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Julia J. Cox Date

To the Horizon and Back:
Double Consciousness and the Journey to Folk Modernism in
Their Eyes Were Watching God, *Ollie Miss*, and *Banana Bottom*

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

2011

Abstract

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There has been a tendency on the part of academic criticism to marginalize African American folklore of the 1930s into an isolated category, a genre separate from both the militant protest fiction of the Harlem Renaissance and the larger movement of American modernism. This project considers how several folklore novels of the 1930s remain buried under this assumption and instead ponders them as complex, experimental, and forward thinking. The thesis postulates a developing "folk modernism" in the 1930s through common themes and concerns in three novels: the lionized *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston, 1937) and the unheralded works *Ollie Miss* (George Henderson, 1935) and *Banana Bottom* (Claude McKay, 1933). "To the Horizon and Back" brings into conversation these African American modernists who each used folk communities as the setting for a female bildungsroman.

The thesis examines the unfolding of modernity through the concept of double consciousness, as put forth in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. The project argues the three protagonists' journeys to self-realization are predicated on a new, modern freedom to negotiate this dual identity at will. Hurston, Henderson, and McKay cast the Global South as a worthy setting for artistic experimentation and change, bringing the possibility of locating and redefining rural black communities on its terrain. By examining how we might better understand linkages between the theoretical mode of double consciousness and the psychological journeys of these female protagonists, a stronger theorizing of modernism within African American folk writing emerges.

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For Christine, my friend, white-boarding coach, and partner in crime who supported and endured this project with tremendous dedication.

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Introduction
Tell About the South

> "Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."
>
> –Shreve McCannon to Quentin Compson, in
> William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Through a conversation between two Harvard roommates, William Faulkner casts the delicate task of the Southern writer. Northerner Shreve's questions about life in the New South—home of his roommate Quentin Compson— drive an entire canon of literature published by Southern writers in the 1930s. A renaissance of sorts occurred for writers of the white South, as Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren, and Katherine Anne Porter began to represent the region, its history, and future in a more modern sense than their Victorian counterparts. Yet, the work of these modernists generally featured African Americans on the periphery, despite poverty, shifting national politics, and continued Jim Crow constituting an even greater need for their authentic representation. In spite of this flowering of Southern literature, there still existed a great need to "tell about the South" from an African American perspective. Folklorist Zora Neale Hurston embraced this mission, noting "there is no agony like bearing an untold story," in regards to her 1937 seminal work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (*I Love Myself* 71).

However, feminist scholars have been quick to identify another story Hurston tells in her 1937 seminal work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Mary Helen Washington, in "I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands" deems protagonist Janie Crawford "Hurston's emergent female hero" ("I Love the Way" 27). Alice Walker believes it the consummate novel of female affirmation, simply stating: "there is no book more important to me than this one" (*In Search* 86). Hurston's portrayal of a woman who travels "to the

horizon and back" between her grandmother's former plantation through three marriages into self-fulfillment does indicate a freedom from traditional gender constraints (*Their Eyes* 191). However, this prominent vein of criticism moves further and further away from Hurston's work with race and rural African Americans. Recent scholarly emphasis on Janie's feminist foregrounding minimizes the element that renders Hurston a true maverick: she casts a non-tragic mulatto heroine at odds with all-black folk communities in the early twentieth-century South. Indeed, Janie's reluctant place among the folk and journey to racial consciousness has become Hurston's "untold story."

As a folklorist who wrote *Their Eyes* following the Great Migration and Depression, Hurston identifies independence from men as merely one attribute of the heroine that navigates her readers through the Florida folk. Hurston's writings support her racial undertaking with *Their Eyes*; she once noted bitterly in "What White Publishers Won't Print": "I have been amazed by the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes" ("White Publishers" 85). In referencing the Negro's internal life and emotions, Hurston advocates the study of African American folklore, which reframes *Their Eyes* as an exploration of racial self-image in folk communities.[1] Definitions of "the folk" vary greatly among scholars. For this project, I mean all-black communities in the rural South and Caribbean who lived in the shadow of failed Reconstructive efforts and endured racial prejudice during the early twentieth century. This is the setting vividly and consciously imagined by Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, Hurston was not the only person interested in giving American audiences black female protagonists struggling with racial identity and gender constraints in folk communities at the turn of the century.

This project attempts a fresh reading of Hurston by comparing her famous book to two other works that are rural coming-of-age novels for black female protagonists. Hurston's concerns in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) also appear in George Henderson's *Ollie Miss* (1935) and Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933). The project responds to the lack of canonical African American texts describing perceptions of racial identity in the folk communities of the early twentieth-century South. The documented perception of race in these novels' folk communities remains intimately engaged with W.E.B. Du Bois and his theory of double consciousness. This project discusses how Hurston, Henderson, and McKay, through the self-discovery of their protagonists, both contemplate and move away from Du Bois's notion of double consciousness as a wholly agonizing condition. The project also argues that the appearance of double consciousness in the minds of their protagonists demonstrates the folk writers' greater attention to racial identity than scholars have assumed. Reexamining *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Ollie Miss*, and *Banana Bottom* with this theoretical lens reveals a surprising, alternative response to segregation, poverty, and the uncertain modern world. Rather than fight for their place in mainstream American or Western society, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay contemplate an alternative modernity that celebrates traditional folk culture and glorifies the black peasantry.

Double consciousness was first theorized by Du Bois in his essay, "Our Spiritual Strivings," collected in the 1903 volume work *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book contains thirteen essays on race, all relating to the experience of being African American in American society. Historian David Blight speaks to the work's significance, lauding Du Bois's "distinctive conception of black racial identity, his interpretation of the post-

emancipation history of the American South, and his tragic portrait of the African American struggle for social recognition and cultural integrity" ("Preface" 2). According to Du Bois, double consciousness stipulates an awareness of oneself in addition to an awareness of how one is perceived by the outside world (*Souls* 2). The condition creates an addling, aching break: "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"(*Souls* 2). Du Bois continues that the "African" and "American" elements of the black individual's self constitute a "warring twoness" formed from "two souls, two unrecognized strivings…in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Souls* 2).

Occasionally considered meaningful only for African American elites like Du Bois, double consciousness remains a valuable tool for examining modern folk realists writing thirty years later. In *The Contemporary African American Novel*, Bernard Bell maintains the folk writers of this period adopted realism and aimed to portray everyday black life, veering away from stereotypical or idealized figures (Bell 114). Taking Bernard's definition, folk realism aims to explore the internal perceptions of the common folk. Indeed, the protagonists of Hurston, Henderson, and McKay embark on journeys that force an understanding of their racial identities and social consciousnesses. Du Bois believes the ideal resolution would be "to be both Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit on by his fellows….to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (*Souls* 3). Come critics argue this "meeting" however, was not as positive as Du Bois imagined.[2] Du Bois has an investment in the possibility of black acculturation to white middle or upper-class mores, likely stemming from his own experience being refused access to certain positions

summarily on account of his race. Thirty years later, black writers don't have to jump as high for social admission, and, as a result, have greater freedom to deal with earthy, sexual, characters closely tied to traditional folkways of African Americans. Hurston, Henderson, and McKay even challenge the presumption that it is of a particular value to see yourself through that white lens. Thus, the writers' various relationships to the dynamic of double consciousness remain a useful means of understanding their commentary on race and self-perception amongst the modern folk.

There are many reasons why *Ollie Miss* and *Banana Bottom* have been obscured from the canon since their initial publication and why *Their Eyes* is rarely examined in terms of its attention to racial consciousness. Even during the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, folklore and novels set in folk communities received little support from black critics and publishers. Many black intellectuals maintained folklore was part of a primitive history and pandered to whites, who by this time claimed the animal tales of Joel Chandler Harris as their own.[3] Richard Wright, speaking of Hurston, claimed she had "no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction" ("Between Laughter and Tears"). Generally speaking, publishers of the 1930s sought more militant, social protest literature that criticized the continued racism that undergirded American life. Yet, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay present folklore in a new way, transmitting traditional African American culture within their twentieth-century novels that stylistically and thematically have modern investments.

In addition to their contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay also warrant consideration as modernists. Admittedly, the term "modern" remains problematic when examining the early twentieth-century American literary canon.

Scholars have attached the label to everyone from Ezra Pound to Langston Hughes, binding writers who adhered to European high modernism to others who purposely absconded from these constraints. Likewise, the modern landscape ranges from Gatsby's New York to Janie's Eatonville. Certainly, much contradiction and difference exists with the genre, making "modern" an unsteady and ambiguous term. Perhaps, rather than seek a definition that encompasses all genres and styles on both sides of the color line, "modernists" should just be considered responders to a general period of change in American life—keeping in mind that their responses vary greatly. Mark Sanders concedes an "essential commonality of newness" in which writers rebelled against Victorianism in the early 20th-century ("Native Modernism" 18). Houston Baker concurs in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, "regardless of their strategies for confronting it….[there] was a change—a profound shift in what could be taken as unquestionable assumptions about the meaning of human life—that moved these artists whom we call 'moderns' " (Baker 5).

"Modern" remains an equally muddled term when looking at African-American literature. Baker alleges "the collaged allusiveness of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses,* [and] the imagism of Pound" remain implicit objects or processes for commentators treating modernism and Afro-American literature and culture" (xii). Indeed, our terminology for defining modernism in African American literature remains bound by the labels and stylistic tropes of European writers. George Hutchinson argues that universities' institutionalization of "high" and "lost generation" brands of modernism have obscured worthy African American fiction (Hutchinson 30). The folk texts do not conform to these academic and formalist tenets of modernism, but rather they explore interior consciousness, a confident black vernacular idiom, sexual relations, and the independent

mobility of female characters.

