

POLK COUNTY: ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S BLACK SOUTH AND THE QUEST FOR A "REAL NEGRO THEATER"

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the ways in which the African American author Zora Neale Hurston draws a texturally rich image of the black South that is shaped by tensions between minstrel stereotypes of black American communities and what she perceives to be authentic Negro folklore. The analysis focuses on Hurston's play *Polk County* (1944) because of its setting and its concern with the performance of southern black vernacular—an element Hurston believes to be characteristic of "Negro expression."

KEYWORDS

Zora Neale Hurston; Richard Wright; *Polk County*; southern writers; Harlem Renaissance; African American literature; minstrelsy; vernacular; authenticity

Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright are two of the most celebrated black southern writers of their times, but their views on what African American literature should achieve differ greatly. In his review of Hurston's 1937 landmark novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Wright accuses Hurston of perpetuating minstrel stereotypes and satisfying a white readership's needs and expectations.¹ A year later, Hurston writes about Wright's short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*: "This is a book about hatreds. . . . Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work . . . all the characters in this book are elemental and brutish."² Both writers agree that white readerships and audiences in America lack insight into the true thoughts, feelings, and motivations of African Americans, but they hold different views on how to amend this situation. Wright demands that African American literature be aware and avoid characterizations, plot elements, and stylistic devices that might be understood as supporting minstrel stereotypes and thus counteract the African American struggle for political and social equality.³ Hurston, on the other hand, wishes to evoke "understanding and sympathy" by focusing on realistic characterization.

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1. Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *New Masses*, October 5, 1937: 22–23.
 2. Zora Neale Hurston, "Stories of Conflict," review of *Uncle Tom's Children*, by Richard Wright, *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 2, 1938: 32.
 3. The fact that Wright's review was written for the Marxist magazine *New Masses* supports this interpretation.

Hurston's and Wright's opposing views are symptomatic of a general problem African American writers face. In creating black characters, they have to negotiate between displaying them as individual and unique, while at the same time knowing that they will be read by white and black audiences and readerships alike as representatives of their racial group. In addition, they have to be aware of the fact that American readers still frequently consider their characters against the backdrop of the traditions established by blackface minstrelsy.⁴ The minstrel show, which was established in the 1830s and declined after the American Civil War, was the most widespread form of popular entertainment of its time. The shows featured mostly white performers emulating and ridiculing blacks by using blackface and presenting in pseudo-vernacular⁵ language a "hopped repartee and comic confrontations interspersed with songs, locomotive imitations, and crop-festival dances."⁶ As the minstrel show was one of the earliest entertainments that depicted African Americans and held a wide appeal, it had a profound impact on how African Americans were represented not only by white authors but also by African American authors of the post-Civil War period. Especially in the first half of the 20th century, authors who wrote about African American characters had to consider that American readers would largely be familiar with the stereotypes established by blackface minstrelsy and would possibly draw comparisons.

Richard Wright tries to avoid this association as much as possible by avoiding textual features that might be considered minstrelsy⁷ and focusing instead on the political and social aspects of African American life. Zora Neale Hurston, as I stated above, attempts to reclaim those elements of minstrel performances she considers African American in origin. In order to do so she aims to un-distort that which was appropriated and consciously misread by pre-Civil War popular culture and continued well into the 20th century.⁸ By making ample use of "authentic" African American vernacular

4. On the lasting effects of the minstrel show on contemporary popular culture, see W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

5. According to Sieglinde Lemke, the term "vernacular" lacks precise meaning, as it has been applied to various objects in various contexts. In an attempt to formulate a working definition, I will argue with Lemke that the vernacular should "be understood as presenting an insider's view of a group that lacks cultural prestige. . . . When used in relation to 'race,' it often refers to ethnically marginalized groups." Sieglinde Lemke, *The Vernacular Matters of American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

6. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 32.

7. James Baldwin, however, charges Wright with creating a character (Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*) that conforms to preconceived notions as well: "Bigger's tragedy is . . . that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human." James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004), 1704.

