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# “De Talkin’ Game”: The Creation of Psychic Space in Selected Short Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston

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“Well, Zora, did we lie enough for you las’ night?”

“You lied good but not enough,” I answered.

“Her tongue is hung in de middle and works both ways.”

*Mules and Men*<sup>1</sup>

In a memorable scene in *Mules and Men*, porch-talker George Thomas explodes to the group: “Don’t you know you can’t git de best of no woman in de talkin’ game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got” (p. 33). His comment elicits a vociferous debate concerning the respective strengths and talents of women as compared to those of men. It is a subject that Zora Neale Hurston considered repeatedly throughout her distinguished career. One of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston has gained in recent decades a dramatic renewal of interest in her work at the prompting of literary figures such as Alice Walker. The publication of Carla Kaplan’s edition of her letters in 2002 and Valerie Boyd’s biography of her in 2003 have evidenced and fostered the increased attention she is receiving from contemporary scholars. Praised especially for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston is remembered as well for *Mules and Men*, generally regarded as the first collection of African American folklore compiled and published by an African American.

Not as well known, however, is her short fiction. Although a collection of stories has been available since 1985, with a complete edition published in 1995, only recently have critics begun to devote attention to these pieces, which initiated her recognition in the 1920s. Like her other work, the short stories are rich in the black, oral tradition of language. “Above all else,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke note, these stories “register a distinct sense of space—an African-American cultural space. The Hurston voice of these stories is never in a hurry or rush, pausing over—indeed, luxuriating in—the nuances of speech. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

One might argue that these stories are in a sense “doubled-voiced,” evincing the persuasive voice of Hurston the storyteller, but also depicting characters whose voices claim ownership of their own psychic spaces.<sup>3</sup> Particularly compelling are the voices of her women characters whose use of language enables their survival of spirit. Unabashedly Hurston relishes

the richness of their voices, for, as Robert Hemenway comments, “Her sensitivity to language had been awakened in Eatonville on Joe Clark’s store porch, and it led to a lifelong study of the way Black folks turned daily communication into an art form.”<sup>4</sup> Like Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, she denounced racist theories of linguistic deficiency among blacks, emphasizing instead their skills in figurative language.<sup>5</sup> Her work was a recording and promoting of the beauty of the black voice and particularly that of the female voice. Her task was to give these characters a means to voice their lives, much in the same way that she records her dying mother’s depending on the young Zora: “Her mouth was slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk. But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice.”<sup>6</sup>

Hurston offers the ultimate model for the assertively voiced female in Big Sweet. “Ah got de law in my mouth,” she asserts to the men in *Mules and Men*. And they agree, although Wiley “snigger[s]” in saying, “Lawd, ain’t she specifyin’!” (p. 134). Significantly, Hurston first mentions Big Sweet in the text right after her arrival in Polk County, where Babe Hill “had shot her husband to death” and gone unpunished. “Negro women *are* punished in these parts for killing men, but only if they exceed the quota,” Hurston comments rather flippantly (p. 65). Big Sweet is a knife-toting tough, skilled at defending her territory. In delineating her character, Hurston judiciously selects the two stories Big Sweet relates. Both are talking-beast tales, the first focusing on mocking birds who offer a friendship to a “wicked” individual because he has befriended birds (pp. 102-03). The second is a trickster tale, relating how the rabbit informs ‘gator of the essence of “trouble” (pp. 115-16). This story immediately follows Oliver’s tale of how the ‘gator lost his tongue and ability to “talk like a nat’chal man” (p. 113). Hurston’s placement of the tales, with trouble following muteness, seems calculated to imply the terrible consequences of voicelessness. Together the three tales suggest the power of friendship, the potency of the tongue, and the ploy of trickery. In her telling of stories and in her powerful stances, Big Sweet functions as a staunch promoter of the female voice, even a protofeminist. “I loves to friend with somebody like you,” she declares to Hurston’s persona in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. “I aims to look out for you, too. Do your fighting for you. Nobody better not start nothing with you, do I’ll get my switch-blade and go round de ham-bone looking for meat” (p. 188). The graphic nature of Big Sweet’s avowal serves to sustain Hurston’s persona in both speech and action.

In her fiction Hurston functions much as Big Sweet does, fending for her female protagonists and ultimately giving them a voice.<sup>7</sup> That voice is sometimes strident and self-revealing, as depicted in the phrase, “You eats mocking bird eggs (tell everything you know)” (*A Life in Letters*, p. 99). But it’s also the interior voice, one that reckons with existence. It’s a voice that occurs in her earliest work, the short fiction, and one that culminates in her

masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is, moreover, a voice that revels in the antics of trickery. I would like to consider briefly the artistry of the female voice in three example stories and then focus on “Drenched in Light” and “Sweat” as exhibiting patterns she would later use in developing the voice of Janie Crawford. That voice ultimately becomes the voice of an inner life, articulating what Maria Tai Wolff has termed, “the language of possibility.”<sup>8</sup> It is this voice that enables the survival of her women protagonists as they create their own psychic spaces of existence.

