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## Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Amy (2014) "Exploring the Efficacy of "Crooked Sticks" : Diasporan Resistance and Discursive Ambivalence in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 4 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol4/iss1/6>

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## Exploring the Efficacy of "Crooked Sticks": Diasporan Resistance and Discursive Ambivalence in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

Amy Schmidt

While a large amount of material—both primary and secondary—in African-American literature emphasizes the importance of literacy and its connections to liberation, another trope in African-American literature is much messier, as it threatens to undercut its own authority;<sup>1</sup> in short, a number of authors highlight oral traditions rather than written ones as potentially more effective resistance to white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Never one to shy away from the messiness of life, Zora Neale Hurston treats this tension in (and ambivalence of) the US black community between the spoken and the written word. The presumed gulf between institutionalized, officially-recognized discourse and that of black folk culture is a topic that Hurston repeatedly returns to throughout her oeuvre, in fiction and otherwise. The extensive work she presents in *Mules and Men* (1935), *Tell My Horse* (1938), and *Every Tongue Got to Confess* (2001) demonstrates both the importance she placed upon African-derived oral traditions and her own ambivalence about the relationship they hold with officially recognized discourse.

Hurston's fiction also reflects her interest in and ambivalence about this tension; *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) depict this discursive tension while also demonstrating how the two discourses can exist in unison, particularly through the practice of Christianity in the black community.<sup>3</sup> The lines between African-derived religious practices such as hoodoo and institutionalized Protestant churches are rather fluid and shape-shifting (if those boundaries exist at all).<sup>4</sup> As is her habit, Hurston capitalizes on the fluidity of these boundaries in order to disrupt a Western, binary, rather categorical, and divisive worldview in favor of a view that is more closely aligned with a diasporan, West African, and holistic one. Ultimately, Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* illustrates how the black community employs both types of discourses for its own resistant ends; in other words, while official discourse—"crooked sticks"—often seeks to disempower the black community, the community appropriates it, signifying on and adapting it to liberatory purposes—hitting "straight licks." While those in power employ and offer "crooked" or corrupt means to achieving power, the disempowered can employ those crooked means for "straight" or liberatory purposes. This relationship between discourse and empowerment is one that Hurston's character, Lucy, embraces when she prays to God to "hit uh straight lick wid uh crooked stick" (JGV 84). For the purposes of this argument, then, the "crooked stick" is not the indirection of black vernacular traditions but the corruption of white supremacist ideologies. Employing such a view, Hurston and her characters reconcile the two types of discourse and use both African-derived and Anglo-American traditions to resist white supremacy and assert their agency within an exploitative system.

Hurston illustrates Houston Baker's argument that African-American writers must "come to terms with 'commercial deportation' and the 'economics of slavery'" and that doing so provides "an economic grounding for Afro-American narratives" (*Blues* 39). While Baker specifically applies this argument to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is equally applicable to *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* demonstrates how coming to terms with the economic history of slavery entails embracing African survivals and diasporan identities while adapting to the circumstances of the Americas. In regards to survivals in particular, Baker argues, if African slaves transported to the New World "had not possessed nonmaterial modes of production, there would have been no production at all" ("Workings," 284). The survivals that Hurston emphasizes, then, resist the exploitation of slavery merely by existing at all. Such diasporan survivals include folktales, mythology, folk medicine, and voodoo—all transmitted orally and all employed to resist the disruptions of the slave trade.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, John Lowe asserts that save one scholar at the time, no one else in Hurston's cohort "saw more Africanisms in black American culture" than she (*Jump* 91). In addition to the resistance involved in retaining such survivals, oral traditions function daily as a means of resistance to Anglo-American epistemologies and, thus, are akin to what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as alternate forms of knowledge (*Black Feminist* 34). While Collins discusses the female blues tradition as a type of alternative knowledge, other forms, such as those Hurston depicts, function in much the same way. These alternative forms strive to resist exploitation and oppression; question dominant (white) discourses; marry knowledge, of various types, to social and political action; rely on individual lived experience as credible and authoritative; and see gaining knowledge as a collective enterprise (9, 11, 17, 257, 259-60). The cultural practices, especially those of oral traditions, that Hurston describes possess all of these attributes.

Focusing on diasporic connections further disrupts exploitative epistemologies by shifting attention away from nation-states and towards a more expansive and inclusive paradigm. Paul Gilroy suggests, rather than focusing on the nation-state as a unit of analysis, that scholars employ the Atlantic as "one single, complex unit of analysis . . . and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (15). Moreover, what connects the Atlantic as a coherent unit of analysis is "the web of diaspora identities and concerns that" Gilroy labels "the black Atlantic" (218). In short, using the Atlantic rather than the US (or the US South) as a lens through which to view Hurston illuminates her and her characters' international sources of empowerment. Rural, predominantly black labor camps in Florida, for instance, become bastions of globalized black resistance. Henry Louis Gates's arguments about oral traditions and diasporic black identities provide a specific example of viewing the black Atlantic in an empowering way. Gates's arguments about signifying(g), or indirect critiques of systemic injustice—reiterations with a critical difference—rely on the assertion that African-American literary traditions differ from white ones because of diasporic influences, which significantly include oral traditions. Thus, indirection is a way of hitting a "straight lick" for empowerment with the "crooked sticks" of white supremacist discourse.