The term "native modernism" seems more appropriate for this project to describe the transformation occurring across the color line during the 1930s in the South. Hutchinson notes that "native modernism" better defines American cultural identity on American terms, rather than European (30). Mark Sanders elaborates, "this wing of modernism commits itself to a project of national identity construction; it established journals and institutions that sought to reduce the status of Anglo-Saxon cultural models while forging a sense of newly synthesized American identity based on indigenous cultural resources, emphasizing ethnic groups and the particularities of their cultural and artistic expression" ("Native Modernism" 137). Even though rural landscapes remain antithetical to the prevailing narrative of the modern, cosmopolitan city, native modernism allows the South to become a place of artistic fertility and experimentation, the kind of shift in attitude that affected racial politics. Thus, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay can appropriately be called "folk modernists" for their attention to the folk heritage and participation in the native modernist movement.

In many ways, the South becomes a fascinating setting for examining modernist literature due to the paradoxical continued presence of racial prejudice. Historian David Potter once deemed the South, "a sphinx on the American land," whose secret holds "an answer to the riddle of American life" (Potter 142). Potter's words classify the South as a region where national issues are most intense and apparent, a pattern that remained especially true in the 1930s in terms of the region's poverty and continued racism. The Depression's economic chaos also de-prioritized attention to continued lynching and racial violence in the South. Historian of Reconstruction David Blight notes that forgetting the

true violence of Southern past helped forge national unity in the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "the reconciliationist vision …delivered the country a segregated memory of its Civil War on Southern terms"(*Race and Reunion* 2). This trend continued into 1930s, as foundational liberal politician Franklin Roosevelt did little to further Civil Rights. Plagued with economic restructuring that would need the support of Southern congressmen, the President's racial stance remained inconsistent at best. Roosevelt refused to support anti-lynching legislation, and did not create a Fair Employment Practices Committee until 1941. Thus, in the 1930s, racial discrimination in the South remained largely unchallenged legally and culturally, despite industrialization and other transformative forces. Hurston, Henderson, and McKay thus faced a modernizing region grounded in the realities and ideology of the Old South. Thus, their creations of life possibilities for black characters warrant critical attention as arbitrators of these two eras.

The first chapter of this project, "Double Consciousness and the Mulatto Heroine: Hurston's Literary Science in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" will explore the most critically examined novel of the three, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Released in 1937, the novel initially received negative attention from leading black critics, who believed Hurston completely glossed over social injustice, telling a love story rather than documenting the South's racism. The chapter will argue that Hurston does, at least partially, confront racial dynamics in *Their Eyes*, through the double consciousness of protagonist Janie Crawford. However, Hurston's heroine will also be examined as a protagonist perpetually on the periphery of the folk world she inhabits. The chapter will explore this artistic stance relative to Hurston's conservative views of racial integration.[4] The chapter will also consider how *Their Eyes* remains only a partial study of early

twentieth-century folk life. The following two chapters will examine how two other voices, Henderson and McKay, can enrich our conception of racial consciousness in early-twentieth century folk communities.

Chapter Two, "Henderson's Forgotten Novel: Reconciling Realism & Romanticism in *Ollie Miss*," explores George Henderson's relatively obscure 1935 novel. Ollie Miss follows the journey of protagonist Ollie as she immerses herself in an all-black farming community in Marion County, Alabama around the turn of the twentieth century. The novel chronicles her relationships with various farm hands and developing love of farm work. While this novel does not address double consciousness as explicitly as *Their Eyes* or *Banana Bottom*, Henderson does present folk self-perception through his protagonist. Through Ollie's journey to psychological and economic empowerment, Henderson explores the possibility of a modern black yeomanry, without any need for an agonizing double consciousness. Du Bois's writings on double consciousness and sociological study of the Black Belt in *The Souls of Black Folk* will be employed to reveal how Henderson's premise situates itself between romanticism and modern folk realism. Finally, the chapter will explore how Henderson affirms native modernism by celebrating a landowning black woman who chooses to raise her son alone.

Chapter Three, "McKay's Jamaican Folk: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in *Banana Bottom*," examines a novel set in the "Global South," if not technically within the geographic confines of the United States.[5] Édouard Glissant's term "Global South" enables us to explore the common thread extending the post-plantation folk experience in the United States into the Caribbean, "no matter which region we contemplate from among those covered by the system, we find the same trajectory and almost the same forms of

expression" (*Poetics of Relation* 68). McKay sets his story in the folk village of Banana Bottom, Jamaica, right outside the missionary town of Jubilee. Banana Bottom traces the story of Tabitha, "Bita" Plant, a black girl educated abroad who rediscovers her roots upon her homecoming. Like *Their Eyes*, *Banana Bottom* progresses through the protagonist's various realizations of double consciousness. The chapter argues that McKay, an Afro-Jamaican educated in the United States, shared many of Hurston and Henderson's concerns about folk culture's collision with the modern world. The chapter argues that *Banana Bottom* advocates for the possibility of a synthesis between Western intellectualism and folk culture—again through a female protagonist.

Ultimately, reading these novels with the perspective of double consciousness reveals the interlacing of racial consciousness, tradition, and change in early twentieth-century folk communities. As wisely noted by Alan Dundes in *Interpreting Folklore*, "with this modern conception of folk, we can no longer think of the folk in monolithic terms as a relatively homogenous group of peasants living in a symbiotic relationship with an urban center" (Dundes 8). Turning to the journeys and self-perception of the protagonists in these novels will enable scholars to complicate these black folk fictions of the 1930s. Additionally, the project will hopefully elaborate and enlarge our understanding of the shared commitments and practices of folk modernist writers during the 1930s.

Endnotes

1. Alan Dundes's essay "Who are the Folk" in his volume *Interpreting Folklore* discusses the slipperiness of the term. In this project, I will also revert to Dundes's definition of folklore, as "the tales, ballads, riddles, etc [that] represent a people's image of themselves" (*Interpreting Folklore* vii). The folk communities then become guarders of these customs.

2. Stanley Crouch, in his essay "Who Are We? Where Did We Come From?" argues that we are "drafted into a bemusing intellectual struggle if we take Du Bois at his word and attempt to explain exactly what the resolution of 'double consciousness' into a 'better and truer self' would be"(*Lure and Loathing* 84). Crouch doubts that this holistic "merging" would be positive or without struggle and complication.

3. Robert Hemenway maintains: "Black identity receives expression in Afro-American folklore because folklore permits the presentation of emotions so deeply felt that they cannot be openly articulated. Hurston understands this process in a away Joel Chandler Harris did not" ("That Which the Soul" 90). The article, originally included as Hemenway's introduction to Hurston's *Mules and Men*, postulates how Hurston consciously revised Harris with her work in folklore.

4. Several articles in the latter portion of her career hint at Hurston's curious stance on integration. She believed it would be damaging to black culture, writing in an August 1955 letter to the Orlando Sentinel: "The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people. How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?" Hurston continues: "Since the days of the never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction, there has been current the belief that there is no greater delight to Negroes than the physical association with whites." While these statements come nearly twenty years after the publication of *Their Eyes*, they reveal Hurston's developing hesitancy on the mixing of black and white communities that also grounds the novel.

5. McKay, while setting his novel in Jamaica, no doubt intended a parallel to the issues in the American South. McKay attended Tuskegee in the early 1910s before moving to Kansas and Harlem. The presence of double consciousness in McKay's Jamaica reiterates Glissant's notion that there is indeed a "Global South" whose common gender, racial, and class dynamics stem from a shared history on the plantation.

Chapter 1

Double Consciousness and the Mulatto Heroine
Hurston's Literary Science in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

> "I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, white ones and black ones."
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston

Reflecting on 1934's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, lionized folklorist Zora Neale Hurston startled the critic Nick Aaron Ford by claiming her lack of interest in "the race problem." (Ford 96-97). Responding to the criticism that her work sentimentalized black life and glossed over racial injustice, Hurston announced her refusal to prioritize racial matters in her work. Hurston continues: "many Negroes criticize my book because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem…I have ceased to think in terms of race" (97). These comments indicate Hurston's resistance to using black literature as propaganda, a posture that Ford and many other black intellectuals lamented.[1] Hurston's controversial remarks to Ford also apply to her seminal work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, released three years later in 1937. Indeed, Hurston's commitment to protagonist Janie Crawford works as both the greatest asset and foremost hindrance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a popular novel profiling a rural black community. From Alice Walker's scholarship to Oprah's movie, *Their Eyes* solidified itself in both academic criticism and popular culture in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Through the eyes of her chosen individual—the beautiful, love-seeking Janie Crawford—Hurston presents the Southern, black world of the early twentieth century in the midst of Jim Crow and modernization.

Yet, for all her apparent disinterest in race, Hurston took her documentary mission as a folklorist very seriously. On a 1936, Guggenheim application, she was asked "in what field of learning, or art, does your project lie?" Hurston's response was "literary science"

(Plant 59). This answer perfectly fuses her two interests of literature and social science. Understanding the intertwining of Zora the artist and Zora the anthropologist remains integral to deciphering the folk world of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston, an anthropology student of Franz Boas, should be lauded for the historical value of *Their Eyes*, as an elegy to a folk culture on the verge of disappearance. Indeed, her work symbolizes native communities across the South left behind during the migration North. Hurston believed they had a story to tell and one worth documenting at that particular and critical junction. Deborah Plant maintains: "Because Hurston was totally committed to a representation of black folk that was true to life, her folklore research was the sine qua non of her writing" (59).

