

**Body, Time, and the Others:
African-American Anthropology and the Rewriting of
Ethnographic Conventions in the Ethnographies by
Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham**

A thesis submitted
for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
in
English**

School of Arts
Brunel University
September 2013

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Abstract

This research looks at the ethnographies *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) by Zora Neale Hurston focusing on representations of Time and the anthropologist's body. Hurston was an African-American anthropologist, folklorist, and novelist who conducted research particularly between the end of the 1920s and the mid-1930s. At first, her fieldwork and writings dealt with African-American communities in Florida and Hoodoo practice in Louisiana, but she consequently expanded her field of anthropological interests to Jamaica and Haiti, which she visited between 1936 and 1937. The temporal and bodily factors in Hurston's works are taken into consideration as coordinates of differentiation between the ethnographer and the objects of her research. In her ethnographies, the representation of the anthropologist's body is analysed as an attempt at reducing temporal distance in ethnographical writings paralleled by the performative experience of fieldwork exemplified by Hurston's storytelling: body, voice, and the dialogic representation of fieldwork relationships do not guarantee a portrayal of the anthropological subject on more egalitarian terms, but cast light on the influence of the anthropologist both in the practice and writing of ethnography. These elements are analysed in reference to the visualistic tradition of American anthropology as ways of organising difference and ascribing the anthropological 'Others' to a temporal frame characterised by bodily and cultural features perceived as 'primitive' and, therefore, distant from modernity. Representations and definitions of 'primitiveness' and 'modernity' not only shaped both twentieth-century American anthropology and the modernist arts (Harlem Renaissance), but also were pivotal for the creation of a modern African-American identity in its relation to African history and other black people involved in the African diaspora. In the same years in which Hurston visited Jamaica and Haiti, another African-American woman anthropologist and dancer, Katherine Dunham, conducted fieldwork in the Caribbean and started to look at it as a source of inspiration for the emerging African-American dance as recorded in her ethnographical and autobiographical account *Island Possessed* (1969). Therefore, Hurston's and Dunham's representations of Haiti are examined as points of intersection for the different discourses which both widened and complicated their understanding of what being 'African' and 'American' could mean.

Acknowledgements

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

I have always thought that these verses by John Donne can be a particularly effective metaphor for academic research. Although this thesis is the work of one person, in fact, this work could not possibly be realised without the support, exchange, and advice I have received by mentors, colleagues, friends, and family during my years of PhD studies.

First of all, I would like to thank Brunel University for granting me an Isambard Research Scholarship which has allowed me to support myself throughout my doctoral studies and visit the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University. In the same way, I would like to thank the Allan & Nesta Ferguson Charitable Trust which has awarded me a grant for my continuation year.

My most sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor Dr. Anshuman Mondal for his continuous encouragement, patience, comments, advice, and the knowledge he has shared with me. His guidance and feedback have enormously helped me in shaping my project and focusing on aspects of my research I could not even see or imagine.

I would also like to say thank you to teachers at the School of Arts at Brunel University who have provided useful feedback and comments on my project, in particular Dr. Johannes Birringer, Dr. Jessica Cox, Dr. Gretchen Gerzina, and Dr. Wendy Knepper. I am also thankful to my fellow postgraduate students involved in the student network linked to the Brunel Gender and Sexuality Research Centre for our debates, discussions, and movie nights: many thanks to Dr. Rohail Ahmad, Marco Borria, Emma Filtness, Gloria Maestriperi, Hamdi Malik, Joe Norman, and Anna Tippett. I am indebted to Professor Kevin Yelvington at the Department of Anthropology, University of South Florida, who has provided me with copies of the letters between Melville J. Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston/Katherine Dunham during their fieldwork in the Caribbean and to my good friends Dr. Mario Maffi, University of Milan, Italy, and Dr. John Wolford, University of Missouri in St. Louis, for their suggestions, advice, and friendship.

Many thanks to my friends Antonio, Davide, Erica, Francesca, Giuseppe, Katia, Lothar, Luca, Mara, Ryohei and Yoshiko for their friendship during my years in London and for our stimulating discussions and exchanges. I would also like to thank my parents for their financial support during the last year of my PhD, their encouragement, and their affection. Thank you from the deep of my heart to my sister Anna for her love and for being the great person that she is, my brother Stefano and other members of my extended family: in particular, Cristina, Donatella, Gloria, and Liborio. Last but not least, my most heartfelt thanks goes to Efrem. He has read the whole thesis and discussed its main points with me during dinners and week-ends offering invaluable insights, witty remarks, and technical help with the final editing. To him, my most sincere gratitude and love.

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Introduction

The present thesis is inspired by the idea, expressed by Edward W. Said, that “anthropological representations bear as much on the representer’s world as on who or what is represented”¹ within ethnographic texts that, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s words, “can be determined as fictions from the standpoint of language”² in the context of a social science such as anthropology which has defined its professional expertise as a “frontier knowledge born on a frontier between cultures.”³ The ethnographies *Mules and Men* (1935)⁴ and *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938)⁵ by Zora Neale Hurston and *Island Possessed* (1969)⁶ by Katherine Dunham will be taken into consideration as case studies for “the critique of the anthropologist-as-subject”⁷ inhabiting their texts and for the analysis of their ways to represent themselves in fieldwork in relation to the ‘Others’ of anthropological inquiry.

The work of Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), African-American anthropologist, folklorist, writer, and choreographer, has been the object of much interest in American Studies from the late 1970s onwards. After a quite solitary death and the going out of print of all her books, her work was rediscovered by the African-American writer Alice Walker⁸ who, together with the scholar Robert E. Hemenway⁹, rekindled the interest in Hurston’s flamboyant personality and her artistic accomplishments within the context of the 1920-black-modernist movement of the Harlem Renaissance and in subsequent decades. Walker set the tone for the recuperation of Hurston’s work envisaging her as one of the main foremothers for the tradition of African-American writing by women; ‘Zora’ was recuperated as a functional answer to

¹ Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropologist’s Interlocutors”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), 224.

² Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 70.

³ Ugo Fabietti, *Antropologia culturale. L’esperienza e l’interpretazione* (Roma-Bari, Italia: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2001), xii: “Se l’antropologia è un sapere critico è perché essa è un sapere di frontiera che nasce sulla frontiera tra culture.” My attempt at translation: “Anthropology is a critical knowledge because it is a frontier knowledge born on the frontier between cultures.”

⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1935).

⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1938).

⁶ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994: 1969).

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Civilization Folded Back: Poems by Stanley Diamond”, *Dialectical Anthropology* 11 (2-4), 1986, 267.

⁸ See, for instance, Alice Walker “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View” and “Looking for Zora” in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 83-116.

⁹ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980: 1977).

the need of significant references for burgeoning black writers in the United States and a useful connection between experimental literature, orality, and folkloric art.¹⁰ Although the complexities of Hurston's character were hinted at, the most controversial aspects of her personality, work, and statements were mostly ignored. This produced an opposite tendency of criticism which tried to counterbalance so-called 'Hurstonism'¹¹, or what was perceived as the acritical and idealised rehabilitation of Hurston's contribution to the arts and letters. In particular, Hazel Carby expressed concerns about the presumed authenticity of Hurston's depiction of African-American traditions and on the decontextualization of her production.¹²

The idea for this thesis was born in a spirit of sincere admiration of Hurston's contribution to American literature and cultural anthropology, but also with a certain degree of awareness of the many threads interlacing in her work and biography which make the reading of her production particularly challenging. In particular, this thesis is located in the context of works, such as the study by Anthea Kraut, which "seeks neither to venerate nor to critique Hurston for her commitment to a rural, black, and southern folk tradition, but rather to further scrutinize how she depicted that tradition."¹³ In order to provide a contextualized analysis of this tradition, it seems important to grasp the connection between Hurston's writing, her involvement in anthropological theory, and her position between different disciplines and practices: while Kraut accounts for the obscured presence of Hurston in dance studies, the present thesis is concerned with her absence from the history of cultural anthropology. In fact, a lot of questions raised in her ethnographic writings, about the presence of the anthropologist in fieldwork, the relationship with the research subjects, the controversial distinction between the stages of observation and interpretation, and the representation of these elements in ethnography, have been the subject of debates occurring in American cultural anthropology from the 1980s, as attested by the publication of *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (1986) edited by James Clifford and George E.

¹⁰ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989: 1988).

¹¹ Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹² Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston" in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O' Meally (eds.), *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28-44.

¹³ Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9-10.

Marcus.¹⁴ The shortfalls of their interesting project, focused on the meaning of aesthetic choices in ethnography, were highlighted in Ruth Behar's and Deborah A. Gordon's *Women Writing Culture* (1995) which stressed the connection between representational features of ethnographic texts and the gender of theory.¹⁵ Thus, my analysis takes as its point of departure an outline of the anthropological context which shaped the tradition of theory to which Hurston belonged; in such a tradition, 'culture' as the pivotal concept of anthropology shows its entanglement with 'race' and both ideas are connected to theories and representations of the black (woman) body as 'natural', 'savage' and 'primitive' which will problematize Hurston's and Dunham's choice to represent themselves as embodied characters in the framework of their ethnographies.

In the first sections of Chapter One, therefore, the embodied aspect of primitiveness is treated in the context of the anthropological fairs taking place between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The fairs are considered as a concrete example of hierarchical visual representation, but also as a possibility to speak out for some of the 'Others' of American anthropology, namely Native and African Americans. The following section of the chapter discusses 'culture' as the foundational concept of anthropology and its connections and differences with the humanistic meaning of the term in relation to some of the works by Franz Boas, the so-called father of American cultural anthropology, and one of the most important African-American intellectuals of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois. This section is aimed at considering both the legacy of the humanistic connotation in anthropology and the 'democratization' of the concept in the Boasian understanding of the term, so that the category of humanistic culture could open to include the contribution of African Americans in the Western arts. In the final section of this chapter, folklore as the core of the anthropological meaning of culture is analysed as an issue central to the emergence of a creative African-American identity both in anthropology and in black modernism, particularly in the 1920s movement of the Harlem Renaissance. The issue of African continuities in the Americas and their significance for the modern African-American identity is structured through the analysis of the main concepts in the works by the Jewish-American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits and the African-American philosopher Alain Locke, especially in relation to his contribution to the Harlem Renaissance. The relationship between primitive, culture, and folklore is particularly

¹⁴ James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997: 1985).

¹⁵ Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (eds.), *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995).

significant for the emergence of an artistic, anthropological, and critical African-American consciousness in the twentieth century; the incidence of African-American culture on American society and history had been denied by racism which tried to justify itself through scientific theories associating 'non-white' people to the primitive and the atavistic. The existence of African-American culture was later questioned by sociological approaches which tried to compensate for economic and social disadvantages in the African-American communities presenting them as basically deprived of both civil rights and a worthy culture by a history of slavery, segregation, and prejudice. From this perspective, 'folklore' was at risk to be read as 'second-class' or a surrogate for culture; its central position in Boasian anthropology, the Harlem Renaissance, and the study of other cultures of black diaspora in the Americas (and particularly in the Caribbean) offered a positive reconsideration of its presence in the United States, of its connections with African origins, and of its African-American rewritings.

In this context, the role of the body in knowledge production will be taken into account as suggested by the Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz whose work *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) dealt with the invisibility of the philosopher's body in the texts he produced.¹⁶ The representation of the embodied presence of the black woman researcher in ethnography raises important questions in relation to the portrayal of the black (female) body in literature, popular culture, and anthropology; as seen in Chapter One, modernity defined itself through the identification of a primitive Other distanced through bodily and temporal coordinates; hence, the representation of body in Hurston's ethnography will be connected to the treatment of Time in anthropology in an analysis reminiscent of Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983) and his considerations on the use of Time in order to establish distance towards alterity in ethnographic texts.¹⁷ The temporal and bodily elements enter into contact in the performative aspects of Hurston's ethnography: orality will be explored as a possibility to introduce both body and the sharing of Time in fieldwork in the writing of ethnography. Chapters Two and Three will focus, respectively, on the representations of body and Time in *Mules and Men* considering them as the two main coordinates according to which the contrast between 'modernity' and 'primitiveness' has been articulated in the representations of

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: 1983).

cultural anthropology. In particular, the role of the body in relation to the strategies of distancing present in the ethnographical canon will inform my analysis of the ways in which Hurston was able to represent herself within her ethnography articulating the question of distance from or proximity to the anthropological ‘Other.’ *Mules and Men* is based on her fieldwork in Florida and Louisiana at the end of the 1920s: in her expedition, she visited both Eatonville, the community in which she grew up, and other African-American communities in Florida and New Orleans in which she dealt with differences of gender, class, and social status.

Performance and representation of the body in writing also constitute the main connection between Hurston’s and Dunham’s works. Dunham (1909-2006) was one of the most important African-American dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century whose training in social anthropology with Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Melville J. Herskovits marked her artistic endeavours through the creation of an original method and performative style which blended the traditions of African diasporic people in the Americas in a series of completely original and innovative shows. While most studies have mainly focused on her dance performances and biography¹⁸, this thesis tries to deal with the representations of body and performance in her writing considering her work as an example of autoethnography. Although the space dedicated to Dunham in the present analysis is limited, her presence is not subordinated to Hurston’s; on the contrary, it supplies an important counterbalance in the sketching of the context in which Hurston’s work took form and meaning. Both Hurston and Dunham visited the Caribbean in the mid-1930s and the role of this area, and of Haiti in particular, for both American anthropology and the African-American artistic imagination will be taken into account in Chapter Four; in this context, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) constitutes an important influence in my analysis of the diasporic dimension of African-American anthropology as conducted in the United States and the Caribbean.¹⁹ In particular, the dialectic relationship between ‘roots’ and the homonym ‘routes’ as delineated by Gilroy²⁰ constitutes the point of departure for an analysis of African-American anthropology considered as a constant renegotiation between the search for African roots and the exploration of alternative routes to envision an African-American critical and artistic identity trying to connect

¹⁸ See, for example, Vèvè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (eds.), *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) and Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993).

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 19.

with other black people involved in the American diaspora. This analysis is also indebted to Talal Asad's study on the relationship between British social anthropology and colonial expansion in so-called Third World territories²¹; the Caribbean will be considered as a pivotal area for both US imperialism and European colonialism and, as suggested by Herskovits, as a 'laboratory' for American cultural anthropology. As underlined by Asad, "the really interesting questions concern[ed] the ideological conditions of anthropology, and the implications of these conditions for its discourse"²²; my attempt is to draft the contours of the African-American anthropological discourse in the passage from the United States to the Caribbean and its connections with and differences from anthropology at large and the emergent African-American modernist arts and criticism.

In relation to the Caribbean, the question of bodily 'resemblance' seems important for the potentialities of the ethnographer's acceptance within the studied community. Nonetheless, factors of difference like nationality, language, and cultural frameworks, complicate the issues at work within Hurston's and Dunham's fieldworks and the ways of applying their anthropological methodologies. For these African-American women anthropologists, the Caribbean could represent a 'laboratory' to question the possible links between Africa and Africa-America and delineate African legacies in the New World in a more precise manner in order to create and represent black diasporic identities in anthropology and art; at the same time, the contact with the Caribbean complicated their understanding of what being 'African' and 'American' could mean. In this study, therefore, the question of Du Bois' concept of *double consciousness*²³ is at work in important ways and, particularly, in the analysis of a double status shaped by the affinity with the United States at a national level while trying to envision a wider community linked to the transposition of Africa onto American ground. Above all, in the Caribbean area, the role of Haiti emerges as both a first example of emancipation and a place rich in myths and traditions of African legacy linked, in particular, to the practice of Vodoun. From this perspective, the Caribbean will be considered both as a geopolitical and historical area, but also as a trope in the discourse of both the African-American arts and the American anthropological imagination at large.

²¹ Talal Asad, (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998: 1973).

²² Talal Asad, "Anthropology and the Analysis of Ideology", *Man*, New Series, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), 607.

²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1995: 1903).

Chapter 1: “Ethnographers in a Footnote”: American Cultural Anthropology, Folklore, and the Harlem Renaissance between Primitivism and Modernism

I began reading all I could find on the subject of “The Negro and His Folkways and Superstitions.” There were Botkin and Puckett and others, all white, most racist. How was I to believe anything they wrote, since at least one of them, Puckett, was capable of wondering, in his book, if “The Negro” had a large enough brain?

Well, I thought, where are the *black* collectors? Where is the *black* anthropologist? Where is the *black* person who took the time to travel the back roads of the South and collect the information I need... where was this black person?

And that is when I first saw, in a *footnote* to the white voices of authority, the name Zora Neale Hurston.²⁴

In this account of her search for reliable sources for a short story on Voodoo, the African-American writer Alice Walker underlines the main focus of the present chapter, namely the relationship between anthropological theory and race, culture, and folklore in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and their articulation of questions and answers in relation to the role of the primitive within modern sciences, art, and society. Asking “where is the *black* anthropologist?” presupposes another crucial question, that is “what does *black* mean in American anthropology?” while articulating “a discourse of race that interrogates whiteness” as well;²⁵ only after considering the role of ‘race’ and later ‘culture’ in American anthropological theory, in fact, is it possible to recognize the impact of anthropologists of different ethnic backgrounds within the discipline and in the renewal of its ethnographical practices. Furthermore, it is pivotal to understand how anthropology and society mutually influenced each other in order to represent *blackness* while constructing *whiteness* and assigning meaning to each of them throughout American history. In turn, the conjoined agency of scientific authority and institutional control was able to affect politics and history in relation to segregationist measures in the first part of the twentieth century, and desegregation procedures and civil rights movements in the second half of the 1900s. This change of perspective, although prompted by historical processes and financial interests, had been made possible by the ‘cultural turn’ in anthropology, that is, the significant shift within what is commonly defined as ‘the

²⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 11. [Emphases in the original]

²⁵ bell hooks, “Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism”, *Inscriptions*, no. 5, 1989, 162.

study of the humankind' from a biological to a cultural framework of reference. Such a shift constituted a progressive, though controversial, separation from disciplines like zoology and biology, at first considered strictly related to anthropology, and the development of an interest in the environmental causes which affect human development.

In this brief introductory section to the chapter, the term 'development' is here deliberately employed to focus the reader's attention on the connection between a main methodological approach in anthropology and a main trope exceeding it, i.e. between 'evolutionism', particularly in the guise of a social Darwinism affecting the discipline from its outset²⁶, and what is at the same time its theoretical assumption and representational by-product, the lingering presence of the 'primitive.' This trope is fundamental to the understanding of the hierarchical construction of race in anthropology and the use of it in American society; the concepts of 'primitive', 'primitiveness', and 'primitivism' were indeed forces operating in the representations and works of African Americans throughout the twentieth century, the measure against which their endeavours were judged, the criterion according to which their need for equal rights and their position in American society were assessed, and their search for cultural origins framed. The idea of the 'primitive' constantly shows the paradox of its presence: it is something to overcome in order to accomplish the mission of 'modernity', but its removal would mean the loss of the fundamental principle through which modernity distinguishes itself from its supposed past while measuring the extent of its accomplishments. The 'primitive' is, at the same time, 'who or what comes before' and 'who or what remains' in order to fulfil one of its primary functions, namely the celebration of modern civilization and progress; in fact, as observed by Bruno Latour, "[f]or traditional anthropologists, there is not – there cannot be, there should not be – an anthropology of the modern world"²⁷ whereas 'modern' is defined according to Sandra Harding referring to "kinds of society governed by the kind of rationality for

²⁶ Lee D. Baker underlines the role of just few ethnologists in the shaping of anthropology as science in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century: the "naturalist and explorer John Wesley Powell, who was the research leader, Frederic Ward Putnam, the museum builder whose academic focus was American archaeology, and Daniel G. Brinton, the academician who was professor of ethnology at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia... Although none of these ethnologists was a strict Social Darwinist in the Spencerian tradition, each was an evolutionist advancing ideas of the superiority and inferiority of particular races when Social Darwinism was a dominant ideology in the United States." In particular, Brinton's *Races and Peoples* (1890) not only maintained racist stereotypes, but "buttress[ed] the logic for racial segregation. He provided the 'scientific' justification for the 'lynch law.'" See Lee D. Baker, "Columbia University's Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism", *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 22 (Winter, 1998-1999), 91. See also Chapter Two in this thesis, 82.

²⁷ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993: 1991), 7.

which Western science provides the model.”²⁸ The celebration of this modernity took a primary form of visual and pragmatic representation in the context of the anthropological fairs being held in various American and European cities between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth.

1.1 “A quiet unconscious schooling to the thoughtful people”²⁹: social science and the spectacle of race at the world’s fairs

“The General Motors tower rises, a bright orange tribute to Modernism, over the wigwams and tepees and hogans of the oldest Americans, over the dances and feathers and beads in the Indian stadium... ‘What a distance we have come’, is the theme of the World’s Fair, but nowhere does it come so sharply to the visitor as when he attends the Indian ceremonials.”³⁰

Whether one turns to the Seattle fair, where schoolchildren poked Igorot women with straw, or the Omaha, Buffalo, and St. Louis fairs, where Geronimo sold his autograph for ten cents, the expositions... gave millions of Americans first-hand experience with treating nonwhites from around the world as commodities.³¹

As noted by Anne McClintock in relation to imperialism, it can be said of world’s fairs that their emergence coincided with a historical juncture during which “commodity racism became distinct from scientific racism in its capacity to expand beyond the literate.”³² In fact, for millions of Americans the international exhibitions constituted an occasion to be instructed on the marvels of industrial modernity and progress while having a first-hand experience of commodities from around the world and of the people producing them.

Between 1876 and 1916, nearly one hundred million people visited the international expositions held at Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo, Saint Louis, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego... Fairs provided manufacturing and commercial interests with opportunities to promote the mass consumption of their products... [while] ideas about race, nationality,

²⁸ Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 173.

²⁹ Robert W. Rydell, “The Fan Dance of Science: American World’s Fairs in the Great Depression”, *Isis*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), 529.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 534.

³¹ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21-22.

³² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 209.

and progress... molded the fairs into ideologically coherent “symbolic universes” confirming and extending the authority of the country’s corporate, political, and scientific leadership.³³

Actually, the distinction between people and goods was rather weak as Robert W. Rydell demonstrates when commenting on the location of the Philippines Reservation at Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, or the St. Louis World’s Fair, in 1904. The pavilion, situated next to the American Indian Reservation, was “an exhibit of 1,200 Filipinos living at the center of the fairgrounds”³⁴ standing as a symbol of the newly acquired imperial supremacy of the United States which were finally able “to compete with the colonial displays that European powers had been building into European fairs since the 1851 London Crystal Palace Exhibition.”³⁵ In particular, apart from the proximity with American Indians, Filipinos were located amongst disparate goods and items; their positioning in this context was a clear signal of the place they would have come to occupy within the political and economic influence of the United States. In fact, “[they] would not only be producers and consumers in the American empire, but could be regarded and manipulated as commodities themselves. By objectifying the Filipinos, this exhibit also had the effect of confirming in white Americans a sense of their own racial and cultural superiority;”³⁶ besides, in the analysis of Georg Lukács, “the commodity lies on the threshold of culture and commerce”³⁷ and the fairs could be certainly considered an adequate representation of such a threshold, suspended as they were between educational purposes and business goals and objectives.

The effect of racial and cultural supremacy was typically based on the optical display of goods and peoples in the attempt of ordering them on the basis of their supposed distance from or closeness to the ideal of progress and modernity celebrated throughout the exhibitions:

[...] woven into the dream world of goods was a hierarchical continuum of material and racial progress that signified nothing so much as the distance travelled from “savagery” to “civilization.” And in a world alive with Social-Darwinian ideas of evolution, displays of material and natural abundance became an outward sign of inward racial “fitness” and culture.³⁸

³³ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

³⁴ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 19.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁷ Georg Lukács quoted in McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 212.

³⁸ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 19.

The educational aspect of the fairs was variously stressed by the politics supporting their organization which involved the theoretical contribution of social and natural scientists;³⁹ in fact, the exhibitions had an enormous impact in popularizing science and creating consensus in relation to new ways of production and consumption while diverting the general attention from ongoing financial crises and social contradictions within the American society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From many angles, they represented that threefold definition of ‘reproduction’ (of labour, of submission to ideology, and of its manipulation) provided by Louis Althusser:

[t]he reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in and by words’ [*par la parole*].⁴⁰

Fairs constituted a discourse connecting the nineteenth to the twentieth century through the tropes of progress and civilization and had reproductive effects in terms of representations of ‘alterity’ – mainly embodied by Native Americans – and significant omissions, usually in relation to the role of African Americans in that same history of progress. As observed by Lee D. Baker in relation to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, “the overarching theme the fair organizers promoted was still unbridled American progress – but not for the Negro. African Americans were systematically erased from the representation of American industrial and cultural progress.”⁴¹ In so doing, the display of technological skills in comparison to ‘less advanced’ stages of development was intended to have an effect on the mass audience in order to favour widespread acceptance of the dominant ideology while attempting to manipulate public opinion in relation to imperialistic claims and the rising interests of corporations. Fairs constituted occasions to dominate not only “‘in and by words’ [*par la parole*]”, but also

³⁹ The commission of the World’s Columbian Exposition, for example, was composed of the anthropologist and naturalist Frederic Ward Putnam as head of the Department of “Ethnology and Archaeology”, Franz Boas as his chief assistant, the ethnographer James Mooney as a specialist in Native-American cultures, and the archaeologist and ethnographer Daniel G. Brinton who superintended the International Congress of Anthropology. See Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 91-94.

⁴⁰ Louis Althusser quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: Urbana Illinois Press, 1988), 273.

⁴¹ Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 63-64.

and predominantly ‘in and by images’, *par tableaux*⁴², whether they were *tableaux vivants* as in the case of Indian villages’ reproductions or ‘still lives’ composed by manufactured products and handmade goods.

It is important to remember that these international exhibitions started to be organized a couple of decades after the invention of photography in 1839 and shared with this innovation the will to document, represent, and order.⁴³ McClintock rightly comments that “photography shifted the authority of universal knowledge from print language to spectacle. If the camera’s claim to truth rested on the science of optics, its effect was to reorder, at a stroke, the hierarchies of world history.”⁴⁴ The fairs were, in fact, suspended between the desire for order and comparison expressed in various ways throughout the natural and social sciences and the centrality of the optical spectacle in mass representation relating the field of photography to the growing advertisement industry. Proceeding into the twentieth century, the optical perspective became pivotal in the elaboration of what Rydell calls “the exhibition culture in the 1920s – a culture that included department stores, museums, and local fairs.”⁴⁵ This visual element also shaped what McClintock considers to be two main tropes of the “imperial science of the surface”, namely “panoptical time” and “anachronistic space.”⁴⁶ In the case of world’s fairs, these two tropes functioned together in the visual display of culture and in the reconstruction of places where time appeared as arrested in an indeterminate, yet distant, past; the “visual paradigm” made it possible to represent “evolutionary progress as a measurable spectacle”⁴⁷ in ways similar to the depiction of “the family tree of man”⁴⁸ already circulating in scientific contexts. The first-hand experience of ‘alterity’ that many visitors had in these international exhibits was regulated by a panoptical conception of time as “the image of global history consumed – at a glance – in a single spectacle from a point of privileged invisibility.”⁴⁹ The visual display and displacement

⁴² Johannes Fabian characterizes ‘synopticism’, namely “the urge to visualize a great multitude of pieces of information as orderly arrangements, systems, and *tableaux*” as “a constant temptation” in anthropology. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 118.

⁴³ As Anne Elizabeth Carroll underlines: “By the 1920s, photography had become an important component in anthropologic studies; Bronisław Malinowski, for example, used photographs to visually introduce readers to the people he studied in Southeast Papua New Guinea”. See Ann Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 125-126.

⁴⁴ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 123.

⁴⁵ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 6.

⁴⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

of the ‘Other’ was finally regulated by the coordinates of Time and its effects on the ‘body’ understood as those fields where the border between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’ was defined through visible signs of definitive distance from one another.

Within this ocularcentric context, where visual representation proliferates and ‘alterity’ becomes spectacle, the role of subaltern voices is central in order to focus on the possibilities for agency dwelling in the interstices between ethnology and entertainment. Even though, in the present analysis, it is not possible to give a complete history of the complex relationship between the popularization of science and the advent of mass production in its various forms of media, consumerism, and leisure industry, a study of some of the texts which can frame such relationships during the world’s fairs will be proposed as a sort of counternarrative to the official records of history and science. These counternarratives enable the reader to appreciate a set of alternative representations germinating within (and despite of) American consciousness. In this chapter, an analysis of a public speech, a pamphlet, and a popular ballad will serve as examples of articulation of alternative voices in contrast to the dominant discourse of the fairs in order to sketch the possibilities for “an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects.”⁵⁰ The first two texts have a historical background in the context of one of the most important American fairs in the nineteenth century, namely the World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 in order to celebrate the first four hundred years of American discovery while the last text is grounded in African-American folklore as collected by the black anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston during her period of fieldwork in Florida in the late 1920s.

1.2 “Can the subalterns speak?” ... and do they write? “The Red Man’s Greeting” and “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not at the Columbian Exposition” (1893)

Simon Pokagon’s “The Red Man’s Greeting” and “Why the Colored American Is Not at the Columbian Exposition”, edited by the African-American sociologist Ida B. Wells with the contribution of the major activist and orator Frederick Douglass, offered to their authors the possibility to enter the discursive realm of history whereas scientific theorizing, in its narrative of evolution, progress, and modernity, was deliberately ignoring a wider historical contextualization. Both texts are a reaction to the

⁵⁰ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 579.

organization of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 in order to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the American discovery; both texts show a problematic relationship to the rhetoric of progress, but they spread out from different mainstream attitudes towards the 'Others' of American society, namely Native and African Americans. In particular, according to the analysis by Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, although limited, the activities of African Americans at the fair served as "foundations for black political, social, and artistic movements in the twentieth century."⁵¹

The reader will be confronted with two written texts, but the main performative difference between them is their original status as a spoken and a written text. This difference in status accounts for a difference in visibility linked to a representational presence of the 'vanishing American' and the invisibility reserved to African Americans throughout the fair, but in the present analysis the pamphlet will be framed within the speeches that Douglass had the opportunity to give in order to honour the participation of Haiti in the international fair. In order to provide a basic visual context for these texts, it is here useful to remember that, as reported by Elliott M. Rudwick and August Meier, "[b]ecause all its buildings had white exteriors, the fair was called 'The White City;' but Negro visitors dubbed it 'the great American white elephant', or 'the white American World's Fair.'"⁵²

Simon Pokagon's "The Red Man's Greeting" (originally "The Red Man's Rebuke") is, in fact, the written version of the speech Pokagon gave at the opening ceremony of the fair. *The Cambridge History of American Literature* is eloquent in its description of the visual effect Pokagon's speech should have produced at the fair:

The fair's opening-day ceremony commemorating Columbus's first voyage to America featured speeches by an array of white dignitaries, but before the addresses from politicians and fair organizers, a Native American, Simon Pokagon, came forward to ring a replica of the Liberty Bell. The resulting tableau was an elegant solution to the problem of how to express the aspirations of a democratic republic in an age of empire. The sight of a Native American sounding the state symbol of US sovereignty created a continuity of national meaning by way of balanced contrast, the red body linked with the state symbol of liberty. The visual symbol could achieve in a single moment what the speeches could only

⁵¹ Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition", *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), 19.

⁵² Elliott M. Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negro and the Columbian Exposition, 1893", *Phylon (1960-)*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1965), 354.

attempt in a temporal sequence: the formal equipoise necessary to contain the internal tensions of an empire of liberty.⁵³

How was Pokagon's body different from the other Native-American bodies at the fair in their double presence of appearances in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and 'living artefacts' in the anthropological pavilions? As observed by Sacvan Bercovitch and Cyrus R. K. Patell, "Pokagon, a Powatoni from Southern Michigan, was... considered a hybrid, a civilized Native American... deemed a fitting figure for the amalgam of Native-American origins and a US global destiny."⁵⁴ His presence there thus constituted that connector between the idealized representations of entertainment and anthropological shows and the results of progress celebrated throughout the exposition. Although similar in appearance to those other bodies, Pokagon's presence was marked by a difference because, through his speech, he embodied that movement intervening between the 'then' of those anthropological representations fixed in an ahistorical past and the 'now' of scientific progress and technological accomplishment, namely the effects of 'civilization' on a person in the flesh and, as he was speaking on behalf of Native Americans, on the people he was there to represent as well. As noticed by Bercovitch and Patell, "[f]or all its ability to reduce people to pictures, the arena of racial spectacle was still a public space in which an English speaker like Pokagon could convert his value as a picture into a form of popular authority, in order to redirect his own iconic status as a representative Native American."⁵⁵

The reader is here confronted with the dichotomy inherent in the word 'representation' according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of its use within the philosophical tradition: making reference to Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Spivak makes an essential distinction between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*;⁵⁶ both terms can be translated into English as 'representation', but they refer to different representative realms as the first is linked to aesthetics and the second to politics. According to Spivak, by ignoring "the aesthetic dimension of political representation"⁵⁷, Western intellectuals end up silencing subaltern voices⁵⁸, already

⁵³ Sacvan Bercovitch and Cyrus R. K. Patell, "Chesnutt and Imperial Spectacle" in Sacvan Bercovitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of American Literature. Volume Three: Prose Writing, 1860-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 186-187.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 275.

⁵⁷ Stephen Morton, "Learning from the Subaltern" in Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 58.

⁵⁸ Spivak refers to a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze on the role of the intellectual in political change.

silenced by dominant historical accounts. In the particular case under examination, Pokagon is indeed passing from the realm of representation as *Darstellung* controlled by the organisation of the fair and, although unable to completely divide himself from such representation and the meanings ascribed to it by his audience, carries out a transition to the alternative meaning of representation, *Vertretung*, or representation as “speaking for.”⁵⁹

As for the opportunities of representation for African Americans throughout the fair, it is possible to focus on a representational shift by analogy performed through a double strategy of concealment of African Americans and concomitant exhibition of people from Africa and the Caribbean. Lee D. Baker reminds us that:

[t]he limited representation of African Americans in Chicago needs to be juxtaposed with the extravagant representation of indigenous folk throughout the Americas, black folk from other places in the diaspora, and the foreign nationals who perform on the midway... The Chicago World’s Fair occurred at the height of the campaign to assimilate the Indian.⁶⁰

The referral of representation in terms of *Darstellung* provokes interesting effects on the political possibilities of representation as *Vertretung* as is noticeable in Douglass’ words when he states “as if to shame the Negro, the Dahomians are... here to exhibit the Negro as a repulsive savage.”⁶¹ This association with the savage and the primitive which includes Douglass’ observations within a rhetoric of civilization and progress produces a further shift in the speeches he had the occasion to give during the fair, well before the contested “Colored American Day” in August 1893, which were delivered in the Haitian Pavilion at the beginning of the same year. “Haiti Among the Most Civilized Nations of the Earth” and “Haiti and the Haitian People” are speeches delivered to commemorate and celebrate the birth of Haiti as “an independent black republic”⁶² marking the ninetieth anniversary of Haitian independence from France.

⁵⁹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 275.

⁶⁰ Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 100.

⁶¹ Frederick Douglass, “Introduction” in Ida B. Wells (ed.), “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature.” Available at: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html>. Last accessed on 20 June 2013.

⁶² Robert Steven Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 233. See Chapter Four for a discussion of the importance of Haiti for both African Americans and the American anthropological imagination.

What emerges from these speeches is that, given the impossibility of autonomous representation for African Americans and the undesired representational association with people from Africa who were seen as primitive subjects destined to be swept away by Western imperialistic expansion, the interstice of choice offered by the analogical mode of representation is traceable in the possibility of deciding, from a subject position, the target of such association; the role of Haitian people in Douglass' speeches is a reversal of the analogical strategy, providing African Americans with a positive *Darstellung* in order to reach significant *Vertretung* as "the Haitian people were battling not just the French but also what Douglass terms 'the ruling race of the world': whites both within and beyond the borders of Haiti."⁶³

In fact, Frederick Douglass' homage to Haiti is an example of a discursive strategy able to destabilize the minstrel mask, or the mask imposed on African Americans both by science and society at large, according to the complementary axes of "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery."⁶⁴ These two positions informing later African-American artistic forms and creative expression seem revealing of what Slavoj Žižek describes as "two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible."⁶⁵ Through the strategies of mastery of form and deformation of mastery, Douglass – like later Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois – was indeed able to displace the minstrel mask of anthropological representation while causing a shift in its perception which opened it to new possibilities for representation and new definitions; namely, if direct representation was not possible for African Americans, they had an opportunity for representing themselves autonomously through shifting the coordinates towards Haiti, as a part of the Americas and a first pragmatic example of freedom and independence for black people in the New World.⁶⁶ As we will see later in this chapter, it is exactly this opening towards new possibilities for outdated models and stereotypes that marks the black cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance in the second decade of the twentieth century. These new possibilities were already germinating in Douglass' times framed by the language of civilization and progress in which modernity was both contrasted to the primitive and marked by a sense of "decadence – of the passing of the old order."⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid., 234.

⁶⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33.

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006), 4.

⁶⁶ See Chapter Four, 165.

⁶⁷ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1972-1990), 97.

In both Pokagon's and Douglass' speeches the audience is confronted with a representational reassignment thanks to the choice of different temporal and spatial coordinates: a shift in history for Pokagon who refers to the historical truth hidden by the celebration of American discovery and progress; a shift in geography for Douglass who sees Haiti as an aspiration for African Americans. The coordinate of history is nonetheless important in the pamphlet "Why the Colored American Is Not at the Columbian Exposition" in which Douglass ascribes to historical factors, namely to the slavery system, the lack of representation for African Americans at the fair: "So when it is asked why we are excluded from the World's Columbian Exposition, the answer is Slavery."⁶⁸ Robert Steven Levine comments on Douglass' contribution to the pamphlet observing that "[i]n the tradition of his 1857 address on West Indies emancipation, [he] underscores the role of black agency in achieving freedom for blacks in the American hemisphere, holding up Haiti as 'the original pioneer emancipator of the nineteenth century.'"⁶⁹ In this context, it is important to underline that the stylistic strategy used by Douglass in the introductory section of the pamphlet is opposite to the analogical mode detected in the Haitian speech: in fact, in order to direct the attention to the unfair treatment African Americans have been exposed to during the organization of the exposition, Douglass opts for an antithetical structure to strengthen his point. He states: "[t]here are many good things concerning our country and countrymen of which we would be glad to tell in this pamphlet, if we could do so, and at the same time tell the truth."⁷⁰ The contrast is even heightened by Douglass' choice to articulate his position within that same rhetoric of progress to which the previous pages have made reference and which constituted the ideological basis for the exposition.

We would like for instance to tell our visitors that the moral progress of the American people has kept even pace with their enterprise and their material civilization; that practice by the ruling class has gone on hand in hand with American professions; that two hundred and sixty years of progress and enlightenment have banished barbarism and race hate from the United States; that the old things of slavery have entirely passed away, and that all things pertaining to the colored people have become new; that American liberty is now the undisputed possession of all the American people... that mobs are not allowed to supersede courts of law or usurp the place of government; that here Negroes are not tortured,

⁶⁸ Douglass, "Introduction" in Wells (ed.), "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition."

⁶⁹ Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation*, 234.

⁷⁰ Douglass in Wells (ed.), "The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition."

shot, hanged or burned to death merely on suspicion of crime and without ever seeing a judge, a jury or advocate; that the American Government is in reality a Government of the people, by the people and for the people, and for all the people... that this World's Columbian Exposition, with its splendid display of wealth and power, its triumphs of art and its multitudinous architectural and other attractions, is a fair indication of the elevated and liberal sentiment of the American people, and that to the colored people of America, morally speaking, the World's Fair now in progress, is not a whited sepulcher. All this, and more, we would gladly say of American laws, manners, customs and Christianity. But unhappily, nothing of all this can be said, without qualification and without flagrant disregard of the truth.⁷¹

The pamphlet is dedicated to “the seeker after truth” and has a preface in English, French, and German. It is exactly this ideal reader in search for the truth that Douglass is addressing here; what emerges from this passage is a dichotomous relationship between what he defines as ‘moral progress’ as contrasted to ‘material progress.’ The violence directed against African Americans is both historical as rooted in the slavery system, but also painfully ‘modern’ in its new forms of segregation, lynching, and attempts at hampering African-American progress itself. Douglass observes that “[t]he enemies of the Negro see that he is making progress and they naturally wish to stop him and keep him in just what they consider his proper place.”⁷² In fact, he is here addressing the paradox at the very heart of modern American citizenship: on the one hand, in order to be part of it, immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans – through different modalities – are asked to completely adhere to the system; on the other, though, that same system rejects them when the assimilation seems the most ‘successful.’ In this sense, the pamphlet anticipates the structure of an African-American journal like *The Crisis*, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois in the 1910s-1920s, in which the denunciation of acts of violence against African Americans was juxtaposed to the detailed account of their achievements in business and education in order to “replace derogatory images of African Americans with ones that draw attention to their achievements and their contributions to American society and culture.”⁷³

By framing his introduction in the context of the ‘progress’ that served as the main theme for the fair, Douglass exposed the inconsistencies in the advancement project where phases of seeming emancipation were, indeed, marked by the same ideologies and attitudes which had previously justified and validated the system of

⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁷³ Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, 223.

slavery. As observed by Paul Gilroy, “the moral and political problem of slavery loomed large not least because it was once recognised as *internal* to the structure of western civilisation and appeared as a central political and philosophical concept in the emergent discourse of modern English cultural uniqueness.”⁷⁴ From this perspective, the enfranchisement of African Americans would have been just an apparent sign of progress as Douglass “listed the rights that African Americans still did not have, although they had been free Americans for thirty years.”⁷⁵ No material progress was, in fact, feasible if not accompanied by that ‘moral’ change that would have tackled the problem of social inequality. After the paradoxes of assimilation and emancipation, a third and final inconsistency emerges in the comparison between the pamphlet and Douglass’ lecture on Haiti: although the American perception of the island is linked to metaphors of barbarism and savagery in their different forms of “voodooism, fetishism, serpent worship, and cannibalism”⁷⁶, the presence of Haiti at the Columbian Exposition “is a proof that she has the courage and the ability to stand up and be counted in the great procession of our nineteenth century’s civilization.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, as a first example of emancipation for black people in the New World, Haiti has a very peculiar place in Douglass’ discourse: if, on the one hand, he underlines the limits of its achievements because of what he defines as “this revolutionary spirit of Haiti [which] is her curse, her crime, her greatest calamity and the explanation of the limited condition of her civilization”⁷⁸; on the other, the Caribbean island stands as the highest example of ‘civilization’ (“Haiti is fortunate. She has in many things been first”⁷⁹) because “its present inhabitants are still more interesting as having been actors in great *moral* and social events.”⁸⁰ Haiti, as “the cradle in which American religion and civilization were first rocked”⁸¹:

[...] has been made the theatre of great events. She was the first of all the Atlantic world, upon which the firm foot of the *progressive, aggressive*

⁷⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 9.

⁷⁵ Paddon and Turner, “African Americans and the World’s Columbian Exposition”, 20.

⁷⁶ Douglass in Wells (ed.), “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition.”

⁷⁷ Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti”, delivered in Quinn Chapel, Chicago, on 2 January 1893. Available at: <http://www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>. Last accessed on 21 June 2013.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added. The dual character of Haiti in the American imagination will be analysed in Chapter Four.

⁸¹ Ibid.

and all-conquering white man was permanently set. Her grand old tropical forests, fields and mountains, were among the first of the New World to have their silence broken by trans-Atlantic song and speech. She was the first to be invaded by the Christian religion and to witness its forms and ordinances.⁸²

Haiti, in its history and very existence, incarnates the paradoxes of ‘civilization’ when faced with the incongruities of slavery, systematic violence and the civilizing message of Christianity because “[i]n thinking of Haiti, a painful, perplexing and contradictory fact meets us at the outset. It is: that negro slavery was brought to the New World by the same people from whom Haiti received her religion and her civilization.”⁸³ By using the “Spanish Christians” as a convenient figure of displacement for the US’ own idiosyncrasies, Douglass is finally able to articulate a condemnation of that same system which exploited and destroyed according to a teleological *Weltanschauung*, as a “narrative of a chosen people or chosen community (*communauté élue*)”⁸⁴, whose progress ends up with the reduction of people to obstacles to be exploited, dominated, and either assimilated or finally deleted.

Douglass’ unveiling of the intrinsic moral fallacies of the system is echoed by Pokagon’s speech; after mentioning the feeling of “Christian charity”, he concludes with the following words:

[n]o cheer of sympathy is given us; but in answer to our complaints we are told the triumphal march of the Eastern race westward is by the unalterable decree of nature, termed by them “*the survival of the fittest.*” And so we stand as upon the seashore, chained hand and foot, while the incoming tide of *the great ocean of civilization* rises slowly but surely to overwhelm us.⁸⁵

Through the words “the survival of the fittest” and their reference to social Darwinism, Pokagon underlines the migration of the teleological perspective from the context of religion to that of science: in this new framework, the idea of ‘civilization’ does not lose its sacred character, but finds a new mission in the project of modernity. As Renato Rosaldo comments, “[t]he process of modernity involves a movement from religion and metaphysics to art, morality, and science. Hence the ideological equation of the modern

⁸² Ibid. [Emphasis added]

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Édouard Glissant quoted in Winfried Siemerling, “W. E. B. Du Bois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity”, *Callaloo*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter, 2001), 331.

⁸⁵ Simon Pokagon, “The Red Man’s Greeting” (originally “The Red Man’s Rebuke”, 1893) in James E. Seelye, Jr. and Steven A. Littleton (eds.), *Voices of the American Indian Experience. Volume 2, 1878-Present* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013), 384. [Emphasis added]

with the superiority of high culture and the traditional with the inferiority of popular culture.”⁸⁶

This new project shows here its menacing side for the ‘Others’ of American history: the contrast between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ stands for the incapacity and unwillingness to overcome the historical inequalities inherent in a system straining to maintain them. It is useful, therefore, to look at modernity in the context of a ‘traditional’ art form such as the ballad confronting itself with new material, namely the emerging industrial contexts of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century when black people had to face the material consequences of such an idea of progress. The anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, who collected the ballad “John Henry” among other songs and tales during her fieldwork in Florida at the end of the 1920s, stated that “*John Henry has no place in Negro folk-lore except in this one circumstance.*”⁸⁷ The ‘circumstance’ of the folksong is a challenge between an African-American railroad worker (a “steel driver”) and a machine, namely a steam drill; John Henry wants to demonstrate that he can beat the technological innovation in hammering spikes, “and asks his boss for a 9-pound hammer saying that if he has a good hammer he can beat the steam drill driving.”⁸⁸

John Henry driving on the right hand side,
 Steam drill driving on the left,
 Says, ‘fore I’ll let your steam drill beat me down
 I’ll hammer my fool self to death,
 Hammer my fool self to death.

John Henry told his Captain,
 When you go to town
 Please bring me a nine pound hammer
 And I’ll drive your steel on down,
 And I’ll drive your steel on down.⁸⁹

Houston A. Baker has noticed that, in this folksong, the contest between man and machine “reflects more than a simple contest; what we have in ‘John Henry’ is the essential dichotomy of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution and the twentieth-

⁸⁶ Renato Rosaldo, “Foreword” in Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005: 1989), xiii.

⁸⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1935), 248. [Emphasis in the original]

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 56.

century age of technology.”⁹⁰ The destiny of the labourer is, sadly, to be crushed within an economy in which he could not be seen as the one capable to master such new technology, but as the tool that technology could replace.

John Henry told his Captain,
Man ain't nothing but a man,
And 'fore I'll let that steam drill beat me down
I'll die with this hammer in my hand,
Die with this hammer in my hand.⁹¹

Both in its style and content, the ballad helps us in articulating several questions concerning widespread notions about ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition;’ Hurston underlines “the comparative newness of the song by the fact that he [John Henry] is competing with something as recent as a steam drill”⁹² while showing the presence of interpolations derived from English ballads⁹³ in order to emphasize the dynamic and hybrid character of the folklore she collected. According to Harding’s definition of ‘suturing’, this ballad could be considered as a moment of suture between tradition and modernity⁹⁴, in which technological innovations are not ‘value-neutral;’ on the contrary, “they can have politics.”⁹⁵ In fact, technological change always entails

the struggles over which social groups will get to design, use, or repair new technologies and their required material environments, and which ones will benefit from these. Who will get the highly skilled, highly paid, and high-status educations and jobs and who will end up with the minimally skilled, low-paid, and low-status jobs, or even with no jobs?⁹⁶

Without the ‘moral’ change envisioned by Douglass, technological innovation becomes just another coordinate of disenfranchisement in the poetics and politics of modernity conceived as that unstoppable progress which, in Pokagon’s conclusion to his speech, will sweep away all that is perceived as an obstacle to its ideal accomplishment. As we will see in the next sections of the present chapter, the poetics and politics of modernity and primitiveness influenced both the very notion of ‘culture’

⁹⁰ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1990: 1972), 35-36.

⁹¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 56.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 248.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Harding, *Sciences from Below*, 182.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

in its anthropological and humanistic meanings and the notion of ‘folklore’ as used in anthropology and modernist art.

1.3 The cultural turn in anthropology and the black man’s culture: Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois

Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the product of human activities as determined by these habits.⁹⁷

Patience, humility, and adroitness must, in these growing black youth, replace impulse, manliness, and courage. With this sacrifice there is an economic opening, and perhaps peace and some prosperity. Without this there is riot, migration, or crime. Nor is this situation peculiar to the Southern United States, is it not rather the only method by which undeveloped races have gained the right to share modern culture? The price of culture is a Lie.⁹⁸

In the first of the two quotations provided here, Franz Boas, the so-called ‘father’ of American cultural anthropology, was trying to shape his own definition of ‘culture’ in relation to one of the first definitions of the term which had been provided some fifty years before, in 1871, by the English anthropologist E. B. Tylor: “Culture, or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society.”⁹⁹ George W. Stocking, Jr. keenly observes that “Edward Burnett Tylor created a science by defining its substance – culture. But story¹⁰⁰ recognizes also that Tylor did not invent the word, that it had been and continues to have now a congeries of ‘humanist’ meanings in addition to its ‘correct’ anthropological meaning.”¹⁰¹ The aim of this part of the chapter is to show the intersection between the anthropological and the humanist meanings of the term ‘culture’ and its connection with the concept of ‘race’, which preceded and accompanied its elaboration; the works of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, two of the most prominent figures of American anthropology and sociology, will be here used as

⁹⁷ Franz Boas, “Anthropology” in E. A. Seligman and A. Johnson (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan, 1930), 79.

⁹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1995: 1903), 224.

⁹⁹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: J. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920: 1871), 1.

¹⁰⁰ Here George W. Stocking uses the term ‘story’ instead of ‘history’ to refer to the dimension of myth in the same history of anthropology.

¹⁰¹ George W. Stocking, Jr., “Matthew Arnold, E. B. Tylor, and the Uses of Invention”, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Aug., 1963), 783.

pivotal examples of how the discourse on culture was articulated in anthropology between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century and the impact that theories of culture had on African-American culture and its reception in American society at large. Lee D. Baker remarks that, although their theories were not widespread from the start, they influenced the subsequent research as “[b]oth men laid the scientific foundation for studying race and culture in the social sciences for the balance of this century”¹⁰² while being, in their respective fields, “the leading spokesperson[s] against Social Darwinism and for liberal reform.”¹⁰³

The intersection between the anthropological and humanist meanings of ‘culture’ is particularly interesting as it can be used to underline one of its assumptions and the significance of this premise in the reception of different cultures within the anthropological canon: although a sheer separation cannot be established, it is quite clear that only one of the two connotations can be directly related to writing and literacy. Stephan Feuchtwang has stressed the role of literacy as “one of the main criteria of social classification in anthropology and what is central to its studies: preliterate people”¹⁰⁴ while underlining the unequal power relations inherent in its practices as “a lack of challenge by its subjects, unable to read the finished work.”¹⁰⁵ According to Raymond Williams,

[w]e use the word culture in... two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.¹⁰⁶

In questioning the conjunction of the two meanings of the term and their deeper implications in everyday life, the role of historical processes and social inequalities in the distribution of knowledge must be addressed from the particular context of American society where ample sectors of the population had been excluded from education within an economical system that used biological racism in order to maintain

¹⁰² Lee D. Baker, “The Location of Franz Boas within the Afro-American Struggle”, *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 14(2), 1994, 213.