While Gates focuses his attention on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is equally relevant to and illustrative of such an assertion. Indeed, the characters in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* repeatedly use oral traditions, secular and sacred (a rather misleading distinction), to assert their agency and resistance to white supremacy;<sup>6</sup> they signify by telling tales, preaching sermons, and employing proverbs as advice and warnings. Some

readers have characterized the novel as nothing more than a flimsy framework to depict oral traditions and have intended such a characterization as a criticism; however, presenting examples of liberation, ways of disrupting exploitative ideology from within the exploitative system itself, is in fact Hurston's point— what the plot and characters that some critique as too thin are working towards illustrating. In Hurston's view, liberating oneself and community is more significant than written literary conventions—indeed, the latter are "crooked sticks," employed by Hurston ultimately to hit the "straight licks" of justice. Hurston consistently demonstrates her ultimate concern with the latter. Throughout her oeuvre, she emphasizes not exploitation itself but the black community's ability to resist and survive exploitation; her focus and main concern is the "shit, grit, and mother-wit" of her black characters, and that trifecta is most clear in the performative oral traditions she depicts in her written texts (Ellison 176).

As Deborah Plant generally remarks about Hurston's use of folklore, Hurston depicts oral traditions as a means of individual survival and collective empowerment, and she consistently highlights the African roots of those practices (61). Hurston's belief in the efficacy of African survivals for liberation causes her accompanying belief that assimilation and even integration are not desirable in the least, as such processes require the relinquishment of empowering practices (70). Such a view ultimately manifests itself in Hurston's critique of the *Brown v. Board* 1954 decision, a critique for which she garners much criticism herself. Hurston's critique of *Brown* includes her concern that with integrated classrooms, black folk traditions would be silenced, marginalized, and perhaps even forgotten, all to the detriment of black students who need those discursive avenues of support and resistance.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, Hurston not only empowers her characters through diasporan discourse, she also provides avenues for more contemporary, twentieth-century authors to empower themselves and their characters. Others, most notably she and Gates, comment on Hurston's influence on Alice Walker, but one could assert a similar influence on Toni Morrison's work, which consistently marries Western and West African traditions, and on that of Toni Cade Bambara, who regularly portrays African survivals as an antidote to white supremacy. Male authors, whom scholars often place in a tradition with Richard Wright rather than with Hurston, also reflect the latter's influence; for instance, Amiri Baraka's embrace of oral traditions, especially early hip hop, are indirectly related to Hurston's work, and August Wilson's dramas echo Hurston, depicting black music and religion as central to the black US experience.

Despite the enduring legacy that follows, early reviews belittle the folk traditions (and their practitioners) that Hurston represents in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, acknowledging those traditions in order to dismiss or misread them.<sup>8</sup> Such assessments, of course, express the dominant view of the 1930s and for some time after, but more importantly, they demonstrate the ethnocentric, racist view of the literary establishment in regards to oral traditions, especially those stemming from African survivals. In short, while Hurston was working to vindicate African-derived traditions, most other writers of her cohort failed to recognize the ways that written and oral traditions overlap and influence one another. While reviewers saw nothing but difference and divide, Hurston saw much more complicated and productive relationships between the two discourses.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on oral traditions allows Hurston to depict them fully; first and foremost, they are a way to relax and entertain—an opportunity to assert diasporan, humanized identities in a safe environment. In addition to these functions of black oral traditions, the performances involved are a way to earn prestige,<sup>10</sup> pointing to the importance of wit in surviving a racist system. Indeed, Hurston emphasizes that even this leisure time activity has a larger purpose that resonates with resisting systemic exploitation. As the title of her most famous collection of folk tales alludes to, after being treated like mules all day—overworked, underpaid and dehumanized by predominantly white landowners or bosses—black men are able to assert their humanity once again after work by participating in oral traditions (Wall 78). The prestige that participating in oral traditions can afford black subjects becomes even more significant as it is categorically denied them in the outside—white supremacist—world (78, 81). This is true for the characters of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, as well. As Debra Beilke asserts, while John works on white-owned land or in white-owned labor camps, he is able to earn prestige in the community and attain a high social status because of his verbal skills (22). Indeed, John uses his verbal skills to impress Lucy, to survive the railroad camps, and to win a revered position within the church (JGV 32-3, 60, 89). In other words, prestige for wit and articulateness is rewarded in a variety of locales and within a diverse range of relationships, implicitly highlighting the denial of prestige in other, white-dominated settings.

Hurston's characters not only participate in oral traditions to resist their immediate exploitation but also to signify on the historical exploitation of their community. As Beilke correctly asserts, signifying "was a survival technique during slavery," though whites failed to view it as such (22-23). As many oral traditions in the US are also African survivals that attest to the resilience of the black community in the face of the Middle Passage and its aftermath, the continuing practice of oral traditions is a way to signify on the historical exploitation of slavery by continually re-asserting a connection to diasporan cultural roots. Significantly, oral traditions also illustrate the present's connection to the past, particularly a pre-Middle Passage past that can be used as further empowerment. John, talking to Zeke, asserts, "[y]ou think it's dead but de past ain't stopped breathin' yet" (JGV 142). Such a comment could easily refer to the continuing effects of the slave trade as well as the continuing practice of cultural traditions employed to resist it. For all of John's faults—this quote is actually an expression of guilt over the mistreatment of his wife—his connection to his pre-Middle Passage ancestry is regularly referred to as an asset in the novel. For example, his adeptness at praying is credited to his African heritage; John's praying is like "roll[ing] his African drum up to the altar, and call[ing] his Congo Gods by Christian names" (JGV 89). This link wins him prestige in the community, among both male and female members, attesting to the value they place on those cultural roots.

