



# Five Harlem Short Stories by Zora Neale Hurston

## Citation

Carpio, Glenda Rossanna and Werner Sollors. Five Stories by Zora Neale Hurston (includes Introduction). 2010. Amerikastudien/American Studies 55(4): 553-581.

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:34603462>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## Five Harlem Short Stories by Zora Neale Hurston

Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors

“West 139th street at ten p.m. Rich fur wraps tripping up the steps of the well furnished home in the two hundred block. Sedans, coaches, coupes, roadsters. Inside fine gowns and tuxedos, marcel waves and glitter. People who seemed to belong to every race on earth—Harlem’s upper class had gathered there her beauty and chivalry.” Does this sound like Zora Neale Hurston? If you know Hurston only as the Southern folk writer and author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), probably not. Hurston, after all, put on the American literary map her beloved Eatonville, the small Florida town she claimed as her native home, although she was Alabama-born. Her story of her black Eatonville folk heroine Janie Crawford finding her own voice gave Hurston mythical status as an anti-establishment novelist who defied constricting gender roles. And many readers have been as enchanted as Hurston seemed to have been with her idealized vision a “pure Negro town,” a self-sufficient, independent place, a “burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged-individualistic setting,” filled with black pride and self-determinism. Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), and her most frequently anthologized short stories, “Sweat,” “Spunk,” and “The Gilded Six-Bits” further fueled the romance of Eatonville as setting and of Hurston as a Southern folk writer. Yet the excerpt with which we opened was written by Hurston in 1927. It comes from one of five urban stories that Hurston published in the Negro weekly, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in the 1920s and early 1930s, stories that have been all but forgotten, even by Hurston specialists, and that are here republished for the first time.

Of course, it is well known that Hurston did write a small number of short stories in which she represented New York and attempted to capture, with her unmistakable sense of humor, the new urban sensibility and language of migrants to the city. Her “Story in Harlem Slang,” published in 1942 in H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury*, with a glossary and with illustrations by New York theater cartoonist Al Hirschfeld, has long been cited, and an uncut version (“Now You Cookin’ with Gas”) was published posthumously<sup>1</sup>, as was “Book of Harlem,” the story of the Southern migrant Mandolin’s going to “Babylon” (ruled by “tribe Tammany,” a recognizable stand-in for New York), told in the biblical format of numbered verses.<sup>2</sup> But the five

*Pittsburgh Courier* stories provide fuller insight into Hurston's engagement with urban black life in Harlem. Hurston was very much part of the modern ambience she makes vivid in her New York stories, and she was also a much more complex author than is often acknowledged, even by herself.

So why did she downplay the urban aspects of her life and work? Hurston devotes precious little space in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), to the period shortly after her arrival in New York and her matriculation at Barnard—about two pages to be exact—and renders it in a matter-of-fact language: “So I came to New York through *Opportunity*, and through *Opportunity* to Barnard.”<sup>3</sup> Hurston had won an award from *Opportunity* magazine for her story, “Spunk,” about an intense and tragic duel between two men over a woman, as well as for her play *Color Struck*, which focuses on a controversial topic, intraracial prejudice. “Spunk” was selected for Alain Locke's landmark anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). The play would be republished in 1926 as the second entry of *Fire!!*, the literary journal launched by Hurston and other notable Harlem Renaissance figures as a challenge to narrow contemporary notions of race and sexuality, since it included an openly gay contribution by the writer and painter Richard Bruce Nugent. The literary journal existed only in its debut issue and did not have a wide circulation. But it did leave evidence that many of the principal figures of the Harlem Renaissance were critical of the constructed and commercial aspects of a movement that briefly put blackness and Harlem itself in vogue. In fact, Hurston and Wallace Thurman famously coined the term “Niggerati” to satirize African-American artists and intellectuals willing to produce mediocre work that pandered to white patrons eager for exotic representations of blackness and that supported largely bourgeois ideals.

