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ROSEMARY V. HATHAWAY

## The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and a Theory of "Touristic Reading"

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*Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God is the focal point in this article for a discussion of "touristic reading," a process that occurs when a reader assumes a fictional text is an authentic and complete representation of its source culture. Although this can happen even when the ethnicity of the writer and reader match, the dynamic is often intensified when their ethnicities differ—that is, when readers read across ethnic (or other) boundaries. Folkloric content in fiction may make texts particularly vulnerable to such readings, but the presence of ethnographic material may also help undermine touristic readings, as evidenced by the resistant and subversive aspects of Hurston's text.*

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IN HIS ESSAY "Authenticity Reconsidered: Toward an Understanding of a Culturalist Reading Paradigm," Matt Herman relates a telling anecdote from his experience teaching N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* at Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy Reservation in north-central Montana. During a discussion of the ways the book had been packaged and marketed, Herman drew his students' attention to a jacket blurb that proclaimed the novel "almost unbearably authentic and powerful" and asked for their reactions to this description. As one of his students slyly and brilliantly observed, "Well, I don't know so much about what unbearably authentic means, but I do know that it says 'fiction' right up here in the left-hand corner" (Herman 1997:125).

Those of us who teach literature have undoubtedly wished we had students as astute when confronted by an allegedly "Other" text. Many of us have certainly heard comments similar to those voiced by students in my own American literature classes, such as the white student who objected to Richard Wright's criticism of Zora Neale Hurston's use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, saying, "But that's how people really talked back then," or the African American student who praised Amy Tan's descriptions of early twentieth-century China in *The Joy Luck Club* for "really making you feel like you're there."<sup>1</sup>

On a certain level, these students are correct: Hurston's remarkable ear for language is one of the qualities that makes *Their Eyes* such a joy to read, and Tan's almost fairy

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tale-like descriptions of an "Other" world are what make the China sections of her novel so engrossing. Yet, we do not have to look much further to see what is problematic about such statements: how do these students "know" how African Americans in Florida spoke in the early twentieth century? How do they "know" what life was like for aristocratic Chinese families in the early twentieth century? And yet, to make an assessment of "authenticity," students presume this sort of knowledge. When—in an effort to complicate this reading tendency—I remind students that Amy Tan is a U.S.-born writer who only visited China once before writing *The Joy Luck Club* (and was certainly not there before or during World War II) and that Hurston was widely criticized by other Harlem Renaissance writers (particularly Richard Wright) for her extensive use of dialect, they likely can see where their logic failed them, although many continue to cling to their prior assessment of these texts. Their readerly desire is for the "unbearable authenticity" of such works, not their fictiveness.

These comments best illustrate the process I call "touristic reading": the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that "Other" cultural group. But the touristic reading is a snapshot, a still photo (with the emphasis on "still"), a cultural portrait that selectively edits out signs of dynamism or contention, both within the text and within the culture "represented" by the text, and features only what the reader wants to see. Just as tourists visiting Paris try to compose photographic shots of the Eiffel Tower so as to eliminate as many other tourists as possible, as well as signs of crass, if ubiquitous, modernity—trash cans, souvenir stands, tour buses, and the like—so touristic readings insist on recomposing the literary text according to what the reader has, in a sense, already seen and expects to see. And just as we seek to have the Eiffel Tower take up as much of the frame of our photo as possible in order to frame, in turn, the experience of being in Paris, so, too, in touristic reading we desire to frame our literary experience of the "Other" by seeing only what we want to see or are conditioned to see.<sup>2</sup>

Tourism, in its most widespread practice, is about shedding context, or, perhaps more accurately, about imposing an external context on a site. I recently overheard an American tourist in Cambridge, England, saying, "I want a picture of *that* building"—not because she knew what it was, but because she knew what she *wanted* it to be; it fit a preinscribed context in her own mind. Similarly, in the process of touristic reading, the literary tourist imposes a predetermined cultural awareness on a text and an author; the interaction between the text and the reader thus results in cultural ascription, the projection of an authentic cultural identity onto a group by "outsiders" to that group. The text, in turn, becomes the reader's Baedeker (or travel guide) to the unfamiliar; the author (and sometimes the teacher) becomes the tour guide.

Touristic reading is fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, appreciating the "otherness" of a text may have some positive and tangible benefits: an awakened interest in cultures other than the reader's own may lead individuals to think more critically about these other cultures, about their own cultural context(s), and about the ways they react to and interact with different cultural contexts. On the other hand, such reading is one-dimensional; touristic readers consume such texts as interesting

sorts of fictionalized travelogues and then return to the safety of their own culture(s) without really having disrupted their notions of their own culture in any more than a superficial way. The near-cliché we spout to children just learning to read as an enticement is “Books open doors to new worlds,” yet this formula overlooks the problems of finding other worlds in books and the ease with which the book and the world can be closed when one’s cultural security is threatened. Books can open doors, but only to awareness, and the opening must be followed by the self-motivated act of going through the open door, fully entering the text in all of its complexity.

In evoking the idea of tourism here, I refer to the larger theoretical notions and complexities of “tourism” as they are perceived by folklorists—not merely as the visiting of historical sites and attractions (or the metaphorical equivalent of doing so), but as ways of creating, reifying, and processing cultural experiences and knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that, I also posit tourism itself as, in fact, a *kind* of reading, a peculiar brand of literacy or hermeneutics by which spectators make meaning not only about what they are seeing, but also about their own lives and the lives of cultural Others.

As such, reading, like tourism itself, is a mixed blessing in terms of the multiethnic agenda: it presents a wealth of opportunities for introducing readers to cultures outside—and even within—their own, but does so with the accompanying danger that those cultures will merely be subsumed under previous ways of understanding. As Melanie McAlister argues in a critique of *The Joy Luck Club*, often when white readers approach “ethnic” texts, “what is reinforced is a simplistic and ultimately condescending attitude toward ‘ethnic art,’ one that requires that representations of, and by, ‘the Other’ be contained and presented as information, rather than as any challenge to the categories of the aesthetic of the mainstream” (1992:106). If, however, we begin to understand tourism as a kind of hermeneutics itself, we may be able to help our students—and ourselves, as teachers and critics—recognize our own touristic impulses when approaching such texts. Furthermore, although some literary texts are better than others at resisting touristic reading, no text is immune from it. Touristic reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text. In most cases, neither author nor reader can be solely and squarely blamed for whatever misapprehensions result. Most texts offer complicated and sometimes even contradictory “directions for [their] own consumption,” to paraphrase Tzvetan Todorov’s “Reading as Construction” (1980:77). Such is the nature of literature. My goal here is not to indict certain texts for being too willing to be “misread,” nor is it to blame critics, teachers, or readers for being “touristic.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, I aim to look at what kinds of materials lend themselves most often to touristic reading and to propose resistant reading as a way of restoring texts to their full complexity.<sup>5</sup>

In her introduction to a recent special issue of *Southern Folklore* dedicated to folklore and literature, Elaine Lawless echoes this desire for more nuanced reading and criticism specifically in terms of how folklore in literature is interpreted. Lawless makes an impassioned and long-overdue plea for folklorists to bring the study of this important area of the discipline up to speed, not only because of the tremendous insights it can provide, but as nothing less than a mode of saving the profession itself:

