Chapter 5

Asymmetrical Possessions: Zora Neale Hurston and the Gendered Fictions of Black Modernity

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> It is the lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change of key and time are evidences of this quality [. . .] Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression'[1]

Zora Neale Hurston begins her 1934 essay, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', with an invocation of 'drama' – not of her own theatre pieces, but of the 'drama' of black linguistic practice:

> Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned.[2]

This brief and wholly unframed introduction to the drama of blackness is also littered, as is the quote on 'Asymmetry' above, with many of the cringe-worthy components of primitivist racial discourse, most notably the continual construction of an evolutionary progress narrative situating black folks as the original and stagnant point from which modernity, and its linguistic and political forms, develop. In this sense, it engages in the temporal problematic of anthropological practice that Hurston herself performs in her nonfiction work: the significance of documenting vernacular black culture to 'preserve' a specific and undervalued history, at the same time that the modern social science of anthropology seemed to suggest that documentation as a modernist record of disappearing, antiquated cultures whose time had passed. In documenting black life away from urban centres, Hurston's work threatened to commodify and hence help to eradicate the modern force of folk cultures.[3] But throughout her literary and scholarly work, Hurston insists on the significant

place of black performance in the thoroughly modern/modernist time of the first half of the twentieth century.

As 'characteristic' par excellence (it is explicitly ranked first), for Hurston, 'drama' sets up the asymmetrical relations of power that these contradictory modes of representation, recording and reception of blackness entail in the discourse of twentieth-century modernity. Hurston takes this up not by animating the narrative of black Atlantic history but instead via a relentless presentism that insists on the simultaneity of cultural difference, and on black aesthetic practice as the primary site of exposure for the temporal fictions of race, gender and modernity. It is no coincidence, then, that Hurston's example of 'Asymmetry' argues for a black modernity 'accustomed to the break[s]' in aesthetic practice, for performance requires constant attention to the uneven exchanges between two perhaps unequal parts – a constant will to read the black diaspora strategically.

In this essay, I would like to consider Hurston's 1938 ethnography, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, and its aesthetic and political projects.[4] In this context I would also like to think of asymmetry – 'the abrupt and unexpected changes' that characterise race and gender's relationship to modernity – as a method of reading Hurston's innovative critiques of existing orders of modernism in the twentieth-century black diaspora. By invoking a black feminist critical model, I would like to suggest that Hurston's engagement with language and discourse, despite the risk it runs of excluding vernacular histories from modernist narratives of politically viable subjectivity, succeeds instead in asymmetrically 'possessing' modernity. She does so not just by interrupting modernity's narrative logic of technological progress, but by denying the teleology of racial and gendered progress that accompanies such linear models of the modern. Instead, she suggests simultaneity of difference across the twentieth-century black Atlantic.

The structure of *Tell My Horse* alters and disrupts the sequence of modernity, and its scripts of black women as modern subjects. For Hurston, and for Haiti, scenes of political and cultural revolution are interrupted by stagnant, uneven gender relations in the semi-public sphere. Exposing, as Diana Taylor puts it, 'the central fiction of reciprocity between modernity and tradition', on the side of power and the 'highly exaggerated difference' between the two in certain postcolonial and black feminist discourse, *Tell My Horse* uses possession as middle ground in the confrontation with and against black modernity.[5] Possession, marked as part of a premodern, fantastic tradition by dominant modernity and by nostalgic, anthropologic recoveries of black folk culture, seems an odd meeting point. But for Hurston, the nuanced

cultural and social practices that surround and support possession as a performance illuminate its possibilities as a brief suspension of concepts of the individual self and the attendant embodiments of class, gender and race. As a form of collective resistance and, as other studies have thought about the contemporary uses of possession, a protected performance of colonial critique, it is decidedly a hybrid, flexible modern practice, able to be incorporated into counter-discourses of modernity. For Hurston, though, the romance of resistance is acknowledged but also reordered, as both tradition and modernity, in their formulations, offer limited scripts for gendered agency, leaving black women subjects out of history and their present political moment. The resulting, uniquely hybrid construction of black modernity is one that acknowledges how race and modernity are constitutively linked, and examines how narratives of that convergence are masculinised.[6]

Hurston's reimaginings are not, however, about reinserting either a tradition linked to women or the modernity of 'great women'. Instead, aligned with Barnor Hesse's critique of a racialised modernity that still focuses on embodiment (for him, the visible difference of race), *Tell My Horse* uses possession to move away from the black, gendered body as definitive marker of difference, into an interrogation of how bodies participate in gendered structures of black modernity, negotiating the narrative boundaries of racial community and pan-African political ideologies.[7] Hurston's intervention provides an early critique of how blackness, and the invocation of African cultures and non-urban blackness as tradition, is mobilised in the service of a black politics that reproduces 'Culture Hero[]' structures of black masculinity across the diaspora. Her text offers these new sequences not as escapes from black modernity, but as critiques from within that try to find ways out of the tradition/modernity divide that black women as subjects find themselves as the shadow sites of in critical discourse.

