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# The Bone of Contention: Mule Bone and the Friendship of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston during the Harlem Renaissance

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The Bone of Contention:  
*Mule Bone* and the Friendship of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston during the Harlem  
Renaissance

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“Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart.”<sup>1</sup> So ends Alain Locke’s foreword to his anthology *The New Negro* (1925). As a leading intellectual during this time, he coined the phrase the “New Negro” and helped encourage young black artists to publish their work. As this quote suggests, the Harlem Renaissance was a period of changing thought in the African-American community. Though there are no exact dates for the Harlem Renaissance, a common time frame is 1925 to the early 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The Harlem Renaissance was a time where there was an influx of new ideas. New young African-American artists began to write on themes other than that of racial uplift.

However, where new ideas exist, controversy will arise, and this movement was no exception. This conflict of ideas meant that the Harlem Renaissance was by no means a cohesive movement. The older and newer generations were constantly at odds with one another. Whenever an author published a book, half of the African-American critics praised it for presenting a new outlook on black life, while the other half called it slanderous. W. E. B. Du Bois even said “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”<sup>3</sup> Within this complicated community Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston began their literary careers.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Locke, “Foreword,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Dates for the Harlem Renaissance range from beginning in 1918 or in the mid-1920s to it ending in 1930 (with the rise of the Great Depression) or in 1940 with the advent of World War II. The beginning date I have given corresponds to the publication of *The New Negro* by Alain Locke in 1925 which spells out the motivations and characterization of the rising African American artists. 1925 was also the year in which the magazine *Opportunity* offered its first literary contest for black writers. The ending date that I have given is vague because during the 1930s, the works published began to decrease and the writers began to disperse. For Langston Hughes, the spring of 1931 “was the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue.” Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 334.

<sup>3</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 296, in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 176.

Friends from 1925 until 1931, they shared similar artistic sensibilities. During their friendship, they confided in one another, moved within the same social circles, and received the patronage of Charlotte “Godmother” Mason. But perhaps the defining moment of their friendship was their decision to write a collaborative play entitled *Mule Bone*. Though Hurston and Hughes had collaborated on other projects in the past, the two had a falling out that prevented the play from being performed (or published) until after both of their deaths.

The question of most importance in this controversy is what caused the split between two leading writers of the Harlem Renaissance? To answer that question, this paper will delve into the lives of both Hughes and Hurston in order to understand the factors that shaped them as writers and as people. After that, it is necessary to see the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance to see what created the movement that gave Hughes and Hurston their big literary break. Once this foundation is established, it will be easier to understand the friendship between the two writers and their goals as “New Negro” artists. With these contextual factors, it is possible to appreciate how race, power, and gender helped to cause the *Mule Bone* controversy and, ultimately, the destruction of a strong friendship.

## I

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 to James and Carrie Hughes.<sup>4</sup> He was the only surviving child of the couple.<sup>5</sup> Soon after his birth, his parents became estranged. His father eventually found his way to Mexico where he made a profitable living during the Mexican Revolution. Hughes’s mother, on the other hand, traveled around the country looking for work and visiting relatives. While he did travel quite a bit with her, the bulk of Hughes’s

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<sup>4</sup> The given name “James” was not often used by Hughes as an adult. This is probably because of his dislike of his father.

<sup>5</sup> He had a brother who was born in 1900 and died soon after birth.

childhood was spent with his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. Because of his mobile life, Hughes attended many different schools and had a hard time making friends.

The first school he attended was in Topeka, Kansas. Carrie Hughes wanted her son to attend a good school near where she worked. The only school she liked was the white Harrison Street School. His mother fought the school board to admit her son, and she won. Hughes recalls that “all the teachers were nice to me, except the one who sometimes used to make remarks about my being colored. And after such remarks, occasionally the kids would grab stones and tin cans out of the alley and chase me home.”<sup>6</sup> Even with the racism at the school, Hughes was able to make at least one friend at school, “one little white boy who would always take up for me. Sometimes others of my classmates would as well. So I learned early not to hate *all* white people.”<sup>7</sup> In his autobiography, Hughes implies that his education at that school was not an overall pleasant experience.

Hughes’s troubles extended past the school yard. Throughout his early years, he yearned for a loving family, but it eluded him. His father was absent for most of his formative years and his mother was frequently missing. The times Hughes spent with her were uneasy because “[h]er failure to reconcile with Jim Hughes [Langston’s father] had left her bitter.”<sup>8</sup> When she was happy, things were fine, but when she was upset, she “vented her anger on [her] son.”<sup>9</sup> She berated him for looking like his father and when Hughes withdrew from her wrath, she called

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 14. The use of the words “sometimes” and “occasionally” seem to imply that life at Harrison Street School was not as forgiving as Hughes paints it to be.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original. Here is an interesting question: what did Langston Hughes mean by emphasizing “*all*?” He seems to be implying that his childhood was a dark time for him and that there were not a lot of things he can remember without pain in regards to how he was treated by white Americans.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1:12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

him stupid. Even his grandmother was not the loving type. She was the one who practically raised him until her death, but she did not give him the affection he craved. During his childhood, Hughes was “very lonesome, living with [his] grandmother.”<sup>10</sup> In Lawrence, Mary Langston forbade her grandson from going out after school and, to the humiliation of her grandson, frequently gave him her cast-offs to wear. When she passed away, Hughes, at the age of twelve, did not cry because “my grandmother’s stories (without her ever having said so) taught me the uselessness of crying about anything.”<sup>11</sup>

After her death, before his mother, stepfather, and stepbrother sent for him, Hughes had perhaps the closest thing to a stable family he could claim to have known: James and Mary Reed. In his autobiography, he says “[f]or me, there have never been any better people in the world. I loved them very much.”<sup>12</sup> That is perhaps the most endearing thing Hughes says about any of the people who raised him. Still, Hughes was ill at ease. When the Reeds brought Hughes to their church to find salvation, the boy waited to see Jesus. After hours of people praying around him, Hughes got up and said that he had seen the Light. He received congratulations from church members, but felt terribly guilty for lying about being saved, and “for the last time in my life, but one...I cried.”<sup>13</sup>

Soon, his mother sent for him and after several more moves, one of which was to Lincoln, Illinois, Hughes wound up in Cleveland, Ohio. In Cleveland, Hughes entered high school and worked to fund his education. High school helped him explore his talent as a poet. Hughes published several poems and stories in the school newspaper. By this point in time,

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Hughes’s novel, *Not Without Laughter*, is an autobiographical sketch of his childhood up to this point.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Hughes's mother was estranged from her second husband and, in an attempt at reconciliation, she and Hughes's stepbrother left Cleveland. All alone in the city, Langston had a hard time making ends meet. His best friend from school, Satur Andrzejewski, would sometimes invite Hughes to his house for dinner, but for the most part, he was left on his own to cook rice and hot dogs. Things took a turn for the better when he made the acquaintance of Russell and Rowena Jelliffe, owners of the "Playground House." They "were starting a life of community service somewhat in the manner of Jane Addams at Hull House...but adapted...to the needs of the local community."<sup>14</sup> Hired as a part-time teacher, Hughes spent much of his free time reading and relaxing before heading back to his apartment.

When Hughes turned seventeen, his father entered his life again. While on a business trip in New York City, James Hughes sent word to his son to come and spend the summer in Mexico. Excited to see the father he barely remembered, Hughes accepted the offer and hoped finally to have a parental figure who would love him. His father was very successful in Mexico. He saved money, owned property, and practiced law. However, Hughes was soon disappointed because "he did not like his father, whose devotion to material values, and his rigorous self-control in pursuit of them, ruled out all other passion."<sup>15</sup> He discovered that his father "hated Negroes....He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States, where none of them had a chance to be much of anything but servants."<sup>16</sup> James Hughes's hatred developed from the belief that "it was their own fault that they were poor."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 40. James Hughes vehemently hated the indigenous population of Mexico as well as African Americans.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

After the summer ended, Hughes returned to Cleveland where he completed his senior year of high school. Even though he disliked his father, he headed back to Mexico to live with him again. From the summer of 1920 until the early fall of 1921, Hughes lived in Mexico. Though James Hughes thought it was impossible for his son to live as a black writer, Langston was able to send several of his poems to the *Crisis* for publication.<sup>18</sup> Though he received no money from the magazine, Hughes was pleased that his work was printed in a notable African American publication. Eager to go back to school, Langston was able to convince his father to send him to Columbia University in New York City.

Hughes attended the university for only two semesters. A primarily white institution, Columbia was not very open to blacks. He was only able to live in a dorm because on “Hughes’s application from Mexico...the absence of any indication of race on his letters and transcripts had tricked the system of exclusion.”<sup>19</sup> The racism on campus was not the only challenge Hughes faced. His father promised to send him money, but none arrived. For several weeks he searched for loans, asked for extensions, and borrowed what textbooks he could from the library. Not until November did money from his father arrive. On top of all that was his dislike of his courses and his lack of ease around campus. Wanderlust hit Hughes after his father demanded a detailed expense report of Langston’s use of his money. In his response, he informed his father that “I felt that I would never turn out to be what my father expected me to be in return for the amount he invested. So I wrote him and told him I was going to quit college and go to work on my own, and that he needn’t send me any more money.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The *Crisis* was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois and was a prominent magazine geared towards the African American community.

<sup>19</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 85.

Hughes moved out of the dorms and entered life in Harlem. He enjoyed Harlem's atmosphere and met Jessie Fauset, an editor of the *Crisis*. She invited him "to the NAACP offices on Fifth Avenue" after she heard that Hughes was the same poet who had been submitting poems to her from Mexico.<sup>21</sup> Hughes worked odd jobs in New York. At one time he was a farmhand for a Greek farmer on Staten Island and at another was a flower delivery boy. But that is not to say that he found jobs easily: "[n]ine times out of ten—*ten* times out of ten, to be truthful—the employer would look at me, shake his head and say, with an air of amazement: 'But I didn't advertise for a colored boy.'"<sup>22</sup> Despite this, Hughes seemed to enjoy being out in the world and discovering new things. His next job was at Jones Point where he looked after retired World War I battleships in case they were ever to be needed again. At Jones Point, he had an abundance of free time in which to work on his poetry and to read.

Though Hughes enjoyed his job, he wanted to sail on the seas and to be a part of an actual crew on a moving vessel. He got his wish when he was signed on the *West Hesseltine* en route to Africa. For Hughes this was twice as good: he could be on the sea and see Africa. To Hughes Africa was his spiritual home and he would receive acceptance there, unlike in America. Once again fate tricked him. In Africa, he saw exploitation of the Africans by white Europeans and institutionalized racism. What shocked him the most was that the Africans would not see him as black. They told him, "You, white man!"<sup>23</sup> He was not even able to see a religious ceremony because the tribe would not allow whites. This was not what he was expecting in Africa. Hughes thought that he would be able to learn about Africa and meet Africans and bring back his knowledge to help better the condition of African Americans.

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<sup>21</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 86. Emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

He left Africa with his illusions dissolved, but soon headed back out to sea on a ship headed to Europe. There he jumped ship and made his way to Paris, France. Once there, he searched for an English-speaking position. Eventually, he found work as a bouncer for a club. The job was not a good fit for Hughes as he slipped out of the club whenever a fight erupted. He found a better job working in a kitchen for another club where he remained until he heard from a friend in America, Alain Locke. A professor at Howard University in Washington, D. C., Locke would become a key member of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>24</sup> Hughes met Locke through a mutual friend, Countee Cullen. Locke arranged for Hughes to meet him in Italy where they could sightsee and talk. Ready to return to America and attend college, Hughes agreed to meet Alain Locke because he seemed to be the man who could help Hughes achieve that goal. Things were looking up until on their way to the ship, Hughes was robbed. Alain Locke had to leave in order to make it back in time for the school year, leaving Hughes stranded in Spain. Without the support of the American Embassy, Hughes tried to find passage on one of the ships headed to America. After a month of trying, a ship finally booked him.