This kind of dichotomous thinking [about folklore and literature as discrete disciplines] has led to the demise of folklore departments across the country. But re-thinking how folklore and literature are connected in very viable and theoretical ways might just be the way to survive in an era that does not seem inclined to maintain folklore courses and programs, as they have been historically defined. (2000:92)

Lawless goes on to suggest that the study of folklore and literature needs similar "redefinition":

With the emergence of new theoretical and methodological concerns about ethnographic research and ethnographic writing, perhaps we can better "sell" folklore studies that point to the relevance and immediacy of folklore and how the study of tradition, belief, and oral narratives discourse provides a window into all the myriad kind of literature that we are reading, writing, and teaching in the new millennium. . . . [N]ew scholars will never abide by "the text is the thing." Nor will they agree to be badgered by the phrase, "But where's the folklore?" They know, intuitively, that text within context is the only way to position writing—probably always has been. Our job should never have been to pry the folklore away, expose it, and preserve it as though it were a wooden icon. (2000:92–3)

Lawless, and the authors in this special issue of *Southern Folklore*, make a strong case for the importance of seizing the moment to draw connections between the ethnographic theories that literary scholars are increasingly drawing on and the ways in which folklorists can reciprocate by bringing their theories to bear on literary works. I propose that a critique of "touristic reading" has the potential to pull together many current theoretical concerns of folklorists, including the following: questions of "authenticity" and "representativeness," questions about the performative aspects of tourism, and questions about the links between ethnography and fiction. In the process, examining literary works in this way can help us reintegrate the folklore into the texts themselves and complicate the many ways folklore can "signify" in literature.

Indeed, one of the red flags that seems to set up a text to be read touristically is the use of folkloric material. The use of such material is frequently double edged: whereas authors may employ "folk" materials in order to subvert or challenge audience assumptions about the culture represented, readers instead often consume such materials as mimetically "authentic." Thus, ethnographic material may serve only to reify preexisting cultural expectations, regardless of how it is presented. For example, in choosing groups of texts to arrange into packets for students to read as part of an extensive study of how high-school students read multiethnic literature (the basis of *Beyond the Culture Tours: Studies in Teaching and Learning with Culturally Diverse Texts*), Gladys Cruz and her collaborators (1997) insisted that each group of three texts always include a folktale. The rationale for this is never explained in the group's description of the study, but because the authors claim they wanted to include texts that "had certain cultural indications" (Cruz et al. 1997:18), folktales presumably were perceived as texts that, by definition, were full of unmistakable "cultural indications."<sup>6</sup> The seeming necessity of including folk material in a study of student reactions to multicultural literature somehow suggests that folklore offers some sort of unmediated grounding in cultural authenticity against which other, more "literary," texts might be measured for representativeness. The further assumption here, then, is that

when readers encounter folk material in “literary” fiction, it should by extension evoke the essential authenticity of the folk culture from which it is drawn.

The institutionalization of multicultural theory into the academy seems to have resulted largely in superficial nods to diversity: some substitutions in the canonical American literature syllabus, brief lectures about the social context in which works by writers of color have been produced, and the hope that either token inclusion or disciplinary isolation will constitute (or at least adequately substitute for) full representation. Although such steps are necessary, they are only the smallest of beginnings. Furthermore, they may do more harm than good, in that such superficial changes embody the tenets of what Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray (1997) and others have termed “vulgar multiculturalism,” the bowdlerized residue of the culture wars of the 1990s—a pedagogical and theoretical homage to cultural diversity that, in reality, reinforces racial, class, and ethnic boundaries by insisting on an essentialized and monodimensional narrative of oppression. Thus, vulgar multiculturalism contributes to the production of touristic, one-dimensional readings of texts, which some students may then take to represent social reality. Whereas anthropologist Edward Bruner (1986) has famously contended that ethnography is fiction, this should not suggest that the corollary is equally true—that fiction is ethnography. Taken metaphorically, such comparisons between fiction and ethnography are very productive; however, the more literal equation between the two is the premise at the heart of touristic reading.

This equation becomes even more complicated when considering the work of an author such as Zora Neale Hurston, who seemed to recognize the fictiveness of ethnography and the ethnographic possibilities of fiction decades before the likes of Bruner, Clifford Geertz, and James Clifford. As David Todd Lawrence argues in one of the essays in the special issue of *Southern Folklore*, Hurston “was a pioneer in the field of folklore studies,” and her life’s work reflects her increasing dissatisfaction with the “scientific” model of anthropology she learned at Columbia under Franz Boas and her movement toward a more “performance-based” model, in some sense anticipating the work of Richard Bauman and others (Lawrence 2000:132). Indeed, in combining and complicating her multiple roles as anthropologist, folklorist, and fiction writer, Hurston, in many ways, provides the most salient and complex basis from which to construct a theory of touristic reading. As “the dominant black woman writer in the United States” of her time, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted (1990:186), Hurston was exposed to the critiques of other African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance for distorting ethnic “reality” and pandering to white expectations and desires. Hurston was certainly aware that her readership was largely white, and in some of her more autobiographical work (for example, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” [1979]), she wrestles quite openly with these very issues of representation and representativeness.

Hurston’s case is especially poignant because her literary career was largely underwritten by white patrons and because the issue of how best to “represent the race” was an ongoing debate among Harlem Renaissance writers.<sup>7</sup> Langston Hughes acerbically paraphrased the dilemma in “The Negro and the Racial Mountain,” his seminal essay of the Harlem Renaissance: “The Negro artist works against an under-

tow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. 'O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites" ([1926] 1994:57–8). To be sure, Hurston labored under the same paradoxical dictates, with the added expectation that, as a trained anthropologist and folklorist, her writings should be scholarly and "authentic." In view of these many competing demands, the fluidity of Hurston's writings and their ability to "change the joke and slip the yoke"<sup>8</sup> are all the more remarkable, calling on us to attend even more closely to their complexity.

As numerous scholars and critics have noted, Hurston may well have been making a very conscious effort to "represent" African American culture on some level. The reductive notion that Hurston's writings were produced solely for the didactic and egocentric agenda of "representing" an entire culture, however, is undermined by the texts themselves. In Hurston's *Mules and Men* ([1935] 1990) in particular, she "signifies" on a wealth of folkloric material, giving the reader an exotic sample of the culture while protectively withholding the whole story. Because Hurston draws on the ethnographic material she collected in Florida for aspects of *Their Eyes*, it becomes all too easy, by extension, to assume that—in light of the material's basis in "empirical reality"—the novel, like *Mules and Men*, is ethnographically "representative."

Folklorists are not immune from drawing such conclusions, either. Lawrence's study of both *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes* concludes that the latter is, in fact, "a superior ethnographic model even to *Mules and Men*" in that its deep, if fictional, contextualizing of folk discourse and customs creates a scene that "operates as a composite ethnographic model" (2000:130). Such "partially fictionalized models," Lawrence argues, "function not just as snap-shot photos recording specific moments, but as predictive simulations which enable us to understand the possibility of when and where a particular kind of folkloric element might be employed over a long period of time" (2000:125–6). In other words, understanding the performance dynamics of "playing the dozens" in the fictional world of Eatonville not only helps the reader understand why Janie's eventual participation is so radical, but may also help the reader understand the context in which such an activity might take place in the "real world." Sandra Dolby-Stahl argues similarly for Hurston's *Mules and Men*, noting that the goal of Hurston's presciently reflexive ethnography is not to establish static generic classifications of her collected materials, but to advance her more "literary goal of mimesis. She wants her readers to experience the 'reality' of folkloric contexts and authentic folklore materials" (1992:56). In other words, the artificially "natural" context Hurston builds around her ethnographic materials is intended to make them read more "authentically." By this process, Dolby-Stahl argues, Hurston is "making art appear as reality" (1992:56).

