Insider and Outsider, Black and American: 
Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston’s
Caribbean Ethnography

Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo

Scholars in a variety of academic fields, including anthropology, literature, and linguistics, have lauded Zora Neale Hurston’s role as a radical pioneer in their respective disciplines. Anthropologist Gwendolyn Mikell, creative writer Alice Walker, literary critic and theorist Françoise Lionnet, and sociolinguist and literary critic/theorist Karla Holloway all praise the “deep structures” of Hurston’s oeuvre.\(^1\) The amount of scholarly attention paid to Zora Neale Hurston’s work has simply exploded in the last two decades, particularly after Alice Walker’s publication of her odes (essays) to (on) Hurston in the late 1970s.\(^2\) Robert Hemenway’s pioneering biography of Hurston has been complemented by the publication of several other biographical, bibliographical, and critical collections.\(^3\) My essay builds on this solid foundation by investigating Hurston’s approach to constructing and articulating community in her collection of African American folklore, \textit{Mules and Men} (1935). It diverges significantly from previous Hurston scholarship, though, by reading \textit{Tell My Horse} (1938), and Hurston’s engagement with the Caribbean therein, as both a site for the working out of the problems of racial and national community as well as of anthropological methodology in \textit{Mules}, and as a textual representation of difficulties with transnational engagements that the singular national frame of \textit{Mules} elides. This essay intervenes in the contemporary discourse on transnationalism by emphasizing both the specific processes by which transnational engagements are enacted.
and the challenges implicit therein. Such transnational engagements are born of the juggling of multiple affinities, multiple ideologies, and multiple modes of defining the self and engaging the other. Transnational black studies scholarship must be attentive to this and delve into both the disparities and the similarities between black communities.

Zora Neale Hurston tells the stories of black folk in the United States and the Caribbean while toeing and transgressing the lines marking various national, racial, and intellectual borders. Hurston emerges as both the subject and the purveyor of these tales. Just as she crafts these stories for presentation to her readers and figures herself within them, so too does she “tell stories” and construct truth in her autobiographical-anthropological writings. As Arnold Rampersad points out, for example, Hurston purposefully erased ten years of her life from her public and published persona’s history. Pamela Bordelon reveals the striking fact that Hurston fabricated the story of Eatonville as her birthplace. She traces Hurston to Notasulga, Alabama, and explicitly states: “Being identified with the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, rather than with the sharecropping and tenant-farming plains of rural Alabama was more in keeping with the image of herself that she was trying to create.”

It is this concern with crafting a particularly configured image that makes reading Hurston’s anthropological and/or autobiographical work such a difficult yet fascinating endeavor. Hurston went to college at Howard and then worked under famed anthropologist Franz Boas at Barnard College of Columbia University. She simultaneously spun literary and anthropological careers, based on her commitment to spotlighting and revealing the uniqueness of black cultures. Undergirding her work, though, lies her struggle with the tension between her desire to represent her (black) community and to find her own voice. That struggle takes place as much in her engagements and representations of U.S. black people and cultures as it does in her engagements and representations of Caribbean black people and cultures.

In order to reveal the mechanics of this struggle, this essay considers the following questions: (1) What techniques does Hurston employ to identify grounds of African American community in *Mules and Men*? (2) Which grounds of community are especially important to her? (3) How must she/reconfigure those grounds when she engages with non-U.S. black communities? My implicit argument is that paying careful attention to Hurston’s engagements with the Caribbean is as important to understanding her scholarly and writerly selves as reading her U.S.-centered novels and scholarship. Hurston’s (re)presentations of the Caribbean in *Tell My Horse* reflect, belie, and magnify the tensions between community membership, anthropological voice, and cultural geographical proximity or distance that surface in *Mules and Men*. A comparison between her approach at home and that abroad is further begged by the fact that Hurston explicitly names familiarity as an impetus for her anthropology at home at the beginning of *Mules*: “Ah come to collect some old
stories and tales and Ah know y’all know a plenty of ’em and that’s why Ah headed straight for home.” That statement inspires the question of what she does when that driving force of familiarity is not available to her.

**Zora in Eatonville**

Hurston begins her study with her homefolks in Eatonville, Florida, and progressively engages subjects further and further away, until she ends up in New Orleans. Her struggle with the tension between her voice and that of her community is multiplied by her affiliation with anthropology and her negotiation between the objective voice the discipline traditionally demanded and the homegirl voice emanating from her sense of connection to the communities she studies. *Mules and Men* shows her developing approach to speaking in an anthropological voice while simultaneously negotiating personal, racial, and/or geographical distance and/or proximity from/to her subjects.

Hurston’s ethnography of Eatonville reads as much like a tale of romantic homecoming as it does like an anthropological study. In fact, Hurston indicates that she chose to collect in Eatonville first precisely because she knew everyone and knew that everyone would help her: “I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm, or danger” (*Mules* 2). From this initial stage of planning her research methodology onward, Hurston “flips the script” that requires the anthropologist to study “other” cultures, cultures that are not her own, that are either faraway or close exotic or primitive cultures. Contemporary anthropologist James Clifford launches an extensive critique of the traditional approach: “In much traditional ethnography, the ethnographer has localized what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins the external relations and displacements of a culture.”

Hurston explicitly states: “I realized that I was new myself, so it looked sensible for me to choose familiar ground” (*Mules* 1). That she chooses to go home speaks to a nascent radical conception that anthropological voice and membership in the community under study are not necessarily mutually exclusive—that one can engage in solid anthropological work and be “kin to” the subjects. Cheryl Wall argues that anthropology enabled Hurston to write even richer literary texts because it “allowed Hurston to appreciate the Eatonville experience intellectually as well as intuitively” and “freed Hurston from the need to defend her subjects’ alleged inferiority.” Gwendolyn Mikell similarly asserts that anthropology “made it possible for her to give so abundantly to literature.” While from one perspective that certainly holds true, anthropology also added certain “rules of engagement.” It demanded that she use her manners and that she refrain from speaking only as an insider who knew about the community from experience. Hurston had to balance this deeper appreciation with those rules.
Language As Link

Language (U.S. black Floridian vernacular in particular) is a major medium through which Hurston illustrates her connectedness to the people of Eatonville (both to them and to her readers). She imagines her comeuppance if she presented herself to the people of Eatonville as somehow better than them: “They’d stand flat footed and tell me that they didn’t have me, neither my sham-polish, to study ’bout” (Mules 2).

The fascinating aspect of the vernacular in *Mules and Men* is that Hurston reflects it not only in the orthography of her subjects’ words but in the spelling of her own words as well, in the replication of her own voice. She refuses to silence her voice as a member of the community in order to gain the appearance of an authentically distanced anthropological voice. When one of the men is taking too long to tell a story, Hurston rejoins “You gointer tell it or you gointer spend de night tellin’ us you gointer tell it? I asked” (47). By choosing to reproduce her comment in an orthographically marked vernacular, she goes beyond simply drawing the reader’s attention to her participation in the “joinin,” a goal that could have been accomplished easily with a standard Anglicization of her words. Instead she emphasizes her place as a member of the community who has enough standing to “crack” on someone without being “cursed out” as presumptuous. Karla Holloway notes that in Hurston’s novels, “the use of dialect . . . functions to deepen the level of communication between characters who share the dialect.”

11 Dialect takes on a similar role in *Mules and Men*; through her language, Hurston constructs and articulates her community.

Hurston does, however, while refusing to fully standard-Anglicize her words here, also mark the greater proximity to standard English that she can achieve. This marking reflects not only Hurston’s northern, now (upper) classed educated self but also, as evidenced by her placement of the fully standard English “I asked” at the end of her vernacular statement, her desire to demonstrate her linguistic and perspectival flexibility. She does not say “I aks,”12 as she could spell *asked* in U.S. black vernacular, and as she does in recalling a story she was told—“Peter ast John” (*Mules* 12), nor does she say “you gonna tell it” or “you’re going to tell it.” Her choice of “gointer” and “asked” suggests a specific approach to presenting herself in this text. Showing that she can move in and out of objective anthropological outsider and the homegirl insider voices proves fundamental to that approach.