Unlike the voices of the victimized women in the work of such contemporaries as Jean Toomer and Richard Wright, Hurston’s female characters evince a vitality of spirit that refuses to be muted. They give life to Hurston’s famous proclamation in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”: “No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”<sup>9</sup> In defending their positions, they may, to use Hurston’s vernacular, “beat you till . . . [you] smell like onions.”<sup>10</sup> In particular, their linguistic abilities derive from their use of signifying, a rhetorical trope that, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, subsumes such figurative language as metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, and litotes. In black rhetorical tropes, signifying may take the form, for example, of loud-talking, rapping, testifying, sounding, or playing the dozens.<sup>11</sup> The archetypal signifier appears in the Signifying Monkey, a folkloric trickster figure whose chicanery is complemented by a virtuosic tongue.<sup>12</sup> While the Signifying Monkey tales typically involve insult, Gates points out that “insult is not at all central to the nature of Signifyin(g)” (*The Signifyin(g) Monkey*, p. 58). Rather, the two defining characteristics of signifying are its metaphorical nature and “indirection” (p. 85), with an actual meaning behind an apparent one. It is a sophisticated ruse understandable only to those capable of discerning its encoded meaning.

The verbal antics of signifying informed Hurston’s linguistic acquisition as a youth, as she explains in *Dust Tracks*:

[A]n average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names. It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mullet-headed, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, ‘gator-faced, shad-mouthed, screw-necked, goat-bellied, puzzle-gutted, camel-backed, butt-sprung, battle-hammed, knock-kneed, razor-legged, box-ankled, shovel-footed, unmated so-and-so! (pp. 135-36)

She developed more subtle aspects of signifying in her maturation as a writer. As Kaplan points out, she “explores secrecy and dissembling as fundamental to a tradition of double voice and masking, devices central

to African American literature since its inception.”<sup>13</sup> Hurston is the ultimate trickster, creating characters whose sharp tongues, deceptions, equivocations, and chicanery secure their survival. In her seminal use of the female signifying character, Hurston is, as Gates notes, the “first author of the tradition to represent signifying itself as a vehicle of liberation for an oppressed woman” (*Figures in Black*, p. 241). Indeed, the judicious use of language is so important for Hurston’s female characters that one critic argues it supercedes physical appearance in conveying who they are.<sup>14</sup>

Hurston’s strategies in developing voice involve rhetorically the talents of the Signifying Monkey, but as creator, she also assumes the role of Esu. Like Monkey, this figure survived the Middle Passage (*The Signifying Monkey*, p. 16) and as an interpreter of a text deposits meaning. Or to draw from other African myths, she employs the verbal antics of Anansi in trickery, but she has the creative control of Aso, Anansi’s wife, who, for example, tells him *how* to gain the world’s stories from the Sky-God.<sup>15</sup> Whether one considers her characters’ use of signifying in support of trickster motifs, or what Gates calls her development of the “speakerly text,” whereby she produces the “illusion of oral narration” (*The Signifying Monkey*, p. 181), Hurston functions as the supreme trickster. Granted, that trickery often has comic reverberations: “My sense of humor,” Hurston acknowledges, “will always stand in the way of my seeing myself, my family, my race or my nation as the whole intent of the universe” (*Dust Tracks*, p. 281). But underneath the lightness, as Ivan Van Sertima notes, the trickster role stems from a “profound and often obscure longing of the human psyche for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting; a revolt against a whole complex of ‘givens’ coded into a society. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

Turning briefly to a couple examples of the female voice in Hurston’s short fiction of the 1940s, we see a witty dramatization of a collision between would-be street tricksters and a sharp-tongued black woman in “Story in Harlem Slang.” Jelly and Sweet Back size up the young woman as a possible meal ticket. Despite their flattering overtures and ingratiating smiles, she sees them for what they are: two “pimps,” which, according to Gates and Lemke, approximates male prostitutes in “Harlemese” (p. 128). With hands braced on her hips, she employs metaphorical tropes indicating her anger: “You skilletts is trying to promote a meal on me, but it’ll never happen, brother. You barking up the wrong tree. I wouldn’t give you air if you was stopped up in a jug. I’m not putting out a thing. I’m just like the cemetery—I’m not putting out, I’m taking in! Dig?” (pp. 132-33). Her selection of images offers a duality that intensifies her insults. Beginning with the life-affirming images of “skillet” and “barking” (suggestive of food and sex), her invective moves to the life-negating images of suffocation and burial. In effect, she signifies on them, refusing to contribute to their

livelihood, but prophesizing instead their elimination should they bother her further. That she does so with such gusto amounts to comic irony. Her final retort of "Dig?" offers a condescending, sardonic pun. While the story's ending may establish some sympathy for the youthful Jelly, who thinks of the "hot meals" he's abandoned in Alabama and forgets how to "look cocky and rich" (p. 133), the thrust of the narrative shows a woman who savors her freedom and protects it with the use of her voice.<sup>17</sup>

"Cock Robin Beale Street," another story of the 1940s, evinces Hurston's skill in using a woman's voice in signifying and trickery to frame a story. The work offers a story within a story, the longer story-fable of Cock Robin being framed by one of domestic verbal dueling. The outer casings of the tale reveal a woman verbally combative with her husband. When Uncle July comes home ostensibly angry, A'nt Dooby immediately erects a verbal offense: "July," she challenges, "don't you come in here starting none of your foolishness wid me this day and year of our Lawd! I done told you now!" (p. 122). July recognizes the threat of her dramatic stance and body language—"her fat fists on her abundant hips," and her eyes glaring. While she hasn't yet begun any naming-calling, he can see "names like 'mule' 'fool' 'sea-buzzard' 'groundhog' . . . swimming around in her eyes" (p. 122). Her effrontery causes Uncle July to sit down before exploding with his complaint against the whites, who, he says, think Cock Robin is just a bird. While the subject of the fable may be serious—Robert Hemenway interprets it as a comment on miscegenation (*A Literary Biography*, p. 290)—the story itself is on the surface funny. As he exits his story, Uncle July claims he hasn't had so much fun since he's been "saved." But Aunt Dooby remains suspicious of her husband and his story. "Humph!" she replies, "Old coon for cunning; young coon for running. Now tell me whut you done wid your wages. I know you been up to something. Tell me! You and your Mucky-Ducky Beetle-Bugs!" (p. 126). She suspects the entire story may be a ploy to make her forget it's payday. Her signifying stance indicates her acumen in domestic affairs.

