LAUGHIN' IT UP AND LYIN' IN THE UNPUBLISHED PLAYS & SKITS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON: AN ANALYSIS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S HUMOR

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ABSTRACT

LAUGHIN' IT UP AND LYIN' IN THE UNPUBLISHED PLAYS & SKITS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON: AN ANALYSIS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S HUMOR

Carolyn Woodland Boulware

This study examined the representation of humor in Zora Neale Hurston's unpublished plays, and skits, which were discovered in 1997 in the archives of the Library of Congress. Among these unpublished items, the following were selected for this study: *Meet the Momma* (1925), *De Turkey and De Law* (1930), *Cold Keener Skits- Filling Station* and *Cock Robin (1930), The Fiery Chariot (1932),* and *Polk County (1944).* This study is twofold: To seek and examine how humor is represented in Hurston's unpublished plays and skits; and to determine the similarity or dissimilarity between the humor in her unpublished works and in her fiction by examining the humor in her two novels, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).* What makes for humor in Hurston's body of work? Does humor present itself in her unpublished plays and skits as it does in her novels? If not, how does the representation of humor differ?

In this study, three specific features that make for humor in Hurston's unpublished plays and skits are identified. These three specific features are the discourse of signifyin'(g) or indirection, the use of dialect or the expressions of Southern black folks, and the situating of the three major theories of humor that exist in Hurston's humor. Hurston used her plays and skits as a platform to present her people to the world with authenticity and to disrupt the ideology associated with blackness to a non-human status of 'thing' to humanness.

Hurston's identity emerges through the humor of the folks who act out their daily performances on Joe Clark's storefront. As she went on errands for her mother at an early age, daily tales she heard. The tales amused the folks of the Eatonville community and tickled her as they remained enmeshed in her memory, that later provided the impetus for the humor in her plays and skits. In so doing, she captures the spirit of the Eatonville community through humor to ensure a segment of its precious culture would not be lost or forgotten.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my paternal grandfather, James Henry Woodland, Sr., where it all began, and my parents, Phillip Henry, Sr., and Mildred Carter Woodland who always believed in me. The following family members made valuable suggestions and encouragement: my twin- brother, Dr. Calvin E. Woodland who constantly asked," Did you finish that chapter, yet? ;" my only sister, Catherine Mildred Gray, who edited my writing when she wasn't correcting her student's papers; my granddaughter, Kai Renee Boulware, a sixth generation college graduate (Drew University) of the Woodland family; who offered excellent ideas for rephrasing; my daughter, Sheila Renee Boulware who endured the hard work of medical school and reminded me to 'stick to the topic;' my great aunt Alice Blair Waters, who believed I could 'jump de sun;' and my aunt and uncle, James, Sr., and Irene Carter, the first black graduates from Columbia University, who impressed me that no matter who you are or where you come from, you can become whatever you want to be.

To my niece, Melicia (Tammy) Woodland who was the impetus, three years ago, behind my decision to pursue Zora as a topic for my dissertation. Tammy, who had a zest for writing and a love for reading Zora Neale Hurston, passed away from ovarian cancer in the fall of 2020. Though she never saw this product in progress, I read to her a book of my unpublished poems, days before her passing. Finally, I dedicate this project to my youngest brother, Jimmy (James Royce Garfield Woodland), the father of Melicia, who passed away suddenly on January 3, 2023.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

> Mieux est de risque de larmes escribe, Parce que tire est le propre de l'homme. It is better to write about laughter than about tears because laughter is essential to man. (Rabelais, 2023).

Just as Rabelais contends it is better to write about laughter than tears, in which he says is essential to man, it is also that Hurston wishes to create laughter and humor to enlighten, amuse, and mute feelings of repression. Humor was essential in the life of Zora Neale Hurston, and for her, humor and laughter were not just to amuse, or to mute feelings of oppression, or to undermine the status quo, but to "celebrate Black culture with its jokes, its linguistic exaggerations, and its flamboyant storytellers (Walker 2003, 111). Freud asserts that "humor has in it a liberating element …It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording pleasure. Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious" (qtd. in Lowe 1994, 25). Hurston "revels in the colorful language of the black community" (Walker 2003, 112); as she speaks of pride and joy for her race. Hurston appreciated the nature of Black folks and recognized them as priceless and gifted human beings who lived in a community that thrived off of laughter and humor. I seek to find this evidence of humor in Hurston's unpublished plays and skits. In this study, *Meet the Momma* (1925), *De Turkey and De Law* (1930), *Cold Keener's Skits (Filling Station (1930)* and *Cock Robin (1930), The Fiery Chariot (1932), Polk County (1944),* as in her two major novels, *Jonah Gourd's Vine (1934)* and *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1937), I seek to find what makes Hurston's body of work humorous? Hurston's sense of humor is legendary and meant to be celebrated, and one

might agree after reading some of her excerpts. It would be difficult to read her plays or novels without releasing a leg-slapping guffaw. Her characters laugh together and laugh at each other as they move their bodies, gyrate, shriek, and snicker. Langston Hughes once said that "Hurston was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South" (*The Big Sea* 1944, 239), which are highlighted throughout this study.

I contend that humor is the major component of Zora Neale Hurston's unpublished plays and skits[1]. Humor and laughter are used interchangeably throughout this study. What is humor? Defining this term find has long been a quest for researchers and scholars. Nonetheless, before proceeding, it would be helpful to delineate a definition of humor. Humor is a form of expression, and its intention is to invoke laughter. Humor has a historical connotation in connection to a particular culture, and what may be humorous to one culture may not be humorous to another. Thus, laughter does not occur spontaneously, and what may be hilarious to one person may not be to another. "That is to say, what rouses laughter in one may be met with silent impassivity by another.

[1] The original scripts of the plays and publication dates were found by Alice L. Birney at the Library of Congress in 1997. They are: *Meet the Mamma (1925), Color Struck (1926), Spears (192, The First One (192&), Cold Keener- 10 skits-1930), De Turkey and De Law (1939), The Sermon and the Valley (1931), Four Plays from Fast and Furious (1931), The Fiery Chariot (1932), Spunk (1933) and Polk County (1944).* In 2008, Zora Neale Hurston Plays were collected in a single volume and edited by Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell with assistance from staff at Morgan State University and Loyola University. The changes made to the plays were minor rearrangement of scene descriptions, cast titles, character descriptions, and stage directions. There were also changes in punctuations that facilitated easability for reading. The source of the plays and skits used for this study were from the *Zora Neale Collected Plays* rather than the original skits discovered in the Library of Congress.

Laughter on the other hand is an objective, discernable social act. Humor is an eminently a social and [cultural] phenomenon" (Levin 1977, 359). Humor is an interactive process among those with a common experience between the joke teller and its community members who are its listeners. The community experience "foster[s] a sense of particularity and group identification" (Levin 1977, 359). Humor is the vehicle that promotes this cohesion and group identification. Mel Watkins writes that, "Humor is like a rich man's wallet: it's a hard nut to crack. No one seems to be able to clearly define it or explain it" (*On the Real Side* 1994, 16). Thomas Hobbs writes "that the passion of [humor] is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others" (Levinson 2006, 389). Sigmund Freud further asserts that "humor is when we become aware of the disparity between a perceived action and what we know should happen, and whatever it may be, humor provides an outlet for sublimated aggression" (1963, 23). He further points out that "humor represents a surge of unconscious often repressed, motives and desires. It distorts the rational and evades most logical decoding and is often amusing" (qtd. in Watkins 1994, 446-447). Langston Hughes concurs humor "is what it is not" (1994, 447). In the analysis of laughter and humor, "inversion is one of its prime comic methods. Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert roles, you obtain a comic scene… Thus, we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate" (Bergson 1911, 94).

The focus of this study is to examine the humor of Zora Neale Hurston in the community where she grew up which fostered cohesion, belongingness, and identification. It was where Hurston discovered a kind of authentic humor that exists in a

black community down South, a community like Eatonville, Florida, where the menfolk sat every evening telling lies, tall tales, folk tales, Uncle Remus tales, and creating "crayon of adornment." The experiences of the community folks of Eatonville developed a sense of commonality that allowed them to escape the plight of a racist society. The everyday lives of ordinary black folks are depicted in Hurston's unpublished plays and skits, as she masterfully employs humor to convey the unspeakable while simultaneously, masking feelings of humiliation, anger, frustration, tragedy, and pain of a marginalized people. Hurston's humor is direct and overtly funny, while other times, it's indirect and subtle. Hurston skillfully uses metaphors, hyperbole, simile, verbal nouns, double descriptors, verbal insults, loud - talking, the dozens, boasting tall- tales, exaggerations, and animals taking on qualities of real people and body parts that become weapons.

Humor rarely occurs in isolation, and it must involve others. Humor can hardly be appreciated in isolation. Henri Bergson notes three facts in the comic: Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Laughter is always the laughter of a group. It must have social signification" (1911, 47). Humor is a community phenomenon involving the interaction between joke tellers and listeners who share a commonality of experiences and situations. It is humor that allows a sense of community and commonality for special bonding to joke, to tease, and to laugh at each other. The laughter and humor promote communal expressions that conjure up a sense of belonging. Humor is an accumulation of personal expressions that create bonding and foster togetherness. Hurston understood how these personal experiences among her folks used humor and laughter to sustain their community, as well as the need to laugh at their oppressors, while laughing at themselves. She saw the necessity to capture that sense of community, despite their

suffering, in her plays, skits, and fiction. Her humor revealed the human condition of black folks in their everyday lives whether they lived in a small southern town, or in a large northern city. Despite W.E.B. DuBois's views of the folks further South, he wrote "that the greatest gift of God is humor. If you want to feel humor that is exquisite and subtle for translation, sit invisibly among a gang of Negro workers" (1968, 148) or better still on the porch of Joe Clark's store front. It is this communal bonding coupled with its humor of absurdity and its ritual of insults that permeates the structure of Hurston's humor.

The tales and lies Zora heard as she eavesdropped on the menfolk as they sat on Joe Clark's storefront provided the materials for her plays and skits. The lies they told were meant not to deceive or mislead but for the mere purpose of entertaining. Little lies became thunderous and bold lies, that would have folks bursting at the seam. Routinely, the story tellers engage in a kind of competition to see who could out do the other in resulting the most laughter.

From Eatonville, Hurston goes to Harlem with $1.50 in her pocket and the clothes she wore on her back to become one of the icons of the Harlem Renaissance. She found herself in the midst of the biggest literary debate ever, "Art for the sake of Art" or "Art for the sake of Propaganda" and there were challenges beset by intellectuals such as the likes of DuBois and others. Hurston did not yield to those who saw themselves as leaders of the elite members of the black race and to their demands that Black artists must create art for the sake of uplifting the race. "Despite such prevailing views in both academia and popular culture, Hurston's life experiences told her that the folks she knew from growing up in Eatonville were complex, dignified human beings, no matter how white (sometimes

black) representations distorted or stereotyped them" (Spencer 2004, 17). Hurston refused to be a race uplifter and took an opposing route to use humor and laughter to celebrate black folks for their humanity and culture, the marginalized people, like the folks of Eatonville, Florida. Their communal bonding, joking relationships and survival tactics for coping and negotiating were uplifting in itself. Her colleagues did not see her as a serious writer, and her writing lacked substance. Hurston was relentless in remaining true to her own conventions and convictions, no matter what her misogynistic colleagues thought. She found inspiration from the culture of her folks and saw a need to preserve their precious culture that was vaporing under threats of industrialization, the Northern migration, and modernism. In addition, Hurston, as "both an educated observer and one of the folks, saw in her study of anthropology a way to merge the bifurcated aspects of 1her life—her rural upbringing in the South and her urban education to form a complex racial philosophy" (Spencer 2004, 18). It was that racial philosophy that greatly influenced her writing and distinguished her from her contemporaries. "Hurston was criticized by DuBois and other leaders for including racial stereotypes in her work" (2004.18).

It was Hurston's endeavor for authenticity to disrupt the ideology associated with blackness from a non-human status of 'thing' to humanness. Her mode of operandi was that Blacks were depicted as humans. Blacks have proven to be builders of civilizations, ruled as honorable kings and queens, creators of pyramids, inventors of streetlights, and blood plasma. To Hurston, blacks had unique ways of being, of reasoning, of surviving, of showing empathy, compassion, love, and most importantly humor and laughter. Hurston unleashed humor, laughter, big tales, big lies, and signifying, in her plays and

skits as well as her fiction, to assert invincibility and humanity, and to give agency to a marginalized people in a racist society, or as Freud puts it, "sustaining without quitting the ground of mental sanity" (1966 344).

I assert Hurston believed that instead of confronting racist oppression, she utilized humor and focused on the authenticity of the Southern folks vernacular to reflect the cohesiveness within the African American community. "No artist before, Hurston or since, has regarded the language, the culture, and customs of the African American South with such affection and seriousness. Unfettered by respectability politics, Hurston lets the people speak for themselves. and speak they do" (*Hitting a Straight Lick* 2003, xiii). In so doing, Hurston captures the spirit, the language, and the humor of her community, to the assurance that the spirit of the folks of Eatonville, Florida would not be lost or forgotten through the enactment of her plays and skits that were found hidden away in the archives of the Library of Congress.

Hurston's humor can be described as affiliative and self-enhancing. Communal humor involves telling jokes, engaging in witty repartee, and amusing others can promote social cohesion, morale, and attention, and reduce conflicts, and tension. (Ruch.2008) The menfolk on Joe Clark's porch engaged in "just this style of communal humor of saying funny things, [stretching the truth], telling jokes and engaging in spontaneous witty bantering to amuse others, to facilitate relationships and to reduce interpersonal tensions" (Ruch.2008.38-39). Kuiper and others assert in a study, "Coping, humour, stress and cognitive appraisals," that humor provides a way of coping with stress. It is the kind of humor that is "benign agentic humor that functions as a defense mechanism by having a generally humorous outlook on life, a tendency to be frequently amused by the

incongruities of life and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress, or adversity" (Kuiper, 1993, 1). Humor is a "mechanism devised to understand the oppression black folks faced in their every-day- lives, but also to mute their effect, to release suppressed feelings and to minimize suffering……. against the world, and to accomplish all of this, as Freud put it, without quitting the ground of mental sanity" (Freud 1966, 344). Hurston's humor masks feelings of despair and hopelessness, yet it is absent of stereotypical imagery, racial strife, or hate for the oppressor, instead, it is filled with laughter, joy, amusement, and entertainment. The folk tale illustrated below is one that Hurston probably heard numerous times as the menfolk repeated it on Joe Clark's store porch:

> Ah know an ole man who had a goat and one Sunday mornin' he got mama to wash his shirt so she would and hung it out to dry so she could iron it befo' church time. The goat spied pa's shirt hangin' on de line and et it up tiddy umpty. The ole man was so mad - dat goat 'bout his shirt till he grabbed him and tied him on de railroad track so de train could run over him and kill him. But dat old goat was smart. When he seen dat train bearin' down on him, he coughed up dat red shirt and waved de train down. (*Mules & Men* 1935, 112)

Under the mask of humor, the tale is benign depicting a "community where folk's artistic expression is spontaneous and free, where blues are "made and used right on the spot" (Wall 1995, 125). The narrative depicts an animal involving a goat who cleverly escaped from his demise. The tale could well be disguised as a wish-fulfillment through which Black folks' hopes of escaping their demise, but yet no malice or hatred is evident in the humorous tale, only laughter.

> Humor was a gift that arose from the very woes which besets us. Laughter was a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship: It is our emotional salvation" (Fauset.1068.161). Humor is the "stripping away of pretense and disguise, revealing the truth, and are therefore frequently obscene, aggressive, and hostile. They may alternately or simultaneously be critical, blasphemous, and skeptical (qtd. in Lowe 1994, 24-25).

Hurston's plays, skits, and fiction contain the kind of agentic humor, that is direct, assertive, and forthright, and filled with incongruities of the lives of the folks in a community down South. If it were not for the efforts of Alice Birney of the Library of Congress who found Hurston's plays and skits, we may not have known of the kind of humor she espoused. Birney had the foresight that Hurston's works were treasures left behind and possibly forgotten by Zora Neale Hurston. She felt that though some of the plays appeared to be unfinished requiring extensive editing, and some containing paper-thin plots, they needed to be shared and even performed before an audience. Hurston stated early in her career "she did not want her work to be buried in scientific journals-but to be shared with the world" (Kaplan 2003, 456). *Polk County*, one of the plays found, was performed on the Loyola Campus [Baltimore, Maryland] in 2005 and "the performance itself was a rousing success, providing positive proof that Houston's work could shine on stage" (*Collected Plays* 2008, ix). Did this mean that the remaining unpublished plays and skits could garner the same kind of success? Was it Hurston's humor or plot that showed success or both?

Chapter One provides a glimpse into the life of a precocious, creative, inquisitive, and high- spirited child, named Zora to the adult, Zora who becomes an icon of the Harlem Renaissance. Interfaced with this period was the development of Black humor and the great stand-up comedians, Mom Mabley, and Red Foxx, to name a few, who were mostly men, during Hurston's time.

Chapter Two identifies one of the major features that makes for Hurston's humor signifying, sometimes spelled as signifyin'(g). Signifying is a way of talking around the subject, in some communities it was a way of circumventing without using direct

discourse to discuss a subject manner. Hurston is best at using signifying or indirect discourse as a way of expressing humor. Geneva Smitherman provides a comprehensive and expansive definition of indirect discourse or signifyin'(g)as a rhetorical process involving the verbal art of insult, with no harm intended.

Chapter Three discusses a second feature identified in Hurston's humor is her use of dialect, the expressions of black Southern folks, the use of metaphors and similes, double descriptive, sometimes referenced as hieroglyphics or verbal nouns. Elements of Hurston's Black expressions are in juxtaposition to Leopold Senghor concept of Negritude. Negritude is a movement inspired by the Harlem Renaissance and its affirmation of the value of the Black experience, its culture, heritage, identity, and most importantly, speech. Hurston's Southern folk expressions are influenced by the oral tradition just as Senghor does. Additionally, Hurston's syntactical structures is typically characterized as that of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or African American English (AAE). I use excerpts from her novels, plays, and skits to illustrate Hurston's use of these forms while showing her keen skills in perfecting the speech of the folks down South as told in the stories and tales with their exaggerations, lies, and prefabrications.

Chapter Four addresses the three major theories: superiority theory, incongruity theory, and release theory. In considering Zora Neale Hurston's unpublished body of work, I situate the three theories in her plays and skits, as well as her fiction.

Chapter Five provides insight into the making of the 'Genius of the South is presented. It is often said that Hurston was ahead of her time, but she had to live then in order to be a force to be an influence on those sisters of color who came after her. She

was an anomaly and what she did to elevate the consciousness of black women, we can only know through the writings of Toni Morrison, Maya Angelo, Alice walkers and others. Did Hurston prove herself to be a playwright in her own right? Was Hurston truly committed to authenticating the culture of the folks down South or was she pandering to the 'white folks' as she was accused by her critics? How would her unpublished plays fare today, or would the language usage alone be seen too stereotypical or disparaging for certain audiences? In this chapter is the Alice recount of finding Zora Neale Hurston name in a scholarly anthropological journal. Walker refers to Hurston as the grandmother she never knew. Though their writings took different paths, both maintained a commitment to reflecting the experiences and stories of survival of Black women and men.

In the appendix of this dissertation, the words from the poem *We Be Theorizing* by Kendra Nicole Bryant are quoted. It is my tribute to Zora Neale Hurston who led the path for all Black literary artists, her adversaries and camaraderie, conventional or non-conventional, race up lifters, or those who were not, and to those who criticized her and to those who loved her.

"Humor is perhaps one of the most difficult subjects to study" (Apte1985, 13). In *Jump the Sun*, the author writes that "he hoped his study of Hurston's humor would prompt others to do so" (Lowe 1994, 185). In my desire of during just that, I hope that I am successful in producing such a document that could serve as an instructional tool for others to study the humor of Zora Neale Hurston.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review includes research of literature focused on three themes as it relates to this dissertation topic, *Laughin' It Up and Lyin' the in the Unpublished Plays of Zora Neale Hurston.* It is not my aim to give a full account of humor literature which is not possible given the space constraints. However, the literature review will provide a glimpse into the young life of growing up in community enriched with humor, her creation of humor in her body of work, and how the three major theories of humor are encapsulated in her plays, skits, and fiction. There were limitations in performing this study due to the scarcity of available research material about Zora Neale Hurston as a playwright, a dramatist, and a humorist.

Dust Tracks on a Road is the first autobiography of its kind, published in 1942 and considered the first of the black female literary tradition, provides insight into who was "Zora Neale Hurston. The novel reveals a young and inquisitive girl growing up in an all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. She tells her story with frankness and candor and it is the humor of the characters, from the old deacon who prays, "Oh, Lawd, I got something to ask, you, but I know You can't do it, to her gross stepmother who became hospitalized with a malignant growth on her neck—Hurston says, quite frankly and honestly, that she wishes the woman had two necks" *(Critical Perspectives and Present* 1993, 31).

Robert Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977) provides a portrait of a novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist. He draws upon archival documents and interviews of people who knew her. Hemenway explores Hurston's treatment of Southern blacks by examining her body of work. He further reveals her deep commitment

to the everyday lives of the folks down South. He further explores her marriages, her relationships with Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, Franz Boas, and Langston Hughes. and finally, the penniless final years leading to her death.

Carla Kaplan's *Zora Neale Hurston, a life of Letters* (2002) is a compilation of correspondences written by Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Dorothy West, Carl Van Vechten, Fannie Hurst, Marjorie K. Rawlings, and others whom she befriended during the Harlem Renaissance. The letters provide an account of the peaks and valleys in her life.

Wrapped in Rainbows, the first biography of Zora Neale Hurston written by Valerie Boyd (2003) tells of Hurston's adventures, the complexity, and the sorrows she experienced during her extraordinary life. Boyd delves in Hurston's history growing up in Eatonville, her brief marriages, sexuality, and her mysterious relationship with voodoo. The Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, and World War II are its historical backdrops, and the novel positions Hurston's work in her time but also offers riveting implications for our own.

The Linguistics of Humor (1994) by Salvatore Attardo provides a thorough historical background of the development of humor and the philosopher who embraced humor. Included in this source is a comprehensive introduction to the terminology, and concepts of the major theories of humor. There is an in-depth discussion of the theories of Verbal Humor, and puns and their interpretation, as well as an outline of the linguistic of humor and its social context, conversation analysis and the sociolinguistic aspects.

John Lowe's *Jump at the Sun* (1994) explores the sources of Hurston's humor and the comic elements found in her fiction. Lowe traces the cultural, historical, literary events and connections to Hurston and how it affected her.

Mahadev L. Apte in *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (1985) focuses on humor's role in social relationships and demonstrates how humor influences non- kin and kin relationships. He discovers the function of humor, and examines humor in the context of language, religion, folklore, and the community.

Henry T. Gates, in *The Signifying Monkey*, published in 1988, traces the root of the "rhetorical theory all the way back to the original myths of Esau in Africa and tales of Signifying Monkey" (*Signifying* 20). Gates establishes signifyin'(g) as the basis for a culturally specific theory, and he explicitly describes it as a mode of indirection, that Hurston employs as one of devices for creating humor.