Race As Bond

Race, particularly her conception of “the Negro,” serves as another community identifying marker for Hurston. In the introduction, for example, she identifies herself with “we,” the Negroes. She writes:

The negro, in spite of his open faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that
satisfies the white person. . . . The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is 
always trying to know into somebody else’s business. . . . He can read my writing 
but he sho’ can’t read my mind.” (3)

It is significant that Hurston engages in this type of community/self identification in 
the introduction, because doing so actually positions her as part of a centered, black 
“us” and her white readers as members of an objectified, passive “them.” As she 
instantiates the text, she indicates her refusal to downplay her blackness and her con-
nections to the communities she is studying. She repeats “we” and “our” several 
times, making her identification unmistakable.

Hurston even goes further than naming her connections to Eatonville as 
home by explicitly expressing how much better her town is than the other sur-
rounding ones. She brags, “when we got there the party was young . . . but the spot 
needed some social juices to mix the ingredients. In other words, they had the car-
cass of a party lying around up until the minute Eatonville burst in on it. Then it 
woke up” (14). This statement is a step beyond simply showing that she can speak the 
language, beyond speaking the language in her anthropological narration, and 
behind a general racial “us” and “them.” In asserting her town’s place at the top of 
the “juice” hierarchy, Hurston identifies her community as based on a site of origin. 
That focus on the site of origin in her conception of community also has an under-
lying racial aspect. In fact, she uses a commentary connecting race and town purity 
to denigrate the town that she and the other Eatonvilleans have to liven up. She 
describes Woodbridge by saying: “It is a Negro community joining Maitland on the 
north as Eatonville does on the west, but no enterprising souls have ever organized 
it. They have no schoolhouse, no post office, no mayor. It is lacking in Eatonville’s 
feeling of unity. In fact, a white woman lives there” (13). She begins by marking the 
community as black and tying it to Eatonville, suggesting a transtown, racially based 
connection. She implies that she views the two towns as parallel because they are 
both black communities (as well as because they both physically adjoin Maitland). 
She perceives Woodbridge’s diffuse character as exemplified by a white woman’s liv-
ing there, implying, therefore, that her Eatonville town pride is also related to the 
racial purity of the town. The statement’s structure proves meaningful because 
Hurston does not explicitly attribute the other town’s lack of unity to the fact that the 
white woman lives there. Rather, she positions the white woman’s presence as simulta-
aneously precluding and emblematizing the lack of unity. The grounds of commu-
nity that she puts forth here, then, are at once racial and spatial.

Her negative commentary on Woodbridge also shows her definitions of com-
community becoming more hierarchical (and more fraught) as she moves away from 
Eatonville. Looking/going outward produces and heightens her tendency toward 
identificatory binarism, toward articulating one’s own identificatory pride or affiliation 
by denigrating the other.
Zora in Florida

After leaving the Eatonville area, Hurston goes into Polk County. Her homefolks from Eatonville suggest that she go to there “to git de bes’ lies” (55). Polk County, unlike Eatonville, is unfamiliar territory for Hurston. She begins the section by indicating her familiarity with the area, but this time it is not personal. She does not know Polk County because she has never been there. Her personal connection to it exists only in memories of songs, so she employs the songs, symbolic of her personal connection to the area, to mark her familiarity with it: “How often had I heard ‘Polk County Blues.’ You don’t know Polk County lak Ah do. Anybody been dere, tell you de same thing too” (59). Voicing her familiarity with a research site as evidenced here seems to be a key part of Hurston’s anthropological approach. Her reference to only knowing Polk County through “tell,” highlights an immediate epistemological distance between Hurston and that area which did not exist between her and Eatonville. As a result of her marking of distance, we, now, as the audience of her skillful storytelling, are eager to see how she negotiates this distance. Hurston sets the stage for her storytelling in a fashion quite similar to a suspense novel writer leading up to the denouement. Our heroine must now figure out how to craft an anthropological voice in relation to a community that she feels a general connection to but that is not hers, her origin, in the sense that Eatonville was. Hurston establishes that voice by representing her drive to find ways to close the distance between herself and Polk County.

She makes a point, in this reconstruction, of how much that epistemological distance bothers her. Very early on in her trip, this distance comes to the fore. She ends up staying at a boarding house her first night, and is frustrated by other guests’ frostiness toward her. She comments, “Very little was said directly to me and when I tried to be friendly there was a noticeable disposition to fend me off. This worried me because I saw at once that this group of several hundred Negroes from all over the South was a rich field for folk-lore, but here was I figuratively starving to death in the midst of plenty” (60). Clearly, Hurston shows herself to be immensely troubled by the distance. Her use of the metaphor of starvation speaks loudly to that. That she is upset because of the folklore that she will be hindered from collecting, rather than because these are her (racial and state) people rejecting her, illustrates both the detachment with which she approaches the people of Polk County and her expectation that racial commonality should encourage black research subjects to let her in more easily than they would a white person. From Hurston’s perspective, the people of Polk County should see her blackness before they see anything else about her, including her anthropological intentions.

It turns out, as she is eventually told by one of her Eatonville traveling companions, that the primary reason for the people’s frostiness is that they think she is “a
revenue officer or a detective of some kind” and “most of them were either fugitives from justice” or had been in jail. Her “shiny gray Chevrolet” did nothing to quell this fear (60–61). What Hurston does with this information, though, speaks volumes about her approach to doing anthropology among “her people.” She writes, “I took occasion that night to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive from justice, ‘bootlegging.’ They were hot behind me in Jacksonville and they wanted me in Miami. So I was hiding out. That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. I was taken in” (61). So Hurston lies, and perhaps even more importantly, shows herself to use lying, in order to be welcomed as a member of the community. The tremendous value that she places on doing anthropology from the inside, as an accepted member of a community, is clearly evidenced in her decision to construct a personality who would receive unquestionable acceptance. In this section of *Mules*, she creates the image of herself as one willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve the insider position. Ironically, though, it is precisely the fact that she has to engage in such contrivances that highlights her status as an outsider. Although Hurston expresses a racial and geographic basis for her sense of community, her anthropological purpose comes to dominate her approach to defining community as she moves further away from Eatonville.

While she is still in Florida, her use of black vernacular is evident both in her conversations with the people of Polk County and occasionally in her narration of what is happening around her. She blends her vernacular fiction writing voice and her standard English anthropological voice beautifully when she writes, “about that time you see a light in every shack. Every kitchen is scorching up fat-back and hoe-cake. . . . Break your hoe-cake half in two. . . . Pour meat grease in your plate with plenty of cane syrup. . . . Grab your dinner bucket and hit the grit. Don’t keep the straw-boss waiting” (67). The standard English narrative voice appears more in her detailing of her research in Polk County than in that of Eatonville. It is important to remember here that Hurston is relanguaging her experience as she is reconstructing it. Her linguistic choices function as markers of her perception of the relationship between language and credibility/authenticity, as well as between language and reader interest. The increased presence of the descriptive voice suggests that she feels the need to explain this place, Polk County, indicating her underlying sense of its relative foreignness to her. That the narrative voice at the beginning of the Polk County section speaks more in standard English reinforces that marking, distinguishes her from her vernacular speaking subjects, and aligns her with ethnically unmarked standard English speaking U.S. readership. For example, she writes:

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

Here we have a layering of the anthropological, the sexual, and the touristic. The wonder in her voice, emphasized by her use of “beautiful,” “magnificent,” “marvelous” arises from a combination of those lenses and implies a sense of distance, whether momentary or more long-term, on the observer’s part. In other words, these activities and bodies would likely not appear so strikingly “beautiful,” “magnificent,” and “marvelous” to one who was part of the community of workers; they would be the everyday norm. The image evoked by Hurston’s words is that of a person staring open-mouthed at the workers while they do their daily tasks. Regardless of which of the three above-mentioned reasons for the wonder are in play, the observer sees the workers as other, as the objects of her gaze, whether only in that moment or in general. Nothing in Hurston’s statement implies a feeling of racial connectedness to the workers. Within this section, Hurston speaks both as an insider and as an outsider. The above-mentioned vernacular referencing narrative statement (hoe-cakes, etc.), which situates her within the community, follows on the page after her comment about the swamp crew. So, within the space of two pages, Hurston defines herself as part of and apart from the community she is studying. She constructs a narrative of engagement with the Polk County other that incorporates both distance/detachment and proximity/affinity. She continually moves in and out of both conceptual loci. Most of the Florida sections reproduce the words and stories of black Floridians with whom Hurston engages, rather than offer a detached narration of the events and folktales. Beth Harrison highlights Hurston’s role in pioneering this approach to ethnography, particularly her merging of the “act of observation” and the “reportage of data” in the construction of *Mules and Men*. Hurston strikes a balance between detailing the folkloric facts that her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason wanted and embracing her own connection to the communities.

