

A PROUD CROW IN A PIGEON'S NEST:
THE INDEPENDENT ZORA NEALE HURSTON IN
MULES AND MEN

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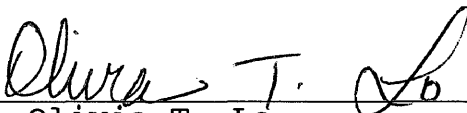
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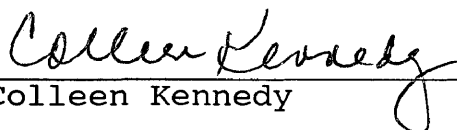
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Joanne Braxton



Susan Donaldson



Colleen Kennedy

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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston's work Mules and Men must be read as both an anthropological and a creative work. While it is credited for textualizing and celebrating black folklore, it has also been criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes. This controversy stems from Hurston's portrayal of the black culture that she sometimes praises and embraces and sometimes criticizes and transcends.

Hurston believed that the improvement of race relations rested on two things: a greater understanding between the two races, and a willingness of the black culture to assert its own greatness. Hurston's book strives toward both these goals. She proudly asserts the merit of the folklore that she finds in the small black communities she studies, and in recording it and explaining it to the larger American culture, she is attempting to create a better understanding between the two races. However, Hurston also criticizes the self-containment, violence and secrecy of the black cultures and subtly points to these shortcomings in how she structures the book and places her narrator in it.

Finally, Hurston presents her narrator as a model of a black American who is able to take pride in her cultural heritage and to rise above those aspects of it that hinder her growth as an artist and her success as an American. She asserts her individualism by going against the predominant black philosophers of her time, breaking anthropological conventions and experimenting with new formal patterns of writing. In so doing, Hurston advocates introspection and individualism to all her readers, both black and white, making Mules and Men a book with universal themes.

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In her autobiography, Zora Neale Hurston writes: "I was always asking questions and making myself a crow in a pigeon's nest" (DT 25). As a child, she constantly questioned convention and asserted her individuality, and as an adult she continued to be independent and made it a predominant theme in her work. While critics usually point to how her fiction embodies this theme, Hurston's anthropological works, such as Mules and Men¹, exemplify it as well, for she "usually perceived herself as a creative writer---even when writing folklore" (Hemenway 160), and "it is clear that with Mules and Men Zora Neale Hurston found her metier as a creative writer" (M. Willis 87). Thus, while Mules and Men is an anthropological collection of black rural folktales and hoodoo practices, it must also be regarded as a work of creative art; it cannot be "pigeonholed" neatly into either an anthropological or a literary category. Furthermore, it goes against the black literary tradition of its time that maintained that the issue of race relations should be the primary focus of black literature (Washington 132). Hurston refused to limit the scope of her work according to traditional norms for black literature; thus Mules and Men's aims are multi-fold. While it is an anthropological attempt to preserve black folklore

¹ Mules and Men will be abbreviated as MM, and Dust Tracks on a Road will be abbreviated as DT.

and to show the reader how and why "negroes tell such glorious tales" (Hurston quoted in Hemenway 163), it also has the more pragmatic aim of showing how the folklore reflects both the affirming cohesiveness and the destructive discord within the black community.

Hurston does not stop at merely showing what she considers to be affirming and what she sees as negative in the black community; she goes on to present an alternative vision of independence to the confining shortcomings of the communities. Thus, the alternative she presents is seen in the narrator---Hurston's recreation of herself---who is both inside and outside of the black community; as Barbara Johnson points out, she refers to it as both "we" and "they" (Johnson 325). As such, she is able both to celebrate its art yet transcend its confining qualities; she is easily accepted into the community, yet she just as easily leaves it; she embraces the art she finds in it, yet she intellectually overcomes its internalized sense of racial shame and need to hide. While she values her connections to the black rural Southern tradition, she also values her connections to the urban, Northern, academic tradition in which she finds liberating insight. She writes in her introduction:

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. 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. (MM

1)

The alternative vision Hurston presents is an artist who "fiercely and explicitly defends her position as an individual within the human race" (McKay 266), and who escapes the limitations imposed on her by both the black and white cultures. Hurston's narrator is independent, introspective, proud, happy, loving of her fellow human, and confident in her worth as a black female writer, and she thus serves as a model for what the individual can accomplish despite any obstacles that society places before her.

Hurston's primary objective when starting her research for this book was to save the black oral tradition from obscurity and to show its richness and complexity to the rest of America. It made her "furious" that black folklore, which she considered to be "the greatest cultural wealth of the continent," was so often considered by others to be "nothing but a high spot of Negro humor and imagery" (Hurston quoted in Hemenway 163). By recording and publishing the folklore, Hurston conveys the "indomitable resilience of the imagination of Africans terrorized in the New World by objective reality in the form of slavery, segregation and poverty" (Rampersad xxi), and she shows the poetic quality in the black American's dialect (Holloway 97). She is attempting to legitimize and affirm the value of black rural culture and thus gain widespread respect for it: "Hurston created a bridge between the 'primitive' authority of folk life and the literary power of the written text" (Pryse 11-12).

Hurston perceives language as a very powerful magic (Pryse 11) and in Mules and Men shows how the black community uses this magic, inherent in its oral tradition, to define itself and affirm its value systems. Through story-telling, respect is constantly earned and negotiated. The tales and "specifying" (elaborate name-calling) with which the community members try to out-do each other invest the tellers with pride and power within the community. No member is cut off from its potential power; even women and children take the opportunity folklore-telling offers to gain respect. Big Sweet, for example, is adept at "specifying" and "signifying" (showing off) which is emblematic of her power and position in the community (Wall 379). Julius, a young boy, also gains respect through his story-telling abilities. For him, telling a story is a sort of rite-of-passage into manhood. His authority to tell a tale is initially questioned by Charles Jones who tells him, "What make you want to jump in a hogshead when a [keg] will hold yuh?" But John French defends Julius' right to speak, and, after "trying to give the impression that he was skeeting tobacco juice like a man," he tells a long tale. When George Thomas tells him, "Dat wuz a long tale for a lil' boy lak you," Julius' right to "lie" is confirmed, and no one questions his right to tell the next tale (MM 42-6). He has won his place in adult society by the merit of his story.