Geneva Smitherman in *Tellin' and Testyfin'* (1977) provides insight into understanding Black English and defining it as a legitimate form of speech spoken by people of Britain, America, and Australia. The author illustrates that Black English has a distinctive structure with a special lexicon. She agrees that the Black dialect is not far apart from traditional English but has its origin with Africa.

Hurston's identifying element that makes for humor is speech and the oral tradition is discussed in *What We Say, Who We Are: Leopold Senghor, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Philosophy of Language*, published by Parker English (2010). Parker explores the commonality between Leopold Senghor's concept of "negritude" and Zora Neale Hurston's view of Negro expression. An important feature of negritude for Senghor is the oral tradition and explains the power of speech in Africa. Hurston

describes Blacks as thinking in hieroglyphics or Blacks think about objects via images of their useful actions. Hurston maintains Black speech is a result of thinking hieroglyphically or needing action words to express their reactions to objects in terms of their images. That is, the speech responding to hieroglyphic thought project images with action words. Hurston describes [such "double-descriptive" as] "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. In action, everything is illustrated.

Mel Watkins' *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (1994) is a detailed look at the history of black humor from slavery days to current times. He also examines African American humor and shows how its humor differ from other ethnic groups.

Henri Bergson's *Laughter*: *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, offers a novel explanation of the comic in general, the forms, and movements of the comic and comic forces. Most significantly, rather than Bergson expanding on the meaning of laughter, he put forth three observations: laughter is a human quality, or that man is an animal that laughs; the comic appeals to the intellect, the comic produces an unsettling affect, and laughter is a social phenomenon, and simply laughter is always the laughter of a group.

Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Stories from the Harlem Renaissance by Zora Neale Hurston with introduction by Genevieve West and foreword by Tayari Jones, published in 2005, is a collection of short fiction. The stories are presented in the order of their composition. Many of the stories were lost and then discovered. Her twenty-one stories cover a myriad of subjects including Harlem's middle

class, courtship, marriage, urban tales, the Great Migration, and domestic violence. Of course, there is humor.

Jonah's Gourd Vine was Hurston's first novel published in 1933 and its theme is derived from Jonah 4.6–10, which uses the gourd vine from the passage as a metaphor for the main character of the novel, John Pearson, a preacher. The novel is actual story of Hurston's parents and how as a preacher, Pearson has a lust for other women. Hurston produces a never-ending stream of parody and cheerful laughter. "Biblical signifying became additive for Hurston mimicking, reshaping, and parodying sacral utterances of preachers, prophets and God himself" (Lowe 1994, 86).

Mules and Men represents Hurston's anthropological work based on the folklore she collected while she studied under Fran Boas at Barnard. The collection extended over a period from 1927-1932 as she traveled to her hometown of Eatonville including visits to the sawmill and the jook. Included in the book is her observation and participation in hoodoo practices while living in Louisiana. The book is divided in two parts: Seventy African American folklores from Eatonville and Polk County. The second part contained hoodoo practices. After a number of revisions, *Mules and Men* was published in 1935.

I Love Myself When I am Laughing, A Zora Neale Hurston Reader with Zora Neale Hurston as Author, edited by Alice Walker and foreword prepared by Mary Helen Washington was published in 1979. It is an anthology with a total of fourteen examples of her fiction, journalism, folklore, and autobiography, six essays and short stories. The collection consists of excerpts from *Dust Tracks on the Road; Mules and Men; Tell My Horse; Jonah's Gourd Vine; Moses, Man of the Mountain;* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

In *Critical Perspectives and Present* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah, in 1993, the book provides in its opening chapters reviews of her published works that appeared in numerous magazines, journals, and newspapers of Hurston during her time. The reviews present evidence of the criticism surrounding her work. In addition, there are fourteen critical essays of Hurston.

M. Genevieve West, in *from Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (2005), examines the cultural history of Zora Neale Hurston's writings and the reception of her work. She provides an explanation why Hurston died in obscure poverty, but only to be reclaimed as an important Harlem Renaissance writer decades after her death. West focuses on how Hurston was marketed and reviewed during her career and how literary scholars reappraised her. The publisher's approach to marketing Hurston as an African American fiction writer and folklorist increased her popularity among the general reading public, while her fellow Harlem Renaissance authors often excoriated her as an exploiter of African American culture and a propagator of black stereotypes. Eventually, the criticism outweighed the popularity, and her writing fell out of fashion. In the 1960s and 1970s, her work was reappraised, and her status elevated to one of the best writers of her generation.

Hitting A Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston by Susan Edwards Meisenhelder was published in 1999. The author provides a review of Hurston's major works*: Mules and Men, Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Are Watching God, Dust Tracks on the Road, Moses, Man of the Mountain, and the Trials of Black Women in the 1950s.* After each selection, Meisenhelder provides insight

into the subtle analysis of race and gender while celebrating black culture. There is also a focus on the identity of the black man and that of the black woman.

The Inside Light by Deborah G. Plant (2010) is a collection of twenty critical essays by distinguished scholars who through research discover a new dimension to Hurston's body of work.

In Z*ora Neale Huston- Collected Plays* by Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, is the collection of Hurston's unpublished plays in a single volume printed from the original manuscripts found in the archives of the Library of Congress in 1997. In lieu of using Hurston's original unpublished plays found in the archives of the Library of Congress, Z*ora Neale Huston- Collected Plays* is the major source for the plays and skits The plays are listed in the next section of this literature review.

Meet the Momma is a play written by Hurston in 1925. Its setting is at a New York port, where passengers are onboard an Ocean Liner to travel to Africa. It is Hurston's first musical during the Garveyism Movement. The characters are unlike the folks down South who appear in her later plays. They speak standard English and represent the middle-class blacks during the period of the Northern Migration and Back to Africa Movement. It is Hurston's only play that does not represent the marginalized folks down South.

De Turkey and De Law was written in 1930 by Hurston. It is a three-act-comedy that centers on a confrontation and a love triangle which centers on an altercation between Dave Carter, "the local Nimrod, "or a skilled hunter, and Jim Weston, the town bully. The two men engages in a fight in which Jim knocks Dave unconscious with a

backbone from a mule. A trial is held in the town due to assault charges which turns into a battle between the Methodist and Baptist congregations.

The *Cold Keener* was written in October 1930. It consists of sketches that amount to a celebration of black culture filled with music, and humor. The two skits used in this study include *the Filling Station* and *Cock Robin*. The first play, *Filling Station*, centers on a battle of words between a Ford Owner and a Chevrolet owner who encounter each other at a gas station located on the Alabama -Georgia state line. The two owners engage in arguments over how white folks from their respective home states and the quality of their respective automobiles.

Cock Robin (1930) is derived from English nursery rhyme "*Who Shot Cock Robin*?" but adapted by Hurston, where characters are portrayed as animals. The characters hold a community meeting about who shot Cock Robin and why he was shot. It was determined that Cock Robin was engaged in philandering with the married women in the community, while the husbands were out hunting for worms. When Cock Robin is around, they noticed their wives lay blue eyes instead of white eggs. It becomes a community affair when its members gather to arrange a funeral for Cock Robin, but the folks decided in the end to leave the funeralizing to the white folks since they are always taking over everything anyway. Meanwhile, community members ban together and march to a barbecue feast.

The story line in *Fiery Chariot* (1935) is an enactment from 2 King 2, where Elijah is taken to heaven in "a chariot of fire, and houses of fire. The very short one- act play symbolizes African Americans being delivered from slavery. Hurston presents elements of superstition with the black man being gullible and cowardice. Elijah is in

constant prayer telling the Lord he wants to go to heaven so he can be relieved from the everyday toil of working from dawn to dust for the slave master. When the master disguised as the Lord (white sheet) appears at Elijah's door, he finds himself in a predicament in that he is not really ready to die. The story is humorous and is very much John the trickster who in the end outwitting the master.

Polk County (1944) is based on material Hurston collected when she spent months at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Loughman, Florida. The characters Big Sweet and Dicey Long are based on women, Hurston met in the camp who help her navigate her way in gathering folktales from the workers. The menfolk at the lumber camp "work hard," "love hard" and "fought hard" with knives and fists rather than resolve conflicts in the courts. The workers loved the sawmill and when they finish working at one camp, they look for another. *Polk County* is a Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with authentic Negro Music in Three Acts with lots of humor and drama.

This literature review establishes a framework for this study while providing the depth and scope of Hurston's extensive literary work. There were numerous articles that could have been included in the review, but brevity was required for cited sources.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM EATONVILLE TO HARLEM

> It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mallet- headed, mull- eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, 'gator- faced, shad- mouth, screw necked, goat bellied, puzzle – gutted, camel-hacked, butt-sprung, battle- hammed, knock- kneed, razor-legged, box-ankled, shovel- footed, unmated so-and-so. (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 138)

In Eatonville, Florida, Zora, at an incredibly young age, was accustomed to hearing the name-calling especially when men sat 'round on Joe Clark's store porch doin' nothin' but tellin' folk tales, tall tales and those Big Ole Lies. "The porch provides a locus for the creative act of storytelling or "lying" (Grimes 1988, 37). Those big ole lies were folk tales and tall tales woven out of the folklore of the South. Zora received daily dosages of these lies as she grabbed at every opportunity when tending to an errand for her mother at Joe Clark's store. She tells how she purposely dragged her feet in and out of the store and lingered and listened to the folks pass "this world and the next through their mouths while allowing the townsfolk gossip to hang in [my] ears" (Grimes 1988, 46).

Zora recalls at the end of the day, men and sometimes a few women, but mostly men gathered on Joe Clark's porch, sitting on boxes, benches, and nail kegs while some leaned on railings sipping soft drinks, eating cheese and soda crackers, talking, and laughing. Sometimes someone would bring out a box, namely the guitar, and the men sang songs or danced the chicken. The men likely needed to unwind and energize themselves in preparation for the lying competition that would soon come. Their overworked bodies had been pushed to the limit from dawn to dusk under the gaze of their abusive overseers, as they worked in the blazing hot sun. Once the lying sessions

began, all other oppressive thoughts were momentarily put aside. The men not only used their voices to communicate, but used hand motions and gestures, which were as much of the verbal insults as the marking, loud talking, calling one out of their name, sounding, rapping, and playing the dozen. There was also woofing, bullying, bashing, and talk about potency and promiscuity or just prefabricating. “The porch rituals and its immediate environs provided the setting for the dramatization of basic emotions and the community's reactions to the drama. Hurston notes further that there were "no discreet nuances of life on Joe Clarke's porch…. all emotions were naked and nakedly arrived at” (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 71). No one was spared from being the butt of jokes including Matt Bonner’s skinny mule.

> Matt Bonner is taunted about his skinny mule, by telling him about how the mule is “bad off.” Matt would always take the bait, demanding to know what’s wrong, and Sam deadpans, De women folks got yo’ mule. When ah come around de lake ‘out noontime mah wife and some others had him flat on de ground usin’ his sides fuh uh wash board. The great clap of laughter that have been holding in, bursts out. (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 52)

Why were these porch rituals so significant? The rituals were significant because it preserved the humor traditions of the African culture. When Africans were transported from Africa to America, they were forced to leave their culture and customs behind, and so they invented other ways to maintain them, to communicate, and to hold onto their past. There was a common thread among them as they were forced into slavery in a foreign country by ruthless people. Humor provided a way of coping and surviving the cruelty imposed upon them and so they invented “word games, verbal contests, generated witty remarks, berated another person, played the dirty dozen, or mocked someone by ridiculing a relative (i.e., your momma so fat). can be traced back to their countrymen” (Abraham 1972, 217). Hurston later described the men, as sitting and passing pictures of

their thoughts for each to see, as "crayons enlargement of life" (*Dust Tracks* 942, 31). This made it even easier for Zora to listen to "a contest in hyperbole and carried no reason" (Hemingway 1977, 23). In the very woes that beset them, driven by sorrow by oppression, by mistreatment, the folks are able to laugh. These were the folks who quarreled, gossiped, poked fun, loved, cared for each other, and laughed at themselves. It was the humor that enabled the Black community to cope and to survive. It is precisely the laughter and the use of the vernacular that tend to form communal bonding and special relationships within the community while establishing an atmosphere that allowed triumph over oppression and laughter in the face of adversity.

As a child, Zora engaged in the same playful antics of teasing and taunting her friends, but it resulted in fights, unlike what she saw happening on Joe Clark's store front. She observed that there were no physical or angry exchanges between the menfolk. Consequently, Zora ceased joking with her friends that frequently led to her getting in trouble and being punished. Since Zora's friends It was through Hurston's ability to eavesdrop on the menfolk as she went on errands for her mother to the store, that she found fancy in the humorous stories and stored them in her memory. Since her friends did not want to engage in playful and joking antics, she learned to play by herself and performed alone.

What Zora observed on Joe Clark's store porch, among the menfolk, was called joking relationships, typically known as a social phenomenon. "Joking relationships are cultural events that are structured with regularity and frequency for the sole purpose of sustaining communal bonding among its members" (Apte 1985, 13). The other functions associated with joking relationships include "the reduction of hostility, the release of

tension, and the avoidance of conflict" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 195). "Other proposed functional explanations indicate that joking relationships result in emotional catharsis and communication" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 60). Joking relationships that exist in Eatonville were kin- based which are often found in preliterate societies as opposed joking relationships that are non-kin ones found in industrial societies. Joking relationships are important features of a community, characterized as "teasing," "taunting," "making fun of another," "bantering," "horseplay," "playful insults," "making sexual innuendos," and, "practical jokes" (Thomson 1935, 460). On Joe Clark's porch, joking activities were daily rituals as menfolk offered comments, opinions, judgement and adjudication about love affairs, marital conflicts, physical appearances, town pranks, Bonner's mule, and other events that could become hyperbolized and become the butt of jokes.

Zora came to understand the coded language from the porch. Whenever the men congregated to swap gossip and have lying sessions, she was able to form a connection between the real and the imaginary because the stories were based on people and the everyday lives of the folks who resided in the town of Eatonville.

> Zora was privileged to have been exposed to what you may call the storytelling geniuses of her community who provide historical accounts of their past through oral tradition including tales of how black got their color, the conflicts between the Methodists and Baptists, and the poetic theories. (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 37)

The porch, to Zora, was the "center of her world" and she had daily instruction in the performing arts, because the men and sometimes women were acting and performing. They spoke in rhythm and used "Metaphors and simile (i.e., "Regular as pig tracks"), double descriptive (i.e., "Kill-dead"), and verbal nouns (i.e., "Sense me into it")" (*Every Tub* 1995, 43). Humor was a part of Zora's culture and of the folks of Eatonville. When the porch sitters gathered to talk, to tease, to tell lies, tall tales and jokes, it was a way for

folks to connect and reminisce about the past. It was a way that the porch sitters assumed a position of importance, and of authority even though it was a temporary one.

Zora grew up on Kennedy Boulevard in Eatonville, and everyone knew her as the precocious, inquisitive, and brassy little girl, whose wholesome and enriched environment enabled her to thrive and grow. She built upon her comic dimensions and what she learned from the folks at Joe Clark's store, which became her fantasy world. "The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost…. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it" (*How it Feel to Be Colored* 1928, 1). In Zora's fantasy world, right in her front yard, there were the Chinaberry trees, multiple lakes, corn fields, alligators, frogs, the moon and the three hundred inhabitants of Eatonville. There were also plenty of oranges, grapefruits, tangerines, and guavas.

Within Zora's saucy imagination, every inhabitant around her became live actors in her vivid tales, including the alligator that turned into Mr. Pendir at night. Tales of God, the Devil, the wind, the trees, the bird with the long tail, ears of corn, bars of soap, the lake, moon, and frogs took on lives only be known to Zora whom she reportedly, conversed with, and they with her. Small events were magnified and grew into grand fanciful ones with demonstrative characters and colorful dialogue evoking humor and amusement. "Whether it was Miss Corn- Cob, smelling soap, Reverend Doorknob, or the Chinaberry tree, they conducted parties, weddings, barbecues, and even funerals as revealed in her unpublished plays, *Cock Robin* and *Mr. Frog*" (*Dust Track* 1942, 70).

The performances on Joe Clark's store front and the stories she created from household goods were not the only impetus behind Zora's humorous storytelling.

Whenever the opportunity arose, Zora demonstrated her skills at storytelling and performing just as she did when two female observers visited her classroom. The children were engaged in oral reading of Persephone, and Zora had read the book several times. Her father had given it to her after finding it discarded in a dumpster. When it came to Zora's turn, she put on one of her finest performances as if she were on center stage. She captivated the visitors' attention with her dramatic and theatrics so much so that she was invited after school to meet with the ladies. Zora had a knack for captivating adults, and this performance was no different. She was rewarded with snacks, given a cylinder of pennies, and, most of all, books. "It was not avarice that moved me. It was the beauty of the thing. I stood on the mountain" (*Dust Track* 1942, 52). The books opened a new world for her and in her coffer, it included "an Episcopal hymnbook bound in white leather, copies of the Swiss Family Robinson, Gulliver's Travels, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Han Christen Andersen, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, Norse Tales, as well as books about Moses, David and Herod" (*Dust Track* 1942, 56). The books described the adventures of men, and fanciful tales of heroes and heroines. She was convinced another world existed way beyond the mundane life in Eatonville. Hercules, and Thor, Tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Sis Cat, Brer Bear, Lion, Tiger, and Buzzard, added to her imagination. It further provoked her appreciation for humor, exaggerations, satire, nature, good versus evil, and heroes, and as Zora put it. 'The books appeased and whetted her imagination and curiosity. They both stirred up fancies in her" (Plant 1995, 160).

Humor was as much of Hurston's life as breathing. Her mother's tattered Bible was her first written source of humor. She was enthralled of the readings from the Old

Testament and found it hilarious when the "when she Hebrews constantly engaged in pigheaded and rebellion against God, the One who chose them" (Lowe 1994, 206). Another source of Zora's humor was the sermons preached she heard every Sunday at Macedonia Baptist Church. Her father was a Baptist preacher and like most preachers, their sermons contained jokes and humorous stories to keep the congregates alert and listening to the message, or to connect themes of the sermon to a particular message. Zora found humor in her father's preaching whose voice she perceived as majestic, filled with comedic poetry, and prophetic narratives. Her father's voice was like thunder that resonated throughout the pulpit. He seemed most powerful when he confronted his congregation of his philandering ways as sermons were filled with jokes. Her father's sermons convinced her there was a strong parallel between humor and religion that took place when her father took the pulpit at Macedonia Baptist Church. When his text did not provide enough humor, there was ample amount of theatrics in the church among the congregates who shouted, stomped, engaged in foot tapping, body swaying, and folks running amuck. As her father stood before his congregation and gave the most stirring and uplifting sermon filled with humor, he asked for forgiveness. These sermons occurred with regularity because her father struggled to be faithful in his marriage to her mother. He "developed into the cosmic poet, who found himself standing in front of the pulpit to save himself from disgrace by mapping the heavens and the earth for his parishioners with his golden tongue" (Lowe 1994, 91).

Zora heard jokes during revival meetings when she and her family attended on a regular basis. It seemed "both humor and religion allowed humans to dispose of what seems unpredictable, capricious, and out of place in life (that includes church), that

mythology bridged the gap between the psychological and cognitive aspects of religion by the use of humor and that the religious values of humor are important" (Apte 1985, 233). There are advantages to including humor in a sermon when it is relevant and can have a positive effect by connecting the preacher to its congregation. "Laughter is always the laughter of a group" (Bergson 1911, 8). Hurston observed there is power in humor to sustaining a community, whether it's in a community of worshippers or porch sitters who gathered daily on Joe Clark's store porch.

Humor and religion did not just occur during church services and revivals, but also when Zora's father and his associates gathered Sunday evenings on the family's front porch. The Pastors told tales that were hyperbolic and exaggerated just like the menfolk on Joe's front porch. There was always so much laughter between them, and again their tales piqued Zora's interest. As a child, she was not permitted to sit among the menfolk, but just as she eavesdropped on the porch sitters, she engaged in lending an ear to listening to the preachers' tales. These experiences provided Zora with the most boisterous and persistent humor, as she found their tales to be as incredulous as the ones, she heard from the men on Joe Clark's store front. Many of her father's sermons and tales are repeated in her fiction in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men*. "The butt of Negro humor on black preachers and the entire spectrum of black religion, by its very ubiquity, indicated that they remained a force in Afro-American life" (Levine 1977, 329-330).

It seems Zora developed and possessed an innate sensibility and sensitivity to the oral culture of metaphors, hyperboles, similes, verbal nouns, double descriptors, verbal insults, loud -talking, the dozens, boasting, tall-tales, exaggerations, animals taking on qualities of real people and their body parts becoming weapons as their stories rolled

effortlessly out of the menfolk's mouths. The community of Black folks of Eatonville also possessed a sensibility and sensitivity to the poetic language and phrases that sustained the bonding and the respect for each other. It was a community where John Hurston, her father, the preacher, mayor, law maker and humor held the community together. No one seems to escape from being laughed at or talked about or even lied about. "Laughter was a gift and quite exquisite when generated by loving men and women behaving deliciously human and challenging" (Du Bois 1940,148). In essence, laughter and humor made for a palatable existence among the folks in the community of Eatonville.

The performers were nameless, but they represented a nation of men who gained power by the words that came from their mouths. The men labored all day under the gaze of their boss men in the beaming sun but as the end of the day, the nation of men gathered together to become their creative selves to engage in gossip, forming opinions, and judgements rendered all in the oral tradition. The porch is where folks were at peace and enjoyed each other's company. "When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and say it was nice" (*Dusk Tracks* 1942, 51). It was the most prominent place to know, and it was the place where most laughter was created.

Hurston proved to be a gifted storyteller and a master at spontaneously generating her tales. As a child, there were no tickets, or reserved seating for others to hear her tales except her mother, who always seemed ready to listen. The porch belonging to Joe Clark became the stage, a place of revelation, of daily performances and a social commentary with a start time of 7 PM or there about. "Humor thrives in an oral setting, in a

performance mode, not as written and read material. People laugh out loud in an audience of laughers far more readily than in the solitary setting of their living room" (Sochen 1991, 12). The characters sat, stood, ate candy bars, and drank. "It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless, and inconvenient all day long. Mule and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the boss man were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human" (Sochen 1991, 1).

"Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it" (Hughes 1989, 87). "To laugh at what you haven't got when you ought to have it," implies a consciousness of both one's rights and the denial of those rights; to laugh when "you wish in your secret heart [that situations] were not funny" (Walker 1988, 101-102). Certainly, the folks of Eatonville felt that way because they had little control of their plight.

Hurston espoused pride in her community, the folks of Eatonville with its jokes, and its linguistic exaggerations, and its flamboyant storytellers" (*Walker* 1988, 11). Her community looked upon Zora as something special too. She found that her anthropological training heightened her keen insight and experiences that helped her to view folks in a different manner and discovered that humor was unique to its culture. Even after she left Eatonville, she latched on to its culture like 'gorilla glue.'