In *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, Hurston finds herself doing fieldwork in the Caribbean, specifically Jamaica and Haiti. It is here that *Tell My Horse* demonstrates a consistent commitment to mapping the minor and major transgressions of the black public sphere in all of its complexity, refusing to be a clean 'public transcript' for either white modernism or black cultural politics.[8] Instead, Hurston moves to expose, enact and describe the gendered and classed labour that goes into the making of black cultures and community, claiming those 'dramas' as significant texts, ones that demand new modes of literacy, in the vein of Vevé Clark's call to 'diaspora literacy' as 'a skill for both narrator and reader which demands a knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political development generated by lived and

textual experience'.[9] But Hurston also questions that knowledge as a site of authenticity, staying committed to a literacy of internal, intra-racial critique. In order to redistribute both the conceptual and material possession of race and gender in the diaspora, Hurston represents spirit possession as a practice of voodoo culture to be 'read' through and as a metaphor for modern political agency within the diaspora. In this, she suggests what Joan Dayan would later state directly: 'The possessed gives herself up to become an instrument in a social and collective drama.'[10] Participation in the drama of the public sphere is a negotiation of power, trading varied registers of mobility in exchange for collective identification. This tension between the individual and the social body, Hurston suggests, is the gendered conflict that drives black modernity with its necessary intersections of the material, conceptual and psychic dimensions of participatory experience.

Tell My Horse rides an uneasy line between believing in the emancipatory possibilities of modernity, and critiquing the limits of individual agency that attend it. Hurston finds new uses for old standards of black modernist representations – Haiti as the modern black state and/or as a failed state, and the black body as a site of modernism's trouble with race – pointing out the continuity between modernity and diasporan communities' constructions of gendered power. These repossessions of black modernity in *Tell My Horse* stage practices of cultural literacy that insist on recognising the asymmetry of public discourses on race and gender across the diaspora, turning our attention to more quotidian and heterogeneous sites staging black women as the social and political subjects of diaspora's modern formations.

Written after her Southern folklore tome, *Mules and Men*, and written at the same time as her most famous work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,[11] *Tell My Horse* is (or was) widely considered Hurston's 'poorest' text – aesthetically, in terms of form, and ideologically, in terms of its politics.[12] However, its combination of the ethnographic and the autobiographic, its modernist prose style fused to the travel narrative genre, augurs its partial feminist and formalist recoveries in recent years as a text 'ahead of its time' in its anticipation of the contemporary form of autoethnography and self-reflexive anthropological practice in the postcolonial moment.[13] For Hurston both engages and subverts the ethnographic impulse of modernism/modernity to describe and document the Other for use as a romantic (re)source, practical foil, and as part of a self-referential practice of social science credibility. To do so, she relocates gender as central to the construction of black political, social and cultural community.

Hurston produced *Tell My Horse* amidst a wave of publicity regarding

Haiti and its US occupation, with artists and intellectuals from dancer Katherine Dunham to poet Langston Hughes making trips to the country in the 1930s. As Millery Polyné and Hazel Carby note, Hurston's sympathy towards the US imperial occupation cast her against the dominant African American political stance on the issue.[14] With even the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) arguing against occupation, and a long list of nineteenth- and twentieth-century race leaders travelling to and writing with rhetorical fascination of Haiti,[15] the struggle to maintain Haiti as a possessed object of black modernity's success hovers around Hurston's text. Ever the antagonist, Hurston intentionally treads on hallowed racial ground with her choice to conduct fieldwork in Haiti, and confronts Afro-identified idealisations of the country head on:

> Since the struggle began [in the late eighteenth century], L'Ouverture died in a damp, cold prison in France, Dessalines was assassinated by the people whom he helped to free, Christophe was driven to suicide, three more presidents have been assassinated, there have been fourteen revolutions, three out-and-out kingdoms established and abolished, a military occupation by a foreign white power which lasted for nineteen years.[16]

Hurston's Haiti is a whole different league of what Amiri Baraka labels 'vicious modernism', or that which both gives voice to and exploits black cultural subjectivity in its 'violent, transforming beauty'.[17] But instead of a primitivist or a nostalgic 'salvage' anthropology project, Hurston relocates black modernity to Haiti, site of the first black 'nation' in and during the heart of chattel slavery.[18] She does so not by rehearsing its past, but by bringing that past into a continuity with the present in Haiti itself, using the revolution's history as more than a 'pretext to talk about something else', as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues of many who took up Haiti as a 'cause' stuck in the past.[19]