Hughes arrived too late to attend the fall semester of university. Still, he made it back in time for the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925, the magazine *Opportunity* held a literary contest. At “the greatest gathering of black and white literati ever assembled in one room,”<sup>25</sup> he received first place for his poem, “The Weary Blues.” At that party, he met Carl Van Vechten, whose influence on Hughes would be important for the rest of his life. Another friend he made that night was Zora Neale Hurston.

## II

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<sup>24</sup> More on Locke will be presented in section III of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 107.

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891<sup>26</sup> in Eatonville, Florida, a town created by and owned solely by African Americans. Describing her hometown, Hurston said, “Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all.”<sup>27</sup> It was “the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.”<sup>28</sup> Unlike Hughes’s childhood in a segregated town, Hurston lived in a comparative utopia. Some of her fondest memories are of the tall tales told by villagers, which would later inspire her to create collections of black folklore in the South and apply it to her novels and plays.

One of eight children, and the second daughter, born to John and Lucy Ann Hurston, she was the apple of her mother’s eye and the constant source of irritation to her father. Hurston commented on this in her autobiography: “Sarah, was his favorite child, but that one girl was enough. Plenty more sons, but no more girl babies to wear out shoes and bring in nothing. I don’t think he ever got over the trick he felt that I played on him by getting born a girl.” But her mother more than compensated for her father’s lack of affection. She encouraged “her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at the sun.’ [and though they] might not land on the sun...at least

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 10. Throughout her life Hurston was never consistent in giving the year of her birth. The biography on her by Robert E. Hemenway says that “[d]epending on the document, and whether she was trying to impress someone with her youth or her age, she claimed to be born in 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, or 1903.” Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 13. I trust the date of birth given by Plant for two main reasons: 1) More information about Hurston’s life is available now than was available when Hemenway wrote his biography in the 1970s, and 2) Plant accounts for why Hurston lied about her age: to be able to attend college with a subsidy when she was in her twenties.

<sup>27</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, ed. Robert E. Hemenway, 2nd ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 3. The accuracy of her autobiography is questionable. It reads as a narrative with many instances of humor. Written in 1942, Hurston most likely embellished, omitted, and added stories about her life in order to create a more pleasing story. With that being said, I do believe that it is a reliable window into her impressions of her life and into the mind of Zora Neale Hurston, the storyteller.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

[they] would get off the ground.”<sup>29</sup> These words of encouragement fostered Hurston’s free-spirited nature. As she grew wilder, her father was afraid of the consequences. He felt that, “[i]t did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit.”<sup>30</sup> Though John Hurston attempted to break his daughter, Lucy Ann Hurston protected Zora from John’s wrath. Due to her mother’s influence, Hurston grew to become a fiercely independent and strong-willed woman.

As Hughes learned of the realities of living in a world as a second-class citizen, Hurston lived with no fear. She claims that she would hail passing cars full of whites and ask to ride with them for a bit: after which she would walk home and, if her father or grandmother found out, receive a beating. Hurston’s sense of invulnerability scared and angered her father. He was convinced that she would end up dead for presuming that she was equal to whites. That is not to say that he passively accepted the realities of life under Jim Crow. In Robert E. Hemenway’s biography of her, he discovered that “[o]n at least one occasion during Zora’s childhood he joined the men of Eatonville, gun in hand, to investigate moans and whipping sounds arising from a nearby lake shore.”<sup>31</sup> That he was willing to confront a possible lynch mob says much about John Hurston’s character, and the awe that his children, including Zora, felt for him.

The idyllic childhood Hurston presents in *Dust Tracks on a Road* ended abruptly in 1904 with the death of her mother. Soon after her mother’s death, Hurston’s father sent her to boarding school in Jacksonville, Florida. She had a hard time transitioning to life at school. For the first time, Hurston lived in a segregated town and learned what it meant to be “colored.” When checks from home stopped coming, the school administration had Hurston work in order to pay off the cost of her tuition. After the term ended, Hurston was stranded at the boarding

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>31</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 14.

school because her father never sent for her to come home. Word finally arrived in a letter in which John Hurston said “that the school could have her.”<sup>32</sup> The school had no place for the fourteen-year-old, so she was given money to find her own passage back to Eatonville.

The next few years of Hurston’s life were not easy. Her father remarried, and her stepmother was not fond of the headstrong teenager. By 1906, Hurston left her home and for the next five years, she moved frequently and worked for several different families as a babysitter, maid, and nurse. While on the move, Hurston’s education was on hiatus. Although she loved reading and learning, for the next five years, Hurston was unable to attend school due to her lack of funds. When she was twenty, John Hurston called Zora home. Once there, any hope of reconciliation was dashed when she ended up in a physical confrontation with her stepmother. After that altercation, Hurston left her childhood home and went to live with her older brother, Bob, and his family. Hurston was excited for this chance at living in a stable family structure again; “he [Bob] wanted to help me to go to school. He was sending for me to come to him right away. His wife sent love. He knew that I was going to love his children.”<sup>33</sup>

Things were not always what they appeared to be; Bob’s generous invitation to his sister had some strings attached. When Hurston arrived, her brother informed her that “[t]here was to be no school for me right away. I was needed around the house....Just work along and be useful around the house and he would work things out in time.”<sup>34</sup> Months passed and Hurston did not get to attend school. Instead, she was an unpaid domestic servant working for her brother. Opportunity came in the form of a white woman she befriended. Though by no means wealthy

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<sup>32</sup> Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

herself, the woman “began to take an interest in [Hurston] and put ideas in [her] head.”<sup>35</sup> One such idea was for her to become the new lady’s maid for a singer.<sup>36</sup> With a gift of a new dress, gloves, and hat, Hurston became a member of a Gilbert and Sullivan theater troupe.

Life in the white acting troupe was a godsend to Hurston. She “found the theatrical troupe the major educational experience of her youth, liberating her from the provincialism she had known all her life.”<sup>37</sup> She was the only African American in the troupe, but still, “she was a fully initiated member of the group.”<sup>38</sup> For the next eighteen months, Hurston toured with the company and received an informal education. A member of the troupe encouraged her to read and lent her copies of books on the theater and music. Her time with the Gilbert and Sullivan Company ended when the singer she worked for married. The singer encouraged Hurston to attend school again because “she thought [Hurston] had a mind, and that it would be a shame for [her] not to have any further training.”<sup>39</sup> She then gave Hurston extra money and instructed her to keep in contact as she would help Hurston out any way she could.

Left in Baltimore by the troupe, Hurston sought a way to receive an education. The biggest problem she faced was that she did not have enough money to attend school. After trying to save money for school by working, she soon realized that “[n]ickeling and diming [sic] along was not getting me anywhere.”<sup>40</sup> A law in Maryland provided her an answer; it stated

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>36</sup> The singer is never referred to by name in Hurston’s autobiography, she is only mentioned as Ms. M —.

<sup>37</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 140.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

that African Americans from six to twenty were “provided...free admission to public schools.”<sup>41</sup> This offered an opportunity to Hurston, but it was 1917 and she was already 26. In order to secure several more years of education, she used her “youthful appearance” to her advantage and told the school her birth year was 1901.<sup>42</sup> She enrolled in Morgan Academy in Baltimore where in exchange for room and board she worked for an elderly white trustee and his invalid wife. In addition to this, she earned a salary of \$2 a week and could use the family’s library.

Spring of 1919 brought Hurston her high school diploma and, in fall of that year, she matriculated at Howard University. Howard was “that capstone of Negro education in the world.”<sup>43</sup> It was “to the Negro what Harvard [was] to the whites.”<sup>44</sup> There, she met Professor Alain Locke. He encouraged his students to write about “African American folk culture.”<sup>45</sup> Locke also brought attention to Hurston’s work by showing it to editors of the magazine *Opportunity* because he “saw potential in Hurston’s work.”<sup>46</sup> In December 1924, *Opportunity* published “Drenched in Light,” the first short story of Hurston’s that went into print. At a reception held by the magazine, she met Carl Van Vechten, who would later play an important role in her life. Hurston also became acquainted with people who would help secure her acceptance into Barnard College. Continuing her education at Barnard, Hurston became entranced with anthropology. She worked closely with the father of American anthropology,

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<sup>41</sup> Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 75.

<sup>42</sup> Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 30. In her autobiography, Hurston makes several references to how young she looked. If we believe that premise, it is plausible that she could successfully subtract ten years off her age and get away with it.

<sup>43</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 156.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Franz Boas, and became one of his protégées. After her graduation, Boas arranged for Hurston to receive a fellowship “to go south and collect Negro folklore.”<sup>47</sup>

Her education at Barnard was not the only thing she concentrated on while in New York City. Hurston also integrated herself into the fledgling Harlem Renaissance as one of the “New Negro” artists. Her writing soon won her accolades when, in 1925, Hurston received second place in *Opportunity*’s literary contest for her story, “Spunk.” As a member of the Harlem Renaissance, she proffered a unique view of the lives of African Americans. What differentiated her from other contemporary black writers was that she was “an artist, period –rather than...the artist/politician most black writers have been required to be.”<sup>48</sup> That quotation is best kept in mind analyzing the themes of Hurston’s writings during the Harlem Renaissance.

### III

The Harlem that Hughes and Hurston lived in was the Mecca for black art. To understand how Harlem became the hub for African American expression, it is necessary to understand the forces in America that created it: the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the ideologies of Harlem’s intellectuals.

In 1879, Frederick Douglass “advised the Negroes...to remain in the South where they would be in sufficiently large numbers to have political power.”<sup>49</sup> He said this only a few years after the end of Reconstruction and before Jim Crow was fully institutionalized in the South. At

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<sup>47</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 171. Hurston went on several folklore missions to the South and published a couple of books on the stories she collected. Boas pushed for her to receive a Ph. D. in anthropology (with a concentration in African-American Culture), but there were two roadblocks that prevented her from achieving this: 1) the field of African-American Anthropology did not exist and 2) many people did not think that she had the intelligence (as a black woman) to complete the courses.

<sup>48</sup> Alice Walker, “On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now,” in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (1918; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Incorporated, 2002), 164.

this time, black men were allowed to vote and to run for political office. Everything changed within the next fifteen years. One by one, Southern states began to adopt segregation laws commonly known as Jim Crow. These laws created an American caste system in which African Americans were second-class citizens. They were not allowed to use the same train car, school, and other public and private facilities. Jim Crow institutionalized and legalized white supremacy.

Political change and the power of the ballot could not help the black community. Although African Americans comprised a substantial percentage of the population in the South, they no longer had representation or say in their local and state governments. African Americans were unable to exercise their right to vote due to laws like the Literacy Clause and the Grandfather Clause.<sup>50</sup> In addition, most land in the South was owned by whites who employed black sharecroppers. Life was not easy as a sharecropper due to the practice of white landowners keeping their tenants indebted to them (which prevented them from leaving and converted them into a stationary work force). The few who were able to obtain an education could not find high paying jobs because whites would not hire an African American (no matter how qualified he or she was). This was in addition to widespread poverty and low wages. Anyone who tried to fight this injustice faced the possibility of intimidation and/or lynching. The rise of lynchings by whites with impunity and the disenfranchisement of the black male voter contributed to halt any attempts by the black community to gain any political foundation.