The slipperiness of the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is certainly a running theme in Hurston's work, and both Lawrence and Dolby-Stahl are correct in noting the revolutionary nature of Hurston's ability to elide these modes. This elision, however, is a double-edged technique. Seemingly designed by Hurston to replicate cultural complexity, it also provides an easy entrée for touristic reading. These

sorts of “folk moments” in fictional texts can become the locus of touristic reading, although they are also frequently the moments in fictional works that can be reread to *undermine* touristic readings as well. Literary folklorists have long looked at “folklore in literature” (in the “extracting” mode Lawless describes above) as a way of corroborating “real-world” knowledge of and work with particular cultural groups, but few have examined the ways in which texts can instead use folk materials to complicate and subvert cultural expectations and perceptions.<sup>9</sup>

That such folk material often becomes a lightning rod for criticism is well illustrated by the reaction to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on its publication in 1937. Generally speaking, it was better received by white critics than by African American critics, some of whom immediately targeted the text for (mis)representing African American culture. The most notorious and oft-cited review of the novel was penned by Richard Wright, whom Gates characterizes as both “Hurston’s dominant black male contemporary and rival” and as the writer with whom Hurston had the least in common (1990:188). Wright’s review, though, seems to suggest that Hurston ought to emulate more closely realist writers like himself:

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. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. . . . In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase for Negro life which is “quaint,” the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the “superior” race. ([1937] 1993:17 [emphases in original])<sup>10</sup>

For “quaint,” read “folk,” and it is clear that Wright’s objections were to the folkloric aspects of Hurston’s writing, precisely those qualities that touristic (mostly white) readers today still perceive as the “authentic” and authenticating moments in the text. So perhaps, on some level, Wright’s fears were justified. In a sense, Wright was concerned precisely about the novel’s potential appeal to touristic readers—those (“white folks”) who would read the novel as a sort of guidebook to the (pre)modern Negro and take away from Hurston’s novel exactly what they expected to find there in the first place.

Certainly the language of Lucille Tompkins’s review of *Their Eyes* for the *New York Times Book Review* seems emblematic of Wright’s concerns; she begins her review of September 26, 1937, by noting that

This is Zora Hurston’s third novel, again about her own people—and it is beautiful. It is about Negroes, and a good deal of it is written in dialect, but really it is about every one, or at least every one who isn’t so civilized that he has lost the capacity for glory. ([1937] 1993:18)

Tompkins here seems to travel the same road as a number of the contemporary critics of *The Joy Luck Club*: the “themes” of the novel somehow enable it to transcend its ethnic origin and become something for “everyone,” a move that first romanticizes or fetishizes ethnicity, then erases it—a classic touristic impulse. Notably, Tompkins locates the “glory” in Hurston’s novel in its use of dialect, as well as in its

characters' lack of "civilization" (i.e., their "folkness"). Alain Locke also admired Hurston's use of "rare dialect," calling *Their Eyes* "folklore fiction at its best," but he then undermined those very compliments by rhetorically asking Hurston,

When will the Negro novelist of maturity . . . come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction? Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public loves to laugh with, weep over, and envy. ([1938] 1993:18)

As with Wright's review, Locke's seems to demand of Hurston a certain kind of conformity or allegiance to a cause. Clearly this is unreasonable weight to put on a novelist, largely because it is typically not a demand made of white writers. Furthermore, such a critique (one that more recent critics have made of Hurston's work, as well) overlooks the ways in which Hurston's novel "plays" with her audiences, both catering to expectations and subverting them at every turn. The novel accomplishes this complexity through the very device for which it was criticized upon its publication—the use of dialect—but also through its use of folk materials, both "traditional" or expected materials, as well as more nontraditional or taboo materials. The very issues about which Hurston's critics took her to task, and the very things that make the novel vulnerable to touristic reading—its representation of folklife, its use of dialect, and its apparent lack of political grounding—are the same issues that can be reread and reinterpreted to create a more complex understanding of the novel, and of Hurston's view of tradition.

### *Unsignified "Traditional" Folk Material*

A closer examination of how Hurston employs and marks her folk materials suggests that the novel is more subversive and political than is generally perceived. The knowledge that Hurston was a working folklorist and had done extensive fieldwork in the very region in which *Their Eyes* is set may encourage readers to perceive the novel's representation of these materials as "authentic," but the same knowledge can also be used to complicate easy equations between Hurston the ethnographer and Hurston the novelist. Although Hurston's fieldwork undoubtedly informs her depiction of the folklife of Eatonville and the muck of the Everglades, we need to be cautious about how directly we connect Hurston's ethnographic work with the novel itself to avoid implying that the novel is itself ethnography. The reason for this caution is not to draw clear distinctions between fiction and ethnography; in fact, the permeability of such generic distinctions challenges the very core of touristic reading. To corral the uses of folklore in the novel into the limited and limiting category of "ethnographic detail" or "local color," however, is to fail to understand the very creative uses Hurston makes of the folklore in the text. Even if some of the novel's "ethnographic details" are derived from Hurston's fieldwork experiences, within the context of the novel they serve very specific purposes.

The example cited above—where Sam Watson remarks that Joe and Janie are "really playin' de dozens"—is one of the few instances in the text where a label is put on the folklore being represented. Elsewhere, Hurston tells us that the men on the store

porch are engaging in “acting-out courtship” with the three girls who stroll by ([1937] 1990:63), and that the Bahamans are performing fire dances behind Janie and Tea Cake’s house (146), but otherwise the folkloric material in the text goes relatively unmarked and unexplained and merges seamlessly with the rest of the narrative. Furthermore, such material is only marked by characters in dialect, not by the more “authoritative” third-person narrative voice, suggesting a reluctance to separate the material from its usual context and provide a more formal explanation of it. Considering that Hurston could have used the novel—and her authoritative omniscient narration, more specifically—as an explicitly didactic tool for educating her largely white readership about African American folklore, her insistence on integrating the material into the rest of the text without comment seems deliberate and significant.

The most notable example of this unsignified inclusion is chapter 6, which features the joke cycles surrounding Matt Bonner’s yellow mule, who eventually dies and receives an elaborate mock funeral. These episodes are followed by a lengthy “debate” between Sam and Lige Moss about caution versus nature (a masterful battle of signifying), the “acting-out courtship” previously mentioned, and a quick reference to the story cycles about John de Conquer (a topic that is elaborated on in chapter 18). Remarkably, very little of the published criticism on the novel addresses chapter 6. In many ways, the chapter seems almost “disposable” in the novel’s narrative arc, because very little in terms of plot advancement happens there. And yet, not only is it the longest chapter in the entire novel, it is also the site of one of Janie’s most important epiphanies: the realization that she has an inside and an outside (to be discussed in more detail below). It is clear that this was a significant chapter to Hurston. Why, then, does she seem to bury the significance of her folk material along with Matt Bonner’s mule—a burial that seemingly has resulted in a critical dismissal of the vernacular treasures she seemed to want to celebrate not only in this chapter, but in the novel as a whole?