Hurston also conveys how the tales are important to the community in the way they serve to define and unite it,

causing the community members to "laugh and move closer together" (MM 68). Who tells, understands, and is allowed to hear the folklore determines who is inside and who is outside of the community. Hurston, as an outsider, must prove her own tale-telling skills in order to win each community's trust. For example, in Polk County, she performs "John Henry," a folk song. "By the time that the song was over," she states, "I knew that I was in the inner circle.... I had to prove that I was their kind" (MM 65). She must also prove that she is receptive to their language, for, as Joe Wiley says, "[Good lyin's] jus' like sound doctrine. Everybody can't stand it" (MM 114). Thus her "laughing acceptance" of Pitts' "woofing" (flirting) "sets everybody at ease" (MM 65) and is the first step in her initiation into that community.

Hurston's "laughing acceptance" indicates to the community members that she understands the inner, secret meanings of their language and that she is therefore one of them. In these communities, the tales and language are like private jokes because black culture has assigned new, affirming meaning to words and ideas that are considered derogatory outside of the community---only insiders will understand them in the positive way they are intended. As one of the storytellers asserts, "They [the 'old time by words'] all got a hidden meanin', jus' like de Bible. Everybody can't understand what they mean" (MM 125). To "lie," for example, means to tell tales (MM 8). Significantly, the meaning of the title of the book, which links the black man with the mule,

rests on the private understanding of the poetic symbolism that the black culture has imbued the word "mule" within their folklore.

This transformation of negative terms into affirming ones is also seen in the folklore. In the "Jack and the Devil" tales, for instance, the devil is assigned new unconventional characteristics. It is therefore significant that one of the few anthropological explanations in the book is given about these tales:

The devil is not the terror that he is in European folk-lore. He is a powerful trickster who often competes successfully with God. There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an extension of the storymakers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters, who are nevertheless defeated by the Negroes. (MM 248)

As with the words "lie" and "mule," the real meaning to those who tell and hear the "Jack and the Devil" stories comes out of a private, inner understanding. If the listener or reader doesn't understand the context, as the "Massa" in the story never does, s/he will unknowingly misunderstand the meaning. To uninformed people outside of the black community, the true meaning of the devil in the tales will be lost, because they will not understand that to the storytellers the devil is not an evil figure but a heroic trickster likened to the black man.

This "private joke" quality of the stories is similar to the situations in many of the tales themselves in which the black man pretends to conform to a stereotype in order to take advantage of the white man's ignorant belief in it. In "The

Deer Hunting Story," for example, the black man deliberately conforms to the stereotype of "stupid nigger" in order to ridicule the white man's gullibility:

You know Ole Massa took a nigger deer huntin' and posted him in his place and told him, says: "now you wait right here and keep yo' gun reformed and ready. Ah'm goin' 'round de hill and skeer up de deer and head him dis way. When he come past, you shoot."

De nigger says: "Yessuh, Ah sho' will Massa."

He set there and waited wid de gun cocked and after awhile de deer come tearin' past him. He didn't make a move to shoot de deer so he went on 'bout his business. After a while de white man come on 'round de hill and ast de nigger: "Did you kill de deer?"

De nigger says: "Ah ain't seen no deer pass here yet."

Massa says: "Yes, you did. You couldn't help but see him. He come right dis way."

Nigger says: "Well Ah sho' ain't seen none. All Ah seen was a white man come along here wid a pack of chairs on his head and Ah tipped my hat to him and waited for de deer." (MM 75)

While the white man in the tale thinks he is the superior one, the storytellers know who really has the upper hand in the situation. The "private joke" nature of the stories is thus affirming to the community who shares them because the stories give those who understand them a sense of superiority over those who are not "in on it." The members of the black community, then, as Cheryl Wall argues, "attain personal identity, not by transcending the culture but by embracing it, "and Hurston shows how black people have thereby "created an alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings" (Wall 372).

Wall's assertion, however, is only partially true, for while Hurston glories in the beauty and cohesiveness of black

communities, she also perceives and depicts their shortcomings, as will be discussed shortly. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Hurston deliberately places the greater emphasis on the beauty and wit of the folklore and the power of the hoodoo, while her criticisms of black culture are much more subtle. She emphasizes the positive aspects of black culture because these qualities are what she considers more important in the creation of a better understanding between American culture and black subculture. Therefore, she makes no secret of her admiration for her black folklore subjects and the extent to which she is a part of them (thereby sacrificing a measure of her scientific credibility). She constantly sings their praises, bragging on "our vivid imagination" (MM 3) and calling the folklore "valuable" (MM 8) and "hilarious" (MM 19). Furthermore, she shows her conviction of the equal value of black folklore to white folklore when she states: "Some [of the folktales told] were the European folk-tales undiluted....others had slight local variations, but Negro imagination is so facile that there was little need for outside help" (MM 20). She emphasizes her respect for black folklore by choosing to tell only the folktales that are original to black communities.