¹⁰³ Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Stephan Feuchtwang, “The Colonial Formation of British Social Anthropology” in Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998: 1973), 79.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary” in Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989: 1958), 3-4.

and justify its inequalities. Anthropology at its outset was both a product of this system – in the sense that its theories were directly influenced by the prejudice spreading from social interactions – and a support to that same system as research was generally financed and directed in order to strengthen the inequalities from which it stemmed. In the history of the discipline in the United States, therefore, the ‘cultural turn’ coincided with Boas’ decision to distinguish language and culture from race whereas his emphasis on the central role of the environment in shaping and influencing the people who inhabit it constituted a landmark which not only affected all the subsequent theory and research, but also – as demonstrated by Lee D. Baker – showed the decisive impact that anthropology can have on social change and the way in which society can borrow some anthropological concepts while apparently ignoring others. It is through these practices of borrowing and concealment that anthropology could be used to support segregation before and desegregation after.

Apart from the pre-literate/literate tension, it is possible to observe another area of friction between these two ideas of culture, namely the plural meaning of anthropological ‘culture’ thanks to the Boasian introduction of the particularity of cultures, on the one hand, and the universalizing aspiration of ‘culture’ in its humanist understanding, on the other. During the evolutionist phase of anthropology, the acknowledgement of different cultural contexts had been connected to the generalizing project of culture in its humanist sense, so that the different cultures encountered in the colonial context and in the American westward expansion had been ranked according to their supposed closeness to or distance from the Western ideal of culture. In Tylor’s definition, the contiguity of the term with ‘Civilization’ (capitalized by the anthropologist himself) becomes apparent while, within the ordering project, its connection with ‘Race’ was marked by a biological determinism used to demonstrate that people considered as racially inferior were unable to attain the highest degree of culture understood as Civilization. In the passage from ‘culture’ to ‘civilization’, the gap between the two (“culture as a whole way of life” and “culture as the arts and learning”) appears connected in the *telos* of material progress; arts and learning, in fact, are inextricably linked to that “whole way of life” from which they came to light. As early as 1894, in an address to the Section of Anthropology of the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled “Human Faculty as Determined by Race”, Boas had identified the boundaries between race and civilization in scientific discourse; although as observed by Stocking, “one is struck by the limits of Boas’

critique”¹⁰⁷ at the time because “he had not achieved [yet] a fully developed notion of the cultural determination of behavior as an alternative to the prevailing racial determinism”¹⁰⁸, still his critique of the predominant ideas on the connection between race and cultural value was groundbreaking. He, in fact, noticed that,

[a]s the civilization is higher, we assume that the aptitude for civilization is also higher; and as the aptitude for civilization presumably depends upon the perfection of the mechanism of body and mind, the inference is drawn that the white race represents the highest type of perfection. In this conclusion, which is reached through a comparison of the social status of civilized man and of primitive man, the achievement and the aptitude for an achievement have been confounded. Furthermore, as the white race is the civilized race, every deviation from the white type is considered a characteristic feature of a lower type.¹⁰⁹

Boas was not calling into question the achievements of Western civilization in comparison with the achievements of other societies, but what he underlined is that there was no reason to think that the state of things at the time reflected an inner superiority of Western people or their greater aptitude towards civilization. Throughout his speech, he contextualized modern accomplishments within a history in which other people had already been able to achieve the highest degree of ‘progress’ and ‘development.’¹¹⁰ Furthermore, he stressed that cultural achievements were never “the product of the genius of a single people”¹¹¹, but were the consequence of an exchange between different groups in which every one gave their contribution as “[i]deas and inventions were carried from one to the other.”¹¹²

In this early speech it is already possible to see the outline of one of Boas’ main contributions to the cultures/culture conflict, namely the concept of ‘cultural relativism’,

¹⁰⁷ George W. Stocking, Jr., “Racial Capacity and Cultural Determinism” in George W. Stocking, Jr. (ed.), *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982: 1974), 220. Stocking summarizes the limits of Boas’ analysis as follows: “He expected that some mental differences between races would be found to exist; he accepted the inferences his friend, the neurologist Henry Donaldson, made from apparent differences in ‘the capacity for education’ to the cessation of brain growth in the ‘lower races;’ and he was rather naïvely optimistic about the possibilities of psychological testing in the public schools.” Following the main scientific beliefs of the time, Boas was not questioning the existence of races, but he also added that: “the question is not if differences exist, but if any one race is anatomically considered superior to others.” See Franz Boas, “Human Faculty As Determined by Race” in *ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 223: “Did no other races develop a culture of equal value? It would seem that the civilizations of ancient Peru and of Central America may well be compared with the ancient civilization of the Old World.” See also, 225: “In the middle ages, the civilization of the Arabs had reached a stage which was undoubtedly superior to that of many European nations of that period.”

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

or the idea that, although some universal traits could be observed in all societies (for instance, the presence of religion or art), there was no evidence to suppose a development towards a same universal ideal as all cultures were influenced by environmental and historical factors. More importantly, the present state of a culture did not account for its past; that is, phases which could be perceived as more ‘advanced’ could have actually preceded the current one. Boas himself underlined the importance of historical factors in destabilizing the concept of ‘primitiveness’ in another early text, his 1889 paper “The Aims of Ethnology”:

I have used throughout the expression “primitive people”... I hope that in so doing I have not created the impression that we are dealing with peoples living in an original state of simplicity and naturalness as Rousseau conceived of them. On the contrary, we must keep in mind that even a primitive people has had a long history behind it. It may have gone through states of higher civilization and then, due to the gradual loss of inventions and ideas, have sunk down again to a lower state; or it may have climbed more slowly but surely up to its present level.¹¹³

The idea of the coexistence of several cultures derived from a different conception of the ‘human’ influenced by the German tradition of thought in which Boas had been formed, namely the *Humanitätsideal*, or ideal of humanity, promoted by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) in opposition to the Enlightenment ideal of humanity. As noted by Matti Bunzl, “[i]n contrast to a uniform development of civilization, they had argued for the uniqueness of values transmitted throughout history” by the *Volksggeist* or “spirit of the people.”¹¹⁴ Stocking connects this current of thought to a particular form of polygenist tradition distinct from “the specific naturalistic scientific current within pre-Darwinian ethnology”¹¹⁵, namely “a broader romantic current of racial thought that tended to see races in organismic, superindividual terms, as entities that had a common genius or soul that expressed itself in specific cultural forms and institutions, and whose existence on earth followed the human life cycle.”¹¹⁶ From this tradition, nonetheless, Boas was able to theorize the coexistence of human groups characterized by cultural traits which had

¹¹³ Franz Boas, “The Aims of Ethnology” in *ibid.*, 68.

¹¹⁴ Matti Bunzl, “Boas, Foucault, and the ‘Native Anthropologist’: Notes toward a Neo-Boasian Anthropology”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, Issue 3, 2004, 437.

¹¹⁵ George W. Stocking, Jr., “The Turn of the Century Concept of Race”, *Modernism/Modernity*, 1.1. (1994), 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

individual value and meaning and, therefore, had to be studied independently and not within a comparative, universal framework.

In the excerpt from “The Aims of Ethnology”, not only is the reader confronted with the coexistence of different peoples and cultures, but also with the coexistence of several times and historical eras in the present; Boas’ acknowledgement of simultaneous cultures had the potential to disrupt the teleological scheme of progress and its narrative of endless development. The kind of historical movement described in the passage, in fact, cannot be represented by a linear outline, but more appropriately by a fragmentary motion where the present aspect of things can only represent the current state of development, which is not considered as representative of a people’s past or future possibilities. Even though the trope of the primitive still lingers in Boas’ text, the very reformative gesture was to ascribe an independent historical course to the so-called ‘primitive peoples’, namely to peoples often without *written* historical records that could refute the universal narrative of western history. Boas’ acknowledgement, therefore, did not constitute a final relegation of the anthropological ‘Other’ to a different time – although this risk was still inherent to anthropological theory and practice¹¹⁷ – but a consideration of “the fundamental differences in ideals of distinct types of civilization”¹¹⁸ which led him to the question: “Have we the right to give our modern ideals the stamp of finality?”¹¹⁹

Bunzl further underlines the importance of the historical factor in his analysis of the lecture “Anthropology” delivered by Boas at Columbia University in 1907, in which the anthropologist stressed the relevance of “two historical questions” in the development of anthropological theory, namely “Why are the tribes and nations of the world different, and how have the present differences developed?” Boas’ perspective was innovative because he saw these questions as pivotal in the study of any people, not merely so-called ‘primitive’ ones, claiming that ““this limitation of the field’ [the stress on primitive peoples] was ‘more or less accidental’, a function of the fact that ‘other sciences occupied part of the ground before the development of modern anthropology.’”¹²⁰ Bunzl also notices that Boas’ anthropology was informed “in terms of human history, conceived both in global and particular terms”¹²¹ which can be connected again to the German intellectual tradition of the *Humanitätsideal* and which

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 3 in this thesis.

¹¹⁸ Franz Boas, “Eugenics”, *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Nov., 1916), 476.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Bunzl, “Boas, Foucault, and the ‘Native Anthropologist’”, 437.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

would constitute the basis for the elaboration of culture areas “conceived not as individual cultures but as aggregations of cultures... with the emphasis on past, rather than present, zones of cultural interaction”¹²² in the works of Edward Sapir and Alfred Kroeber, two of Boas’ first students. The advantage the other disciplines had on anthropology was represented by the possibility of using evidence based on written texts “that allowed the reconstruction of culture history using the philological methods developed in 19th century Germany.”¹²³ Bunzl finally revises Stocking’s reflections on the role of history in the elaboration of Boas’ culture concept, claiming that

[i]n a radically universalizing move, Boas sought to extend such philological work to all humans, implicitly arguing that the domain of culture (conceived in a fairly traditional humanistic sense) was not unique to literate groups. If other disciplines accounted for the culture history of the “civilized” world, it was incumbent on anthropology to do the same for the “primitive” part of humanity.¹²⁴

In analysing the history of anthropology, it is clear that the emphasis on ‘primitive peoples’ was no accident; on the contrary, the economic and political domination of the peoples encountered in the colonial expansion boosted the birth and beginnings of anthropological research. Hence, the need to define and represent these same peoples as inferior, dependent, and primitive in order to justify the control exercised on them and their lands and to promote an ideal of colonization as the propagation of modern civilization. Nonetheless, Boas’ contribution – entangled as it was in the power relations inherent to the conditions of fieldwork and research funding – was stressing the plurality not only of other peoples and cultures, but also of other histories which were unknown and neglected because of imperial and colonial coordinates of power and the lack of written records produced by the people who were the protagonists of those histories, and not just objects in the grand narrative of western, capitalized ‘History.’ In his attempt to “extend such philological work to all humans”, Boas was affirming his belief in “the ways in which the ‘genius of a people’ integrated the elements that the almost accidental accumulation of historical processes brought together in a single

¹²² Ira Bashkow, “A Neo-Boasian Conception of Cultural Boundaries”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, Issue 3, 2004, 446.

¹²³ Bunzl, “Boas, Foucault, and the ‘Native Anthropologist’”, 437. The ‘universal’ and ‘relativist’ aspects are only apparently in tension in Boas’ theory as described by Bunzl; in fact, what was being emphasized was cultural diversity (the relativist element) as a characteristic trait of humanity (the universal element) against the generalizations of nineteenth-century science and its ethnocentric biases.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 438.

culture”¹²⁵, but the problem which the new direction of anthropology had still to face was the control which the ethnologist could exert on the material s/he was collecting. Although Boas always attested to the importance of native informants in the collection of oral material to be recorded in fieldwork and successively interpreted in written ethnographies, the introduction of the coordinate of history made more evident the idiosyncrasies inherent in the project of ethnography and in the concept of ‘participant observation’, namely the assumption that the anthropologist could be an observer who was involved in native everyday life without either influencing it or being finally overcome by it.

Notwithstanding these problems, which have informed both anthropological practice and theory, Boas was starting a process of potential opening and democratization of the modern concept of ‘culture’ which, as emphasized by Stocking, was “accompanied by a critique of evolutionism”¹²⁶ that started to take form in the 1890s, during Boas’ early stage of his academic career in the United States after having left Germany in 1887. In 1904, Boas finally wrote that “the grand system of the evolution of culture, that is valid for all humanity, is losing much of its plausibility. In place of a single line of evolution there appears a multiplicity of converging and diverging lines which it is difficult to bring under one system.”¹²⁷

Both Boas’ critique of the disposition of items in the anthropological museums and his early contact with W. E. B. Du Bois, with its emphasis on the importance of the African heritage for the African-American identity, can be contextualized within this theoretical framework defining itself in sheer opposition to the theories of biological determinism and social evolutionism. Boas’ 1887 debate with Otis T. Mason, curator of the ethnological section at the United States National Museum, as underlined by Stocking, involved the concepts of causality and classification and was aimed at emphasizing the importance of dividing the artefacts collected in separate geographical areas instead of ranking them according to a universal evolutionist paradigm, as was customary at the time. Boas’ request was supported by his belief that “though like causes have like effects, like effects have not like causes.”¹²⁸ Stocking further adds that

¹²⁵ George W. Stocking, Jr., “Introduction: The Basic Assumptions of Boasian Anthropology” in Stocking (ed.), *A Franz Boas Reader*, 6.

¹²⁶ George W. Stocking, Jr., “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective,” *American Anthropologist*, 68, 1966, 871.

¹²⁷ Franz Boas quoted in *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Boas quoted in Stocking, “Introduction” in Stocking (ed.), *A Franz Boas Reader*, 2.

[i]mplicit in the issue of the likeness of effects was the general problem of classification, which is a focus of concern in much of Boas' early work. At various points Boas attacked what he was wont to call "premature" or "arbitrary" classification. The attack on Mason in fact centered on Mason's attempt to define "families, genera, and species" of ethnological phenomena that could then be treated comparatively. Involved in this was the determination of "like effects" by prior definition.¹²⁹

Boas was basically arguing against both the abstractions that were inherent to that system of classification and the limits of the observer's perspective, which could mistakenly liken items and phenomena that were only apparently similar. Boas' early reflections on the classification of items are here used in order to underline both his way of breaking with the anthropological theories which preceded him and his way of articulating his vision of anthropology as an empirical and grounded study of culture from a historical and psychological perspective.

In this context, the recovery of hidden or ignored histories is a fundamental step in the analysis of a people's present state. These thoughts informed Boas' lecture at Atlanta University in 1906 during which his first encounter with Du Bois and an audience of African-American university students was marked by an appeal to recover their African past defined as a counter-narrative to the rhetoric excluding black people from progress and development. Boas pointed out the racist assumptions of anthropology as evolutionary theories tended "to interpret as racial character what is only an effect of social surroundings"¹³⁰ and also asked a fundamental question: "Does race limit the ability to achieve civilization?"¹³¹ Lee D. Baker summarizes Boas' conclusions in relation to African Americans and racism in the United States in these terms:

[h]e also explained that the primary reason for African American inequality was racism, suggesting "that the old race-feeling of the inferiority of the colored race is as potent as ever and is a formidable obstacle to its advance and progress." He advised scientists to focus on how much Negroes have "accomplished in a short period against heavy odds" because "it is hardly possible to say what would become of the negro if he were able to live with the whites on absolutely equal terms." Boas concluded that "historical events appear to have been much more potent in leading races to civilization than their faculty, and it follows

¹²⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

¹³⁰ Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 104.

¹³¹ Boas quoted in *ibid.*

that achievements of races do not warrant us to assume that one race is more highly gifted than the other.”¹³²

As seen previously, Boas did not renounce the category of race, and kept on conducting anthropometrical measurements as it was customary in the scientific practice of the time, but he progressively downsized the importance of the physical data by showing how the assumptions inherent to its elaboration were abstractions having no actual correlatives at an empirical level.¹³³ In fact, in his essay “The Occurrence of Similar Inventions in Areas Widely Apart” (1887), Boas stated that “[t]he object of our study is the individual, not abstractions from the individual under observation.”¹³⁴ This research attitude was particularly evident in his report on the children of immigrants, *Changes of Bodily Forms of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912), which with the support of “more than 500 pages of painstaking statistics, graphs, and formulas”¹³⁵ constituted an attack on the theories of eugenics in its attempt “to prove that the so-called inferiority of Eastern European immigrants was erroneous.”¹³⁶

Although Boas was characteristically cautious, he stated that “we are therefore compelled to draw the conclusion that... the adaptability of the immigrant seems to be very much greater than we had a right to suppose before our investigations were instituted... [N]ot even those characteristics of a race which have proved to be most permanent in their old home remain the same under the new surroundings; and we are compelled to conclude that when these features of the body change, the whole bodily and mental make-up of the immigrants may change.

These results are so definite that, while heretofore we had the right to assume that human types are stable, all the evidence is now in favor of a great plasticity of human types, and permanence of types in new surroundings appears rather as an exception than as the rule.”¹³⁷

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ As observed by Stephen J. Whitfield, still in 1937, “Boas could not jettison the term [race]. Indeed a paper that he presented in Paris... [in that year] argued for the reality of race, which ‘must be conceived as a biological unit, as a population derived from a common ancestry and by virtue of its descent endowed with definite biological characteristics.’” Nonetheless, the definitive contribution Boas made to the theory of race, and what finally transformed its definition, was his assertion that “environmental influences can alter the biological inheritance that is bequeathed to us.” Finally, in order to further underline Boas’ distancing from both deterministic racialism and the German notion of *Volkgeist* which had informed his early thought, Whitfield reminds us that: “He also persuaded Du Bois to jettison what remained of the racialism that stamped *The Souls of Black Folk*, and to scrap the notion of innate group characteristics.” See Stephen J. Whitfield, “Franz Boas: The Anthropologist as Public Intellectual”, paper presented at the First Annual Conference on Public Intellectuals “Speaking Truth to Power”, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 23-24 April 2010. Available online as “Culture Hero: The Anthropologist as Public Intellectual” at: www.firstofthelast.org/archives/2012/04/culture_hero.html. Last accessed on 11 May 2012.

¹³⁴ Stocking, *A Franz Boas Reader*, 3.

¹³⁵ Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 106.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Boas quoted in *ibid.*, 106-7.

Boas' report used the same tools of eugenics in order to prove them unreliable at an empirical level, even though "[e]ugenists [finally] helped to write sterilization laws and anti-immigrant legislation, including the sweeping immigrant-quota scheme embodied in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924."¹³⁸ In the words of Werner Sollors, the "way of looking at America as immigration"¹³⁹ made widely popular by John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964) was not mainstream yet, but this approach to American society can be found at its outset in Boas' research as an attempt to start interpreting "America not narrowly as immigration but more broadly as ethnic diversity... includ[ing] the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the continent, [and] the kidnapped Africans and their descendants... – though they, too... [were] not classic immigrants."¹⁴⁰ Boas' personal background as a German Jewish immigrant and his fieldwork both among the immigrants and the Inuit and Native American peoples supported his belief and interest in the geographical and historical conditions which had moulded the current state of cultures in the United States.

Compared to the experience of both Native Americans and immigrants, though, the historical factor raised some important questions in relation to African Americans. In fact, while most immigrants could refer to a motherland to which they could ascribe their cultural legacy and ethnic heritage¹⁴¹, and Native Americans were still in their lands although displaced and dispossessed, diaspora had completely uprooted African Americans from their different histories, cultures, and languages in Africa while slavery and segregation – their most recent past in the New World – had produced a social context in which their representation as historical subjects had been hindered by the need to maintain them in a subaltern position as an economic resource to be exploited and abused. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn describes the early presence of blacks in the Americas as follows:

¹³⁸ Ibid., 94.

¹³⁹ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ This is not to say that the conditions of immigrants were less hard, but it refers to the degree of eradication from the motherland. In regard to the situation of immigrants, apart from the legislation against them in the early twentieth century, Howard Zinn reminds us that: "[i]n the 1600s and 1700s, by forced exile, by lures, promises, and lies, by kidnapping, by their urgent need to escape the living conditions of the home country, poor people wanting to go to America became commodities of profit for merchants, traders, ship captains, and eventually their masters in America... After signing the indenture, in which the immigrants agreed to pay their cost of passage by working for a master for five or seven years, they were often imprisoned until the ship sailed, to make sure they did not run away." In Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2003: 1980), 41.

[t]heir helplessness made enslavement easier. The Indians were on their own land. The whites were in their own European culture. The blacks had been torn from their land and culture, forced into a situation where the heritage of language, dress, custom, family relations, was bit by bit obliterated except for the remnants that blacks could hold on to by sheer, extraordinary persistence.¹⁴²

As hinted above, the focus in Boas' Atlanta speech in 1906 – the same year of the Atlanta Race Riot – is particularly important as it allowed African history to enter into the context of African-American culture not as a narrative of backwardness, but as a positive cultural heritage. It also marks the first encounter between Boas and Du Bois with whom he had been corresponding since the previous year, but never met in person before. Rachel Farebrother observes that “Boas's efforts to ‘decouple the primitive from the atavistic’ by explaining cultural difference in historical rather than biological terms meant that his ideas were a valuable resource for Du Bois's anti-racist project.”¹⁴³ The event and the impact it had on Du Bois' successive works, research, and political commitment are recorded in *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939):

Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching History in 1906 and said to the graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted.¹⁴⁴

Lee D. Baker contrasts Boas' 1906 speech at Atlanta University with “The Negro Brain” written in the same year by Robert Bean and published in the *Century Magazine*. In the article, Bean stated that,

[t]he Caucasian and the negro are fundamentally opposite extremes in evolution. Having demonstrated that the negro and the Caucasian are widely different in characteristics, due to a deficiency of gray matter and connecting fibers in the negro brain... we are forced to conclude that this is is [*sic*] useless to try to elevate the negro *by education* or otherwise except in the direction of his natural endowments.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 25.

¹⁴³ Rachel Farebrother, *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 42.

¹⁴⁴ William E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1939), vii.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Bean quoted in Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 123-124 [emphasis added]. In reminding the reader that Social Darwinism dominated the press and Boas was still attempting “to popularize his views in magazines”, Baker adds: “In response to this article Boas wrote to the owner, editor, and publisher of this magazine, Richard Watson Gilder, explaining that such an article would ‘give strong

‘Education’: this is the connector between the anthropological and humanist meanings of culture; in anthropology, it denotes the tension between enculturation as “[t]he aspects of the learning experience which mark off man from other creatures, and by means of which, initially, and in later life, he achieves competence in his culture”¹⁴⁶ and acculturation defined in broad terms as “an individual brought up in one country, transported into another;”¹⁴⁷ in Bean’s racial determinism, it becomes the connector between race and culture;¹⁴⁸ and in American history, one of the most debated topics in the battle for equal rights and opportunities for African Americans. As observed by Houston A. Baker,

[e]ducation – the process of developing knowledge, mind, skill, and character – has played a vital role in the black American experience. From Jamestown to the present day, black preachers, prophets, and protesters have championed the value of education in the black man’s struggle for freedom and equality... Education as a road to freedom, therefore, was an established tradition among black Americans...¹⁴⁹

In this context, culture as “the arts and learning” in its humanistic understanding shows its entanglement with culture as “a whole way of life” according to its anthropological definition whereas in the so-called ‘complex societies’ the first meaning of the term is separated from the second on the basis of coordinates of class, race, and gender. According to the explanation of the two separate meanings provided by Melville J. Herskovits,

[i]t is scarcely necessary to differentiate the concept of culture used as a tool in the study of man, from the popular meaning of the term “cultured.” Yet for those unfamiliar with anthropological usage, the application of the concept “culture” to a digging-stick or a cooking recipe necessitates some readjustment in thinking. A popular concept of culture comes within the terms of what may be called a boarding-school definition, and is the equivalent of “refinement.” Such a definition implies the ability of a person who has “culture” to manipulate certain

support to those who deny the negro equal rights; and from this point of view... the paper is not just to the cause of the negro.’ Boas’s letter to Gilder did nothing to curb the racism perpetuated by Gilder’s magazine. A month later, in the October issue, Gilder published another article by Robert Bean which espoused the same propaganda as ‘science.’”

¹⁴⁶ Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 39.

¹⁴⁷ Jerry Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 66.

¹⁴⁸ See this chapter, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Long Black Song*, 84-86.

aspects of our civilization that brings prestige. In reality, these aspects are principally the possession of those persons who have the leisure to learn them. For the scientist, however, a “cultured person”, in the popular sense, commands but a specialized fragment of our culture, sharing more than he suspects with the farmer, the bricklayer, the engineer, the ditch-digger, the professional man. The rudest economy, the most frenzied religious rite, a simple folktale, are all equally a part of culture. The comparative study of custom shows us this very clearly. In small isolated groups, where the economic base is narrow, and technical knowledge is slight, there is no room for the social stratification that must be present if a person, “cultured” in the popular sense, is to have the economic resources essential for his support while he devotes himself to his avocation.¹⁵⁰

‘Refinement’, ‘prestige’, ‘leisure’, and finally ‘economic resources’ denote the main features of humanist culture and social stratification; under such circumstances, to reach such level of ‘refinement’ with its subsequent ‘prestige’, meant to deal with a system which was basically preventing large parts of the population from having access to it on the basis of racial prejudice and class distinction according to the boundaries established by what Du Bois defined as the main issue of the twentieth century: “the problem of the color-line.”¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, education was not the only right of which African Americans and other ethnic minorities had been deprived, within a historical situation in which they had been disenfranchised of the most basic human rights for centuries.

The perspectives of the two most important African-American leaders at the turn of the twentieth century, namely Du Bois himself and Booker T. Washington, strongly diverged on this subject. In fact, whereas Du Bois supported an idea of education as access to Western ‘high’ culture – befitting his own personal academic trajectory as the first African American who earned a doctorate from Harvard University and his studies in philosophy and the social sciences both in the US and in Germany – Washington, an ex-slave who had finally become the founder and principal of the most important African-American college in the South of the United States, Tuskegee Institute, felt that the African-American youth needed to be trained in the professions in order to master modern technology and have access to financial independence. Lee D. Baker observes that “Washington’s strategy... emphasized vocational training and devalued university education.”¹⁵² Returning for a moment to the analysis of the ballad “John Henry” in the

¹⁵⁰ Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, 18.

¹⁵¹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 54.

¹⁵² Lee D. Baker, “Columbia University Franz Boas”, 95.

previous section of this chapter, what Washington saw as valuable training for African-American students was that kind of technical knowledge which would have allowed John Henry not to see himself as a tool to be finally substituted by the steam drill, but the skilled technician whose expertise and proficiency would have been appreciated by a society in which, according to Washington's famous "Atlanta Compromise", "[i]n all things that are purely social we [white and black Americans] can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."¹⁵³ Houston A. Baker describes the Washingtonian professional as "the educated black American [who] could be a 'useful' citizen, an improver of the community, a clean and well-mannered manual laborer of high moral character. Moreover, such a black man... would not trouble himself with social equality."¹⁵⁴ As observed by Susanna Ashton, Washington's philosophy "was accepted, and even hailed, by many in the African American community as the best that could be expected from the segregated South."¹⁵⁵ Nonetheless, Washington's address at the 1895 Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta had "many disturbing consequences, not the least of which was the implicit sanctioning of general bigotry."¹⁵⁶ Washington was trying to provide access for African Americans to the economic resources and technical skills essential to their advancement in a modern society; at the same time, though, he was taking care of reassuring white Americans that this change would not challenge their status quo and would be for the common good and advancement of the United States according to what "Washington felt... [as] a social and educational philosophy that was compatible with the times."¹⁵⁷ Washington's view could be read as a version of the American Dream which he considered available to African Americans at the time; "[t]he American Dream held out the promise to all men: through industry, self-reliance, and individual talent the limitless vista of progress were theirs."¹⁵⁸

Whereas Washington focused on the industrious side of the American Dream, Du Bois' philosophy of the "Talented Tenth" was pointing at the "individual talent" in Huggins' definition of that same dream. Du Bois believed that the Washingtonian perspective on education for African Americans was narrow and limited as asserted in

¹⁵³ Booker T. Washington, "Address to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition", 1895. Available at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>. Last accessed on 15 May 2013.

¹⁵⁴ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song*, 86.

¹⁵⁵ Susanna Ashton, "Du Bois's *Horizon*: Documenting Movements of the Color Line", *MELUS*, Vol. 26, No. 4, African American Literature (Winter, 2001), 10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song*, 86.

¹⁵⁸ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973: 1971), 139.

his reflections on the aims of a “true college [that] will ever have one goal, - not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.”¹⁵⁹ Du Bois’ own approach to culture was influenced by the humanist tradition, but also modified by the opening provided by Boasian anthropology with its focus on history, the African past, and its inclusion – on equal terms – of cultural traditions different from the European. In fact, although not exempt from a certain degree of essentialization, when applied to the humanistic understanding of the term, Boas’ anthropological approach could promote an opening of the Western artistic canon to other traditions, namely a possibility for inclusion of African-American culture into American art and an act of recognition of the influence of the first on the latter. Furthermore, this inclusion could represent one of the American elements allowing the cultural tradition of the United States to differentiate itself from the European.

The problem emerges when it is taken into account that, according to Houston A. Baker, “one index of black American culture is the extent to which it repudiates the culture theorizing of the white Western world.”¹⁶⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois was basically suspended between a humanist ideal of culture inherited by Matthew Arnold, the new definition of anthropological culture provided by Boas through Herder’s legacy, and the awareness that what was specific to African-American culture could constitute an alternative source of acknowledgement for black intellectuals and artists, one that would have allowed them to acquire independence from a system of judgement which repudiated their achievements as a way of defining itself. As noted by Toni Morrison,

[a]s a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients, this Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do without. Deep within the word “American” is its association with race. To identify someone as South African is to say very little; we need the adjective “white” or “black” or “colored” to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen.¹⁶¹

Morrison’s comment on the struggle over the hyphen connecting the word ‘African’ to ‘American’ has to be looked at as the accomplishment of an identity passing through several stages before reaching its current status. In fact, the inclusion of

¹⁵⁹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 115.

¹⁶⁰ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1993: 1992), 47.

the ‘American’ element into an integrated definition of the black identity in the United States was a conquest derived from the positive appropriation of the word ‘Negro’ by the black artists and intellectuals in the 1900s. The transition from the ‘Old Negro’ to the ‘New Negro’, namely the inspirational figure of the Harlem Renaissance, to ‘American Negro’ and, finally, ‘African American’ marks the attempt at integration of what Du Bois defined as that double consciousness which was a distinctive mark of the black experience in the United States. The definition of ‘American’ as white, contrasted with the concomitant rejection of the (black) ‘Other’, certainly has historical and economic reasons; nonetheless, it could be traced back to (white) America’s own cultural anxiety about “what culture is, what is distinctively American culture, and what of value America has contributed to Western civilization.”¹⁶² Huggins, commenting on the role of public schools for the definition of cultural heritage in the education of both white and black American students, notes that

[t]he object of American public schools was to make their charges American; which meant a rounding off of points of difference. Oriental and Jewish children were able to retain the gift of their past through special schools. But Negro children were swept into the cultural blender with other Americans, pulled into the vortex of Anglo-Saxon norms. Having no known culture to deny, the Negro was doubly damned. For when he discovered the emptiness and soulessness of the bland amalgam, or when he saw that *the ultimate truth of the lie was that you had to be white*, he had no place to return to... Like white children, black children were taught that the speech of their fathers was not proper English speech. They were encouraged to leave behind their dialects and regional and ethnic idioms. The tales that they had heard the old folks tell were not the stuff of culture; they would read Jane Austen and Thackeray and dream of English romance. Nor were the special rhythms of their speech suitable for poetry when Keats and Shelley were the models. In time, they could learn to accept the spirituals, with their decorum and simple majesty, but never the more spirited gospel songs and surely not the profane blues. Culture was something distant and alien – generally English – to be studied... and fitted on like a suit of clothes.¹⁶³

By integrating the terms ‘African’ and ‘American’, therefore, the black intellectual was mediating among several degrees of consciousness and inheriting, together with the double perspective that Du Bois assigned to the African-American experience, the multiple perspectives on the Western cultural tradition transmitted by the emerging American canon. This context of ‘culture-in-the-making’ may be the proper background

¹⁶² Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 60.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63. [Emphasis added]

which favoured the black American intellectual's search for different ways to root and authenticate his/her production, in the attempt to overcome the "rounding off of points of difference"¹⁶⁴ imposed by basic education.¹⁶⁵ Michael A. Gomez observes that the essence of African Diaspora and of Du Bois' 'twoness' is, in fact, "the unattainable nature of the polarities: Africa, once lost, has yet to be recovered; whereas America, as an ideal, has yet to become home"¹⁶⁶, although, as noted by Winfried Siemerling, Du Bois' efforts "to combine the words 'American' and 'Negro' harmoniously in a collective self-assertion of the 'American Negro' are staged... within a logic of recognition that is defined by 'American' values."¹⁶⁷ In relation to this polar tension, Gilroy has observed that it was at first impossible for Du Bois to include contemporary Africa into an idea of modernity which took shape in the nineteenth century and in which Africa could only emerge "as a mythic counterpart to modernity in the Americas – a moral symbol."¹⁶⁸ From this context, Africa could not be recuperated as it was constructed as a functional 'Other' for highlighting the modernity of the 'New World' while America continued to reject the African-American presence on the basis of the association with the 'Dark Continent.' Gilroy makes further reference to Boas' influence on Du Bois' decision to map the history of Africa when "[he] began to retell the narrative of western civilization in systematic ways that emphasized its African origins and expressed a deeper disengagement from modern forms of thought that were discredited by their association with the continuing practice of white supremacy."¹⁶⁹ Du Bois' plea for education and his perspective on culture must, therefore, be taken into account within this context and in the light of his own observations in the review of his major work *The Souls of Black Folk* for the Independent in 1904 when he characterized

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ James Baldwin acknowledged the need to locate himself in relation to his past as the most American trait of his being African American. See James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012: 1955), 122-123: "They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years – an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's good will, too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid... It is difficult to make clear that he is not seeking to forfeit his birthright as a black man, but that, on the contrary, it is precisely this birthright which he is struggling to recognize and make articulate. Perhaps it now occurs to him that in this need to establish himself in relation to his past he is most American, that this depthless alienation from oneself and from one's people is, in sum, the American experience."

¹⁶⁶ Michael A. Gomez, "Of Du Bois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African American Studies", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Special Issue: Back to the Future of Civilization: Celebrating 30 Years of African American Studies (Nov., 2004), 177.

¹⁶⁷ Siemerling, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Hegel, and Alterity", 327.

¹⁶⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 113.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

the book's style as "African" adding that "the blood of my fathers spoke through me and cast off the English restraint of my training and surroundings."¹⁷⁰

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, "the book that made him a leader of black Americans"¹⁷¹ and "one of the most important models for thinking about cultural difference today"¹⁷², even the references to the most established Western philosophical tradition embodied by Hegel's theories are transformed by what Ashton describes as "a new way of thinking about documentary evidence... Du Bois 'authenticated' himself with sorrow songs, with personal narrative of spiritual ascendancy, and with the explicit rejection of extraneous documentation."¹⁷³ In particular, Ashton refers to Robert Stepto's analysis of *The Souls of Black Folk* when he observes that,

[Du Bois] not only assumes the responsibilities for authenticating his voice and tale, but also advances a new scientific standard for what constitutes authenticating evidence. He seeks nothing less than a new narrative mode and form in which empirical evidence, scientifically gathered in a literal and figurative field (e.g. the Black Belt), performs the *authenticating chores previously composed by white opinion*.¹⁷⁴

The coexistence and integration of different cultural traditions in *The Souls of Black Folk* is evident in the quotes that open every one of the chapters: Byron and Schiller, The Song of Solomon, and the Negro songs are all used as epigraphs. Thomas Hibbs, quoting Zamir, has noticed that "the 'historical knowledge' embodied in the spirituals 'reverses the flow of knowledge and power' from any kind of elite to 'the black masses;'"¹⁷⁵ also the linguistic choices effected by Du Bois seem to be in line with such a reversal of the flow of knowledge. This important formal feature of Du Bois' text, which Dale E. Peterson has identified as the "dialogue of the double epigraphs"¹⁷⁶ taking place at the beginning of each chapter, invites "the reader... to intuit the spiritual equivalence between a few lines of European lyric poetry and selected bars of black

¹⁷⁰ Du Bois quoted in Richard Cullen Rath, "Echo and Narcissus: The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Sep., 1997), 461. In regard to the stylistic aspects of Du Bois' work, which Gilroy has defined as "a self-consciously polyphonic form", see Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 115: "The genre of modernist writing he inaugurated in *The Souls of Black Folk* and refined further in his later work... supplements recognisably sociological writing with personal and public history, fiction, autobiography, ethnography, and poetry."

¹⁷¹ Gilroy, *ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷² Shamoan Zamir quoted in Siemerling, "Du Bois, Hegel, and Alterity", 325.

¹⁷³ Ashton, "Du Bois's *Horizon*", 13-14.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. [Emphasis added]

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Hibbs, "W.E.B. Du Bois and Socratic Questioning", *Expositions*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2008), 49.

¹⁷⁶ Dale E. Peterson, "Justifying the Margin: The Construction of 'Soul' in Russian and African-American Texts", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), 753.

melody;”¹⁷⁷ in fact, the use of German together with standard and vernacular English refers to different linguistic traditions coexisting and being used as equal forms of authentication for the essays. In this regard, Peterson adds that Du Bois was “experimenting with the possibility of conveying in the medium of print the notion advanced by Herder that song is the oral writing of folk experience.”¹⁷⁸

This acknowledgment on equal terms of coeval traditions can be considered a transposition to the level of culture of the Hegelian symmetrical recognition preceding the dialectical relationship between master and slave. Siemerling has underlined the connection between the Hegelian vision on social contact and economic exploitation and Du Bois’ ideas on culture when he notes that “since recognition after this struggle is validated only by the one who has lost it... only the reciprocal recognition of equals can validate both sides, and result in the kind of recognition Du Bois seems to have in mind when he formulates the ‘end of this striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture.’”¹⁷⁹ Frantz Fanon had already noticed that “[t]here is at the basis of Hegelian dialectic an absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted”¹⁸⁰, and in reading Du Bois’ double consciousness according to Fanon’s analysis of Hegelian self-consciousness¹⁸¹, it is possible to speculate that recognition and reciprocity were being acknowledged in the same African-American consciousness as thought by Du Bois, that is, his stance towards multiple cultural legacies expresses his “*desire*, the first stage that leads to the dignity of the mind”¹⁸², of being actively engaged with those traditions considered as equal contributors to the foundations of his (double) self-consciousness. This kind of consciousness can be read as a prefiguration of the black postmodern consciousness described by bell hooks in terms of “yearning... [as] a common psychological state... cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender... the longing for a critical voice”¹⁸³ in cultural matters. Cultural recognition on equal terms, therefore, though not exhaustive of Du Bois’ broader political programme, seems to be coherent with his project on culture and the specific role that black artists and intellectuals could have within Western and, in particular, American culture. As noted by Rath, in fact, “Du Bois never

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967: 1952), 191.

¹⁸¹ See *ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁸³ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 27.

relinquished his Euro-American training and heritage... he forged a philosophy that accounted for the multiplicity of his experience as an African American.”¹⁸⁴

The very notion of Africa and the meaning that Africa can have within the Americas would become central for the artistic and national identities of African-American intellectuals in the United States throughout the twentieth century. The interest and fascination for Africa, both in cultural anthropology and in the modernist arts, was marked by its connection to the primitive, primitivism, and nature; both in its praise of an alleged pristine state of humanity or in its fear of its ungovernability and irrationality, this interest presumed a lack of temporality and history whereas, for Du Bois and the African-American artists and intellectuals of the 1900s, Africa had to be recovered as a source of historical legitimacy. Rath notes that Du Bois’ “Africa was made of the ideas and feelings he claimed to share with 10 million Americans whose ancestors slavery had brought. His Africa was a way of life more than a place.”¹⁸⁵ Reclaiming Africa was not an easy intellectual move if it is taken into consideration the role of Africa as margin for the delineation of a world history in which its presence actually marked an absence. As suggested by Peterson, the same notion of ‘soul’ in Du Bois’ text and subsequent African-American literature could be the result of the expulsion of peoples, such as Africans and Slavs, “from modern Europe’s philosophy of history”, namely “from the world-historical ‘spirit.’”¹⁸⁶

In the magisterial progress of civilization forecast by Hegel’s master plot, the Africans had literally no script assigned to them:
 “The Africans, however, have not yet reached *recognition of the General*... Thus we find nothing else than man in his immediacy... The Negro represents the Natural Man in all his *wildness and indocility*; if we wish to grasp him, then we must drop all European conceptions. What we actually understand by “Africa” is that which is without history and resolution.”¹⁸⁷

The words “a whole way of life” transform the idea of ‘Africa’ as a geopolitical entity into ‘Africa’ as a cultural referent for black America which, according to Houston A. Baker, can be defined precisely as “a *whole* way of life that includes its own standards of moral and aesthetic achievement.”¹⁸⁸ In the reference to a “whole way of life”, it is possible to trace a direct connection to the anthropological definition of

¹⁸⁴ Rath, “Echo and Narcissus”, 463.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 466.

¹⁸⁶ Peterson, “Justifying the Margin”, 751.

¹⁸⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel quoted in *ibid.*, 751-2. [Emphasis added in the article]

¹⁸⁸ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Long Black Song*, 6.

‘culture’ while the allusion to aesthetic and moral categories of evaluation associates it with ‘culture’ in its literary and artistic meaning; in particular, black America as a way of life provided the African-American intellectual with an array of critical categories which, while destabilizing the canon, allowed for an opening to his/her presence. Although in the case of the Harlem Renaissance such an opening was favoured by the interest and funding of white patrons, the possibility of making themselves heard not only as producers, but also as critics of culture was an unprecedented chance for African Americans to enter the historical discourse and represent themselves within it. As observed by Du Bois, who can be rightly considered a precursor of this tendency among African-American intellectuals, his intention was neither to “Africanize America”¹⁸⁹ nor “bleach his Negro soul.”¹⁹⁰ His ultimate goal would be “to merge his double self into a better and truer self... to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.”¹⁹¹ In this regard, Siemerling notes that “[w]hile the merging of a ‘double self into a better and truer self’ seems to indicate a dialectic synthesis and teleology, this merging implies here also, *on the contrary*, a stubborn maintenance and separation of the particulars.”¹⁹²

Despite the undeniable difficulty of such a project due to the overwhelming presence of the ‘color line’ throughout American society, this was not impossible when we realize that Du Bois considered the contribution of African-American culture to be fundamental in the delineation of what was properly ‘American’ within American culture itself as attested, for instance, by his approach to music as one specific cultural trait, when he stated that “there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave.”¹⁹³ This ‘twoness’ also constitutes the perspective through which, according to Siemerling, Du Bois was able to abandon the singularity of Hegelian *Geist* for the plurality of the ‘souls’ of his title: as seen in reference to Boas’ attitude towards the idea of *Volksgeist*, Du Bois “[i]n focusing on the ‘unhappy consciousness’ rather than on the metaphysical schema of history in the *Phenomenology*... is rejecting idealist teleologies.”¹⁹⁴ The application of a teleological project to American society and, more specifically, to race relations had led to a confusion between “a physical accident”¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 45.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Siemerling, “Du Bois, Hegel, and Alterity”, 327. [Emphasis in the original]

¹⁹³ Du Bois quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Zamir quoted in *ibid.*, 326.

¹⁹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk” (1910) in Meyer Weinberg (ed.), *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 303.

(whiteness) and “a moral deed – to draw unreal distinctions among human souls.” Both science and religion, as tenets of Western modern civilization, were responsible in the propagation of such confusion. In particular, regarding science, Du Bois denounced its degree of complicity with social prejudice by observing that,

[m]entally the blight has fallen on American science. The race problem is not insoluble if the correct answer is sought. It is insoluble if the wrong answer is insisted upon as it has been insisted upon for thrice a hundred years. A very moderate brain can show that two and two is four. But no human ingenuity can make the sum three or five. This American science has long attempted to do. It has made itself the handmaid of a miserable prejudice. In its attempt to justify the treatment of black folk it has repeatedly suppressed evidence, misquoted authority, distorted fact and deliberately lied. It is wonderful that in the very lines of social study, where America should shine, it has done nothing.¹⁹⁶

The “lie of culture” emerges here as the involvement of social science with pre-existing prejudices which tried to find legitimacy through scientific authority. The African-American intellectual finds himself/herself dealing with more than one cultural tradition; in fact, the acquisition of competence within the framework of Western ‘high’ culture is to be related to ‘traditional’ culture, which is not understood anymore as simply the object of anthropological interest, but mainly as a source of critical knowledge, an alternative method of analysis which possesses the potentiality of highlighting the inconsistencies inherent to the racist assumptions of scientific knowledge and cultural elitism. In this regard, Néstor García Canclini notes that “in modern societies the same person may participate in diverse folkloric groups, and is capable of being synchronically and diachronically integrated into various systems of symbolic practices.”¹⁹⁷ It is precisely for this reason that the ideas of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’ cannot be absorbed unquestioningly as ‘improvement’, but have to be related with the (often denied) existence of coeval temporalities within the same social structure. In particular, Du Bois did not detect the roots of racism in a past order, but within modernity itself as Julia E. Liss explains in the following passage:

[u]nlike Boas, who saw racism as a survival of a primitive tendency of hatred of the stranger... Du Bois thought that racism and color conflict were modern predicaments tied to the distinct development of “modern

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995: 1989), 156.

world commerce, modern imperialism, the modern factory system and the modern labor problem [which] began with the African slave trade.” (1917, Du Bois)¹⁹⁸

This does not mean that Du Bois did not recognize the element of hatred in such an unequal social structure, but he did not ascribe it to a less developed stage of history; on the contrary, the elevation of racial hatred to a tenet of society constituted the very basis of modern economy and organization of labour which made ‘progress’ and ‘development’ finally possible with the support of both science and religion. This latter had become “a gospel of human hatred and prejudice” which, while not speaking out against the unfair treatment reserved to African Americans, finally diminished “any reasonable statement or practice of the Christian ideal.”¹⁹⁹

The using of men for the benefit of masters is no new invention of modern Europe. It is quite as old as the world. But Europe is proposing to apply it on a scale and with an elaborateness of detail of which no former world ever dreamed. The imperial width of the thing – the heaven-defying audacity – makes it modern newness.²⁰⁰

Du Bois denounced the role of education in propagating and promoting a system such as the one described above, and he saw teaching as responsible for the “atrophy of soul”²⁰¹, namely the cause of both mental and moral suffering in the white folk of the United States whenever they draw those “unreal distinctions among human souls”²⁰² which substantiated the racist thought into everyday social interactions. In this regard Rath observes that “[f]or Du Bois the color line was not a problem of *persons*”²⁰³, but precisely a matter of these interactions, “of the warped *relations* – power relations – that stood between white and black.”²⁰⁴ In this context, as noted by Axel R. Schäfer, ‘culture’ and ‘moral development’ could be used as “a new rationale for discrimination that had little in common with the cultural cross-fertilization that Du Bois had envisaged.”²⁰⁵ Because of this, the role of the black man or woman of culture in the process of change and so-called ‘progress’ had to be defined and questioned; from this

¹⁹⁸ Julia E. Liss, “Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois, 1894-1919”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May, 1998), 148.

¹⁹⁹ Du Bois, “Souls of White Folk” in Weinberg (ed.), *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 303.

²⁰⁰ Du Bois, “Of the Culture of White Folk” (1917) in *ibid.*, 314.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Rath, “Echo and Narcissus”, 485. [Emphasis in the original]

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* [Emphasis in the original]

²⁰⁵ Axel R. Schäfer, “W.E.B. Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide in American Progressivism, 1892-1909”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (Dec., 2001), 947.

perspective, it is possible to apply Canclini's thoughts on the meaning of being cultured in dependent societies to the situation of African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century: in both contexts, writing – or more generally, producing culture – meant “to occupy a space that is already occupied.”²⁰⁶ In fact, while recognizing the complicity of education with an unjust economic and social system, Du Bois also acknowledged the role of culture in the struggle for freedom and enfranchisement throughout the history of African Americans. In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, the essay opening *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois reports how “the vain search for freedom”²⁰⁷ was transformed into “a new vision”²⁰⁸ at the end of the nineteenth century thanks to the perspective offered by the “ideal of book-learning”²⁰⁹:

[...] a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power, –a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of “book-learning;” the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.²¹⁰

In this regard, Schäfer justly observes that “Du Bois stressed education and cultural refinement as the path to racial equality and justice, deemphasizing both Booker T. Washington's bootstrap ideology and the liberal rights discourse.”²¹¹ Although Washington was probably right in stressing the importance of financial independence and technical knowledge within the developing American industrial system, the rhetoric of progress had indeed transposed the “racialist belief in fixed biological deficiency”²¹² onto “the notion of cultural deficiency”²¹³: within such a system, it is evident that technical specialization by itself would have not guaranteed a proper evaluation of the African-American contribution to modern society. Du Bois seems to question not only Washington's idea that technical education is to be emphasized in the training of African-American youth to the detriment of intellectual refinement, but also the

²⁰⁶ Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 75.

²⁰⁷ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 48.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Schäfer, “Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide”, 926.

²¹² Ibid., 927.

²¹³ Ibid.

mindless adherence to a system of exclusion that such a training would imply and support. Within the particular trajectory of African-American education, therefore, what Gomez defines as “autodidactic tradition” gains in importance:

[t]he autodidactic tradition was... an indispensable means of navigation against the stiff and disorienting headwinds of a master narrative that, in its quest to rewrite histories in ways that served imperial, colonial, and capitalist interests, took every precaution to write subject populations and cultures out of history, or to at least render them as inconsequential...²¹⁴

Because of such a narrative and epistemological attitude towards ‘history’, the idea of ‘progress’ itself is overtly challenged by Du Bois, as it is possible to see in one of the essays published in *The Souls*, “Of the Meaning of Progress”, reporting on a small African-American community in Tennessee where he taught at the start of his career. Du Bois stresses the simplicity and roughness of the place, the “longing to know”²¹⁵ of his students, and “the fine faith the children had in the wisdom of their teacher.”²¹⁶ He also describes the “honest efforts”²¹⁷ of some of the inhabitants “to be decent and comfortable”²¹⁸, “their knowledge of their own ignorance”²¹⁹, and the doubts of some of them (particularly “the old folks”)²²⁰ about “book-learning.”²²¹ He adds details about the conditions of life of his students’ families, paying attention to the variety within the community: while some of them were neat, others were not;²²² the life of some was pleasant, although difficult, the life of others was seriously marked by poverty.²²³ The smallness of this community does not prevent him from seeing it as a ‘world:’

I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity. All this

²¹⁴ Gomez, “Of Du Bois and Diaspora”, 184.

²¹⁵ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 99.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*, 101.

caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages.²²⁴

It is interesting that his use of the pronoun ‘us’ makes Du Bois a member of the community although both his education and temporary position within it could suggest his different standing in American society; but this is not the case as the ‘Veil’ represents the very “embodiment of the color line”²²⁵ the overwhelming presence of which he had already described in the life of any African American regardless of his/her education and social position.²²⁶ In this regard, Daphne Mary Lamothe argues that “if Du Bois’ image of the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* is a potent figure for racial divisions and inequality, then the act of raising the veil signals the ethnographer’s skill in cross-cultural transit and translation.”²²⁷ As for the “various languages” to which Du Bois makes reference, what he actually refers to are the different interpretations of their present and future conditions provided by the members of the community. These different readings of or attitudes towards the present are influenced by their knowledge as historical subjects. In fact,

[t]hose whose eyes twenty-five and more years before had seen “the glory of the coming of the Lord,” saw in every present hindrance or help a dark fatalism bound to bring all things right in His own good time. The mass of those to whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering. Such a paradox they could not understand, and therefore sank into listless indifference, or shiftlessness, or reckless bravado. There were, however, some—such as Josie, Jim, and Ben—to whom War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales, whose young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought. Ill could they be content, born without and beyond the World. And their weak wings beat against their barriers,—barriers of caste, of youth, of life; at least, in dangerous moments, against everything that opposed even a whim.²²⁸

The vision of the Veil and a “half-awakened common consciousness” characterize and unite these interpretations of American society despite different attitudes towards its history and the meaning of such history for African Americans. According to Du Bois, in order to transform partial consciousness into double consciousness and, in so doing,

²²⁴ Ibid., 102-103.