Even in outlining its status as a failed state, Hurston creates the grounds for looking at Haiti not just through the sign of revolution, the history of 'great men' that critic David Scott insists misses the point, and the temporal significance, of the event:

> The vindicationist story of the slave's undaunted will to resist, however stirring and commendable it may be, obscures another and – in the context of our present – more important story, namely, a story about the transformed conditions (indeed the specifically modern conditions) in which the slaves were obliged fight for freedom.[20]

As a public intellectual, an anthropologist, and a black modernist provocateur, Hurston's questioning of Haitian history as told through the lens

of the Revolution could and should be viewed through the lens of her recuperation as a black feminist subject in the past twenty-five years.[21] Her feminist politics provide a sustained critique of the material and conceptual power of masculinity in Western modernity that has also, in her estimation, constructed the terms of debate in black modernity. Her turn to Haitian voodoo, then, is an act of regendering the primal scene of black freedom through narratives of political resistance.

Hurston investigates the conditions of Haitian culture as insistently of the present, much as she lays out in 'Characteristics': 'Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use.'[22] Rather than fix the vernacular as authentic, Hurston here expands the timing, geographies and cultural class of black history and black culture's resources and resourcefulness. Blackness itself, as a practice of modernity for *Tell My Horse*, is nothing if not adaptable, as are Hurston's own persistent methods of knowledge and cultural production. This twist of perspective, no longer just responding to Western preoccupations with normative forms of capital and democratic success, anticipates a Caribbean modernism coined by the likes of C. L. R. James and Wilson Harris, where Afromodernist cultures 'develop as a narrative strategy and counter-discourse away from outmoded and conventional modes of representation associated with colonial domination and colonizing cultural structures' rather than in response to white modernist experiments with a primitive Afro-past.[23] Modernity is itself a form of charismatic possession, in Hurston's hands, one possessed with 'progress' and its failures, the speed and relative access to both political and material change. But as Patricia Chu astutely observes, primitivism emerges not simply as the foil by which modernity defines and congratulates itself, but somehow as the model for the modern individual subject who still has power to critique the status quo, and most importantly, the state.[24] In this sense, the Haitian revolution charismatically possesses Western modernity, effectively occupying the modern rhetoric of republican rights and its essential contradiction with the capital system that fuels modernity's gains.[25]

But Hurston's text remains uneasy with this characterisation of Haiti, its revolution, and that event's – and its leaders' – charismatic place in the logics of modernity. As Erica Edwards powerfully claims, 'charisma' as an animating force and organising concept in black life and literature runs hand in hand with individualist, masculine notions of leadership and resistance that have come to define black politics.[26] It is this very construct that Hurston devotes herself to unmaking across her career

– another way that we can mark her iconoclastic position vis-à-vis her fellow black authors and organisers. Hurston writes out of this charismatic context, but also the one that possesses her contemporary writing on black political struggles over Haitian rights and status. A combination of fear, longing and abjection hovers around Haiti as a simultaneous symbol of modernity and its discontents – rendered as the lingering traces of the premodern, in the guise of anthropological interest in the 'African' in the black diaspora, which forms into both covert and more obvious signs of rebellion.

Tell My Horse moves towards what seems an antithetical project of anthropological primitivism, but instead insists on the very modern charisma of voodoo, and its uneasy and uneven intertwining with the more familiar trappings of the modern state. *Tell My Horse* demonstrates this connection partially by drawing out the amount of work that it takes to perform the primitive in rituals of possession:

> The usual routine is this:
>
> The spirit enters the head of a person. He is possessed of this spirit and sometimes he or she is troubled by it because the possession comes at times and places that are, perhaps, embarrassing. On advice, he goes to a houngan and the spirit is identified and the 'horse' is advised to make food for the loa who is the master of his head. As soon as the person is financially able, he or she goes through the ceremony of baptism known as 'getting the head washed.' Three days before the reception of the degree, the candidate presents himself to the houngan, who receives him and makes certain libations to the spirit who has claimed the candidate.[27]

Far from exotic or romantic descriptions of ritual, Hurston transforms voodoo and spiritual possession into modern 'routine'. She renders a site of primitivist fascination – possession – banal. And, indeed, the histories of spirit possession are too numerous to name, found in Judaism, the Ibo people, Vietnam, Brazil, India, in French Catholicism (there's even a black Joan of Arc to whom Hurston devotes a chapter) and, of course, in American religious practice. As such, possession is not so much a particular of blackness or even the primitive associations it maintains, but a practice that has adapted its meaning across geographic and temporal difference into modernity. Its history constantly possesses Hurston's present-day observations – falling in line with what Jenny Sharpe has identified as 'history as spirit possession', an epistemology animated by the few lingering traces, as well as the absence, of evidence surrounding displaced cultural identities.[28] Hurston's presence is needed to claim a rather ordinary history, one that fits, albeit unevenly, within the structures of modern life in the Caribbean as, in Daphne Lamothe's terms, a 'site of culture' for the diasporic world.[29]

