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“Sister, Can You Line It Out?": Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to recuperate and examine the work of Zora Neale Hurston's long overlooked sonic performances, and it rehearses several ways in which to read the socio-political aesthetics of Hurston's vocal recordings as archival and ethnographic endeavors. For Hurston, singing not only operates as a mode of embodied cultural documentation, but it also upsets the putative boundaries between scholar and cultural informant, individual and community, folk culture and modernity, and gendered spaces of work and play. Above all else, it encourages readers to listen (again) to Hurston's vocals so as to recognize the centrality of sound as an epistemic tool in her rich, lively, and diverse career as a cultural worker.

I just wanted people to know what real Negro music sounded like [...].
Was the real voice of my people never to be heard?
--Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*²

Bessie Smith she was not. While no scholar in her right mind would dispute the fact that Zora Neale Hurston revolutionized and revitalized the voices of black folk in her fiction, drama, and anthropological scholarship, you'd most likely be hard pressed to find anyone who would call her a 'great singer.' Most people, in fact, may not even know that the Harlem Renaissance rebel writer sang at all, let alone that during the late 1930s she readily and dynamically performed and recorded a colorful array of songs that she, herself, collected out in the field: on the open road, in her now legendary automobile 'Sassy Susie,' in the boisterous leisure gatherings of Florida locals, and all along the railroad line where day laborers hammered out their sorrows, pleasures, and desires in intricate, percussive melodies. In songs like the joyously brassy "Halimuhfack,"³ Zora the vocalist emerges sly and playful, spirited and earnest, an everyday singer intent on letting her audience "know what real Negro music sounded like," an aim that spurred her ethnographic work

¹ My deepest thanks to Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors for encouraging me to put Zora in the remix and for offering marvelous and invaluable insight and archival material to me as 'the deal went down.' I also owe a great debt to Sonnet Retman, Marti Newland, Sonya Posmentier, and Matthew Frye Jacobson for offering brilliant and encouraging feedback as this piece took shape.

² "Concert" in *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*; chapter omitted in 1942 edition, restored in Cheryl Wall, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995) 804-08; 804.

³ For recordings of Zora Neale Hurston singing "Halimuhfack" and other songs, see *Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections, 1937-1942. American Memory*. Library of Congress. Web.

forward for much of that decade. No doubt, many scholars have documented the complexities of Hurston's preoccupation with 'realness' and Negro culture. Yet her singing perhaps presents something of a problem when it comes to reading her racial authenticity politics since it was a voice that fell so far outside of black popular music conventions, from the howls, growls, and shouts of the gospel tradition to the "'dirty' tone, para-linguistic effects and 'blue notes'" (Middleton 30) evolving out of the blues to the elegant virtuosity of pioneering jazz singers from this era. Instead, Hurston's voice was, according to biographer Valerie Boyd, decidedly "limited. She could hold a tune in the shower, peck out a few bars on the piano and strum some decent chords on the guitar, but she was no maestro [...]" (227).⁴

No maestra, indeed. In many ways, this Zora is a refreshing antidote to both the over-determined literary and feminist icon of the past few decades (see duCille) as well as to the perpetually romanticized figure of the melisma-driven, black female singing diva who is chronically "called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one" (Griffin 104).⁵ Her technical imperfections are bold and pronounced in the realm of singing yet delivered with clarion confidence and simmering delight, like an amateur karaoke singer who revels in the song itself while ignoring the missed notes and the *American Idol* 'pitchy'-ness that our contemporary ears have become so trained to police. Perhaps in fact it is Hurston, herself, who provides us with some of the most fruitful and generative ways to theorize the sounds coming out of her mouth. In her groundbreaking 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (called by some the first black performance studies essay), Hurston defines and explores the significance of terms like "angularity" (i. e. multiple, slanted postures in dance), "asymmetry" (the "presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry" in choreographic movement), and "adornment" ("embellishment" and a passion for the ornate) in black cultural production (834-35, 831-32). That her singing and not just dance projects would manifest these theoretical moves is abundantly clear in her recordings from the late 1930s. Our sonic Zora who travels through the archive of Florida folk music leads us "in a high pitched but forceful voice" (Boyd 324) into the muck of black women's musical alterity and challenges us to listen again to the form as well as the content of her angular ethnography.

Get in the Crowd: Zora's Phonographic Arrangements

I heard "Halimuhfack" down on the [...] east coast [...]. I was in a big crowd, and I learned it in the evening [in] the crowd [...]. I learned it from the crowd [...]. [Zora singing]: 'You may leave an' go to Halimuhfack, but my slow drag will bring you back. Well, you may go, but this will bring you back. I been in the country but I move to town. I'm a toe-low shaker from a head on down. Well you may go but this will bring you back.

