for many audiences, getting what she needed or what she wanted—because of the looseness of self tied to the historical individual that performance intimates and possession confirms.

The suggestion that Hurston is elusive, even as an historical character, is not a new one. What I hope to have made clear in the course of this essay is how thoroughly she pursued elusion and elision. As a fellow fieldworker and child of a rural and segregated Southern landscape, I have a tendency to believe that some of Hurston's sensibilities and abilities are a product of the African American experience—one need look no further than her own contemporary, and strident critic, Richard Wright. Some of the most striking passages in *Black Boy* are those scenes where Wright is being instructed in how to act in front of whites and, to a lesser degree, how to act in front of other blacks (see, for example, the presentation in dramatic form [91-95] or the scenes with Griggs [219, 231-32]).

Hurston's experience of the world as one performed was extended during her stay on Haiti, where *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first written and where she encountered the world as possessed. Having already experienced the dislocations and displacements of self of voodoo as practiced in New Orleans, her sense of the mutability of the boundary between self and other most certainly was confirmed. *Their Eyes*, as a novel, is filled with images taken from the religious practices she observed.[18] It may be that the best example can be found at the novel's end, when Janie finishes her story and goes inside. The objects in the house come alive and commence to sing, sob, and sigh. Tea Cake joins the contents of the house in their dance, and his memory kisses her, making "pictures of love and light against the wall" (184). The very last line of the novel insists upon the blurring of

boundaries, when Janie calls "in her soul to come and see."

Hurston's aesthetics, perhaps grounded in a metaphysics still too little known by most, refuses easy resolutions and easy explanations. Moreover, her way of looking at the world and of acting in the world, as seen in her fiction and nonfiction, complicates our usual understandings of authority and of authenticity. Hers is not a world of one-to-one correspondences, of insides and outsides, of the authoritative "Ah." Some readers will be tempted to conclude that I have merely pursued an application of a few current theories to Hurston, but I would argue that some contemporary work in linguistics and literary theory is only now beginning to make it possible for us to examine the various layers of her work, which, reflecting both her fictional and nonfictional protagonists, reveals the dynamism of human subjectivity and thus the dynamism of those texts produced by it.

Notes

1. I address some of these matters of inside and outside in the context of doing fieldwork on and with urban Appalachians living in Cincinnati, Ohio, in my essay " 'There's Not Much to Say.' "

2. There are a variety of works that have tackled this subject within anthropology that have become fairly popular in literary studies as well. Perhaps the most famous is the anthology edited by George Marcus and James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), followed by Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), and Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) — Pratt was a contributor to the Marcus and Clifford anthology — to name a few.

3. As one observer has noted, much of the contemporary critical reception and reinterpretation of Hurston has been for the purpose of "ancestral recovery" and the same kind of positive revaluation of black folk life for which Hurston was initially criticized. Samira Kawash writes that "this project of recovery, one that focuses on the racial politics of identity and community, has simultaneously been a recuperation of Hurston's reputation, challenging an earlier critical marginalization of the writer and her work. What is seldom noticed, however, is the extent to which Hurston is engaged in the reconsideration (and frequently rejection) of precisely these terms: ancestry, community, race, and identity" (167).

4. This suggestion is in fact one of historical timeliness, or *Zeitgest*, if readers prefer, since Zora Neale Hurston could have counted as a contemporary the Russian philosopher of language M. M. Bakhtin, who, like Hurston, was also interested in "two actual people talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time and in a particular place" (Holquist xx).

5. The article was originally entitled "Hoodoo in America" and appeared in *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (1931): 317-417.

6. Hemenway's treatment of Hurston's use of Emma Langdon's *Historic Sketches of the Old South* in the essay that appeared in the October 1927 issue of the *Journal of Negro History* is both generous and specific, detailing that only twenty-five percent of the essay is original material by Hurston but also detailing other events in Hurston's life that help us to understand her actions (Hemenway 95-99).

7. Barbara Johnson's analysis of structures of address in Hurston is foundational to the current essay, which parallels hers in trying to articulate the ideas that "Hurston's work itself was constantly dramatizing and undercutting just such inside/outside oppositions, transforming the plane geometry of physical space into the complex transactions of discursive exchange" (279).