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<sup>50</sup> The Literacy Clause dictated that election officials could test a voter's ability to read by asking him to read a passage from the Constitution, and then have him explain the significance of the passage. If the voter was unable to do that, he was ineligible to vote. A large percentage of the black community in the South was illiterate, and even if they could read, it was up to the discretion of the election official to decide if he gave an adequate interpretation of the Constitution. The Grandfather Clause stated that you could vote in an election if your grandfather could vote. As most African Americans in the South had parents and grandparents who were slaves (who could not vote), they were unable to vote. Between these two clauses, almost the entire population of African American males was not qualified to vote.

All of these reasons seem to answer the question of what triggered the Great Migration.<sup>51</sup> Still, conditions in the North were not much better. Jim Crow might not have existed there as it did in the South, but that by no means signifies that northern whites were willing to have equality with African Americans. In the North, African Americans “are denied social contact, are sagaciously separated from the whites in public places of amusement and are clandestinely segregated in public schools in spite of the law to the contrary.”<sup>52</sup> The beginning of the twentieth century saw several race riots in the North: notably in Springfield and East St. Louis. If life in the North was no rose garden, what can account for the waves of African Americans that came north? Several contemporary scholars attempted to answer this question. For Carter G. Woodson “[t]he immediate cause of this movement was the suffering due to the floods aggravated by the depredations of the boll weevil,”<sup>53</sup> and the job opportunities brought on by the onset of World War I. As the boll weevil consumed the crops, many African Americans lost their money as the cotton disappeared from their fields. When America restricted European immigration, jobs formerly unavailable to African Americans opened up. Black migration north became such a big event, according to Woodson, due to these factors.

But not all of his contemporaries agree. Alain Locke was of the opinion that the crop failures and opportunities offered during the war did not sufficiently explain why blacks moved from the rural South to industrial cities in the North. Locke believes:

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<sup>51</sup> The First Great Migration dates from 1910 to 1930 in which about six million African Americans migrated from the South to the West, Midwest, and Northeast.

<sup>52</sup> Woodson, *A Century*, 186.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-170. The boll weevil is “a small weevil that feeds on the fibers of the cotton boll. It is a major pest of the American cotton crop.” *The Oxford American College Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), s.v. “boll weevil.”

The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.<sup>54</sup>

He believed that the hope and promise of a better future in the North inspired many migrants to leave their home and try for a new life. Locke's view is an idealized take on migration. Still, both viewpoints adequately cover the "whys" of The Great Migration. The true difference between them is the factors they emphasize. Woodson and Locke agree that several factors caused The Great Migration. For the purpose of this paper, the two men sufficiently explain the causes for black migration from the rural South to the urban North

The explanation of why Harlem was a magnet lies in the power of New York City. New York was, and still is, the financial capital of America. It was a bustling port and jobs were always available. Harlem became popular for African Americans as early as 1905 when Philip A. Payton Jr. was able to buy an apartment building in white Harlem.<sup>55</sup> As he filled the building with reliable black tenants, other African Americans soon flocked to the area. White landlords then began to rent out to African Americans because "landlords frequently preferred Afro-Americans as cleaner, more stable tenants than 'lower grades of foreign white people' ...and they could charge the Afro-Americans much more."<sup>56</sup> Over time, whites fled the area (because of racial mixing and depreciating property values) and more blacks moved in. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, there was a significant percentage of blacks living in Harlem.

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<sup>54</sup> Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> To learn more about the circumstances of Payton's acquisition of the building, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

With a substantial African American community in Harlem, black-owned businesses sprang up. Harlem had its own newspapers and magazines that published news relevant to the community. W. E. B. Du Bois was a leader who commanded much respect in the goal of racial uplift. Years earlier, he crafted the idea of the “Talented Tenth” as a strategy to accomplish equality with whites. He famously stated that “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.”<sup>57</sup> The idea of the “Talented Tenth” is a reference to the population of African Americans that should/could receive an education and help direct the uplift of the race. What he meant by this was that African Americans who received an education should not just be content with their lot in life, but also be active members of the black community and help prove to the whites that they were equal, by becoming intellectual equals. With this background, African Americans could convince the white community that they were human beings capable of the same pursuits.

But years passed, and there was no positive change in mainstream white society’s vision with regards to race. As a new generation of educated African Americans emerged, so did a new vision of self. In 1925, Alain Locke coined the phrase “The New Negro” in his essay (later anthology) of the same name. Locke describes the rejection of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” by the next generation. He voices the worldview of this group:

the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. Until recently, lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 15th ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1926), 13.

<sup>58</sup> Locke, “The New Negro,” in Locke, 4.

The new generation refuted the concept that they had to imitate whites to prove their equality. They refused to see themselves as inferior to whites and as a victim of society. Locke believed that this generation was self-empowered and self-discovered.

Instead of looking for white philanthropy as W. E. B. Du Bois did and his generation to fund racial uplift, Locke wanted the more autonomy for African-American artists. For Locke, “this new phase of things is delicate; it will call for less charity but more justice; less help, but infinitely closer understanding.”<sup>59</sup> Writers such as Hughes and Hurston wholeheartedly agreed with his assessment. Hughes wrote: “[w]e younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too....If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either.”<sup>60</sup> This declaration of artistic independence had strong meaning. Until this point, much of the African American literature was written to garner support either in the white philanthropic or the black community. Without actively attempting to please anyone, the new generation stated that they were creating art for the sake of art.

While that is all well and good, it was very difficult to make a living from writing. Although Alain Locke professed that there would not be as strong a need for charity as was required in the past, many of the members in the Harlem Renaissance, Locke included, relied on patronage of wealthy whites and the connections that whites had in the publishing and theatrical world. This was needed due to the near-impossible task of living as an artist in America at that

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 36.

time. In fact, Hughes and Hurston lived in poverty for most of their lives; without patronage they would have had a much harder time supporting themselves as writers.

The interest that whites had in the Harlem Renaissance was not limited to the support of struggling artists; they took a keen interest in the unique culture of Harlem. Even though many African Americans sought to create art and culture separate from whites, it was very rare that there was a public space without whites. The Cotton Club, one of the most famous Harlem nightclubs, is a prime example of how Harlem was no perfect oasis from the racism in America. The club, “catered to white clientele by keeping black patrons, when they were admitted at all, out of sight.”<sup>61</sup> In his autobiography, Hughes describes the scene: whites “flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo.”<sup>62</sup> There were no open signs of black resentment because “Negroes are practically never rude to white people.”<sup>63</sup>

Segregation in nightclubs was not the only way whites satisfied their curiosity of events surrounding Harlem. Guided tours were also offered. Carl Van Vechten, a white writer, was one such man who was obsessed with Harlem and the life of African Americans. A friend of both Hughes and Hurston, Van Vechten was a controversial figure during the Harlem Renaissance. Some did not believe the sincerity of his friendships in the black community. He did not help his case when he published a book depicting Harlem in a very negative light. The novel was reviled by W. E. B. Du Bois and the older generation. They felt that Van Vechten had “betrayed” his

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<sup>61</sup> Emily Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 32.

<sup>62</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 225.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

African American connections by writing a slanderous book about Harlem. However, Hughes and Hurston, and many of the “New Negroes,” stood by him and praised his attempt to capture the life of blacks. When the controversy over *Mule Bone* arose, Van Vechten had a key role in the progress of events.

#### IV

Even with all of these internal conflicts, the important players of the Harlem Renaissance came together during literary awards’ ceremonies, like the one created by *Opportunity*. The 1925 dinner at *Opportunity*’s literary awards’ ceremony was an important gala, not just because of the inclusion Hughes and Hurston, but also as a staging ground for the Harlem Renaissance. It was a place where people mixed and mingled, some re-acquainting themselves, some making new friends. At this event, Hughes and Hurston met for the first time. This encounter would lead to a near six-year long friendship that would be responsible for several collaborations and support systems that helped the two thrive as poor writers throughout the Harlem Renaissance.

During the ceremony, Hughes and Hurston were introduced. A month after their first encounter, Hughes remarked to Carl Van Vechten: “Hurston is a clever girl, isn’t she? I would like to know her. Is she still in New York?”<sup>64</sup> This is an interesting passage because it says that a month after the dinner, the two authors were not yet friends. In most biographies of Hughes and Hurston, it is implied that they became friends during or shortly after the awards ceremony, but this was not the case. What would be more accurate to say was that Hurston was able to impress Hughes with her outgoing nature and charisma at the gala. In order for Hughes to know Hurston better, they had to have been introduced again. The best candidate for that job was Van Vechten, who was already a friend of Hurston.

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<sup>64</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, June 4, 1925, in *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964*, ed. Emily Bernard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 19.

Carl Van Vechten was more than a white man who took an interest in African Americans. He was what Hurston called a “Negrotarian,” an “influential [white] who supported the New Negro movement and who took an interest in black life.”<sup>65</sup> As a man in the know, Van Vechten liked to be included in all of the dealings in Harlem. He may have been the connection that brought Hughes and Hurston together. It was not uncommon for Hughes and Hurston to ask Van Vechten to proof-read their manuscripts and ask his opinion “I [Hurston] thought the article not so bad, Mr. Van Vechten thought it rather good. It was he who introduced me to *Vanity Fair*.”<sup>66</sup> His connections in the publishing world were invaluable to struggling writers. When his friends sent him a manuscript, he would submit it to his publisher, Alfred Knopf, if he liked it. He did this several times for Hughes.

Once they got to know each other, Hughes and Hurston’s friendship blossomed. During the course of the six years they were on speaking terms, they frequently sought each other’s advice on their work and how to develop different themes. In the letters written by Hurston, this reliance on friends can be seen. She sent him her rough drafts of her stories. She sent Hughes nothing “final so that you may suggest as many changes as you like.”<sup>67</sup> By sending rough drafts and outlines, Hurston and Hughes had to have trusted one another’s instincts. Hurston even instructed Hughes to, “[m]ake plenty of suggestions. You know I depend on you so much.”<sup>68</sup> An author’s writing is very close to the author’s heart and it is not easy letting someone else critique it. To send out drafts to someone and encourage them to make changes demonstrates the

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<sup>65</sup> Boyd, *Wrapped in*, 100.

<sup>66</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Annie Nathan Meyer, September 15, 1925, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 64.

<sup>67</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 21, 1927, in *ibid.*, 107.

<sup>68</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, May 31, 1929, in *ibid.*, 144.

bond between the two writers. They could not have been mere acquaintances to do this. Hughes and Hurston had to have had a deep respect for one another as writers.