That Hurston recognized flaws in the culture of her race is clear when she states in Dust Tracks on the Road that she "sensed early that the Negro race was not one band of heavenly love. There was stress and strain inside [the black community] as well as out" (DT 170). Several themes and elements recur

in the tales and their frames that Hurston seems to view as confining and oppressive to both the culture and the individual: the internalization of a sense of racial inferiority reflected by the reliance of black communities on private meanings and their tendency to hide, the practice of playing up to negative stereotypes (known as "Tomming"), and the discord between community members, especially between women. Hurston emphasizes these elements in the tales and stories she chooses to relate by disclosing personal judgments, all the more powerful because they are so rare, by making occasional anthropological explanations, and by strategically placing certain stories and scenes at the end of chapters.

To some extent, Hurston's work differs from a lot of black literature in which black characters often feel a sense of inferiority that has been imposed on them from outside and then internalized. As W.E.B. DuBois expresses in The Souls of Black Folk, the American world into which the black person is born is "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other [white] world," which results in the black person's experience of a "double consciousness": "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 3). While racial issues such as DuBois' "double consciousness" is a force in Hurston's work, she refrains from making overt sociological and psychological evaluations about these issues.

The absence of overt social commentary in Hurston's work has led to Harold Bloom's misinterpretation that Hurston was "free of all the ideologies that currently obscure the reception of her best book [Their Eyes Were Watching God]" and that "her sense of power has nothing in common with politics of any persuasion" (Bloom 4). Bloom's words imply that, unlike her black contemporaries, Hurston did not have a political stance on racial issues in her fiction.

Hurston is far from apolitical in Mules and Men, however. While she does not overtly assert her views on the "race issue" and the ways in which blacks have suffered and responded to prejudice, her recognition of the internal conflicts black people experience is seen in the portrayal of her subjects, their tales and the conversational frames. How a sense of internalized inferiority has incorporated itself in her subjects' language, for example, is seen in popular phrases like: "Ah ain't got to do nothin' but die and stay black" (MM 150), a remark that equates being black with dying. In a conversation between Gold and Gene in Chapter Two, blackness automatically is seen to be considered a negative quality even within the black community. When Gold says she knows a man as black as Gene, Gene immediately takes offense: "What you always crackin' on me for?" (MM 28).

This complicated internal conflict is also reflected in the tales that Hurston chooses to relate. The tales about Jack and the Devil exemplify this internal conflict because both characters are representative of black men but they are

often at odds with each other as in "How Jack Beat the Devil" (MM 47), and "Strength Test Between Jack and the Devil" (MM 154). In these stories, black identity is wrestling with itself---a reflection of DuBois' "two warring ideals in one dark body." Thus the transformation of the conventionally negative image of the devil into an affirming symbol of the black man is not made cleanly, since the black trickster (the devil) is tricking another black trickster (Jack).

The sense of internalized inferiority is also reflected in the fact that the tales often rely so heavily on secrecy and the "private joke" element. As Susan Willis argues, this need for secrecy is based on a negative identity imposed on them from outside and it perpetuates a "cultural otherness" that alienates black subculture from the larger American culture: "The stories...affirm race, but they do not then transcend racial prejudice....[They] begin in negativity; seize their negativity; and in so doing, position themselves on the brink of formulating an alternative vision. But they go no further" (S. Willis 45). No matter what "liar" means when black people apply it to themselves, it still has a derogatory, stereotypical meaning to larger, white American society. In using this subversive language, then, the black race risks misrepresenting itself to the larger culture.

Hurston's recognition of the danger of misrepresenting the black self is seen in the way she reacts to the "Deer Hunting Story" at the end of Chapter Four. This story, as discussed above, relies heavily on the "private joke" aspect

---the slave takes advantage of the white-imposed identity of "stupid nigger" in order to fool the master. The black man's behavior, however, is a double-edged sword, for while it is affirming in the way it brings the community members together in a shared, secret understanding, it also unfavorably misrepresents the black man to white society. In the only instance in which Hurston's narrator verbally expresses a negative personal opinion about a tale, she states at the end of this one: " 'Some colored folks ain't got no sense, and when Ah see 'em like dat,' Ah say, 'my race but not my taste.' " (MM 75) "Ah" is Hurston's narrator. (Hemenway misquotes her here, asserting that "Ah" is inside the quotation marks and is therefore spoken by the storyteller (Hemenway 170)). This is an unequivocal expression of her disapproval of the black man in the tale for deliberately perpetuating a negative stereotype by putting a false and unflattering face forward publically in order to be privately clever. Significantly, the black character of this tale is identified as only "a nigger" and not as "Jack," who is the "great human culture hero in Negro folklore...the wish fulfillment hero of the race" (MM 247).

Hurston refers to the practice of deliberately deceiving the white man at the expense of the black man's dignity as "Tomming" in the unedited version of the "My People! My People!" chapter in her autobiography. "My People! My People!" is a cry of despair and disapproval "called forth by the observation of one class of Negro on the doings of another

branch of the brother in black" (DT 157). In this chapter, she claims she does not complain of "Tomming," "if it is done right" (DT 216). The "Tomming" done by the slave in the "Deer Hunting Story," however, is not being "done right" in Hurston's estimation. While Hurston herself does "Tom right" in her autobiography, by ironically going along with a stereotype in order to show how ludicrous it is (Braxton 153), the character in the tale only perpetuates the stereotype with his behavior.

The potential danger of this willful misrepresentation in order to take advantage of the white man is also reflected in such tales as "You Think I'm Gointer Pay you but I Ain't," in which a "skillet blond" (a very dark-skinned person) tries to trick the white man into paying him even though he is not working (MM 92), and "God and the Devil in the Cemetery," in which Jack feigns fear to get away from the Massa (MM 86-7). In these stories, the black man's ploys of indulging in stereotypical behavior in order to trick the white man seem to work but backfire in the end as the black man ultimately comes out behind. In "You Think I'm Gointer Pay You...", the white man is not really tricked and does not pay the "skillet blond," and in "God and the Devil in the Cemetery," Jack arrives home to find the massa already there waiting for him. Hurston chooses to include these stories, perhaps, because they convey the idea that when the black person plays up to the stereotypical identity imposed upon him or her, it may serve as a good private joke to the black community, but it

also reinforces the stereotype in the white man's eyes, which, in turn, keeps the black community in the subordinate position.