Another verbal dueler appears in "Muttsy," a story written in the 1920s and set in Harlem. The story focuses on Pinkie Jones, an innocent young southern woman, and Muttsy, a lady's man and inveterate gambler who nonetheless has a successful position as a stevedore. Pinkie unwittingly comes to Ma Turner's brothel, mistaking it for a hotel. Although the plot follows the affair of Pinkie and Muttsy, much of the story's color is supplied by the tactics of Ma in her summation of those who frequent her establishment. She maintains her self-respect with her signifying demeanor, often levied against her husband, whose philandering ways are apparent. When he attempts to introduce himself to Pinkie, she says, "Now you jus' shut up! . . . You gointer git yo'teeth knocked down yo'throat yit for runnin' yo' tongue. Lemme talk to dis gal—dis is *mah* house. You sets on the stool un do nothin' too much tuh have anything tuh talk over!" (p. 43). While Ma's demeanor

may strike us as harsh, we soon realize her signifying is an attempt to maintain control of *her* house, thereby making it monetarily profitable. As she complains to Pinkie later, “Heah ah is—got uh man dat hates work lak de devil hates holy water. Ah gotta make dis house pay!” (p. 49). She denies her husband a voice because he fails to contribute to her upkeep. Like Big Sweet, she has the “law in [her] mouth.” Ma is like Hurston’s other female protagonists, who, Hemenway notes in “Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?,” promote themselves because they have the “courage and the verbal techniques to establish [themselves] in something other than a dependent relationship with a man” (p. 145).

Unlike the previously discussed stories, “Drenched in Light” presents a dramatization of the signifying antics of a woman and her grandchild. Largely autobiographical in nature—Grandma Potts in the story shares Hurston’s own grandmother’s name (Hemenway, *A Literary Biography*, p. 11)—the story attracts us with its delineation of Isis Watts, an eleven-year-old girl as vivacious as the story’s title suggests and known by everyone in her community as “the joyful” (p. 17). Her name, reminiscent of the Egyptian nature goddess, is appropriate. In Egyptian mythology Isis tricks Ra, the Creator god, and becomes the most revered of all, known for her immense intelligence and great skills in magic and invention (Boyd, p. 92). The name suggests Hurston’s youthful infatuation with mythology, for as a child, she determined to emulate Hercules and other forceful deities such as Isis. “My soul was with the gods,” she later commented, “and my body in the village” (qtd. in Boyd, p. 38).

The fictional Isis, like the young Hurston in Eatonville, perches on the gatepost to watch travelers making their way to and from Orlando. The “shell road” is her “great attraction,” for eventually she knows it will offer escape and adventure. In some parts celebratory, the story is, according to Boyd, “Hurston’s unapologetic tribute to the impudent, unrefined child she once had been” (p. 91). Often similar to reality in the exactness of its details, the story depicts Isis sporting her grandmother’s red tablecloth for the admiring white visitors, while the real Hurston wore a “red ribbon” and a “red and white checked gingham dress” when she impressed the whites in a hotel in Maitland (p. 36, emphasis added). Additionally, Boyd points out that red was the color associated with the mythical Isis (p. 92). As Hurston’s first national publication, “Drenched in Light” proclaims unabashedly the vitality and assurance that Hurston possessed as a young writer. While other writers of the period may have been searching for their identity, Hurston, as Boyd insightfully notes, “wanted only to be herself” (p. 92).

The story is rich in its verbal combat between Isis and Grandma, the latter vying with Isis and the world for control in her domain. Grandma's voice explodes in the story's first line: "You Isie Watts! Git 'own offen dat gate post an' rake up dis yahd!" (p. 17). The scene offers a stream of invectives from Grandma: "Heah Joel, gimme dat wash stick. Ah'll show dat limb of Satan she kain't shake huhseff at *me*. If she ain't down by de time Ah gets dere, Ah'll break huh down in de lines," and later "You'se too 'oomanish jumpin' up in everybody's face dat pass" (p. 17). Despite the vehemence of Grandma Potts's diatribe, the mischievous Isie outwits her elder in both speech and actions. When Grandma asks her where she's been, the young trickster lies. "Out in de back yahd," she claims and then does a cart wheel and a "few fancy steps" (p. 18), relishing her subterfuge.

After Grandma falls asleep, Isis assumes complete authority. Motivated, she says, by her "pity for her mother's mother," she decides to shave the old woman, ridding her of her unsightly "stragglin' beard" (p. 20). Grandma wakes to find Isis over her, clutching the razor. While the scene has the trappings of the trickster, it also includes mythic overtones of the cutting of another's hair to gain control. Like a trickster also, Isis slips away without punishment, lulled by the music she hears at a nearby barbecue and log-rolling event. She steals Grandma's new red tablecloth to complete her metamorphosis into an exotic gypsy dancer, replete with shawl. Her debut as dancer for the barbecue crowd gives her momentary power in a sphere beyond Grandma's house. When Grandma eventually charges in to regain control, Isis again escapes, this time assuming the guise of a tragic heroine who will drown herself in the creek rather than submit to a whipping. She is a shapeshifting trickster whose signifying provides her desired outcome. Ultimately this "Madame Tragedy," as the admiring white couple dub her, not only escapes her Grandma's retaliation, but gets to perform for another admiring crowd at a nearby hotel.