⁴ Debates regarding the centrality of racial authenticity politics have shaped analyses of Hurston's work since the height of her career in the 1930s. See for instance Richard Wright's (in)famous review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). For recent and thoughtful reconsiderations of 'realness' and race in the work of Hurston, see Lamothe (2008); and Retman (forthcoming).

⁵ Or, for that matter, to belt out the grace notes in episodes of *Glee*.

[...] some folks call me a toe-low shaker, it's a doggone lie. I'm a backbone breaker. Well you may go, but this will bring you back. Oh you like my features but you don't like me. Don't you like my features, don't you shake my tree? Well you may go but this will bring you back. Who do? Who do? Who do working? My heels are poppin' [...] my toenails crackin'. Well you may go, but this will bring you back.' (Hurston, "Halimuhfack")

By June 18, 1939, when Herbert Halpert with a crew of fellow WPA workers recorded Hurston performing the rollicking "Halimuhfack" along with more than a dozen other songs down on the Florida peninsula, she had amassed over a decade's worth of experience as a Barnard and Columbia University student of anthropology, as a published author of three books on African American folklore, as a playwright and folk concert artist, and as a scholar of black culture who had racked up two Guggenheim fellowships as well as a Rosenwald grant to her name.⁶ She had spent the period from 1927 to 1932 collecting tales and dances and songs by way of funding from her wealthy white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason (who owned and controlled the rights to this material), but by 1932, with Mason's patronage having come to a halt, she embarked on a period of creative experimentation with the music of African American folk at the core of her performative and scholarly projects.

Her ambitious New York City concert production *The Great Day* (1932) excavates and showcases the sound as well as the movement that sit at the foundation of the black vernacular cultures that she had been researching. Conceived as a day in the life of a Florida railroad work camp community, *The Great Day* follows the path of musicality and expressive movement embedded in quotidian African American labor and leisure. As dance studies scholar Anthea Kraut has shown in her fine study *Choreographing the Folk*, *The Great Day* went against the grain of contemporaneous black musical revues and black folk dramas. Kraut contends that "[t]he *Great Day* did not quite fit into any of these existing genres [...]. Hurston's concert [...] was dramatic without being a drama and musical (and dance heavy) without being a musical [...]. Audiences," for instance, "encountered spirituals as part of that community's religious practices—'with action,' as Hurston later put it—and not as an extracted and isolated art form" (124). Hailed for its originality by critics as well as her contemporaries, from intellectual colleague, sometime mentor and occasional adversary Alain Locke to music colleague and occasional adversary Hall Johnson, *The Great Day* transitioned Hurston into an era in which she quested to celebrate, cultivate, and make more audible to the masses the depth and complexities of Afro diasporic sonic cultures.⁷

⁶ For more on the Hurston and Halpert WPA recording project, see Boyd 323-25. See also "The Sound of 1930s Florida Folklife." The program includes a then eighty-five-year-old Stetson Kennedy's reflections on working with Hurston on the Florida Guide project.

⁷ At varying points in her career, Hurston oscillated between expressing her respect for and gratitude towards Howard University professor and Harlem Renaissance figurehead Locke and directing unbridled vitriol his way. Locke served as the key mediator between Hurston and their shared patron Mrs. Mason, and in the "Concert!" section of her autobiography, which was restored in Wall's *Zora Neale Hurston*, Hurston describes her regret for having not publicly thanked Locke for his support of *The Great Day*: "I found out later that I had seemed to ignore Dr. Locke, for which I am very sorry. [...] It may be too late, but I ask him to please pardon me.

Throughout the thirties, Hurston applied for funding and dreamed big in her grant proposals, stating, for instance, in her Guggenheim application that she “hope[d] *eventually* to bring over a faculty from Africa and set up a school of Negro music in America [...]. No Negro can remain a *Negro* composer long under white tutelage,” she asserted. “The better he is taught, the less there is left of his nativity” (Hurston’s emphasis, qtd. in Boyd 251). She bounced between teaching positions at various colleges, continued to develop, nurture, and present revised versions of her folk concert material, and by mid-decade she had entered into a complicated, on-again, off-again working relationship with select units of the Roosevelt administration’s Works Progress Administration (WPA).⁸ Her employment was unsteady, and she often struggled to pay the bills during this period. Yet her commitment to her field work and especially to the project of recognizing and analyzing black music as a field of critical inquiry was unwavering. She worked for a spell in 1935 alongside Orson Welles, John Houseman, and other theater professionals as a drama coach for the newly organized Federal Theatre Project (FTP), and that same year she embarked with folklorists Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle through the South, collecting material for the Music Division of the Library of Congress. The trio’s recording of “Bellamina” in Chosen, Florida, in 1935 and Hurston’s high-pitched, ludic, and sugar-sweet performance of “Bluebird” and “Bama Bama” recorded by Lomax in Pétienville, Haiti, on December 21, 1936, belie what was an undoubtedly fractious working relationship (Kaplán 171; Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* 178).⁹ Nevertheless,