Hurston's urban period was at its peak in the mid-1920s and reminds us that she was a central player in the Harlem Renaissance as well as one of its fiercest critics. Later she consciously distinguished herself from other New Negro writers by focusing on rural black life. Though her training in anthropology at Barnard College and Columbia University never culminated in a dissertation, it did return her to the South to do fieldwork that resulted in the 1927 publication of “Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver,” a strangely plagiarized tale about one of the last slave ships brought to the United States<sup>4</sup>, and in her folklore book *Mules and Men* (1935). Perhaps the field trips she took to the South equipped with the “spy-glass of anthropology” and supported by academic grants and fellowships as well as by financial backing

from Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason (which commenced in 1927), also inspired her to favor Southern settings in the bulk of her later work. That choice brought her recognition, since everyone else seemed to be writing about urban black life, but also criticism (from Richard Wright and others) that she romanticized “the folk” and reinforced stereotypes of black ignorance.

Hurston was also more complicated than the progressive foremother some 1970s feminists wanted her to be. She thought Reconstruction was a deplorable period, favored Booker T. Washington over W. E. B. Du Bois even decades after Washington’s death, and opposed the New Deal; later she also polemicized against *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down the doctrine of separate-but-equal in public schools. Thus, Hurston’s rural folk orientation seemed to go along with her conservative leanings and made some of her views compatible with those of Southern Agrarians like Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate. No wonder writers like Sterling Brown and Ralph Ellison criticized Hurston’s racial politics, and Richard Wright famously complained that she “*voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, John H. McWhorter viewed Hurston favorably as America’s favorite black conservative.<sup>6</sup>

The rediscovered stories, more *Vanity Fair* than Southern Agrarian in tone, do not sound like Wright or Ellison. They rather remind us of authors like Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, and Carl Van Vechten and their sophisticated stories of city courtship and of migration. Some suggest affinities to the party life theme of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Jazz Age.” Others seem to evoke Edith Wharton’s concern with marital choices in the city or ask us to think of Henry James’s interest in the American girl. Three of the five stories employ a biblical mode of storytelling in their diction, their division into verses, and their ending with the exclamation “Selah!,” an equivalent of “Amen” or “so sayeth the Lord” from the Book of Psalms that Hurston also used as tongue-in-cheek valediction in a 1927 letter in which she expressed hope for a large automobile. Since all five stories are set in Harlem, they show us that the matter of Harlem was of great interest to Hurston when she was in her mid-thirties, and ask us to dig deeper into the phase of her life before she became so completely identified with Eatonville.

\*

The five stories that are being republished here will surprise not only general readers and scholars of the Harlem Renaissance but also specialists who have worked on Hurston's biography and on her short stories. In Part One we present "The Book of Harlem," "Monkey Junk," and "The Back Room," which we found browsing the *Pittsburgh Courier*. We came across "The Book of Harlem" when perusing the microfilm edition of that weekly paper for possible cultural contexts of Hurston's years at Barnard and Columbia. At first glance we thought that what appeared in the *Courier* of February 12, 1927 was simply the story that had been published posthumously from a manuscript in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, but we soon recognized that it was such a different version of the known story carrying the same title (without the definite article) that one may regard it as a separate story. We quickly found two more stories in the issues of subsequent weeks (February 19 and March 6, 1927). Checking traditional bibliographical tools and "Google Books" for "Monkey Junk" and "The Back Room" we found no scholarly references at all, and must therefore assume that this introduction constitutes the first published approach to these two stories. When we did a search in the digitized version of the *Courier* we found two more stories, "The Country in the Woman" and "She Rock" (really two different ways of telling a similar story). Checking digital resources for those stories led us to M. Genevieve West's work, which also includes a discussion of "The Book of Harlem," whereupon we immediately contacted her and asked her to take part in this issue.<sup>7</sup> She agreed, and in Part Two, West introduces "The Country in the Woman," and "She Rock." She had come across the *Pittsburgh Courier* stories through the data base *Black Literature, 1827-1940*. To our knowledge not a single one of these five stories has ever been reprinted, with the exception only of "Monkey Junk" which appeared in January 2011 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The coincidental nature of this small rediscovery makes us think that more Hurston texts might well surface in other venues as well as in archival manuscript collections. The fact that Carla Cappetti located, and here introduces, two letters by Hurston to Robert Redfield and to Alan Lomax from 1936 and 1937 that were not widely known and that never before published in their entirety further confirms our suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