While some have dismissed this story and other examples of Hurston's early fiction as lacking in complexity, relegating the pieces to her apprenticeship, Susan Meisenholder seems correct in her view that the story "invites" a "more complicated interpretation."<sup>19</sup> The vitality of this early work is akin to that of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the initial publication of which prompted Emerson's now-famous description of the work as "at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start."<sup>20</sup> Here and elsewhere in these early stories Hurston shows admirable skill in employing trickster and signifying techniques in support of a "theme that seems of singular importance to her throughout her career as writer: the quest for female empowerment in a patriarchal world."<sup>21</sup> Granted, "Drenched in Light" offers "joking relationships"<sup>22</sup> and a jocular surface, but the story ultimately concerns manipulation, power, and control. Isis yearns for absolute freedom; she



dreams, like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, of seeing the horizon and being a “delegate to de big ‘ssociation of life.”<sup>23</sup> In Isis’s case, the dream is not only to escape her grandmother’s attempted domestication (“Being the only girl in the family, of course she must wash the dishes,” p. 19), but more importantly she must carve out the psychic space to exult spiritually—to experience a kind of “spiritual transformation” (Samuels, p. 243). According to the work of Lloyd Brown, who sees a relationship between Hurston’s thoughts and Simone de Beauvoir’s studies in psychology in *The Second Sex*, both Hurston and de Beauvoir believe, “It is a female trait . . . to use dreams as a means of transcending rather than resigning to reality.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, according to Gates, dreams—“quasi-dreams” or “daydreams”—also play a significant role in the literature pertinent to the Signifying Monkey, whose tales “can be thought of as versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiasitic fantasies of reversal of power relationships.”<sup>25</sup> Gates concludes, “To dream the fantastic is to dream the dream of the Other” (*The Signifying Monkey*, p. 59).

A close reading of “Drenched in Light” reveals a protagonist given to daydreams and dreaming the “dream of the Other,” which in this case is that of freedom. Lying under her grandma’s table, Isis fantasizes herself as various “personages” sporting flowing dresses and “golden slippers,” riding “white horses . . . to the horizon,” and “gazing over the edge of the world” (p. 19). Later she claims to the “indifferent” white men that she is a “princess” and had been “Hercules and had slain numerous dragons and sundry giants” (pp. 23-24). Perhaps her transgender claim is prompted in part by the men’s “indifference,” but throughout the story Hurston describes Isis’s person and action in traditionally masculine ways. For instance, the “fond” Robinson brothers, the “white cattlemen,” allow her to ride behind them on horses as well as “to crack the long bull whips” (pp. 17-18). (Hurston was to use the latter action in her story “Sweat” two years later in 1926 to depict Sykes’s misogynistic power.) Similarly, Isis whistles, much to the consternation of Grandma Potts who insists that only boys do such. In the scene where she attempts to shave Grandma (a traditionally masculine activity, of course), Hurston notes that even after Grandma wakes up and goes to tell on the children, Isis uses the razor to “shave” the “wooden door jamb.” In a publication of the story entitled “Isis,” she shaves herself.<sup>26</sup> Hurston’s word choice in the shaving scene offers also a strong suggestion that she invests power in this cult of shaving, for Isis holds the razor “clutched cleaver fashion,” and refuses to allow her brother Joel any part except that of applying the lather. “The thing with her,” Hurston writes, “was to *hold* the razor—sufficient in itself” (p. 21). Clearly the razor blade signifies power in Isis’s world, as it does in Big Sweet’s, a world where cunning and force may be necessary ploys to strengthen the voice.

In her next metamorphosis as gypsy dancer, Isis again has absolute

power, as “[n]o one listens” to the speech of the “Grand Exalted Ruler” because they are mesmerized by Isis’s performance (p. 22). At the story’s conclusion, she uses her knowledge and wit to accompany the whites to a world clearly beyond Grandma’s control. While the story’s ending with Grandma’s accepting five dollars to release Isis from punishment and her consent to her granddaughter’s travel may be a racist undermining of her authority, as some critics suggest,<sup>27</sup> the conclusion nonetheless fits the trickster motif. Grandma Potts, schooled in trickery herself, quite willingly accepts five dollars for a one-dollar tablecloth. If the white woman wants to be a fool, Grandma allows it. She perhaps partakes in what Hurston terms, in *Mules and Men*, the “feather-bed” ploy of the trickster (p. 4). Certainly Isis has learned her trickster ways, at least in part from the image her grandmother provides, and as Meisenhelder notes, “emerges from the story finally, not as a racial dupe, but as a figure (like her African goddess namesake) of formidable power and magical words” (p. 7).