8. An extensive discussion of the strategies used to create minstrel stereotypes and the minstrel show's effects on audiences can be found in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

expressions (such as dialect, behavioral patterns, music, mythology, and religious practice) she wishes to reassign their perceived original meaning to them and replace the one previously connected to them in white mainstream culture.⁹ Hurston defines the real and authentic in terms of cultural heritage and folklore, a focus she shares with Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Consequently, Hurston, even though somewhat confined, considered the folk culture of the rural South, in which a large majority of African Americans of her time lived, the most genuine source of racial authenticity.¹⁰

With her reliance on folk traditions, Hurston approaches her goal of simulating authentic blackness and reassigning its meaning anthropologically. Her vernacular is based on the research on African American folklore¹¹ which she conducted in several locations in the American South. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., celebrates Hurston's literary voice as one of the most authentic¹² black vernacular voices in American literature,¹³ and even those who review her work unfavorably usually credit her with being able to write vernacular language credibly, even when they perceive the apolitical African American society she depicts as being largely unrealistic. In this essay, I will discuss Hurston's use of vernacular expression as an attempt to create a sense of authentic "Negro life"¹⁴ in connection with the debate concerning the literary and cultural value of Hurston's work that revolves around the question of minstrelsy vs. authenticity.¹⁵ I will focus on her 1944 play *Polk County*, which is set in a Florida lumber camp and in which the setting and characters are loosely based on places Hurston visited and people she encountered during her anthropological research. The play was co-authored with Dorothy Waring, the wife of a theatrical producer who hoped to produce the play on Broadway. According to Robert

9. On the problems of reconstructing such original meaning, see Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

10. J. Martin Favor points out the problems of "the centrality of folk" that result in a confined view of authentic African Americans as "southern, rural, and poor." See J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 12–13.

11. See, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935).

12. For an overview on attempts to define authenticity and the authentic in connection with folklore, see Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

13. For example, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A Tragedy of Negro Life," in *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, ed. George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 5–24.

14. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 355.

15. Despite the fact that Hurston sets out to depict African American vernacular language realistically, her works are literary products and thus carefully composed mimicry of a perceived authentic original. I therefore argue that despite the fact that her plays are written to be performed and thus oralized, Paul Goetsch's term "simulated orality" (fingierte Mündlichkeit)—coined in reference to narrative texts—applies. See Paul Goetsch, "Fingierte Mündlichkeit in der Erzählkunst entwickelter Schriftkulturen," *Poetica* 17 (1985): 202–18.

Hemenway, Hurston disagreed with Waring, who encouraged her to give *Polk County* a “Gershwin-esque feeling,”¹⁶ no doubt in hopes of repeating the success of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935), which had been accused of painting a distorted image of the black South. Little else is known about Hurston’s collaborator or the extent of her contribution to the play. Since the vernacular elements in *Polk County* were almost certainly exclusively written by Hurston herself, I will refer to Hurston as the playwright in the following discussion.

In her essay “The Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Hurston draws a clear distinction between white and “Negro” ways of thinking when she writes: “The white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.”¹⁷ According to Hurston, African Americans think in images instead of abstract linguistic concepts, a fact, she goes on to explain, that hints at a more “primitive,” but not inferior, way of thinking. Consequently, Hurston’s “Negro expression” is full of imagery. Thoughts and ideas are often expressed in metaphors and similes, and abstract terms are combined with more concrete ones to make up what she calls “double descriptives,” for instance expressions such as “sitting-chair.”¹⁸ To aid the tangibility of these expressions, not only forms of artistic expression, but, in fact, all forms of conversation are not merely uttered verbally, but acted out and performed, combining elements of thought and language with race-specific rhythms of speech and movement. The literary form of the drama, with its focus on oral speech and performance, might therefore probably be considered a more suitable way to convey a sense of “real” African American life than prose forms. Hurston adds several other characteristics she perceives to be typically African American to her general observations on language and performance, among them a penchant for mimicry, the tradition of incorporating current events and public figures into their folk tales, and a natural inclination toward openness and communality. Because *Polk County*, like “Characteristics of Negro Expressions,” draws heavily on Hurston’s anthropological research, many of these elements can be found in the play.

The scholarly work that has been done on *Polk County* usually focuses on the autobiographical elements of the play. And indeed, many elements, such as names and character traits, verbal expressions and mannerisms, the characters’ roles in the closed community of the lumber camp and their interactions with each other, mirror Hurston’s account of the time she spent doing anthropological research in the real Polk County. When Leafy Lee, a young mulatto woman from New York, arrives at the lumber camp in search of the blues, she is befriended by the camp’s informal leader, a woman named Big Sweet. Soon the men of the lumber camp develop an interest in the light-skinned girl, a fact that causes a darker-skinned woman named Dicey to

16. Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 298.

17. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 355.

18. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 356.

develop a jealous hatred of her. When the man with whom Dicey is in love begins courting Leafy Lee and eventually asks her to marry him, Dicey enlists the help of a voodoo priestess to prevent the wedding and kill Leafy Lee and her husband-to-be. The plan is foiled, Dicey and her accomplices are arrested, and the wedding ceremony is performed, inspiring the men and women of the lumber camp to seek more “civilized” ways (such as legalizing their common-law marriages).

The focus of the play, however, is not its straightforward plot, but the various forms of “Negro” vernacular expression used to make tangible the characters and the inner workings of their community. As there are no recordings of performances of *Polk County* available, and as the text only hints at the body language of the characters or the sound of the accompanying music, considerations concerning the rhythms of movement or the type of musical score the play might have must remain speculative. There are, however, elements of what Hurston perceives to be anthropologically correct African American vernacular expression that can be traced in the dramatic text itself. First of all, *Polk County*’s tight-knit community conforms to Hurston’s concept of the typical African American community in which nothing remains private and relationships are performed publicly. This stress on community defies the individualist notions prevalent in many modernist works of literature, while it reaffirms the Harlem Renaissance’s striving for a distinct “Negro Art.”¹⁹ In addition, Hurston’s focus on a largely independent black community which does not allow the white “Quarter Boss” to interfere with its inner structure may have a critical function. The fact that members of the community use vernacular terms and phrases that require insider knowledge to be understood suggests that the play was not written for the white audiences that would attend primitivist Broadway plays or minstrel shows.

The community is defined by a vernacular code which, in addition to specific terms and phrases, includes distinct oral behavioral and speech patterns, as well as elements of folk mythology, religion, and cultural production. The men of the lumber camp, for instance, rarely use standard forms of verbal communication, nor do they employ a style that is artificially poetic. Nevertheless, their dialog is a dramatic performance on the character level, as they frequently resort to posturing and insults to address each other and brag about what they perceive to be commendable qualities in the rough environment in which they live, revealing a colorful repertoire of image-driven language. When one of them wakes the others in the morning, he calls them “rowdy mule-skinners” (274). Shortly after that, two of the men can be observed boasting to one another, which is, according to Henry Louis Gates,

19. See Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 112–18. See also Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004), 1311–14.

Jr., a form elemental to African American literature and the culturally specific technique of "Signifying."²⁰

Do-Dirty: . . . I'm liable to make me a graveyard all by myself. I'm so mean till I'll kill a baby just born this morning.

Few Clothes: Me too. Man, I'm mean! I have to tote a pistol with me when I go to the well, to keep from gitting in a fight with my own self. I got Indian blood in me. Reckon that's how come I'm so mean. (*They all admit to Indian blood and meanness.*) (276)

Big Sweet, the informal leader of the camp, displays similar vernacular behavioral attributes. While fulfilling her duties as the camp's unofficial law enforcer, she boastingly threatens a man who cheated another in a card game: "I'll beat you till you slack like lime! Gimme that six dollars you beat Lonnie out of! . . . (*Trying for another good place to kick*) You didn't die! You multiplied cockroach. . . . I'll teach you to die next time I hit you!" (281).

The dialog of the camp inhabitants is characterized by African American vernacular dialect as Hurston understands it and transcribes its oral form into written words.²¹ The peculiarities of it occur on the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic level. The phonetic alterations of standard written English are comparatively moderate and not applied systematically throughout the text. Most frequent are contractions and elision, such as *gimme*, *ain't*, *'em* (them), and *'round* (around). Syntactically, the language of the inhabitants of the lumber camp is characterized by double negations ("I ain't going to give you nothing!" [281]), double participles ("Ain't I done told you about your meanness?" [283]), non-standard subject-verb agreement ("Some folks thinks they is a lord-god. . ." [284]), and elliptical expressions that usually miss either the subject or the auxiliary ("Who you personating, Dicey?" [284]; "Taint a man in Tennessee can make a shoe to fit your foot!" [275]).²² The semantic peculiarities are the most profound in that, unlike most phonetic changes and syntactic vernacular patterns, they are almost impossible to understand without an insider's knowledge. For instance, if Dicey, the darker-skinned woman, is said to have the "black-ass" (284), only her behavior throughout the play will help an unknowing audience understand that this term refers to her jealousy of lighter-skinned women. Similar metonymic and metaphoric expressions such as "I'll make me a graveyard of my own" (290, meaning: I will kill many people), "pick his box" (306, meaning: to play the guitar), or "bottle-neck it off" (308, meaning: to accompany someone on the guitar) appear throughout the play. To mirror the obscurity of the vernacular language to uninducted audiences, the inhabitants of the lumber camp have trouble understanding Leafy Lee's white urban speech.

