

**THE PREACHER IN THE TEXT:
ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND THE HOMILETICS OF LITERATURE**

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Introduction: “Speakerly” Texts

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that sustained attention to the vernacular language of African Americans serves as the best framework for approaching the study of African-American literature. Conventional understandings of literary representation, he asserts, should not apply to the works of black authors in the same way they do for so-called canonical writers. He grounds this distinction in a cultural legacy of orality, which originated in West Africa, survived middle passage and was forged in the cultural apartheid of American slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Whereas for Gates, the central orientation of “Western” literature is *textual*, preserved and transmitted via the written word, African-American literature is oriented toward spoken, *oral* transmission.

Along these lines, he classifies Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a “speakerly text,” which he defines as “a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition” (181). Gates situates the novel’s meaning not only in *what* is spoken but also, and perhaps more importantly, in *how* it is spoken. Therefore, any attempt to understand Hurston’s craft should attend to the rhetorical orientation of this speakerly voice. Hurston’s textual representation of Gates’s

“oral literary tradition” emerges from the social structure and aesthetic sensibility of African-American culture. To accomplish this, she relies upon anthropological fieldwork that she conducted throughout her native Florida, exemplifying Gates’s thesis but ultimately going beyond his portrayal of *Their Eyes* as a “speakerly” text.

Gates’s treatment of canonical and African-American vernacular modes of literary representation takes into consideration a wealth of cultural antecedents: African and American folklore, slave narratives, street slang and humor such as “the dozens,” and vernacular music such as the blues, among others. Curiously, Gates ignores what may well comprise the richest of vernacular traditions in African-American culture: preachers and their sermons. Because their location between divine calling and human depravity renders them ripe for complex moral conflict, the figure of the preacher appears frequently in American literature. For example, preachers like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Arthur Dimmesdale (in *The Scarlet Letter*) and Sinclair Lewis’s Elmer Gantry (from *Elmer Gantry*) appear as troubling examples of all-too-human ambiguity—if not outright treachery.

Beyond such Manichean moral struggles, however, preachers contribute to our understanding of literature in myriad ways. They interpret “the Word” and serve as tellers-of-tales, relating ancient narratives to contemporary contexts. Preachers figure most appropriately in Gates’s vernacular, “speakerly” theory because they are primarily rhetorical figures. African-American preachers in rural and urban settings alike have given voice to millions dispossessed of their own voices. Politicians emulate their cadences; singers vamp upon their phrasing. If Gates is correct in his suggestion that African-American vernacular culture lacks a central textual authority, traditional black

preaching—the “preacherly” voice—supplies the foundation from which a culturally authoritative speakerly rhetoric emanates. If so, we must acknowledge that the voice of Gates’s “speakerly” text has significant preacherly antecedents.

By the 1930s, preachers and their sermons came to occupy a prominent position in Hurston’s anthropological research and writing, as well as in her fiction. That her own father was a preacher makes this all the more understandable. Through an examination of her anthropological work in the context of her first two novels, I suggest that, beyond providing a cultural frame of reference for Hurston the novelist, her anthropological treatments of preachers and preaching reflect a preacherly rhetoric central to the speakerly nature of her fiction. Further, I argue that preaching and homiletics provide useful tools for literary criticism that have been long neglected, but that were prominent in Hurston’s broader literary worldview. I suggest that these considerations deserve renewed attention, that awareness of the preacherly voice as a vital component of American and African-American literature offers much to religious and literary scholarship as well as to broader understanding of the vernacular mode of American culture.

Preachers and Preaching in Hurston’s Anthropology

Of Hurston’s three published volumes of anthropological writing, two deal directly with the United States, particularly the American South: *Mules and Men* (1935), a narrative collection, and *The Sanctified Church* (1981), a posthumous edition assembling various essays first published between the late-1920s and the early-1940s.¹

¹ A third collection, *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1938) contains only her work with Caribbean sources. So does the second half of *Mules and Men*. A portion of Hurston’s field research was published as *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

As one might expect, the books differ starkly both in their respective treatments of anthropological material and in the goals that they aim to achieve.

The essays in *The Sanctified Church* explore the semiotic complexities of black churches through their worship, interrogated and understood as cultural performance. Hurston suggests that the Negro “self” is permeated by a vital sense of “drama,” that expressions of meaning “rich in metaphor and simile” are consistently depicted in intricate and ubiquitous interaction rituals transpiring in the course of every day living (49-50). The expression of self bears significance only insofar as it is thrust into the context of social interaction through a community.