He had been helpful and I meant him good” (807). Yet in a scathing written response to Locke’s disparaging review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston declares that “Dr. Locke knows that he knows nothing about Negroes, and he should know, after THE NEW NEGRO, that he knows nothing about either criticism or editing [...]. [He] is abstificaly [sic] a fraud, both as a leader and a critic [...]. He is a public turn coat” (“The Chick with One Hen”). Her professional relationship with celebrated African American composer and arranger Hall Johnson was equally bumpy. Initially Hurston sought out Johnson to collaborate on music for her folk concerts, but the relationship soured when several of Johnson’s African American singers clashed with Hurston’s Bahamian dancers (see Kraut 95-98).

⁸ During this period, Hurston joined the faculty of North Carolina College in Durham and briefly taught drama at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. She wrote for the poorly-reviewed musical revue *Fast and Furious* (in which she also made a cameo appearance as a cheerleader alongside comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley). *Fast and Furious* had a brief run in New York City in 1931. That following year Hurston achieved critical success on the stage with *The Great Day*, and she would continue to organize and present versions of this folk material in concert form and under such titles as *From Sun to Sun* (1933) and *Singing Steel* (1934) in Chicago and Florida.

⁹ The professional and personal connections and tensions between the work of Hurston and that of the Lomaxes (both Alan and his father, John) are worthy of a study in and of itself (perhaps even a movie? Taraji P. Henson and Mark Ruffalo, perhaps?) and deserve far more attention than I am able to give here. It is worth noting, however, that Hurston’s performative ethnography is in some ways akin to John Lomax’s penchant for singing the archive of cowboy songs, prison songs, and work songs that he amassed while conducting fieldwork with his son in the early 1930s. As performance studies critic Paige McGinley observes, “John Lomax’s theatrical collecting practices and public performances staged a drama of circulation, a drama of singing-as-vehicle which championed mobility and travel through ‘the magic of song’” (129).

throughout this period Hurston continued to yoke together her interests in theater aesthetics, black music, and ethnographic exploration. With yet another program housed under the WPA, the Federal Writers Project's (FWP) invitation in 1938 to join the editorial staff of *The Florida Guide*, part of an "American Guide" series designed to "hold up a mirror to America" (Boyd 313), she sharpened her engagement in each of these fields and moved closer towards both recording as well as performing her findings. According to her colleague Stetson Kennedy, she collected "fabulous folksongs, tales, and legends, possibly representing gleanings from days long gone by" (qtd. in Boyd 318). She drafted reports on the music of local church services and filed an essay on Florida folklore and music entitled "Go Gator and Muddy the Water." Thus, in spite of her recalcitrant autonomy as a member—the only black female member—of the editorial staff (the lowest paid and yet, according to Kennedy, perhaps the most experienced),¹⁰ Hurston emerged as the ideal candidate to participate in a statewide recording expedition organized by the FWP. In the eyes of Ben Botkin, the FWP folklore program's new national director, "mere written transcriptions did not provide enough detail and ambience" (Boyd 322), and so he turned to Hurston and crew to turn up the volume in the wetlands.

I heard "Halimuhfack" down on the [...] east coast [...]. I was in a big crowd, and I learned it in the evening [in] the crowd [...]. I learned it from the crowd [...]. (Hurston, "Halimuhfack")

June 1939. The tapes are rolling in Jacksonville, Florida, where Hurston has set up camp with Florida guide colleagues, among them state FWP director Carita Dogget Corse, "twenty-something" folklorist Herbert Halpert, and Jacksonville student turned project supervisor Stetson Kennedy. Halpert had on hand a recording device "the size of a coffee table—the moving parts looked like a phonograph—and cut recordings with a sapphire needle directly onto a 12-inch acetate disk," and Hurston, along with her fellow black FWP workers, had rounded up "a