While Hurston’s signifying women in the short fiction typically create comic reverberations with their sharp tongues, in “Sweat,” Delia Jones signifies in a darker mode—“humming a song in a mournful key” (p. 73). As Kathryn Lee Seidel appropriately notes, “The story is remarkable in Hurston’s body of work for its harsh, unrelenting indictment of the economic and personal degradation of marriage in a racist and sexist society.”<sup>28</sup> It is also convincingly described by Lillie P. Howard as a “story of marriage gone sour, of hard work and sweat, of adultery, hatred, and death”<sup>29</sup> and by Boyd as a “story of enormous tension, nuance, and complexity” (p. 136). The dark tone and sinister aspects of the story may, in fact, reflect Hurston’s own involvement with an abusive man, according to Boyd (p. 68). Taking the form of a trickster-tricked tale (a structure that Hurston no doubt knew well from her study of folklore), the story provides a compelling heroine in Delia, who supports herself and her husband Sykes as a washwoman for the white community. Significantly, the story opens with a trick: knowing his wife’s terror of snakes, Sykes throws his bull whip at her; “long, round, limp and black,” it falls on her shoulders and slithers to the floor (p. 73). The action both functions as a foreshadowing of his subsequent acquisition of a rattlesnake to kill Delia and alludes to his own feelings of emasculation, for as Hemenway insightfully observes, Sykes’ manipulation of phallic symbols underscores his feelings of inadequacy (*A Literary Biography*, p. 71).

As Boyd notes, the story is a cunning rendition of the biblical myth of Adam and Eve and the serpent (p. 138). Although Delia’s home, which she has paid for herself, may seem Edenic to her—“It was lovely to her,

lovely" (p. 76)—for the fifteen years of her marriage she has lived with a snake in her garden in the form of Sykes, whose name even suggests the hissing of a reptile. Like the mythical Satan, he has become an outcast, in this instance from his wife's love and his community's respect. "He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear" (p. 77), the village men agree. A wife-beater and philanderer, Sykes flaunts his new girlfriend Bertha, whom the porch talkers describe as a "hunk uh liver wid hair on it" (p. 79). Sykes' actions have grown so vile that Delia transfers her church membership rather than share the sacrament with her husband. When Sykes tells her she "looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby" (p. 82), his quip contains an element of truth. She has lived in the presence of his devilish power for years, succumbing, in fact, to "habitual meekness" (p. 75).

On the night of the bull whip incident, however, Delia rallies her determination not to allow Sykes to push her from her home. "Mah tub of suds is filled yo'belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it," she asserts. "Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it." Holding her skillet up as a weapon, she signifies against Bertha: "that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin' with aint comin' heah to pile up on *mah* sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost" (p. 75). That night her signifying takes the form of a prayer, which, alone in bed, she says aloud. Prophetic in nature, the prayer wills Sykes to his own evil. "[W]hatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly," she announces, adding, "Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing" (p. 76). Followed by an "AMEN" in the voice of the narrator, her words seem a prayer for revenge. Sykes will soon literally be under the belly of the snake, or under Old Satan, as Delia calls him.

The rattlesnake, which Sykes brings to the house, represents figuratively his hate and literally his own entrapment. A dim-witted trickster, he calls himself a snake charmer. "He wouldn't bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle 'im," he brags. When Delia begs him to take the snake away, he ominously remarks, "Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin' uh de kin'—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin' but die" (p. 80). The constant presence of the snake cements Delia's will. She tells Sykes she hates him as though he were a "suck-egg dog" (p. 82). The image is appropriate, for as John Lowe notes, "dog" in Black vernacular might refer to a predator of women, who are, of course, the bearers of eggs.<sup>30</sup> The verbal battle heightens between the two, with Delia finally realizing the full power of her own signifying voice. In a culminating attack on his masculinity, she asserts, "Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passel uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings" (p. 82). She mocks his sexual manhood with the comment and then his racial man-

hood in her threat to tell the “white folks” about him.

The following night as Delia makes her way home from church, she prophetically sings an old hymn: “Jurden water, black an’ col’ / Chills de body, not de soul / An’ Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time” (p. 82). The words “crossing Jurden” refer, of course, to death, which the speaker in the song wants to experience “in uh calm time.” Entering her home, she finds the rattlesnake in all its “awful beauty” (p. 83) in her clothes-basket, assuredly put there by Sykes to force her own “crossing of Jordan.” Fleeing the house, Delia climbs into the hay barn loft for safety and hours of intense emotional discord that give birth ultimately to what Hurston calls “an awful calm” (p. 83). The phrase significantly evokes the hymn’s words. When Sykes is bitten by the snake later that morning, his death is the antithesis of calmness, while Delia, when she climbs down from the loft and approaches the bedroom window, does so “without fear now” (p. 84). While Hurston’s narrator tells us at the story’s end that Delia experiences a “surge of pity too strong to support” (p. 85), she nonetheless waits persistently for his death, with her husband knowing that she refuses to help him. Ironically he dies in the light of day, perhaps cursing the light that he had needed so badly earlier, when in the dark with the snake. While he suffers, Delia stretches herself on the “cool earth to recover” by the “four-o’clocks,” whose eyes we assume have not yet opened. As he dies, the light momentarily reflects the hope of his “one open eye” for Delia’s help. Upon her retreat, she waits for his death, knowing “the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew” (p. 85). It was Sykes who must that day be in the “cold river” to cross over Jordan.