This interplay between individual and community colors her fundamental understanding of culture. Negro “originality,” for example, serves in her estimation not as a “return to original sources,” or even as an expression of the avant-garde, but rather as “the modification of ideas,” the re-interpretation of extant material. Such a mimetic impulse marks the “Negro” apart from “other racial groups” including whites or American Indians, and apart from what she calls “a [black] middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro”—an attribute exemplified by their unwillingness to interact with lower-class Negroes—and thus are filled with “self-despisement” (58-60).

Hurston’s understanding of cultural revision, taking place through mimesis as effectively a form of collective creative expression, resonates in her discussions of the formal aspects of liturgy and homiletics in black churches:

Beneath the seeming informality of religious worship there is a set formality. Sermons, prayers, moans and testimonies have their definite forms. The individual may hang as many new ornaments upon the traditional forms as he likes, but the audience would be disagreeably surprised if the form were abandoned. Any new and original elaboration is welcomed, however, and this brings out the fact that all religious

expression among Negroes is regarded as art. . . . It is . . . a form of expression that people are not accustomed to think of as art (83).

Hurston grounds artistic “expression” in the routine interplay between individuals and the broader groups to which they are bound. Church liturgy ritualizes these “informal” expressive encounters between individual and community bodies. The historical iterations of these rituals then serve to formalize “tradition,” defined as the cultural framework that the individual must negotiate with a stylistic elegance that individualizes the formal limitations that tradition prescribes. Public prayer, for example, enables a single speaker to “hang . . . new ornaments” upon the “tradition” that is embodied by the congregation as a whole, as the speaker’s unique supplication follows established forms. Language that is performed liturgically negotiates the figurative line that both demarcates between and joins together the individual and the community in a social context.

Whereas the laity (usually *laymen*) speak the prayers in Hurston’s account, the preacher’s sermon follows a similar model of embodiment: it ritualizes the struggle between the impulse driving individual expression and the traditional forms that unite the community. This kind of sermon is organic, a living force. Its vitality, signaled by the preacher’s transformation of his very life-giving breath into a percussive linguistic device (“ha!”), punctuates meaning and deepens the liturgical power of the sermon’s performance (82). The preacher’s performance embodies his individuality. The words he speaks, the themes through which he moves, the imagery he employs, however, are grounded firmly in terms dictated by community and its liturgical tradition.

According to Hurston the congregational community “bears up” the individual preacher by emphasizing his preaching-points through musical chant and low singing, riffing upon the themes or even the biblical allusions invoked by the sermon. She

emphasizes that this chant “must grow out of what has been said and done: ‘Whatever point he come out on, honey,’” says one of her sources, “‘you bear him up on it’” (104).

Hurston elaborates on this idea elsewhere in her essays:

For instance, if the preacher should say: ‘Jesus will lead us,’ the congregation would bear him up with: ‘I’m got my ha-hands in my Jesus’ hands.’ If in prayer or sermon, the mention is made of nailing Christ to the cross: ‘Didn’t Calvary tremble when they nailed him down’ (82).

Thus, the congregation, embodying community, anchors the individual sermonic motif to the community’s understanding of tradition in two ways. First, it interprets the preacher’s words through the juxtaposition of singular fragments of meaning. His postulation, “Jesus will lead us,” expresses a cluster of possible meanings—not all synonymous. The congregation’s response, “I’m got my ha-hands in my Jesus’ hands,” limits these possibilities and insists on the preacher taking this limitation into account in the next improvisational cadence that he speaks. The call inspires a response, and the response renegotiates the terms of the preceding call. The community thereby directs the preacher’s individuality, forcing him to make semiotic choices that drive the trajectory of his sermon according to the interpretive hermeneutic of his audience. At the same time, the preacher embodies Hurston’s understanding of “originality,” because in this performance he must imagine new interpretations of familiar material in order to adapt a limited cluster of theological narratives and symbols to the endless variety of circumstances that a community may confront.

Scholars of homiletics call this act of interpretation “exegeting the congregation.” Congregational exegesis, as such, understands the role of the preacher to resemble that of the cultural anthropologist, “studying and interpreting . . . congregational life in order to gain greater understanding of congregational subcultural identity,” driven by the

congregation's own *Sitz im Leben* (Tisdale, 56-7). Thus preaching becomes an existential performance of "local theology," marking the *kerygmatic* integration of the narrative of one text (the congregational community) with that of another (the *ur-text* of Christian theology, or the Gospel): "The preacher is also charged with the [imaginative] task of . . . bringing biblical text, church tradition, and congregational context together into one proclamation of local theology and folk art that is integrative and capable of capturing the imaginations of its hearers" (Tisdale 93). This is the preacher's exegetical responsibility.

