

At the Crossroads: African American and Caribbean Writers in the Interwar Period

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ABSTRACT

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At the Crossroads: African American and Caribbean Writers in the Interwar Period charts discourses of folk culture, empire and modernity in the works of six African American and Caribbean writers. Each of the dissertation's three sections pairs a writer from the U.S. with a writer from the Anglophone, Francophone or Spanish-speaking Caribbean: Jean Toomer and Eric Walrond; Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén; and Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Price-Mars. I argue that these writers engage the concept of modernity precisely by turning to "imperial sites" that are conspicuously absent from dominant narratives of modern progress. With a sustained interest in the masses and vernacular culture, they turn to the remnants of the Southern plantation, the Caribbean "backwoods," the inner city slums and other "elsewheres" presumably left behind by history. I contend that U.S. empire is a crucial frame for reading the various representations of local folk culture in these works. From the construction of the Panama Canal on the eve of WWI, to the U.S. military occupation of Haiti and ongoing intervention in Cuba, the interwar years are marked by aggressive U.S. expansion into the Caribbean basin. Though it is commonplace to observe that interwar literature is preoccupied with newness and change, less acknowledged is the role of U.S. imperialism in constituting this newness. Caribbean experience is profoundly influenced by these events, and as African Americans sought fuller citizenship they could not ignore the workings of U.S. imperialism just south of the South. Far from being symbols of a bygone time, these imperial sites—and the "folk" who inhabit them—help to produce the modern. *At the Crossroads* considers the entanglements of U.S. empire and Jim Crow as it traces uses of the folk and vernacular culture across this U.S-

Caribbean literary space. The “folk” emerge as a concept that varies across space and time, challenging anew the claims to authenticity, shared origins, and monolithic community that have persistently shaped understandings of the folk’s place in the black tradition.

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DEDICATION

For my parents.

Chapter One

At the Crossroads: Discourses of the Folk, Empire, and Modernity

In April 1925, several months before Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* burst onto the literary scene, the Harlem-based British Guianese writer Eric Walrond published a short piece called "The Negro Literati" in *Brentano's Book Chat*. In similar language to Locke's, Walrond describes the artistic milieu as brimming with potential. The only thing inhibiting the would-be Negro artist is the fact that he is "not yet free" in expression: bound by convention and the imperative to favorably represent the race, he is unable to "let himself go." Fortunately, there was a group of young writers who were "utterly shorn," of these inhibitions, who wrote not of stilted "high society" but of the "Negro multitude," or simply "the folk," as they would come to be known in the parlance of the day. They wrote of the masses "not in a way that would bring them favorably under the eye of Mr. Lorimer (God forbid!) but in such a style that people will stop and remark, 'Why I thought I knew negroes, but if I am to credit this story here I guess I don't'" (131). Unlike yesterday's purveyors of local color tales, this group undertook the task of upsetting expectations of representation—a feat that they accomplished as much through 'style' as through thematic focus. The members of this "esoteric school" included Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and of course Walrond himself. Walrond closes the piece with the prediction that before long, "the literature of the United States will be colored to an amazing degree by the exploits of these gallant youngsters" (131). Just a year later, Walrond himself answers this call with the publication of his short story collection, *Tropic*

Death.¹ In *Tropic Death*, Walrond again takes up the question of the “the Negro multitude.” But unlike many of his peers, he poses it neither in relationship to the U.S. South nor migrant settlements in the North. Instead, the book depicts peasant life in the Caribbean and the Panamanian isthmus during the U.S.’ largest imperial project to date—the building of the Panama Canal (1904-1914). *Tropic Death*’s Caribbean setting has often been treated as little more than an incidental detail to the book’s reinforcement of Harlem Renaissance discourse of the folk. But to read *Tropic Death* seriously is to reconsider the boundaries of this very discourse, a discourse that developed in response to patterns of migration and relocation, forms of labor and industrial development, and structures of power that shaped the folk’s entrance into modernity.

I begin with Walrond because his work sits at the intersection of U.S. and Caribbean discourses of the folk, empire and modernity. *At the Crossroads* charts that intersection through the work of six African American and Caribbean writers: Eric Walrond, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Haitian ethnographer Jean Price-Mars, Langston Hughes, and Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. These writers engage the concept of modernity precisely by turning to those people and places that are conspicuously absent from dominant narratives of modern progress. With a sustained interest in the masses and vernacular culture, they turn to the remnants of the Southern plantation, the Caribbean backwoods, the inner city slums and other “elsewheres” presumably left behind by history. I explore how their interest translates into literary practices—such as Guillén and Hughes’s crafting of a poetics informed by black music, or Hurston and Price-Mars’s use of the narrative structures of Haitian folklore in their ethnographic studies on Haiti.

¹ *Tropic Death*’s debut coincides with a special Caribbean issue of *Opportunity* that Walrond helped to organize in November 1926, as well as the sole issue of *FIRE!!*

Most importantly, I argue that the relationship between these various representations of local folk culture should not be understood solely in terms of their connection to an African diaspora, but more specifically in terms of their place within U.S. empire. Indeed, from the construction of the Panama Canal on the eve of WWI, to the U.S. military occupation of Haiti and ongoing intervention in Cuba, the interwar years are marked by aggressive U.S. expansion into the Caribbean basin. Though it is commonplace to observe that interwar literature is preoccupied with newness and change, less acknowledged is the role of U.S. imperialism in constituting this newness. Caribbean experience is profoundly affected by these events, and as African Americans sought fuller citizenship, they could not ignore the stirrings of imperial power taking place just south of the South. These imperial sites—and the “folk” who inhabit them—help to produce the modern. Collectively, these works position the black folk subject at a crossroads: between tradition and modernity, the local and the transnational, and between U.S. empire and Jim Crow.

This dissertation contributes to recent developments in U.S. empire studies.² As part of the transnational turn in American studies, U.S. empire studies explore the relationship between U.S. expansion and various forms of geographical, historical, and cultural intersection. While such a framework has helped produce new readings of 19th and 20th century literary texts, until now sustained considerations of black literary culture have been largely absent.³ *At the Crossroads* attempts to address this gap in three ways. First, I argue that although literary uses

² See Gilman, Susan Kay. “The New Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?” *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005): 196-214. While studies of U.S. empire are not “new,” the past decade or so has seen a resurgence of interest in studies of empire. See for example, Harilaos Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms* (2008); Jackson Lear, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America 1877-1920* (2009); Gretchen Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man’s Burden: U.S. Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line* (2010); John Cullen Gruesser, *The Empire Abroad and the Empire at Home: African American Literature and the Era of Overseas Expansion* (2012)

³ Gruesser’s text is a notable exception.

of the folk have often been understood as expressions of cultural nationalism and local specificity, discourses of the folk are actually crafted with an eye to the hemispheric stage. The stirrings of empire were important to the articulations of black modernity that emerge in discourses of folk culture. Secondly, whereas recent criticism has chiefly concerned the responses of U.S. writers to imperialism, my project considers the work of both African American and Caribbean writers. Such comparisons go beyond acknowledging Caribbean involvement in the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, they seek instead to explore relationships between the folk-based movements that emerge during especially pronounced periods of U.S. intervention in the Caribbean. Empire is not merely a force that shapes cultural movements abroad, but rather has implications for how we read “local” U.S. literatures, especially depictions of the South. I understand the asymmetrical workings of empire as constitutive of and not incidental to modernity in the western hemisphere.⁴ Also, by including the Caribbean’s three major language groups, I uncover connections obscured by studies that focus mainly on American writers and their “counterparts” in the British West Indies. Finally, as I will explore in the following section, my work combines a number of critical approaches, bringing U.S. empire studies into conversation with work in vernacular criticism, black transnational studies and literatures of the global south.

At the Critical Crossroads

Theories of vernacular culture have had particular influence in literary histories of the Harlem Renaissance.⁵ As Hazel Carby has observed, “the dominant way of reading the Harlem

⁴ I borrow the notion of “asymmetrical workings” from Antonio Benitez Rojo’s text *The Repeating Island* (11).

⁵ In their groundbreaking works on literature and culture, for instance, Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates trace an African American literary tradition to its “roots” in black folk culture. While critical interest in folk culture certainly does not start or end with these texts, I am particularly interested in works that emerge in the late 1980’s

Renaissance is that black intellectuals assertively established a folk heritage as the source of, and inspiration for, authentic African American forms” (119). Carby argues that this way of reading the Renaissance has “uncritically reproduced at the center of its discourse the idea of an authentic folk heritage,” adding that “what was defined as authentic was a debate that was not easily resolved and involved confrontation among black intellectuals themselves” (120).⁶ Echoing Carby’s critique, David Nicholls argues that much vernacular criticism has treated the folk as an “assumed category” rather than as a “contested vision of collectivity” (4). Both Carby’s and Nicholls’s analyses inform my approach to the folk and vernacular culture, specifically the imperative to challenge notions of authenticity and to reframe literary histories of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of conflict rather than consensus. Moreover, an emphasis on contestation raises the question of whether U.S.-centered models are adequate for understanding the literary turn to black folk culture in other parts of the diaspora. As J. Martin Favor has asked, if understandings of “the vernacular” remain rooted in their U.S. forms, “does this particular vernacular also have room for, say, immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and the vernaculars they bring along with them?” (5)

and early 1990’s that have shaped the terrain of contemporary African American literary criticism. Though not as prominent, Gayl Jones’s *Liberating Voices* had also theorized the relationship between “oral and aural forms” and modern literary production (Jones 1). See Baker *Blues, Ideology and African Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and Gates *The Signifying Monkey* (1988)

⁶ Carby’s revisionist approach calls for a turn to the urban writing of Richard Wright and others whose work offers a presumably less romanticized understanding of the black experience. More recently, Madhu Dubey has extended Carby’s argument by undertaking a critique of black “southern folk aesthetic” employed by more recent writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. See *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. In contrast, I would argue that it is useful to revisit the discourse of the folk in the light of recent developments in transnational studies. Framing the folk in comparison reveals a more complex understanding of the category that has been occluded by existing critical frameworks.

What Favor provocatively suggests is the need for comparative studies of vernacular culture that take into consideration differences in culture, nation, and language.⁷ However, my project here is not to embark on a study of folk culture itself, but rather to attend to constructions of the folk in the literary imagination. Such an approach works against “universalizing discourse” of folk culture that has often prevailed in vernacular criticism (Nicholls 134). As Brent Hayes Edwards has demonstrated in *The Practice of Diaspora*, comparative approaches can destabilize narratives of racial belonging. Like “diaspora,” articulations of folk culture can only be “discursively propped up.” Such props can be “‘mobilized’ for a variety of purposes but can never be definitive” (14).

Developments in new Southern Studies offer opportunities to re-evaluate the status of region in understandings of the folk. John Lowe’s observation that the South is “in many ways the northern rim of the Caribbean” is just one example of a reconceptualization of the South as a “a contiguous and connected space marked historically by the flow of goods, bodies, and texts”(Lowe 54; McKee and Trefzer 683). Folk culture is an especially significant category to consider within this broader frame because of the level of regionalism involved in critical framings of the folk. In U.S. scholarship the folk are often located in the South or else in pockets of rural alterity that are removed geographically and sometimes historically from the rest of the world—even as these spaces are privileged as productive cultural sites. A broader geographical lens importantly disrupts notions of insularity and provincialism by emphasizing the South’s interconnectedness to the rest of the hemisphere.

However, attending to the workings of modern imperialism means that we cannot regard this interconnectedness as wholly organic. The “flow of goods, bodies, and texts” between the

⁷ Favor’s project is more specifically concerned with understandings of authenticity in the literatures of the Harlem Renaissance itself. See *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999)

South, the Caribbean and the urban North is made possible by a set of imperial routes. As Frank Guridy has observed, the rise of U.S. empire marks the full emergence of a “U.S.-Caribbean world,” a “cross-border, transnational zone...which stretched from the eastern seaboard of the United States southward along the Atlantic coast to the islands of the Caribbean basin, the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, the nations of Central America, and even the northern reaches of South America”(7). Guridy’s study is part of recent efforts to trace intersections between U.S. empire and culture production. The fact that the emergence of such a “translocal” zone coincides with the rise of various black literary movements in the New World has telling implications for interwar literary history, especially as it concerns folk culture. If the folk become central to articulations of national identity, it is always in view of hemispheric relationships.

In tracing “the folk” as a discursive category across this U.S.-Caribbean space, *At the Crossroads* attends to the possibilities of these various critical threads. The title *At the Crossroads* invokes different figures of transition, intersection, and divergence. It is first of all a spatial metaphor encompassing the U.S.-Caribbean. Unlike Guridy’s notion of a “U.S.-Caribbean zone,” the crossroads is not a unified space, but rather a point at which distinct routes overlap and branch off into different directions. The crossroads is also a way of understanding the location of the folk in interwar black literary culture. I borrow the phrase from Eric Walrond’s observation that “the Negro is at the crossroads of American life.” In an article entitled “The New Negro Faces America,” Walrond observes that the “rank and file” of America, more than any other group, stand at a crossroads that is at once temporal and geographical. Temporally, they stand at a crossroads between past and present: between “old” and “new” ways of life, modes of production, and forms of racial oppression. Though the idea of a crossroads

engages transition narratives of modernity, it is meant to signify convergence of past and present rather than linear movement across time. Geographically, the folk are poised between regions—between North and South, between the U.S. and the various islands of the Caribbean. Moreover, I use the term to explore how discourses of “folk culture” intersect and diverge with historical understandings of the masses and their status as migrants and laborers.

Another expression of crossroads lies in the role of the specific historical crossings I discuss in this study. During the interwar years the U.S. and Caribbean stand at a geographical, political and cultural crossroads constituted by American empire. As Charles W. Chesnutt remarked in 1900, “If certain recent tendencies are an index of the future, it is not safe to fix the boundaries of the future United States anywhere short of the Arctic Ocean on the north and the isthmus of Panama on the south” (122-3). In December 1898, the United States gained control of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and would soon intervene in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Panama. The completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, following a failed attempt by France in the 1880s, marks an inaugural event in the U.S. imperial march: The Canal, which carved a route from the Caribbean sea to the Pacific ocean, literally and figuratively changed the landscape of the Caribbean and Central America. Along with other industrial worksites, this massive project precipitated waves of circum-Caribbean migration that coincide with the African-American Great Migration, and remittances from work on the Canal Zone often facilitated migration to U.S. urban centers such as Harlem. The completion of the Canal on the eve of World War I broadcasted the U.S.’ arrival as a world power, and the racial attitudes and Jim Crow policies it had extended to the Canal Zone would be a significant feature of this legacy.

Along with Panama Canal construction, which drew workers mainly from the British West Indies, U.S. intervention in Cuba and Haiti is also important to this study. In the first decades of the 20th century Cuba found itself between two empires. Having achieved liberation from Spain, Cuba now stood at the edge of what would be called the American century. Writing from New York in 1891 during his 14-year exile in the U.S., José Martí predicts that as the “islands of the sea” sought to find their collective voice in the coming century, they would have to come to terms with U.S. imperial power.⁸ Indeed, Martí’s prediction corresponds with Du Bois’s more expansive articulation of the problem of the 20th century, in which the color line is also entangled with the question of modern imperialism. The U.S. occupied Cuba from 1898-1902, and in 1902 (also the year of Nicolás Guillén’s birth) the Platt Amendment set the stage for continued intervention. This intervention would take various forms: economic, political, and cultural. Over the first half of the 20th century, the *afrocubanista* movement would explore continuities between Cuba’s colonial history of slavery and the modern realities of industrial agriculture. As I shall explore, Nicolás Guillén (who would become Cuba’s poet laureate after the 1959 revolution) played a central and complex role in shaping this discussion.

Traces of Cuba’s history of revolution and its struggle against imperialism also find their way into the literature of Haiti. The opening of Jacques Roumain’s novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*) finds the protagonist returning from exile in Cuba where he experienced the brutal conditions of work in the cane fields. His time in Cuba has inspired not only his radicalization but also his desire to forge models of local national community in the rituals of the common folk. As J. Michael Dash has explained, “ordered, purposeful and harmonious, the *coumbite* would have met Brouard’s criteria for the fundamental ingredients of a

⁸ *Nuestra América. La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York. Jan 10 1891*

Haitian *volkgeist*” (79). Though Dash reads the *coumbite* as fitting more generally into “organicist longings of this phase of Caribbean modernism,” it must be read in part as a response to the *indigéniste* movement’s call for folk-based models of national community, a call issued some years earlier in the context of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. As I will explore later in this chapter, the military occupation (1915-1934) constituted a wholesale restructuring of citizenship in Haiti. Haitian ethnographer Jean Price-Mars would advocate a turn to the folk not only to instill pride in Haiti’s indigenous culture, but also to suggest that Haiti’s independence from empire could only be ensured through strategic identification with the masses.

These developments in Cuba and Haiti overlap with historical formations that are key to understandings of the folk and modernity in Harlem Renaissance literary production: the Great Migration, the turn from agriculture to industry, and the rise of sophisticated forms of racial oppression. All three movements seek to re-evaluate “uses” of folk culture at this pivotal moment. And while literature in the Caribbean accounts for the cultural presence of the United States, the interwar years also see a resurgence of African American interest in the Caribbean.⁹ A

⁹ An interest in folk culture led a significant number of Harlem Renaissance writers and intellectuals to travel South during the interwar period, often extending these voyages into the Caribbean through the pathway of the Gulf States. In many cases these cultural crossings profoundly influenced their work. To name an early example, one can see the influences of James Weldon Johnson’s early childhood and his travels in Latin America on his 1912 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, in which the narrator’s journey south to collect folk materials brings him into contact with a community of Cuban cigar workers in Jacksonville, Florida. Langston Hughes’s 1930 trip to Havana was initially part of plan to write a folk opera based in Cuban themes. The trip initiated a collaborative relationship with Nicolás Guillén that marked the beginning of Hughes’s career as a translator. Shortly after his visit, Hughes published translations of Nicolás Guillén’s poems in journals such as *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, and *The Negro Quarterly*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston’s celebration of southern folk culture, bears the traces of its composition in Haiti, where she wrote the novel and collected material for *Tell My Horse*, her ethnography on voodoo and folklore.

Such travels are part of a larger wave of American interest in Caribbean culture. Before traveling to Haiti for instance, Hurston was joined by Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle in the migrant labor camps of Belle Glade Florida, where they studied Haitian and Bahamian dance rhythms. Along with Hurston Lomax, Harold Courlander, Melville Herskovits, and Katherine Dunham also traveled to Haiti in the 1930s. The burgeoning field of anthropology made field research a key practice in engagement with the folk, even for those who were not formally trained in its methods. The turn to the Caribbean in studies of the folk should be understood as distinctly comparative. It arose not solely from an interest in Caribbean culture itself, but as an effort to identify the elements that linked black culture in the U.S. and the Caribbean (Harold 7).

case in point is the career of James Weldon Johnson, a figure who interacted in some way to each of the writers in this study. In the *Book of American Negro Poetry* for example, Johnson deliberately went “a little afield and mentioned some of the Negro poets of the West Indies and South America” (375).

However, I do not view the Harlem literati’s interest in Caribbean folk culture as merely a natural extension of their work at home, or even primarily in terms of efforts to forge diasporic belonging. Heightened interest in Caribbean culture took place at a time when, as Barbara Christian puts it, “U.S. troops were continually invading one island or another” (72). Though it will not be my project here to trace the full spectrum of African American responses to U.S. empire, I do follow John Allen Gruesser’s observation that “African American writers often did not adopt and maintain a fixed position on the subject of imperialism” (7). For instance, while Johnson valorized Haitian cultural forms as part of his vehement opposition to the U.S. occupation of Haiti, as U.S. consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua he was also in the position to advocate for American imperial interests. Indeed, some of the most complicated responses to empire came from writers and intellectuals who were deeply involved in shaping discourses of folk culture. Moreover, the routes of travel and exchange opened up by U.S. intervention had a direct influence on American understandings of Caribbean folk culture. Though discourses of the folk in the U.S and Caribbean are differently located in relationship to American hegemony, neither escapes the complex entanglements of empire.

The following chapters focus on writers who played key roles in imagining the folk. Seeking to bring the folk into representation, these writers often thought of themselves as mediators and in some cases translators of folk culture. Because the *literary folk* are a

construct—imagined, invented, and written into being from a number of perspectives—it is possible to compare the motives and approaches taken by various writers. I have chosen to pair writers who address particular problems in the discourse of the folk and black modernity. I devote a chapter to the paradigm of a dying folk culture in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death* (1926). The next chapter explores the link between music, poetry, and models of racial collectivity in Langston Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1926) and Nicolás Guillén’s *Motivos de Son* (1930). Finally, I examine the relationship between folk culture, citizenship and resistance in two ethnographies of Haitian culture, Jean Price-Mars’s *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* (1938). As I explore in greater detail in the summaries that close this chapter, these comparisons are informed by a series of historical flashpoints sweeping the hemisphere in the 1920s and 1930s.

My methods of comparison also differ from those employed by work that frames “Afro-diasporic interaction” and “attempts to forge commonality across difference” in terms of face-to-face encounters between black intellectuals (Guridy 11). The comparative logic of *At the Crossroads* does not solely depend upon actual acts of collaboration. Though collaboration and correspondence are important conduits of interwar literary culture, focusing solely on these can obscure connections between writers who did not collaborate but who contributed to a common discursive field. My study seeks to find space for these kinds of comparisons between, for instance, writers such as Toomer and Walrond whose work is so deeply concerned with themes of death and modernization. Even in the case of Hughes and Guillén, whose collaboration has been the object of much critical attention, much work remains to be done in comparing their separate careers as poets who confronted imperialism and Jim Crow through their engagement with black music.

Finally then, the crossroads is also a useful figure for the kinds of comparison I enact in this study. As a point of intersection between roads that also branch off into different directions, a crossroads implies overlap as well as divergence, and even indicates a relationship between points that do not meet. The various engagements with folk culture that I discuss might be conceptualized as producing such a crossing: convergence without equivalence, divergence without detachment. By focusing on the topic of the folk, my project here will be to locate, in Natalie Melas's words, a "ground for comparison that is common but not unified" (xiii).

Discourses of Empire and the Folk in Interwar Literature

In an editorial foreword to Trinidadian scholar Eric Williams's 1942 study, *The Negro in the Caribbean*,¹⁰ Alain Locke emphasizes the need to "link up hitherto isolated segments of the racial problems common to his hemisphere" and to forge "inter-American understanding"(iv). On one hand, Locke's reference to common racial problems and his call for mutual understanding are not unlike the calls issued by Caribbean intellectuals since the beginning of the century. On the other hand, his foreword also includes curious rhetoric about the "constructive enlargement of Western democracy:"

Both selfishly and altruistically, for national as well as international interests, it behooves the United States to pursue constructive economic and political policies in the Caribbean, and without a realistic and objective understanding of the situation and its problems such an enlightened, long range program is impossible. The issues of this analysis present a challenge to us which, rightly solved, will lead to the constructive enlargement of Western democracy. (iv)

¹⁰ Eric Williams became Prime Minister of Trinidad from 1961-1981.

Locke's wording is not arbitrary. *The Negro in the Caribbean* is published at the beginning of the U.S. Occupation of Trinidad.¹¹ His foreword exemplifies the ways in which American intervention often provided an occasion to think about U.S.-Caribbean relationships. Though Locke posits that an "objective understanding of the situation" was a necessary goal, he stops short of offering a vision of anti-imperialist solidarity. In fact, Locke suggests that such an understanding might inform rather than impede a "long range program" of U.S. intervention.

Though Locke writes from the perspective of the 1940s, his foreword raises the question of how the "international interests" of the United States are related to the New Negro internationalism of the 1920s and 30s. Indeed, a variety of perspectives on imperialism had appeared within the pages of *The New Negro* itself. Du Bois's essay "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" ends the anthology by reasserting his 1899 observation that "the problem of the twentieth century [is] the Problem of the Color Line." This time, however, he frames the color line within a larger understanding of "imperialistic world industry" (414, 406). It is within this context that he proposes an alliance: "Led by American Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out hands toward each other to know, to sympathize, to inquire" (412). As a bookend to the volume's introduction, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" lends greater specificity to Locke's claim that the "new internationalism is primarily an effort to recapture contact with the scattered peoples of African derivation"(15).

The question of American empire is taken up more directly in a 1926 Caribbean-focused issue of *Opportunity*, organized in part by Walrond, the magazine's business manager.¹² In one

¹¹ 1941-1947. The U.S. established air and naval bases in Trinidad during WWII. See Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees*.

¹² Editor Charles Johnson writes of Walrond, "To his thorough acquaintance with the spokesmen of the Caribbean in this country we are indebted for the selection of special articles which appear in these pages" (334).

notable piece, W.A. Domingo argues that although West Indians continued to “bemoan” the failures of British imperial rule, it was far preferable to the “hegemony of the United States.” He explains: “They fear that under the hegemony of the United States they would be made to experience the social degradation to which Americans of color are subject. They point to the horrible examples of Haiti and the Virgin Islands, and refuse to exchange their tangible social birthright for an economic mess of pottage”(341). The phrase “mess of pottage” is not only Biblical but also alludes to the famous conclusion of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. The allusion effectively likens Caribbean acceptance of American economic rule to racial passing.¹³ Here passing describes an exchange in which dubious promises of economic gain are traded for social losses. At stake is the Caribbean subject’s “social birthright” to national sovereignty, which was ultimately inseparable from racial pride. Though Domingo hyperbolically asserts that British colonialism was preferable to American intervention, he ultimately emphasizes that Caribbean subjects are caught between two imperial regimes, the latter of which would subject West Indians to the “social degradation of Jim Crow.”

To address this dilemma, Domingo pledged cooperation between the “two branches of Anglo-Saxonized Negroes” in the U.S. and the British West Indies (342). Such an alliance would not only be based on language but also some notion of a shared Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage. Indeed, although this particular issue of *Opportunity* announced a pan-Caribbean focus, its main contributors were figures such as Claude McKay, Domingo, Ethelred Brown, Wendell Malliet and others from the Anglophone Caribbean. Though Harlem Renaissance visions of the Caribbean meaningfully encompassed non-English speaking nations, the “spokesmen of the Caribbean,” made visible by such organs as *Opportunity*, were often from the British West Indies

¹³ At the close of Johnson’s novel of racial passing, the narrator writes, “I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (207).

(Charles Johnson 334).

The issue's one article on Marcus Garvey seems to provide a missed opportunity to expand its focus. The author, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier acknowledges Garvey's mass appeal among African Americans but devotes scant attention to the UNIA leader's influence in the wider Caribbean (346-8). Doing so may have broadened the conversation: in the 1920s Cuba had 52 chapters of the UNIA, the largest number outside of the United States; the Panama Canal region was a close second with 46 (Opie 78). While Garveyism had wide appeal throughout the black Americas it had special resonance in spaces with recent or ongoing histories of U.S. intervention.¹⁴ Thus, although the volume grimly foreshadows future intervention in the Anglophone Caribbean, it leaves open the question of what it would have meant to more thoroughly engage spaces in which "American hegemony" was an immediate reality.

Published the same year (1926) as *Opportunity's* Caribbean issue, Walrond's *Tropic Death* takes up this task by tracing imperialism through a multi-lingual space that both encompassed and moved beyond the British West Indies. The protagonist of Claude McKay's 1928 novel *Home to Harlem* is a Haitian migrant who pointedly critiques U.S. involvement in Haiti. These texts are suggestive of engagement with U.S. empire and mass-based culture in the work of Cuban and Haitian intellectuals themselves, to which I will turn in the following sections.

¹⁴ Walrond wrote for *Negro World* prior to joining *Opportunity*. He had observed that Garvey "stood head and shoulders above" other race leaders in terms of his appeal to the masses. Walrond would later break with the *Negro World* after publicly critiquing Garvey as a "megalomaniac" who was foolishly enamored with capitalism, a system under which the American Negro had no future.

The U.S.'s imperial designs on Cuba stretch back long before the 20th century. In “Confederate Cuba” Caroline Levander quotes Martin Delany’s 1848 observation that “Cuba is the great western slave mart of the world...it is the great channel through which slaves were imported annually into the United States...” (Delany qtd. in Levander 823). The confederacy’s longstanding interest in Cuba also included an early nineteenth century plan to “‘found a gigantic tropical slave empire’ that would outstrip and finally conquer the ‘free republic’ to the North”(824). It is no surprise then that Cuba also becomes a site of resistance in Delany’s 1859 novel, *Blake*.¹⁵ These antebellum efforts to link the South and Cuba as part of one vast imperial space for the cultivation of racial slavery are helpful to understanding the racialized nature of the U.S.’ expansion in Cuba in later periods. Empire would not just take the form of military occupations. It would also include more subtle dynamics, including corporate interests, tourism, and importantly, the dissemination and appropriation of Afro-Cuban culture.¹⁶

Responses to imperialism underscore the politics of *afrocubanismo* in Cuban literary movements in the 1920s and 1930s. This was a time of vast social upheaval: faced with the growth of U.S. economic interests on the island, the authoritarian rule of the Machado regime, and pervasive, yet unacknowledged racial and social inequality, Afro-Cuban intellectuals took up the project of defining a Cuban national identity that would include the voices of all Cubans.¹⁷

Crafting a true Cuban identity would mean ensuring that the perspectives of people of color

¹⁵ Delany, Martin. *Blake or the Huts of America*. 1859. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. Delany had written about Cuba in two essays in the *North Star*: “Annexation of Cuba” 27 April 1848, p. 2 (quoted above) and “The Redemption of Cuba” 20 July 1849 p. 3.

¹⁶ For instance, in the 1930s while Guillén wrote anti-imperialist verse steeped in the rhythms of son music, the Cuban song “Peanut Vendor” became a smash hit in the U.S., beginning a U.S. craze for Afro-Cuban music. Such dissemination often stripped the music of its context and its politics. Such exchanges were not unilateral—in Cuba the 1920s saw the popularity of jazz for instance, performed in white Cuban clubs by white musicians. These exchanges are not automatic but instead exemplify the ways that cultural channels are fostered by empire.

¹⁷This period was also characterized by migration from the mountains/countryside to Havana and labor migration to other Caribbean islands.

would no longer be silenced. Such a project sought to strategically link anti-imperial sentiment to anti-racist struggle—two missions that were not always joined in certain sectors of Cuban society.

Afrocubanismo took shape through various conduits: political activism, social organizations, and the Afro-Cuban press. As in the Harlem Renaissance, journals and periodicals became a crucial part of this project—their wider readership and ability to draw on a number of perspectives made them the ideal venues for public debate. *Ideales de una Raza* (“Ideals of a Race”) was a key forum for these conversations. Edited by Gustavo Urrutia, *Ideales de una Raza* ran weekly from 1928-1930 in the prominent (and conservative) daily newspaper *Diario de la Marina*. As John Patrick Leary explains: “*Ideales de una Raza* was part of a politically active, cultural nationalist intellectual movement in the 1920s and 1930s Cuba that has been loosely referred to as *vanguardismo*, or avant-gardism. *Vanguardismo*...took up the reevaluation of *cubania*, or ‘Cubanness,’ during a period of intense political and economic crisis on the island” (147). The column’s central premise was that *cubanía* could not be understood without acknowledging the black presence and taking steps to address racial inequality in Cuba.