The only critic to fully address the significance of the “Matt Bonner’s mule” episode is Sharon Davie. In “Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (1993), Davie argues that the mule functions as a multivalent symbol in the chapter: he is at once a figure for Janie herself and for black women in general, whom Nanny has called “de mule uh de world” ([1937] 1990:29). The mule also becomes the focal point for community storytelling that recalls other animal tales and trickster tales in African American oral tradition and, furthermore, offers the linguistic opportunity for a kind of festival misrule: Davie reads Joe’s description of “mule-heaven,” where “mule angels would have people to ride on” as the novel’s disruption of the usual hierarchies of whites-on-top, men-on-top, human beings-on-top and sees the episode as a radical one that asks if one might “dissolve the idea of status, or hierarchy itself, by turning the world upside down” (1993:450). To be sure, this issue of hierarchies is one to which Hurston returns throughout the novel, as the discussion of class in the novel, below, will address. Davie’s reading allows us to see the mule episode not as an idle bit of folkloric “color” inserted randomly into the text, but rather as a metaphoric anchor for the entire novel. Also, Davie reads the scene with the talking buzzards at the end of

the chapter as a further example of the ways the text “plays with, teases, and fools readers, who expect a story about talking buzzards to be labeled a fiction: Hurston does not oblige” (452). Instead, Davie notes, “the black folktale is not something ‘in’ the novel; it has escaped confinement by achieving an equal status with the novel” (452).

My take on chapter 6 is slightly different. Equally important as understanding the folkloric traditions on which the mule episode draws is noting that Hurston does not specify what those traditions are. Davie notes the way these moments “pull the cultural rug out from under the readers’ feet” (1993:446), an apt description of how Hurston’s text resists touristic reading. Equally important to that resistance, though, is Hurston’s refusal to play tour guide or ethnographer. As Dolby-Stahl says of the similar rhetorical strategy Hurston employs in *Mules and Men*, “Hurston could have presented the stories, sayings, practices, and beliefs she collected . . . as pure ‘ethnography’ . . . that she chose not to is both significant and fortunate” (1992:54). The same may be said of the narrative strategy Hurston employs in presenting the folkloric material in chapter 6 and throughout *Their Eyes*: Hurston’s cloaking or “soft-pedaling” of her folkloric material is highly strategic and comprises the best defense against critics’ claims that, by including this kind of material in her novel, she is pandering to white expectations and propagating racist stereotypes.

If Hurston had wielded her anthropological authority more overtly, such an accusation would perhaps be substantiated. But her deliberate refusal to play the role of ethnographic interpreter in chapter 6 allows her to present her folkloric materials not as “exotic” eccentricity, but as part of the day-to-day functioning of this community—so routine as to not require explanation by the authoritative, omniscient narrative voice. Hurston’s deliberate omission of ethnographic explanation or analysis thereby excludes the unknowing (touristic) reader from fully understanding what is going on. In so doing, Hurston prevents these materials from being “mistranslated” or coopted. This strategy both supports and resists a touristic reading of *Their Eyes*: on the negative side, the lack of mediation in chapter 6 (and other “folk” parts of the text) has the potential to leave the touristic reader thinking she has just had an encounter with an “enigmatic” Other, but no mediation also leaves the reader (and the critic) with the erroneous impression that this material is at best secondary to the “real” story. This cloaking strategy, however, is also one of the novel’s greatest strengths: by not explaining to readers what they are witnessing and its functions or purposes (as she certainly could have), Hurston “saves de text”—the complete text—from the potential misunderstanding of touristic eyes, thereby preserving its integrity. This cloaking strategy, combined with the “third language” of Hurston’s narrative strategy (the combination of dialect and free-indirect discourse that creates a hybrid “third” narrative voice), gives Hurston complete control over which aspects of her text she chooses to mediate for her audience.<sup>11</sup>

### *Dialect/Dialectic*

Before examining more recent interpretations of Hurston’s use of dialect, most of which fully reverse negative judgments like Wright’s, it is necessary to understand the

context in which Wright and others made their criticisms. As Gayl Jones notes, Wright's concern that any use of dialect would be perceived as mere "minstrelsy" was grounded in the fact that minstrel "audiences . . . were used to hearing 'dialect' only in comic contexts" (1993:141). Thus, for Wright and other African American writers, any use of dialect—even one like Hurston's, which attempts to reclaim the artistry and rhetorical subtlety of African American vernacular—could only be read by outsiders as comical evidence of "black innate mental inferiority, the linguistic sign . . . of human bondage" (Gates 1988:176). More recently, Michelle Wallace has inverted this perception to suggest instead that "Hurston's self-conscious manipulation of a kind of minstrelsy . . . may be the crucial mark of Afro-American cultural and artistic productivity" (1990:173).

What seems most remarkable today about Wright's critique, however, is its implication that the novel's entire text is written in dialect, a view that totally overlooks its very complicated blend of dialect with free indirect discourse.<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, the very structure of the novel's narrative that offers the first opportunity for resistant reading. The dialect itself offers a locus of "authenticity" within the text, as my student noted—especially because much of the dialect functions to illustrate verbal folk exchanges such as signifyin(g), the dozens, and joke cycles. In fact, the dialect is framed by the much more traditionally literary—even epic in its tone—narration provided by Hurston's omniscient narrator. A good example of this occurs in the scene in which Janie rhetorically castrates Joe by "scoring," or outsignifying, him in front of the other men in the store:

"Tain't no use gettin' all mad, Janie, 'cause Ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is." . . .

"Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak the change uh life."

"Great God from Zion!" Sam Watson gasped. "Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight." . . .

Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul's daughter did to David. ([1937] 1990:75 [emphasis in original])

Hurston's combination of dialect and literary narration here—including a biblical allusion—not only explains to her readers the import of what Janie has done, but this positioning also recasts the "dialectical" interactions of the characters in a larger and more literarily *validated* narrative style. This technique is employed throughout the novel, and with a further purpose: Gates cites Hurston's observation that "the white man thinks in a written language, and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" by way of suggesting that "Hurston conceived of it [the combination of "dialect-informed free indirect discourse"] as a third language, as a mediating third term that aspires to resolve the tension between standard English and black vernacular" (1988:215). In other words, Hurston's "third language" may well be designed specifically for the touristic reader, as a mediating device that "translates" the Other into more familiar terms.

Both Gates (1988) and Barbara Johnson (1987, 1993) have suggested that Hurston's combination of dialect and free indirect discourse may also function as a tex-

tual manifestation of W. E. B. DuBois's notion of double-consciousness. In other words, the twin narrative modes, and the ways in which they play off of one another, become Hurston's linguistic representation of the bifurcated experience of being African American in a white-dominated culture. This dualism is echoed thematically in the text as well. When Janie realizes that "she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" ([1937] 1990:68), her words can also be taken as a sign of her awareness of her own double-consciousness. In some sense, the use of dialect becomes associated with the "outside" parts of Janie's existence (because dialect is used to represent her interactions with other members of her various communities), whereas the free indirect discourse may be read as the voice of Janie's interiority. Ironically, Janie obviously *has* learned how to mix the two, because the entire novel is presented to the reader as one long, uninterrupted storytelling performance, in which Janie relates her life story to her friend Phoeby upon her return to Eatonville from the muck.