They clearly also respected each other as friends. In addition to proof-reading, they kept secrets for one another. Hurston told Hughes that “never would I speak of any of the things you tell me. I know they are for me only and I am most discreet.”<sup>69</sup> They also supplied candid opinions on others that would cause an uproar if made public knowledge. This can be seen in Hurston’s opinion on Alain Locke; “he is intellectually dishonest. He is too eager to be with the winner, if you get what I mean. He wants to autograph all successes, but is afraid to risk an opinion first hand.”<sup>70</sup>

The connection between Hughes and Hurston was not solely based on proof-reading and secret-keeping. They helped each other out when it came to pleasing their patron, Charlotte “Godmother” Mason. Mason was an elderly wealthy white woman whose interest in tribalism of Native Americans during her youth led her to live among them. After meeting Alain Locke and hearing him speak on African art, she decided to “[commit] herself to nothing less than a personally directed and financed project to elevate African culture to its rightful place of honor against its historic adversary, which she unhesitatingly identified as the white race.”<sup>71</sup> She liked to adopt African American writers and “help” them publish works. Though this sounds noble of her, she was not an easy woman to work for. She was not easily pleased and her temperament is reflected in her insistence that her “godchildren” refer to her as “Godmother.” In order to stay on Mason’s good side, Hurston used flattery whenever possible in her letters to Mason: “[s]pring means birth, but the real upspringing [sic] of life comes on May 18, when you renew your

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<sup>69</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, spring/summer 1929, in *ibid.*, 142.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>71</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 147.

promise to the world to shine and brill [sic] for another year. You are God's flower, and my flower and Miss Chapin's flower and Langston's flower and the world's blossom."<sup>72</sup>

Even with all the praise she heaped on Mason, Hurston was afraid of getting in trouble with her. After Hurston's car broke down on one of her tours of the South, she purchased a used car. For an entire letter, in what is perhaps the most emotionally raw Hurston is, she fretted about the \$400 purchase and wanted Hughes's help in ascertaining Godmother's mood. She explained to Hughes her worries and troubles. She had been able to convince Charlotte Mason to give her money for a new car (after the one she had been using became too expensive to repair). Mason's help came grudgingly, but Hurston was able to buy a newer car. The used car she bought began to malfunction about a hundred miles later. She then traded it in for a brand new car and decided that she could use her allowance from Mason to pay for it. Still, she fretted that if Godmother found out, she would get in trouble. Hurston was conflicted with this because "I do not feel that I have done wrong."<sup>73</sup> This is a very human emotion and Hurston needed validation from Hughes that she did the right thing. On the back of this letter, Hughes added a couple notes for Hurston: Don't be afraid for if one thing ends there's always something else[.] would advise telling [Godmother] about car although [she] may explode again[.] she loves you too much to completely blow you out[.] best way work with her is [to keep] nothing hidden then you have a solid foundation to go on[.] explosions are part of the business."<sup>74</sup> To write this on the back of the letter Hurston sent him means that Hughes must have cared enough for her not to

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<sup>72</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, May 18, 1930, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 187.

<sup>73</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, winter 1929/1930, in *ibid.*, 156.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

wait to begin comforting her. He must have begun formulating his response as he was reading her letter.

In order for Hurston and Hughes to receive Mason's patronage, they had to sign contracts about their relationship with her. Charlotte Mason "adopted" Hughes first. On November 5, 1927, Hughes signed a formal contract with Mason.<sup>75</sup> The contract stipulated that every month he would receive \$150 from Mason and in exchange he was to continue writing poetry or short stories. The rights to his work would remain his, but he was to consult with Mason periodically "on every important aspect of his creative flight."<sup>76</sup> He was also to create an expense report, and any money he did not spend was to be put in the bank. The existence of Mason and her patronage was a heavily guarded secret, but one that Hughes shared with Hurston.<sup>77</sup> The contract that Mason had Hurston signed was significantly different from the one Hughes signed a month prior. This is because she did not want Hurston to have the freedom that she gave Hughes. Because she was interested in anthropology herself, Mason "wanted to fund Hurston to do work that Mason would covet as her own."<sup>78</sup> Unable to do the research herself, Mason viewed Hurston as an instrument. Her job was to research and report all the folklore, music, hoodoo, and histories told by Southern blacks. In the end, Mason legally owned all the research. Even so, Hurston signed as a "godchild" of Mason and lived off her patronage for several years. With the secret patronage of Mason, Hughes, and Hurston had an even greater connection with each other.

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<sup>75</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 156.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. This last stipulation, the expense report, is reminiscent of his father's demand for Langston Hughes to inform him of how his son used his money. It is interesting that he accepted creating the report for Mason but not his father. This is most likely a reference to his hatred of his father, which made him reject his father's conditions.

<sup>77</sup> On the secrecy of Mason, Ibid., 157; On Hughes telling Hurston, Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 41.

In the summer of 1927, Hughes joined Hurston on her tour of the South. Hurston writes: “Langston and I are making a collection of art objects and expect to hold a joint exhibition on our return.”<sup>79</sup> Hurston had decided to explore hoodoo and its different practices. While in Georgia, Hughes informs Carl Van Vechten, “[w]e’ve decided to get somebody conjured while we’re down here. There are some great conjure doctors in Savannah.”<sup>80</sup> Eventually they found “a Root doctor to conjure T.R.S. Not that we had anything against him but we had to have a victim and since he is free[,] single, and childless we thought he was the best one to use. If he should turn up one day with his limbs all tied up in a knot dont [sic] tell that we conjured him.”<sup>81</sup> The lighthearted nature of this exchange shows that the two were having a good time in the South and enjoying each other’s company. A year later, when Hurston was learning how to conjure, Hughes apparently asked her to place a spell on him, to which she replied, “Yes, I WILL conjure you too, but only for good luck.”<sup>82</sup> This is good-natured banter between friends and a way for them to express interest in one another’s lives.

While on later folklore tours of the South, Hurston helped support Hughes by selling his books on her trips. “I sold 7 books and gave 3...Please send me 10 copies of ‘[The] Weary Blues.’ I could do with some more ‘Fine Clothes [to the Jew]’ too,”<sup>83</sup> she wrote to Hughes in

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<sup>79</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, August 26, 1927, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, August 15, 1927, in Hughes, *Remember Me*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, August 26, 1927, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 106. Hoodoo is a religion that was created by African slaves who came to America and were forced to practice Christianity. Hoodoo developed as a way to preserve their African heritage in secret. Conjuring is a type of spell casting that relies on spiritual energy and the power of nature to cast spells. These spells are not necessarily to harm a person, but to influence them. T. R. S. was Tom R. Smith, a friend of Carl Van Vechten, and an editor. What Hurston is doing is making a joke saying that they were going to cast malicious spells against him. That is because, like now, there was a negative connotation to in mainstream American society about Hoodoo and Voodoo as “evil.” Zora Neale Hurston did learn quite a bit about Hoodoo and became initiated as a conjurer herself later in her life.

<sup>82</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, November 22, 1928, in *ibid.*, 131. Emphasis in original.

<sup>83</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, August 16, 1928, in *ibid.*, 125.

one letter, and in another, “[b]ooks almost all gone. Check will be forwarded as soon as the last one is in. People like you immensely.”<sup>84</sup> She tells Hughes how popular he is in the South. In several letters, Hurston tells her friend that most everyone loves his poetry. This must have made Hughes feel good. After being a misfit for most of his childhood, to have people enjoy his work must have soothed his nerves. She did more than just flatter Hughes. Because she paid him, Hurston was also trying to help him live. Neither of the two had much money, and throughout their lives, they struggled to support themselves. Though she probably had a commission for selling his books, Hurston still had to carry several copies with her as she traveled. Overall, it must have been a bit of an inconvenience to sell these books. Still, she sold them and seemed happy to do it. Because the only books she mentions selling are Hughes’s, it is obvious that she did not do this for just anyone she knew, only for her close friend.

While they respected each other and helped each other out, Hughes and Hurston shared the same ideology. They agreed that there were important contributions to be made to society as “New Negro” artists. One of the ways in which they attempted to shake up the African American literary community was in the publication of *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artist*. A magazine co-authored by Hughes, Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglass, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce Nugent, and John Davis, the goal of the quarterly was to revolutionize the themes that African American writers used. With this in mind, several of the contributions were pretty avant garde (some examples are the use of stream-of-consciousness storytelling and a story told from the point of view of a prostitute). From the beginning, the magazine struggled with financial support. Each of the seven artists promised to send money to help pay for the publication and the most noteworthy external contributor was Carl Van Vechten.

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<sup>84</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, August 6, 1928, in *ibid.*, 124.

The magazine's first and only issue was published in November 1926. It "was a flawed, folk centered masterpiece"<sup>85</sup> that rejected the old paradigm of the Talented Tenth. In his article entitled "Intelligentsia," Arthur Huff Fauset blasts them because they:

have no more right to become associated with true artistic spirits than the Knights of Columbus have to drink the Grand Kleagle's health. They simply give art and artists a black eye with their snobbery and stupidity; and their false interpretations heighten suspicion against the real artist on the part of the ordinary citizen [more] than perhaps any other single factor in the clash of art and provincialism.<sup>86</sup>

This criticism might have turned off many readers. Few copies of the magazine sold due to its high cost and the negative reviews it received. These factors helped contribute to the magazine's failure.

Even though *Fire!!* folded, it demonstrates that Hughes and Hurston were able to work together to create a product. Each of them took the project seriously and spent the preceding months planning. In March, Hurston had already written her play "Color Struck" for *Fire!!* and had the money for her contribution ready; "I shall send the money I owe with my story....[which are] in my apt. in N.Y."<sup>87</sup> For years after, Wallace Thurman, with help from Hughes, gave money to pay for the printing of *Fire!!*<sup>88</sup> These actions show the dedication they had for their magazine. Though they tried to make *Fire!!* a success, "irony of ironies, several hundred copies of *Fire* were stored in the basement of an apartment where an actual fire occurred and the bulk of the whole issue was burned up."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Lewis, *When Harlem*, 195.

<sup>86</sup> Arthur Huff Fauset, "Intelligentsia," *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, November 1926 (repr. 1982), 46.

<sup>87</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, March 17, 1927, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 93.

<sup>88</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 237. They had to continue paying even after the magazine's folding because of the exorbitant price *Fire!!* cost to print.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

*Fire!!* may have folded, but that was not the last time Hughes and Hurston tried to work together. In her letters, Hurston mentions several different attempts that the two made in the production of a joint play. As early as 1927, the two began their venture as playwrights. Hurston explained the dream to Mason who “like[d] the idea of the opera, but says that we [Hurston and Hughes] must do it with so much power that it will halt all these spurious efforts on the part of white writers.”<sup>90</sup> This unnamed opera never seems to have gotten off the ground.

Hurston and Hughes were not the only ones who thought that they could produce a successful play. Mason put her money behind their attempt. Zora Neal Hurston reports that “[s]he does not believe that any one [sic] but us could do it. At any rate, she would not give her aid in any way to any one [sic] else.”<sup>91</sup> They wanted to create an accurate depiction of African American life. They were tired of “how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick—my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us.”<sup>92</sup> To accomplish this, Hurston and Hughes wanted to create “the real Negro art theatre”<sup>93</sup> that gave audiences an accurate representation of black life.

Six months later, in March of 1928, Hurston informed Hughes that “I have not written a line of anything since I have been down here [Eatonville, Florida] and I left all of my MSS. [manuscripts] in Newark in storage.”<sup>94</sup> It is unclear if this play is the same one from September of 1927 or not. However, Hurston explains, “I have the street scene still & 2 others in my mind

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<sup>90</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 21, 1927, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 106.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>92</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 20, 1928, in *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 12, 1928, in *ibid.*, 116. Emphasis in original.

<sup>94</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, March 8, 1928, in *ibid.*, 113.

–if you want them you can use them for yourself and its [sic] O.K. by me. Godmother asked me not to publish and as I am making money I hope you can use them.”<sup>95</sup> By giving up her ownership of the material for this play, she is in effect giving Hughes permission to plagiarize her. This act seems to be very generous and caring. By mentioning that she is doing fine and not in need of money at this point, she implies that she knew Hughes was not doing well and wanted to help him out. On its own, this passage does not signify much, but when Hurston and Hughes later work on *Mule Bone* together, it takes on a much greater significance.<sup>96</sup> This passage is the single most important moment in their friendship because of what happened during the production of *Mule Bone*.