Leafy: . . . He even went and asked Papa for my hand.

Big Sweet: Your *hand*? What did he want with that? (300)

20. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

21. She thus creates Goetsch's "simulated orality."

22. Another "double descriptive."

In addition, speech rhythms, rhymes, anaphoras, and parallelisms play a large role in *Polk County*. Examples include the phrase “I come for a reason, not for a season” (311), “Hit the grit” (284), and “I done called you once! I done called you twice” (275). Others are plentiful and often connected to the aforementioned habit of posturing. The use of vernacular language in *Polk County* not only defines the community, it is community-building. When Leafy Lee arrives, she speaks in a refined, non-vernacular way. On entering the community, however, she falls into the vernacular pattern with ease. In fact, even the white Quarter Boss’s language is infused with black vernacular expressions, probably an illustration of Hurston’s theory that African American vernacular language has influenced and, indeed, enriched the language of the American South as a whole.²³

In addition to vernacular mannerisms and language, Hurston attempts to create a sense of authenticity by referencing elements of the folk culture she researched in the American South. A children’s game she observed (as described in her *Mules and Men*) plays a role (293–94), a voodoo ceremony is observed (354–59), and the legend of John the Conqueror, an African American trickster figure, is referred to repeatedly (278–79). Blues and work songs are not merely mentioned, but meant to be performed on stage and accompanied by guitar and piano playing. Dancing occurs, and although the secondary text contains little information about the exact realization of the dances it can be assumed that they should be performed in accordance with Hurston’s impression of African American dance as “dynamic suggestion”—a kind of dance in which the dancer suggests, but never expresses fully, leaving the audience to complete the image on its own.²⁴

Polk County is an attempt at, as well as a refinement of, Hurston’s “real Negro theater,” a concept she explained to Langston Hughes, who co-authored her *Mule Bone*, as follows: “Did I tell you about the new, *real* Negro theater I plan? Well, I shall, or rather we shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naiveté of the primitive ’bama Nigger. . . .”²⁵ This original idea of a primitive acting out of folk tales is refined by *Polk County*’s introspective characters, who show signs of wisdom and philosophical insight that go beyond the simplicity of the folk tale. They offer glimpses into the inner lives of the play’s black characters that, according to Hurston, white Americans do not expect behind the amiable façade African Americans put on to evade interrogation and that publishers are not interested in.²⁶ Big Sweet, for example, likens herself and the other inhabitants of the lumber camp to “[d]ust

23. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 356.

24. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 358.

25. Quoted in Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 115.

26. In her 1950 essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” Hurston laments that white publishers and readers are only interested in African American literature that concerns itself with race tensions, which allegedly distorts the reality of African American life. She writes: “[F]or the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally, according to natural

from God's big saw" (337) when she realizes that they belong to the lowest stratum of American society and that without their community in the camp they would be left to spend their lives as social outcasts. Elsewhere, she reflects on her life prior to the lumber camp, explaining how circumstances made it difficult for her, but not denying her own poor choices (301). Her laments are uttered without any activist call for political and social changes, as Hurston avoids conforming to the white publishers' demands for engaged African American literature. Big Sweet's self-reflexivity and consistent moral code also defy minstrel stereotypes, as minstrel characters are usually portrayed as superficial and fickle. Thomas Dartmouth Rice's character Jim Crow, for instance, displays an inconsistent attitude towards divorce:

I'm for union to a gal,
 An dis is a stubborn fact,
 But if I marry an don't like it,
 I'll nullify the act.
 . . .
 Its berry common 'mong the white
 To marry and get divorced
 But dat I'll nebber do
 Unless I'm really forced.²⁷

The two stanzas are only separated by one other concerning the happiness marriage surely must bring. However, the speaker's attitude towards resolving the marriage bond changes twice in the course of just three stanzas, from a definite readiness to a determined refusal and back to an—albeit hesitant—willingness to separate from his future wife. In comparison, the moral attitudes of the camp inhabitants in *Polk County*, even though they leave room for improvement, are usually firm, and changes need to be triggered by incisive events, such as the wedding and its circumstances at the end of the play.