This sense of double-consciousness plays out elsewhere in the text as well. In one of the most often cited passages in the novel, Janie discovers that she is black only when she sees a photograph of herself among the white children with whom she has been raised:

"So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.'

"Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie . . . she pointed to de dark one and said, 'Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?'

". . . Ah done looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said, 'Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!'" ([1937] 1990:9)

In many ways, this scene parallels an episode from Hurston's own life that she relates in "How it Feels to Be Colored Me." Describing her own childhood in the real Eatonville, Florida, Hurston recalls how she used to loiter on her front porch to interact with the white tourists who drove by seeking a glimpse of the famous "all-black town." Hurston acknowledges that, although she enjoyed performing for these tourists, these encounters did not activate her sense of herself as ethnically "different" from them; that realization only came when she left Eatonville to attend school in predominantly white Jacksonville at age thirteen (1979:152–3). The suggestion in both Hurston's personal and fictional accounts seems to be that ethnic identity, like authenticity, is an ascribed quality: only by seeing oneself as a tourist might is one able to perceive one's "Otherness." Janie's whole experience of herself up until she sees that photograph is based on interiority—her "inside": seeing the photograph allows her to see the "outside" and, more important, the disjuncture between the two.

In many ways, the plot of *Their Eyes* is set in motion by Janie's viewing of that photograph and her later articulation of the problem engendered by it: the realization of having an inside and an outside. The rest of the novel tracks Janie's further recognition that she must "mix" those selves in order to reach her beloved horizon. It is in Janie's process toward discovering how to do that that the reader comes to

understand the complexity of the task. Janie has to reconcile her sense of herself not only with the external reality of being African American, but also with being a woman. The novel begins with Janie's body being assessed by the men on the porch then flashes back to her being "sold" to Logan Killicks by her grandmother at the first sign of her emerging sexuality. Her second husband, Joe Starks, takes great pains to erase Janie's sexuality by forcing her to wear a head rag in public (thus covering her hair, an object of great admiration and envy), while paradoxically displaying her as a trophy wife. It is only in Janie's relationship with Tea Cake that she is allowed to fully inhabit her body. Ironically, it is only then that she sheds the trappings of femininity and begins wearing overalls. This last metamorphosis also alludes to Janie's final realization about, and shedding of, her exteriority. With this, she is also ready to reject others' attempts to "class her off" as a light-skinned black woman.

### *Signifying on Taboos*

If the traditional folk materials in *Their Eyes* are cloaked so as to be able to slip past the touristic reader's radar, the more controversial folk materials are even less mediated and more soft-pedaled. And yet, the passages in which this "taboo" material is introduced also represent the novel's most political moments. It seems shocking now that a critic such as Wright could accuse Hurston of writing a novel with "no theme, no message"—in short, with no political sensibility whatsoever—when the novel obviously addresses issues of miscegenation, Jim Crow racism, and questions of black self-determination. It is clear, though, that the novel's discussion of these matters slipped under even Wright's highly tuned radar, indicating again that perhaps Hurston has a strategy in mind here. By including this kind of "taboo" material in her text—even in a way in which it is almost destined to be overlooked—Hurston breaks the rules about which aspects of culture are "tellable" and which are not. This "signifying" on her part seems to undercut the notion that the novel conforms to racial (and racist) expectations, for, in addition to the already complicated nexus of race and gender identities addressed in the novel, Hurston adds the complicating (and contentious) issues of class and color, thus challenging her readers to understand how any individual "identity" (such as Janie's) is actually constructed at the intersections of several competing identities.

The first example of this kind of taboo folk material comes early in the novel. When Janie's grandmother (Nanny) discovers Janie kissing Johnny Taylor at the gate, she feels compelled to tell her "de text" that she has been saving for just this moment, when Janie's womanhood becomes a danger. Nanny tells Janie her family's oral history, a straightforward enough folk genre, but Nanny's text is also a story of rape, exploitation, and miscegenation. Janie's mother was the product of a sexual relationship between Nanny and her slave master (a relationship that Nanny describes fairly unproblematically), and Janie herself is the product of her mother's rape by a schoolteacher ([1937] 1990:16–8). Until recently, very little has been made of this genealogy in the scholarship on the novel, and yet it seems crucial to an understanding of the novel's politics. In the figure of Janie—who is later described as having a "coffee-and-cream complexion" ([1937] 1990:134)—Hurston both embodies and undercuts

an essentialist interpretation and application of Du Bois's philosophies. Janie is "light" enough to compel the "milky"-skinned Mrs. Turner to suggest that people like her and Janie "oughta make us a class tuh ourselves" ([1937] 1990:136)—presumably, to join the "talented tenth"—but the fact that Janie's lightness is attributable to her slave owner grandfather and her rapist/schoolteacher father explicitly mocks class distinctions based on such troubling lineage and implicitly critiques the value of formal education. Furthermore, Hurston blasts the notion of racial essentialism by having the racially mixed Janie become the subject of a quest toward immersion in African American culture, which she finally (thinks she) achieves when she arrives on the muck and can fully participate in its folk culture. For as much as critics argue that the novel tracks Janie's quest for a voice, so it is also tracking her quest to reconstruct her ethnic identity while simultaneously deconstructing the issue of class. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued, race for Hurston is "a determinant that itself could be overruled by class and economic self-interest" (1990:99).

Janie's lightness is explicitly tied to class issues throughout the novel, another indication that the novel is, indeed, highly political. It is this issue of class that offers perhaps the most fruitful opportunity for resistant, nontouristic reading in the novel. Class is an issue from the very outset of the novel: as Janie returns from the muck in her overalls, the "porch sitters" wonder, "Why don't she stay in her class?" ([1937] 1990:2)—which suggests she is too uppity—even though her overalls indicate her recent working-class experience. Janie tells Pheoby that she has been "classed off" against her will ([1937] 1990:107), first by her grandmother, who wanted her to "pick from a higher bush" ([1937] 1990:13), then by her second husband, Jody, who calls Janie a "pretty doll-baby . . . made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" ([1937] 1990:28). In practice, though, Jody excludes Janie from the store porch in Eatonville and forces her to work against her will. When he dies, Janie decides her days of being classed off are over, but she soon discovers that because she "slept with authority . . . she was part of it in the town mind" ([1937] 1990:44). Her wealth and status as Joe Starks's widow only increase the class distance between her and the townspeople, who go "mad" when they discover that Janie is seeing the working-class bluesman Tea Cake ([1937] 1990:105). Ultimately, in order to break with the rigid notions of class that bind her, Janie must sell the store and leave town, going with Tea Cake to work on the muck and immerse herself in what Hurston presents as democratic folk culture, almost utopian in its separation from the depressing and dangerous white-controlled towns of Jacksonville and Palm Beach, where Tea Cake is stabbed at one time and forced into unpaid labor burying bodies at another ([1937] 1990:120, 161).