²²⁵ Rath, “Echo and Narcissus”, 484.

²²⁶ See Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

²²⁷ Daphne Mary Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 16.

²²⁸ Ibid., 103.

acquire a more comprehensive view of history and society, liberal arts education was essential. In fact, as noted by Schäfer in his discussion of the influence of German social thought on Du Bois's theories,

[a]ccording to Schmoller [Du Bois's mentor in Germany and the most eminent exponent of the German historical school of economics] and Du Bois, two major steps were required to ensure... human moral self-realization within an ever more sophisticated and interdependent social organism. First, the submerged moral feelings needed to be transformed into clearly spelled out ethical premises in order to be an effective element of cultural advancement. "The idea of justice is, like other moral ideas, not imparted to men by some revelation," Schmoller noted; "in many it works only as a vague feeling. In the course of history it develops, for the majority, into clear conceptions, standards and conclusions." The key to this process was liberal arts education. Ethical development was part of a cultural and civilizational process, which Schmoller defined, quite traditionally as an advance in rationality. In turn, Du Bois's studies under Schmoller strengthened his faith in education, in "accomplished moral intelligence", and in the ideal of cultivated men. "The aim of the higher training of the college is the development of power, the training of the self whose balanced assertion will mean as much as possible for the great ends of civilization," Du Bois asserted; "we must give to our youth a training designed above all to make them men of power, of thought, of trained and cultivated taste." It was on this basis that he rejected Booker T. Washington's philosophy of self-help as an undue reduction of liberty to technical training and business success. Freedom of spirit and self-reflection were more important for the ethical advance of blacks than were technical understanding, competitive achievement, and business skills. As his mentor Schmoller had asserted, "spiritual and literary powers must first prepare the terrain and make old Mother Earth ready to conceive a new child, before the time for practical things comes." Second, the social and economic structure of society had to be brought in line with the new ethical ideas of justice.²²⁹

The ethics implicit in a formative experience as the one envisioned here can attenuate the accusation of elitism towards Du Bois' own attitude in relation to Western high culture and his ideal of the 'Talented Tenth' as the leading fraction of the race. Houston A. Baker's observation about the fact that "[w]hile elevating the black intellectual, Du Bois perhaps depressed the masses too far"²³⁰ should be contextualized in the light of an opening of intellectual wealth to a greater section of African Americans and of Du Bois' cultural references to the spiritual wisdom of the folk. Although he did recognize that a training in liberal arts was not the kind of education which could be suitable to

²²⁹ Schäfer, "Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide", 937-938.

²³⁰ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song*, 102.

everybody, still he underlined that the propensity for it could not be established exclusively on a racial basis and its usefulness for African Americans was evident in the strengthening and articulation of that consciousness which would have been just half-awakened either by forced ignorance or incomplete training. In the essay “Of the Training of Black Men”, Du Bois exposes his views on the necessity of educating African Americans according to the highest standard for the security of American society as a whole,

I insist that the question of the future is how best to keep these millions [of African Americans] from brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and coöperation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future. That one wise method of doing this lies in the closer knitting of the Negro to the great industrial possibilities of the South is a great truth. And this the common schools and the manual training and trade schools are working to accomplish. But these alone are not enough. The foundations of knowledge in this race, as in others, must be sunk deep in the college and university if we would build a solid, permanent structure. Internal problems of social advance must inevitably come,— problems of work and wages, of families and homes, of morals and true valuing of the things of life; and all these and other inevitable problems of civilization the Negro must meet and solve largely for himself, by reason of his isolation; and can there be any possible solution other than by study and thought and an appeal to the rich experience of the past? Is there not, with such a group and in such a crisis, infinitely more danger to be apprehended from half-trained minds and shallow thinking than from over-education and over-refinement?²³¹

From this perspective ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’, far from being certain outcomes of industrialization and modernity, would result from an ethical attitude towards social challenges attained through and stimulated by a kind of education taking into account the human and intellectual experiences of black students because the final “function of the Negro college”²³² should be “to develop men.”²³³ Such a formative experience should focus on “the unknown treasures of their inner life”²³⁴ providing them with the means to “give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts.”²³⁵ The effects of ‘progress’ alone can be devastating if not supported by a concomitant effort to develop such an ethical attitude as

²³¹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 137-138.

²³² *Ibid.*, 138.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

demonstrated by Du Bois' return to the small Tennessee community in which he lived as a young teacher.

My log schoolhouse was gone. In its place stood Progress; and Progress, I understand, is necessarily ugly... As I sat by the spring and looked on the Old and the New I felt glad, very glad, and yet...²³⁶

How shall man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies?
How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure – is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?
Thus sadly musing, I rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow Car.²³⁷

The impoverishment striking the community is not an exception, rather it is a sign that, as Schmoller underlined, “the economic organization of a people is not a product of nature; ... it is primarily a product of the respective ethical views about what is right and just in the relationship between the different social classes.”²³⁸ If such ethical views are ignored by economy and education, the outcomes of civilization do not equate with social and financial improvement, but finally contribute to the undermining of the delicate balances on which small and isolated communities, such as the one described by Du Bois, rested.

As noted by Schäfer, “*The Souls of Black Folk*... advances the vision of ‘proud, enduring hyphenation’ based on the confluence of spiritual and social evolution;”²³⁹ this positive hyphenation could only be the result of the synergetic acquisition of culture and consciousness by African Americans as the progressive knowledge of historical events shaped the relationship between African continuities and American rewritings.²⁴⁰ From this perspective, the desire to make “the African connection”²⁴¹, although a “frustrating task”²⁴², was anticipated by Du Bois and shared with both cultural anthropology and the modernist arts as he “began to explore a model of agency that drew on African as well as European precedents.”²⁴³ In the following section, the consciousness of these two “unreconciled worlds”²⁴⁴ existing at the same time will be used to analyse how the

²³⁶ Ibid., 105.

²³⁷ Ibid., 108.

²³⁸ Schmoller quoted in Schäfer, “Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide”, 934.

²³⁹ Ibid., 939.

²⁴⁰ See Rath, “Echo and Narcissus”, 466.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 475.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid., 474.

²⁴⁴ See Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

question of African continuities in the Americas was treated in Melville J. Herskovits' anthropological research and the meaning of Africa as a cultural referent for the creation and artistic expression of a black modern identity in the United States. In the end, Du Bois' ideas on the importance of culture and education were directed towards the accomplishment of such an identity through the expression of a "double consciousness" which could become both a social and artistic hermeneutic tool and a factor in the ethical and political acknowledgement of African-American humanity. The task of the black intellectual was finally inscribed in the possibility of overcoming the presence of the 'color line' and lifting the Veil:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move
arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling and welcoming
women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing
between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon
Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously
with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the
Veil.²⁴⁵

1.4 Discovering Africa while singing America: modernist attempts at African-American representation

The bigotry of civilization which is the taproot of intellectual prejudice begins far back and must be corrected at its source. Fundamentally it has come about from that depreciation of Africa which has sprung up from ignorance of her true rôle and position in human history and the early development of culture. The Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture.²⁴⁶

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 139.

²⁴⁶ Arthur A. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past" in Alain Locke (ed.), *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Touchstone: New York, 1997 – 1925), 237.

²⁴⁷ Countee Cullen, "Heritage" in *ibid.*, 250.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.
 Tomorrow, I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me, "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.²⁴⁸

The American historian James T. Campbell observes that “[a]s paradoxical as it may sound, Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society.”²⁴⁹ In his preface to Campbell’s text, David Levering Lewis adds, “[t]o put the matter more poetically, when an African American asks, ‘What is Africa to me’, he or she is also asking, ‘What is America to me?’”²⁵⁰ The juxtaposing of the extract by Countée Cullen and the poem by Langston Hughes, two of the most representative figures of the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro movement, articulates the kind of tension described by Campbell as defined by the search for African origins and continuities in the Americas both in cultural anthropology and black modernism. Such a tension, which is essential for the elaboration of a positive identity characterised as a point of departure for political representation and artistic expression, is reflected both in the anthropological research and the dilemmas of American society in the first half of the twentieth century. Lee D. Baker’s analysis illuminates the conjunction between changing perspectives in social sciences and the role of race and culture in the acquisition of civil rights for African Americans. As he underlines, the question “[d]id the Negro have culture?” is first of all a political question more than an empirical one;²⁵¹ still, this same question is able to

²⁴⁸ Langston Hughes, “I, Too, Sing America” in *ibid.*, 145.

²⁴⁹ James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York and London: The Penguin Press, 2006), xxiv.

²⁵⁰ David Levering Lewis, “Preface” in *ibid.*, xiii.

²⁵¹ Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 24.

influence the empirical and theoretical bases of a discipline. Anthropology and sociology, in fact, concentrated respectively on tradition and modernity²⁵² and provided different answers in different times to the question asked above. In relation to African-American culture at the beginning of the 1900s, it is possible to notice a certain degree of ambiguity in relation to the very existence of a distinctive African-American culture in opposition to the recognition, by the 1920s, of specific Native-American cultures.²⁵³ Baker quotes Boas' "Introduction" to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* in which he stated that "the North American negroes, [were] a people by descent largely African; in culture and language, however, essentially European."²⁵⁴ In 1925, in his contribution for *The New Negro*, the anthology of the Harlem Renaissance edited by the African-American philosopher Alain Locke, the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits maintained a very similar position; in this regard, Baker notices that: "both Boas and Herskovits were trying to argue that blacks were not unlike whites and therefore should not be subjected to discrimination."²⁵⁵ Both Boas' reference to the history of Africa in Du Bois' recollection of their first encounter and Herskovits' subsequent interest in the African continuities among the Saramaccan Maroons of Suriname account for a tension within anthropological theory and practice which was absent in the concept of culture in relation to African-American communities as defined by Robert E. Park of the Chicago School of Sociology. Park maintained that "the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament."²⁵⁶ If compared to Boas' statement above, it is possible to see that the distance between the two was not so extreme at first²⁵⁷, but the discrepancy between

²⁵² Renato Rosaldo, "Foreword" in Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, xii.

²⁵³ See Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 23.

²⁵⁴ Franz Boas, "Introduction" to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911) quoted in *ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24. Herskovits preferred not to be directly associated with a political struggle which he saw as undermining the scientific scope of his research, nonetheless his and Boas' involvement in the battle against social discrimination must be read in the context of a growing nativism within the United States. As observed by Gershenhorn, in fact, "[d]uring the first decades of the twentieth century both Jews and African Americans faced discrimination, albeit of different magnitude, from racist and nativist groups. This fact joined blacks and Jews in opposition to their common enemies. But... Jewish organization rarely attacked anti-Semitism in public because they 'feared that too much discussion of the subject might stimulate anti-Jewish sentiment where it had not yet appeared.' Thus... Jews often supported civil rights for African Americans and attacked racist theories to 'fight against anti-Semitism by remote control.' It was no coincidence that many of the scholars who joined with Boas to attack racial hierarchy were also Jewish, including Otto Klineberg, Ashley Montagu, Alexander Goldenweiser, and Herskovits. Boas acknowledged this fact in a 1934 speech, noting that much of the important research on race was 'the product of Jewish students and scholars.'" See Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, 21.

²⁵⁶ Park quoted in Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 25.

²⁵⁷ The common element in the quotations by Boas and Park is the relevance they both ascribed to the cultural and linguistic influence of Europe on African Americans against a biological element seen as prevalently African. The point of rupture between the two positions seems to be in Park's recognition of

cultural anthropology and sociology grew larger as “[t]he Boas influenced project privileged history, diffusion, and continuities, which... helped to shape African American culture” while social scientists influenced by Park’s theories, and particularly the African-American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, committed themselves to an uplift project which basically saw African-American cultural differences as the result of a history marked by economic deprivation and social disenfranchisement.²⁵⁸ Ultimately, Negro culture constituted a deviation from the white standard “determined by educational and economic factors as well as by social isolation.”²⁵⁹

These social scientists usually pointed to statistics that compared Negroes’ deviations to a white standard, which underscored the high number of female-headed households and fictive kin relations, and these so-called deviant practices were conflated with high rates of crime, disease, and poverty. Together, they became indelible signs of deviant behavior or a pathological culture... Even at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the heritage project was simply dwarfed by the uplift project.²⁶⁰

While the New Negro Movement referred to Boas’ work in order to acknowledge a specific African-American cultural tradition²⁶¹, the origins of nineteenth-century-folklore studies can be found in the work of John Wesley Powell, the head of the Bureau of Ethnology from 1879 to 1902. Powell focused on American Indian folklore, collecting it in an evolutionary perspective “that saw all society developing through four levels of progress. Three of these stages – savagery, barbarism, and civilization – were already realized, but in the future an additional level, that of ‘enlightenment’, would be achieved.”²⁶² In his view, it is possible to identify the beginning of an uplift project which marked part of folklore studies, as attested in the foundation of the Hampton Folk-lore Society in 1893 which was the first institution to express interest in African-American folklore;²⁶³ the association explained its concern

“a tropical temperament” in African Americans which, I think, could not be validated in Boas’ views of the preponderance of environment on behavioural patterns. For a discussion on the polarisation of these two positions by later schools of social sciences in the study of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and Latin America, in particular from the Herskovits-Frazier debate onwards, see Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001), 228-232. See also Chapter Four in this thesis.

²⁵⁸ Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 26-27.

²⁵⁹ Frazier in *ibid.*, 27.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ See *ibid.*, 26.

²⁶² William K. McNeil, “American Folklore Scholarship: The Early Years” in Jan Harold Brunvand (ed.), *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 31.

²⁶³ See Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 45-52.

with “so-called cabin people”²⁶⁴ as a way “to make missionaries more efficient health-care providers.”²⁶⁵ In the 1800s, this missionary intent coexisted with two main approaches to folkloric content, namely the literary²⁶⁶ and the anthropological approach. The foundation of the American Folklore Society in 1888 favoured the latter largely because of the influence of the folklorist William Wells Newell and Boas²⁶⁷, who were “the major forces in the early years of the AFS, Boas maintaining that role for half a century.”²⁶⁸ In this context, the study of folklore became part of a broader anthropological interest characterised by an increasing professionalization of its standards and “a systematic approach.”²⁶⁹

In the very concept and definition of the term ‘folk-lore’, in its original hyphenation, it is possible to find an area of blurring between ‘culture’ and ‘race’ as “[l]ore means learning; folk, as I shall here use the word, means race. The Folk-lore of Negroes in the United States then, is the learning of knowledge peculiar to the Negro race... which they brought with them from Africa.”²⁷⁰ An element to underline here is the shift from a biological to a cultural concept of race to be found in the perspective of ‘race’ not as a quasi-ontological state of being, but something to be acquired in a process of learning. The uplift project was based, on the other hand, on the assumption that another kind of learning could substitute and therefore modify the very essence of race, making it invisible, or at least negligible. In the definition of ‘folk’ as ‘race’ and in its contiguity with ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’, which is the meaning that folklore will acquire in its progression as a discipline influenced by anthropology, ‘class’ makes its appearance as a significant factor for the acquisition of other kinds of learning that can guarantee access to the category of ‘Americanness.’ On the whole, from the perspective of uplift, ‘cultural’ specificities characterizing ‘race’ were consigned to a framework of deprivation, which once modified, would spontaneously elide those perceived differences.

Gershenhorn observes that Herskovits’ position focused on the idea that “black assimilation into American culture and preservation of the African heritage were not

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ An example of the nineteenth-century-literary approach to folklore is Joel Chandler Harris’ collection *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880).

²⁶⁷ See McNeil, “American Folklore Scholarship”, 33.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁷⁰ William Wells Newell quoted in Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 56-57. In the twentieth century, the folklorist Richard M. Dorson challenged the idea of African origins for African-American folktales. See McNeil, “American Folklore Scholarship”, 33.

mutually exclusive. Nor was cultural change a one-way street.”²⁷¹ Herskovits had arrived at such a view following a significant change in perspective from his initial contribution in *The New Negro* and his subsequent research in the Americas and West Africa in order to identify African traits in American cultures. His essay in *The New Negro*, entitled “The Negro’s Americanism”, starts with a description of Harlem which, although considered at the time as quintessentially African American, “a metonymic of African America in general”²⁷², was in his eyes “a community just like any other American community”²⁷³, so that what was considered the cradle of modern African-American culture was for him “a typical American community”²⁷⁴ where “once in a while an element peculiarly Negro does manifest itself.”²⁷⁵ Although racial prejudice had prevented black workers from joining the white unions²⁷⁶, according to Herskovits’ observations, “the general economic motif comes in for much more attention than the problems which are of interest to the Negro *per se*.”²⁷⁷

A key factor which marked Herskovits’ research on African elements in the Americas and significantly changed his perspective on the cultural traditions of black people in the New World was folklore in its definition of oral ‘folk literature’, “arising out of but distinct from cultural custom.”²⁷⁸ The basis for this was his own research in Dahomey (Benin) in 1931. Herskovits especially focused on the performative style and the context of oral folk literature that became the objects of his in-depth analysis more than the actual folkloric texts. As noticed by the anthropologist Kevin A. Yelvington, in the period during which American cultural anthropologists started to become interested in folklore, “in the Caribbean as elsewhere... folklore was used as a plank in nationalist arguments”²⁷⁹: scholars such as Antonio S. Pedreira in Puerto Rico and anthropologists such as Jean-Price Mars in Haiti and Fernando Ortiz in Cuba connected the study of folklore to the rise of national pride and the construction of a national identity.²⁸⁰ The possibility of maintaining a nucleus of tales and characteristic ways of expression

²⁷¹ Gershenhorn, *Melville Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, 94.

²⁷² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Harlem”, *Social Text* 81, Vol. 22, No. 4, Winter 2004, 115.

²⁷³ Melville J. Herskovits, “The Negro’s Americanism” in Locke (ed.), *The New Negro*, 353.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 354.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

²⁷⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Kevin A. Yelvington, “Melville J. Herskovits’s Theory of Folklore.” Paper presented to the Workshop on Folklore and the Politics of Belief in the Caribbean, Mellon Seminar on Caribbean Cultural History, Department of History, University of California at Los Angeles, 14 May 2009. Available at: <http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/files/Yelvington-Melville-J-Herskovits-Theory-of-Folklore.pdf>. Last accessed on 5 September 2013.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

through folklore constituted the core of Herskovits' 'Africanist Turn'; in fact, Yelvington observes that "[f]olklore figured prominently in this new theoretical orientation. Folklore was conceived by Herskovits as one element of culture, such as religion or kinship, that could survive more or less intact..."²⁸¹ In *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937), Herskovits assigned to folklore a central role in the survival of African culture in the Americas, describing it as "[t]he trait of African culture that has survived most tenaciously in all the New World, even when European influence has been strongest."²⁸² Yelvington further notices how, during the years, Herskovits moved from the Boasian concept of 'survivals' to that of African 'retentions' implying a higher degree of conceptualization and reinterpretation in the conservation of African elements in African-American culture.²⁸³

The folkloric element was also central to the project of modernism in general and to that of the Harlem Renaissance in particular. In Alain Locke's view, folklore would have been essential in the transformation of the African-American common experience into 'a common consciousness'²⁸⁴, particularly important for a movement which represented a section of diverse African-American groups in the United States constituted by the migration of people from the rural South and the West Indies to the cities in the North of the United States. Between 1910 and 1930, in fact, about six millions of African Americans had left the Southern states in order to look for jobs and a better life in the urban centres of the North.

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and the village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another.²⁸⁵

By juxtaposing Locke's description of Harlem with Herskovits', the reader becomes aware that the apparent adherence to the wider context of modern New York travels

²⁸¹ Ibid., 13-14.

²⁸² Herskovits quoted in *ibid.*, 14.

²⁸³ See *ibid.*, 16.

²⁸⁴ See Alain Locke, "The New Negro" in Locke (ed.), *The New Negro*, 7.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

through coordinates of class and competence while what may have characterised the area as specifically African American was the particular outlook that those people from the South and the Caribbean cast over such a context and the possibilities it offered to or denied them; in fact, the degree of alienation that the new black immigrants had to face was probably what posited the question of ‘difference’ both as a resource – in the case of the Harlem Renaissance and the subsequent research by Herskovits – and a problem as sensed by both mainstream sociology and the American society at large. The modern urban environment is the twentieth-century context from which African-American history could be read and evaluated as resource or deprivation, pride or unassimilated presence.

The particular reception of folklore within such a context and the possibility of using it as a basis for a modern model of racial self-representation as implied in the Harlem Renaissance project reveals a web of connections and interactions between class and race, cultural politics and economics. As observed by Vladimir Propp, folklore studies defines itself as “an ideological discipline”²⁸⁶ marked from the very beginning by a set of premises and principles whose aim is to distinguish the objects of its study from other areas of culture and, especially, ‘high’ culture. In this regard, Canclini observes that folklore is “a label that indicated its differences with respect to art as much as the subtlety of the cultured gaze, which was capable of recognizing the value of the generically human even in the object of the ‘others.’”²⁸⁷ Propp underlines several important aspects of folklore studies, but two are particularly useful for the present analysis: first, the connection with modernity as “[i]ts methods and aims are determined by and reflect the outlook of the age”²⁸⁸ and second, its focus on “only one stratum of the population studied... namely, that of the peasantry.”²⁸⁹ Propp also comments on the temporal preoccupations that mark contemporary studies on folklore: “[i]n the West it is the poetical works of the *peasants* and always of the *contemporary* peasants that are studied, though only insofar as their contemporary culture has preserved elements of the past. The subject is ‘living antiquity.’”²⁹⁰ According to Propp, this is a specific limit of folklore studies because of the dynamic character of folklore²⁹¹ and its existence prior to the constitution of peasantry as a class; in so doing, Propp identifies a much more varied

²⁸⁶ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997-1984), 4.

²⁸⁷ Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 108.

²⁸⁸ Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

background in folkloric production as folklore becomes for him “the art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitate toward the lower social classes.”²⁹²

Besides, folklore shows some significant connections to both anthropology and literature. In fact, although at least at the beginning, anthropology and folklore studies tried to distinguish their respective fields of research according to geographical areas of interest related to international borders for anthropology and national boundaries for folklore, so that “if a French scholar studies French songs, this is folklore, but if the same scholar studies Albanian songs, this is ethnography”²⁹³, Propp highlights the international aspect of folklore²⁹⁴ and its constitution as a science which “embraces the art of all people, no matter who studies them.”²⁹⁵ The interconnectedness between folklore studies, anthropology, and literature is even enhanced by the fact that “[n]one of the humanities, be it ethnography, history, linguistics, or the history of literature, can do without folklore.”²⁹⁶ The relationship of folklore to literature posits some important questions on how it can be used as a validation for literary identities and what its distinction from literature says of its status within it. As Propp rightly observes, literature as well is the product of a particular class of society and when folkloric themes and modes of expression find their way through literature in moments of stylistic revisions, the tension between two different, although complementary, traditions can be both a resource and a problem.

In the case of a modernist movement such as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, the challenge and problematic gesture consists in placing the folkloric element at the core of a literary project as, while folklore is strictly linked to literature, its presence presupposes a set of questions on the nature of authorship, originality, and the changeability/stability of art. In fact, “not only is there a close tie between folklore and literature, but folklore is a literary phenomenon. Like literature, it is verbal art,”²⁹⁷ nonetheless literature and folklore differ in significant ways²⁹⁸ and their relationship can become further complicated by their complementary difference:

²⁹² Ibid., 5.

²⁹³ Ibid., 5.

²⁹⁴ See *ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

[o]ne of the most important differences is that literary works invariably have an author. Folklore works, on the contrary, never have an author... It has long been known that literature is transmitted through writing and folklore by word of mouth... this distinction... captures the innermost difference between the functioning of literature and folklore. A literary work, once it has arisen, no longer changes. It exists only when two agents are present: the author (the creator of the work) and the reader. The mediating link between them is a book, manuscript, or performance. A literary work is immutable, but the reader always changes... Folklore also presupposes two agents, but different agents, namely, the performer and the listener, opposing each other directly, or rather without a mediating link.... Performers do not repeat their texts word for word but introduce changes into them. Even if these changes are insignificant (but they can be very great), even if the changes that take place in folklore texts are sometimes as slow as geological processes, what is important is the fact of *changeability of folklore compared with the stability of literature*.²⁹⁹

Folklore, as described in the extract above, would be characterised by anonymity, orality, directness (performer and listener interact in the course of a direct confrontation), and changeability while literature would be an authorial endeavour by means of a written, and therefore fixed, medium of communication connecting the writer to the reader. Movement and change are important features when related to folklore and the evaluation of its producers, ‘the folk’, who were usually seen as static human relics of a previous age as figures such as “the vanishing American” or “the disappearing Negro... as the central trope of the [modernist] movement”³⁰⁰ seem to suggest.

The challenge of modernism, and especially black modernism, was therefore to include that folklore as a means of authentication for a literary project that could be considered of national and international significance. American modernists turned to folklore as a way of defining their national specificity when confronted with European modernisms in an international arena while African-American modernists discovered in American folklore both their presence as subjects and their stereotyped representation. Therefore, when Henry Louis Gates speaks of a “two-toned heritage”³⁰¹, he is not only defining the hybrid legacy of black and white linguistic interactions in the United States, but also addressing the intermingling of different versions of American history and diverging interpretations of Americanness. From this perspective, it seems

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 6-8. [Emphasis added]

³⁰⁰ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.

³⁰¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989: 1988), xxiii.

appropriate to apply to the North American context the analysis of Brazilian modernism by Aracy Amaral as reported by Canclini when he notices that for American modernists, “to be cultured it is no longer indispensable, as it was in the nineteenth century, to imitate European behaviors.”³⁰² Canclini interestingly adds that “[t]he modernists drank from double and facing fountains: on the one hand, international information... on the other, ‘a nativism that would be evidenced in the inspiration and search for our roots.’”³⁰³ In fact, “[a]lthough the internationalizing trend has been characteristic of the vanguards, we note that some united their experimental search in materials and languages with an interest in critically redefining the cultural traditions from which they were being expressed.”³⁰⁴

As Michael North reminds us, these two modernisms cannot be understood without reference to each other, but especially “without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared”³⁰⁵, namely the language in which folklore was expressed, and this language was dialect. From this perspective, the role of the lower classes became central; North quotes Ambrose Gonzales, a white American dialect writer of the 1920s, who supported the pivotal role of peasantry as “conservators of speech”³⁰⁶ and ‘authentic’³⁰⁷ American heritage. North also adds:

[a]nd yet, on the other hand, black English had long been considered not just corrupt in itself but also the cause of corruption in others... Writers like Kennedy and Gonzales do not disavow such notions: the black speakers in their works are abundantly provided with the sort of malapropisms that have always characterized literary representations of “broken English”... the language included in [their] works... is both broken and pure, twisted and authentic.³⁰⁸

Thus, while dialect was regarded as a ‘purer’ idiom because it freed expression from the constraints of standardized usage and mainstream education³⁰⁹ and revealed the creative and expressive potential of language, “black speech... [was] mocked as deviant”³¹⁰

³⁰² Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 50.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 64.

³⁰⁵ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 11.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 21.

³⁰⁷ The term ‘authentic’ is here used with the definition of “a modern and transitory invention” as suggested by Canclini in his analysis of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). See Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 139.

³⁰⁸ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 21.

³⁰⁹ See *ibid.*, 19.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

although being recognised as “the only true voice of the South.”³¹¹ African-American modernism, as a consequence, saw folklore as a collective, oral enterprise as delineated above³¹², but added to it the distinctive dimension of repudiation of “the culture theorizing of the white Western world.”³¹³ This act of rebellion has been, indeed, necessary for African Americans in order to experiment in the arts during and after the Harlem Renaissance. Together with “the call for an appreciation of popular forms”³¹⁴, bell hooks reminds us that “[w]hatever African-Americans created in music, dance, painting, etc., it was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilized, and that the measure of this was our collective failure to create ‘great’ art.”³¹⁵ hooks’ words echo the “Preface” by James Weldon Johnson to his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) when he observes that “[t]he final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.”³¹⁶

More than a simple alternative to the white standard, African-American folklore in black modernism – as it has been underlined before in the case of Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* – “performs the authenticating chores previously composed by white opinion.”³¹⁷ From the direction suggested by Du Bois’ *Souls*, the anthology *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke, can be seen as a continuation of a project that is informed by the collective aspect of folklore as it underlines the passage from the “story of ‘I’ to a story of ‘We.’”³¹⁸ The Harlem Renaissance, far from being a failure according to Higgins’ famous evaluation of the movement³¹⁹, would represent one of the most accomplished examples of modernism because of its close connection to and creative use of folkloric materials. In fact, North comments on Alain Locke’s observations on the significance of Harlem in the wider context of the avant-garde noticing that the “effort toward an indigenous American cultural renewal” had found “a natural ally in the black movement that has come to accept ‘the folk music and poetry as an artistic heritage.’”³²⁰ *The New Negro* can be defined as the ‘autobiography of a generation’ – actually, of different generations – of African-American artists, scholars, and

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² See Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song*, 10-11.

³¹³ Ibid., 10.

³¹⁴ hooks, *Yearning*, 106.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 105.

³¹⁶ James Weldon Johnson quoted in Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, 160.

³¹⁷ Susanna Ashton, “Du Bois’s *Horizon*: Documenting Movements of the Color Line”, *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 4, Winter 2001, 14.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ See Higgins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 308.

³²⁰ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 128.

intellectuals living in Harlem in the 1920s. Like any self-portrait, the anthology provides a description while omitting significant traits: Anne Elizabeth Carroll has praised both the collective dimension of the anthology and its interdisciplinary structure, but has also highlighted its unifying impulses and attempts at simplification.³²¹ Even more importantly, what emerges from Carroll's analysis is a particular attention to the visual elements throughout the anthology which, thanks to the pictures and designs by Winold Reiss and Aaron Douglas, focus on "the link between African Americans and Africans and turn that link into a motif of the book."³²²

The visual emphasis that the anthology puts on the African element present in African-American folklore and culture is important as it has constituted a major point of critique of the movement and a main area of interest both for black modernism and anthropology. The Harlem Renaissance was contributing to a wider context of recuperation of African motifs as expressed by both the European avant-garde and the concomitant direction of ethnographic research. In this regard, John C. Charles notices that "Locke's call for a cultural reconnection with Africa was part of his overall cultural nationalist project."³²³ Charles positions Locke within a "history of African American leaders and intellectuals who advocated greater interest in Africa,"³²⁴ such an interest often involved a messianic attitude exercised by African-American spokespeople towards the continent of their ancestors. From this perspective, "evangelical 'civilizing,' or 'uplift'"³²⁵ was promoted as a mission towards "their 'benighted' African brethren."³²⁶ Charles also quotes historian Kevin Gaines who has observed that African Americans thought of themselves as "privileged agents of progress and civilization for the disadvantaged black majority."³²⁷ This "civilization ideology" was not exempt from imperialist beliefs and missionary activities in many ways similar to the general attitude

³²¹ Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, 159.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ John C. Charles, "What was Africa to Him?: Alain Locke, Cultural Nationalism, and the Rhetoric of Empire During the New Negro Renaissance" in Australia Tarver and Paul C. Barnes (eds.), *New Voices of the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2006), 34.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 20-21, 17, 208: in relation to a long history of African-American leaders and intellectuals interested in Africa, see for example, the figure of Martin Robison Delany (1812-1885) who, as reported by Gilroy, "was justly renowned for having organised and led the first scientific expedition to Africa from the western hemisphere: the 1859 Niger Valley Exploring Party" or Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), "one of the first black authors from the Americas to make authoritative interventions in early African history." One of the most important examples of such interest in Africa was, finally, the Pan-Africanism proposed by Marcus Garvey (1887-1940).

³²⁵ Charles, "What Was Africa to Him?", 37.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ Kevin Gaines quoted in *ibid.*, 38.

Western countries maintained towards their colonies.³²⁸ Although Charles acknowledges the fact that Locke was critical towards missionary projects as he saw them as “a corollary of modern imperialism”³²⁹, and that he shared with anthropology “the emergent cultural relativism”³³⁰ of his age, nonetheless “when Locke [in his essay ‘The New Negro’] describes the relationship between African Americans and Africans, his language conveys... unquestioned power, asymmetry, and sense of presumption.”³³¹ From this context, Harlem becomes “the metropole, the center of global race leadership.”³³² The major tension provoked by such a rhetoric in the context of the Harlem Renaissance deals, once again, with the representative possibilities for a New Negro who was “prototypically modern and Western”³³³, while Africa – which, together with African-American folklore, constituted the source of such a modern identity – “was considered the antithesis of the modern West.”³³⁴ The representation of Africa was rather uncertain within this framework since “if Africa provided an ‘authentic’ and ‘classic’ artistic tradition – a usable past for African American artists – it continued to represent a usable present as a source of exotic signs.”³³⁵

In the present study, the role of Africa within the Harlem Renaissance is considered as both a source of inspiration and a cultural and political ‘elsewhere’ from and to which discourses regarding the primitiveness of black Americans and their supposed exoticism within national borders could be transposed and distanced in order to define a modern African-American identity. Africa provided the black artist and intellectual with a tradition that was felt as ‘authentic’ and ‘classical’ while trying to dismiss the unwanted association with its primitivism. The fact is that this act of recuperation was not independent from previous theoretical assumptions on the ‘nature’ of both Africans and African Americans because the funding for many of the artistic endeavours which marked the age of the New Negro was actually coming from white patrons who were expecting to find the primitive and the exotic within the urban context of the modern metropolis as, in Canclini’s words, “the simultaneous exaltation of

³²⁸ See *ibid.*

³²⁹ Alain Locke quoted in *ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*, 39.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48. This tension will be present in the anthropological imagination as well; in this regard, see the discussion of the role of Haiti for both American anthropology and African-American culture in Chapter Four of this thesis.

aesthetic modernism and social premodernity are shown to be compatible.”³³⁶ What indeed was happening could be described as a progressive detachment from the folk *per se* while folklore was used as both method and basis for literary and artistic endeavours. In fact, according to Canclini:

[t]he literary gaze at patrimony, including visual culture, contributed to the divorce between the elites and the people. In societies with a high rate of illiteracy, documenting and organizing culture chiefly through written means is a way of reserving memory and the use of symbolic goods for the few. Even in countries that incorporated large sections of the population into the formal education in the first half of the twentieth century... the predominance of writing implies a more intellectualized mode of circulation and appropriation of cultural goods, foreign to the subaltern classes, who were accustomed to the visual elaboration and communication of their experiences.³³⁷

From this context, it could be useful, as Canclini suggests, to overcome the opposition between traditional and modern taking into account three factors highlighted by Raymond Williams: the *archaic*, the *residual*, and the *emergent*. Commenting on Williams’s distinction, Canclini observes that,

[t]he *archaic* is what belongs to the past and is acknowledged as such by those who today relive it, almost always ‘in a deliberately specialized way.’ On the other hand, the *residual* is formed in the past but is still active within cultural processes. The *emergent* designates new meanings and values, new practices and social relations.³³⁸

What can this mean in relation to the distinction between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Negro within the Harlem Renaissance? The idea here is that for black modernism Africa could constitute the *archaic*, African-American folklore could be associated with the *residual*, and the *emergent* would have been personified by the New Negro in the context of modern New York. While the *residual* had to be seen as an active part of the *emergent* in order to acquire a new, fuller meaning for the rising African-American identity, the *archaic* had to be recuperated as an authoritative legacy living throughout both the *residual* and the *emergent*. In order for this to be possible, a whole corpus of representations coming from scientific studies, sabotaged histories, and ‘common’

³³⁶ Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 69. He also observes that: “[a]lthough the patrimony serves to unify each nation, the inequalities in its formation and appropriation require that it also be studied as a space of material and symbolic struggle between classes, ethnic groups, and other groups.” *Ibid.*, 136.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

³³⁸ Raymond Williams quoted in *ibid.*, 138.

beliefs had to be rewritten and their narratives disentangled in order to reclaim some form of legacy without, at the same time, reclaiming its prejudices. Although Charles's analysis of Locke's Africanism has many good points, he only partially takes into account such a context while seemingly ignoring the potential of Africa as a referent for more than artistic freedom both for Locke and the Harlem Renaissance. It is appropriate to say that Locke could not completely disentangle himself from the uplift project – which, at any rate, was not exclusively addressed to Africans – but saw in Africa the potential for freeing African-American art and expression from a controversial inheritance while at the same time reclaiming a privileged connection compared to the wider context of American modernism. In his essay “The American Negro As Artist” (1931), Locke writes:

[s]urely we should expect the liberating example of such an [African] aesthetic to exert as marked an influence on the work of the contemporary Negro artist as it has already exerted on leading modernists like Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Epstein, Lipschitz, Brancusi, and others. Indeed we may expect even more with a group of artists becoming conscious of an historical and racial bond between themselves and African art. For them, rather than just a liberating idiom or an exotic fad, African art should work with all the force of a rediscovered folk-art, and give clues for the repression of a half-submerged race soul.³³⁹

The resurgence of Africa is paralleled by the “downfall of classic models and Caucasian idols”³⁴⁰ which, through a reversal of the discourse associating African traits to infancy, are – in Locke's vision – related to “the childhood period of American Negro art”³⁴¹ while the rediscovery of the African legacy would be a sign of “the growing maturity of the young Negro artist, the advent of a representatively racial school of expression, and an important new contribution... to a whole body of American art.”³⁴²

Locke's reversal of the rhetoric associating the Negro with childish behaviour and partial development is at the basis of Melville Herskovits' project aimed at dismantling the myth of a Negro past in order to substitute this construction with an image as free as possible from outdated stereotypes and prejudice. Therefore, in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits deconstructed the whole structure of a myth which had been used to validate race prejudice in the United States. Herskovits started his

³³⁹ Alain Locke, “The American Negro as Artist” (1931) in Charles Molesworth (ed.), *The Works of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *Ibid.*

analysis from the widespread assumption that African Americans were ‘naturally’ childlike and thus more inclined to be submissive and challenged the common beliefs in relation to their aptness for slavery, their origins (it was generally assumed that slaves came from lower strata of society), and the idea that African cultures were so underdeveloped that they had left no traces in American culture. Because of all these reasons, the American Negro was considered without a past. Trying to dismantle the whole apparatus while introducing a historical perspective on it, Herskovits’ work constituted a careful collection, comparison, and analysis of materials and data coming from different regions of the United States and from Western Africa which highlighted – among many other things – differences and specificities of African survivals and retentions in American cultures³⁴³, the influence of migration in shaping the black American experience³⁴⁴, the degree of identification with or detachment from white values³⁴⁵, and the existence of forms of resistance alternative to direct opposition to the slavery system.³⁴⁶ In 1940, Herskovits had already asserted the liminality of the African-American heritage which was, in his words, “neither purely African nor purely European, but represents, in varying degrees, a syncretism of the dual heritage of Europe and Africa.”³⁴⁷ Gershenhorn also underlines how the idea of African-American culture was embedded into a project of historical recuperation echoing, in certain ways, the project set forth by the Harlem Renaissance. He observes that,

Herskovits... refuted the present focus of most studies of the “Negro problem,” arguing for “a thoroughgoing historical attack of the Negro problem. In the tangled skein of American Negro culture history, the African threads are meaningless unless we arrive at a comprehension of the mechanisms whereby such Africanisms as may be discovered were perpetuated, and how they were rewoven with yarn from other sources.”³⁴⁸

The historical look at African traits in the Americas is what connects the research of the Harlem Renaissance with the concomitant research by Herskovits in cultural anthropology. Apart from that, an important aspect of the collection and analysis of folklore is the context in which it was produced and acquired significance. Such a context is so important because it allows the ethnographer and artist to trace not only the

³⁴³ See, for example, Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 80.

³⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 133.

³⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 141.

³⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 99.

³⁴⁷ Herskovits quoted in Gershenhorn, *Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, 104.

³⁴⁸ Herskovits quoted in *ibid.*, 103-104.

historical relevance of marginalised experiences in the Americas, but also to understand continuities in the everyday lives of people suspended between ideas of ‘primitivism’ and ‘modernity.’ This allows him to draw a comparison between religion and technological innovation which is used as a metaphor to conclude this chapter.

Religion is close to the everyday experience of the West African. Supernatural forces are potentially dangerous, it is true, but so are wild animals or illness. An analogy can be drawn in terms of our own reaction to electricity and automobiles. For those who work with either or benefit from the use of either, the potential dangers – of shock or of accident – are considerable. Yet, if we are normal, we do not set up phobias which preoccupy our waking moments and torment our sleep with nightmares concerning electricity and automobiles. For if these are dangerous, they are also helpful; if they can harm us when not handled properly, their proper use is beneficial. So with the West African’s gods, and so with his magic. What can potentially harm, if not handled properly, can also be of the greatest aid; and just as we have specialists who see to it that our electrical devices are properly insulated and our automobiles are in proper working order, so in West Africa priests and diviners and dealers in magic charms are likewise on hand to exercise proper control.³⁴⁹

Through this comparison, Herskovits shows the connection between two aspects apparently far from one another. Religion, and by extension folklore, in Canclini’s words, has a function in the everyday lives of the peoples who produce them as technical innovations have a function within modernity. The separation between the two spheres, anyway, is marked – both in art and anthropology – by coordinates ascribing specific meanings to the temporal and embodied presence of the anthropologist and his/her ‘objects’ of study; such a separation is responsible for the epistemology of anthropology which delineates a marked separation of the anthropologist from the ‘Other’ of anthropological enquiry. This Other is relegated to ‘primitiveness’ on the basis of supposed distance from the modern perspective of anthropology and this is the main reason why Herskovits’ association between ‘ancestral’ religion and modernity is so important. In the following chapters, the reader will be confronted with the extent of such assumptions in ethnographic practice and anthropological theories when the anthropologist’s presence is marked by racial and/or gendered characteristics which closely associates her/him to the ‘objects’ of her/his study. As observed by Paul Gilroy in relation to modern black political culture, it is true for early cultural anthropology as well that it “has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and

³⁴⁹ Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 74.

rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movements and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.”³⁵⁰ Representations of body and Time in Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnography, therefore, will be here used as a way of complicating the question of rootedness while recording the movements involved in the delineation of routes which can articulate the relationship between the anthropologist, her practice, and subjects suspended between tradition and modernity, history and myth.

³⁵⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 19.

Chapter 2: Anthropological Distance and the Body in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*

This chapter attempts to analyse the representation of the woman anthropologist's body in the 1935 ethnography *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was one of the main literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920s artistic movement based in New York City, an unprecedented occasion of autonomous representation and theorization of black identity by African-American musicians, writers, and performers. Apart from her artistic endeavours, Hurston was also trained as an anthropologist at Columbia University, working under the guidance of Franz Boas. Through the reading of her work, this chapter focuses on the ways in which literature, including folk and oral expression, can problematize the issues which have emerged in cultural anthropology at the end of the twentieth century in relation to the conventions of ethnographical writing. From this perspective, Hurston's choice to represent herself as an embodied character within the narrative frame of her ethnography will be questioned and analysed.³⁵¹

Embodiment will be considered as an element that destabilizes the paradigms of invisibility and scientific objectivity applied to the anthropological methodology of those years. The emergence of the body in the ethnography will focus on the question of distance in anthropology through the representation of alterity. Furthermore, the theme of the body is connected to the representation of Time³⁵² in anthropology, which will be explored in the following chapter. Orality and performance constitute the links that articulate an analysis of the representative forces at work in Hurston's ethnographies as possibilities of expression for alternative conceptions of Time and corporeality.

This chapter will propose an analysis of the representation of the body within *Mules and Men* through the observations on the relationship between body and knowledge as suggested by the Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz in her studies *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*³⁵³ and *Architecture from Outside:*

³⁵¹ See Graciela Hernández, "Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality: Zora Neale Hurston's Experimental Ethnographies", in Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (eds.), *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995), 160. Hernández reads Hurston's choice to feature her body in her ethnography as one of the main experimental gestures and novelties in the context of a "highly subjective narrative."

³⁵² In the present thesis, the term Time is capitalized when used as a general concept in a way similar to Fabian's capitalization of the word in his *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983).

³⁵³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Essays on Virtual and Real Spaces.³⁵⁴ The discussion of body and knowledge will be connected to the analysis of Hurston's self-representation in the ethnography in relation to the specificity of the racial history of the United States: the representation of the embodied subjectivity of a black woman in a segregated society can be read as both daring and controversial. These considerations will try to underline how the black body has been represented and perceived in the US imaginary and how embodiment is linked not only to knowledge production, but also to consciousness and particularly, according to W. E. B. Du Bois' famous definition, to "double consciousness" in relation to the experience of African Americans. Thus, the chapter will analyse the role of the body as a fundamental site of struggle and resistance and, in the fieldwork, as an important position for the anthropologist in order to situate her knowledge within the community which she studied. The body will be regarded as a "discursive phenomenon" which is able to overcome the dialectic between nature (and the attempt at forcing bodily processes into a pre-cultural status) and culture because of the body's pivotal role in both ethnographic knowledge and oral performance. In the end, the different levels of embodiment present in Hurston's representation of her journey through Florida and Louisiana will be taken into consideration in order to articulate the theme of presence and distance in ethnography. The encounter with difference is represented as apparent closeness to and similarity with the "object of study" which is ultimately denied by the course of the narrative events represented in the framework of the ethnography. Thus, in the second part of *Mules and Men*, dedicated to hoodoo practices in New Orleans, it is possible to detect a final attempt at reconciliation of the different layers of subjectivity and the possibility of acquiring knowledge through the embodied practice of hoodoo.

2.1 On body and knowledge in ethnography

Blacks, slaves, immigrants, indigenous people can no longer function as the working body for white "citizens", leaving them free to create values, morality, knowledges.³⁵⁵

When de nigger opened up his bundle he found a pick and shovel and a hoe and a plow and chop-axe and then de white man opened up his bundle and found a writing'-pen and ink. So ever since de nigger been out in de hot sun, usin' his tools and de white man been sittin' up

³⁵⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Spaces* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001).

³⁵⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 22.

figgerin', ought's a ought, figger's a figger; all for de white man, none for de nigger.³⁵⁶

The two quotations opening this chapter constitute a complementary view on the relationship between body and knowledge and, in particular, on the role of bodies' specificities in relation to the production of knowledge and the division of labour. The first sentence, taken from Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* presents an interesting transposition of the mind/body division from the epistemic to the social and historical contexts. The second quotation, taken from the 1935 folklore collection *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston, represents a theorization of the same concept through narrative. The framework of this quote is the tale "De Reason Niggers Is Working so Hard" included in the seventy-tale-anthology which constitutes the core of Hurston's ethnographic work based on her fieldwork in Florida and Louisiana between 1927 and 1932. This tale tries to provide an explanation for black exploitation in the United States making it date back to the moment in which God left two bundles on the road and the black man, outrunning the white, would have chosen the biggest one to discover, a few moments later, that the parcel contained the tools of physical labour the white man has historically imposed onto him. Since that moment, the pen and ink lodged inside the smallest bundle have been controlled by the white man in the context of a story assigning mythical origins to a division of labour linked to oppressive and segregationist systems.

In relation to the first quote by Grosz, the extract provides an adequate framework for this chapter's discussion of the relationship between body and knowledge in connection to specific forms of exploitation in the history of the United States. It provides a contextualization for Zora Neale Hurston's role as ethnographer and novelist as well because her biography can be seen as an attempt to subvert this 'original' order and conquer the pen and ink, the instruments of knowledge production, undermining a division of roles so oppressive to be felt as beginning in a dateless time. The historical conditions of Hurston's research, though, can show that the influence of white authorities on the intellectual work by black artists and researchers was still very evident in the North American context of the 1930s.

Hurston's ethnographical expedition was, in fact, directed by Franz Boas, the founder of American cultural anthropology, and funded by Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, a white patron deeply interested in the African-American cultural heritage and

³⁵⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1935), 75.

arts.³⁵⁷ Apart from Hurston's literary and anthropological endeavours, Mason financed black educational programmes and several other artists who – like Hurston – were part of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes. According to him, Mrs. Mason was interested in black artists not because she wanted to help them, but because she considered them as “America's great link with the primitive.”³⁵⁸

Starting from the assumed connection to the primitive which has been explored in Chapter One in relation to both American cultural anthropology and the Harlem Renaissance, the present chapter explores the representations of body in Hurston's work: the anthropologist's choice to represent herself as one among the many characters of her study, the introduction of oral language in the first part of the ethnography, and the revelation of hoodoo practices in the second section of her ethnography.

2.2 'Primitive' bodies: the emergence of the ethnographer's body in *Mules and Men*

O my body, always make me a man who questions!³⁵⁹

The body has thus far remained *colonized* through the discursive practices of the natural sciences, particularly the discourses of biology and medicine. It has generally remained mired in presumptions regarding its *naturalness*, its fundamentally biological and *pre-cultural* status, its immunity to cultural, social and historical factors, its brute status as *given, unchangeable, inert, and passive*, manipulable under scientifically regulated conditions.³⁶⁰

'Colonized', 'natural', 'pre-cultural', 'unchangeable', 'inert', 'passive': all these adjectives, which Grosz refers to the treatment of the body in natural sciences, can be connected to other adjectives such as 'primitive', 'savage', 'tribal', 'ancestral' which are widely spread throughout the anthropological canon in relation to the 'object' of its analysis. Johannes Fabian remarks that these kinds of terms permeate anthropological discourse in order to prevent the 'other' of ethnographical inquiry from entering “coevalness” (an inclusive term referring to both synchronicity and contemporariness): that is, to deny this other the possibility of being a contemporary in relation to the anthropologist.³⁶¹ In this regard, Fabian observes that

³⁵⁷ Mary E. Lyons, *Sorrow's Kitchen. The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribners, 1990), 51-56.

³⁵⁸ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993: 1940), 315.

³⁵⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press: New York, 1967: 1952), 206.

³⁶⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x. [Emphasis added]

³⁶¹ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: 1983), 30-31.

[a] discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the “primitive;” it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought.³⁶²

The denial of coevalness to the anthropological Other becomes a double denial if considered in relation to the possibilities of representing the body in scientific texts: alterity is confined in another time, while the body is displaced from knowledge production because of its supposed association with natural and biological processes. In fact, as suggested by Grosz, to take into consideration the bond between the “sexual specificity of bodies” and their relation to the kind of theories and knowledges that have been constructed helps us to understand that the objectivity and impersonality of knowledge rests on “one type of corporeality, one type of subject (white, male, European, middle-class).”³⁶³ Grosz is convinced that philosophy, like any other knowledge, is a consequence of the body seen as “the intimate and internal condition of all knowledges.”³⁶⁴ Hence the authority of knowledge rests on the denial of the particular bodies participating in its creation in order to see itself as “objective, true, valid for all, independent of formulation and context, outside of history, and immutable;”³⁶⁵ such an authority rests on a transcendental and remote voice which can be universalised. The idea is that the objectivity and impersonal style of theory hides a subject assuming that his experience and view can be universal and authentic while denying his involvement in embodiment and historical dynamics circumscribing his view and perspective.³⁶⁶ The definition of the body has been mainly left to natural and medical sciences, which confine it in narrow descriptions while distancing it even more markedly from other disciplines and theories.

The awareness created by the acknowledgement of the body’s incidence on knowledge production can be particularly valuable in the creation of spaces for other corporeal representations in which new “positions, perspectives, interests, productions” can be developed.³⁶⁷ If the concept of the specificity of bodies is enlarged in order to

³⁶² Ibid., 17-18. [Emphasis in the original]

³⁶³ Grosz, *Architecture from Outside*, 40.

³⁶⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 125.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, x: “The sciences themselves are not immune to – indeed, they depend for the very mode of their formulations and operations on – everyday assumptions and beliefs of scientists and others regarding knowledge, power, desire, and bodies.”

³⁶⁷ Grosz, *Architecture from Outside*, 40.

question other kinds of specificities, such as ethnic and cultural components of identity, the previous observations become pivotal in the analysis of the treatment of the ethnographer's body in *Mules and Men*.