Urrutia founded the column with hopes of fostering cooperation between the races. Its message would be addressed to those who had heretofore denied the black experience, in order to “explain our points of view to them and to the entire country, regarding this concrete problem and other tasks that urge us all, white and black, to resolve them together, and to make visible the thought, feeling, suffering and yearning of the race of color in Cuba” (654, translation mine). The column took up the task of exposing realities of racial inequality that stood in stark contrast to nationalist discourses of racial harmony. Indeed, certain voices had been silenced in order for such a discourse of harmony to prevail. The contradictions between Cuba’s expressed attitudes

and de facto policies regarding Afro-Cuban culture are a case in point: For example, authoritarian leader Gerardo Machado declared his fondness for *son* music—but continued to criminalize the use of Afro-Cuban drums and to persecute its practitioners.

As Pedro Cubas Hernández has observed, *Ideales de una Raza* was energized by, and helped to promote, the celebration of black culture that was already underway: “The black presence is registered in the cultural tasks of the intellectuals of this epoch: in the canvases of Victor Manuel or Domingo Ravenet; in the verses of Regino Pedrosa or of Guillén himself; in the scores of Amadeo Roldan or Alejandro Garcia Caturla, in the essays of Fernando Ortiz” (632). Guillén became one of the most important contributors to this column, publishing his 1930 volume *Motivos de son* within its pages.

On one hand *afrocubanismo* saw itself as connected to the Harlem Renaissance. Urrutia and others organized Langston Hughes’s visit to Havana in the 1930’s. (Arthur Schomburg had helped to introduce Urrutia to the work of African American writers.) Members of the elite Afro-Cuban organization, Club Atenas, also did much to publicize the visits of prominent African Americans (Schwartz 108). On the other hand, the *afrocubanista* movement’s relationship to the Harlem Renaissance was not one of unilateral influence and unwavering admiration. Harlem came to symbolize not only artistic flowering, but also the grim realities of U.S. segregation. Guillén makes precisely this point in one memorable essay in *Ideales*, “El Camino de Harlem.” The essay warned that if Cuban society did not continue to make steady progress toward improving race relations, it was in danger of going “the way of Harlem.” *Ideales* often included various negative examples of race relations in the U.S. (Schwartz 108-9). Such anecdotes were intended as cautionary tales, as the *afrocubanista* movement saw the infringement of the U.S. (and its attendant racial policies) as a direct impediment to its goal of multiracial community.

The black literati were also pressed for more radical responses to the race problem. Even comparisons between the work Guillén and Hughes contained this caveat. As critic Regino Boti famously quipped, “Hughes’s muse waits [while] Guillén’s makes demands” (Boti, qtd. in Ellis 131).

Boti’s statement contains a presumption about the nature of avant-garde writing: to “make demands” is to not only to test the limits of form, but to use literary form to effect social change. Uses of the vernacular were truly avant-garde if they could “demand” inclusion, thereby contributing to a nationalist discourse of multi-racial equality. However, as I will explore in my chapter on Hughes and Guillén, the true question of interest is not which poet was more radical. It rather concerns the signal difference between Guillén’s *mestizo* poetics Hughes’s melancholy yet distinct blues voice.

While *Ideales de una Raza* re-invigorated Cuban discussions of race and nationhood, a cluster of similar projects was emerging across the Caribbean. In Haiti *La Revue indigène* ran between July 27 and Feb, 1928. Though short lived (it ran for only six issues) the journal helped to articulate key goals of a young literary movement which intended to “*preparer l’avenir*,” to pave the way for Haiti’s future and for a new generation of Haitian writers. Founded by Émile Roumer, Jacques Roumain, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, Carl Brouard, and others, the journal hoped to stage a crucial intervention in nationalist thought at a turning point in Haiti’s history.

Twelve years into the U.S. Occupation, with no end in sight, Haiti was undergoing structural changes as well as shifts in ideas of national identity. The U.S. occupied Haiti in July 1915 after the events of June 28, 1915, in which President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was

assassinated following the massacre of political prisoners at Port au Prince. Though the U.S. framed intervention as a regrettable yet necessary measure to restore order to a country plagued by instability, the United States had long held a strategic interest in Haiti. As James Weldon Johnson observes in his report for the NAACP in 1920, the assassination of President Sam did not cause intervention, but merely furnished the long-awaited opportunity: “When the United States found itself in a position to take what it had not even dared to ask, it used brute force and took it” (Johnson 662). As I shall explore in my final chapter, the U.S. occupation constituted not just an abstract threat but a wholesale restructuring of citizenship in Haiti.

In light of these circumstances, Normil G. Sylvain reflects in his introduction to the first issue of *La Revue*, a focus on literature (and particularly poetry) might seem counterintuitive. But in fact, Sylvain argued, literature was the only force able to unite a divided country that had lost touch with its identity by holding too fast to the cultural ideals of France. “Poetry is an instrument of knowledge,” and “gives infallible expression to the soul of a people,” Sylvain writes (3).¹⁸ By providing space for Haitian poetry within its pages, the journal would serve as “a faithful and vibrant tableau of the myriad manifestations of contemporary Haitian life and thought” “*un tableau fidèle et vivant des diverses manifestations de la vie et de la pensée haitienne contemporaine*” (9). In order to accomplish this, the journal would champion, above all else, the “indigenous point of view:” “Just as the word ‘indigenous’ has been turned into a manner of insult, we revindicate it as a title: the indigenous point of view” “*comme on fait une manière d’insulte du mot indigène nous le revendiquons comme un titre, le point de vue de l’indigène*” (9).

¹⁸ “*La poésie est un instrument de connaissance...la littérature donne l’expression infallible de l’âme d’un peuple*” (3).

Appropriately then, the first issue of *La Revue* included a piece by a founder of the *indigéniste* movement, ethnographer, physician and diplomat, Jean Price-Mars. The essay, entitled “*La Famille Paysanne: Moeurs Locales et Survivances Africaines*,” ‘The Peasant Family: Local Customs and African Survivances’ would become the final chapter of Price-Mars’s seminal text *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (1928). Like many of Price-Mars’s pieces this essay concerned the peasant but was addressed to the Haitian elite.¹⁹ The aim of the piece was twofold. Through a survey of daily life in Haitian countryside, Price-Mars hoped to elevate the humble peasant to a respectable and even noble status in Haitian society. This description would pave the way for a discussion of African “survivals,” customs that he argued had been retained in Haitian folk culture from slavery until the present.²⁰ Anticipating the resistance of his audience, Price-Mars reflects: “We are ashamed of [these practices] because they have been called superstitions and prejudices...but have they not “sustained us?” (41). Price-Mars argued that the cultural practices of the folk, especially vodou, ought to be embraced rather than disavowed as the core of Haiti’s national identity. Furthermore, the incorporation of all Haitians into a cultural and political (civic) community would be key to strategies of resistance to the U.S. occupation.

In the second issue Sylvain extends Price-Mars’s discussion by issuing a call for a Haitian national literature inspired by the indigenous art forms of the Haitian masses. A true Haitian poetics would be inspired neither by the stuffy Parisian salon, nor by the local color tales from the pens of writers who had never set foot in Haiti. Rather a new poetry would be energized by “the sound of tom-toms urging to the dance on one hill or another; the call of the conch, the hoarse cry of cornered humanity; it is the hectic and sensual and rhythm of a meringue

¹⁹ The piece was an excerpt from an address given at the elite Primavera Club in 1922.

²⁰ Price-Mars’s work on African survivals had a significant influence on Herskovits and other American anthropologists.

with its lustful melancholy, that should be transmitted through our poetry. The notation of our turmoil will be direct, and personal.”²¹ Haiti’s culture—especially its rich folkloric traditions—would serve as a great store of material for the young artist seeking to find a voice.

Finally, the foundation of a Haitian literature, written in French, would require special acts of translation. “Even if we write in French,” Sylvain asserts, “one mustn’t forget that we are strangers [to the language], perhaps even barbarians”(53). Therefore, there was no need to follow French “refinements of sensibility or to try to imitate, but we should instead render our own sensations, express our own sentiments. Our poems are translated from Haitian, that is to say, the translation of our own states of mind.” (53). Translation here is not merely linguistic, but also concerns “states of mind,” (literally, “soul”) and mood. Haitian writers would fashion themselves not only as artists, but translators who assumed positions of authority as mediators of Haitian cultural thought.

Like coterminous movements in Cuba and in the U.S., the Haitian literary movement had comparative orientation. *La Revue* proclaimed affiliation with its neighbors in the Antilles and Latin America, citing José Énrique Rodó’s *Ariel*, among other texts. In 1928 the founders of *La Revue* released an anthology, *Anthologie de la Poésie Haïtienne*. As Paul Morand writes in the Introduction, “Haitian problems, and I’m speaking here of literature, should retain all of our attention. Then we must situate these problems in the scope of the problems of the world. One cannot understand, that is to say, be legitimate, but through comparison” (1).²² It would therefore

²¹ “C’est le bruit des tams-tams conviant à la danse d’un morne à l’autre; l’appel des lambis, cri rauque d’humanité aux abois, c’est le rythme trépidant et sensuel d’une méringue avec sa mélancolie lascive, qui doit passer dans notre poésie. La notation sera direct, de nos émois, et personnelle” (Sylvain 52).

²² “Les problèmes haïtiens—je ne parle que littérature—doivent retenir toute votre attention. Ensuite il vous faudra les situer dans le cadre des autres problèmes du monde. On ne peut comprendre, c’est à dire être juste, que par comparaison” (1).

be key to compare Haitian literary efforts to “the literary efforts of the entire race, from Chicago to Madagascar”(1).

This is one of many examples of strategic comparison enacted by interwar intellectuals. Strategic comparison might be understood as a kind of transnationalism that enables black writers to simultaneously articulate affiliation while emphasizing difference; to claim solidarity while also elevating national projects. As Michelle A. Stephens has observed, the question is not whether transnational perspectives transcend the national, but “whether the nation under construction is understood and represented in domestic or international terms” (606). Far from being unilateral, strategic comparison operates from both sides and can be seen at work in each literary context this dissertation explores. Ultimately, I will argue that it has the effect of highlighting significant tensions between literary projects. If folk culture is the common thread across these various contexts, it is also the site of difference.

The following chapter considers imaginings of the folk in Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and Walrond’s *Tropic Death*. (1926) In the tradition of Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, each book paints a series of portraits of black rural life dense with song, prophetic folk wisdom, and rich spirituality. However, though both Toomer and Walrond suggest that this folk tradition could serve as inspiration for the modern black writer, they differ on whether the folk themselves have access to the modern black experience. In *Cane*, the South and the folk who reside there are detached from the stirrings of modernity taking place in Northern cities. Though black migration is *Cane*’s larger context, the characters that we encounter in Toomer’s Georgia—who are mostly women—seem as rooted to the Southern soil as the sugarcane that covers the landscape. In

contrast, unlike the South of *Cane*, which is portrayed as a fading pre-modern site, the Caribbean islands of *Tropic Death* simultaneously invoke a past defined by colonial plantation slavery, and a modern present structured by U.S. industrial imperialism. Here, modernity is not defined in terms of narratives of progress that presume a radical break with the past, but rather in terms of the Caribbean subject's shifting relationship to empire. Walrond thus revises *Cane* by exploring the idea that the folk— laborers in a “backwoods village in Barbados”—experience a form of modernity that links them historically to their counterparts throughout the global South.

Chapter three explores the uses of blues and son music in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén. I suggest that each poet's use of music to chronicle the daily lives of the black masses is reflective of their working class politics, a concern that I expand upon by examining their other writings. Yet, their use of black art forms also reveals major disjunctures in U.S.-Cuban definitions of race, as well as differing ideas about the status of that concept in articulations of national identity. Although Guillén acknowledges African contributions to Cuban music, in his view race cannot be subsumed into U.S. binaries of black and white, and must instead be understood within the Cuban mixed-race discourse of *mestizaje*. Guillén crafts a son poetry that embodies this concept of cultural mixing to suggest a model for a unified Cuban national identity— an indispensable tool against the pervasive *yanqui* presence in Cuba. Hughes's status as an oppressed black minority within U.S. empire does not allow him to make the same claims for racial solidarity and nationhood in his blues poetry. Yet his blues poems are nevertheless key to the imagination of an articulate theory of U.S. black modernity emerging from the black masses themselves. Thus Hughes's and Guillén's struggle to forge connections between their work was an exercise not merely in linguistic, but also cultural translation.

My final chapter considers the treatment of folklore and vodou in two important ethnographies of the period: Jean Price-Mars's *Ainsi parla l'oncle* 'So Spoke the Uncle' (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938). I consider the ways in which the subject of Haiti loomed large in the African American imagination in the years surrounding the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, sparking debates about nationhood and self-determination and specifically the role of black folk culture in fostering a sense of national identity. Both Price-Mars and Hurston explore the ways in which a Haitian folkloric tradition granted insight into the country's history of slavery and revolution. They are also among the first to argue that voodoo was a valid syncretic religion whose development modeled that of other world religions; rather than invoking it as evidence of Haitian superstition and barbarism (used as justification for continued subjugation of Haitians). In addition, each of these studies translates a concern with the vernacular into a set of literary practices, particularly the use of the narrative structures of Haitian folklore and the dynamic synthesis of a number of styles, genres and voices. Yet, Hurston's text remains understudied, perhaps because it is now infamous for its embarrassing "bursts of imperialist rhetoric" and her praise of the U.S. occupation. Rather than taking this as a cause for dismissal, I want to explore the ways in which transnational encounters are often inflected with a host of national assumptions and attitudes, including in this case, a complex and uneven relationship to U.S. imperialism.

The organization of these chapters also raises a question about the role of form in representations of the folk. How do experiments with form relate to the visions of folk culture these writers are attempting to create? Toomer and Walrond draw upon the short story cycle, a genre that eschews the monolithic narrative in favor of the sketch or fragment; an effect that ultimately emphasizes multiplicity within a larger whole. It is appropriate form for the prismatic

view of black culture approached by each author. Hughes and Guillén found verse especially suited to their experiments with music as poetic form; and through poetry they were also able to articulate the relationship between the solitary voice of the individual and a larger cultural community. Hurston and Price-Mars take up ethnography, which played a key role in shaping theories of folk culture: it took up the task of definition and classification, and it often deployed a comparative approach as it attempted to establish the relationship between cultures. Many intellectuals shared Arthur Huff Fauset's idea that ethnographic study of the folk was a necessary prelude to fictional representation, and to some degree, each writer in this dissertation is informed by the methods and approaches of ethnographic study, including the emphasis on fieldwork.²³ As we shall see, the authority and influence wielded by the ethnographic approach was not unproblematic—even the most progressive of its practitioners risked entanglement in an objectifying imperial gaze. Yet in spite of this (or perhaps because of it) through this genre we learn much about the politics of the observer and student of the folk.

Though there is considerable overlap in their approaches, it can neither be said that these writers turned to the folk and the vernacular for the same reasons, nor that they based their efforts in shared definitions of race and culture. These efforts are not merely variations on a theme, but often frankly oppositional. Such an effect is emphasized, perhaps, by the inclusion of writers across the Anglophone, Francophone and Spanish speaking Caribbean—different linguistic communities with uneven relationships to U.S. empire as well as to the legacy of European colonialism. Yet such dissonance is also revelatory: By tracing the uses of the folk across this U.S.-Caribbean literary space, bringing in the entanglements of U.S. empire and Jim

²³ “It is the ethnologist, the philologist and the student of primitive psychology that are most needed for its present investigation... a literary treatment based on a scientific recording will have much fresh material to its hand, and cannot transgress so far from the true ways of the folk spirit and the true lines of our folk art” (243-4). Fauset, “American Negro Folk Literature,” in *The New Negro*.

Crow, we are able to see the “folk” as a concept that varies across space and time, challenging anew the claims to authenticity, shared origins, and monolithic community that have persistently shaped understandings of the folk’s place in the black tradition.

Chapter Two

Death on the Modern Desert: Folk Culture and Modernity in Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*

Turning to the rural South and the Caribbean “backwoods,” *Cane* (1923) and *Tropic Death* (1926) position black culture at a geographical and temporal crossroads. Each text retraces African American and Caribbean migration routes in order to grapple in distinctive ways with black folk culture’s transition into modernity. The publication of Toomer’s *Cane* in 1923 was an inaugural event of the Harlem Renaissance. *Cane*’s turn to a rural peasant class as well as its crafting of a modernist aesthetic inspired by the “terse lyricism” of Negro spirituals does much to shape the artistic and literary terrain of the period. Central to *Cane*’s project is the imperative to preserve a folk culture that was, in Toomer’s words, “walking in to die on the modern desert” (*Wayward and the Seeking* 123). *Tropic Death*, a book of short stories set entirely in the Caribbean and Central America during the construction of the Panama Canal, is published in 1926 at the height of the Renaissance. Like *Cane*, *Tropic Death* also positions the folk at a crossroads in the history of the New World: the transition from the plantation economy to industrialism, the subsequent waves of migration to industrial centers, and the changing shape of racial violence and systematic oppression in the first decades of the twentieth century. And as announced by its title, *Tropic Death* also frames modernity in terms of demise. Yet by positioning his discussion of black folk culture in the Caribbean basin during the years of U.S. expansion, *Tropic Death* performs a significant regional shift. In *Tropic Death*, the reader again returns to the cane field at dusk, but finds that the perspective has changed. “It was not Sepia, Georgia,” Walrond writes, “but a backwoods village in Barbados.”

This phrase not only enacts a regional shift but also invites us to frame the geographies of the folk in comparison. Appearing in *Tropic Death*'s opening pages, the phrase insists on the specificity of place (this particular story's setting in rural Barbados) but it also leaves behind the trace of an alternative, a Southern elsewhere that invokes the landscape of Toomer's *Cane*. In other words, this statement about regional difference is simultaneously an acknowledgment of the ways in which rural Barbados *does* in fact resemble rural Georgia. The images and sounds that populate the text—the snatches of folk song, “dark brilliant faces of black...peasants,” “canes spread over with their dark rich foliage into the dust-laden road”—are all markers of rural black life that Walrond's readers might also associate with literary depictions of the U.S. South. Like Toomer's Georgia, the Caribbean landscape is also unsettlingly linked to a haunting past of plantation slavery. Indeed, in both texts the cane field (that ages-old symbol of labor, violence, and resistance in the black literature of the Americas) is a reminder of modernity's insufficient break with an oppressive past.

While retaining a trace of the U.S. South, Walrond's geographical shift also allows him to link the past of colonial slavery to the modern violence of U.S imperialism in the Caribbean. *Tropic Death*, with its catalogue of death, disease, and natural disaster, is even more relentless than *Cane* in its depiction of a dying folk. This is because Walrond more pointedly frames folk culture's demise as a result of uneven development and systematic violence, rather than its inherent resistance to modern progress. This emphasis on the material consequences of modernity marks a signal difference between Toomer and Walrond's treatment of dying folk: *Cane*'s elegiac tone and its emphasis on a fading folk culture that eludes artistic representation ultimately tells us more about the problematic position of the black artist who finds himself in a disorienting borderspace between a folk past and a modern present. *Tropic Death* revises *Cane*

by considering the politics of the folk's demise. Paradoxically, Walrond's more pointed focus on dying and impoverished bodies serves to place his folk more firmly in the present as modern subjects of empire.

Together these texts challenge common frameworks for understanding the literary turn to folk culture situated in rural geographies. The turn to the South and to the Caribbean in these texts is not simply a quest for roots or a nostalgic backward glance toward a space of pre-modern simplicity. Nor is it merely a question of reveling in the "glamorous sensuous ecstasy" of "the folk" as an answer to the "Puritanism" of a previous literary generation, as Alain Locke suggests in *The New Negro*. Trumpeting the arrival of a young generation of black writers in that seminal anthology, Locke singles out Toomer and Walrond's literary innovations for special mention: "Toomer gives a musical folk-lilt and a glamorous sensuous ecstasy to the style of the American prose modernists," Locke writes. "Walrond has a tropical color and almost volcanic gush that are unique even after more than a generation of exotic word painting by master artists" (52). Locke's exuberant description notwithstanding, the work of these writers is somewhat at odds with Locke's framing of the anthology. This is not only because Toomer would later reject racial framings of his work, but also because neither writer celebrates the flowering of black folk culture or makes unqualified claims for its redemptive powers. On the contrary, the folk are framed within each text's gothic preoccupation with death. The particularly grim outlook of each of these works is a significant stance in a moment that was being hailed as a time of cultural renewal. Death, however, does not merely constitute an end in these texts. Rather, death raises questions about the folk's participation in processes of modernity, placing them within a historical matrix from which they were often deemed separate.

Moreover, Toomer and Walrond's treatment of the folk is not merely a thematic concern but also a question of literary form and stylistic experimentation. They were frequently named together by their contemporaries as two of the Harlem Renaissance's most promising experimental writers. Though less effusive than Locke, Sterling Brown calls *Cane* (1923) and *Tropic Death* (1926) "two striking books of the movement," noting that "these authors were alike in being masters of their craft and, unfortunately, in falling silent after the publication of one book each" (85).²⁴ Such sentiments are echoed by later critics such as Kenneth Ramchand who asserts that "the two stylists of the movement were Jean Toomer, strange author of a single work, a neglected masterpiece *Cane*, and Eric Walrond" (68). More recently, seeking to contextualize Walrond's work within the context of American modernism, Michelle Stephens observes that "in a manner remarkably similar to that of Jean Toomer in his descriptions of the Southern United States in *Cane*...Walrond literalised the metaphor of the modern 'wasteland' on Caribbean shores" (173).

Though these critical accounts suggest the possibility of pairing the writers on stylistic and thematic grounds, Toomer and Walrond have yet to be the subject of an extended comparative reading.²⁵ That reading will be the project of this chapter. In particular, I will explore the relationship between their thematic focus on death and their experimentalism. Such

²⁴ Toomer and Walrond did not precisely "fall silent," as Brown contends. Though neither writer produced another masterwork on the scale of their original debut, they each continued to publish throughout their lives. See *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*, Ed. Rusch; and *In Search of Asylum: The Later Writings of Eric Walrond*, Ed. Parascandola and Wade, respectively.

²⁵ Given the lack of a collaborative relationship the pairing eludes a common rationale for comparison in interwar scholarship. Secondly, although both works re-emerged during the Black Arts Movement, critical recuperation of Walrond has not progressed at the same rate as that of Toomer. Until fairly recently there has been little critical framework in Harlem Renaissance scholarship to situate Walrond, a writer who focused so relentlessly on Caribbean labor migration and its relationship to U.S. imperialism. This has begun to change through recent work of Louis Parascandola and Arnold Rampersad.

interplay is apparent at the level of form: Though *Cane*, a book of 31 lyrical poems, short stories, and vignettes, is more generically hybrid than Walrond's collection of 10 short stories, both authors engage the tradition of the short story cycle, a form which links them to white modernist counterparts such as Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank but also to an African American tradition of short forms in the vein of the *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois's panorama of black folk culture. Du Bois's theory of dynamic black collectivity is propelled by the short story cycle, a form well suited to displaying multiplicity within a larger whole. In a similar vein, Toomer and Walrond's use of the form enables them to render black modernity with a prismatic complexity that cannot be reduced to any single master narrative. Unlike *Souls*, however, *Cane*'s "genre-bending" and *Tropic Death*'s mechanical repetition of death are exceptionally jarring—albeit in distinct ways. Because the reader must find her footing again and again, the feeling of irresolution in these texts is especially pronounced. Their episodic nature enables them to pose a series of unresolved and perhaps unresolvable questions. Modernity holds no jubilant promises but is rather a story still in the making.

In *Cane*, the journey South is figured as a poet's pilgrimage to the birthplace of a black folk culture born out of the slave experience, but now fading in the face of modern industrialization and black migration to Northern cities. *Cane*'s tripartite structure—the book begins in between rural Georgia, swings upward to a radically different vision of black life in Washington D.C., then returns South— suggests that the black experience of modernity was in part a matter of geography. In many ways Toomer constructs the South as a space not only geographically but also temporally removed from modern urban life. In "Song of the Son," the poem that sets a nostalgic tone for the first section of *Cane*, the poet sings a song to his native

land: “Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,/Thy son, I have in time returned to thee” (9-10). This inverted phrasing suggests somewhat paradoxically that on one hand, the poet has returned just in time, before the sun has set on a “song-lit race of slaves”(12). On the other hand, it imagines the poet’s return to the Southern landscape as a journey back in time.

This last meaning is crucial to *Cane*’s ultimate staging of the poet’s return as a failure. In *Cane*’s closing dramatic sketch, “Kabnis,” the poet’s voice is stripped of the lyricism and hope that characterized the first part of the text: “Do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them,” he laments (85). The land and its people are out of reach because they are literally situated in the past; the poet does not have access to the spiritual terrain of a bygone era. *Cane* thus ultimately tells us more about the problematics of return than it does about a fading folk culture. After all, it is not the folk, but the poet (a figure that Gorham Munson defines as *Cane*’s “spectatorial artist”) who is *Cane*’s true tragic figure and who exemplifies the dilemma of the black modern subject. Black modernity, as Toomer defines it, is not only shaped by physical migration, but by a constant shuttling back and forth between two symbolic geographies and temporalities: The spiritualized South, as past, as memory; and an urbanized Northern present future, “jazzed, strident, modern” (“Letter to Waldo Frank” 23).

Cane’s meditation on folk culture had an enormous impact on the writing of the Harlem Renaissance, and as Mark Whalan has observed, also did much to suggest “a critical terrain that would figure largely in the decade; the interest in ‘the folk,’ the politics of the observer—namely who had the authority to observe, and how one’s situation affected what could be seen; and the political value of formal experimentalism”(71). *Cane*’s trope of the traveling observer is inspired

by the time he spent among the Southern folk as a teacher in Sparta, Georgia. In a now famous reflection Toomer writes:

The setting was crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful. I began feeling its effect despite my state, or perhaps, just because of it. There was a valley, the valley of cane, with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night. A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them "shouting." They had victrolas and player pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, were certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the town and then towards the city—and industry and commerce and machines. The folk spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death so tragic...And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song, a song of an end. (*The Wayward and the Seeking* 123)

Several things are striking here. Folk culture's fading is viewed in part, as a rift between the Negroes of the town and the "back-country." This rift is embodied in the discontinuity between two black artistic forms: On one hand, there are folk songs and spirituals, which seem to emerge effortlessly from the peasants themselves with the simple phrase "they sang," as if it was their sole purpose. On the other hand, there is jazz, whose dissemination is mediated by modern technologies such as the victrola. This passage thus reveals Toomer's tendency to see black artistic forms in terms of discontinuity rather than transformation and development. Such a

narrative would have been disrupted by a consideration of blues music, for example, as a black vernacular form that encompassed the experiences of both the town and the “back-country;” of both the “folk spirit” and “industry commerce and machines.” Yet establishing this sense of discontinuity would be important. By highlighting an inability to imagine folk-expression as rooted in modern experience and not solely in the past, Toomer emphasizes the perspective of an urban artist coming into contact with folk-culture for the first time. He stresses not only the beauty of the setting, but also its strangeness. The images of “smoke-wreaths” and “mist” suggest that the land is veiled in mystery. Toomer frames folk culture’s demise in the context of his own distance from it. Folk culture is intangible and elusive; it is presented as dying because it is outside the black modern artist’s range of experience.

To be sure, Toomer draws from his own experience in his depiction of the spectatorial artist who moves through the pages of *Cane*, observing, documenting, and interpreting what he sees. Such a traveling figure is also a common trope in black modernist literature. It is seen in the work of Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, as well as Hurston, Hughes and Sterling Brown. These writers are influenced in no small part by the burgeoning field of ethnography and its emphasis on travel and fieldwork. In turn, this new ethnographic work was in dialogue with (and often sought to revise) a long tradition of imperial travel writing that had been preoccupied with representations of “primitive” and presumably pre-modern life in the New World.²⁶ Like much writing of the New Negro era, *Cane*’s spectatorial artist is in conversation with imperial

²⁶ The first decades of the twentieth century see a proliferation of such narratives produced by U.S. writers. See for example William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* and John Houston Craige’s *Cannibal Cousins*, published in 1929 and 1934 respectively during the U.S. Occupation of Haiti. Such narratives had a wide readership in the U.S. and played a big role in bolstering the imperial ideologies of superiority that served as justification for the U.S.’ presence in the Caribbean.

ideologies and methods. *Cane* imagines a different, more sensitive kind of spectator, but the text is never completely disentangled from the problematics of observation.

Toomer revises the trope of imperial travel by recasting his narrative as a return of a native son. Toomer also gives serious consideration to the aesthetic brilliance of black cultural forms while being sensitive to the legacies of racial violence out of which these forms are born. Still, the narrator's ability to travel into and out of this space suggests special privileges of geographical, temporal, and cultural mobility—privileges that Toomer's folk do not always share.

Indeed, even as the Great Migration provides the context for *Cane*, Toomer's folk often seem rooted to their surroundings while the narrator is shown whizzing by in trains or carriages or even walking the dirt roads on foot, as the first person narrator does in "Fern," a story about a mysterious woman of the same name. "If you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day," the narrator explains, "you'd be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch"(17). The narrator is drawn to Fern, especially her eyes, which are mysterious and magnetic, and contain "hardly a trace of wistfulness." Because Fern seems so rooted to her surroundings, it is impossible to imagine her anywhere else. The narrator considers the possibility of bringing her up North, but quickly dismisses it: "Besides picture if you can, this cream-colored solitary girl sitting at a tenement window looking down on the indifferent throngs of Harlem. Better that she listen to folk-songs at dusk in Georgia, you would say, and so would I" (17).

The fact that Fern lives in a lonely shack by the railroad where she can see the searchlight of the evening train is significant—in another kind of narrative she would be a blues

woman. In blues music the train is a pervasive symbol in songs that celebrate mobility or express the longing for it. Though Toomer is not particularly interested in that kind of voice, Fern is not completely voiceless. As dusk settles with a purple haze around the cane, Fern springs up and begins to sing:

She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Her body was tortured with something she could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang with a broken voice. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. (19)

Fern is lost in the dusk, and the narrator (and by extension, the reader) cannot actually see her: “dusk hid her, I could hear only her song.” Fern’s song—a song of suffering as well as a prayer—is all that is left, but it too is marked by brokenness. Her body, as the narrator imagines it, is both beautiful and “tortured.” Sap, which Toomer elsewhere characterizes as a fount of authenticity and deep-rooted sustenance, does not nourish, but instead boils and burns. Expression is muted at best and only emerges in intermittent snatches. Like Father John of “Kabnis,” Fern represents a “muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them” (106). Throughout the text, the inevitable reality of folk culture’s demise is illustrated through breakdown of self-expression: in the broken voices and inarticulate mumblings of its characters, in “convulsive sounds” and, and most notably, in fleeting, fragmented images.

In many ways, this vision of Fern parallels Toomer’s description of the agonizing experience of writing *Cane*: “*Cane* was a lyric essence forced out with great effort despite my

knotted state. People have remarked of its simple, easy flowing lyricism, its rich natural poetry; and they assume that it came to bloom as easily as a flower. In truth it was born in an agony of internal tightness, conflict, and chaos...the book as a whole was distilled from the most terrible strain that I have ever known” (“To Waldo Frank” 156). The concept of lyricism distilled from “terrible strain” provides a framework for understanding one of *Cane*’s central tensions: the paradoxes of artistic composition. “Rich, natural poetry” does not bloom as organically as a flower but rather emerges from forced effort and internal agony.