The routine possession described above refuses to centre the charismatic black leader, or to romanticise black 'tradition' in a nostalgic move to mark the folk as a similar site/invocation of authenticity. It also has another, intertextual history to claim as well: Hurston's own initiation past the first 'degree' of voodoo priestess as recounted in her 1935 collection of Southern folklore and Louisiana hoodoo, *Mules and Men*. Though *Tell My Horse* does in passing let us know that the narrator may 'go Canzo', the second degree of initiation, Hurston's narrative swiftly distances her as the subject of a possessed episode. In fact, Hurston remains publicly un-possessed throughout the text, vacillating between narrative modes of scientific inquiry, journalistic distance and personal curiosity. Rather than claiming her space in voodoo ritual as an initiate, Hurston maintains her difference – as American, as anthropologist and, particularly in *Tell My Horse*, as a woman. The 'he or she' slips into the routine (along with a mention of money), suggesting the tension *Tell My Horse* locates in its description of voodoo as a social structure and practice in Haiti: the promise of equal access against the material conditions of gender and class hierarchy.[30] In this, Hurston locates voodoo (and diaspora) as relentlessly modern, and as an allegory/doppelganger for black political community in the United States. Possession only holds currency within complex structures of meaning, ones that exceed the defining presence of what Hurston calls 'Culture Heroes', the title of a chapter in *Tell My Horse*. These men (as they all are) are a source of power for black cultural and political life, but *Tell My Horse* marks an even sharper turn in Hurston's work towards a scepticism of a black modernity imagined as the charismatic rhetorical presence of individual subjects, including her own authorial exceptionalism.

It is no surprise that Edwards finds this charisma acting through the power of narrative performance, or that Hurston seeks to reorder these 'fictions' of the organisation of black politics around masculinity.[31] Returning to Baker's call to black modernity, possession is a mark of the rite of passage for 'race leaders' in a gloss that would make Hurston and her suspicion of empty language and powerful men roll over.[32] One must, like Martin Luther King, Jr, be 'touched by the frenzy of black spiritual existence' manifested through 'rhetorical effectiveness'.[33] Possession, then, becomes a 'style' that 'makes one recognizable and resonant before a spirited mass audience'.[34] Of course, possession is a remarkably flexible signifier for *Tell My Horse* and its depicted audiences, its range extending as a figure of success, threat (both direct and indirect), unconscious voice, regulation, a sign of evil, or of spiritual power and potential. But for Hurston, it is not the 'frenzy' of the charismatic speaking subject that is rendered resonant in *Tell My Horse*, but

the 'mass audience'. She recounts a moment of 'evil' possession during a ceremony with Dieu Donnez (a houngan) treating both him and the possessed body with far less interest than she registers for the power of the group in response to the public performance:

> But that was not all. A feeling had entered the place. It was a feeling of unspeakable human fears, and the remarkable thing was that everybody seemed to feel it simultaneously and recoiled from the bearer of it like a wheat field before a wind.[35]

Group action becomes the 'remarkable' or recognised moment of drama.

Hurston shifts to the 'audience' – 'a necessary part of any drama', as she says in 'Characteristics' under the heading of 'Absence of the Concept of Privacy' – while never losing sight of the major players, continuing:

> The fear was so humid you could smell it and feel it on your tongue. But the amazing thing was that the people did not take refuge in flight. They pressed nearer Dieu Donnez and at last he prevailed. The man fell. His body relaxed and his features untangled themselves and became a face again. They wiped his face and head with a red handkerchief and put him on a natte [. . .] they poured libations for the dead and the ceremony ended.[36]

The descriptive rhetorical force belongs to 'the crowd' and 'the people'. Donnez may prevail, but 'they pressed', 'they wiped', and 'they poured libations' and closed the event. Yet even as *Tell My Horse* is didactic about support for 'the majority' and political 'compromise' at moments, it is also unromantic about the will and 'intelligence' of the crowd.[37] The possessive audience is shown to *labour* before, during and after a possession, in order to create the very circumstances of the performance. The performer is, in many ways, beside the point for the text, and the possessive audience can gain too much power; as Hurston notes in her titular section, 'Gods always behave like the people who create them.'[38] Possession, like subjection, is a paradox, not just the unilateral application of external power hailing the internal subject, but also produced through the ambivalent desire to become a subject, to submit oneself to an understandable discourse of, in this case, group identity.[39] Power is both internal and external, an ambivalent relationship that Hurston unflinchingly narrates.