Thus, social realism no doubt remained a conscious priority in the creation of *Their Eyes*. In a 1933 letter to Fannie Hurst, Hurston wrote about *Their Eyes*: "I know I cannot straighten out with a few pen-strokes what God and men took centuries to mess up. So I tried to deal with life as we actually live it" (Hurston to Hurst, *A Life in Letters* 286).[2]

Part of this "actual living" for any self-styled literary scientist of the 1930s South could not avoid the less savory topic of Jim Crow. Contrary to early critical opinions, notably that of Richard Wright, Hurston does confront Southern racial dynamics in *Their Eyes*.[3] From the raped former slave Nanny to the decrepit work camps on the "Muck" and degradation of black corpses, Hurston does not let her faith in the vibrancy of folk culture entirely cloud the grit of black life in the shadow of the Old South. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston melds these elements of the past with distinct indications of a modernizing New South, from the all black town of Eatonville, to Tea Cake's car and a female heroine. Thus her documentary task, in the 1930s, also assumes the role of casting an alternative modernity

for a group assumed to be on the cultural periphery. Yet, the "science" of this effort to capture modern folk life never reconciles with her exceptional heroine, Janie Crawford, who seems perpetually immune to its struggles. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* occurs as a conversation between forty-something Janie Crawford and her friend Pheoby. Janie recounts her life story to Pheoby, from her childhood on her grandmother's plantation through her marriages to farmer Logan Killicks, flashy Joe Starks, and young Tea Cake. Janie's journey is also a literal one, as she ventures between the plantation, all black Eatonville, and the Everglades. Janie's path through her marriages also becomes a vehicle of self-discovery and a means of determining her racial identity as a mulatto woman in the black South. After shooting Tea Cake and being acquitted of his murder, Janie moves back to Eatonville to tell the tale of her life, which is where the novel begins.

Hurston's confrontation with racial reality remains muddled, due to her preference to tell Janie's story, a devotion to individual romance over social reality. The effect is an incomplete documentation of the folk world. Her narrative devotion to Janie Crawford's love story never resolutely answers Southern blacks' collective response to the social injustice and disappearing folk culture, which Hurston insinuates are related. Yet, in tracing the experience of Janie, she presents an individual model of how a black woman with certain advantages could manipulate and survive the world of Jim Crow as it existed. Hurston's individual focus is not without complication in its own right. Characteristics including her light skin, bank account from husband Joe, and refusal to name or confront her oppressors powerfully remove Janie from racism's clutches. In many ways, Hurston never truly allows Janie to be a victim of the racist and sexist South.

Du Bois provides a useful way of understanding Hurston's esoteric, yet still valuable study of Janie's racial self-image. *Their Eyes* contains moments of Du Bois's double consciousness, where Janie seems deeply aware of her own limitations as an African American in American society. In these moments of interiority, *Their Eyes* reaches its most psychologically complex level, proving the folk's awareness to internalized racism gained from Jim Crow. These moments of internal racial consciousness, however, never mandate a route of external change. In this missing link between individual journey and collective possibility, Hurston presents fatalism and resignation that themselves becomes bleak, if incomplete forms of political commentary. Considering Janie's journey to self in *Their Eyes* alongside Du Bois's theoretical model of the African American's internal struggle with race and society enables a richer discussion of Hurston's esoteric, if inevitable study of racial consciousness in the 1930s poor, black South. Janie's moments of double consciousness weave us through the folk landscape of Florida, on her grandmother's plantation, in the all black town Eatonville, and finally in the peasant thick "Muck" of the Everglades.

Hurston introduces Janie's racial consciousness in a photograph incident, which occurs in Janie's childhood on a New South plantation. As a young child, Janie bears no ability to perceive double consciousness, but rather thinks of herself as white and race as a dichotomy of black and white, with no person able to possess or experience both identities. "Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old," remarks Janie in retrospect (*Their Eyes* 2). Critically, she cannot yet conceive of "black," but only "wuzn't white." Janie spends her childhood on the Washburn plantation with "quality" white folks. "All of us played together and dat's how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin' but Nanny 'cause dat's what everybody on de place

called her," she continues (*Their Eyes* 8). Here, Hurston establishes Janie's early notion of race, which remained tied to day-to-day commonalities with the children around her. They all played together and called her Grandmother "Nanny," so, in the young Janie's mind, she was as white as they were. In many ways, Janie experiences race as an activity, by participation in a peer group and a common name for her "Nanny," which sounds eerily similar to the iconic "Mammy," with but a consonant replaced. However, an incident involving a photograph awakens Janie to double consciousness, of her self as something different—yet the same—from the white children.

When Janie is six, a man takes a photograph of Janie and the Washburns. When they get the picture developed, Janie immediately becomes confused by her own appearance, "everybody got pointed out [and] 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 child as me. So ah ask, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.'" (*Their Eyes* 9). Thus, Janie first thinks she is missing from the picture, on the basis of a "missing" white skin. She cannot recognize herself due to her own "dark" appearance. Suddenly, she realizes she is different from the other kids, "before Ah seen de pictures Ah thought Ah wuz like just like de rest (*Their Eyes* 9). Janie's realization is also formulated through the reactions of the white Washburns who laugh at her confusion, "Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself" (*Their Eyes* 9). The reactions of the white family imply they know something about Janie that she does not know herself. In this instance, Janie exemplifies Du Bois' explanation of double consciousness, as a "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (*Souls of Black Folk* 2). Through the contempt and pity of the laughing

Washburn children, Janie permanently shifts her vantage point, to seeing herself through the eyes of others.

Hurston connects Janie's perception of her corporal self with the existential realization of herself outside a white ideal, as seen through the interplay of double consciousness and the mirror stage. Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan notes that infants all enter a developmental stage, dubbed the mirror stage, in which "the subject primordially identifies with the visual gestalt of his own body" (Lacan 113). Lacan's notion of infant development can be adapted to the process of learning about skin color, and consequently racial difference. Janie's mirror is the photograph, the first meaningful reflection she has of herself as a physical being. However, for Janie, that "gestalt" mentioned by Lacan is not merely recognizing her whole body as a specific entity, but recognizing the totality of its blackness. Thus, Janie's first experience of knowing her "ownself" involves recognizing her own "dark" appearance, coming to the epiphany: "Aw, aw! Ah'm colored" (*Their Eyes* 9). Janie doesn't align exactly with the mirror stage model, as Lacan argues it occurs in infant development when the child "is unable yet to walk" and predates the ego's social determination (Lacan 2). However, Lacan's model can be adapted to the social self. Through the photograph, and more importantly, the comments of the Washburn children, Janie experiences an added level of consciousness regarding the racial world she has been thrown into by the virtue of her black skin. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," from *The Souls of Black Folks,* Du Bois outlines a very similar incident that constituted his own awakening to double consciousness as a child in a schoolhouse when a white girl refused to exchange a visiting card with him. "Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life

and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (*Souls* 2). In the connection of these two theoretical models, *Their Eyes* psychologically explicates Janie's internal war of race and identity.

This moment of double consciousness is of course complicated. The initial instrument of intrusion into Janie's consciousness is not prejudice, but a photograph. Thus, while Hurston presents racism in the Washburn children, she never fully indicts them. If the camera is truly the oppressor, then Hurston more vehemently criticizes industrialization, the photograph existing as a symbol of modernity. The photograph does cause Janie to recognize an ideal world of whiteness, which in Du Bois's terms signifies the ideal life on the other side of the veil. However, Hurston's emphasis on the instrument, not the world, limits her ability to depict and critique the social order of the South. Hurston, with all her anthropological gusto, appears to be misidentifying the true problem of color prejudice. The real question becomes the linkages between mechanization and racism. Hurston offers an incomplete relationship, implying that the photograph delivers racism, making modernization a deliverer, rather than arbiter of prejudice. The resultant tension, between Janie's psychological recognition of herself outside of a white ideal, and Hurston's identified culprit—technology—presents a fatalist outlook for the folk world and inevitably confines the possibility of social change. In this very moment, Hurston prevents her protagonist from escaping this realm, but rather begins Janie's narrative of manipulating the existing world of racism, introduced narratively through the Washburn children.

Another incident directly after the photograph forms another incident of double consciousness as Janie realizes she isn't entirely "black" either, delineating Du Bois's notions of "warring souls." Until this point, Janie's notion of her own blackness is purely

tied to skin color, but a schoolyard incident renders a new, cultural understanding of racial difference. Janie recalls that "de chillun at school got to teasin' me 'bout livin in de white folks' back-yard….[with] "clothes her grandchillun didn't need no mo' which still wuz better'n whut de rest uh de colored chillun had" (*Their Eyes* 9). Thus, the young Janie experiences taunting for her ties to whiteness, both the physical proximity of her home and the quality of her clothes. The result was "[t]hey'd push me 'way from de ring plays and make out they couldn't play wid nobody that lived on premises" (*Their Eyes* 9). Combining these two incidents, the young Janie recognizes herself as culturally white with black skin. Indeed, Janie embodies the struggle described by Du Bois, of being "both Negro and an American" (*Souls* 3). Hurston begins, here, perhaps a critique of a Du Bois-ian advocacy of social progress.

Yet, Hurston, while touching on this debate, also quickly disengages with it through the appearance of a white benefactor. Janie's conflict of not-belonging and racial intermediacy is followed by this passage: "Nanny didn't love tuh see me wid mah head hung down, so she figgerd it would be mo' better fuh me if us had uh house. She got de land and everything and then Mis' Washburn helped out uh whole heap wid things" (*Their Eyes* 10). This quick leave of Janie's psychological struggle indicates Hurston's conservative politics. Hurston believed that racial problems were best solved locally and through the state, likely through the aid of people like Miss. Washburn.