Hurston thus views this tendency of assigning private meaning to language as negative in some ways, for while it does establish the boundaries of the community, it also limits those who use them to its confines because to venture outside of it results in being misunderstood. Once outside their own community, the blacks, judged by their tales and language, are likely to be believed inferior by white supremacists who don't understand the true significance of what they hear. Even worse, the black storytellers are vulnerable to the appearance of accepting this "inferior" label. Clearly, Hurston views this breach in communication as a problem, for while she does show black communities to be rich in art, spirituality and humor, she also shows them to be deprived of power, influence, and material wealth. The opportunities of the larger American society are closed off to them. Hurston also describes the violence, crime and drunkenness with which the black community members live, all of which, perhaps, indicate a sense of frustration or alienation.

As stated earlier, Susan Willis argues that Hurston's book consciously conveys how self-contained the black community is from the larger American society. This self-containment is further reflected formally in the way Hurston frames the tales. The "closure of its form" contains the tale just as the isolation and economic system contains the camps (S.

Willis 30), and the camps' conventions, as reflected in the folklore, contain the individual: "The story and its telling affirm the group as a cohesive unit, whose members' real-life possibilities are just as contained as the form of the stories they tell" (S. Willis 44).

Another shortcoming of the black communities that Hurston perceives, also reflexive of a sense of inferiority, is their tendency to be secretive, shy, and distrustful of outsiders. The unwillingness of the storytellers to open up to outsiders and the subversiveness of the hoodoo practices prevent the larger public from recognizing both the merit of the folklore and the spiritual power of the hoodoo. Hurston writes in her introduction that "the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive.... We let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries" (MM 3). This "feather bed resistance" (MM 3) contributes to white society's contempt, disregard and suspicion towards blacks, which in turn hinder the black person's chances to be successful outside of the black community. Hurston believed that in order to gain respect from the larger American society, black people must assert their sensitivity, artistry, and humanity rather than hide it. She writes in her essay, "What White Publishers Won't Publish":

For the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are human and internally, according to natural endowment, are just like everybody else. So long

as this is not conceived, there must remain that feeling of unsurmountable difference, and difference to the average man means something bad. (I Love Myself... 171)

Hurston's writings, especially Mules and Men, are her attempt to create this better understanding between the races by exposing the hidden black aesthetic.

Yet another element that Hurston seems to view as oppressive is the violence and discord within the community, despite the unifying nature of its oral tradition. In fact, the power of language is often used in destructive, rather than unifying, ways, and the tale tellers themselves are well aware of this destructive potential. In Chapter Two, George Thomas perceives that "her tongue is all de weapon a woman got" (MM 30), and used as a weapon, the tales and specifying often create hard feelings. Like many of the chapters, this one ends on a note of discord; Shug and Bennie Lee exchange threats and insults, which seem good-natured at first, but take on harder undertones until Bennie Lee finally falls asleep from the "coon dick" (MM 37).

Hurston seems to feel that disharmony between women is especially destructive. She strongly believed in the importance of friendship in the search for identification and happiness. "Without the juice of friendship," she declares in her autobiography, "I would not be even what I seem to be" (DT 226). In Mules and Men, the importance of female bonding is indicated by the friendship Hurston forms with Big Sweet, and the pain and violence of female discord are seen in her

dispute with Lucy. This violent discord is viewed by Hurston as a terrible hindrance to the community's well-being. Interestingly, Lucy's hatred of Hurston stems from her jealousy of the latter's friendships with Big Sweet and Lucy's lover Slim, both of which were brought about through the power of folklore-telling. It is significant that the folktales section of the book ends with the most violent scene, a fight between Lucy and Big Sweet, and the most hasty and desperate departure imagery in the book:

Slim stuck out the guitar to keep two struggling men from blocking my way. Lucy was screaming. Crip had hold of Big Sweet's clothes in the back and Joe was slugging him loose. 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. Jim and Slim helped me throw my bags into the car and I saw the sun rising as I approached Crescent City. (MM 179)

Because of the violence, the cohesiveness and celebration accompanying the tale-telling and the folklore-collecting come to an end.

The tales themselves also address the destructiveness of jealousy and the resulting violence. In the tale "Why the Waves have Whitecaps," Mrs. Water is jealous of Mrs. Wind's children and so the former drowns them (MM 128-9). Hurston's choosing to end a chapter with this tale of jealousy and murder places greater emphasis on its importance and adds to the sense of entrapment such a tale conveys. Examples of violence also occur in background information that Hurston

chooses to relate, such as the high rate of female murderers in Polk County: "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" (MM 60). Later, she describes the violent influence of alcohol on the saw mill workers: "Paynights used to mean two or three killings" (MM 144). The clinical tone of the narrator in these places, unlike most of the book when she enthusiastically praises the black community, indicates a sense of distance; this is a part of the culture from which she has divorced herself.

The oppressive negative qualities of the communities and some of the tales lead Hurston's narrator to feel a desire to escape from these communities, which Hurston emphasizes, not only by containing the tales in frames, but also by closing her chapters with departure imagery. For example, the violent tale discussed above, "Why the Waves have Whitecaps," is closed with the sense of departure by the following remark: "'Bought dat time a flea wanted to get a hair cut, so Ah left" (MM 129). This departure image is especially interesting because it is a storyteller's traditional closing line, which, in a previous story ("A Fast Horse," MM 41), Hurston had included in the smaller, indented print, making it a part of the tale rather than a part of the frame. Now, however, she places the line in quotation marks in the larger print, making it part of the frame. Thus she both contains the story by closing its frame and emphasizes the departure by making it the last image of the chapter.