The story’s ending of seeming revenge and lack of Christian charity from Delia has occasioned critical debate. Some view Delia, in refusing to help her husband, as compromising her Christian principles, while Myles Hurd argues, “there is no doubt that the protagonist was intended to be an exemplar of [Christian] virtue from its first scenes to its closure.”<sup>31</sup> I suggest that the story is not meant to be one that offers Delia as a symbol of Christian virtue but one that argues for the primacy of existence through allusion to the trickster figure. Hurston’s emphasis is on life, not religion. A passage from the chapter “Religion” from *Dust Tracks* may offer a valuable parallel:

As for me, I do not pretend to read God’s mind. If He has a plan of the universe worked out to the smallest detail, it would be folly for me to presume to get down on my knees and attempt to revise it. That, to me, seems the highest form of sacrilege. So I do not pray. I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny. It seems to me that I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose. I do not expect God to single me out and grant me advantages over my fellow men. Prayer is for those who need

it. Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down. I do not choose to admit weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility. Life, as it is, does not frighten me, since I have made my peace with the universe as I find it, and bow to its laws. (p. 278)

Like Hurston, Delia is busily engaged in “working out” her own “destiny.” As a signifying character Delia is not roused primarily over Sykes’s adultery as a “Christian” woman presumably would be, but mainly over his attempt to seize ownership of her property. For years, she has lived with his philandering, but it is only when she is confronted with losing her house that she fights back. The story opens, in fact, with her signifying about her property: “[W]here you been wid *mah* rig?” she asks and asserts shortly thereafter, “Mah sweat is done paid for this *house* and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it” (pp. 74-75, emphasis added). When she goes to sleep that night, she doesn’t worry over his adultery. It was “[t]oo late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else.” It was, in fact, “[t]oo late for everything except her little *home*” (p. 76, emphasis added). In the same scene in which she appears to offer a prayer (and the Gatesean doubling of text provides an “AMEN”), the “prayer” concerns not God, but the Devil, whose power to circumscribe evil does appear certain: “. . . whatever goes over the Devil’s back, is got to come under his belly” (p. 76). The words of the hymn that she sings returning from church the night of Sykes’s death may in fact signal her wish that he die, for as Hemenway notes, “his evil provided the means for her to fulfill a wish for his death” (*A Literary Biography*, p. 72). She returns, indeed, from a “love feast” to a “hate feast,” where, waiting in the loft of the barn for Sykes to return, she determines to survive no matter the cost, for through her “stalked . . . a cold, bloody rage” and from this, the “awful calm” (p. 83).

That Sykes offers a perversion of religion heightens both his ironic stance and the artistry of the text. In the opening scene of the story, he kicks the clothes that Delia has sorted, “his whole manner hoping, *praying*, for an argument” (p. 74). In the same scene he declares, “Ah done promised Gawd . . . Ah aint gointer have it [white people’s dirty clothes] in mah house” (pp. 74-75). In the scene of his encounter with the snake he ironically cries, “Mah Gawd! . . . ef Ah could on’y strack uh light!” (p. 84), and at the story’s end, “Mah Gawd! . . . Mah Gawd fum Heben!” (p. 85). Crawling before her, he mouthes cries to God, supplicating to the wife he ironically had called a “big fool” and “hypocrite” (p. 74) and had predicted may be “tote[d]” from the house “sooner than [she] expect[ed]” (p. 75).

Sykes’s attitude toward the snake also enriches the psychological complexity of the text. With Freudian overtones, Sykes declares to Delia his preference for the snake over her. “Ah think uh damn sight mo’ uh

him dan you! (p. 80), he tells her. Psychologically the snake constitutes a double for Bertha, for what Sykes really means is that he likes Bertha far better than he likes his wife. Like Bertha, who is a big woman, the snake is the “biggest snake” (p. 80) Delia has ever seen, such a huge snake that Thomas asks, “How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Sykes?” (p. 80). As he has previously done in his sexual encounters with Bertha, Sykes leaps on Delia’s featherbed when he is terrified by the snake, but instead of enjoying the ecstasy of sex, this time he embraces death in the form of the snake.

Contributing as well to the psychological complexity of the story, Delia evinces a transformation in viewing the snake.<sup>32</sup> At first she is terrified of it and can’t bear to look at it. But in a few days she regards it more closely, analyzing its “chalky-white fangs . . . hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second. . . .” (p. 81). That night, surely drawing courage from her confrontation with the snake, she strikes out at Sykes with more fury than her timidity has henceforth allowed. In the following scenes, she almost seems to have a camaraderie with the snake,<sup>33</sup> commenting when she misses it after the love feast, “Whut’s de mattah, ol’ satan, you aint kickin’ up yo’ racket?” (p. 82), and then when she descends from the barn “without fear now,” surmising “Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” (p. 84). The snake becomes her surrogate in her death struggle against Sykes and with its “tremendous whirr” signifies in a manner that strips Sykes of both manhood and life. When she listens outside the window to Sykes’ shrieks, she finds no “recognizable human sound,” but rather the voice of the “maddened chimpanzee” or “stricken gorilla” (pp. 84-85). Drawing from her background in folktales, Hurston reminds us of the sometimes grim realities of would-be tricksters. Mirroring her position in “Religion,” she submits these characters to the laws of the natural world.

In her analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Kathleen Davies argues, in fact, that Hurston uses nature to heighten Janie’s powers as a survivor and ultimately as a trickster character. Nature—in the form of the rabid dog—punishes Tea Cake for his failures. Davies argues that because Hurston wishes to both criticize and protect the black man from white criticism, she uses nature subversively in the text to confront Teacakes’s inadequacies. She concludes that Nature offers “most of the signifyin’.”<sup>34</sup> I argue similarly that Hurston uses nature to signify against Sykes. He is responsible for the snake’s presence and thus subject to nature’s powers. Rather than presenting human or authorial intervention—the porch talkers insist they “oughter kill ‘im [Sykes]” (p. 78)—Hurston subscribes to nature. That she does so, however, does not detract from her female protagonist’s strength. Delia has used her voice to defend her rights as a woman and in the end

relies on the misguided wiles of her trickster husband to gain her psychic and physical survival.