Several decades later, Hurston spoke out against the 1954 Brown vs. Board of education court ruling in an open letter to the *Orlando Sentinel*, noting "How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?" ("Court Order" 956). Again, Hurston displays her resignation and

bitterness toward racial mores, but refuses to protest them, or in the case of *Their Eyes,* allow her protagonist to do so. Hurston continues in the open letter that the black South needs "Growth from within. Ethical and cultural desegregation. It is a contradiction in terms to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association"("Court Order" 958). Thus, politically and narratively, she positions the individual as proxy to real change. Yet, as the bitter tone her first statement suggests, she came to these beliefs through experiences with violent racism. Thus, *Their Eyes* is an interesting test case for Hurston's theory, as it demonstrates these missing links between individual suffering, growth, and the perpetuation of Jim Crow. As the book progresses, Hurston, through Janie, does slowly concoct a political treatise, just a conservative and resigned one.

This early anxiety over Janie's racial identity juxtaposes in narrative space with her sexual awakening a "singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears…it followed her though all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep…it connected with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness" (*Their Eyes* 11). The coinciding elements spur her desire to develop fully and explore herself—linking sexuality with race in her quest for self-understanding. As Du Bois notes, the problem of double consciousness requires a quest of its own, "to merge [a] double self into a better and truer self" (*Souls* 3). While a lyrical moment in the text, this passage actually problematizes Janie's psychological development. Until this point, within the tale, Hurston posits race as the proxy to Janie's life and development. In this process, the "problem of the individual" becomes a microcosm for the folk and displays Hurston's conservative, resigned

engagement with racial prejudice. However, the abrupt introduction of love, early boyfriend Johnny Taylor, and the pear tree pushes Janie's quest outward, now focused on finding love rather than finding herself through racial understanding. Once again, Hurston has failed to develop a link between the moments of social injustice that defined Janie's coming of age and the world that created them. Rather, the journey shifts to romance, as Janie "wait[s] for the world to be made" (*Their Eyes* 11). Critically, it is a world made by men, again confining and limiting Janie to the world of patriarchy in addition to that of racism.

The coming of the "cityfied stylish," Jody Starks marks another chapter in Janie's quest to understanding her racial identity. Jody exists as a trickster figure who provides a crossroad for Janie and gives her the ability to manipulate her racial identity at whim.[4] Jody, first appearing "whistling coming down the road," deceptively presents himself in the musical form integral to Janie's pear tree vision, the "voice of it all" hovering over the "sanctum of a bloom" (*Their Eyes* 11). In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates defines the trickster as a mutable figure whose qualities might include magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, and sexuality simultaneously (Gates 6). Jody also fits what Hurston identified in her folklore as a white mare. Hurston writes: "[t]hose familiar with the habits of mules are aware that any mule, if not restrained, will automatically follow a white mare. Dishonest mule-traders made money out of this knowledge in the old days…Lead a white mare along a country road and slyly open the gate and the mules in the lot would run out and follow this mare" ("Court Order" 2). Indeed, Janie does "follow the mare" into a second marriage and the all-black town of Eatonville. Critically, Jody's care for presentation and vanity is a mask, a mask he exercises in Eatonville to achieve status over fellow blacks. Jody

imposes a patriarchal structure onto his life with Janie. As he becomes Mayor and storeowner, Hurston positions Jody as a neo-salve owner, "with a house so large, the rest of the town looked like servants quarters" (*Their Eyes* 47). Notably, this comment centers on intra-racial dynamics, with Hurston choosing to attack Jody for assuming this role rather than the system he emulates. Jody's exercising of masks foreshadows another moment of double consciousness after his death, where Janie not only realizes her elevated status as a rich, mulatto wife, but how to appropriate this identity.

Hurston invokes the mirror stage as Janie stares in the looking glass after Jody's death, conscious of her privileged racial position and how to exercise that identity at her choosing. Hurston creates a true moment of interiority in Janie's time of mourning:

> "She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again. Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see, and opened up the window and cried, "Come heah people! Jody is dead. Mah husband is gone from me" (*Their Eyes* 87).

This moment indicates Janie's understanding of a *double* consciousness, as she witnesses what Du Bois noted as a "peculiar sensation" while looking at herself in the mirror (*Souls* 3). She first sees a natural, unadorned face, "the handsome woman" that had formed in place of the young girl. This woman has "plentiful" hair with weight, length, and glory. Yet, in taking "stock" of herself, Janie makes the choice to comb and tie up her hair, "always looking at herself through the eyes of others" (*Souls* 3). Jody first made her tie up her hair,

so making this choice in his death allows her to adopt the mask of Mrs. Starks voluntarily. Additionally, the starching and ironing of her face literally creates a mask through whitening her appearance. As Janie forms her face into what Eatonville demands for a grieving widow, Hurston not only proves Janie's awareness of her perhaps hypocritical racial position, but her willingness to perform that position for a particular audience. The next day, Janie "came set in the funeral behind her veil" (*Their Eyes* 88). This "veil" of starched white skin protects her from the obligation of emotionally mourning Jody: "she sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime of the world" (*Their Eyes* 88).

Hurston again flees significant psychoanalysis and racial commentary in Janie's negotiation of these masks following the funeral. After the funeral, Hurston first implies that Janie discards the mask of obligation and whiteness in burning her head rags and placing her hair "in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (*Their Eyes* 89). Then, abruptly, Hurston comments through a third-person omniscient narrator: "that was the only change people saw in her" (*Their Eyes* 89). She continues to order around Hezekiah in Jody's old store and live in her fine house. This indicates Janie's problematic dispensing of certain higher-class and race cues, such as head rags because she simultaneously maintains his store and continues to view fellow black Hezekiah as a servant. Hurston thus proves Janie's mask remains divorced from any real power or independence, but rather tied to resources: light skin and money from Jody. The mirror passage casts Janie in a hypocritical light, the freedom to let down her hair, yet no obligation to work or experience the life of a black peasant. Hurston, for all her care in documenting folk life as it was actually lived, presents a heroine with immense advantages, who has "the rest of her life to do as she

please[s]"(*Their Eyes* 89).

Hurston more deeply engages Janie with a racial debate in the Muck, contemplating the romanticism of a black peasant ideal. Her time with Tea Cake in the Everglades provides trial and tribulation in an untamed adventure land. Hurston describes Belle Glade, nicknamed "the Muck" as a community with "weeds waist high and ground so rich everything went wild" (*Their Eyes* 113). In this section of the tale, Hurston introduces the possibility of a voluntarily isolated black community—flirting with a withdrawal from white society altogether. In many ways, however, Hurston glosses over the psychological depth of Janie's relationship with third husband Tea Cake and phase of exploration by writing it off as revenge against Jody. When Janie meets beautiful Tea Cake, ten years her junior, Eatonville friend Pheoby expresses concern: "dat Teacake draggin you round tuh places you ain't used tuh…you always did class off" (*Their Eyes* 112). Janie's reply reveals her growing hostility to the community of Eatonville; " Jody classed me off. Ah didn't," she remarks coldly to Pheoby (*Their Eyes* 112).

On the surface, the earthy, natural setting symbolizes Janie's further descent into nativity and removal of the mask of privilege she utilized with Jody. Yet, Hurston prevents the romanticism from fully taking hold. The signs of Jim Crow remain, from the poverty to the uneducated children to the doctor, sheriff, and judge that throw her in jail after she shoots Tea Cake in self-defense. Thus, while Hurston in a way advocates for the promise of such communities, she also attests to their fragility. Reconciling the two remains her foremost task and the ultimate hindrance of Janie's time in the Muck. A conversation with Mrs. Tuner allows Janie to explore these issues herself, as Hurston presents a political debate through Janie's conversation and interior monologue.

Janie experiences a moment of double consciousness with Mrs. Turner, with whom Janie speaks about her "black and yaller" kinfolks (*Their Eyes* 141). Mrs. Turner, a "milky sort of woman" advocates an assimilationist approach to race. Hurston notes that Mrs. Turner's "disfavorite subject was Negroes" (*Their Eyes* 140). Mrs. Turner likes Janie for her light skin, a trait they both share. Mrs. Turner advocates, "It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up the race" (*Their Eyes* 140). Mrs. Turner sees herself and Janie as a separate, elevated section of black people. She even critiques Booker T. Washington's notion of the slow, economic path to equality, "he [Washington] didn't do nothin' but hold us black—talkin' 'bout work when the race ain't never done nothin' else" (*Their Eyes* 142). Through Mrs. Turner, Hurston further presents Janie as the mulatto heroine, a woman fiercely sought in white and black society. Yet Janie's mulatto identity never renders her tragic, as this particular black woman is often portrayed in literature. Certainly she is neither William Wells Brown's Clotel nor Nella Larsen's Helga Crane. Janie's mulatto identity remains her safeguard, not her downfall, as Hurston lauds the advantages of white skin.

Hurston's racial theory gains another complication one moment later, as Janie's disagrees with Mrs. Tuner's desire to "whiten up the race." Rather than agreeing with Mrs. Turner, Janie argues: "us can't do it. We'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against black?" (*Their Eyes* 142). Thus, Hurston paradoxically uses her mulatto heroine to defend against intentional racial mixing. Hurston continues Janie's response via interior monologue: "Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable: Caucasian characteristics for all. Her god would smite her, would hurl her from pinnacles and lose her in deserts, but she would not

forsake his altars" (*Their Eyes* 145). These statements signal Janie's psychological recognition of the damage that a Caucasian god can cause a poor, black woman. Hurston therefore conditions her peasant possibility with bitterness, not promise. The final words of the chapter have Hurston again removing herself from further discussion by implying certain conditions don't apply to her protagonist, "So Mrs. Turner frowned most of the time. She had so much to disapprove of. It didn't affect Tea Cake and Janie too much" (*Their Eyes* 145).