Cane’s poetic voice does not mask the terrible strain of its composition, but instead vacillates between “lyric essence” and “internal tightness, conflict, and chaos.” Noting the breakdown of the lyrical poetic voice in the final section of *Cane*, Karen Jackson Ford observes, “*Cane*’s song of an end regards the very end of song, the inability of the modern black poet to transform the last echoes of the spirituals into a new poetry” (8). *Cane* certainly does seek to dramatize this failure, particularly through the figure of Kabnis, a frustrated poet for whom expression seems to emerge only in incoherent stammers. “Kabnis” is a far cry from the lyrical cadences of “Song of the Son.” Ultimately, Ford suggests, such fragmentation tells us just as much about the narrator’s distance from his subjects as it does about the presumed disintegration of a culture itself.

On the other hand, *Cane*’s lapses into incoherence also seem to mark great moments of artistic possibility. Fern’s voice exemplifies what Nathaniel Mackey has called a “telling inarticulacy,” a quality of black artistic expression characterized by obliqueness, incompleteness, and abstraction. While the fragmented voice has been considered a hallmark of modernist expression, telling inarticulacy is more specifically “an introspective gesture that arises from and reflects critically upon an experience of isolation or exclusion”(252). Inarticulacy also evidences

a “given frustration with and questioning of given articulacies, permissible ways of making sense” (253). The persistence of such a gesture in *Cane* seems to complicate Toomer’s own trope of passive “fading.” If folk expression is indeed dying, it does not fade away like the soft edges of a vignette. Rather, its breakdown seems to embody, in its very form, a critique of its own embattled history of exclusion.

Telling inarticulacy is also in tension with *Cane*’s own preservationist imperative—its drive to document and order folk culture. For one thing, inarticulacy suggests resistance to transcription, thereby eluding a key practice of the would-be student of folk culture. The crisis of representation that results is not only a function of the observer’s distance, but also of folk culture’s formal resistance to accepted modes of understanding. “Song of the Son’s” desire to recover a coherent narrative of the past (transmitted through easy flowing lyricism) is soon challenged by more fragmented voices—voices that deliberately oppose *Cane*’s own mission as a recovery project. *Cane*’s questioning of “given articulacies” is also evident in its formal hybridity. *Cane* is a text in search of alternate forms, new modes of expression through which to communicate the black experience.

That such fragmentation occurs as folk culture recedes is not merely a tragedy; it is also a revelation. In *Cane*, death has potentially illuminating consequences, but only if the observer is able to cast aside accepted tools of interpretation. *Cane* not only calls attention to the fact of death, but also urges us to attend to its contours. What happens at the moment of death? What visions are possible there? It may be said that the poet’s return precisely at the dusk hour just before an epoch’s sun declines” is not a belated arrival, but a matter of deliberate timing. Dusk—the moment before darkness falls, but when sunlight still casts a diffused glow—assumes a special and often otherworldly significance in *Cane*. In its sunset hour, folk-life springs up to

provide haunting visions of the past as well as mysterious glimpses of prophecy. As the narrator of “Fern” relates, dusk is the time when “things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had a vision” (19). *Cane* seeks to be this artistic vision—but it can only do so by relinquishing the need for fixed, coherent meaning and photographic detail.

That this vision is transient is precisely the point. That is, contrary to how it has often been read, *Cane* is ultimately more interested in death than preservation. Though this complex confrontation with death requires hard-won tools of interpretation and expression, it is precisely in this moment that the modern artist is conjured into being. As if to suggest that mourning is a privilege of the living, *Cane* ultimately accepts and even embraces the idea that the folk must fade for the modern artist to exist. While death is seen as an unfortunate yet inevitable consequence of modern progress, it also generates artistic innovation. The modern artist is inclined, and even eager, to frame the fate of folk culture in terms of “fading.” Yet such a trope allows death to remain figurative and obscure: a way of life receding slowly and mysteriously just as dusk fades into night.

Of course, there are other ways of reading death in *Cane*. Though Toomer described the book as a mourning song to the “death of the folk *spirit*,” *Cane* also confronts the reader with several actual deaths (“Becky,” “Blood Burning Moon”) and rumors of death (“Kabnis”). As Farah Griffin has observed, “Blood Burning Moon” and “Portrait in Georgia” are *Cane*’s most explicit statements about racial violence. Appearing as they do right before *Cane*’s upward swing into the North, these pieces “establish violence on the black body as a trope to signify the violence of the South as the major catalyst for migration” (25). By migrating North, it would seem that the text itself aims to escape what it deems as less sophisticated (and therefore quintessentially *not* modern) forms of racial violence. The lynching in “Blood Burning Moon”

takes place in an abandoned factory, presumably a symbol of the Southern town's failed entry into the industrial age. Yet as a contemporary tool of violence, supported by modern technologies, lynching may be read as constitutive of Southern modernity, rather than fundamentally at odds with it. "Blood Burning Moon's" placement right next to "Seventh Street" with its whizzing streetcars would seem to suggest a connection, rather than rupture, between modern innovation and technologies of violence, such as lynching. Such connections sit uneasily with Toomer's "fading" model of transition into modernity, because they seem to suggest that folk culture's demise is manufactured, rather than an inevitable consequence of time. While this tension between different modes of death remains unresolved in Toomer's text, Eric Walrond attempts to address it three years later in *Tropic Death*.

Tropic Death was published in 1926 by Boni and Liveright to general critical acclaim. In a piece called the "Negro Literary Renaissance," Benjamin Brawley calls *Tropic Death* "the most important contribution made by a Negro to American letters since the appearance of Dunbar's 'Lyrics of Lowly Life.'" called *Tropic Death* a human document of deep significance and great promise, and a distinct contribution to Negro literature: "Here is a book of ten stories of death, which, with impressionistic pen and little plot, show forth with singular vividness the life of black laborers of the West Indies. There is superstition, unusual dialect, singular economic glimpse; but above all, there is truth and human sympathy" ("Five Books" 152). Langston Hughes remarks, "the throbbing life and sun-bright hardness of these pages fascinate me... And the ease and accuracy of Mr. Walrond's West Indian dialects support the belief that he knows very well the people of whom he writes" (n. pag).

A recurring theme in critical reviews of *Tropic Death* was the idea that Walrond's text was a departure from previous representations of black folk life in the West Indies. As Du Bois remarks in his review of the collection, "Our knowledge of the West Indies has usually come from the words of English rulers and tourists and the chance observations of white Americans" (152). In one simple sense *Tropic Death's* difference was a matter of perspective: unlike imperial travel narratives, these stories came from a racial and cultural insider. Looking at the matter from another angle, Mary White Ovington remarks with unfeigned surprise: "To those of us who know the West Indies as a pleasant winter resort...Eric Walrond's picture is like a stomping blow" (15). The book's title foregrounds this grimmer perspective, rejecting the touristic gaze even as it plays with imperial vocabularies of danger. The phrase "tropic death" does in fact conjure up a vast, homogenous region of sweltering heat, lush untamable foliage, dusky natives, and peril at the hand of mysterious tropical diseases. Yet this book turns that narrative on its head. Here it is not the traveler but rather the so-called natives—particularly the laboring folk—that fall victim to tropic death.

If Toomer sees modernity as an inevitable transition in which one way of life expires and is supplanted by the next, Walrond depicts modernity as a force that deals out death with machine-like precision. As *Tropic Death's* title suggests, a grisly death awaits one or more of the characters at the end of each of the ten stories. The causes are multiple—starvation, murder, accident, supernatural phenomena—but the outcome is the same. Several critics have rightly noted Walrond's use of the Gothic mode: its atmosphere of gloom and terror, its preoccupation with sensational, supernatural occurrences, its violence.²⁷ In many ways, this is a preoccupation

²⁷ See Robert Bone, "Eric Walrond." *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975.

he shares with Toomer. Both *Tropic Death* and *Cane* are full of Gothic scenery: the lynched body, crumbling ruins, dead animals, and ominous happenings.²⁸ As Daphne Lamothe has explained, “African American writers typically make use of the Gothic to convey the terrors of American history. African American Gothicisms evoke experiences of absence, fragmentation and loss, characteristic of ‘the black experience’”(59). The gothic horror in these texts is not free-floating but serves as a commentary on both blatant and insidious forms of historical violence that were constitutive of colonialism and slavery. While both Toomer and Walrond engage with the Gothic mode to demonstrate how the legacy of a brutal past erupts into the present, Walrond takes pains to also highlight new manifestations of violence that are inextricably linked to modern progress.

One signal difference between Toomer and Walrond’s depictions of folk-life is Walrond’s focus on industrial labor and its attendant migrations. The book centers on what is perhaps one of the United States’ most salient examples of industrial imperialism: the construction of the Panama Canal (1904-1914). Canal and railway construction signaled vast change in the Caribbean and Central America. It precipitated one of largest mass migrations the region had ever seen, as workers from all over the Caribbean flocked to the isthmus in search of the higher pay promised, but not always delivered, at the Canal Zone. *Tropic Death* traces the contours of this Caribbean labor migration as it moves between Panama, British Guiana and Barbados to the coasts of Honduras and Jamaica. Such movement is informed by Walrond’s own life: born in British Guiana in 1898, Walrond migrated with his family to Barbados, and then to the Canal Zone before Walrond finally settled in Harlem in 1918. Whereas *Cane*’s perspective is that of a traveling spectatorial artist, *Tropic Death*’s perspective is that of the migrant. Though

²⁸ See “Portrait in Georgia,” “Becky,” “Reapers,” and “Blood Burning Moon” in *Cane*; “Subjection,” “The Vampire Bat,” “The Yellow One,” and “Drought” in *Tropic Death*.

Tropic Death eschews first person narration in favor of an omniscient and notably detached voice, the book's movement parallels that of its characters. Indeed, unlike Toomer's folk, Walrond's characters are often seen traveling: they are migrants or the recently migrated.

On one hand, the circum-Caribbean migration depicted by Walrond is compatible with narratives of modern agency and mobility, exemplifying the pattern of movement, relocation and transformation that Paul Gilroy describes as part of the condition of black modernity in *The Black Atlantic* (xi). Circum-Caribbean migration is as much a part of the modern black experience as the northbound flight from "cotton, cane and rice fields" that looms so large in the African American artistic imagination.²⁹ On the other hand, if the black modern subject is a migrant, Walrond shows that he is often also a subject of empire. Caribbean histories of colonialism are certainly invoked in *Tropic Death*, but the book also sees modern industry as a complex tool of an emerging U.S. empire that will continue to persist long after the old colonial regimes have faded. In this context, the modern "death" that the text explores is twofold. It is first of all an acknowledgement of literal peril, as work on the Canal was a treacherous enterprise. As Irma Watkins-Owens notes, "During the decade of Canal Construction, thousands of black men died or sustained permanent injury through premature or delayed explosions of dynamite, asphyxiation in pits, falls from high places, train wrecks or even landslides" (14). To think of the U.S. imperial project in terms of gothic horror was not a far cry for Walrond, who worked as a journalist in Colón, cataloguing not only beatings and brawls but also a staggering number of deaths. Walrond also observed the establishment of Jim Crow policies on the Canal Zone, often brutally enforced by white marines from the Southern U.S. *Tropic Death* is equally concerned with what happens to the migrant workers after they return home. In one story,

²⁹ The title of Walrond's 1926 essay on the Great Migration, "From Cotton, Cane, and Rice Fields." In Parascandola, 138-41.

“Panama Gold” a worker returns to Jamaica, marked by his experience on the Canal by his gold chains, his colognes—and by a missing leg.

Beyond these more blatant threats to life and limb, however, is the idea that empire operates as an unwieldy force whose machinations are ubiquitous yet unknown, and made all the more insidious because of that mystery. Accordingly then, though the construction of the Canal stands at the literal and conceptual center of the text, it also serves as a flashpoint whose effects ripple outward. Though several of *Tropic Death*'s stories take place on or near the Canal Zone at Colon, other stories establish a link between that large-scale project and the many smaller industrial projects taking place far from the shores of Panama.

Such is the case with *Tropic Death*'s opening story, “Drought.” Containing *Tropic Death*'s most explicit allusion to the Southern landscapes of *Cane*, (“it was not Sepia, Georgia, but a backwoods village in Barbados”) “Drought” revises *Cane*'s sense that these rural sites exist in pockets of pre-modernity far from the workings of modern industry. For Walrond, it is labor that links the folk to the workings “of industry, commerce, and machines” in the Caribbean, though not in the way that either writer might have hoped. In “Drought,” a ravaged landscape is produced by a combination of natural disaster and industrial drilling at a rock quarry. The harvested rock is shipped elsewhere and turned into building materials for modern cities. At the site itself, however, the drilling pulverizes the marl rock, producing a ubiquitous white dust. Baked and dried by the oppressive heat of the sun, the suffocating industrial waste takes on a life of its own: “Marl...dust,” “thick adhesive marl,” “hot creeping marl.” The story follows a protagonist, Coggins Rum; a worker at the site. On his daily trek home from work at the quarry, Coggins gasps at the “consequences of the sun's wretched fury:”

The sun had robbed the land of its juice, squeezed it dry. Star apples, sugar apples, husks, transparent on the dry sleepy trees...Undug, stemless—peanuts, carrots—seeking balm, relief, the caress of a passing wind, shot dead unflustered eyes up through the sun etched cracks in the hard brittle, soil. (24).

In stark contrast to Toomer's lyrical portrait of soft dusk and rolling hills "heaving with folk songs," *Tropic Death* stages a jarring encounter with a land that is already dead. The people are equally robbed of their vitality. In the face of this "dizzying spectacle," they sink to their knees and pray for rain. With the crops dead, and with Coggins's meager wages barely sustaining them, Coggins's wife Sissie is "running a house on dry-rot herring bone, a pint of stale, yellowless cornmeal, a few spuds" (26). But the focus soon shifts to Coggins's six year old daughter, Beryl: "Beryl in the marl road, possessing a one-piece frock, no hat, no shoes...A victim of the sun—a bright spot under its singing mask—Beryl hesitated at Coggins' approach. Her little brown hands flew behind her back"(25). In light of the all-around scarcity, the girl has adopted the habit of eating the only thing that the landscape provides in abundance—the marl rocks. Coggins frequently admonishes her behavior, to their mutual distress: "A gulping sensation came to Coggins when he saw Beryl crying. When Beryl cried, he felt like crying too...But he sternly heaped invective upon her. Marl'll make yo' sick...tie up yo' guts, too. Tie up yo' guts like green guavas. Don't eat it, yo' hear, don't eat no marl"(26). These warnings become ominously repetitive. Yet they also ring hollow in the face of the family's inability to provide any alternative. In the face of poverty the physical environment becomes malevolent and deadly.

This foreshadowing nevertheless fails to prepare us for the story's abrupt and disorienting conclusion. In what becomes one of *Tropic Death*'s characteristic stylistic moves, the story's outcome is revealed only in fragments; evoking the sense some key development or crucial turning point has been overlooked:

Marl...marl...dust..." It came to Coggins in swirls. Autopsy. Noise comes in swirls. Pounding, pounding—dry Indian corn pounding. Ginger. Ginger being pounded in a mortar with a bright, new pestle. Pound, pound. And. Sawing. Butcher shop. Cow foot is sawed that way. Stew—or tough hard steak. Then the drilling—drilling—drilling to a stone cutter's ears!..

"Too bad, Coggins," the doctor said. "'too bad, to lose yo' dawtah..." (33)

The precise moment of death eludes us here and elsewhere. Afterward, its reality slips in and out of consciousness only in "swirls" of sound and image. Yet it is precisely in this moment of fragmentation that the link between the family's impoverishment, the exploitative, repetitive labor, and the literal disintegration of the landscape becomes remarkably vivid. For the "noise" of the autopsy can be understood in terms of the preparation of the food items that the deceased girl's family lacked: "dry Indian corn," "ginger," "cow foot," "stew." Moreover, the incessant pounding and sawing, which elevate at the final moment to drilling, are reminiscent of the back-braking industrial labor that fails to provide enough money for the workers to feed their families.

Here, Walrond's use of the fragment paradoxically brings into focus a harsh and disorienting reality. Though the connections are not spelled out for us, we are promptly wrenched back to the stark reality of it all: death. "‘Too bad Coggins’... ‘too bad to lose yo dawtah.’"

"Drought's" matter-of-fact, unsentimental exploration of the cause of death uncovers a visceral relationship—in this case a malevolent one— between the people, the land, and the work that is done there. Importantly, this relationship is not organic. If "Drought" introduces us to a world in which modern imperialism and its attendant industrialism exert a subtle, deadly force, such a critique is not explicit but rather embedded in the aesthetic of the text: its descriptions of a disabling physical environment and its use of language that mirrors the disintegration of black life. As *Tropic Death's* opening story, "Drought" announces the imperative to grapple with the elusive far-reaching effects of imperial violence that resist mimetic representation.

At the time of *Tropic Death's* publication, Walrond's unique style both enticed and perplexed critics. Du Bois remarks that "the book's impressionism, together with its dialect, make it often hard reading and difficult to understand in parts"(152). While praising Walrond's use of dialect Hughes admits that the prose is "sometimes tangled and confused." Mary White Ovington complains that "Mr. Walrond's style...is at times trying. He has the modern method of making sentences out of words...He does not seem to realize that his milieu is unusual and that if he wishes us to really see the pictures that flood his mind he ought to take a little more pains in presenting them to us"(15). Most notably, in an *Opportunity* review entitled "In Our American Language" Waldo Frank (one of Toomer's greatest advocates) regards Walrond's use of unusual language as a distraction, and advises Walrond to "take it easier:"

Mr. Walrond is using a raw instrument—a language whose relation to literary English is not organic at all. And the very fact that his instrument is raw, unwieldy, forces his attention so hypnotically to it that some of the life energy is drawn from the tales he tells... The reader too, finds himself thinking of Mr. Walrond's language: finds himself seeing (and often being moved) by Mr. Walrond's words; rather than by the pictures and the dramas they are supposed to flesh. (352)³⁰

As these remarks suggest, *Tropic Death* stretched the boundaries of existing vocabularies for black literary experimentation during the Harlem Renaissance. Though references to “impressionism” and “modern method” vaguely position Walrond within the modernist school, they are deployed with little assessment of their function in the work of this Caribbean writer. Then too, these critiques presume that the novelty of Walrond's project (a rare glimpse into the life of the West Indian peasant) required special clarity; more stable grounding in this “unusual milieu;” a more realist approach. (In contrast, Waldo Frank had praised Toomer for being a poet true to his art and not shackled by crude representation.) Because such criteria seemed to understand *Tropic Death* as a project of documentation and a contribution to the existing catalogue of American folk-life, it tended to dismiss the text's experimentation as extraneous and even counterproductive.

But the question of aesthetics, particularly tone and language, is an important point of comparison between Walrond and Toomer and it is revealing of their distinct perspectives

³⁰ This review appeared in the November 1926 Caribbean-focused issue of *Opportunity* cited in the previous chapter.

fragments suggest wholes,” revealing startling historical entanglements of race, violence, geography.³²

Even in its prose, *Tropic Death* employs a similar poetics. Along with the passages from “Drought,” the following passage from “Subjection” has often been cited as evidence of Walrond’s impressionistic style, though with little accompanying analysis. Sitting at the physical center of the book, “Subjection” takes place in the Canal Zone. The event—the beating of black migrant worker by a white American marine—is initially presented only as a mysterious sequence of images:

A ram-shackle body, dark in the ungentle spots exposing it, jogged, reeled and fell at the tip of a white bludgeon. Forced a dent in the crisp, caked earth. An isolated ear lay limp and juicy, like some exhausted leaf or flower, half joined to the tree from whence it sprang. Only the sticky milk flooding it was crimson, crimsoning the dust and earth.
(100)

With a force of imagery reminiscent of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” this beating scene depicts both body and land as the sites of disorienting violence.³³ Yet here we encounter not the beating itself, but its shadow. The assailant is invisible. His presence is indicated only by the phrase “white bludgeon,” and this is only after the moment of impact has occurred. Instead, the focus is on the way both body and earth respond in the aftermath of the violence. On one hand, the land is indelibly marked by the violence done to the body: As it lands, the nameless,

³² Toomer has also been linked to the imagist poets. See Mark Whalan, “Jean Toomer and the Avant-Garde.”

³³ Poem written and published by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol) in 1937. It appeared in the Marxist journal *New Masses*.

faceless, “ramshackle-body” forces a dent in “crisp, caked, earth.” On the other hand, the imagery goes even further to join body and nature: The half severed ear is like an “exhausted leaf or flower,” the body is a “tree,” and the blood is a “sticky milk” that literally crimsones the dust and earth. The land is “crisp” and barren. Like those who work on it, it is exhausted by the violence that has occurred there.

Both authors depict events that may commonly be read as straightforward spectacles of black suffering, but instead reveal them to be the product of mysterious historical and social entanglements. However, whereas Toomer favored (in his own words) “the profound image saturated in its own lyricism,” Walrond’s language is considerably more abrasive. This difference is fairly consistent throughout both texts. On a broader level, *Cane*’s lyricism not only echoes the melancholy of the spirituals but also serves the book’s elegiac mission. Walrond’s language bypasses the elegiac altogether to instead achieve what Langston Hughes called a “sun-bright hardness,” a style that is at once vivid, harsh, and unsoftened by the lyricism that characterizes *Cane*. Though *Tropic Death* also exposes historical violence, the text is not interested in mourning, nor does it take up the task of preserving dying folk forms—though as I will explore, folk culture is certainly present in *Tropic Death*. Rather, Walrond seeks to expose modern violence as it occurs in real-time: vivid, ruthless and tangibly present. If the Gothic is normally understood to concern the “encroachment of the dark ages of oppression upon the enlightened modern era,” *Tropic Death* seeks to show that the modern era itself is not in fact enlightened. The tools of oppression have simply changed their form, becoming as enigmatic, mobile and disorienting as the fragmented image.

In *Tropic Death*, then, imperialism is a modern technology of violence that structures the text’s exploration of folk life. This is apparent not only in the language but in its machine-like

form. In fact, both Toomer and Walrond share an interest in what might be called a “machine aesthetic.” More precisely, Toomer saw it as his mission not only to “touch the soil,” but rather to merge the rich, lyrical form of a “tree in summer” with the dynamism of the machine. Alone, these symbols are found “wanting:” a tree is fertile yet rooted and motionless; a machine has dynamic, moving parts but is regrettably “all form...its very abstraction was now the death of it” However, the machine was not an oppressive object to be condemned. With the right touch it could be artistically improved: “Perhaps it is the mission of our age to fecundate it.” (Toomer, “From Letter to Gorham Munson” 21-2). *Cane* strives to find an ideal balance between these two contrasting aesthetics—one timeless and elemental like the folk themselves, the other futuristic. In contrast, though *Tropic Death* critiques the machine age, the text itself mimics the movement and structure of the mechanical form. While the short story cycle allows for an arc of movement, the recurrence of death provides structure and precision. Punctuating the end of each story, death is swift, systematic, and final. Though the folk of both texts will “die on the modern desert,” *Cane*’s trope of fading lacks the systematic intention that *Tropic Death* takes pains to demonstrate through its very form.

In Walrond’s text the death of the rural peasant class is not a consequence of progress, but rather a sign of their uneven encounter with processes of modernity. This is a perspective that Walrond would communicate forcefully some years later:

If the Negro is to be free he must rid himself of whatever illusions he may still have about the social and economic system that has grown up under capitalism and imperialism. A system that fattens off the laboring masses—black, yellow and white—and that enriches

the privileged few is one that can never be reconciled to. Until and unless he takes a stand against it, there can be no salvation for him: none of the things which he prizes in life—a higher scale of living, the end of race and class hatred, the hegemony of the Negro over Africa—will ever be realized. (“The Negro Before the World” 266)

Though both writers had socialist leanings, Walrond more insistently focused on the folk as laborers, and not just an aesthetic category. As migrants, industrial laborers and imperial subjects, they contribute to the stirrings of modernization taking place in the Caribbean, yet they are systematically denied access to its promises. Death is a sign of the violent symbolic and material consequences of that denial.

Despite its grim outlook however, *Tropic Death* does not relegate its folk to a bygone era. Unlike Toomer’s folk, who appear suspended in a sepia-toned vignette, Walrond’s black masses are strikingly contemporary. This stance distinguishes Walrond not only from Toomer but also from many of his contemporaries. As Leigh Anne Duck has convincingly argued, much of the literature of the interwar period is characterized by the “the sense that ‘the modern black American’ and the global ‘black folk’ inhabit different temporalities” (*The Nation’s Region* 118). What is perhaps most revealing about Toomer’s version of a regionally-defined modernity are the contradictions it hinges upon: In fact, Toomer’s South is profoundly shaped from afar by processes of modernization—the very fact that folk culture and the conditions that presumably support it are being obliterated reveals that it cannot be preserved in a pre-modern time capsule. Paradoxically however, the South of *Cane* is also fundamentally detached from narratives of

modern progress. Though the book explores the possibility that the folk may serve as inspiration for a rich modern poetry, as a group, they are a “muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them” (106). For the most part then, the folk do not sing; the poet sings for them. His struggle to be their voice hinges on his ability to travel between regions and temporalities, an ability that his subjects do not share. What is most provocative about this are the possibilities that it forecloses: that the South itself might be imagined as site of modernity; that the “folk,” and not just the urban black elite, might be considered modern subjects, and that a rural peasant class might contribute to the stream of modernity even as they remain on its periphery.

These are the very possibilities that *Tropic Death* considers by focusing on the lived paradoxes of modernity rather than lamenting its advent. On the other hand, the book’s grim focus on death as the common denominator of contemporary black experience exists side by side with vibrant and diverse folk-life that surges within its pages. *Tropic Death*’s broader regional lens and focus on labor migration also allows the text to unsettle monolithic ideas of collectivity. Walrond’s peasants and laborers are not a homogenous group: Though the workers were often labeled natives or simply “niggers,” Walrond depicts the Canal Zone as a place of incredible diversity: Among the workers are migrants from San Andres, Colombia, Turks Island, St. Vincent, and the Bahamas. There are “Bajan creoles,” “black taciturn French colonials,” “tempestuous” Jamaicans; there are Panama men from Bottle Alley, Boca Grande, and Silver City. Caribbean blackness is shown in terms of internal diversity, and the folk as a group are constantly in flux and transformation.

Furthermore, folk-life also provides particularly efficacious forms of resistance. Walrond depicts not only victimization but also mastery of folk knowledge in the spiritual practice of

Obeah, for instance.³⁴ “The Vampire Bat” is especially revealing in this respect, for it is the only story in which a white colonial falls victim to tropic death. The story concerns Bellon Prout, a white soldier who returns from the Boer War to reclaim his father’s old plantations: “He was one of the island’s few plantation owners and a solid pillar of the Crown. He had gone forth at the king’s trumpet call to buck the Boer’s hairy anger. But at last the guerilla warrior had become a glorious ghost and the jaunty buckras were trekking back to Barbadoes”(sic, 242). His nostalgia for the colony turns to disillusionment when he finds the first plantation in ruins. “But Mount Tabor, once a star on a pinnacle of wooded earth, was lost to old Sharon Prout’s Boer fighting son.” The old plantation is “a garden of lustrous desolation,” a striking Gothic image that seems to harken back to some ancient time. For Bellon, the absence of plantation-style labor signals a kind of pre-modern disorder. Though slavery had been abolished in Barbados in 1834, the island’s growing black population seemed to ensure that sugar plantations would keep running much the way they had in the past. The loss of this seemingly-ensured labor constitutes a regression for Bellon’s family. In many ways, Bellon Prout is like the Bob Stone of Toomer’s “Blood Burning Moon,” who realizes with regret that “his family had lost ground” since the days of slavery (*Cane* 33). Bob Stone’s presumptuousness (“His family still owned the niggers, practically”) is echoed in Bellon Prout’s assertion that a “law abiding colonist” ought to be able

³⁴ Such a theme is notable in Walrond’s more frequently anthologized stories such as “The Wharf Rats” “The Vampire Bat,” and “The White Snake.” The presence of “black magic” in *Tropic Death* led Robert Bone to claim that although “[Walrond] suffered at the hands of white Americans a series of humiliations that demonstrated vividly the demonic potentialities of man,” above all else “Walrond’s penchant for the Gothic may be traced to the anguish of a fragmented self. . . Was he African or European; Anglo-Saxon or Hispanic; West Indian or North American?...The Gothic mode is utilized to express the primitive and atavistic features of his heritage”(173). Though the limitations of such a reading may be apparent, it represents a fairly standard interpretation of Walrond’s interest in the “superstitions” of the folk.

to “walk the King’s highway after dark,” without consequence and without heeding ominous signs of danger.

Bellon’s nighttime journey to reclaim his father’s second plantation is marked by various omens, the most spectacular of which is a burning cane field shooting “balls of crimson fire” into the sky. A Negro storekeeper—a mulatto woman—warns Bellon that the fire is not an act of sabotage by some “jealous squatter,” but the work of “fire hags” on errands of “fiery vengeance”(249). “Fire hags! St Lucia mulatto sluts—changing their skins—turning into goats—sheep—prowling—going forth” (252). Bellon outwardly dismisses the idea, but is familiar with the lore:

Sometimes, on returning, at the end of the eventful night, they would find their skins salted—by the enemy—and unable to ease back into them, the wretches would inquire, ‘Skin, skin yo’ no know me?’ And for the balance of their thwarted lives they would go about, half-slave, half-free, muttering: ‘Skin, yo’ no know me, skin yo’ no know me?’(249)

The folk wisdom concerning the fire hag attributes their “fiery vengeance” to anger over the colony’s embattled history of racial mixing. The mulatto of changeable skin is not merely a demonized figure to be feared, but also a tortured one, a specter still fettered by the chains of history. The significance of burning a cane field—that symbol of the plantation economy and the social order it engendered, keeper of slavery’s secrets and the place where “time stands still” in

both *Tropic Death* and *Cane*—should not be overlooked.³⁵ As it turns out, however, the “vampire bat” of the story is not a fire hag, but a discarded black baby that Bellon discovers sleeping in the marl dust in the middle of the road. “Another of the colony’s lurking evils, the desertion—often the murder of illegitimate Negro babes. O God—another of the island’s depraved nigger curses!” (251). If a smoldering sawdust pile is the haunting specter of Karintha’s abandoned baby in *Cane*, the haunting achieves its physical embodiment in *Tropic Death*.

However, Bellon’s claim that this is one of the island’s “nigger curses,” reveals his willful forgetting of the historical context surrounding the legend. Such abandonment of illegitimate babies may just as accurately be termed a “white man’s curse.” Indeed, the extent to which the vampire/baby is the ghost of his own transgressions is the unspoken question as Bellon reflects on the weird interchangeability of “black Negro babes and vampire bats!” (252). In keeping with the rest of the stories in *Tropic Death*, Bellon’s demise is unseen. Instead the morning sun reveals a corpse, “utterly white and bloodless.” His death occurs in private, but does not go uncatalogued by the local inhabitants: “Coming up the hill the mulatto *obeah* girl who tidied the overseer’s hut felt deeply exultant. For she was strangely conscious of the fact—by the crystal glow of the sun, perhaps—that a vampire bat, with its blood-sucking passion, had passed there in the night”(252).