Hurston illustrates a variety of other facets of Afro-American oral traditions. For instance, blues lyrics help John express himself, disrupting yet another binary that would separate the sacred from the secular (JGV 185). While Angela Davis focuses specifically on the feminist resistance in black women's blues, her comments are also applicable to the ways that blues music, regardless of the performer's gender, is an effort of resistance; Davis argues that oral traditions "reveal not only rewrought African cultural traces, but also the genius with which former slaves forged new traditions that simultaneously contested the slave past and preserved some of the rich cultural products of slavery."<sup>11</sup> Hurston, then, depicts the ways that literary oral traditions overlap with and influence musical ones,

disrupting categorizations that separate them, as they both are African survivals and function as discursive resistance.

Hurston is acutely aware that verbal traditions are not the only practices that survived the Middle Passage, as she regularly refers to reminders of Africa, particularly those of music and dance. Characters sing Ibo lyrics and comment on being African (JGV 30-31). Often accompanied by dancing, drumming—an act of resistance to white supremacy—occurs throughout the novel, most significantly at John's funeral, ending his life in rhythm and, thus, leaving the reader with one of John's more positive qualities in mind—his ability to stay connected to diasporan practices and communities. At his funeral, the mourners "beat upon the O-go-doe, the ancient drum" and "[w]ith the drumming of the feet, and the mournful dance of the heads, in rhythm, it was ended" (JGV 202).<sup>12</sup> The rhythmic resistance of the accompanying drum is, Hurston's characters assert, what ultimately distinguishes their ceremonies and their dancing from those of white folks (JGV 29, 31). Such difference results from the black community's connections to Africa, their diasporic ways of being in the world, and, thus, is similar to their unique practices of Christianity that reject more Westernized practices which often serve to uphold exploitation.

In addition to blues music, other leisure activities that illustrate oral traditions include proverbs, loud-talking, and telling tales. Hurston's characters employ proverbs to signify on unacceptable actions and warn others not to mimic such behavior; for instance, the warning, "God don't eat okra" expresses the belief that one cannot be false (and slick) and garner the Lord's favor at the same time (JGV 206). Loud-talking and other types of signifying become ways not only to earn prestige within the community but also of commenting on the systemic injustice constraining the community (Gates 82-83); for example, slaves talk big behind their master's back, and workers brag about running away from the white legal system (JGV 202, 205). Such boasting illustrates implicitly the value of resistance, discursive and otherwise, in the community. Boastful tales echo the sentiments of trickster tales, such as those involving Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit tales also hold a prominent place both in the community and in the novel; as a trickster, Brer Rabbit demonstrates the ability to overcome systemic injustice with his wits. Significantly, John is the one who often tells of Brer Rabbit and other tricksters, and he tells about them so well that they "walked the earth like natural men" (JGV 25). In addition to Brer Rabbit, as Lowe points out, the spider that appears while Lucy is dying is reminiscent of the West African (and Caribbean) trickster Anansi or Anancy (*Jump* 131). While he does not discuss the tricksters in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Gates's more general arguments about tricksters are certainly applicable to them (4, 11). Gates asserts that trickster tales, and the world view they represent, function "as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual" (5). Such preservation demonstrates the black community's discursive resistance to the disruption and exploitation of the trans-Atlantic trade.

As an informal demonstration of the ways in which oral speech functions as resistance, Hurston depicts the importance of grape, rather than gourd, vines. Characters regularly convey news through the "Black Dispatch" or "Black Herald" (JGV 157, 206); significantly, such news often conveys warnings, particularly warnings about exploitation. Calling it a herald or dispatch is, of course, Hurston signifying on the differences between (largely) white institutionalized newspapers (written discourse) and the oral grapevines in

the black community. Tellingly, what the Black Herald conveys is what the white southern press often fails to: tales that include dreams and projections of what liberation might look like. However, these daydreams are misguidedly focused on the northern US. For example, for the characters living in a southern rural community, the North becomes mythologized as a promised land, opposite from Egypt, where one can find well-paying work and escape systemic racism (JGV 149-151). While such myths propel some to the North, where there are, in fact, more nonagricultural job opportunities, they presumably quickly find the North rife with racism and Jim Crow in a different guise.<sup>13</sup> The similarities between the North and South in terms of racism, and discursive racism in particular, were not lost on Hurston, who lived in both regions. Ultimately, as Anthony Wilson aptly describes it, Hurston's reaction to the Great Migration and its effects, like her view of institutionally sanctioned discourse, is "ambivalent" (76). While Hurston recognizes the liberatory possibilities of mobility, something denied during the antebellum era, she also remains skeptical about the actual manifestation of liberation in the US North.

Certainly, Hurston acknowledges that members of the black community do not always use language for positive or liberatory ends. In other words, just because language is orally spoken and by a black mouth does not mean that it works against white supremacist power structures. In fact, it can even serve them in directly oppressive ways, demonstrating the presence of internalized racism as well as of sexism in abusive interpersonal relationships. Within the community, language, even as it travels through the grapevine, can convey hurtful (though sometimes true) gossip about its members (JGV 88, 119, 128, 184). John, frustrated by the gossip about his affair with Hattie, complains that some community members are so "expert on mindin' folks' business dat dey kin look at de smoke comin' out yo' chimbley and tell yuh whut yuh cookin'" (JGV 119). While gossips are decried, nearly all of the community participates in gossip anyway, and significantly, its gossip can have material effects (which do not differ markedly from those of white supremacist discourse), such as when a man refuses to pay John for his work because of gossip about the latter's philandering (JGV 90, 195). In addition to gossip, language can be used in more directly destructive ways. For example, Ned barks orders to other black folks, mimicking the racist structure that confines him to unsuccessful sharecropping in the first place (JGV 45-6). Other characters lie on each other, sometimes leading to violence; lie, in this sense, should not be confused with lying as a way of signifying;<sup>14</sup> this is negative (and serious) lying that reifies violent social relationships rather than working to disrupt them (JGV 3, 5, 24, 188). Indeed, the novel opens with a violent scene between Amy and Ned; during the fight, she accuses him of being angry not at her but at his exploitation, and he retorts that "Youse uh lie" (JGV 5). Though Amy is telling the truth, the charge escalates the fighting in a way that accusing someone of signifying never would. Indeed, such charges often lead to the domestic violence that characterizes Amy and Ned's relationship.