On September 18, 1904, at age 13, Zora Neale Hurston's world changed forever when her mother died, at a time when especially teenage girls need their mothers the most. "Looking back, she remembers her mother's death as the moment her girlhood ended and the hour, she began her wondering" (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 123). There was very

little for her to laugh about, and to lose her mother was devastating. She felt despair, unsafe and insecure for the first time in her life. Lucy Potts Hurston was her anchor, protector, her confidante, and the one who would take time to listen to her stories. "Lucy was the one who'd been guiding Zora through adolescence and preparing to usher her into adulthood. Lucy was the one teaching her all the things every colored girl ought to know" (Boyd 2003, 46). Toni Morrison said, "Lucy was the one who recited Zora's growing up litany: "Pull up your socks… your slip is showing' or hem is out. Come back in here and iron that collar. Hush your mouth. Comb your head. Get up from there and make that bed. Put on the meat. Take out the trash. Vaseline get rid of that ash" (qtd.in Boyd 2003, 46-47). This is reminiscent of what most nurturing black mothers tell their daughters.

Losing her mother was not only horrific in itself, but the relationship with her father was unsavory, and there. existed a love-hate relationship between the two of them. since her birth. Her father loved one daughter and that was Zora's older sister, Sara. Sara was the "apple of his eye" and her father never hesitated to let her know that. He was not present during her delivery, but threatened to cut his throat when he found his wife had given birth to another girl (*Dust Tracks* 1942). It weighed heavily on her mind long after her mother's death, more so because before her mother's death, Zora vowed to follow her mother wishes, which was to prevent the communal superstitious death rite. "Do not remove the pillow from my head until I am dead, and do not cover the clock and the looking glass was the request from her mother" (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 44). This was a community norm, and practiced when one of its members died, but Zora was physically prevented from a carrying out her mother's wishes. She was deeply wounded,

"particularly because it was the first time, she found herself voiceless and powerless to honor her mother's final wish" (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 45).

After her mother's death, Zora later joined her older siblings, Bob, and Sarah at the Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville where the Hurston's children attended school. At school she continued to long for her mother and on one occasion, she thought she saw from a distance what appeared to be her mother, but it was only an illusion. She accepts that she was a motherless child and in lieu of her relationship with her father, she was also a fatherless child. At the end of the school year, her older brother left to get a job, but Zora was told to remain at school until her father sent for her. As it turned out, her father never came. Zora wrote, "Weeks passed, and then a letter came. Papa said that the school could adopt her" (Boyd 2003, 61). "Steeped in grief, the absence of her siblings' laughter, the absence of books to read, she could only focus on absence- the absence of her mother's guiding hand" (Boyd 2003, 68). The only humor she experienced was when she played pranks on her classmates that ultimately ended in her receiving some form of punishment.

How did Zora handle this rejection? She wondered how long she would face this life of rejection. "I had always thought I would be in some lone wasteland with no one under the sound of my voice" (*Dusk Tracks* 1942, 115). This must have been this wasteland that she thought about because Zora suffered from physical hunger, emotional hunger, and hunger for a happier life. It was the first time, she had no books to feed her fancy, no laughter, and no family to call her own. She remarked that "when she saw more fortunate people her age on their way to school, she would cry and become depressed for

days, until she learned "how to mash down on my feelings and numb them for a spell. I felt crowded in on, and hope was beginning to waver" (*Dusk Tracks* 1942, 61).

However, Hurston's situation changed and there was laughter again when she was hired as the lead singer's wardrobe maid with the Gilbert and Sullivan Troupe company. This experience gave her a new lease on life. She felt belonged, loved and the troupe became her family for eighteen months. Books were available for her to read, and she was able to earn a living that allowed her to purchase basic personal items like a comb, brush, and toothpaste. In addition, she found a new love, the stage. From childhood, Zora loved performing and she was forever performing for her mother or for the folks she waved town as they passed down the dirt road in front of her house. "Zora was smitten by the stage, and the sights, while performing enchanted her" (*Dust Tracks* 1942, 86). The stage became a playground for her to learn hands-on- in producing plays. Drama and the theater piqued her interest, as well as the urge to entertain. Behind the stage, joking and playful activities took place among the actors and actresses, as she often was the butt of their jokes, but she quickly learned to take the jostling, and teasing. It was helpful she knew of playing the dozens, signifying, and specifying, from watching the menfolk who engaged in such activities on Joe Clark's store front. Most importantly, the folks of the troupe loved her way of speaking in dialect, her use of idioms and especially her sense of humor. "They teased me all the time just to hear me talk. But there was no malice in it. If I got mad and spoke my piece, they liked it even better. I was stuffed with ice-cream sodas and Coca-Cola" (*Dusk Tracks* 1942, 136). This phase of her young life ended after eighteen months when the Gilbert & Sullivan Troupe closed. Luckily, she connected with her sister, Sara, who resided in Baltimore near the theater district on Pennsylvania

Avenue. It was there again, she was exposed to acting and performing, as she attended every performance she could. Zora also found a way to earn her high school diploma from Morgan Academy, now known as Morgan State University. She entered Howard University and eventually earned an Associate degree. Her professors at Howard University quickly recognized her interest in folklore, her writings, her skillful use of the dialect and sense of humor from down South. Her professors advised her to make folklore, her art, and encouraged her to travel to New York City where a sort of revolution was taking place. It was a place for young people to go and become a part of the new movement, the Harlem Renaissance. These events led her on a path to Harlem with $1.50 in her purse and a lot of hope.

What about The Harlem Renaissance? This historical event had been as much of a debated issue as its icon, Zora Neale Hurston. There were some who say the Renaissance did not exist at all, at least not under the label, the Harlem Renaissance, but designated as the "The Negro Renaissance," the "New Negro Movement," "The Negro Awakening," or the "Jazz Age," James Hatch (2003) asserts:

> None of these titles is completely accurate, for there was nothing 'new' about the Negro, and the sense of 'renaissance' implies 'rebirth' (from what?), and 'awakening' connotes 'sudden awareness' (of what?) And certainly, for the millions of blacks who were faced with poverty, enforced segregation, and frequent threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the notion of nonstop music and dance as suggested by the Jazz Age terminology would have been highly conjectural. (4)

The name, Harlem Renaissance remained. The dates of when the period began and ended have also been disputed, but it existed during the decades of the twenties between the end of World War I and the stock market crash. Some "marked the rise and the fall of the Renaissance in terms of political events: the silent protest through Harlem in 1917 and the Harlem Riots of 1937" (Lewis 1981, 116). However, Harlem became the center of

"Negro Culture" even though few were from New York, and what was unique, it became populated with blacks from throughout the Africa diaspora including North and South America, the West Indies, and Africa itself with the majority of artists being African Americans. This new population migrating into New York were the "cosmopolite and the peasants, the workers and the professionals, the artisans and the artists, the Preachers and the criminals" (Wall 1995, 87). The Great Migration, the incorporation of folk speech and Zora Neale Hurston were hallmarks of the period regardless of when and where it happened.

When Hurston arrived in New York in 1925, the tone in Harlem was positive, upbeat, and explosive. Black artists migrated to New York at the same time she did which included Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Counted Cullen, Walter Thurman, Jean Toomer, Arena Bontemps, and others who formed the nucleus of the literary movements and represented what was called "The New Negro" (Bloom 1986, 49). At the end of World War One, there were changes in the attitudes and awareness of Black selfhood, and folks had a different mindset. Approximately two hundred thousand Black soldiers were among those who returned to the United States after fighting in a war to preserve democracy and freedom in Europe, and yet they were denied the same kind of freedom and democracy they fought for when they returned to the states. (Jones 1918) It was also during a time also when Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican businessperson, encouraged blacks to return to Africa where they would be assured equal treatment. However, many of the young soldiers and other blacks felt too far removed to voice any claims to Africa; instead, they were not going to be denied their place as contributors to a culture they already knew and helped create. In the words of Claude McKay, "they were

tired of being lynched, butchered like hogs, and running - they would no longer run, but fight back!" (Bloom 1986, 49). It seems a metamorphosis has taken place as a response to the racism and prejudice. The American mind must pay attention to the emergence of the changed Black. The new mentality for the American Black is to seize upon self-reliance, self-respect, self- determination, and independence. "There was an emergence of the strong black family and a sense of community" (qtd in Plant 1995, 65). As racial pride emerged, black intellectuals began to think of ways for this new energy to be channeled.

Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois, the major change makers during this era took upon themselves to explore how best to build upon this new attitude among Blacks and how to deconstruct the stereotypical images and the barrages of pseudoscientific theories documenting blacks as being depraved, lazy and lacking in the ability to adapt outside a paternalistic sitting. *The New York Times* used derogatory terms to refer to Blacks as "Chicken- stealing and razor-toting' negroes and used other descriptive terms such as "coon" and "darky" (Watkins 1994, 140). To continue under such conditions "blacks would certainly find it difficult to exist, and to gain respect or be taken seriously" (Watkins 1994, 141). It did not matter to white folks that black soldiers fought for this country, because they were being lynched in their uniforms. For these Harlem Renaissance leaders, they determined that the theater and black drama would be plausible. "While white society had geared itself to resist advances by blacks in employment, voting …there were fewer obstacles to blacks in publishing and entertainment" (Watkins 1994, 205). The opportunities to expand upon the arts, theater and drama become the thrust. Alain Locke comments that "in the mind of White America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—something to be

argued about, condemned or defended to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden" (*Survey Graphics* 1925, 631-34). Blacks began to think differently, and in contrast, the New Negro seems to have "slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem, we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation" (*Survey Graphics* 1925, 631). Hurston connected with DuBois and shared her dream about establishing a Negro theater and she created six laws that were somewhat similar to DuBois' criteria. They were:

1) The Negro's outstanding characteristic is drama.
2) The Negro lack reverence whereby God, church and heaven are treated lightly.
3) Angularity in everything sculpture, dancing, abrupt story telling.
4) Redundancy- Examples- low- down, Cap'n high sheriff, top- supervisor.
5) Restrained ferocity in everything-From tense ferocity to hysteria.
6) Use of some dialect. (Plant 1995, 81)

Based on an essay Hurston later wrote in 1934, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," she recognized the aesthetics of black expression: language, music, dance, thought patterns, laughter, walks, and spirituality, and [humor] whereby "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized" (Huggins 1987, 225).

Though DuBois, Locke, Hurston, and later Hughes formulated ideas about how the theater and drama would best represent black culture, they differed substantially in the process, and thereby the debate began, art for the sake of art or art for propaganda to uplift the black race. One might say, the debate existed between the 'Old Negro' and the

'New Negro,' or simply the 'Old' versus the 'Young' black artists. For DuBois, art (and especially theater) was crucial for countering the stereotypes still plaguing the race, and for establishing inspirational models for a progressive people. As DuBois expressed it, "All Art is propaganda, and ever must be ...for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (Crisis 1926, 296). To achieve a black theater (as opposed to a black imitation of white theater), he proposed that "plays of a real Negro theater" must be similar to the criteria established by Hurston. DuBois outlined the following criteria and asserted it must:

1) About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Black life as it is.
2) By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continuing association just what it means to be a Negro today.
3) For us. That is, the theater must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
4) Near us. The theater must be in a neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (DuBois 1968, 34)

In response to DuBois, Langston Hughes, in his black manifesto, expressed the following:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves with fear or shame. If white people are please we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Boyd 2003, 190)

Though both Hurston and Du Bois dreamed of the New Negro Theater, neither saw eye-to eye of how they might do it together. They both strongly believed that the new Negro World was worthy of literary treatment; and there was significant literary value in presenting all black folk communities for the purpose to preserve its culture. the two

believed Negro literature should be imprinted on the minds of all, and to inspire future generations. Locke and Hurston saw folklore as a valuable resource to bring to the stage, and that black artists should break away from the conventional form, and experiment to derive their own form of theater presentation while incorporating folklore in its oral folk tradition in all its vernacular manifestations. Alain Locke agreed and had previously complained that Negro dramatic art needed to change from white images of black characters, while "writers had to have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts, to develop its own idiom, to put itself into new molds; in short, to be experimental" (qtd.in Lowe 1994, 29). This mandate suggests that Negro dramatic art had to be different from the portrayal of black characters previously portrayed by white artists.

Out of that infamous debate, and having established a criterion for the Negro Theater, restrictions were placed on young Black artists on what they should and should not write. Hurston established a close connection with those who align with her position which included Wallace Thurman, Gwendolyn Bennett, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson, Dorothy West, and Robert Bruce Nugent that art should be produced as art and not as propaganda. Hurston surfaced as the leader of a small group who called themselves the "Niggerati" while she proclaimed herself as the undisputed "Queen of the Niggerati" (Boyd 2003, 117). "She could not depict blacks as defeated, humiliated, degraded or victimized" (*I Love Myself* 1979,17). Restrictions proposed by Dubois and others prompted Hurston to assert in her most controversial essay, "*How It Feels to be Colored Me*":

> But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, not lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing

> school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given then a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are hurt about it……. No I do not weep at the world—I am busy sharpening my oyster knife. (*The World Tommorow* 1928, 2)

In this essay, Hurston expressed her pride for the black race, and did not deny that blacks were both economically and psychologically deprived and oppressed, but there was no need to waddle in self- pity. Hurston wanted to "create characters who laughed, [who laughed together and even at themselves], celebrated, loved, sorrowed, struggled, who teased and taunted each other playfully, being unconcerned about white people, and did not hate themselves or their blackness" (*I Love Myself* 1979, 17-18). Her goal as a young Black writer, was to pay homage to the historical folk arts of Black people and by Black people and not merely be a 'race uplifters.' This was the impetus behind Hurston's desire to become a playwright to create plays and skits to celebrate, to amuse, to laugh, to and to provide humor.

When Hurston identified herself as a folk dramatist, southern folks became the nexus of her creativity, and humor was a grand part of her culture and of the lives of the folks in her community. Hurston's decision to dramatize the lives of folks she knew most about "resulted in political consequences and placed her in the most contentious debate of that era" (West 1977, 17). However, it was not a decision that she made entirely on her own. Her professors, Alain Locke, and Montgomery Gregory, while attending Howard University encouraged her to make folk art her own. While studying anthropology at Barnard College under the tutelage of Fran Boaz and Ruth Benedict, she was urged to pursue her interest in folk life. Due to treatment of the folks in her play *Spunk,* which was published in Alain Locke 's The New Negro," she gained the reputation of being the best known and emerging best artist. "Hurston could hardly have resisted the attraction of being a part of this emerging movement, and at the same time to be able to celebrate the

folks of Eatonville which "meant to authorize her folk roots was to authorize herself" (West 1977, 18).

Hughes and Hurston established themselves as artists who valued folk culture just as Locke prescribed and began to construct the play *Mule Bone.* It would be the first real Negro folk comedy that portrayed Black characters without the stereotypical imagery. As the dramatic result of a feud between Hughes and Huston, the play was never produced or published and became the biggest dispute ever between two literary artists.

It was the art or propaganda debate that increased the opposition toward Hurston because of her interest in folk drama and humor at the exclusion of writing other fiction. Many of Hurston's critics failed to realize she had not faced the kind of discrimination and racial strife her colleague had endured. Among the members of the *Niggerati,* Hurston was the only Black female who grew up in the South, in an all-Black town, incorporated by blacks, governed by blacks, and owned by blacks. This remains true to this day, as in many towns in the South, which results in a different kind of race relations. The only white folks Hurston encountered growing up were those who traveled the dust track road that ran in front of her house where she sat on the gatepost as she hailed her travelers to a stop and asked if she could ride down the road apiece while she gladly entertained them (*Dust Tracks* 1942).

Zora's later encounters with white folks were mostly positive, and she had no quorums to speak about. When white visitors came to her classroom, she impressed them with reading *Persephone,* so much so that she was awarded a variety of books and a cylinder of coins. Fannie Hurst, a famous white journalist, provided her a place to stay, food, a job, and connections to other writers when she first arrived in New York. Anne

Meyers, a trustee of Barnard College, offered her admission to the first women's college, and she gladly accepted as the first Black female. I would attribute her male critics of professional jealousy, sexism, and misogyny. To those who treated her in such an insulting and irreverent manner, ultimately encouraged others to think of her negatively, and did not consider her a serious writer, and at best, the least important contributor to the Harlem Renaissance.

Zora Neale Hurston, by most standards, did not have an impoverished life, at least up to the time of her mother's death. Hurston's father was a Pastor, her mother, a Sunday school teacher coming from modest means, eventually, she earned a high school diploma from Morgan State Academy (now Morgan State University), attended Howard University where she received an Associate degree, graduated from Barnard College, and attended Columbia University. There were not many Black women who could boast or brag about such accomplishments and her talents. Even though she was not recognized as of the major contributors of the Black literary cultural movements of the Harlem Renaissance, she made an impact, despite conflicting messages and mixed messages in regard to her as a person and an artist. Some thought of her as a serious writer, while others saw her as loud and coarse. "One critic wrote that her work reveals an unconscious desire to be white" (Bloom 1986, 124). Others accused her of playing the role of pandering to white folks. There were those who criticized her for receiving support from white patrons, but so did many of the other black artists, including Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Walter Thurman, Richard Nugent, Jean Toomer, and others. Most Black writers were poor and supported by white patrons in order to survive. There were no Woolfians among them with a room of their own to create their art. Hurston's harshest

critics, Richard Wright, expressed the following comments: “Hurston’s characters were nothing more than minstrels (typical white performers with blackened faces during the 19th and 20th centuries to make white folks laugh” (*Wright* 1937, 25). To Hurston, it did not matter what others thought of her and she never wavered from her desire to be the best storyteller, folklorist, dramatist, humorist and most importantly to create a ‘Negro Theater.’ Bloom further asserts “the attention focused on Zora Neale Hurston’s controversial personality and lifestyle inhibited any objective critical analysis of her work” (1986, 124). These personal attacks upon her person undoubtedly resulted in dismissing her work or rendering her work less, or of no significant value.

However, Hughes' and Hurston's play was never published which became Zora Neale Hurston’s presence was felt during the Harlem Renaissance, but literary scholars failed to acknowledge her as a gifted artist. The seeds of criticism thwarted her for being black, and a woman from the South whose humor of black folks, and her witticism were considered not to be in vogue. It was difficult for her contemporaries to see positive elements in Hurston’s comic folk culture, but instead associated old stereotypes as negative that “eschew smacked of the primitive” (Lowe 1994, 55). To Hurston, humor was a vehicle to show love, to negotiate conflicts and to bridge distances between whites and blacks, between the marginalized and the non- marginalized.

There were other reasons, Hurston was met with negative criticism and not given credit for her contributions to laughter and humor. In the early years of the twentieth century blacks remained “particularly sensitive to Negro jokes, stereotypes, and epithets because they had not at that time gotten far enough away from the conditions pictured not to be harmed by them. These derogatory depictions further intensified the disdain and

antipathy with which many whites already regarded blacks" (qtd. in Watkins 1994, 141). Black elites and middle class denounced theatrical or literary humor, or any unflattering mannerism or unrefined customs of blacks. Blacks began presenting their own versions of folk humor and comedy, but within the black community. Its humor was free of internal imposed restrictions, and "focused on actual, negative situations that were part of day-to-day reality" (qtd. in Watkins 1994, 446). Humor and comedy were a rich expressive part of black cultural life as much as music and poetry.

Another factor that may have been a hindrance to Hurston being accepted for her humor is the negative connotation that's associated with females who tell jokes. or the non-acceptance or women who engaged in telling jokes. Traditionally, restrictions are placed on girls at an early age, and they are to "maintain the model of the "good girl" chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean kind, virtuous, conventional, and above suspicion, and reproach" (qtd. in Lowe 1994, 52). In Apte's study of sex roles of women and humor, women are as capable of appreciating humor as men, but women have not always been given the opportunity to engage publicly in humor discourser. "Modesty, passivity, and virtue have been widely associated with the ideal women" (Apte 1985, 18).

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGNIFYIN'(G) VOICE

> And all the time, there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jack pot with no other stake but a laugh. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force and winning his war from within. [.. .] He romps, he clowns, and looks ridiculous, but if you will, you can read something deeper behind it all. (Kaplan 2003, 112)

> Black writers, both explicitly and implicitly, turn to the vernacular in various formal ways to inform their creation of written fictions. To do so, it seems to me, is to ground one's literary practice outside the Western tradition. Whereas black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so "authentically," with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular. (Gates, 2006, 56)

Henry Louis Gates, (1988) acknowledges the black vernacular as a distinct oral mode of expression and asserts that Hurston is masterful at employing this rhetorical device. Gates supports her efforts and acknowledges her exemplary writing in the vernacular and her genius with language, which has been grossly overlooked. The black vernacular and the nature of indirect discourse, or the signifying discourse reflects whatever is Black about Black American literature. (Gates 1988)

Of all the comic dimensions, signifying or indirect discourse is the dominant humorous content in Hurston's humor. Henry L. Gates "explicitly describes signifyin' (g) as a mode of indirection and a rhetorical device that Gates maintains that the black vernacular is a celebration of figurative language and despite its lack in literal interpretations and determinate meanings. To buttress this claim, he draws upon a body of mythic literature-folk tales and lyrics-as well as the studies of linguists and anthropologists. The vernacular term that comes to stand for figurative language use is 'Signifyin'(g),' a word encompassing a variety of "rhetorical practices, including lying,

speaking indirectly, and playing the verbal game of exchanging insults" (Carson 1991, 51-52). "Extravagant boasting or self- aggrandizement is another feature of signifying, and it is accepted behavior among African Americans and Black folks, and a source of humor and a form of entertainment" (Kochman 1972, 63-70). The elements of intimidations of sexuality, verbal abuse, profanity, and physical violations are evident in the tale, *The Lion, Elephant, and the Monkey*. The tale is an excellent illustration of signifyin' (g) and makes for lots of humor and laughter. In this tale, the Lion is trounced handedly and dethroned by the Elephant. The Lion, downtrodden, finds the Monkey, attempts to impose the same kind of trouncing he received from the Elephant. The defeated Lion engages the Monkey in a physical challenge so as to regain his status and self-claimed title. It is pure signfyin'(g) at its best: The tale is sequential with all of the elements of signifying of verbal abuse, profanity, and of course, self- aggrandizement.

> Lion found the Elephant sittin' under a tree,
> Say, "Now …you belong to me."
> Elephant looked outta the corner of his eyes,
> Say, "Go on play with somebody yo' size."
> But the Lion wouldn't listen, and he made a pass.
> The Elephant kicked him dead in his ass. (qtd.in Watkins 1994, 9-11)

Now the Lion comes back more dead than alive after being beaten down by the Elephant. That is when the Monkey started his signifyin' (g) jive.

> He said, "King of the Jungles, ain't you a bitch, you look like
> someone with the seven-year itch. "He said, ''When you left, the
> lightnin' flashed and the bells rung, you look like something been
> damn near hung." Now…. don't you dare roar,
> Cause "I'll jump down on the ground and
> beat your funky ass some more."
> "While swinging around on the tree,"
> "His foot missed the limb, fell dead on the ground.
> Like a streak of lightning and a bolt of white heat,
> the Lion was on the Monkey with all four feet.
> Monkey looks up with tears in his eyes,
> Say, "Please, Mr. Lion, I apologize.