Hurston continues to explore the world of the Muck through the psychological frustration of Tea Cake. This choice to move outside of Janie remains significant for its similarly isolated significance. Tea Cake more directly recognizes the agony of Jim Crow America. After the hurricane—an ecological indicator of crisis—white men with rifles force Tea Cake to dispose of bodies. The white corpses get coffins, while the black ones are merely covered in lime. "Whut different do it make 'bout color, Dey all needs buryin' in a hurry," says Tea Cake (*Their Eyes* 171). Here, Hurston creates perhaps her most obviously political moment in the entire novel. The guards' attitudes fulfill the prevailing ideology about ownership of black bodies, going back to the plantation master's control over the bodies of slaves. In forcing Tea Cake to complete the ritual of liming, not burying the bodies, the men force him to disrespect the black corpse in a highly public fashion. In Tea Cake's forced participation in a spectacle of black bodily suffering, Hurston realistically portrays the Jim Crow South and acknowledges its pervasion of folk communities.

Tea Cake's response signals frustration and possibly even a loss of faith in God. "They's mightly particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgement" (*Their Eyes* 171). Tea Cake observes bitterly. "Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law"

(*Their Eyes* 171). If read in a certain way, Tea Cake lashes out at either a Jeffersonian deist God or an evil deity bound by white supremacy. Tea Cake postulates that God does indeed know about the Jim Crow law and allows it to occur. Or—possibly—that he created it himself. Thus, the men's efforts at separating the bodies are useless, as God will re-create the same racial hierarchy in Judgment. In *The New Challenge* review, Marion Minus notes "there is bitterness to his reaction to his compulsory activity, and one wonders that there is no elaboration or act to involve change which would vitiate the habit of employment without consent" (Minus 87). While a valid complaint, perhaps that was not Hurston's point. She does not deny the possibility or value of change, but merely its potential source. Through Tea Cake, Hurston refutes the notion that religion or God alone will produce a toppling of such racial discrimination. "It's bad bein' strange niggers wid white folks. Everybody is agints yuh… Ah feels lak uh motherless chile round here," laments Tea Cake, questioning not merely his poor treatment, but the existence of a compassionate, patriarchal God (*Their Eyes* 171).

Tea Cake's internal war remains critical in Hurston's commentary on double consciousness—for its disconnect from Janie. Hurston never allows these characters, whose psychological states she develops separately, to commune about their frustrations. Thus, her "interest the individual" actually precludes depictions of unity in the folk world of the 1930s. Her heroine holds a hypocritical and reluctant place at best among the tapestry of characters that provide the rich backdrop of *Their Eyes*. From this disconnect with young lover Tea Cake, refusal to speak with Eatonville porch folk, frustration with Mrs. Turner or silence with Pheoby, Janie remains just that: an individual. She never truly immerses herself in the world Hurston so painstakingly tries to glorify. While Hurston creates a

complex, attractive mulatto heroine, these moments probing the double consciousness of her psyche remain ephemeral and incomplete as we never truly see their consequence or larger relevance.

Perhaps this is Hurston's ultimate point, that the folk culture should simply withdraw rather than marshal itself against the backdrop of Southern history and continued injustice, or that individuals should capitalize on any attribute that might allow them to step outside the virulent racism and sexism of Jim Crow. As Du Bois notes in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "Those whose eyes twenty-five years 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" (*Souls* 77).

The last scene of the book, with its emphasis on the passing of the tale, similarly isolates Janie, and by consequence, her story of racial discovery. Janie acknowledges the community's desire to hear the story. "Ah know all dem sitters-and-talkers gointuh worry they guys into fiddle strings till dey find out whut we been talkin' bout," says Janie (*Their Eyes* 191). In this statement, she realizes the vitality of her story and the necessity that Pheoby tell it: They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves," remarks Janie to an astonished Pheoby, who in turn replies: "ah done growed ten feet higher from us listenin' tuh you, Janie" (*Their Eyes* 192). Janie's statement, urging others to discover life "fuh themselves," advocates self-reliance in facing the struggles of life, one of them being the Jim Crow South. Janie places the burden on the individual. According to Michael Awkward, her final act is one of consolidation, as she walks up the stairs to her bedroom, "she called in her soul to come and see" (Awkward 56). As the story passes from Janie to Pheoby to the Mouth Almighty, Hurston embeds the very form of the

folktale within the modern novel. Duck comments that Hurston "paradoxically seeks to preserve a vision of folkloric pleasure within a bourgeois form given to individual consumption—that of the novel" (Duck 278).

When searching for the rural, black South of the 1930s, Hurston provides a great deal in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her gift for dialect and devotion to the folk tale form are commendable. Indeed, for this feat alone*, Their Eyes* deserves its place in the canon. However, Hurston partially fails in her mission of "literary science." *Their Eyes* refuses to explore fully the pressures bearing on the folk communities it profiles. Hurston certainly indicates the presence of these pressures, whether industrialization, poverty, racism, or intra-racial hierarchies. Yet, Hurston's heroine frequently finds herself outside their reach. *Their Eyes* also lacks the folk promise, how to connect the individual experiences of women like Janie into a real ideology and outlook for the rural, black South. Hurston highlights the vibrancy and culture of these black communities, yet refuses to discuss how they might survive against modernization and Jim Crow—other than through withdrawal and disengagement. Yet, Hurston remains the most celebrated folklorist of the Harlem Renaissance and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* her most commended work. Due to Hurston's tendency to dodge the dilemma of a modern folk—one that would have to confront racial discrimination and technological change—further study is needed to discern the gaps Hurston leaves in *Their Eyes's* discussion of racial perception and folk life. Two other, lesser known novels, George Wiley Henderson's *Ollie Miss* and Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* were more critical and deliberate in their portrayal of modern rural life and "the race problem." George Henderson's *Ollie Miss,* published in 1935, provides the link between individual journey and folk promise that Hurston rather intentionally obscures.

Henderson, situating himself between Hurston's folk romance and modern folk realism, presents a decidedly independent heroine, who incorporates folk tradition into her self-fashioning as a modern woman.

Endnotes

1. According to Lawrence Jackson's study of the period, (*The Indignant Generation*, Princeton University Press, 2010), Ford's 1936 *The Contemporary Negro Novel* was the third academic study of black writers. In this volume, Ford writes "since the Negro novelist has not yet produced even a first rate novel, is he not justified in laying aside the pretensions of pure artistry and boldly taking up the cudgel of propaganda? "(96). Hurston's politics befuddled Ford, who believed black writers should be public intellectuals and carry the cause of social reform.

2. In this December 1933 correspondence, Hurston thanks Hurst for her letter of support to the Guggenheim foundation. Hurst wrote a letter earlier in 1933 supporting Hurston's application to the fellowship. Hurston also deems her fiction "from the middle of the Negro out, not the reverse" (*Life in Letters* 286).

3. In a 1937 *New Masses* review entitled "Between Laughter and Tears," Richard Wright deemed Zora Neale Hurston's writing "quaint," with her novels carrying "no theme, no message, no thought." Wright continued that Hurston's prose "is cloaked in that facile sensuality" and dogged by "pure simplicity." Wright's derogatory opinion of Hurston's work was shared by several other leftist black writers and scholars of the 1930s.

4. Many would deem Janie's third husband, Tea Cake, the trickster, but Hurston also seems to be playing on this type in her depiction of Jody. Alan Dundes maintains there is a "city-slicker trickster" in modern folklore that exists as a reflection of capitalistic free enterprise (*Interpreting Folklore* 8). Jody's appearance in a fine suit "dazzles" Janie and provides the spark absent with Logan, discussing his ambitions in Florida and talking about how he wanted to become "the big voice" after working for white folks all his life. In Eatonville, Jody's replication of plantation power dynamics reverses Janie's initial impression of him as an ally for poor blacks.

Chapter 2
Henderson's Forgotten Novel: Reconciling Realism & Romanticism in *Ollie Miss*

> "I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it."
> —W.E.B. Du Bois (*The Souls of Black Folk*)

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois reflects on his time as a schoolteacher in the tiny "world" of rural, segregated Tennessee during the late 1880s. Du Bois continues, indicating a gothic, yet rich turn of the century South: "How curious a land is this,—how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise. This is the Black Belt" (*Souls* 107). Du Bois's words signal the rural promise that lived beneath a violent past in many of these remote geographies. Indeed, a similar promise of the folk governs George Wiley Henderson's forgotten 1935 novel, *Ollie Miss.*[1] Set in Black Belt territory— Marion County, Alabama— *Ollie Miss* traces the growing psychological and economic independence of heroine Ollie as she discovers her identity and place in a folk community. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Ollie Miss* also documents the South's rural black communities around the turn of the century. *Ollie Miss*'s entire plot occurs on a few miles of Alabama swamp, complimenting and enriching the portrait Hurston provides of agricultural work and folkways in work camps on "the Muck" in *Their Eyes.*

The novel follows Henderson's sensual protagonist Ollie, as she wanders onto the farm of black landowner Uncle Alex in Marion County, Alabama. Like Hurston, Henderson looks back to a time prior to the gross transformation of society which occurred during the migrations following WWI. *Ollie Miss* traces Ollie's immersion into the working community on Alex's farm and her sexual experiences with male farm hands Slaughter and Willie and former lover Jule. The novel's climax occurs as Jule's other lover, Lena, stabs Ollie at a camp

meeting. Nursed back to health by the women folk on Alex's farm, Ollie chooses to raise Jule's child alone. Excluding the doctor and sheriff, all the novel's characters are black, either working on Uncle Alex's farm or one nearby. The novel ends as Ollie becomes a member of the black yeomanry herself, purchasing several acres from Alex for her and the unborn child.