Just as destructive is the verbal abuse that occurs within romantic relationships. John verbally abuses Lucy and Hattie, and while both women retaliate, verbally assaulting John, John's verbal abuse is disturbingly accompanied by his physical abuse of both women (JGV 96, 128-129, 139, 141, 145; see also Lowe, *Jump* 123). Because of the destructiveness of John's abusive behavior, Lowe likens the worm destroying the gourd vine of the novel's title to John's slap of Lucy, and Beilke astutely characterizes Lucy and John's relationship in terms of language, asserting that while Lucy's verbal skill attracts John initially, he ultimately "resents her verbal skill because it threatens his manhood" by garnering her

(not him) prestige (Lowe, *Jump* 130; Beilke 25). Yet another destructive use of language in the novel is the tendency of some members of the black community to snitch to the white power structure, thereby supporting racial exploitation, which significantly often uses language in demeaning ways and works to deny black speech (JGV 50, 148). John, Ned, and Bud all spy and tattle on other black characters to the white power structure, most clearly represented by Pearson, who enlists John not only to spy but to write his observations down, harnessing written language for exploitative purposes (JGV 20, 44, 95, 49-50). These portrayals of the ways the black community can fail to use language (oral and written) for liberatory purposes further demonstrate Hurston's ambivalence about language and the questions she raises about its efficacy as resistance. Ultimately, however, Hurston indicates that both written and oral discourse can function as resistance, as long as the speaker is conscious of that intent and actively pursuing it.

While Hurston focuses on resistance rather than exploitation, she also provides readers some sense of what her characters are resisting in the twentieth century; additionally, she explores the ambivalence in the black community about institutional discourse, clearly illustrating the cause for such ambivalence. In short, the ever-present threat of physical violence accompanies discursive violence and, thus, renders the black community afraid of the former and suspicious of the latter. While Ned's fear of whites seems pathetic, especially with Amy's designation of it as "skeered" "mealy-moufin," other characters are not derided for their fear of the threat of white violence (JGV 6). The spunky Pheemy is scared to even speak about night riders (JGV 100-1). The point of night-riding is exactly that: to instill fear in the black community. Moreover, the fact that such fear halts speech is significant. Common during both slavery and the Jim Crow era is the injunction by those in power for the black community to be silent. While even the white community is expected to be silent when it comes to matters of racist violence, the injunction of silence to the black community specifically creates the necessity of a signifying tradition that whites often have trouble de-coding.

Further creating need for a signifying tradition is when the discourse sanctioned by those in power expresses white supremacist logic; thus, Hurston illustrates why the black community is suspicious of white-dominated institutions and their (usually written) narratives. The most obvious example of such an institution is the schoolhouse, which reinforces whose speech is valued and whose is not. When John first sees a schoolhouse, he is shocked by the number of black children in attendance, as he had always associated such institutions, and their practices of literacy, with white folks (JGV 13). However, even when John attends the school and reworks his earlier assumptions about it, Hurston continues to present the institution with ambivalence; when the teacher asks for his name, John ironically lists it as Pearson (JGV 26). While this does, in fact, reflect the reality that Pearson is John's father, because white fathers often failed to claim their offspring with black women, and, as in Pearson's case, may have even employed them as tenants, this "naming" demonstrates how the exploitation of John and his labor echoes racist, sexualized practices of slavery. Commenting on yet another type of white discourse—that of northern "liberators" rather than southern enslavers—Lowe argues that "renaming scenes like this one are enacted over and over again in slave narratives when agents of northern education and civilization provide new names for newly freed slaves" (*Jump* 105). Thus, John giving the name Pearson, or the name of the man who "owns" him more in the socioeconomic sense



than in the familial sense, signifies John's exploitation by the white power structure (and is, notably, another example of Hurston herself signifying).

Though Hurston and her characters often mistrust the discourses of the school house, they also recognize the value and efficacy of formal education. The black community in Hurston's works views formal education in cautious, ambivalent ways, wanting to utilize it to succeed and survive—to hit “straight licks”—in a white supremacist world that requires education for any sort of prestige; however, they, like Hurston herself, also recognize that white supremacy employs sites of formal education—“crooked sticks”—as support and justification for its exploitation of many groups of Others. Thus, characters react to formal education in a variety of ways. The most effective, however, Hurston suggests, is to use formal, written discourse for liberating ends; in other words, though the tools or sticks of the schoolhouse are crooked, they can still be effective in hitting “straight licks” if used with a subversive intention.