> "But "if you let me get my balls out the sand
> I'll fight yo' ass like a natural man."
> Say, "If you jump back like a good man should,
> I'll bounce yo' ass all over these woods."
> Lion stepped back and was ready to fight,
> But the Monkey jumped up and went outta sight.
> And I heard The Monkey explained as he went out of view,
> Tell yo' momma and yo daddy, too,
> Signifying Monkey made a fool outta you. (qtd.in Watkins 1994, 22-38)

This is one of the most popular and well-known folk ballads of signifyin' (g) discourse "with characteristics of boasting of physical and verbal challenges, hyperbole, lying and exaggeration" (qtd. in Watkins 1994, 471). The wit, potency, self- aggrandizement, and verbal play make for humor and verbal entertainment.

Geneva Smitherman defines signifyin' (g) as a narrative with a sequence of jokes containing one or more of these elements, embedded in longer stories containing nonessential details as described in the poem, *The Signifying Monkey* illustrates the fundamental characteristics that includes boasting, lying, cajoling, and needling are found in Hurston's plays, skits, and fiction. Smitherman asserts that:

> A speaker humorously puts down, talk about, needles—that is signification— The listener: Sometimes signifyin' (also siggin) is done to make a point, sometimes it's just for fun. This type of folk expression in the oral tradition has the status of customary ritual that's accepted at face value. That is to say, nobody who's significant is supposed to take it to heart. It is a culturally approved method of talking about some-body—usually through verbal indirection. Since the signifier employs humor, it makes the put-down easier to swallow and gives the recipient a socially acceptable way out. That is, if they can't come back with no bad signification 'of they own, they can just laugh along with the group. (Smitherman 1977, 118-119)

As described in the definition for signifyin'(g), this rhetorical device is evident in Hurston's play, *De Turkey and the Law* (1930) in Coles & Mitchell's account of the unpublished plays in *Zora Neale Hurston- Collected* Plays, involves the courtship rituals between Dave, a skilled hunter, and Jim, the town drifter, as they verbally battle for the

attention of Daisy Blunt, the town's flirt. The play is filled with indirection discourse, signifying and humor surrounding this confrontation between Dave, Jim, and Daisy. The main theme involves Dave's shooting a turkey and for which Jim claims the turkey as his own which results in a fight. Jim hits Dave with a hock-bone and knocks him unconscious. The plot is never about the ownership of the turkey, but a fight is over the affection of the town flirt, Daisy, as described in the excerpt below:

> JIM: Daisy I love you likes God loves Gabriel—and dat's his best angel.
>
> DAVE: I love you harder than de thunder can bump a stump—If I don't—God's a a gopher.
>
> DAISY: (Brightening) Dat's de first time you ever said so.
>
> DAVE and JIM: Who?
>
> JIM: Whut you hollering "who" for? Yo' foot don't fit no limb.
>
> DAVE: Speak when you spoken to-come when you called, next fall you'll be my coon houn' dog.
>
> JIM: Table dat discussion. (Turning to Daisy) You ain't never give me no chance to talk wid you right.
>
> DAVE: You made me feel like you was trying to put de Ned book on me all de time. Do you love me sho'nuff, Daisy?
>
> DAISY: (*Blooming again into coquetry*) Aw, y'all better stop dat. You know you Don't mean it.
>
> DAVE: Who don't mean it? Lemme tell you something, mama, if you was mine a I wouldn't have you count no ties wid yo pretty lil toes. Know whut I'd do?
>
> DAISY: (*Coyly*) Naw, whut would you do?
>
> DAVE: I'd buy a whole passenger train and hire some mens to run to for you.
>
> DAISY: (*Happily*) Oo-ooh, Dave.
>
> JIM: (*To Dave*) De wind may blow, de door may slam—Dat whut you shootin ain't worth a damn. (*To Daisy*) I'd buy you a great big ole ship- and then baby, I make you a ocean to sail yo' yo ship on.

DAISY: (*Happily*) Oo-ooh, Jim.

DAVE: (To Jim) A long train, a short caboose-Dat lie whut you shootin,' ain't no use.

(To Daisy) Miss Daisy, know what I'd for you?

DAISY: Naw, whut?

DAVE: I'd like uh job cleanin' out de Atlantic Ocean for you.

DAISY: Don't fool me now, papa.

DAVE: I couldn't foo you, Daisy,' cause anything I say 'bout lovin' you don't keer how big it is, it wouldn't be half the truth. I 'd come down de river riding a mud cat and leading a minnow.

DAISY: Lawd, Dave, you sho is propaganda

JIM: Naw he ain't—he's just lying—he's a noble liar. Know whut I'd do if you was mine?

DAVE: Naw, Jim

JIM: I'd make a panther wash yo' dishes and a gator chop yo' wood for you.

DAVE: Daisy, how come you let Jim lie lak dat? He's as big a liar as he is man. But sho'nuff now, laying all sides to jokes, Jim there don't even know how to answer you. If you don't b'lieve it, ast him something.

DAISY: You like me much, Jim?

DAVE: See dat! I tole you he didn't know how to answer nobody like you. If he was talking to some of them ol'funny looking gals over town. He'd be answering 'em jus right. But he got to learn how to answer you. Now you ast me something and see how I answer you.

DAISY: Do you like me, Dave?

DAVE: Yes ma'am! Dat de way to answer swell folks like you. Furthermore, less we prove which one of us love you de best right now. Jim, how much time would you do on de chain.

JIM. Twenty years and like it.

DAVE: See dat, Daisy? Dat … ain't willing to do no time for you. I'd beg de Judge to gimme life" (*De Turkey and De Law*, 1930, Act Three, Scene One, 184-186)

In the above exchange between the characters, Jim, Dave, and Daisy, there is plenty of talking around the subject in woofing, verbal insults, and exaggeration are used in this courtship rituals. These are elements of indirection or signifying where speakers 'talk around' the subject of courting using humor. A dispute over the ownership of the turkey never comes up in the discussion as Dave and Jim both, vie for Daisy 's love and attention, while both hyperbolize and exaggerate about their willingness to go to any length to win her. Speaking in indirect discourse, using exaggerations, playing the dirty dozen, and exchanging insults, Hurston is masterful at using *signifyin'*(g) in this play.

In another scene of *De Turkey and De Law* (1930), an exchange takes place between the men folk on Joe Clark's porch and Reverend Methodist Simms when someone ask, "How is Mrs. Simms feelin' today?" The response question set in motion a cascade of lies., and in Hurston's world it doesn't take much to whip up a lie, the start of exaggerating and signifyin'(g):

> LINDAY: Whuss matter wid Sister Simms- is she kinda po'ly today??
>
> SIMMS: She don't keep so well since we been here, but I reckon she's on the mend.
>
> HAMBO: Don't look like she never would be sick. She look so big and portly.
>
> CLARKE: Size don't mean nothin.' My wife is portly and she be's on de sick list all de time.
>
> LIGE: Besides, Mrs. Simms ain't very large. She wouldn't weigh more'n two hundred. You ain't seen no big woman. I seen one so big she went to whip her lil boy an' he run up under her belly and stayed up under dere for six months.
>
> WALTER: You sen de biggest one. But I seen uh woman so little till she could go out in uh shower uh rain and run between de drops. She had tuh git up on tuh box tuh look over uh grain uh sand. (Collected Plays, 2008, Act One, Scene One, 152)

In Hurston's fiction, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), signifyin'(g) is illustrated in this verbal exchange between John, the teenage mulatto stepson, and his stepfather, Ned. The crux of

the exchange is that the stepfather dislikes his stepson since he has learned to read and write. Ned finds no benefits for his biological children to learn to read and write, but he immediately notices the power of speech which his stepson, John. While John's mother refers to John's self- actualization as "going through puberty' his stepfather refers to his stepson as "smelling hisself- done got so mannish" (*Jonah* 1934, 45). Ned quickly finds he is no match for his stepson, John. Here again, Hurston takes another opportunity to show the power of speech and its cultural significance. John's biological father, Pearson, a white man, acknowledges him and takes vicarious pride in his son's learning, as well as his sexual appeal and appetite. Actually, John admires his son also for his studding ability. The stepfather describes John as insolent and disrespectful and says to his mother, Amy, "He's smelling hisself, some fast' womanish gal is grinnin I'n his face and he tries tuh git sides hisself" (*Jonah* 1934, 45). The conversation between John and Amy is humorous, and the verbal exchange characterizes signifying or indirect discourse. John comically signifies on his stepfather, as illustrated in this discourse below:

> And you, you ole battle- hammed, slew-foot, box ankled nubbin, you!
> You ain't nothin' and ain't got nothin' but whut God give uh billy-goat,
> And then rond tryin' tuh hell- hack folks! Tryin' tuh kill somebody wid
> Talk, but if you wants tuh fight, -- dat's de very corn Ah wants tuh grind.
> You come grab me now and Ah be yuh Ah'll stop you from suckin' eggs.
> Hit me now! G'wan hit me! Bet Ah'll break uh egg in yuh! Youse all
> Parts of uh pig! You done got me jus' ez hot ez July jam, and Ah ain't
> Got no mo' use fuh yuh than Ah is for mah baby shirt. Youse mah race
> but you sho ain't mah taste. Jus' you break uh breath wid me, and Ahm
> goin' tuh be jus' too chastisin'……Don't you part yo' lip tuh me no

> mo' jes 'ez long ez heben is happy---do Ah'll put somethin' on yuh dat lye soap won't take off. You ain't nothin' but uh big ole pan of fell bead. Now dat's de word wid de bark on it. (*Jonah* 1934, 47)

The passage is rich with epithets, figurative language and signifyin'(g). "John equates pigs, women and children in an effort to feminize and thus symbolically castrate his stepfather" (*Jonah* 1934, 47). Ned is no match to John's signifyin' (g). In addition to using signifyin' (g), Hurston is skillful at producing rich idiomatic vernacular form of discourse.

Meet the Mamma, (1925), is Hurston's first dramatic work depicting a domestic melodrama, musical play in three acts. It is the play written in standard English about a middle-class family traveling to Africa to collect their inheritance of gold. Hurston uses the device of signifyin' (g) to insult, to put down, and to make mockery. Hurston may have been experimenting with which form of discourse to use, standard English or dialect, and she seem to be influenced by the Garveyism[1] Movement in 1925 in which Blacks were encouraged to return to Africa. In this play Hurston attempts to showcase blacks as owners of property and working at jobs other than customarily performed by their ancestors. The main characters include Pete, the owner of the hotel, Carrie, his wife, and Edna his mother-in-law. Peter is a thorn in the side of his mother-in-law or vice versa because she catches him cheating on Carrie, his wife, and his daughter. The trip to Africa would eliminate the interference from the mother-in-law and to acquire his inheritance from his uncle. So, he is all for traveling to Africa to get rid of his mother-in-law, so he

[1]Garveyism centers on the unification and empowerment of American of African- descended men, women, and children under the banner of their African descent and the repatriation of the descendants of enslaved and profits to the African continent. It was the Back to Africa Movement

thinks, and getting rich. Hurston displays her art of signifyin' (g) when Peter attempts to whittle out of a situation when he stays out all night and he has to come up with an alibi not for his wife, but for the mother-in-law. In the first scene, the following dialogue between Peter and the Bellhop takes place in the Hotel Lobby. Peter solicits advice from his employees to conjure up to help him conjure up an alibi for his staying away from home the previous night.

He is much more intimidated by his aggressive mother-in-law than his passive wife. Peter never admits to his wife but asserts, "a man has gotta roam sometimes." Nonetheless, here is another illustration of Hurston's narrative sequenced with non-essential detail and indirect discourse, typically characteristic of signyfyin' (g). The excerpt is from Collected Plays, by Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, (2008).

> PETE: Have you seen my mother-in-law? (Everyone answers "No.") It won't be long now before she comes sniffing and whiffing around. I ain't been home since yesterday, and I got to have an alibi. What can I tell 'em? (He indicates mental anguish and strolls over to bellhops' bench).
>
> PETE: Oh no-can't say that. I'm supposed to have been at the bedside and funeral of every Mason in New York City. There ain't supposed to be no more left,
>
> BELLHOP 2: Tell her you went to a bone yard to meditate and see if you could make 'em get up and gallop like Man O' War.
>
> PETE: Nope, that won't do. Every time I mention bones I get the shinny in my wrist. I'm trying to fool her, boy, not tell where I was. I have been out having a yellow time.
>
> BELLHOP 1: What kind of time is that?
>
> PETE. Well, I been riding in a yellow taxi with yellow girls and spending yellow money and drinking yellow whiskey. Can't none of you men (To the audience) help out a fellow? You fellows are the poorest bunch of liars I ever seen. I could kill that smart aleck Peter.
>
> BELLHOP 2: What Peter?

> PETER: The one that killed Ananias.[2] I just got back from the church house and hear what the preacher said. It seems that a dirty look from Peter Laid the poor old scout out dead. They say he was killed for lying—I can't see why that should be that they should croak a good old scout like him and do a thing to me. Now this Peter was a busy body, like a prohibition hound. When regular guys are having fun he's sniffing and whiffing 'round. He ought to 've been brought to justice and given life for company and never a chance for bail. (*Meet the Momma,* 1925, Act One, Scene One, 3-4)

Peter compares himself to Ananias, who was the greatest liar that ever lived. Peter like, Ananias was a fixer of tales, lies, and especially for creating alibis for husbands who cheat on their wives. Peter ends the song with, "If he was alive, I'll bet you a five, I'd be a member of his club" (*Meet the Momma,* 1925, Act One, Scene One, 4). Philandering is a theme that reoccurs in Hurston's plays, skits, and her fiction. Though Hurston never directly speaks of her father's infidelity, it was problematic for her growing up as a child because it caused a great deal of pain for her mother. In the poem, she refers to her father and to others like him in the community who cheat on their wives or who go "sniffing and woofing' around, who need to be brought to justice, and given life with no chance for bail" (*Meet the Momma,* 1925 Act One, Scene One, 4). Signifyin' (g) is the device in this play where the subject of philandering, marital infidelity, or the lust for other women are spoken about in indirect discourse. Hurston recognizes that infidelity and philandering in the black community causes a disruption. Hurston's plays serve as a social commentary, and though the skit is humorous, it is important the community maintain its values such as being faithful and committed in marriage. Marriages and family are the foundation for sustaining the community.

[2] Ananias was a disciple of Jesus at Damascus who was found lying to his community and guilty of committing the sin of hypocrisy.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT'S IN THE *AHS'* AND "*AHMS*?

> If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt- cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of "arms" and "Ises." Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself." (*Characteristics of Negro Expression* 1934, 31)

"Characteristics of Negro Expression" is an essay published by Zora Neale Hurston in 1934. Hurston carefully provides with precision, the uniqueness and originality in the artistic expressions of African Americans. In her critique of African American expressions, she contends they are reinterpretations, original, and modifications. For example, when the African American dance, their movement as are abrupt with unexpected changes. There is no symmetry, and it is difficult for non-whites to learn their movements because they are original and spontaneous. Thus, Hurston refutes the idea Negro expressions are an imitation of white art and culture. A second feature of Hurston's humor identified is the use of dialect. This feature highlighted the expressions of Black folk, the use of metaphors and similes, double descriptive (sometimes referred to as Hurston's hieroglyphics), and verbal nouns in order to create humor. The elements of Hurston's Black expressions are in juxtaposition to Leopold Senghor's concept of Negritude movement which was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. Seneghor was born into an experience of discrimination and oppression in the country of Senegalese, Africa, who eventually became the first president of Senegal. He was a Senegalese poet, a cultural theorist, and a major theoretician of Negritude. "Negritude has been defined by "as the sum of the culture as they are expressed in the life values, the institutions and the work of black men" (English 2009,16).

Both Hurston and Senghor share the belief that the sum of the culture and the preservation of that culture is through the language and speech sounds of its country or its community. "Speech is the culmination of thoughts, emotions and actions and there is no thought or emotion without a verbal image, no free action without first a projection in thought" (English 2009, 84). The type of speech that Senghor and Hurston speak about is humanistic and evolves from the soul, and transforms the speaker's sense of self. Both Hurston and Senghor's Black Speech and Black expressions are "a result of the oral tradition and there are three important features: images, drama and rhythm" (Englsh 2009, 15-16).

With respect to images, Hurston describes Blacks as thinking "in hieroglyphics" or thinking of objects and their action or use. In hieroglyphics, speech is projected as images with action words. So, you will find in Hurston's text, "double-descriptive," such as "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," and "cook-pot" because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object and the use of the object. Some of her characters represent hieroglyphics such "*Few Clothes, Beef Stew, Dicey Long, Do Dirty*, and *Big Sweet* in the play, *Polk County* (1944). Action is everything illustrated. So, we can say the White man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (*Characteristics* 1934, 24). English asserts that "Hurston's performances with hieroglyphics speech may have influenced her sense of self" (2009, 19). Hurston celebrated and affirmed her sense of self through crafting her words.

> Hurston's characters spoke the language of folk, a language they could use to express their innermost thoughts, growth and connection to the culture. This language can certainly be characterized by its richness, expressiveness and metaphorical properties, but it is important to note the specifically AAE linguistic patterns Hurston used to make the speech appear to be authentic. (Green 2002, 35)

In Hurston's speech performances of hieroglyphics in her plays, skits as well as her fiction, are the ahs and ahms, tight-fittin' words, metaphors, as well as incorrect subject verb agreements, phonetic distortions, sound contrasting, and other distortion of words which add to her humor. Hurston's Black expressions and dialectical distortions can be situated within the structure of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) because of the consistencies between the forms of verbal expressions. Hurston's abundance use of folk expressions in the vernacular or the AAVE are illustrated throughout her plays and skits, no matter the themes, whether it involved her plays about female rivalry, philandering, funerals, courtroom, courtships, violence, aggression, verbal dueling, verbal insults, and conflicts between the Baptists and Methodists. Hurston consistently reflects her keen ear and the lyrical dialect spoken among the folks of the community of Eatonville, Florida. Here are some excerpts illustrating aspects of hieroglyphic speech and expressions associated with AAVE in excerpts in the following examples. (All excerpts from her plays and skits are from *Collected Plays* (2008):

> "You poor stretched-out chocolate-éclair." (*Meet the Momma* 1935, Act One, Scene One, 5)
>
> "Miss Leafy, which would you ruther be, a lark a' flying, or a dove a' setting?" (*Polk County* 944, Act Three, Scene One, 37)
>
> "Don't come trying, to hand me dat rough package bout yo house so clean." (*De Turkey and De Law* 1930, Act Two, Scene One,167)
>
> "That's a tight little piece of pigmeat (a well-developed body)!" (*Filling Station* 1930, Act 1, 79)

> "Naw, you ain't nuthin- do you wouldn't be drivin' dat ole money rattler you drivin." (*Filling Station* 1930, Act 1, 81)
>
> "Chile. Some folks don't keer. They don't raise they chillen, they drags 'em up." (*De Turkey* 1930, Act Two, Scene One, 162)
>
> "Go head on yo self. Yo head look like it done wore out three bodies- talking bout me smelling- you smell lak a nest of grand daddies yo'self." (*De Turkey* 1930,, Act Two, Scene One, 163)
>
> "You ain't got naim to feed- You better go hunt another dead dog and git some mo teeth. Great big ol empty mouf, and no chears in de parlor." (*De Turkey*. 1930, Act Two, Scene One,168)

Reading Hurston's body of work in the vernacular is not an easy task, but one can become accustomed to the lyrical and rhythmic expressions. "Language functions as a cultural gatekeeper. As it opens for some, it can also exclude others. Much of Hurston's efforts focused on the presentation of authentic black folk expression that would allow those unfamiliar [outsiders and insiders] to appreciate it. Despite criticism, she included dialect in her plays and skits, as well as her fiction" (Plant 1995, 19). In the above excerpts, the gatekeepers are those in the community who speak the language that sustains them as a community and functions as a communal bond. When Hurston makes use of the community dialect, she exerts all efforts to be the insider and with authenticity to speak the community language. She is skillful at reflecting with her black expressions' syntactical creative abilities to produce similar intelligible utterances by arranging familiar elements into previously syntactical patterns. She inverts word order, alters phonetic characters, and she is able to use these rhetorical devices to create humor. Hurston says:

> The primitive [preiliterate] man exchanges descriptive words. His terms are all close fitting. Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary-not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue… must add action to it to make it do. So we have "chop-axe, "sitting-chair" "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in is mind the picture of the object in use. Everything illustrated. (*Characteristics* 1934, 31)

Throughout this chapter, Hurston's characters speak in hieroglyphics or project in speech an image or object with an action or use which includes: diddy-war-diddy, have-mercy, unletter-learnt, pop-eyes, dish-rag, church-house, raw-boned, he- looking rascal, corn-stalk, heavy-hipted, and many others are examples of hieroglyphics.

Among the structural distortions that include phonetic distortions, sound contrasting, irregular noun and verb pattern, omission of the apostrophe -s and th-. The pronunciation of "dem for them, dese for these, "dat" for that, dose for those, widd for with" appear frequently. For instance: (excerpts are from *Collected Plays*, 2008).

"I'll hit dat a lick if you stick it out." (*De Turkey* 1930,167)

"Cause dem crackers y'all got over there sure is hard on zigaboos." (*The Filling Station* 1930, 80)

"Dis ain'-no hand, dis is a foot." (*De Turkey* 1930, 144)

Hurston frequently dropped vowels, consonants or consonant and vowel sounds in the initial position such as in the following examples: round for around; 'bout for about; 'oman for woman; blong for belong; 'spect for suspect; 'sembled for assembled; and 'cause for because. Words that include phonetic distortions or sounds contrasting such as: ast for ask; heered for here; kin for can; rood for road; keer for care; kilt for kill; lessen for unless; ezactly for exactly; oughter for ought to; gointer for going to; keerful for careful; sho-oter for sure ought to; lemme for let me and ruther for rather are found throughout her plays and skits for comedic effect. Hurston use words with irregular noun

and pronoun patterns such as: chillen for children; chile for child; wimmen for women, teethes for teeth; youse for you; and hisself for himself. Hurston omits the final-t in words such as Baptis' for Baptist and Methodis for Methodist. These features of Hurston's speech sounds: hieroglyphics and dialectal distortions are found throughout her plays, skits and fiction that create humor.

Words ending in-ing such as zipping, buzzing, and laughing are pronounced as 'zippin,' 'buzzin' and 'laughin.' "Dropping the consonant-g at the end of words that have –ing is a most common feature of AAVE" (Pullum 1999, 121). Hurston frequently used these features.