On and off from 1927 until 1931, various letters Hurston sent Hughes mentioned several unnamed plays and their status. It is unclear if this is the play that they spent years on and eventually became *Mule Bone*, but it seems more likely that they attempted several different collaborations. One such joint project is called “JOOK.”<sup>97</sup> According to Hurston, it “is the word for bawdy [sic] house in its general sense.”<sup>98</sup> Here she tells Hughes that Mason “would never consent for me to do so, so you will have to take it all in your name.”<sup>99</sup> If giving up her rights to a previous play was the most important event mentioned in these letters, this is a close second. Hurston still wishes to create a play with Hughes, but knows that Mason could cut her off if she

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>96</sup> An analysis of this quotation and the possible ramifications of this act will be discussed in Section VI of this paper.

<sup>97</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, spring/summer 1929, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 143.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

does. To circumvent this problem, she decides to have Hughes publish the play under his name. This may have also been a factor in the events surrounding *Mule Bone*.

Although their friendship was eventually very close and included several collaborations, Hughes and Hurston did not see everything eye-to-eye. In a letter to Countee Cullen, Hurston expresses her frustration at Hughes for his representation of African American spirituals in his anthology *The Weary Blues*:

By the way, Hughes ought to stop publishing all those secular folk-songs as his poetry. Now when he got off the 'Weary Blues[' (most of it a song I and most southerners have known all our lives) I said nothing for I knew I'd never be forgiven by certain people for crying down what the 'white folks had exalted', [sic] but when he gets off another 'me and mah honey got two mo' days tuh do de buck' I dont [sic] see how I can refrain from speaking. I am at least going to speak to Van Vechten.<sup>100</sup>

This is an interesting claim. She is saying that the original poetry Hughes has in *The Weary Blues* is not his, but traditional folksongs. Whether that is true or not will not be discussed in this paper: however, her accusations do raise some questions about how friendly the two writers actually were at this point in time. If she doubted his intellectual integrity, that could have influenced her actions during the controversial *Mule Bone*. Because it was in a letter in 1926, and at the beginning of their friendship, it could be that she did not fully like Hughes or trust him at that point. She never brought up these accusations again, but the fact that she made them raises several questions about her actions during the *Mule Bone* controversy.

## V

Before launching into the accusations made by Hurston and Hughes during the winter of 1931, it is necessary to understand what they were trying to accomplish with a production of *Mule Bone* and a chronology of the events surrounding the controversy. In the spring of 1930,

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<sup>100</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen, March 11, 1926, in *ibid.*, 84. Emphasis in original. It should be noted that this line is from 1926, at the beginning of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's friendship. It may be that she did not fully trust him in the beginning of their friendship and, thus, made her allegations.

Hughes and Hurston decided to co-author a comedy based on Southern African-American life. They settled on a comedy because “practically all the plays by or about Negroes offered to the [Theatre] Guild were serious problem dramas, and that they [the Theatre Guild] would like very much to have a comedy.”<sup>101</sup> In addition to that, they wanted to create an accurate depiction of African American life. They saw how white playwrights treated blacks as stereotypes and wanted to confront that notion by creating “the real Negro art theatre.”<sup>102</sup> These were the goals Hurston and Hughes wanted to meet when they began to devise a play, first entitled “The Bone of Contention,” later entitled *Mule Bone*.<sup>103</sup>

After deciding this, Hughes and Hurston began to devise a plot and create the first and third acts of the play. They hired another “godchild” of Mason, Louise Thompson, to act as stenographer. Things were going well: Hurston felt that Thompson “did a dandy job” working for her and Hughes.<sup>104</sup> When she headed south for another folklore tour, Hurston was to write the dialogue for the second act, or that is at least what Hughes recalled. The last time Hurston mentions working on *Mule Bone* with Hughes is in a postcard from August in which she recounts that she “[d]reamed last night that you [Hughes] were working on the play.”<sup>105</sup> This implies that as of August 1930, Hurston had no intention of breaking up with Hughes over their play.

The next mention of the play is in November, when Hurston sends it to Carl Van Vechten. She explains that “Langston and I started out together on the idea of the story I used to

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<sup>101</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 21, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, ed. George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (n.p: Harper Perennial, 1991), 229.

<sup>102</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 12, 1928, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 116. Emphasis in original.

<sup>103</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 30, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 256.

<sup>104</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Lawrence Jordan, May 31, 1930, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 189.

<sup>105</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, August 11, 1930, in *ibid.*, 191.

tell you about Eatonville, but being so much apart from rush of business, I started all over again while in Mobile and this is the result of my work alone.”<sup>106</sup> In the letter Hurston explains that it is only a rough draft, and she would like him to look it over and let her know how he liked it. This letter seems very straight forward and she assures her friend that the work she did on this version of *Mule Bone* was derived from her ideas alone.

Whether or not Hurston would have sent the play out to be performed on her own is unknown because in the end she never got to make that decision. It turned out that Carl Van Vechten was so taken with the play he sent it out to the Theatre Guild himself, without informing Hurston. Barrett H. Clark, a reader for the guild, “found it sufficiently fresh and interesting to recommend further readings by other Guild staff members.”<sup>107</sup> Clark then met Rowena Jelliffe and “[he] took the liberty of giving her the script.”<sup>108</sup> Rowena Jelliffe was the same woman Hughes met in high school. She was by now the owner, along with her husband, Russell, of the Karamu House in Cleveland.

Sick with tonsillitis, Hughes was living with his mother in Cleveland and taking an interest in the activities of his old friends, the Jelliffes. The day after Clark wrote to Van Vechten informing him about his actions with regards to *Mule Bone*, Rowena Jelliffe returned from New York with the play. Hughes was shocked when he discovered that the play written by Hurston was the same one they had begun a year earlier. Still in shock, he wrote a letter to Carl Van Vechten. “We had been such good friends—” Hughes said, “this unexpected deception is the

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<sup>106</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 14, 1930, in *ibid.*, 193.

<sup>107</sup> Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten, January 15, 1931, in “Letters: Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten,” Zora Neale Hurston Collection, in James Weldon Johnson Collection in the American Literature Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. <http://brbl.l.library.yale.edu/pdfgen/exportPDF.php?bibid=10171149&solrid=3724585> (accessed April 11, 2013).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

first disappointment [sic].”<sup>109</sup> He explains how each of them had a unique role in its creation. Hughes was responsible for “doing the plot, construction, and guiding the dialog toward the necessary situations and climaxes, Zora supplying the little story about the trial of the man who hit another with a mule-bone, giving the dialog it’s [sic] Southern flavor and many of the ‘wise-cracks.’”<sup>110</sup> He felt that Hurston was being evasive and secretive about the play in the months prior, but he thought nothing of it since they had worked together so much in the past. Now he understood why she did not want to finish the play with him. It is interesting that Hughes was disappointed and not angry that Hurston put her name to the play they had written together. That same day he wrote a brief note to Hurston asking for clarification on what had happened and why she finished *Mule Bone* on her own.

On January 18, three days after Rowena Jelliffe received *Mule Bone*, Hurston began a letter to Hughes. In this missive, she outlines her reasons for rewriting and putting only her name on the play. Her objection was to Louise Thompson, the stenographer. Hurston “object[ed] to having my work hi-jacked,”<sup>111</sup> and “the idea of you, HUGHES, trying to use the tremendous influence that you knew you had with me that some one [sic] else [Louise Thompson] might exploit me cut me to the quick.”<sup>112</sup> Afraid of losing her work, she re-wrote *Mule Bone* on her own out of “self-preservation.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, January 16, 1931, in “Letters: Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten,” Zora Neale Hurston Collection, in James Weldon Johnson Collection in the American Literature Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/pdfgen/exportPDF.php?bibid=10171150&solrid=3724586> (accessed April 11, 2013).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 18, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 202.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 203. Emphasis in original.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 203.

After Hughes received this letter from Hurston he informed her that Louise Thompson had no interest in the play and that she only received the money due her for typing it. As the letter progresses, though Hughes says wants the two of them to have *Mule Bone* produced, he does get increasingly peeved at Hurston. He threatens, “if you make any further attempts to dispose of any script based upon the play which we did together and now called Mule-Bone [sic], it will be a matter for my lawyers and The Author’s Guild.”<sup>114</sup> He also tells her that “her” version of the third act is the same as the one he wrote with her.

Hughes was not the only one who was irritated. Hurston began to take offense at the language he used in his letters to her. She objected to him using explicative language and stated: “[y]ou know I don’t use such a nasty word.”<sup>115</sup> At the beginning of the same letter she writes sarcastically, “[g]ee, I was glad to get your letter!”<sup>116</sup> She also expresses her frustration that *Mule Bone* was sent out to Rowena Jelliffe (and probably Barrett H. Clark) without her consent. However, like Hughes, she does say that she is willing to finish the play together and have it performed in Cleveland.

For the next several days, letters were frantically sent between Hurston, Hughes, Van Vechten, and Barrett H. Clark. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, Van Vechten writes to Hughes telling him, “I cannot mix up in this any more [sic]. Zora had one grand emotional scene down here and I can’t very well face another. Beside, anything she might promise to do for me would have no effect whatever on her subsequent actions.”<sup>117</sup> He further informs Hughes that the Theatre Guild “sent

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<sup>114</sup> Langston Hughes to Zora Neale Hurston, January 20, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 221.

<sup>115</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 20, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 205.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> Carl Van Vechten to Langston Hughes, January 20, 1931, in Hughes, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 77.

the play on to Cleveland with no authority whatever."<sup>118</sup> In this letter Carl Van Vechten wants to try and remain friends with both Hughes and Hurston. He expresses hope that the two can sort out the dilemma with *Mule Bone* so that it can be produced.

In the meantime, Barrett H. Clark of the Theatre Guild begins to try and cover himself. He writes to Van Vechten: "[t]he moment I heard that another author besides Miss Hurston claimed some part in the writing, I wired Mrs. Jelliffe to return the manuscript to me."<sup>119</sup> He postulates that "the play might have some chance of production" if there was no controversy over authorship.<sup>120</sup> The same day, Clark writes an apology note to Hughes informing him of his role in the *Mule Bone* reaching Cleveland and to "bear in mind that my part of this affair was confined to the activities I have just outlined."<sup>121</sup> Though he explains to Hughes in great detail his contact with *Mule Bone*, Clark never apologizes to Hughes for his actions. However, Clark was "sorry to have contributed, though with the best intentions, to this mix-up" in his next letter to Van Vechten.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. This disclaimer seems a little hypocritical since Carl Van Vechten was the one who sent the play to the Theatre Guild without the consent of Hurston.

<sup>119</sup> Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten, January 21, 1931, in "Letters: Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten." It sure seems that Clark is attempting to cover himself in case of a lawsuit.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Barrett H. Clark to Langston Hughes, January 21, 1931, in *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten, January 22, 1931, in *ibid.* Although Carl Van Vechten told Langston Hughes he wanted to disassociate himself from the affair, he appears to have continued making inquiries to the Theatre Guild about what happened to the play there. He wrote the Play Reading Department to see what actually happened to the manuscript. In a letter from the end of the month, Hope Newcombe, a secretary, responded to his letter. In it she informs him that she had told the Play Reading Department to send it directly back to her after they read it. But when asked if they were finished with it she "was informed that Mr. Barrett Clark wished to submit it to someone and that he had planned to phone you [Van Vechten] that day to ask your permission....The next day I asked the Play Reading Department what decision had been made, and was amazed to learn that Mr. Clark had sent the manuscript to Cincinnati [sic] without having first phoned you." Hope Newcombe to Carl Van Vechten, January 28, 1931, in "Letters to Carl Van Vechten," in Zora Neale Hurston Collection, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the American Literature Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. <http://brbdl.library.yale.edu/pdfgen/exportPDF.php?bibid=10171151&solrid=3724587> (accessed April 11, 2013).