Because of the association between white folks and not only literacy but also violence—both linguistic and otherwise—some characters are understandably skeptical about formal education. Lowe perhaps overstates Hurston's case here for formal education as he asserts that the school in the novel is a life-giving force, crucial to survival, concluding implicitly that Hurston's tension between literacy and oral traditions is resolved in favor of the former (*Jump* 104, 110-111). Beilke also privileges the formal language of the schoolhouse: “school learning represents knowledge, community, and upward mobility for John” (26). However, Hurston does not make such a clear-cut case for institutionalized discourse but presents it as suspicious though effective. While Ned's opinion that education is worthless—only used to “fill up de jails and chain-gangs” (*Jonah's* 28)—is negligible, largely illustrating his dislike of John and John's power rather than that of literacy itself, others in the community view literacy as worthless and impractical, divorced from their daily lives (JGV 28, 44; see also Lowe, *Jump* 115). For instance, some characters refuse to be impressed by W. E. B. Du Bois because he fails to “do” anything; he only writes, and “dat ain't nothin', anybody kin put down words on uh piece of paper”; what really counts is a “man dat could make sidemeat taste lak ham” (JGV 148). Such a comment reflects a larger belief that Booker T. Washington did much more to change the everyday lives of rural, southern blacks, who were often excluded from more formal, written discourse (Lowe, *Jump* 142).

Significantly, most of Hurston's characters who do not possess literacy merely adapt and tend to their daily business fairly successfully, especially considering the systemic racism that constantly is constraining them. For instance, when John is courting Lucy, Lucy's mama insists on hearing every word that passes between the young couple; hoping to outsmart his illiterate chaperone, John begins passing Lucy notes on a chalkboard. While she cannot read the notes, Lucy's mama solves the problem by merely erasing the chalkboard, erasing “as well as the world's greatest professor” (*Jonah's* 72). Similarly, Mehaley's Daddy wants to officiate at his daughter's wedding, though he lacks both a Bible and the skills to read it; rather than give up his officiating position, he simply uses an almanac and recites the marriage ceremony from memory (JGV 83). In other words, while Hurston sees literacy as effective resistance when combined with folk traditions, she does not ever portray illiterate characters as impotent or ineffectual. Indeed, while Cheryl Wall asserts that John learns more at the work camp, where he participates in oral traditions, than he ever does at the school house (85), Hurston's point seems to be that John needs to

be fluent in both discourses; his ability to code-switch and adapt is what garners prestige and ensures his success. Ultimately, the most successful characters, literate or otherwise, are those who adapt to their diasporan circumstances.

Despite some characters' abilities to succeed without literacy, others continue to value formal education. Lucy demands of her daughter that she get all the education she can. She warns her daughter that education is "de onliest way you kin keep out from under people's feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin'" (JGV 130). As a black woman, Lucy is ever-struggling to acquire any available skills that might help her avoid some of the exploitation she encounters on multiple fronts; while her marriage to John unfortunately thwarts her efforts at every turn, Lucy wants better for her daughter and sees education, like many in the Afro-American literary tradition, as the most efficient way to thrive. Significantly, it is Lucy's race combined with her gender that requires her to adapt in multiple ways, sometimes using the master's tools. While she embraces the efficacy of formal discourse, however, she also warns her children not to fall prey to language's more exploitative functions, advising them to be leaders and not to take orders from others. As Lowe asserts, her speech to her children emphasizes the "gaining and keeping [of] power through language" (*Jump* 131). Lucy recognizes the attempts of others, black and white, to disempower her through language, oral and written; because of her verbal abilities, she is able to resist those efforts and, likewise, wants her children to do so (and, hopefully, to be more successful than she).

It is not surprising that Lucy's experience of discourse is a struggle between exploitation and empowerment that resonates in both racial and gendered ways. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism all intersect and influence one another. Collins refers to these intersections as a "matrix of domination," a "social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (*Black Feminist* 228). These bundles support oppressive social hierarchies, causing them to "become taken-for-granted and appear natural and inevitable" (*Black Sexual* 96). bell hooks and Angela Davis similarly stress how ideologies of race, class, and gender influence one another.<sup>15</sup> If, as some scholars argue, most notably Catherine Kodat,<sup>16</sup> oral traditions like signifying are often inaccessible to women in the black community, then Lucy astutely becomes proficient in other language realms. Through Lucy, Hurston again suggests that the most effective resistance combines multiple discourses.

In addition to the schoolhouse, the post office and, more importantly, the courthouse operate in Hurston's work as other institutional sites of white supremacist discourse. The connection between the legal system and white supremacy is, of course, one with a long history that continues to resonate in the present. The legal system has historically been complicit with some of the US's most racist ideologies and practices; it has upheld slavery, segregation, and sexual exploitation. Presently, the legal system continues to perpetuate the criminalization and incarceration of people of color, particularly men.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is no wonder that Hurston's characters mistrust the courthouse and its official, written narratives and declarations. Indeed, the court and its discourse regularly fail black citizens. The black community is well aware of what it is up against with the legal system; thus, John cannot find any witnesses to testify on his behalf because others are scared to go to court, demonstrating their mistrust of it (JGV 165). Their mistrust is well-founded: everyone in the court, besides Hattie and John, are white, including the spectators, and

Hurston tellingly describes the white judge as acting like “a walrus would among a bed of clams” (JGV 167). Like dominant characters in trickster tales, the walrus has more physical power than the clams; however, unlike trickster tales, in which the less powerful escape, the clams are the ones who are tricked and, significantly, eaten. Such an image of deception and imminent consumption sums up the characters’ experiences with the white community and its supporting discourses.