Too much giving way to either charismatic force or audience participation can also lead to death or dispossession – emblematised in the curious cases of Haitian 'Zombies' that Hurston painstakingly addresses in *Tell My Horse*. Dayan, Strongman and other critics read zombies as a reaction to and representation of the postcolonial condition, subject

to uncertain governance and the anthropological gaze; Hurston insists on the immediate present, on an allegory of black diasporan social and cultural relations in the realm of modernity, infused with but not strictly analogous to colonised history – Jamaican colourlines, Haitian class divides, the US occupation of the island that ended just the year before Hurston arrived.[40] Her often contradictory and difficult views on all three examples perform obvious breaks with her contemporary and certainly our contemporary critics of black modernity and imperialism, refusing the flattening effect of a predictable audience and challenging our 'conceptual' political alignment with contemporary readings of Hurston.[41]

Hurston's anecdotes about fake mountings, scientifically explainable zombies, stones that wear dresses and urinate, and marriages between goats and family members of the heads of state are not the subversive narrative behind her apparently party-line imperialism. They are part of Hurston's formal and conceptual strategy of understanding the imbricated nature of the charismatic state and its subjected community. These two cultures, she demonstrates, are parts of a whole, constantly reflecting back on each other in public and in private, with all of the attendant hierarchies coming through – be they the houngan's will or America's occupation of Haiti. For her, structure and resistance are both part of the text, and part of the institution of modernity, particularly the contradictions of black modernity. *Tell My Horse*'s feminist politics demand such asymmetrical and sometimes contradictory sites of change, refusing hardened categories of the state and the people, or even imperialism and autonomous democracy. Both are possessed, internally and publicly, by the discourses of gendered and classed power, from which there is no easy escape, or for which there is no easy narrative form, as *Tell My Horse*'s aesthetic choices attest.

One critic says of *Mules and Men* that it is 'a textual paradigm of the functionality of US black folk culture' – but is the failing text of *Tell My Horse* then about the dysfunction of diaspora?[42] Or does diaspora act as a vision of the difficulty of difference within difference, or what Ellison referred to as 'the blackness of blackness'? In *Tell My Horse*, diaspora exposes the multiple myths of national and transnational unity/progress, instead articulating the dangerous work of relying too much on past success – 'the greatest progress' line that Hurston skewers US 'race leaders' for using – or a detached, obstinate presence, as when she identifies the practice of 'lying' as the greatest weakness of Haiti, 'people who have no memory of yesterday and no suspicion of tomorrow'.[43] These rhetorical temporalities – to use Baker's terms, the 'mythomania'[44] – fail black modernity at the level of 'action' (for the people), though Hurston

herself is unsure of how to proceed, as evidenced by her at times aggressive elitism surrounding the vague concept of 'intelligence' and at other points sensitive readings of black literature's role in enacting social and political change on a mass scale. For Hurston, there is no way out of modernity's rhetorical or material power – only the critical possession and critique of the excessive charisma of power.

Until now, I have focused on the reckoning and revision that Hurston does in rendering the charismatic power of seemingly singular bodies, objects and states. Her text inverts and even exploits these signs of hierarchal structure to lay out potentially feminist visions of black modernity. These hegemonic asymmetries – their unequal possessions of *Tell My Horse*, as well as of diaspora studies – play out in the formal and structural dramas of the text, and in what these uneven 'failures' of charismatic narrative presence might suggest about the intertwined futures of gender and race in diaspora studies.

When Hurston takes on the nonfiction voice in *Tell My Horse*, she refuses charisma, or a totalising, linear version of that rhetorical force. Unlike, for instance, Maya Deren's late modernist work on voodoo ritual, *Divine Horsemen* (1953), Hurston also refuses to write the catalogue of Haitian ritual, the textbook that isolates Haiti and imagines its culture exhausted and without connection to even the rest of the Caribbean, let alone its present political moment. Hurston seems bored, in fact, by her own theory/practice division – the conceptual versus the dramatic. That impatience, and her own model of political and social engagement, comes to fruition most publicly in *Tell My Horse*'s fragmented and mixed generic claims. Many, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr in his afterword to the Harper and Row edition, attribute this to a kind of tragic sloppiness:

> In fact, Hurston's life [. . .] reveals how economic limits determine our choices even more than does violence or love. Put simply, Hurston wrote well when she was comfortable, wrote poorly when she was not. Financial problems [. . .] produced the sort of dependence that affects, if not determines, her style.[45]