The elements in *Polk County* that aim at folkloristic authenticity, such as vernacular language and non-verbal expressions, provide an easier target for criticism than the personalities of its characters. Most opponents of African American vernacular literature in the first half of the 20th century have argued that the vernacular technique was primitivist and thus white in origin and aimed at preserving the status quo of race relations. In their search for the primal roots of human existence, both white and black primitivist artists and writers turned to cultures they believed to be largely untainted by modern, urban civilization. In the case of African American culture, however, they failed not only to recognize the diversity of African American expression, but also the impact of the mainstream culture on it. Many also did not

endowment, just like everybody else." Quoted in M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 223.

27. T. D. Rice, "The Original Jim Crow," in *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays*, ed. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 8–9.

distinguish between African American art and white art made out to be African American, such as the minstrel show.²⁸ The most vocal critics of black primitivism, such as Alain Locke and Richard Wright, were concerned with its political implications. They argued that the dominant white culture had appropriated elements of African American cultural expression and reinterpreted them pejoratively,²⁹ thus turning African American vernacular into a signifier for the oppression of blacks in America. Richard Wright's review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* attests to that view: "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh."³⁰

And indeed, elements of minstrel performances may be attributed to Hurston's work. In fact, parallels between her writings and minstrel performances should be expected if one considers that minstrel writers and performers did borrow means of expressions from African Americans they encountered—albeit mostly in the North. In addition, as a writer attempting to simulate African American life in as realistic a manner as possible, Hurston might at least have drawn unconsciously on the literary traditions in which African Americans were depicted in the American literature of the time, and which had been influenced by the immensely popular minstrel show. Like, for instance, the minstrel stock characters Jim Crow and Zip Coon, who tend to deliver grotesquely exaggerated accounts of their own achievements, Hurston's characters are prone to posturing. But while the dialog situation in *Polk County* provides a credible context for this performance of masculinity, minstrel boasting often seems disconnected and autotelic.

Hurston's southern African American dialect equally shows similarities to the language of the blackface minstrels. Like *Polk County*, T. D. Rice's play *Virginia Mummy*³¹ contains shortened words ("spect" [52], "til" [54]), double negations ("If you isn't sent nobody else" [49]), non-standard subject-verb agreement ("I ar one of dem!" [48]), and elliptical expressions ("I wonder

28. Even African American thinkers trying to define the essence of being African American failed to clearly distinguish between minstrel features and authentic African American expressions. Both W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson were convinced that minstrel tunes had originated on the plantations of the South. See Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamarr, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). On the characteristics of primitivist modernism, see also Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

29. Eric Lott argues that this comical reinterpretation of black vernacular culture was spurred by white Americans' need to deal with their ambiguous feelings of fascination and unease toward black culture and the male black body. See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 3–4.

30. Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," 22–23. Wright's italics.

31. T. D. Rice, *Virginia Mummy: A Farce in One Act*, in *Jim Crow, American: Selected Songs and Plays*, ed. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 48–70.

what he gwan [going] to do . . .” [54]). But many of the grammatical and spelling peculiarities regularly found in minstrel texts, among them those which contribute most to the unintelligibility of black minstrel characters, are missing from Hurston’s text. For instance, she does not apply Rice’s technique of replacing fricative consonants with stops (*dem, dat, nebber*). Equally, she avoids his burlesque mispronunciation of high register or even common words such as “gemmen” (gentlemen, 54), “sartain” (Satan, 65) or “jubious” (dubious, 69).

Finally, Hurston’s drama, like the minstrel show, includes actual music and dance. Like all writers who wish to convey a sense of authentic black culture by utilizing music and dance, Hurston must imply musical pieces and a dancing style that will only be fully realized on stage. As the playwright’s influence on the production is usually limited, the production will always be potentially in danger of invoking those parallels with blackface minstrelsy that the writer has meticulously tried to avoid. But if the performance of the dances in *Polk County* is in concordance with Hurston’s observation that African American dance is “dynamic suggestion” (see above), it will differ greatly from the grotesque or slapstick dance numbers on the minstrel stage. And while Rice’s characters can regularly be found singing satirical songs and playing the banjo or the fiddle, Hurston’s characters perform blues and work songs accompanied by the guitar and the piano. It should be concluded, therefore, that Hurston’s play differs significantly from actual blackface minstrelsy when the two of them are put side by side.³²