> "If Whoopin' an; hollerin' would git yuh dere, you would be dere away head uh me, but thang God, dat ain't what counts." (*The Fiery Chariot* 1932, 223)
>
> "Down on yo' rusty knees beggin' God to come git yuh and take you to heben in his fiery chariot. (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 223)
>
> "Yeah, you can't teach 'em nothin' but talk on." (*De Turkey* 1930, Act Two, Scene One, 177)

Hurston refers to the completive *done* when it is used in conjunction with the past tense. as in the examples, "they *done* went to the skating rink, or even I *done* told yo u not to eat the candy," as in *De Turkey, Filling Station* and *Polk County* featured illustrating examples of dialectal distortions:

> "I 'had done seen' you somewhere" (*Filling Station* 1930, 81)
>
> "Aw, dry up, Simms. You 'done talked' yo' talk." (*De Turkey* 1930 Act Two, Scene One, 181)

"I 'done tried' and tried to tell her dat" (*Polk County* 1944, Act One, Scene One, 290)

"Is it Miss Bunch 'done come'?" (*Polk County* 1944, Act 1. Scene 2, 297)

"Is you done gone crazy?" (*Polk County* Act *Two*, Scene One, 325)

The use of double negatives and omission of -ur appears frequently:

"Yo' maw ain't got no later heah" (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 222)

"You know 'no shirt ain't' under dat bed" (Fiery *Chariot* 1932, *225*)

The use of incorrect verb tense is illustrated

"What name did you say 'you was' going by?" (Polk *County* 1944, 298)

"I bet 'they does,' too, Lonnie." (Polk *County)* 1944,*298*)

These syntactical or dialectical distortions in the use of the past tense are commonly used by Hurston. For example, Hurston would use "knowed" for knew, where the "-ed" is a sign of the simple past. The following examples are used in conjunction with the past tense:

"You 'knowed' right then you had done laid me under convictio" (*Polk County* 1944, Act 1, 353)

"That's what I 'knowed.' Its better for him to handle'em than for us" (*Polk County* 1944, 360)

Another syntactical distortion Hurston often would use is verb patterns, where the subject-verb agreement is absent between the regular verb and the irregular verb. For example, she walk to school versus she walks to school; and, they is working versus they are working. Another feature of verb patterns involving past tense that Hurston also uses is when the -ed is omitted as seen in this example, "Barack Obama talk about equal

justice" versus "Barack Obama talked about equal justice." The use of the irregular be verbs ("We was shopping" vs. "We were shopping"), and ("He good" versus. "He is good") (Smitherman 1977, 31). These verb patterns are plentiful and used plentiful throughout Hurston's body of work and adds to her humor as shown in her excerpts:

> That they is in they house. (*De Turkey* 1930, 166)
>
> Brother, we wants to know how to come. (*Cock Robin* 1942, 86*)*
>
> You wasn't there, Sister Anderson. (*De Turkey* 1930,172)
>
> Say, Simpson, they tells me you got a new mechanic round here. (*Filling Station* 1932, 81)

Grammatical patterns that are consistent with AAVE and Hurston's plays and skits invariant be, remote (past) been, axillary absence, completive done, simple past had and verb, specialized auxiliaries, negation, nominal, and question formation, and use of. These patterns are consistent when the auxiliary verb or helping verb take the forms be, like been, being, am, are, is, was, and were. "Didn't nobody know where she was?" For example, "you ain't goin' to no heaven "vs "you are not going to heaven" (Pullum 1999, 1). The habitual be shows a recurrence of an activity or event, as indicated in these examples: "sometimes they be playing basketball," instead of "sometimes they play basketball." The aspectual be is a habitual marker, preceded by all types of predicates, but with verbs that end in -ing. For example, an aspectual be is "They be having money, vs "They have money." (Green 2000, 2). Most of these grammatical features are prevalent in Hurston's plays and skits as illustrated below: (Excerpts illustrated below are from *Collected Plays* 2008):

"Since youse de one got hurted, you be de first witness and

tell me just what went on out dare" (*De Turkey* 1942, 168);

"Well, what sayin?" (*De Turkey* 1930,*144*)

"Aw Lord you ain't no good how." (*DeTurkey* 1930,145)

"We goin' too." (*De* Turkey 1930,140)

The remote *been* is a frequent feature found Hurston's plays and skits as well as her such as in this example: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1942) been had them for ten years." The *been* is used with a past tense form of the verb or *been* is used with a deleted contrast form of the subject and verb in perfect tense, (I've had them for….). The remote past BIN (slang for been) indicates that an event took place in the distant past, an in the example that follows: "She been married." vs "She has been married for a while." The grammatical feature of auxiliary absence occurs when the contractual form of is and are, is used. (Labov. et al. 1988, 110). Another example of auxiliary absence *is* "they acting crazy" versus "they are acting crazy" (Wolfram 2004, 41). (Excerpts are from *Collected Plays* 2008).

"De Chevrolet been flyin' dat's what Lindbergh flew to Paris—in a chevie

My old man been dead'bout three years" (*Filling* Station 1930, 263)

"I been layin' off to ast you what you done wid dat turkey." (*De Turkey* 1930, 181)

"I done read dis book from lid tuh lid an' I knows de law." (*De Turkey* 179)

"Yu done talk yo' talk." (*De Turkey* 1930.180)

"I'm clean as a fish, and he been in bathing all his life." (*Polk County* 1944, 319)

"He been over dat creek all his life jes' es barefooted es uh yard dawg." (*Jonah's Gourd Vine* 1933, 40)

A pattern of third person singular-s absence when it comes to a subject- verb agreement. The distorted forms been is illustrated:

"I'm clean as a fish, and he been in bathing all his life." (*Polk County* 1944, 319)

Some examples include he *walk*, instead he *walks;* he *have* shoes, instead of he *has* shoes. Another feature of AAVE include the following: "It wasn't nothing" or "They didn't do nothing about nobody having no money or nothing like that." Another example that involves negation involves a preverbal infinite and negative like Nobody can't work with her. This clause is labeled negative by the auxiliary verb (Wolfram 2004, 123). A feature of negative inversion is where the negative auxiliary is in the example, ain't nobody gonna find out vs nobody is going to find out (Pullum 1999, 61).

"I say you ain't got no case; no case 'ginst dis boy." (*De Turkey.179*)

"I say you ain't got no case; no case 'ginst dis boy." (*De Turkey.179*)

"Yu done talk yo' talk." (*De Turkey, 180*)

"He got mo book- learnin than Rev. Singletary got." (*De Turkey* 132)

"Who ain't had no taters?" (*De Turkey* 128)

"I ain't going to marry no man that ain't going tro take care of me." (*De Turkey* 111)

The dropping of consonant sounds in the final position from words is an AAVE feature as well in Hurston's usage of language such as the past vocalic /t/ and /t/deletion." For example, in AAVE *best* may be pronounced as *bes,* and *fast* may be pronounced *fas.* Dropping consonants also include dropping the third-person singular s, as in she *do* for she *does*. The absence of *-r* such as *flo f*or floor and the absence of-*g* as in *doin* for doing. These linguistic patterns and syntactical distortions are prevalent throughout Hurston's body of work.

"Who dat at de do's you reckon?" (*The Fiery Chariot* 1932, 222)

"There's hemps uh 'po' young girls ain't got no mo husband attall." (*De Turkey* 1930, 115)

"Who dat at de do's you reckon?" (*The Fiery Chariot* 1932, 223)

The following illustrations show how Hurston is able to make use of distortions in lengthy passages in which the use of *I* namely, *Ah;* omission of consonant sound, -d substituted for -th), dropping the consonant-g, incorrect subject -verb agreement (Ah tries), the dropping of initial and final consonants s and sound distortions are illustrated throughout her plays: Excerpts from the *Turkey and De Law* in *Collected Plays* 2008)

> LIGE: Ah'm willin' tuh ser…. but mah wife won't' lissen'tries to show /her 'dis' spec….. where 'ain't right for one woman to be harboring uh whole man all to herself where there's heaps uh 'po' young girls ain't got no husband atall. (*Collected Plays* 2008, 115)

From the skit, Filling Station:

> CHEVROLET DRIVER: Aw, yeah, you 'was' on Number Four. I seen you. I was goin' four hundred miles an hour when I passed you and I thought you 'was having tire trouble. I didn't know you 'was' moving. (*Collected Plays* 2008, 81)

A feature of Hurston's plays, skit and also two of her novels are the dropping of initial and final consonants such as "You" becomes "yuh," occasionally "y'all," a plural, and a vowel shift where "get" becomes "git" as illustrated from the skit, *The Filling Station:*

> CHEVROLET DRIVER: Well, over in Alabama if they tell a funny joke in the theatre,'y'all' ain't allowed to laugh till the white folks' git' through.
>
> Then a white man from down below turns 'round and look up in the peanut gallery and say.…y'all' kin laugh now. (*Collected Plays* 2008, 80)

Hurston's speech distortions in her novel do not differ from what is observed in her plays and skits. Illustrated in the passages, *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* are a fusillade

of distortions that provide a comedic dimension. Looking closely at the poem in *Their Eyes*, the first line begins with a double negative and the omission of-ur.

> "Yo' Moma 'don't wear no' Draws." (*Collected Plays* 2008, 66)

The "I" is invariably "Ah" and initial consonants are dropped in line two.

> "Ah seen her when she took 'em off." (*Collected Plays* 2008, 66)

Misspellings such as de for the, tuh for to, and the omission of th- exist in line 3 and line 4.

> "She sold 'em tuh 'de Santa Claus " and" To wear dem dirty Draws." (Their Eyes 1937, 233)

In a passage from *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, there are several following linguistic distortions. They include the culmination of the of -th in that (dat), and there (-dere). There are many other distortions that Hurston cleverly uses in the dialogue such as the use of ain't, misspellings of 'im for him, jes' for just, de for the, nairn for not one, disturbinment for -disturbance, -fuh for for, the dropping of g as in (crossin'), substitution of -g for-d, -uh for a, -es for as, omission of beginning sounds in away, between, him, and hyperbolic language (i.e. barefooted….), vowel shifting (git forget), and omission of verb (he too for -he's too; he been for -he has been, incorrect verb tense don't for does not), substitution - AH done for I've, and sound contrasting (goog for good).

> He too hard- headed tuh do dat. Ah done tried and tried but his back don't bend. De only difference 'tween him and uh mule is, de mule got four goog foots, and he ain't got nairn.
>
> De minute anybody mention crossin' dat creek, he's good tuh make disturbinment and tear up peace. He been over dat creek all his life jes' es barefooted es uh yard dawg and know he ain't even got uh rooster tuh crow fuh day, yet and still you can't git im 'way from dere. (*Jonah* 1934, 40)

Hurston is consistent in the use of linguistic distortions, as illustrated in this excerpt from *De Turkey* depicting the omission of the -g in Talkin,' f is substituted for th at the end of a word, a is added at the end of a word (-musta), the substitution of they for "their," kin for "can," incorrect abbreviations (young'uns) for youngster, and double negative "Tain't no" substituted for "there aren't," and sho do for sure do.

> SISTER TAYLOR (Methodist): I hate to tell you what 'yo' mouf' looks like. I sho do-you and soap and water 'musta' had some words.
>
> SISTER LEWIS (Baptist): Talkin' bout other folks being dirty- 'young'uns' must sleep n they draws' cause you kin smell 'em' a mile down de road.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: 'T'ain't' no lice on 'em though." (*De Turkey* 1930, Act Two, Scene Two, 166)

There are other speech distortions that Hurston uses and are typical features of AAVE. These include: come, steady, and finna. For example, "She come prancing in here like she pay the dang rent. Marcus steady trying to get Erica. I'm finna go in a minute" (Smith 1998, 115). Illustrated in *Polk County*, the term, finna' is used:

> "That one ain't finna' neither." (*Polk County* 1944, 305)

When reading Hurston's plays, skits, and fiction, one acquires the full essence of the expressions of the southern folks and the humor that stems from the excerpts. In the lengthy passages from her fiction, *Jonah Gourd's Vine* (1942) and *Their Eyes Are Watching God (*1937*)* and her plays and skit, you will experience the flowery language, and feel the authenticity of her characters. Hurston's plays are best when read aloud as you struggle with the distortions, but despite the struggle you can experience the play, its humor, the dialect, and the folksy characters. The use of metaphorical, simile, exaggerations and hyperbolic language are magnified, and the characters become real. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the exchange between Ned and Amy is powerful. Amy has a voice

despite the physical threats from her husband. There is humor in spite of the aggression. Hurston's use of the black Southern dialect brings the characters to life, while the characters' voices and their actions allow the reader to see who they are through the dialogues fused with humor.

> NED: li'l yaller God (speaking of stepson)
>
> AMY: Dat's uh big ole resurrection lie, Ned. Uh slew-foot, dragleg lie at dat, And Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too.
>
> NED: Don't you change so many words wid me, 'oman! Ah'll knock you dead ez.
>
> HECTOR: Shet yo' mouf!'
>
> AMY: Ah change jez es many words ez Ah durn please! Ahm three times seben and uh button. (*Jonah* 1934, 5)

In the dialogue from *Their Eyes Are Watching God,* Janie shares with Nanny the lack of luster in her marriage to her husband. Hurston brings Janie and Nanny to life through the dialect as Janie seeks advice from her Nanny with the dialect. "Janie erupts in revealing, dialect-driven, comic invective" (Lowe 1994, 164). There are combinations of tight-fittin' word, word reversals, subjects that disagree with the subjects, the omission of the consonants in the initial position with ahs and ahms. The fury and pain in Janie's rhetoric is heart retching as she describes her disdain for her husband. She has no attraction for him, and her respect has dwindled, in fact her attraction or her respect for him is no longer in existence. He lacks personal hygiene, and intimacy, besides his head is long and flat and his toenails are not what they should be. Nevertheless, there is humor in Janie's tirade and in her play on words.

> JANIE: Some folks are not meant to be loved and he's one of em."
>
> NANNY: How come?

> JANIE: Cause Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck.
>
> NANNY: He never made his own head. Your talk so silly.
>
> JANIE: Ah don't keer who made it. Ah don't like de job. His belly is too big too, now and his toe-nails look lak music foots. And "tain't nothin' of him washin' his feet every evening before he comes tuh bed. "Taint nothin' tuh hinder him' cause Ah places de water for him. Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whilst he is dere. He doesn't even never mention nothin' pretty. (*Their Eyes* 1937, 42)

Hurston's authentic portrayals of the characters in the dialogue between Nanny and Janie in *Their Eyes* allows the reader to gain access to Janie's feelings toward her husband and as Nanny listens attentively, this leaves you with a sense the conversation is humorous as well as timeless.

In the dialogue that follows is the men at the *Filling Station* who boast and brag about white folks' treatment of black folks in their respective states The characters are authentic and convincing in what they believe to be true. This skit is one of nine skits in *Cold Keener*, and there is much to laugh about in the exchange between the two men, as they engage in outlandishness, exaggeration, and name -calling, in their attempt to top each other with their lies. (Excerpts from *Filling Station* in *Collected Plays* 2008).

> CHEVROLET DRIVER: Make it a gallon- goin' way over in Alabama. Lo stranger how's Alabama.
>
> FORD DRIVER: Just Fine- couldn't be no better. How's you Georgy folks starvin'?
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: Starving'? Who ever heard tell of anybody starvin' in Georgy—people so fat in Georgy till I speck Gabriel goin tuh have knock us in de head on Judgment Day so we kin go'long wid de rest.
>
> FORD DRIVER: He might have to knock some of them Georgy crackers in de head, but you niggers will be all ready and waitin' for de trumpet.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: How Come?

> FORD DRIVER: (Snickering) 'Cause dem crackers y'all got over there sho is ard on zigaboos.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: (Peeved) Lemme tell you something coon. We got nice White folks in Georgy!
>
> But them Alabama red necks is too mean to give God a onest prayer without snatchin' back amen!
>
> FORD DRIVER: Who mean? I know you ain't talkin; bout them white folks in my state. Alabama is de best state in de world. If you can't git along there, you can't get along nowhere. But in Georgy they hate [black folks] so bad till one day they lynched a black mule for kickin' a white one." (*Filling Station* 1930, 221)

The Fiery Chariot is a one act play where Hurston mixes humor, flattery, and a hidden agenda. The humor in this play comes from what" Hurston calls rupture, surprise, and unexpected juxtapositions, which is evident in most cultures" (Lowe 1994, 8). Like all Hurston's plays and skits, there are dialectical distortions. Ike is the comic performer in this play who alternates between piety and godliness. He prays incessantly to go to heaven but quickly changes his mind when he is given the chance to go when God comes knocking on his door for his ride in the fiery chariot to heaven. Ike engages in all kinds of antics to get out of this situation. Of course, Ike doesn't know he is being tricked by Ole Massa dressed in a white sheet disguised as the Lawd. Hurston uses this opportunity to combine humor and religion. When Ike has a change of heart, Ole Massa offers a similar opportunity for his wife to join him. Dinah exclaims, "I ain't in this!! She beckons Ike to come from under the bed and accept his heavenly fate and that God has answered his prayers. Ike finds a way to whittle out of what has become a dilemma, because he is not ready for that ride to heben. There is hilarity and even more so when his wife, Dinah says to their son, "God ain't got no time wid yo' pappy and him barefooted too" (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 226). The comic signification in the play contains a moral lesson, "Be

careful of what you pray for." In the excerpt below it begins with Ike 's praying on bent knees:

Each night Ike prays "Come in Yo' fiery chariot and take me 'way from dis sin-sick world. Massa work me so-o hard and Ah ain't got no rest nowhere." Then there's a knock at the door. (Excerpts are from *Collected Plays* 2008)

> DINAH: Oh Lawd, Ike ain't heah right now. Come 'round some other time and Ah reckon You might ketch 'im.'
>
> OLE MASSA: Well then, Dinah you'll do.
>
> DINAH: (In Whisper) Ike, why don't you gwan wid God, You hear Him callin' you.
>
> IKE: Why don't you go wid'im? He done called you too.
>
> DINAH: You was de one been whoopin an' hollerin' for Him to come git you an'
>
> Take you to heben, I ain't prayed de first lick
>
> OLE MASSA: Come on Ike, my chariot is tired of waiting.
>
> IKE: (*Drags to open the door. He sees Ole Masa white and clean.*) You don't want me to go heben wid you in dese ole dirty clothes. Gimme time to put on my Sunday best (shirt, pants).
>
> (In the meantime, his wife Dinah jumps up and throws him his shirt and pants).
>
> IKE: (Angrily) Who ast you to be so fast- findin' my shirt befo' I do? Ah got a mind to maul yo' knot for you.
>
> OLE MASSA: Come on Ike.
>
> IKE: (*Measuring the space with his eye)* O Lawd, heben is so high and Ah'm so humble in Yo' sight, and Yo' glory cloud is so bright and Yo' radiance is so compellment, so kind in Yo' tender mercy as to stand back jes' a lil bit mo' "
>
> (Ole Massa steps back another step and Ike leaps past him out of the door. Ole Massa grabs up the tail of his sheet and starts in hot pursuit.)
>
> IKE: If thou be a running death, ketch me. (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 224-226)

This one- act play also illustrates the trickster tradition which is very much a part of Hurston's folklore collection.

Cock Robin (1930) one of the two skits in *Cold Keener* in which Hurston uses animals to play human characters. The animals are not exempted when it is their turn to speak. The dialect spoken by the animals contains similar distortions, omission of consonants and vowel sounds, and noun becomes adjectives (i.e., funeralizing). The animals function like real people and their dialogue seems typical in a close-knit community where the folks take control of their business, including rendering justice where due. The animals take charge of bringing justice to one of their community members because philandering is a crime and will not be tolerated, so justice is served. *Cock Robin* originates from an English nursery rhyme, "Who Shot Cock Robin?" The main character or the main feathered character, in the play is shot with three arrows for messin' around with the other hens in the community while their husbands are away hunting for worms. Hurston points out that in the Black community, philandering is a common occurrence, and the folks come together in this community to condemn such behavior. The community folks have seen enough blue eggs. They agreed Cock Robin got what he deserved. The social commentary is this play is about miscegenation, in which Hurston uses her plays to comment on social issues without making judgement. In a racist society, we have those who ae accepted and those who are not: The plain white eggs are acceptable, while blue eggs are not. Hurston also calls for a parody of a religious ritual in all of its grandeur, the funeralization of Cock Robin. "We'll put him in a crystal casket and have thirty carriages. We're gointer strut our stuff, we gointer strut our stuff, Good Lawd! We're gointer spread our mess" (*Cock Robin* 1930, 89). As in

this festive atmosphere "the basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees the folks from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism" and they are free to parody the church's form where everyone in the community participates" (Lowe 1994, 172).

> Owl: (Warily) Course we don't keer nothin' bout you killin' him, Brother Sparrow, we wants to know how come.
>
> SPARROW: Well, I'll tell you. When me and my wife first started to nestin' she never laid nothin' but plain white eggs, but since Cock Robin been hanging' round our place—every time. I go out on a worm hunt, when I come back, she'll done laid another blue egg in my nest.
>
> JAYBIRD: (Begins to pick feathers violently) Now, you done got me to scratchin' where I don't itch—come to think of it, I done seen two or three blue eggs in my nest.
>
> CROW: (Glaring at his wife) You been complaining 'bout my singing ever since this
>
> Guy: (Points at Cock Robin) has been 'round here. "Nother thing—I ain't never brought home nothin' but worms, and I been seeinga powerful lot of grasshopper's bones around lately.
>
> MRS CROW: (Crying and trembling) Oo-oo, you done got me so nervous—I got de haystacks. (She flutters and an egg falls to the floor.)
>
> CHORUS OF VOICES: She's lain a egg! And it's blue—robin egg blue.
>
> JAYBIRD: Dere now! De mule done kicked Rucker!
>
> OWL: Let's get dis killin' straight. Brother Sparrow say he kilt him for just causes…
>
> CROW: And I don't blame him- when they get so they kin lay mo' eggs in my nest than I kin--- they's got to be some changes made.
>
> (A committee is formed to make arrangement for funeralizin' Cock Robin. The chief mourner, the shroud maker, the bell toller, Brother Bull, the leader of the funeral possession are selected.)
>
> OWL: Now which one of you lodges think you kin do de best job?
>
> ALL Us! We! Me! De Crows have him! … Give him to de Blackbirds…De Beattles is the only ones. Let de Fishes funeralize him!
>
> OWL: Well, whoever pays de bills can have de body, who gointer pay d bill?

> (There is profound silence, then Brother Crow speaks up.)
>
> CROW: Well brothers and sisters, since we'se all here at one time, you know Sister Speckled Hen is having a grand barbecue and fish fry down on Front Street and Beale-Street Why not let's have one grand consolidated, amalgamated fraternal parade down to her place and enjoy the consequences. (*Cock Robin* 1930, 86-89)

Female rivalry is one of Hurston's themes that embraces humor as in the play, *De Law and De Turkey.* Again, she makes use of the black dialect, and folk speech in the duel between two female characters. In this dialogue, the two women attempt to top each other in insults over whether their children 's undergarments are the cleanest or whether their houses are better-off with bed bugs or lice. The extremity of their language, dialect, and salty expressions, and playing the dozens make the dialogue hilarious.

> SISTER TAYLOR: Some folks is a whole lot more keerful 'bout a louse in the church.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Whut you gazing at me for? Wid your pop-eyes looking like skirt ginny-nuts.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: I hate to tell you what yo' mouf looks like. I sho do- you and soap and water musta had some words.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Talkin' bout other folks being dirty- young'uns must be sleep in they draws' cause you kin smell' em a mile down de road.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Tain't no lice on 'em though.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: You got just as many bed- bugs and churches as anybody else, don't come trying to hand me dat rough package 'bout yo' house so clean.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Yeah, but I done seen de bed-bugs marching' out yo' house in de mornin,' keepin' step just like soldiers drillin.' An' you got so many lice and put it in de dish water and then lice pulled back and tole you, Aw naw, damned if I m going to let you drown me. (*Collected Plays* 2008, Act Two, Scene Two, 166-167)

Hurston uses colorful language and hyperbole in the next dialogue where her humor is at its very best. The bedbugs and lice take on human qualities (personification) that reflects Hurston attention to details and her consistent visual mindedness to create humor. The

verbal performance between the two women is outlandish froth with exaggerations, contradictions, and insults as they await the court proceedings to be held by Mayor Clarke. The exchange heats up to a point where Sister Taylor jumps up and starts across the aisle to attack her opposition. She is pulled back out of the aisle by friends. The verbal insults result in an explosion. The humor becomes obvious when the two women converge upon each other to the point of being ludicrous, ridiculous, and outrageously funny.