In this story Obeah does not unleash mayhem but rather exacts retribution for the “colony’s lurking evils.” Because Obeah practitioners possess important knowledge about colonial history and its legacies, those who dismiss folk wisdom as superstition do so to their detriment. Those who respect and use this knowledge are offered invaluable protection.

³⁵ Also see Bonham Richardson, *Igniting the Caribbean Past: Fire in British West Indian History* Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2004

Throughout *Tropic Death*, practitioners of folk magic are like Toomer's singing women who, foreseeing trouble, "improvised songs against its spell" (31). In Walrond's text however, folk wisdom is not part of a fading way of life but rather offers insight that continues to be viable in this time of transition.

Indeed, though *Tropic Death* offers no facile model of folk culture as resistance, culture nevertheless serves as an indispensable tool in the modern era. While the "Vampire Bat" may be said to depict a fading colonial regime, it also demands to be read in light of U.S. empire's insidious rise. In *Tropic Death*, U.S. imperialism's uncanny continuity with colonialism and slavery is apparent in the figure of the plantation itself. Though dilapidated and fading here, elsewhere in the text the plantation continues to be the site of increasingly mechanized agricultural production. Indeed, pre-existing plantation structures would pave the way for the United Fruit Company, that paradigm of "yankee imperialism" that writers such as Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén would later explore in the 1930's. As Antonio Benítez Rojo has argued, the plantation is a figure that repeats itself throughout the New World, "a feed-back machine with *asymmetrical workings*, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel" (11, emphasis mine). Édouard Glissant also encourages us to consider "the extensions of the Plantation, the things to which it gave birth at the very instant it vanished as a functional unit" (*Poetics of Relation* 75). What does it mean to think of a slavery and its "extensions" in asymmetrical terms, or as Rojo appropriately suggests, to think about the "uncanny" or gothic text functioning asymmetrically in the literatures of the New World? *Cane* and *Tropic Death* are indeed two uncanny texts that stage a rich debate about the politics of death in the modern era. To attend to their "asymmetrical workings" is to acknowledge the distinct yet related forms of violence that shape the experience of modernity across geography. It is also to introduce U.S. empire as a

crucial framework for understanding the status of the folk in interwar black literature. If Walrond hints at the quintessential modernity of folk and folk culture in an age of empire and Jim Crow, this premise is taken up in full force in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén.

Chapter Three

Writing Blues and Son: The Poetics of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén

Whereas Jean Toomer and Eric Walrond held contrasting perspectives on the contemporaneity of the folk, Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén both posit a folk modernity. Both writers shape their vernacular poetry in direct response to conditions of social transformation. The two poets shared a lasting collaborative relationship. Their meeting in Havana in 1930 inaugurated a decades-long friendship and correspondence that has been the subject of significant critical attention, especially in scholarship that seeks to explore the importance of transnational literary circuits to articulations of black diasporic identity.

At the time of their meeting the young Cuban *mulato* poet had not yet risen to the level of national prominence that he would later enjoy. But he already developed strong views on race and the possibilities of the black vernacular, as well as a vehemently anti-imperialist politics. He expressed these regularly in his contributions to *Ideales de una Raza*, a column of the leading Cuban newspaper *Diario de La Marina*. Soon after his meeting with Hughes, he published *Motivos de son* (*Son motifs*), a book of eight *criollo* poems written in the spirit of the popular Afro-Cuban dance music—an effort which some critics have too hastily attributed to Hughes’s “immediate” and “transcendent” influence as a blues poet from Harlem.³⁶ But the poets’ first meeting in Havana was seminal for other reasons. For one, it initiated a collaborative relationship that marked the beginning of Hughes’s career as a translator. Shortly after his visit to Cuba, Hughes published translations of Guillén’s poems in journals such as *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, and *The Negro Quarterly*. He also included them in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, an

³⁶ See Rampersad and Smart, respectively.

anthology on which he worked with Arna Bontemps in 1946.³⁷ In 1948, Hughes and Howard University Spanish professor and translator Ben Carruthers published *Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén*. The collection incorporated 50 translations of Guillén's poems, including the famous *Motivos de son* in a section called "Cuban Blues." The poets met again in Cuba in 1931, in battle-torn Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and again in New York in 1949. Throughout his career, Guillén wrote several essays and poems about black life in the U.S. and especially in Harlem.³⁸ And when Hughes died in 1969, Guillén published "*Recuerdo de Langston Hughes*," an essay in remembrance of Hughes's artistic legacy as well as their friendship.

Much of the poets' relationship centered on the discovery of what was translatable across national borders and what eluded translation—in a linguistic, conceptual, and experiential sense. Their correspondence is almost entirely in Spanish, which made for some interesting connections as well as misreadings since Guillén spoke little English and Hughes's initial knowledge of Spanish was highly functional but had its limits: "Mr. Hughes' Spanish is not the best, but he makes marvelous use of it," Guillén writes in "*Conversación con Langston Hughes*," an interview that he published in the March 1930 issue of *Diario de la Marina*. From the start of their relationship, Hughes's relative unfamiliarity with Cuban creole fueled his fascination and frustration with Guillén's *son* poetry. After reading *Motivos* for the first time, Hughes wrote to Guillén excitedly: "Man! Your *Motivos de Son* are great. They're very Cuban and very good" (qtd. in Heredia 41). Hughes's remark that the poems were "very Cuban" is likely a reference to Guillén's fluid use of Cuban *criollo*. Not taking Hughes's facility with *criollo* for granted, Guillén had previously advised Hughes to enlist the aid of

³⁷ See Kutzinzi

³⁸ While the target of Guillén's critique was often the insidious brand of discrimination practiced in U.S. Northern cities, he also focuses on the brutal specter of lynching in his poem "Elegy for Emmett Till."

“someone who knows Cuba well” to help him interpret the “many turns of phrase, idioms, and phrases that escape your current knowledge—I believe—of Spanish” (Heredia 27).

Most critics have taken up the question of translation by focusing almost exclusively on Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers’s now largely neglected first English language edition of Guillén’s poems, the 1948 volume *Cuba Libre*.³⁹ As Vera Kutzinski has observed, “*Cuba Libre* can be regarded as the literary culmination of the two poets’ long standing friendship” (“Fearful Asymmetries” 115). Indeed, *Cuba Libre* was a project nearly two decades in the making—an endeavor that in many ways highlights Hughes’s and Guillén’s similar interests in black vernacular speech and music, their mutual concern for the struggle of the black working class, and their anti-racist and anti-imperialist sensibility. Yet the volume also shows the seams of this transnational connection, its many points of divergence. These are perhaps most vividly captured by Hughes’s renaming of the *poemas-son* (*son poems*) as “Cuban Blues.” In doing so, Hughes echoes at least two of his Cuban contemporaries, José Antonio Fernandez de Castro and Gustavo E. Urrutia, who hyperbolically assured him that Guillén’s *son* motifs “are the exact equivalent of your blues.”⁴⁰ While such statements of equivalence attempt to establish music as the common ground of this Harlem-Havana encounter, they also erase key differences between the technical aspects of the two genres, their performance, and their social meaning. As Monica Kaup

³⁹ One notable exception is William Scott, who moves beyond *Cuba Libre* to argue that music in Hughes and Guillén’s work serves as a way of “translating” a lived (and therefore strictly unrepresentable) diasporic experience and its history. In their use of music, Scott argues, Hughes and Guillén were concerned not with “acts of communication or transmission,” but rather with “acts of expression of a specific sociopolitical significance that is not amenable to linguistic and discursive models of intelligibility” (38). In other words, Scott insightfully suggests that black music in the work of these poets seems to point toward an experience that “resist[s] being contained by representational language itself” (44). However, while Scott reads Hughes’s more overtly political work of the 1930’s, I focus exclusively on Hughes’s earlier blues poetry.

⁴⁰ “Letter to Langston Hughes.” 20 Apr. 1930. Langston Hughes Papers, box 158, fol. 2926

observes, “in Cuba and Guillén’s poetry, there is no such thing as ‘Cuban Blues,’” a fact that becomes clear when one considers that the poems inspired by Cuban music and vernacular posed the greatest challenges for Hughes and his co-translator (95).

However, while critical assessments of *Cuba Libre* have acknowledged that questions of music and translation were inevitably intertwined in the Guillén-Hughes encounter, they have not sufficiently taken up a comparative analysis of Guillén’s *poemas-son* and Hughes’s blues poetry. Such a comparison will be my project in this chapter. The purpose of such an assessment is neither to argue for the musical equivalence of blues and *son*, nor to assert that Guillén and Hughes share a poetics. Rather, I hope to contextualize the *Cuba Libre* project by tracing the fundamental questions that inaugurated Guillén and Hughes’s collaborative relationship in the first place: What are the stakes of using music as the basis of a modern poetics? What aspects of experience could music poetry attempt to access and transform? And how could poetry’s performance of music suggest and enact new models of racial and cultural community? It is through such questions that Guillén and Hughes explored ideas about folk culture’s visionary potential.

Nevertheless, their mutual engagement with these questions does not necessarily inform a transnational poetics. While each poet attempted to answer these questions in a transnational conversation, their national context was the place from which each poet spoke. Thus, while they each use music to imagine an articulate theory of modernity emerging from the black masses themselves, they also faced major disjunctures in U.S.-Cuban definitions of “blackness,” as well as differing ideas about the status of that concept in articulations of collective national identity. Some of these differences also emerge through the formal qualities of the music itself. The blues’ emphasis on the voice of the solitary performer is central to Hughes’s work, while Guillén makes

use of the signature interplay between solo (*motivo*) and chorus (*estribillo*) that is indispensable to *son* form. Each poet invokes these ritual modes of performance to suggest different models of interaction between the individual and a larger collectivity. By attending to the tensions that inevitably arose from these distinctions, we can detect moments of resonance as well as profound dissonance in their work.

“A Stranger in a Strange Town:” Hughes’s Blues

By the time of his trip to Cuba in 1930, Hughes had already published two books of poetry: *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), the latter of which received startlingly harsh reviews in the black press. In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, J.A. Rogers declared the book “piffling trash;” the *Philadelphia Tribune* called it “a study in the perversions of the Negro” (qtd. in *Life of Langston Hughes Vol. 1*, 140). Part of the reason for the critical outrage was the book’s frank subject matter. The poems take an unfiltered approach to a range of themes from heartache and hard luck, to issues of sexuality and domestic abuse. One such poem, “Listen Here Blues,” reads as an uncensored snippet of confidential advice between women:

Sweet girls, sweet girls,

Listen here to me.

All you sweet girls,

Gin an’ whiskey

Kin make you lose yo’ ginity. (1-6)

This poem also highlights *Fine Clothes*' much-lauded poetic intervention: The poems are in the first person voices of the folk, without the distancing narrator that had been present in "The Weary Blues." Without the mediating voice, the reader is drawn in as part of an intimate audience, able to hear these highly personal stories as they are recited—or performed. The idea (radical at the time) was to place speaking black subject at the center of this poetic project without the use of an interpreter, and moreover, to do so through the use of blues as poetic form. As "Listen Here Blues," suggests, the paradigmatic voice of the volume is one that subtly gestures toward communal wisdom and experience but is also distinctly individual. Hughes's emphasis on the blues voice also governs the structure of *Fine Clothes*, with the blues poems comprising the opening and closing sections of the book. This is not a silent choice either, as Hughes includes a note on the matter at the opening of the text: "The first eight and the last nine poems in this book are written after the manner of the Negro folk-songs known as Blues," he writes. The effect of this placement is that the blues poems become the portal through which the reader enters and departs from the text. In short, black vernacular expression is given the first and last word on the story of the modern black condition that the book attempts to tell.

The modern blues voice in Hughes's work catalogues the African American experience of migration; remarks, often obliquely, about the changing forms of racial oppression that one encounters as one travels through geographical space; and speaks openly about the changing shape of black relationships. Above all, it is transitional music told from a working class perspective. Hughes wrote at length about these aspects of the music in his essay, "Songs Called the Blues:" "The blues are folk-songs born out of heartache. They are songs of the black South, particularly the city South. Songs of the poor streets and back alleys of Memphis and

Birmingham, Atlanta and Galveston, out of black beaten, but unbeatable throats, from the strings of pawn-shop guitars, and the chords of pianos with no ivory on the keys” (143).

The blues are music of a Southern folk heritage, Hughes argues, but are nevertheless quintessentially modern—and urban. Unlike the spirituals, the blues are “*city* songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against the lonely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can’t sleep at night. The spirituals are escape songs, looking toward heaven, tomorrow, and God. But the blues are *today* songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you’re troubled in mind and don’t know what to do, and nobody cares”(144, emphasis mine).

For all of the divisions that Hughes draws between the blues and the spirituals, both genres nevertheless share a sense of “orphanic” longing that Nathaniel Mackey has defined as a quintessential quality of black music: “Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of ‘orphan’ one hears echoes of ‘orphanic,’ a music that turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual, ‘Motherless Child.’ Music is wounded kinship’s last resort” (232). What is “modern” about the condition of longing and alienation referenced by blues however, is its focus on black migration as an experience of rupture. Central to Hughes’s blues narrative is the voice of the black worker or recently arrived migrant who finds herself emotionally alone, “a stranger in a strange town”(144). Such a sentiment is expressed in an excerpt from the poem “Bound No’th Blues.” Appearing near the end of the volume, it is both a farewell and an uncertain greeting to the open road:

Road’s in front o’ me.

Nothin’ to do but walk.

Road's in front o' me,

Walk...and walk...and walk.

I'd like to meet a good friend

To come along an' talk. (7-12)

In Hughes's view the blues constitute a valuable perspective not because they are instruments of sociological accuracy but rather because, as he explains in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, they aim to give voice to "eternal unsatisfied longings" (11). Often, as with the poem above, this sense of longing serves to link the individual performer to an imagined community. In "Bound No'th Blues" migration is figured not only in terms of a direction (North), but also in terms of an emotional quest for a "good friend"—toward the possibility of repairing "wounded kinship" or forging new ties. In this poem, eternal longing is a searching impulse that compels movement, in fact demands it: there is "nothin' to do but walk." It is not the moment of arrival, but an intermediate space of transition that the blues voice of this poem inhabits. The ellipses signal the open expanse of road, that real and imagined distance between a Southern past and a Northern future. Perhaps more provocatively, these spaces also indicate where the words most try to approach the charged silences that a skilled vocalist can effect in a blues performance; an almost palpable emptiness that nevertheless refuses despair, and instead calls upon the empathy and imagination of the audience to fill the space with expressions of recognition and acknowledgment. Such use of space is the poem's formal enactment of its thematic search for a "good friend." Hughes's blues performer is the solitary voice gesturing toward communal affiliation.

A Poetics of “Compelling Insinuation”

The use of empty space signaled not only by ellipses but also by the sparseness of the blues form, is the source of much of the suggestive power of Hughes’s poetry. Although Hughes does not discuss this aspect of his own work in “Songs Called the Blues,” he does linger on the blues’ potential to inspire art in another arena: dance. “I see no reason why great dances could not be born of the Blues. Great American dances containing all the laughter and pain, hunger and heartaches, search and reality of contemporary scenes...”(145). The blues’ push and pull between laughter and tears, its physical and emotional hunger, and its searching (orphic) impulse constitute a “scene” that is not only visually interpreted but also physically embodied. Furthermore, it is precisely the blues’ sparseness that leaves room for the variety of scenes that it can imagine.

Hughes’s vision of blues-inspired dance echoes Hurston’s discussion of black dance in “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” In that seminal essay, Hurston coins the term “compelling insinuation” to describe a black aesthetic in dance that is characterized by a combination of rich suggestiveness and calculated restraint. The power of black dance, Hurston argues, lies in its ability to insinuate much more than could be expressed in any single performance. She writes:

Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more. For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut

as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. (302)

Hurston formulates compelling insinuation as an aesthetic, a strategy, and a sensuously suggestive mode of performance that is present not only in black dance, but also in other art forms such as blues music. Her emphasis on dance is especially provocative however, because the dancer's performance turns an elusive artistic impulse into a physical gesture. To "[thrust] the body forward," in preparation for a "ferocious assault" which never occurs except in the spectator's imagination—this is an apt figure for the formal and semantic suggestion as well as the sense of possibility that often characterize blues music. Hurston also reformulates the idea of spectatorship by making the spectator a performer in his own right. He "finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle." In other words, compelling insinuation implies two or more complementary performances or narratives occurring side by side. As an aesthetic strategy then, it must be distinguished from call and response—in which a melody sung by a performer is responded to or echoed by others. Rather, it imagines the possibility of restraint and "ferocious assault" coexisting in a single moment. In short, compelling insinuation might be a way of understanding the polyphonic texture of blues performance. We hear one voice, but are "compelled" to imagine multiple voices, narratives, and meanings.

Compelling insinuation helps to explain how a vision of black collectivity and affiliation is accessed through the solitary blues voice in *Fine Clothes*. It may also help to explain, for example, such conundrums as the tragic-comic sensibility of blues music. In a prefatory note to *Fine Clothes*, Hughes remarks: “the mood of the blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh.” Hughes is not necessarily suggesting here that blues are funny—although in some cases they were indeed styled as absurd, comedic performances. To be sure, the audience perceives and identifies with a sense of ironic humor in the performer’s “autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe” (Ellison 103). Nevertheless compelling insinuation invites us to see the audiences’ laughter not merely as a response, but rather as constitutive of the performance. Despondency and laughter exist simultaneously as equally important voices in the narrative of black experience; neither dominates, neither is the main melody.

In *Fine Clothes*, this emphasis on multiple and seemingly incongruous perspectives is present in single poems, but also helps to illuminate the relationship between poems. For instance, a poem entitled “Laughers,” follows one of the grimmest in the volume, “Mammy.” The latter poem reads simply: “I’m waiting for ma mammy—She is Death. /Say it very softly./Say it very slowly if you chose./ I’m waiting for ma mammy—/Death.” This poem does not follow the standard form of the blues, yet it shares the blues’ sparseness of form and the quiet irony of the blues mood. While the poem’s disturbing twist is the personification of mammy as death, it continues a persistent theme that runs throughout the volume: death as solace, as a longed for source of nurturing and release from the harshness of this world. This is not unlike a sentiment often voiced in the spirituals, but, as Hughes argued, the emotional arc of the blues does not necessarily stretch toward heavenly redemption. Rather, they are “today,”

songs, as Hughes writes, charged with the immediacy of the present (143). The poem still quietly references the religious however, echoing the burial service utterance “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” both in its form and in its sense of finality. But I would argue the poem’s most pointed use of compelling insinuation is in the strange lines, “Say it very softly/say it very slowly if you choose,” which read almost as a guide for how these lines are to be spoken—or performed. This intervening whisper seems to enact the blues’ principle of understatement even as it explicitly calls for it. This is the poem’s decrescendo, here serving as a signal for the reader to listen more closely. The subtle variation in the final line “I’m waiting for ma mammy—death,” supplies a more insistent restatement of the poem’s central paradox: that death (mammy) provides both beginning and end, origin and demise, and it is increasingly unclear which comes first. Black artistic expression (the speaker’s very performance) is placed at the center of this life-death cycle; not simply awaiting loss, but born and reborn out of it.

As if to reinforce Hughes’s opening note about the link between despair and laughter, the poem “Laughters” immediately follows “Mammy.” The poem responds to the one preceding it not by eradicating the presence of death and loss, but by facing it: “Loud laughs in the hands of Fate,” the poem reads. Addressing any skepticism that laughter is a valid response, the speaker intones: “Laughters? Yes, laughs!” In *Fine Clothes*, laughter is a mindful response, for to laugh is to possess the ability to reflect critically on the irony of one’s circumstances. The kernel of hope in *Fine Clothes* lies in just that: the possibility of self-assessment. The volume ultimately moves toward a theory of black experience articulated by the folk themselves. The speaker of “Laughters” addresses “My people,” naming the wide range of personas that fill the pages of *Fine Clothes*. The “Dish-washers,/Elevator-boys,/Ladies’ maids,/Crap-shooters,” are also the volume’s “Dream singers” and “Story tellers” (5-9; 1-2). This is a community of individuals

linked not solely by race, geographical parameters, or even “Fate,” but rather by collective polyphonic performance. By initiating collective performance, blues not only reflect black experience but also help to shape it. In this way structure becomes a practice in compelling insinuation, inviting us to look beyond the individual blues performance in order to find the relationship between poems; the link between “autobiographical chronicle” and collective experience. These kind of resonances may be heard as a soft yet powerful echo: “say it very softly/say it very slowly if you choose.”

The Racial Mountain from Harlem to Havana

Framed in part as a response to George Schuyler’s claim that a distinct black art “made in America” is “non-existent,” Hughes’s essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” intends to argue for a highly individual black art that was nevertheless quintessentially American.⁴¹ Yet Hughes perceives great tension in the relationship between blackness and American national identity. The racial mountain, he writes, is the “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (32). Hughes insists that in order to ascend and cross over the “racial mountain,” the black artist must, somewhat ironically, *descend* beneath the surface of mainstream American life to the world of the black masses. Such is the world that Hughes attempts to uncover in his blues poetry. The racial mountain is as much obstacle of class as it is of race, for Hughes is careful to reveal the ways in which these “low-down folks” (the bluesmen and women of Hughes’s poetry) were invisible even to their more affluent black counterparts. Yet the folk “furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.

⁴¹ Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum.”

And perhaps these common people will give *to the world* its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself” (36, my emphasis).

By turning to the art of the folk, the black artist might hope to capture the distinctiveness of the black experience, an experience all the more rich and original because its expressions had not yet been standardized. The paradox here is that the folk’s resistance to standardization is in part a result of their systematic exclusion from narratives of American cultural identity. Though fully aware of this paradox, Hughes does not attempt to resolve it by moving away from racial categories. To climb the racial mountain is not to embark on a quest to be absorbed into white American society. In fact, Hughes’s vision suggests that black art must first bypass the nation in order to be recognized as its signature voice. The true redemptive possibilities of black art lie in its ability to speak universally, “to the world.” Such universality in black art exists because of its racial distinctiveness, and not in spite of it. Blues music was especially suggestive in this regard because of the polyphonic vision of collectivity it mobilizes. In “Songs Called the Blues,” Hughes adds to his idea by suggesting that folk music’s ability to embody specificity and universality enables its international reach: “The most famous blues, as everybody knows, is the St. Louis blues, that Mr. W.C. Handy wrote down one night in the corner of a bar on a levee street in St. Louis....The St. Louis blues is sung more than any other on the airwaves, is known in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, Paris and Berlin—in fact, is heard so often in Europe that a great many Europeans think it must be the American National Anthem”(145).

Such a statement points to Hughes’s interest in the ways in which black cultural forms traveled. Interestingly, when Hughes is interviewed by Nicolás Guillén in 1930, he turns to his own early travels as a sailor as inspiration for the *The Weary Blues*, the Harlem-composed

volume that marked his first effort to incorporate African American vernacular forms into his work:

I landed one cold winter afternoon in New York, broke and down on my luck. That night I went to Harlem.... Luckily my poetry caught on. Some friends helped me and in 1926, I published my first book, *The Weary Blues*, which contained my black poems, my jazz poems, written for that kind of music... sea poems which recalled my barefoot days on board ship in Africa and Europe. ("Conversation with Langston Hughes" Mullen 28)

It is significant that Hughes regards his early blues compositions not simply as artistic efforts rooted in the geography of Harlem or the American South, but as a product of his days sailing the waters between continents. In the spirit of the blues' international reach, they are "sea poems" in which memories of travel, as well as an impulse to travel were encapsulated. His autobiography *The Big Sea* makes use of this trope of maritime travel, often to mark periods of transition or moments of revelation in Hughes's life and career. Of course, the usefulness of the phrase "sea poems" goes beyond how it informs characterizations of Hughes's own life and work. One might turn to Paul Gilroy's use of the image of ships as a symbol of the black Atlantic: "Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists..." (4). Hughes learned firsthand that projects for redemptive return often ended in disillusionment. After landing in the port of Dakar after his first trans-Atlantic voyage in 1923, he recalls with some dismay that "The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro" (*The Big Sea*, 11). Hughes's trans-Atlantic travels certainly served to challenge fixed definitions of race as

well as the possibility of racial homecoming. However, I would argue that his journeys South to the Caribbean also served as key moments in this regard; moments in which the “racial mountain” became the obstacle of translating race.

Hughes made his first trip to Cuba in 1927 as a mess boy aboard ship bound for Havana from a New Orleans port. He documents the trip in a travel journal entitled “1927 Trip South,” a notebook in which he sketches details of his travels to New Orleans, Mobile, and Tuskegee. That Hughes considered Havana a stop on his journey “South” not only highlights the geographical proximity of Cuba to the US; it also suggests a certain linkage between the southern U.S. and Cuba in his regional conceptualization of the South. Indeed, Hughes hoped that like the South of his own country, Cuba would provide a rich field of folk material. The initial purpose of his second journey in 1930 was to seek a black composer with whom to write a folk opera “using genuinely racial motifs,” an idea that his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason backed wholeheartedly. Hughes would later write that Mason’s insatiable hunger for all things “primitive” fueled her enthusiasm (*Big Sea* 325). “I am to go to Havana for rest, new strength, and contact with the song,” he writes (Rampersad 146). His meeting with the Cuban composer Amadeo Roldán proved disappointing however, when the Cuban insisted that he was not a Negro. In many ways this initial encounter exemplifies the different understandings of race and racial identification that Hughes would continue to navigate as he forged alliances with artists and intellectuals in Cuba.

During this visit Hughes also met Nicolás Guillén, Gustavo Urrutia, and José Fernandez de Castro. The daily record of his activities in Havana reveals an itinerary of meetings with various writers and artists by day; sumptuous dinners, rum, and Cuban dancehalls at night.⁴²

⁴² Langston Hughes Papers, Box 492 fol. 12436. Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Cuban nightlife had a major impact on Hughes's overall impression of Havana. Guillén was Hughes's regular companion during these visits. In "*Conversación con Langston Hughes*," an interview that Guillén publishes in *Diario de la Marina*, Guillén recounts Hughes's desire to visit "*un cabaret de negros*." The Cuban poet obligingly escorts Hughes to one of these nightly dances for the "poor and déclassé." It was there that Hughes first heard rumbas and *sones*, which he admiringly describes in his autobiography as "hip shaking music, of Afro-Cuban folk derivation, which means a bit of Spain, therefore Arab-Moorish, mixed in. The tap of the claves, the rattle of gourds, the dong of iron bells, the deep, steady roll of drums speak of the earth, life bursting warm from the earth, and earth and sun moving in steady rhythms of procreation and joy" (*I Wonder as I Wander* 43). Hughes's fascination with the *son* was fueled by his interest in the cultural production of the Afro-Cuban masses, which he viewed as a unique lens into Cuban experience. At one of these vibrant night spots, Guillén writes, Hughes stands captivated for a long time next to the band which is furiously playing a Cuban *son*. As the music "spreads its green smoke," Hughes—"his breath faltering with emotion"—strains to follow a rhythm that was "new to his spirit." Finally, after gazing with wonder at the *bongosero*, he exclaims with an air of dissatisfaction: "*Yo quisiera ser negro. Bien negro! Negro de verdad!*" (Mullen 175).

Hughes's outburst has been read as an expression of racial essentialism, a romanticized desire for access to a "truer" blackness. Indeed, complete with beating drums and mysterious green smoke, the scene is not unlike the fictional descriptions of jazz clubs of Harlem Renaissance literature in which music functions to unearth repressed racial memories of Africa. Yet as Hughes himself was aware, the history of the *son* is one in which various cultural crossings—African, Spanish, Native American—complicate attempts to locate in the music in any notion of black authenticity based on racial purity. I would argue that Guillén paints this

vivid scene not to draw attention to Hughes's naiveté, but to highlight a crucial question: What is “true” blackness in a Cuban context? What idea of blackness does this music provide access to? When the furious tempo of the *son* prompts Hughes to exclaim, “I’d like to be black. Really black. Truly black!” he frames this blackness within a complex history of cultural intersection.

Negro de verdad! Music and Mestizaje

Guillén famously proclaimed that “the spirit of Cuba is *mestizo*” (*el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo*) Blackness in Cuba is framed within the complex and often contradictory discourse of *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje* is a difficult concept to translate to American racial vocabularies where as Hughes explained, “the word ‘Negro’ is used to mean anyone who had *any* Negro blood at all in his veins” (*The Big Sea*, 11). Vera Kutzinski offers a useful set of definitions for this slippery term:

Mestizaje can variably be translated as miscegenation, racial amalgamation (as in blanqueamiento, whitening), creolization, racial mixing, inter- transculturation. It is perhaps best described as a peculiar form of multiculturalism—one that has circulated in the Caribbean and in Hispanic America...as a series of discursive formations tied to nationalist interests and ideologies. (*Sugar’s Secrets* 5)

As part of these formations, “Afro-Cuban speech music and dance became “the new signifiers of a desire for cultural and political independence” (154). As a music whose various cultural crossings are sonically discernable in its instrumentation—bongó, tres, claves, marímbula—*son* was at the center of this multi-disciplinary discourse.⁴³ Equally important, I would argue, the

⁴³ This was thanks in large part to the pioneering work of the famous Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.

structure of the *son* encourages, in fact requires, the participation of multiple voices. The lead *sonero* weaves an improvisational solo but is almost always joined by other singers (who often also serve as musicians and/or dancers) in the form of a chorus, or *estribillo*. In terms of its meaning, the *estribillo* is less of an answer to the story being told by the soloist than it is a response that ultimately extends or even complicates the overall meaning of the exchange. What can sound like a circular monotony of structure actually becomes the driving force of the *son*: an interplay of voices that suggests the answer is not merely in content but in the collective ritual itself.

In Guillén's poetry, the *son*'s emphasis on collective ritual comes to signify a movement toward a national identity synthesized from Cuba's various cultural influences. Although Ben Frederic Carruthers claims somewhat misleadingly in the Introduction to *Cuba Libre* that "Guillén started a movement known as Afro-Cuban poetry," Guillén's affirmation of Afro-Cuban culture was by no means a unique stance in pre-revolution Cuba. Although Guillén was perhaps one of its most famous proponents, the movement known as "Afro-Cuban poetry" participated in the much broader discourse of *mestizaje* that had been gaining force for well over a century with both white and black contributors. Guillén saw himself as heir to the legacy of national heroes such as José Martí and Lino Dou among others, who had espoused the language of *mestizaje* to craft a narrative of national identity in the struggle for independence against Spain. This discourse would continue to gain strength in the face of neo-colonial and imperialist intervention and continued social injustice in Cuba.