Yet the preacher's congregational exegesis is not one-sided, and as such the preacher cannot go too far a-field in his interpretive imagination. The second way in which the congregation anchors the individuality of the preacher to tradition returns to the notion of liturgy as a metaphor for rituals of interaction. Social interactions are governed by accepted codes of conduct, organized by manners in much the same way that worship is organized by liturgical "traditions."² The preacher's sermon must adhere to acknowledged forms iterated through biblical or pseudo-biblical imagery that enable the congregation to reciprocate by bearing up the preacher. Not to do so is, in the terms of this comparison, "bad manners," an affront to the implicitly accepted give-and-take that Hurston understands to transpire between the individual and the community in a liturgical context.

The claim that preaching ritualizes social interaction is illustrated even more clearly in the reception of a preacher who refuses to adhere to the sanctified tradition of preaching. According to Hurston, the sanctified church, which she both discusses as an anthropologist and creates as a novelist, originated in part as a reaction against the rise of

² Flannery O'Connor offers this parallel between liturgy and manners in the essays collected in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

liberal Protestantism among upwardly mobile African Americans in the early twentieth century. Seeking “respectability,” the black middle class adopted “the white man’s religious ways,” wherein, among other things, the sermon becomes a “lecture” (103). While whites presumably know no better than to embrace such dry and deficient modes of preaching, “the Negro [preacher] who imitates the whites comes in for spitting scorn” (106-7).

On a semiotic level, this liturgical reaction is not entirely unjustified. If the sermonic event embodies social interaction rituals, then the introduction of a racial dynamic signals a radical moment of semiotic disjuncture. Ritualizing one actor as “white” (in this case it is the preacher) while the other (the congregation) is ritualized as black carries troubling resonances. The ritual shifts from one rooted in harmony—or at least in cooperative antagonism—between individual and community to one characterized by the racial dynamic of its given time and place (here early twentieth-century Florida—one overwhelmingly comprised of violent apartheid). The move away from a “sanctified” tradition to a tradition resembling “white” liberal Protestantism plays itself out in a destructive metaphorical relationship—one of racism and even ritualized race-violence.³

Finally, we should consider the text of a sermon by C.C. Lovelace, a sanctified preacher, from *The Sanctified Church* (95-102). Through this sermon Hurston attempts a textual representation of an oral performance, placing special emphasis not only on the breathing technique (“ha!”), but also on the poetics of the sermon:

Jesus was ‘sleep on a pillow in de rear of de boat

³ See John Michael Spencer, “The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance,” *African American Review* 30:3 (Autumn, 1996): 453-60. Spencer sees “an institutionalization of the [Harlem] Renaissance in the black church and that this institutionalization came in the form of the social gospel movement” (453).

And de dynamic powers of nature become disturbed
 And de mad winds broke de heads of de western drums
 And fell down on de Lake of Galilee
 And buried themselves behind de gallopin waves
 And de white-caps marbilized themselves like an army
 And walked out like soldiers goin to battle
 And de zig-zag lightning
 Licked out her fiery tongue
 And de flying clouds
 Threw their wings in the channels of the deep
 And bedded de waters like a road-plow
 And faced de current of de chargin billows
 And de terrific bolts of thunder—they bust in de clouds
 And de ship begin to reel and rock
 God A'mighty!
 And one of de disciples called Jesus
 "Master!! Carest thou not that we perish?"
 And He arose
 And de storm was in its pitch
 And de lightnin played on His raiments as He stood on the prow
 of the boat
 And placed His foot upon the neck of the storm
 And spoke to the howlin' winds
 And de sea fell at his feet like a marble floor
 And de thunders went back in their vault
 Then He set down on de rim of de ship
 And took the hooks of His power
 And lifted de billows in His lap
 And rocked de winds to sleep on His arm
 And said 'Peace be still.'
 And de Bible says there was a calm (99-100).

In Hurston's hands, Lovelace's cadences resemble poetry. The first word of each line is capitalized. Rhythmic clauses, through clever enjambment, carry over into the next line. The only consistent punctuation marks are preacherly interjections such as "ha!" and "No!," not illustrated in the citation above but prominent in Hurston's transcript nonetheless. Otherwise, Hurston relies upon the natural caesura at the end of a phrase to indicate a new independent clause. While she does deliberately endow Lovelace's sermon with these literary ornamentations, Hurston's presentation essentially qualifies as a

written transcript of an oral performance—uncontextualized and presumably, as is the case throughout *The Sanctified Church*, an “objective” artifact of scientific anthropological inquiry.