*Mules and Men*, to this point, clearly illustrates the extent to which Hurston values, and perhaps overvalues, the importance of being part of a community to doing “good” anthropology. It further highlights her desire to script herself as an insider in this public, published discourse. She wants her readers to recognize her authenticity. Conversely yet simultaneously, she has moments in which she expresses distance in order to shore up her authority. Hurston continually walks the line between authenticating herself linguistically and epistemologically and disidentifying with the various communities she engages—creating an alternative voice that is neither wholly insider nor outsider. Whether she maintains this approach when she goes even further out of her geographical, cultural, and epistemological (comfort) zone remains to be seen.
Zora in New Orleans

The section entitled "Hoodoo" in *Mules and Men* constituted a last-minute addition and, perhaps partially because it was not written just for the book, is structured quite differently from the Florida sections. Stylistically, it contains more of Hurston's narrative and relies less directly on the folk source discourse. In her reconstruction of her research in New Orleans, Hurston seems less interested in collecting and reproducing general Louisiana folklore than in learning and providing as much information as she can about the specific religion of hoodoo. She presents becoming a part of the community of hoodoo followers as easier for her than becoming a part of the Polk County community. Whereas she mentions the immediate resistance the residents of Polk County seemed to have toward her as a foreigner, she does not initially refer to encountering any such walls in New Orleans: “Now I was in New Orleans and I asked. They told me Algiers, the part of New Orleans that is across from the river to the west. I went there and lived for four months and asked” (*Mules* 191). She asks. They tell her. She goes and lives there. There is no hint that the transition from one step to the next was difficult in any way. Her tone is so matter of fact as to almost appear nonchalant. Hurston presents herself as gaining immediate entry into the community, as being an insider. She reports her multiple initiations by hoodoo doctors in a similar tone: “When I found out about Turner, I had already studied under five two-headed doctors and had gone thru an initiation ceremony with each” (191). Her chosen words insinuate that she was already an insider, that she was already intimately familiar with hoodoo. That she specifically states that she “had gone thru an initiation ceremony with each,” going further than simply referring to having known some hoodoo doctors, emphasizes her investment in constructing herself as an insider. The Hurston who writes *Mules and Men* is not comfortable with being seen by those in the communities or her readers as an outsider. Part of Hurston's attitude is certainly attributable to her white advisor's (Franz Boas) and her white patron's (Charlotte Osgood Mason) valuation of her as an insider who can tap into and write about blackness in a way that they cannot. For them, she is and must be authentically black and therefore able to automatically know and understand black communities everywhere. Boas, for example, wrote: “It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life.”17 He focuses on her status as a racial insider with the black communities she writes on, and on her ability to get herself inside. Through her writing, she allows him access to the “inner life” of Negroes.18

Hurston appears to resist this expectation when she ultimately refrains from presenting her entrance into the New Orleans hoodoo community as completely
untroubled. She writes, “So I asked Turner to take me as a pupil. He was very cold. In fact he showed no eagerness even to talk with me. He feels so sure of his powers and seeks no one. He refused to take me as a pupil and in addition to his habitual indifference I could see he had no faith in my sincerity. I could see him searching my face for whatever was behind what I said” (Mules 191–92). Here, Hurston chooses to include a moment in which she is not so easily accepted, in which she is read as an outsider despite her racial and religious connection. She tells us that Turner does not immediately welcome her as kin. Her action could be read as the rebellious surfacing of the process undergirding her community building and the articulation of anthropological methodology. It could be interpreted as her refusal to pretend that gaining access to these communities was easy. Her subsequent statements, however, undercut these readings and suggest that there is more than resistance happening in her revelation here. She continues:

The City of New Orleans has a law against fortune telling, hoodoo doctors and the like, and Turner did not know me. He asked me to excuse him as he was waiting upon someone in the inner room. I let him go but I sat right there and waited. When he returned, he tried to shoo me away by being rude. I stayed on. Finally he named an impossible price for tuition. I stayed and dickered. He all but threw me out, but I stayed and urged him. I made three more trips before he would talk to me in any way that I could feel encouraged. He talked about Marie Leveau because I asked. I wanted to know if she was really as great as they told me. So he enlightened my ignorance and taught me. We sat before the soft coal fire in his grate. (192)

Hurston seems to need to explain why Turner does not immediately accept her, implying that his behavior requires explanation, that it is somehow strange. Her explanation aligns her with him and marks how much she understands (him). What it also illuminates, though, is her desire to explain why her great skill at getting inside has not worked. Her specifying of the reason he asks her to excuse him reinforces that interpretation. The rest of the statement is constructed as a tug-of-war that Hurston eventually wins. Her choice of the word let, as in “I let him go,” illustrates the presence of this power struggle. She mentions returning three times, condensing those three trips into one sentence, and then suddenly constructs the battle as over: “He talked about Marie Leveau because I asked.” Now he talks because she asks. He teaches her. They sit comfortably together. He starts talking, and Hurston has his direct words completely fill the next several pages. Abruptly, his resistance has disappeared, suggesting the triumph of the prowess Boas praises. Hurston creates a narrative of the ease with which she can come to be perceived as an insider, an approach she replicates throughout the text.

Although Hurston mentions the secrecy of hoodoo initiates, she goes on to
detail many aspects of each of her initiations. The tension between her insider’s silence and her desire to reveal completely surfaces here. She does not tell everything in *Mules and Men*, saying, “I studied under Turner five months and learned all of the Leveau routines; but in this book all of the works of any doctor cannot be given” (202). Hurston tells us that she has gained insider’s knowledge, but then she withholds it from us. In part, this statement authenticates her place as an insider, as one who is not only invested in the community but who is also a member of it and therefore holds its secrets. Here she positions herself as an insider who is bestowing on her readers, the outsiders, only a tidbit of all the insider’s information possible.

Implicit in Hurston’s mention of her studying and learning, though, is an acknowledgment that she did not already know the mysteries of hoodoo. She presents herself as eventually learning from the doctors, thereby calling attention to the process by which she moves from outsider to insider. That she so briefly mentions that process suggests that she is as uncomfortable with revealing her lack of knowledge in New Orleans as she was in Polk County. In both cases, she also constructs the process of moving from outsider to insider as a significant achievement. Of her “getting in” in Polk County after she flirts with local men, dances with one of them, and flatters one by asking him to play “John Henry,” she writes, “before Joe Willard lifted me down from the table I knew that I was in the inner circle. I had first to convince the ‘job’ that I was not an enemy in the person of the law; and second, I had to prove that I was their kind. ‘John Henry’ got me over my second hurdle” (65). She has done the work of convincing, and with the help of “John Henry,” she has reached her goal.