The muck, however, is not without its own problems. In fact, Hurston seems to use the muck as her heart of darkness, the place where she can best interrogate the problems that, as Coker remarks, "keeps our own selves down" ([1937] 1990:37). For it is on the muck that Janie meets Mrs. Turner, the "milky sort of a woman" who is the most vehemently "color struck" and race-conscious character in the novel. Like the chapter about Matt Bonner's mule, this one (chapter 16) also seems "disposable" in terms of plot advancement and has also received very little critical attention. Although it does introduce the character of Mrs. Turner's brother, who later leads Tea Cake to

question Janie's fidelity and finally to strike her, little else happens in this brief chapter except for its detailing of Janie's encounters with Mrs. Turner. Nevertheless, these encounters are crucial to an understanding of the political nature of the novel (and Hurston's own politics within the Harlem Renaissance movement), for it is through the character of Mrs. Turner that Hurston is able to address the issue of "color (and Caucasian features) within race," which have "always been a painful part of African American heritage" (DuPlessis 1990:114).

Mrs. Turner befriends Janie because of her "white" features, but, significantly, those external features are, for Mrs. Turner, merely the visible signifier for her own more overriding concern with class. Despite Janie's insistence on "slumming" with the fieldhands, she reads Janie's complexion as the indicator of her essential worthiness: "Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields" ([1937] 1990:134). Here again, Hurston seems to soft-pedal the issue of Janie's being light-skinned by inextricably and necessarily linking that issue with the issue of class: a woman who looks like Janie, in Mrs. Turner's mind, should not be out working in the field. Here, Hurston does not downplay the issue of racism, as her critics suggest; rather, she makes it an even more complicated and contentious issue than the reader might have previously imagined, because Hurston eradicates the possibility of a monolithic concept of race by demonstrating the crucial ways race and class intersect with and undercut each other. In addition, Hurston raises the taboo issues of classism and colorism within African American culture, which adds yet another dimension to her representation of ethnic identity.<sup>13</sup>

In their conversations, Mrs. Turner and Janie discuss matters that Mrs. Turner imagines should be of equal importance to them both as members of the same "race," but Janie becomes acutely aware that what Mrs. Turner is really talking about is class, as this lengthy excerpt illustrates:

"Mis' Woods, Ah have often said to mah husband, Ah don't see how uh lady like Mis' Woods can stand all them common niggers round her place all the time."

"They don't worry me atall, Mis' Turner. Fact about de thing is, they tickles me wid they talk."

"You got more nerve than me. When somebody talked mah husband intuh comin' down heah tuh open up uh eatin' place Ah never dreamt so many different kins uh black folks could collect in one place. Did Ah never woulda come. . . . Yo' husband musta had plenty money when y'all got married."

"Whut make you think dat, Mis' Turner?"

"Tuh git hold of uh woman lak you. You got mo' nerve than me. Ah jus' couldn't see mahself married to no black man. It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up the race."

"Naw, mah husband didn't had nothin' but hisself. He's easy tuh love if you mess round 'im. Ah loves him." . . .

"You'se different from me. Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em myself. 'Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off."

"Us can't do it. We's uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against black?" . . .

"If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back."

"You reckon? 'course Ah ain't never thought about it too much. But Ah don't figger dey even gointuh want us for comp'ny. We'se too poor." ([1937] 1990:134–5)

It is difficult to understand how *Their Eyes* could be perceived by its contemporary critics as being apolitical with an exchange like this placed at precisely the point in the novel when Janie thinks she has discovered the ideal African American community, a place where—as Mrs. Turner herself notes—"so many different kins of black folks could colleck in one place" ([1937] 1990:134). In this passage, Hurston again evokes the inextricability of race and class and shows the dangers of trying to isolate them from one another, recalling Janie's earlier realization about the need to "mix" things up. Indeed, Janie herself reminds Mrs. Turner that "We'se uh mingled people," in turn reminding the reader that what is broadly labeled the "African American community" is itself diverse and contested territory. The issue that Mrs. Turner overlooks, Janie astutely notes (despite her self-disparaging remark that she "ain't never thought about it too much"), is not "color" or "looks," but class: whites will not want to associate with them, not because of their appearance, but because they are "too poor." Mrs. Turner, on the other hand, readily admits she wants to associate with Janie because of her appearance, but she is blind to her own colorism and classism seen in the fact that she would like Janie even better if she would "class off." In this light, Janie's comment that she "ain't never thought about it too much" can only be read as a bit of ironic politeness: Janie most certainly has thought about what it means to be "classed off," as she tells Phoeby. In fact, she consciously abandoned her middle-class occupation, home, and social position in Eatonville to join the heterogeneous collection of "black folks" on the muck.

But Hurston does not end her critique of colorism here; she extends it to the larger African American community by having Mrs. Turner couch her colorist views in the debate (well defined and still influential at the time of Hurston's writing) between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington about the best course for African American advancement. Mrs. Turner aligns herself with DuBois in an attempt to draw out Janie's own position in this definitional controversy. She tells Janie,

"You oughta meet my brother. He's real smart. Got dead straight hair. Dey made him uh delegate tuh de Sunday School Convention and he read uh paper on Booker T. Washington and tore him tuh pieces!"

"Booker T.? He wuz a great big man, wusn't he?"

"'Sposed tuh be. All he ever done wuz cut de monkey for white folks. So dey pumped him up. But you know whut de old folks say 'de higher de monkey climbs de mo' he show his behind' so dat's de way it wuz wid Booker T. Mah brother hit 'im every time dey give 'im chance tuh speak."

"Ah wuz raised on de notion dat he wuz a great big man," was all that Janie knew to say.

"He didn't do nothin' but hold us back—talkin' 'bout work when de race ain't never done nothin' else. He wuz uh enemy tuh us, dat's whut. He wuz a white folks' nigger."

According to all Janie had been taught this was sacrilege so she sat without speaking at all. ([1937] 1990:136)

It is difficult to read Janie's silence here: does she feel she does not know enough to enter into a debate with Mrs. Turner about this issue, or is she dumbstruck at Mrs. Turner's "sacrilege"? Again, Janie's silence seems more the product of good manners than ignorance: she well understands how Mrs. Turner has chosen to "justify" her colorism (and thus disguise the real issue of classism) by couching it in terms of a more acceptable public debate. If anything, Janie seems merely astonished that Mrs. Turner—herself a working woman who depends on the business of the other migrant workers for her livelihood—could denigrate the value of work. Notably, the brother with "dead straight hair" seems to rely on that physical feature as his sole means of getting by in the world: Mrs. Turner tells Janie that "He's sorter outa work now" but that "He's uh fine carpenter, when he kin git anything tuh do" ([1937] 1990:136–7). Again, Hurston seems to be slyly signifying on Mrs. Turner and perhaps also on some of the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals with this complex portrait of a man who can use his looks to avoid doing any work at all. And Hurston may well be aligning *herself* with Washington here, because she too was accused by her contemporaries of "cuttin' de monkey for white folks." As Langston Hughes wrote of her, "[S]he was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, and she did it in such a racy fashion. . . . To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was the perfect 'darkie,' in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro" (Hughes 1940:239).