In many ways, *Mules and Men* stands as the antithesis of the work assembled in *The Sanctified Church*. Consisting entirely of stories Hurston gathered in and around Eatonville, it is an anthology held together by a pseudo-fictional narrative detailing her time spent living among the locals, collecting stories from neighbors she knew in childhood. The only “objective” or “scientific” elements of the narrative reside in its didactic commentary on the social context of storytelling, cleverly woven into the telling of her own “story”:

It was a hilarious night with a pinch of everything social mixed with the story-telling. Everybody ate ginger bread; some drank the buttermilk provided and some provided coon dick for themselves. Nobody guzzled it—just took it in social sips.

But they told stories enough for a volume by itself. . . . Some were European folk-tales undiluted, like Jack and the Beanstalk. Others had slight local variations, but Negro imagination is so facile that there was little need for outside help. A’nt Hagar’s son, like Joseph, put on his many-colored coat and paraded before his brethren and every man there was a Joseph.

Steve Nixon was holding class meeting across the way at St. Lawrence Church and we could hear the testimony and the songs. So we began to talk about church and preachers (19-20).

Rather than analyzing the setting or even transcribing a disembodied sermon as she did in *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston paints the scene. She includes vital information for understanding the context of “story swapping” and the conditions that may cause stories to arise, but reveals this information through narrative, telling the story of the telling of a story. As a result, *Mules and Men* serves less as an anthology and more as a “disclosed” narrative.

Several stories about churches and preachers appear in *Mules and Men*. The first concerns a man who believes he was called to preach. After a decade on the job, however, he has still not saved a single soul. Troubled, he returns to his praying ground to discover that what he thought was the voice of God's calling had been, in fact, a braying mule (21-2). A second story concerns an outstanding guest preacher at a "split-off" church whose congregation is so contrary that they refuse to bear him up in the proper sanctified style. They simply stare at him blankly as he preaches. At long last, when the congregation refuses to participate on the final night of his two-week stand, the evangelist has the sexton lock the door. He brandishes a ".44 Special" with explicit instructions: "Ah say bow down!" The congregation complies as the preacher fires shots over their heads and escapes through a window—proof indeed that there is more than one way to "exegete" a congregation (22-3). In the third story, a stranger arrives in town with two women in tow. The townspeople mistake him for a bootlegger and possibly a pimp. They begin shouting out liquor orders, to which the stranger responds by reaching into his bag and, with great suspense, drawing out not a bottle, but a Bible. He then preaches a sermon on "Adam's rib," "de woman that was taken from man [Genesis 2:21]" (139-42). After one of the women sings a song, the trio takes up a collection and heads off—presumably to the next town (142).

While Hurston does not interpret these examples in *Mules and Men*, it is interesting to consider them within the context of her essays in *The Sanctified Church*. The narratives offer a subversive characterization of the preacher and what sets him apart from his broader social context. Far from depicting these preachers in the role of distinguished men of the community, interpreters of God's word and presumably models

of virtue, these stories cast a thin line of differentiation between the preacher and a buffoon, the preacher and the armed outlaw, or the preacher and a bootlegger.

Furthermore, through these examples Hurston pairs the tools of the preacherly trade with deliberately suggestive and even sacrilegious doubles. God is an ass—stubborn, ill tempered, and half-bred. The sermon becomes a firearm: deadly, explosive, a purveyor of *kerygmatic* justice and an equalizer before which all should bow down. Finally, the Bible, representing the word of God, becomes an intoxicating poison, one capable of making people howl, shout, or generally “act out,” signifying a fine line between religious ecstasy and public drunkenness. Hurston’s itinerant evangelist, one might say, bootlegs not whiskey but the Word.

These critical metaphors for God, preaching, and religion are founded as well upon the social ritual inherent in Hurston’s treatment of sanctified liturgy. Each one represents a common breach of the manners that govern interaction rituals. Anti-social behavior may stem from one’s personality, making one “stubborn as a mule.” The gun manifests an extremely potent example of power and revenge, either enacting or reacting to some interpersonal violation. Finally, alcohol distorts social relationships, subverts the mutuality that must stand between individual actors in order to assure common ground. The community generates and repeats these subversive metaphors as reminders of the ways in which social reality is intertwined with its traditional metaphors and rituals. The extreme blessing of sanctification pairs with the curse of fallenness, joined by a boundary serving both as a line of demarcation and a point of convergence. The anthropological role of the sermon for Hurston, then, is as a ritual embodying *both* the ideal social relationship between the individual and the community *and* its treacherously close

proximity to the location where things begin to fall apart.

The Sermon in Hurston's Novels

Given Hurston's anthropological understanding of the sermon, wherein ideal forms of community mediate individual expression founded upon the possibility of human conflict, it is not surprising that she would seek to integrate the themes, language, and activity of the sermonic event into her fiction. Though written sequentially, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represent radically different visions of the sermon as an element of literary narrative. The results vary as well.

Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), Hurston's first novel, follows the life of John Pearson, the son of an enslaved woman and her master, reared on a post-bellum plantation in Alabama before he moves to Eatonville, Florida and becomes a preacher of regional renown. Prodigiously talented as an orator, John is plagued by his weakness for whiskey and women—a self-destructive tendency that ruins one marriage and forces him into a second, unhappy one. He remains in constant danger of compromising his career. Finally, faced with the fallout of his wicked ways, in risk of being voted out of his pastorate at Eatonville's Zion Hope church, John delivers a sermon on the wounded martyrdom of Jesus (174-81). This sermon is, in fact, Hurston's transcription of C.C. Lovelace's sermon, cut somewhat shorter than in *The Sanctified Church*. Otherwise it remains unaltered. The twelve representative lines from *Jonah's Gourd Vine* cited here coincide almost exactly with Lovelace's sermon cited above, albeit with six minor differences including three apostrophe changes, two changes in capitalization, and one shift in verb tense:

Jesus was sleep on a pillow in de rear of de boat
And de dynamic powers of nature became disturbed

And de mad winds broke de heads of de Western drums
 And fell down on de lake of Galilee
 And buried themselves behind de gallopin' waves
 And de white-caps marbilized themselves like an army
 And walked out like soldiers goin' to battle
 And de zig-zag lightning
 Licked out her fiery tongue
 And de flying clouds
 Threw their wings in the channels of the deep
 And bedded de waters like a road-plow. . . . (178)

In preaching this sermon, John wins back the confidence of his congregation (who bear him up “continually” while he preaches). However, upon pronouncing “the final Amen” he walks down from the pulpit and out the door, effectively resigning his post and “leaving stupefaction in his wake” (181). Redeemed, he finds love and a stable marriage with a faithful widow and seeks to atone for his wicked life. But he succumbs to temptation one last time. Following an indiscretion with a much younger woman, he drives his car toward home “but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward,” is struck by a train and killed (200).

Critics have noted that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is very much a first novel. Whereas Hurston's talent is evident, in the end her execution does not succeed because of “transitions that jog [and] a little too much “local color”” (xiv). Furthermore, her attempts to integrate her anthropological research into the narrative fall short because “her eloquent commentary stands full-blown and self-contained, interrupting her narrative flow” (xiv). A reader is left with the impression that Hurston was determined to find a vehicle for her fieldwork and wound up trying too hard to make it fit. That she would include the Lovelace sermon wholesale suggests that she has constructed a story around the materials she had on hand; the obviousness of John's death by the “very” train he (with C. C. Lovelace) foreshadows in his sermon twenty pages earlier (“I heard de

whistle of de damnation train / Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo goin' to hell" [180-1]) is evidence of Hurston's over-determination. Two further examples clarify this tendency.

The first occurs in the midst of John's troubles when a group of deacons invite a "Rev. Cozy" to come preach a revival in hopes that his reputed talent in the pulpit can convince the congregation to unseat John from his position. Cozy stands before the congregation and begins: "Ah got uhnother serus [serious] job on mah hands. Ahm a race man! Ah solves the race problem. One great problem befo' us tuhday is what is de blacks gointer do wid de whites?" Two sisters of the congregation exchange glances and one says to the other, "Ah ain't heard whut de tex' wuz." Cozy continues on a twelve-point sermon extolling the Negro but neglecting either to name a "tex," or otherwise to dedicate any significant attention to the Bible. When, after the service, an eager deacon asks the ladies how they enjoyed the sermon, he receives this reply: "Sermon?' Sister Boger made an indecent sound with her lips, 'dat wan't no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture'" (158-59). This episode cites almost directly from *The Sanctified Church*, where Hurston observes that it is said of a preacher who avoids a text and preaches like a white preacher: "Why he don't preach at all. He just lectures" (106).