Grosz's reflection on philosophy and the body is here employed for the analysis of Hurston's choice to represent the ethnographer's body – characterized as a black woman's body – in a discipline like anthropology that entails a great investment in the body and its agency through the practice of fieldwork; the necessary interactions with the 'objects' of anthropological inquiry in order to collect the material on which the written ethnographies will be constructed, the dialogic and quantitative methods involved in ethnographical research, the travel activities strictly linked to these practices, and the subsequent writing activity as physical engagement with professional tools (pen, paper, typewriter, computer, keyboard) point to the role of the body as an essential producer of anthropological knowledge. In this perspective, its representational absence in most ethnographical works can reveal a certain degree of awkwardness in dealing with the bodily presence of the researcher though it is possible to bring back the reasons for such disappearance to the dictates of objectivity and distance informing a great part of the history of anthropology both in its American and European traditions. Commenting on the actual problems anthropologists can experience in fieldwork, Kirin Narayan rightly observes that "the very nature of researching what to others is taken-for-granted reality creates an uneasy distance."³⁶⁸ This understandable difficulty in experiencing closeness to the anthropological Other³⁶⁹, nonetheless, does not account for the rendition of another distance, produced through writing, that is a conscious detachment and avoidance of the attempt at proximity lived in fieldwork.

Indeed, the ethnographer's body almost disappears through the workings of the anthropologist as a demiurge who puts order in the collected data, organizes and 'objectively' compares them according to patterns, structures, models, while establishing distance.³⁷⁰ The disinvestment of the body hides the centrality of the ethnographer's experience: a pragmatic, empirical kind of experience to be transcended in order to distinguish the material from other genres linked to travel and other

³⁶⁸ Kirin Narayan (1993) quoted in Matti Bunzl, "Boas, Foucault, and the 'Native Anthropologist': Notes toward a Neo-Boasian Anthropology", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, Issue 3, 2004, 435.

³⁶⁹ One of the most famous accounts of this difficulty is to be found in the comparison between *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Bronisław Malinowski's official account of his experience in the Trobriand Islands, and his personal account of the same experience as rendered in his diaries.

³⁷⁰ For instance, this seems to me the epistemological stance at the basis of the structural anthropology as theorized and practiced by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

pragmatic activities such as the travelogue and autobiography and, in so doing, achieve scientific authority.

The body's resurfacing in *Mules and Men* is far more significant if considered as a commentary on the hidden agency involved both in the collection of data and the construction of anthropological works. The body, as observed by Grosz, is as capable of knowledge as the mind, but it raises "the question of sexual difference in a way that mind does not."³⁷¹ In Hurston's case, sexual, racial, and ethnic differences are all involved in the representation of her embodied identity within the ethnography. In particular, the emergence of the body as characterized by Hurston's depiction of her role in fieldwork contributes to the attempt to reduce the distance between the researcher and the 'object' of her study.

The present chapter will try to underline this attempt towards 'distance zero' in Hurston's ethnography proceeding from the first part in which the collection of folk tales lets the body emerge through oral language and the physical activities she is involved in (driving, dancing, talking, storytelling, fishing, accompanying men to work in the swamp) to the second part in which, after the unsuccessful effort at reconciliation, the distance between observer and observed is reduced through the hoodoo initiations. This apparent fusion with the object of her study, however, could suggest that the shared identity supposed to be the basis of her fieldwork cannot be recuperated through the interpretive methods of anthropological inquiry.

Hurston's choice to represent the body, nonetheless, is both daring and controversial. The courageous element would be linked to the desire to complicate the question of distance, difference, and identity between the ethnographer and the 'object' of her study through the introduction of the body in the ethnography, while the controversial component would be linked to the risk of being associated with discourses ascribing both the womanly and the black experience to restrictive representations of bodily processes. As observed by Carla Peterson, the African-American woman's body could be easily identified as "unruly, grotesque, carnivalesque."³⁷² The choice of introducing it into the ethnography can represent a strategy of survival and resistance, but also includes the risk "that [her] presence merely reified existing structures."³⁷³ In this perspective, the body can no longer be considered as an "inertive, passive,

³⁷¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, vii.

³⁷² Carla Peterson quoted in Carolyn Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 8.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

noncultural, and ahistorical term”, but becomes a “site of contestation, in a series of economic, politic, sexual and intellectual struggles.”³⁷⁴

The hypothesis of the present analysis is that the body as characterised in *Mules and Men* can be considered a place of intersection among conflicting motives informing the context of data collection and their elaboration. In this perspective, the researcher’s body constitutes a sort of threshold allowing other bodies to enter her ethnography. If at the basis of ethnographic knowledge production resides a white, male, European subject, the act of introducing a body characterized as female and black denotes the effort to allow other bodies and subjectivities to enter the dynamics of knowledge production from which they have been excluded by the ‘impersonal’ subject permeating scientific objectivity. As Grosz observes, bodies contain in themselves the capacity “to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them.”³⁷⁵ This extended framework can be detected from Hurston’s introduction to the collection in the vacillating handling of the personal pronouns:

[f]olklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. *They* are the most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And *the Negro*, in spite of his open-faced laughter, *his* seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see *we* are a polite people and *we* do not say to our questioner. “Get out of here!” *We* smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about *us*, he doesn’t know what he’s missing.³⁷⁶

From this quotation, it is possible to detect a substantial movement from “they” to “we” passing through “the Negro”: the distance established through the third person pronoun is nullified and, through the connection to the generalized term, the author accomplishes an important shift from personal stance to communal affirmation. In this sense, other bodies and other voices are allowed to cross the threshold of knowledge disrupting the logic confining them within boundaries of irrationality and primitiveness.

The body, defined by Grosz as “the very ‘stuff’ of subjectivity”³⁷⁷, can be a way of problematizing such “universalist and universalizing assumptions of humanism, through which women’s – and all other groups’ – specificities, positions, and histories

³⁷⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 18.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁷⁶ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 2. [Emphasis added]

³⁷⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, ix.

are rendered irrelevant or redundant.³⁷⁸ The apparent absence of a speaking subject, the impression of a comprehensive and objective description, and the subsequent illusion of a 360-degree-perspective are consequences of the humanistic premises linking the natural and social sciences. As a black woman anthropologist, Hurston suffered from a multiple condition of redundancy (gendered and racial), which shaped the representation of corporeality within her folklore collection. As observed by Du Bois, from the inside the external social condition of ‘double redundancy’ is, in fact, a condition of ‘double awareness’:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁷⁹

Here we are confronted with a dichotomy further complicated in relation to Hurston by other terms such as gender and a higher level of instruction perceived by her informants as a form of belonging to a different class. Focusing on Du Bois’ duality, however, it is possible to understand that the difficulty inherent in this envisioning of the race problem is that the refused element of the pair contains the component trying to expel him. Because of this, the lacerating experience reported by Du Bois is intimately linked to a system that makes every effort to absorb without acceptance. As remarked by Grosz,

[t]he problem of dichotomous thought is not the dominance of the pair (some sort of inherent problem with the number two); rather, it is the *one* which makes it problematic, the fact that the one can allow itself no independent, autonomous other. All otherness is cast in the mold of sameness, with the primary term acting as the only autonomous or pseudo-autonomous term. The one allows no twos, threes, fours. It cannot tolerate any *other*. The one, in order to be a one, must draw a barrier around itself, in which case it is necessarily implicated in the establishment of a binary – inside/outside, presence/absence.³⁸⁰

These thoughts on the construction of difference between the genders seems to comment on Du Bois’ considerations about the African-American experience; in his perspective, the dichotomy migrates from the social to the personal dimension, the first

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1995: 1903), 45.

³⁸⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 211. [Emphasis in the original]

term being internalized by the blackness it has created in order to emerge as the one which longs for those *others* to whom it is not allowed to be present as equals. The condition of being “American” and “Other” at the same time, in the same body, can be devastating if not supported by that double perspective which enables the subject to create a conscious reading of the society in which s/he is involved in order to change it. Although Hurston and Du Bois had very different views on the ways this change could take place, they had a common belief in the strength and possibility of empowerment inherent in the African-American theorization of distinctive modes of expression and representation.

2.3 Double consciousness, mimicry, and alienation

The tradition of racist imagery in the United States is long... and Brinton wove together science and imagery found in widely circulated magazines, minstrel shows, and the Uncle Tom Cabin's shows that were crisscrossing the country. Old stereotypes became scientific fact.³⁸¹

Commenting on the emergence of American anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century, Lee D. Baker focuses on the evolutionist ideas applied to races expounded by John Wesley Powell, Frederic Ward Putnam, and Daniel G. Brinton, the founders of the discipline in the United States. As introduced in Chapter One, the ‘scientific’ explanations Brinton provided in his *Races and Peoples* (1890) justified the “lynch law” and racial inferiority.³⁸² During the eighteenth century, the idea of the polygenesis of races had been advanced several times to be substituted during the nineteenth by an evolutionist perspective in which black people came to represent “the savages” in “the Great Chain of Being.”³⁸³

If we read this cultural project according to Edward Said’s analysis of the distinction between civil and political society in Antonio Gramsci³⁸⁴, it is possible to understand how these beliefs, although promoted by and through political and academic institutions, survived through imagery and representation creating that consent throughout society which was necessary to perpetrate them and make them operative in both the legal and social contexts. The idea of consent is at the basis of Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness: words and beliefs seep into the conscious minds of

³⁸¹ Lee D. Baker, “Columbia University’s Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism”, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 22 (Winter, 1998-1999), 91.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 91-92. See Chapter One, footnote 26, 8.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁸⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979: 1978), 7.

black people by way of cultural, linguistic, and political means. On the other hand, the dimension of consent was not straightforward and unproblematic; in fact, in the internalization of racial representation, it is necessary to take into account the psychoanalytic element related to the unconscious throughout the historical experience of black people in the United States. As observed by Sandra Adell, the treatment of the racial problem in the essays by Sander L. Gilman, Julia Kristeva, and Frantz Fanon all locate “[...] the source of pathology... in the image of blackness or Jewishness as it is represented in what Kristeva calls ‘an other-directed being.’”³⁸⁵ In particular, Adell refers to Fanon’s essay “The Fact of Blackness” in order to analyse African and Jewish identities in the United States in relation to their representation in American culture according to Kristeva’s definition of the “abject” as “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object”³⁸⁶... For Fanon, that ‘something’ is ‘an impurity, a flaw’ in the Weltanschauung of colonized black people that ‘outlaws any ontological explanation.’³⁸⁷

In particular, the work of the unconscious in the internalization of the racial image would be connected to the black person’s lack of ontological status in the encounter with the whites. This ‘lack of ontological resistance’ is what makes possible the unconscious, interiorized image of blackness to emerge as “a presumed inferiority... coming ‘into being through the other.’”³⁸⁸ In this confrontation, the black person’s “bodily schema” is reduced to a “racial epidermal schema” where the outside is finally turned inside.³⁸⁹

The Negro cannot *be* for himself. Unlike the Jew who can assume the guise and attributes of a white man and “be unknown in his Jewishness” [...], the Negro’s blackness marks him with the triple responsibility for body, race, and ancestry. As Fanon’s anecdotal “Negro” learns after his (black) presence frightens a child on a train, to assume that responsibility, to subject oneself to an objective examination of one’s blackness is to discover an “other” that must be excised: “I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘sho’ good eatin’ [...].”³⁹⁰

³⁸⁵ Sandra Adell, “Writing about Race”, *American Literary History*, vol. 6 no. 3 (Autumn, 1994), 560.

³⁸⁶ Julia Kristeva quoted in *ibid.*, 561.

³⁸⁷ Fanon quoted in *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 560.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 561-562.

The unconscious internalization of the racial identity and its meaning in the surrounding society becomes a main trope for representation both in Hurston's own biography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and in her best known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Writing about her moving to Jacksonville as a teenager, Hurston observes:

*Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl. Things were all about the town to point this out to me. Streetcars and stores and then talk I heard around the school. [...] These white people had funny ways. I could tell that even from a distance. I didn't get a piece of candy or a bag of crackers just for going into a store in Jacksonville as I did when I went into Galloway's or Hill's at Maitland, or Joe Clarke's in Eatonville.*³⁹¹

This passage finds an echo in Janie's discovery of her own blackness in *Their Eyes*:

"Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin' pictures and without askin' anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us. Round a week later de man brought de picture for Mis' Washburn to see and pay him which she did, then give us all a good lickin'.

"So when we looked at de picture and everybody got point there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.'

"Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chillun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, 'Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?'

"Dey all useter call me Afphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names. Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said:

" 'Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!

"Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest."³⁹²

As Fanon suggests, the black person is not ontologically black, but becomes black in the encounter and confrontation with whiteness. Assuming as bodily identity her/his racial epidermal identity, s/he internalizes both the unconscious and consensual meanings of her/his blackness as triple responsibility for body, race, and ancestry. After the experience of estrangement and separation from the imposed image of blackness ("it

³⁹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990: 1942), 68. [Emphasis added]

³⁹² Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1937), 8-9. [Emphasis added]

was mah dress and mah hair”) and its internalization, Du Bois’ stress on a conscious embodiment of blackness emphasizes the possibility of awareness towards acquired meanings of blackness and their rewriting into constructive, affirmative terms.

In fact, the embodied identity of the black American citizen could be liberated from the actual conditions of slavery, but had to strive in order to achieve independence from a complex system of representation aimed at defining the black person and nullifying her presence in and contribution to historical and cultural processes. Double consciousness as theorized by Du Bois articulates itself as a focal point of encounter of conflicting motives and influences, of internalized notions about race relations and social hierarchies, and reactions to them. More importantly, it expresses the ambivalence springing from the ideals supported by political institutions (such as equality, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and justice)³⁹³ and the subsequent awareness of being discursively excluded by them, of being finally expelled by the geographical context representing the landscape of one’s personal memories and from the historical circumstances in which the individual’s life unwinds and acquires meaning.

The shift from imagery to scientific fact can be explained through what Homi K. Bhabha defines as “a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning.”³⁹⁴ A metonymy based on prejudice like, for instance, the sadly famous association between apes and black people³⁹⁵, becomes a metaphor for their identity, a representation mistaken for reality and, from there, apt to be probed by science. “The figures of farce”³⁹⁶, like those represented in the minstrel shows, become the means through which authority constantly re-establishes itself³⁹⁷ through the repetition of difference, which, in this way, acquires a supposedly ontological status influencing both political choices and scientific assumptions. The idea that Bhabha identifies at the basis of colonial mimicry is, in fact,

the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference, that is *almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.³⁹⁸

³⁹³ As stated in the United States Declaration of Independence (1776).

³⁹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004: 1994), 128.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 130: “So Edward Long can say with authority, quoting variously Hume, Eastwick and Bishop Warburton in his support that: ‘Ludicrous as the opinion may seem I do not think that an orangutan husband would be any dishonour to a Hottentot female.’”

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.* [Emphasis in the original]

The transposition of this desire from the (at least partially) assimilationist project of the colonial empire to the American segregationist system produces a further slippage, a movement towards the definition of a more irreducible kind of difference at the point of divergence between Du Bois' double consciousness and the white gaze as demonstrated by the repeated attempts at finding a scientific basis for polygenetic theories.³⁹⁹

Bhabha contributes several definitions of mimicry as compromise ("representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal"⁴⁰⁰), as a strategy of appropriation of alterity, as a sign of the inappropriate.⁴⁰¹ These definitions seem to merge around a basically bidirectional effect of mimicry which is absorbed and performed both by the hegemonic culture and the subjects repeatedly admitted just to be subsequently expelled from it.⁴⁰² Interestingly, Hurston herself has theorized on mimicry in relation to originality in the literary and artistic contexts. "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), the essay in which she develops her vision on the subject is, as observed by Karen Jacobs, Hurston's "only... entirely interpretive ethnographic piece"⁴⁰³ and in it "Hurston makes use of primitivist discourse herself"⁴⁰⁴ making this text a very interesting example of ambivalence towards evolutionist ideas in anthropological theories. In particular, this essay "attempts simultaneously to deploy and to rehabilitate the category of the primitive and its corollary, the imitative, as artistic resources."⁴⁰⁵ In her analysis of the concept of originality, Hurston writes:

[i]t has been said so often that the Negro is lacking in originality that it has almost become a gospel. Outward signs seem to bear this out. But if one looks closely its falsity is immediately evident... What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. The most ardent admirer of the great Shakespeare cannot claim first source even for him. It is his treatment of the borrowed material... the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.⁴⁰⁶

³⁹⁹ Lee D. Baker, "Columbia University's Franz Boas", 89.

⁴⁰⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² The ritual aspect of this cultural procedure seems to me well exemplified by the makeup called "blackface" which was originally worn by white actors, but later worn by black actors as well.

⁴⁰³ Karen Jacobs, "From 'Splyglass' to 'Horizon': Tracking the Anthropological Gaze in Zora Neale Hurston", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1997), 337.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression", in Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995: 1934), 838.

This perspective is associated with her view on mimicry, as attested by her decision to treat the two in relation to one another:

The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself... the contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it. The group of Negroes who slavishly imitate is small. The average Negro glories in his ways. The highly educated Negro the same. The self-despisement lies in a middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro... But, this group aside, let us say that the art of mimicry is better developed in the Negro than in other racial groups. He does it as the mocking-bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated... The dances are full of imitations of various animals.⁴⁰⁷

Through the comparison with the mocking-bird, Hurston is suggesting that mimicry has, in fact, a performative element in its closeness to mockery conceived as resistance to the forms of oppression activated by systems of racialized power. This form of unconscious resistance inherent in mimicry constitutes one of the main links between Hurston's and Bhabha's theorizations on mimicry and mockery; from the dimension of resistance the ambivalent status of mimicry emerges in its full potential.⁴⁰⁸ In fact, mimicry still works towards the illusion of a presence of 'authenticity' which can be imitated and reproduced. In the chain of reproductions, the myth of presence reveals itself as a lack of origin and centre; at this point, mockery emerges as "l'affirmation d'un monde de signes sans faute, sans vérité, sans origine", as "interprétation active."⁴⁰⁹ The revisionary process works as a house of mirrors with no possibility of reflecting an authentic presence or essence: the acknowledgement of any essential lack is what encourages the conflation of mimicry with mockery; the nostalgia towards the absence of a presence which can be expressed through mimicry becomes exultation towards the possibilities for interpretation of this same lack offered by mockery. From this context, the tension between mimicry and mockery becomes play in Derrida's sense of "jeu" as "disruption of presence" and something prior to the alternative presence/absence, a possibility allowing the thought of being as presence or absence, not viceversa:

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 838-839.

⁴⁰⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.

⁴⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2009: 1967), 427. The quotation, which provides a description of the Derridean notion of 'play', can be translated as follows: "the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin... [as] active interpretation."

[...] Le jeu est la disruption de la présence... Le jeu est toujours jeu d'absence et de présence, mais si l'on veut le penser radicalement, il faut le penser avant l'alternative de la présence et de l'absence; il faut penser l'être comme présence ou absence à partir de la possibilité du jeu et non l'inverse.⁴¹⁰

Hurston's discussion of mimicry and originality follows an analysis of language in which she compares the linguistic system to the monetary market. In this part of her analysis, it is possible to detect another influence of primitivism when she contrasts the element of action associated with 'primitive' languages with the degree of abstraction of "highly developed languages." The idea of 'primitive' languages as characterized by action associates Hurston's view with Bronisław Malinowski's idea that "among 'primitive' (oral) peoples generally language is a mode of action and not a countersign of thought, though he had trouble understanding what he was getting at... since understanding of the psychodynamics of orality was virtually nonexistent in 1923."⁴¹¹ Commenting on this point, Walter J. Ong adds that the degree of action of oral languages could derive from the fact that "... all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic.'"⁴¹² Considering Hurston's decision to use African-American English as the linguistic vehicle for her ethnographic data it is possible to make a further observation; from the stylistic choices she actuated in her novels and ethnographies, it can be inferred that she is taking mimicry as the subject of her discourse and mockery as a strategy of analysis when she confirms widespread anthropological beliefs about languages while disavowing them in her own production:

Let us make a parallel. Language is like money. In primitive communities, actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later, even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later cheques for certain usages... Now the people with highly developed languages have words for detached ideas. That is legal tender... Some individuals even conceive of the equivalent of cheque words, like "ideation" and "pleonastic." Perhaps we might say that *Paradise Lost* and *Sartor Resartus* are written in cheque words.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 426. My attempt at translation: "Play is the disruption of presence... Play is always play of absence and presence, but if we want to think of it radically, we must conceive it as antecedent to the alternative between presence and absence; we must think of it as being presence or absence moving from the possibility of play and not the other way round."

⁴¹¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002: 1982), 32.

⁴¹² Ibid.

The primitive man exchanges descriptive words. His terms are still close fitting. Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary – not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact – must add action to it to make it do. So we have “chop-axe,” “sitting-chair,” “cook-pot” and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.⁴¹³

Commenting on this passage, Cheryl A. Wall observes that Hurston relies on a binary opposition primitive/civilized that undermines the assumptions of her analysis. On the other hand, Wall agrees with Lynda Hill when she states that Hurston “displays essentialist ideas of her time while illustrating the contradictions implicit in racialist conceptions of culture.”⁴¹⁴ In this regard, Kurt Eisen rightly notices that

[i]n “Characteristics”, Hurston’s primitivism features some of the usual essentializing terms of the era, such as “the Negro”, the “upper-class Negro”, “Negro life”, and even “primitive man”, but in a way that clearly puts such essences into play as creative performance through her concept of mimicry, an imitative act of reinvention that, for Hurston, distinguishes and sustains African-American art... Unlike O’Neill and Eurocentric modernists generally, Hurston’s primitivism was concerned not with revealing hidden universals but with enacting the inherently performative potential of her ethnographic material, revealing how so-called primitive cultures are continually made and remade in story and ritual.⁴¹⁵

Eisen proceeds in his analysis by associating Hurston’s dramatic mimicry to Bhabha’s concept of “metonymy of presence” or “the transformative dynamic of colonial mimicry”⁴¹⁶ anticipating Derek Walcott’s idea of mimicry as an “‘act of imagination’ which transforms imitation into invention.”⁴¹⁷ In fact, her analysis of African-American language is opened by another observation on mimicry seen as a “universal” ability of the black person and “an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama.”⁴¹⁸ Between celebration of the black modalities of expression and rejection of a debased form of mimicry, Hurston articulates her analysis,

⁴¹³ Hurston, “Characteristics”, 830.

⁴¹⁴ Lynda Hill quoted in Cheryl A. Wall, “Zora Neale Hurston’s Essays: On Art and Such”, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Volume 3, Number 2. Available at: http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/hurston/wall_01.htm. Last accessed on 28 August 2013.

⁴¹⁵ Kurt Eisen, “Theatrical Ethnography and Modernist Primitivism in Eugene O’Neill and Zora Neale Hurston”, *South Central Review*, Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2008, 62.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁸ Hurston, “Characteristics”, 830.

which seems to strive for independence from evolutionist theory, but is finally confined within the discursive boundaries framed by it. This is possible because, though she “means to ‘like her own things best’... Hurston lacks an agreed upon, sanctioned aesthetic standard through which to validate her preferences.”⁴¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is important to underline that Hurston, as other representatives of the Harlem Renaissance, was in fact in the process of creating that framework which could provide black writers and artists with an aesthetics independent from traditional hierarchies.⁴²⁰

Furthermore, another important aspect of Hurston’s discussion is linked to the element of class and the desire of differentiating within itself the otherwise monolithic category of ‘African American.’ This seems particularly important if, quoting Fanon

the true disalienation of the black man implies a brutal awareness of the social and economic realities. The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process:

First, economic.

Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority.⁴²¹

Although Fanon is here commenting on the condition of the black person in the Antilles and her/his relationship to the colonial empire, nonetheless this quotation seems an appropriate observation on one of the possible ways to mitigate the effects of ambivalence within the American context as well. In fact, in her depiction of rural communities, Hurston revealed the presence of different realities (independent communities like Eatonville, turpentine camps, swamps) and represented these contexts as essential in the articulation of different black identities. Ambivalence, in fact, can become an inside track if conceived as a possibility of diversification in the ways of representing black identity through the awareness that factors like economic conditions, class distinctions, and levels of instruction are indeed determining in the internalization of a sense of inferiority. In the case of a writer like Hurston, ambivalence as a hybrid position from which it is possible to acquire and produce knowledge is “a form of engaged intellectual and political address – a space of identity...”⁴²² allowing the articulation of a “hybrid discourse as a dynamic dialogue between ethnicity and citizenship”⁴²³, that is a discourse of double consciousness in Du Bois’ sense.⁴²⁴ As

⁴¹⁹ Jacobs, “From ‘Spyglass’ to ‘Horizon’”, 339.

⁴²⁰ For a discussion of this point, see Chapter One.

⁴²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xiv-xv.

⁴²² Homi K. Bhabha, “Black & White and Read All Over”, *Artforum International*, Vol. 34, No. 2, October 1995, 17.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

remarked by David Huddart, this can be related to Salman Rushdie's observations on the migrant condition in "Imaginary Homelands" when he states that "[o]ur identity is at once plural and partial... it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy"⁴²⁵, although, Huddart adds, "[s]uch a privilege quite often, and suddenly, reverses itself and becomes a burden."⁴²⁶ In fact,

[i]t is possible to convert the absence of definitive identity into a privilege, which is certainly one way to understand Bhabha's mimicry. At the same time, it is important to avoid romanticizing this lack of final grounded identity, which is experienced by different people in very different ways. Mimicry is itself a markedly ambivalent phenomenon.⁴²⁷

On the other hand, Bhabha observes that:

[h]ybridity... is no jejune post-Modern lark, nor is it simply my invention. It comes from Baldwin's profound meditation on the unique power and pathos of the American color line. Race in the United States is not a separate (or separatist) historical domain; it is ubiquitous everyday experience lived in the recognition of cultural and psychic hybridity.⁴²⁸

From this perspective, double consciousness becomes both a result of the interaction of different influences and a starting point for a more diversified, comprehensive perspective in which elements like class, gender, and possibilities of advancement in professional and intellectual contexts are as important as the sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group, its position in the racial hierarchy, and the ambiguities released from the split between attempts at fixing identities at a representational level and their actual indefiniteness as revealed by the awareness that "[c]ommunities negotiate 'difference' through a borderline process that reveals the hybridity of cultural identity: they create a sense of themselves *to and through an other*."⁴²⁹

Such a consciousness is at the core of new possibilities of expression envisioned by artistic movements like the Harlem Renaissance and Aimé Césaire's *Négritude*, currents that – although maybe still relying on the dictionary of evolutionism – were striving for independence from its discursive modalities in the desire to provide

⁴²⁴ See Chapter Four, 195 in this thesis for a discussion of Du Bois' 'double consciousness' in relation to Hurston's ethnography in the Caribbean and her construction of an African-American identity.

⁴²⁵ Salman Rushdie quoted in David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Bhabha, "Black & White and Read All Over", 114.

⁴²⁹ Ibid. [Emphasis in the original]

definitions of the black embodied and artistic experience finally freed from stereotypical notions of race and creativity. As seen in Chapter One in relation to the Harlem Renaissance, both movements represented an occasion to transpose the partly unconscious elements of resistance in mimicry to the conscious level of artistic production and criticism that, according to Hurston's contribution, could achieve its fuller potential only through the acknowledgment of its cultural legacy and peculiarities.

2.4 Double consciousnesses and triple bodies

The presence of the black body within *Mules and Men* is fundamental in giving corporeal form to double/multiple consciousness and to the way in which the material has been collected and presented, as these activities cannot be detached from the meaning that the bodily presence of the ethnographer had within the community in which she conducted her research. In anthropological writings, apart from quite recent experimentations encouraged by the success of *Writing Culture* (1986)⁴³⁰, it is possible to trace what Grosz defines as “a fantasy of disembodiment... linked to the fantasy of mastery at a distance... the illusion of being able to leave the body at will and reappear elsewhere, to be present while not really present.”⁴³¹ This definition matches quite well the ideal of participant observation that was so popular in the years of Hurston's anthropological activity. Although the anthropologist's presence in fieldwork was essential to the authority of the text s/he was going to write, nonetheless the final form of the monograph bore the signs of this fantasy of disembodiment and mastery in the erasure of the anthropologist's corporeality and fieldwork interactions through the objectifying gaze and canonical style of anthropological writing.

As observed by Margaret Lock, despite the body's centrality to the anthropological project, “a perusal of the canon of social and cultural anthropology indicates that the body's explicit appearance has been sporadic throughout the history of the discipline.”⁴³² Lock directly connects this tendency to “the concept of a reflexive ‘I’, a mindful self independent of the body and nature at large”⁴³³ which is the basic condition of “the ‘view from nowhere’ characteristic of a post-Enlightenment approach

⁴³⁰ James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997: 1986).

⁴³¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 83. She is here referring to cyberspace.

⁴³² Margaret Lock, “Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993), 133.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 138.

to knowledge.”⁴³⁴ In relation to this, Linda Martín Alcoff has underlined the prevalence of sight in the project of all Western epistemology “as the basis for mastery through a detached, objectifying gaze.”⁴³⁵ Using Merleau-Ponty’s theory on embodiment, Alcoff underlines the “ontological interdependence between being seen and seeing”⁴³⁶ constituting a position opposed to mastery. In *Mules and Men* the objectifying stance is partially destabilized by the treatment of corporeality, as the ethnographer’s body emerges through the text either reinstating difference or reducing it through the ethnographer’s double positioning as a site for the anthropological gaze and a visible identity in relation to other people in the field.

Starting from its title, *Mules and Men* focuses on erasure: not the voluntary, epistemological erasure of the researcher from her/his own work, but the cultural removal of a part of the society from discourse. The ambiguity of the title accounts for a world in which ‘men’ can be represented by the white élite and ‘mules’ can be the subjugated Other, the black workers striving for their survival. As suggested by Robert Hemenway, both terms could also refer to the double identity of black people in the United States, human though treated as animals.⁴³⁷ Another reading could refer to a series of internal dynamics driven by issues of gender in which the ‘men’ are black, but the ‘mules’ are black women.⁴³⁸ The common element in at least two of these possibilities of reading is the negation of human status to black women and the discursive expurgation of their presence within the linguistic realm. It is important to consider, though, that these differences between men and women could have been amplified rather than attenuated by the new industrial system, which proliferated throughout the United States. In fact, as observed by Angela Davis, “the ideology of femininity” is “a by-product of industrialization.”⁴³⁹

The awareness of African-American social invisibility poses several questions to the black woman ethnographic researcher, and in particular it could account for the scarce appeal scientific invisibility can have on a person lacking visibility in the social structure in which she was inserted. Although in a quite different position from her female informants because of her background, it cannot be overlooked that Hurston was

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 111.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980: 1977), 222.

⁴³⁸ See Susan Meisenhelder, “Conflict and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*”, *Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (Summer 1996), 284.

⁴³⁹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (London: Women’s Press, 2001: 1981), 12.

living in a segregated society in which the colour of her skin and her gender weighted on the possibilities of expression accorded to her both in anthropology and literature. Ralph Ellison, in his major work *Invisible Man* (1952), consciously revisits the paradox inherent in invisibility as a sort of social status for African Americans in the United States when connected with the actual visibility of their skin colour. In this context, invisibility reveals its duplicity: while for the (white, male) philosopher being invisible can represent the opportunity to impose his vision of the world as objective truth, for the African-American scholar and writer invisibility poses the question of her/his own lack of visibility conceived as lack of humanity within the society in which s/he lives. In this context, being invisible is equivalent to not being seen because of the stereotypes imposed on black people's actual existence. As observed by Bhabha,

[t]he stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations... the stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of "race" as anything other than its *fixity* as racism.⁴⁴⁰

This definition of stereotype resonates in the prologue of *Invisible Man*:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.⁴⁴¹

Nonetheless, invisibility undergoes a transformation during the development of Ralph Ellison's narrative; in fact, from stereotype conceived as a racial strategy for fixing the Other it becomes a reversed strategy consciously actuated by the black person in order to survive and prepare covertly to a better understanding of oneself and one's own possibilities for expression beyond social restrictions and in spite of them.

Going back to Davis' reading of the slavery period as the historical source of invisibility for African Americans in subsequent stages of US history, her analysis of this violent and unjust structure connects it with an essentially genderless perception of

⁴⁴⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 75 [emphasis in the original]. This can be read in connection to the issue of representation in both anthropology and modernism as discussed in Chapter One.

⁴⁴¹ Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2001: 1952), 3.

the slaves, considered as chattel⁴⁴², and has as unforeseen consequence a more equal distribution of roles within the slave household as wife and husband worked side by side in the fields and both provided for their family. According to her examination, it seems more likely that the term ‘mules’ can be referred to both men and women subjugated by the hard working conditions of slavery and segregation. Actually, although Hurston never commented openly on the unfair condition of life and work in the South, nonetheless she decided to insert in her collection a great number of tales which present a keen elaboration and a reversal of the African-American experience of exploitation in the New World as attested by the saga of the ‘folklore hero’ Jack or John:

Jack or John (not John Henry) is the great human culture hero in Negro folklore. He is like Daniel in Jewish folklore, the wishfulfillment hero of the race. The one who, nevertheless, or in spite of laughter, usually defeats Ole Massa, God and the Devil. Even when Massa seems to have him in a hopeless dilemma he wins out by a trick. Brer Rabbit, Jack (or John) and the Devil are continuations of the same thing.⁴⁴³

If that ‘thing’ could be defined, it would probably be marked by the sign of rewriting and resistance; furthermore, the connection to the slavery period and its reductionist use of the black body makes Hurston’s choice controversial and captivating especially if compared with the following comment by Davis on the essential genderless status of enslaved workforce:

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, “the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker”. Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically *anomalies*.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² However slave women suffered from particular forms of violence, e.g. sexual assaults which were infrequent towards their male counterpart. See Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 7: “Rape... was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder’s economic mastery and the overseer’s control over Black women as workers.”

⁴⁴³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 247.

⁴⁴⁴ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 5 [emphasis added]. It has to be remarked that the widespread obsession with the black female body perceived as anomalous finds a historical documentation in the sadly popular case of Saartjie Baartman.

Nonetheless, as evident both in Margaret Garner's biography⁴⁴⁵ and its fictional rendition in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, during slavery racial and gendered violence merged into a system of bodily exploitation and objectification. Camp has provided an analysis of the slavery system as a structure functioning through the captivity of black bodies.⁴⁴⁶ In her study on body politics as a strategy of resistance during slavery, quoting the French historian Dorinda Outram, Camp identifies the body as "a basic political resource"⁴⁴⁷, an essential site of resistance in the struggle for power between classes. Even more interestingly, she identifies a stratification of the enslaved body that could combine Davis's reading of slavery to Morrison's historical memory and representation of it. In fact, Camp states that "[e]nslaved people... possessed at least three bodies"⁴⁴⁸: the first body, or body as "the site of domination", the second body, or body as experienced by the black person involved in their daily confrontation with white people⁴⁴⁹, and the third body, the body she takes into consideration in her study on runaway parties, as "a site of pleasure and resistance" especially for women.⁴⁵⁰

From this perspective, the representation of black womanhood as anomalous would be just one of the available readings of black women's bodies in a racist society, rendering the emergence of the body a very remarkable feature of Hurston's ethnographical writing. The significance of Hurston's choice to provide a representation of the black body could be connected to her adhesion to an ideal of blackness propelled by the Harlem Renaissance with its emphasis on the beauty of the black body and its physical potentialities: on the one hand, this could favour stereotypes of blackness among the white patrons who financed black artists at the time;⁴⁵¹ on the other, though, if it is true that "inherent in the dynamic of the master-servant... relationship... is the constant striving to annihilate the consciousness of the servant"⁴⁵², the reaffirmation of the body could represent a statement of vitality in front of the violence and attempts at erasure enacted by the systems which validated slavery and segregation. This body would represent the re-emergence of Camp's third body as a possible identity for the African-American subjectivity theorized within the Harlem Renaissance. The body of

⁴⁴⁵ Margaret Garner is the historical figure on which Toni Morrison shapes the character of Sethe in *Beloved* (1987).

⁴⁴⁶ Stephanie M. H. Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861", *The Journal of Southern History*, 68, no. 3 (August 2002), 534.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 538.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 543.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Camp observes that it is this second body which is at the centre of Fanon's analysis of the black body within the colonial context.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 544.

⁴⁵¹ This was one of the main criticisms Hurston received from the black artistic community.

⁴⁵² Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 97.

the ‘New Negro’ would be a site of cultural production, an active force of resistance to physical and psychological domination and attempts at annihilation. These potentialities of the black body came from the experience of slavery exactly as the wounds produced by recognizing that in the South of the United States “the slave body, most intensely the female body, served as the ‘bio-text’ on which slaveholders inscribed their authority.”⁴⁵³ Davis’ and Morrison’s readings are both possible in relation to the stratification of the black embodied experience and the consequences of it both in terms of suffering and possibilities for reaffirmation.

2.5 “Feather-bed tactics” and embodied authorship

The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.”⁴⁵⁴

The present analysis sees Hurston’s choice of bodily representation in her text as the narrativized attempt to perform a “feather-bed tactic”⁴⁵⁵ as defined in her introduction to *Mules and Men*. Her comment on this particular modality of resistance to external intrusions could be a clue to the reading of several controversial choices in the elaboration of her ethnography. In fact, as a representative of the African-American community, she could have decided to “put a play toy” (in this case, an image of blackness which could be understood by people believing in an African-American primordial essence) in the hands of her white patrons in order to allow the black experience to enter the process of meaning creation and knowledge production. It is exactly double consciousness as theorized by Du Bois that makes these strategies effective, though – in the process – she perhaps confused African Americans as well.⁴⁵⁶

From this perspective, the ‘mule’ of the title can have a third meaning: putting aside the question of gender for a moment and reflecting on the status of the mule – a hybrid without possibility for reproduction – it is clear that (either referred to the black

⁴⁵³ Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance”, 543.

⁴⁵⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 3.

⁴⁵⁵ According to Hurston’s explanation, a “feather-bed tactic” would be a particular strategy of diversion against external interferences. See *ibid.*, 2-3: “The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.”

⁴⁵⁶ Here the reference is to the contentious reception of her work within the African-American artistic community.

community in general or just to women in particular) this image denotes a dehumanized entity who is deprived of the possibility to procreate. In a wider sense, ‘mules’ are denied a voice and the possibility to produce cultural meaning. This is possible because the reductionist gesture to associate them with nature links them to a realm lacking the philosophical premises to enter knowledge production. In fact,

[w]hat Descartes accomplished was not really the separation of mind from body (a separation which had already been long anticipated in Greek philosophy since the time of Plato) but the separation of soul from nature. Descartes distinguished two kinds of substances: a thinking substance (*res cogitans*, mind) from an extended substance (*res extensa*, body); only the latter, he believed, could be considered part of nature... The mind, the thinking substance, the soul, or consciousness, has no place in the natural world. This exclusion of the soul from nature, this evacuation of consciousness from the world, is the prerequisite for founding a knowledge, or better, a science, of the governing principles of nature, a science which excludes and is indifferent to considerations of the subject.⁴⁵⁷

In a context of racial segregation, this epistemic choice has been translated into the essential association of slaves to nature and the body, those working bodies whom white ‘citizens’ needed in order “to create values, morality, knowledges.”⁴⁵⁸ In this perspective, the dichotomy self/other is strictly connected to the dyad mind/body where the mind is the site of rationality. The Other is, therefore, defined as irrational and pre-logical so that the first term of the dyad can justify its power and existence through the exclusion and subjugation of a demeaned otherness. Therefore, the affirmation of a black subjectivity active in the production of meaning through the theorization of the body is pivotal in constituting the image of a culture refusing to be subjugated by systemic oppression. As suggested by Grosz in her analysis of the different theorizations of the body throughout twentieth century⁴⁵⁹, the body becomes “the site of the subject’s social production”, no longer an exclusive “site of rationality”, but a location of consciousness⁴⁶⁰ and, it should be added, of empowerment.

The representation of the body is, however, not exempt from contradictions. In fact, as observed by Sánchez-Eppler in her analysis of the role of the body during the

⁴⁵⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 6.

⁴⁵⁸ See this chapter, footnote 354, 74.

⁴⁵⁹ Body as “site of the proliferation of the will to power” in Nietzsche, as the “site of docility and resistance” in Foucault, and as a “site of becoming and transformation” in Deleuze and Guattari. See Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, xii.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

rise of the abolitionist and feminist movements in the United States, “[f]eminists and abolitionists were acutely aware of the dependence of personhood on the condition of the human body, since the political and legal subordination of both women and slaves were predicated upon biology;”⁴⁶¹ this statement shows the incongruities inherent in a representation of the citizen on the basis of an incorporeal conception of personhood while large parts of the society were being denied the basic rights of citizenship precisely because of the biological characteristics of their bodies and the supposed meaning of these bodily facts on their personal abilities and attitudes. In her comment on Harriet Jacobs’ work, Sánchez-Eppler connects the political representation of the body within the abolitionist and feminist movements to the concept of authorship in the literature of slavery. For the sake of the present analysis, as shown in the previous comment on Grosz’s theory, this idea will be extended to the mechanism of knowledge production. Thus, a possible link between the concepts of political representation, literary authorship, and scientific authority can be delineated.

Speaking about the figure of the mulatto in fiction, Sánchez-Eppler states that “the recognition of ownership of one’s own body as essential to claiming personhood is matched by the fear of being imprisoned, silenced, deprived of personhood by that same body.”⁴⁶² The menace of confinement inherent in every representation of the body is possible as “it uncovers the physical attributes of whiteness and maleness implicit in such [political] power.”⁴⁶³ From this perspective, political power, authorship, and scientific authority would be linked to a more general attitude in the construction of a speaking subject whose bodily presence is downsized and finally denied in favour of a presumably universal conception of personhood. The Cartesian division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* which Grosz positions at the basis of knowledge production migrates from the scientific and philosophical contexts and permeates the political and literary representations of the subject. The result is the avoidance of subjectivity in order to hide the historical, physical constituted subject and allow his words to reach the status of universal truth, authentic authorship, and right-based citizenship.

The power of this rhetorical person resides precisely in its disembodiment which is able to both absorb and hide the different bodies who try to have access to both knowledge and political/literary representation(s).

⁴⁶¹ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 17.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.

As employed in the service of patriarchal authority, the distinction between body and soul traditionally functioned to increase, not decrease, social control over the body... The writers of antislavery fiction seem well aware of the oppressive consequences of locating personhood in the soul.⁴⁶⁴

Paralleling this political attitude, the concept of authorship in literature rests on the occlusion of the physical data inherent in the author's body.⁴⁶⁵ Thus, the emergence of the body in the literature of slavery is particularly significant. In fact,

[i]nverting this pattern, slave narratives, and perhaps all confessional and testimonial genres, rhetorically create an authorial body. Rather than attempt to assert the incorporeality of authorship, testimonial writing inscribes the author's bodily existence and experience.⁴⁶⁶

Hurston's decision to insert the anthropologist's body into the frame of her ethnographic collection could therefore be read within the tradition of confessional, testimonial writing that Sánchez-Eppler connects to Jacobs' autobiographical work, "[t]he goal of the narrative itself is... to succeed in attaching a dark-skinned and female body to the recognition and respect – the personhood – awarded to authorship."⁴⁶⁷ This move acquires a particular meaning in connection to the authorial voice as the material on which Hurston bases her ethnography, and is related to a shared conception of authorship common in societies where orality is still the predominant mode of communication. As authorship is collective, the emergence of bodily specificities accounts for the several authorial voices and for the diversity of their contributions in the continuation and reprocessing of the material. Ong observes that in oral societies, authorship is conceived as embodiment because

[t]he oral word... never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable. In oral verbalization, particularly public verbalization, absolute motionlessness is itself a powerful gesture.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 66. The body is also a main link between oral performance and Hoodoo practice as they both can represent alternatives to official accounts and interpretations. In fact, as Cheryl A. Wall notices, "the folktale puts into play the complex connections between hoodoo and the word, that is between power and language." See Cheryl A. Wall, "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale

From this perspective, the introduction of the anthropologist's body in relation to the bodies of her informants establishes a dialogue constituted by words, but also by gestures, sounds, and body language. The words in their oral character constitute a performance of the time shared during the experience of fieldwork and identify knowledge production as a collective enterprise based on sharing and exchange.

2.6 Framing the body in *Mules and Men*

Through a narrativization of her embodied reality, Hurston represents herself as one among the many characters of her work, and situates her location in the specific setting she has chosen (Florida and Louisiana) through a series of interrelations that are determined both by her ambiguous status as a researcher and by the implications of her womanly status within the studied communities. In order to understand the significance of Hurston's self-representation, it is necessary to introduce the frame device, which connects the folktales of her collection and explain its role in the structure of the ethnography. The narrative frame constitutes a commentary both on the tales and on the role of the ethnographer in the fieldwork. Added at a later stage, after the rejection of the original seventy-tale-manuscript by several publishers,

this background information reveals a great deal about the tales – how they were told, how they were integrated into the ongoing verbal interaction and the practice of everyday life, for example – and about the tellers. It likewise locates Hurston in the process of collecting and transforming the tales and other folkways.⁴⁶⁹

Such a narrative device, though appealing both for the publishers and the general public, has been one of the most analysed elements of the ethnography, as explained by Nicholls.⁴⁷⁰ In his article, he traces the main approaches to the analysis of the narrative frame as a combination of autobiography and ethnography in Hemenway's study and

Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment", *Black American Literature Forum* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1989), 674.

⁴⁶⁹ Keith Walters, " 'He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind': Zora Neale Hurston's Revenge in *Mules and Men*", *Journal of American Folklore* 112 (445), 1999, 352. See also Chapter Four in this thesis, 201.

⁴⁷⁰ David G. Nicholls, "Migrant Labor, Folklore, and Resistance in Hurston's Polk County: Reframing *Mules and Men*", *African American Review* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 467-479.

his followers;⁴⁷¹ as an element compromising the scientificity of the work in early readings of the collection; as a brilliant break with scientism according to the postmodern critique; and as an example of subversion according to feminist criticism.⁴⁷² In Nicholls' view, all these readings, although remarkable, would constitute an oversimplification that "has led readers to miss the book's presentation of everyday forms of resistance in the Jim Crow South."⁴⁷³ For the present analysis, Nicholls poses a very interesting question linked to the possibility of recording the "'hidden transcript' of everyday resistance"⁴⁷⁴ while being an outsider. Although he highlights the disappearance of Hurston's narrative persona when following the men in their daily working activities⁴⁷⁵, the theme of resistance in folklore seems clearly linked to Hurston's way of representing herself as an embodied character of her ethnography and problematizing – through her presence – the question of identity within the fieldwork, of the ways in which being a 'native' interjects and overlaps with being an 'outsider' and, ultimately, a 'stranger.'

Therefore, in her positioning within this narrative frame, it is possible to detect a series of movements towards a progressive textual embodiment denoting an alternate distancing from and approach towards the object of her anthropological observation: the arrival in Eatonville and the toe-party in Wood Bridge, the humorous courting ritual and dance in Polk County, the attempted stabbing caused by jealousy and fleeing from Florida, and the several Hoodoo initiations in New Orleans. The connection between these episodes can be found in the written representation of the oral language of Florida. Through this means and the use of the Hoodoo practice in the second part of her ethnography, the anthropologist makes an attempt at reducing distance through representation.

Orality and Hoodoo, in fact, are here introduced not only as ethnographic data, but also as an integral part of the form and style in which Hurston wrote her work and as modalities of resistance towards external attempts at definition and interpretation. Hurston's stylistic choices and the effects derived from them, as attempts at reducing distance while reinstating it, depend on the double meaning of the term 'representation'

⁴⁷¹ See Hemenway quoted in *ibid.*, 468: "Is *Mules and Men* about Zora Hurston or about black folklore? If the former, the self-effacement makes the reader want to know more about what was going on in her mind, more about her reaction to the communities that embraced her. If the latter, there is a need for folklore analysis."

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

provided by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as *Darstellung* (“placing there”)⁴⁷⁶ and *Vertretung* (“stepping in someone else’s place”).⁴⁷⁷ In her rendering both of her experience of fieldwork and the data collected, Hurston indeed shifted between these two definitions of ‘representation’ linked both to scientific/anthropological canons and fiction, which had the potentiality of undertaking a second level of re-presence related to her status as both an ethnographer and an informant. Fictional representation of oral rituals and Hoodoo practices, in fact, are aesthetic choices which could reveal the political possibilities of *Vertretung* in its connotation not only of speaking for, but speaking *through* the subjects she represented in the sense of *Darstellung*. Therefore, her embodied presence in the ethnographic frame accounts for an articulation of this double connotation of the term ‘representation’ and its amplification through the fictional devices she activated in her ethnographical narrative.

In terms of the representation of the black female body, its first appearance is in the ‘Introduction’ when Hurston, as observed by Jacobs, uses the metaphor of the “tight chemise” as a representation of a cultural heritage from which she had to take distance in order to achieve a different degree of awareness. According to Hurston herself, this new understanding has been attained through the “spyglass of anthropology.”⁴⁷⁸ Jacobs analyses the trope of the chemise as an article of clothing able to reveal the form while concealing the surface of the black female body. Thanks to the “detachment through the machinery of science”, Hurston would actuate a distancing strategy towards her embodied reality as bearer of cultural significations over which she cannot have complete control.⁴⁷⁹ Although in the text Hurston’s movement oscillates between distance and reconciliation, it is indeed possible to retrace the emergence of the ethnographer’s body throughout the book according to the definition of body as proposed by Braidotti, that is “[t]he body, or the embodiment, of the subject is to be understood neither as a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological.”⁴⁸⁰

This position focuses on “the embodied nature of the subject, in its link with desire, power, and knowledge.”⁴⁸¹ Rosi Braidotti’s definition of the body can be

⁴⁷⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Practical Politics of the Open End”, in Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990), 108.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁸ Hurston, “Introduction” in *Mules and Men*, 1.

⁴⁷⁹ Jacobs, “From ‘Spyglass’ to ‘Horizon’”, 329.

⁴⁸⁰ Rosi Braidotti, “Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject”, *Hypatia*, 8, no. 1 (Winter 1993), 7.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

connected to a Foucauldian notion of embodiment where, as remarked by Ladelle McWhorter⁴⁸², it is used to challenge the dichotomy nature/culture. In fact, McWhorter's analysis shows how the conception of the body in Foucault is not directed towards a liberation of a supposed 'natural' body from the constraints of culture, but – as evident in the history of representation of the black body and the imagery linked to it – “the natural body is itself a discursive phenomenon.”⁴⁸³ In this sense, the representation of the body in Hurston's ethnography wouldn't be a mere condescending gesture towards primitivist ideas circulating both in anthropology and in the arts during the 1920s but, as a site of social interaction and ethnographic knowledge, it articulates a discourse in the interstices between nature and culture. Camp's triple stratification of the enslaved body⁴⁸⁴ – which could be defined as dominated, experienced, and celebrated – shows again its aptness in the analysis of Hurston's ethnography in relation to the definitions of body provided by Braidotti and Foucault. “The tight chemise” could represent the societal constraints inherent in the first body and the psychological limitations inherent in the second. Thus, both anthropological knowledge and artistic endeavours would contribute to the attainment of the third body, a body that is not natural or cultural, but is a site of political action and knowledge production inserted within this dichotomy and connected to the “mind in a new flux of self.”⁴⁸⁵ This shift in representation is even more impressive because of its link to a history in which the body had been such a contested site of political representation and a visual sign of social disadvantage and racial violence.

The second movement, represented by the anthropologist's arrival, constitutes a convention of the ethnographical genre. The peculiarity of Hurston's arrival rests on her underlining the fact that this arrival is actually a return to her native village Eatonville. Although Hurston claimed the town was her birthplace, her birth certificate attests that she was born in Notasulga, Alabama, but moved to Eatonville with her family in the very first years of her life. As such, Eatonville can be considered her second birthplace as it was certainly there that her literary imagination started to flourish. From this perspective, the fictional arrival becomes an occasion of mutual recognition between the researcher and her informants, as attested in the following lines: “They looked up from the game and for a moment it looked as if they had forgotten me. Then B. Moseley said,

⁴⁸² Ladelle McWhorter, “Culture or Nature? The Function of the Term ‘Body’ in the Work of Michel Foucault”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86, no. 11 (November 1989), 612.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ See this chapter, 96-97.

⁴⁸⁵ Braidotti, “Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject”, 11.