While this entire episode took place, Hughes began to seek legal advice. He contacted a NAACP lawyer by the name of Arthur Spingarn. In his letter to Spingarn, Hughes gives his account of *Mule Bone* and its authorship. Hughes says that in Hurston's version of the play, the changes she made were minimal, and they "weaken[ed] her climax."<sup>123</sup> He criticizes her for sending out two different endings for the play, "an awful way to send out a manuscript, evidently leaving the producer his choice of acts and endings. In fact the whole thing is perfectly amazing. Maybe she has lost her mind!"<sup>124</sup> Hughes seems to be bitter at Hurston for what she did. It is interesting to note that Hughes believes that she was the one who submitted and approved its production. To back up his claims, Hughes offers seven pieces of evidence that prove his story. For the most part they are people who knew the two had been working on *Mule Bone* for the past year. He goes on to ask Spingarn to speak with Hurston on his behalf in New York and tell her that Hughes does not care about anything, so long as they can put both of their names on *Mule Bone*. He gives permission that "[s]he may have two-thirds of the joint royalties if she feels that she should, I will accept one-third," if Hurston did not want an even split."<sup>125</sup>

Arthur Spingarn was able to meet several times with Hurston and talk to her about the play. He found that "she is not so much concerned about the matter of royalties, but feels that you [Hughes] have been unfair and unjust in the matter."<sup>126</sup> He also discovered that "Miss Hurston thinks, and I agree with her, that this matter can be much better adjusted if you two meet

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<sup>123</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 21, 1931, in "The Correspondence," in Hughes *Mule Bone*, 233.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 239. Emphasis in original

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Spingarn to Langston Hughes, January 24, 1931, in "The Correspondence," in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 244.

face to face.”<sup>127</sup> In the end, he believed “she is at bottom very friendly disposed toward you and that she really has been more hurt by what she thinks is an ungenerous attitude on your part than by anything else.”<sup>128</sup> In all of his letters to Hughes, Spingarn reiterates that he feels the *Mule Bone* affair is a simple misunderstanding and that if the two were to meet and talk it out, the conflict would be resolved.

Hurston was not sitting idle as this occurred. She was concerned about her rights and her work that went into the play. As she was still under the patronage of Charlotte Mason,<sup>129</sup> Hurston felt it was her duty to keep Godmother on her side. She believes “that Langston makes no claim of authorship. In the letter, over the phone and thru his friends, he attempts to set up the claim that he is due something because I didnt [sic] tell him to get out.”<sup>130</sup> While it is true in the letters that survive Hughes never mentions verbatim “I am a co-author,” the intent behind his words implies that he is essentially saying that phrase. Hurston, at this point may have only been trying to emphasize her own position as author of *Mule Bone* to impress Mason. That aside, Hurston makes one more claim against Hughes to Charlotte Mason, “I noted in his NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER that he used several bits that I had given him. Now I am not using one single solitary bit in dialogue, plot nor situation from him and yet he tries to muscle in.”<sup>131</sup>

For several more days Hughes and Hurston wavered between working together again and calling the play off until they eventually agreed to produce the play in Cleveland. Hurston would

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>128</sup> Arthur Spingarn to Langston Hughes, January 27, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 250.

<sup>129</sup> While Hurston and Hughes were writing the play, Hughes broke up with Mason. By the time that the controversy surrounding *Mule Bone* came into being, he had been living without her patronage for several months.

<sup>130</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 20, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 206.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

meet Hughes in Cleveland to finish the script and allow the Gilpin Players, a black acting troupe, to perform it on February 15<sup>th</sup> as their season's opening performance. Hughes "guess[es] the split is over" after Hurston sent three telegrams to support the production of the play.<sup>132</sup> He seems to be happy that the play will be performed and the controversy is over: "I guess now everything will be the same again. Thank God!"<sup>133</sup>

Most everyone was excited that the play was going to be performed. Hurston seemed to be fine working again with Hughes. Carl Van Vechten was pleased that the two were back together and wanted to be kept abreast of *Mule Bone*'s production. Louise Thompson, who received the brunt of Hurston's blame, wished "[s]uccess to the play and all matters pertaining thereto. It has truly become a bone of contention, hasn't it. The only thing I can say is that Zora is crazy, but unfortunately maliciously so."<sup>134</sup> However, not everyone was excited about the play. Rowena Jelliffe and the Gilpin Players were becoming increasingly nervous as the premier date crept closer and Hughes and Hurston still had not signed a contract. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, Rowena Jelliffe wrote to Arthur Spingarn asking for his advice. After receiving telegrams from Hurston, some consenting to the play's production and some against it, Jelliffe worried whether or not it was worth producing *Mule Bone* at all. To perform the play at all she wanted Spingarn to get Hurston's signature for her consent to the play's production.

On the evening of February 1<sup>st</sup>, Hurston arrived in Cleveland.<sup>135</sup> According to Hughes, before any of them knew she was in town, "the Gilpin Players voted to no longer continue with

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<sup>132</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, January 22, 1931, in Hughes, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 78.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>134</sup> Louise Thompson to Langston Hughes, January 28, 1931, in "The Correspondence," in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 253.

<sup>135</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary*, 144.

the production.”<sup>136</sup> Still, they all met the following day because “Mrs. Jelliffe felt that the group would perhaps reconsider their action and continue with the play.”<sup>137</sup> Hughes and Hurston met before the meeting and spoke to each other about her grievances. Hughes ascertained Hurston believed “that by taking the play alone and go[ing] off with it she was thus protecting me and herself from what she chose to call ‘a gold digger’ [Louise Thompson].”<sup>138</sup> At the meeting itself, the two came to the agreement that whenever the Gilpin Players decided to perform *Mule Bone*, they would back it.

The following day, everything fell apart. Hurston became enraged that Louise Thompson was in Cleveland some days prior on unrelated business.<sup>139</sup> She ranted at Rowena Jelliffe, and at a meeting in Hughes’s house, she “[k]ept bringing Miss Thompson into the conversation as a bad woman.”<sup>140</sup> Hughes felt the episode “was most absurd, like a scene in a play itself.”<sup>141</sup> After the tantrum, Hurston left Cleveland and halted production of the play, effectively ending their friendship. Hughes “regret[s] the loss of what I had considered her friendship, and the loss (I hope only temporarily) of what might have been an amusing comedy.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, February 3, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 259.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>139</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography*, 144.

<sup>140</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, February 3, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 261.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 263.

Where Hughes was saddened by the turn of events, Hurston celebrates that she “STOPPED LOUISE THOMPSON” and she “SMASHED THEM ALL BE HOME BY THE WEEK END [sic].”<sup>143</sup>

At this point, in *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote that he “never heard from Miss Hurston again.”<sup>144</sup> But this is not the case. A little over a week later, Hurston sent Hughes a letter expressing her concern for his health and wishing him luck.<sup>145</sup> A month later, Hughes sent her a letter with a newspaper clipping to which Hurston responded: “Thanks. I read it. I dont [sic] know whether you sent it to me so that I might know that this sort of thing happens to lots of folks, or whether some part of it appeared to you to fit the case.”<sup>146</sup> Even though they were not on the most cordial of terms, Hurston and Hughes did have contact for the next month.

They also had contact through Hughes’s lawyer, Arthur Spingarn on and off for the next year. Hurston was attempting to separate her work from *Mule Bone* because she hoped “to eliminate all parts of the play in which you [Hughes] claim collaboration.”<sup>147</sup> In response, Hughes said “I think it would be just as well to let Miss Hurston have the play.”<sup>148</sup> Besides trying to extricate her work, Hurston also raised objections to Hughes’s claim he had the “original” manuscript of *Mule Bone*. She informed Spingarn, “[y]ou have seen what you client

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<sup>143</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, February 3, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 209. Emphasis in original.

<sup>144</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 334.

<sup>145</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, February 14, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 210-211.

<sup>146</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, March 18, 1931, in *ibid.*, 213.

<sup>147</sup> Arthur Spingarn to Langston Hughes, March 5, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 267.

<sup>148</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, March 6, 1931, in *ibid.*, 268.

says is the original script. You evidently forget that your client had my script out in Cleveland and I see did not hesitate to copy off some emendations.”<sup>149</sup>

Here end the events surrounding *Mule Bone* and Hurston and Hughes’s disagreements over it. The two never resolved their differences and the play was not performed until after both of their deaths. In 1991, the play was published, and before the first page of the play, the editors note: “[s]everal drafts of *Mule Bone* exist, housed at Howard and at Yale. The most complete draft, however, and the only one containing two scenes in Act Two, is that dated ‘Cleveland, 1931.’ It is this draft that we have published here.”<sup>150</sup> As it stands today, the published version of the play incorporates many themes often used by Hurston and several elements that would later be used in her novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Among these instances are the tall-tales told by the men outside the store, the story of the stubborn mule, and domestic abuse. The elements that can be clearly defined as the work of Hurston stand out much more than those of Hughes. That is not to say that other themes do not exist, but to emphasize the connection that Hurston had with the play. Hughes did have an obvious link with the play, especially in its ending. When the two male protagonists decide not to marry the girl they love, it is due to their unwillingness to work for white society (and as second class citizens). This is reminiscent of the protagonist in Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter*. He confronts the reality of working for whites and living with a dead-end job. In the matter of themes, *Mule Bone* is both Hughes and Hurston’s play.

## VI

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<sup>149</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, March 25, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: An Life*, 215. Emphasis in original.

<sup>150</sup> Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, ed. George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (n.p: Harper Perennial, 1991), 43. This paper will not delve into the plot of *Mule Bone* itself, but look at overall themes of it.

Even though both authors left their distinct impressions on *Mule Bone*, why did Hurston decide to re-write the play on her own? Why were the differences between Hughes and Hurston irreconcilable? And most importantly, why was the controversy so polarizing in the first place? The answers to these questions deal with race, power, and gender. Each of these themes reflects the conditions in which the two writers lived and the reasons they acted the way they did. The three themes are interconnected and overlapping.

Race played an important role in the conflict between Hurston and Hughes. In the biographical sketches of Hughes and Hurston presented earlier, it is possible to gain an understanding of what life was like for an African American coming of age in the early twentieth century. They both faced discrimination because of their race, though Hughes had to deal with discrimination much more than Hurston. Because other African Americans dealt with this same issue, Harlem became almost a utopian ideal. The attraction of Harlem for young blacks was in its predominantly black culture. Harlem had an aura of acceptance and had businesses owned and operated by African Americans. Because of that, African American artists had the ability to showcase their talent in a setting that judged their gift, not the color of their skin. This led many to feel that the borough was the center for black life and a place where black intellectuals and artists could make a living creating art.