The second example of Hurston's tendency toward over-emphasizing her anthropological understandings of preaching in her first novel concerns the use of certain terminology in awkward or repetitive ways that draw attention to the clinical nature of her knowledge. The adjective "barbaric," a curious one at that, appears at least twice in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* to describe the "poetry" of preaching (89, 201). It also appears in *The Sanctified Church* (103) and clearly was one of Hurston's favorite depictions of

preaching, since it also turns up in a letter she wrote to James Weldon Johnson in 1934 about a review of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*: “[Y]ou and I . . . seem to be the only ones even among Negroes who recognize the barbaric poetry in their sermons” (Kaplan, 302).⁴ Its continual appearance across several sources suggests that Hurston sought to drive home some significance that she attached to the word. As another example, Hurston defines “bearing up” quite specifically in *The Sanctified Church* (91-2, 103-7). In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* she places it within quotation marks, setting it apart from the narrative as if it is specialized language, problematic to or distinct from the narrative in some way (181). Consequently, the reader finds it difficult to incorporate the term into his or her own reading lexicon because of the distance erected by the quotation marks. This feeling is exacerbated by Hurston's decision to include a glossary at the novel's end (203-6). Again, the reader senses that Hurston does not have confidence in the contextual success of her book, that she does not possess the narrative control necessary to let the representation stand on its own without clarification or footnote.

In sum, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* suffers from Hurston's overeager attempt to synthesize her anthropological insights into an artistic representation of African-American culture. She constructs her narrative around a sermon that it does not fully engage. There is little contextual cooperation between the ritualized individual and community because the individual's words address a completely different liturgical situation from the one in her narrative. The sermonic ideal is imposed upon the novel, ultimately restricting its effectiveness in representing the fullest organic understanding of African-American culture that she exhibits in her anthropological writing. Still, despite

⁴ Johnson published *God's Trombones*, a book of poetry based on the “old-time” sermon, in 1927. Interestingly, Hurston's transcription of Lovelace's sermon in *The Sanctified Church* resembles the poems from *God's Trombones* on the page.

the negative assessment issued here (and while I do address these shortcomings, I hope not to overstate them), one must also recognize that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is remarkable in that it reveals Hurston to be consumed, from her earliest attempts as a novelist, with how the sermon and the novel may compliment one another and cooperate toward more meaningful and accurate depictions of African-American existence.

In her subsequent novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) Hurston continues to stress the integrity of preacherly voice and narrative text. Yet she pursues it in an entirely different manner, forcing nothing like we have observed in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* upon the narrative. With *Their Eyes*, the novel itself embodies her sermonic ideal. A story within a story or “frame tale” narrated by Janie, a woman returning to Eatonville after burying her third husband Tea Cake, *Their Eyes* chronicles the events of Janie’s lifelong search for love and authenticity. Replete with biblical and pseudo-biblical citation and imagery (such as fruit trees representing carnal knowledge), Janie finds herself consistently at odds with the expectations of the community and the traditional mores that she must navigate in order to craft a meaningful life (which is also her text). Finally finding “true love” in Tea Cake, her blues-singer third husband twenty years her junior, Janie is forced to kill him in self-defense when he contracts rabies and attacks her with a pistol. Put on trial, she is acquitted by a jury of white men before returning home to Eatonville where she enters the frame that begins the novel. Here, on the back porch of her home, Janie tells her story—in fact the novel’s narrative—to her good friend Phoeby Watson.

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston appears to have learned from her mistakes in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, or at least to have refined her novelistic craft. While she still borrows

liberally from her fieldwork and makes good use of “local color,” the narrative comes across as less didactic in its introduction of black folkways than the first novel. Hurston is much more comfortable with allowing her anthropological material to drive the narrative conflict created in the plot through the liturgical metaphors of social interactions, not vice versa. Permitting the anthropological material to perform instead of illustrate enables *Their Eyes* to embody Hurston’s sermonic ideal rather than merely to relate it. Thus, whereas *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is a novel about a preacher who delivers sermons illustrative of Hurston’s anthropological ideal, the narrative of *Their Eyes* itself functions as Hurston’s ideal sermon.

Eatonville’s Zion Hope Church, prominent in the first novel, is absent in *Their Eyes*. Episodic preaching, then, moves to secular contexts. Janie’s second husband Joe Starks, the mayor of Eatonville, makes a speech that riffs on the Christian rhetoric of “light” on the occasion of the town’s first streetlamp: “De first street lamp in uh colored town. Lift yo’ eyes and gaze on it. And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp-wick let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine” (43). The refrain from “This Little Light of Mine” invokes “Let there be light” from Genesis 1:3—which Joe enacts by placing match to wick—and “the light shineth in darkness” from the fourth Gospel’s prologue (1:5). Elsewhere, Joe offers a eulogy for a dead mule, the town mascot, which is then echoed by the vultures that circle and gather to consume the carrion after all of the “mourners” have departed (57-8). In both of these instances, Hurston implies sermons but does not rely upon their liturgical function as limited to or by the church. In fact, by placing them in the mouth of the mayor, she reverses the presumptive order of things in the world outside of all-black towns. Preacherly rhetoric is the

provenance of political standing, and serves to legitimize Joe's struggle to retain his place in power. In this way Hurston suggests a broader cultural and social function for the "sermonic event," one that *Their Eyes*, taking place entirely outside of the church, embodies.