And, in fact, we might not be far off from what Hurston herself seemed to recognise about not just her own work, but the so-called 'folk' culture she studied. The vernacular does not stand outside of what Baker calls 'the economics of slavery', but instead situates them as simultaneous events.[46] When cultural expression is possessed by economic need, a particularity is produced, a rubric, a style, a local difference. Instead of viewing 'creativity and commerce' as 'antimonies', we could perhaps view them as Hurston does – necessary and mutual social dramas,

whether produced for intra-community currency or reproduced (by her) in a transnational framework, the condition of modernity pushing the conditions for art and vice versa. This is not to say that there are no ramifications to that imbalance in representative and economic power, but it is, in *Tell My Horse*, a significant distinction as it continually represents cultural production – be it in the form of voodoo, politics, wild boar hunts or curried goat feeds – as structured internally by class and gender difference.[47]

Hurston's text engages in large-scale structural asymmetry, from its anaemic section on Jamaica to its sprawling two-thirds on the 'Politics and personalities of Haiti' and 'Voodoo in Haiti'. As voodoo is clearly the 'draw' of the book, why even present Jamaica? The answer comes in the form of the comparative, as Hurston contemplates what is in her estimation a decidedly un-modern maroon settlement and wonders aloud about the conceptual versus the material power of revolution. Diasporic reception as well as colonial histories make Jamaica and Haiti asymmetrical modernities, with the Jamaican narrative allowing Hurston to outline the dangers of romantically maintaining perpetual and uncomplicated narratives of revolution. The text does this in part by speaking from a point of failure (Jamaica does not gain independence until 1962) before addressing the 'success' of Haiti, the first black republic. That there are grave similarities between the two in the realm of the social, in particular, is Hurston's unspoken link between the uneven sections. Beyond geographic proximity, then, there is the conceptual and structural proximity that *Tell My Horse* implicitly imposes and invites.

Elsewhere noted for her prowess at signifying, Hurston's larger formal concerns remain difficult for critics to read in the case of *Tell My Horse*, partially because they feel resolved to the recovery of the American vernacular in Hurston's other work, and the diasporic context of *Tell My Horse* leaves them unsure of how to read Hurston's politics on global black modernity and US imperialism.[48] Nowhere is this rendered more strange than in her sudden shift to direct comparison of US and Caribbean gender relations in the last chapter of the 'Jamaica' section, 'Women in the Caribbean'. Immediately following the description of funeral rites of 'Pocomania' or indigenously inspired religious practice, *Tell My Horse* switches rhetorical gears. Leading up to chapter 5, we have only been given short quips of witty and incisive political observation in an otherwise part travelogue, part celebrity-ethnographer narrative. Without any warning but the chapter title, we are told that:

> It is a curious thing to be a woman in the Caribbean after you have been a woman in these United States. It has been said that the United States is a large

> collection of little nations, each having its own ways, and that is right. But the thing that binds them all together is the way they look at women, and that is right, too.[49]

From the feminist hero/author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this nationalist celebration of the US's forward-thinking gender politics seems strange indeed. But if we think of Hurston's larger project of asymmetry, this is the moment of conflated identities before the break: the US is just a 'collection' of nations, like the Caribbean, and the 'little nation' that Hurston is most interested in is that of the black public sphere. Allowed access to white institutions, Hurston's frustration with the lack of rhetorical power of women in black political movements and social-cultural politics is laid bare throughout the book.[50]

Hurston is trying to think through a metaphor other than the 'rooster's nest' of masculine-colonialist imitation, to provide another model for thinking gender in black diasporic modernity. In her forced transition, she finds it. As the 'only woman' allowed to participate in the goat feed, or to hunt wild boar, in the previous 'Jamaica' sections, the funeral chapter is much less ostentatious about the author's exceptionalism. The funeral rites are a long, involved process, demanding group participation in elaborately preparing the dead to stay dead, for as Hurston puts it, 'It all stems from the firm belief in survival after death. Or rather that there *is no death*. Activities are merely changed from one condition to the other.'[51] Rather than the finality of a single revolutionary act, or the fixed position of gender roles, Hurston's asymmetry suggests that social politics are an ongoing process. Hurston flags the flame of US national feminist pride (if there can be said to be a fire at all) *instead* of racial nationalism and myths of progress in an attempt to allow less visible, and less 'official', shifts in modernity – and nascent development discourse – come to the forefront. Above all, in the death rituals, there is a sociability inflected with all of the sexual and gendered relations that exist (older women try to keep track of younger ones, for instance) among the people and among a more symbolic order, where a ceremonial stick's 'name is always feminine. It is named for some mule or horse or obeah woman.'[52] In the wake of communal events that seem to write women out of significant performance, there comes a 'break' in the ceremony: 'A few warming-up steps by some dancers. Then a woman breaks through the dancers with a leap like a lioness emerging from cover. Just like that. She sings with gestures as she challenges the drummers, a lioness defying the tribesmen.'[53] Obviously a scripted possession of the community stage, the moment not only recognises the performative force of here, a charismatic woman 'whipping' the audience

into a mass possession, but also underscores the various other, unseen labour that Hurston documents women doing throughout, including herself – from making a dead man's shirt to decorating the ritual space, from being mounted as a possessed 'horse' to finding sexual pleasure and connection in 'the crowd' of ritual.