These ideals were shared by Hughes and Hurston. They felt that they could make it on their skill as writers. Though Harlem seemed to promise a life for black artists, the two discovered that it was not easy to make money from writing. Neither had financial security during their lifetimes. They relied on help from one another. Throughout their relationship together, Hughes and Hurston helped each other out. Both of them proof-read each other's manuscripts. In doing this, they increased the likelihood of a publisher agreeing to accept their

work. Hurston went even further by selling Hughes's poetry books while she toured the south. When she gave up her ownership to several of the plays she was working on with Hughes, Hurston implied that she knew Hughes was not doing well financially. Though not monetarily secure herself, Hurston never-the-less walked away from the plays. She implied that she was not tight on money at the time and the loss of income would not hurt her. These types of acts are generous and reflect the mentality of life for "New Negro" artists. Because they faced discrimination from the white community, artists like Hurston and Hughes worked together to secure their artistic careers.

When the events surrounding *Mule Bone* arose, the aid Hurston gave Hughes was most likely on her mind. By sacrificing her authorship to both of the plays, Hurston may have felt that she was owed something by Hughes. She also sent him love letters she collected on her travels in the South, as Hughes wanted to use them in an anthology. The premise of Hurston wanting her share is further backed up by her assertion during the *Mule Bone* affair "that he used several bits that I had given him. Now I am not using one single solitary bit in dialogue, plot nor situation from him and yet he tries to muscle in."<sup>151</sup> This seems to be Hurston's way of expressing that Hughes is in her debt. She let him use some of her research without strings attached; she therefore felt she should be allowed the same. This could have contributed to Hurston's decision to rewrite the play.

The last piece of evidence that demonstrates how race was a factor in their work lies in Hurston and Hughes's decision to attempt reconciliation and finish the play. Instead of keeping their distance from one other, the two decided to come together and try to work their differences out. Hurston recognized that "I am in fault in the end and you [Hughes] were in fault in the

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<sup>151</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 20, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 206.

beginning. I shall freely acknowledge my share at anytime [sic] and place.”<sup>152</sup> Even though they accept that neither has acted in the best light, they agree to help one another out and meet in Cleveland to bury the hatchet. Hughes writes that “I hope you will agree for it [*Mule Bone*] to be done here [Cleveland], as I think it will mean much to us both.”<sup>153</sup> Hughes and Hurston knew that the only chance of success for *Mule Bone* at this time would be if they could work together. Their play was a first: a black folk comedy written by blacks and about blacks. There was a good probability of success for this play. Van Vechten, Clark, Jelliffe, and even Arthur Spingarn recognized the play’s potential. If Hurston and Hughes could have performed the play, they could have become (at least temporarily) financially secure. With this in mind, it does not seem too shocking that after all of the accusations made by both sides, Hughes and Hurston made several attempts to continue production of the play.

With the factor of race added into the picture, the reasons why Hurston did what she did become clearer. Still, it is not the only factor that offers an insight into the *Mule Bone* affair. Closely tied into the theme of race is that of power. Due to the fact that many black artists of the Harlem Renaissance were unable to sustain themselves, a white support structure emerged. Charlotte Mason and Carl Van Vechten were important white patrons to black writers during this period. Mason gave financial support; Van Vechten offered important connections to publishers and to people like Barrett H. Clark and Rowena Jelliffe who had the means to actually stage a play’s production. These four, on the surface, seemed to be good friends to “New Negro” artists, but upon closer examination, they did not always do what was best for the artist. Mason gave her “godchildren” the money needed to produce their art, but forced them to sign oppressive

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<sup>152</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 20, 1931, *ibid.*, 204.

<sup>153</sup> Langston Hughes to Zora Neale Hurston, January 19, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 214.

contracts in order to receive it. Hughes had to get the changes he made to his manuscripts approved by her before he could publish them or receive her money. Hurston's contract was much more restrictive. She lost all control over her work as her contract stipulated that Mason would be the author of anything Hurston published.

This patronage did help Hughes and Hurston's ability to write, but they lost a significant amount of artistic freedom. They were no longer in control of their work. This can be further seen in the *Mule Bone* controversy. Van Vechten gave Hurston's version of *Mule Bone* to the Theatre Guild without asking for her permission. Since he was known for sending out manuscripts he liked to publishers, it would not be surprising if this was a common occurrence. Van Vechten had the clout to push a manuscript through publication. In doing this, he was promoting art and gave the black authors, such as Hurston and Hughes, the opportunity to be taken seriously in higher publishing circles. Van Vechten's work helped support many African Americans, not through money he personally gave them, but the money the artist gained by having his/her work printed.

Still, by not receiving Hurston's permission first, Van Vechten minimized the power that she had over her work. Even though he did this and helped to cause the affair in the first place, neither Hughes nor Hurston considered him an enemy. Hurston hardly mentions him, and Hughes "in no way blame[s] him for the present situation."<sup>154</sup> In fact, both of them seemed to take his advice to attempt reconciliation and have the play performed. This lack of blame can be explained as a result of Van Vechten's influence in the publishing world. He was not accused of any wrong doing because he could provide both Hughes and Hurston with valuable connections in the future.

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<sup>154</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 21, 1931, in "ibid., 235.

But what led to Hurston's break with Hughes? Hurston says that "I could not but get the idea that your [Hughes's] efforts were bent on turning everything into a benefit for somebody else."<sup>155</sup> Here is where she explains that she wanted some power over her work. Hurston believed that Hughes was trying to take her work from her and prevent her from claiming authorship. Keeping in mind her oppressive contract with Mason, Hurston was probably very sensitive over this issue. If she truly believed that Hughes planned to cut her out, then Hurston most likely decided that her only option to secure her power over her work was to rewrite *Mule Bone* and pass it off as her own.

The same yearning to control his work can be seen in Hughes's reaction to Hurston's tale. Hughes claims that Hurston's rewrite of *Mule Bone* was an "unfinished messed-up version."<sup>156</sup> Hughes felt that she was "spoiling the climax."<sup>157</sup> In saying this, Hughes was implying that the genius behind the play was himself and he had the real talent for playwriting. Like Hurston, Hughes wanted to lay claim to his authorship of *Mule Bone*. However, if Hurston's version of the play was as bad as Hughes believed, why did Carl Van Vechten believe it good enough to send it on to the Theatre Guild, and then Barrett H. Clark feel the impulse to send it with Rowena Jelliffe without permission? Because Van Vechten had a reputation for picking and choosing which manuscripts to send out, it is improbable that Hurston's *Mule Bone* was as bad as Hughes paints it.

When both Hurston and Hughes copyrighted *Mule Bone*, they were making a statement saying that they had creative control of the work. When Hughes noticed that the play Rowena

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<sup>155</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 18, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 202.

<sup>156</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, January 18, 1931, in "Letters: Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten."

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Jelliffe had did not have a copyright date on it, Hughes combined Hurston's second act of *Mule Bone* with his versions of the first and third act and then "mailed the comedy off to be copyrighted on Monday (Jan. 19) in my name, but giving both our names as the authors."<sup>158</sup>

However, Hurston had copyrighted the play on October 29, 1930.<sup>159</sup> Still, Hughes's request was approved by the Copyright Office, which Spingarn notes "is not unusual for the Copyright Office to copyright any material that is regularly presented to it."<sup>160</sup> With *Mule Bone* copyrighted by both Hughes and Hurston, it shows the determination that they had to be recognized for their work.

The spectrum of emotions expressed by each author can be explained through the filter of power. In her letters, Hurston expresses a large range of emotions during the whole controversy from resentment to anger to regret. Although Hughes feels several different emotions, he expresses no anger. If he was the completely innocent party that he claims he was, at some point it would be natural to express anger at Hurston for plagiarizing his work. However, in the letters of Hughes found for this paper, he never expresses anger.<sup>161</sup> This implies that he understood, on some level, Hurston's motivations for claiming *Mule Bone* as her own. Because they were living and working under the same conditions, Hughes and Hurston probably had a better feel for each other's motivations than what is indicated in their letters. Hughes faced the same lack of power over his work; and by not expressing anger at Hurston, he may have been signaling that he

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<sup>158</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 21, 1931, in "The Correspondence," in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 236.

<sup>159</sup> Date of copyright given in Zora Neale Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, August 14, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 225.

<sup>160</sup> Arthur Spingarn to Langston Hughes, February 3, 1931, in "The Correspondence," in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 265.

<sup>161</sup> It should be noted that Langston Hughes was not a man that angered easily. Even so, he does express hatred of his father in his autobiography. The ability to say that he hated someone points to the ability to be angry at someone. If ever there was a time in Hughes's life to be angry, it would be over intellectual plagiarism.

sympathized with her reasons for writing the play on her own. But as an author himself, he did not want to sacrifice his claim in lieu of hers.

As the conflict unfolded, Hurston and Hughes wrote to many of their friends attempting to woo them to their side. The division of their friends was a power play in which Hughes and Hurston attempted to gain more power over their work. The more people they convinced, the more power they had. Hughes began to feel the pressure after Hurston was able to recruit her godmother Mason and Alain Locke (another godchild) to her side. The stress began to build and Hughes felt that “New Yorkers are beginning to think that I am the robber instead of the robbed!”<sup>162</sup> Now out from under Mason, Hughes was able to convince Rowena Jelliffe and Louis Thompson (also free from Mason) of the truth of his story. By struggling to convince their friends, Hughes and Hurston tried to validate their claims of authorship.

To have a more complete understanding of the affair, it is necessary to understand how gender affected the authors. Gender played an important part in the events surrounding the controversy and Hurston’s reactions. Hurston was a strong, independent woman who did not want to compromise herself for anyone. This sense of self was formed during her childhood and young adult years. Hurston did not have the healthiest relationships with the men in her family during her formative years. She was abandoned by her father at boarding school when she was only fourteen and freely acknowledged that she was a disappointment to him. Later, she was lied to by her brother and was required to work as his domestic servant. Not mentioned earlier is the failed marriage Hurston had with a man she met in college. What caused the relationship to end was that she felt smothered by him and that she could not do everything she wanted to. Overall, Hurston did not have good relationships with the male members of her family who were

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<sup>162</sup> Langston Hughes to Arthur Spingarn, January 30, 1931, in “The Correspondence,” in Hughes, *Mule Bone*, 256.

supposed to take care of her. Due to this, it would not be surprising if she had a hard time trusting men. If she felt that Hughes was trying to usurp her position in the play by introducing Louise Thompson into the mix, Hurston may have acted, in her mind, in a way to secure her own interests and protect herself.

In the whole muddle of *Mule Bone* and the events of January 1931, it is obvious Hurston resented Louise Thompson. From a real or imagined slight, Hurston blamed Thompson for the mishaps with the play. She felt her work that went into the play had been “hi-jacked” and that there was a sexual relationship between Thompson and Hughes.<sup>163</sup> While Hughes denies the claims that he wanted to give Thompson a share in the play, he knew “Zora was jealous of the stenographer.”<sup>164</sup> When Rampersad was compiling his biography of Hughes, he was able to interview Thompson and ask her about the validity of Hurston’s claims. She responded, “well, she’s just lying. She’s just lying. Because there was never any relationship between Langston and me other than as a brother....If Langston had approached me in another way, I might have been receptive, but he never did. I accepted Langston on that plane, that we were the best of friends and comrades.”<sup>165</sup> Whatever Thompson’s true participation in the play, Hurston felt that she had to tell everyone about the “vile wretch.”<sup>166</sup>

Some scholars believe Hurston’s claims about the relationship between Hurston and Thompson. Others believe that she was in love with Hughes and became jealous of Thompson

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<sup>163</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 18 1931 in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 202.

<sup>164</sup> Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, January 20, 1931, in “Letters: Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten.”