The displacement of the sermon also provides a rhetorical and material background for unifying Janie's individual narration with the cultural tradition of the sermonic event in African-American culture.⁵ This unification occurs in three ways: through the semiotic performance of the text as an oral event, through the appropriation of cultural history and the practice of its signification through citation, and ultimately by participating in the elegant metaphorical and liturgical interactions between the individual and the community. *Their Eyes* represents an oral performance because its narrative enacts the story that Janie tells Phoeby: "'we can set right where we is and talk'" (7).

After hearing Janie's story, in the second part of the frame, Phoeby responds: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo" (182-83). Along these lines, we may invoke Gates's "speakerly text" once again. As Gates puts it, "[A]ll other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance . . . privileging . . . oral speech and its inherent linguistic features" (181). The novel's meaning comes at least as much from *how* the words are spoken as *what* the particular words are—not unlike the way Hurston describes the impact of the sermon in *The Sanctified Church*. There is unity in the speakerly and preacherly characterizations of her narrative, and one may argue a chicken-egg scenario

⁵ Dolan Hubbard makes a similar argument but comes about it quite differently in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994). See especially his chapter on *Their Eyes* (47-63).

as to which comes first in the primacy of Hurston's textual imagination. Her insistence upon utilizing the preacherly elements of her anthropological writing—overtly in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and more subtly in *Their Eyes*—leads me to conclude that there is for Hurston a preacherly antecedent to the speakerly text.

As a “speakerly text,” Hurston's novel relies upon the revision of traditional cultural figures as a narrative tool for creating meaning. Like a sermon, which, in the sanctified tradition outlined by Hurston, refers to a “[biblical] text,” *Their Eyes* is laden with biblical and pseudo-biblical imagery that is transformed by the individual preacher/narrator into African-American idiom as a means of interpreting the material for the issues at hand. This is not to say that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* does not employ biblical allusion—indeed, the title proves otherwise. But given the different orientations of the two novels toward the elements of the preacherly voice, the instances in *Their Eyes* are more noteworthy because they carry a heavier hermeneutical burden.

Hurston's use of displaced, “secular” sermons within the novel has already been discussed, but Hurston, through narrator-Janie, employs extensive biblical allusion as well. She structures the hurricane episode after the book of Job:

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark but their eyes were watching God (151).

Job is echoed again later, as Janie searches for meaning in Tea Cake's certain death: “Did [God] *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease. . . . Her arms went up in desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions”

(169). Janie, speaking as an individual, allows biblical citation to order and enrich the narrative she preaches to Pheoby (her congregation)—who doubles as her implied reader and offers the “bearing up” that Janie requires to mediate the shared sense of “tradition” that is so crucial to Hurston’s understanding of the anthropological sermonic event.

In addition to Job, there are countless smaller references that reinforce this shared mediation. Janie’s grandmother acknowledges her own impending mortality: “One mornin’ soon, now, de angel wid de sword is gointuh stop by here. De day and de hour is hid from me, but it won’t be long (14).⁶ Joe seduces Janie to leave her first husband by insisting that “De day you puts yo’ hand in mine, Ah wouldn’t let de sun go down on us single” (28; cf. Deut. 24:15 and Eph. 4:26). Tea Cake twice tells Janie “You got de keys to de kingdom” (104, 116; see Mt. 16:19). Janie discovers that she is “too old a vessel for new wine” (114; cf. Mt. 9:17, Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-9). After Janie kills Tea Cake, “the grief of outer darkness” descends (175; see Mt. 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30). These allusions endow Janie’s own story with biblical authority, aligning her individual tale with a universal narrative, and creating through this understood universality a rhetorical strategy for connecting her own life-text with others’—represented by Pheoby.

It is through such a rhetorical strategy that Hurston casts *Their Eyes* along the semiotic lines of the sermonic performance that she outlines in her anthropological work. As biblical allusion draws together the individual body and the social body, the novel, as a “speakerly text,” embodies the sermon. Hurston sets *Their Eyes* in a liturgical context by emphasizing its “speakerly” elements. Janie, the individual speaker, narrates the novel to Pheoby who, in turn, represents the community that “bears up” Janie, responding in

⁶ The angel with the sword resonates closest with the account known as “Balaam’s ass” in Numbers 22:22-35. The language of “day nor hour” appears twice in Matthew (24:36 and 25:13), the Gospel Hurston seems unofficially to favor (though it also turns up in Mark and Luke).

counterpoint to her story and cooperating with her (albeit antagonistically) in order to shape the narrative as it emerges in its “being spoken.” Biblical allusions, in turn, serve to textualize the narrative voice, establishing the formal terms of this cooperative endeavor.