8. In a way, Hurston turns Bakhtin's dialogism on its head. Instead of "words not enclosed in quotation marks, formally belonging to authorial speech but clearly distanced from the mouth of the author" (Bakhtin 416), Hurston intimates herself by confusing exactly who the words enclosed in quotation marks belong to.

9. The relationship between African American literary studies and the fields of linguistics and folkloristics is a long one, reaching back at least to Sterling Brown's references to the work of Stith Thompson, Melville Herskovitz, and others. More recently, the foundations of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* rest on folkloristics research by Roger Abrahams, John Szwed, and others.

10. One obvious exception to this would be the folkloric qualifier "they say," used as a prefix or suffix in discourse to indicate common knowledge or positioned as common knowledge, in which case it *operates as a* placeholder.

11. An example of the "I" simply being a discursive place marker, as well as an example of reported speech, can be found in a "toast," as the rhymed poems of African American oral tradition are sometimes called by some scholars, I recorded in Rayne, Louisiana. Oscar Babineaux, the speaker of the toast, told it like this:

I just come back from my motherfuckin' barn
I look in my stall my old mule was gone
Said Miss Lady have you seen my mule?
She said no man I just come back from bringing my kids to school.
He said but you give me time to put down my books,
I'll tell you exactly how that poor motherfucker looked
Said he got three legs broke and one leg lame
Said he's nine now but he'll be ten next spring
He said he used to go with this girl named Mabel
Fuck her three times and he's dead back to the stable
He said I put him in the barn when he's catching a fit
I put a light in his ass so he can see his own shit
He said every time the dirty come to pass
You can tell him cause he's got a star dead in the crack of his ass.

In the case of this toast, a literary reader will be at least momentarily confused about whom the dialogue is attributed to. Is it the "I" of the first two lines, or is it the "he" of the lines that follow? The confusion is, in fact, doubled by the later quoted speech of the "he" in a line like, "He said I put him in the barn when he's catching a fit." Punctuation for the literary reader would perhaps dispel this bit of confusion, but such punctuation is not available to the listener, who, incidentally, is also not confused by the switch from "I" to "he" in the fifth line. The listener understands that the speaker of the dialogue within the toast is simply a place-holder, as well as a beat-holder for the poem's rhythm, for the text which is in fact the subject of the toast (see Laudun, " 'Talking Shit' ").

12. Much of this discussion on the various referencing schemes for the "I" of discourse is based on the work of Greg Urban, who makes much more subtle distinctions between the indexical-referential "I" and the anaphoric "I" (the reported "I") in his 1989 essay on the subject. Urban develops the schemes sketched out above based on his own research with the Shokleng of Brazil, who have a number of ways to manage the co-referentiality of reported speech.

13. Awkward goes on to note that "Janie refrains from such narration because of the same cultural imperatives that allow her to feel no compulsion to tell her story to the females who contemptuously see her return to Eatonville" (13).

14. In my own fieldwork in an African American community in the Midwest, I have been greeted with "You hear me testifying, don't you?" when I have asked what my audience has thought an obvious question.

15. Folklorist Richard Bauman explores a number of possible relationships between narrated event and narrative event in *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Bauman's work is particularly useful since he like Hurston treats those genres of discourse that, because they test the boundaries of reality and believability, must embark upon fairly complex negotiations in their telling.

16. As Hill notes, there have been a number of investigators from a variety of disciplines interested in what is essentially the intersection of culture and agency. Among others, the sociologist Erving Goffman "found in reported speech and other multivocal phenomena his most important clues that the 'everyday self' can be considered as a framed dramaturgical presentation" (Hill 109).

17. Another example, this time from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, would be the conversation between Sam and Lige cited previously.

18. A more thorough account of how voodoo is enacted throughout the novel has been done by my colleague Steven Beech, who I hope will seek publication of the manuscript. Summarizing his detailed analysis here would unnecessarily lengthen the current essay as well as do poor justice to his ideas.

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