The celebratory tone that accompanies the representation of her entry into the Polk County community becomes a rather calm, matter-of-fact one when she writes on her entry into the hoodoo community. A comparison of the above Polk County–related statement and the one she makes when she enters into the hoodoo community bears out this difference: “So he enlightened my ignorance and taught me. We sat before the soft coal fire in his grate” (192). Here Hurston is almost humble because neither she nor Boas expect her to begin her research on hoodoo knowing all about it and its practitioners. Even Boas makes the distinction in his foreword, locating the “great merit” of Hurston’s work in the fact “that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood” as well as that fact that she “has been equally successful in gaining the confidence of the voodoo doctors.”19 The phrases “as one of them” and “gaining the confidence of” imply opposite positionalities—the first describes an insider, whereas the second suggests a person who needs to work to get inside. Boas does not expect inherent familiarity because Louisiana is not her home state, and because, significantly for this project, her research subject consists of a particular religion with very definite secret rules and rites, not just a racial commu-
nity she belongs to. She has to be initiated in order to know, and therefore does not expect to know before she has been initiated. This variation in approach produces a narrative that reads quite differently than the Florida sections do. Her narrative demeanor is markedly more passive when she describes her initiations, but just as markedly more dominating in the other parts of her scripted recollection, as we have seen in her insistent staying when Turner has made it clear that he wants her to leave. First, in her description of one of her initiations, she says:

I was stretched again upon the couch. Turner approached me with two brothers. . . . With ceremony Turner painted the lightning symbol on my back from my right shoulder to my left hip. . . . I was now dressed in the new underwear and a white veil was placed over my head, covering my face, and I was seated in a chair. . . . Many came into the room and performed ceremonial acts, but none spoke to me. Nor could I speak to them while the veil covered my face. (200)

From one angle, the tone of passivity emanates from the very nature of the initiation itself. From another, however, when compared to her “initiation” into the Polk County black community, this quotation reveals her greater willingness to proceed patiently through the rites that lead to membership in the hoodoo community. In Polk County, Hurston was impatient and resolved to go as far as lying in order to gain quick acceptance in the community. The implication is that Hurston views a community based on religion as much less permeable than one based on shared geographical location or more general cultural referents and history. Her lying in Polk County marks her acknowledgment of the greater difficulty there as the alacrity with which she moves from initiation to initiation indicates her belief in the relative ease here.

Hurston begins the New Orleans section with a short history of hoodoo. No such introduction exists for either her Eatonville or Polk County chapters. The question of why she feels the need to introduce this section and not the others is key to understanding her later engagements with non-U.S. black cultures. Comparing her introductions to each chapter sheds light on her reasons. She begins the Eatonville section with the words, “As I crossed the Maitland-Eatonville township line I could see a group on the store porch. I was delighted. The town had not changed. Same love of talk and song. . . . Yes, there was George Thomas, Calvin Daniels, Jack and Charlie Jones, Gene Brazzle, B. Moseley and ‘Seaboard” (7). The Polk County section starts, “Twelve miles below Kissimmee I passed under an arch that marked the Polk County line. I was in the famed Polk County. How often had I heard ‘Polk County Blues.’ You don’t know Polk County lak Ah do. Anybody been dere, tell you de same thing too” (59). The introductory paragraphs to the hoodoo/New Orleans section read:
Winter passed and caterpillars began to cross the road again. I had spent a year in gathering and culling over folk-tales. I loved it, but I had to bear in mind that there was a limit to the money to be spent on the project, and as yet, I had done nothing about hoodoo.

So I slept a night, and the next morning I headed my toenails toward Louisiana and New Orleans in particular. New Orleans is now and has ever been the hoodoo capital of America. Great names in rites that vie with those of Hayti in deeds that keep alive the powers of Africa.

Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself, such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.

Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.

The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. (183)

Hurston’s valuation of presenting herself as an insider reappears here. In each case, she finds a way to point out her bond to, and even membership in the community under study. In the first quotation, she illustrates her familiarity with Eatonville and the people there with a striking specificity (the names). She is less familiar with Polk County, but she finds one thing that connects her to that place and uses it to mark her familiarity. It takes Hurston many sentences to express her connection to the hoodoo community of New Orleans, to explicitly identify with a hoodoo community “we.” Her bond is insinuated in several of the previous sentences, though. One therefore finds a tension here between her expression of a bond and the distance evident in the informative tone. The sentence, “Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion,” exemplifies this tension. Here, Hurston seems to be speaking from both inside and outside of the community—she mocks “the whites” and passionately describes the strength of hoodoo in fiery language. At the same time, she refrains in this description from explicitly using the “we” that she uses in the later paragraph, implying an observer/observed distance between herself and the hoodoo community. The incongruity of the last sentence of the penultimate paragraph, “So nobody knows how it started,” and the first sentence of the last one, “The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything,” also illustrates the tension between her insider and outsider positionalities. “Nobody” marks those outside of the commu-
nity, whereas “we” identifies her with those inside. She pretends to embrace the epistemeological framework of the outsiders by plainly stating that nobody knows but then goes on to powerfully undercut that approximation by placing herself on the epistemeological other side.

What is also interesting, though, is that she feels the need to provide a descriptive introduction to hoodoo and to feign a distance from it at all. She seems to assume a certain basic familiarity on the part of her readers with black Floridian culture that she does not assume with hoodoo. Her white audience would not know either one particularly well. No one else had done such detailed research among black Floridians. In fact, more work had been done on hoodoo. The appearance of this standard English introduction reveals a sense of distance on her part from hoodoo in/and New Orleans. Although she seems to neither feel nor express a complete distance or unfamiliarity with the religion, the striking differences between her upfront and explicit invocations of familiar insider referents in the Florida sections and the insider/outsider description in the hoodoo section suggest that she is trying to affect distance (from hoodoo).

The appearance of markers of proximity within that illustration of distance highlights its contrived nature. Interspersed in Hurston’s detached history of hoodoo, readers gain the sense that she forms part of the hoodoo community: “Moses was the first man who ever learned God’s power-compelling words and it took him forty years to learn ten words. . . . That’s what the old ones said in ancient times and we talk it again” (185). Here we see Hurston blending her sense of connection to a community and her expository anthropological intentions. She speaks not primarily as an outsider communicating what she has been told by the community members, but as one who believes, as one who has as much ownership of the information as any other member of the hoodoo community. In this passage, Hurston (partially) collapses the distance between herself and hoodoo that she created by even writing an introduction. She defines community, “we,” based on shared knowledge and belief, rather than explicitly on race. Barbara Johnson reads this almost continuously shifting voice on Hurston’s part as producing more questions about the grounds of (this) racial community than it answers by articulating “difference as a suspension of reference” rather than as something easily pinpointed. The key, though, as Johnson sees it, is that Hurston does not erase racial and perspectival differences, but rather foregrounds “the complex dynamism of their interaction.” The points at which Hurston names specific references rather than suspending them, where she claims or articulates a particular racial or national positionality, do not simply form part of Derridean free play, though. They indicate a specific approach to the world in general, and to the black (both U.S. and non-U.S.) world in particular.

Hurston’s transnational black collectivism is spotlighted when she refers to parallel beliefs in Florida, the Caribbean, and West Africa. This moment highlights
the significance of black racial and/or cultural connectedness to comprehending Hurston’s worldview. She comments specifically on death rituals, saying, “All over the South and in the Bahamas the spirits of the dead have great power which is used chiefly to harm. It will be noted how frequently graveyard dust is required in the practice of hoodoo. . . . The Ewe-speaking peoples of the west coast of Africa all make offerings of food and drink. . . . It is to be noted in America that the spirit is always given a pint of good whiskey” (Mules 227). Here we see Hurston’s vision of a black world, perceived through her hoodoo lens. She asserts a connectedness between these sites which is based on common religious practices. In doing so, she situates herself firmly in the midst of the debate swirling around her mentor and colleague Melville Herskovits on whether the culture of blacks in the Americas can be traced via so-called Africanisms to an African root. It is no accident, then, that her next project more explicitly explores this question by focusing on folk culture and religion in the other America, specifically the Caribbean.

Tell My Horse

Hurston published *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* in 1938, just four years after the end of the U.S. occupation of Haiti and during a relative explosion of scholarly and artistic interest in that republic. Hurston’s own former Columbia colleague, Melville Herskovits, entered that scholarly discourse with the publication of his *Life in a Haitian Valley* in 1937. The doctoral thesis of Katherine Dunham, another major African American female anthropologist, entitled “The Dances of Haiti” was published in 1947. A photographer and dance enthusiast/student, Maya Deren, published her study of dance voodoo in Haiti, entitled *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, in 1947 and produced a documentary film of the same title based on the book in 1953. In fact, Robert Silberman states explicitly that Deren “owes a significant but unacknowledged debt to Katherine Dunham.” Haitian thinker Dr. Jean Price-Mars, who is mentioned by both Hurston and Deren as a local advisor, posted his own entries in this discussion on Haitian life, history, and culture well in advance of the Americans.