The Literary Implications of Preaching—and Vice Versa

During one week in May 1934, not long after *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was published and as she was finishing *Mules and Men* (Kaplan, 301), Zora Neale Hurston wrote two remarkable letters that reveal both her frustration at the critical response to her first novel and her determination to emphasize preachers and their sermons as vital literary tropes and rhetorical motifs. In her letter to James Weldon Johnson dated May 8, which we encountered briefly above, Hurston pours out her frustration over a *New York Times* review that found John Pearson’s final sermon “too good, too brilliantly splashed with poetic imagery, to be the product of any one Negro preacher” (quoted in Kaplan, 302 n1). Hurston writes, “[T]here are hundreds of preachers who are equalling [*sic*] that sermon weekly. . . . [The preacher] must also be an artist. He must be both a poet and an actor of a very high order. . . . [T]hey are the first artists, the ones intelligible to the masses” (Kaplan, 302-3). Hurston does not simply insist on the relevance of preaching to her novel; she emphasizes the notion that any sense of a literary culture among African Americans must begin with preachers and their sermons.

These same themes occupy her May 12 letter to Lewis Gannett, who reviewed *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* for the *New York Herald-Tribune*:

Our preachers are talented men even though many of them are barely literate. The masses do not read literature, do not visit theaters nor museums of fine arts. . . . But the truth is, the greatest poets among us are in our pulpits and the greatest poetry has come out of them. It is merely not set down. It passes from mouth to mouth as in the days of Homer (Kaplan, 304).

As with Gates, Hurston locates the origins of African-American literature in the vernacular, oral tradition. But she amplifies this speakerly voice by associating it with Homer, the classical (oral) bard and progenitor of the Western canon. She reframes the terms of Gates's argument, asserting that African-American literature, in its vernacular, speakerly origins, in fact shares this common sense of origin with the Western canon. The preacherly voice, then, while certainly a product of African-American culture, serves as an analogue to the classical sources of the Western literary tradition.

So what might we say are the broader implications of the relationship between preachers, preaching, and literature? Most frequently we assert, implicitly and explicitly, that homiletics has much to gain from literature and the methods of its criticism. Literary characters serve to illuminate preaching points and exemplify lives led for good or ill. Narrative conflict presents rich sources for theological wrangling. Poetry offers economical, aphoristic slogans that serve as a shorthand for the message on a given day, and its cadences underscore the eloquent aspirations of spoken words. Furthermore, biblical exegesis, the cornerstone of any solid Protestant sermon (even in a "vernacular" congregation like Eatonville's Zion Hope Church, the sisters demand to know the "tex"), depends upon close reading and the deployment of literary critical methods in order to formulate a broader message. In these and other ways, the study of literature, broadly construed, is vital for any preacher who undergoes ministerial training at a seminary or divinity school.

My reading of Hurston suggests that the relationship between literature and preaching is, in fact, a reflexive one. Preachers are vernacular critics who also exemplify the speakerly mode of literary creation as "the first artists, the ones intelligible to the

masses.” They parse “the Word” in order to contextualize universal truths, that they might address highly specific locales and incidences. The liturgical interactions between preacher and congregation point to broader social and political implications both within a given community and in that community’s relationship to the wider culture in which it participates. Preachers’ regular addresses are spoken with a rhetoric that serves to orient the broader rhetorical strategies of African-American culture as well.

Toward these ends, literary scholars should find studies of liturgy, homiletics, and other disciplines among the “ministerial arts” invaluable for articulating new modes of literary discourse that contribute to a broader understanding of vernacular literatures or, as Gates puts it, “speakerly texts.” But also, as Hurston reminds us, preaching is to African-American literature what the Homeric tradition is to the Western canon. In all these ways, the implications of preaching as a method of literary inquiry may in fact extend beyond the provinces of African-American vernacular literature.

I close with one final observation. Recent debates over the nature of “religious studies” have tended to cast ministerial disciplines—homiletics, liturgy, and other areas of study—aside, the assumption being that they, as “practical” in nature, are somehow less serious pursuits than more theoretical approaches. Such a view tends to ignore that religious practice does indeed participate in the formation of culture, as it has throughout history—especially vernacular culture. Simply because homiletical and liturgical studies contribute to the vocational formation of ministers does not mean that they should be occluded from the broader scope of religious and cultural inquiry. To do so overlooks many imaginative and incisive contributions to the study of religion and more generally

undermines the spirit of scholarly openness to diverse disciplinary engagements within religious studies.

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