On the other hand, as Guillén knew all too well, the imperative to embrace *mestizaje* sometimes tended to bury divisive social realities beneath rhetoric of racial unity. As suggested by one of its stand-in terms, "*blanquemento*," *mestizaje* could often be used to argue not for

social equality, but for assimilation to a white standard. Racial conflict—exemplified by the Massacre of 1912 and the often vigorously enforced color line in Cuba—provided ample evidence that injustices continued to persist in Cuba.⁴⁴ Furthermore, although the struggles against racism and imperialism are inextricably linked in Guillén’s view, this was not a twin mission for all members of Cuban society. Cuban administrators could be vehemently anti-imperialist at the same time that they took their own measures to reinforce the color line. Hughes learned this first hand. In “My Adventures as a Social Poet” he recalls that shortly after his early translation of Guillén’s poem “*Caña*”—in which he names the oppressor “white man” instead of “*yanqui*”—he was detained by immigration authorities and barred from entering Cuba. He did not see this as a coincidence: “This was during the dictatorial Machado regime,” he writes (272). In light of these realities then, *mestizaje* does not emerge as a triumphant solution to be exported and championed throughout the diaspora. While Hughes and Guillén groped for a more expansive language of blackness, they could not avoid bumping into the specter of Jim Crow or into the unsubtle practices of discrimination that kept so many of Havana’s *negro* population in poverty. Guillén hoped that *son* poetry could work to articulate a more honest vision of cultural hybridity while sounding a dissonant note to mythical narratives of racial harmony. This dissonance was signaled by the acknowledgement of a tradition of black vernacular production at

⁴⁴ Several years after a group of Afro-Cuban citizens in the eastern province of Oriente organized a separate political party in 1908 (Partido Independiente de Color) to promote access to equal rights in the wake of Cuban independence, they became the targets of state sanctioned citizen and military violence. The event became known as the Massacre of 1912 or erroneously, “the Negro War.” The organizers of the PIC, mostly middle-class war veterans, had gained the support of thousands of disenfranchised black and mulatto peasants and working class throughout the island. By 1910 the PIC threatened the monopoly of the mostly white Liberal and Conservative parties and prompted a government ban on the party as well as organized harassment and jailing of PIC members and sympathizers. After the PIC organized an armed protest in 1912 to regain its legal status, the press purposefully misrepresented the protest as a “race war.” This rallied white volunteers, soldiers and rural guards who not only shot and killed dozens of PIC protesters, but also killed and mutilated hundreds of unarmed black citizens not associated with the PIC. For more on the Massacre of 1912 and the PIC see Aline Helg.

the center of Cuba's *mestizo* heritage. With signature irony, he remarks that the Cuban elite "reject the vernacular with an ingenuity that is really touching."⁴⁵ This rejection of the vernacular held very concrete consequences: In the late 19th through the early 20th century, *son* had been a source of enormous controversy, prompting not only an official attitude of disdain from the elite classes, but also legislation to ban the playing of the music in public. Special ire was reserved for its key instrument, the *bongó* drum. In 1900 for example, a Havana mayoral decree prohibited the public playing of drums of African origin, which were traditionally played with the hands. This emerged partly in response to the musical activities of the *cabildos de nacion*, African mutual aid societies which emerged during slavery whose customs were increasingly being adopted by Cuban whites, to the utter dismay of many Cuban leaders (Chambers 499-504). *Sones* came to represent an integral, yet dis-acknowledged presence in Cuban culture: a disruptive sonic reminder of Cuban blackness.⁴⁶

Although Guillén was by no means unknown prior to publishing *Motivos de son*, the book thrust him into national prominence, causing—as he writes with evident satisfaction in one letter to Hughes— "*un verdadero escándolo*" 'a veritable scandal' in Havana (Heredia, 26). Though some critics read the debut of Guillén's *Motivos de son* as a joyous celebration of diasporic homecoming,⁴⁷ the volume presents a far more ambiguous picture. Many of the poems—and Hughes's translations of them—raise more tensions than they resolve with respect to questions of Cuban cultural hybridity. A case in point is "*Ayé me dijeron negro.*" (Literally: "Yesterday they called me black," translated in Hughes version as "Last Night Somebody Called Me Negro." Negro becomes "darky" in the body of the poem.)

⁴⁵ From "Rosendo Ruiz," *Diario de la Marina*, January 26, 1930.

⁴⁶ See also Ned Sublette, *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004.

⁴⁷ See for example Kaup 102.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Ayé me dijeron negro</i> | Last night somebody called me darky |
| <i>pa que me fajara yo;</i> | Just to make me fight |
| <i>pero e'que me lo desía</i> | But the one who said it to me |
| <i>era un negro como yo.</i> | Was a darky too, alright. |
| <i>Tan blanco como te bé</i> | Can't fool me, dat White face of yours |
| <i>y tu abuela sé quién é.</i> | 'cause I know who your grandma is. |
| <i>Sácala de la cosina,</i> | call her out de kitchen, |
| <i>Mamá Iné.</i> | Mama Inez. |
| <i>Mamá Iné, tú bien lo sabe,</i> | Mamá, you knows all about it. |
| <i>Mamá Iné, yo bien lo sé;</i> | Mamá Inez, I knows, too. |
| <i>Mamá Iné te llama nieto.</i> | Mamá Inez calls you grandson. |
| <i>Mamá Iné.</i> | Mamá Inez |

Like many of Guillén's poems, "*Ayé me dijeron negro*" plays with fixed concepts of racial identity. There are three key personas of note in this poem. The speaker, who we presume is "*negro*" at least in appearance and whose *criollo* speech hints at his working class status; his invisible insulter who the speaker designates as white in appearance; and "Mamá Iné," a "prototypical signifier of African slavery in Hispanic Caribbean cultures, who is hidden when company comes," much like the speaker of Hughes "I too, sing America" ("Fearful

Asymmetries”126). The trope of the hidden black ancestor was one that Guillén used often (see for example, “*Los Dos Abuelos*” ‘the two grandfathers’) and also one which would have been familiar to U.S. readers as well. In many ways, the trio serves as a microcosm of Cuban culture in which race relations are cast not only in terms of practices of affiliation but also more concretely as (repressed) familial ties. The *estribillo*—we are to imagine a chorus of singers joining in at this point—is signaled by the repetition of “Mama Iné.” It is a taunting chorus of bystanders that urges the speaker to reveal this “black” secret, so to speak.

I have placed the Guillén and the Hughes version side by side to highlight some of the challenges of translating Cuban vernacular to English, which incidentally, also bring into relief some of the poem’s central tensions. The elided consonants (“*ayer*” becomes “*ayé*”, “*por que*” becomes “*pa’ que*,” etc) give the Spanish version a clipped, percussive feel that mimics *son*’s instrumentation; the effect is an almost abrasive word-music largely lost in the English. But perhaps the most important change is the translation of “negro” as “darky.” Hughes and Carruthers use the more neutral word “Negro” in the title but choose “darky” for the body of the poem, a term meant to approach the weight of the epithet used in the original version. Yet, as Vera Kutzinski has observed, part of the point of this poem is to highlight the instability of the term “negro,” since “neither the speaker nor his insulter, whose bodies are invisible to the reader, are clearly identifiable in racial terms” (126). Furthermore, the word “*negro*” in Cuban might designate color but not necessarily race—especially not in rigid terms of black and white as might be understood in a U.S. context.

Again, it is important to note that cultural hybridity does not necessarily equal cultural harmony. Ultimately, the poem leaves unresolved the question of what it means to have Mamá Iné hidden in the shadows of one’s family tree. Here it is useful to return to the poem’s *estribillo*.

The possibility of the collective acknowledgment of the legacy of slavery symbolized by the black ancestor is enacted by the chorus, who has dared to speak her name. By invoking Mamá Iné, the chorus implies that the speaker and his insulter (in effect, all Cubans) share a common ancestor, but it is as yet a troubled kinship. While the aim is to destabilize claims to racial purity, the result is not an affirmation of *negro* heritage, or a transformation of shame into pride. On the contrary, the chorus takes the form of a taunt, akin to an airing of dirty laundry in the middle of the Havana street. Elsewhere, Guillén turns the trope of the black ancestor into a point of pride, but this poem's unsettling effect stems from its refusal to do just that. The poem leaves us aware of the fallibility of racial naming, but we are still not completely disentangled from the framework of shame in which we started. Like blues poetry, the terseness of the *poema-son* contributes to its ability to raise problems that it declines to resolve, but instead allows to resonate.

Ancestry, Collective Ritual and the *Son de la Ma Teodora*

The question of ancestry and origin is a central one in Afro-Cuban music and literature, and is inevitably bound up with questions of tradition. Although *son* as it is known today developed in the late 19th century, reaching widespread popularity as a dance music in the 1920's and 30's, its "lineage" in Cuban musical and literary myth goes back much further. The 16th century "*Son de la Ma Teodora*" is at the center of this narrative. It has been considered a founding text of Hispanic literature, and was presumably composed and performed in Santiago by Teodora Ginés, a black woman from Santo Domingo. The text of the "Son" is as follows:

¿Donde está la Ma' Teodora?

--*Rajando la leña está.*

--*¿Con su palo y su bandola?*

-- *Rajando la leña está.*

--*¿Donde está que no la veo?*

-- *Rajando la leña está. Rajando la leña está. Rajando la leña está (1-6)*

The Son's driving question, "*Donde está la Ma Teodora?*" (Where is Ma' Teodora?) has taken on new significance in recent years, as scholars have increasingly disputed the details of its origins.⁴⁸ Yet the "Son" has nevertheless played a key role in the Cuban writerly imagination as a musical text in which the various contributions to Cuban (Caribbean) culture were synthesized early on in the country's history. In "*La Música en Cuba*" for instance, Alejo Carpentier cites the composition's use of the Spanish ballad form and African rhythms as an early example of transculturation: a demonstration of Cuban sound as an "amalgam of Spanish music and Negro rhythm" (374). Roberto González Echevarría, whose extensive analysis of the Son de la Ma' Teodora is instructive here, expands on Carpentier's observation by noting that the Son is "a synthesis of the Spanish, African and *taíno* (Arawack) cultures that composed the Hispanic Caribbean"(7). Ma' Teodora's "tools" help to dramatize this synthesis: her *palo* (staff) of African origin, and *bandola* (a guitar used in Hispanic folk music) are necessary components of her mysterious song and dance. The performance is mysterious because, as Echevarría observes, it pivots around a question that never achieves definite resolution:

⁴⁸ See Mugerica, Alberto. "Teodora Ginés: mito o realidad histórica?" *Revista Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*. La Habana: 1971

Like a riddle ballad, Teodora's *son* asks the question: 'Where is Ma' Teodora?' and answers it always with the line 'She's splitting the logs.' The question is repeated with variations: "Is she splitting the logs with her staff and guitar?" and 'where is she that I can't see her?' and the answer comes back "She's splitting the logs," incessantly, until the Son becomes simply a repetition of the line 'She's splitting the logs.' 'Splitting the logs' meant at the time, dancing, just as 'cutting a rug' meant dancing in English some years ago. Teodora's song then consists of a question asked by one singer, presumably Teodora herself, with minor variations and an answer repeated by a chorus of dancers: 'Where is Ma' Teodora?' 'She's dancing.'" (7)

Echevarría reads the Son as "an ontological quest" in that Ma' Teodora embodies tradition and Cuban national identity, concepts which cannot be understood by merely pinpointing her physical location, which the Son never does. Furthermore, the cultural blending that the Son enacts does not simply suggest harmony. Considering the "deracination characteristic of Caribbean culture...cultural synthesis does not necessarily mean plenitude, but a void where elements meet and cancel each other out to open the question of meaning"(10). In other words, identity and tradition are not definable terms here, but rather can only be discovered/recovered in the collective ritual of song and dance. Ultimately however, Echevarría concludes that the successful invocation of this ritual (signaled by the repetition of "*rajando la leña está*") is a triumphant mode of cultural recovery: "The jubilation at the end is the intoxicating recovery of tradition, an immersion in a rhythm that is primordial, that keeps time"(8). Put another way, Ma'

Teodora has successfully subverted her own deracination by turning work (splitting logs) into dance.

But to reframe the matter, I would argue that a bit of the “orphic trace,” that permeates blues music is also audible in the Son’s questing, improvisatory call and its obsessively repetitive, (yet elusive) collective response. For, as Echevarría remarks, “one has the feeling the question ‘Where is Ma’ Teodora?’ is not asked to gain information, but to elicit the ritualistic response, a response that is encoded in a circumlocution, a verbal feint, like Teodora’s dancing movement” (9). The response “*rajando la leña está*” (she is dancing) which is not only meant to be sung, but also danced, is not an answer as such. Rather it is a response that seductively resists resolution. Nor can we “see” Ma’ Teodora for ourselves. (*dondé está que no la veo?*) In order to know where and who she is, one must join the ritual—(as Hurston famously wrote: you’ve got to go there to know there.) The energy of the *son* is thus redirected into a performance of collective expression. In other words, Ma’ Teodora’s location cannot be communicated verbally, or even definitively pinpointed, but must instead be experienced. The dance itself, the movement of individuals as one body, becomes the only way of answering the question “Where is tradition?” Although this ritual provides some healing, the very structure and content of the ritual are crafted to stage a paradox; that is, to stage a quest for a response to the urgent yet unanswerable question.

The importance of “*Son de la Ma’ Teodora*,” to Cuban literary history is not simply about a symbolic transformation of toil into dance. On the contrary, toil is the object of the ritual. Drawing from “Ma’ Teodora’s” symbolic power, the modern *son* emerges as an artistic form capable of performing a kind of transformative work in relationship to questions of Cuban national identity, as well as the Afro-diasporic experience. As a poetic form, a kind of music,

and a dance, *son*'s significance emerges not only through its spoken meanings, but also (and perhaps most crucially) through form. By embodying a collective ritual, *son* could disrupt an elite who was invested in limiting participation and citizenship to a chosen few while maintaining a false narrative of cultural harmony.

In other words *son* was capable of a particularly dynamic form of compelling insinuation. To heed the imperative of collective ritual that *son* music so powerfully encapsulated would mean to acknowledge Cuba's black presence. As suggested above, this acknowledgment was not merely symbolic but also literally a matter of form, and of sound: By the 20th century, the *son*'s use of the forbidden bongo drum, its use of call and response and collective repetition in the *estribillo*, and perhaps most crucially, its use of the Cuban vernacular, helped to create a sonic landscape of a Cuba *mestizo* blackness. And it was a particularly urban landscape. After all, though *son* had rural origins in the mountains of Cuba (hence the common designation, "*son montuno*") it was now above all a street music: performed in the alleys of the barrios of poor blacks. On the other hand, it was also enjoyed by members of the elite in the mood for a spree—including president Machado himself who was fond of hiring *son* bands for private parties.

Motivos de son thrust Guillén into national prominence in elite literary circles, but he also became known as a poet of the people. In a piece originally intended for the Introduction of *Cuba Libre*, Hughes would later write:

Because Guillén writes about the everyday problems of the people, often using the idioms and the rhythms of the rumbas and *sones* in his verses, his poems are recited and sung by thousands of men and women who are far from 'literary.' His style varies from delicate

lyrics and ultra-modern unrhymed poetry to singing Afro-Creole dialect verses, but his subject matter is almost always the problems, poverty, and folk-ways of his native Cuba. (“Concerning Nicolás Guillén” LHP 265)

This description of Guillén’s poetic influences highlights the similarities between the two poets work: their dual focus on the “idioms and rhythms” black music; their range of styles, and their thematic focus “problems, poverty, and folkways.” It is perhaps unsurprising then, that Hughes and Carruthers chose to place Guillén’s *poemas-son* in a section entitled “Cuban Blues.” Guillén seems to make a similar gesture when he argued that as Cuba’s most representative music, the son, like American blues, was an ideal form from which to craft vernacular poetry (“*Sones y Soneros*” 7).

Yet what is lost in translation here is precisely the thing that made the son-poems Cuban: a mestizo poetics. Guillén articulates such a poetics in the prologue to his 1931 collection *Sóngoro Cosongo: Versos mulatos*. (several poems from this collection also appear in *Cuba Libre*, but the prologue is omitted.) Guillén writes:

No ignoro, desde luego, que estos versos les repugnan a muchas personas, porque ellos tratan asuntos de los negros y del pueblo. No me importa. O mejor dicho: me alegra. Diré finalmente que estos son unos versos mulatos.... Opino por tanto que un poesía criolla entre nosotros no lo sera de un modo cabale con olvido el negro. El negro—a mi juicio—aporta esencias muy firmes a nuestro coctel...Por lo pronto, el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo. Y del espíritu hacia la piel nos vendrá el color definitivo. Algún día se dirá: “color cubano.” Estos poemas quieren adelantar ese día.

I'm not unaware, of course, that these verses will disgust many people because they deal with Negroes and the masses. It doesn't matter to me. Or better said: It makes me happy. I will say finally that these are mulatto verses...I further believe that a creole poetry here would not be complete if one forgot the Negro. The Negro—in my judgment—brings very strong essences to our cocktail. To begin with, the spirit of Cuba is *mestizo*. And from the spirit, not the skin, will emerge a definitive color. Someday we'll say: "Cuban Color." These poems seek to bring forth that day. (*Obra poética* 114)

Guillén's prediction that his verses would disgust "many people" is one of his many references to what he saw as the haughty prejudice of the Cuban middle class. Yet he insists that Cuban literary history is incomplete without the tradition of black vernacular production at the center of Cuba's *mestizo* heritage. One does not have to listen very hard to hear echoes of Hughes's manifesto, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In this piece he famously critiques the pretentious tastes of the "Nordicized Negro intelligentsia," who reject the "inherent expressions of Negro life" such as jazz and the spiritual. He writes that if white and colored people are pleased with the work of the younger Negro artists "we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves"(36). Like Hughes's essay, Guillén's *prólogo* marks one of his first major efforts to situate his own work. Hughes and Guillén's joint claim that "it doesn't matter" reads as a declaration of artistic independence as well as an attempt to articulate a politics of solidarity with the struggle of the common people. Nevertheless, both poets did in fact care deeply about the opinions of their audiences and the reception of their work. For both Hughes and Guillén not only believed that the rich cultural history of the people could inspire

poetry, but also felt that poetry could become an instrumental part of this history—helping to facilitate a nuanced understanding of black life that would propel the nation(s) into the future. Crucially, Guillén’s *prólogo* signals that a universal understanding of Cuban cultural identity as difference within unity has not yet been realized. In the spirit of Ma’ Teodora’s quest, *mulato* verses energized by the rhythm of the son must both issue the call for change and begin to answer it. As I have remarked above, Hughes took a similar stance in “Negro Artist,” when he writes: “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand”(37).

For music to demand real action, in Guillén’s view, it had to demand the participation of all segments of Cuban society. One of his strongest statements in this vein, “Song of the Cuban Drum”(“*La Canción del Bongó*”) uses the force of the erstwhile forbidden *bongó* to issue its own call:

This is the song of the *bongo*

Esta es la canción del bongó

Here even blueblood

--*Aquí el que más fino sea,*

answers when I call.

responde, si llamo yo.

Some answer, “Right now!”

unos dicen: Ahora mismo

Others say, “On my way!”

otros dicen: Allá voy.

But my hoarse rejoinder

Pero mi repique bronco

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| deep bass voice | <i>pero mi profunda voz</i> |
| calls both black and white | <i>convoca al negro y al blanco</i> |
| to dance the same <i>son</i> . | <i>que bailan el mismo son</i> |
| Brown of skin or brown of soul | <i>cueripardos y almiprietos</i> |
| more from blood than sun | <i>más de sangre que de sol,</i> |
| those who are not night outside | <i>pues quien por fuera no es noche,</i> |
| get darker deep within. | <i>por dentro ya oscureció.</i> |
| Here even blueblood | <i>aquí el que más fino sea,</i> |
| answers when I call. (1-15). | <i>responde, sí llamo yo.</i> |

The voice of the *bongó* and “I” of the poem are one, given further connection through the rhyme that can only be heard in the Spanish version: the accented “bongo” and...yo.” The *estribillo*, or refrain, tirelessly issues a call that will elicit the response of even those of the most refined tastes: “*el que más fino sea, responde, sí llamo yo.*” The next few lines both anticipate these responses and enact them, prompting the voice to issue the call once more with greater strength: “But my hoarse rejoinder/Deep bass voice/Calls black and white to dance the same *son*”(7-10). The poem culminates in a relentless drum-like rhythm in which change is demanded through repetition:

—*Compadre,*

ya me pedirás perdón

ya me comerás de mi ajiaco,

ya me darás la razón,

ya me golpearás el cuero,

ya bailarás a mi voz,

ya pasearemos del brazo,

ya estarás donde yo estoy:

ya vendrás de abajo arriba,

¡que aquí el más alto soy yo! (35-44)

The final lines of the Hughes version also take up that rhythm: “You’ll dance to my song yet,/we’ll be arm in arm yet,/you’ll be where I am yet.” Such words also resonate with Hughes’s poem “I, Too (Sing America)” (42-44). But the word “*ya*” is more accurately translated as “already” or “now”—evoking a greater sense of urgency and immediacy. The poem is simultaneously a statement of arrival and an anticipatory gesture—the *son* and the announcement of the *son*. In Guillén’s poem, meaningful integration will occur not simply when “[They] see how beautiful I am/ and be ashamed,” but rather when Cuban society acknowledges and embraces its own *mulatez*/blackness. Only then could a pre-revolution Cuba move towards true independence.

Cuba Libre

Importantly, the other side of the movement toward true independence was the fight against U.S. intervention. In Guillén's view, one of the U.S.' most harmful imports (and barriers to a more productive discourse of *mestizaje*) was the legacy of Jim Crow, which did not singlehandedly draw the color line in Cuba but helped to reinforce it. In the postwar climate of 1948, however, Hughes and Carruthers struggled to translate this sentiment in Guillén's poetry. In his Introduction Carruthers explains that "*Cuba Libre*" was originally a cry for freedom and in these poems it still is" (ix). But his discussion quickly shifts from the struggle for Cuban independence and takes a decidedly different turn:

We *yanquis* have come to know it [*Cuba Libre*] as a delightful drink concocted from the best of light Cuban rum, a dash of *limón* (lime to you) and cola poured over ice. Cuba's rum is the symbol of its fiery passions, its lifeblood, its livelihood. In these poems it must represent, the white blood in the veins of our mulatto poet, Nicolás Guillén. As in the perfect *Cuba Libre*, it is fused with the dark cola which for us is the symbol of his African heritage. The *limón* is the bitterness of frustration lending piquancy and genius to the verse as the sour juice does to the drink. (ix)

Carruthers's statement to his North American readers that Cuba's rum is the "symbol of its fiery passions, its lifeblood, its livelihood," is meant to suggest the facility and comfort with which they can access, indeed imbibe, this vibrant Cuban culture. Carruthers does not venture to illuminate the cluster of troubling associations that rum, the sugar industry, and tourism have for black Cubans, but as he speaks of American enjoyment of this "delightful drink" made with rum and (Coca) cola, he inadvertently gestures at the link between history of exploitation of Cuban workers in the cane fields and U.S corporate capitalism. In Guillén's work, *yanquis* and the

tourist industry are deeply implicated in this history of exploitation. One might recall Guillén's caricature of the ravenous sight-seers in Guillén's poem "West Indies Ltd." who "Come to munch our blue sky/and wash it down with Bacardi" '*Viene comerse el cielo azul/regándolo con Bacardí*'(41-2). There is little to suggest that this irony is intentional on Carruthers's part however, and a series of elisions in the English versions of several of the translated poems further suggest the strategic suppression of such connections. One such example concerns the translation of the poem "*Caña*," ('Cane') which reads simply:

Negro

in the cane fields

White man

above the cane fields

Earth

beneath the cane fields

Blood

that flows from us (*Cuba Libre* 23).

In the Hughes version, violent exploitation in the cane fields is figured explicitly in terms of black and white in a way that American readers could link directly to U.S. slavery.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁹ Vera Kutzinski usefully points out in her article that while "critics typically credit [Hughes] with most of the translations...the manuscripts nevertheless show that Ben Curruthers translated half of the poems"(123). This

starkness of the four short stanzas—Negro/Whiteman/Earth/Blood—seems to function as a distillation of both U.S. and Cuban histories of slavery and racial oppression. In the original version however, the second stanza reads “*El yanqui sobre la cañaveral*”—which contains a specific reference to U.S imperialism that is missing in the translation. If Northern readers who claimed to be sympathetic to the plight of Negroes could detach themselves from the “white man” in the English version, the Spanish version places North American *yanqui* readers literally at the center of a landscape of violence and exploitation that defined the history of labor in the cane fields. In contrast to the English version’s “blood that flows from us” the exclamatory final line of the Spanish version, “*¡Sangre que nos va!*” lends a greater urgency to the suffering, but also suggests bloodshed in the context of resistance. This is made even more explicit in Guillén’s later poem, “West Indies Ltd,” in which a voice from the cane fields (“*un voz moderna y bárbara*”) chants: “*¡Cortar cabezas como canas, chas, chas, chas!*” ‘Cut heads like cane stalks, chop, chop, chop!’ (95-6).⁵⁰ Although Hughes himself wrote anti-imperialist poetry throughout his career, his translation of *Caña* constitutes a crucial erasure of the poem’s revolutionary meanings.

For Guillén, the struggle against racism and discrimination was inseparable from resistance to neocolonialism and imperialism. The *son* helped to provide the language of resistance. As suggested above, “West Indies, Ltd,” which appeared in a collection of the same name, is one of Guillén’s most radical critiques in this vein, encompassing not only Cuban reality but a larger vision of the Antilles as a region whose many islands were linked by a

certainly complicates any reading of *Cuba Libre* as simply an example of Hughes’s aesthetic sensibilities put to work in the process of translation. However, in this chapter, I distinguish between the translations done by Hughes (many of which he had published previously in journals), those done by Carruthers, and those for which there was evidence of collaboration by naming them as such: Hughes, Carruthers, Hughes-Carruthers. This naming has its limits, as undocumented collaboration between Hughes and Carruthers was possible, and even likely.

⁵⁰ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Caribbean-wide system of exploitative labor, the sugar plantation. Adding more context to the concept of *mestizaje*, the speaker of the poem declares that cultural amalgamation in the region was facilitated in large part through “contracts:” “*A traves de tratos y contratos/se han corrido los tintes/y no hay un tono estable*” ‘Through deals and contracts/the colors have run together/ and there is no stable tone’ (18-19). In the modern era, it is a region whose labor, culture, resources, and “blue sky” are increasingly consumed by its American neighbors—like the drink, *Cuba Libre*. Hence the satirical use of the language of U.S. corporate capitalism in the English title, “West Indies Ltd.” Guillén’s anti-imperialist critique as well is his attempt to conceptualize the Caribbean as region is reminiscent of Walrond’s 1925 *Tropic Death*. Yet, whereas the cycle of death and exploitation seems relentless in *Tropic Death*, in “West Indies Ltd” the voice of the *son* intervenes, disrupting the flow of the poem: “*Cinco minutos de interrupcion. La charanga de Juan el Barbero toca un son,*” ‘Five minutes of interruption. The band of Juan el Barbero plays a *son,*’ a mysterious narrative voice announces. The *son* that follows is not a triumphant reversal of circumstance, but rather approaches the melancholy of blues:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>No tengo donde vivir,</i> | I have no place to live |
| <i>Ni mujer a quien querer</i> | Nor a woman to love |
| <i>No tengo donde vivir</i> | I have no place to live |
| <i>Ni mujer a quien querer</i> | Nor a woman to love |
| <i>Todos los perros me ladran</i> | All the dogs bark at me |
| <i>Y nadie me dice usted</i> | And nobody calls me sir. (13-18) |

The *sonero* (who the poem implies is a worker in the cane field) continues with several verses in this tone, concluding with seemingly incongruous statement: “*Si me muriera ahora mismo,*” (repeated 3x) “*qué alegre me iba a poner!*” ‘If I were to die this very moment...How happy it would make me!’ At this point, the *estribillo* joins in to finish the *son*:

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Ay, yo te daré, te daré,</i> | Oh, I will give you, give you |
| <i>Te daré, te daré</i> | Give you, give you |
| <i>Ay yo te daré</i> | Oh I will give you |
| <i>La libertad!</i> | Liberty! (29-32) |

The end of the poem presents a double meaning: On one hand the “yo” ‘I’ of the *estribillo* could be read as death personified, promising, with bitter irony, to provide not only solace but freedom. On the other hand, “yo” also represents the collective voices of the *soneros*, initiating the call for liberty through their own action—the *son* itself. In this sense, the *son* does not signal a triumph over power, but rather functions exactly as Guillén labels it: an “interruption,” an interlude not unlike the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* experiences when, without warning, he descends into the “silence of sound,” guided by Louis Armstrong’s voice. In both instances, the significance of the “interruption” lies in the music’s ability to send up a momentary vision of freedom, however fleeting it might be.

From Havana to Harlem: “Is a solution close at hand?”

Although both poets knew that there was immense work to be done, they had different ideas about how to proceed, and assigned different values to certain literal and metaphorical “spaces” of cultural production and progress. These connections and divergences rise into view in “*Conversación con Langston Hughes*,” in which Guillén suddenly interrupts Hughes’s lengthy description of his recent literary activities to ask about the race problem in the U.S. “‘How do you perceive’, I asked him, ‘the race problem in the United States, as far as it concerns the Negro? Is a solution close at hand? I want to know your opinion’ ” ‘*Como ve usted*’—*le pregunto—‘el problema de razas en los E. U., en lo que toca a la negra? Se adelanta en la solución? Me gustaría conocer lo que usted opina’*” (174). The question comes at the end of conversation that had proceeded more or less unguided; in fact it is the only formal question in the interview. Clearly, this is not a wide-eyed Guillén who was enamored with Hughes’s “fearless racial aesthetic.” He rather wanted to explore the connections and disconnections between the U.S poet’s aesthetic and political sensibilities and his own.

By this time (1930) Guillén had already formed his own ideas about the U.S. race problem, expressed most notably in his essays “*El Camino de Harlem*” and “*De Nueva York a Moscú pasando por París*.” In each of these, Guillén holds the segregated black enclave as a negative example for a Cuba moving toward independence. For Guillén, an acknowledgment of Harlem’s great cultural achievements could not change that fact that “On 111, 113, 115, and 138 streets, thousands of Negroes drag along miserably, at the margin of the opulence and joy of the richest city in the world” (“*De Nueva York a Moscú*” 83). In his own country Guillén saw integration—fueled by a discourse of *mestizaje*—as a goal to be pressed for immediately and continuously. Hughes in turn was equally perplexed by processes of systematic exclusion at

home and abroad. Yet, his career as a social poet was not backed by a national discourse of cultural amalgamation, but instead was too often at the mercy of white patrons, or conservative members of a black press concerned with racial uplift. Still, Hughes and other black writers were nevertheless invigorated by “Harlem and its lovenights, its cabarets and casinos, its dark, warm bodies. The thundering subways, the arch of the bridges, the mighty rivers hold me...I become dizzy dancing to the jazz-tuned nights, ecstasy-wearied in the towered days” (“The Fascination of Cities” 31). This difference in perspective creates an almost palpable tension at this point in the interview. Accordingly, Hughes takes his time to respond to Guillén’s inquiry: “The poet smiles. He fingers his school ring with its shining emblem, and finally responds:”

Look, I’m not a social scientist. I’ve never studied for that. I’m simply a poet. I live among my people, I love them; every blow that is dealt them hurts me as well and I sing their pain, translate their sorrows, give flight to their worries. All this I do in the manner of the people, with the same ease with which the people have done. Do you know that I’ve never been preoccupied with the rules of classical verse? I am sure that I’ve never written a sonnet, you know? What I write comes from within. I don’t study the Negro, I feel him. (Mullen 175)

Hughes had spent much time abroad, and this was not the first and certainly not the last time he would be asked to give his take on the race problem in the U.S. Nor was he oblivious to the ways in which imperialist intervention had helped to reinforce the color line in Cuba, where

he was brought to court for attempting to enter a whites-only beach controlled by Americans.⁵¹ However, he chooses to skirt Guillén's inquiry in order to respond to it from a different direction. Instead of projecting a solution to the problem, he turns to what he considers his personal contribution to an imaginative language of change: A dedication to "feeling" the black masses, to sympathizing with them in their distress, and to translating their sorrows. Guillén lends some irony to Hughes's statement by including the image of the U.S. poet fingering his glistening university ring, a gesture that suggests a certain distance from "my people" and points to the ways in which artists actually are students as well as producers of culture.⁵² Guillén encourages us to read Hughes's connection to the black masses as not merely an organic one, but rather as an articulated connection that must be spoken and written into existence.