*Tell My Horse* is a text written simultaneously from the perspective of an initiated insider and an observing anthropologist as well as from the perspective of a national outsider and a racial insider. As an African American female anthropologist studying the Caribbean, Zora Neale Hurston had to grapple with questions of gender and intellectual (in this case anthropological) voice in addition to those of how an African American could/should engage the Caribbean. Hurston embarks on her study with the conceptual raw materials left by her African American intellectual predecessors, including Nancy Gardener Prince, a Bostonian missionary who trav-
eled to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century and published a monograph on her experiences and the situation of West Indian blacks. Hurston also comes to the Caribbean grounded in the anthropological methods of her teacher Franz Boas. Although she often endeavors to obscure her investment in anthropology by couching ethnographic information in terms of kinship and/or collectivism, it does surface periodically. Her approach ultimately constitutes an alternative version of the objective observer, wherein she downplays her position as an anthropologist and plays up her status as a black woman. Throughout the text, Hurston moves back and forth between these voices, crafting an African American female anthropological/intellectual identity that explodes to the surface in her engagements with the Caribbean. 

Mules and Men reveals her creation of a writerly voice out of her multiple positions as a woman, a member of the community she is studying, an anthropologist, and as a black anthropologist trying to change the view of her race. Her travels to the Caribbean, as well as the challenge of writing Tell My Horse, multiply her negotiations, adding in the factor of geographical/cultural/national distance, and requiring her to simultaneously balance all the voices she spoke through previously while also figuring out how to express her kinship with her black Caribbean subjects as a national and perspectival outsider. Not only is she a foreigner but she is also an anthropologist—a person whose approach her subjects can easily read as inherently othering and exoticizing.

Unlike the primarily dialogic Mules and Men, Tell My Horse remains predominantly narrative—Hurston telling about “voodoo and life in Haiti and Jamaica.” We see all of them through her eyes. The first few pages of Tell My Horse set the tone for the rest of the work, particularly in terms of how Hurston will negotiate between her various identities. She begins the text, “Jamaica, British West Indies, has something else besides its mountains of majesty and its quick, green valleys. Jamaica has its moments when the land, as in St. Mary’s thrusts out its bosom to the sea. Jamaica has its ‘bush.’ That is, the island had more usable plants for medicinal and edible purposes than any other spot on earth” (3). The tone here is didactic. She is informing the reader about Jamaica. It is also relatively detached, particularly when compared to the tone of the early parts of Mules and Men: “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore’ (Mules 1). The reappearance of the “I,” of the first person, in Mules and Men and its disappearance in Tell My Horse suggest a distance from the subject(s) of the Caribbean project. The beginning of Tell My Horse recalls traditional anthropologist-as-outsider-and-objective observer approaches. Herskovits, for example, begins his book with the words, “The traveler comes suddenly on the valley of Mirebalais, as the road from the capital turns the shoulder of a hill. Long and narrow, the plain stretches before him with its many tones of green . . . the observer must seek well beneath the surface if he is to attain any understanding of the country and its people.” This
introduction emphasizes both that the gaze is that of the (traveling) outsider and the difference of the object of his gaze. Hurston’s beginning has a similar effect in that it aims to introduce the outsider to this unknown terrain. Compared to the Herskovits beginning as well as to the beginning of *Mules and Men*, though, it is significantly flatter. As such, Hurston’s introductory remarks indicate that her text will differ significantly from her fully folk-voiced *Mules and Men*. That difference inheres, in large part, in the fact that this subject (the Caribbean) is both foreign and familiar to Hurston—foreign in terms of geography, culture, religion, and language, but familiar in terms of race.

**Religion**

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston elides the regional difference between herself and the blacks of New Orleans by focusing on religious commonality. Similarly, in the Haiti section of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston represents religion as a way of minimizing national differences. For example, when she explains how close she and a Haitian woman have become, she positions their common view on voodoo as a key part of the bond between them. After noting their willingness to share the ugly truths about their own countries, Hurston highlights the cementing of their bond by saying “neither of us apologized for Voodoo. We both acknowledged it among us, but both of us saw it as a religion no more venal, no more impractical than any other” (204). Religion alone is not enough to detach her from her Americanness, her status as an anthropologist, or to erase the impact of either on her attitude toward Haitian religion. Although her epistemological connection to the voodoo community seems clear, particularly from her presentation of so-called zombies as real and her inclusion of a picture of one in *Tell My Horse*, her desire to find out the real “truth about Zombies” indicates otherwise (*Tell* 179). Her drive to investigate the phenomenon, rather than to accept it as part of her religion, points to the intervention of her scholarly voice into her sense of religious community. An acceptance of zombies as a fact of life (or death) is basic to the worldview of voodoo practitioners, as well as to that of other nonvoodoo-practicing Haitians.31 Read within that context, Hurston’s search for the “real story” behind the zombies appears virtually blasphemous.

The specter of the tension between the scholarly and the religious again comes to the fore when Hurston contrasts scholars’ and adepts’ pronunciations of the name of one of the primary *loa* (deity or god). She writes that “I ought to explain that while the people always say and sing ‘legba,’ the scholars tell me that the African word is Lecbah or Letbah. Perhaps the people are in error. All I know is they sing ‘Papa Legba, ouvrier barriere por [sic] moi passer’” (148). This statement certainly has a sarcastic edge, with “the scholars” as the butt of her mocking. Although Hurston ridicules the scholars, it is the opposition between “the scholars” and “the people” that makes this statement more than a sarcastic comment. Her positioning of herself
proves especially interesting because she plays at representing herself as neither a scholar nor as one of “the people” who practice voodoo. She opts out of fully tying herself to either community. Although she clearly leans toward the people, her construction of a syntactical opposition between “the scholars” and “they,” “the people,” sets them up as equivalent opposing forces. Her claiming of the space between the two here exemplifies the delicate balancing act she undertakes in this text. Her syntactical positioning of herself reiterates her location of herself between the two—“scholars tell me,” “I know they sing.” She knows both worlds. The connections between her and these worlds, though, differ in terms of power. The scholars tell her—they assert power over her—whereas she knows the people, she knows what they sing. She holds power here. It also indicates her unwillingness to completely choose one over the other, in other words, to reject one narrative voice completely in favor of the other.

Race and Class
Race and racial commonality, as a way of identifying the grounds of community, take on a much greater role in Hurston’s approach to this project. After all, race, and specifically the presumption of black racial and therefore cultural connectedness, is what brings her to Haiti and Jamaica in the first place. In several instances, Hurston grapples with the meanings of blackness in the United States and the Caribbean. One particular moment raises questions about where blackness comes from, about whether blackness is connected to specific nations or not. She recalls that

At Ansa-a-galets I met the black marine. A sergeant of the Garde d’Haiti lived in the house beside mine and I kept hearing “Jesus Christ!” and “God damn!” mixed up with whatever he was saying in Creole. When we became friendly enough to converse, I told him that I had heard him and that it was remarkable to hear the ejaculations from him. “Oh,” he said, “I served with the Marines when they were here.” “I see,” I replied facetiously, “then you are a black Marine.” “But yes,” he replied proudly, “I am a black Marine. I speak like one always. Perhaps you would like me to kill that dog for you.” . . . “Jesus Christ! God Damn! I kill something,” he swaggered. I learned afterwards that he had told all his friends and associates that he must be just like an American because the femme American had recognized the likeness at once. Perhaps by this time he has promoted himself to Colonel Little. (137)