However, Henderson dramatically diverges from Hurston in his treatment of racial consciousness. Henderson presents only two whites in the novel, thus the explicit realizations of double consciousness that drove Janie's story in *Their Eyes* are notably absent. In *Ollie Miss*, Henderson gives a portrait of folk life that questions the value or necessity of seeing oneself through a particular double consciousness. Indeed, the absence of a double consciousness remains useful in examining how Henderson situates his premise of modern black life without internalized racial pain—between realist and romantic writing modes. Du Bois's writings on the Black Belt in *The Souls of Black Folk* expose Henderson's idealizing of folk life through *Ollie Miss*'s impoverished rural setting, the black yeoman possibility, and the folk's cultural isolation. Yet, a defining element of the novel affirms Henderson as a modernist: the celebration of an unmarried, female heroine who moves about freely and chooses to raise her child alone.

Henderson's fusion of realism and romanticism becomes evident in the novel's opening pages, as Henderson describes Ollie's appearance at Alex's farm and the novel's Black Belt setting: "This much, however, was certain: Ollie had appeared at Alex's one evening at dusk. It was May, and the Spring twilight had faded into a symphony of purple and scarlet. The countryside, deep in a lull of its own peace, lay hushed and still; and toward the west, the fast finding afterglow was a somber study in solitude" (*Ollie Miss* 12).

Henderson's writing here provides simple information, the time of Ollie's arrival, the month, and the rich beauty of the country atmosphere. Yet, the lyrical language contradicts the realist capacity of the information. The personification of the countryside has a poetic effect, attesting to the power of an untapped nature, which possesses an innate "peace."

Henderson undercuts the human tragedy of the Black Belt in romanticizing of the folk landscape, evidenced through Du Bois's descriptions. Du Bois argues there is a "veil" of racism that continues to land between the folk and prosperity. *Souls'* third essay, "Of the Black Belt" describes the rural South of 1900, the era during which the drama of Ollie Miss unfolds, arguing it remained "the centre of the Negro problem, —the centre of those nine million men who are America's dark heritage from slavery and the slave trade" (*Souls* 104). Du Bois continues, finding a gothic quality within the rural, isolated black world:

> "The whole land seems forlorn and forsaken. Here are the remnants of the vast plantations of the Sheldons, the Pellots, and the Rensons, but the souls of them are passed. The houses life in half ruin, or have wholly disappeared; the fences have flown, and the families are wandering the world….now only the black tenant remains; but the shadow-hand of the master's grand-nephew or cousin or creditor stretches out of the gray distances to collect the back rent remorselessly" (*Souls* 107).

Du Bois maintains these literal distances from modernity are far from the "solitude" that Henderson finds. Rather, the world of racism intrudes upon the idyllic landscape, through the economic exploitation of the black tenants. In these early pages, we see Henderson's desire to retreat behind the veil, to develop possibility within its constraints rather than truly confront the world that created it. Indeed, through this attempted isolation,

Henderson builds on naturalist imagery of the South to create a viable folk setting for his heroine to inhabit, but one oddly suspended in time and place.

The references to poverty in the early portion of the novel realistically portray the poverty of Ollie's life, yet her entrapment and seeming satisfaction within them presents Henderson's romanticizing of the black peasant possibility. Henderson immediately conveys Ollie's emptiness and longing for meaning at the novel's inception through indications of material inadequacy described in home and body. *Ollie Miss* literally begins "in the cabin door" (*Ollie Miss* 1). Even by the 1930s, the cabin remained a volatile literary setting, as a symbol of the historical past in the quarters. To illustrate *Ollie Miss's* departure from older novels of cabin-culture, comparing Henderson's descriptions with Harriet Beecher Stowe's masterpiece, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, demonstrates a shift in time and atmosphere. In Stowe's fiction, the cabin is a vibrant, small log "dwelling" that closely adjoins the Shelby plantation and exists as the center of black life for Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe (*Uncle Tom* 23). Stowe establishes the cabin as a place of fertility, "the whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen" (*Uncle Tom* 23).

Henderson, however, does not depict Ollie's cabin as a place of warmth and activity, employing simple, realist language to indicate its emptiness. He breaks down Stowe's romantic cabin imagery by emphasizing the cabin's physical defects:

> But there was no ceiling; only the joists. And during the day or night, one could look through tiny holes between the boards on the roof at dark or light patches of open sky. And when it rained, the water came through the roof and made wet splotches

> there upon the floor…on the hearth, before the fireplace, there were pots and skillets, dusty from disuse (*Ollie Miss* 27).

Henderson emphasizes two elements with this description: the cabin's physical disrepair and its current solitude. The unused pots and skillets indicate that the cabin was once used for another purpose, but has fallen into dust, and quiet. The cabin might have once been slave quarters, but that kind of large-scale activity has now ceased. Although, Ollie's cabin stands by itself in the quarters of a black farmer and she lives behind a black family, not a white one. The cabin's physical disrepair might also allude to the Depression of the 1930s, when Henderson composed the novel. Either way, he portrays a materially poor New South. The defects of Ollie's "home" symbolize her need to understand and enrich her life, "Lawd, 'dis is home," she said aloud. "Dis is the only home I got, an' hit ain't enough" (*Ollie Miss* 9). Thus, Henderson signals the possibility for autonomous folk growth on the ashes of the plantation landscape.

Henderson continues to provide clues to Ollie's poverty in her lack of material possessions and physical malnourishment, continuing for the moment in the vein of realism. Henderson notes Ollie came to Alex's farm "save for a small bundle in one hand, she carried nothing of any tangible importance" (*Ollie Miss* 12). This material lacking parallels Ollie's physical description, "her shoulders broad and lean, almost gaunt…her lips full and free and a little sad (*Ollie Miss* 2). Seymour Gross notes Henderson renders Ollie "lusty and natural" and decidedly emblematic of folk traits (Gross 152). However, Gross fails to realize completely the implications of these early descriptions. Words such as "broad, lean, and full" are coupled with the qualifiers of "gaunt" and "sad"—indicators of emptiness. Henderson also forces Ollie to remain nameless in the first chapter, providing

an ambiguity that signals a lack of personal identification. These images of Ollie as missing something pair nicely with the physical defects of the cabin, proving that Henderson did acknowledge the unavoidable poverty within these folk communities, debunking the romantic sharecropper notion. Immediately, Henderson connects Ollie's personal emptiness to the poverty her surroundings, establishing that link that Hurston so painfully misses—that between the protagonist and the folk world. The novel, as it traces Ollie's psychological and personal empowerment, finds a means of economic vitality for the folk through idealizing the black peasant, as Henderson departs from realism into a folk romance.

Modern historiography and Du Bois's writings on the Black Belt attest to Henderson's romantic transformation of Ollie into a twentieth-century black female yeoman. While the all black structure on the farm signifies the eradication of double consciousness and questions the need for whites in the farm economy, Henderson's presentation of Ollie remains unrealistically idyllic. When Ollie comes to Uncle Alex's farm, she attests to her skills in the fields. "But I kin do a lot work in de field," the girl said defensively, "Evahbody say dat I is de best hand de evah had" (*Ollie Miss* 21). Ollie uses these skills to carve out a place of respectability on Alex's farm, as the only female amidst the male trio of Slaughter, Shell, and Little Willie. As Ollie begins her plowing, "Slaughter and Shell found it increasingly difficult to keep the pace that was being set by this girl" (*Ollie Miss* 41-42). The presence of a female work hand notably presents an element of freedom from gender norms in the postbellum South. According to Eugene Genovese's foundational study, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, female slaves commonly worked in the fields alongside their male counterparts (Genovese 319).[2] However, Reconstruction changed

labor patterns for black females. Historian of Reconstruction Eric Foner, in *Forever Free*, maintains emancipation enhanced the power of black men and institutionalized the accepted nineteenth-century notion that men and women should inhabit separate spheres (Foner xix).[3] Jacqueline Jones, in her study *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* argues these gender shifts in the post-Emancipation period caused black women to seek paid domestic labor as baby nurses, cooks, and laundresses (Jones 2).[4] Thus, Ollie's work in the fields counters late nineteenth-century gender ideology of accepted practices of labor for black women.

Henderson's modernist departure from this history is Ollie's voluntary work in a conventionally male sphere; yet Du Bois proves her joining of the yeomanry has its limitations. Throughout the novel, Ollie proves her worth as an independent farm hand, with her reward being ten acres around her cabin from Alex. "I kin work some fer you to pay fer de rent on de land an' a mule to plow hit wid," says Ollie, who notes this idea makes her "feel happy in a way she had never felt before" (*Ollie Miss* 276). Henderson presents Ollie's labor as the means of her psychological and economic freedom, not a vehicle of entrapment. While this in many ways is a radical position for a black woman in the segregated South—to become a member of the yeomanry—Ollie's life of farm toil does not end, nor does the quality of her life really change. Indeed, Ollie's life becomes like any other person's in the Black Belt, where Du Bois notes: "the coming of a stranger was an event, and men lived and died in the shadow of one blue hill" (*Souls* 77).

Indeed, Ollie's story parallels Du Bois's observations about the limited scope of isolated black life behind the "veil" of racism around the turn of the century, regardless of Ollie's step into modern gender norms and lack of internalized inferiority. Du Bois ties his

conception of racism's veil to double consciousness. Du Bois asserted in *The Souls of Black Folk* that a veil existed between African-Americans and white society, a barrier that forces the African-American to realize difference and be "shut out from their world" (*Souls* 38). Du Bois maintains that trying to break through this veil produces double consciousness, as being present in the white world yields no true self-consciousness, but only allows a person to see themselves through the "revelation of the other world" (*Souls* 38). In other words, Du Bois means that blacks' self perception is distorted by white racism. In Henderson's novel, this world of whiteness and racism is not explicitly depicted. Through the novel's tight frame on one side of the color line, Henderson critiques the applicability of Du Bois's theory to blacks without significant exposure to whites.