‘Well, if it ain’t Zora Hurston!’ Then everybody crowded around the car to help greet me.”⁴⁸⁶

This picture is particularly meaningful if compared to the scene of the ethnographer entering the community as transmitted through the anthropological canon. As observed by Mary Louise Pratt in relation to Firth’s and Malinowski’s ethnographies⁴⁸⁷, the influence and fascination of travel literature is often present especially at the opening of the ethnographical texts in which the anthropologist’s arrival becomes a metaphorical rite of passage, a place of transition between familiar ground and the field and its mysteries. In particular, analysing the opening of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Pratt identifies “the image of an old-fashioned castaway”⁴⁸⁸ as “an evocative and utopian self-image for the ethnographer”⁴⁸⁹ in Malinowski’s description of his own arrival into the Trobriand community. According to Pratt, the image of the castaway or the captive would represent both an idealization and a mystification of the anthropologist’s role in fieldwork, embodying the ideal of participant observation while, at the same time, hiding the difference in economic and political status between a captive and an ethnographer.⁴⁹⁰ In this context, Hurston’s reaffirmation of her status as a member of the community is charged with an attempt at authority similar to the attempt at the core of the castaway’s image: she represents herself as perfectly integrated within the community although her personal account of her fieldwork experience⁴⁹¹, like Malinowski’s diaries, shows the discrepancy between the actual conditions of research and their final rendition in the written form. More than a captive, she states her knowledge and understanding of the matter from the beginning, in an act of “ethnographic self-fashioning”⁴⁹² through which she becomes Zora, Eatonville’s daughter.

⁴⁸⁶ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 7.

⁴⁸⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places” in Clifford and Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture*, 35-39.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ The account of the real conditions of her fieldwork can be found both in the letters Hurston sent to Boas and in her autobiography. See Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 128: “Considering the mood of my going south, I went back to New York with my heart beneath my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley. I stood before Papa Franz and cried salty tears. He gave me a good going over, but later I found out he was not as disappointed as he let me think. He knew I was green and feeling my oats, and that only bitter disappointment was going to purge me. It did.”

⁴⁹² This expression was coined by James Clifford in his essay “On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski” in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002: 1988), 92-113.

Just after this scene and a first session of storytelling, Zora (Hurston's narrative *persona*) is invited to a toe-party and drives her informants to Wood Bridge. The distance between her and the studied community, although always denied, is perceptible in her supposed ignorance of the conventions of such an event, as clearly stated in the following exchange: "Say, what *is* this toe-party business?' I asked one of the girls. 'Good gracious, Zora! Ain't you never been to a toe-party before?'"⁴⁹³ The occasion reveals its gendered connotation soon after: a toe-party consists in hiding all the girls present behind a curtain and buying their toes for a dime to dance with them and offer them some food and drinks during the evening. Zora, the researcher, is not exempted from participating in this social ritual; her gender determines the way in which she can take part in it ascribing the bodily fact to her possibility of intervention and interpretation of the event. In fact, despite the claim of objectivity, the anthropologist's presence as an observer in the context of research requires her/him to participate according to coordinates linked to gender, age, and social status (or her/his status as perceived by the community in which the research is conducted). She has to take on a social role suitable to her appearance in order for her presence to acquire meaning within the community and therefore become a possible sharer of their cultural production.

Inherent to the fieldwork dynamics as described both in the passage above and in the folkloric collection at large, John Dorst has located the presence of "two closely integrated codes": folkloric and erotic⁴⁹⁴ emerging plainly in Hurston's most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), but present as well in the development of *Mules and Men*. In his analysis of the Eatonville section, Dorst focuses on the interconnectedness between storytelling and gender clash and how the fights taking place among the storytellers comment and inspire new tales and oral performances.⁴⁹⁵ In the second section, dedicated to Polk County, he observes an even more marked stress on the two codes in the passage from folklore to embodiment of one Ella Wall, represented in the jook songs, and later appearing "in flesh"⁴⁹⁶ among the characters of the ethnography. Furthermore, leaving the more familiar space of Eatonville, Hurston had to adapt herself to being part of contexts – like the jooks and the swamps – which she had not had the possibility to know before as she left Florida as an adolescent and

⁴⁹³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 14.

⁴⁹⁴ John Dorst, "Rereading *Mules and Men*: Towards the Death of the Ethnographer", *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (Aug. 1987), 309.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

was involved in very different milieus in her journeys towards the north of the country. In her fieldwork, she had to take into account that her body, appearance, and gender had a meaning in those places and could influence the success of her work because, as remarked by Ugo Fabietti commenting on Lila Abu-Lughod's research, the ethnographer's gender is pivotal for her positioning in fieldwork.⁴⁹⁷

What Fabietti's remark does not take into account, however, is that the anthropologist's gender is important in the positioning within the fieldwork also because the presence of a woman researcher makes evident the lack of an attempt to "problematize" sexuality in ethnographies written by men. In fact, as observed by Esther Newton, "by not 'problematizing'... *his* own sexuality in his texts, the anthropologist makes *male* gender and *heterosexuality* the cultural givens, the unmarked categories."⁴⁹⁸ In relation to Hurston's representation of her presence in fieldwork, Dorst writes about disruption of the ethnographer's identity⁴⁹⁹ revealing "the paradox of authenticity at the heart of social science fieldwork."⁵⁰⁰ Connecting this observation to the body theme, Dorst's disruption could be considered as well in relation to the difficulty of transposing the embodied experience of fieldwork within a text that, as made clear by Newton's observation, excludes it from its very premises.

2.7 Zora's journey and levels of embodiment

In Zora's movement from Eatonville to the nearby area of Polk County, it is possible to see a correspondence between her journey and a further level of embodiment. While in Eatonville she could claim an 'insider' status, in Polk County the colour of the skin is not enough to determine a sense of belonging to the community. In fact, several factors linked to class and social status contribute to the complication of the encounters she has there. The anthropologist's outward appearance is considered with suspicion because the reasons for her presence in the community are not clear. Her apparel and belongings (in particular, her car) mark her out as different. She has to take up a role to make her presence comprehensible in a community characterized by harder working conditions as she perceives their perplexity and detects the activation of those "old feather-bed

⁴⁹⁷ See Ugo Fabietti, *Antropologia culturale. L'esperienza e l'interpretazione* (Laterza: Roma-Bari, 1999), 71.

⁴⁹⁸ Esther Newton, "My Best Informant's Dress: the Erotic Equation in Fieldwork", *Cultural Anthropology* 8(1), 1993, 4.

⁴⁹⁹ Dorst, "Rereading *Mules and Men*", 311.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

tactics” they use towards strangers.⁵⁰¹ Her awareness of these strategies of self-defence, nonetheless, indicates that she is not a complete stranger, articulating once again an alternate movement between proximity and distance in representation. Her solution to overcome this stalemate is “to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive from justice, ‘bootlegging.’”⁵⁰² In this way she can justify her car and participate in the dance, as an observer. Her will to shorten the distance is felt in her desire to dance with the others, as stated in the quote: “[...] nobody asked me to dance. I was just crazy to get into the dance, too... it looked as if I was doomed to be a wallflower and that was a new role for me.”⁵⁰³

Since she has no luck among the dancers, she decides to go out where some people are talking. It is there, through the dialogue, that she understands the further reasons for suspicion which are surrounding her presence:

“Miss, you know uh heap uh dese hard heads wants to woof at you but dey skeered.”

“How come, Mr. Pitts? Do I look like a bear or panther?”

“Naw, but dey say youse rich and dey ain’t got de nerve to open dey mouf.”

I mentally cursed the \$ 12.74 dress from Macy’s that I had on among all the \$ 1.98 mail-order dresses. I looked about and noted the number of bungalow aprons and even the rolled down paper bags on the heads of several women. I did look different and resolved to fix all that no later than the next morning.⁵⁰⁴

These episodes connecting the several stories of the collection are a reflection on the role of the ethnographer within the studied community, as suggested by Graciela Hernández.⁵⁰⁵ From this perspective, the sense of estrangement is fictionalized through the representation of bodily factors that are perceived as clear signs of different class and status. Zora’s reaction is to give a narrative form to her presence in the fieldwork, providing her appearance with a new meaning that can be felt as less disturbing in the economy of the community. This strategy appears a very focused critique on the role of the researcher and on the possibility of conducting ‘participant observation’: while the anthropologist is conducting her research, she herself is being observed and analysed and the conclusions reached concerning her person actually affect the results of her

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 61.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁰⁵ See Hernández, “Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality”, 155.

observations. The bodily presence of the researcher can activate a different awareness in the self-perception of the community that enacts its own reading on elements of class and gender. This reversal of the gaze is a way of questioning and destabilizing ethnographic authority similar to the literary strategies actuated by the anthropologist and novelist Amitav Ghosh in the rewriting of his doctoral thesis and fieldwork in Egypt into the hybrid text of the novel *In An Antique Land* (1992). As observed by Neelam Srivastava,

[t]he more Ghosh tries to find out about customs and lifeways in the village, the more his questions are turned against himself, in a sort of counter ethnography, a reversal of Ghosh's Western "participant observation" method for accumulating anthropological data... The ethnographer's culture has been "studied", in a parody of the way the careful anthropologist approaches his object of study.⁵⁰⁶

This situation finds an echo in Hurston's own report of her first experience of fieldwork in her autobiography:

I did not have the right approach. The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me... I knew where the material was all right. But I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?" The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads...⁵⁰⁷

The representation of the ethnographer's body and presence in fieldwork accounts for the question of visibility and the vulnerability connected with it when the gaze is directed towards the anthropologist and the distance created by ethnographical methodology is finally reversed onto her/him. Concerning Ghosh's questioning of ethnographic authority, Anshuman Mondal points out that "in a reversal of the procedure by which the ethnographer takes it upon him/herself to translate difference into distance, it is *they* who distance Ghosh by translating his religious difference from them into an inexplicable and absolute Otherness."⁵⁰⁸ As shown in the passages above, something similar happens to Hurston in relation to her representation of embodiment and presence in fieldwork as evident also in the following scene of humorous courtship where, once again, the bodily data cannot be ignored. While in the scene analysed above

⁵⁰⁶ Neelam Srivastava, "Amitav Ghosh's Ethnographic Fictions: Intertextual Links between *In An Antique Land* and His Doctoral Thesis", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume 36, Issue 2, 2001, 53.

⁵⁰⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 127-128.

⁵⁰⁸ Anshuman A. Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 77.

the element of class seems to prevail, here it is the ethnographer's gender that is exposed in its interweaving with the erotic element:

“Say, Miss, you know nearly all dese niggers is after you... Some of 'em talkin' 'bout marryin' you... Dese mens don't even know how to talk to nobody lak you. If you wuz tuh ast dese niggers somethin' dey'd answer you 'yeah' and 'naw.' Now, if you wuz some ole gator-back 'oman dey'd be tellin' you jus' right. But dat ain't de way tuh talk tuh nobody lak *you*. Now you ast *me* somethin' and see how Ah'll answer yuh.”

“Mr. Pitts, are you havin' a good time?”

(In a prim falsetto) “Yes, Ma'am. See, dat's de way tuh talk tuh *you*.”

I laughed and the crow laughed and Pitts laughed. Very successful woofing.⁵⁰⁹

Although the goal of the conversation is clarified from the beginning as being 'woofing' (namely, joking) still what is at stake here is a double difference: the ethnographer is involved in this conversation because of her womanly status, and her being woman is perceived as different from the other women present in the commune. As observed by Dorst, “an erotic undercurrent previously confined to the tales and to the sanctioned space of performance begins to spark out in the social reality of the fieldwork situation.”⁵¹⁰ in fact, what passages like this one show is that “erotic and social power[s]”⁵¹¹ are at work in the field shaping the collection of data and the ways of rendering them while underlining that “sexual attraction... [though] not a research tool openly acknowledged in realist anthropology”⁵¹² is indeed a shaping force of its methodology and practice. This is possible because, as Vincent Crapanzano has observed in relation to his own ethnographic research, “passion and science are in fact not so easily separable.”⁵¹³

In fact, at the basis of knowledge production resides what Braidotti defines as “‘the desire for philosophy’ as an epistemophilic drive, i.e., a will to know that is fundamentally *affective*.”⁵¹⁴ When this philosophical stance is transposed to anthropology, it becomes possible to trace a map of affectivities that involve the Other of anthropological enquiry in a play of rejections and attractions taking place at different levels of subjectivity. This desire is “not just libidinal... but rather ontological... the desire to be, the tendency of the subject to be, the predisposition of

⁵⁰⁹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 64.

⁵¹⁰ Dorst, “Rereading *Mules and Men*”, 312.

⁵¹¹ Newton, “My Best Informant's Dress”, 7.

⁵¹² Dorst, “Rereading *Mules and Men*”, 312.

⁵¹³ Vincent Crapanzano quoted in Newton, “My Best Informant's Dress”, 5.

⁵¹⁴ Braidotti, “Embodiment, Sexual Difference, and the Nomadic Subject”, 6. [Emphasis added]

the subject toward being.”⁵¹⁵ When this disposition to knowledge becomes ethnographical practice, however, it can encounter other kinds of will and desire. Misunderstandings and the ways of overcoming or avoiding them become an integral part of the ethnography, even if often an unrepresented, unwritten one. In particular, the different way of inhabiting femininity provided by Hurston activates a series of dynamics that will eventually lead to the attempt to stab her; furthermore, this is also a sign of an enduring difficulty in the effort of reducing distance through representation because, in writing, “there is no such thing as a delivered presence but a re-presence, or a representation... On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing.”⁵¹⁶

In this sense, a further critique that seems to persist in the subtext of the ethnography is the will to represent the essentially active status of the ‘observed’ and their possibility of influencing the material gathered while interfering with the conditions of its collection. In relation to Hurston’s research, in particular, what emerges is the subversive potentiality of the canonical choice of having men among her informants. As observed by Newton, “[t]he straight male anthropologist’s best informants are likely to be, or at least to be represented as, male, presumably minimizing the danger of these key relationships becoming eroticized.”⁵¹⁷ From her particular point of view, Hurston had to face and represent the difficulties and implications of conducting research in contexts in which women were marginal and the consequences of her choices and her presence in those social encounters.

The necessity to collect songs and stories that could account for the cultural production in the turpentine camps or the chain gang placed her in an adversarial position towards both the women and the men involved as informants in the fieldwork. Passing through the working and fishing sessions to which she is admitted even though just a few women usually take part in such events⁵¹⁸, Hurston’s comment on the gender relations within the community is represented by the choice to insert the sermon “Behold de Rib”⁵¹⁹ in which the woman’s bodily status is made still more visible thanks to the synecdoche of the rib. The speech by the travelling preacher, as observed by

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

⁵¹⁷ Newton, “My Best Informant’s Dress”, 5.

⁵¹⁸ See Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 66-75 for the working session and 94-107 for the fishing gathering.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 139-142.

Meisenhelder, “represents the ideal against which relationships between men and women are measured in *Mules and Men*.”⁵²⁰

Brothers, if God
 Had taken dat bone out of man’s head
 He would have meant for woman to rule, hah
 If he had taken a bone out of his foot,
 He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
 He could have made her out of back-bone
 And then she would have been behind us.
 But no, God Amighty, he took de bone out of his side
 So dat places de woman beside us;
 Hah! God knowed his own mind.
 Behold de rib!⁵²¹

The story from Genesis 2:21 is employed as a commentary on gender equality and, as suggested by Wall, it allows Hurston “to celebrate a verbal art she greatly admired and to register a protest against the tradition that shaped it.”⁵²² Furthermore, this constitutes an amplified dimension of rewriting: the story of the Genesis has been transformed through the verbal tradition and it is here proposed again on the written page as an observation in contrast to the actual conditions of women within the community. The lack of feedback after the sermon (“The sparse contribution taken, the trio drifted back into the darkness of the railroad...”⁵²³) is significant of the tensions between genders and of the unresolved conflicts framing the sessions of storytelling when both men and women are present.

The pressure palpable within the commune involves the anthropologist as well and reaches its climax at the end of the Polk County section. Zora’s exit from the community, in fact, becomes the moment when the tensions caused by the researcher’s presence are extrapolated and the violence inherent in the appropriation of the ‘objects’ of anthropological research by the ethnographer are reversed on her character.⁵²⁴ The pretext for this violent act can be traced to a jealousy motive that once again addresses the issue of the anthropologist’s presence *as* a woman. Her special status among men who finally accepted her within their circle in order to let her hear their stories and songs, places her in a difficult position towards the other women of the commune. The

⁵²⁰ Meisenhelder, “Conflict and Resistance”, 282.

⁵²¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 141.

⁵²² Wall, “*Mules and Men and Women*”, 671.

⁵²³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 142.

⁵²⁴ Hernández, “Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality,” 161.

tension is relieved through the literal fleeing of the anthropologist who moves to New Orleans in order to undertake her research on Hoodoo.⁵²⁵

In this episode, we can trace the presence of a question concerning the ethnographer's subjectivity as delineated by Braidotti in relation to Foucault's definition of the subject. The subject formation does not depend on a supposed 'internalization' of cultural codes, but rather on "a negotiation between layers, sedimentations, registers of speech, frameworks of enunciation."⁵²⁶ In this perspective, the 'native' anthropologist seems to have actuated a defective subjectivity in which the negotiation among the several layers of her presence as a black woman, an anthropologist, a participant, an observer, a member of the community yet an outsider, has been unsuccessful and recognized as such by the object of her research.

The second section of the ethnography⁵²⁷, therefore, is triggered by the attempt to reconcile these different layers of subjectivity through the embodied practice of Hoodoo. In "Part 2: Hoodoo",

Hurston seems to be very consciously inscribing herself as some type of occult figure, further establishing herself as the focal point of subjectively experienced folkloric culture. Instead of providing objective, distanced reportage of voodoo and conjure rituals in New Orleans, she focuses her writing on her reaction to the events she is participating in.⁵²⁸

In this section, the role accorded to oral language in the first part shifts onto Hoodoo as both of them are presented as valid alternatives to mainstream interpretations of meaning.⁵²⁹ The primitiveness that social sciences have associated with both oral language and Hoodoo practice could identify the first as a degraded version of the English language and the second as a by-product of religion. On the contrary, their pivotal roles within the collection point to their stylistic validity in the reprocessing of African-American material and their theoretical originality in comparison to other

⁵²⁵ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 175-179.

⁵²⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 14.

⁵²⁷ See Hernández, "Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality", 159-160: "In an ethnography that often overflows with the conflictual nature of race, class, and gender, this section is relatively conflict free. Although she potentially places her body in harm's way, Hurston never recounts any experiences that smack of the highly charged sexual imagery characterizing her Polk County experience." Hernández sees in Hoodoo a possibility for women to embrace unconventional social positions, but my view is that Hoodoo places the woman researcher in a condition of extreme vulnerability as explained in relation to both Hurston's and Dunham's fieldwork in the Caribbean in Chapter Four of this thesis.

⁵²⁸ D. A. Boxwell, "'Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*", *African American Review* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 612.

⁵²⁹ See also Chapter Four in this thesis for a discussion of the relationship between language and Hoodoo in Hurston's Haitian ethnography.

modalities of knowledge production.⁵³⁰ As observed by Wall, “the Afro-centric belief system of hoodoo” constituted a source of empowerment for both women and black people in general.⁵³¹

Psychologically, hoodoo empowered all of its adherents; it allowed them to perceive themselves as actors in the world, not the passive reactors the dominant society held them to be. Conversely, hoodoo put the masters’ power in a new perspective... Indeed, hoodoo could be used to exact justice from the master as well as revenge against fellow slaves... Finally and most pertinently, power in hoodoo was decentered; the absence of clerical authority militated against male dominance within the slave community. Consequently, hoodoo was particularly empowering for women.⁵³²

This notion of empowerment is based on the body and its possibility to interact with the forces of nature and master them: in fact, in this section “Hurston’s concerns with spirituality, the body, and gender forcefully emerge from the subtext and assume primary importance.”⁵³³ In order to underline the importance of the bodily facts in this part of *Mules and Men*, a brief description of the beautiful etching by Miguel Covarrubias opening it⁵³⁴ will be provided here for further analysis; the picture represents the naked body of a woman lying on a bed, face downwards, the drawing of a thunder stretching from her left shoulder down to her right hip; beside the bed is a chair with a water pitcher and a glass. This illustration, depicting one of the several Hoodoo initiations presented in the ethnography, represents graphically the textual presence of Hurston’s body. As observed by Boxwell, commenting on this image, “[h]er naked body itself becomes a kind of runic ethnographic text in this same rite.”⁵³⁵ Providing as an explanation the necessity to experience Hoodoo personally as the only way of knowing its essence, Hurston tries to reset the distance between ‘observer’ and ‘observed’ once again. It is precisely the introduction of her body and its vulnerability into the text that makes this shift possible.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁰ See again Chapter Four for a contextualization of the role of Hoodoo in 1930s anthropology and popular culture.

⁵³¹ Wall, “*Mules and Men* and Women”, 672.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 673.

⁵³³ Hernández, “Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality”, 159.

⁵³⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183. Covarrubias’ etchings frame some of the main episodes as described in the ethnography.

⁵³⁵ Boxwell, “‘Sis Cat’ as Ethnographer”, 612.

⁵³⁶ See Hernández, “Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality,” 160: “Featuring her body so prominently in the ethnographic venture is yet another methodological innovation and experimental aspect of this highly subjective narrative.” See also the figure of the anthropologist as ‘vulnerable observer’ as outlined by Behar in relation to both Hurston and Katherine Dunham.

In the three initiations she goes through as a Hoodoo novice, what is at stake is the possibility of acquiring the right to belong to the studied community through a process of apprenticeship. As shown in the context of the previous section of *Mules and Men*, neither ethnic factors nor made-up lies can account for the anthropologist's presence and activities. In the detailed descriptions of the hoodoo initiations⁵³⁷ and rituals, the body is present in its physical possibility of performing the tasks prescribed by faith. The references to the body are numerous throughout the initiations: "leg", "head", "arms", "loins", "navel", "eyes", "feet", "cheeks", "forehead", "face", "little finger", "hand", "blood"⁵³⁸, "head" (again), "chest", "flesh"⁵³⁹, "throat"⁵⁴⁰ are all actively involved in the activity of research. The woman ethnographer is physically and wholly present in her nakedness at the mercy of the supposed 'object' of her study. The kind of knowledge resulting from this process is, *par force*, an embodied, situated, and positional form of knowledge. As observed by Wall, the knowledge acquired through Hoodoo requires "physical strength and mental stamina that are many times greater than those any of the Eatonville homefolk would have attributed to Lucy Hurston's daughter."⁵⁴¹ The difficulties experienced in entering the world of Hoodoo and in making herself a trustworthy novice are narrated as part of the initiation process itself. This process, as underlined by Wall's analysis, is characterised by the verb *ask* that "not only structures the paragraph... [but] becomes a metonym for the rite of initiation which is the climax to which the chapter builds."⁵⁴²

The practice of Hoodoo could represent a means of reconciliation of the different layers of subjectivity proposed above; in fact, as suggested by Wall, this alternative interpretation of spirituality can denote "a location of female empowerment" through word where the decentring of authority results in a possibility of active representation for women.⁵⁴³ Through the Hoodoo practice in which the body has the possibility to emerge in less problematic ways than in the embodied experience of fieldwork, it is possible to see a space of retreat from the phallogocentrism of both folklore and science as "there is no such thing as a mother tongue, ... all tongues carry the name of the father and are stamped by its register."⁵⁴⁴ As noticed by Houston A.

⁵³⁷ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 199-200, 207-208, 215-216.

⁵³⁸ All the terms are taken from the description in *ibid.*, 199-200.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁴¹ Wall, "*Mules and Men and Women*", 676.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 675.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 661.

⁵⁴⁴ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 11.

Baker in relation to Marie Laveau, one of the most important Voodoo priestesses in the history of New Orleans, “[v]oodoo... is indisputably a woman’s domain.”⁵⁴⁵ On the other hand, though, there is also the danger for black people to be ascribed, once again, to irrational practices and confined by an external perception of their existence. In this regard, Baker observes that

[p]erhaps that is something terribly right about this strong propensity for the supernatural in Afro-American life. After all, the “Grand Narrative” of the Western Enlightenment assumed that the mere fact of melanin confined all people of color to bestial irrationality. In that grand narrative, whiteness was written as the only hue that was both natural *and* rational. The marginal spaces left for color were the non-rational and the perversely supernatural. It is understandable, therefore, that, in the New World, African captives who had been stolen by enlightened Europeans would transform these spaces of color into the vivid, spiritual common sense called Voodoo.⁵⁴⁶

The potentiality for resistance inherent in Hoodoo as in other forms of expression considered peculiar to the African-American experience constitute also their menace because, while opening spaces for agency, they also risk being invalidated by the same discursive practices of power that the strategies of survival were trying to subvert in the very first place. This is possible because, as Stuart Hall observes, “black is marked”⁵⁴⁷ in opposition to an idea of whiteness as a synonym of “what the world is.”⁵⁴⁸ What Hall defines as the ‘markedness’ of ethnicity as black, associated with the apparent unmarked status of both whiteness and knowledge as seen in Grosz’s analysis, favours a lack of balance which easily denotes the (black) ethnic sign with a surplus of meaning. As Bhabha notices:

[s]uch contradictory articulations of reality and desire – seen in racist stereotypes, statements, jokes, myths are... the effects of a disavowal that denies the differences of the other but produces in its stead forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of “civil” discourse... the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudoscientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to “normalize” *formally* the disturbance of a discourse of

⁵⁴⁵ Houston A. Baker Jr., “Review of *Voodoo Dreams* by Jewell Parker Rhodes”, *African American Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (spring 1995), 157.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁷ Julie Drew, “Cultural Composition: Stuart Hall on Ethnicity and the Discursive Turn”, *JAC*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1998, 188.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.* This seems to be at the basis of the sensationalistic approach to Haitian Vodoun in 1930s American popular culture which Herskovitsian anthropology tried to counterbalance as we will see in Chapter Four.

splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality. The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry* – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to *menace* – a difference that is almost total but not quite.⁵⁴⁹

Because of the menace inherent in stereotypical images of blackness, Hurston decided to work on the borders of representation, in the interstices which offered, at the same time, possibilities for expression and erasure while stressing the importance of conscious rewriting of (at least, partially) unconscious modalities of resistance in order to let them emerge as vital elements of African-American identity and art. In her works the reader's attention can be directed towards representational choices performed by the anthropologists in their texts that are invariably linked to the body (and its absence), as seen in the present chapter, and to Time (and its avoidance), as will be explored in the next one.

⁵⁴⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 130-131. [Emphasis in the original]

Chapter 3: Time and Orality in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*

“Our lives are summed up in sounds and made significant... That’s why we must do so much to invent meanings...”⁵⁵⁰

To question the significance of Time in ethnography in relation to Hurston’s work is to question the meaning of conducting anthropological research in a segregated society as a way of taking into consideration alterity within the national borders of the US, because the divisions along lines of colour, ethnicity, class, and economic status present in 1930s American society were marked according to different temporal coordinates on the basis of their adherence to or distance from modernity and the increase of speed in social and working rhythms. The approaches to the temporal question in Hurston’s ethnographies are, therefore, manifold: from the point of view of a decolonizing project, Time can be taken as a coordinate for problematizing concepts like ‘modernity and ‘backwardness’ in the context of an evolutionist hierarchy;⁵⁵¹ from the point of view of the researcher, Time is an element that can destabilize the binarisms ‘insider/outsider’ and ‘participant/observer;’ from a third perspective, the representation of Time in ethnography through orality can alter the visualism of traditional ethnographic depictions questioning the immobility and ‘Time denial’ of cultural descriptions as expressed in the convention of the ‘ethnographic present.’ Kirsten Hastrup refers to this feature of ethnography as “a literary device”⁵⁵² and a “construction of time”⁵⁵³ in the passage from description to interpretation, from fieldwork to writing. In the relationship between the actual flowing of time in fieldwork and its representation in ethnographic writing it is possible to find a pattern which has been often reproduced in the history of anthropology thanks to the activation of particular literary strategies of omission and translation such as, for instance, the representation of Time and body in ethnography.

The main link between these two elements is their erasure from the text as a result of the interpretation of data collected in fieldwork; that is, elision of the anthropologist’s body and of the researcher’s and the Other’s Time: in fact, if temporal immobility is inherent in ethnographic descriptions, labels such as ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ can be an indication of the reversal of such immobility towards the

⁵⁵⁰ William Faulkner, “Mountain Victory.” In William Faulkner, *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Vintage International, 1995: 1932), 766.

⁵⁵¹ For a discussion of this aspect, see Chapter One. The use of these categories in the Caribbean context will be discussed in Chapter Four.

⁵⁵² Kristen Hastrup, “The Ethnographic Present: A Reinvention”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Feb. 1990), 45.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

ethnographer inasmuch as they do not take into consideration the complex intermingling and stratification of academic knowledge, anthropological methodology and their contradictions in the pragmatic context of fieldwork, personal memories, and associated vicissitudes. Such labels seem to have the final aim to ‘freeze’ the anthropologist within a period of her/his life (for instance, when s/he was considered a member of a defined community) and do not take into account the actual temporal flowing in the anthropologist’s own life, her/his detachment from the group of origin, and the reactions to her/his return among them. As observed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in fact, “[i]ndigenous research approaches problematize the insider model in different ways because there are multiple ways of both being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts.”⁵⁵⁴

In Hurston’s case, actually, although the community probably had an ambivalent attitude towards the researcher, and she probably experienced a significant shift from the perspective she had before leaving the community in her teenage years, considering her as either an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ means congealing her presence in Time and nullifying the effects not only of institutionalized education and ethnographic fieldwork, but also the influence of the anthropologist’s personal growth and elaboration of life in its variety before and after leaving the community. The works of so-called insider anthropologists, in fact, carry with them a different degree of reflexivity or “a constant need”⁵⁵⁵ for it due to the fact that “insiders often have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis.”⁵⁵⁶ Hurston returned to live in Eatonville only at a later stage in her life, but taking into consideration her belonging to several communities at once (the anthropological community, the artistic community linked to the Harlem Renaissance, the black community at large, to name just a few), it is possible to see how degrees of ‘insiderness’ intersected in her research in important ways producing real consequences on her life and career. An example of this can be found in what Lynda Marion Hill has defined as Hurston’s difficulty in “classifying stories she collected into ‘tale types’, as a folklorist is expected to do”⁵⁵⁷, and how this became “for her... a challenge to figure out how tales she remembered from a time past have taken new forms.”⁵⁵⁸ These observations on her problematic approach to the

⁵⁵⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2008: 1999), 137.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996), xxviii.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

categorization of African-American tales relate to the question of performance as an articulation of Time in anthropology and in the lives of the ethnographer and her community; Hill comments that:

[a]ccording to Richard Schechner, a performance can be distinguished from daily behavior because it repeats or “restores” previous behavior. This is the meaning of enactment – a ritualization of behavior... Some definitions of performance emphasizing ritualistic – repetitive – behavior offer insights into Hurston as a person who understood *how cultural traditions change*.⁵⁵⁹

If this notion of cultural performance is applied to anthropological practice, “[i]nasmuch as ‘one learns through performing, then performs the understanding so gained’, Hurston’s work opens a learning process.”⁵⁶⁰ The representation of the performative features of both cultural material and ethnographic praxis as a learning process can be considered an attempt to overcome both the dichotomy between ‘lived’ and ‘structured’ Time and a way to avoid the essentializing potential of anthropological descriptions while underlining creativeness and variation within traditions through linguistic and paralinguistic expression.

3.1 ‘Lived’ and ‘structured’ Time in fieldwork and theory

One main point of the current analysis of Time in *Mules and Men* is to be found in language as a methodological and stylistic choice guiding the development of the text. In fact, by introducing the dialogic dimension and the oral features of spoken language into a written text, Hurston is choosing a different representation of Time in the context of her monograph. Language in its aural and oral characteristics⁵⁶¹ can represent a connection between Time and the body, and is a way of introducing a shared temporality into the text while attempting to reduce distance. Through the reading of her work, the focus will be directed on the ways in which folk and oral expression can problematize the issues which have emerged in cultural anthropology at the end of the twentieth century in relation to the conventions of ethnographical writing, as demonstrated by works such as Fabian’s *Time and the Other* and the debate originated by the publication of James Clifford and George Marcus’ *Writing Culture* in the 1980s.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., xxiv. [Emphasis added]

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: 1983), 119-120.

In fact, although as observed by Bunzl, “[a]t the turn of the century, the intersubjective coevalness of anthropological Self and ethnographic Other is no longer in question”⁵⁶², it seems quite revealing that Hurston’s ethnographies have not found the place they deserve in the anthropological canon; the decision to insert her autobiographical voice in the ethnography or the ways in which she decided to problematize her presence in fieldwork as an African-American woman while attaining ethnographic authority were important experimental achievements in the context of the 1930s. Therefore, I will use Fabian’s analysis of Time in ethnography to study Hurston’s representational choices in her writing. At the time in question, anthropology had established its written records by removing its referent from the present of the writing subject. In this way, it constructed an allochronic discourse denying coevalness, namely the sharing of the same Time with its object of study. Basically, alterity had been defined through distance in Time more than geographical, spatial remoteness.⁵⁶³

This is significant for the anthropological discourse as it was constructed in the US; in fact, alterity was not necessarily to be found in faraway lands through the colonial encounter, but it was mainly studied within the national boundaries or at the very borders of the nation, and from this perspective, the Caribbean represented what I would define as ‘a close, faraway place.’⁵⁶⁴ The discourse so constructed, as noted by Fabian, derived its language from prehistory and archaeology, disciplines that do not involve any kind of interaction with living people. In the North American context of the 1930s, anthropologists could provide an explanation for alterity in the existence of different temporal realities within the same territory. The system that made this possible was a segregationist organization of society in which rhythms were different because the possibilities for political representation and public affirmation of black people were different (read: disadvantaged or non-existent). As noted by Leigh Anne Duck⁵⁶⁵, the mainstream depiction of African Americans suffered from an anachronistic bias that resulted from their exclusion from institutions and politics and, in turn, reinforced such exclusions.

The representation of Time in *Mules and Men* has been seen as partly reinforcing both anachronistic and segregationist discourses in the attempt to portray the

⁵⁶² Matti Bunzl, “Foreword to Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other/ Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology*” in *ibid.*, xxvii.

⁵⁶³ See *ibid.*, 143-146.

⁵⁶⁴ For a discussion of this, see Chapter Four in this thesis.

⁵⁶⁵ Leigh Anne Duck, ““Go there tuh know there”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk”, *American Literary History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 269.

authentic aspects of folkloric experience as profoundly different from the principles and rhythms of modernization. Nonetheless, Duck observes that Hurston's temporal coordinates are "flexible and vital", her representation of the 'folk' is far from being backward and tales are inserted in "a context of conflict, interchange, and alteration."⁵⁶⁶ It is evident from the context in which the tales are inserted that they represent a reflection on interracial and intra-racial conflicts and tensions; even the Time of mythical accounts seems to function as a space in which to find an origin for present problems or current situations rather than being an essentialization of the Time of alterity.⁵⁶⁷

Duck suggests that the issue of Time in *Mules and Men* can be framed within the different layers of temporality as experienced by Hurston in her fieldwork. In reference to this, it can be useful to consider the distinction proposed by the Italian anthropologist Antonino I. Buttitta between 'lived' and 'structured' Time in relation to the different times intersecting any anthropologist's life and fieldwork.⁵⁶⁸ In order to explain this temporal divide, Buttitta makes reference to the ways in which time has been treated in historiography; he indicates the historical flux as the "macrosystemprocess of history"⁵⁶⁹ that has been structured by historiography in represented time. It is in this passage that the shifts from the life *continuum* and representation, history and historiography, take place.⁵⁷⁰ In similar ways, lived experience in the anthropologist's life and in her/his research and representation in fieldwork notes and ethnographic writing coexist and overlap.⁵⁷¹

In relation to the divide between experience and theory expressed in Michelle Rosaldo's claim that "what we now need is not more data (read: fieldwork), but more

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁶⁷ There are numerous examples of tales which function as myths in order to explain situations and interactions observed by the storyteller in nature, everyday life, and in the social structure at large. See, for instance, Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1935), 27 "How the Church Came to Be Split Up", 31 "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men", 74 "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest", 82 "How the Negroes Got Their Freedom", 94 "Why the Mocking Bird Is Away on Friday", 121 "How the Cat Got Nine Lives" to name just a few.

⁵⁶⁸ See Antonino I. Buttitta, "Cultura, segni e società", Seminario *Le solidarietà. La cultura materiale in linguistica e in antropologia*, Dipartimento di Filologia, Linguistica e Letteratura, Università di Lecce, 1996, 13. Buttitta applies the distinction between 'structured' and 'lived' time to the study of culture assigning 'structured' time, namely the time of individual creation, to the historian's interests of research while the anthropologist would deal with 'lived' time, the time of interactions and of a less 'conscious' stage of inventiveness. This distinction, though interesting, seems rather problematic as it reiterates a hierarchical reading of culture as divided between intentional and non-intentional moments of meaning production.

⁵⁶⁹ Antonino I. Buttitta, "Forme del tempo", *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo*, anno X/XI (2007-2008), n. 10/11, 7.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ The idea here is to discuss Buttitta's temporal divide between 'lived' and 'structured' time in culture applying the distinction to the anthropologist's life and research activities.

questions (read: theory)”⁵⁷², Kamala Visweswaran observes that “this separation... loses sight of the fundamentally restitutive value of feminism, and the potential of a feminist ethnography that has yet to be expressed: locating the self in the experience of oppression in order to liberate it.”⁵⁷³ The tension between the phases of ‘lived’ and ‘structured’ experience – that in anthropological practice corresponds to the dimensions of fieldwork and writing – finds its final expression in objective/subjective ethnographic accounts and in “the development of what might be termed ‘woman-centered’ and ‘decentered’ approaches in feminist anthropology.”⁵⁷⁴ Thus, Time can be theorized as another point of negotiation in the subjective, embodied experience in which to practise such a defined separation between life and research, lived (fieldwork) experience and theoretical (written) interpretation, is indeed difficult, if not impossible.

3.2 Visualism and temporal traditions

In relation to Hurston’s approach to the temporal issue, it is possible to notice an attempt at placing the object of her study in a distant Time, if not denying Time to it altogether in the account of Zora’s return to Eatonville at the very beginning of *Mules and Men*:

“... Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?”
 “Plenty of people, George. They are a lot more valuable that you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late.”
 “Too late for what?”
 “Before everybody forgets all of ‘em.”
 “No danger for that. That’s all some people is good for – set ‘round and lie and murder groceries.”⁵⁷⁵

This passage could give the impression that, because of her ethnographer’s status, Zora, Hurston’s narrative *persona*, has knowledge of processes of which the average Eatonville inhabitant is unaware. This preoccupation was typical of salvage anthropology and can be traced back to the Boasian conception of anthropology in its cultural relativist consideration of cultures as “separate gardens” to be observed in

⁵⁷² Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 1994), 19.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 8.

isolation in order to avoid the interference of external elements.⁵⁷⁶ This anthropological mode rested on the assumption of authenticity and potential corruption: while reinstating the originality and uniqueness of cultural heritage, it could end up reinforcing claims of difference based on evolutionist notions of Time and divisions such as, for example, ‘folk’/ ‘primitive’ opposed to ‘modern’/ ‘civilized.’

In *Mules and Men*, this disciplinary discourse is destabilized, nonetheless, by the introduction of the dialogic dimension in which storytelling takes place. In the intersection between corporeality and Time, aural and oral characteristics of enunciation, the shared dimension of Time is recovered through the notion of ethnography as encounter, life, bodily investment, sound, speech, dialogue, successive moments of sharing embedded in power relations regulated through Time. From this perspective, knowledge is not something to be ‘preserved’, but rather becomes the result of the interactions taking place in fieldwork. Thanks to the introduction of the category of Time through orality, Hurston proposes the representation of it as performance so that its erasure in anthropological writing reveals its own performativity as epistemological practice.⁵⁷⁷ This becomes evident in the account of a day of work in the swamp, as attested by the following quotation: “Men are not supposed to over-sleep and Dick Willie gets paid to see to it that they don’t. *Listen* to him singing as he goes down the line.”⁵⁷⁸ The register is here closer to the chronicle than to the ethnographic account in its use of the imperative form of the verb *listen* in relation to a referent identified as an implicit second person subject (‘you’).

While the present tense is typical of the ethnographic monograph, the implicit ‘you’ to which this sentence refers is very uncommon as the referent of the ethnography was usually erased from its context.⁵⁷⁹ The reference to sound also destabilizes the notion of ‘visualism’ which was inherent to anthropological writings and rested on the idea of sight as “the noblest, most comprehensive, and most reliable of the senses,”⁵⁸⁰ Fabian, however, questions this privilege: “what makes a (reported) sight more objective than a (reported) sound, smell, or taste?”⁵⁸¹ Although the whole scene widely

⁵⁷⁶ See Chapter One in this thesis, 27-28.

⁵⁷⁷ This aspect will be discussed later in this chapter. See, in particular, 156-161.

⁵⁷⁸ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 66. [Emphasis added]

⁵⁷⁹ See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 84. Fabian refers to the “the obstinate form of the ethnographic account” as a connection between the present tense of the commentary and the third person of history according to the distinction proposed by Émile Benveniste.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

relies on visual images⁵⁸², it is indeed significant that one of its first references is to sound as the basis of the ethnographic encounters represented throughout the text. The auditory category allows the entering of the temporal element into ethnographic writing, a movement which had been often denied by the stillness of visualistic descriptions.

In fact, Hurston's ethnography renounced objective depictions in order to provide alternative descriptions through the theoretical possibilities of folklore. With regard to the legacy of visualism in ethnography, it can be useful to explore the notion of 'picturesque' as an aesthetic category introduced in 18th century theory. As defined by William Gilpin in his *Essay on Prints* (1768), the term would refer to "that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture."⁵⁸³ The concept of picturesque is historically related not only to composition and choice of subject in painting, but also to travels, travelogues, and ways of observing. In this sense, as noted by Robert Smithson⁵⁸⁴, the picturesque would be strictly linked to "a more physical sense of the temporal landscape."⁵⁸⁵ In its suspension "between the beautiful and the sublime", according to Uvedale Price's definition of the term⁵⁸⁶, the category of picturesque rendered a whole set of subjects, such as decadent buildings and underprivileged people, eligible for representation. Furthermore, in Gilpin's text it is possible to deduce the relation between depiction and Time in the tradition of visual art. In his explanation of "the judicious choice of circumstances"⁵⁸⁷ within the *design* of a composition in its "historical relation to a fact", he includes "[...] *a proper time, proper characters, the most affecting manner of introducing those characters, and proper appendages.*"⁵⁸⁸ In the painter's treatment of Time suggested by Gilpin, what is striking is the reliance on a temporal conception more properly linked to literature and, in particular, theatre:

[w]ith regard to a *proper time*, the painter is assisted by good old dramatic rules; which inform him, that *one* point of time only should be taken – the most affecting in the action; and that no other part of the story should interfere with it... With regard to *characters*, the painter must suit them to his piece, by attending to historical truth, if his subject be history; or to heathen mythology, if it be fabulous.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸² As written narratives always rely on visual images, the crucial point to consider is the way those visual images function in the textual structure and their relationship with other elements of the text.

⁵⁸³ William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints* (London: Strahan, 1802: 1768), xii.

⁵⁸⁴ Eliana Sousa Santos, "Changing Chance: A walk through the landscape of process in design", *The Role of the Humanities in Design Creativity International Conference*, University of Lincoln, 2007, 2.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Gilpin, *Essay on Prints*, 2.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

The reference to two distinct conceptions of Time, historical and mythological, in pictorial representation is of utter importance in the transposition of the idea into writing, especially ethnographical writing. In fact, what emerges in visualistic ethnographical descriptions is an ambiguous relationship to the category of Time in its elision of the historical conditions in which the anthropological encounter takes place, and in its difficult relationship to the actual living conditions of its 'objects' who often relied on narrative accounts based on oral means of transmission in which the category of myth was not always distinctly separable from that of history, as in the narrative modalities of folklore.

In Hurston's case, the insertion of folklore and of elements associated with the genre of the novel raise questions about the traditions informing her writing and the different temporal modes inherent to them. As observed by Houston Baker, referring to T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), there is a tradition "in a historical sense" which is constituted by "the monuments of black American literature"⁵⁹⁰ and another meaning of tradition that is "broader, less literary"⁵⁹¹: this second connotation "refers to customs, practices, and beliefs that have been handed down from generation to generation by 'the folk' or 'the group.'"⁵⁹² In the present study, a third factor enters this double tradition here, that is, the 'interstitial' position of multiple traditions: Western and American literary traditions in general, black American literature, and folklore all had a role in shaping Hurston's writing. As attested by her own account of her literary education in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942):

[...] the books gave me more pleasure than the clothes... In that box were Gulliver's Travels, Grimm Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales. Why did the Norse tales strike so deeply into my soul? I do not know, but they did... Of the Greeks, Hercules moved me most... I resolved to be like him... I also met Hans Andersen and Robert Louis Stevenson. They seemed to know what I wanted to hear and said it in a way that tingled me. Just a little below these friends was Rudyard Kipling in his Jungle Books. I loved his talking snakes as much as I did the hero. I came to start reading the Bible through my mother... Except for the beautiful language of Luke and

⁵⁹⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1990: 1972), 18.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

Paul, the New Testament still plays a poor second to the Old Testament for me.⁵⁹³

I turned in written work and answered questions like everybody else, but he [Dwight O.W. Holmes, her English teacher] took no notice of me particularly until one night in the study of English poets he read Kubla Khan. Listening to Coleridge's poem for the first time, I saw all that the writer had meant for me to see with him, and infinite cosmic things besides... This was my world, I said to myself, and I shall be in it, and surrounded by it...⁵⁹⁴

[...] I had hundreds of books under my skin already. Not selected reading, all of it. Some of it could be called trashy. I had been through Nick Carter, Horatio Alger, Bertha M. Clay and the whole slew of dime novelists in addition to some really constructive reading. I do not regret the trash. It has harmed me in no way.⁵⁹⁵

Swift, Grimm, Stevenson, Andersen, Roman, Greek, and Norse myths, the Bible, English poetry and 'trashy' literature are all recognized as part of her literary background shaping her writing together with the oral tradition of storytelling heard on the store-porch of Eatonville⁵⁹⁶, and implicit references to African-American literature as will be demonstrated in the development of this chapter in relation to the construction of authorship and authority in writing. What is at stake here is the intermingling of different literary traditions influencing both her novels and her ethnographies; in particular, in relation to her ethnographic writing, it is possible that it was exactly the tradition linked to novel and poetry (either oral or written) together with the features of black folklore that enables her to open the text to new possibilities of representation of body and Time. In this context, the term 'novel' is here used in a Bakhtinian sense to refer to

[...] whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system. Literary systems are comprised of canons, and "novelization" is fundamentally anticanonical. Always it will insist on the dialogue between what a given system will

⁵⁹³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990: 1942), 39-40.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-47: "For me, the store porch was the most interesting place that I could think of... I would hear an occasional set of gossip in what to me was adult double talk, but which I understood at times... But what I really loved to hear was the menfolks holding a 'lying' session. That is, straining against each other in telling folks tales."

admit as literature and those texts that are otherwise excluded from such a definition of literature.⁵⁹⁷

In this sense, the introduction into ethnography of elements referring to other literary traditions (mainly the ones linked to the novel and storytelling) call into question the literary elements inherent in the construction of ethnographical writing as, in fact, “the novel can include, ingest, devour other genres and still retain its status as a novel, but other genres cannot include novelistic elements without impairing their own identity.”⁵⁹⁸ Because of the “novel’s awareness of the inadequacies of its own language”⁵⁹⁹, questions of Time and embodiment can emerge in ethnography opening the genre to new possibilities, but also bringing into question the status of the text and the authorship framing it. In fact, “since the novel is aware of the impossibility of full meaning, presence, it is free to exploit such a lack to its own hybridizing purposes.”⁶⁰⁰ Through the introduction of elements traditionally ascribed to the novel (among which it is possible to find questions on the representation of temporality and identity, either embodied or not), the ethnographic genre acquires richness and stratification, opens up to a self-reflection on its own modalities of construction and representation, but it is also destabilized, hybridized, and subsequently, shaken in its foundation from its very core.

Taking into consideration Hurston’s account of a working day in the swamp, it is possible to detect the presence of visual elements in her description of the community waking up: this can be considered as a sign of the presence of different forces linked to manifold traditions with which she deals in her text in order to shape it and shape the narrative voice(s) sustaining it. The passage under consideration relies once again on the second person pronoun identifying a witness summoned to first observe and then, take part into the scene: in the description of the whole day in the swamp, it is possible to trace the interest in portraying a day of work through theatrical devices, one of Hurston’s interests as a playwright.⁶⁰¹ The representation of Time in *Mules and Men*, therefore, is important not only in order to understand how anthropological Time (or the

⁵⁹⁷ Michael Holquist, “Introduction”. In Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), xxxi.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁶⁰¹ See Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 114. The programme of Hurston’s theatre show *The Great Day* (1932) was based on a day of work in the swamps and a night in the jooks as will be shown later in this chapter.

denial of it) finds expression in this ethnographic work, but also to trace the interrelations between ethnographic and literary writing within the text.

As suggested by Kristeva, “we live within a fragmented chronology that has yet to discover a founding concept of its own.”⁶⁰² The problem is in determining to whom the pronoun ‘we’ refers and according to which chronological principles the construction and representation of Time is subject to processes of fragmentation and distancing. In fact, as stated by Fabian, cultural relativism “circumvents the problem of common Time by postulating a multiplicity of times and spatial coexistence... the very notion of containing walls and boundaries creates order and sense based on discontinuity and distance.”⁶⁰³ As observed by Duck, Hurston’s treatment of Time in *Mules and Men* suggests the interweaving of multiple temporalities in her experience: the Time of the “folk” meets the “time of the highway” just like “clock time” meets “the transcendent timelessness of hoodoo.”⁶⁰⁴ Hurston would represent herself at the “intersection of different temporalities”⁶⁰⁵ showing that the mediation of different times inherent in the different rhythms of the North and South of the United States was indeed possible. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the attribution of a different time to the South of the United States and the perceived backwardness of a system of production which was felt as surpassed by the industrial development in northern areas of the country is a strategy of distancing by the North deflecting from its own racism. In so doing, the South became “the abjected regional Other.”⁶⁰⁶

3.3 Time, orality, and writing

In its presentation of Time in ethnography, *Mules and Men* reveals itself to be a hybrid text in which general assumptions on the ways of conducting ethnography and the denial of coevalness inherent in them can be destabilized and coexist with the representation of “intersubjective time”⁶⁰⁷, the Time of exchange taking place in fieldwork. The introduction of oral speech into writing is particularly significant in order to understand the temporal implications of Hurston’s text; apart from the different temporalities intersecting in Hurston’s representation of herself in fieldwork, this

⁶⁰² Julia Kristeva, *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1996: 1994), 169.

⁶⁰³ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 52.

⁶⁰⁴ Duck, ““Go there tuh know there””, 275.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, “Preface” in Baker and Nelson (eds.), *Violence, the Body and ‘The South’*, *American Literature* (Special Issue), vol. 73, no. 2, June 2001, 236.

⁶⁰⁷ Duck, ““Go there tuh know there””, 275.

chapter will consider how Time enters her ethnography according to three main features: through the presentation of different versions of the same tale; through the representation of the dialogic context of fieldwork giving the temporal and spatial coordinates in which the storytelling took place; and as already observed, through the representation of the oral features of language. As observed by Ong, “writing... is not a mere appendage to speech. Because it moves speech from the oralaural to a new sensory world, that of vision, it transforms speech and thought as well.”⁶⁰⁸ This perspective on writing and orality can be productive in connection to the question of the representation of Time in anthropology because it provides a direct link to the visualism inherent in the ethnographies which deny coevalness to the studied Other and shows us the potential of the introduction of orality into the text in order to allow other senses to enter anthropological knowledge.