Importantly, each poet actively *chooses* affiliation. Hughes's use of the word "translate" is notable in this respect, for he sought to interpret, transform, and archive the cultural and experience of the black masses at home as well as abroad. He "gives flight" to their sorrows not by eliminating their struggles, but by launching them into a modern poetic vision. In this way Hughes and Guillén saw an affinity between their projects. In distinct ways each poet sought, in Guillén words, to advance (*adelantar*) more expansive cultural identities through the rhythms and language of the folk.

Whereas Hughes emphasizes that he is not a "social scientist" Jean Price-Mars and Zora Neale Hurston both center their work on a combination of scientific authority and "insider" access to folk material, using these tools to "read" the U.S. Occupation of Haiti. The radically different interpretations that result will be the subject of my next chapter.

⁵¹ See Ellis 143.

⁵² Hughes's claim that he had never studied classical verse or written a sonnet is also a bit hyperbolic.

Chapter Four

Vodou Politics: Folklore and the U.S. Occupation of Haiti in the Work of Jean Price-Mars and Zora Neale Hurston

This chapter explores the work of two major ethnographers of the interwar period, Jean Price-Mars and Zora Neale Hurston. While there is no evidence of collaboration between these two writers, their work stages a conversation about the politics of ethnographic study: its value, its authority in crafting definitions of the “folk,” and its ability to make arguments that extend well beyond the realm of culture. Written in the context of the U.S. military occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, their ethnographic work also demonstrates the intersection between the study of culture and articulations of nationhood and self-determination. Price-Mars’s *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (*So Spoke the Uncle*) and Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* are among the first ethnographic works to argue that vodou was a valid syncretic religion and to compare its development to that of other world religions, rather than invoking it as evidence of superstition and barbarism—a common justification for continued subjugation of Haitians.⁵³ In addition, each text experiments with the form of ethnography—incorporating a number of styles, genres and voices, and, above all, modeling the dynamism of folk culture and asserting its place in scholarly discourse.

Hurston and Price-Mars draw upon not only scientific tools of analysis but also folk sources as objects of study as well as theoretical guides. This is evident in their use of Uncle Bouqui and Papa Guedé, Haitian folk figures who provide the guiding tropes of *So Spoke the*

⁵³ My spelling of “vodou” is derived from the *English Haitian Creole Dictionary*, 268. Where I quote Hurston’s text or Shannon’s translation of *So Spoke the Uncle*, I preserve the spelling “voodoo.”

Uncle and *Tell My Horse*, respectively. In their quest for the appropriate forms in which to represent the folk, they embrace the same practices of originality and innovation that they observed during their studies in the field. Their approach to researching and writing about folk suggests that what was true for the folk artist might also be true for the ethnographer: “nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use” (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 300).

Culture, however, is also a contested site in these works. Although both Hurston and Price-Mars upheld that folk culture could inform aesthetic and methodological approaches, they differed on whether it could also fuel strategies of resistance. Price-Mars was interested in theorizing the relationship between Haiti’s vernacular traditions and its resistance to imperialism, linking these explicitly to a political agenda. On the other hand, Hurston’s text has become infamous for its embarrassing lapses into imperialist rhetoric. Previous critical assessments of *Tell My Horse* have posited a contradiction between Hurston’s careful treatment of folk culture and her praise of the U.S. occupation. Yet I argue that Hurston’s appropriation of folk culture is itself problematic, since it is through this appropriation that she grants herself the authority to make such pronouncements. Reading Price-Mars and Hurston together raises important questions about the politics of an experimental ethnography that attempts to speak in and through the voices of the folk.

Jean Price-Mars and the U.S. Occupation

Jean Price-Mars was born in 1876 in Grande Rivière du Nord, a province in Northern Haiti. Ethnographer, physician, diplomat, and founder of the *Institut d’ethnologie*, Price-Mars was a pioneer in the study of folk culture in Haiti in the 1920s and 30s. His landmark work on Haitian folklore and vodou, *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, (1928) is a foundational text in *indigéniste* and

noiriste movements that attempted to offer ideological responses to the problem of U.S. imperialism. For Price-Mars, a valorization of Haiti's rich cultural heritage, including its African roots, was the central tenet of nationalist resistance against U.S. intervention. A collection of essays culled from his many public lectures, *Ainsi parla l'oncle* is noteworthy for its painstaking history of the African origins of Haitian culture, as well as its denunciation of imperialism—especially its manifestations in the concurrent U.S. occupation of Haiti.

Price-Mars's work is an important chapter in pre-négritude writings of the Caribbean. As G.R. Coulthard has observed, Price-Mars was “in the vanguard of the revaluation of African culture long before the concept of négritude was developed in the Caribbean” (117). Indeed, it would be difficult to understand the turn to African-derived folk forms in Francophone Caribbean literature without reference to Price-Mars. In 1956 Léopold Sédar Senghor, known as one of the “three fathers” of négritude⁵⁴ wrote a testimonial reflecting on the impact of reading *Ainsi parla l'oncle* as a young student: “*me contant les trésors de la Négritude qu'il avait découverts sur et dans la terre haïtienne, il m'apprenait à découvrir les mêmes valeurs, mais vierges et plus fortes, sur et dans la terre d'Afrique*” ‘he told of the treasures of Négritude that he had discovered in the Haitian soil, and he taught me to discover the same riches, though more virginal and more profound, in the soil of Africa’ (*Témoignages* 3).

Such a lineage may be traced back even further, as Price-Mars himself joined an ongoing “Haitian intellectual tradition of racial vindication” that stretched back to the turn of the 19th century (Magloire and Yelvington 3). In particular Price-Mars was influenced by the work of anthropologist and diplomat Anténor Firmin, whose 1885 book *De l'égalité des races humaines* (*On the Equality of Human Races*) had refuted the racist theories of Arthur de Gobineau and

⁵⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Gontran Damas.

others. Price-Mars had been named after the Haitian diplomat and poet Hannibal Price, who authored the influential *De la rehabilitation de la race noire par la République d’Haïti (On the Rehabilitation of the Black Race by the Republic of Haiti)*. But Price-Mars dates his decision to study anthropology to a pivotal moment in 1898, when, as a medical student in Paris, he became acquainted with the racist theories of the French sociologist Gustave Le Bon.⁵⁵ As a critical tool, anthropology would allow him to scientifically debunk arguments about the inherent inferiority of blacks and unfitness for self-governance—arguments which had profoundly threatened Haiti’s self-determination as a black republic. And throughout his career, an involvement in politics would allow him to use this expertise to contribute to Haiti’s efforts at nation building. The work of Firmin, Price, and Price-Mars, who each held political posts throughout their careers, demonstrates the important ongoing relationship between anti-racist scholarship and political involvement in Haiti.

What set Price-Mars’s work apart from previous efforts, however, was the urgency of the moment. The first decades of the 20th century were marked by aggressive U.S. expansion in the Caribbean. The U.S. occupied Haiti in July 1915 after the events of June 28, 1915, in which President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was assassinated following the massacre of political prisoners at Port au Prince. Though the U.S. framed intervention as a regrettable yet necessary measure to restore order to a country plagued by instability, the United States had long held a strategic interest in Haiti. As James Weldon Johnson observes in his report for the NAACP in 1920, the assassination of President Sam did not cause intervention, but merely furnished the long-awaited opportunity: “When the United States found itself in a position to take what it had not even dared to ask, it used brute force and took it” (“Self-Determining Haiti” 662). Magdaline Shannon

⁵⁵ See Le Bon, *Les Lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples*, 1894.

explains, “within a month [the U.S.] had established martial law, assumed military and civil control of Haiti, restricted the Haitian press, and seized control of five services: customs, finance, the constabulary, public works, and public health” (7). They also revived the *corvée*, an obsolete law which required every citizen to labor on the public roads, under conditions that many Haitians compared to slavery. A new Haitian constitution was adopted in 1918, which, among other things, granted property rights to foreigners for the first time. In short, the US occupation constituted not just an abstract threat but rather a wholesale restructuring of citizenship in Haiti.

For Price-Mars, occupation signaled a crisis in national progress and a challenge to aspirations toward a full Haitian citizenship. Building on an argument he had launched in his earlier work *La Vocation de l'Élite*, Price-Mars asserted that internal divisions in Haiti—between an urban elite and a largely rural, illiterate peasantry—would have to be resolved in order for Haiti to have any hope for national advancement and self-determination. This division was due to a crisis of identity on the part of the elite who suffered from what he termed “*bovarysme collectif*”—that is, “the faculty of a society of seeing itself other than it is”(8). Price-Mars criticizes not only the cultural imitation of France but also the retention of a colonial order of inequality. As it stood, the elite perpetuated a system that effectively reduced the unassimilated masses to non-citizenship, even as the elite had lived off of their labor in a “state equivalent to parasitism” (*Vocation*, 91). In Price-Mars’s view, the first step toward a coherent articulation of citizenship was to establish a strong sense of national identity rooted not in French ideals, but rather in the vernacular culture of the masses. The cultural practices of the folk, especially vodou, ought to be embraced as the core of Haiti’s national identity, instead of disavowed as markers of a dark racial past. Furthermore, the incorporation of all Haitians into a cultural and political (civic) community would involve not only embracing Haiti’s folk forms, but also

embarking on a mission to improve the material circumstances of the masses through education.

In order to articulate the principles of this project, Price-Mars turns not only to the Haitian discourse of racial vindication but also to two branches of the African American intellectual tradition: turn-of-the-century racial uplift discourse and the New Negro Movement. In 1932, for example, Price-Mars writes a piece on the Harlem Renaissance called “*A propos de la Renaissance nègre aux Etats-Unis.*” In this essay he expands the period of the renaissance to encompass not only the artistic ferment of the 1920’s, but also the earlier advancements African Americans had made in the U.S. since emancipation. Yet this expansion of the Renaissance period still doesn’t quite prepare the reader for a curious throwback to Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Exposition Speech, just at the point where Price-Mars begins to articulate a call for cultural nationalism. To be sure, Price-Mars had long been drawn to Washington’s philosophies of self-help and technical training—philosophies that resonated strongly throughout the Diaspora. He had visited Tuskegee Institute in 1904, taking a tour of the facilities and staying for two weeks before traveling alone throughout the Deep South. That visit had given him insight into race relations in the U.S., as well as principles for advancement that could be used in Haitian schools.

To invoke Washington in a piece praising the New Negro Movement is eyebrow raising however, especially since members of that movement saw Washington as representative of “old Negro” strategies of accommodation. Importantly, at the heart of these critiques of Washington was a rejection of the way he conceptualized African American citizenship—conceding equal rights and political involvement in return for white sponsorship. It is this deferral of full citizenship that earned Washington’s 1895 speech the name “Atlanta Compromise,” and it is precisely on these grounds that Price-Mars attempts to revise Washington. He does so, curiously

enough, by alluding to the most infamous part of Washington's speech, the parable of the ships.⁵⁶

In the original version, Washington urges blacks to cast down their buckets into “common occupations of life” and into efforts for the mutual progress of the races. But this is also accompanied by a parallel call to eschew questions of social equality and political involvement. Price-Mars refashions Washington's parable, addressing it to the people of Haiti. Repeating Washington's imperative to “cast down your buckets where you are,” Price-Mars encourages Haitians to “*plongez vos baquets*.” Like Washington, Price-Mars also advocated for the value of agricultural and industrial training. Unlike Washington, Price-Mars rejects the dichotomy between technical training and intellectual and artistic endeavors. His version of the parable calls for immersion not in “common occupations of life” but rather in the riches of Haiti's expressive culture. “To all our intellectuals,” he exclaims, “to all those who live in and of this country, and who are unaware of the potential richness in human values, to all those who are unaware that they might find art and beauty in the intangible bronze that is our community, I say in symbolic fashion, ‘plunge your buckets!’” (Price-Mars 1932, 14.) In Price-Mars's version the phrase “*plongez vos baquets*”(‘plunge your buckets’) becomes a call for immersion in Haiti's rich internal resources—its folklore, its rituals, the integrity and ingenuity of the people. As Michael Largey has observed, Price-Mars figures Haiti as a ship in distress that might alleviate its own circumstances by looking within, and not by seeking sustenance from without: (quoting Largey) “The ‘fresh, sparkling water’ pulled up in the buckets represented to Price-Mars the pure, authentic folk tradition of the Haitian peasantry, a heritage capable of satisfying Haitians’

⁵⁶ “A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, ‘Water, water; we die of thirst!’ The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, ‘Cast down your bucket where you are.’ A second time the signal, ‘Water, water; send us water!’ ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, ‘Cast down your bucket where you are.’ And a third and fourth signal for water was answered, ‘Cast down your bucket where you are.’ The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River” (145). Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address.”

thirst for a cultural legacy that could defy the U.S. occupation” (3).

Yet while Largey further remarks that the “vast ocean of salt water was like the rapacious imperialism of the United States, threatening to pollute the freshwater of Haitian folklore,” the most provocative figuration of Haiti’s relationship to imperial power is the image of the two ships themselves. Indeed, few Haitians could forget the day when the U.S.S. Washington appeared in the harbor at Port-au-Prince in July, 1915, marking the beginning of the occupation and continuing the U.S. policy of “Gunboat diplomacy.” Price-Mars’s use of the parable acknowledges the imperial resonances of the ship as a symbol, invoking an ongoing New World history of conquest and exploitation. Yet he also attempts to rewrite this history, or rather, to envision Haiti’s future relationship to other nations—a relationship that he likens to a “code of solidarity between people at sea” ‘*code de la solidarité entre gens de mer.*’ While maintaining a posture of mutual cooperation, the two ships are nevertheless independent vessels. Furthermore, he emphasizes, the idea that the distressed vessel had actually needed intervention was an incredible misperception: “the ship in distress had been navigating the mouth of the Amazon and had not even perceived it” (14).

In this essay, Price-Mars performs what might be called a strategic misreading of an African American text: In Price-Mars hands, Washington’s parable shifts into an anti-imperialist statement. Whereas Washington had stressed compromise—the forfeiture of social equality and political power—Price Mars’s version refuses this tactic. Foreign intervention had in fact been Haiti’s great compromise. Many of the promises the U.S. had made to transform Haiti had not been forthcoming, and those advances it had achieved had not been worth the price. It was now time for Haiti to “plunge its buckets” into the business of self-governance and nation building, which included gaining a sense of their place within a hemispheric community of nations.

Though Price-Mars locates the responsibility for nation-building with the elite, he also revises a key tenet of Washington's racial uplift philosophy, a project which is best epitomized by the statue at Tuskegee which shows Washington lifting the veil of ignorance from the eyes of a kneeling slave. In contrast, Price-Mars locates models for modern citizenship in the endless adaptability of the Haitian masses: "Those in the lower classes accommodate themselves more easily to the world, to the juxtaposition of beliefs, or to the subordination of the more recent to earlier ones, and succeed thus in achieving a quite enviable equilibrium and stability" (*So Spoke the Uncle* 14). In other words, it was not the masses that needed reform, but the elite.

Price-Mars description of this process of "accommodation, juxtaposition, and subordination" is by and large a reference to the dynamic process by which the masses had developed its folklore. In the folklore of the masses lay the key to achieving "equilibrium and stability," qualities which had long eluded Haiti. But since "folklore" was a new term in the realm of scientific study, Price-Mars's aim was not only to valorize, but also to define. Accordingly, Price-Mars had opened *Ainsi parla l'oncle* with the fundamental question: "What is folklore?" He proceeds by quoting Count de Puymaigre's definition of folklore: "folklore comprises....the popular poems, traditions, tales, legends, beliefs, superstitions, riddles, proverbs, in short everything concerning nations, their past, their life, their opinions" (12). This definition, of course, encompasses quite a bit more than the folktales or stories that might normally be classed under the rubric of folklore. Broadly speaking, it also includes the "knowledge" and "culture" of a locale and emphasizes the nation as the unit upon which to base an understanding of a folk tradition. Following this assumption, Price-Mars quickly brings the question of folklore into national focus: "In other words, has the Haitian society a stock of oral traditions, legends, tales, songs, riddles, customs, observances, ceremonies, and beliefs which are

its own, or which it has assimilated in a way that gives them a personal imprint, and if indeed this folk-lore does exist, what is its value both in literature and in science?... This is the question with which we are faced in writing these essays”(12).

If one is to take seriously the claim that folklore comprises “everything concerning nations,” the question at hand concerns Haiti’s very nationhood. Did Haiti possess the “personal imprint” that would classify it as a nation? Price-Mars quickly reframes this inquiry, however. The true issue is not *whether* Haiti possesses its own folklore, after all, but rather how to approach the abundance of material that does indeed exist but has yet to be seriously studied: “As we well know, the multiple aspects of the subject, the abundance of the information, its intricate character, even the newness of the enterprise would handicap our efforts...if we had not the firm purpose of limiting our field of action in advance by choosing from the confused mass of material those elements which are representative of our folklore”(13). Price-Mars recasts the question of Haiti’s folklore as a challenge for the researcher. The amount of material is so multifaceted and abundant, so “intricate” and overwhelming that the serious researcher is compelled to “limit” his field of inquiry. This emphasis on abundance validates Price-Mars’s enterprise and serves as a response to skepticism about the richness of Haiti’s “culture.” Such a response is geared toward Price-Mars’s dual audience for his project, “the people of Haiti” and the “discipline of traditional ethnography:” “We have nourished for a long time the ambition of restoring the value of Haitian folk-lore in the eyes of the people. This entire book is an endeavor to integrate the popular Haitian thought into the discipline of traditional ethnography (7).

As this sentence demonstrates, Price-Mars sought to restore the “value” of Haitian folklore. If Haiti does indeed possess a rich “stock” of folklore, how might it be assessed as an

object of scholarly and artistic inquiry? Price-Mars suggests that the answer to this question lies in the universality of the Haitian story, which he paints as an epic struggle against adversity:

our presence on the point of the American archipelago which we have ‘humanized,’ the breach that we have made in the process of historic events in order to secure our place among men, our fashion of utilizing the laws of imitation in order to make ourselves model borrowers, the pathological deviation which we have inflicted through collective *bovarysme* by conceiving of ourselves as other than what we are, the tragic uncertainty that such a step stamps on our evolution at the moment when imperialism of every order disguises its lusts under the appearance of philanthropy, all of this gives certain configuration to the life the Haitian society and, before darkness falls, it is not futile to collect the facts of our social life, to assess the gestures, the attitudes of our people, however humble they may be, to compare them to those of other peoples, to examine their origins, and to situate them in the general life of man on the planet. They are the evidence, the deposition of which cannot be negligible in judging the value of a part of the human species. (9)

This sweeping sketch of Haiti includes both heroism and tragedy. Haiti’s revolutionary past is summoned up not merely as a point of pride but as a radical “breach” in the process of historical events—an intervention which forever altered the course of history on the American archipelago. Haiti’s achievements are “evidence” of the value of the people, their participation in a human struggle that is both universal and specific.

These ideas resonate with Harlem debates about the study of black folk culture, specifically the pairing of scientific study and literary engagement. As Arthur Huff Fauset writes in “American Negro Folk Literature,” the interest of black folk culture lay in its “universal appeal.” Importantly, scientific study would be at the frontier: “It is the ethnologist, the philologist and the student of primitive psychology that is most needed for this present investigation” (*New Negro* 243). Thus ethnography had an important role to play in legitimizing these vernacular forms and making them accessible and intelligible to a larger public.

“So Spoke the Uncle”: Uncle Bouqui as Paradigm of Folk Culture

Price-Mars launches his discussion with two important heroes in Haitian folklore, Uncle Bouqui and Ti Malice: “It has been properly said of these two inseparable heroes that one is the personification of the typical rustic, of unintelligent but sincere Force, while the other is that of the Ruse.” The difference between these two character types can be boiled down to Uncle Bouqui’s presumably closer connection to his African heritage. “Bouqui is typical of the ‘*nègre bossale*’ newly brought from Africa to Saint Domingue whose clumsiness and stupidity were the object of frequent bullying and merciless joking by Ti Malice, personification of the ‘*nègre créole*’ generally considered as more adroit and even a little sly”(18).

Price-Mars hastens to point out that such folk figures are not unique to Haiti. They can also be found in the “prehistoric tales of Old Europe,” as well as in various black cultures throughout the New World and on the continent: “have not our brother-Americans also chosen the rabbit or the hare as the symbol of ruse? Over the greater part of the black continent is the hare not considered the ingenious model of finesse while the antelope characterizes foolishness and simplemindedness?”(19). Price-Mars’s discussion of Bouqui and Ti Malice plays an important function in the text, as the relationship between them becomes an analogy for Haiti’s class structure—a structure that repeats itself across the diaspora. The “*nègre créole*” more rapidly assimilated into the dominant culture, and the *nègre bossale*—a so-called savage in need of civilization and reform, becomes an allegory of the opposition between the mulatto elite and the black folk.⁵⁷

Over time Uncle Bouqui acquired a nobler image: “a force borne of patience, resignation,

⁵⁷ See Maryse Condé, *La civilisation du bossale: Reflexions sur la littérature orale de la Guadeloupe et de la Martinique*.

and of intelligence, just like the expression which we are able to detect in the mass of our mountain folk” (18). But there is also another side to the humble Uncle. The word “Bouqui,” Price-Mars speculates, may in fact be derived from “Bouriqui,” the name of an ethnic group from the Grain Coast whose members were rumored to be “unmanageable” and who became distinguishable by their “eccentricities and the unassimilable nature of their temperament so unlike other Negroes promptly mixed into the indistinct mass of slaves”(18). Such a description suggests that underneath Bouqui’s apparent “resignation” and docility was unruliness and even a posture of defiance to the colonial regime. Price-Mars suggests that Bouqui’s closeness to his African origins had served as boon rather than as detriment to his survival in the New World, Furthermore, his unmanageability was perfectly suited to the needs of the present.

It is through such readings that Bouqui is transformed into an icon of “unassimilable resistance” in the Haitian *indigéniste* movement inspired by Price-Mars (Meehan and Léticée 1379). This more defiant version of Bouqui appears in the first issue of *La Revue Indigène*, the Haitian literary journal that ran July 1927 and February 1928.⁵⁸ In a poem by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin titled “The Atlas Lied” (*L’atlas a menti*), Bouqui is invoked alongside another character named Roumer, a version of the assimilated “*nègre creole*.”⁵⁹ A stark contrast is made between these two characters: while Bouqui weaves a mat of palm leaves, Roumer studies geography from an atlas, a tool that symbolizes the imperial drive to map Haiti in terms of conquest. Urging Bouqui to offer his own rendering of Haiti’s cultural geography, the poetic persona intones, “Oh bouqui, spit out the bitter wad of your scorn/Sing a *boula*/And beat the *assótor*/and dance the *chica*” (7-10). These folk rituals offer an alternative mode of knowledge

⁵⁸ *La Revue Indigène* was founded by a group of young writers which included novelist Jacques Roumain. This movement was inspired by Price-Mars, who published what would become the final chapter of *So Spoke the Uncle* in its first issue.

⁵⁹ I refer to Meehan and Léticée’s translation of the poem in *Callaloo* 23.4 (2000): 1390.

that serves as a corrective to Roumer's colonial education. The performance is interrupted by the phrase "behind mountains there are more mountains," a Haitian proverb which conveys a cycle of continual struggle and overcoming which also offers an alternative conceptual mapping of Haiti from a Haitian perspective. Citing the poem's invocation for Bouqui to "spit out the bitter wad of [his] scorn," Meehan and Léticée suggest that Bouqui's freedom of expression is only possible once Bouqui has rid himself of "*ressentiment*," a form of contempt which also implies his internalization of his inferiority. Once this is done, "his mouth is free to express resistant Kreyol phrases" (1379). I would argue however that scorn, an emotion not generally associated with the gentle Bouqui, actually fuels his resistant performance of Haitian ritual. The gesture of spitting out implies that his song is infused with this scorn, not free of it. The poem itself models this gesture in the second half by switching to creole in order to launch a critique of how "foreigners made Haiti so/small/with their maps" '*et lan cate-lá/blancs-yo fait Haiti piti piti/conca*' (14-17). Meehan and Léticée translate "blancs-yo" as "foreigners" but the phrase more specifically refers to white foreigners—a reference to Haiti's colonial past and its modern present in the snares of U.S. imperialism. Thus, in this poem and in the *indigéniste* movement, Bouqui becomes not only a folk resource, but also a figure of direct resistance to the occupation.

Of course, by the time of Price-Mars's writing such resistance was not merely symbolic. The Haitian *cacos*, a peasant force concentrated mainly in Northern Haiti, had taken up armed resistance to the occupation (Shannon 38). In 1919, Charlemagne Péralte led a revolt at Port au Prince, vowing to "drive the invaders into the sea and free Haiti" (Péralte, qtd. in Heintz 452). This was also the year that Price-Mars published *La Vocation de l'Élite*, where he recalls his dismay at the "state of disarray in which I found the elite of this country since American intervention into the affairs of Haiti" (ix). It is in the light of the contrast between these two

responses—peasant resistance and the initial disorganization of the upper classes—that we must read Price-Mars decision to use Uncle Bouqui as his symbol. While the elite had thrown up their hands in despair (according to Price-Mars) Haiti’s folk had taken action.⁶⁰ Although Price-Mars called for political organization and reasoned debate rather than armed resistance, he hoped that Bouqui’s spirit of defiance could help re-energize the elite. Together Bouqui and his brother Ti Malice would become “spokesmen of our grievances and of our bitterness” (19).

Price-Mars’s embrace of the Uncle is also a sincere gesture of solidarity with the folk that demonstrates his life-long concern with the culture and social welfare of the masses. Such a concern was fed by face-to-face contact: as a practicing physician, Price-Mars often traveled on horseback to the mountains to treat patients. These visits became a part of his fieldwork, allowing him to hear folktales and eventually gain entrée to over 100 vodou ceremonies (Magloire and Yelvington 6). However Price-Mars was also a well-established member of the elite, and participated in a discipline—ethnography—that implied a separation from its subjects. In embarking upon the monumental task of bridging the gap between the elite and the peasantry, he is also faced with his own distance. Thus, Price-Mars’s appropriation of Bouqui is also a strategy to close this gap. His title “So Spoke the Uncle” announces the book’s intention to speak not only of the folk, but *as* the folk: to channel the wisdom, authenticity, and sincerity of this subaltern group. Furthermore, the book’s extensive exploration of Haiti’s African roots—the entire middle section is devoted to this—emulates Uncle Bouqui’s retention of African culture. Since Price-Mars’s connection to the folk cannot be presumed to be organic, he risks a kind of ventriloquism, an effective silencing of the very group he seeks to empower.

However, Price-Mars’s use of Bouqui also helps to prepare the way for his discussion of

⁶⁰ Price-Mars’s claim that the elite had done nothing was a bit hyperbolic: among those to oppose the occupation were Dantes Bellegarde, Georges Sylvain, and novelist Jacques Roumain.

vodou, where he goes to considerable lengths to assert the agency of his subjects. Despite his subversive potential, Bouqui was familiar and accepted folk figure who could serve as an ambassador of sorts, smoothing Price-Mars transition into a more controversial subject. As I will argue, his discussion of vodou is important not only because he is one of the first to validate it as a religion. It is also noteworthy for his analysis of spirit possession as a practice that affirms the right of individuals to speak, and to speak in a way that is supported by collective ritual. As Price-Mars suggests, because the vodou ceremony occurs in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation with a number of actors who each play equal roles, it offers a powerful model of unification and collective resistance that Haiti so sorely needed.

“The Restless Countenance of the Nation: Spirit Possession and National Community”

In his search for forms of community, Price-Mars turns to the very thing that many of the elite had publicly denounced—the vodou ceremony. Vodou’s ancestral influences, its adaptability to the needs of its practitioners, its focus on the interplay between individual and group, could serve as an important model of national unity. Possession is described as a process through which the community is edified and the individual is transformed, given a power of voice and an authority that eluded him in everyday life. For the black masses, the humble workers of Haiti, possession represented a form of individual agency enabled by communal ritual. Far from being a shameful chapter in Haiti’s past, such rituals were “the mirror which reflects most accurately the restless countenance of the nation” (*Uncle* 174).

Price-Mars takes up possession in a chapter entitled “The Religious Sentiment of the Haitian Masses,” beginning his discussion by debunking commonly held assumptions about how it was to be understood as a psychological phenomenon. He frames his remarks partly in response to J.C. Dorsainvil’s claim that “voodoo is a religious, racial psychoneurosis.”(qtd. in

Price-Mars 117.)⁶¹ Such a claim implicitly reinforces the popular idea that possession—specifically the state of “trance or the ecstasy”—is a manifestation of hysteria, according to the theory of Pierre Janet. Central to Janet’s theory is the premise that hysteria occurs only in individuals with an “obvious psychological deficiency” (120). Such a “weakminded spirit,” Price-Mars explains, “can be affected by a lecture, a conversation and reproduce in behavior, in attitudes, the ideas which have been suggested to him by this authority”(121). By (mis)applying Dorsainvil’s and Janet’s theories to the study of vodou, Price-Mars suggests, one arrives at the conclusion that the possessive state is actually a kind of racially determined hysteria; a phenomena made possible by the psychological deficiency of the black mind.

It is such an assumption that Price-Mars aims most pointedly to refute. As elsewhere in *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, he argues that popular scientific theories and methods could not be applied to the study of Haitian culture without “serious revision.” Haitian cultural patterns required the development of new theories that took into consideration their unique cultural and historical contexts. Grounded in specificity, such theories would break the cycle of using Haiti as a test case on which to base broad generalizations about racial behavior.