However, Du Bois asserts the folk do sense their position at the bottom of the South's economic and social order: "…there was among us but a half awakened common consciousness…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" (*Ollie Miss* 77). Henderson recognizes this lack of opportunity and seeks to answer it not through moments into Ollie's psychology, but through her acquiring of acreage. In presenting this possibility, Henderson attempts to answer Du Bois's assertion that the veil of racism entirely prevents economic self-sufficiency.

Henderson's description of black life in Marion County connects fluidly with Ollie's journey, setbacks, and triumphs. Ollie by no means possesses the advantages of Janie that allow her to escape from the troubles her fellow folk would endure. Henderson's presentation of a protagonist directly molded from the mass of people in which the drama is set produces more effective realism. When examining key interactions between Ollie and

Uncle Alex's farm, we get a more unified and hopeful portrayal of black folk life, moving away from Hurston's poisoned-tongued sitters. Yet, in this harmony between the protagonist and community, Henderson actually romanticizes the folk's isolation. The isolation appears romantic and impractical as Henderson's simultaneously presents the dependence of these folk communities on technological and medical necessities of the modern, white world, through the intrusion of the doctor and sheriff.

Henderson idyllically positions Alex's farm as a self-sustaining black community, who in taking in Ollie, spur her ability to grow and prosper. The narrator recounts Ollie's first day on Alex's farm, most importantly Ollie's introduction to Nan, Mae Jane, and Caroline. The women, positioned on the porch with "arms folded tightly across their breasts" in a scene similar to the opening of *Their Eyes,* have many things to say as the girl approaches: "she looked like one of those back-water women… she eben 'lowed de mens to talk sweet talk to her" (*Ollie Miss* 12). Henderson narrates the scene in the third person and limits the reader's access to Ollie's thoughts. He is more interested in the porch talk that portrays the community. The women rebuke Ollie's table manners and chastise Alex's willingness to take on another "stray dog" (*Ollie Miss* 16). Yet, they give her food and take her in as one of their own. She in turn proves her work through potential in the fields, the only woman among Alex's field team that can plow "row for row" (41). Ollie is not resisted as a plow hand, as other members of Uncle Alex's farm are also female—she is resented because she is better. Henderson portrays the characters of Ollie Miss working the farm in harmony:

> "from dawn to dusk, man and beast had to sweat, plowing and hoeing. When the plowing was caught up, plow hands took over a hoe. Mules went to pasture and man

> and woman had to sweat alone…Saturday afternoons they went to ball games and picnics. Saturday nights they went to frolics. And on Sundays there was church" (*Ollie Miss* 109).

In this passage, the folk exist as one unified body, living a singular life; this description is romantic in its simplicity and removal of whites from the folk landscape. Henderson's use of structural repetition in these sentences establishes a rhythmic, cyclical pattern that governs folk life—from the fields to the church house. This prospect, of a female black hand working for a black farmer counters a prevailing image of the New South, with blacks working the same grounds as their enslaved grandparents for masters' descendants. Indeed, Ollie's journey upsets traditional perceptions of black and white relations in the New South, which historian Edward Ayers deems "a confusion of human interaction, that kept some Southern whites worried and uncomfortable, that made others bloodthirsty and vengeful" (Ayers 427). Rather than recreate this dynamic in *Ollie Miss*, Henderson removes the presence of whites altogether. Ollie also departs from literary portraits of the New South black woman, as neither Faulkner's mammy Dilsey nor Hurston's privileged mulatto Janie.

Yet, Henderson simultaneously hints that this community cannot completely exist in harmonic isolation, reverting to simple, realist language to describe the doctor's visit. Certain conditions mandate the folk on Alex's farm to reach beyond themselves, into a modern world. The appearance of a doctor following Ollie's stabbing signals a necessary meeting of the folk with modern medicine. Henderson notes it "was long past midnight when the doctor arrived," indicating the delayed response of the modern world to the folk, as Ollie's stabbing occurred much earlier (*Ollie Miss* 222). The section remains in a

distanced third person narration; the few references to the doctor are always related through oration of the folk, he never speaks directly. For example, his medical orders are rather communicated through Uncle Alex and Caroline, "Doctor say she got to git some sleep," Alex says (*Ollie Miss* 228). Thus, Henderson only presents the Western, white world through the speech of the folk. Caroline and Alex respect his judgment, realistically questioning poor blacks' access to medicine without a connection to white society.

Switching back to a folk romance, the narration during the doctor scene also keeps the modern world of science at a distance, placing not merely the verbal power, but healing power within the hands of the folk. The doctor only provides the medical essentials of treatment, dietary guidelines and a few stitches and appears to leave swiftly. Perhaps Henderson insinuates a joining of folk magic and modern medicine, the stitches of the white doctor and loving care of Caroline. This relationship presents itself again as Caroline brings in a plate of fruit and coffee—homemade healing—yet inquires about the doctor's pills: "You know he given her dem white pills to take when he was leavin,' " (*Ollie Miss* 233). The pill—which contains Ollie's ability to heal and survive—remains incased in whiteness. Henderson therefore portrays the inevitability that the folk meet the benefits of modern life, but minimizes the necessity of such interactions. The role of the folk womens' healing ultimately overshadows the white pills, as Henderson downplays the doctor's critical role.

Du Bois addresses the limitations of Henderson's romantic viewpoint, noting the folk are forced to interact with the modern world at their most vulnerable. Du Bois notes: "ill could they be content, born without and beyond the World. And their weak wings beat against their barriers—barriers of caste, of youth, or life; at last, in dangerous moments, again everything that opposed even a whim" (*Souls* 78). Indeed, moments of danger force

the folk to interact with the modern world. Ollie Miss certainly fits with this pattern, as Henderson only brings whites into the narrative in time of crisis; the white doctor and sheriff both appear after Ollie is stabbed by Lena. Du Bois attests to the magnitude of these communities' vulnerability—more than Henderson suggests or Hurston admits. The scene with the doctor problematizes Henderson's modern, self-sustaining black peasantry, as connections with the modern scientific world become necessary for the protagonist's literal survival.

Henderson eschews romanticism and fully embraces a folk modernism in describing Ollie's independence from gender expectations. Through its tapestry of secondary characters, *Ollie Miss* depicts the patriarchy imbedded in black, folk life, allowing the protagonist's eventual independence to resonate clearly and symbolically, becoming Henderson's most radical suggestion for a modern adaptation of the folk. With Slaughter, Alex, and Jule's comments to Ollie, Henderson portrays the patriarchy that structures these folk communities; critically, rather than manipulate this system like Janie, Ollie refuses it all together. The patriarchy is evident from the novel's outset, as Alex takes the girl in a paternalistic way, and Slaughter offers to carry her things to the cabin. Ollie's response to this simple gesture indicates her belief in independence, "Thank you jes de same, mistah, but I guess I is used to pickin' up my own bundles an' things…I is a 'oman, but I don't guess dat's no reason fer you to do something' fer me jes to be doin' hit" (*Ollie Miss* 25). The implications of this statement, for a turn-of-the-century, poor black woman, are tremendous. Ollie's description of independence, "pickin' up [her] own bundles" implies that she provide for herself economically. She refutes the notion that the identity of "woman" awards her certain privileges, the notion that women should be cared for an

protected. In Ollie's resistance, Henderson also critiques the gender norms imparted onto blacks through the patriarchal Old South. A later comment to Slaughter presents a critique of traditional gender dynamics: " Jes didn't want you to think you had to do something' fer me jes 'cause you is a man an' I is a 'oman, dat was all" (44). Compared to Hurston's love-seeking heroine, Ollie Miss becomes an independent, modern woman.

These early comments refusing male assistance do not negate Ollie's sexual attractiveness to men as Henderson argues folk women can be both sexual and independent. Henderson argues Ollie's beauty and her independence are not mutually exclusive. "Well, daugher," Mity said now, "you is a right pretty-lookin' gal, does you knows dat?" "Yes'm, I knows hit," Ollie said evenly. "But dat don't make no difference" (*Ollie Miss* 57). Thus, Henderson establishes Ollie's knowledge that her appearance (and male reaction to it) do not tangibly amount to anything. Yet, Henderson also clearly depicts Ollie's sexuality, most vividly symbolized through the dance at Lucy West's. As Ollie dances, her "eyes began to sparkle; her hair worked loose; and her body might have been one series of hips after another. For now, it seemed jointless. It moved with a rhythm all its own" (*Ollie Miss* 80). Here, Henderson likens Ollie's sexuality to dance—a serious of hair tosses and hip gyrations. Yet, Henderson also constructs Ollie as something of a modern woman, while dancing with Willie, she "went on rolling her cigarette" (*Ollie Miss* 81). Soon, all the men at the dance vie for Ollie's affection. However, when one tries to light her cigarette, Ollie replies "Thank you jes de same mister, but I has my own matches" (*Ollie Miss* 82). Henderson has done something quite radical, presenting a sensual black woman who resists male advances, requests, and offers of assistance. Through Ollie, Henderson argues that it doesn't take modernity to encase women's independence, but that this sensibility

can have an autochthonous point of origin from the folk. Ollie lacks an education or exposure to cosmopolitan culture, yet maintains her independence as much as any heroine from a traditional narrative of modernity.