Hurston's desire for escape from black communities is similarly seen in other chapters, as almost all of the chapters end with an image of either discord or departure, often both. In Chapter One, the narrator is leaving the "jook," and the "woofing" which ends the chapter has taken on imagery of murder and alienation:

Somebody was woofing in my car about love...He said, "Ah ain't got no buddy. They kilt my buddy so they could raise me. Jus' so Ah be yo' man Ah don't want no damn buddy. Ah hope they kill every man dat ever cried, 'titty-mamma' but me. Lemme be your kid." (MM 17)

Chapter Two ends in an argument between Bennie Lee and Shug. Chapter Three ends with Hurston's departure from Eatonville after the "John Henry" song, in which John Henry works himself to death trying to beat the steam engine. Chapter Four ends with Hurston saying, "My race but not my taste;" Chapter Five with a tale about John leaving his master; Chapter Seven, as discussed above, ends with the departure image of a closing line, set outside of the tale of female violence; Chapter Eight with the departure of the traveling preachers; and Chapter Ten with Hurston's departure from Polk County after the fight. The two exceptions, Chapters Six and Nine, both end with tales that may be interpreted as reflecting the inner black conflict between racial pride and shame: Chapter Six ends with "How the 'Gator Got Black," which is about how the "'gator" was once a "pretty white varmint" until he is burned by Brer Rabbit because he didn't know what trouble was. The moral of this story thus implies that being black is a sort of

punishment. Chapter Nine ends with "Strength Test between Jack and the Devil," which involves two characters who are both representative of the black man competing against each other. Both chapters end with the tale without a closing frame, which places emphasis on the tale and its sociological significance.

Many of the same tensions found in the folktales are also found in the Hoodoo section. Again, there is the recurrence of discord between the different community members, as many of the clients come to the doctors seeking a way to do harm to someone else. Significantly, most of the acts of aggression that the doctors are appealed to for involve jealousy and broken marriages. The first chapter of the hoodoo section ends in such a story, in which Eulalia breaks up a marriage in order to gain a husband for her client. Significantly, the chapter ends with the line, "And Saturday night Eulalia got her pay and the next day she set the ceremony to bring about the marriage" (MM 189). Thus the actual ceremony and the outcome of the new marriage are left untold while we are told that the old marriage is successfully destroyed. The emphasis is thus placed on the broken marriage, not on the possible new one.

The attention given to breaking up marriages in the hoodoo section is significant because, as Lillie P. Howard argues, "[Hurstons] seemed particularly interested in the problems that beset the state of marriage" as one of those life problems that all races and cultures have in common. "To

her, [marriage] was an important institution capable of various possibilities which she explores sometimes beautifully, sometimes unmercifully" (Howard 268). In Mules and Men, Hurston presents a variety of marriages, fully showing the spiritual merit of those like Gold's and Gene's in the folklore section and the pain of those like The Frizzly Rooster's and Mary's in the hoodoo section. It is further significant that she includes a tale that comments on both hoodoo doctors and breaking up marriages in the folktale chapter immediately preceding the hoodoo section:

Raw Head [a conjure doctor] said he had done turnt a man into a ground puppy. Devil said he been havin' a good time breakin' up couples. All over de world de Devil had husbands and wives fightin' and partin'. (MM 165)

Thus breaking up marriages is established as the devil's work and it is vicariously linked to hoodoo. As in the first hoodoo chapter, many marriages are broken in the following chapters, while there is little actual description of successful unions being brought about.

A second similarity between the hoodoo passages and the folklore section is the profound sense of secrecy with which community members treat both their religion and their folklore. Community members will not divulge the secrets of their hoodoo practices, or even admit to outsiders their belief in hoodoo, any sooner than they will tell an outsider a folkloric tale. Just as Hurston must pass tests to win the trust of the storytellers, she must prove herself to the hoodoo practitioners in order to be included into their circle.

She must reassure them that she is an understanding believer in them: "People can do things to you," she tells her first source to gain her confidence, "I done seen things happen" (MM 186).

Similar to the way the hidden meanings of the folktales have led to a lack of understanding between blacks and whites, the subversive nature of hoodoo has led to the misunderstanding of the practice by the rest of the nation:

It is not the accepted theology of the Nation, and so believers conceal their faith.... Mouths don't empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing. That is why these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. (MM 185)

Like the folktales, this "suppressed religion" (MM 183) is contained within the black communities away from the larger society, which leads to a feeling of mutual suspicion and fear between the two cultures.

It is this breach in communication between cultures that Hurston felt to be most damaging in race relations, and, as stated before, this is why she constantly proclaims the merit of black communities. Why, then, does she also depict communities' shortcomings? Hurston's motives for criticizing the black communities is consistent with her motives for praising it; in order to create better relations and understanding between the races, Hurston felt that her people must be made human to those who would prefer to think of them as less than human. By refusing to shy away from exposing the shortcomings of black communities, Hurston is striving against

the false glorification of blacks, which is an important part of this "humanizing" process. To ignore problems in black communities would be to place the black person outside of the human condition, since all human communities have problems. Hurston expresses this sentiment very concisely in her unedited autobiography chapter "Seeing the World as it is" when she inquires: "And why should Negroes be united? Nobody else in America is" (DT 241).