<sup>165</sup> Louise Thompson Patterson to Arnold Rampersad, interview, quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2:196.

<sup>166</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Charlotte Osgood Mason, January 20, 1931, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 208.

because of this. In the research I was able to do, I was unable to uncover any evidence that supported the claim that Hurston was in love with Hughes or that the *Mule Bone* controversy was caused by a love triangle. In fact, many of Hughes's contemporaries saw him as asexual.<sup>167</sup> This makes Hurston's passage to Hughes, "I am glad for Wallace and Bruce. More power to them"<sup>168</sup> more powerful. The two men in the quote are Wallace Thurman and Bruce Nugent; who were apparently living together as a couple. As there is a question about Hughes's sexuality, it could be that Hurston believed that he was not heterosexual and by applauding these two men, Hurston is telling Hughes she accepts him for who he is. It could also be what the quote appears on the surface—Hurston having very progressive views on homosexuality and accepting of those who lived openly. Later she laments for Wallace Thurman when she marries Louise Thompson, "I wish he might get a divorce,"<sup>169</sup> to be true to himself.

If she was not sexually attracted to Hughes, what made Hurston dislike Thompson so? For several weeks she got along with Thompson and praised her work. Although she claimed her animosity was due to Thompson's wish to get as much money from the play as possible, that does not seem likely. She felt that she had been taken advantage of by Hughes bringing in a third person, but Hurston was an independent woman who had no trouble expressing her opinions. It is also hard to imagine that Hughes had such a "tremendous influence" over her that he could railroad Hurston into doing something that she did not want to do. It is far more likely that Hurston felt that her close, platonic relationship with Hughes was threatened by the addition of Thompson. Hughes and Hurston seemed to be inseparable during the 1920s. They spent

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<sup>167</sup> Mention of Thompson conclusions on Hughes's sexuality are in Rampersad, *The Life*, 196.

<sup>168</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 12, 1928, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 116.

<sup>169</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, winter 1929/1930, in *ibid.*, 157. This quote is from a letter written about a year before the events of *Mule Bone*, so it is unlikely that Hurston is making a derogatory remark about Louise Thompson.

months together on a tour of the south and collaborated on several different projects. The injection of Thompson into that relationship could have made Hurston feel that her friendship was under attack.

There is no question that Hughes was good friends with Thompson. The two of them shared communist sympathies and “[I]ike Thompson, Hughes had connections to the CP [Communist Party]...but he was not a Party member.”<sup>170</sup> A year after the *Mule Bone* events, the two went to the Soviet Union with several other African Americans to talk about racism in America. There is also Thompson’s quote about her relationship with Hughes. She says that their relationship was akin to family and if Hughes wanted, she was willing to further their relationship. With this level of familiarity, it is possible to see why Hurston felt threatened by Thompson. By writing the play on her own, it might have been a ploy to separate Thompson from Hughes. Hurston was a strong woman who seemed to lack close ties with others. Because of this, she might have wanted to keep Hughes to herself.

As these factors influenced the actions and reactions of Hurston and Hughes, they could not prevent *Mule Bone*’s shelving for sixty years. The themes of gender, power, and race created the world in which Hughes and Hurston lived. They were responsible, by and large, for the creation of the Harlem Renaissance itself. With this in mind, it is possible to understand why Hurston rewrote *Mule Bone* and why Hughes reacted the way he did. Most importantly, these themes solve the mystery of why two writers with opposing viewpoints agreed to meet in Cleveland and try to reconcile.

## VII

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<sup>170</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950* (New York: W. E. Norton and Company, 2008), 136.

Most of the treatments of the *Mule Bone* affair deal with the period surrounding the publication of the play. In both Hemenway's biography of Hurston, and Rampersad's biography of Hughes, they devote a number of pages to this event. In newer books (Plant's biography of Hurston, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* by Lewis, and Bernard's biography of Carl Van Vechten), there are only brief mentions of the controversy. Even though the topic has been covered and researched, it does not appear to be fully developed.

In Rampersad's tome, he is vehemently opposed to Hurston's claims to *Mule Bone* and sees her as the aggressor and Hughes as the victim. He claims that she was "mistaking or deliberately misrepresenting" events as well as Hughes and Thompson's relationship.<sup>171</sup> He believes that "Hurston's suspicion of Thompson seems to have been based on little more than a general sense of insecurity with a woman younger, prettier, more poised, and, although in a more orthodox way, as intelligent as Hurston herself."<sup>172</sup> This version of events is very biased towards Hughes's claims. Because of this, Rampersad's treatment of *Mule Bone* is very one-sided and does not tell the entire story.

Hemenway's coverage of the events is not much better. Though he devotes a good twenty pages to the controversy and tries to show both sides of the issue, he is biased on the side of Hurston. He writes that "Hughes's account of this whole episode in *The Big Sea* is discreet to the point of being self-serving."<sup>173</sup> Hemenway also mentions that Hurston felt saddened by the events surrounding *Mule Bone*, "but the bitterness stayed with Hughes to the end."<sup>174</sup> This treatment is still not a full story of the events. Hemenway wrote the chapter in the late 1970s

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<sup>171</sup> Rampersad, *The Life*, 196.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary*, 145.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 148.

before the play was produced and published in 1991. Because of this, approximately seven pages of Hemenway's coverage of *Mule Bone* are devoted only to an outline of the play and key events that took place in it.

In more recent years, the same trend continues. Biographers of Hughes prefer his version of events over Hurston's, and her biographers side with her. There seems to be no interest in seeing the affair from both sides. One biographer of Hurston goes so far as to call Hughes a "chauvinist."<sup>175</sup> An historian of the Harlem Renaissance, David Levering Lewis, devotes only a couple of pages to the controversy, most of which point to the tragedy of the play never being performed, lamenting that the "almost perfect union of the talents of Hughes and Hurston" was never to be seen by the public.<sup>176</sup> Lewis does not so much pick a side of the affair, as wish it had never arisen. He feels that "the 'Mule Bone' controversy enveloped much of Harlem's leadership"<sup>177</sup> and many were forced to choose a side. Though Lewis's treatment involves less name-calling, it still does not satisfy the question of why the controversy existed in the first place. Because of this, I feel that my coverage of the *Mule Bone* affair is much more comprehensive.

That being said, there were some limitations to my research. One such restriction is in the letters between Hurston and Hughes. Hurston kept a correspondence with many different and important figures of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the interesting pieces to the puzzle of Hughes and Hurston's friendship are the letters she wrote to him. In these letters she reveals that she was a good friend of Hughes. Though these letters are a treasure trove of information, they

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<sup>175</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979), 10.

<sup>176</sup> Lewis, *When Harlem*, 261.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

only reveal one-half of the friendship. This is one of the limiting factors of my analysis. I was unable to locate many letters written to Hurston by Hughes. The few letters that I was able to find have already been published in an edition of *The Mule Bone*.

I do have two theories in regard to why there is a lack of letters in the historical record: 1) because Hurston lived most of her life in poverty (especially the last fifteen/twenty years), and she moved around quite a bit, Hurston was probably unable and/or unwilling to carry boxes of old correspondence from the 1920s and 1930s, and 2) if the letters do exist, they may be in a private collection and not archived. Even with this limitation, it is possible to glimpse their friendship through the letters written by Hurston to Hughes and some of her other acquaintances.

Another limitation to my research was my inability to get a copy of *Mule Bone* that is in the Zora Neale Hurston Collection in Beinecke Library at Yale. When I contacted them about that version, I was informed, “this collection is currently on exhibition and unavailable to patrons at this time. We anticipate the collection to be available sometime late spring/early summer.”<sup>178</sup> If I were able to gain access to this version of *Mule Bone*, I would have been better equipped to analyze the differences and weigh the arguments of Hurston and Hughes, comparing the published version and what is in all likelihood the play that Hurston sent to Carl Van Vechten in November of 1930.<sup>179</sup> Even without it, I was able to read two different versions of the play, the published “Cleveland” edition and the one that was dated in the spring of 1930.<sup>180</sup> There are no startling differences between the two. A few scenes changed. In the earlier version of *Mule*

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<sup>178</sup> Sara Azam, e-mail to author, March 7, 2013.

<sup>179</sup> But there is no point to go into the “what-ifs.”

<sup>180</sup> “Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts. Drafts, holograph and mimeograph, corrected.” Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Langston Hughes Papers, in James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/pdfgen/exportPDF.php?bibid=2005589&solrid=3521490> (accessed April 11, 2013).

*Bone*, for example, there is only one scene in Act II, instead of the two scenes in the published version. These can be explained as last-minute edits by either Hughes or Hurston before they broke off contact. The rest of the differences between both *Mule Bones* are mostly limited to the vernacular speech of the characters (for example, “y’all” in the first version, and “you all” in the published).<sup>181</sup> Overall, the versions are almost identical.

If I had access to the version of *Mule Bone* in the Zora Neale Hurston Papers, I could have analyzed the claims of each author and decided who wrote what in the play that was sent to Cleveland. I could also have been able to say definitively whose claim was more valid and whether Hurston, Hughes, or both were at fault for the events of January and February 1931. Without that edition of *Mule Bone*, I am unable to say if Hughes or Hurston was in the wrong.

What I was able to draw from the resources available to me was that everyone connected to *Mule Bone* was at fault. Yes, it is an ambivalent answer, but it is the only conclusion I can reach. Hurston left and completed a version of the play on her own. Even if that version were free of Hughes’s ideas, it was still wrong of her not to tell Hughes her intentions and that the project was through. Though I cannot point to a specific example where Hughes was in the wrong, there are many inconsistencies in his story that imply he was trying to put himself in the best light. Because of this it is hard to take without question Hughes’s version of events. I feel comfortable to add Carl Van Vechten and Barrett H. Clark to the list of persons at fault.<sup>182</sup> Van Vechten sent Hurston’s *Mule Bone* to the Theatre Guild without her permission after she expressly told him “it is tentative.”<sup>183</sup> He betrayed her trust by sending it away without her

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<sup>181</sup> “Tbid., 12; Hughes, and Hurston, *Mule Bone*, 79.

<sup>182</sup> I would add Rowena Jelliffe, but it is unclear whether or not she knew Clark gave her *Mule Bone* without the consent of Van Vechten.

<sup>183</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 14, 1930, in Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life*, 193.

consent. Her confusion over how her play arrived in Cleveland is evidence enough for this: “I know no Mr. French and so I wondered what the reference meant. I don’t know what you meant by it either.”<sup>184</sup> Barrett H. Clark receives part of the blame for giving Rowena Jelliffe the play without contacting Van Vechten. He admits he “took the liberty of giving her the script.”<sup>185</sup>

What made the *Mule Bone* controversy such a big event was how each of the people involved did not think their actions would have consequences. None of them considered it necessary to get permission before taking liberties with the play. As a result, Hughes was shocked when *Mule Bone* appeared in Cleveland. Through their actions during the controversy and their friendship, it is possible to see how gender, power and race motivated Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston’s actions. As a result, their collaboration fell by the wayside and their friendship terminated. What was initially a spat between Hughes and Hurston became part of a larger conflict as several of their mutual friends chose sides. As Hughes says in *The Big Sea*, “[t]hat spring for me (and, I guess, all of us) was the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, January 18, 1931, *ibid.*, 203. Samuel French was a theatrical producer and his name appears on the letterhead on Barrett H. Clark’s letters.

<sup>185</sup> Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten, January 15, 1931, in “Letters: Barrett H. Clark to Carl Van Vechten.”

<sup>186</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 334.



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