This exchange raises the pertinent questions as to what the descriptor “black marine” means to her, and whether it means the same thing to him as well as what that similarity or difference in connotation implies for African American/Caribbean relations. The layering of national and international politics here is absolutely striking. She feigns surprise at his cosmopolitanism (his American language), evidenced in her describing it as “remarkable.” Her tongue-in-cheek ascription to him of the comment about killing a dog highlights her scornful disdain for his John Wayne–
esque image of Americanness, and particularly of American manhood. In her facetious reply and her sarcasm, she mocks his immense pride in his link with what he identifies as Americanness. Apart from the fact that Hurston finds herself just generally annoyed by his machismo, what we have here are two markedly different relationships to the sign of the United States, expressed through the image of the black marine. Whereas black marine imagined as cursing and machismo proves infinitely irksome to Hurston (her adding and removing of the capital M), it is quite the opposite for the black marine himself. He is proud of being “mistaken” for American by the American lady (and misses her scoffing at him), and she appears ironically invested in the “real” Americanness that he cannot see. That she feels the need to make fun of him implies not only that she believes Americanness to exceed those symbols he embraces and that she can serve as an arbiter of Americanness but also that she imagines her text in conversation with other U.S. Americans rather than Haitians. It positions her as an American talking to other Americans about Haitians. At this moment, she does not imagine Haitians as part of her audience. Her unsympathetic mocking of him establishes a hierarchy with her above and this pitiable black marine below. A comparison between Hurston’s comment and Dunham’s (later) statements about Haitians’ responses to the occupation highlights the almost caustic tone of Hurston’s remark. Dunham states that “even among the unlettered peasant population of Haiti there is a great consciousness of the oppressions suffered by their African ancestor during slavery, and certainly this was reawakened by the disastrous occupation of Haiti by American Marines.” Dunham’s sympathetic tone contrasts with Hurston’s condescending one. Here, in this offhanded, seemingly inconspicuous sarcastic comment Hurston articulates an African American–over–Caribbean hierarchy that reverberates throughout Tell My Horse.

Also apparent in this exchange between Hurston and the black marine is the palimpsest that is the U.S. occupation of the island. During the U.S. occupation, the Garde d’Haiti was formed and commanded by U.S. Navy and noncommissioned officers. The black marine Hurston refers to formed part of that group, and his statements reflect a Haitian opinion of Americans as well as a Haitian mimicking of what he views as American behavior. The crassness and rowdiness of U.S. marines became an issue under the occupation: A “source of open clashes between Haitians and Americans was drunkenness by marines, especially enlisted men on liberty. . . . A number of American civilian observers noted that marines under the influence of alcohol bragged about their cavalier treatment of Haitians, disparaged them as ‘niggers’ and ‘gooks’; and otherwise behaved in a manner offensive to Haitien [sic] pride.”

As a result of this behavior “even poor black Haitians looked down upon American blacks.” This fact suggests that the black marine may have been mocking Hurston, even as she was mocking him, making this another point in the text in which racial commonality and national difference meet uncomfortably.
Hurston’s comparison of African American and Haitian race men and the response they engender in their communities highlights her approach to imagining the grounds as well as the bounds of racial connectedness between U.S. and Caribbean blacks. Of Haiti, Hurston writes:

Haiti has suffered from . . . (an) internal enemy. . . . Another brand of patriot . . . . The bones of L’Ouverture, Christophe, and Dessalines were rattled for the poor peasants’ breakfast, dinner, and supper, never mentioning the fact that the constructive efforts of these three great men were blocked by just such “patriots” as the present day patriots . . . . These talking patriots, who have tried to move the wheels of Haiti on wind from their lungs, are blood brothers to the empty wind bags who have done so much to nullify opportunity among American Negroes. (Tell 75)

Her use of the phrase blood brothers suggests her perception of both an ideological and a racial connectedness between race men and Haitian patriots. In so doing, she communicates her conception of the two communities/societies as not just parallel to each other but as kin. The belief in the racial and ideological sameness apparent in the phrase blood brothers is reinforced throughout the Haiti section with comparable details. The problem that the difference in national status between the two societies creates for Hurston, however, explodes to the surface in her analysis of where the two communities are headed politically. She marks what she sees as progress in political thought within the African American community by writing “America has produced a generation of Negroes who are impatient with the orators. They want to hear about more jobs and houses and meat on the table. They are resentful of opportunities lost while their parents sat satisfied and happy listening to crummy orators” (77). She summarizes Haiti’s direction this way:

These same sentiments are mounting in Haiti. But they have not spread as rapidly as in the United States because so few of the Haitian population can read and write. But it is there and growing. There is a group of brilliant young men who have come together to form a scientific society under the leadership of Dr. Camille Lherisson who is a great grandson of a Lowell of Massachusetts. He is a graduate of Magill [sic] University in Canada and Harvard, and head of the Department of Biology in the Medical School at Port-au-Prince, and on the staff of the hospital. Dr. Dorsainville, Dr. Louis Mars, and several other men of high calibre meet in the paved court of Dr. Lherisson’s home once every week to listen to foreign scientists who happen to be visiting Haiti at the time, or to provoke discussion among themselves. (77)

Here we see the scales of what I call “binaristic blackness” in motion, with the African Americans being raised up and Haitians being concomitantly lowered.
Binaristic blackness refers to a notion of blackness that resembles a scale—to elevate one group, the other is necessarily lowered.) The but at the beginning of the second sentence signals the invasion of an (African) Americo-centric ideology into Hurston’s heretofore quite evident perception of African America and Haiti as two parallel black worlds. After that but, Hurston’s statement becomes a generalization about the relationship of literacy to the political sophistication of the Haitian populous. The appearance of a second but (as in “but it is there and growing”) suggests that these statements do not roll easily off Hurston’s pen. Its presence suggests a subtle discomfort with stating without qualification that the absence of literacy is concomitant with an absence of political intelligence. The second, more positive “but” statement seems to be situated as a qualification of the first, more negative one. Hurston appears to be extricating herself from an ethnocentric, classist trap. The escape does not prove wholly successful, however, because she focuses only on the “civilized” biographies of members of Haiti’s middle and upper classes in her attempt to negate the implication of backwardness in her earlier statement. Her approach here is multilayered and consequently quite fascinating. The name and title dropping (Harvard, Lowell, Magill, Dr.) emanate both from Hurston’s desire to elevate Haiti in the minds of her white U.S. audiences (particularly evidenced by her reference to the Lowells of Massachusetts) and from her own nationally oriented valuation of these accoutrements. In other words, both she and her audience (will) hold Haiti in higher esteem because of the presence of such “brilliant young men.”

The classism that appears only in faint outline here takes on a more definitive shape at several other points in the text. Not the least of these is Hurston’s characterization of the poorer Haitian populous as “the inert mass of illiterates” whom the “few intellectuals must struggle against” (81). The fact that she only mentions getting information on Haitian history and politics from the bourgeois, and that she positively engages with the “peasants” only in relation to voodoo, suggests an underlying class hierarchy on Hurston’s part. She praises the young (middle and upper class) intellectuals lavishly, and often presents their opinions as truth. For example, she writes:

These men with Dividnaud, who is the most politically conscious of them all, are the realists of Haiti. Dr. Rulx Leon, Director General of the Public Health Department, is definitely of these thinking men to hold the future of Haiti in their hands. . . . He does not even permit his own feelings toward the men to influence him. Every one in Port-au-Prince knows that he is the personal enemy of the most brilliant man of his staff and yet he retains him. “The man is a genius. Haiti needs his talents,” Dr. Leon explained. “It is not for me to thrust my personal disagreements before the welfare of the country. I am trying to keep this department up to the standard set by the American doctors of the Occupation.” (78)
What becomes evident here is not only Hurston’s willingness to read this individual as wholly true to his words but also his affinity for the United States, particularly his belief in the superiority of the United States in at least one area. These two factors are interrelated.