In this context, both body and Time cross the threshold of ethnography in the form of, respectively, voice and rhythm: in fact, it is possible to crystallize an image, but it is not the same with sound which – in order to be reproduced in the present moment – requires the same duration it originally had in fieldwork. According to Ong’s analysis,

[t]here is no way to stop sound and have sound... If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing – only silence, no sound at all. All sensation takes place in time, but no other sensory field totally resists a holding action, stabilization, in quite this way. Vision can register motion, but it can also register immobility. Indeed it favors immobility, for to examine something closely by vision, we prefer to have it quiet... There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound.⁶⁰⁹

Representation, in this resonant description, really acquires the meaning of re-presentation because it is very difficult to reproduce a sound without allowing it to be inserted in the present moment. This is a very different ‘present’ from the one promoted by ethnographic writing as analyzed by Fabian. In fact, he observes that the ethnographic convention of present tense “at the very best ‘freezes’ a society at the time of observation; at worse, it contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability, and conservatism of primitives.”⁶¹⁰ On the contrary, Hurston’s present is not constituted through an atemporal description, but through the time of orality: in this sense,

⁶⁰⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002: 1982), 83.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶¹⁰ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 81.

representation becomes re-presence. In fact, in order to be appreciated, her ethnography would require to be staged as a theatrical play so that the characters involved in it can regain the power of the oral word and, through it, its rhythms and time; the ethnographic form is, therefore, challenged by the content which attempts to resist ideological concepts inherent in that form.

In orality, the body and its time are the main resources of communication; the transposition of these facts on the written page, with their impact on sound and gesture, is commented on in some of the tales of the collection, as for instance in “How to Write a Letter.” When a father asks his daughter who has been “off to school for seven years” to write a letter to his brother, he is mostly disappointed when the girl cannot write a clucking sound he makes with his tongue to call the attention of his new mule.

[...] “Now tell him some mo’. ‘Our mule is dead but Ah got another mule and when Ah say (clucking sound of tongue and teeth) he moved from de word.’”

“Is you got dat?” he ast de girl.

“Naw suh,” she tole ‘im.

He waited a while and he ast her again, “You got dat down yet?”

“Naw suh, Ah ain’t got it yet.”

“How come you ain’t got it?”

“Cause Ah can’t spell (clucking sound).”

“You mean to tell me you been off to school seven years and can’t spell (clucking sound)? Why Ah could spell dat myself and Ah ain’t been to school a day in my life. Well jes’ say (clucking sound) he’ll know what yo’ mean and go on wid de letter.”⁶¹¹

The story provides a powerful statement on the relationship between oral and written expression commenting of the idea whether writing can always substitute for orality while representing a more complete form of communication. On the contrary, it gives an account of the oral word as able to transmit an alternative series of sounds and meanings. To offer an alternative to official accounts and interpretations is another resource inherent in orality: the impossibility of reproducing the clucking sound in writing, in fact, accounts for the limits of (ethnographical) written texts which – although giving the impression of a comprehensive, 360-degree-description – ignore human experience in terms of temporal and bodily facts in order to create an immutable, unquestioned description of a community frozen in time.

In relation to this tale, Barbara Johnson has pointed out that

⁶¹¹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 41.

[t]he daughter in the tale is in a situation analogous to that of Hurston: the educated student returns home to transcribe what her forebears utter orally. She has learned a notation system that considers itself complete but that turns out to lack a sign for (clucking sound). The “inside” is here commenting on the “outside”, the tale commenting on the book as a whole... But lest one fall into a simple opposition between the tale’s orality and the transcriber’s literacy, it is well to note that the orality/literacy relation is the very *subject* of the tale, which cannot be appreciated by those who, like the father *in* the tale, cannot write. Its irony is directed both ways.⁶¹²

These observations seem to find an echo in Ong’s ideas on the passage from orality to literacy. He notices that:

[o]ral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations... This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world.⁶¹³

In Ong’s vision, it is possible to perceive an evolutionist bias in the essentialization of orality that, although defined as ‘beautiful’ and ‘powerful’, would be relegated in a psychological frame anterior to writing, activity that allows people to achieve a further degree of development (‘fuller potential’). Hurston’s work on orality, on the contrary, shows the ways in which oral and written expression can affect one another in a mutual exchange which does not presuppose a ‘before’ and an ‘after,’ in *Mules and Men* writing can indeed be a means to revive oral language thanks to the connection between fieldwork, folklore, and theatre. Gates has based his theory of Signifyin(g) on the capacity for self-reflectiveness inherent in trickster figures of the oral tradition such as Esu in Yoruba cultures and the Signifying Monkey in African-American folklore. The two characters, in fact, would share “the curious tendency to reflect on the uses of formal language.”⁶¹⁴ In the trope of Signifyin(g) it is possible to

⁶¹² Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), *“Race”, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 326-327. [Emphasis in the original]

⁶¹³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 14.

⁶¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989: 1988), xxi. See also Chapter Four in this thesis, 162 for a brief description of Esu as characterised by Gates in relation to the figure of Papa Legba in Haitian Vodoun.

trace the feature which shapes the connection between orality and writing, African-American musical forms and literary expression: through the movements of repetition and revision⁶¹⁵, the black artistic forms would acquire their peculiarity; throughout these movements the passage between oral and written forms of expression become just one – although maybe the most marked one – among passages of reinscription, renaming, and rewriting.

In ways akin to the critical theory proposed by Gates, with its focus on the connection between black vernacular and African-American literary tradition, the Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has explored the relation between the oral custom of *adda* and the role of this dialogic practice in literary circles and Bengali literature. Chakrabarty uses the term *adda* according to the definition by the linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay who describes *adda* as “[...] ‘a place’ for ‘careless talk with boon companions’ or ‘the chats of intimate friends.’”⁶¹⁶ Differently conceived as “useless talk”⁶¹⁷ and as “a site of self-presentation, of cultivating a certain style of being in the eyes of others”⁶¹⁸, *adda* in its oral features was connected with and influenced by written literature in several ways. Chakrabarty marks the passage of this ancient ritual to modernity explaining the importance of *adda* as a cultural model of reference for ‘modern’ clubs and literary circles, because in *adda* encounters what was at stake was the creation of a cultural and psychological space enabling one to enjoy language and style as markers of identity. *Adda* helped the diffusion of literature, cinema, and the arts in important ways;⁶¹⁹ acquired a new status thanks to its connection with writing, and adapted itself to ‘modernity’ in such ways that render Ong’s idea of a definitive, ‘no return’ passage from orality to literacy, and from oral to written modalities of thought, quite limited in the contexts of the rich exchange taking place between *adda* and Bengali writing, as well as between black vernacular and African-American literature. In Chakrabarty’s view, learning self-expression in oral *adda* meant to be involved in a framework opening new possibilities for the appreciation and the creation of written literature. Finally, *adda* represented a communal way of thinking about language and maintaining an independent organization of time and space, which was antithetical to the one proposed by “modern civil society.”⁶²⁰ This self-determination, finding

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

⁶¹⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Adda*, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity”, *Public Culture* 11(1), 1999, 110.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 115-116.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 116-117.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 135.

expression in orality, is maintained and amplified in literature as observed by Gates when he states that “[t]he language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference.”⁶²¹

From this perspective, writing would be already present in orality⁶²² so that Hurston’s tale on the relationship between orality and writing can constitute a comment on the actual conditions of literacy in the African-American communities where younger generations were acquiring reading and writing skills while forgetting the connection of written forms with oral modalities of expression. This could be revealing of Hurston’s conviction that African-American writers were unaware of the oral and folkloric legacy lying at the core of black urban speech and literary expression. The political possibilities inherent in the conquest of literacy could be neutralized by this lack of awareness and lose its empowering potential in the process. In fact, Hurston’s work seems to echo Fanon’s idea that “[a]ny idiom is a way of thinking”⁶²³, so that her involvement in linguistic and anthropological research supports her stylistic and literary achievements. Language and theory, speech and folkloric legacy, are closely interrelated. The aim to be achieved is not some kind of racial betterment, but a form of collective self-awareness of the artistic and political potentialities inherent in folkloric forms of expression and their actual influence on mainstream American English language and culture.

In his essay “Harlem is Nowhere” (1948), Ralph Ellison gives an interesting account of the displacement of the African-American identity in the northern urban regions of the United States. He describes the chaotic reality of the ghetto in which forms of musical expression like jazz and bebop coexisted with the most extreme violence. The resulting contrast between these positive and negative aspects was due to the “abruptness of change and the resulting clash of cultural factors.”⁶²⁴ In Harlem, he continues, time has sped up at such a fast pace that “it is possible for talented youths to

⁶²¹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 66.

⁶²² As in the Derridean ‘grammatological’ concept of writing as *arche*-writing. See Jacques Derrida (transl. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997: 1967), 60: “This *arche*-writing would be at work not only in the form and substance of graphic expression but also in those of nongraphic expression. It would constitute not only the pattern uniting form to all substance, graphic or otherwise, but the movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression, whether it be graphic or not.”

⁶²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press: New York, 1967: 1952), 8-9.

⁶²⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995: 1964), 296.

leap through the development of decades in a brief twenty years, while beside them white haired-adults crawl in the feudal darkness of their childhood.”⁶²⁵ And he adds,

[s]ignificantly, in Harlem the reply to the greeting, “How are you?” is very often, “Oh, man, I’m *nowhere*” – a phrase revealing an attitude so common that it has been reduced to a gesture, a seemingly trivial word. Indeed, Negroes are not unaware that the conditions of their lives demand new definitions of terms like *primitive* and *modern*, *ethical* and *unethical*, *moral* and *immoral*, *patriotism* and *treason*, *tragedy* and *comedy*, *sanity* and *insanity*.⁶²⁶

In Ellison’s words, it is possible to perceive the potentialities of such a ‘nowhere status’, but also its implications in relation to chaos and identity issues. ‘Being nowhere’ is a way of escaping definitions, especially at a time when those definitions were being discussed and redefined, but it also bears the risk of losing one’s own identity in the very process of redefinition. In fact, in the passage from South to North, Ellison acknowledges the yielding without replacement of structures supporting the African-American personality. In his vision, “the cultural history of Negroes in the North reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology.”⁶²⁷ In particular, African Americans had abandoned a more stable social order that, although repressive, constituted the environment in which they had acquired “those techniques of survival to which Faulkner refers as ‘endurance.’”⁶²⁸ Other ways of thinking that Ellison ascribes to African Americans would have been compromised in the passage from southern to northern regions, such as the “peasant cynicism” and the “sense of being ‘at home in the world;’”⁶²⁹ although, even more importantly, the African-American citizen had renounced to “an authoritative religion which gives his life a semblance of a metaphysical wholeness; a family structure which is relatively stable; and a body of folklore – tested in life-and-death terms against his daily experience with nature and the Southern white man – that serves him as a guide to action.”⁶³⁰ The view of folklore as ‘a guide to action’ seems quite close to the use of folklore made by Hurston in her own fictional and ethnographic works. More precisely, it is the value of folklore as a guide to linguistic and artistic actions that Hurston is promoting as a political stance against the idea of folk as too primitive and naïve for the modern age.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 297-298. [Emphasis in the original]

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 298.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 299.

Another point to be underlined in Ellison's passage is the description of the southern social structure in which African Americans had acquired some stability, but not humanity. In fact, if Harlem is *nowhere*, the southern experience of slavery is *somewhere*, but *somewhere* where African Americans could not be *someone*. These spatial coordinates could be seen as circumscribing the history of black people in the United States; if, as noticed by Bhabha, "mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge"⁶³¹ producing, by way of its ambivalence, a 'slippage' or 'excess' summarized in the formula "almost the same, *but not quite*"⁶³², in the US context marked by slavery and segregation, the particular issue of a 'partial' (in the sense of "both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'"⁶³³) presence becomes the dominant element in the reading of the same African-American presence: 'almost here, *but not quite*' could be an appropriate formula to describe the attempt at erasure of the African-American agency and location in the context of American history.⁶³⁴ The experience in Harlem, therefore, summarizes the chaotic and exciting situation of having the possibility to define oneself for the first time while escaping previous definitions orchestrated by the external (white) gaze, but with the constant risk of invisibility and identity annihilation. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the real meaning of slavery – even in its 'soft' and apparently more endurable forms – accounts for the theory under the system. Sweet Home is, indeed, a protected universe for the slaves working there where Mrs. and Mr. Garner treat them as 'men.' After Mr. Garner's death, Mrs. Garner's brother-in-law and his two nephews come to help her in the administration of the plantation. The arrival of schoolteacher – as the ex-slaves remember him – show the theoretical assumptions sustaining a system that could be wrongly idealized in Mrs. and Mr. Garner's version of it. Paul D, one of the ex-slaves, still questions their attitude after many years of freedom:

[f]or years *Paul D believed schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men. And it was that that made them run off. Now... he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?* That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether

⁶³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004: 1994), 85.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶³³ See *ibid.*

⁶³⁴ See Chapter One, 11 for a discussion of the African-American 'non-presence' and lack of representation at World's Fairs between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway – before Sweet Home – without Garner? In Sixo's country, or his mother's? Or, God help him, on the boat? *Did a whiteman saying it make it so?* Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? *Took the word away.* Would they have run then?... *they had been isolated in a wonderful lie...* Protected and convinced they were special.⁶³⁵

“Did a whiteman saying it make it so?” summarizes the theoretical issue inherent in slavery; Mrs. and Mr. Garner's generous attitude towards their slaves shows, by contrast, what was inherent in the system: the impossibility to define one's identity in independent terms. Their magnanimity within the boundaries of their protected universe juxtaposes, but does not challenge, what is outside: a man is either a man all the time, in all places, or is not; and a man is a man when the society in which he is inserted gives him the possibility to define himself as such. The character of schoolteacher is the embodiment of the definitional power inherent in slavery and segregation, and of the philosophical assumptions that make freedom not just an issue of iron collars and broken chains.

Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it? At the peak of his strength, taller than tall men, and stronger than most, they clipped him, Paul D. First his shotgun, then his thoughts, for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes. The information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them.⁶³⁶

Schoolteacher's and his pupils' notebooks are almost characters in themselves as, in their pages, the lives of the slaves working at Sweet Home are summarized and defined by the external gaze which tries to discern between what it sees as 'human' and 'animal' characteristics.⁶³⁷ In the episode of Sethe's stolen milk the sheer violence inherent in such classification becomes painfully evident in its practical consequences:

Schoolteacher was teaching us things we couldn't learn. I didn't care nothing about the measuring string. We all laughed about that – except Sixo. He didn't laugh at nothing. But I didn't care. Schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, 'cross my nose, around my behind. Number

⁶³⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2005: 1987), 260. [Emphasis added]

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

my teeth. I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all.⁶³⁸

Schoolteacher's 'foolish' questions and anthropometric measurements constitute an important link between slavery and anthropology, especially in its first stages: at its outset, in fact, anthropological theory both supported and challenged different theories of race; what it shared with oppressive systems of power was exactly the sole rights to define what it considered the objects of its studies.⁶³⁹ From this perspective, Sixo's character can be analysed as an embodiment of the witty spirit of folklore at self-definition and awareness. Sixo is the protagonist of an episode in the novel that closely reminds one of John's tales in folklore when schoolteacher questions him on what he judges as a theft.

"You stole that shoat, didn't you?"

"No. Sir," said Sixo, but he had the decency to keep his eyes on the meat.

"You telling me you didn't steal it, and I'm looking right at you?"

"No, sir. I didn't steal it."

Schoolteacher smiled. "Did you kill it?"

"Yes, sir. I killed it."

"Did you butcher it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then. Did you eat it?"

"Yes, sir. I sure did."

"And you telling me that's not stealing?"

"No, sir. It ain't."

"What is it then?"

"Improving your property, sir."

"What?"

"Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work."

Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that *definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined*.⁶⁴⁰

In the end, Sixo cannot escape slavery like John, the folklore's character, does in most African-American folktales; and he is physically eliminated by it. Nonetheless, his presence in the novel highlights the link between definition and representation inherent both in slavery and anthropology as expressed in Karl Marx's famous words: "[t]hey

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 226.

⁶³⁹ As seen in Chapter One, 33, anthropometric measurements were common practice in anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century.

⁶⁴⁰ Morrison, *ibid.*, 224-225. [Emphasis added]

cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”⁶⁴¹ It is possible to understand the ‘nowhere’ of Ellison’s Harlem as the no man’s land of (self)-representation where the legacy of folklore is to be remembered as the first artistic and theoretical attempt at self-definition.

Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe. In addition to having to use their heads to get ahead, they had the weight of the whole race sitting there. You needed two heads for that. Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle... In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.⁶⁴²

The myth of the jungle – now in more positive, but always controversial terms – was reemerging in the primitivist assumptions present both in anthropology and modernism during the years in which Hurston was giving shape to her works and the theory behind them but, as observed by Paul D in *Beloved*, “Does a whiteman saying it make it so? ...What if he changed his mind? Took the word away.”⁶⁴³ Thus, one of the main attempts present in Hurston’s work both in anthropology and fiction is to be found in the possibility that the word would not be taken away again because African Americans had the possibility to define themselves in independent terms, a resource that had been always present in folklore and could be expressed in both artistic forms and anthropological theory.

The complexity of this cultural legacy is inherent in Hurston’s choice to represent variety within the African-American communities she studied; apart from being another way to represent the passing of Time and the transformations occurring

⁶⁴¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) quoted in Gates (ed.), “Race”, *Writing, and Difference*, 2.

⁶⁴² Morrison, *Beloved*, 234.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 260.

through it, it can be seen as part of her attempt to “reveal that which the soul lives by”⁶⁴⁴ as stated in her Introduction to the collection. Thus, her decision to provide an alternative representation of relations in fieldwork by introducing the themes of Time and body in ethnography through orality must be read as an effort to overcome assumptions which both governed her research methodology and were instilled in her training as an anthropologist and in her lived experience as an African-American woman in a segregated society. In fact, relating *Mules and Men* to her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, it is possible to notice how categories such as ‘primitive’ and an evolutionist vision of culture and language were present in her intellectual background. Ideas like “[t]he primitive man exchanges descriptive words”⁶⁴⁵ can coexist with and be shaken by the firm belief that “Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use.”⁶⁴⁶

This idea of folklore in the making is probably that which identifies Hurston’s project as ethnography in the making, a project which, through the representation of Time and body, allows the anthropological ‘Other’ to enter the written text as a subject empowered by the oral features of language and its rhythm.

3.4 Stratifications of body and Time

My analysis of Time in ethnography starts from its relationship to the body and connects these two themes through language, voice, and orality. In particular, I would like to consider the three-fold stratification of the enslaved body as suggested by Camp in relation to the three main representations of Time in ethnography delineated by Fabian. In Camp’s analysis, the first body of the enslaved person is the body as a site of domination;⁶⁴⁷ it represents what she calls, using a term borrowed from Michel Foucault, the “biotext” of slaveholders’ authority. This first body can be related to what Fabian addresses as ‘Physical Time;’ in fact, this ethnographic temporalization is

⁶⁴⁴ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 2.

⁶⁴⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) in Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 830. See Chapter Two, 86-89 for a discussion of some aspects of this essay.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 836.

⁶⁴⁷ Stephanie M. H. Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861”, *The Journal of Southern History*, 68, no. 3 (August 2002), 543.

strictly connected to “a system of ideas which include space, bodies, and motion”⁶⁴⁸ which came into being during colonialism in order to “move or remove the other body.”⁶⁴⁹ Through the use of different devices in order to favour distance, “one assigns the conquered populations a *different* Time.”⁶⁵⁰ In this context, Time and space become coordinates of domination interiorized by enslaved and colonized people leading to the second layer of embodiment and temporalization. The second body is, in fact, constituted by “the subjective experience of this process... the colonized body that, in Fanon’s terms, the person of ‘color’ experienced ‘in the white world.’”⁶⁵¹ The experience of the body in a colonized/segregated society could be considered in relation to ‘Mundane or Typological Time’, the second representation of Time presented by Fabian.⁶⁵² In this second temporal framework, categorizations such as ‘neolithic’ or ‘archaic’ start being used as “distancing devices” and “[a]djectives like *mythical*, *ritual*, or even *tribal*, will... connote temporal distancing as a way of creating the objects or referents of anthropological discourse.”⁶⁵³ Through the shift from chronology to qualitative judgment, the colonized person discovers the role of her/his body within the wider society.

Ethnicity and colour of the skin become markers of a different Time within the same society and this temporal distance is organized on an evolutionist model according to which economic status and ethnic affiliation can function as signs of different stages in progress and development. Frantz Fanon has accounted for the role of black skin as a marker of a different (read: primitive) Time in France and its colonial territories like Martinique where the role of the colonial ideology and government was so pervasive that their inhabitants judged themselves according to coordinates of modernity and backwardness acquired from the external, imposing gaze. He observed that “[a]ll colonized people – in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave – position themselves in relation to the civilized language: i. e. the metropolitan culture.”⁶⁵⁴ More importantly, in the passage from native country to colonial France, black people gained a different status in the eyes of their fellow citizens as “the *métropole* is the holy of

⁶⁴⁸ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 29.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵¹ Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance”, 543.

⁶⁵² Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 30.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2.

holies”⁶⁵⁵ and entering it, they were experiencing a change of status and a shift in Time. The status they were leaving in the eyes of their fellow people – but still retained in France – is well expressed by Eduardo Galeano’s words:

The nobodies: nobody’s children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied...
 Who are not, but could be.
 Who don’t speak languages, but dialects.
 Who don’t have religions, but superstitions.
 Who don’t create art, but handicrafts.
 Who don’t have culture, but folklore.
 Who are not human beings, but human resources.⁶⁵⁶

Treated as bearers of a different Time in France, black people from Martinique did experience a shift in belonging to the modernity and centrality of the *métropole* in the passage from the ‘periphery’ to the ‘centre;’ this often meant being judged as a ‘central nobody’ instead of a peripheral one in France, while acquiring the status of a “demigod”⁶⁵⁷ in their native land.

The perception of the body one can experience in this kind of society is certainly very different from the third and final layer of bodily consciousness described by Camp, that is the body as a “contested terrain of struggle”, “as a site of pleasure and resistance.”⁶⁵⁸ In this context, the body becomes a source of pride and self-expression, which can be celebrated as a way of destabilizing the “geography of containment that aimed to control slave mobility in space and time.”⁶⁵⁹ This last bodily stratification can be connected to what Fabian calls “Intersubjective Time”, the framework in which communication is most likely to take place in order to create a shared Time.⁶⁶⁰ Although this model of communication can still favour distance, Hurston’s choice to celebrate the body through oral expression and the representation of voice while including the context of performances in dialogue and conflict is an attempt to represent the sharing of Time between the anthropologist and the studied community during the experience of fieldwork. In so doing, she is trying to avoid what Fabian calls the ‘denial of

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁵⁶ Eduardo Galeano, “The Nobodies” quoted in Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 1. See Chapter One in this thesis, 10-11 for a discussion of the hierarchical notion of culture and its transposition in twentieth-century American cultural anthropology.

⁶⁵⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 3.

⁶⁵⁸ Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance”, 544.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 31.

coevalness', that is "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse."⁶⁶¹ In this context, Deleuze's perspective on embodiment, according to which "[b]odies may be chemical, biological, social, or political" suggests that "the distinction between these modes is not... ontological. It becomes, for Deleuze (with Félix Guattari), semiological, a function of different regimes, different organizations of life"⁶⁶² can be applied to the different layers of Time representation and the different ways of organizing temporal experiences both in social and anthropological relations. As Fabian suggests in relation to Time, this movement is not only semiological, but also political.

3.5 Layers of embodiment and temporalization in *Mules and Men*

In order to probe the significance of this approach to body and Time and the parallel between segregated/colonized society and representation of Time in anthropology, one can apply the correspondences between layers of embodiment and temporalization as delineated in the previous section to the specific texts present in Hurston's ethnographic collection. The first level (body as site of domination/physical time) is signalled by the marking of Time during the day of work at the mill.

Well, we were at the mill at last, as slow as we had walked. Old Hannah [the sun] was climbing the road of the sky, heating up sand beds and sweating peoples. No wonder nobody wanted to work. Three fried men are not equal to one good cool one... Work was too discouraging to think about. Phew! Sun and sawdust, sweat and sand.⁶⁶³

By that time somebody saw the straw boss coming so everybody made it on into the mill. The mill boss said, "What ate y'all comin' in here for? Ah ain't got enough work for my own men. Git for home."⁶⁶⁴

In the above passages, it is possible to notice the influence and control exerted by the white employers on both physical and temporal conditions of the black workers. The mill boss can decide either to make the men work in extreme weather conditions or dismiss them without any explanation while giving them an unexpected day off. Body

⁶⁶¹ Ibid. [Emphasis in the original]

⁶⁶² Dorothea Olkowski, "Flows of Desire and the Body-Becoming" in Elizabeth Grosz (ed.), *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 99.

⁶⁶³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 84.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, 92.

and Time become the very sites in which the dominion and authority over black people's everyday life and general living conditions can be unrelentingly wielded and reaffirmed. As for the positioning of the anthropologist towards the 'objects' of her research and distance to them, the first passage is revealing of Hurston's identification with the workers (use of the plural first person pronoun "we") and her understanding of their condition, regardless of their genders and working status. As for the temporal distance, the past tense used in the recollection of the fiery-hot day of work acquires rhythm and speed through the last sentence made up of the alliteration of four nouns which make tangible the actual conditions of work and their effects on the workers (sun, sawdust, sweat, sand).

In relation to the second layer of embodiment and temporality (body as subjective experience of domination/typological Time), it is possible to analyze "Kill the White Folks"⁶⁶⁵, one of the tales of the slavery period, which have as their main protagonist a slave named Jack or John. According to temporal coordinates, it is important to underline that these tales constitute a conscious recollection of the shared history of the community, that is they represent the insertion of a mythical element (victory over slavery in the form of cultural struggle and resistance) in a historical framework (the recent experience of slavery as reflected in the actual conditions of segregation). Furthermore, these tales are often told in breaks and spare moments during the working day making even more evident the connection between slavery and subsequent exploitation of black skilled labour. In this particular tale, the name of the protagonist is not specified, but its position between two tales which have John as main character⁶⁶⁶ underlines its connection to this figure of folklore.

And dat put me in de mind of a nigger dat useter do a lot of prayin' up under 'simmon tree, durin' slavery time. He'd go up dere and pray to God and beg Him to kill all de white folks. Ole Massa heard about it and so de next day he got hisself a armload of sizeable rocks and went up de 'simmon tree, before de nigger got dere, and when he begin to pray and beg de Lawd to kill all de white folks, Ole Massa let one of dese rocks fall on Ole Nigger's head. It was a heavy rock and knocked de nigger over. So when he got up he looked up and said: "Lawd, I ast you to kill all de white folks, can't you tell a white man from a nigger?"⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁵ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 89.

⁶⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, 88-89. The two tales are "Praying for Rain" and "Member Youse a Nigger."

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

This tale is particularly interesting because it stages racial difference and its interiorization by the enslaved person. The distance between black and white men is underlined by the ironic substitution of God by the white who was, in fact, in a condition of semi-almightiness within the slavery system. This distance is not nullified by an encounter, but by the violence represented by the throwing of the stone: the mythical time of the black man's prayer finds its parallel in the mythical time of God's ironic substitution while the historical time of slavery is paralleled by the historical violence represented by the stone which knocks the slave down. This touch without actual encounter is a result of pervasive control and violence, of constant marking of difference through labels such as 'nigger', which contain a temporal distancing in the social system and are interiorized in the subjective experience of the body, so that the final reaction is the reaffirmation of difference through the question: "Can't you tell a white man from a nigger?"

As for the third stratification of embodiment and temporality (body as a political site/intersubjective Time), a good example – apart from the very style in which Hurston decided to convey her fieldwork data – can be found in the interactions taking place during the day off when the men are sent home by the mill boss.

When Mrs. Bertha Allen saw us coming from the mill she began to hunt up the hoe and the rake. She looked under the porch and behind the house until she got them both and placed them handy. As soon as Jim Allen hit the steps she said: "Ah'm mighty proud y'all got a day off. Maybe Ah kin git dis yard clean today. Jus' look ad de trash and dirt! And it's so many weeds in dis yard, Ah'm liable to git snake bit at my own door." ... "Ah'm standin' in my tracks and steppin' back on my abstract – Ah ain't gointer rake up no yard. Ah'm goin' fishin'", Cliffert Ulmer snapped back. "Grandma, you worries mo' 'bout dis place than de man dat owns it. You ain't de Everglades Cypress Lumber Comp'ny sho nuff. Youse just shacking in one of their shanties. Leave de weeds go. Somebody'll come chop 'em some day." ... Big Sweet and Lucy got out their poles and joined us. It was almost like a log-rolling or a barbecue. The quarters were high. The men didn't get off from work every day like this.⁶⁶⁸

During the day off and the session of fishing and story-telling, the body becomes a site of pleasure and resistance both to inter- and intra-group pressures. In fact, the old woman's request of raking the yard is declined by the younger men who see it both as a form of internalized subjugation ("You ain't de Everglades Cypress Lumber Comp'ny

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 92-94.

sho nuff... Leave de weeds go”) and a denial of the rare possibility to administer their time by themselves. The fishing session constitutes an occasion of celebration of the Body through motion and freedom from constraints and a possibility for sharing meanings and time with other members of the community in the presence of the anthropologist.

3.6 Voice and Time: “the human side” of science

What makes a (reported) sight more objective than a (reported) sound, smell, or taste?⁶⁶⁹

To explore the role of voice in *Mules and Men* is to take into account how authority, either scientific or literary, can construct itself within a text. As seen in the previous chapter, the apparently impersonal style of scientific writing hides a subject who needs invisibility in order to establish his analysis as valid. To question scientific authority means to take into consideration the construction of authorship in writing. In relation to Hurston, authorship deals with both the oral folkloric tradition she researched in her ethnographic practice and with the written texts that are part of the African-American canon. In particular, it is possible to trace a link between slave written narratives and Hurston’s search for authority in her texts.

In this regard, what has to be underlined once again is that visualism is not completely eliminated in Hurston’s ethnographies, but more precisely integrated with sound and motion. This approach to sight represents a different approach to authority that can be delineated in relation to diverse ideas on authorship in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass, as observed by Jeannine DeLombard. De Lombard notices that Emerson’s statement “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all”⁶⁷⁰ is a “transcendentalist version of the implicitly white, implicitly male, implicitly bourgeois universal subject... recently consolidated in Western culture”⁶⁷¹, and she adds:

[i]n contrast to the “embodied” subjectivity of women, people of color, and the poor, the universal subject’s “predominant mode of epistemological engagement with the world is through the agency of

⁶⁶⁹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 108.

⁶⁷⁰ Jeannine De Lombard, ““Eye-Witness to the Cruelty’: Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass’s 1854 *Narrative*” in Baker and Nelson (eds.), *Violence, the Body, and “The South”*, 245.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

reason.” Thus, Smith notes, “[T]he topography of the universal subject locates man’s selfhood somewhere between the ears.” In *Nature* Emerson locates the self even more specifically with the image of the “transparent eyeball.”⁶⁷²

What is at stake in Emerson’s text is delineating “the project of U.S. authorship in visual terms”⁶⁷³ and DeLombard is successful in opposing this “transparent eyeball” to the representation of the eye in Douglass’ *Narrative*. The eye in Douglass cannot be separated from the “historical relations between the black body and ‘scopic regimes of modernity’ in Western culture.”⁶⁷⁴ In his *Narrative*, vision in the embodied image of the eye is inextricably linked to violence and witnessing in person the acts of brutality perceived through sight. To pass from the act of witnessing to the act of testifying, a shift from sight to sound, from eye to voice, is necessary in order to achieve distance from the body not acquiring complete transparency, but at least a lower degree of vulnerability.

Douglass’ eye, in his narrative, is injured during an episode in which he passes from witnessing to being the target of racial violence. DeLombard observes that “this scene produces in Frederick a heightened awareness of the inescapability of the slave’s embodied subjectivity.”⁶⁷⁵ Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” is very far from Douglass’ embodied, vulnerable eyeball as expressed in the following sentence in which he gives account of a kick he received in his eye using the words “[m]y eyeball seemed to have burst.”⁶⁷⁶ In Douglass’ text, this episode marks the end of his status of enslaved person and the passage to the condition of freed man enabled to write his memories of slavery as a testimony to its violence and injustice. The shift away from vision is given also to the fact that, for the enslaved subject, it was impossible to disconnect vision from the body and, in this regard, sight becomes destabilized by its closeness to distorted perspective.

DeLombard underlines that, while narratives of former slaves were acquiring the status of testimony, nineteenth-century optical science “was undermining the reliability and authority of such [visual] observation on the basis of the body’s unsettling capacity to produce its own experiences, its own reality.”⁶⁷⁷ That is to say that the black embodied sight could not acquire the transparency and universality of Emerson’s

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid, 253.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 263.

⁶⁷⁶ Frederick Douglass quoted in DeLombard, 264.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 256.

eyeball and, therefore, had to find another medium of expression for authority. The metonym for authorship becomes voice in Douglass' assertion of his identity "as one who speaks rather than one who sees."⁶⁷⁸ De Lombard further observes that "[p]erhaps, as a voice... Douglass... could at last shed the embodied subjectivity associated with his former role as an eyewitness to Southern slaveholding violence and attain "a degree of freedom" in a universal subjectivity unencumbered by the body.⁶⁷⁹

Nonetheless, Douglass soon finds out that prejudices are present in the North as well and that he cannot escape his body.⁶⁸⁰ What emerges is the fundamental bodily dimension of both sight and voice in African-American literature; as it is impossible to achieve transparency because the (white) subject hidden in it is not invisible at all, but rather employs a mimetic strategy within the text, the possibility for black authorship is linked to embodiment. From this perspective, voice becomes a medium of action in contrast with the limits of observation as passive witnessing of racial violence. In this regard, Douglass becomes "a witness and a participant"⁶⁸¹, using a definition which approximates his position to the role of the Boasian anthropologist in fieldwork. The question of authorship and embodiment is linked to the most important slave narratives of the nineteenth-century and, considering the gender variable, it is important to remember Sánchez-Eppler's observations on authorship in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In fact, she notices:

[r]arely playing on the body of the reader, the slave narrative replaces that body with the body of the author. This is a startling move, since generally the position of author gains its privilege precisely because the text produced occludes the specific physical body of the person who produced it. Inverting this pattern, slave narratives, and perhaps all confessional or testimonial genres, rhetorically create an authorial body. Rather than attempt to assert the incorporeality of authorship, testimonial writing inscribes the author's bodily existence and experience.⁶⁸²

This seems to delineate a tradition of writing in which Hurston could acquire significance shifting the focus from autobiographical to (auto)ethnographical accounts.⁶⁸³ In fact, in contextualizing her work within a canon, it is important to

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 269.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 268.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 257.

⁶⁸² Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 136.

⁶⁸³ For a brief discussion of the text by Katherine Dunham considered as autoethnography, see Chapter Four in this thesis, 179.

consider her instruction in English literature and cultural anthropology, her oral ‘weaning’, and her insertion in a tradition of African-American writing. Thinking about her theory of imitation and the bias of mimicry against which black authors had to confront themselves through writing, her choice of inserting orality in ethnography is indicative both of the awareness of the oral legacy informing her writing and of her desire not to be considered derivative in the writing tradition of anthropology whose authorship was based on an artificially invisible subject which refused her authority from the start while marginalizing her contribution as imitation.

In relation to authorship, the decision to represent orality in ethnography by filling the text with names of people who contributed to it (usually dismissed as anonymous informants)⁶⁸⁴ seems to honour the shared authorship typical of the oral traditions. Finally, ethnography and other texts based on ethnographic data are the ideal media to convey the hybrid experience of fieldwork as suspended between oral and written expression, a practice of constant movement between sound and vision. In Hurston’s writing it is therefore possible to trace the legacy of the construction of authority in abolitionist literature with its focus on the “visual power of the injured black body”⁶⁸⁵, an authority which constructed itself on the awareness of being in the position of “a witness more than an advocate, an authority that produced not Emersonian transcendence but an insistent corporeality structured always through black physical vulnerability.”⁶⁸⁶

3.7 From vision to voice (and back)

“Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.”⁶⁸⁷

How can I say things that are pictures⁶⁸⁸

The others are not any more present in the text the anthropologist offers to her readers than their voices are present in (or even behind) the phonetic transcription of their utterances. In fact, it is because of this,

⁶⁸⁴ Proper names and nicknames are abundant in Hurston’s ethnography. See, for instance, Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 7: “Yes, there was George Thomas, Calvin Daniels, Jack and Charlie Jones, Gene Brazzle, B. Moseley and ‘Seaboard.’” In this page, Hurston interestingly gives a name to her informants and they, in their turn, assign a nominal identity to her. Just after the list of names quoted above, “B. Moseley said, ‘Well, if it ain’t Zora Hurston!’” which indicates the kind of reciprocal relationship she intended to represent in her text.

⁶⁸⁵ Houston A. Baker and Nelson, “Preface” in Baker and Nelson (eds.), *Violence, the Body, and “The South”*, 237.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁷ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

⁶⁸⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 248.

because of this phonic and existential absence that these others can in the end be represented by the anthropologist, for, if they were here, there would be no point in representing them, that is, to stand for them and to speak for them.⁶⁸⁹

Fabian has argued against the preponderance of metaphors of vision in anthropology and their marked inclination towards visualism or synopticism, namely “the urge to visualize a great multitude of pieces of information as orderly arrangements, systems, and tableaux.”⁶⁹⁰ Nonetheless, visualism alone – considered as both “the *ideological* current in Western thought” and a “cognitive style”⁶⁹¹ – cannot be held responsible for the essentialization of the object of observation. In fact, to assume “the political twist which we ascribe to anthropological discourse, visualism had to be expounded in spatial schemes.”⁶⁹² Fabian further notices that “in this tradition the object of anthropology could not have gained scientific status until and unless it underwent a double visual fixation, as perceptual image and as illustration of a kind of knowledge. Both types of objectification depend on distance, spatial and temporal.”⁶⁹³

Ethnography defines itself as “observing and gathering, i.e. as a visual and spatial activity”⁶⁹⁴ underlining, in this epistemological and ideological attitude, its connection to the diffusion of oil painting starting from the sixteenth century. Paintings were mainly used to show sights and commissioned by owners in order to show what they possessed⁶⁹⁵ underlining the “analogy between *possessing* and the way of seeing.”⁶⁹⁶

Significantly enough it is an anthropologist who has come closest to recognizing it... Lévi-Strauss writes: “It is this avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even the spectator which seems to me to constitute one of the outstandingly original features of the art of Western civilization.”⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁸⁹ Jean-Paul Dumont quoted in Johannes Fabian, “Presence and Representation: the Other and Anthropological Writing”, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Summer 1990), 755.

⁶⁹⁰ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 118. See also Chapter One in this thesis, 12.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶⁹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss quoted in John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 85.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Lévi-Strauss sees Renaissance paintings as both instruments of knowledge and possession⁶⁹⁸ and detects in them “a way of seeing the world, which was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange.”⁶⁹⁹

In Hurston’s ethnographic practice, vision as an instrument of knowledge and appropriation is not completely dismissed because of the five senses it is ascribed the power to observe and define. As seen in relation to Douglass’ narrative, though, for the African-American subjectivity sight is not that space of rationality and universality granted to the white, male, bourgeois subject of science. For black people, sight is historically and inextricably linked to the limits imposed by both slavery and segregation and epistemologically connected to the vulnerability of the body and its limited perspective. As observed by hooks,

[t]he “gaze” has always been political in my life... There is power in looking... The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze. Connecting this strategy of domination to that used by grown folks in southern black rural communities where I grew up, I was pained to think that there was no absolute difference between whites who had oppressed black people and ourselves.⁷⁰⁰

Because of the definitional power of sight, Hurston cannot dismiss it from her text so easily, but because of the embodied characteristics of her vision, she decides to integrate her scopic perspective with sound and motion, allowing the entrance of a temporal dimension into her ethnography. Furthermore, vision is destabilized by embodied African-American authorship because, as it has been discussed in the previous chapters, the presence of the black body can suggest a primitivist bias linked to irrationality rather than reason.⁷⁰¹ The possibility of being associated with irrational ways of thinking is apparent in the matter-of-fact way in which Hurston tries to deal with phenomena generally ascribed to the paranormal or the occult, such as her use of the picture of a zombie in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) or in her account of the visions she had throughout her life at the beginning of her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁰⁰ hooks, *Black Looks*, 115.

⁷⁰¹ For a brief discussion of this, see Chapter Two in this thesis, 98.

I do not know when the visions began. Certainly I was not more than seven years old, but I remember the first coming very distinctly... There was no continuity as in an average dream. Just disconnected scene after scene with blank spaces in between. I knew that they were all true, a preview of things to come... These things had to be... So when I left the porch, I left a great deal behind me. I was weighed down with a power I did not want. I had knowledge before its time... I never told anyone around me about these strange things. It was too different. They would laugh me off as a story-teller. Besides, I had a feeling of difference from my fellow men, and I did not want it to be found out. Oh, how I cried out to be just as everybody else! But the voice said No. I must go where I was sent... Time was to prove the truth of my visions, for one by one they came to pass. As soon as one was fulfilled, it ceased to come.⁷⁰²

In the description of Hurston's visions about her future, it is possible to detect a relationship between vision (either physical or spiritual) and a power which is difficult to contain ("I was weighed down with a power I did not want" could refer to the power of seeing and subsequently defining while refusing the reciprocity of the gaze to the object under observation) and voice as an element which prompts to action while fostering movement and activity ("But the voice said No. I must go where I was sent.") Vision is here not the basis of rational knowledge, but of cosmic understanding and premonition, perhaps implying a connection between visual perspectives associated with African Americans and different degrees of 'irrationality' and 'lack of control' which render the mere reliance on vision impossible because of its ultimate unattainability.

Nonetheless, in Hurston's conception of ethnographic writing, vision as appropriating knowledge is present in such metaphors as the "spyglass of anthropology"⁷⁰³ and in her definition of research as "formalized curiosity... poking and *prying* with a purpose."⁷⁰⁴ What is interesting in her use of the spyglass metaphor is that the gaze is autoethnographic or, at least, self-oriented, directed toward the chemise she is wearing (an image for her culture) which the instrument of anthropological distancing allows her to see more clearly. In Antonio Gramsci's words, "[t]he starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of

⁷⁰² Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 41-43.

⁷⁰³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1.

⁷⁰⁴ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 127. [Emphasis added]

traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.”⁷⁰⁵

The dyad ‘knowledge/objectivity’ is present also in her consideration of Boas’ main merits as “the greatest anthropologist alive.”⁷⁰⁶ Following his instructions “to go out and find what is there”⁷⁰⁷, the initial results are, however, unsuccessful. As she admitted in her reflections on her initial fieldwork in Florida, “[m]y first six months were disappointing... I did not have the right approach. The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me... I knew where the material was all right. But, I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?’”⁷⁰⁸

As suggested by the passage above, in Hurston’s ethnography the acquisition of knowledge is strictly connected to the acquisition of a voice as an actual means of contact with the anthropological Other(s). Her gaze is able to deal with distance because it is also directed towards her own self in order to achieve awareness of the intrinsic value inherent in the material she is studying. This seems to be the main role of anthropological theory in her research and writing as evident in her statement regarding the tales she is going to collect. When questioned by two of her informants about the scope of her research, she highlights the central role of folktales, adding that “[t]hey are more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late.”⁷⁰⁹ Anthropology provides awareness, self-consciousness, and a method which – although based on visualistic assumptions – relies also on orality and allows her to shift from sight to voice, as in Douglass’ *Narrative*, whereas observation alone is demonstrably unsuccessful as “[f]or an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known.”⁷¹⁰

The main difference between sight and voice as epistemological modalities is to be found in the different degrees of distance from and involvement with the object of ethnographic knowledge: in fact, vision can be performed without reciprocity and in perfect stillness while the lack of reciprocity stops sound, therefore voice requires a response in order to fulfill its potentialities. By means of these sonic exchanges, Time is allowed to enter the epistemology of knowledge. As observed by Fabian, though, “aural

⁷⁰⁵ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1998: 1929-1935), 324.

⁷⁰⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 127.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 127-128.

⁷⁰⁹ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 8.

⁷¹⁰ Eric A. Havelock quoted in Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 45.

perception and oral expression neither presuppose nor guarantee a more ‘personal’ idea or use of knowledge”⁷¹¹ and they may depersonalize knowledge “as much as through visual-spatial reduction;”⁷¹² nevertheless “[t]he aural and oral must be invoked for epistemological reasons because they may provide a better starting point for a *dialectical* concept of communication.”⁷¹³ At the same time, Yelvington has highlighted the usefulness of the metaphor of dialogue in the study of the anthropology of diaspora and has focused on the dialogic aspect as one of the most important concepts which anthropology borrowed from linguistics; he also carefully evaluates the possibilities of the concept of dialogue as applied to anthropological research, noticing that in relation to diaspora studies, the dialogic dimension “does not imply an equality among participants in the process.”⁷¹⁴ Rather,

[i]t entails... multiparty interactions of material, ideational, and discursive phenomena, among others, in complex relationships characterized more often than not by an unequal distribution of power; a dialogue not between fixed objects, but a process of mutual influence and conditioning that is itself already part of an ongoing dialogic process where ‘rhetorics of self-making’... play a crucial role.⁷¹⁵

In Hurston’s ethnography, the representation of Time is both connected to the representation of sound and to a different notion of vision, linked to the body (not incorporeal) and present in orality. Ong’s observation that “[w]ithout writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might ‘call’ them back – ‘recall’ them. But there is nowhere to ‘look’ for them”⁷¹⁶ could be destabilized by Hurston’s definition of African-American oral language as “hieroglyphics”, which undermines the opposition between written and oral expression, but also underlines the connections between the two:

⁷¹¹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 119.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001), 240.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 240-241. In this regard, see also James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997: 1985), 12: “Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually... it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture). The writer’s ‘voice’ pervades and situates the analysis, and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced... The evocative, performative elements of ethnography are legitimated. And the crucial poetic problem for a discursive ethnography becomes ‘how to achieve by written means what speech creates, and to do it without simply imitating speech.’”

⁷¹⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31.

Now the people with highly developed languages have words for detached ideas... The primitive man exchanges descriptive words. His terms are close fitting. Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary – not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact – must add action to it to make it do. So we have “chop-axe,” “sitting-chair,” “cook-pot” and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.⁷¹⁷

In spite of its hierarchical presentation of differences between more ‘developed’ and ‘primitive’ languages, this passage could constitute an appropriate answer to Ong’s statement on the lack of visualistic elements in orality; it may also be true that the aural is indeed prevalent, but in the particular case of African-American oral tradition as analysed by Hurston, words acquire visual presence in orality through action. In fact, the category of action is what brings motion into visual perspective and ultimately links it to sound and rhythm. From this, it is possible to understand that Time as represented in *Mules and Men* can mimic the actual time of the ethnographic enterprise of fieldwork, but more than that it inserts in ethnographical writing theatrical Time, in the sense of drama. As Hurston writes:

[t]he Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile.⁷¹⁸

Just as the introduction of sound does not automatically guarantee the insertion of Time, so it is possible to free the visual perspective from immobility through action drawing it close to the modalities of representation of cinema and theatre and distancing it from metaphors of still perspectives linked to painting and photography. This conception of vision applied to the formula of ‘participant observation’ shifts the focus from observation to participation and from a theory of knowledge as a result of interaction (and, in this perspective, collectable and recordable) to a practice where knowledge is

⁷¹⁷ Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, 830.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

the result of a dialectical process of exchange in a context where “[t]o do, to dramatize, to reproduce... seem to be some of the elementary structures of embodiment.”⁷¹⁹

3.8 Ethnography and theatre: performance between primitivism and diaspora

As observed by Judith Butler in relation to gender, identity “requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*.”⁷²⁰ In this process, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body becomes both an historical idea and a set of possibilities whose “materiality... bears meaning... and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities.”⁷²¹ In this historical and processual conception of the dramatic body and its potentialities, it is possible to see another means of representing Time in Hurston’s ethnographic writing. Time, though, is represented in the text as sound and act as well, whereas ‘act’ is defined as

a given temporal duration within the entire performance,... shared experience and “collective action”... The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene... As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation... the performance renders social laws explicit.⁷²²

In the present analysis of Hurston’s ethnography, the text is considered as entwined between two different, complementary kinds of performances: on the one hand, the ethnographical performance⁷²³ whose performativity Hurston represents both

⁷¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1988), 521.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 526.

⁷²³ See Robert P. Crease, “Inquiry and Performance: Analogies and Identities Between the Arts and the Sciences”, *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2003, 266: “The word ‘performance’ has a spectrum of meanings, but one important sense in which it is applied, especially in the dramatic arts, is to the conception, production, and witnessing of material events the experience of which gives us something more than what we had before. When viewed in this way, the structure of performance is not a metaphor extended merely suggestively from the theatre arts into experimental science; it is the same in both.” Crease’s connection between artistic and scientific ‘performances’ is of particular interest for my reflection on anthropology as performance in Hurston’s ethnography. As for different uses of the term performance in sociocultural analysis, see José E. Limón and M. J. Young, “Frontiers, Settlements, and Development in Folklore Studies”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 15 (1986), 437-438: “Bauman... usually identifies three related definitions of ‘performance’...: performance as situated,

in the fictionalized account of the interactions taking place in fieldwork and in her frame to the folktale collection and, on the other, the community performances which, through storytelling, produce identity awareness in the group. In the staging of the dialogues and storytelling sections of fieldwork, the boundaries between writing and orality, description and interpretation, become blurred. The process of sedimentation of the storytelling tradition, represented in the tensions between speakers and in their interactions, apart from casting light on intragroup relations and difficulties, introduces “timing and shared time in communicative events.”⁷²⁴ From this, what emerges is the idea that “much of cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative and... this has consequences for the way we think of ethnography.”⁷²⁵ As observed by Carme Manuel in relation to Hurston and Langston Hughes’s theatrical play *Mule Bone* (1930), their main achievement was

[...] to read the culture of nonliterate rural blacks as a text, yet become ethnographers using performance as both a mode of investigation and representation so as to change the “gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of ‘co-activity’ or co-performance with historically situated, named ‘unique individuals.’”⁷²⁶

Here the relation between anthropology and literature, linguistic commitment and theatrical device, cultural and fictional performances, unravel in the fabric of the ethnography as, just like the play, it can be considered “a drama based on a conception of performative language.”⁷²⁷ In this regard, quoting Michael North, Manuel reminds us that, in analyzing Hurston “[c]ritics have noted that, regarding the relation of literature and anthropology in her work, ‘it is difficult to say whether she fictionalized her ethnographic reports or whether the fiction had always been in part the product of ethnographic collecting.’”⁷²⁸ It must be added that, apart from questioning the

ordinary, cultural practice, an approach indebted to the Marxian concept of *praxis*; performance as... cultural displays or... ‘enactments’, an approach closely... associated with a particular wing of symbolic anthropology (Singer, Geertz, V. Turner, and Peacock among others)... [and] finally, performance as the situated interactional practice of verbal art – oral poetics.” Another useful definition of ‘performance’ in the context of the present analysis is Margaret Thompson Drewal’s definition of African performance. See Chapter Four for a discussion of this aspect.

⁷²⁴ Johannes Fabian, “Theater and Anthropology, Theatricality and Culture”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter 1999, 25.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Dwight Conquergood quoted in Carme Manuel, “Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston’s Dream Deferred of an African-American Theatre of the Black Word”, *African American Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2001), 82.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 81.

fictionalization of Hurston's ethnographic reports or the use of fiction within them, it is useful to investigate the role of ethnographic material in her fictional works and theatrical productions. In fact, taking into account some of her plays such as *The Great Day* (1932) or *From Sun to Sun: A Program of Original Negro Folklore* (1933)⁷²⁹, the structural resemblance between the plays and the ethnographic work *Mules and Men* is striking. Of the seven sections which constitute *From Sun to Sun*, for instance, four are present in the ethnography as well: "In the Quarters – Waking the Camp", "Back in the Quarters – Dusk Dark", "Itinerant Preacher at the Quarters", "In the Jook – Black Dark" are submitted to dramatic unity condensing several years of research into a performance deploying itself in the theatrical time of one day. What is also interesting in these productions at the beginning of the 1930s is their role of 'bridge' between two stages of ethnographic research: the research Hurston had conducted in Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and the Bahamas between 1927 and 1932 and her subsequent research in Haiti and Jamaica in 1937. Anthea Kraut observes that

Hurston's stage production... not only resituated African American culture in relation to the material conditions of labor in a rural Floridian community; it also recast dance practices in a broader, transnational framework. After immersing the audience in the ways of Southern black Americans, Hurston's narrative erupted into a display of a distinctly Caribbean dance form, thereby shifting the geographical terrain of the revue.⁷³⁰

As underlined by Fabian, the dialogue between anthropology and theatre is particularly productive as "social and cultural relations are better understood when tensions, even contradictions, between actions and acting, life and theater, are acknowledged"⁷³¹ whilst "[t]he significance of theater in multicultural situations would seem to depend on the theatricality of culture."⁷³² Kraut justly remarks that the significance of theatre in Hurston's particular situation seems to rely on the introduction of diaspora as an alternative to primitivism and a method of investigation of African-American and black Caribbean cultural forms. Kraut adds:

[i]n crowning her vision of black folk culture with a number whose African origins she frequently underscored, Hurston effectively advanced

⁷²⁹ Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, 17-23.