> SISTER LEWIS: (furious) Well, my house might not be exactly clan, but there is no fly- speaks on my characters! They didn't have to sit de sheriff to make Willie marry me lie they did to make Tony marry you.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Yeah, they got de sheriff to make Tony marry me, but he married me and made me a good husband too. I sits in my rocking cheer on my porch every Sat' day evening …. The assaults continue with threats to harm.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Them what?
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Them dollars. Now you sho- orter go git de sheriff and a shot-gun and make some of dese men marry yo' daughter Ada.
>
> (Sister Lewis jumps up and starts across the aisle. She is restrained but struggles hard.)
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Lemme go, Jim Merchant! Turn me go! I'm going to stomp de heifer till she can't sit down.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: (Also struggling) Let her come on! If I get my hands on her I'll turn her every way but loose.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Just come on out dis church, Lucy Taylor. I'll beat you on everything you got but yo' tongue and I'll hit dat a lick if you stick it out. (To the man holding her) Turn me go! I'm going to fix her so her own mammy won't know her. She ain't going to slip me into de dozens and laugh about it."
>
> (Enters Mayor Clarke through the pulpit door.)
>
> Clarke: Order, please. Court is set. Where's dat gavel I told you to put here? (*Warning to women to be quiet*).
>
> You wmmen, shut up!

> SISTER LEWIS: Air Lawd! Dat ain't yo' trouble. They all knows whut you is—eg-zackly!"
>
> LINDSAY: Aw, why don't you wimmen cut dat out in de church-house! Jus' jawin'
>
> And chewin' de rag!
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Joe Lindsay, if you'd go home and feed dat raw-boned horse of yourn you wouldn't have so much time to stick yo' bill in business that ain't yourn. (*Collected Plays* 2008, 166-167)

In this dialogue, the hieroglyphics or double- descriptive (i.e., pop- eyed, ginny-nuts, church house, raw- boned horse) and metaphors are abundant. The potency of words unleashed by her characters reveal Hurston's skill in recording with accuracy, the phonologic, morphological, and graphemic characteristics of the dialect. Her characters are screaming with such emotional intensity that their voices can be heard jumping off of the pages as it is written.

In Hurston's *Polk County*, the combination of humor and aggression exists. There is plenty of action when Big Sweet manhandles, a gambler called Nunkie, like a rag doll, or like an over- sized marionette, who cheated h her lover out of money in "skinin," the name of a card game. Hurston shows that her female characters do not back down. The women are no longer silent and passive while they take charge, to the extent of manhandling a male culprit. In Hurston's plays, the women undergo transformation from passivity seen in Peter's wife, Carrie, in *Meet the Momma*, to the assertive Sister Taylor and Sister Lewis who duel with each other and the Reverend Singletary in *De Turkey and De Law* and Big Sweet who is the kind- hearted, but aggressive, when necessary, in *Polk County* as seen in the action in the scene below: (Excerpts from *Collected Plays* 2008)

> LAURA B: Oooooh, Big Sweet done caught Nunkie!

> SOP- THE-BOTTOM: (*With Admiration)* Look at that lump on his jaw! Big Sweet, You sure hit him a lick.
>
> BUNCH: You told that right.
>
> LAURA B: (To Big Sweet) Did you all have words before you fell out?
>
> BIG SWEET: (Hovering over Nunkie so that he cannot escape) He better gimme Lonnie's money before I finish him, I asked him nice and kind to gimme Lonnie's money, but no, he had to get up in my face with some of his big talk. I'm going to kill him!

Other examples of hieroglyphics are in Hurston's naming of her characters in *Polk County*. Hurston uses names to distinguish and describe the characters as a mean of characterization which also adds humor.

> SOP-THE-BOTTOM: has a big appetite, a rather good gambler at Georgia skin (card game), but not above being sharp with less efficient players." I suspect that Sop- the Bottom is great at cleaning the bottom of his plate.
>
> DO-DIRTY and BOX-CAR: Rough, cheerful, careless of human life, including their own, use to prison, hard work and danger." You might find Do-Dirty and Box Car working in their dirty work clothes laying tracks for the railroad.
>
> BIG SWEET: a handsome, Negro women around thirty. Physically very strong. She has a quick temper and great courage but is generous and kind. Just as her name suggests, big, plump, soft-spoken until she's rattled, then she becomes bullish.
>
> DICEY LONG: a homey narrow- contracted little black woman, who has been slighted by Nature and feels evil about it. She suffers from the "black ass envy. Her name indicates she is unpredictable and potentially dangerous. And she is,
>
> STEW BEEF: Portly, witty, good humored, dances and sings. Portly, probably from eating too much beef-stew.
>
> LEAF LEE: a slim mulatto girl who wants to be a blues singer. She wandered into Lofton Lumber Mills in Polk County from New York." The green, naïve virgin from New Yok city looking for an opportunity to sing the blues.
>
> MY HONEY: a fairly nice- looking brown man in his mid- twenties who has no love but his box (guitar) when the story opens, though Dicey has resolved to make him hers." (1944, 274- 362)
>
> Through the eyes of Big Sweet, My Honey, belonged to her and only her.

> FEW CLOTHES: Differs from the rest only in that he plays the organ well.
>
> (The assumption is his wardrobe is limited). Apparently, he had few clothes to wear.
>
> NUNKIE: a no-good gambler, shifty and known to be irresponsible. (1944, 274-362)

In this play, Nunkie cheats at playing cards and preys on those who have little or no skills. In *Their Eyes (*1937*),* Nunkie is the plump girl who flirts with Tea Cake'before he is married to Janie Hurston uses the same name in different plays. Hurston chooses some of the same characters throughout her plays, skits, and fiction.

Hurston believed that black folks speak in hieroglyphics or adjectives, nouns and verbs help to form double-descriptive that add action or its use. Her illustrations of metaphors, similes, verbal nouns, double negatives, onomatopoeias, neologisms, and hyperboles also add an appropriate form of action to speech. Such tropes include these speech combinations: "Regular as pig tracks"), double-descriptive ("Kill-dead"), and verbal nouns ("Sense me into it") are considered "the Negro's greatest contribution to the language" (English 2009, 15-17). These elements exemplify what Hurston called the "will to adorn" as described in Hurston's essay, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* (1934):

> Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatised. No matter how joyful or how sad the there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. . . . No little moment passes unadorned. . . . These little plays by strolling players are acted out daily in a dozen streets in a thousand cities, and no one ever mistakes the meaning. Hurston believed that, "My People love a show". We love to act more than we love to see acting done. We love to look at them and we love to put hem on. . . . We just love to dramatize. (2)

The use of metaphors and simile; the use of the double- descriptive; and the use of verbal—nouns can also be thought of as joking techniques where exressions are

condensed into relatively few *words* "to facilitate the expression of hostility and a wide range of other emotions and feelings" (Levine 1977, 320).

"You show is propaganda" (De *Turkey and De Law* 1930, 185.)

"My Mouth is in Big Sweet's Mouth" (*Polk County* 1944, 302)

"Yom head look like it done wore out three bodies" (*De Turkey and De Law* 1930, 163).

"You smell lake [like] a nest of granddaddies yodel" (*De Turkey* 1930, 163).

"Scoop one in the rough" (*Polk County* 1944, 318).

"Every time you lift you' arm you smell like a nest of yellow hammers (summer sweats)" (*De Turkey and De Law* 1930, 164).

Hurston's use of double-descriptor function like the following are prevalent in her body of work include: "Mullet-head," "Pot-a-boiling," "gobbler's eggs, "hen-biddy," "low-down," "jar-heads," "two bits," "dinner-bucket" and "waltzing jacket" (Holloway 1987, 82). Verbal nouns show action such as "Federalizing," "scoop one in the rough," 'steal a haw an' eat his hair," "rack on down the road," and "stomp the black heifer" (Holloway 1987, 82). Hurston's use of adornments "emphasizes her intent to capture the character of the speaker as well as to tell the story" [while creating humor] (Holloway 1987, 82). She believed the use of adornments needs no literary interpretation or explanations, but they merely highlight the adorned language and humor. The "Characteristics of Negro Expression" is a description of unique traits of "negro expression" in drama, the will to adorn, dancing, negro folklore, culture heroes, originality, imitation, absence of the concept of privacy, and the jook. Hurston describes three major characteristics of

expressions in her essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" published in 1935.

Drama, is the first important feature of negro expression as Hurston describes below:

> The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile. The metaphor is of course very primitive. It is easier to illustrate than it is to explain because action came before speech. Let us make a parallel. Language is like money. In primitive communities, actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later for cheques in certain usages. Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatised. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned. Now the people with highly developed languages have words for detached ideas. That is legal tender. "That-which-we-squat-on" has become "chair." "Groan-causer" has evolved into "spear," and so on. Some individuals even conceive of the equivalent of cheque words, like "ideation" and "pleonastic." Perhaps we might say that Paradise Lost and Sartor Resartus are written in cheque words. The primitive man exchanges descriptive words…. all close fitting. Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—……. transplanted on his tongue by contact—must add action to it to make it do. We have "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. (*Characteristics* 1934, 3)

Action is Hurston's second important feature:

> Everything illustrated. We can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. A bit of Negro drama familiar to all is the frequent meeting of two opponents who threaten to do atrocious murder one upon the other. Who has not observed a robust young Negro chap posing upon a street corner, possessed of nothing but his clothing, his strength and his youth? Does he bear himself like a pauper? No, Louis XIV could be no more insolent in his assurance. His eyes say plainly "Female, halt!" His posture exults "Ah, female, I am the eternal male, the giver of life. Behold in my hot flesh all the delights of this world. Salute me, I am strength." All this with a languid posture, there is no mistaking his meaning. A Negro girl strolls past the corner lounger. Her whole-body panging* [* from "pang"] and posing. A slight shoulder movement that calls attention to her bust, that is all of a dare. A hippy undulation below the waist that is a sheaf of promises tied with conscious power. She is acting out "I'm a darned sweet woman and you know it." These little plays by strolling players are acted out daily in a dozen streets in a thousand cities, and no one ever mistakes the meaning. (*Characteristics* 1934, 4)

The Will to Adorn is a Hurston third important characteristic in Negro expression.

> Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator. In this respect the American Negro has done wonders to the English language. It has often been stated by etymologists that the Negro has introduced no African words to the language. This is true, but it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has had his revision accepted by the ruling class. No one listening to a Southern white man talk could deny this. Not only has he softened and toned down strongly consonanted words like "aren't" to "aint" and the like, he has made new force words out of old feeble elements. Examples of this are "ham-shanked," "battle-hammed," "double-teen," "bodaciously," "muffle-jawed. (*Characteristics* 1934, 11)

Hurston is masterful at using these expressions to communicate a range of human emotions and interactions in her plays, skits and her novels using the speech sounds of the folks down South to create her humor.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUPERIORITY (INSULTS), INCONGRUITY (ABSURDITIES), AND RELIEF (RELEASE OF TENSION) IN HURSTON'S HUMOR

> A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand ere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees. (*Their Eyes* 1937, 121)

INSULTS = HUMOR

The third identifiable element in Hurston's humor is the situating of the three major theories of humor: superiority, incongruity, and relief of tension. Plato and Aristotle were among the first to formulate the theory of superiority which is a form of humor that contains insults and elements of aggression. Thomas Hobbs believed that laughter arose from a sense of superiority or to make mockery of another that results in laughter because it makes the other feel superior (i.e., like poking fun). A person can have a sense of superiority if he insults another or demeans another in a humorous way or a humorous event that can be disparaging and make the person feel superior when putting down or poking fun at another. "People enjoy jokes in which individuals or groups they like or identify with put down those they dislike" *(McGhee* 1983, 371-372).

Ridicule and feelings of relative superiority are essential components of humor as illustrated in the dialogue between Janie and her husband, Jody in Hurston's fiction, *Their Eyes* (1937). For seventeen years, Janie has taken her husband's verbal bashing, but on this particular day, something 'musta"' swelled up in Janie's spirit not to take it no 'mo.' Janie is no longer silent and says in front of his men folks. "You big-bellies round here and put out a lot off brag, but 'taint nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin;' about me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life"

(*Their Eyes* 1937, 121). Janie not only insults her husband, but she emasculates him in front of the menfolk, his friends. Janie not only insults her husband, but she emasculates him in front of the menfolk, so much so that one of the porch sitters named Sam Watson gasped, "Great God from Zion. Y'all really playing de dozens tuhnight... Janie "laughing at him and putting the town to do the same... She made such a charge that one of the menfolk taunts, "You heard her, you ain't blind" (*Their Eyes* 1937, 121-123). Hurston engages Janie in a public display of talking back and breaking her silence for the first time. She emasculates her husband, Jody by insulting in front of his male friends, and she receives accolades from the group of men sitting on the porch. This is what is considered the kind of insult that brings about laughter from the group, which is a feature of superiority. "Superiority theories align humor principally with ridicule and the enjoyment of one's own superiority in pinpointing the foibles or weaknesses of another" (Dadlez 2011, 2). Adrian Bardon says, "The superiority theory is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior" (McGhee 1983, 463). The principle of superiority "entails mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others and is central to this humor experience" (Keith- Spiegel 1972, 5–6).

The insult Janie lashes onto Jody illustrated in the excerpt above looks different when it is between man and a woman. Janie is expected to remain silent and not engaged in any rebuttals but between men, there is the verbal duel, or the dozens which occurs where one man attempts to outdo the other with insults with no pun intended. This is seen as joking relationships with no pun intended, which is also characteristic of the

superiority theory. Janie accepts the challenge with venom and aggression after thirteen years of subjugation with pun intended.

Their Eyes (1937) is a story of a Black woman's quest for love and for her own identity, taking place in an era where women, particularly black women, were marginalized, silenced, and forbidden to engage in 'talk' with men folks. Janie loses her patience when her husband of seventeen years who directs disparaging remark to her. Hurston masterfully uses everyday language that is authentic and forceful with verbosity and rhythmic in sound, while maintaining the ridicule and insult that Janie lashes onto her husband, Jody. It leaves Janie with a feeling of superiority and makes Jody the "butt of the joke" in front of the men folks on the store front. Janie is no longer an "object, mute and decorative like the spittoon, but a speaking, acting, funny, and fighting human being" (Lowe 1994, 177).

In *De Turkey and De Law,* a play, written by Hurston in 1930, there are scenes that depict similar verbal duels taking place between two women churchgoers. The superiority theory befits this dialogue where both women render themselves to be superior to the other by spouting whether their children wear undergarments with the better fragrance or whether their houses are better-off with bed bugs or lice. The dispute or rather the onslaught of insults takes place in the interior of Macedonia Baptist Church, center, while the two women, Sister Taylor, a Baptist, and Sister Lewis, a Methodist, await the beginning of the trial between Jim Weston and Dave Carter. It begins with Sister Taylor looking pointedly at Sister Lewis, who takes a dip of snuff and looks sneeringly at Sister Lewis again. It is not just the dialogue that provides the humor, but one must envision the body language, the hands on the hips, the rolling of the eyes, and

the woofing that are on display for everyone to see. The dialogue begins in its full vernacular as Hurston so skillfully maintains its content of humor as the insults come out of the women's mouth, nonstop. (Excerpts are from *Collected Plays* 2008)

> SISTER TAYLOR: Some folks is a whole lot more keerful 'bout a louse in the church than They is in they house.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Whut you gazing at me for? Wid your pop-eyes looking like ginny-nuts.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: I hate to tell you what yo' mouf looks like. I sho do- you and soap and water musta had some words.
>
> SISTER LEWIS: Talkin' bout other folks being dirty- young'uns must be sleep in they draws' cause you kin smell' em a mile down de road.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: "Tain't no lice on 'em though" .
>
> SISTER LEWIS: You got just as many bed- bugs as anybody else, don't come trying to hand me dat rough package 'bout yo' house so clean.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Yeah, but I done seen de bed-bugs marching' out yo' house in de mornin,' keepin' step just like soldiers drillin.' An 'you got so many lice I seen' em on de dish-rag. One day you tried to pick up de dish-rag and put it in de dish water and then lice pulled back and tole you. Aw naw, damned if I m going to let you drown me (*DeTurkey and De Law* 1930 , Act Two, Scene Two,).

The verbal performance in the next scene in *De Turkey and De Law* (1930) between two women is outlandish froth with exaggerations, contradictions, and insults, with one woman asserting her superiority by purporting she was not forced to marry by gunshot. The verbal insults result in an explosion. The humor in this exchange is just as hilarious as before...

> SISTER LEWIS. (furious) Well, my house might not be exactly clan, but there is no fly- speaks on my characters! They didn't have to sit de sheriff to make Willie marry me like they did to make Tony marry you.
>
> SISTER TAYLOR. Yeah, they got de sheriff to make Tony marry me, but he married me and made me a good husband too…
>
> SISTER TAYLOR: Let her come on! If I get my hands on her I'll turn her every way but right. (*Collected Plays* 2008, Act Two, Scene Two,188)

JUXTAPOSITION OF TWO INCONGRUOUS IDEAS = HUMOR

> Man, I was doin' one hundred fifty in first. By the time I got as far south as Jacksonville, I was really running. Man, I come down that Florida Number Four going faster than the word of God! I was doing three hundred in seconds" (*Filling Station* 1930, 81)

Incongruity becomes obvious when two elements within a story contradict each other, or when those elements are in total opposition to acceptable norms, just as described in the above excerpt from the play, *Filling Station*. In incongruous humor, there is constantly a comparison of opposite images that create the basis for humor. The basis for the incongruity theory was formulated earlier by Aristotle who defined humor "as something bad, unbefitting, out of place, but not necessarily evil. The notion of congruity and incongruity is the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, or some expectation. (Attardo 1994, 137). Excerpts *from* the skit, *Cold Keener's Filling Station* (1930) illustrates a simple exchange of incongruity. The cast includes the Proprietor, the Ford Driver, the Chevrolet Driver, and the girl. The scene takes place at a point on the Georgia state line at a filling station. The action begins when the curtain goes up, a fat Negro is reared back in a chair beside the door of the station asleep and snoring. There is the sound of car approaching from the Alabama side and a Model T-Ford rattles up to the pump on the upstage side of the pump and stops at the one nearest to the left entrance. (*Filling Station* 1930, Act 1, Scene1, 1-2 from (Collected Plays 2008).

> PROPRIETOR: (Sleepily): How many?
>
> FORD DRIVER: Two.
>
> PROPRIETOR: Two what?
>
> FORD DRIVER: Two pints. -1- -2- (The Proprietor gets a quart cup and measures the gas and wrings the hose to be sure to get it all, then he pours it in the tank.)

> FORD DRIVER: You better look at my water and air, too. (He has a very expensive and ornate cap on the radiator, but otherwise the car is most dilapidated.
>
> (As the Proprietor pours the water into the radiator, the driver gets out of the car and stands off from it looking it over.)
>
> FORD DRIVER: Say, Simpson, they tells me you got a new mechanic round here that's just too tight.
>
> PROPRIETOR: That's right. He kin do more wid 'em than the man that made 'em.
>
> FORD DRIVER: Well, looka here. My car kinda needs overhauling and maybe a little point. Look her over and tell me just what you could make her look like a brand new car for.
>
> (Proprietor lifts the hood and looks. Walks around and studies the car from all angles. Then stops at the front and examines the radiator cap.)
>
> PROPRIETOR: Well, I tell you. You see it's like this. This car needs a whole heap of things done to it. But being as you'se a friend of mine--tell you what I'll do. I'll just jack that radiator cap up and run a brand-new Ford under it for four hundred and ninety-five dollars.
>
> FORD DRIVER: (*Indignantly*): Whut de hen-fire you think I'm gointuh let you rob me outa my car. That's a good car" (*Filling Station* 1930, 78)

The above scenario seems illogical and unreasonable based on the premise that the Ford driver believes his car needs only a little work, but the entire car is in a dilapidated condition. The proprietor asserts that the car itself needs to be replaced except for the decorated gas top. The anecdote is humorous because what seems likely is unlikely. In another illustration of incongruity and flawed logic, a Ford driver from Alabama and a Chevrolet driver from Georgia, exaggerate about the speeds their respectable cars are able to sustain to reach, be mindful the time frame is the 1920s and 30s.

> FORD DRIVER: That's all right. They don't 'low y'all to ride no faster than ten miles an hour. If you ride any faster--you liable to get in front of some white folks can't pass nobody.
>
> FORD DRIVER: Now, what's de matter wid a Ford? –
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: What you asking' me for? I ain't no dictionary.

> FORD DRIVER: Naw, you ain't nuthin--do you wouldn't be drivin' dat ole money rattler you drivin'.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVE: You can't talk about no Chevvie now. They got everything that a good car need. Speed! Oh, boy!
>
> FORD DRIVER: Yeah, 'bout eight miles a
>
> CHERVIE: Still every time I look back I see a Ford--way behind.
>
> FORD DRIVER: And every time I look in front I see a Chevvie--in my way. On every highway, at every turn, on every hill, on every side road, you see a Ford hitting it up.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: And a Chevvie passing it.
>
> FORD DRIVER: Dat's a lie and otherwise you ain't really seen a Ford run yet. Now I was going down to Miami and I had dat old car doing seventy-eight, man.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: I went dat same road and had mine doing ninety.
>
> FORD DRIVER: I mean I was doin' seventy-eight on the curves, otherwise I was doing a hundred and fifty.
>
> CHEVROLET DRIVER: That was draggin' along. I was doin' two hundred and wasn't pushin' her. Fact is, I was in second. (*Filling Station* 1930, 181)

When Hurston's characters speak in the vernacular, they espouse eloquence as displayed in the courting scene between Jim, Dave, and Daisy who compete for Daisy's attention who engage in exaggerated declarations of love, such as "Baby, I'd walk de water for you- and tote a mountain on my head while I'm walkin" (*De Turkey* 1930, 186). Hurston holds the reader's attention when the dialect and the spirit of the characters is shown. The entire scene is hilarious., and another example of incongruity at its best Excerpts from (*Collected Plays* 2008).

> DAVE: Miss Daisy, know what I'd do for you?
>
> DAISY: Aw, whut?
>
> DAVE: I'd like uh job cleanin' out de Atlantic Ocean jus for you.
>
> DAISY: Don't fool me now, papa.