Hurston’s detailing of her closeness to the army chief in Haiti speaks to her affinity for those at the top, especially those at the top friendly toward America(ns). She details: “There is Colonel Calixe with his long tapering fingers and his beautiful slender feet, very honest and conscientious and doing a beautiful job of keeping order in Haiti. In fact we have a standing joke between us that when I become President of Haiti, he is going to be my chief of the army and I am going to allow him to establish state farms in all of the departments of Haiti” (89). This exchange proves simultaneously touching and shocking. The statement reflects a sense of connection to Calixe, but it also appears to mock him subtly. Her tone in speaking about even those who she seems close to suggests a hierarchy. Again, a comparison between Hurston’s words and those of Katherine Dunham helps to highlight the strangeness of Hurston’s comments. Dunham describes many of the same intellectuals and politicians that Hurston meets as her “local field advisors.” Dunham appreciatively allows that “these local advisors introduced me to native companions, helped me locate living quarters, and generally prepared these several communities for my arrival and at the same time gave me sufficient background material for a substantial starting point.”

At the same time, Hurston’s text obscures these kinds of assistance, of which she was surely also a beneficiary, while simultaneously laying bare the tensions undergirding her encounters with Haitians as an American anthropologist.

Whereas Hurston goes to the ruling class for information on Haiti’s politics and history, she goes to the masses for knowledge about voodoo. From her perspective, they possess that truth. She carefully ensures, though, that she does not step on the toes of her upper-class friends. Without explicitly criticizing upper-class Haitians, Hurston marks the differences between the upper and lower classes on the topic of voodoo: “The upper class Haitians fear too, but they do not talk about it so openly as do the poor” (181), and:

Yet in spite of this obvious fear and the preparations that I found being made to safeguard the bodies of the dead . . . , I was told by numerous upper class Haitians that the whole thing was a myth. They pointed out that the common people were superstitious . . . But . . . I had the rare opportunity to see and touch an authentic case. . . . If I had not experienced all of this I might have come away from Haiti interested but doubtful. (182)

That she stays away from decrying the upper class’s descriptions of the masses as simply superstitious and goes on to indicate that she would have felt the same way marks her affiliation with the elite, both materially and ideologically. Despite the
closeness to the poorer community created by and reflected in Hurston’s gaining entry into the voodoo community, and the affinity for the religion and the practitioners articulated in her methodical detailing of the ceremonies, she still has a underlying perception of herself as connected to the upper classes and/or an interest in her readers seeing her in this way.

For Hurston, class commonalities can take priority over national differences when it comes to relations with Caribbean blacks. She similarly limits Floridian folk in *Mules and Men*, particularly those not from Eatonville, to the realm of folklore—they only tell folktales, make jokes, tell lies, and fight. For Hurston, the folk possess religious and folkloric truth, whereas the middle and upper classes possess intellectual, historical, and political truth. Although her valuation of both truths is evident in her works, her separation of them into class-based spheres proves troubling. Even though her approach does not always constitute an explicit denigration of the masses, it is an implicit class-based bifurcation that relegates the masses to the margins of national politics even as it purports to elevate them.

At points, Hurston’s affinities for the upper classes and the United States combine to produce particularly primitivizing statements about her Caribbean subjects. She opines, for example, “The Haitian people are gentle and lovable except for their enormous and unconscious cruelty. It is the peasants who tie the feet of chickens and turkeys together and sling the bundle over their shoulders with the heads of the fowls hanging down and walk for miles down mountains to the market” (82). She discusses this with a Haitian associate of hers, who calls attention to the hints of ethnocentrism in her evaluation. She recalls:

I spoke of this one day to Jules Faine when I visited him and found him chasing some boys away who were trying to kill birds with stones. I said that he was the first Haitian whom I had noticed who seemed to care about such things. “Why should these peasants be tender with animals?” he asked gently. “No one has been tender with them.” “Why do you Americans always speak of our cruelty to the animals?” The editor of the *Le Matin* asked me. “You are cruel also. You boil live lobsters.” “Yes,” I said, “but the people who sell them would not be permitted to drag them by the legs from Massachusetts to Virginia, not to half-skin them on the way.” “It is all the same.” He shied away from actuality and went on. (83)

Not only does Jules identify her as a foreigner, as an outsider misinterpreting Haitian culture, but the editor also highlights a parallel between what she names as cruelty in Haiti and as food preparation in the United States.37

Although, at points, she asserts a kinship to the people of the Caribbean in her writings, she also clearly establishes an intraracial hierarchy that situates U.S. blacks above those in the Caribbean. For example, in speaking of Jamaica, she says...
Being an English colony, it is very British. Colonies always do imitate the mother country more or less. For instance some Americans are still aping the English as best they can even though they have one hundred and fifty years in which to recover. ... There is a frantic stampede white-ward to escape from Jamaica's black mass. ... Then there is the colonial attitude. Add to that the negro's natural aptitude for imitation and you have Jamaica. (Tell 6)

And: “I do not pretend to know what is wise and best. The situation presents a curious spectacle to the eyes of an American Negro. It is as if one stepped back to the days of slavery or the generation immediately after surrender when negroes had little else to boast of except a left-hand kinship with the master” (7). Hurston is attempting to grapple with the legacy/presence of colonialism in Jamaica. She admits that she is an outsider who does not necessarily know what is best. Mikell argues that Hurston's comprehension of slavery and racial prejudice in the United States as well as the “fact of her blackness” enabled her to escape the problems that haunted the Haitian anthropology of her “mentor” Ruth Benedict. I am arguing that it is precisely that combination of factors that troubles her view of the Caribbean. This mixture prompts Hurston's flattening of the political complexity of Jamaican society, a problem that Mikell cursorily mentions as only being “of interest.”

What Hurston does here is classify Jamaicans as backward in comparison to U.S. blacks. She implies that American blacks have progressed beyond the focus on the master, whereas Jamaicans have not. Her statement does not only distinguish between U.S. and Caribbean blacks as the slave narratives did through the absence, but it establishes a hierarchy. This hierarchy is again apparent when she speaks of the differences between being a woman in the United States and the Caribbean. She writes:

It is a curious thing to be a woman in the Caribbean after you have been a woman in these United States. ... The majority of men in all the states are pretty much agreed that just for being born a girlbaby you ought to have laws and privileges and pay are perquisites. ... But now Miss America, World's champion woman, you take your promenading self down into the cobalt blue waters of the Caribbean and see what happens. ... Of course all women are inferior to all men by God and law down there. (57–58)

This statement is especially fascinating because of the simultaneous romanticization of gender relations in the United States and the converse cynical denigration of them in the Caribbean. Hurston pokes fun at herself in the phrase “Miss America, World's champion woman,” but she still goes on to generalize negatively about Caribbean gender relations. Her recognition of her own nation-based arrogance does not result in a dehierarchized vision. These contortions imply an unconscious tendency to go
out of her way to posit the United States over the Caribbean. Although Hurston’s playful commentary differs markedly from the “objective” descriptions of “mating and marriage” given by Herskovits, for instance, they do imply a civilization-versus-barbarism hierarchy. Harrison argues that although Hurston may seem ethnocentric here, she is actually “defending her own tenuous status as social scientist by distancing herself from the cultural practices she observes.” Whether that is true or not, the fact that she chooses to denigrate Caribbean blacks in order to secure her position (whether authorial, scholarly, or any other type) still illustrates binaristic blackness.

There is more to Hurston’s construction of Caribbean societies as backward in comparison to the United States than just her attempt to convince a skeptical white audience. For example, in her analysis of racial politics in Jamaica, she ventures, “Everywhere else a person is white or black by birth, but it is so arranged in Jamaica that a person may be black by birth but white by proclamation. . . . When I used the word black I mean in the American sense where anyone who has colored blood at all, no matter how white the appearance, speaks of himself as black” (Tell 7). The phrase “everywhere else” is clearly hyperbolic. The one-drop rule is not the system of racial classification throughout most of “nuestra America.” Her use of the phrase to refer in principal to the United States highlights the U.S. focus of the lens through which she sees the Caribbean. Despite her desire to embrace Caribbean blacks as her kin, her connection to the United States and its particular American-ness prevents her from articulating a transnational kinship free of nation-based hierarchization (binaristic blackness). That Hurston is bound to the United States even as she attempts to reach beyond it, becomes especially clear in the discussion of her visit to the Maroon town of Accompong. She recalls: “Here was the oldest settlement of freedmen in the Western world, no doubt. Men who had thrown off the bands of slavery by their own courage and ingenuity. . . . And yet . . . I could not help remembering that a whole civilization and the mightiest nation on earth had grown up on the mainland since the first runaway slave had taken refuge in these mountains” (22). Hurston’s reference to the United States as the mightiest nation on earth without qualification illustrates just how difficult it is for her to detach herself from her U.S. roots (albeit troubled ones) once she is outside of the country, even when she praises her Caribbean subjects.