⁷³⁰ Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 2003), 441.

⁷³¹ Fabian, "Theatre and Anthropology", 25.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 26.

an embodied theory of Afrocentricity long before the term entered popular or academic discourse. Just as crucially, she demonstrated how discrete diasporic expressive practices were transported to American shores on the bodies of West Indian migrant workers.⁷³³

In such a context, the anthropologist becomes ethnodramaturg, according to Victor Turner's definition in the sense of a "provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense and a producer (in analogy to a theatrical producer) in the strongest."⁷³⁴ From this perspective, the introduction of Time in the ethnographical narrative with its connection to embodiment depends on the characteristics of performance which does not "simply enact a preexisting text. Performance *is* the text in the moment of its actualization (in a story told, in a conversation carried on, but also in a book read)." As underlined by Kraut, what performance actualizes in Hurston's plays is the passage from a notion of primitiveness to a representation of diaspora which connects her production to the work by another African-American anthropologist and performer, Katherine Dunham. Although audiences were not always ready to understand the nuances present in their works and could finally reduce their performances to within the boundaries of primitivism⁷³⁵,

the turn to the Caribbean in both women's anthropological and performance work... [was] a key factor in diaspora's gradual replacement of primitivism as the dominant interpretive lens for apprehending black dancing bodies. Independently of each other, Hurston and Dunham found the West Indies to be a valuable site for discerning and documenting African influences in the New World.⁷³⁶

To think of language as performative in Hurston's representation of African-American English within her ethnography means to consider language and the process of storytelling, like the body, as "a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities... conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention."⁷³⁷ The staging of social conflicts during the sessions of storytelling in her ethnography and their subsequent rendition in theatrical form, thus, would be a textual representation of this process as communal awareness building itself through time thanks to the intervention

⁷³³ Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora", 442.

⁷³⁴ Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba* (Madison, Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 6-7.

⁷³⁵ See Chapter Four, 180 for a brief discussion of this aspect in relation to Dunham's theatre shows.

⁷³⁶ Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora", 449-450.

⁷³⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 521. The importance of language in Hurston's ethnography in relation to the Haitian context will be discussed in Chapter Four, 196-200.

of historical, embodied subjects who created identities and meanings while arranging in concert sight as a source of power and voice as a way of destabilizing or giving an alternative account to the scopic modalities of knowledge. Hurston's way of approaching African-American folklore reminds us once again of Gates' definition of Signifyin(g) as repetition and revision with a critical difference.⁷³⁸

On the other hand, to think of ethnography as performative means to use anthropological practice as an institutionalized and dramatized mirror of processes of meaning formation in fieldwork settings. Hurston's ethnography becomes, in this sense, a performative as opposed to 'informative' mode of knowledge production, the latter being "based on data first gathered and then controlled by the collector" in which "performances need to be dismissed because they are threatening to any enterprise, project, or institution that depends for its existence on maintaining distance and control."⁷³⁹ As noticed by Crease, performance is a shared event occurring in both arts and sciences; in this sense, "[a] performance... is more than the application of a *praxis*... it is a *poiesis*, a bringing forth of a phenomenon, something with presence in the world, something which can be returned to and which can appear in different ways in different circumstances."⁷⁴⁰ According to Crease's analysis, what dramatic performance and, in this specific case, anthropological performance share is being both "forms of *inquiry*"⁷⁴¹ dependent on a hermeneutic circle in which "[e]ach moment... is already a movement of interpretation."⁷⁴² Significantly, in the passage from ethnographic practice to theatrical performance, what emerges is the function of the Caribbean as a site where it is possible to cultivate "'diaspora literacy' in American audiences, to borrow Vèvè Clark's words for 'the ability to read and comprehend the discourse of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed indigenous perspective.'"⁷⁴³ The 'turn to the Caribbean' as an "intermediary terrain between Africa and America"⁷⁴⁴ will be the focus of the following analysis of Hurston's and Dunham's Haitian ethnographies. The role of the anthropologists within their ethnographic works and the significance of their writings for both American cultural anthropology and

⁷³⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. quoted in Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora", 438.

⁷³⁹ Fabian, "Theater and Anthropology", 27-28.

⁷⁴⁰ Crease, "Inquiry and Performance", 268.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*, 267.

⁷⁴³ Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora", 450.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

African-American diaspora⁷⁴⁵ will be explored in the fourth and final chapter of this thesis.

⁷⁴⁵ Diaspora considered as both a concept and a method.

Chapter 4: “When the anthropologist arrives, the gods go away”⁷⁴⁶: Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham in Haiti

“*Papa Legba, ouvrier barrière por moi passer*”⁷⁴⁷

“Work on a frontier, if you can find one.”⁷⁴⁸

It seems appropriate to start this chapter on the anthropological fieldwork conducted in Haiti by Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham with an invocation they both report having heard at the beginning of Vodoun ceremonies. Papa Legba, god of gates and crossroads, is the first god to be summoned in any Vodoun rite because Legba is the one who can make things possible. Henry Louis Gates describes him as a topos or “divine trickster” derived from the Yoruba myths and recurring in the narrative traditions of black orality:

[t]his curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His New World figurations include Exú in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba (pronounced La-Bas) in the pantheon of the loa of Vaudou of Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States... Each version of Esu is the sole messenger of the gods... he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, ... master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane, text with interpretation... The Fon call Legba “the divine linguist”, he who speaks all languages... Esu is the text’s interpreter... “the one who translates, who explains, or ‘who loosens knowledge.’”⁷⁴⁹

In anthropology as envisioned in the present research, his presence is particularly fascinating as it casts light on the existence of a threshold to be crossed in order to acquire knowledge and understanding, “a liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America.”⁷⁵⁰ Thus, the present research sees the Caribbean as a possible threshold or frontier for both American

⁷⁴⁶ Haitian proverb quoted in Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: McPherson & Company, 2004: 1953), xiv.

⁷⁴⁷ See Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1938), 128- 129. Hurston introduces Papa Legba as the Haitian god who is “probably best known to the foreigners for no one can exist in Haiti very long without hearing the drums and the chanting to Papa Legba asking him to open the gate.”

⁷⁴⁸ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Challenges to Young Poets” in *San Francisco Poems* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Foundation, 2001), 29.

⁷⁴⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989: 1988), 5-9.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

anthropology and the African-American creative arts. The summoning of Papa Legba is a metaphor for the multiple boundaries and frontiers involved in this project: the interdisciplinary distinctions between science and art, the intradisciplinary organization of anthropology, the fragile boundary between participation and observation implied in its epistemology, the frontiers and boundaries embodied in the very presence and subjectivity of the anthropologist involved in the tasks of fieldwork and interpretation; in fact, the border can also represent “a metaphor for psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialised boundaries”⁷⁵¹ as noticed by Avtar Brah in relation to Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of borderlands. Brah also adds that the concept of ‘border’ is strictly connected to the notion of diaspora⁷⁵² and these concepts together refer to the theme of ‘location.’⁷⁵³

Within this framework, the movement of anthropology from the United States to the Caribbean, together with the converse migratory movement of Caribbean people to the United States, can highlight the complex interaction between, on the one hand, the search for African roots in the Caribbean, and on the other, the transformation of the meaning of blackness in the North American context via migratory routes departing from the South of the United States and the Caribbean as well. Cultural anthropology as practised by Hurston and Dunham is here considered as one of the “contemporary trans/national movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital.”⁷⁵⁴ The difference between the use of the trope of the border in the present research and the use of the metaphor of the frontier in American Studies – and in Ugo Fabietti’s definition of anthropology as “a frontier knowledge born on a frontier”⁷⁵⁵ – is characterised by the effort not to romanticize the border as such, but to utilize this metaphor as “a means to reflect upon social conditions of life” as in Anzaldúa’s theorisation of the border. In this regard, Brah reminds us that

⁷⁵¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2005: 1996), 198.

⁷⁵² See *ibid.*, 180.

⁷⁵³ See *ibid.*

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁵⁵ Ugo Fabietti, *Antropologia culturale. L'esperienza e l'interpretazione* (Bari, Italia: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2001), xii. On anthropology as a frontier, see also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: 1983), 117: “[Anthropology] patrols... the frontiers of Western culture. In fact, it has always been a *Grenzwissenschaft*, concerned with boundaries: those of one race against another, those between one culture and another, and finally between culture and nature. These liminal concerns have prevented anthropology from settling down in any one of the accepted domains of knowledge other than in the residual field of ‘social science.’”

“[b]orders are arbitrary constructions. Hence, in a sense they are always metaphors. But, far from being mere abstractions of a concrete reality, metaphors are part of the discursive materiality of power relations. Metaphors can serve as powerful inscriptions of the effects of political borders.”⁷⁵⁶

The interest in the Caribbean area for American anthropology seems to coincide with both the closing of the American frontier and the actual expurgation of the “vanishing Americans” and the rise of interest in possible connections between African Americans and other black people in the American territories. Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Ellen Irene Diggs, and Vera Mae Green are all African-American women who were trained in either anthropology or sociology and had the opportunity to conduct research in the islands of the Caribbean mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. The connection between African-American women researchers involved in social sciences and the relevance of the Caribbean as a source of African continuities in the New World for American anthropology suggest that this geopolitical and cultural area can be considered as a frontier for both anthropological research and African-American culture.

Therefore, the ethnographies by Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham and their creative renditions of their fieldwork materials both in fiction and performance can be used as case studies in order to analyse the role of anthropology as a “frontier knowledge born on a frontier” and its significance for women and so-called ‘native’ anthropologists. In this research, the approach to their contributions in the Caribbean is reminiscent of Talal Asad’s analysis of the relationship between colonialism and European social anthropology. In particular, his reflections will be transposed to the context of the United States in order to consider in which ways anthropological research at the beginning of the twentieth century could be involved in power relations within and outside the US territory. While Asad’s analysis was articulated on the encounter between European social anthropology and the so-called Third World, in reference to American anthropology and, in particular, to its Boasian matrix, it is pivotal to understand the role of anthropology in the study and analysis of so called minorities within the US territory.

The hypothesis here is that, for these African-American women anthropologists, the Caribbean could represent a ‘laboratory’, borrowing this term from Melville J.

⁷⁵⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 198.

Herskovits⁷⁵⁷, where it was possible to examine the potential links between Africa and Afro-America and delineate African legacies in order to acquire a conscious understanding of black diasporic identities and their several representations. The present analysis is also mindful of W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of *double consciousness* which is at work in particular ways when considering the anthropologists' double status of belonging to the United States at a national level while trying to envision a wider community linked to the transposition of Africa onto American ground and their involvement in both anthropology and the arts. Finally, in the Caribbean area, the role of Haiti emerges as both a first example of emancipation and a place rich in myths and traditions of African legacy. From this perspective, the Caribbean is here considered as both a historical-political context and a trope in the discourses of Hurston, Dunham, and US anthropology at large.⁷⁵⁸

4.1 Haiti: an African continent, an American Dream in black skins

HAITI: Good Neighbors (but Queer)

Calypso-like musings of Edith Efron, U.S.- born wife of a Port au Prince businessman, as reported in the Haiti Sun:

ANTHROPOLOGY

Americans are infinitely queer
 Say the Haitians, with a jeer.
 They think in terms
 Of mechanical devices,
 They dislike spices.
 Their wives
 Run their lives;
 And they consider that being flirty
 Is, somehow, dirty.
 Vice
 Does not entice
 The Cranky
 Yankee,
 Who considers license a good thing
 Only so far
 As it applies to a car.

Haitians are infinitely queer

⁷⁵⁷ See Jerry Gershenson, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 127: "Herskovits always saw himself as a professional anthropologist using the New World as a laboratory for testing hypotheses about culture... not as a stimulus to political activity", observed sociologist St. Clair Drake. But Herskovits's research had a social purpose, too. 'He hoped... that one result of his scientific work would be to replace error with truth and thus to increase respect for Africans and people of African descent', recalled Drake."

⁷⁵⁸ For a further reference to the role that Haiti played in the American imagination, see Chapter One, 17.

Say the Americans, with a jeer.
 They eat their salad before their meat
 And refuse the salty in favor of the sweet.
 Most irritating is the patience
 Of the Haitians,
 Who are always late
 For a date.
 And who don't know
 That being philosophically slow
 May be sublime,
 But is a horrid loss of time.
 Haitian habits of driving and joywalking
 Make Americans leery,
 Because Haitians are always trying to disprove
 The "two-bodies-cannot-occupy-the-same-space-at-the-same-time"
 theory.
 And of course the Haitian institution of
 Which Americans beware
 Is the *garçonnière*.

Personally, I jeer
 At both Haitians and Americans, who
 Are infinitely queer...⁷⁵⁹

The anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz observes that "[f]ew countries in modern times have received so bad a press from foreign observers as Haiti"⁷⁶⁰, and adds:

A small, rugged nation, born of an exhausting and destructive revolution, its poor people, disease-ridden, illiterate, and erratically led, independent Haiti gives the impression of having drifted aimlessly (and painfully) for more than a century. Observers from "more developed" lands have had a field day – and still have – bemoaning the evil consequences of a mass of African slaves having turned upon their masters to destroy them and their works.⁷⁶¹

In this context, Haiti finds its location among several possible representations: a dangerous example for other black people in the New World, the first black Republic in the world, the second free Republic in the Americas, a Caribbean land suspended between United States imperialism, European colonialism, and internal rivalries; "the magic island" of William Seabrook's well-known 1929 travelogue or not an island at all

⁷⁵⁹ "HAITI: Good Neighbors (but Queer)," *Time*, 12 May, 1952. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Maya Deren Collection, Boston University, Boston, MA.

⁷⁶⁰ Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989; 1974), 267.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*

according to Maya Deren's definition of Haiti as "a nation of continentals"⁷⁶² characterised, as observed by J. Michael Dash, by "the ruggedness of its mountainous landscape."⁷⁶³ In her 1950 article for *Flair* magazine, Deren was writing for the average US tourist to whom she reminded that there is a basic paradox in contemporary Haiti "[w]hich is this: you have come to an island, and as you accept the hospitality of Haitians, visit them, awaken to the meaning of their ancient culture and craft, you presently find yourself among a people who are no islanders..."⁷⁶⁴ The continent embedded within the island – if it is still possible, at this point, to refer to Haiti as one – is Africa.⁷⁶⁵ Deren's observations on Haiti are also useful in order to contain the kaleidoscope effect which, though fascinating, risks to refracting and diffracting this land, and its people with it, until the point of making them disappear into a blurred image of exotic Otherness. In the midst of contrasts, with the subsequent difficulty in 'telling the truth', Deren finds an attempt at unity based on the historical consciousness sprung from the revolt of the slaves against their French colonizers:

[i]t is difficult to tell the truth about Haiti. There are so many truths, and they do not seem to be part of the same truth, and one is embarrassed, suddenly, to remark that the cliché "land of many contrasts" is smugly entrenched in one's mind... And yet there is, over and above all these contrasts, that certain homogeneity which is national character, that special integrity which distinguishes a people as an individual, independent nation in spirit as well as in fact. The contrasts are between the ways of life; the unity is that they all developed out of a single, basic reason – the spectacular revolt of the Negro slaves against the French which made Haiti the second independent republic of the Western Hemisphere (the United States was of course the first).⁷⁶⁶

It is possible, then, that exactly because of the historical consciousness at the basis of the nation and its unity, Haiti does not contain simply one continent, but two at the same time. In fact, Hispaniola – the Caribbean island housing the nations of Haiti and Santo

⁷⁶² Maya Deren, "Travels to Haiti", *Flair*, October 1950, 98. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Maya Deren Collection, Boston University, Boston, MA. Maya Deren was Katherine Dunham's personal assistant throughout the 1940s. Her interest in Haiti probably sprang from Dunham's ethnographical materials as presented in her theatre and dance performances. Deren's subsequent travels to Haiti resulted in several hours of footage, recordings, and a study on Haitian voodoo entitled *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953).

⁷⁶³ J. Michael Dash, *Culture and Customs of Haiti* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 1. See *ibid.*: "Almost every book written on Haiti makes reference to these mountains, majestic or forbidding depending on the writer's point of view, that dominate the landscape."

⁷⁶⁴ Deren, "Travels to Haiti", 98.

⁷⁶⁵ See *ibid.*

⁷⁶⁶ Maya Deren, "Women of Haiti", *Mademoiselle*, May 1950, 134. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Maya Deren Collection, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Domingo – bears the first historical mark of the European venture in the Americas. The 1492 discovery of America started from this geographical location, but in the particular case of Haiti, the American element also highlights the presence of a mythical dimension not connected for once to its African legacies and Voudoun rituals, but to its standing as either an (alternative) ‘American Dream’ for black people in the Americas or an ‘American Nightmare’ for the slaveholders who still profited from slave labour in 1804⁷⁶⁷, the year in which Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti independent. As observed by Mintz in an article he wrote after the magnitude 7.0 M_W earthquake which stroke Haiti in 2010,

[b]y using the sword against their oppressors, the Haitian people turned themselves into Thomas Jefferson’s universal human beings. Yet they were feared and reviled for having done so. International political, economic, and religious ostracism, imposed by their slaveholding neighbors, followed and lasted for close to a century. Not until 1862 did the United States recognize Haiti. What country that profited from slavery could dare to be a good neighbor? The Vatican did not sign a concordat with the new nation until 1860.⁷⁶⁸

Mintz’s words today echo the preface of C. L. R. James’s 1938 *The Black Jacobins*, his historical account of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804):

In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte’s brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte’s expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day. The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement.⁷⁶⁹

⁷⁶⁷ See J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press, 1988), 11: “If the Haitian revolution was white America’s nightmare, it fulfilled the most passionate dream of black Americans. The black American, himself stereotyped as the ‘Other’ in the United States, was unlikely to identify with the reductionist myths of Haiti’s strangeness. He was more likely to see a war, successfully waged by black slaves against a European power, in admiring and idealistic terms.”

⁷⁶⁸ Sidney W. Mintz, “Whitewashing Haiti’s History”, *Boston Review*, 22 January 2010. Available at: <http://www.bostonreview.net/world/whitewashing-haiti%E2%80%99s-history>. Last accessed 3 July 2013.

⁷⁶⁹ C. L. R. James, “Preface to the First Edition” in C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage House, 1989: 1938), ix.

According to Mintz, these historical facts are still at the basis of recent rhetoric misrepresenting Haiti in the medias: “[t]he inescapable truth is that ‘the world’ never forgave Haiti for its revolution *because the slaves freed themselves*.”⁷⁷⁰

4.2 African-American culture and the Caribbean

Herskovits dedicated a main section of *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) to the aspect of revolt in the experience of black people in the Americas in order to debunk the notion of a supposed passive adherence of the slaves to the slavery system; in fact, although most historians in the United States “took it for granted that the slaves were merely passive elements in the historical scene”⁷⁷¹, he quoted several studies, among which the 1934 *Economic History of United States* by Fred A. Shannon, in which detailed accounts of slave rebellions such as “the New York uprisings of 1712, the South Carolina rebellions of 1720 and 1739, and of three nineteenth century revolts”⁷⁷² had been provided. Another study cited by Herskovits, “an even more recent textbook of American history”⁷⁷³, took into account “the numerous insurrections that bear witness to maladjustments among the slaves”⁷⁷⁴: “[s]ix uprisings in continental United States... [were] listed... for the period between 1663 and 1700, fifty during the eighteenth century, and fifty-three between 1800 and 1864.”⁷⁷⁵

The stereotype of the acquiescent African was often opposed to the myth of the untamed Indian and Herskovits referred precisely to Haitian history to debunk this notion, noticing that “[i]n Haiti... the Negroes were imported because the work in the mines had almost exterminated the Indians, as it likewise did the Negroes who were imported for this purpose”⁷⁷⁶ while, at the same time, he observed that “[i]n the United States... it would seem that Indians had a lower resistance to bacterial diseases borne by Europeans than did Negroes.”⁷⁷⁷ These myths, although apparently opposed, had complementary functions: on the one hand, the narrative of the unyielding Indian justified the actual extermination of Native Americans; on the other, the focus on the passivity of the slaves brought from Africa served a reassuring function which ill-

⁷⁷⁰ Mintz, “Whitewashing Haiti’s History.” [Emphasis in the original].

⁷⁷¹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958: 1941), 95.

⁷⁷² Fred A. Shannon, *Economic History of the United States* (1934) quoted in *ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.* Herskovits is making reference to *The Roots of American Civilization* (1938) by Curtis P. Nettels.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

concealed the fear for insurrections. In this regard, Sybille Fischer notices that “[f]antasy, paranoia, identificatory desires, and disavowal”⁷⁷⁸ had always been an essential part of the economies of slave trade and plantations. Herskovits, apart from giving examples of alternative ways of resisting slavery such as running away, slowing down work, suicides, infanticides, and poisoning⁷⁷⁹, had also recorded the ways in which the South of the United States reacted to the possibility of a slave rebellion in the 1830s and 1840s. Quoting again from 1930s studies of the historical period in question, he cast light on “[t]he constant fear of slave rebellion [which] made life in the South a nightmare” and delineated the contours of this fear by using Carl R. Fish’s words in *The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850* (1935):

Nor was the fear of property loss the only or the greatest of Southern apprehensions. One of the strongest points in Southern culture was in acquaintance with the elements of classical literature. To them the history of the servile wars in Rome was a familiar topic. Nor was it ancient history alone which alarmed them. Fresh in their memory were the horrors of the Negro revolution in Haiti. Toussaint L’Ouverture, who to Wendell Phillips was an apostle of liberty, was to them a demon of cruelty. How far the Negroes who surrounded them, who cooked their food and nursed their children, had been affected by civilization, and how far they retained the primitive savagery they were presumed to have brought from Africa, they did not learn until the Civil War.⁷⁸⁰

The menace to civilization was a priority to place even before the fear of actual property loss; furthermore, the above passage suggests that the question of African-American ‘cultural retentions’, as anthropology would later call them, had already been sketched: was there a ‘heart of darkness’ which kept beating, unheard yet unstoppable, under the surface of Western civilization? As seen in Chapter One, folkloric traditions in the United States came to occupy a contentious position in the anthropological debate on the origins of African-American difference: was there a cultural heritage to preserve, as sustained by Herskovits after 1925 or, as suggested by the African-American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, black people in the United States had been irreparably deprived of their cultures and were, therefore, to be considered as disadvantaged

⁷⁷⁸ Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

⁷⁷⁹ See Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 99-103.

⁷⁸⁰ Carl R. Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850* (1938) quoted in Herskovits, *ibid.*, 96.

Americans?⁷⁸¹ Yelvington reminds us that this debate, which has later influenced the approaches of anthropologists to the African diaspora in the Americas, was less polarised than it can seem at a first glance. In fact,

Frazier adhered to a Herskovitsian view of acculturation... Citing Herskovits, he was willing to admit that African survivals existed in the Caribbean and Latin America, especially in religion... and he attributed the uniqueness of the United States in this regard... to the contrasting effects of the differing slave regimes. On the other hand, Herskovits never diminished the power of the enslavement process in “stripping from the aboriginal African culture” their “larger institutions, leaving the more intimate elements in their organization of living.”⁷⁸²

Yelvington is certainly right in highlighting the undeniable similarities between the two positions; nonetheless, the contours of this debate provide the proper framework for the inclusion of the Caribbean, South America, and West Africa into the horizon of U.S. cultural anthropology. In fact, the doubts cast by the experiences of slavery, segregation, and institutional racism on the actual worth of African-American folklore and its supposed ‘authenticity’ represented a real push towards a comparative study of African cultures in the Americas in relation to their West African origins. In this regard, Greenberg notices that:

[i]n Herskovits’ view the variations the New World cultures exhibited in relation to the different situations into which the Negro was brought as a slave constituted a vast comparative laboratory from which might emerge results of general value to the understanding of the interrelationship between culture and physical form as well as the processes of cultural change. Moreover, such studies would shed light on the basic nature of Negro culture.⁷⁸³

The image which was looming large over the interpretation of African legacies in the Americas was, once again, the myth of the vanishing American: in fact, although Boasian anthropology underlined the importance of environment and cultural change, the notion of ‘authentic’ Native American cultures was directly connected with

⁷⁸¹ Lee D. Baker has rightly observed that the answer to such a question was not merely empirical, but political. See Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 24.

⁷⁸² Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001), 232. See also Chapter One in this thesis, 56-57.

⁷⁸³ Joseph C. Greenberg, “Melville J. Herskovits 1895-1963: A Biographical Memoir” in *Biographic Memoirs Volume 90* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1971), 67-68.

references to a period prior to the contact with the European colonizers. This anthropological approach to Native American cultures implied a strategy of temporal denial⁷⁸⁴ consigning Native Americans to a past “which failed to interrogate the tumultuous history of contact.”⁷⁸⁵ Lee D. Baker adds that

[o]ften times anthropologists perpetuated the idea that American Indians were trapped in time because they were trapped on reservations. The sardonic upside, however, was that Indians transmitted a pure, authentic, and healthy culture to their children; the tragic downside for Negroes was that they inherited a dangerous, counterfeit, and pathological culture from their parents.⁷⁸⁶

Baker also notices that the difference between Native American and African-American cultures was recorded by Hurston in a letter to Boas written in 1927. Although her comments must be read in the context of a first unsuccessful expedition to collect African-American folklore in Florida, she claimed that: “the negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation, being kept pure. His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture.”⁷⁸⁷ What Hurston was here deliberately ignoring was the fact that, although it was possible to trace a moment prior to contact with Europeans for Native Americans, the same could not be done for the cultures of Africans in the Americas: the fact of being banished from modernity through temporal or spatial coordinates (pre-colonial history/reservations) meant that ‘conservative’ Native Americans could aspire to an ideal of cultural ‘purity’ which was denied to “so-called progressive Indians, east European immigrants, Negroes, and people within the orbit of the modern urban environs”⁷⁸⁸ who were “in the process of freeing themselves from the shackles of tradition through acculturation.”⁷⁸⁹ Hurston later recognised that the acculturative process did not mean a cultural loss, on the contrary, it could be a signal of cultural vitality as she wrote to Boas on her return to Miami after a short trip to the Bahamas in 1929: “Now I find that there is a new birth of creative singing among Negroes. The old songs are not sung so much. New ones are

⁷⁸⁴ See Chapter Three in this thesis, 142-143.

⁷⁸⁵ Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 25.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁷ Hurston quoted in Lee D. Baker, *ibid.*

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

flooding everywhere.”⁷⁹⁰ Hurston was starting to become aware of the influence of the Caribbean on African-American folklore.⁷⁹¹ As recorded by Hemenway,

Hurston... found much material around Miami during September [1929]. She also began to see links between Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean folklore. She had met so many West Indians in the Miami area that she was sure “their folklore definitely influences ours in South Florida.” In October she travelled to Nassau in the Bahamas to collect material that would both reinforce and contrast with her previous collections.⁷⁹²

It was exactly the West Indian element which further complicated the position of African-American culture in the United States as, on the one hand, its presence was read as an element of innovation able to modify the meaning of blackness within the US borders; on the other, it represented an ideal of cultural authenticity and ‘Africanness’ against which African-American folklore risked falling short. Hurston wrote Boas that he “might be interested in the Bahamas. The Negroes there are *more African*, actually know the tribes from which their ancestors came. Some still speak the dialects. I know that you were interested in finding out as near as possible the tribes and localities of the slaves.”⁷⁹³ It is important to remember that, as Walter Jackson has pointed out, Boas “believed that African culture had been lost by blacks in America”⁷⁹⁴ although he “stressed the importance of educating black Americans about African culture as a way of increasing race pride and countering the ‘strong feeling of dependency among the best classes of Negro.’”⁷⁹⁵ At the same time, Boas did not exclude the idea that “African ‘mannerisms’ were retained by African Americans.”⁷⁹⁶ The influence of Boasian theory, together with close contacts with both the Harlem Renaissance and Caribbean

⁷⁹⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, letter to Franz Boas, 20 October 1929, Franz Boas Papers, Zora Neale Hurston Folder 2 1929-1931, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁹¹ Ifeoma Nwankwo has noticed that “Hurston’s transnational black collectivism is spotlighted when she refers to parallel beliefs in Florida, the Caribbean, and West Africa. This moment highlights the significance of black racial and/or cultural connectedness to comprehending Hurston’s worldview.” See Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo, “Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston’s Caribbean Ethnography”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 87 (fall 2003), 62-63.

⁷⁹² Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980: 1977), 127.

⁷⁹³ Zora Neale Hurston, letter to Franz Boas, 20 October 1929. [Emphasis added]

⁷⁹⁴ Walter A. Jackson quoted in Kevin A. Yelvington, “Melville J. Herskovits’s Theory of Folklore”, 5. Paper presented to the Workshop on Folklore and the Politics of Belief in the Caribbean, Mellon Seminar on Caribbean Cultural History, Department of History, University of California at Los Angeles, 14 May 2009. Available at: <http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/files/Yelvington-Melville-J-Herskovits-Theory-of-Folklore.pdf>. Last accessed 5 September 2013. See also Chapter 1 in this thesis, 56.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

anthropologists such as Fernando Ortíz in Cuba and Jean Price-Mars in Haiti⁷⁹⁷, modified Herskovits's initial position of full assimilation of African Americans into US society.⁷⁹⁸ Yelvington and Jackson have stressed the role of Hurston – here in the position of subject under observation - in Herskovits's change of understanding of African elements' significance in the Americas:

Herskovits had written to Austrian ethnomusicologist Erich Moritz von Hornbostel about Hurston, his research assistant in his physical anthropology project on “race mixing” and the American Negro. Although she was “more White than Negro in her ancestry”, Herskovits said, her “manner of speech, her expressions, - in short, her motor behavior” were “what would be termed typically Negro” and he suggested that these movements, observed by Herskovits when Hurston was singing spirituals, had been “carried over as a behavior pattern handed down thru [sic] imitation and example from the original African slaves who were brought here.”⁷⁹⁹

It was 1927 and Herskovits, together with Hurston, had been involved in a physical anthropology study “which concluded that American Negroes were, in fact, not even a race.”⁸⁰⁰ The epistolary debate between Herskovits and von Hornbostel was focused on the meaning of motor behaviour as either a product of race (von Hornbostel's racial argument) or culture (the Herskovitsian hypothesis of ‘cultural patterns’).⁸⁰¹ According to Herskovits, similarities in behaviour among African Americans “could not be racially determined but must be due to cultural influences.”⁸⁰² The difficulty in disentangling the threads of these cultural influences led Herskovits, Hurston, and another of his assistants, the dancer Katherine Dunham, to consider the Caribbean as a necessary stop over between US black culture and other black cultures in the Americas and West Africa.

⁷⁹⁷ For the relationship between Herskovits and Ortiz/Price-Mars, see Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Invention of Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean: Political Discourse and Anthropological Praxis, 1920-1940” in Kevin A. Yelvington (ed.), *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press), 2006, 53-63.

⁷⁹⁸ See Chapter 1 in this thesis, 60.

⁷⁹⁹ Jackson quoted in Yelvington, “Melville J. Herskovits's Theory of Folklore”, 5-6.

⁸⁰⁰ Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, 69.

⁸⁰¹ See *ibid.*

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*

4.3 Being possessed by modernity: American anthropological imagination and the Caribbean

In 1955, the French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch directed *Les maîtres fous* (*The Mad Masters*), a short ethnographic movie on a religious sect operating in the city of Accra, Ghana, from the late 1920s: young men who had recently moved to the city from the British colony of the Gold Coast, confronted with the new urban environment, started to celebrate and be possessed by a new set of divinities, called *Houka*, gods of the city and technology who also represented colonial authority and domination. At the beginning of the movie, Rouch explains that the violence during the *Houka* ceremony he had filmed, which expressed itself through a series of turbulent possessions and the sacrifice of a dog, was “the reflection of Western civilization.”⁸⁰³ The possessions he witnessed were, in fact, mimicked performances of European colonial administrators and occupiers: some of the *Houka* he observed were ‘Houka Sarikaki’, the driver of locomotives; ‘Captain Malia’, a British captain who travelled the Red Sea; ‘Madame Lokotoro’, the doctor’s wife; and ‘the governor’.

Although comparisons between two very distant places such as Ghana and Haiti cannot be easily drawn, Rouch’s controversial ethnographic movie works here as a metaphor for 1930s American anthropology in the Caribbean and in Haiti as the particular focus of the ethnographies by Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston. As explained previously, the Caribbean constituted a sort of laboratory in which to look for Herskovitsian ideas of African retentions and survivals in order to envision potential continuities with African-American cultures in the United States. On the one hand, therefore, the Caribbean was studied as a source for ‘roots.’ On the other hand, as observed by Mintz, the Caribbean region had experienced modernity “even before Europe itself”⁸⁰⁴ because modernization in the region had had a definite impact on people, the organisation of their lives and work, and their cultures as “[it] took place in the constant presence of multicultural Others.”⁸⁰⁵ These cultures were characterised by ‘creolization’ which, Mintz explains, did not entail “the fragmentation of culture and the destruction of the very concept, but the creation and construction of culture out of fragmented, violent, and disjunct pasts.”⁸⁰⁶ Mintz considers the plantation lifestyle, in its entanglement with colonial rule, as the main trigger for a modernization before the

⁸⁰³ Jean Rouch (dir.), *Les maîtres fous*, Les Films de la Pléiade, 1955. Film.

⁸⁰⁴ Sidney W. Mintz, “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: The Caribbean Region as Oikoumene”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jun. 1996), 289.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

time, “a modernity that predated the modern”⁸⁰⁷, which went unnoticed exactly because it was experienced in a century when it had not been realised elsewhere. In this sense, “the modernity of the sixteenth-century Caribbean was unique”⁸⁰⁸ and its uniqueness derived from being a place where “the anonymity, depersonalization, and individualization of modern life”⁸⁰⁹ were realised before the times. Thus, the perception of the Caribbean as ‘archaic’ resulted from the decline of the area in world economy⁸¹⁰ and, in the specific case of Haiti, from the one-hundred-year isolation the country experienced after its independence.⁸¹¹ Although Boasian anthropology had acquired a certain awareness of the stratified character of cultures in their historical contexts, the search for cultural ‘authenticity’ was still very strong as was the idea that “cultures vary in intactness and coherence”⁸¹² (seen as inherently positive qualities of a culture).⁸¹³ Caribbean cultures did not meet these standards and had distanced themselves from them for many centuries; Mintz ascribes to this the limited interest anthropology could have in the 1930s Antilles. In fact, “[a]s they must have been perceived at the time, Caribbean cultures represented a fourth category, alongside the genuinely ‘primitive’, the Western and the archaic civilizations: these were the people without culture.”⁸¹⁴ As seen at the beginning of this chapter⁸¹⁵, this same perspective questioned the existence of specific African-American cultures within the United States; the Caribbean with its gods and Voudoun rites, the drums and the dances of possession, thus became a ‘reversed’ mirror for African-American anthropologists who were, in their turn, ‘possessed’ by an idea of anthropology as modern science and of progress as defined by the growing interests of the United States’ international politics. How Dunham and Hurston decided to deal with these concerns is connected with the ways in which they represented and located themselves in their Haitian ethnographies. In fact, both anthropologists found their presence complicated by racial, cultural, national, and

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., 305.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., 303.

⁸⁰⁹ Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 257.

⁸¹⁰ See Mintz, “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories”, 296.

⁸¹¹ See Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California and Oxford, England: University of California Press, 1991), 5. In relation to Vodou, for instance, Brown observes that: “Vodou’s closer ties to its African origins are primarily a result of Haiti’s virtual isolation from the rest of the world for nearly a century following its successful slave revolution.” See also Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 94. Buck-Morss focuses here on the intensification of racism in the aftermath of Haitian Revolution “as a means of segregating Europe from the impact of global events.”

⁸¹² Mintz, “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories”, 304.

⁸¹³ See *ibid.*

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., 305.

⁸¹⁵ See also Chapter One in this thesis, 56-57.

gender affiliations. Their difficult positions as African-American anthropologists and artists in 1930s Haiti will be the main focus of the sections following in this chapter which provide an analysis of some aspects in Dunham's *Island Possessed* (1969) and Hurston's *Tell My Horse: Voodoo Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938), the accounts of the fieldwork they both conducted in the Caribbean in the mid-1930s.⁸¹⁶

4.4 Dance and embodied knowledge in Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed*

But could a civilized person have been expected to concern himself with the savage beliefs of people who worshipped a snake?⁸¹⁷

This section analyses the role of body, or embodied representation⁸¹⁸, and performance in *Island Possessed*, Katherine Dunham's 1969 account of the fieldwork she conducted in Haiti between 1935 and 1936 and of her subsequent visits to the island until the 1960s. Born in Joliet, Illinois, in 1909, Katherine Dunham was an African-American anthropologist, dancer, choreographer, and activist who decided to use her anthropological findings in the Caribbean to create and put on stage a new, autonomous representation of African diasporic identities in the Americas through a series of shows or revues which toured worldwide between the late 1930s and the early 1960s. As noticed by Vèvè A. Clark, "[Dunham's] major works, assembled in a variety of shows on and off Broadway, combined aspects of the American musical and techniques of European ballet with forms and rhythms of traditional cultures to produce dance drama of a characteristic and noteworthy kind."⁸¹⁹ While undertaking her training in dance with the renown dancer Ludmila Speranzeva in the late 1920s, Dunham studied philosophy and specialised in anthropology at the University of Chicago with Robert Redfield while coming in contact with prominent anthropologists of the time such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronisław Malinowski, and Melville J. Herskovits who supported her application for the prestigious Rosenwald grant which allowed her to study Vaudun rituals and dance forms in the Caribbean for eighteen months. Her Master's thesis was

⁸¹⁶ While *Tell My Horse* accounts for Hurston's travels in Haiti and Jamaica, Dunham's Jamaican trip is the subject of another ethnographical study entitled *Journey to Accompany* (1946).

⁸¹⁷ Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006: 1957), 73.

⁸¹⁸ I am borrowing the expression 'embodied representation' from Anthea Kraut. See Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 2003), 436.

⁸¹⁹ Vèvè A. Clark, "Katherine Dunham's *Tropical Revue*", *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Black Theatre Issue (Winter, 1982), 147.

published in 1983 under the title *Dances of Haiti* and held an introduction by Claude-Lévi Strauss, the ‘father’ of French structural anthropology.

After the period of specialised research in the Caribbean, Dunham decided to dedicate herself full time to theatre and dance following the advice given to her by Redfield. She accounts for her decision in a passage of *Island Possessed* juxtaposing Herskovits’ view of her as “the eternal chercheur, the eternal commentator on the flux of people in life”⁸²⁰ that she acknowledges as one personality trait of which she was not aware at the time with Redfield’s who saw “the step beyond the chercheur; another person.”⁸²¹ She recounts how she was induced to choose dance as a profession when Redfield simply asked the question “What’s wrong with being a dancer?”⁸²² which provoked the reaction described in the following paragraph:

I suppose my mouth dropped open because I thought of what I considered the fortune the Rosenwald and Guggenheim Foundations had spent on me, of the first lady anthropologist to camp out with the Maroon people of Jamaica⁸²³, of my baptisms into the mysteries of the Haitian loa... It must not have taken long for my mouth to close, because soon I was in New York, not long after on Broadway, then Hollywood, then Europe and a large part of the rest of the world, with not only the cult of the Arada-Dahomey to serve, but the gods of Cuba, Brazil, and Africa to remind me that they had started it all.⁸²⁴

Nonetheless, she continued to pursue her anthropological interests throughout her life and career and, as in Zora Neale Hurston’s case, it seems appropriate to say that her anthropological research shaped her artistic endeavours while maintaining a common focus on the representative aesthetics of African diasporic subjectivities.

While her dance performances are at the centre of the works dedicated to her life by Vèvè A. Clark and Joyce Aschenbrenner⁸²⁵, this section is interested in the emergence of embodied representation and performance in her ethnographical writing. It is important to remember that, even if one of the main focus of the book is her fieldwork in the mid-1930s, *Island Possessed* had been written after years of touring with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company and the development of the Dunham

⁸²⁰ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994: 1969), 67.

⁸²¹ Ibid.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Zora Neale Hurston who visited Accompong the following year, in 1936, soon followed Dunham.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 67-68.

⁸²⁵ The reference is here to the collection of articles and essays on Katherine Dunham edited by Clark with Sara E. Johnson, *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (2005) and to Aschenbrenner’s biography *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (2002).

Technique, her own method of dance training; hence her text cannot be considered a basis for her performances, but rather a reflection on the relation between those performances and her fieldwork in post-occupation Haiti.⁸²⁶ Her role as an anthropologist and dancer in the Caribbean is here analysed according to Margaret Thompson Drewal's definition of African performance as "a primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed."⁸²⁷

Aschenbrenner has defined *Island Possessed* as an autobiography⁸²⁸, but it would be more appropriate to refer to it as an example of 'autoethnography' defined in social sciences as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)."⁸²⁹ In the field of literary studies, Pratt refers to 'autoethnography' and 'autoethnographic expression' as

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.⁸³⁰

Dunham, in fact, locates herself in relation to both anthropological theory and Haitian culture while creating a dialogue between the tradition of research in which she is practising and an autonomous representation of herself in the process of understanding that culture and becoming part of it. In her autoethnography, the diasporic element comes forth in a twofold way: at a first stage, in fact, her reason to visit Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti specifically, is to study "[t]he dances of the West Indies, their primitive backgrounds, their choreographic and rhythmic patterns."⁸³¹ Once back

⁸²⁶ The United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

⁸²⁷ Margaret Thompson Drewal, "The State of Research on Performance in Africa," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Dec., 1991), 2.

⁸²⁸ See Joyce Aschenbrenner, "Katherine Dunham: Anthropologist, Artist, Humanist" in Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison (eds.), *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 137.

⁸²⁹ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview", *Forum: Qualitative Social Research Sozialforschung*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Art. 10, January 2011. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>. Last accessed on 9 August 2013.

⁸³⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003: 1992), 7.

⁸³¹ "Katherine Dunham Observed in London", *London Observer*, 12 September 1948 in Vèvè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (eds.), *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 307.

in the United States, though, what she creates and performs is a show made up of “primitive and Latin rhythms, Creole dances, and plantation dances”⁸³² blended with jazz and modern dance as it is evident in some of her most famous shows, such as her 1937 concert “Negro Dance Evening” or her *Tropical Revue* (1943). The contradictions she experienced between national affiliation and sense of racial belonging in the Caribbean find an echo in the reception of her dance performances once back in the United States. The shows she created were a synthesis of her American training and her Caribbean research, performative articulations of the anthropological concept of ‘survivals’ albeit hybridized and ‘translated’, but the reviews commenting on her theatrical renditions insisted on her being an anthropologist who staged the savage and the exotic through dance. Clark observes that

[m]any critiques of the Dunham shows fall into a dialectic that originates with Dunham’s own persona (serious or sexy)... The dialectic goes something like this: 1) A serious anthropologist is not expected to play erotic theatre roles in public; 2) folk dance and ballet technique do not mix; 3) folk culture should remain pure of any theatricalizing tendencies.”⁸³³

What Dunham developed was a specific method in which elements of so-called primitive dances were actually the inspiration for innovation in modern dance, showing the transformative possibilities of folklore and its function in the present, but audiences and critics alike were not always ready to accept her reading of African-American and African diasporic cultures.

The title of *Island Possessed* is reminiscent of this ambiguity as it is a clear reference to the myths surrounding the Vaudun rites object of anthropological interest and, at the same time, pejorative evaluation by both the élite governing the island and the supporters of an evolutionist view of cultures and civilization. Joan Dayan’s review of *Island Possessed* has highlighted the quite explicit reference to the 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island* by William B. Seabrook. Dunham herself acknowledges Seabrook as “the creator of the myth of the Magic Island”⁸³⁴, but Dayan’s thoughts on the dangers of Dunham’s recourse to “the strange and magical”⁸³⁵ do not suit her recuperation of Vaudun rituals very well. In fact, while Seabrook’s travelogue had a sensationalistic tone and widely used tropes and pictures which easily promoted the association of the

⁸³² Clark, “Katherine Dunham’s *Tropical Revue*”, 151.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸³⁴ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 20.

⁸³⁵ Joan Dayan, “Review: Haiti’s Unquiet Past”, *Transition*, No. 67 (1995), 160.

primitive with the savage and the aberrant, Dunham depicted herself as an initiate in Vaudun trying to understand its roots as a healing ritual in which the presence of *lwa* or spirits corresponded with a symbolic recuperation of Africa and the actual embodiment of ancestors through dance and possession performances. Furthermore, Dunham was working in the path traced by Herskovits' *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937), his ethnography of the small Haitian village of Mirebalais. In his study, Herskovits was trying to present Haitian Vaudun as ordinary practice with a precise historical and cultural function and in opposition to *The Magic Island* and other writings of the time which, as rightly noticed by Dayan, were "published for the delectation of readers in the United States who sought justification for the occupation of Haiti."⁸³⁶ Herskovits' depiction of Vaudun as everyday practice is counterbalanced by the acknowledgment of the degree of magic present in European religions in the attempt of making the 'strange' familiar while highlighting the 'estranged' core of Euro-American traditions.⁸³⁷

As for the representation of the anthropologist's body in Dunham's ethnography of Haiti, it was functional in highlighting other contradictions inherent in the experience of conducting research in a country recently occupied by the nation of which the ethnographer was a citizen. In *Island Possessed*, the researcher comments on the peculiar position in which she found herself while conducting fieldwork on the island, suspended as she was between national and racial sense of belonging:

Americans have remained a confusion in the Haitian mind ever since [occupation], and there seems little to do about it... Being a member of the race was a distinct advantage. Skin color, hair texture, facial measurements, yes, these are the external part of "race"; but, as Fay-Cooper Cole so often pointed out, race is psychology... I am, however, sensitive to "kind", to blackness in the sense of spirit, a charismatic intangible, and this is what the Haitians and Brazilians and Malaysians and Chinese and those Africans with whom I have had time really to discuss things must have felt, must feel... This "kind" that I speak of is of the human race...⁸³⁸

Her arrival in the Caribbean, with letters of introduction by Herskovits, had already made her aware of her status as a black woman researcher and an American citizen in Haiti. In fact, she noticed: "[m]y passport would make me to some degree persona non grata. I counted on color to offset this, but then there was to offset *that* my sex and class

⁸³⁶ Ibid.

⁸³⁷ See, for instance, Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2012: 1937), 268.

⁸³⁸ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 73-74.

– the student class, very hard to place.”⁸³⁹ Here the ethnographer’s body emerges at the intersection of several coordinates of subjectivity – race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class – all playing a role in her fieldwork and in the reading of her presence within the community under analysis. The alliances she was able to make during her stay further complicated her presence in Haiti; the reference is here to her friendship with Fred Alsop, a foreign resident in Haiti who was difficult to insert into the island’s social, racial, and class categories. Because of this relationship, Dunham suddenly finds herself “the object of discrimination inverse from what I had known in America, because of friendship with someone who was non-Haitian, ‘non’ any one of those forty razor-fine black-white mixtures of Moreau de Saint-Méry.”⁸⁴⁰

Another relationship marking, in a different way, her fieldwork in Haiti is her romantic involvement with Dusarmis Estimé, an important political personality at the time and future President of Haiti from 1946 to 1950. As observed by Joyce Aschenbrenner,

[a]lthough she was aware of the cultural exploitation inherent in much fieldwork, she has shown an ongoing commitment to Haiti and its people, sharing Estimé’s goals. Despite her social and economic advantages, she closely identified with the peasant class, thus defying conventions to pursue her commitment to the African cultural influences that were suppressed by the elite.⁸⁴¹

Apart from his political relevance, Estimé was, in Dunham’s words, “the first in defining the concept of negritude, the placing of the black race in its proper perspective and accord with the rest of the world, a prise de conscience.”⁸⁴² Estimé’s closeness allows her to “[g]radually... [begin] to see things around me with his eyes, with his evaluations”⁸⁴³ although never forgetting what she defines as an “intense preoccupation”⁸⁴⁴ with the object of her anthropological research in the Caribbean,

⁸³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., 13. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry (1750-1819) was a Creole author from Martinique. His *Description de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue* (1797) contains a “‘colored nomenclature’ [which] consisted of eleven categories and 110 possible combinations from absolute white (128 parts white blood) to absolute black (128 parts black blood).” Dayan further observes: “In colonial Saint-Domingue, the maintenance of white supremacy in the midst of ever lighter mixed offspring depended on this taxonomic debasement: a cult of whiteness that necessitated inventing new names for those who possessed ‘drops’ of ‘black blood.’” See Dayan, “Review: Haiti’s Unquiet Past”, 162.

⁸⁴¹ Joyce Aschenbrenner, “Katherine Dunham: Anthropologist, Artist, Humanist”, 147.

⁸⁴² Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 46.

⁸⁴³ Ibid. 42.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

namely “the vaudun and the complex surrounding it”⁸⁴⁵ in its connection with dance and performance. Actually, her exchange with Dusarmais Estimé adds a political dimension to her research and presence as an African-American student of anthropology because Estimé was concerned with social and political issues such as the *‘ti mounne* system (the employment of children as servants, the basis of the Haitian social structure of the time) and, as Dunham recalls, “education for the masses, and shoes for everyone, and sanitation in market places... and recognition of Haiti on an equal level in the rest of the world.”⁸⁴⁶ It is, in fact, in the process of learning from her difficulties in her relationship with Estimé and from the unavoidable misunderstandings resulting from the choices she accomplishes in her fieldwork that she tries “to turn this thirst for knowledge to a way of service.”⁸⁴⁷

The political consciousness she acquired during her fieldwork in Haiti just after the ending of US occupation subsequently shaped both her activism through performance and her involvement in the education of American younger generations of dancers interested in the cultures and aesthetics of African diaspora. In fact, the fieldwork constituted for her an occasion to think about social issues in the Caribbean, envision a connection between this area and African Americans in the United States, explore the Herskovitsian idea of African continuities/retentions in the New World, but also and most importantly, through the recent experience of US occupation, “Haiti was good practice ground for what goes on now between black and white in the United States of America, excepting that the Southern Marines... were... [not] accustomed to differentiating between degrees of blackness”⁸⁴⁸ as it was common in the Haitian society of those days where, according to Dunham’s own memories, “the first social regulation... was to stay closely knit to your own color or degree of black-white blood-mixture grouping – which was actually a caste, being exclusive, endogamous, inherent, nontransferable, immutable.”⁸⁴⁹

Even more tellingly, the anthropologist herself has to find her own location within this social structure because, as observed by Sandra Harding, “[h]ow societies are structured has epistemological consequences... What people do – what kind of interactions they have in social relations and relations to the... World – both enables

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

and limits what they can know”⁸⁵⁰ and the anthropologist in fieldwork becomes part of these interactions shaping her research in its limits and potentials. In Dunham’s case, the ethnic, national, and class elements are keys to her reception in Haiti; in the description of how her presence there could be read by the local population, she passes from the first-person pronoun ‘I’ which is very common throughout her ethnography to a third-person pronoun⁸⁵¹ which shows her distance from such a reading:

I was in the Hotel Excelsior by personal introduction of Dr. Herskovits. It was just the right address for a young woman not yet placed sociologically or socially in the community she has invaded, but who was, more than likely, in the Moreau de Saint-Méry scheme of things, to be classed as mulatto and élite because of the letters of introduction she carried, her serious appearance, and her quantities of baggage. She was without question scholarly by credentials, excess of apparatus, and dress peculiarities – dress more casual even than for Americans, unless they happened to be tourists from the weekly boats, and these didn’t enter into the scheme of Haitian thinking or recognition, except as they affected the economy through sightseeing and at the Iron Market.⁸⁵²

In order to acquire a standpoint in her research, she feels the need to interpret her own presence within such a social structure by observing the fact that she is ‘the first of her kind’, namely all the researchers who preceded her were white and male; Dunham is here underlining the fact that she was probably a novelty for the community in which she was planning to conduct research. She, in fact, observes:

[o]f my kind I was a first – a lone young woman easy to place in the clean-cut American dichotomy of color, harder to place in the complexity of Caribbean color classifications; a mulatto when occasion called for, an in-between, or “griffon” actually, I suppose; most of the time an unplaceable, which I prefer to think of as “noir” – not exactly the color black, but the quality of belonging with or being at ease with black people when in the hills or plains or anywhere and scrambling through daily life along with them.⁸⁵³

⁸⁵⁰ Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 62.