As a variation of the Biblical Adam and Eve story, "Sweat" offers a cogent argument for the ingenuity and determination of Eve as dramatized by Delia. She, like Isis and Janie, evinces a deeply embedded desire for fulfillment. They all follow the advice that Hurston's mother gave her as a child. "Jump at de sun," Lucy Hurston urged. "We might not land on the sun," Zora quoted her mother as reasoning, "but at least we would get off the ground" (qtd. in Boyd, p. 27). Likewise, Hurston's female characters manifest Lucy Hurston's ultimate dictum: "Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll be dying befo' yo' time is out" (qtd. in Boyd, p. 69). One might argue, in fact, that Hurston's stories are in large measure about "self-love," as Boyd posits about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (p. 304). Janie, Isis, and Delia all choose to live. They love themselves enough to value their own life over others, and they all seek to understand themselves and to voice that understanding. The same may be said of the briefer portraits we see of, for example, the witty young woman in "Story in Harlem Slang," Aunt Dooby in "Cock Robin Beale Street," or Ma in "Muttysy."

Whatever the cost, Hurston's female characters evince a determination to survive. Although they use many strategies to preserve themselves, they all share a reliance on vocal, verbal power. The women in her stories of the 1920s as well as those of the 1940s exude a formidable spunk. They are like Hurston herself, whom Harold Bloom compares to a "vitalist," one whose work he maintains "exalts an exuberance that is beauty, a difficult beauty because it participates in reality-testing."<sup>35</sup> Big Sweet, Isis, Delia, and other women in her work raise their voices to affirm what is their birthright, an independent will to create their own beauty—a beauty of life that is both won and guarded by their sharp tongues. It is a beauty carved out of the psychic space of existence and one that draws from the language of possibility for others to emulate.<sup>36</sup> And like Emily Dickinson's persona who draws from the beauty of language and "dwell[s] in Possibility," they too spread their "Hands / To gather Paradise—" (p. 466),<sup>37</sup> or as Janie terms it, gather the horizon "like a great fish-net. . . . So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (p. 286).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; rpt., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 33. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Hurston, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), p. xi. Subsequent references to editorial com-



ments or to the stories are to this edition (unless otherwise noted) and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "Zora Neale Hurston and The Speakerly Text," in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 170-216, for the consideration of doubling voices. This paper focuses mainly on the characters' voices but acknowledges the relevance of the narrators' voices in terms of narrative frame and characterizations. I argue throughout that both voices possess techniques of the trickster, as manifested in aspects of the plot as well as in Hurston's use of language. Valerie Boyd and others describe Hurston's acquisition of the trickster voice, of her knowledge of "signifying, specifying, playing the dozens—from growing up in Eatonville"; see Boyd's *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 71. Boyd argues that Hurston became a "prankster and wags herself" (p. 71). Hurston seems to have viewed the world in part in terms of trickery. For example, in describing her father's disappointment that she was not a boy, she said, "I don't think he ever got over the *trick* he felt that I played on him by getting born a girl, and while he was off from home at that" (qtd. in Boyd, p. 18, emphasis added). Subsequent references to Boyd will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hemenway, "Foreword," *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, ed. Hemenway, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 86-87. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Several critics have suggested Big Sweet as a model for Hurston's fictional characters. See Wall, "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; Wall writes: "The portrayal of Big Sweet anticipates the process of self-discovery Hurston's fictional heroines undergo. Like her, they must learn to manipulate language" (p. 83). See also Hemenway, "Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?" in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: MLA, 1978), p. 145: "Her heroines also owe much to 'Big Sweet' . . ." Trudier Harris notes that although Big Sweet is a "bad woman, we willingly tolerate [her] because of the protective role into which Hurston writes her in the text"; see *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 12. While Hurston depicts Big Sweet as guarding her, Boyd indicates that Hurston had the potential herself to fight. Boyd describes Hurston's encounter with her stepmother Mattie: "Zora pinned Mattie against a wall and pounded her face with unrelenting fists. Mattie fought back, but Zora's unswerving hatred of her stepmother was an indefatigable opponent" (p. 63).

<sup>8</sup> Maria Tai Wolff, "Listening and Living: Reading and Experience in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, p. 223.



<sup>9</sup> Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 1031.

<sup>10</sup> Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expressions," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 1042.

<sup>11</sup> Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 236-37. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Brown, Jr.'s poem "Signifyin' Monkey," in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*, ed. Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 457, reveals Monkey's typical stance. After causing Lion to be beaten by elephant through deception, the trickster shouts: "Give you a beatin' that was rough enough; / You' s'posed to be king of the jungle, aint't dat some stuff? / You big overgrown pussycat! Don' choo roar / Or I'll hop down there an' whip you some more." By tricking Lion into believing Elephant defamed his family, Monkey has brought about Lion's beating. Monkey, thus, signifies in several ways, but he has tricked Lion ultimately through duality of meaning. One can readily appreciate Gates's opinion that the Signifying Monkey tales find origins in slavery (*Signifying Monkey*, p. 51).