In daring to criticize black culture at all, Hurston is implying that the rising of the black people in American society is to some degree their own responsibility, and she emphasizes both this black responsibility and the black capability to do so by depicting the power of the black person's resilience and talent to transform pain into art and humor. This is very much in opposition to the prevalent black literary philosophy of the time set forth largely by Richard Wright, who asserted that the black man is powerless to help himself within the white power structure, and for whom "being black was such grimly serious business...that he was incapable of judging Hurston's characters, who laugh and tease as well as suffer, and who do not hate themselves for their blackness" (Washington 133).

Hurston's criticism of black societies also goes against the popular opinion that black characters should be depicted as favorably as possible in order to dispel negative stereotypes. In 1936, Nick Aaron Ford wrote that while, "Sinclair Lewis appears at his best when he is pointing out the foibles

and absurdities of...his own race....this is not the case with the Negro writer who sets out to reveal the secret faults of his race," for a critical a black writer "can do much to reinforce the already prevalent doctrine of race inferiority... and to convince many unfriendly fellow citizens that their vague and unsupported opinions concerning this stepchild of American civilization is absolutely true" (Ford 10). In Ford's view, then, as well as many other black thinkers and authors at the time, Hurston worked against the black cause.

Ford's criticism of Hurston, however, rests on the assumption that her works are meant to represent blacks to a white audience. While this assumption is certainly true for the most part, and most of her readers at the time probably were white, Ford neglects to acknowledge what the black reader might learn from Hurston's work. Hurston, however, probably was not ignoring this consideration, and thus her criticisms of black communities may in fact be geared towards internal reform in exactly the same way Sinclair Lewis' social commentaries are. Theresa Love acknowledges Hurston's sense of responsibility to her own race when she writes: "Zora Neale Hurston has a special message for her people. Acknowledging that they have suffered many injustices, she insists that they turn from bitterness to hope" (my emphasis, Love 60).

To imply that the black reader is incapable of internal social reform, Hurston felt, was an insult to black capabilities. She expresses her view on this issue in a letter to Countee Cullen, a fellow black writer:

When I suggest that to our "leaders" that the white man is not going to surrender for mere words what he has fought and died for, and that if we want anything substantial we must speak with the same weapon, immediately they object that I am not practical. No, no indeed. The time is not ripe, etc., etc. Just point out that we are suffering injustices and denied our rights, as if the white people did not know that already!My stand is this: either we must do something about it that the white man will understand and respect or shut up. No whiner ever got any respect or relief....my own self respect refuses to let me go to the mourners bench. Our position is like a man sitting on a tack and crying that it hurts, when all he needs to do is to get up off it. (Borders 90)

Hurston does not address where that tack comes from or whose fault it is that the black man is sitting on it. She addresses only what should be done about it, and clearly, she turns toward her own race to do something rather than to the white race. Since Hurston believed that the key to improving race relations rested on black action as much as on white reform, her work must be seen as geared to both black and white audiences. Because Mules and Men both criticizes and praises black culture, it may be seen as attempting to make the black race recognize its own shortcomings while taking pride in its own worth. At the same time the book asserts the worthiness of black culture to its white readers and admits to weaknesses that make black communities human.

That Hurston intended her book to be read by blacks as well as whites is further indicated by her refusal to measure black culture against white culture's standards, or to cater solely to white understanding, for she was aware of DuBois's warning of "the danger of seeking oneself through the eyes of

others" (Love 49). Barbara Johnson's interpretation of Hurston is quite right when she says, "Hurston seems to [present] a difference [between cultures] as a suspension of reference" (Johnson 328). This "suspension of reference," however, has led to Hurston's being unjustly criticized and misunderstood by some critics. Harold Preece, for example, accused her of being a "literary climber" for referring to her race with the stereotypically "servile term" of "mules" (Preece 374). Preece is mistakenly defining the term "mules" through white culture's understanding of it as "a stupid beast of burden," rather than through the black folklorist's affirming understanding of it as "a creature of beauty, strength, and endurance," which is how Hurston intends for it to be interpreted.

Because Hurston's depiction of black culture so often is judged with "suspended reference" --- that is, she does not judge it by white culture's value system --- she was often accused of that behavior that she so chastised: "Tomming." Her choice to depict an underclass, for example, was seen as counter-revolutionary by many who believed that "it was the duty of the black artist to picture their race in the 'best' possible light, thereby implying that only middle class blacks were worthy of being depicted" (Love 49). Hurston, however, perceived the value of folklore and thus "placed herself on the side of those who saw nothing self-defeating in writing about the black masses" (Love 50).

It is true that Hurston does not shy away from depicting

behavior that may be construed as stereotypical, but when the stereotype is untrue, she is very quick to defend the behavior. In Chapters Five and Six, for example, she depicts the mill-workers as far more interested in telling folklore than getting to their jobs, which might be seen, by such critics as Preece and Ford, as perpetuating the prevalent "lazy nigger" stereotype. However, Hurston is careful to provide the context of the situation in order to explain the behavior: "Old Hannah [the sun] was climbing the road of the sky, heating up the sand beds and sweating people. No wonder nobody wanted to work. Three fried men are not equal to one good cool one" (MM 84). Furthermore, earlier in the chapter she very emphatically describes the industriousness and competence of the tale-tellers at work:

Having watched some members of that swamp crew handle axes, I didn't doubt for a moment that they could do all that they said. Not only do they chop rhythmically, but they do a beautiful double twirl above their heads with the ascending axe before it begins that accurate and bird-like descent. They can hurl their axes great distances and behead moccasins or sink the blade into an alligator's skull. In fact, they seem to be able to do everything with their instrument that a blade can do. It is a magnificent sight to watch the marvelous co-ordination between the handsome black torsos and the twirling axes. (MM 66)

Thus, not only are the workers extremely skillful and capable at work, but they look good doing it, as they seem to have turned it into an art. By admitting that the workers try to get out of work when it's hot, Hurston shows that she is honest in her depiction of them and thus strengthens the credibility of her admiration given in the above passage.