Beginning to craft such a theory, Price-Mars describes in great detail the “special atmosphere” required to facilitate the act of possession:

The subject, in this case—most often, but not always—requires a special atmosphere, that of the worship ceremony which unfolds only in a setting where the *mystères* of the faith hover. The scene takes place in the approaches to the temple or the home of some devotee. In the open air or under a *tonelle* (thatched canopy) a space is reserved for the execution of the ceremony in which the dance is the most joyous episode. The high priest inaugurates the ritual of worship with the consecration of the premises. He offers libations to the gods, scatters wheaten flour on the ground, pours spirituous liquors as he pronounces the liturgical words. The deep and muffled voice of the drums prolongs the vibration of the chants and incantations. The Hougan invested by his insignia intones the

⁶¹ *Vôdou et névrose*, Port au Prince: L’Imprimerie La Presse , 111.

liturgical *melopée* [recitative chant] that the whole audience takes up in chorus. Agile dancers, as if spirits, leap about the arena and increase the rhythm of pace to the cadence of nostalgic sounds and those evoking orgiastic frenzies. Abruptly the possessed one bursts out from the crowd where his attention was intensely concentrated on the movement of the ceremony and mixes with the dancers, or else dancing by himself, he is more and more intoxicated by the sounds and movements and dances, dances madly. But then he stops, dazed. He staggers, shrieks, sinks to the ground, prostrate or shaken by violent contortions. He rises again by himself or with the help of an assistant. His face assumes a tortured expression. Often the drums become silent at this moment. The tumult of his mind improvises an air in honor of the god by which he is possessed and who identifies himself through the lips of the subject. And the possessed transmits a new momentum to the dance with an enhanced power that is irrepressible, inexpressible. (122-3)

Price-Mars begins this remarkable description not with an image of the possessed devotee, but rather by passing through a series of elements that serve to advance the ceremony, gradually preparing the way for the entry of the loa. This process is far from disorganized. Rather, it is a carefully orchestrated “ritual of worship” with specific roles for all participants. The priest or Houngan begins the ritual by consecrating the space—with libations, blessings, and other gestures—a repertoire which up to this point resembles a Catholic liturgy. The musicians also play a key role. The “voice” of the drum extends the chants of the Hougan, giving his words additional resonance. At this point, the audience is invited to take up the chant. The ceremony has now moved from a single chant to a chorus of voices. Sound constitutes only one layer of this collective performance; the other is movement. Dancers “leap about the arena and increase the rhythm” of the music and the incantations. In the meanwhile, the person to be possessed has not been standing by idly, but rather has had his “attention intensely concentrated on the movement of the ceremony.” The ceremony is moving toward its climax. It is then, and only then, that the loa is able to *monter la tête* (mount the head) of the chosen devotee. The other participants have anticipated this moment and recognize the signs of its arrival: “He staggers, shrieks, sinks to the ground...” All the while the other participants are on hand to aid his

progress: “he rises again with the help of an assistant.”

Finally the ceremony reaches another crossroads: the possessed begins to speak. The musicians, who both guide and submit to the ebb and flow of the ceremony, fall silent, as the servant of the loa “improvises an air in honor of the god by which he is possessed.” In this moment, which has been greatly anticipated by all, prophecies are often uttered. Thus, just as the possession itself has been facilitated by the energy of collective performance, the possession in turn lends additional “irrepressible” power to the ceremony. “According to the attributes of the god that dwells in him,” the possessed subject “vaticinates [predicts in chanting style], prophecies, commands, prescribes imperatively” (123). Thus, the subject has been granted the gift of prophetic language, which also empowers his audience. Indeed, Price-Mars’s own language is transformed as he describes the ceremony.

If prophetic speech emerges as the most significant outcome of vodou possession, this is contrasted with the “habitual ignorance of the individual.” These momentary prophets are not great orators in their day to day lives. Rather they become attuned to an “internal voice” urging them to say things that they would not normally say, which are foreign to them. Delivery ranges from inarticulacy to lofty, elevated speech: “...Sometimes in this confusion of words there is a rough meaning which becomes all the more mysterious since it is obscure. Other times the language is lively and colorful and the hyperdophasia of the subject becomes explicit in elegant terms, well-balanced phrases, even strange dialects, and all of it contrasts oddly with the habitual ignorance of the individual” (125). The humble peasant undergoes a ritual transformation, suddenly approaching an eloquence and authority which otherwise eludes him. “The person possessed of voodoo, the humble unskilled worker of yesterday who has become suddenly the dwelling place of the Spirit, not only chides, reprimands, prophesizes, but what of the respect

and the veneration by which he is heard, obeyed, feared by his entourage?” (126).

Price-Mars does not emphasize the transformative power of speech in order to argue for the singularity of Haitian religious practice. Rather, he argues that spirit possession is a form of religious mysticism common to all world religions. “It is in fact the phenomenon of glossolalia. [gift of tongues] It is common to all religions, and least in their beginnings, and is perpetuated in the mystical theology of all the cults. And it is because the voodooistic ‘servants’ are mystics that we find again in them the self-same phenomenon just as it is revealed elsewhere”(125). But before embarking upon this comparative aspect of his research, Price-Mars sharply interjects his own narrative to address the skepticism of his readers: “We know how shocking this conclusion is to a great many good people. People in general consider mysticism in Haiti as only a function of Christian piety and as a means of rendering homage to those who have been touched by this manifestation of divine beatitude. Furthermore, they will ask, scandalized, can Voodoo, ferreted out by secular institutions, condemned by the Church, feared by all as the worst superstition, engender acts and phenomena of mysticism? ‘No’ will be the response of most people” (125).

Price-Mars correctly anticipates that his claim that “voodooistic servants are mystics” would be an affront to the beliefs of “most people,” including powerful political and religious institutions, foreign opinion, and most pressingly, Price-Mars’s target audience, the Haitian elites who routinely denounced vodou culture. Yet it was Price-Mars’s hope that a reevaluation of vodou could influence social realities. As Kate Ramsey observes, “the implications of this reclassification were not merely academic, given that such practices were then subject to criminalization under Haitian penal law, repression at the hands of the marines and the U.S. trained Garde d’Haïti, and demonization by the Catholic and Protestant clergies in Haiti” (180). By classing vodou possession as a form of spiritual mysticism, Price-Mars aims to legitimize it.

As a person who believed in the “spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect,” a mystic could claim access to transcendent knowledge. In this light, the practitioners of vodou are elevated while attempts to retaliators are shown to engage in the age-old practice of religious persecution.

Price-Mars was also establishing criteria for comparing the persecuted religion with other national traditions. If Haitian religious practices were to be understood in terms of global practices of spiritual mysticism, then its practitioners were not—as popular narratives would have one believe—aberrant primitives detached from the rest of civilization. Such a comparative method constituted Price-Mars’s challenge to theories of Haitian exceptionalism. Notions of exceptionalism could go both ways, pointing either to the abnormal deficiency of Haitian culture, (i.e. the “worst superstition”) or to its uniqueness and authenticity. Because the latter meaning was often used in articulations of nationalism, it is noteworthy that Price-Mars eschews this approach in his own effort to define national culture.⁶² Rather than insisting on insularity, Price-Mars establishing Haiti’s connection to the world would help the cause of nation building. One of his major interventions, then, is his rejection of definitions of culture that, for good or for ill, link it inextricably to place. It is in such a context that a comparative method becomes subversive, a fact that his own narrative acknowledges: “It is of little importance that the conclusions we reach go against respectable convictions, reverse constructs built on ignorance and prejudice, intervene with the traditions of the Church and State. Undoubtedly, all these

⁶² In his article “Fictions of Displacement: Locating Modern Haitian Narratives,” J. Michael Dash, quoting Michel-Rolph Trouillot, argues that the “The nationalist resistance to the US occupation ironically further strengthened the case for Haiti’s absolute difference by rejecting ‘the universals inherited from the Enlightenment’ and insisting on ‘the particularities of the Haitian mentality’ ”(32). Though this position was certainly taken by younger followers of Price-Mars such as Trouillot, Patrick Bellegarde Smith, Jacques Roumain and others, Price-Mars himself was wary of notions of “absolute difference” and instead stressed universalism at every turn.

considerations are formidable, but what is all that compared to the little glimmer of truth in the darkness of Time?" (125)

When Price-Mars enumerates examples of vodou possession's resemblance to other religious practices across the world, some interesting connections arise. He locates an analogous form of "mysterious transformation" in the Mohammedan sect of the Dervishes, and again in Methodist revivalism, before suddenly arriving in a black Baptist church in Washington, D.C., where Price-Mars recalls witnessing a "phenomenon of the same category."

It was on a Sunday morning when our insatiable curiosity led us into a Baptist chapel filled with people of color, situated in the northwestern part of the city. At the moment that we entered the pastor was at the peak of predicting the most dire calamities for those of his flock who, by their reprehensible conduct, were drawing down the wrath of God upon their heads... 'Oh! No!' A voice from the congregation answered quickly, 'Be merciful! Have pity!'... Suddenly, the pastor with haggard eyes, earnest voice, pointed the right hand straight before him and cried out, 'There is the Christ!' And the entire congregation turned instinctively toward the imaginary spot where the apparition seemed to be. Then one good woman got up, uttered plaints and lamentations, and danced and sang. Another followed her, another, still another... Soon more than two thirds of the congregation were leaping around in a state of extraordinary exaltation, shouting at the top of their voice, 'Oh lord, have mercy!' But the pastor, who was himself silent during this whole strange scene, signaled that he had something else to say, and little by little calm returned to the flock. Then he extended his hands, implored the forgiveness of Christ for his flock of repentant sheep and the scene ended with a particularly expressive prayer. This lasted a good half-hour.

At the time we were both scandalized and moved by this show of foolery that so severely tried us before some of our American friends. One of them said to us, smiling, 'They were happy.' We only understood much later that our Baptists had been in a state of mystical delirium. (131)

This passage might be juxtaposed against Price-Mars's description of the vodou ceremony.

There are specific roles for the pastor and congregation; accepted patterns of behavior which

govern the ritual. All parties work together to assure its success. By drawing this analogy between Haitian vodou ceremony and a Baptist service, Price-Mars does not succumb to the overtones of primitivism that often colored descriptions of religious ceremonies. Unlike the other description however, here Price-Mars highlights his position as an outsider driven by “curiosity” to observe this scene of worship. Of course, he is also an outsider in the Haitian context—a fact that his vodou description effectively erases—but his ability to gain enough trust to be invited into those sacred spaces of worship elevates him to something more than a voyeur. The church, however, is a semi-private, semi-public space to which he has access, but is not a full participant. As a foreigner and visitor, he does not take part in the performance.

Yet he is nevertheless scandalized by this “show of foolery.” Despite his status as an outsider, then, he realizes he might be categorized with these worshippers on the basis of race. His blackness somehow implicates him in this performance even as he does not take part in it. He and his companion, who is probably black, feel “severely tried” in front of his “American friends,” who most likely are white. Although he is able to put the performance into a familiar context and later uses this example to highlight similarity, a great deal of distancing takes place here. However, this distancing also reinforces the final intervention he makes in his discussion of vodou possession: “to reject the opinion that makes this phenomenon an attribute of race.” On the contrary, he contends, “any individual of any race” could be “susceptible to having a voodooistic crisis”(134). Much to the probable chagrin of some of his readers, he closes with an anecdote of whites being overcome by spirit possession: “the historiographer of the colony, Moreau de Saint-Méry, informs us [that the] magnetism exercised by the dance of Voodoo is such that Whites found watching the mysteries of this sect and touched by one of its members who

had discovered them began to dance themselves” (134).⁶³ Thus Price-Mars creates a framework for comparison that transcends race, even as he sought to vindicate black culture.

Price-Mars’s description of the Baptist service anticipates the work of his contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston. In particular Hurston’s description of the rituals of the “Sanctified Church” is remarkably similar. Hurston would draw a direct connection between the spirit possession and the practices of the church: “Then there is the expression known as shouting which is nothing more than a continuation of African ‘Possession’ by the gods. The gods possess the body of the worshipper and he or she is supposed to know nothing of their actions until the god decamps. This is still prevalent in most Negro protestant churches and is still universal in the Sanctified churches” (“The Sanctified Church” 902). Like Price-Mars, Hurston argued that something resembling spirit possession was present in Christian ritual. And like potentially subversive potential of vodou worship, the rituals of the Sanctified Church constituted a form of “protest against the more highbrow churches efforts to stop it.” Unlike Price-Mars, Hurston classes possession as a distinctly Afro-diasporic phenomenon. Hurston’s transnational studies might be seen as part of her effort to test this theory. In her writings for the Florida Federal Writer’s Project, she remarked that Caribbean migrants on the Gulf were closer to African traditions than their black American counterparts. “The West Indian Negro generally has had much less contact with the white man than the American Negro. As a result, speech, music, dancing, and other modes of expression are definitely nearer the African” (“Folklore and Music” 890). However in Hurston’s work, Caribbean subjects’ supposed mastery of African-derived cultural practices has mixed implications for their agency and ultimately their citizenship.

⁶³ Price-Mars is being ironic by using Moreau de Saint-Méry as his source—the colonist and slave owner defended slavery and segregation on the basis of race.

“A Golden Age for Haiti Studies:” Ethnography and Cultural Politics in the 1930s

The 1930s have been called “a golden age for Haiti studies,” particularly in the field of anthropology⁶⁴ (Harold 7). Hurston made two trips to Haiti on a Guggenheim fellowship between 1936 and 1937, resulting in the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tell My Horse*. She was not the first, nor would she be the last student of Franz Boas to visit Haiti during these years. In 1934 Melville and Fanny Herskovits lived in the Mirebelais Valley where they conducted fieldwork for the influential 1937 book *Life in a Haitian Valley*. With a letter of introduction from Herskovits, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (who had earlier accompanied Hurston to record music rituals in Eatonville, Florida) arrived in Haiti in December, 1936, toward the middle of Hurston’s first visit. Armed with state-of-the-art sound recording equipment loaned to him by the Library of Congress, Lomax recorded 1500 tunes within a period of 5 months (Harold 3). Also in 1936, Katherine Dunham, then a graduate student in anthropology, landed in Port au Prince. As Dunham later recounts in *Island Possessed* (1969), she had many lively conversations about “politics, vaudun, and methods of research in ethnology” with numerous Haitian intellectuals including Jean Price-Mars and his wife Cécile (23)

Though they differ in approach and in scope, these studies are linked by the effort to establish Haiti as an important site of serious anthropological inquiry in American scholarship. Anthropology was emerging as a field with important authority in crafting definitions of culture. These scholars, especially Herskovits, were interested in exploring the African origins of New

⁶⁴ Haiti held a unique place in the African American imagination, among populations that neither conducted fieldwork nor set foot there. Its revolutionary history had long made it appealing to formulations of black nationhood and resistance. In particular, images of Haiti had a prominent place in theatrical performance. As J. Michael Dash has observed, “in the 1930’s Black America clasped Haiti to its bosom” (*Haiti and the United States* 60).

World black cultures—although they placed a varying degree of emphasis on the importance of African “survivals.” In addition, these projects took a decidedly comparative approach toward black cultures in the New World, a methodological outlook that linked them with their Haitian counterparts such as Price-Mars and others.

Price-Mars and his son Louis Mars were instrumental in helping these North American anthropologists navigate a Haitian milieu that was often skeptical toward the intentions of American researchers. Such skepticism was justifiable response to the racist and sensationalist accounts of Haitian culture written by U.S. visitors during and after the occupation. Two popular titles in this vein are William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) and John Houston Craige’s *Cannibal Cousins* (1933) The texts contained sensational accounts of vodou rites, offensive illustrations, and other content that emphasized the primitivism of Haitian culture. Such accounts shaped the American imagination of Haiti in popular culture, spawning, among other things, the first wave of zombie films in the 1930’s. Hurston was well aware of these American images of Haiti as well as Haitian attitudes toward American “sensation seekers” and “voodoo hunters.” In a letter to Alan Lomax she also notes that “the Haitians say Seabrook is an awful liar.” She then offers a word of advice to Lomax: “You will please have the Library, in your letters of introduction, ask permission for you to record some songs and not use the general term folk-lore or magic practices. If the letters are not specific, they may think you are another sensation seeker. Seabrook and those who followed him have disgusted the Haitian government with voodoo hunters” (“Letter to Alan Lomax” 19-20). As Hurston observes in *Tell My Horse*, this attitude was held not only by the government but also by “the majority of the Haitian elite, who have become sensitive about any reference to Voodoo in Haiti. In a way they are justified in this because the people who have written about it, with one exception, that of Dr. Melville

Herskovits, have not known the first thing about it” (204).

Such remarks are part of Hurston’s effort to distance her own work from that of Seabrook and other writers in that tradition. Unlike those who had come before her, she was not another “sensation seeker” but rather a serious researcher. Her goal, as she writes in her proposal to the Guggenheim foundation, was to “make an exhaustive study of Obeah (magic) practices...to add to and compare with what I have already collected in the United States” (Hurston, qtd. Hemenway 227). Hurston saw her fieldwork in Haiti as a natural extension of what she had accomplished with her first ethnography *Mules and Men*. Traveling throughout the Gulf States to collect material for that volume, and later as part of her work for the Florida Federal Writers project, she had observed and remarked upon the cultural influence of the Caribbean on U.S. southern folk culture. From New Orleans to Key West, a West Indian element was “seeping into Negro folkways” (“Folklore and Music” 890). It is not surprising then that Hurston’s travels to document folk culture would extend to the Caribbean itself. As Hazel Carby has observed, “Hurston’s work during this period... involves an intellectual’s search for the appropriate forms in which to represent the folk and a decision to rewrite the geographical boundaries of representation by situating the southern, rural folk and patterns of migration in relation to the Caribbean rather than the northern states” (“Politics of Fiction” 127).

Rewriting the “geographical boundaries of representation” also involved facing new representational challenges. The familiar questions of authority (who had the authority to represent the folk, and on what grounds could the authenticity of that representation be judged?) become especially urgent when Hurston is faced with navigating her distance as a cultural outsider. The publicity for *Tell My Horse* attempted to erase this distance altogether, simultaneously exploiting readerly appetites for the exotic and primitive and at the same time

established Hurston's authority as a racial insider. (West 136) According to these advertisements, what made Hurston's volume distinct from previous studies of Haiti was its black authorship. One such ad in the *New York Times Book Review* on Oct 23, 1928 exclaims: "VOODOO as no WHITE PERSON ever saw it!" The ad refers to "the amazing experiences of an actual initiate of Voodooism, whose race enabled her to witness secret ceremonies seemingly incredible in these modern times" (West 138).

Unlike her white counterparts, Hurston's blackness presumably trumps her status as a foreigner and grants her unique access into the mysteries of Haitian "voodooism." Hurston would then make these mysteries accessible to white readers. The ad also contains a statement of praise from William Seabrook, author of the sensationalist travel narrative *The Magic Island*. "I must tell you how terrifically excited I am by this new book of Zora Hurston's," Seabrook gushes. "Papa Legba opened wide the gate for her—and Zora has come through as no white ever could"(138). Seabrook's reference to Papa Legba implies that Hurston is not only a racial but also a *spiritual* insider. Papa Legba is the Haitian loa who grants permission for humans to commune with the gods at the opening of a vodou ceremony. To claim that Legba has "opened wide the gate for her" is to suggest that Hurston had been granted the ultimate approval. On one hand, it is considerably ironic that this praise comes from Seabrook, whose work Hurston had privately criticized. On the other hand, in the pages of *Tell My Horse* Hurston finds herself making similar claims. The title "Tell My Horse" invokes the signature utterance of an authoritative Haitian cultural hero—a loa named Papa Guedé. In similar fashion to the strategy Price-Mars uses with "So Spoke the Uncle," such an invocation announces the fundamental truth of the pages that follow. This approach becomes problematic however, with Hurston's foray into the realm of occupation politics. Whereas Price-Mars uses the Uncle's truth-telling authenticity

to devise an argument against imperialism, the opposite is true in Hurston. Melding folk authenticity with scientific authority, Hurston crafts a redemptive narrative of the U.S. occupation.

“Rebirth of A Nation”: Hurston’s Parable of the U.S. Occupation

One hears resonances of Washington and Price-Mars in Hurston’s own ship parable in *Tell My Horse*, as part of the chapter entitled “Rebirth of a Nation.” Hurston’s parable aims to describe the specific historical events that, in her analysis, “brought on” the American occupation: the massacre of political prisoners at Port-au-Prince and the subsequent assassination of President Guillaume Sam in June 1915. Indeed, in Hurston’s view this disastrous event is the culmination of many years of political corruption and internal disorder. In fact, Hurston’s description goes as far as to figure the political disintegration in terms of the literal fragmentation of human bodies in the massacre: “There in the cells in the huddled stillness were shot bodies and cut bodies. Skulls crushed in by machetes’ blows and bowels ripped away by blades. Men with machetes had been ordered to follow the rifle men. The hunks of human flesh screamed of outrage. The blood screamed” (69). Hurston seems to deploy such brutal imagery not merely to document the violence, but to suggest that Haiti itself was like a fragmented, mutilated body, in need of being made whole again: “All that day of the massacre the families washed bodies and wept and hung over human fragments asking of the bloody lumps, ‘Is it you, my love, that I touch and hold?’ And in that desperate affection every lump was carried away from the prison to somebody’s heart and a loving burial” (71). There is a certain helplessness in this characterization; it is a scene worthy of pity. The Haitian people issue a desperate plea for help that is answered, at long last, by the arrival of white troops in Haiti. This is figured in the language of biblical salvation, with the white U.S. forces cast in a messianic relationship to the black masses: “One black

peasant woman fell upon her knees with her arms outstretched like a crucifix and cried, ‘They say that the white man is coming to rule Haiti again. The black man is so cruel to his own, let the white man come!’ With the bodies in the earth, with the expectation of American intervention, with the prong of such cries in their hearts, the people moved toward the French legation”(72).

Hurston encourages

us to imagine that the Haitian people remain literally and figuratively in this posture of supplication until a symbol of salvation appears: a black plume of smoke on the horizon. It is as if a prophecy had been fulfilled. As Hurston writes, “a prophet could have foretold [peace] was to come to them from another land and another people utterly unlike the Haitian people in any respect... Wait for the plume in the sky”(66). It is, of course, a plume of smoke from the American battleship the U.S.S. Washington:

They were like that when the black plume of the American battleship smoke lifted itself against the sky. They were like that when Admiral Caperton from afar off gazed at Port-au-Prince through his marine glasses. They were so engaged when the U.S.S. Washington arrived in the harbor with Caperton in command. When he landed, he found the head of Guillaume Sam hoisted on a pole on the Champ de Mars and his torso being dragged about and worried by the mob... But it should be entombed in marble for it was the deliverer of Haiti. L’Ouverture had beaten back the outside enemies of Haiti, but the bloody stump of Sam’s body was to quell Haiti’s internal foes, who had become more dangerous to Haiti than anyone else. The smoke from the funnels of the U.S.S. Washington was a black plume with a white hope. This was the last hour of the last day of the last year that ambitious and greedy demagogues could substitute bought Caco blades for voting power. It was the end of the revolution and the beginning of peace. (72)

Critics have appropriately remarked on the ways in which Hurston’s analysis constitutes a profound misreading of Haitian history and the politics of the occupation. Her argument, however, is a familiar one in the imperialist rhetoric of the occupation. Haiti’s distress came

from “internal foes;” ambition and greed had caused so much corruption among Haiti’s leaders that the only hope for a peaceful future would come from without. Of course, this is a particularly racialized narrative. The saviors would have to be “utterly unlike the Haitian people in any respect,” that is, they would be civilized, devoted to principles of democracy, and white. In this narrative, any agency the masses may possess is necessarily misguided: Hurston dismisses the people as a “mob” refers to the resistance forces synecdochally as “*caco* blades.” The *cacos* were in fact some of the earliest and most persistent forces of resistance against U.S. intervention. Here, Hurston characterizes them as the henchmen of corrupt political leaders. Perhaps the most telling phrase of the passage is its finale: “it was the end of the revolution and the beginning of peace.” Hurston does not see revolution and revolt as a means to achieve peace in the long run, but rather as a self-interested conflict that must be diffused. Of course, it would be difficult to miss the irony at the root of the idea that peace would be delivered to Haiti via an American battleship and armed U.S. forces.

For a scholar who celebrates Hurston’s dedication to folk culture and the masses, such a passage is particularly cringe-worthy. But what makes this passage both unsettling and fascinating is not only its content, but its tone, in which historical narrative and political analysis is communicated in a voice of prophetic wisdom. Indeed, we are encouraged to imagine that if a “prophet could have foretold” the events that led to the U.S. occupation, that prophet would have been, and in fact *is*, Hurston herself. Interestingly enough, in order to craft such truth-telling authority Hurston must make herself disappear. In other words, this narrative is written in such a way that does not allow us to attribute the words to Hurston, the fieldworker—a necessarily biased source with her own set of subjective opinions. Hurston does not use the first person anywhere in this account. Instead, a certain sense of detachment and distance must be cultivated

in order for this story to have the timeless truth of a parable. Far from being an anomaly in Hurston's oeuvre, this device is one that she used often in her ethnography and her fiction. As Hurston attempts to balance authentic folk wisdom with the objectivity of the anthropologist, a third voice emerges—a prophetic voice that merges the fundamental truths of the former with the omniscient distance of the latter.

Hurston was well aware of this delicate balancing act, and it is one that she attempts to resolve (and dramatize) through her famous metaphor of the “spy-glass of Anthropology.” In the Introduction to *Mules and Men*, she admits that although she had the distinct insider-advantage of having been born and raised in the Eatonville community in which she intended to collect folklore, it was “fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it”(1). Thus, she needed the “spy-glass of Anthropology” to look through in order to make full sense of the material she encountered. In other words, while her background granted authenticity to her endeavors, her training under Franz Boas provided the interpretive lens and the appropriate critical distance required for legitimate scientific study.

The spyglass metaphor has perplexed Hurston scholars because of the ways it could signal not only critical distance, but also an objectifying and voyeuristic gaze. Karen Jacobs observes that the “the spyglass evokes not just the penetrating male gaze of science but the imperial white gaze of colonialism, both of which inform the ambiguous history of anthropology and its consolidation as a discipline in the 1920s and 1930s” (112). The spyglass has special implications when it is applied to Haiti, a country with a complex colonial history that found its echoes in the U.S. occupation. It finds a remarkable representation in the passage above, in which “Admiral Caperton from afar off gazed at Port-au-Prince through his marine glasses.” One could find no better image to embody the far-off imperial gaze implied by the spyglass. To be

sure, the vision that the spyglass enables is far from objective. Even as it allows its user to see things from a new perspective, it can only be used from a distance, thus it also distorts and limits what is seen. Hurston's ethnographic work is certainly not immune to these risks. This is especially the case for *Tell My Horse*, which was being marketed both as a travel narrative—a genre marked by “imperial white gaze of colonialism”—and an ethnography, which represented the “penetrating male gaze of science” (Jacobs 112).

In her writings on U.S. black culture, Hurston attempts to negotiate the limits of anthropological distance by providing evidence of her participation in the communities that she studies. In other words, while it was important to be able to “stand off and look at [her] garment” from afar, her authenticity hinged on her ability to re-inhabit that cultural garment when the need arose. Such a negotiation enables the double-vision that is Hurston's hallmark, in which she looks through an anthropological lens from above while still keeping her feet on the ground. Though this was part and parcel of the participant-observer method that was becoming widespread by the 1930's, Hurston prided herself on being a step closer to her subjects than her counterparts in the field, who were traditionally white and male.

However, her Caribbean studies raised a new challenge. In view of the considerable cultural, national, and linguistic differences that separated her from her subjects, she could not claim the same kind of membership in Haitian folk community as she had in her Eatonville studies. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo notes that “Hurston's (re)representations of the Caribbean in *Tell My Horse* reflect, belie, and magnify the tensions between community membership, anthropological voice, and cultural and geographical proximity or distance that surface in *Mules and Men*”(51). Because Hurston “explicitly names familiarity as an impetus for her anthropology at home,” the question arises of what approach she takes “when that driving force of familiarity

is not available to her”(52). Nwankwo argues that in contrast to the largely “dialogic,” folksy style of *Mules and Men*, the tone in *Tell My Horse* is “didactic” and “detached,” suggesting a “distance from the subject(s) of the Caribbean project”(64). Part I of *Tell My Horse*, which begins with a survey of the Jamaican landscape, certainly “recalls traditional anthropologist-as-outsider-and objective observer approaches.” But the beginning of Part II on Haiti aims to do something more. The prophetic voice that emerges in “Rebirth of a Nation” is not merely didactic and detached; it is all-knowing and all-encompassing. It allows Hurston to appropriate the story-telling power of the folk and the authoritativeness of anthropology without explicitly announcing her use of either. In doing so, she attempts to transcend both of these discourses.

In pointing out that Hurston uses a different voice to open the Haiti section of *Tell My Horse*, I argue that this voice is part of Hurston’s effort to address Haiti’s status as myth. By this point, Haiti’s revolutionary history and its epic struggle to achieve nationhood and recognition as the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere had become the stuff of legend throughout the diaspora. Therefore a special kind of voice was needed as a point of entry into the Haitian story. Once Hurston has established this voice, she is able to craft a narrative of the U.S. occupation that makes its advent seem inevitable, as much a part of Haiti’s destiny as the revolution of 1804. Equally important, “Rebirth of a Nation” also de-historicizes the U.S. occupation, replacing specificity with timeless universality. As a result of such strategies, Haiti becomes more accessible and malleable to Hurston as storyteller and as researcher, smoothing her own messy entry into a cultural and political sphere that was less familiar to her. Thus, what Hurston wrote about her protagonist Janie seems to also be true for Hurston herself: “her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (32).

Keeping in mind Hurston's imperative to "remake" her narrative techniques and methods, we might take a moment to examine the title that Hurston chooses for this section, "Rebirth of Nation." The title is a startling allusion to D.W. Griffith's white supremacist film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). As Leigh Ann Duck observes, "given the strangeness of Hurston's narrative, it seems certain that she was signifying on this tremendously successful film," which was released the same year American marines landed in Port-au-Prince (138). Duck argues that paradoxically, Hurston's allusion to *The Birth of a Nation* "serves to express what Hurston's narrative vigorously suppresses—the effect of the occupation on Haitian racial and political ideologies." The film's premise that African American involvement in the Reconstruction government constituted "the beginnings of a 'Black Empire'" which had to be suppressed at any cost would seem to have special implications for Haiti, the Black Republic of the Western Hemisphere. Duck concludes that Hurston's invocation of the film "suggests her awareness that the occupation disrupted the relationship between the state and the public in a particularly destructive way." (139).

While I would agree that Hurston's use of the title exposes the seams of her own narrative, the idea that Hurston was being deliberately ironic is a bit unsatisfying. Even though irony was always an important part of her arsenal, Hurston's analysis in the subsequent chapters of *Tell My Horse* seems to support the ideas set forth in "Rebirth of a Nation." To be clear, Hurston would certainly never sanction the violent policing inherent in rise of the Ku Klux Klan that Griffith's film celebrates. Still, "rebirth" in Hurston's account is unnervingly linked to the paternalistic effort of a "foreign white power" to restore order to a hopelessly dysfunctional (black) state. If Haiti's birth had been a "savage lunge for freedom," its rebirth would be a civilized march toward democracy. Hurston then, seems to support the civilizing mission of the

U.S. even as she concedes that it is a last resort. As I have suggested above however, the phrase “rebirth of a nation” also encompasses Hurston’s effort to re-create Haiti in her own image. In other words, in order to pave the way for her own entry into this milieu, Hurston creates a fictional Haiti in which the agency of the Haitian people has been displaced—not just by occupation forces, but by her own prophetic voice. It is only after she has established this authoritative voice that the Hurston, the folklorist, is able to re-enter the scene, and the first person “T” reappears to take ownership of the ideas being set forth in the text.