But, as we shall see below, Hurston's theoretical and material emphasis on and cultural identifications with the theatrical dimensions of black culture would have placed her at odds with the elder Lomax, whose "own performing body," as McGinley contends, "became the site, sight, and sound of spatial—and racial—*difference*, privileged as one that could move with ease between both worlds—the men of letters and the men of the land" (137, my emphasis). The Hurston letter to Lomax discovered by Carla Cappetti and included in this issue reveals the extent to which Hurston's unbridled contempt for father Lomax and even more so for son Alan was deep-seated and palpable. Here she brutally dissects the latter's character, dressing him down for having, in her opinion, spread rumors about the two of them, for having exploited her field work labor, and for having reneged on promises to share research materials that she had requested. Hurston rails, "you knew no more about folk-lore than a hog knows about a holiday, you were content to have me do it for you, but contrive to have it appear I didn't deserve credit." She also notoriously butted heads with Barnacle whom she refers to here as "looking like a mammy walrus with a sunburned nose." See Carla Cappetti, "Defending Hurston against Her Legend: Two Previously Unpublished Letters" in this issue.

¹⁰ Says Kennedy, "She had already published her first two books by that time, but she wanted a job and was given the same job title that I had when I started out. I was junior interviewer. Imagine Zora Hurston, junior interviewer. She had already had her degrees from Boas and Columbia and Barnard and so on" ("The Sound of 1930s Florida Folklife").

group of railroad workers, musicians, and church ladies at the Clara White Mission on Ashley Street, a landmark institution in Jacksonville's black community." There, Halpert "used his cumbersome recording machine to capture the voices of various informants singing, telling stories, and occasionally hamming it up for posterity" (Boyd 324; "The Sound of 1930s Florida Folklife"). At the center of it all there is Hurston shifting fluidly between the role of the folklorist and that of the informant, introducing songs, sketching out their socio-cultural context and utility, and performing them for a wonkish gaggle of folkloré scholars who listen and prod her for details.

Like many of the other performances from this session, her rendition of "Halimuhfack" encapsulates the oscillating Zora, the woman who was both of and in the crowd as well as whimsically positioned outside of it. Reveling in the taunt, sass, and innuendo of this jook song's chorus ("You may go but this will bring you back"), she inhabits the playful ("Who do?! Who do?!") and the flirtatious energy of the tune while also wistfully stretching out the song's melancholic lyrics ("you may go but this will bring you back") that signal lapsed love, abrupt departures, and the sting of abandonment. As the twinned pressures of the Great Migration and the Depression continued on through the thirties, songs like "Halimuhfack" captured the entwined sounds of collective play and individual despair as well as steely determination in the face of turbulent change. Hurston brought all of this to bear/bare in her vocal aesthetics of song in these Florida guide recordings, what voice studies scholar Marti Newland describes to me as a series of performances that "demonstrat[e] her comfort in the range of a second soprano. What emergés [even] more clearly than her comfort in a particular range," Newland observes, "is her value for representing a communal vocal experience as a solo singer. With thoughtful shifts between head and chest voice, and her use of clear and raspy timbre, Hurston's singing allows the listener to imagine both soloist and responsive ensemble through a single vocal line." With that weird, quirky, piercing voice, Zora folds the folk musically into the realm between head and heart and sonically mediates that space through her own form of what cultural critic Sonnet Retman refers to as "signifying ethnography," the method through which "her insider and outsider claims loop together like a Möbius strip to stretch the very limits of participant observation methodology [...]." It is a method that "allows [Hurston] to create a radically hybrid text that traverses the space between informant and ethnographer [...]" and between personal and collective voice (262-63). As Zora lets loose on "Mule on the Mount," a "lining rhythm," she describes as "the most widely distributed work song in the United States," we hear the heterogeneity of black regional expression as verses shift and change according to locality. With "a rainbow wrapped tightly around [her] shoulder," Hurston journeys through black America picking up sound along the way ("Mule on the Mount").¹¹

I just get in the crowd with the people and if they sing it I listen as best I can and then I start to joinin' in with a phrase or two and then finally I get so I can sing a verse. And then I keep on until I learn all the verses and then I sing 'em back to the people until they tell me that I can sing 'em just like them. And then I take part and I try it out on

¹¹ For text and notes, see also *Mules and Men* (1935), 251-53.

different people who already know the song until they are quite satisfied that I know it. Then I carry it in my memory [...]. I learn the song myself and then I can take it with me wherever I go. ("Halimuhfack")¹²