When stereotypical behavior that may be seen as negative is observed by Hurston, she not only depicts it, thus admitting its truth; she criticizes it---if, and only if, she views this behavior as destructive. While sitting around telling stories might be viewed by some as negatively stereotypical behavior, Hurston sees and shows it to be positive in how it affirms the communities' artistic talents and their cohesiveness. The brawl in Chapter Ten, however, which may also be viewed as stereotypically negative behavior, is treated differently by Hurston because she herself disapproves of it. She therefore relays what happens and strongly criticizes it by calling the saw-mill camp "sordid" (MM 151). I disagree with Cheryl Wall's argument that Hurston is "playing up to her [white] audience" when she describes the camp as "sordid:" " 'sordid' voices [her audience's] opinion of the camp and its people. It does not express Hurston's view" (Wall 377). Wall seems to be assuming here that because Hurston is black, she would not view the life-threatening circumstances of the brawl as "sordid." However, not only does Hurston describe her departure from the mill in frantic terms in Mules and Men, as quoted earlier, but she is equally alarmed when she describes it in her autobiography:

Big Sweet yelled to me to run. I really ran, too. I ran out of the place, ran to my room, threw my things in the car and left the place. When the sun came up I was a hundred miles up the road headed for New Orleans. (DT 139)

Clearly, Hurston found the violent behavior unacceptable and was quick to divorce herself from it.

Hurston does not stop at merely pointing to the positive and the negative aspects of the black communities. Consistent with her view that the improvement of race relations relies on the black person's willingness to assert his greatness outside of his own community, Hurston provides the reader with an alternative to the black storyteller's life---her narrator. This narrator is all the more influential because she is Hurston's recreation of herself, bearing the same name, occupation, background, and ideology. The narrator is thus imbued with the author's success in the literary and academic (outside) worlds. Narrator and author are, for the most part, interchangeable.

Hurston presents her narrator as the alternate vision that Susan Willis, as quoted above, believes the black storytellers are almost, but not quite, able to formulate. Willis looks to the dialectical form of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God for a novel that transcends the confinement of Mules and Men's black camps, as the novel "wields the authorial persona of the figure of the protagonist, Janie Woods, and articulates its dialectic through her movements through geography and through three very different relationships to men" (Willis 46). In using Janie as an example of the independent heroine that Hurston admires, however, Willis ignores Hurston's narrator in Mules and Men who serves a similar function in this book as Janie Woods does in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Like Janie, Hurston's narrator is able to move through

geography and thus physically escapes the containment of the storytellers' community. In the course of the book, Hurston's narrator visits and leaves numerous communities and breaks off with many individuals with whom she has formed close ties. The most memorable example of a close bond which she must sever is the one she has with the hoodoo doctor Luke Turner about whom she says: "He wanted me to stay with him to the end. It has been a great sorrow to me that I could not say yes" (MM 205).

Also like Janie, Hurston's narrator gains increasing independence as the narrative of Mules and Men progresses. This progression is seen especially clearly in her relationships with the different hoodoo doctors as she seems to move towards a growing sense of liberation from their control. The first hoodoo doctor she studies under, Luke Turner, is portrayed as more controlling and possessive of Hurston's narrator than any of the others. He suppresses her right to talk, for example: "With an impatient gesture he signalled [her] not to interrupt" (MM 196), and he wants her "to stay with him until the end [of his life]" (MM 205). In Chapter Four, she still seems very much under the power of the hoodoo, as she participates in the bloody initiation ceremony and loses a degree of objectivity:

I went into a trance. Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don't know. Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don't know. I don't know. (MM 221)

In the last chapter, however, the tone is rather different from these earlier ones, as Hurston's narrator seems more distanced and skeptical of the doctor's, Kitty's, power. The hoodoo doctor in this last chapter is unsuccessful in keeping Minnie and her husband together. In the final scenario, Minnie returns in tears asking, "What can I do to rule de man I love?" Kitty answers:

Do like I say, honey, and you shall rule.... This is the way to change a man's mind about going away: Take the left shoe, set it up straight, then roll it one-half over first to the right, then to the left. Roll it to a coming-in door and point it straight in the door, and he can't leave. Hatband or sock can be made into a ball and rolled the same way; but it must be put under the sill or over the door. (MM 245)

To the non-believer, this story seems ridiculous, especially when compared to earlier hoodoo rituals like the one described above. Furthermore, because Hurston leaves the results of this final ceremony undisclosed, she implies that like the past scenarios with Minnie and her lover, this one will also be unsuccessful. The lack of faith that Hurston's narrator expresses here indicates that she is less under the power of the hoodoo doctor now than she was with the earlier doctors.

Hurston's narrator's increasing independence is also seen in the way she becomes a more active presence in the hoodoo section than in the folktale section. While she mentions in the folktale section that she participates in the telling of tales, often to get the other tellers started, her performances are not described. In the hoodoo section, however, she actually describes her contributions to rituals.

While in the folktale section Hurston relies on Big Sweet for protection; in the hoodoo section Hurston herself participates in vindictive ceremonies. For example, she helps Pierre with a ceremony that will make a boastful enemy of Pierre's physically "swell" (MM 211). Hurston's feelings about her own participation in such violent activities are ambiguous---either she is unbelieving, or she is contributing to the violence that she views as destructive. Either way, however, she is a stronger and more active force to be reckoned with in the second half of the book.