Despite the mistrust of the court, the black church will uphold the courthouse’s dictates about John; if the white court finds him guilty, so will his church (JGV 163). This replication of an admittedly racist and exploitative institution’s views is, of course, problematic and demonstrates a significant example of internalized racism. Internalized racism is not something that Hurston shies away from depicting, and often she illustrates it through characters’ replications of white supremacist discourse. Ned is perhaps the most poignant example of internalized racism, and he demonstrates his internalization with his comments that parrot white ideology about the detriments of race-mixing, asserting that those of mixed race “‘ain’t no good nohow” (JGV 9); notably, Amy critiques him for it, mockingly describing his parroting as “[m]onkey see, monkey do” (JGV 9, 10). As Lowe asserts, Ned and Amy’s household is rife with “mimicry of patriarchal oppression” (*Jump* 102; see also Ciuba 121). Thus, Ned not only has internalized racist ideology but sexist logic as well, further demonstrating Collins’s matrix of domination and the ways that different types of oppression re-enforce one another.

More often, however, the black community in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, as it does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, rejects and fears the white community’s ideological violence, and it seeks to protect itself from that violence, particularly in its interactions with the legal system.<sup>18</sup> For example, John fails to tell the white court about Hattie’s hoodoo and romantic affairs because he does not want the white community to know too much about what goes on in the black community; if it knows about these two specific behaviors, John correctly reasons, it will assign such behavior to all residents of the black community (JGV 169). John asserts to Hambo that the white community “‘knows too much ‘bout us as it is, but dey some things dey ain’t tuh know. Dey’s some strings on our harp fuh us tuh play on and sing all tuh ourselves” (JGV 169). Such an assertion attests to the ways that resistance to the white supremacist structure, even asserting one’s creativity, must often be hidden from it to avoid negative, punitive consequences. Such consequences can affect individuals or the community as a whole, and they can be physical or discursive.

The difference in value judgments between the white and black communities is worth clarifying here: when residents in the black community engage in hoodoo in particular, there typically is no onus attached to it, whereas the white community views such subversive behavior in a purely negative way, especially because of its function as resistance to white-dominated institutions. Indeed, though Gary Ciuba attributes John’s downfall to hoodoo (127-128), Hurston is not “condemn[ing] hoodoo itself . . . merely its inappropriate use” (Lowe, “Seeing” 79). Hurston denounces Hattie, not the hoodoo she employs; however, the white court provides an inverse of that judgment, implicitly deriding hoodoo while explicitly ruling in favor of Hattie. The walrus, then, rejects both the agency and the cultural practices of the black community. Just as he knows to remain silent about subversive, African-derived religious practices, John also knows that it is in his best interest to minimize black sexuality in front of the walrus judge; any inkling of sexual deviancy will be employed as part of the matrix of domination, perpetuating negative

stereotypes of black sexuality that were often used by the court to enact or overlook racist violence, such as the lynchings of black men falsely accused of rape.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the exploitative practices of white institutions and their attendant discourses, the black community regularly appropriates those sites for its own usage—hitting “straight licks” with “crooked sticks.” For instance, residents use mail to communicate with those in the North because white folks cannot censor the letters very well (JGV 151). Similarly, while the commissary marriage contract, standing in for a courthouse marriage license, illustrates the exploitative Jim Crow practice of white land owners acting as judge, jury, and executioner, the fact that the black tenants demand it and that the license is consequently produced is significant (JGV 55). Before emancipation, such validation for black marriages through paperwork was nonexistent. In other words, black men and women demand recognition of their humanity and legitimate human relationships by white institutions and their paperwork, even though those same institutions work against black humanization.<sup>20</sup> Such appropriations and Hurston’s attention to them further illustrate her ambivalence about the efficacy of discourse. Even Lowe, who privileges the written word over the oral, admits that John’s proficiency in one discourse relies upon his proficiency in another (*Jump* 117), suggesting that the most effective relationship to language (and the power it provides access to) is to combine the skills of written and oral traditions.

Like other African survivals in the US, oral traditions do not survive fully intact or in such a way that they are unchanged by their new environment. Indeed, Africans in the US adapted survivals to their newfound environment and circumstances. Moreover, those adaptations included oral traditions, which sometimes were combined with written ones. Thus, the boundaries between written and oral language are not always clear, and Hurston capitalizes on this fluidity, particularly in her portrayals of religion, itself a bit messy in terms of origins and practices. While the practice of Christianity is forever linked with the history and exploitation of slavery, it also was and is employed by the black community for efforts of resistance.<sup>21</sup> It is these elements of adaptation and resistance that cause Lowe to assert that Hurston understood black religious culture to be markedly different from that of the white community (*Jump* 89). Slave owners demanded the practice of Christianity on their plantations in hopes of replacing African and African-derived religious practices that encouraged disobedience if not outright revolt.<sup>22</sup> However, slaves often outwardly complied with these demands while altering and adapting the practices of Christianity so that it accorded more with their efforts of resistance and desires for liberation rather than with their masters’ hoped-for submission. This adaptation by the black community can be seen in the ways hoodoo overlaps with and reinforces the practices of the black church, Protestant and Catholic.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Lucy expresses Hurston’s view that one can take advantage of these overlaps and effectively employ multiple discourses for liberatory ends. Demonstrating the ways the black community has embraced Christianity but adapted it to more liberating uses, Lucy prays to God “to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick” (JGV 84). In other words, Lucy is pleading with God to facilitate justice in an unjust world. An often-referenced line from Hurston, Lucy’s plea is popular because it sums up Hurston’s view of Western traditions, especially intellectual ones, with their attendant institutions and discourses: they can be useful for anti-exploitative ends if one is