Hurston thus tries to cut the link between African American expression and minstrel stereotypes. She wishes to undo the linguistic and interpretative distortions which black vernacular expression suffered in white cultural production and to reintroduce what she perceives to be its original contents and connotations. By paying close attention to portraying African American language and expression as authentically as possible, she attempts to deconstruct false and reassign proper meanings. Instead of reproducing the pseudo-vernacular language of minstrel writers, she uses a dialect she herself researched in the American South. In addition, she infuses the speech of her characters with elements that suggest worldly wisdom and creativity. Her rhymes and parallelisms are designed to imitate the natural speech rhythms of African American dialect, as opposed to the deliberately failing mimicry of conventional white poetry that Rice uses for comic purposes in his Jim Crow songs. Hurston’s dance performances and, especially, her musical score suggest a connection to acclaimed popular African American music instead of referencing the musical satire of the minstrel show. Her characters are three-dimensional, multi-faceted people, most of whom manage to keep a credible balance between character flaws and redeeming qualities. They are

32. This would not, however, keep the play from alienating audiences, as they are not likely to draw a direct comparison and the stereotypical expressions of the minstrel show are, as mentioned before, still very present in audiences’ minds.

thus opposed to the stock characters of blackface minstrelsy, but also to the functional characters that can be found in much African American *art engagé*.

Hurston's choice to set her play (and most of her other works) in a closed-off community in the rural South, where she perceives American culture to be richest and most authentic, goes hand in hand with her decision to depict African American lives as comparatively unaffected by the political and economic struggles many African Americans were engaged in at the time, not only in the segregated South but also in the urban centers of the North, which features very little in Hurston's conception of authentic black culture. With this focus on black life relatively free of the confinements of victimization and revolutionary zest, she goes against the demands of many African American protest writers of her time. Richard Wright, following W. E. B. Du Bois's notion that "All art is propaganda and ever must be,"³³ for instance demands:

Every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the *oppression* of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.³⁴

Although Wright acknowledges the importance of folklore to African American national identification, he avoids black vernacular expression and denies his characters wholeness in order to point at political and social wrongs. Like Du Bois, he has his eyes firmly set on a new and better future. Wright spent most of his adult life in the North of the United States and later in Europe. His works are set in the Northern urban centers and are infused with the leftist notions of a future worth fighting for he shared with many African American writers who, like him, lived mostly in the North. Hurston's work, on the other hand, remained bound to the rural South. Despite her perception that African American culture was highly adaptive and inclusive of present-day occurrences, her focus remained on matters of tradition and heritage, and thus mostly rooted in the past. Hurston's critique of Wright's characters as being "elemental and brutish" is a critique of characters stripped of their humanity, reduced to being victims or revolutionaries, destroyed or future-bound, but in any case unaware of their own essential identity. Wright's critique of Hurston voluntarily continuing the traditions of minstrelsy is a critique of characters clinging to the past, perpetuating the wrongs of tradition instead of throwing off every aspect of past oppression and fighting for a complete political and cultural renewal. Wright, however, does not allow for a cultural renewal that is inclusive of the past and thus a heritage that many African Americans consider an integral part of their identity.

33. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1000.

34. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Literature," in *Amistad 2: Writings on Black History and Culture*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York: Vintage, 1970), 10.

Both Hurston and Wright try to establish a new and distinct African American literature. Both of them define this literature in terms of opposition. Wright contests primitivist claims of black authenticity in favor of a cultural future that is yet to be established. Hurston defines her writing in opposition to activist literature and its emphasis on victimization by adopting a pre-modern focus. The popularity of primitivism in modern art and literature and the lingering effects of the immensely popular and ideologically influential minstrel show made it difficult for the critics, readers, and audiences of her time to evaluate Hurston's work without relating it to either minstrelsy or primitivism. During the 1950s and 1960s, her work faded into obscurity. Only in 1975, more than thirty years after *Polk County* was completed, did Alice Walker renew public interest in Hurston's work.³⁵ Walker praised her ability to create characters that are "complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings,"³⁶ pointing out those elements of Hurston's literature that are valid and valuable beyond the cultural currents of her time.

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