⁸⁵¹ Dunham had used the third-person narration in *A Touch of Innocence: A Memoir of Childhood* (1959), the autobiographical account of her early years. Aschenbrenner reports that when Dunham was questioned about this, she answered that it was a protective strategy towards herself and her family. The author adds that “[Dunham] distanced early painful experiences by referring to her childhood self as ‘the girl’ or ‘Katherine’ and by shaping her memories by means of metaphors or objective correlatives.” See Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 17-18.

⁸⁵² Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 6.

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Dorothea Fischer-Hornung comments on this episode noticing that

[s]he claims she is a “first”, but specifically mentions that William Seabrook, Harold Courlander and Melville Herskovits had preceded her – but they were white and male, emphasizing race and gender as important analytical distinctions. More significantly in our context, she points to the complexity of intercultural understanding due to the significant differences between U.S. and Haitian society in general and racial classification in particular.⁸⁵⁴

The self-definition of her presence in Haiti does not coincide with a fossilized identity, but constitutes a point of departure from which Dunham can have access to the Vaudun rituals and dances as an active participant, on the one hand, while complicating her position as ethnographer on the other. In a certain way, her involvement in Haitian Vaudun is a possibility for acknowledging those “tensions, even contradictions, between acting and action, life and theatre”⁸⁵⁵ through which, according to Fabian, “social and cultural relations are better understood.”⁸⁵⁶ What she experiences is, in fact, a “split in attitude”⁸⁵⁷, because – as the ethnographer herself realizes, she had always had difficulties “to reconcile [such an inner division] in any sort of research into private habits, whether of cult, religious practices, marriage customs, or otherwise. It is the feeling of being outsider within, or viceversa, as the occasion dictates.”⁸⁵⁸ These personal thoughts on her own Vaudun initiation show her mixed feelings about the possibility of being (or not being) possessed by a *lwa*. Her considerations on Vaudun rituals finally blend into an appraisal of the participant observation method in relation to her fieldwork experience:

And when people ask me... what of those mystic or occult experiences I believe in, or why I spend so much time in their search and research, I find myself answering... that I honestly do not know. I am there to believe or not believe, but willing to understand and to believe in the sincerity of other people in their beliefs, willing to be shown, to participate, and where the participant begins and the scientist ends, I surely could not say.⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁴ Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, “An Island Occupied: An Interpretation of the U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* and Katherine Dunham’s *Island Possessed*” in Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (eds.), *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2000), 163.

⁸⁵⁵ Fabian, “Theatre and Anthropology, Theatricality and Culture”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter 1999, 25.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁷ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 106.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

Such a “willingness to be shown” closely reminds us of what Fabian observes about “the theatricality and encounters between cultures”⁸⁶⁰, namely his thoughts about the fact that “[i]f allowed, people will let us get to know them by performing (parts of) their culture. Such knowledge – let us call it performative – demands participation (at least as an audience) and therefore some degree of mutual recognition.”⁸⁶¹

In this context, the body as “the intimate and internal condition of all knowledges”⁸⁶² according to the definition provided by Elizabeth Grosz, emerges as a pivotal element in the production of ethnographic knowledge; in fact, if Dunham is unable to grasp the ultimate meaning and implications of Vaudun possessions at the intellectual level, her physical engagement in the rituals and ability in learning the dances are essential for another kind of understanding, a form of embodied knowledge.⁸⁶³ Such embodied knowledge is, according to Yvonne Daniel’s definition, “a knowledge found within the body, within the dancing and drumming body... [which] is rich and viable and should be referenced among other kinds of knowledge.”⁸⁶⁴ In fact, Daniel observes that the Haitian practitioners refer to a vast array of disciplines such as “history, philosophy, religion”⁸⁶⁵ and many others as articulated by the body “as it grows in spiritual practice over a lifetime.”⁸⁶⁶

The role of the body for the acquisition of knowledge becomes particularly clear in the episode of the ceremony of Dunham’s marriage to Damballa, the serpent god. In this circumstance, the difficulty in adjusting anthropological theory and Haitian fieldwork lead to a climax in which the anthropologist is even more exposed than Ruth Behar’s ‘vulnerable observer’;⁸⁶⁷ she is actually a very vulnerable participant as performer. Dunham does not hide from the reader her vulnerability during the ceremony involving a male partner whom the god will also marry. His narrative presence contrasts with Dunham’s highlighting her inability to rise to the occasion by either intellectual or

⁸⁶⁰ Fabian, “Theatre and Anthropology”, 27.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

⁸⁶² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125. For a discussion of this aspect, see Chapter Two in this thesis.

⁸⁶³ Embodied knowledge, involving both intellectual and bodily activities, refers to a kind of learning which is close to Herskovits’ ideas on Hurston’s motor behaviour. See this chapter, 174.

⁸⁶⁴ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4-5.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ The reference is to Ruth Behar’s work *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (1996).

cultural means.⁸⁶⁸ Her unsuccessful attempt at participation is related to succumbing to an old taboo, “a revulsion toward eating raw eggs”⁸⁶⁹ which she was supposed to ingest after crashing them with her lips or chin and having lapped at the flour in the sacrificial plate. This act would have guaranteed the presence of the god at the ceremony. She tries to master herself in this situation, but her reactions are marked by the awareness of the fact that she has no choice:

I froze for a moment, then went into action, inching and undulating in rhythm toward my sacrificial plate. I reached into it and tilting my head away from the houngan [Vaudun priest] to cover my face, crushed the egg with my chin, praying to some Christian or at least non-vaudun god to come to my rescue, to work some miracle so that the dish would disappear or I would be able to overcome my repugnance, which was augmented by the fact that the egg was not quite fresh. The miracle did not happen... There was no way out... I stood up, my face smeared with flour and egg, Damballa's offering untouched.⁸⁷⁰

The role of dance in her anthropological practice emerges in the moment in which she shows utmost vulnerability:

I stood where he [the houngan] had left me, feeling sick and helpless as tears streamed through the flour and egg. Someone handed me a kerchief, I wiped my face and started to dance. I danced more than I have ever in my life, before or after. I danced out all my anger at unknown things and at myself for trying to know them, frustration at the rotten egg and weariness with strange mores. I found myself alone with one, with another, or just by myself while others clapped and sang and it dawned on me that it was with affection and encouragement. I hadn't dared look at Julien [the houngan], but at last I did. He was puzzled, speculative, but benign. He nodded to me, and seemed to be telling me that everything was well, that the gods were happy, that things were now in my hands, even the decision as to how long we should dance.⁸⁷¹

Ultimately, neither Christian nor Vaudun gods intervene, but it is her ability at dancing which finally saves her while favouring her insertion into the community. While Dunham was convinced that the repugnance towards raw eggs was one of her (personal) greatest taboos, this episode confronts the reader with the crumbling away of an

⁸⁶⁸ In fact, he fulfils the requirements of the ceremony demonstrating the successful identification with the god. See Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 233: “His body rippled, his neck became elongated, his tongue darted rapidly in and out between his open lips, and the familiar ric-a-tic of the serpent god filled the improvised tent. I watched fascinated as he lapped at the flour.”

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

anthropological pillar. In fact, Behar observes that “[i]n anthropology, which historically exists to ‘give voice’ to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation”⁸⁷² as “[t]he tendency is to depersonalize one’s connection to the field, to treat ethnographic work (only a small part of which is done personally by the principal investigator) as that which is ‘other’ to the ‘self.’”⁸⁷³ Furthermore, through the depiction of the ceremony, Dunham is able to highlight the balance between control and apparent irrationality within the ritual; in fact, her own portrayal of herself in the act of channelling intellectual frustration through dance challenges the notion of “black dancing bodies as unthinking, uncivilized bodies;”⁸⁷⁴ the reworking of this idea through dance performance will constitute one of the main links between her anthropological research and her artistic endeavours. In this context, as Daniel notices, dance is not only an object of study, but also “a particularly rewarding mode of access to knowledge”⁸⁷⁵: this knowledge is not exclusively about the anthropologist’s ‘self’ or the anthropologist’s ‘others’, but it is a knowledge about the relationship which connects and separates them at the same time. The anthropological fieldwork, then, becomes a context in which relationships shape the form and content of knowledge, its creation, and regulate the modalities of admission to it. Throughout the episode, Dunham is confronted with what Bhabha defines as cultural ‘*incommensurability*’:

[t]he difference of cultures cannot be something that can be accommodated within a universalist framework. Different cultures, the difference between cultural practices, the difference in the construction of cultures within different groups, very often set up among and between themselves an *incommensurability*... The assumption that at some level all forms of cultural diversity may be understood on the basis of a particular universal concept, whether it be ‘human being’, ‘class’ or ‘race’, can be both very dangerous and very limiting in trying to understand the ways in which cultural practices construct their own systems of meaning and social organisation.⁸⁷⁶

Fieldwork, in this instance, represents that “‘third (or hybrid) space’ which enables other positions to emerge”⁸⁷⁷ as “[r]esearch and performance... work

⁸⁷² Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 26.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷⁴ Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora”, 450.

⁸⁷⁵ Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 50.

⁸⁷⁶ Jonathan Rutheford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha” in Jonathan Rutheford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 209.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

similarly... [in fact,] both are in a perpetual state of liminality and otherness;”⁸⁷⁸ this is true although both the conditions and assumptions of applied research and the personal presence of the anthropologist can easily favour imbalance between involved powers or inability to overcome the unavoidable tensions resulting from the encounter. Fieldwork as third space can be associated with the ‘liminal’ position of the anthropologist in the field according to the definition of the term provided by the anthropologist Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969):

[t]he attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.⁸⁷⁹

Dunham’s liminal state as an African-American woman anthropologist in the Caribbean is underlined by her being, within the community she is studying, an initiate in the Vaudun cult as recounted in detail in the several chapters dedicated to her *lavé-tête* or baptism in Vaudun.⁸⁸⁰ Her anthropological curiosity (what Dunham called “the eternal chercheur”)⁸⁸¹ and her artistic interest in the aesthetic form of the rituals and dances are counterbalanced by the fact that her research is marked by the desire of discovering a history which she not only recuperates, but finally embodies as researcher and recreates as artist. In fact, as observed by Drewal, “performing itself is perpetual liminality, a condition of otherness that is at once repetition and transformation of the past.”⁸⁸² If “[l]iminals’... may be initiands or novices in passage from one sociocultural state and status to another, or even whole populations undergoing transition...”⁸⁸³, Dunham’s trajectory may parallel that of the people involved in the diaspora as a hybrid space in which different African cultures had to face their own incommensurability and become functional in the new American context independently from and in relation to Euro-American and indigenous traditions. Dunham herself provides the reader with a careful consideration on the meaning of being initiated when she states that “[i]t is hard to describe to an uninitiated the process of becoming initiated. Harder still when one

⁸⁷⁸ Drewal, “Performance in Africa”, 7.

⁸⁷⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969), 95.

⁸⁸⁰ Dunham’s description of her *lavé-tête* starts in Chapter 4, Book I of *Island Possessed* and proceeds throughout Chapter 7 ending at the beginning of Chapter 8, Book II.

⁸⁸¹ See Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 67.

⁸⁸² Drewal, “Performance in Africa”, 7.

⁸⁸³ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 159.

remains for years on a fringe border of belief and nonbelief, because the two are so close.”⁸⁸⁴ This suspension between belief and nonbelief delineates what Anzaldúa described as an inner “*lucha de fronteras*, a struggle of borders”⁸⁸⁵ which defines an “‘alien’ consciousness... constantly in the making;”⁸⁸⁶ in fact, “liminality is not merely a medial stage in a rite of transition, but rather it is itself the ‘process of transformation at work.’”⁸⁸⁷ Zora Neale Hurston was similarly confronted with cultural incommensurability during her fieldwork in Haiti; in her case, this coincided with the deterioration of an ‘a priori’ (and apparently unproblematic) form of belonging to communities of African descent in the Americas, as we will see in the next and final section.

4.5 “Let the stranger in”⁸⁸⁸: Zora Neale Hurston’s Caribbean in *Tell My Horse*

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see.⁸⁸⁹

Long ago before he was twenty, he had found out that he was two beings. In short, he was everybody boiled down to a drop. Everybody is two beings: one lives and flourishes in the daylight and stands guard. The other being walks and howls at night.⁸⁹⁰

All translation is only a provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages.⁸⁹¹

Tell My Horse: Voodoo Life in Haiti and Jamaica (1938) is Hurston’s account of her fieldwork in the Caribbean between 1936 and 1937. The book has been defined, from its first publication, as a hybrid text; Elmer Davis, in his 1938 review, described it as “a curious mixture of remembrances, travelogue, sensationalism, and anthropology.”⁸⁹²

⁸⁸⁴ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 105.

⁸⁸⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 77.

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁷ Colin Turnbull quoted in Drewal, “Performance in Africa”, 7.

⁸⁸⁸ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 12.

⁸⁸⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1990: 1937), 14.

⁸⁹⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses Man of the Mountain* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991: 1939), 60.

⁸⁹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 75.

⁸⁹² Elmer Davis, “Review: Tell My Horse”, *Saturday Review*, October 15, 1938 in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (eds.), *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 24. Davis adds: “The remembrances are vivid, the travelogue tedious, the sensationalism reminiscent of Seabrook, and the anthropology a melange of misinterpretation and exceedingly good folklore”. See *ibid.*

The text is divided into three sections; the first one is dedicated to Hurston's fieldwork in Jamaica, the other two are an account of her Haitian experience, distinguishing between her views on Haitian politics and history and her research on Voodoo. The comments on both Jamaican and Haitian societies have always been quite problematic for her readers because of her judgments on sexism and cultural subservience towards Great Britain in Jamaica, corrupted politics in Haiti, and her praise of the US occupation which had ended two years before her period of research in the island.

It is possible to trace at least two main elements of continuity between Hurston's experience of research in the South of the United States as presented in *Mules and Men* and her subsequent ethnography of the Caribbean. Such continuities operate on two levels: at the level of political imagination, in relation to the possible association between the small-scale ideal of independence of the self-governing town of Eatonville, the place in which Hurston grew up, and the Republic of Haiti as echoed in Nanny's words quoted at the beginning of this section; at the cultural level, the continuities can be traced in the practice of Hoodoo which connects Hurston's experience in New Orleans with her further research in Haiti. At the beginning of the Hoodoo section in *Mules and Men*, Hurston defined New Orleans as "the hoodoo capital of America"⁸⁹³ where "[g]reat names in rites that vie those of Hayti in deeds... keep alive the powers of Africa."⁸⁹⁴ As for this second level, signs of connection can be found more easily if a wider framework and a more inclusive idea of religious experience are taken into account; in fact, if Hurston saw Hoodoo as a survival strategy of African legacy, she also envisaged elements of rebellion in the African-American experience of Christianity as shown in her 1940 report on the Seventh Day Church of God of Beau Fort, South Carolina, when she observes that the church represents "a revolt against the white man's view of religion which has been so generally accepted by the literate Negro, and is therefore a version to the more African form of expression."⁸⁹⁵ The connection Hurston envisaged between Hoodoo and Christianity is further articulated in the following passage taken from *Mules and Men*:

Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its

⁸⁹³ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "Ritualistic Expression from the Life of the Communicants of the Seventh Day Church of God. Beaufort, South Carolina", circa 1940, Margaret Mead Papers and South Pacific Ethnographic Archives, 1838-1996, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself, such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.⁸⁹⁶

Although areas of affiliation between Hurston and the subject of her research in the Caribbean are certainly traceable, the controversial issues of identity, difference, and sense of belonging already sketched in *Mules and Men* are further complicated in her ethnographic expedition to Jamaica and Haiti. In this context, Jamaica – as her first stage of research in the Caribbean – seems to have a double function in *Tell My Horse*: on the one hand, the English language shared with the United States locates the island as a sort of linguistic bridge which allows Hurston to cross the Gulf of Mexico towards Haiti; on the other, it complicates the question of racial belonging as it sketches Jamaican identity at a crossroad between a sort of invincible ‘Africanness’ as embodied in the Maroons of Accompong and the desire for ‘whiteness’ and ‘Britishness’ observed by Hurston in the urban centres of the island which she defines as “the land where the rooster lays an egg”⁸⁹⁷ where “the aim of everybody [is] to talk English, act English and look English.”⁸⁹⁸ Although this is a clear criticism directed towards the Jamaican society of the time, her thoughts on the similar position of the United States counterbalance her judgement. In fact, she states that Jamaica, “[b]eing an English colony, it is very British. Colonies always do imitate the mother country more or less. For instance some Americans are still aping the English as best as they can even though they have had one hundred and fifty years in which to recover.” Such a statement, as seen in the previous analysis of her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression”⁸⁹⁹, has the power to revert the rhetoric ascribing to African Americans a derivational and imitative culture; moreover, it underlines a degree of uncertainty in the construction of the same Euro-American identity⁹⁰⁰ which, in her view, was suffering from some kind of cultural dependence on its former colonizer. It is possible to characterise this initial statement as a sign of her awareness that what she wrote could be read in terms of racialised notions of blackness; throughout the text she will struggle to maintain a balance with mixed results.

Because of its textual instability, the value of the analysis in *Tell My Horse* has been discussed by scholars of Hurston’s work: in his biography of Hurston, Hemenway

⁸⁹⁶ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.

⁸⁹⁷ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 6.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ See Chapter 2 in this thesis, 86-90.

⁹⁰⁰ See Chapter 1 in this thesis, 40.

called it her “poorest book, chiefly because of its form”⁹⁰¹ and set the tone of the debate around its duality in terms of its inadequate political analysis “often of a naïve sort, with superficial description of West Indian curiosities”⁹⁰² opposed to “[t]he voodoo sections [which], by contrast, are vivid and exciting, despite the confusing accumulation of ceremonies and gods.”⁹⁰³ In the 1930s, the book had already been charged of dualism, but of another kind: focusing only on Voodoo, Davis saw in it a synthesis between Seabrook’s sensationalism and Herskovits’ presentation of the religion “in its coldest mathematical terms;”⁹⁰⁴ in such a hybrid attempt, the reviewer detected “a constant conflict between anthropological truth and taletelling.”⁹⁰⁵ The following year, the African-American historian Carter G. Woodson reviewed the work in positive terms underlining the fact that “Zora Neale Hurston as a writer is almost *sui generis*. She is regarded as a novelist, but at the same time she is more of an anthropologist than a novelist.”⁹⁰⁶ He described the book as “convincing evidence of the transplantation of African culture to America... an important chapter in the conflict and fusion of cultures.”⁹⁰⁷

More recent critiques have mainly been moved from the two poles conceptualized by Hemenway after Hurston’s revival from the late 1970s by focusing on either her interesting work on Voodoo or on her patronising attitude towards Haiti. In the 1980s, Gwendolyn Mikell tried to envision a connection between the two aspects suggesting that “[i]t was her understanding of the mulatto/black class and culture conflicts which... [she] used as an introductory theme in her discussion of the role of Voodoo in Haitian society”⁹⁰⁸ while pointing to a third kind of dualism when she noticed that “Hurston’s Haitian ethnography is... a delicate balance between the calm insider’s and the agitated outsider’s perspective.”⁹⁰⁹ In the 1990s, while Dash saw some of Hurston’s comments as examples of “the black American imagination at its least generous”⁹¹⁰, Wendy Dutton focused on the connection between Voodoo and invisibility commenting on Renato Rosaldo’s reading of Hurston’s two-sided status by

⁹⁰¹ Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 248.

⁹⁰² *Ibid.*, 249.

⁹⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁴ Davis, “Review: Tell My Horse” in Gates and Appiah (eds.), *Critical Perspectives*, 25.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁶ Carter G. Woodson, “Review: *Tell My Horse* by Zora Neale Hurston”, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. 1939), 116.

⁹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹⁰⁸ Gwendolyn Mikell, “When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston’s Haitian Anthropology”, *Phylon* (1960-), Vol. 43, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1982), 225.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹¹⁰ Dash, *Haiti and the United States*, 59.

use of the figure of the “[t]wo-headed doctor... [or] voodoo doctor...[,] *bocor*...[,] *houngan*.”⁹¹¹ In even more recent times, Annette Trefzer has suggested other possible connections between the two poles of Hemenway’s analysis, by casting light on the polysemous nature of the text “[s]ituated among descriptive ethnography, political commentary, and colourful travelogue.”⁹¹² She finds an explanation for what she defines as a general and political ambiguity of the text in Hurston’s position “[a]s a black American ethnographer working on the cultures of the Caribbean... [who] seems caught between defending the U.S. imperial ‘possession’ of Haiti and simultaneously critiquing it by highlighting... Haitian voodoo rituals as a strategy of resistance to colonial politics.”⁹¹³ Amy Fass Emery, on the other hand, identifies as “[t]he Other story told in Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*... that of the author’s struggle against being rendered voiceless.”⁹¹⁴ Thus, the picture of a zombie in which Hurston took particular pride, would represent “the uncanny return in the text of fears that Hurston tries to repress – of the dispossession of voice and the loss of the self’s autonomy through submission to the will of others.”⁹¹⁵ The possible loss of voice should be read from the perspective suggested by Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo who, going back to Mikell’s insider/outsider argument, has read *Tell My Horse* as a text in which multiple voices intersect, “written simultaneously from the perspective of an initiated insider and an observing anthropologist as well as from the perspective of a national outsider and a racial insider.”⁹¹⁶ Finally, Leigh Anne Duck has proposed a reading of Hurston’s political commentary as “a conscious... response to developments in Haitian cultural and political thought”⁹¹⁷ with which she could not agree because of a substantial collusion between folklore and “an authoritarian and racially essentialist political ideology”⁹¹⁸ emerging in the Haitian society of the time. In the present study, two attempts are made in order to articulate an analysis of Hurston’s Haitian ethnography: first the Caribbean, and Haiti in particular, is considered as the place where Hurston has to renegotiate her notion of blackness; second, the impossibility of sharing a common

⁹¹¹ Wendy Dutton, “The Problem of Invisibility: Voodoo and Zora Neale Hurston”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), 138.

⁹¹² Annette Trefzer, “Possessing the Self: Caribbean Identities in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*”, *African American Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), 299.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁴ Amy Fass Emery, “The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*”, *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Fall, 2005), 327.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁹¹⁶ Nwankwo, “Insider and Outsider, Black and American”, 63.

⁹¹⁷ Leigh Anne Duck, “‘Rebirth of a Nation’: Hurston in Haiti”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 117, No. 464 (Spring, 2004), 127.

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

language with the subjects of her study in Haiti seriously complicates her methodological approach in fieldwork.

In her article “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928), Hurston argued that she did not live her being black and American as an inner contradiction asserting that she experienced “no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored.”⁹¹⁹ She refused to consider herself as “tragically colored”⁹²⁰ while constructing her argument against the members of “the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all about it,”⁹²¹ according to her reading, these people saw blackness as an irreversible mark of social disadvantage and cultural deprivation. Duck has commented on Hurston’s claims as expressing a tension with Du Bois’ concept of ‘double consciousness’⁹²², but if Hurston’s view is analysed in the context delineated in Chapter One, it is possible to think that she was referring to the representatives of the Chicago School of Sociology who saw African Americans as the bearers of a defective and deviant culture affected by the historical conditions of slavery and segregation and by the subsequent deprivations at the social and economical level. Her vision and knowledge of folklore sharply contrasted with this reading of the African-American experience; in light of all this, her claim of an unproblematic hyphenated identity could be the expression of a reading of black culture which she had tried to integrate successfully both in her public persona and in her art. Nonetheless, once she was confronted with a wider definition of both ‘Africa’ and ‘America’ in the Caribbean, the balance between racial and national sense of belonging was probably complicated by the international politics of her country and by her commitment to anthropology. As noticed by Mikell in reference to *Tell My Horse*, “[o]ne senses within Hurston’s work an inherent conflict which derives from the fact of her blackness: an identification with the people she studies... as well as an intellectual separation from them.”⁹²³ Although probably reluctant to admit it, it was probably in Haiti that she could not deny any longer the implications and the intimate meaning of ‘double consciousness;’ at least in the ways the idea could affect her own research and fieldwork.

⁹¹⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”, *The World Tomorrow*, May 1928 in Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Literary Classics, 1995), 829.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 827.

⁹²¹ *Ibid.*

⁹²² See Duck, “‘Rebirth of a Nation’”, 130.

⁹²³ Mikell, “When Horses Talk”, 222.

In this regard, the linguistic element is pivotal in Haiti: language in *Mules and Men* was not only an object of interest for her, but also her method, her particular approach to African-American folklore. In relation to *Mules and Men*, Emery suggests that “[i]n... her ‘one recognized ethnography’..., Hurston presented black folklore of the South as a language system used to empower the black self in a cultural milieu where blacks were subordinate.”⁹²⁴ Content could not be separated by the form in which it had been originally conveyed without seriously compromising its meaning; the effort in representing the African-American oral speech from Florida in a written ethnography was sustained by both aesthetic and anthropological requirements. The same Boasian view of culture had been influenced by and modelled on language⁹²⁵, but in Hurston’s case language was more than a cultural mould: apart from being the medium in which she artistically excelled, it was by sharing the same language with the community in which she studied that she guaranteed the presence of a bond in her fieldwork. ‘Barnardese’⁹²⁶, the speech of academia, was a foreign language in Eatonville, Polk County, and the Everglades: her notion of whole African-American identity was based on a linguistic competence which included paralinguistic communication, Signifyin(g), and the understanding of the role that single tales had within the wider body of folklore. In Haiti this was not possible: although she studied Creole and could certainly work with it, it is unlikely that she could acquire the same kind of language proficiency she had had within the communities of Florida and Louisiana. If patterns of distance could be traced in those contexts as well⁹²⁷, language in Haiti probably constituted a barrier not only between Hurston and the subject of her analysis, but also between herself and her methodological approach to fieldwork research.

From this perspective, Voodoo functions as an alternative language, the realm where her anthropological research can find a dimension bringing it closer to the one in *Mules and Men*.⁹²⁸ As observed by Dunham, in fact, in Voodoo, “[t]he language barrier, my rudimentary creole, was not as important as one would have thought, there having always been a language barrier between the widely conglomerate tribal groups of

⁹²⁴ Emery, “The Zombie In/As the Text”, 327.

⁹²⁵ See Chapter One in this thesis, 26.

⁹²⁶ See Chapter Two, 109.

⁹²⁷ For a discussion of this, see Chapter Two in this thesis.

⁹²⁸ Nwankwo notices that “[i]n *Mules and Men*, Hurston elides the regional difference between herself and the blacks of New Orleans by focusing on religious commonality. Similarly, in the Haiti section of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston represents religion as a way of minimizing national differences”, but “[r]eligion alone is not enough to detach her from her Americanness, her status as an anthropologist, or to erase the impact of either on her attitude toward Haitian religion.” See Nwankwo, “Insider and Outsider, Black and American”, 65.

slaves.”⁹²⁹ In his Foreword to the 1990 edition of *Tell My Horse*, Ishmael Reed focuses again on Voodoo as “less a religion than the common language of slaves from different African tribes;”⁹³⁰ this might be the reason why the Voodoo section of *Tell My Horse* has always been considered the most accomplished while the previous parts which present Hurston’s own commentary on the island are rather characterised from a not completely successful attempt at bonding with a group of people: differently than in *Mules and Men*, in fact, she represents herself not within a community, but often in dialogue with single informants with whom she sometimes finds herself at odds. The absence of folklore in the Haitian section of *Tell My Horse* is even more evident when the book is compared with *Ainsi parla l’oncle (So Spoke the Uncle)* written in 1928 by the prominent Haitian anthropologist Jean-Price Mars. Magdaline W. Shannon has defined the work as “a book demonstrating how the meaning of African origins and the New World environment had shaped the Haitian political and sociocultural system.”⁹³¹ In a way, Price-Mars was for Haiti what Hurston had been for Florida: a champion of folklore against the detractors who, in this case, belonged to the elite governing the island.⁹³² As Hurston only partially shared a language with the subject of her research, tales are not central in her ethnography of Haiti. Performance and the body as experienced in the Voodoo rituals become her point of contact with the local culture and the main connection between the island and her background in the United States. In her case, though, the lack of bonding at the linguistic level as a shared, alternative way to read Haiti’s history and its politics, must have created that estrangement which favoured judgments from the nationalistic side of her personality.

Her reading of Caribbean societies as chauvinistic, racist, and in the case of Haiti, in need of intervention from the United States, can be furthermore contextualized in the light of the literary works she wrote while in the Caribbean and just after her return in the United States. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was conceived and written during Hurston’s fieldwork in Haiti⁹³³ while *Moses Man of the Mountain* was published in 1937; in the novel Moses’ Biblical figure becomes central for the African-American identity in the context of the African diaspora in the Americas. Moses is a man and a

⁹²⁹ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 107.

⁹³⁰ Ishmael Reed, “Foreword” in *Tell My Horse*, xiii.

⁹³¹ Magdaline W. Shannon, *Jean-Price Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation 1915-1935* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), xii.

⁹³² See Robert Cornevin, “Présentation.” In Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (Montréal, Canada: Lémeac, 1973: 1928), 37.

⁹³³ See Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990: 1942), 155.

god at the same time, a Voodoo doctor or *houngan* who acquires infinite power throughout the story and his power is strictly related to language. It could be appropriate, therefore, to read her statements regarding Caribbean society and politics in relation to what she realised in these two novels: in fact, although she bitterly criticised the treatment of women in Jamaican society and the divisions on the basis of colour in Haiti, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she represents these attitudes within African-American communities in the South of the United States while rewriting themes specific to Haitian Voodoo.⁹³⁴ As for *Moses Man of the Mountain*, the novel epitomizes her positive view of Voodoo described in *Tell My Horse* as “the old, old, mysticism of the world in African terms... a religion of creation and life”⁹³⁵ in stark contrast with all the negative or exotic depictions of the cult which had been spread through social sciences and popular culture alike.⁹³⁶ By inserting her anthropological fieldwork and data in the context of these two novels, the boundaries between the Caribbean and Afro-America start to appear as porous and blurred.

An important statement about language and voice in fieldwork also seems to emerge from the analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in connection with *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Hurston's first novel, in the context of her anthropological research in Florida and Haiti. Mary Helen Washington has, in fact, analysed the two novels in relation to the emergence of the female hero and “two problematic relationships... in... [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*]: women's relationship to the community and women's relationship to language.”⁹³⁷ Washington particularly criticises feminist readings focusing on the novel as “an expression of female power”⁹³⁸ while she states that the text “represents women's exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech”⁹³⁹ in contrast with the character of John in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as a prototype of articulate folk hero.⁹⁴⁰ Although it is certainly correct to read the two novels in relation to the manifest coordinates of gender, my hypothesis is here that Hurston was actually ‘translating’ uncertainties in relation to both gender and race as experienced in her fieldwork; in this reading, then, John and Janie would both stand as

⁹³⁴ A discussion of the role of Haitian folklore in the novel is provided by the essays in Lavinia Delois Jennings (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

⁹³⁵ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 113.

⁹³⁶ See Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 249: “By stressing its religious nature, *Tell My Horse* dignifies voodoo worship, removing it from the lurid and sensational associations held by the popular mind.”

⁹³⁷ Mary Helen Washington, “‘I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands:’ Emergent Female Hero.” In Gates and Appiah (eds.), *Critical Perspectives*, 98.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁰ See *ibid.*

fictional alternatives to Hurston as ethnographer; John Pearson would represent an ideal of easy integration within the studied community by way of oral speech⁹⁴¹ while Janie Crawford would mirror the position of the ethnographer in Haiti who, confronted with the oral foreignness of Creole, might have started to doubt “the relevance of oral speech”⁹⁴² and opted for focusing on the importance of experience above words (as in the practice of Voodoo). This attitude would be articulated in Janie’s famous words to her best friend towards the end of the novel “Pheoby you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there”⁹⁴³, a fictional echo of the concept of “being there” as later articulated by Clifford Geertz. In this regard, Geertz observes that

[t]he ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly “been there.”⁹⁴⁴

As for *Tell My Horse*, the reader is left wondering if Hurston moved her comments and judgements on the ground of a racial bond she might have taken for granted while in the United States and had to learn to renegotiate while in Haiti as this connection was, at least in part, dependent on a very particular notion of language.⁹⁴⁵ As suggested above, Voodoo probably functions, therefore, as an alternative link between her experience in the South of the United States and her participation in Haitian rituals; nonetheless the cult is characterised, in its essence, by inchoate moments which cannot be conveyed into words.⁹⁴⁶ Hurston found herself dealing with *langage*, “a mixture of pure African languages and dialects of the surviving tribal groupings represented in Haiti”⁹⁴⁷, silence, and “the inchoate”⁹⁴⁸, that which cannot be “fully grasped”⁹⁴⁹, but can

⁹⁴¹ As seen in Chapter Two and Three, such an ideal had already been undermined in *Mules and Men*.

⁹⁴² Washington, “‘I Love the Way’”, 105.

⁹⁴³ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 183.

⁹⁴⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008: 1988), 4-5.

⁹⁴⁵ In this context, we should read the change in style observed by Duck. See Duck, “‘Rebirth of a Nation’”, 135: “in *Mules and Men*..., rather than providing authoritative commentary concerning Southern African American life, Hurston describes her participation in that life... In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston identifies herself insistently with non-Caribbean readers, configuring herself as the agent of an outside group’s gaze.”

⁹⁴⁶ As noticed by Nwankwo about *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s relationship to Voodoo is also characterised by “the tension between her insider’s silence and her desire to reveal completely.” Nwankwo adds that “Hurston tells us that she has gained insider’s knowledge, but then she withholds it from us” underlining the role of silence in the account of Voodoo practices. See Nwankwo, “Insider and Outsider, Black and American”, 59.

⁹⁴⁷ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 107.

find expression through performance. According to Drewal, inchoateness or “obscurity... is born of the duplicity of language, the conflict of social roles in life, and the idiosyncrasies of experience and its interpretation.”⁹⁵⁰ As for silence, Hurston, like Dunham, could probably have sensed that “[d]efining the indefinable is a precious waste of time”⁹⁵¹ while, as a Voodoo initiate, there were things she was not supposed to tell because there were “things [which] were good to know and... things [which] were not.”⁹⁵²

Even the most dreaded deed related to Voodoo, the cannibalism associating Haitians with savagery and heathenism, could have been a result of the misunderstanding of a metaphor. In her chapter dedicated to the Secte Rouge, one of Haiti’s secret societies, which Hurston explains to have been mistakenly associated with Voodoo, she is confronted with an explanation of Haitian uses of metaphor by a member of the elite:

He... accepted the rum and then explained to me with all the charm that an upper class Haitian is so full of, that the peasants of Haiti were a poetical group. They loved the metaphor and the simile. They had various figures of speech that could easily be misunderstood by those who did not know their ways. For example: It was the habit of the peasant to say “mange’ moun” (eat a man) when he really meant to kill. Had I never heard the Haitian threat “map mange’ ou sans sel” (I’ll eat you without salt)? It is of course the same exaggerated threat that is commonly used in the United States by white and black. “I’ll eat you up! I’ll eat you alive; I’ll chew you up!”

I acknowledged that I had heard the expression in the market several times. I added that we Negroes of America also employed figures of speech continuously. Very well then, he replied, I would understand, and not take the mode of speech of the peasants literally.⁹⁵³

The whole episode is worth a close reading because it reveals many of the idiosyncrasies and tensions she was probably experiencing in her Caribbean fieldwork; it also produces an interesting picture of Hurston as ethnographer within the context of her Haitian fieldwork. The prologue to the passage quoted above is her confrontation with a young housekeeper named Joseph who had moved to Hurston’s house in Port-au-Prince with his wife and baby in order to help her with the general management of the

⁹⁴⁸ James Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (1986) quoted in Drewal, “Performance in Africa”, 9.

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁵¹ Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 93.

⁹⁵² Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 204.

⁹⁵³ Ibid., 203.

place. The family lived in the basement, but Hurston recounts that one night, while she was writing, she smelled the unpleasant odour of something burning in her employee's dwelling and, quite annoyed, asked the boy for some kind of explanation:

I called down to Joseph and demanded to know what on earth was going on. He told me he was burning something to drive off bad things. What bad things, I wanted to know. I was good and angry about the thing. He said not to be angry, please. But cochon gris (gray pigs) qui mange' moun (who eat people) were after his baby and he "was make a little ceremony to drive them away."⁹⁵⁴

As the young man does not want to leave his room until the following morning, she has to wait for the answer she is so eager to have. Their exchange during breakfast confronts us with a paradox highlighted in her dialogue with the member of the Haitian elite; in fact, she is reading Joseph's words literally, as if she did not have any prior knowledge of figurative use of language ("I have never seen a grey pig... in robes of any sort...") or never heard any rumours about possible cannibalistic practices in the island:

He told me that he had seen figures in white robes and hoods, no, some of them had red gowns and hoods, lurking in the paraseuse (hedge) the night before. He thought the cochons gris knew that he had a very young baby and they wanted to take it and eat it.
"Now Joseph", I objected, "you are trying to excuse yourself for disturbing me by telling a fantastic lie. In the first place I have never seen a grey pig and do not believe they exist. In the second place, hogs do not go about in robes of any sort and neither they go about eating babies. Pas capab."

Hurston is indeed making an effort at inserting Creole words in her account, but while in *Mules and Men* the frame in which the ethnographer's voice was revealed had been inserted at a second stage and only under her publisher's request⁹⁵⁵, here she is confronted with the impossibility of representing her interlocutor's words in his own terms. While her voice could ideally melt with the characters in *Mules and Men* despite their possible recalcitrance, here she deliberately represents herself as incapable at the game which had been the pillar of both her art and research: she does not seem capable of Signifying anymore to the point of using for the first time the word 'lie' in the sense of 'falsehood' or 'fraud.' The distance between Joseph and herself is reaffirmed when

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁹⁵⁵ See also Chapter Two in this thesis, 101.

she decides not to see the risk of harming the boy and losing his trust for the fleeting pleasure to tell everything to “an upper class Haitian” who happens to interrupt their exchange:

The discussion was broken off there because an upper class Haitian came at the moment for a morning visit. The Haitian peasant is very humble before his betters, so Joseph shut up quickly and went on back to cleaning up the yard. The gentleman and I went on the front gallery that commands such a magnificent view of Port-au-Prince and the sea, and sat down. I laughed and told him the fantastic explanation that Joseph had made. He laughed briefly, then he said he was thirsty. He would neither permit me to go for a glass of water for him, nor call Lucille [the maid] to bring it. He would just go out to the kitchen and let Lucille give it to him there. After he went to the rear, I thought I'd join him and offer him a drink of rum. When I reached the end of the salon I saw that he was not asking Lucille for water at all. He was on the back gallery speaking to Joseph in the yard. He was speaking in Creole and calling Joseph every kind of stupid miscreant. He ended his tirade by saying that since Joseph had been so foolish as to tell a foreigner, who might go off and say bad things about Haiti, such things, he was going to see that the Garde d'Haiti gave him a good beating with a coco-macaque. Knowing that I would embarrass my friend by letting him know that I had heard, I went back to the porch as quietly as I could and waited until he returned before I mentioned the rum.⁹⁵⁶

This is only one of the possible readings of the episode, but in the context of the present analysis, the prevalent impression is that Hurston is commenting on the role of the anthropologist in Haiti who has to mingle with members of the elite while looking for answers among members of the lower classes. She seems to consider this member of the elite as a ‘friend’ although he has just called her ‘a foreigner’, but their association is only apparent: when he explains her, a writer, the meaning and use of ‘figures of speech’ used by the Haitian peasant, she finally uses the pronoun ‘we’: “I added that *we* Negroes of America also employed figures of speech continuously.”⁹⁵⁷

Kevin Meehan has provided an analysis of *Tell My Horse* as “a critique of ethnography as a form of knowledge that sees Hurston as working to produce a dissenting form of transnational culture grounded in the logic of a decolonizing contact zone.”⁹⁵⁸ In Meehan’s analysis “ethnography becomes ‘possessed’”⁹⁵⁹, but the episode orchestrated by Hurston goes even further as it seems to function as an example of

⁹⁵⁶ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 202-203.

⁹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 203. [Emphasis added]

⁹⁵⁸ Kevin Meehan, “Decolonizing Ethnography: Spirit Possession and Resistance in *Tell My Horse*”, *Obsidian III*, Special Issue on Zora Neale Hurston, 9:1 (Spring/Summer 2008), 61.

⁹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

possession *by* ethnography as “formalized curiosity... poking and prying with a purpose”⁹⁶⁰ and with little regard for the consequences of that curiosity on the lives of people touched by it. If Hurston, the ethnographer as character, seems to have forgotten how to Signify, it is just because Hurston, the writer, is probably successful at Signifying upon both the ethnographic method and her audience alike.

Taking into account the particular location where ethnographic and artistic representations converge and distance from each other is a way to highlight a meaningful connection not only between Hurston and Dunham, but also between their different academic and artistic interests, and their particular ways of looking at the Caribbean and converting their ethnographic data into creative practice. Such a location can be considered as a significant conjunction where the two dimensions of ‘culture’ as the main object of interest for anthropology, on the one hand, and as a process of discovery and creative effort, on the other, are encountered in both Hurston’s and Dunham’s productions. The representation of the anthropologist’s body emerges here as the carrier of a movement connecting anthropological fieldwork, ethnographic texts, and artistic renditions of fieldwork data: starting from the presence of Hurston’s body in *Mules and Men* which becomes central in her Hoodoo initiation, the reader can trace the connection with the interest in Haitian Vodoun present in the texts of both anthropologists before finally reaching Dunham’s body dancing the diaspora in her shows and public performances. This embodied movement is not only in space, but in time as well, because although widespread anthropological categories and adjectives like ‘savage’, ‘primitive’, ‘peasant’, and ‘barbaric’ are kept alive in their ethnographies of the Caribbean; we also find their conscious effort to transpose so-called ‘primitive patterns’ onto modern forms of artistic representation in order to challenge the atavistic characterisation of the former and show their aesthetic rigor and cultural functionality.

The presence of the anthropologist’s body in Haiti highlights the contradictions inherent in the experience of conducting research in a country recently occupied by the nation to which both ethnographers belonged. In the following passage, Dunham comments on the peculiar position in which she found herself while conducting fieldwork on the island, suspended as she was between national and racial sense of belonging:

Americans have remained a confusion in the Haitian mind ever since [occupation], and there seems little to do about it... Being a member of

⁹⁶⁰ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 127.

the race was a distinct advantage. Skin color, hair texture, facial measurements, yes, these are the external part of “race”; but, as Fay-Cooper Cole so often pointed out, race is psychology... I am, however, sensitive to “kind,” to blackness in the sense of spirit, a charismatic intangible, and this is what the Haitians and Brazilians and Malaysians and Chinese and those Africans with whom I have had time really to discuss things must have felt, must feel.⁹⁶¹

National belonging also makes ambivalent Hurston’s presence in Haiti and her reading of Haitian political situation; as reminded by Duck, *Tell My Horse* has been accused of sensationalism and imperialistic rhetoric.⁹⁶² Although Hurston was interested in and sincerely appreciated the connections between African-American folklore in the South of the United States and Caribbean popular culture, her American nationality and the foreign language complicated her notion of what being ‘African’ and ‘American’ could mean and marked her activities in post-occupation Haiti from which her presence in the island emerged as a complex negotiation “between the calm insider’s and the agitated outsider’s perspective”⁹⁶³, according to Mikell’s analysis. Although her support to the American occupation of the island has been often given for granted, Duck convincingly demonstrates that Hurston was well aware of the fact that “the occupation [had] disrupted the relationship between the state and the public in a particularly destructive way.”⁹⁶⁴

Such contradictions between national affiliations and sense of racial belonging find an echo in the reception of Dunham’s works in the United States. The performances she created were a synthesis of her American training and her Caribbean research; the reviews that commented her theatrical renditions insisted on her being an anthropologist who staged the savage through dance. As we have seen, she developed a specific method in which elements of so-called primitive dances were actually the inspiration for innovation in modern dance, showing – as Hurston did in her turn – the transformative possibilities of folklore and its functionality in the present.

⁹⁶¹ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 73-74.

⁹⁶² See Leigh Anne Duck, “‘Rebirth of a Nation’: Hurston in Haiti”, 127.

⁹⁶³ Mikell quoted in Duck, *ibid.*, 136.

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

Conclusion

The main conclusions reached in this thesis relate to the possibilities and limits offered by representational choices in the ethnographic texts under analysis. Anthropology uses an ocularcentric and visualistic ordering which became evident in the organisation of anthropological museums and world fairs between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Fairs, together with the invention of photography and publicity, offered a first possibility for the popularization of anthropological theories which constructed differences on the basis of racial and temporal coordinates. All the people encountered through European colonisation and US imperialistic expansion were, in fact, ordered in relation to the supposed closeness to or distance from the white race seen as the only one able to achieve full civilization and material progress. The biological trait was, then, linked to the cultural trait as intellectual achievements and technical advancement were seen as an exclusive prerogative of Europe and North America. When Boas favoured a more democratic and inclusive concept of 'culture' as the basis of his anthropological project, both theories of race and other meanings of culture, mainly linked to a humanistic understanding of the term, constituted a problematic legacy to which anthropologists had to relate. In the case of African-American anthropologists, this meant having to deal with an ideal of authenticity, largely based on the reception of Native-American traditions, against which both African-American and Caribbean cultures risked falling short because of their more evidently hybridized character. In search of the authentic, Herskovitsian anthropology and black modernism embarked on a project of recuperation of Africa as a source of history and legitimisation for modern black American culture; at the same time the association between Africa and the primitive, seen as a defining element of modernity in general and of anthropology as modern science in particular, made the African-American project particularly challenging.

For the Harlem Renaissance, it can be said without detracting anything from the creative and artistic achievements of the movement, that one of the most astonishing results for black intellectuals and artists was the possibility to acquire a critical voice. This critical voice is a direct link between black folkloric tradition, the Harlem Renaissance, and African-American anthropology; it could also explain why Hurston and Dunham generally chose not to distinguish the creative moment from the analytical one: Hurston probably sensed folklore to be both creation and interpretation, invention and analysis at the same time. In similar ways, Dunham's performances reflected

'traditional' ways of producing knowledge, her dance company mirroring a community coming to grips with 'old' and 'new' materials in order to offer a creative synthesis ritualistically repeated and modified through time. This understanding of the entanglement between creation and criticism, fiction and analysis, also marked Hurston's and Dunham's autoethnographies: representations of body and Time in their texts should be read not only as examples of experimental writing, but also as conscious reflections on the ethnographic method and on the ways of establishing authority in writing. If Boas' democratising move had favoured the entrance of different cultural groups into the realm of culture as subject of analysis, it had also favoured the emergence of anthropologists seen as part of or close to those same groups; in their case the physical element (understood as biological body and as a set of bodily possibilities given by specific training as, in the case of Dunham, by her dance education) was perceived as central to their chances of acceptance within the studied community, to their authority in the field. At the textual level, the centrality of the embodied element complicates the position of the ethnographer as author considered able to produce an objective and comprehensive analysis of an observed community according to scientific standards stable throughout time; the black woman body, thus, irrupts in the text disclosing the difficulty of being an anthropologist in fieldwork. The racial fact *per se* is not enough in order to be accepted within the studied community: both in Hurston's and in Dunham's case, belonging does not coincide with supposed racial roots, but with cultural routes marked by excellence at something perceived as functional within the communities in which they were conducting fieldwork, as for instance storytelling or particular uses of language in relation to Hurston's presence in Florida or exceptional skills at dancing marking Dunham's participation in Vodoun rituals in Haiti. This competence must be seen as the main chance for them *to become* insiders *in spite of* their gender and *in spite of* their training whereby education is perceived as a marker of class difference, but it also marks their texts through the representation of an embodied authority which is always at risk of being associated with controversial pictures of the black woman's body seen as a marker of irrationality and unruliness in direct contrast with the invisible, yet present, mark of scientific reason and knowledge.

It must be stressed that the representation of the ethnographer's body in fieldwork is not a guarantee of a more democratic representation of the others of anthropology just as the democratising Boasian move towards cultural inclusion could not counterbalance the economic and political inequalities in the practice of

anthropology; yet the emergence of the ethnographer in the text favours the entry of the temporal element in the account of fieldwork experience making it more difficult to distance the analysed subject from the observer. Temporal distance is yet reaffirmed anytime the anthropologist is not able to renew her 'right' to belong to the community; this appears evident for Hurston in Haiti, the place where she loses the oral bond with the subject of her analysis.

Going back to Walker's question at the beginning of this thesis, "where is the *black* anthropologist?"⁹⁶⁵ I would say that in trying to analyse the meaning of Hurston's and Dunham's presence and fieldwork in the Caribbean and their creative renditions of ethnographic data, a pattern emerges through the dynamic relationship between the search for roots and rootedness and the black anthropologist's identity as a route, namely "a process of movement and mediation" as suggested by Paul Gilroy's reading of racial identity.⁹⁶⁶ This can find an echo in Dunham's own thoughts about Herskovits' cultural politics in the Caribbean:

So often I have regretted not staying closer, not remaining faithful to the path Herskovits had chosen for me, but he was single-minded about an object, a thing, not the person and what the person was made up of and how much a person could take of one thing, no matter what great vistas would be opened. Herskovits' one *thing* was Africa in terms of the New World – a fascinating, complex, never-ending study.⁹⁶⁷

If Dunham's view is compared to Hurston's representation of the 'horizon' as a trope for her ethnographical research, we can finally delineate their location in the Caribbean as suspended between the search for roots and the envisioning of viable routes for a process of representation and recreation of identities; in their works, the Caribbean location becomes pivotal for this 'dynamic' relationship between roots and routes as the area represents a horizon of opportunities for exploring the meaning of being 'African' and 'American.' The Caribbean provided them with a space where racial and national affinities could be reconsidered in order to deal with the concept of double consciousness both in anthropology and in the arts; indeed, the search for African roots revealed a pattern of hybridized routes by which black people in the Americas actively engaged with tradition and modernity. Above all, the Caribbean gave them the certainty

⁹⁶⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 11.

⁹⁶⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 19.

⁹⁶⁷ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994: 1969), 65.

of being endowed with a culture which anthropology finally considered worth studying in its own terms.

At the beginning of her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), in a chapter entitled “The Inside Search”, Hurston refers to her childhood longing towards the horizon in ways that seem to suggest the centrality of this image in her life and anthropological research:

But no matter whether my probings made me happier or sadder, I kept on probing to know. For instance, I had a stifled longing. I used to climb to the top of one of the huge chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate, and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon. Every way I turned, it was there, and the same distance away. Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like.⁹⁶⁸

The horizon as a metaphor for the process of knowledge acquisition is sensed, at the same time, as unattainable and ever-present within the researcher’s consciousness. The contours of the path that transforms roots in routes in the anthropological works by Hurston and Dunham pass through the different uses of performance in anthropology and theatre and the possibility they offer as processes of creation and representation of identities. The interiorized horizon defines “how much one person can take of one thing” where, quoting Gloria Anzaldúa, the “‘alien’ consciousness is constantly in the making”⁹⁶⁹ – the consciousness of a frontier knowledge born on a frontier which lies, at the same time, within and outside, “*una lucha de fronteras*, a struggle of borders”, between texts and footnotes.

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio
estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan
*simultáneamente.*⁹⁷⁰

⁹⁶⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990: 1942), 27.

⁹⁶⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987), 77. My attempt at translation: “Because I, a *mestiza*,/ continually walk out of one culture/ and into another,/ because I am in all cultures at the same time,/ a soul between two worlds, three, four/ my head buzzes because of the contradiction/ I am disoriented by all the voices speaking to me at the same time.”

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid.

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