### **Part One: "The Book of Harlem," "Monkey Junk," and "The Back Room"**

"The Book of Harlem" is a somewhat funnier version of the posthumously published

story with a similar title, “Book of Harlem.” The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran the story in its magazine section featuring fiction, accompanied it with seven small illustrations, and highlighted it with the blurb “A literary gem, sparkling with wit and originality—brimming with thrills.” It carries the heading “Chapter I.,” suggesting that Hurston may have envisioned it as the beginning of a longer migration tale in the form of a narrative organized by biblical chapters. At first glance “The Book of Harlem” does not seem to differ a great deal from its sibling story. Both stories adhere to mock-biblical storytelling and focus on pleasure-seeking country bumpkins who, loaded with their fathers’ “shekels,” leave their rural towns for Harlem in pursuit of “Shebas of high voltage.” But, in the *Courier* version, Hurston considerably pares down the set up and development of the plot. In “Book of Harlem,” the main protagonist, Mandolin, causes such “a riot” among the women of Harlem when he sheds his hick ways and learns the ways of the “Niggerati,” that he comes to be known as “Panic.” Indeed, he makes all the “damsels and the matrons and the grandmothers” and “all those above 125<sup>th</sup> street” swoon with his learning and *savoir faire*.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in the *Courier* version, where he is known as Jazzbo, the main protagonist does not undergo such a cultural transformation. Instead, Jazzbo merely flashes his fathers’ shekels to achieve the same success that Mandolin has with the ladies of Harlem:

26. And the maiden parked her head upon his shoulder and his mouth flew open and told her all about his father’s shekels, and she loved him . . .

The trick works so well that he repeats it several times with other ladies:

27. Then he thought no more of her and when the night came again, went to another tabernacle of joy and did the same. Thus he did for many nights.

Eventually he tires of the game and seeks a wife among the many ladies he has wooed. But, to keep the lucky lady happy, he buys her the “fur of the mink, and much fine raiment and a sedan of twelve cylinder.” The story, like others included in the group here republished for the first time, focuses on gender relations, satirically portraying women as gold diggers and men as the dupes that fall for their charms. Still, one could argue that the ultimate focus of the story is Hurston’s wit. When Jazzbo’s father advises him against going to Harlem to look for a wife (as does Mandolin’s in “Book of Harlem”) he reminds him of the neighbor’s daughter

Cora, “a damsel of great piety, who wilt bear thee many sons, and moreover, she is a mighty biscuit-cooker before the Lord.” To which Jazzbo replies, “Go to now, wherefore should I marry that drink of boiled water, when in great Babylon there are females that are as a cocktail to the tonsils?” The mock biblical mode in which the story is rendered gives it much of its humor through the juxtaposition of the high and sacred with “low” urban colloquialisms and modern times. As Genevieve West notes, in “Book of Harlem,” Hurston also uses this juxtaposition to issue veiled warnings “to migrants about the temptations of city life.” For instance, Jazzbo refers to Mathew 4:4 when he tells his father, “Behold, man was not made to live by bread alone, but upon every thrill that proceedeth from life.” The end of the verse should read “but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,” and teach the reader the “primacy of the spirit over the body, even in times of great temptation and physical want—a message lost on Jazzbo.”<sup>10</sup> Readers aware of the biblical context would have seen Jazzbo as a humorous but negative example.

“Monkey Junk” also adheres to mock-biblical storytelling to satirize urban divorce, with the duped husband going back to Alabama at the end. Since the *Courier* often added blurbs it is not clear whether “A Satire on Modern Divorce” is Hurston’s own subtitle for the story or the *Courier*’s way of calling attention to it. (Hurston seemed to prefer short titles for her stories and rarely if ever used subtitles.) The story, like that of “The Book of Harlem” and its sibling story, is a classic migrant tale on the country mouse vs. city mouse, rustic yokel vs. city slicker theme. The pseudo-biblical mode in which the story is rendered gives it much of its humor through the juxtaposition of the King James version high and sacred diction with the “low” urban idiom of modern times: “Now, when the trumpets sounded, even the saxophones, then the multitude arose, two by two and stood upon the floor and shook with many shakings.” And such mixed-up proverbial wisdoms as “He that laugheth last is worth two in the bush” and colorful insults like “Go now, and broil thyself an radish” further add to the comedy.