In light of this perception of Hurston among her peers, it is easy to see how she might align herself with Washington, who was also perceived as an accommodationist. Like Hurston, Washington was concerned about the "Negro farthest down," rather than with the talented tenth.<sup>14</sup> Yet Hurston's intent in establishing this parallel does not seem to be to espouse Washington's political agenda. Rather, Hurston seems to use the Washington-DuBois debate here to raise the issue of representation in general and to suggest that one person cannot speak for an entire ethnic group. Hurston might have felt that her ideas—like Washington's—had been appropriated, mistranslated, and oversimplified by those with competing agendas. If that is the case, then perhaps Janie's silent defense of Washington here serves as a warning to Hurston's readers to see her project in its own context, according to its own terms. In so doing, Hurston calls on the reader to consider both herself and Janie as independent subjects—not "representative" characters—and also asks the reader to see the various communities in which Janie dwells as contested spaces, not monolithic sites of "black folk life." As Michelle Wallace notes, "Hurston's extraordinary textual ambivalence about race, class, nationality, sex, religion, and family, her cryptic, inscrutable subjectivity, offers a crucial vantage point on the crisis in signification that fuels postmodernism and haunts Western self-esteem—and which, not coincidentally, lies at the core of the Afro-American experience" (1990:174). This ambivalence, then—read by some of Hurston's harshest critics as an indication of her apoliticalness—actually provides a locus (albeit, a moving target) for understanding the very complex politics of the novel. As Davie writes, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "may help readers to acknowledge the multiplicity and contradictoriness of experience, to acknowledge that which one cannot pin down, fix, with rational thought" (1993:447).

Critics who focus on the notion of Janie as a questing hero, or who focus on the issue of Janie's voice in the text, are destined to overlook the very sections of the novel that offer up the kind of complex and critical dialogue about the very issue of representation in the text: those "folk episodes" illustrated in chapters 6 and 16, as well as the complexities of the novel's narrative levels. Hazel Carby's essay, while insightful, focuses almost exclusively on the novel's narrative technique, and although she closely addresses the question of how the "folk" are constructed in *Their Eyes*, she does not look very closely at the folklore itself, nor at how it operates in the novel. DuPlessis, on the other hand, comes to a radically different conclusion by focusing on the oft-dismissed parts of the text: the "folklife" in chapter 6, Janie's encounter with Mrs. Turner, and her trial. Because Janie does not "speak" much if at all in these parts of the novel (indeed, she does not even witness the mule's funeral, because Joe forbids her to go), these moments are generally interpreted as being extraneous to the text or as evidence that Janie never really does acquire her own voice or autonomy. DuPlessis argues, however, that these sections of the novel where Janie is represented by "undepicted speech" are also the most political moments, places where Hurston "resolves a tension about power and powerlessness (as it intersects with race)"; these junctures, DuPlessis claims, function as "Hurston's narrative resolution of conflictual social determinants of race, class, and gender" (1990:108).

Nevertheless, the wide and sometimes conflicting range of interpretations of Hurston's novel makes the central question of Carby's essay an important one, as she openly wonders why and how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become a sort of "Ur"-text in African American literature: "We need to return to the question why, at this particular moment in our society, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become such a privileged text. Why is there a shared assumption that we should read the novel as a positive, holistic, celebration of black life? Why is it considered necessary that the novel produce cultural meanings of authenticity, and how does cultural authenticity come to be situated so exclusively in the rural folk?" (Carby 1990:89). Carby's astute critique exposes the romantic and problematic premises underpinning *Their Eyes*, as well as the cultural dynamics the novel selectively omits. Carby largely seems to be disappointed that Hurston "bought into" the anthropological thinking of her day, which encouraged fieldwork with "dying" cultures, the goal being to document the group before it became "extinct." Hurston was open about her fears of northward migration, urbanization, and technology that she felt spelled the demise of African American folk culture, but Carby suggests that this was Hurston's most damning mistake. Had Hurston broadened her own perception of the "folk," Carby implies, she might have created a narrative less subsumable to stereotype. [B]ell hooks describes a similar discomfort with what she perceives to be Hurston's anthropological romanticism, noting that "Hurston envisioned her anthropological work as a means of preserving black folk culture. Yet she never directly states for whom she wished to preserve the culture, whether for black folks, that we may be ever mindful of the rich imaginative folkways that are our tradition and legacy, or for white folks, that they may laugh at the quaint dialect and amusing stories as they voyeuristically peep into the private inner world of poor Southern black people" (hooks 1992:136).

[H]ooks rightly implies that, although Hurston's text may in some ways encour-

age voyeurism, the individual reader actually determines whether the text will be consumed voyeuristically or touristically.<sup>15</sup> More troubling, however, is hooks's apparent suggestion that it is the very "folkloric" nature of the text that invites tourism, more so than other kinds of cultural material might. The issues of "representation" and "realism" seem to be thrown into even higher relief when folkloric materials are evoked, especially in texts by nonwhite writers.

But I think we err in casting blame on authors themselves, or on the folklore itself. On the whole, the "folkloric" aspects of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when read resistantly, function more to complicate notions of ethnic identity rather than to reify them, as some critics claim. In many instances, Hurston's use of folkloric material is more often subversive: in choosing not to focus on sanctioned issues, or to adopt a more realistic style, Hurston gives voice to a realm of experience generally shunned and dismissed as being "nonliterary." As Daphne Lamothe argues, "In contrast to those critics who read Hurston's use of folk culture . . . as a sign of nostalgia, I view it as her means of comprehending transformation. Within traditional cultural forms lies a structure which encourages and enables dynamic change. Therefore, Hurston's reluctance to abandon African American tradition does not signal a rejection of modernity; rather, it becomes a vehicle for her to acknowledge modernity" (1999:158). In other words, Hurston's text does not grieve for the passing of soon-to-be-extinct traditions. Instead, it gives them new life, and new significance, in fiction. The equation between folk practices in real life and those in the novel are, at best, only a starting point for interpretation—and most likely a false start.

As such, Hurston was not only presaging Bauman and others' emphasis on folklore as performance, but also contesting the notion of "invented tradition" in much the same way as Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin have redefined the slippery concept of "tradition": "We would argue that tradition resembles less an artifactual assemblage than a process of thought—an ongoing interpretation of the past. . . . We suggest that there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present. Undeniably, traditional action may refer to the past, but to 'be about' or to refer to is a symbolic rather than natural relationship, and as such it is characterized by discontinuity as well as continuity" (1989:41). To my mind, this explanation effectively describes the use of folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: far from offering static, mimetic representations of "real-life" traditions that Hurston knew from her own fieldwork experience to be dynamic, diverse, and deeply embedded in specific contexts, Hurston's fictional reinvention of those traditions takes on significant new meanings, which may "refer to the past," as Handler and Linnekin put it, but which also break from the past. Handler and Linnekin's definition also points generally to the real problem with locating a fictional text's "authenticity" in its use of folkloric materials: such an equation rules out the possibility of invention, a process that is, of course, central to the process of writing fiction. Hurston herself must have recognized that ethnography can be fictional, and fiction can be ethnographic; Hurston recognized that the two modes can inform each other without defining or delimiting one another.

If Hurston were writing against the grain of her own era—focusing on rural, Southern African Americans at a time when the aesthetics were all about the urban and the

Northern—is that so much a sign of her being a reactionary, as her contemporaries Wright and Locke (as well as many recent critics) would have it, or a sign of her inventiveness? We can read Hurston's novel not so much as a romantic eulogy for a disappearing way of life, but rather as an attempt to imagine how those old traditions are transmogrifying into the new. After all, Janie herself resists some of the "traditional" aspects of the various communities she finds herself in: she infiltrates the all-male storytelling context of the porch and outperforms them at the dozens; she rejects the traditional colorism and "party-line" politics of Mrs. Turner to instead embrace a pan-African aesthetic in the culture of the muck. She reinvents tradition as she goes.