A voice of the people. An archive of folk sound. The Zora who surfaces on these *Florida Folklife* recordings actively theorizes her own phonographic project, walking us through her dual ability to, like Edison's queer little late-Victorian instrument, both record and playback the sound around her. By using embodied and sounded performance as a tool of ethnographic inscription, as an instrument that might put black voices on the (scholarly) record, Hurston's form of "sonic Afro-modernity" differs from Alexander Weheliye's landmark definition of phonographies, where "the coupling of the graphematic *and* the phonic represents the prime achievement of black cultural production in the New World" (Weheliye 38). The 'phono' in her project does more than 'intermingle' with the graph. Rather it amplifies, worries, and speaks back to discursive ethnographic endeavors that elide the audibility, visibility, and eccentricities of black female cultural agents.¹³ In the realm of her phonography, Zora loops together a zone in which she operates at the crossroad of the modern and the folk. On tape, one hears a forty-eight-year-old Hurston (who brashly claims for the record that she is thirty-five) (Boyd 325) both collaborating with and perhaps also facing off against Halpert's "coffee table-sized," big, bulky machine to offer her own definitive repertoire of Southern vernacular culture for the archive. Her performances underscore Hurston's critical acuity in the realm of listening, performing, and, by extension, arranging the sounds that she encounters, stores, and "carr[ies] [...] in her memory" out in the field. We are made privy to *a listening to a listening*: Kennedy and Halpert and Corse and others lean in and pose questions as they strain to follow Hurston's musical cartography of folk songs, work chants, blues, and children's songs gathered up in the American South and the Caribbean diaspora, from the Bahamian "Crow Dance" to the swinging "Charleston rhythms" of "Oh the Buford Boat Done Come" picked up by Hurston from a South Carolina Geechee country woman she met in Florida. Hurston in these recorded performances becomes the arranger who, as music theorist Peter Szendy observes, "signs" her listening. As the performer/arranger of these folk songs she operates as "an adaptor, transcriber, orchestrator" who performs a record of what she has heard (Szendy 6). Her performance doubly inscribes the subjectivity of the black collective whose voices she preserves, as well as her own present, active independent reception as a woman with her ear to the ground and her voice on the wind. Her work of art

¹² The line is perhaps one of the most oft-cited Hurston quotes in which she describes her fieldwork methodology.

¹³ Weheliye considers the ways that past critics have often "abandon[ed] the *phone* or the *graph* in *phonograph*" rather than "taking into account how sound suffuses New World black writing" (39). I am suggesting here that we explore the ways that Hurston's use of sound in relation to her discursive ethnography demands that we theorize other forms of phonography, ones in which, for instance, embodied sonic performances directly engage with and complicate written texts. Likewise, we might think more about the ways that Zora's angular voice interrupts the phonographic projects of the literary "race men" (Du Bois and Ellison) who sit at the forefront of Weheliye's cogent study.

in the burgeoning age of mechanical reproduction illuminates the critical instrumentality of sonic black womanhood.¹⁴

Coda: Rhythmic Epistemologies: Shaking the Archive with Zora, Ethel & Odetta's Repertoires

And in those days came the voice of the prophetess Ethel Waters, who prophesied in Harlem and in Philadelphia and in divers other cities crying ["hear, oh ye sons and daughters of Ham and Hagar, shake that thing [...]"] And the multitudes hearkened unto the voice of the prophetess and arose as one man and shook with many shakings. (Hurston, "She Rock" 594)¹⁵

Of course they were friends, that Zora and Ethel. It may have taken some time to meet each other "across the footlights," as Hurston put it in her memoir, but once they connected through their mutual friend Carl Van Vechten, the bond between this untrained singer and a woman referred to by some as "the Voice of an Era" was strong and intimate (*Dust Tracks* 738; see Cherry).¹⁶ Aesthetically, too, they had more in common than one might think. Born in Philadelphia and raised in a multicultural, working-class neighborhood where, as Waters puts it, "whites, blacks, and yellows, were outcasts [...] together," she made use of an "elephant memory and gift of mimicry" in school (qtd. in Reitz). As feminist blues archivist Rosetta Reitz contends, "[i]t was this magnificent ear and the awareness that there was authority in language, that gave Ethel Waters an edge which she used to empower her life." Like Hurston, she mastered the art of multilingual colloquialisms and phrasings, assumed multiple personas in her vocal performances, and finessed the art of performative storytelling as she crafted a distinctly theatrical, vaudevillian style of blues singing. Hurston would marvel: "[s]he is one of the strangest bundles of people that I have ever met. You can just see the different folks wrapped up in her if you associate with her long. Just like watching an open fire—the color and shape of her personality is never the same twice. She has extraordinary talents which her lack of formal education prevents her from displaying" (*Dust Tracks* 739).