Like many of Hurston’s other works, “Monkey Junk” challenges the feminist mantle. At the center of the story are the foibles of a migrant who is undone not by urban life, as one might expect, but by feminine guile. This is how Hurston announces

the courtship that ends in divorce:

6. And in that same year a maiden gazeth upon his checkbook and she coveted it.

7. Then came she coy and sweet with flattery and he swallowed the bait.

The object of the story's satire is not so much divorce per se but the fact that the woman is able to use her sexuality to get her way, first with her husband and, after milking him for his money and cheating on him, in court:

43. And she gladdened the eyes of the jury and the judge leaned down from his high seat and beamed upon her for verily she was some brown.

44. And she turned soulful eyes about her and all men yearned to fight for her.

45. Then did she testify and cross the knees, even the silk covered joints, and weep. For verily she spoke of great evils visited upon her.

The lady in "Monkey Junk" is decidedly not a feminist heroine. The fact that neither the female schemer nor the doubly duped male are given names contrasts with Hurston's choice of identifying the woman's divorce lawyer as "Miles Paige" — the name of an African American judge in New York's family court system. This raises the possibility that Hurston's story may be satirizing an actual case from the 1920s that readers of the *Courier* would have remembered when the story was published. Placed together, "The Book of Harlem," and "Monkey Junk," tell a tale of wooing and marriage that ends with divorce and provide snapshots of a migrant's coming-of-age story with feminine seduction and pride as the biggest tests of character, tests that the protagonists fail. In "The Back Room," Hurston explores similar themes from the perspective of an urbane female protagonist.

"The Back Room" appeared in the *Courier's* magazine section around a large image of the actress Freddie Washington and was blurbed by the editors as "A Gripping Story of the Life of New York Society from Twilight to Dawn and a Woman who had reached the 'Dangerous Age.'" It is as fully immersed in the most sophisticated 1920s upper-crust Harlem party life as any story previously known from the Harlem Renaissance. It contains numerous allusions to classic and contemporary literature while also creating a fresh, vivid, and stylistically impressive "slice-of-life" effect that makes the reader curious whether the characters in the story were drawn from life. With the story's focus on a (still) marriageable heroine it is difficult not to think of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905), who, like Hurston's "Lilya Barkman, born Lillie Barker," but more tragically so, was unlucky in pursuing



courtships and marital options. The fact that Lilya had her youthful image captured in a large oil painting evokes Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. The large portrait in Lilya's back room provides the central image of the story, as a reminder of her youth and beauty and as a worrisome contrast with her own mirror image now, at age thirty-eight. The way the painting is described in the story, it seems like an uncanny anticipation of James A. Porter's award-winning "Woman Holding a Jug" (generally dated between 1930 and 1933), all the more so since Bill Cameron identifies the painter as "Porter David" and tells Lilya: "When you grow old, if you ever do, you can take pleasure in showing the world that you had the world in a jug once." The subject of Porter's "Woman Holding a Jug" bears a certain resemblance to photographic portraits of Hurston, and further descriptions of the painting in Hurston's story largely match the features of Porter's figure (apart from Lilya's long hair): "From the canvas a pair of long, full-lashed eyes, a little mystic a little glowing, looked everywhere and nowhere out of a creamy face with a metallic glow beneath the soft downiness. Europe and Africa warred in her face, a grecian nose above a full, luscious mouth with a blue-black cloud of curly hair falling well below the waist." This suggests the possibility that Porter's portrait was finished as early as 1927 (when he was still a student at Howard) or that he painted it in response to Hurston's story. The story leaves the primary setting of Lilya's parlor and the "back room" of its title for a party at the Brooks's where Lilya's scheming begins to backfire and returns to Lilya's back room at the end, when it has become irrefutably apparent that she has lost her gamble, and when even her own youthful portrait seems to mock her and say: "I am youth, and beauty. I know nothing, feel nothing, except the things that belong to me." Lilya has lost all prospects for marriage in the story Hurston published, ironically in the very year when she got married to Herbert Sheen. If Lilya is partly an autobiographic projection of Hurston (both also lied notoriously and very dramatically about their age), and Porter David is a stand-in for James A. Porter, then might Bill Cameron, Bob Magee, and Mary Ann perhaps also be thinly veiled representations of personages from Pittsburgh and Harlem? And since Smalls Paradise, where some of the party-goers are headed in the story, was a famous Harlem nightclub at 2294½ Seventh Avenue at 135<sup>th</sup> street, could the Brooks's whose party is at 139<sup>th</sup> street, also be based on well-known Harlemites?