> DAVE: I couldn't foo you, Daisy,' cause anything I say' bout lovin' you, I don't keer how big it is it wouldn't be half the truth.
>
> DAVE: I'd come down de river riding a mud cat and leading a minnow.
>
> DAISY: Daisy: Lawd, Dave, you sho is propaganda.
>
> JIM: (Peevishly) Naw he ain't- he's jut lying- he's a noble liar. Know what I'do if you was mine?
>
> DAISY: Naw, Jim
>
> JIM: I'd make a partner wash yo' dishes and a 'gator chop yo' wood for you. (*De Turkey* 1930, 186)

The dialogue is simplistic, yet all telling and humorous. Again, Hurston shows a keen awareness of mimicking the dialectical patterns between the speakers, while creating the comedic effect. In this next amusing dialogue, Hurston uses the vernacular masterfully in the oral tradition as well as the various townspeople, young and old, who have congregated in the church. Young and old women engage in verbal exchanges with the men. It does not matter to the women that if the man is a minister of the Baptist church or the judge in the court room. The women exercise agency in *De Turkey and De Law*. Beginning with the ritual of insults between Deacon Lindsay and Sister Taylor before the trial, we will see how a man is picked like mincemeat or made to feel he's been picked. This excerpt, barrages of insults, incongruity, and relief (plenty of tension) are illustrated, from *Collected Plays* 2008).

> LINDSAY: (Angrily) What's de matter, y'all? Cat got yo' tongue?
>
> MRS. TAYLOR: More matter than yo' kin scatter all over Cincinnati.
>
> LINDSAY: Go 'head on, Lucy Taylor. Go 'head on. You know a very little of yo' sugar sweetens my coffee. Go 'head on. Everytime you lift yo' arm you smell like a nest of yellow hammers.
>
> MRS. TAYLOR: Go 'head on yo'self. Yo' head look like It done wore out three bodies. Talkin' 'bout me smellin'-you smell lak a nest of gran daddies yo'self.

> LINDSAY: Aw rock on down de road ‘oman. Ah don't wan-tuh change words wid yoh. Youse too ugly.
>
> MRS TAYLOR: You ain't nobody pretty baby, yo'self. You so ugly I betcha yo' wife have to spread uh sheet over yo' head tuh let sleep slip up on yuh.
>
> LINDSAY: (Threatening) I done tole you I don't wanter break a breath wid you. It's uh whole heap better tuh walk off on yo' own legs than it is to be toted off. I'm tired of yo' achin' ere . You fool wid me now an' I'll knock you into doll rags, Tony or no Tony.
>
> MRS TAYLOR: (Jumping up in his face) Hit me! Hit me! I dare you tuh hit me. If you take dat dare, you'll steal uh hawg an’ eat his hair.
>
> LINDSAY: Lemme gunn down to dat church befo' you make me stomp you. (*De Turkey* 1930, 145)

De Turkey and De Law, including the minister, Reverend Simms, the town marshall or the mayor who’ plays the judge in the court room scene. In Ac (Lum Boger, the young town marshal about twenty, tall, gangly with big flat fleet, liked to show off in public tries to order the girls away: This is the exchange that takes place- and he “gits showed up.” (Excerpts from *Collected Plays* 2008)

> LUM BOGER: Why'nt you go on away from here, Matilda? Didn't you hear me tell you-all to move?
>
> LITTLE MATILDA: (Defiantly) I ain't goin' nowhere. You ain't none of my mama. (Jerking herself free from him as LUM touches her). My mama in the store and she told me to wait out here. So take that, ol' Lum.
>
> LUM BOGER: You impudent little huzzy, you! You must smell yourself ... youse so fresh.
>
> MATILDA: The wind musta changed and you smell your own top lip.
>
> LUM BOGER: Don't make me have to grab you and take you down a button hole lower.
>
> MATILDA: (Switching her little head) Go ahead on and grab me You sho can't kill me, and if you kill me, you sho’ can't eat me. (*De Turkey* 1930, 146)

In this dialogue, Hurston shows that even a young, Matilda, can speak up and outduel the best of them, which gives this brief dialogue its comedic effect. In the play, *Fiery*

Chariot, Hurston uses the incongruous humor when Dinah defies her husband, Ike, the main character, who rays incessantly to go to heben to forfeit the hard work he has to endure every day as a slave. His wife, Dinah, and his son want that he cuts back on his praying because he is preventing them from getting their rest and sleep. Ike retorts, "Aw shut up 'oman! You lemme and God tend to us business. You ain't got a thing to do wid it. Ah' ma prayin' man, and long as Ah kin feel de spirit Ah'm gointer pray" (*Fiery Chariot* 1935, 223). Ike has a change of heart when God who is really *Ole Massa* knocks on his door for him to come with him in His *Fiery Chariot* to go to heaven. Ike attempts to coerce his wife to go with God in his place. Dinah rebukes and says with authority, "This is between you and God and I ain' in it!" The play involves using deception. Eventually Ike dupes his master to avoid the calamity. There is more aggression and humor. The scene is incongruous, and the events read from *Fiery Chariot* are unlikely to occur. The excerpt from *The Fiery Chariot* is a s follows from *Collected Plays* 2008

> IKE. (Look up from his prayers) Who dat? (Turns to Dinah) What dat at de do' you reckon? (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 223)

"*Ole Massa is as tired of hearing Ike complain as his wife and son, so he masquerades as God wearing a white sheet and knocks on the door*." (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 224)

> OLE MASSA: (*Sing-songing*) it's me, Ike, the Lord, I come in my fiery chariot to take you to heaven with me. Come right now, Ike.
>
> IKE: Tell 'm Ah ain't heah, Dinah.
>
> DINAH: Oh Lawd, Ike ain't heah right now, Come 'round some other time and Ah reckon ou might krtvh'im.
>
> OLE MASSA: Well then, Dinah you'll do. (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 224)

Since Ike "was de one whoopin' and hollerin' for him to come git him an'take him to heben. I ain't prayed de first lick. After Ole Massa makes repeated requests for Dinah to

go with him in his fiery chariot, Dinah tells Ole Massa that Ike is hiding under the bed" (*Fiery Chariot* 1932, 233)

> OLE MASSA: Ike, O Ike, Why do you try to fool me? Come out from under that bed and go with me.

"Ike finally gives up and resigns to the fact that he must go with Ole Massa noy until he gives him several excuses. He finally makes several requests that Ole Massa move several distances from the floor. With peace in one hand and pardon in de other, Ike tricks Ole Massa as he darts passes with overwhelming speed" (*The Fiery Chariot* 1932, 225)

TENSION RELIEF= HUMOR

> You didn't die! You multiplied cockroach. I'll teach you to die next time I hit you! Die! Shut up that racket! I mean to kill you. Beating my Lonnie out of his money. Gimme! If you don't, and that quick, they going to tote you through three yards---this yard, the churchyard, and the graveyard. Gimme!" (*Polk County*, 1944, Act One, Scene One, 281).

The release or relief theory is associated with Sigmund Freud. He contends that the central component of a joke is its delivery, especially in African American humor, and that jokes have a social context, requires an audience, and constitute a basic form of communication. Freud asserts laughter dismisses the need to reason or use critical thinking, instead laughter allows you the freedom to acquire pleasure to enjoy the joke without the constraints of reason. As Freund states "jokes strip away pretenses and disguise, revealing the truth, and may be obscene, aggressive, hostile, cynical, critical, blasphemous and skeptical" (qtd.in Lowe 1994, 24). The release/ relief theory allows that freedom. "The playful, the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, sense in nonsense, the succession of bewilderment, the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar ideas or condensation of wit are basic consideration" (Lowe 1994, 25). The

matter of aggression in humor is not just subjected to Freud, but Mary Douglas sees the role of aggression happening in humor as when something formal gets attacked by something informal. Freud and Douglas perceive humor and laughter as a form of release. When a joke is humorous, pent-up energy is released evoking laughter, shrieking, dancing, or snickering. This release or relief of pent -up-energy is prevalent in both Hurston's skit *Cock Robin* (1930*)* and this *play, Polk County* (1944).

Hurston collected the material for *Polk County* written in 1944 after spending months among the sawmill workers at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Loughman, Florida. The elements of the relief theory of Humor is evident when *Big Sweet* manhandles Nunkie. The protagonist, Big Sweet is a handsome Negro woman around thirty, and Nunkie is the no-good gambler. Big Sweet pounces on *Nunkie* and seizes him by the lapels of his coat and buttons him up because he has swindled money from Lonnie. Lonnie is a soft-spoken man with a baritone voice, and he is not at all aggressive or violent, and he belongs to Big Sweet, or Big Sweet has ownership of Honey. Nevertheless, the people have spent all day in the blazing sun working in the Sawmill, and it's late evening. Those who are not sitting on Joe Clark's porch gather at the jook to listen to music, dance, and play cards. Big Sweet hears that Honey has lost money at the card table to the no –good gambler, Nunkie. Honey has no skills at playing cards. His skills lie only in playing his guitar. Hieroglyphics are used in abundance in the names of her characters, and they need no interpretation. In this excerpt, which reflects lots of tension and physical aggression, there is plenty of laughter. (Excerpts from *Polk County (1944)* is illustrated from (Collected Plays 2008).

BIG SWEET: Where you think you going?

NUNKIE: (Scared, startled, but recovers and tries to appear defiant) Take your hands off of me!

BIG SWEET: Gimme that money back!

NUNKIE: (*Struggles to free himself, but vainly*) Take your hands out off my Collar, woman! I don't allow no woman to button me up.

BIG SWEET: (*Tightens her grip firmly)* Well, I done done it. Look like there ain't no help for it. Gimme my Lonnie's money! You Know I don't allow none of you low- life-ted gamblers to hook Lonnie out of his money. Give it here!

NUNKIE: I ain't supposed to teach Lonnie how to skin. Naw, I ain't going to give you nothing! I ain't putting out nothing but old folks' eyes, and I ain't doing that till they dead. Let go!"

(Nunkie starts his hand to his pocket nervously, but looking into Big Sweet's angry face, thinks better of it. Big Sweet tightens his clothes around his neck until he is being choked.)

BIG SWEET: I'll beat you till you slack like lime! Gimme that six dollars you beat Lonnie out of! Gimme!

NUNKIE: (In desperate straits, tries to get to his pocketknife) I'll cut your throat.

BIG SWEET: (Lands a terrific blow to his stomach) You going to cut me, eh? (*Another blow to his face, and Nunkie goes down. She kicks him hard)* I'll kill you. Gimme!

NUNKIE: (Trying to cover up) Murder! Help!

BIG SWEET: Trying for another good place to kick) You didn't die! You multiplied cockroach. (Aims another kick) I'll teach you to die next time I hit you! Die!

NUNKIE: Murder! Murder! Somebody come git this woman off of me!

(Sop-The-Bottom, Do-Dirty, Laura B, Few Clothes and Bunch rush in and take in the scene.Big Sweet done caught Nunkie!)

SOP-THE- BOTTOM: (*With admiration*) Look at that lump on his jaw! Big Sweet, you sure hit him a lick.

BIG SWEET: (*Hovering over Nunkie so that he cannot escape*) He bettor gimme Lonnie's money before I finish him. I asked him nice and kind to gimme Lonnie's money, but naw, he had to get up in my face with some of his big talk. I'm going to kill him!

> DO-DIRTY: (*To Nunkie*) Give it to her, man, if you got good sense. Taint nothing in the drugstore will kill you quicker than Big Sweet will about Lonnie Price. Give it to her.
>
> SOP-THE-BTTOM: You might as well give it to her. You cant whip her. She got them loaded muscles. Come on, hand it to her. Give her that little spending change.
>
> (Nunkie is sullen and silent, rolls his eyes hatefully at Big Sweet, lying curled up like a worm)
>
> BIG SWEET: Don't you lay there all curled up like that! (She puts her foot on top of him and presses down to make him straighten up)
>
> BIG SWEET: *Straighten* up and die right! (She glares at him, then turns full of self-pity to the crowd)
>
> BIG SWEET: See? Thats how so many lies gets out on me. They twist theyselves all up and dies ugly, and then folks swears Big Sweet kilt 'em like that. You aint going to die a lie on me like that. Straighten up! (*Polk County*, 1944, Act One, Scene One. 280-281)

In *Polk County* (1944), Big Sweet's gestures, physical aggression, and her movements make the play humorous and laughable as she manhandles Nunkie. The play contains both physical comedy and humorous aggression as onlookers are held in suspense as to what will happen next. This is typical of Freund's Relief theory where there's aggression, suspense, humor and finally relief in when Big Sweet let go of Nunkie. after being stripped of his manhood in front of an audience.

Cock Robin (1930) is a one act unpublished play contains plenty of pent-up energy and tension "where Hurston uses animals as characters. Hurston constantly experiments with different forms to garner humor as she does with *Cock Robin*. *Cock Robin* has been murdered by three arrow shots shot in his chest by Bull Sparrow who discerns that Cock Robin has been 'messing around' with the hens in the neighborhood. Instead of the hens laying white eggs, the eggs as of late are laying blue eggs. Bull Sparrow confirms that *Cock Robin* is the culprit after he sees Cock Robin running out of

his hen house. The folks of the community praises Sparrow for rendering justice and support his action. Hurston again reflects her love for community in showing communal bonding even if one of its members is put to death for wrongdoings. Bull Sparrow admits to killing *Cock Robin* on Beale Street because Mrs. Sparrow is no longer producing "plain white eggs." In fact, ever since Cock Robin has been hanging around, Bull Sparrow complains, "every time I go off on a worm hunt, when I get back, I find another blue egg in my nest" (Boyd 2003, 347). Sparrow's brother birds complain of the same puzzle and agrees *that Cock Robin* got what he deserved. This is Act One of *Cock Robin,* and it is any city in a colored town. The stage has a cheap restaurant with a crude sign on which is written "The Grease Spot;" (2) a cheap pool hall called "The Eight Rock;" (3) a dingy rooming house, "The Shimmy Shack." (Excerpt from *Cock Robin* is from Collected Plays, 2008).

There are no judges, courtrooms, or jails to dispel justice in the black community. Just as the community's complicity in granting *Cock Robin*'s a death penalty, the folks thought it appropriate to plan a proper burial to celebrate *Cock Robin.* Oops! The community abruptly ends the planning of the funeral and goes about their business to attend a community barbecue and decides to leave the burying to "de white folks since dey always loves to take charge" (Boyd 1993, 348).

The scene opens with blues playing in the background at the Shimmy Shack. Three shots are heard, and turmoil breaks out. Suddenly, *Cock Robin* staggers through the door with three arrows sticking in him and falls dead on the sidewalk on his back on the sidewalk. The windows fly open with heads thrust out and crowds pour out of the doors. The Bull looks out his second-story window of the Shack.

JAYBIRD: (*standing over Cock Robin*) Its Cock Robin!

BEETLE: (*gazing down on him*) Dat's him all right and murdered in de first degree.

OWL: Who! Who! Who kilt Cock Robin?

MRS. BLACKBIRD: I just knowed something bad was going to happen--I dreamed last night the air was full of feathers.

BEETLE: I don't know who kilt him--but I do know he was due for a first class killin.' He give these married man more aid and assistance than de-ice man.

SISTER BUZZARD: (*belligerently*) I don t keer who kilt him..... But nobody better not cast no slam at my hotel. (points to shack) They bet not say my shack ain't respectable and they bet not tell me my eye is black.

OWL: (*officiously)* Hey, Sister Buzzard, let's squat dat rabbit and jump another one. What we wants to know is- who kilt Cock Robin?

SPARROW: I, the sparrow, with my bow and arrow, and I kilt Cock Robin--who wants to know?

OWL: Course we don't keer nothin' 'bout you killin' him, Brother Sparrow, we wants to know how come.

SPARROW: Well, I'll tell you. When me and my wife first started to nestin' she never laid nothin' but plain white eggs. But since Cock Robin been hanging round our place--every time I go out on a worm hunt, when I come back, she'll done laid another blue egg.

JAYBIRD: (*Begins to pick feathers violently*) Now, you done got me to scratchin' where I don't itch--come to think of it, I done seen two or three blue eggs in my nest.

CROW: (*glaring at his wife*) You been complaining 'bout my singing ever since this guy (points at Cock Robin) has been round here. Nother thing--I ain't never brought home nothin' but worms, and I been seeing a powerful lot of grasshoppers bones around lately.

MRS. CROW: (crying and trembling) Oo-oo, you done got me so nervous --I got de hay-stacks. (She flutters and an egg falls to the floor.

CHORUS OF VOICES: She's lain a egg! And it's blue-robin egg. (*Cock Robin* 1930, 88-89)

Acts of infidelity, philandering, mixing of the races, and shameful behaviors were not tolerated in the community, and if rules are broken, they are addressed and resolved. Even Buzzard Sister who runs a jook joint (a modern-day tavern) is concerned about decorum and says, "nobody better not cast no slam at my hotel. They bet not say my shack ain't respectable and they bet not tell me my eye is black (shameful, disrespectful behaviors)" (*Cock Robin* 1939, 91). Community members care about maintaining values, morals, and a level respect especially among the woman folk who's produce blue eggs. The community also maintained their rituals, and so when a member of the community dies, he is given a proper send-off, which is the communal act of having a funeral or funeralizing. The carnival-like atmosphere adds to the suspense of this humorous skit. Surprisingly there is no funeral, and the justification is, "White folks always want to be in our business anyway, let them do the burying." However, this did not stop the community from celebrating, so the entire community marched together to the neighborhood barbecue. Again, Hurston's humor is situated throughout this play even in the middle of a planning a funeral.

The combination of the three humor theories is shown in this scene from *Polk County* as two characters, Lonnie and Sop-The Bottom describe the women they 've slept with and what the women dream about. They described their women "dream about hatchets, and knives, and pistols, icepicks and splitting open people's heads" (*Polk County* 1944, 279). The tale the two men tell become more outlandish and unbelievable; Bull Sparrow admits to killing Cock Robin on Beale Street because Mrs. Sparrow is no longer producing "plain white eggs." In fact, ever since Cock Robin has been hanging around, Bull Sparrow complains, "every time I go off on a worm hunt, when I get back, I

find another blue egg in my nest" (Boyd 2003, 347). Sparrow's brother birds complain of the same puzzle and agrees that Cock Robin got what he deserved. After some arguing about who will bury him, they decide to form "one big amalgamated, contaminated parade" with a down home Sister "dey always loves to take charge" (Boyd 2003, 348). Invariably there is laughter or a release of pent- up energy as the listener's get set up for something to happen at the end. This tale is illustrated as follows from *Collected Plays* 2008).

> LONNIE: You tellin' the truth, I done seen 'em dreaming. They don't never dream about roses and scenery and sunshine like a sweet woman do. Naw, they dreams bout hatchets and knives and pistols, and ice-picks and splitting open people's heads. I done seen 'em dreaming it!
>
> SOP-THE-BOTTOM. Lonnie aint lying. I had one like that down round Tampa one time. I tried hard to be good to that woman, but she wouldn't let me. Bought her shoes for her feet, and a brand new wig for her head. But she used to hump up in the bed and pull bed-covers right on. Lay up there and dream about killing folks every night. Go to bed evil and get up evil. Know what I done? One Day I just told her, say, "Mary, gimme back the wig I bought you." She hollered and cried and asked me, W-What is I'm going to do for hair?" "Let your head go bald! Bald! Man, I grabbed it, and I was out and gone. Left her without a dust of meal or flour. (*Polk County* 1944, 289)

Often there is not a single theory of humor situated in Hurston's unpublished plays or skits. I have attempted to illustrate each of the theories in one or more of her plays, skits, and fiction. The primary theory of incongruity or outlandish and unimaginable acts shown in the courtship scene between Dave, Jim, and Daisy where they declare today anything to obtain Daisy's attention in *De Turkey and De Law* Jim and Daisy; and in *The Filling Station,* in the exchange between two men from Georgia and Alabama who describe their dilapidated automobiles that can travel at phenomenon speeds up to 400 mph in the 1920s. In contrast, in *Meet the Momma,* there is evidence that all three major theories are identifiable. The act of superiority or the act of insulting another individual to

make themselves feel superior occurs when Edna, the mother-in-law insults Pete by calling him a "poor stretched out chocolate éclair" for cheating on her daughter. There is also incongruity or absurdities in *Meet the Momma*, when Ike, the cheating husband, describes how he spent his night on the town, "I been riding in a yellow taxi with yellow girls and spending yellow money and drinking whiskey." The elements of release/ tension when arriving to Africa, Peter tells his uncle (a King) he is having mother-in-law troubles, but his uncle response, "There aint a mother-in-law in my kingdom. As soon as a girl gets married here, we take her mother off and feed her to the lions" (*Meet the Mamma* 1925, Act Three, Scene Three, 26). Fortunately for Edna, the mother-in-law, is saved when the uncle, the King, discovers that she was his "old sweetheart" who was denied her hand in married by her parents. *Polk County* contains plenty of physical aggression, humor, pent-up tension, and release of tension. The melee between Big Sweet and Nunkie when he is manhandled and forced to relinquish money, he took in a card game from a novice card player. The suspense ends when Big Sweet loosens her grip on Nunkie. The suspense, physical aggression, relief of tension and humor all describe Freud's Relief theory of humor.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

> We do not love her for her lack of modesty …. we do not love her for her unpredictable and occasionally weird politics …… we do not applaud many of the mad things she is alleged to have said and sometimes actually did say; we do not even claim never to dislike her.... most of us, I imagine, find her alternately winning and appalling- We love Zora Neale Hurston for her work, first, and then again..., we love her for herself. Zora Neale Hurston, "Genius of the South." (Walker 2003, 105)

For more than six decades after Zora Neale Hurston's death, she remains in vogue as one of the few literary artists who elevated southern black folks and their culture to heights unimaginable. She was rightly named by Alice Walker, Genius of the South, but could readily be referred to as a Genius of the International Literary World, whose novels, essays, short stories, folklore, and hoodoo have been read, reviewed, and critiqued by scholars all over the universe. Her most prominent novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Mules and Men* (1935), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) continue to be one of the bestselling literary treasures in American publishing, with close to 500,000 copies of her books still sold annually, more than sixty years after her death. Countless published articles and dissertations continued to be researched and written by high school and college students as well as literary scholars. Her novels are part of most high schools and colleges' curricula throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, and the African Diaspora. Hurston made an immense impact on the writings of Maya Angelo, Gayle Jones, bell hooks, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others. In 1975, Alice Walker wrote the article, *In Search of Zora Neale Hurston*, that lauded her as a heroine, and the need "to find her on behalf of the countless women as well as for herself. Hurston set the bar high and served as the "precursor to the epistemological

development of women in contemporary society" (Plant 1995, 236). She indeed was ahead of her time, an anomaly, but "she had to live then in order to be a force to be reckoned with" (Plant 1995, 236).

Zora Neale Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave in the Garden of the Heavenly Rest in Fort Pierce, Florida. The greatest literary event to be recorded occurred when she was elevated from the forgotten literary bookshelf. Her time arrived when there was an increased and unusual interest in black female writers which included "Harriet Jacobs (1813-1877), Pauline E. Hopkins (1859-1930), N.F. Mossell (1855-1948), Lucy P. Parsons (1853-19420, Francis Harper (1825-1911) and others" (Plant 208 It could not have occurred at a more opportune time. Black modern authors Toni Morrison Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and others found these authors including Zora Neale Hurston needed to be acknowledged. Hurston's body work resurfaced and today she is recognized as an anthropologist, folklorist, ethnographer, essayist, and novelist, but her contributions to drama and her humor have been downplayed and trivialized. The plays and skits I chose for this study may not have been considered or nominated for a Tony Award, but they did exist, and they represented the precious culture and history of black folks, down South. Many of Zora's plays appeared unfinished simply because she lacked adequate finances to complete them, and to preserve them, she placed them in the archives, to be completed at a later time.