What surfaces in these moments, I argue, is Hurston’s Americanness, even more so than her relationship to anthropology. Hurston has been criticized for her primitivization of African American blacks. The foregoing analysis of Tell My Horse illustrates how that negative approach is magnified when she encounters Caribbean blacks. Her treatment of the Caribbean results from/reflects both the exoticization of the other inherent in the anthropological gaze, the U.S. imperialist gaze, and, I am arguing, the binaristic black weltanschauung. Hurston cannot see the Caribbean on
its own terms because the approaches to the Caribbean other implicit in the anthropological and national lenses she looks through blind her. The national/binaristic (as well as the anthropological) gaze gets in the way of her textual engagements with Caribbean blacks. Even though she may endeavor to present herself as ( racially) connected to the Caribbean communities she researches, the objective voice demanded of her as an anthropologist requires her to write as a detached observer, while at the same time the weltanschauung emanating from her U.S. national grounding inspires a hierarchical distance.

Joan Dayan’s citation of Hurston as an authority worth referencing on aspects of voodoo speaks to the strength and innovation of Hurston’s content.41 She gained access to information as a racial insider that Herskovits may not have been able to see. One can argue convincingly, too, that she paved the way for Dunham and Deren. The striking differences in form, content, and tone between her African American anthropology and her Caribbean anthropology, however, prevent an uncritical celebration of her ability to represent the folk. To celebrate her work in Mules and Men without considering the problematic representations in Tell My Horse would suggest that the two visions remain wholly unrelated to each other and would enact a scholarly version of binaristic blackness. The work of Zora Neale Hurston, while pioneering within the context of U.S. black (women’s) intellectual thought, also provides an example of the shades of ethnocentrism that have continued to haunt transnational engagements between black peoples. Hurston was well intentioned, but problematic ideologies and notions of the black other hindered her. This trap constitutes another dimension of the double consciousness identified by Du Bois, and one worth significantly more attention in transnational black studies scholarship.

Notes


2. The exponential increase is not only evident in the number of published books and articles on Hurston but also in the number of as yet unpublished dissertations that engage Hurston as a key figure. Of particular interest are Lesley Grace Feracho, “The Stylistics of the Reformulation of Identity: Explorations of Feminine Writing As the Interaction of Marginality and Centrality in Four Texts by Carolina Maria de Jesus, Clarice Lispector, Julieta Campos, and Zora Neale Hurston” (Duke University, 1998); Todd Robert McGowan, “The Empty Subject: The New Canon and the Politics of Existence,” which juxtaposes Hurston, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Charles Chestnutt (Ohio State University, 1996); and Deborah Karush, “Innocent Voyages: Fictions of U.S. Expansion in Cather, Stevens, and Hurston” (Yale University, 1991).

4. Rampersad reads this silence as an indication of Hurston’s ambivalence toward her Southern black roots. He says, “In dropping a decade from her life, she was almost certainly denying the existence of experiences and involvements that, however unpalatable to her later on as she strove for success, had been a major part of her knowledge of her world.” Arnold Rampersad, foreword to *Mules and Men*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1935; New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), xx.


7. For discussions of this issue from a wide variety of national sites, see Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, eds., *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1992). The editors and authors, although primarily concerned with British anthropology, highlight many anthropological scholars’ resistance to combining autobiography and anthropology. They particularly critique Clifford’s dialogical mode of engagement as reinforcing the division between autobiography and anthropology by continuing to fixate on the other as subjects (albeit the other who travels). It seems to me that Cathy N. Davidson’s *Thirty-Six Views from Mount Fuji* (New York: Penguin, 1993) accomplishes many of the goals for blending autobiography and anthropology set out in Okely and Callaway’s texts, even though it does not constitute self-consciously anthropological scholarship. Davidson writes of the negotiation of her own foreignness, of her own gaijinness, rather than of the fascinating exoticness of Japanese culture.

8. He also identifies other anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai who have contributed greatly to the streidence of this critique. James Clifford, *Routes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24.


12. Hurston is in error when she uses *ast* to signify *ask* in African American vernacular. Karla Holloway has pointed out that the correct spelling is *aks*. Karla Holloway, personal communication with author, April 1999.

13. It is more than noteworthy that Hurston, a woman attracted to men, is watching these men and representing them in this eroticized fashion. At various points during the text, she uses her own sexual power to gain information from men and/or to bolster her reporting of the ethnographic details (as she does in this case).

14. My argument here diverges from that of Houston Baker, who reads this quotation as helping to construct the image of an energetic vernacular community. He notes the narrator’s detachment from the camp, as I do, but infers that the narrator, nonetheless, is “thoroughly absorbed by the rhythms” of this community. See Houston A. Baker Jr., *Workings of the*


18. Boas’s statement recalls William Dean Howell’s praise of the wonderful authenticity of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s dialect poetry. Although Howells acknowledges that Dunbar’s literary English poems are “very good, and even more than very good,” he deems them “not distinctively his contribution to the body of American poetry.” He evaluates the dialect poems, on the other hand, as “divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music.” He gives much more credence to Dunbar’s dialect poetry because he believes that it is putting him in touch with the soul of the Negro. William Dean Howells, introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life,* by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), xix.


20. Boas himself refers to this work in the foreword as “the much discussed voodoo beliefs and practices.” Ibid., xiii.


22. The goal of this section of my essay is to explicate Hurston’s engagement with Haiti, though, rather than to delve into the contemporary discourse from or on Haiti. James de Jongh’s *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) goes into significantly greater depth on the actualities and ideologies of the Haitian intellectual discourse during this period and also takes the important step of situating Haitian negritude in relation to French surrealism, the New Negro Renaissance, and *negrismo*.


27. In fact, Hans Schmidt suggests that the occupation led to a literary movement, of which Aimé Césaire’s work forms a part: “Interest in ethnography and folk culture was also manifest in the reaction of Haitian poets and novelists to the occupation. . . . This probliterature was one of the earliest manifestations of the world revolutionary phenomenon which the Martinican poet Aime Cesaire and Jean-Paul Sartre labeled ‘negritude.’” Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 141.

28. My implication here is not that she necessarily read them, but that their public, published, and publicized writing informed the way their descendants would come to conceptualize


34. Schmidt, *United States Occupation of Haiti*, 139.

35. Ibid., 141.


37. Significantly, though, Hurston’s ethnocentrism may, at least in part, form a response to the Haitian upper class’s negative views of Americans in general and African Americans in particular. Schmidt notes that “the complex elite racial ideology, marked by both emulation of white characteristics and intense pride, included disdain for American blacks, who were looked upon as being servile. The Haitian minister to Washington informed the State Department in 1924 that even poor black Haitians looked down upon American blacks. This attitude, strengthened by direct contact with American racial discrimination, prevented President Harding from rewarding black Republicans with Haitian appointments, and resulted in the posting of whites to Haitian diplomatic positions previously held by blacks.” Certainly, this information cannot be taken completely at face value since the minister may have had his own racist reasons for suggesting that “even poor black Haitians” viewed African Americans negatively, including giving a rationale for the maintenance of segregation at home. This information also suggests, though, that the taint of the U.S. occupation, and the attitudes toward Americans developed by Haitians during that period, likely had an effect on interactions between U.S. and Haitian blacks and by extension on Hurston’s relationships with her Haitian friends. The hints of ethnocentrism in Hurston’s work, however, are not fully attributable to the history of the U.S.-Haitian relationship.


39. See, for example, Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 109. Here he discusses the process of betrothal and marriage in Haiti without explicit commentary on his opinion. At the same time, though, his detailed descriptions still make Haitian culture appear utterly foreign, primitive, and exotic.

40. Harrison, “Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Austin,” 93.