Whatever may have been the real background of "The Back Room," Hurston draws both the psychology of her protagonist and the social atmosphere of Harlem

nightlife with great verbal verve, in third-person narration close to Lilya's point of view, in elaborate dialogues punctured with vivid expressions like "Dog in the manger" and "Heads I win, tails I grab it," and in prose-poem-like, verb-less, urban-staccato, art-deco sentences that give the reader the illusion of being an immediate participant.

Twelve o'clock. Formality had been rubbed off, everybody was being their own age or under. Everybody being modern. Cigarettes burning like fireflies on a summer night. A Charleston contest with a great laundry show. Hey! Hey! Powder gone, but a lively prettiness taking its place. A wealthy woman in the foolish forties giggling on the shoulder of a twenty-year old. He is amusing himself by giving her what he calls a good sheiking as they dance around. They are bumping and she is panting a laugh at every bump. Business man near fifty dancing with a sweet young thing with a short dress and her knees roughed.

Or:

"Crowd grows noisier. Cocktails aplenty. Punch bowl always full. Good food, good liquor, pretty women, goodlooking men, and Lilya was in the center of it all with Bill, laughing like the rest, doing like the rest, and keeping what she had seen that evening in the looking glass hidden way down beneath her laughter."

It is passages like these that make the reader both happy at the discovery of "The Back Room" and sad that Hurston did not write a novel-length work of Harlem fiction (or that no such manuscript has been found), for she had such a remarkable ability to bring exterior reality and interior emotions to life in the interaction between character and setting. In addition to being everything she has been to so many readers, Zora Neale Hurston also could have become *the* Harlem novelist of the 1920s.

## **Part Two: "The Country in the Woman" and "She Rock"**

M. Genevieve West

When "The Country in the Woman" appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in March of 1927, biographer Robert Hemenway tells us, Zora Neale Hurston had already left New York to embark upon her first trip south as a folklorist collecting under the guidance of her mentor, renowned anthropologist and Columbia Professor Franz

Boas (82). The basic tale recounted in both “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock” of Caroline, her philandering husband and the axe appears four times in Hurston’s writings, including the two versions reprinted here. Hurston’s study with Boas and her interest in folklore may have encouraged her to tell--and revise--the story for new audiences. Hurston’s oral performances were legendary in Harlem (84), and as any folklorist knows, repetition and revision allow folklore to thrive.<sup>11</sup> Rural versions of the story set in Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville, Florida, appear in “The Eatonville Anthology” (1926), where the tale is incomplete, likely cut short in the editorial process, and in Hurston’s fraught autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock,” which appeared in 1933, transpose the tale from Hurston’s more typical Florida settings to bustling Harlem during the Great Migration. Like most of Hurston’s other migration fiction, “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock” humorously treat the impact of urban migration on romantic relationships.<sup>12</sup> The tales juxtapose dichotomies facing migrants relocating from the rural South to a more populous, sophisticated urban Harlem: rural/urban, male/female, sacred/profane, public/private, and sexual freedom/monogamy. After migrants physically left what one character calls “the basement” of the rural South, they faced a world of New Negro middle-class norms, norms that Hurston’s male characters in these tales embrace while her female protagonists reject them. Beneath the humor of the inevitable conflicts between husbands and wives, these tensions quietly caution against abandoning the agency afforded women in the rural South for the lady-like passivity of New Negro womanhood.

Hurston’s autobiography, while problematic as a factual resource, may disclose her inspiration for the Caroline character: family folklore.<sup>13</sup> Hurston tells readers of her autobiography that Aunt Caroline Potts’ “side-splitting” responses to her husband’s philandering were legendary sources of amusement in Eatonville (575). On one occasion, for instance, Hurston tells readers that Aunt Caroline pushed a rival from the church steps, spit on the bare buttocks revealed by her rival’s fall, and with her shoe ground in the spittle (575). The story that Hurston repeats, however, is that of Caroline and her axe. In every version, Caroline’s philandering husband (whose name varies) gives his paramour a gift, which triggers a humorous, violent, and deliberately performative public response that ends the extra-marital affair. In the rural versions a gift of shoes (specifically

oxfords) demands response from Caroline; in the urban versions, a fur coat prompts her to intervene. While the versions of Caroline's antics reprinted here follow the same basic plot, there are significant differences between them, most obviously their time-lines, their narrative structures, and their sources of humor. These seemingly small changes yield stories that illuminate different aspects of the migratory experience, the characters, and their contexts.