By recognizing the pitfalls of "touristic reading," we also avoid the all too common literary-folkloristic mistake of "pry[ing] the folklore away, expos[ing] it, and preserv[ing] it as though it were a wooden icon," as Lawless describes it. Such a process only mirrors the act of touristic reading, as it denies the dynamism of traditions both inside the text and out. By resisting touristic readings, we restore the text's folklore to its full contextual complexity and liberate it from that insatiable slavedriver, "representativeness." We need to regard the uses of folklore and other traditional cultural material in texts not as static sites of pure representation or "unbearable authenticity," but as places where culture and identity are actively constructed and contested. We need to stop looking for the familiar and instead seek out the places in multiethnic texts where boundaries collide and collapse. I believe we can do this by consciously evoking the idea of tourism, by recognizing our own desire to impose a predetermined context on a text and to read past that impulse, to look again, widening the frame of the picture we take away. Such a methodology rejects imposed boundaries and allows that what one experiences when reading a text may defy all expectations.

### Notes

1. Both of these comments were made during an American literature survey course I taught in 1994, while a graduate student at The Ohio State University. During the course, I did some informal "classroom ethnography" work to assess student reactions to ethnic literature.

2. As folklorist Pat Mullen commented, this process is a familiar one to organizers of folk festivals as well: regardless of the efforts one might put into contextualizing and complicating visitors' notions of what they are viewing or consuming at folk festivals, the audience perceives the performance or display however it wants to—generally, in the way it is preconditioned to perceive such things (personal conversation).

3. In using the term "tourism," I am, of course, drawing on the extensive recent work of folklorists on tourism as cultural production and other concepts that tourism-as-culture invokes: questions of authenticity, cultural representation, authority, and so forth. To my mind, these very questions are what make it productive to apply the concept of tourism to the act of reading, because literary scholars have raised many of the same questions about literature-as-cultural-production. My own ideas about tourism have been indelibly shaped by the work of Regina Bendix (1989, 1997), Edward Bruner (1986), Robert Cantwell (1993), John Dorst (1989, 1999), Deirdre Evans-Pritchard (1987), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), and Dean MacCannell (1989), among others.

4. The final chapter of my doctoral dissertation, "Reading Tourist Sites, Citing Touristic Readings: Anglo Constructions of Native American Identity and the Case of Tecumseh" (1998), offers a fuller discussion of this issue as it applies to other texts and to pedagogical strategies for teaching such texts.

5. In using the term "resistant reading," I am drawing on theories of reading and interpretation pro-

posed by reader-response and reception theorists. There is not enough space in this article to detail the connections between reader-response theories and my own concept of touristic reading, but the most important connection to note here is the shared notion that meaning does not reside in the text, the author, or the reader solely, but rather in the particular and dynamic context created among the three in any given reading—e.g., the text cannot exist apart from the act of reading, and the text is, in fact, recreated anew with each act of reading. Clearly such a view matches the view in contemporary folkloristics that entities once presumed to be stable—folkloric “texts,” tradition, ethnicity, and so forth—are, in fact, reinvented with every performance, in each new context. In fact, this dynamic view of the notion of “text” has led a number of reader-response critics (and others) to recognize the value of anthropological methodologies (specifically, ethnography) to understanding the process by which readers interpret and thus recreate texts.

6. Folklorists will be interested to know that, in addition to not explaining why folktales themselves were considered essential for inclusion, no explanation was offered as to why any given tale was chosen from the range available within the cultural traditions represented, nor is there any explanation as to why the particular variants were chosen.

7. Robert E. Hemenway details Hurston’s relationships with various white patrons, especially with Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977). For a discussion of the debate over representation among African American writers before and during the Harlem Renaissance, see Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* (1988).

8. This folkloric phrase is, of course, also the title of a well-known essay by Ralph Ellison, which appears in *Shadow and Act* (1964).

9. This insistence on drawing parallels between fictional depictions of folklife and “reality” strike me as completely unproductive, illuminating neither the text nor the “reality” the text is alleged to represent. A good example of the fruitlessness of such a critique can be found in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s (1995) reading of Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Wong has evidence that some of Tan’s translations from the Chinese are inaccurate and that Tan has “Westernized” some of the Chinese wedding traditions she employs. Her argument that these “errors”—coupled with the text’s implicit marking of itself as authentic—make Tan’s novel Orientalist is a sound one; however, it draws on the fallacious assumption that a nonwhite writer has less license to play with language and cultural material than whites. It also operates by a definition of authenticity as *extracontextual*—i.e., something is perceived as “authentic” only when it appears and functions the same way regardless of context. Thus, the wedding traditions in *The Joy Luck Club* become “authentic” in the mind of the touristic reader because she assumes the novel presents an ethnographically accurate portrait of them; Wong, conversely, assumes the novel is *inauthentic* because she has real-life analogues with which to compare it. Both schools of thought are flawed, because they assume a narrow and romantic sense of authenticity as an extracontextual quality that is, or should be, inviolable. As the logic goes, if a direct analogy cannot be made between cultural practice and its fictional representation, the representation is considered flawed, “inauthentic.” Recognizing this desire for authenticity, and then probing the dangerous assumptions behind it, reveals the double bind in which this desire places nonwhite writers; it also returns the reader’s focus to the play and experimentation that should be inherent to all kinds of fiction.

10. Wright’s review first appeared in the periodical *New Masses* on October 5, 1937.

11. As noted above, Hurston invokes a similar dynamic in *Mules and Men*, particularly in the final section on “Hoodoo,” where she describes rituals selectively and cloaks the larger belief systems behind them, thus serving her ethnographic “duty” while also protecting her informants and their beliefs.

12. So much has been written about the narrative structure of the novel that I have chosen to summarize the major trends within that locus of criticism and instead focus on connecting the implications of those arguments to my interest in touristic reading. For more detailed discussions of the novel’s narrative technique and use of dialect, see Gates’s *Signifying Monkey*, as well as the essays by Hazel Carby (1990), Lori Ann Garner (2000), David Kadlec (2000), and Keith Walters (1999).

13. “Colorism” is Alice Walker’s term, defined in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (1983:290).

14. This debate also plays a role in Hurston’s earlier novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* ([1934] 1990), in which another set of porch sitters comments more directly on DuBois and on intellectuals in general: “Whut did dis DuBois ever do? He writes up books and papers, hunh? Shucks! Dat ain’t nothin’, anybody kin

put down words on uh piece of paper. Gimme da paper sack and lemme see dat pencil uh minute. Shucks! Writing! Man Ah thought you wuz talkin' 'bout uh man what had done sumpin'" ([1934] 1990:148). Here Hurston may also be implicating herself, questioning her own struggle to be both a part of her culture and its ethnographer.

15. As reader-response critic Robert Stepto has theorized, the real locus of unreliability in a narrative lies in the reader. He notes that "the principle unreliable factor in the storytelling paradigm is the reader (white American readers, obviously)" (1986:309).

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