willing to utilize them in such a way, which often entails combining them with other, especially diasporan, discourses.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* illustrates the ways that prayers and sermons reflect the influence of African-derived oral traditions as much as they do the ideals of Western Christianity (Plant 78). Lowe, drawing on a variety of sources, likens the preacher's role in the black community more to a West African griot than to a white preacher (*Jump* 92), and Plant asserts that folk preachers have evolved from African priests and, thus, provide not only the value of resistance but also another link to hoodoo (109).<sup>24</sup> Eric Sundquist similarly recognizes the novel's characterization of the sermon as an intersection of cultures, as he discusses John's sermon as reconfiguring white, Anglo-American Christian traditions (41, 60-62). Thus sermons, as Hurston portrays them, combine the discourses of multiple traditions. As with other oral traditions in the black community, sermons also provide opportunities to win the prestige denied to black speaking subjects by the white community. Thus, John's "far-famed" sermon is "Dry Bones" which wins him fame precisely because of its reliance on the content and practices of oral traditions (JGV 158). Unfortunately, while John wins prestige on the basis of his sermons and prayers, he uses most of his prestige to re-enforce power hierarchies, at least within the black community, rather than to disrupt any unjust relationships. His support of hegemony can most easily be seen in his treatment of women, illustrating once again that speech and discourse are not always put to liberating ends within the black community.

One of the most intriguing demonstrations of how diasporan communities can appropriate the oppressor's discourse is Hurston's treatment of the Bible, which is, of course, a written, institutionally sanctioned narrative. The characters in Hurston's novel, while often leery of such texts, favor this one and adapt it to their own purposes, using it as what Gates refers to as a speakerly text or a talking book.<sup>25</sup> They value it to such an extent that when a guest preacher fails to take his sermon from the Bible, his performance fails miserably; however, demonstrating the intersections of the written and the oral is that the guest preacher's failure is gauged by the lack of call and response from the congregation—a hallmark of the communal aspect of oral traditions and one that distinguishes it from most white services (JGV 158-159).<sup>26</sup> Thus, the women of the church deride the preacher's failed performance as a "lecture" rather than a sermon, highlighting its difference from the collective and interactive facets of sermons grounded in oral traditions. For preachers, the success of debuts at new churches, in particular, is always gauged by the congregations' oral response during the sermon (JGV 189). The collectivity of the church service, like the collectivity of hoodoo rituals, is one of the aspects that enables religion to be an avenue of effective resistance. Further blurring the lines between discourses, the Bible is also seen by many of Hurston's characters not as oppression's tool but as a hoodoo or talking book—a text of resistance that adapts, signifying its difference from the systemic oppression surrounding it.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Deacon Harris asserts to Hattie that Moses is "de greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made. . . . De Bible is de best conjure book in de world" (JGV 147). The Bible, then, is Hurston's ultimate illustration of how the black community can "hit uh straight lick [achieve empowerment] wid uh crooked stick [with a tool of exploitation]."

Often scholars present Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright as opposing one another, especially in terms of their views on oral traditions; presenting the authors in opposition is understandable, as Wright and Hurston themselves demonstrate animus in their scathing, public reviews of one another's work. Wright for instance, in his review of

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, accuses Hurston of upholding racist stereotypes with her portrayals of folk traditions.<sup>28</sup> However, Wright, in his fiction especially, approaches oral traditions and their tensions with written narratives in ways rather similar to Hurston (though certainly his characters also resist in more direct, sometimes violent, ways). Like Hurston, he regularly depicts oral traditions as liberating, as in tension with written narratives that are often exploitative, and ultimately leaves those tensions unresolved, suggesting that the most effective resistance is being able to code-switch and adapt to multiple discourses. For example, in *Native Son* (1940), Bigger and Gus signify on systemic racism when they "play white"; in *Lawd Today!* (1963), Jake and his cohorts regularly play the dozens to win prestige; and in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), the black community's grapevine saves Big Boy's life. Also like Hurston, Wright presents such oral traditions in ambivalent tension with written discourse, suggesting that the most successful individuals will master both traditions. In *Black Boy* (1945), Wright embraces written literature during the library episode in Memphis and when he rejects his grandmother's view of literacy—that it gives one worms in the brain; however, he also remains correctly skeptical of narrative discourse, especially as it appears in schools, newspapers, and political campaigns, suggesting that while one must master the master's discourse, one must also be vigilant about not falling prey to it.

Thus, though they differ in some significant ways—for instance, in their views of the relationship between oral traditions and modernity—the texts of Wright and Hurston include more similarities than differences, and examining those similarities could produce useful insights for the field of African-American studies.<sup>29</sup> Recognizing such similarities becomes even more important since, as Hurston points out, the most effective resistance, whatever discourse is employed, is typically a collective effort.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eric J. Sundquist's "'The Drum with the Man Skin'" (64) presents a similar argument. The work of William Andrews is especially enlightening on this topic; his *To Tell a Free Story*, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Realism," and "Richard Wright and the African-American Autobiography Tradition," discuss the links between liberation and literacy in African-American autobiography. Joanne M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography* also adds to this discourse, especially by accounting for the effects of gender.

<sup>2</sup> While other scholars, particularly Gary Ciuba in "The Worm Against the Word," argue that Hurston ultimately privileges written language, the tension between the two traditions is never resolved in Hurston's work; instead, she uses the tension in productive ways to resist exploitative discourses. Ciuba argues that Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* "gave voice to outright denunciations of reading and writing so that the text seems to turn against itself" (124). However, Ciuba, rather than viewing this tension as remaining at the close of the novel, incorrectly asserts that literacy ultimately trumps orality (125). Thus, he unfortunately privileges the written, formal language that frequently upholds white supremacist institutions.