"The Country in the Woman" opens with Caroline publically confronting husband Mitch and "side-gal" Lucy Taylor on a Harlem sidewalk. Talking smart, for the benefit of all who have gathered around the threesome, Caroline "let[s] out," "Maybe dat hussy think she's a big hen's biddy but she don't lay no gobbler eggs. She might be a big cigar, but I sho kin smok her. The very next time she gits in my way, I'll kick her clothes up round her neck like a horse collar. She'll think lightenin' struck her all right, now."<sup>14</sup> Caroline's idiom is predictably "delectable" to the crowd watching and creates humor for readers. The rural imagery of hens and horse collars foreshadows the weapon she will use to end Mitch's extramarital relationship. The situation becomes more humorous when the narrator comments on the scene to create dramatic irony and highlight the performative element of Caroline's behavior. The narrator tells readers, "No one besides her husband believed she was really jealous. She had an uncultivated sense of humor." Rather than being a stereotypical jealous wife, Caroline plays, and in doing so, she performs at various times for husband Mitch, passers-by on the street, and Mitch's cadre of pool-hall companions.

In contrast, "She Rock" has a longer time frame and uses the parodic biblical structure of chapters and verses also found in "The Book of Harlem" and "Monkey Junk." In the biblical version, the plot opens in Sanford, Florida, prior to the couple's urban migration. Readers learn that Oscar, Caroline's husband in this version, migrates not to escape economic hardship, racism, rape, or certain death--as do other protagonists typically found in Harlem Renaissance migration fiction--but in a failed attempt to escape his "rock hard" wife!<sup>15</sup> Rather than incorporating the folk idiom found in the 1927 version, here Hurston humorously blends archaic biblical language and sentence structure with colloquialisms from and references to the 1920s. For instance, when Caroline confronts Oscar about the "mouth paint" upon his collar, he responds, "This be great Babylon, not Sanford, moreover thou are no tea for my fever, neither are thou a B. C. for my

headache.” The use of *thou* and *Babylon*, to refer to New York, clearly invokes biblical discourse. By referring to the traditional use of various teas to treat fevers or illnesses, Oscar colloquially insults his wife, essentially telling her that she fails to satisfy his passions. Informing Caroline that she is not a B.C. headache powder sends the same message: Caroline cannot give Oscar what he needs, and thus he persists in “put[ting] off the ways of Sanford, Florida, and hearken[s] unto Harlem.” Hurston’s unlikely combination of discourses itself derives from black Southern folk culture. Daniel Spagnuolo, building upon the work of John Lowe, perceptively suggests that the clashing of formal and informal, high and low, sacred and profane, serious and humorous, biblical and contemporary found in all of Hurston’s biblical tales mimics the role and voice of the African American folk preacher. These men bridged the distance between biblical text and contemporary times each week on the pulpit. Hurston understood the dichotomies contained in the life of the black folk preacher who had to be “neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod” but a “human being and poet” in order “to succeed in a Negro pulpit” (qtd. in Kaplan 298), and those tensions surface in the language of “She Rock.”

Another notable difference in these urban Caroline tales is that the narrator of “She Rock” allows readers to follow along with Caroline as she and her axe retrieve Oscar from his love nest. This scene--unique among the Caroline tales--allows readers to see the altercation between wife, husband and side-gal. The other versions of the tale create dramatic tension by placing readers in the position of Caroline’s audience of community men. Without this violent confrontation, the humorous climax occurs when the men see Caroline proudly parading the spoils of victory. When readers go knocking with Caroline and her axe, the climax shifts to the apartment as Oscar slips down the fire escape and the other woman faces Caroline alone. Although Caroline has interceded in past affairs, the husbands in both urban versions (wrongly) assume that in Harlem they can conceal their behaviors among the busy streets or that Caroline has adopted the urban norm of ignoring her husband’s affairs. As Caroline quietly waits for the perfect moment to intercede, Oscar foolishly rejoices that “Babylon hath confounded the mighty and laid waste the strength of the rock.” Scholar Hugh Davis, in his treatment of “She Rock,” points out the “implied contrast between urban sophistication,” which Oscar wishes to adopt, and the “rural backwardness” Caroline maintains (17).