There is decidedly room for alternate performances of gender and modernity in transitional and transnational spaces in *Tell My Horse*, inasmuch as there are still parallels to other, less generous metaphors of sexual and corporeal possession.[54] Hurston writes of one anecdotal exchange in 'Women in the Caribbean': 'Up in a safe little spot he induced her to leave the car after a struggle and possessed her', lamenting that even in the realm of black modernity, 'She cannot refute his statement. What could she offer as proof?'[55] The modern condition for black women in relation to sexuality and the state then follows a trajectory of madness and death in the narrative. But Hurston's juxtapositions attempt to retain the promise of a 'change' of activities, where black women's inability to register on the scale of charismatic rhetorical force as political subjects is transmuted into Hurston's poetics of transition. *Tell My Horse* then finds not just the detached imperialism of anthropology, but a mode of critical participation through proximity and transition.

At the end of the 'drama' section in 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', an essay that embodies the asymmetrical politics of transition in its non sequiturs as well as its unexplained and/or absent transitions, Hurston introduces us to a narrative anecdote, one of a public drama of a black vernacular heterosexuality. Comparing 'a robust young Negro chap' to Louis XIV, Hurston does a play by play translation of his body – posture, gesture, costume – into language; and not just any language, but an aggrandised and primitivised register that turns him into 'male, giver of life'.[56] Recognising and reproducing colonial understatement, she notes that: 'There is no mistaking his meaning.' The 'girl' in the drama gets more action, less language, 'Her whole body panging and posting [. . .] that is all of a dare. A hip undulation below the waist that is a sheaf of promises tied with conscious power.'[57] A dare, a promise, power – these high concepts emerge directly from her 'action', the again exaggerated inverse of the amount of language it took to turn the black male body into a 'king' of the modern street. The drama of gender and race, the public nature of how black bodies are read in the colonised world, and how black speech possesses the bulk of political power in the black public sphere, are not incidental tensions for Hurston. Indeed, she ends: 'These little plays by strolling players, are acted out daily in a dozen streets in a thousand cities, and no one ever mistakes the meaning.'[58] Received ways of reading blackness are

dangerous, for Hurston, in their effort to maintain fixed subject positions and cultural methods. The repetition of 'no one ever mistakes the meaning' betrays an anxiety around the performance of blackness, particularly concerning gender and sexuality, an anxiety about never being able to escape comparisons to categories of modernity that read blackness as permanently possessed by the primitive. It is a trap that Hurston both participates in and exposes in her poetics of asymmetry. She ends 'Characteristics' noting that, 'Nothing less than a volume would be adequate' to document the fullness and particularities of black expressive culture, particular vernacular language. From 'no mistaking' to 'nothing less', her sequencing is her signal of conscious disciplinary failure, her lack of wholly 'ethnographic' intentions in her work, her engagement of the values of modernity as well as her commitment to alternate ways of reading for it and through it.

Rather than betraying Hurston's disciplinary anxieties, *Tell My Horse* exposes modernity as a practice of both fear and desire that the text employs for its narrative and structural conflicts. Hurston creates Haiti as the point of origin for modernity only to expose its messy fictions of race, gender, and political and social 'progress', historically and ideologically. Modernity comes possessed by not just its past, but by its diasporic present, trying to hold on to all of the 'old' narrative strains of self and empire-building in new forms. Modernity, in turn, possesses the present for Hurston's texts, and arrests it into a perpetual failure. Achille Mbembé might locate this seeming stasis as what he calls a mutual 'zombification' of coloniser and colonised, but for *Tell My Horse*, there is much possibility in the 'convivial' relationship between the two.[59] The shared public cultural practices and gendered spaces of the text are where the potential for radical political thought emerges, asymmetrical as the borders around those spaces may be. Foregrounding gendered critiques of charismatic power, Hurston repossesses modernity to make a more difficult diaspora visible, rather than searching for its conceptual cure, through interdisciplinary prose formats. The 'dynamic suggestion' of metaphorical and rhetorical movement, no matter how indelicate the juxtaposition, prepares the field for 'the abrupt and unexpected changes' that characterise black modernity. This modernity pivots on the public, disciplinary and difficult dramas critical to understanding the complexities of race in the first half of the twentieth century, and beyond.

Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' (1934), in Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 75 vols, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 830–46, p. 830.
2. Ibid. p. 830.
3. Of course, that primitive categorisation is often read as an attempt at genuine engagement with vernacular culture or a moment of signifying play with dominant cultural codes in the criticism surrounding Hurston's body of work.
4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).
5. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 60; Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 122–3.
6. An argument that Caribbean thinkers like C. L. R. James have made quite convincingly for some time.
7. Barnor Hesse, 'Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30:4 (2007), pp. 643–63, p. 644.
8. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 301.
9. Vevé A. Clark, 'Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness', in Hortense J. Spillers (ed.), *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 40–61, p. 42.
10. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 40.
11. *Eyes* was written during her time in Haiti.
12. Robert E. Hemenway and Alice Walker, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 248.
13. On the question of *Tell My Horse*'s form and the definition of autoethnography as a genre, see Leif Sorensen, 'Modernity on a Global Stage: Hurston's Alternative Modernism', *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 30:4 (2005), pp. 3–24; Amy Fass Emery, 'The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*', *African American Review*, 39:3 (2005), pp. 327–36.
14. See Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870–1964* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), p. 65; Hazel V. Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston', in Michael Awkward (ed.), *New Essays on Their Eyes were Watching God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 71–93.
15. Prominent African American visitors to Haiti included Frederick Douglass (1893), Du Bois (1944, but with extensive writing about Haiti from the 1920s), James Weldon Johnson (1920) and Langston Hughes (1932).
16. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 74.
17. Amiri Baraka, 'Return of the Native', quoted in James de Jong, 'Viscious

Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 111; de Jongh, 'Viscious Modernism', p. 2. Baraka's term modifies Harlem, not Haiti, in 'Return of the Native'.
18. The Haitian revolution is usually recognised as starting with a slave revolt in 1791, and ending with declared independence on 1 January 1804.
19. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 97.
20. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, p. 131. Scott reads this into the appendix of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, consciously trying to reach against the grain of the main text's discourse of masculinist heroics.
21. The sources are too numerous to list here, but some central texts are John Carlos Rose, 'Opening the Gate to the Other America: The Afro-Caribbean Politics of Zora Neale Hurston's Mules and Men and Tell My Horse', in Utz Riese and Doris Dziwas (eds), *Kontaktzone Amerika: Literarische Verkehrsformen Kultureller Übersetzung* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2000), pp. 109–56; Carby, 'The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk'; the prefaces to Hurston's reprinted texts from *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Kwame Anthony Appiah (eds), *Zora Neale Hurston, Critical Perpectives, Past and Present* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993).
22. Hurston, 'Characteristics', p. 836.
23. Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 5.
24. Patricia E. Chu, 'Modernist (Pre)Occupations: Haiti, Primitivism, and Anticolonial Nationalism', in Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel (eds), *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 170–86, p. 172.
25. Houston Baker begins his essay on black modernity by claiming that: 'Temporally, modernity is always situated before or after the revolution'; though he does not specify 'the' revolution as specifically Haitian, he hints at such in claiming that, in mainstream US culture, said revolution must always be produced as a 'well-passed aberration', in line with both David Scott and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's arguments about the failure of Western history to account for the Haitian revolution in all of its complexity. Houston Baker, Jr, 'Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere', in Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (eds), *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), pp. 264–96, p. 267.
26. Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 3.
27. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, pp. 174–5.
28. Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 1.
29. Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 1.
30. See Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) on reproduced class/colonial hierarchies in voodoo and spirit possession.
31. Edwards, *Charisma*.

32. Houston A. Baker, Jr and Robert B. Stepto, 'Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance', in Lucy Maddox (ed.), *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 261–78.
33. Houston Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 25.
34. Hurston, 'Characteristics', pp. 825–6.
35. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 144.
36. Ibid. p. 144.
37. Ibid. p. 74.
38. Ibid. p. 219.
39. See Judith Butler, *Theories in Subjection: The Psychic Life of Power* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 19.
40. Emery, 'The Zombie In/As the Text', p. 330.
41. See John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rowe, 'Opening the Gate'.
42. Rowe, *Literary Culture*, p. 8.
43. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 81. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston even participates in 'lying contests'.
44. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit*, p. 74.
45. Gates, quoted in Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 298.
46. Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 28.
47. We can think of the 'financially able' qualification to voodoo initiation that I mention earlier in this essay as one example (Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, pp. 174–5).
48. Rowe, 'Opening the Gate'.
49. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 57.
50. And even, you could argue, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in the Eatonville section and through the trial scene's cartography of black and white reception of Janey and Janey's story.
51. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p. 43; original emphasis.
52. Ibid. p. 52.
53. Ibid. p. 53.
54. See Strongman or Tinsley for more on potentially radical reformations of gender normativity within Haitian and Haitian voodoo culture.
55. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, pp. 60–1.
56. Hurston, 'Characteristics', p. 34.
57. Ibid. p. 34.
58. Ibid. p. 34.
59. J.-A. Mbembé, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 139. See also Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).