As a writer, Hurston further exemplifies independence when she escapes the confinement of convention in the hoodoo section of Mules and Men by breaking the patterns established in the folktale section. This breaking of patterns is especially evident in the last two chapters of the book. The text in the hoodoo section is different from that of the folktale section in that the different chapters of the hoodoo section are not marked by images of departure, and there are increasingly fewer stories told inside a frame. While Chapter Two of the hoodoo section does present the story of Marie Leveau's life within a frame, (Luke Turner tells it to Hurston), Chapter Six presents conjuring stories which are introduced briefly, but then are set forth one after the other in a continuous narrative without a frame to contain them or to set them apart from one another. This pattern continues until she comes to the last story, which is set apart from the others by a single space, simply, perhaps, to break the

pattern established by the rest of the chapter. At the end of the last hoodoo chapter, a final folktale is presented with no introduction or explanation at all. Within the structure of the book itself, then, the narrative strives towards liberating the stories that are told.

Thus, the alternative that Hurston offers to the black American is a life led with introspection and independence. That Hurston values independence is seen again and again in her essays and private interviews. She writes in her autobiography that it was the realization that "it took more than a community of skin color to make your love come down on you. That was the beginning of my peace. Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole" (DT 171). She also states that "we will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else. It is up to the individual" (DT 172).

Furthermore, Hurston succeeds in making her themes of independence universal rather than just geared towards those of her own race (Tischler 3). In a private meeting with Nick Aaron Ford, she says: "I have ceased to think in terms of race, I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, white ones and black ones" (Ford 8). Her refusal to consciously and overtly address as her main theme the effects that prejudice has had on the black community conveys Hurston's theme of independence. This theme is

directed not only to blacks, but to all people who are limited by their communities---that is, to all people.

Hurston's narrator serves as an example of an individual who takes pride in the aspects of her communities, both black and white, that she feels are positive, but who also rejects those aspects that she views as hindering to her growth as a writer and as an American citizen. In this way, she achieves widespread success and recognition, meriting the notice and respect of both white and black readers. The violence of the folklore communities she physically escapes, but she takes with her the tales and their art. She transcends any sense of racial shame and need for secrecy by publishing black folklore, and she is completely confident of the folklore's greatness. She is able to see things more clearly through her studies in anthropology, but she does not feel bound for its sake to disclose all of the communities' secrets and she breaks away from anthropological methods when she tampers with the stories and their frames (Rampersad xxiii). She refuses to allow the black communities, scientific conventions or common literary practices to dictate her actions and thus she refuses to be categorized. Because of her refusal to be "pigeon-holed," she has had to find a satisfactory balance between all of the different aspects of herself. That she had achieved this balance in Mules and Men is indicated by her sense of well-being while working on it. According to her biographer, during the summer she spent writing the book, "she was happier than she had been in years" (Hemenway 162).

Hurston is fully aware that she is "disturbing the pigeon-hole way of life" and that this is "upsetting" to people (DT 33), but she makes no apologies. She explains her position with the last story:

Once Sis Cat got hongry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat 'im. Rat tried and tried to get 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 of manner," 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. (MM 246)

Unlike the storytellers who can find no liberation in their tales, Hurston uses this tale in an effort to explain her position and thus gain liberation through the creation of greater understanding. She has decided on what and why she writes regardless of expectations, and only then does she "use her manners" in an effort to gain acceptance. We see her "using her manners" in her ability to get and keep patrons like Mrs. Mason, in spite of the fact that this relationship with the domineering white woman sparked the accusation that she compromised her own dignity in the process (Washington 126). We see her manners again in the letter she writes to

her sponsor and teacher Frank Boaz asking him to write the introduction, which she realizes will lend legitimacy to her work. In this letter, in which she pleads and flatters, we see a willingness on Hurston's part to humble herself in order to achieve her goals (Hemenway 163). If this is "Tomming," it is a sacrifice made only to achieve a larger and more important goal, part of which is her own success, since she sees herself as a role-model for others.

In her autobiography, Hurston asks, "What do I want?" and, significantly, again uses a folkloric parable to explain herself and thus gain liberation through understanding:

A Negro deacon was down on his knees praying at a wake held for a sister who had died that day. He had his eyes closed and was going great guns, when he noticed that he was not getting any more "amens" from the rest. He opened his eyes and saw that everybody else had gone except himself and the dead woman. Then he saw the reason. The supposedly dead woman was trying to sit up. He bolted for the door himself, but it slammed shut so quickly that it caught his flying coat-tails and held him sort of static. "Oh, no Gabriel!" the deacon shouted, "dat aint no way for you to do. I can do my own running, but you got to 'low me the same chance as the rest." (DT 284)

In this parable, the closed doors are all the conventions, both of black and white societies, that hinder Hurston's growth. Hurston is the deacon who simply wants his fair chance, but she is also the resurrected woman who refuses to let her art be buried. Thus this parable is a microcosm of Hurston's own internal conflicts between her loyalties to the conventions of her black upbringing and her respect for her white social and academic ties. Like Mules and Men, it

addresses what Wall terms as "the difficulties in reconciling the demands of community and the requirements of self," and it "challenge[s] black people to dig deep into their culture to unearth the values on which it was built. Those values could restore the balance" (Wall 392). While the parable leaves the conflict unresolved, Mules and Men does not. Hurston concludes her anthropological collection with the line: I'm sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and using my manners. " Clearly, Hurston's narrator is satisfied and content with her work and herself. She asks for no more.

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VITA

Olivia T. Lo

Born in Kingston, New York in 1967, where she graduated from the Kingston High School in 1985. Received her BA in English Education from the State University of New York at Albany in May of 1989 and entered the English Masters Program at the College of William and Mary in January of 1990. She intends to teach English in high school, preferably to emotionally disturbed students.