<sup>3</sup> As John Lowe points out in *Jump at the Sun* (147), the themes Hurston explores in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, particularly ways in which the black community employs the Bible to resist white supremacy, are more central to her later novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. For further discussion of Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, consult Lowe's "Seeing Beyond Seeing," 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> In order to be consistent with Hurston's characters, this analysis will employ the name "hoodoo," rather than "voodoo" or "Vodoun."

<sup>5</sup> Significantly, voodoo rituals, especially songs, often incorporate African terms or place names to preserve diasporan connections; see Dayan, "Voudon, or the Voice of the Gods," 47-8.

<sup>6</sup> In the process of empowering individuals and communities, black practices of Christianity, specifically the folk sermon, often blend the sacred and the secular, disrupting that binary; see Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Moylan, "A Child Cannot Be Taught by Anyone Who Despises Him" (216). Moylan provides a thorough discussion of Hurston's reasoning and of others' criticisms of her stance.

<sup>8</sup> For example, while Gruening recognizes that the white courts are exploitative, she misreads the white plantation owner Pearson as "kindly" (3), but, as John Lowe asserts, Pearson is exploitative and dehumanizing, particularly in relationship to his unclaimed son (*Jump* 115). Gruening's assessment only implicitly condones racism while other reviews outright practice it. Felton calls the folk traditions "primitive" and likens voodoo to "witchcraft" (4), and Pickney classifies Hurston's characters as lacking intelligence and critical insight, dismissing the use of oral traditions as merely humorous—and not the critically aware and signifying humor that John Lowe treats (3-4).

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Sundquist argues that the use-value of the novel is that it provides a bridge between African survivals and modernity; see Sundquist, "The Drum," 40. Plant similarly and mistakenly asserts Hurston's preference for the oral, or "the primacy of the spoken word," failing to recognize her more ambivalent view; see *Every Tub*, 86, 94.

<sup>10</sup> See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 69-70, for a discussion of the importance of style in winning prestige.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (xix). Davis discusses how blues music works as social protest and was influenced by the diaspora. Samuel A. Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* also examines the relationships between black music and resistance.

<sup>12</sup> Floyd's *The Power* (38-39) describes how drums resisted slave codes and resonated with African-derived, adaptations of Christianity. Lowe echoes this discussion in *Jump* (133).

<sup>13</sup> As Martyn Bone argues, however, Hurston's treatment of the Great Migration and the mythology surrounding it discredits Carby's argument that Hurston failed to treat movement to the North. Rather, the novel "maps the impact of black Southern migration to the urban North before and after World War I" (762).

<sup>14</sup> Plant provides a discussion of different definitions of lying in *Every Tub* (87).

<sup>15</sup> Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* discusses ways in which multiple identity categories influence campaigns for civil rights. hooks's *Feminist Theory* offers similar discussions of how racial exploitation inflects that of gender and sex.

<sup>16</sup> Kodat asserts this gendered characteristic of signifying in her article, "Biting the Hand that Writes You," which examines *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of both past and present racial discrimination within the penal system, see Davis's "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry."

<sup>18</sup> The tenuous relationship between the courts and the black community is echoed in *Their Eyes* when Janie testifies in self-defense to a white judge, under the questioning of white lawyers, and garnering the support of white women in the audience, while the black community rejects her claims of self-defense, refusing to support her during the trial; see Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 185-189.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Joseph argues that the porch in Hurston's work provides an alternative and more liberating source of justice than white courts. Its possibilities for liberation are due to its open discourse, challenges, and revisions. This flexibility, on the other hand, was clearly missing from a legal system that perpetuated Jim Crow; see "The Verdict from the Porch," 458, 467, 466.

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Gray-White describes the denial of legitimate marriages and the slave community's resistance to it in *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (153-162).

<sup>21</sup> See Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* for an in-depth discussion of this.

<sup>22</sup> As Wall points out, those same Judeo-Christian traditions can be and have been used to oppress and marginalize women; however, utilizing the tradition in a liberating way, Hurston employs a sermon in *Mules and Men* to present Big Sweet in a positive light and portrays Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a frustrated preacher; see Wall, "Zora," 82-3, and Plant, *Every Tub*, 111.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Dayan's "Vodoun" and the larger collection of which it is a part, Margarite Olson's and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's *Sacred Possessions*, offer discussions of hoodoo as resistance. Hurston herself describes the ways that hoodoo overlaps with Christianity in *Tell My Horse* (116).



<sup>24</sup> Spirituals also demonstrate the intersections of Western Christianity with West African religious traditions; see Plant, *Every Tub*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> The intersection of the oral and the written often occurs in institutions that the black community views with ambivalence—the schoolhouse and the church. This intersection appears during the school recital at which students orally perform in order to win prestige—not unlike the informal performances of oral texts discussed above; see Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 36-7.

<sup>26</sup> Plant also discusses call and response in this way in *Every Tub*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> Gates defines a “talking book” as “making the white written text speak with a black voice” and, thus, as “the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced” (131-132); however, he does not discuss the Bible or Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* as such. Additionally, throughout her oeuvre, Hurston regularly engages in what Lowe calls “Biblical signifying” (*Jump* 86).

<sup>28</sup> For a similar assertion, see Beilke, “Yowin,” 21. Wright’s review appeared in *New Masses* (5 October 1937) as “Between Laughter and Tears.” It is reprinted as “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)” in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, unlike Wright’s *Black Power*, which depicts modernization in opposition to a number of West African cultural practices, Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, with its emphasis on hoodoo’s flexibility and adaptability, suggests a way out of this seeming opposition.

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