<sup>13</sup> Carla Kaplan, "Introduction," *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Pearlle Mae Fisher Peters, *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 4. See generally Roger D. Abrahams, "Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women," *Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (1975), 58-80, rpt. in "Sweat": *Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 73-106, where he outlines what he believes to be a basic difference between the ways perceived threats are handled by Euro-Americans and African Americans. He argues that the former groups' communication strategy typically minimizes conflict, striving for a kind of "closure within the scenes," while the latter group approaches opposition as constant irritation that cannot be denied. Instead, the opposition affords them a "sense of cultural affirmation of community through a dramatization of opposing forces" (p. 79).

<sup>15</sup> See "How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories," in *Best-Loved Folktales of the World*, selected by Joanna Cole (New York: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 620-23.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Van Sertima, "Trickster, The Revolutionary Hero," in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*, ed. Linda Goss and Marian E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd offers an interesting story of the young Hurston's ability to take care of herself when approached by a "ladies' man" in an elevator in Harlem in the 1920s: "The unfortunate fellow made an overly aggressive move, and Zora . . . coldcocked him with a roundhouse right that left him sprawled on the elevator floor." Boyd adds that Hurston "calmly stepped over" him and "went on to her party" (p. 130). The story suggests that Hurston could replicate Big Sweet's aggressive manner as well as her "signifying" language.

<sup>18</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 290. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 5. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. See also Rosalie Murphy Baum, "The Shape of Hurston's Fiction," in *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), pp. 94-109. Baum also argues there is "an apparent, misleading simplicity" in this story (p. 95). Similarly, in "'The Ring of Singing Metal on Wood': Zora Neale Hurston's Artistry in 'The Gilded Six-Bits,'" *Mississippi Quarterly*, 49, No. 3 (1996), 775-90, Nancy Chinn and Elizabeth E. Dunn argue for the artistic complexity of another of Hurston's early short stories, "The Gilded Six-Bits," which they maintain is more complicated than simply a "straightforward tale of love, betrayal, and reconciliation" (p. 790).

<sup>20</sup> See "Walt Whitman," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al., 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Vol. B (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 2129.

<sup>21</sup> Wilfred D. Samuels, "The Light at Daybreak: Heterosexual Relationships in Hurston's Short Stories," in *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Gloria L. Cronin (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), p. 240. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>22</sup> John Lowe, "Hurston, Humor, and the Harlem Renaissance," in *Harlem Renaissance Re-examined: A Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. Victor A. Kramer and Robert A. Russ (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1997), p. 314.

<sup>23</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 18. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd W. Brown, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Nature of Female Perception," *Obsidian*, 4, No. 3 (1978), 39. I am indebted to Samuels for pointing out the appropriateness of Brown's comment for this story (pp. 243-44).

<sup>25</sup> Gates, Jr. offers the following couplet as example: "The Monkey laid up in a tree and he thought up a scheme, / and thought he'd try one of his fantastic dreams" (*The Signifying Monkey*, p. 59).

<sup>26</sup> An edition of the story entitled "Isis," in Hurston, *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island Foundation, 1985), reads, "Isis shaved and replaced it in the box" (p. 14). "Drenched in Light," in *The Complete Stories*, reads, "Isis shaved some slivers from the door jamb with the razor and replaced it in the box" (p. 21).

<sup>27</sup> See Laurie Champion, "Socioeconomics in Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston," *The Southern Quarterly*, 40, No. 1 (2001), 79-92. Champion argues that in this scene, "Hurston exposes the unequal distribution of wealth by illustrating opposing degrees of economic privilege" (p. 81).

<sup>28</sup> Seidel, "The Artist in the Kitchen: The Economics of Creativity in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" in *Zora in Florida*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Lillie P. Howard, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 74.

<sup>31</sup> Myles Raymond Hurd, "What Goes Around Comes Around: Characterization, Climax and Closure in Hurston's 'Sweat,'" *The Langston Hughes Review*, 12, No. 2 (1993), 9.

<sup>32</sup> In an analysis of Janie Crawford, Michael G. Cooke, "The Beginnings of

Self-Realization,” in *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), writes: “The more she is threatened, the more resourceful she becomes. The more she is deprived, the more self-sufficient she becomes. That inner stability and outer indomitability mark her off from anything that has gone before; these traits will not appear again before Alice Walker’s *Meridian* in the 1970s” (pp. 139-40). In terms of fortitude and resourcefulness, I see Delia as a kind of understudy for Janie, the former also growing in strength with each instance of Sykes’ cruelty as represented by the snake. While the text indicates Delia feels “a surge of pity” (p. 85) for Sykes when he is bitten by the snake, that “pity” underscores her humanity in contrast to Sykes’ cruelty and strengthens her determination to live.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Hurston records in *Dust Tracks* that as a child she was never afraid of snakes: “They fascinated me in a way which I still cannot explain. I got no pleasure from their death” (p. 56).

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Davies, “Zora Neale Hurston’s Poetics of Embalment: Articulating the Rage of Black Women and Narrative Self-Defense,” *African American Review*, 26, No. 1 (1992), 151.

<sup>35</sup> Bloom, “Introduction,” *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> See McKay, “‘Crayon Enlargements of Life’: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography,” in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 51-70. McKay writes: “The autobiographical ‘I’ in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* finds self and voice in forging a new history constructed out of the handing down of one woman’s story of liberation to another” (p. 68). Certainly this statement rings true for all of Hurston’s female protagonists.

<sup>37</sup> Emily Dickinson, “I dwell in Possibility,” #466, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 215.