In the subsequent chapter “Politics and Personalities in Haiti,” Hurston sheds her prophetic voice to ask, “So where does [Haiti] go from here?” Such an open question allows her to speculate on the state of Haitian politics-- past, present, and future. Turning to the issue of Haiti’s leadership, she remarks that, “In the past, as now, Haiti’s curse has been her politicians,” who are full of “political tricks” and believe “that a national election is a mandate from the people to build themselves a big new house in Pétionville and Kenscoff and a trip to Paris.” (74). Hurston’s analysis of Haiti’s deeply ingrained political corruption does a great deal to reinforce the narratives of salvation. Unlike imperialist rhetoric, however, Hurston also turns to the problem of Haiti’s “Race Men,” launching a critique of black leadership that goes beyond Haiti to encompass the United States. Aside from the blatantly corrupt, Haiti had suffered from:

Another internal enemy. Another kind 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 the wind from their lungs, are blood brothers to the empty wind bags who have done so much to nullify opportunity among the American Negroes. The Negroes of the United States have passed through a tongue-and-lung era that is three generations long. These ‘Race Men’s’ claim to greatness being the ability to mount any platform at short notice and rattle the bones of Crispus Attucks; tell what great folks thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the constitution had made out of us; and *never* fail to quote, “We have made the greatest progress in sixty years of any people on the

face of the globe...It made us feel so good that the office-seeker did not give out any jobs.
(77)

Hurston takes issue with a certain brand of “patriot” who built political platforms by invoking the ghosts of Haiti’s long dead revolutionary heroes. However, what bothers Hurston most is not that these patriots have debased the legacy of Haiti’s heroes. Rather she is disturbed by the prevalence of empty oratory. Though Hurston privileged the oral mode, she makes a distinction between innovative uses of language and the rhetoric of “empty windbags” and “tongue-and-lung” leaders. Such talk was useless because it did not have the power to be transformative: none of this “bone rattling” had served to improve the material conditions of the masses. “What happened in 1804 was all to Haiti’s glory,” she intones, “but this is another century and another age...The peasants of Haiti are so hungry, and relief would not be difficult with some planning.” Her turn to the U.S. is revealing, because it shows Hurston’s impatience with narratives of progress. She seems to dismiss the landmark legislation of the 13th and 14th amendments as the achievement of a bygone time. It is significant that Hurston singles out these Reconstruction era amendments having to do with emancipation and citizenship; for it was precisely these principles that had been upheld in articulations of resistance to the occupation. The division she imposes between social equality and economic advancement is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington—even as he could also be implicated in her critique of *Race Men*. When Hurston applies such a division to Haiti, it makes it possible for her to view the country’s struggle for self-determination as somehow separate from, and subordinate to, the improvement of “public education, transportation, and economics”—things that she argues were improved by the occupation. In other words, in the spirit of Booker T. Washington’s imperative to “cast down your buckets where you are,” Hurston urges compromise: “So far there has been little recognition of compromise, which is the greatest invention of civilization”(74).

Whereas Price-Mars had warned of the price of compromise years before, Hurston's rewriting of occupation history as a redemptive narrative results in a remarkable short-sightedness. Such views Hazel Carby labeled "reactionary and blindly patriotic" (Carby 1990). Calling attention to the racial dimension of this patriotism, Nwanko describes Hurston's use of "binaristic blackness," a strategy in which African Americans are raised up and Haitians are concomitantly lowered. (49) Such a tactic is evident in Hurston's bold declaration that unlike their Haitian counterparts, American leaders were learning to move past empty talk into the realm of action: "But America has produced a generation of Negroes who are impatient of 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. Our heroes are no longer talkers but doers" (74). However, Hurston does briefly turn to a few promising young leaders among the ranks of the Haitian elite. Haiti's potential lay with "a group of intelligent young Haitians grouped around Dividnaud, the brilliant young Minister of the Interior. These are young men who hold the hope of a new Haiti because they are vigorous thinkers who have abandoned the traditional political tricks" (74). Such intellectuals included Louis Mars, Price-Mars's son, and others who were helping to transform the field of ethnography in Haiti. These were men who, as Hurston observes, "admire France less and less, and their own native patterns more." (92). However, these were also men who, for the most part, had invoked these same "native patterns" in order to oppose the occupation—a point of contention that Hurston does not address. It was precisely this group to which Price-Mars had appealed and who he hoped would be the key voice of resistance to foreign intervention.

Whereas Price-Mars is optimistic about the power of such a group to change the face of Haitian politics, Hurston ultimately concludes that such intellectuals are scarce, and moreover,

“these few intellectuals must struggle against the blind political pirates and the inert mass of illiterates”(81). The description of the Haitian majority as “blind” and “inert” is strikingly reminiscent of the kneeling slave at the feet of Booker T. Washington in the famous statue at Tuskegee. In Hurston’s narrative, the duty to lift the veil of ignorance lay not with young Haitian intellectuals (who were not yet as advanced as their American counterparts), but rather with the wise purveyors of American democracy. Hurston seems to align herself with the latter. Again, such alignment is as much a reflection of rhetorical strategy as it is of Hurston’s political views. While Hurston upholds the as-yet unrealized potential of the Haitian elite, her text is careful not to cede too much authority to them. And this is not for lack of familiarity. As Duck observes, Hurston was “unquestionably acquainted” with prominent figures of the movement, including Price-Mars and J.C. Dorsainvil who “are featured repeatedly as sources in Melville Herskovits’s *Life in A Haitian Valley*, which Hurston cites approvingly”(Duck 132). At the time of Hurston’s visit, Price-Mars’s ideas were still being widely discussed and would have been accessible to Hurston despite the fact that *Ainsi parla l’oncle* hadn’t yet been translated into English. Yet Hurston does not directly engage the theories of Price-Mars despite the fact that many of the youth she describes were his protégés. Doing so would have compelled her to take seriously the connection between “vigorous” intellectual energy and strategies of resistance.

Instead, Hurston uses another tactic to address this perspective, reconstructing a conversation with an anonymous Haitian man who is used to stand in for all attitudes of opposition of to the Occupation. The man complains, “We never owed any debts. We had plenty of gold in our bank which the Americans took away and never returned to us...But what can a weak country like Haiti do when a powerful nation like your own forces its military upon us, kills our citizens and steals our money?”(85) After recording a few of these statements, Hurston

seizes narrative authority, informing the reader that “every word of it was a lie.” She goes on to remark that “his statements presupposed that I could not read and even if I could that there were no historical documents in existence that dealt with Haiti. I soon learned to accept these insults to my intelligence without protest because they happened so often”(86). Though Hurston dismisses the nameless man’s comments as patently untrue and tinged with “self pity,” it is clear that she sees his views as a challenge to her status as an intellectual, which is here inextricably bound up with literacy. Indeed she turns to her ability to “read” as a key qualification for discerning historical truth. This automatically makes her an authority in a nation where “so few of the...population can read and write.” She suggests that in order to know the truth about history one must turn to “documents” and not to cultural memory. Such an idea seems like a surprising reversal for Hurston, but it performs an important function: it invites readers to privilege her own written text and not the oral narratives that she records. Ironically, among the *documents* that Hurston might have turned to are the writings of Price-Mars and even James Weldon Johnson in his report for the NAACP in 1920.⁶⁵ By attributing some of their arguments to an anonymous and non-literate source, Hurston avoids giving serious consideration to interlocutors who may challenge her narrative.

Hurston’s tendency to suppress narratives of resistance to the occupation can be attributed not only to her nationalism or her “Americanness”⁶⁶ but also to her longstanding skepticism toward black leadership. In particular, she questioned the fitness of the elite to lead the masses—often viciously parodying the self-serving tactics of this very group. At the root of the humor was a sincere doubt that the leadership of a privileged few could ever work toward the

⁶⁵ From “Self-Determining Haiti,” *The Nation*, 1920.

⁶⁶ See Duck; Nwanko, respectively. Duck also notes Hurston’s denunciation of race leaders, observing that in Hurston’s fiction, “she began to explore the possibility that folklore could be used by corrupt politicians to win the allegiance of persons they plan only to exploit”(137).

best interests of the masses. But even more specifically, as her portrait of “Race Men” demonstrates, Hurston was especially wary of a certain kind of charismatic male leadership. Such leaders often emerge as tragic figures in her fiction—would-be heroes whose rise to glory is cut short by their own greed and ambition.⁶⁷ Such a perspective certainly could have shaped Hurston’s reading of Haitian politics. However, as I have suggested, I am interested in how this critique is also a part of Hurston’s struggle for authority against voices that threaten to silence her. Stepping into a political arena dominated by male “talk,” deploying the tools of a traditionally male discipline, and unable to claim the cultural insider-ship of a native son, Hurston seems especially anxious about having her narrative authority hijacked. Such a risk is implied in her conversation with a “very intelligent young Haitian woman:”

She asked me if I knew the man I was going to study with. I said no, not very well, but I had reports from many directions that he was powerful...she said I was not to go about trusting myself to people I know nothing about...it was not possible for me to know whom to trust without advice...She was as solemn and specific about the warning as she was vague about what I was to fear. But she showed herself a friend in that she introduced me to an excellent mambo (priestess) whom I found sincere in all her dealings with me. (204)

Though this passage has been read as indicative of Hurston’s dramatization of her own “vulnerability” in the face of “voodoo’s potential for malevolent activity,” I would suggest that the true danger being dramatized is the reliance on untrustworthy, yet powerful, male guides. (Emery 329) Having learned that Hurston was on her way to the mountains to study voodoo practices with a powerful priest, the woman re-directs her by referring her instead to a mambo, a

⁶⁷ See especially *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

female voodoo priestess. By directing Hurston toward someone who she knows will be “sincere in all her dealings,” the woman “showed herself a friend.” This exchange is a marked departure from the encounters with Haitian men that Hurston records throughout the text—which set her up for “lies,” “self-deception,” “insults to [her] intelligence”(82,84,86). Above all, these encounters threaten to consume her narrative voice. In contrast, Hurston is sure to note that she and the young woman “had come to be very close to each other. We had gotten to a place where neither of us lied to each other about our respective countries. We 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). Structuring their talk on honesty and reciprocity, the women develop a level of intimacy not unlike the one present between Janie and Phoebe in *Their Eyes*, which Hurston wrote while she was in Haiti. It is such intimacy—as much as the true religious cross-fertilization between the U.S. and the Caribbean—that allows Hurston to claim vodou as her own. To be sure, Hurston’s attitude toward Haitian religious practices sharply diverges from her grim appraisal of Haitian politics. Contrary to many American assessments of the country’s ills, Hurston’s narrative contends that “voodoo is not what is wrong with Haiti” (92). I would argue that part of the reason for the difference between Hurston’s critique of politics and her praise of culture is her awareness that women are excluded from the former and central to the latter. In contrast to the opening chapters that document a largely corrupt male-dominated political arena, the remainder of the text maps a cultural terrain in which women play pivotal and often subversive roles. It is on such grounds that Hurston is able to find her footing, uncovering alternate sites of resistance that she had previously seemed to foreclose.

“Tell My Horse”: Spirit Possession and Cultural Agency

“What is the truth?” Hurston’s chapter on “Voodoo and Vodoo Gods” opens with this sweeping question. By way of an answer, she refers to “a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, ultimate, truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life.”(113). In a dramatic departure from the first part of the text Hurston’s discussion of vodou begins, quite literally, with a display of femininity. In the female aspects of vodou worship, Hurston suggests, one finds not only timeless Truth but also authenticity. (Authenticity is an important tool for Hurston in *Tell My Horse*, for it allows her to distinguish culture from politics.) Of course, such a description as the one above serves to essentialize the feminine, as “authenticity” is located precisely in the body, particularly in the female ability to give birth to life and truth. But the passage goes beyond upholding the importance of female to highlight the role of women in vodou ritual. The mambo is not merely the object of the ceremony; she also controls it. The mambo has the power to commune with the loa; to welcome worshippers or to send them away; to either encourage spirit possession or to check its progress to keep the ceremony on-task. Far from being inherent, such gifts are the result of years of careful study and practice. The photographs in the text tell a similar story. Of the individual portraits in the text, all but one are of women—mostly vodou priestesses or participants in ceremonies. Over the course of the text Hurston takes pains to show how these priestesses are respected, if not revered for their wisdom and expertise. All but invisible in the first part of the text, women play a central role. (Hurston also dedicates quite a bit of space to describing the importance of women within the vodou pantheon itself, especially Erzulie Frieda, the “pagan goddess of love” 121.)

Hurston also seems interested in the ways in which vodou ritual—particularly

possession—could also empower women who were not vodou priestesses. As Price-Mars explains, possession had the power to transform even “the humble unskilled worker” into the “temporary dwelling place of the Spirit;” an authority who “chides, reprimands, prophesizes.” Hurston’s interest in the populist implications of possession overlaps with Price-Mars. Significantly, Hurston lingers on the figure of Papa Guedé (also spelled ‘Gede’), a humble yet powerful loa who dresses in tattered clothing and requires no sacrifice other than roasted peanuts and clairin, a locally made rum. Like Uncle Bouqui, the folk hero of Price-Mars text, Guedé is singled out for praise precisely because he resembles and empowers the people who created him. Unlike Uncle Bouqui however, the figure of Guedé also has the potential to transcend gender. Though Guedé is male, women are equally likely to be possessed by him. In turn they are able to “possess” some of the truth-telling authority normally granted to men. This concept has direct implications for Hurston’s own narrative authority, as the utterance associated with Guedé “*parlay cheval ou*” (“tell my horse”)—becomes the title and guiding trope of the text.

Though *Tell My Horse* abounds with descriptions of loa and instances of spirit possession, Hurston’s devotes an entire chapter to Papa Guedé. She claims that Guedé is “the one loa who is entirely Haitian” and that he “sprang up or was called up by some local need” (219). Unlike the other loa, Guedé requires no elaborate ceremonies and no *hounfort* (temple) for his worship. His offerings are humble: “Guedé eats roasted peanuts and parched corn like his devotees. He delights in an old coat and pants and a torn old hat”(220). Smoking a cigar, Guedé cavorts about, drinking and talking. His true hallmark, however, is free-wheeling speech. Created by the people, he speaks through them and on their behalf: “One can see the hand of the Haitian peasant in that boisterous god, Guedé, because he does and says the things that the peasants would like to do and say”(219). Though invisible, Guedé “manifests himself by ‘mounting’ a

subject as a rider mounts a horse, he then speaks and acts through his mount...Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the 'horse' does and says many things that he or should would never had uttered unriden" (220).

Once Guedé's presence is announced, a stream of derisive speech is sure to follow: " '*Parlay cheval ou* ' ('tell my horse') the loa begins to dictate through the lips of his mount and goes on and on. Sometimes Guedé dictates the most caustic and belittling statements concerning some pompous person who is present. A prominent official is made ridiculous before a crowd of peasants" (221). Requiring neither a special ceremonial atmosphere nor the cover of night, Guedé's speeches frequently take place in broad daylight and on the busy city streets where he can find a large and receptive audience. It is clear that this loa is "a deification of the common people of Haiti," created by the peasants because "they needed a spirit who could burlesque the society that crushed him" (222). Accordingly, Guedé's favorite object of critique is the Haitian elite, who frequently attempted to suppress vodou worship and looked down on the masses. Guedé belongs to the workers, the "uneducated blacks," the folk. Guedé also belongs to women, who are otherwise relegated to silence in their everyday lives: "you can see him in the market women, in the domestic servant who now and then appears before her employer 'mounted' by this god who takes occasion to say many stinging things to the boss. You can see him in the field hand, and certainly in that group of women about a public well or spring, chattering, gossiping and dragging out the shortcomings of their employers and the people like him" (219).

According to Hurston, "this manifestation comes as near a social criticism of the classes by the masses as anything in all Haiti" (219). Similarly, nowhere else in the pages of Hurston's text are the masses granted such agency and subversive speech-power. Significantly, the chapter on Guedé is a striking reversal of chapter on zombies that precedes it. Zombification, Hurston

explains, is the process by which normal human beings are reduced to “unthinking, unknowing” shells. Lacking “consciousness of his surroundings and conditions and without memory of his former state” the zombie is also reduced to permanent silence: “He can *never speak again*, unless he is given salt” (183, emphasis mine). Only able-bodied victims are chosen, since the main motivation is labor. Victims are forced to toil “ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast...like a brute crouching in some foul den in the few hours allowed for rest and food”(181). The analogy to chattel slavery is obvious. But modern day Haitians would have found a contemporary analogue not only in the persistence of the plantation labor, but also in the *corvée*, the outdated road labor system revived by the U.S. military during the occupation. In a more figurative sense, the “reports” of barbarism that had been used to justify the occupation also had the effect of reducing the Haitian masses to mindless brutes in the eyes of the American public. The first zombie films emerged, and became wildly popular, in the years of the occupation. Thus, cultural beliefs about zombies during this period had their roots in actual historical processes of objectification. From the perspective of Haitian masses, it was not the zombie that was to be feared, but rather the malevolent forces capable of reducing one to such a state. Zombification represented the ultimate threat to subjectivity and agency.

Rather than attributing zombie tales to superstition, Hurston’s text confirms the existence of these “living dead” and suggests that the masses in general, and women in particular, were especially vulnerable. (She even includes a photograph of Felicia Felix-Mentor, an “authentic case.”) Then too, Hurston’s text at times affects a zombification of its own: her characterization of the Haitian populous as an “inert mass” conjures up images of zombies not unlike those that were emerging in the first zombie films of the 1930’s. However, her discussion of Guedé seems to contradict this characterization by introducing the possibility of resistance. It is perhaps no

coincidence that Guedé is in charge of the regions of the dead. In their worship of a god who could control death, the devotees of Guedé steel themselves against the threat of psychic death implied by zombification. There is powerful symbolism in this gesture, as it affirms their ability to speak, to act, and to exert some control over their fate in the face of threats to self-determination. As Annette Trefzer has argued, spiritual possession takes on new significance in light of the imperial drive to “possess” Caribbean territory: “Historically and politically oppressed by Euro-American colonizers, [Haitians] are not only victims but also masters of ‘possession.’ The performative function of spiritual possession ‘frees’ Caribbean subjects from their colonial enslavement and imperial surveillance” (305). Furthermore, as Hurston explains, possession by Guedé was especially transformative because it offered not only spiritual affirmation but also “social consciousness, plus a touch of burlesque and slapstick” (223). In this way possession is strategic ritual, a method of social critique employed so often and with such zeal that it functions for Hurston as an important form of every-day signifying: “That phrase ‘Parlay cheval ou’ is in daily, hourly use in Haiti and no doubt it is used as a blind for self-expression. So one is forced to the conclusion that a great deal of the Guedé ‘mounts’ have something to say and lack the courage to say it except under the cover of Brave Guedé” (222).

Ritual, then, has a protective function, allowing people to voice critiques of those in power without fear of censure. However, as Trefzer argues, “possession as protest definitely works within limits” (307). I would add that some of these limits are ones that Hurston herself imposes. On one hand, Guedé is significant because he enables a critique of Haiti’s class divisions, empowering the masses by allowing them to humble their “betters” (221). On the other hand, these very same masses are articulate only within the context of ritual: when they are possessed, mounted by the spirits of the loa. Once we move out of the cultural realm and into the

world of politics, (for Hurston's texts affects such a division) the speech of both the masses and the "classes" becomes ineffectual. The realm of politics is marked by "empty talk," "crummy-orators," "self-deception," and flat-out "lies." There is no concept of majority rule, since (according to Hurston) the majority— an "inert mass"—are as yet too ignorant and disenfranchised to voice political opinions. Furthermore, unable to read or write, they "have not the least idea of is being done in their name"(75). It is this prevalence of "empty speech," more than corruption, historical disadvantage, or foreign interference that Hurston links to Haiti's presumed failure of leadership. Hurston's celebration of ritual signifying actually helps to reinforce her own critique of the political arena in Haiti: Spirit possession unleashes "devastating revelations" and "startlingly accurate" readings of the "past and future." Political lies are exploded as Guedé "covers up nothing," considering it his mission to "expose and reveal" (222-3). Culture is shown to have a subversive relationship to politics, but this is precisely because, in Hurston's view, the political arena and the realm of ritual are separate. Even as Guedé makes pronouncements that are politically significant, it is his distance from the seat of power that allows him to do so. The extent to which this subversive posture could lead to participation, enfranchisement, and ultimately self-determination is unclear.

Hurston takes a strikingly different stance from Price-Mars and his followers, who believed that culture and politics could be integrated—that culture could inspire not only individual and collective empowerment but also new forms of government. Price-Mars often used irony to critique Haiti's class divisions, but always with an eye toward reform and unification. This difference between Hurston and Price-Mars can also be seen in their choice of folk-heroes: Price-Mars fixes upon Uncle Bouqui, a humble peasant who was quintessentially Haitian but who also represents a return to a shared source: a rich African heritage that all

Haitians could draw upon as they sought to develop a unique source of collective identity. Because he embodied Haiti's shared past and present, Bouqui is an appropriate figure for unification and nation building. With the use of "so spoke the uncle" as his title, Price-Mars effectively claims to speak through, and in the name of, this folk figure and all he represents. Hurston's appropriation of the phrase "tell my horse" (*parlay cheval ou*) for her title works similarly, allowing her not only to invoke the transformative power implied by spirit possession, but also to make claims to authenticity and truth-telling in her work. Yet, whereas Bouqui is known for his humility and simplicity, Guedé in fact more closely resembles Ti Malice, Bouqui's more cunning brother and the consummate trickster of Haitian folklore. Indeed, Ti Malice and Guedé have much in common, as they both represent the subversive potential of black folk culture—particularly its capacity for satire. It is this subversive potential that Hurston celebrates and also seeks to model in her own research and writing.

Ultimately however, Hurston rejects Ti Malice as well, paternalistically linking him to the Haitian "habit of lying." The brashness of this generalization aside, Hurston's disapproval of lying in *Tell My Horse* is certainly a departure from her own self-fashioning, not to speak of her praise of "featherbed resistance," the kind of protective deception employed by black communities in the U.S. In her transnational studies however, deception becomes a barrier; a layer of subterfuge that she cannot penetrate. Guedé however, does offer a point of entry. Whereas Ti Malice (or Hurston's version of him) deals in lies, Guedé's domain is "truth." Guedé embarks on the noble mission of speaking truth to power, of exposing the hypocrisy of the elite, and "signifying" upon the corrupt workings of politics—a similar aim to the one that she sees herself embarking upon in the text. The voice of prophecy that she deploys in the first part of the text merges with the folk expression of Guedé. Speaking as his 'horse,' Hurston achieves a kind

of cultural mastery and authenticity that neither the elite nor the masses can claim to possess outside of the context of ritual. Unlike Price-Mars, Hurston appropriates this folk voice in order to express skepticism that the upper and lower classes could be brought together in an effort to achieve fuller citizenship for all. In place of participation in a larger political community, Hurston seems to favor individual empowerment in circumscribed spaces of performative resistance.

Together, Hurston and Price-Mars's work raises questions about the significance of possession as ritual and as metaphor for the researcher's relationship to folk culture. If both texts demonstrate the drive to "possess" folk culture—to appropriate its authority and its voice—Hurston's leap across national boundaries reveals just how precarious this endeavor could be. Because ethnography required a mastery of "unchartered territory" that could veer dangerously into the colonial, scholars of folk culture were faced with the specter of imperialism as well as its concrete manifestations.

Conclusion

Writing Empire in the “Hemispheric South”

The crisis of American imperialism brought us Price-Mars and Hippolyte and Jacques Roumain in Haiti, José Martí and negrismo in the Spanish Antilles, and in a way, the international emergence of calypso in Trinidad.

-Edward Kamau Brathwaite

Throughout this dissertation I have emphasized the relationship between the folk, empire, and southern and Caribbean geographies in interwar black literary culture. It seems fitting then that this work began with *Cane* and *Tropic Death*, two vivid explorations of the folk in the geographical imagination. Jean Toomer’s portrait of a fading southern folk is revised and enlarged by Walrond’s depiction of a dying yet paradoxically modern folk moving through a Southern-Caribbean space. Indeed, if literary representations of the folk and vernacular culture risk atemporality, Walrond’s understanding of empire brings the folk starkly into the present.

Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén share Walrond’s interest in the folk as laborers and migrants, and all three writers approach a Marxist idea of uneven development in their understanding of folk modernity. However, in the work of these two poets is an even stronger understanding of the folk as conscientious producers of modern culture. Blues and *son* music are not only illuminating sites of cultural memory, as the spirituals are in *Cane*, but also suggest potentially empowering models of collectivity. While Hughes does not seek to offer the same

vision of racial transcendence as Guillén's *mestizo* poetics, his use of blues seeks to unmoor the folk from any fixed notions of racial or regional identity.

Finally, more than the other writers in my study, Hurston and Price-Mars assume roles as cultural investigators who make explicit statements about the value of studying folk culture, as well as the ends to which that knowledge may be put. Like Hughes and Guillén, they each insist on the ingenuity, dynamism and quintessential modernity of the folk. However, their radically different responses to a single event—the U.S. Occupation of Haiti—challenges the notion that uses of folk culture are inherently subversive to dominant power structures. While it appears paradoxical that Hurston engages with folk culture in order to bolster imperial rhetoric, this actually exemplifies one of the many uses of folk culture in the age of American expansion. Moreover, at the close of my study it serves as a reminder of how national interests were often precariously balanced with the impulse to forge hemispheric alliances. Together, these works offer representations of folk culture that are not only historically specific but also as individual as the writers who create them.

In its reading of the folk at the crossroads of the U.S. and the Caribbean, this dissertation is suggestive of new directions in the study of empire and culture. It would also be possible to chart responses to “yankee imperialism” in literatures of Trinidad and Jamaica or to include artistic forms such as calypso, as Edward Kamau Brathwaite observes in the epigraph preceding this chapter. Brathwaite's essay, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature,” theorizes relationships between the various forms of cultural expression that emerge across the Caribbean. As its title announces, the essay stresses the African roots of literature “which attempts to transform folk material into literary expression” (81). But Braithwaite also posits that the emergence of folk-based literature be read as responding to a set of “crises” which uniquely

shape black experience in the New World. The “crisis of American imperialism” brings us not only Price-Mars, Roumain and Martí, he argues, but also the “urban folk art” of the Harlem Renaissance. Braithwaite’s comparative approach suggests possibilities for charting the folk, literature, and empire that go beyond the writers in my study.

By considering the stirrings of U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean and the cultural exchange furnished by the Caribbean’s geographical proximity to the Southern coast of the U.S., *At the Crossroads* also engages central questions in New Southern studies: How has an awareness of transnational intersection informed articulations of race, culture, national identity? What role do narratives of migration and travel play in the imagination of inter-regional space? What new visions of self and community become visible through this U.S.-Caribbean transnational lens, and how do they change over time?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between this U.S.-Caribbean crossroads and recent work on the “Global South,” a term now often enclosed in quotation marks? As Levander and Mignolo observe, the Global South should be understood not as an “existing entity” but rather a cluster of discursive formations:

‘Global South’ is a geopolitical concept replacing ‘Third World’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the global south is the location of underdevelopment and emerging nations that needs the ‘support’ of the global north...However, from the perspective of the inhabitants, the ‘Global South’ is the location where new visions of the future are emerging and where the global political and de-colonial society is at work. (3).

Once a signifier of oppression, “the metaphor of the global south has been appropriated and resignified”(10). According to Levander and Mignolo, a critical turn to the global south now entails the uncovering of “‘South-to-South’ networks that have the potential to engage decolonial forces in art, knowledge, ethics, politics and creative practice” (10).

Most useful for my purposes is the concept of the Hemispheric South, which has recently emerged as a sub-category within Global South framework (8). Encompassing “networks filtering through as well as beyond the Americas” the Hemispheric South usefully engages recent critical efforts to expand the borders of the U.S. South and to read Southern literatures in the context of global processes. Theories of the global and hemispheric south seek to do more than draw connections between spaces; they aim to also transform them. The concept of “decolonial forces” at work in south-to-south networks owes much to recent work in postmodern spatial theory, particularly Edward Soja’s notion of Thirdspace. Thirdspace is a “purposefully tentative” term which expands the “spatial or geographical imagination” by upsetting the binaries between North and South, margins and center, real (material) and imagined (discursive) spaces (Soja 5-6). Drawing upon the work of feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa, Soja proposes a “critical restructuring” of space and knowledge in order to locate sites of resistance at the so-called margins and borders of society.⁶⁸

However, as Madhu Dubey observes in her study on black literary postmodernism, the alluring possibilities of such a restructuring must be balanced with its possible dangers. Dubey argues that though Thirdspace discursively transforms the status of racial minorities at the margins, “somewhere along the way, the material particularity of their marginal location

⁶⁸ See hooks “Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness” and Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* respectively.

evaporates as they become prized carriers of epistemological or cultural difference” (23). In Dubey’s argument this risk is most pronounced in the realm of vernacular culture, which is prized for its subversive potential precisely because the folk are presumed to reside in residual spaces somehow untouched by the dominant conditions of (post)modernity. Thirdspace and its attendant theories have the potential to produce a “romance of the residual” which at its worst involves “[mining] sites of deprivation for their cultural capital” (9). Though Dubey’s critique is specific to Thirdspace, it seems appropriate to ask whether such a warning also holds true for global south theories that seek to appropriate and “resignify” marginalized spaces.⁶⁹

What then is the status of the black folk culture in theories of the global and Hemispheric south? If the hemispheric South becomes useful as a frame for understanding literary representations of the folk, how can we deploy it ways that emphasize, rather than submerge the “historical and geographical specificity” of their marginalized positions? It seems to me that by attending to the possibilities and pitfalls of the various critical threads outlined above, one may return with renewed energy to literary uses of the folk in both the modern and postmodern eras. *At the Crossroads* begins this work by situating the hemispheric folk in spaces profoundly touched by processes of imperial modernity. This is neither to valorize folk-based literary

⁶⁹ The decolonial turn is a major thread in recent work on the global south. Some of its central premises are articulated in Walter D. Mignolo’s seminal lecture “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality”: “Coloniality and de-coloniality introduces a fracture with both, the Eurocentric project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality, heavily dependent on post-structuralism as far as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have been acknowledged as the grounding of the post-colonial canon: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhabha. De-coloniality starts from other sources. From the de-colonial shift already implicit in *Nueva corónica* and *buen gobierno* by Waman Puma Ayala; in the de-colonial critique and activism of Mahatma Gandhi; in the fracture of Marxism in its encounter with colonial legacies in the Andes, articulated by José Carlos Mariátegui; in the radical political and epistemological shifts enacted by Amílcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Rigoberta Menchú, Gloria Anzaldúa, among others. The de-colonial shift, in other words, is a project of de-linking while post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy” (Mignolo 452).

projects nor to claim that they are reactionary, but to argue that they are historically contingent. I have avoided any unified notion of “the global political and de-colonial society” at work in the literatures of the U.S. and the Caribbean, rather seeking to challenge the notion that South-to-South networks signal convergent (or progressive) politics, especially if one is to read them as sharing the goal of deconstructing the colonial. By seeking to uncover historical and cultural connections without necessarily embedding them in alliances, I seek to give voice to the full complexity of the literary efforts I describe. It is my hope that the figure of the “crossroads” will be a useful contribution to theories of the hemispheric south that seek to imagine the various crossings of culture, geography, and empire.

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