Now, it ain't no Charleston, ain't no Pigeon Wing, Nobody has to give you no lessons, to shake that thing, When everybody can shake that thing, Oh, I mean, shake that thing! I'm gettin' tired of telling you how to shake that thing! Oooh, oooh, with this kind of music, who wouldn't shake that thing? (Waters, "Shake That Thing")

Both Waters and Hurston invoked their kinesthetic bodies as central instruments of storytelling in their musical endeavors. While Waters's massive breakthrough hit "Shake That Thing" (first performed in 1925 at the Plantation Club) would

¹⁴ On the politics and poetics of black instrumentality, see Moten.

¹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, "She Rock," *Pittsburgh Courier* (5 Aug. 1933), Section Two (Magazine Section): 3. Reprinted for the first time in this issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 592-97.

¹⁶ In his reading of her classic performances of "Stormy Weather," Shane Vogel argues that Waters's "voice [...] became a modern technology, replacing effects with affects and redeploying the popular song in the service of an African American modernist critique" (100).

take the sexual energy of the jook (a realm Hurston refers to as the pinnacle of black theatricality in her "Characteristics" essay) to its ludic extreme, Hurston would also invoke her body as not only a mode of storytelling but as a performative epistemology called upon to reference and re-vivify the cultural and historical memory of the work song archive. In tunes such as "Let the Deal Go Down" and "Let's Shake It," she vocalized the aesthetics of the "lining out" tradition of the labor and railroad camps, a style of singing in which, as she describes it, the "singing liner" is "a man who doesn't work t'all [...]. he walks up and down and gives the rhythm for the people to work [...] a whole crew of men singing at one time and the railroad has to pay the singing liner or else the men won't work [...]. The singing liner always starts [...]" ("Gonna See My Long Haired Babe"). Assuming the role of the liner as well as of the laborers, Hurston shapes the rhythmic pulse of these songs and corporeally sounds out the strenuous physical work life along the railroad. As Kraut has shown, Hurston maintained a fascination with a particular performative detail characteristic of both these songs as well as that of the vernacular spirituals and sermon performances that featured "audible breathing," ornamentation, and "the well-known 'ha!' of the Negro preacher." Along with the spiking and lining song's cacophonous, propulsive "grunts uttered at period rhythmic intervals," "the 'punctuations of breath' [...] amounted to a 'hidden rhythmic law' governing the work and religious practices" of black folk communities (Kraut 126; Sundquist qtd. in Kraut 129; Hurston, "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals").

That Hurston not only theorized the sounds in her scholarship and incorporated them in her folk concerts but also performed them herself underscores the extent to which she embraced the act of singing as an extension of her critical ethnographic work. Zora singing traverses the putative boundaries between what Diana Taylor influentially refers to as the archive and the repertoire; "the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i. e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i. e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)" (19). Zora singing intervenes in the so-called hegemony of Harlem Renaissance black music scholarship what she vociferously referred to as an aesthetics that "watered down" the voices of the folk.¹⁷ In her commitment to engaging this repertoire of ephemeral sounds and gestures she thus paved the way for a figure like Civil Rights era activist and musician Odetta who would emerge on the folk music revival scene a little over a decade later with a similar kind of project. If, as historian Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown, Odetta would assume the role of "a public *archivist*" through renditions of work songs, prison songs, and railroad chants, "delivering up to consciousness some long-suppressed historical sounds and scenes that might inspire the blacks in her audience and accuse, remind, challenge, and prod the whites," Hurston, more than a decade before her, set the stage by excavating this material and affirming its very existence for white listeners who were no doubt more (and perhaps only) familiar with black music prepared for the concert hall (3). Both women pounded out the

¹⁷ In her essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," Hurston calls for a rigorous examination of the intricacies of "real Negro" singing and critiques the popularity of concert hall spirituals.

beat of overlooked histories through their bodies. They took “the ethics of the jook and the blues” that Hurston so loved, ethics that “freed” them of “the constraints of ladyhood” (Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* 166), re-deployed them in the space of men at work and play (in songs like “Georgia Skin,” “Gonna See My Long-Haired Babe” and “Uncle Bud”), and utilized folkloric song as the medium through which to assert a kind of modern black womanhood that might shake the foundations of American culture.

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