Zora's plays and skits do not reflect black folks waddling in pity and sorrow, despite being psychologically and economically depressed, but chose to show the spirit of black folks, their love and respect for each other, and how humor and laughter sustained their community. She saw the necessity to capture their precious culture and their

communal bonding despite their sufferings and human conditions. Her colleagues were highly critical of her unconventional style of writing because she wrote in the vernacular and in the black idioms. Plant asserts:

> It is hard in the contemporary moment to understand how radical Hurston's refusal to write primarily about racial oppression was then. She believed that much of black art in that era had been reactive instead of original and had been pigeon-holed into focusing on the sorrows of the "Negro problem" rather than the vitality of the culture. Her legacy has been confusing to some because she both refused to be reduced to focusing on race and because she passionately loved her people and their uniqueness. (*Collected Plays* 2018, xx)

Yet, Hurston captured the humanity of her folks through the rich language expressions and the vernacular because it was the best way to reflect authenticity.

> Hurston saw herself as the storyteller, and as an anthropologist and ethnographer, and her intellectual experience allowed her to see her characters as human beings and what motivated them to be as they were and their idiosyncrasies as manifested in the language they used. Their idiosyncrasies are manifested in the language they used. This is the "nature of the Negro. (*Collected Plays* 2018, xx)

Hurston's plays represented blacks who lived the pieties of their lives, practiced their culture and values. She had an immense passion for the rich, and colorful Southern black rural culture, the folklore, the community bonding, and every phase of the lives of black folks, provided her with the materials for her drama productions. Most importantly, she saw that the rural folks were being forgotten and left behind due to the Great Migration to the North. Hazel Carby makes the claim that Hurston wanted to represent "rural folk" and their cultural forms as measured "against an urban, mass culture" (1990, 75). Eatonville was the place of her childhood and etched in her memories was the landscape that was rich with the folks and their dialect. The landscape depicted a perfect picture to grow up and develop as a child with its luminous chinaberry trees, guava, oranges, lemons, brilliant colored foliage, five freshwater lakes, and cross-eyed alligators swimming in muddy waters. Hurston's characters are strong, authentic, judgmental, witty, were and

articulate in the vernacular that filled her plays with folk culture. She wanted all of the moments to be captured and remembered. Her studies under the infamous Boas at Barnard College and Columbia University enabled her to see the value and worth of her folks. Hurston used humor in her staged performance to recreate a positive aspect of a near perfect all-black town, with a black major, black councilman, two black churches, one black school, no jail, and John Clark's store front porch among its three- hundred inhabitants. Everyone seems to have the right amount of money, sufficient food, a roof over their heads and plenty of jobs to go around. The folks lived their lives as stress- free as possible to relieve the racism and oppression and so they told lies, tall tales, played the dirty dozen and, poked fun at each other with little or no dissension between them.

The characters in Hurston's first unpublished plays, *Meet the Momma,* did not resemble the southern folks who spoke the dialect, but instead they were representative of the black middle class who spoke standard English. After the Emancipation period, many blacks migrated to the North when there was employment, educational, and entrepreneurial opportunities. The play takes place in New York City, and the cast is representative of those blacks who were able to obtain skilled, semi-skilled or professional positions. Some were property owners and entrepreneurs such as the main character, Ike, an owner of a restaurant. The Industrialization era gave rise to increased opportunities for blacks including getting an education. Blacks became more aware of their social status and began to make economic gains and to accumulate capital. Hurston wanted to make a claim to the diversity among blacks, but this only represented a minuscule of blacks, and presumably Hurston felt the history of authentic black folks would be lost. Rather, representing the marginalized community, their joys, happiness,

customs, values, religion, Baptist or Methodist, love, courtships, food, jookin,' preachin' voodoo, work ethics, the court, philandering, and domestic abuse, and humor would best depict the experiences of Black people. From the time Zora was old enough to walk and tend to errand for her mother, she eavesdropped on the porch sitters who told lies, tales as she made commentary on the everyday lives of the folks of Eatontown. The folks amused themselves, and laughed at themselves while they unknowingly recorded their history. The Sunday morning church sermons delivered humor and of it and there was plenty of theatrics among the community folks with their shouting, clapping, stomping, jumping, and giving praise. Zora declared that in itself produced enough humor. She listened attentively to her father and his associates, after their Sunday's meetings, who told jokes about the congregates. Instinctively, she knew the stories she heard had significance. Barnard's education afforded her the training and tools to gather the enriched material by recording what she saw and becoming an observer- participant which provided her with first-hand knowledge of the folks' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. According to Apte (1985), "the ethnographer identifies and records as many nonverbal humorous events… record and describe observed humorous events… ask [folks in the community] to narrate events in the past that they, as either witnesses or participants found humorous" (20).

Like many of Hurston's unpublished plays, they are based on African American folktale. Adele Newson writes that *Fiery Chariot* (1933) "supports both the well-known motif of John the trickster and the stereotypical image of black men possessing superior physical speed" (qtd. in Carson 1991, 128). While she had not become fully equipped to produce, she knew drama would best genre to represent the everyday life of the black community. Carson writes:

> Clearly, the study of Hurston's few plays reinforce her insistence that black drama should be a sincere, realistic reflection of black life. The strong sense of place, the powerful imagery, the incorporation of music, dance, and spectacle, and the dramatic use of language are tributes not only to Hurston's immense and versatile talent but underscores her philosophy regarding the ingenuity of black culture. (1991, 129)

It is unfortunate that Hurston's creative and inventive efforts were not embraced by those who were part of the Harlem Renaissance. She fell out of favor for most the artists who formed the Niggerati, a group of young black artists, whose goals were to discuss ways to express their artistry for the sake of art and not for propaganda purposes as DuBois and others would have liked. She was often misunderstood due to her position on race and inequality, and most had little knowledge of her growing up in a supportive, community rich in culture, values, and language. There was a special communal bonding in the little town of Eatonville, Florida, where black folks had a sense of belonging and respected each other. There was a real sense of community where people laughed together and laughed at each other. Most importantly, "anywhere Zora looked, she could see the evidence of black achievement" (Boyd 2003, 202).

The folks played together, worked together, and worshipped together in one of the two churches in town. It was a culture where storytelling was a major pastime, and where Zora learned to imitate those stories and the joke-telling styles long before she understood what they meant. Hurston's exuded electrical power in her ability to use words and humor. She used humor and laughter to deal with oppression while she carved out a space to capture the everyday life experiences of a marginalized group in a racist society. Her characters are seen not as weak men and women, but as strong, assertive, and valued members of their community. Hurston showed her appreciation for her southern folks by acknowledging them in her plays and skits. unlike her critics who

claimed she was “pandering to white folks as a way to make the white folks laugh” (Wright 1937, 133). She wanted to negate the prejudicial and stereotypes that had been so prevalent, but others viewed her plays as stereotypical and reminded them more of the minstrelsy type. John Lowe (1994), made the claim that Hurston's theatrical productions were headed to the "historical curiosity shelf while her fiction and her own lively autobiography continue to furnish subjects for the American stage” (*Jump the Sun*, 78) I would disagree that many of Hurston’s unpublished plays and skits and its themes are timely and have the possibilities to stand on its own merits with improvement in the development of its plot and characters. The flowery expressions and dialogue provide the kind of humor that are prevalent today Tyler Perry’s comedy skits, *Meet the Brown*. Hurston understood clearly that language represents the spirit and culture of its people. As an artist, Hurston saw the significance of Negro expressions and so she celebrated African Americans who had been silenced and those who were able to speak and her greatest contribution might be that created a space for represent the culture of Black people from the inside and outside, but on her terms. “Hurston seems to say a people can survive trauma while holding onto your own spirit. The lesson is to preserve one’s humanity at all costs, and laughter and song, and of course, drama, rather than being symbols of complacency” (Plant 1995, 175).

Hurston intended her plays and skits to be social commentaries about common folks. What do common folks do? What are their beliefs? What do they value? She wanted to create a history and a form of art to represent the common folks, their values, and beliefs. Instinctively, Hurston understood what common folks do to function in a racist world. In 1921, a New World editorial declared “the history and the artistry of any race are the credentials on which the race is admitted to the family of civilized men and

are the indications of future possibilities" (Williams 1973, 327.) The folks themselves were providers of commentary because as they sat on Joe Clark's porch, they were also good observers. This was a part of their daily routine, to observe, to make mental notes, to make judgment and to form opinions. Though they lacked the research skills, the anthropological tools, or the critical eyes of Hurston, they had an innate awareness and understanding of the culture within their community. Hurston dramatized what common folks do in the most authenticated way through the use of their dialect, in the duels between the Baptists and the Methodists, in the harsh working conditions at the sawmills, the justice system in the absence of jails, courting, marital relationships, philandering, and rituals (i.e., funerals, barbecues). Plant asserts:

> Her work contributes to our understanding of the social life of the Southern black population from an insider's perspective. Hurston's experience growing up in Eatonville, Florida, and her explorations throughout the deep South made her an expert on black culture. As an "insider," she was better positioned to translate, and interpret black culture. (Plant 1994, 19)

Hurston proved to be an astute observer, mediating between two spheres- the Eatonville experience and the Barnard experience. A non-conformist, a self- inventor, a ground breaker, and a humorist who pursued humanity in the folks in a community who maintain solidarity and fellowship, and camaraderie. Humor was the glue that held the community together from the oppressive when "The Other' perceived black folks as 'thing' and lacking in humaneness, Hurston believed Black folks were the most human of all people. It is the misfortunes of her contemporaries who in their own humanity and the least of others who failed to realize it. Surely her contemporaries could not conceive of Zora Neale Hurston co-existing as an anthropologist and a humorist could see laughter and humor in the world, and especially in the world of Eatonville. She recognized that humor

and laughter can always be found, and there is much to laugh about and to laugh at. As Langston Hughes said it best, "Zora could always make you laugh" (Hughes 1940, 239).

She was censored because she refused the conventional life expected of a black woman in the early 20th century. Hurston's manifesto should read: "I refuse to write in the conventional style. I refuse to speak in the conventional style. "Instead I choose to use humor and the black vernacular to record the expressions of black folk and to represent black folk and folk culture on stage. This served as a view into the world of people little known and much misunderstood" (Plant 1995, 19). Zora Neale Hurston was a black woman from the South, a Barnard graduate, a Columbia Attendee, an anthropologist who studied under Fran Boas, as a well as a writer, ethnologist, humorist, and an inventor of words. She transcends social barriers set by others and those of her race in not adhering to the literary expectations of black writers, white writers and so on. Hurston had a passion for her people, and she believed that an accurate representation through her plays and skits would perhaps turn the tide of racism. As spoken by James Weldon Johnson echoed in the preface to his *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1958), "The final measure of greatness of all people is the amount of literature and art produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people create great literature, poetry, paintings, dance, music, and drama" (2).

When great people create and remain committed to being Southern Black writers, like Zora Neale Hurston as well as Alice Walker who have granted her much credit and accolades. In recounting Walker's story of finding Zora Neale Hurston's name in the footnote of a scholarly anthropology journal, she knew that she had discovered someone special. In the readers' review of Hurston's work, her research, reportedly, was deemed

remarkable, and highly valued, yet there was no acknowledgement of Hurston's value as a human being and scholar. The readers praised her work, but not Hurston. This must have been disconcerting to Walker, that this incredible scholar was reduced to one of invisibility, which prompt her to have flashbacks of her own invisibility and fragmentation, growing up as a child in a racist town in Georgia. Walker noted also when credit is not given to the rightful person, others take credit for the work themselves. She observed that when 'others' take credit for the work of others, ideas are reshaped according to their perspectives. Instead of honoring and acknowledging black people, their history and their experiences, 'others' have distorted or rendered black people 's account of their experiences, their stories, history as unimportant and invisible. Zora Neale Hurston was committed to recording the history and the lives of Black folks and their experiences with authenticity. What is important to note that Alice Walker was also committed to uncovering the experiences and stories of Black women and Black men and reveled their values, virtues, and morals. Hurston's community thrived on laughter and humor to sustain itself, with a kind of communal bonding that embraced virtues of generosity, graciousness, audaciousness, courage, compassion, spiritual wisdom, justice, and goodness. This was imminent in the writings of Alice Walker's community.

It was Walker's commitment to digging up and rediscovering the life and writings of Zora Neale Hurston, and through her efforts she authenticated Hurston's research methods, literary writing and her voice. Walker's actions validated and honored Hurston's body of work in her publication, *Looking for Zora* (1983) and in her dedication to her in *I love Myself When I am Laughing,,, and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive* (1979*).* "We are a people. A people do not throw their genius away, And

the future to collect then again for the sake of our children [future generations], and if necessary, bone by bone" (Hurston 1983, 173). Hurston is no longer invisible and silent and nor is Alice Walker.

Both Hurston and Walker saw the value of the community. Walker grew up in community of sharecroppers, symbolizing exclusion due to race and economics, but a strong bond existed between its members. Hurston's family own property and resided in a community governed and controlled by blacks, remaining independent and self-sustaining. Oppression and danger lurked outside both communities. However, members of each community depended on each other and shared the responsibility of keeping the community together. There was a sense of belongingness and togetherness held together by "generosity, compassion, spiritual wisdom, audacious courage, justice and good community" (Harris 2010, 114). Hurston and Walker's stories validate the Black women's experiences and Black men' experiences whatever they might be, whether in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* published in by Hurston in 1937) or Walker's film, *Color Purple* produced in 1985. Their writings "creates space wherein woman to maintains their own dignity in the midst of chaos and remind themselves of their own agency and power, in spite of the oppression or violence they faced" (Harris 2009, 91). When Walker writes of her mother, she speaks of her mother's graciousness, one of the virtues supplanted in the community. When Walker speaks of her mother's kindness, strength, and courage, she reflects on her graciousness. Hurston espoused graciousness when she took the time to listen to the stories of the menfolk and women at the jooks and sawmills.

> Humor was a basic, continuing component in [Hurston's] work: To her, laughter was a way to show one's love for life; an indirect mode useful in saying the unsayable and in negotiating differences; a wonderful teaching tool and thus a

> way to bridge the distances between rural and urban, black and white, rich and poor, man and woman author and reader (Lowe 1994, 51)

This study examined the representation of humor in Zora Neale Hurston's body of work. If it had not been the resourcefulness of Alice Birney, an archivist for the Library of Congress, who discovered ten of Hurston's plays and skits, her dramatic productions may have remained in obscurity or on the "historical book shelf." In Hurston's work, she incorporated the oral tradition, folklore, and fieldwork while employing the inscription of authenticity of a community located in Eatonville, Florida. Influenced by her training under Franz Boas, Hurston embraced anthropological and ethnographic techniques to create a real authentic portrayal of black folks through performance. Her technique was the first of its kind and could be considered that of the postmodernist style. She utilized ethnographic training, mimicking the language and observing the dramatic expressions, while she imposed the own non-conventional dramatic, artistic techniques and new experimental forms. The anthropologist was known to observe culture and report their findings., but in contrast, Hurston totally immersed herself in her community as one of them and entered into the life of the southern Negro. "She wrote that she had been immersed in rich black folklore since her infancy. It was not until she left Florida to attend college that she was able to interpret this folklore through "the spy-glass of Anthropology" (Staple 2006, 62)

> Entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the world through its eyes, is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect of this understanding, it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding-in time, in space, in culture. (Knauft 2002, 202)

Due to Hurston's total immersion in her community, she formed the first authentic portrayal of African American theater. By using the prism of ethnography, she imparted integrity and authenticity to the stage. Hurston's focus was about analyzing the social structure of the community and used this method coupled with her anthropological techniques to create something original. She never meant to be on the outside looking in but about becoming the insider. Franz Boas, Hurston's professor, and the father of modern anthropology gave praise to Hurston for "her ability to enter into the life of the southern Negro as one of them" and to be "fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood" (*Mules and Men* 1935, xiii). Bruce Knauft (2002) a modern twentieth century anthropologist, eloquently illustrates this as the proper methodology for a proficient fieldworker: "In good ethnography, the dialectic between empathy and detachment, insidedness and outsidedness, should be actively engaged rather than disparaged or cut off from either human experience or analytic reflection" (205). She received acknowledgement from literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin articulated that Hurston conducted her anthropological research to create authenticity as opposed to producing something other than the truth. (Staple 2006).

Hurston was extremely powerful and astute at using words in a way that made people laugh. She discovered early she had an innate gift to use humor, laughter, and wit in telling stories of the everyday life experiences of her folks who resided in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. "Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. The town ….is a by-product of something else" (qtd. in Lowe 1994, 57). The product of communal bonding and joking relationships co-existed where folks laugh at themselves and laugh at each other.

Her plays and skits were her attempt to capture the bonding, the soul and spirit of the town folks, of a marginalized people in a disparaging society. Her characters were strong, assertive, bodacious, opinionated and valued by each other. Hurston's humor "is an acknowledgement and appreciation of her folks, unlike her critics who claimed she was pandering to white folks as a way to make the white folks laugh" (Wright 1937, 33).

Hurston chose to celebrate, to embrace, to applaud, and to laud the richness of the folks and their precious culture as a way to invalidate and cancel out the prejudicial and stereotypes imagery of blackness. Hurston was compelled to alter that imagery and to produce a genre that represented the culture of black folks as it existed in the Southern rural folk community of Eatonville. "Hurston refused to shrink from aspects of black life such as folk traditions and patterns of speech that other others found undesirable or shameful" (*Hitting the Stick* 2020, xxiii).

It was Hurston's inventive sense of humor and with her saucy imagination that became her signature. The comic discourse situated in her body of work spoke to and about African Americans, and she thought it important for white folks to learn about the African American culture through its folk drama, folk language, folkways, and folk stories, and most importantly, humor. "[Humor] and laughter provided a sense of the total black condition not only by putting whites and their racial system in perspective but also by supplying an important degree of self and group knowledge" (Levine 1977, 320). Wright and other critics did not perceive her work as serious or understood the significance of her humor, and unfortunately, she was misunderstood, undervalued, underread. Hurston stood her ground, and it did not matter what her critics thought or said about it or how controversial she was. Her humor was the root of humanity, of

survival, and her refusal to accept what was imposed on a marginalized folk by ignorance and prejudice. Her plays and skits remained unpublished until discovered in 1997 which were a response to those who would dare to oppress, to depress and to deny the existence of black folks.

Hurston explored "what it meant to be black in America and affirmed that blacks were worthy of her attention" (West 1937, xxxvii). She was privileged to have grown up in an all-black town, controlled and governed totally by blacks that allowed her to acquire the sensitivity and the ability to see beyond skin color. It was her literary peers who lacked sensitivity because they did not have the experiences she had growing up in a black town with an all- black governing of its community. The oppression, lynching, unequal justice, rape, and discrimination of black people were rampant, and many black artists addressed these issues, while Hurston was harshly criticized for not doing so, instead she lauded the experiences of the ordinary folks who had been forgotten. Hurston saw that language, the laughter, the humor, and the communal bonding among the folks could not be left undocumented, and because of her strong convictions "every phase of Negro life is highly dramatised. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama" (Wall 1997, 55) For laughter and humor made the community go round. Humor is richly multifaceted and reflects a wide range of emotions: "The brother in black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind. His laugh has a hundred meanings It may mean amusement, anger, grief, bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple pleasure or any other of the known or unrefined emotions" *(Mules and Men* 1935, 67-68).

Hurston's plays, skits, and her fiction *Jonah'*s G*ourd's Vine* (1934) *and Their Eyes (*1937*)* represent a humor that is rich in culture, colorful in folksy expressions, and

reflective of the depth of her sensibility to a people she loved. Hurston's humor was created to enlighten, to amuse, and to mute feelings of repression. Humor was essential in the life of Zora Neale Hurston, and for her, humor and laughter were to "celebrate Black culture with its jokes, its linguistic exaggerations, and its flamboyant storytellers" (Walker 2003, 111).

APPENDIX A

A TRIBUTE TO ZORA NEALE HURSTON WHO PLANTED THE SEEDS FOR OTHER BLACK ARTISTS

"We Be Theorizin":

A Poem composed by Kendra Nicole Bryant, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of English, North Carolina A & T State University

They thought we were over here

Shuckin and jiving

When all the while we been theorizin

They try to keep us down

But we keeps on thrivin

Can't no oppression keep us from strivin

They try to break our souls

But we keep smilin

And through grins and lies

We master guisin

gotta be a trickster for humanizing

But we'll wear the mask

cause we be theorizin

So right on Zora Neale

Write on

Right on W. DuBois

Write on Booker T.

Right on

we been watchin God

while they been in the dark

the souls of black folks

produce the purest heart

and our plantin seeds

is just a start

see we sowin wisdom

with literary arts

and through performances

that's how we impart

the theory they claim, rename, and bogart

so Right on Langston Hughes

Write on

Right on James Baldwin

Write on

cause the negro speaks of rivers

and the weary blues

he's the native son

the outsider

if she choose

and if beale street could talk

it would share some news

cause we ‘ve gone a piece of the way

in our travelin shoes

and through our cutting the rug/might seem our muse

we be theorizin and maskin the clues

so Right on Nella Larsen

Write on

Right on Countee Cullen

Write on

Right on Claude McKay

Write on

Cause just as quick as sand

we can change our time

we speak in vernaculars

they call us a coon

but once they’re outta our way

and have left the room

out comes Harlem wine

and intellectuals bloom

and when the Harlem dancer/makes her body croon

so talk that talk money

and walk that walk

black feeling and judgement/ compels them to gawk

it’s our colorful brilliance

that makes them balk/at the notion that we be a theory

cause we be theorizin

in our baptizing

in churches and clubs

we signifyin

gospel jazz/ blues got us cryin

oral traditions keep us from dyin

We flyin on tryin

We hypnotizin

And dance floors are our silver linin's

Creatin the arts keep us glidin

So we paintin faith and building horiz'ns

Keepin hope alive and eyes on prizes

and writin poetry makes us the wisest

we are the ones that we 've been waitin for

we soar…

like….birds…. in the sky…

so high five

Gwendolyn Brooks and James Weldon Johnson

Nina Simone and Alice Walker

Ive me some skin

Malcom X and Leopold Senghor

Toni Morrison and Martin Luther King

Tell me something good

Andre Lorde and Jamaica Kincaid

Houston Baker and Franz Fanon

Throw me a shimmy

Bel hooks and Lauryn Hill

Angela Davis and Assata Shakur

Pass me the mic

Marcus Garvey and Henry Louis Gates

Aime Cesaire and Cornel West

Bet that up

Mos Der and Wole Soyinka

Huey Newton and Amiri Baraka

All givin life to Barack Obama!

See our theorizin

Be Our Salvation

Through the Middle Passage and their plantations

Through Jim Crow laws and humiliation

COINTELPRO and subjugation

Our theorizin so bright it's blazin

WE are the light that gives them life

Blacker than the blackest night

We're the blues on the left tryin to be the funk on the right

Magical and dynOmite-

we are the world's good time

Cause we be theorizin

Which is our uprisin

No reparations/ but we're enterprising

Creatin life to keep us from dyin

singin, dancing, paintin, and writin

we see the Titans

and our hue gives the world humanity" (Plant. 2010. Afterword).

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