Despite pressures to conform, however, Caroline refuses to “broaden” her mind by allowing her husband’s extramarital affairs to proceed without intervention. Instead, she embraces rural femininity which grants her a voice, an axe and a mind of her own.

Like the other Hurston stories reprinted here, “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock” remained hidden for years amid the pages of a weekly newspaper. Now back in view, they enrich our understanding of Hurston as a writer, one who explored the African American urban experience, as well as the world of rural Florida folk. Complex despite their relative brevity, these biting funny tales capture a voice and perspective of Harlem that is uniquely Hurston’s. In biblical parody and in the idiom of the urban migrant, the stories complicate our knowledge of migration fiction, which so often ends with dire consequences for urban migrants, and they invite fresh analysis to better situate Hurston and her writings within the Harlem Renaissance.

## Works Cited

- Abrahams, Roger. "Negotiating Respect." *Women and Folklore: Images and Genres*. Ed. Claire R. Farrer. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1986.
- Fisher, Rudolph. "City of Refuge." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. New York: Atheneum, 1992.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford U P, 1996.
- Davis, Hugh. "'She Rock': A 'New' Story by Zora Neale Hurston," *The Zora Neale Hurston Forum* 18 (2004): 14-20.
- Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston A Literary Biography*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. Ed. Cheryl Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Muttsy." 1926. *The Complete Stories of Zora Neale Hurston*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. 41-56.
- Kaplan, Carla, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston A Life in Letters*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- Lowe, John. *Jump at the Sun the Cosmic Comedy of Zora Neale Hurston*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1997.
- Rodgers, Lawrence. *Canaan Bound the African-American Great Migration Novel*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1997.
- Spagnuolo, Daniel. "Paraphernalia of Conjure: Hurston and the Folk Preacher." 2009. Unpublished Paper.
- Toelken, Barre. *The Dynamics of Folklore Revised and Expanded Edition*. Logan: Utah State U Press, 1996.
- Walker, Pierre A. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Post-Modern Self in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," *African American Review* 32.3 (1998): 387-99.

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Complete Stories by Zora Neale Hurston*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke (New York: Harper, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Complete Stories*. Both stories are also included in Zora Neale Hurston, *Novels and Stories*. Cheryl Wall, ed. (New York: Library of America: Penguin Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Novels and Stories*. Cheryl Wall, ed. (New York: Library of America: Penguin Books, 1995). 682.

<sup>4</sup> As Robert Hemenway noted, Cudjo's story, though it pretends to be the result of Hurston's own field work and was published in Carter Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* (October, 1927—in the same year in which four of the five stories presented here first came out), the text is largely plagiarized from Emma Langdon Roche's *Historic Sketches of the Old South* (1914), with Poleete's name changed to Cudjo. As late as 1944, Hurston published "The Last Slave Ship" another time in Mencken's *American Mercury* where her "Story in Harlem Slang" had previously appeared.

<sup>5</sup> "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses* (October 5, 1937).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/05/132674087/the-root-zora-neale-hurston-was-a-conservative>. Accessed January 16, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Hurston from Kingston, Jamaica, to Robert Redfield, September 17, 1936, and Hurston from Port-au-Prince, Haiti to Alan Lomax, June 4, 1937; both at the University of Chicago Library.

<sup>9</sup> Hurston, *Novels and Stories*, 980, 983.

<sup>10</sup> West, *Hurston*, 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Toelken's introduction provides discussion of change or revision in folkloric transmission (*passim*).

<sup>12</sup> Hurston's 1926 story "Muttsy" is exceptional in its treatment of migration and provides a much more serious look at the threats facing those relocating to Harlem.

<sup>13</sup> *Dust Tracks* often conceals more than it reveals. Walker provides an excellent overview of concerns about the volume.

<sup>14</sup> Talking smart is a presentational strategy which may be found in a range of situations between men and women. Abrahams explains, it ranges "[f]rom the totally public badinage in which the interactants entertain on-lookers while they establish joking as the basis of their relationship to the dyadic interaction between two already deeply involved participants in which the smart talk is intended to produce strategic advantage" (76).

<sup>15</sup> Rudolph Fisher's "City of Refuge" is often cited as an example of migration fiction from the Harlem Renaissance. For discussions of migration fiction see Rodgers and Griffin.