Ollie's temptation away from female independence is Jule, a young man similar to Hurston's Tea Cake, "big and strong, and the muscles on his arms showed huge ripples, like a giant's where his sleeves fell short" (*Ollie Miss* 135). Rather than sexuality itself, Henderson posits Ollie's love for Jule as dangerous, as her longing for an unattainable man who "look[s] upon her as a woman" nearly costs her life. Ollie's longing for Jule appears early in the novel, causing her to briefly leave the life she has cultivated on Alex's farm, as she laments that "now she was alone" (*Ollie Miss* 30). As Ollie travels through the swamps to Jule, she becomes covered in the "shadowy, murky waters," symbolizing a drowning of self through her obsession with Jule, "the only living thing she could think about" (*Ollie Miss* 134). She finds Jule's cabin empty, yet waits for him for ten days with Della, who also pines for Jule. Henderson describes Della as "old and helpless," relaying the decay that comes with pinning for Jule's affections (*Ollie Miss* 150). As she finally locates Jule in the fields, Henderson foreshadows Jule's control over Ollie, "she had a feeling that his arms could squeeze and crush every bone in her" (*Ollie Miss* 135). Henderson reiterates the psychological danger of such a relationship "thinking of Jule…she forgot herself" (*Ollie Miss* 134).

Henderson continues his modernist critique of traditional patriarchy in folk communities as he portrays the danger of Ollie's feelings for Jule, which lead to a stabbing from another woman. David Nicholls asserts Ollie's confrontation with Lena—another lover of Jule— at the camp meeting is over Jule the object, not Jule the lover ("The

Bildungsroman" 95). Lena, who has discovered Jule's relationship with Ollie, makes her way through the crowd, "her right hand concealed beneath the folds of her skirt, her eyes leveled on Jule" (*Ollie Miss* 218). Everyone at the meeting thinks she's going to stab Jule, yet surprisingly attacks Ollie. Henderson seems to be making the point that women in these folk communities who fight for a traditional domestic relationship with a man, will be the ones hurt. Henderson symbolically connects the violence with the end of Ollie's relationship with Jule, as blood "dripp[s] from Jule's wrist and arm about Ollie's waist and mak[es] dark blotches there in the sand" (*Ollie Miss* 220). Henderson, through the stabling, signifies a need to step outside of traditional gender constraints.

Ollie's embrace of sisterhood, rather than Jule, following the stabbing indicates Henderson's embrace of independent, black women within folk society. As Ollie heals, she rids her body of the desire to possess Jule and replaces it with sisterhood, a rejection of Jule, and immersion into the agrarian workings of Alex's farm. After the stabbing, it is the female folk that rally around Ollie, whose "cabin resembled a camp meeting" (*Ollie Miss* 225). Then men present merely words of question and critique, "I jes don't see how anybody could do sump'n lak dis to Mis' Ollie," says Slaughter, whereas Willie presents criticism, "she musta done sump'n she aint go no business doin'" (*Ollie Miss* 230). By contrast, the women, headed by Caroline, wait by the bedside, "Caroline came to the door. Then Nan and Mae Jane came. All of their eyes looked tired" (*Ollie Miss* 228). Thus, it is the women who truly empathize with Ollie and share her condition. Each night, the three women sit with Ollie until she regains her strength (*Ollie Miss* 243). Ollie's care by former enemy Nan, contrasts immensely with the women folk in Hurston's novel, who (with the

exception of Pheoby) attack and criticize Janie even in Jody's death. Henderson's natural, progressive woman has a far easier return to the community.

Henderson's modern, folk sisterhood extends to villains, as Ollie refuses to implicate Jule's lover Lena in the stabbing. The Sheriff's appearance marks a rare intrusion of the white world into Henderson's novel, presenting Ollie with the opportunity to condemn her stabber. Henderson adjoins the Sherriff's coming to Alex's with modern technology, as the "sheriff drove out to Alex's place on a Saturday" (*Ollie Miss* 263). Again, the white world appears to the folk in times of crisis. The Sheriff, like the doctor, attests to the folk's inability to remain completely isolated from the modern world. Yet, Ollie's rejection of the Sherriff's suggestion to implicate Lena proves Henderson's faith in black sisterhood, as a protective carrier of these folk communities into the modern world. The Sheriff asks Ollie point blank, "is this the woman that cut you?" (*Ollie Miss* 268). Henderson notes the Sheriff "continued to look at the side of Ollie's face," yet she doesn't give in, replying "De 'oman whut cut me, I nevah see her befo' in my whole life" (*Ollie Miss* 268-269). When questioned about her refusal to name Lena, Ollie replies, "I don't reckon dat would do me no good now" (*Ollie Miss* 271).

Henderson places control back in the hands of his independent heroine, rather than the modern legal system. In placing forgiveness and reconciliation in the hands of the individual, Henderson argues for the folk's ability to govern themselves into the modern world.

In presenting a voluntary black matriarch at the novel's end, Henderson confirms his pretensions as a modern, folk realist. Ollie rejects Jule's offer of marriage. "Sem lak us was jes livin because us wanted something'…mebbe ef dere had been something' us could

want an' not hab—something' us could work fer and an still want—mebbe hit mought hab been dif'rent," Ollie says (*Ollie Miss* 273). Ollie's new emphasis on working for something rather than possessing it is key, as she reintegrates herself onto Alex's farm to provide for her unborn child. "I guess hit aint easy havin a baby…Hit'll be something' to live an' work fer—something' to dream about," she exclaims (*Ollie Miss* 276). Henderson provides a literal reward on Ollie's quest to female independence in the form of a child. Ollie's decision to cultivate her own acreage brings her even closer to the folk community on the farm, as far as even becoming an emblem of it. David Nicholls asserts that the novel "maintains the congruity of the folk world by grounding the heroine's autonomy in seasonal change" and even unifies and reproduces the folk world for her progeny ("The Bildungsroman" 85). Examining the general scope of the novel, Ollie begins with "an innocence as primitive as a child's" and ends as a mother, happily cultivating "things that would love and grow [by] the nurture of her hands" (*Ollie Miss* 276). Remarkably, Henderson does not portray the single mother-to-be Ollie as tragic or downtrodden, but he rather glorifies her choice to raise her child independently and alone.

Ollie Miss, while a lyrical tale of African American folk life, has been obscured, much as Hurston was until the late 20th-century. Although early reviews of *Ollie Miss* were positive, it failed to find a strong readership. *Survey Graphic* reviewer James Hubert lauded the novel proclaiming it "what critics of Negro literature have long been waiting for," for Henderson's lyricism and ability to depict the South without becoming a treatise on race (Hubert 308). This idea of social document fiction has in many ways defined our canonization of the 1930s. Ollie Miss doesn't fit with the other literature celebrated from

the decade also due to its Southern setting. Many writers took their protagonists to Harlem and placed them in the Great Migration narrative, which chronicled urban black life.

Tales of the rural South, seem by default, backwards and of an older generation. Du Bois further notes the limitations for economic growth in the poor, uneducated South through the story of Josie in the essay "Of the Black Belt," which strikingly parallels Henderson's story of Ollie Du Bois begins with a physical description of a girl whom he meets while teaching in Tennessee: a "thin, homely girl of twenty, with a dark-brown face and thick, hard hair…she had about her a certain fineness, the shadow of an unconscious moral heroism that would willingly give all its life to make life broader, deeper, and fuller for her and hers" (*Souls* 74). Josie seems to embody the peasant, rural promise that Henderson instills in Ollie. Du Bois goes back to his position at Fisk and doesn't see her for ten years. When he returns, she is dead. Like Ollie, Josie tried to provide for herself independently, is forced to migrate to an urban center to make rent payments, she "toiled a year in Nashville, and brought back ninety dollars" (*Souls* 78). In presenting the example of Josie, Du Bois signals a more realistic fate for people like Ollie, who only pursue life within a rural and racially isolated realm. In the end, Josie was forced into an urban and mixed racial center (Nashville), signaling Du Bois's recognition these black peasants must encounter modernity and consequently, the anxiety of double consciousness. Thus, Henderson's tale, while signaling a rural, modern folk ideal, fails to mention how this lyrical portrait might become muddled when racism and the industrial world intrude. As Henderson himself notes, "she was born to work" (*Ollie Miss* 111).

Despite its avoidance of internalized racial pain and the white world, *Ollie Miss* provides a great deal. It demonstrates both the real conditions of Southern black life and

the romanticism that folk writers attached to it. Many would argue the novel does not belong to the breadth of Harlem Renaissance literature because it is not explicitly engaged with that moment of African-American literary and cultural history. Despite its modern heroine, there is nothing to ground *Ollie Miss* in the 1930s, the 1920s, or even the 1910s for that matter. There are hints of doctors, medicine, and sheriffs, but little else. This suspension in space and time, however, becomes perhaps the novel's most chilling element. The story could have occurred in the shadow of Reconstruction or in the mist of the Great Depression. For acknowledging that historical truth, *Ollie Miss* remains intimately engaged with the 1930s in a way scholars might not want to admit. Henderson's novel ultimately endures as a humble, yet melodic window into the little communities that became worlds across the modern black South. Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom,* examined in the next chapter, shares Henderson's romantic notion of black peasant communities around the turn of the century. However, McKay places his folk village of Banana Bottom next to a missionary town in Jamaica, bringing back double consciousness as an explicit shaper of folk identity in the modern world.

Endnotes

1. Like *Ollie Miss,* George Henderson remains a shadowy figure of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Blyden Jackson in the 1988 introduction of Ollie Miss, Henderson was born in 1904 Alabama, attended Tuskegee, and later immigrated to Harlem. Jackson also maintains Henderson participated in the literary "salon" of 1920s and 1930s Harlem and worked as a print maker at the time of *Ollie Miss*'s publication.

2. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll* Genovese maintains: "field women matched the men in hard work, not only in picking cotton, but in rolling logs, chopping wood, and plowing" (319). Genovese also comments on the "demand" for a division of labor that would send women "out of the fields and into the homes" in Reconstruction (451).

3. Foner notes the role of the black pulpit in this shift, arguing black ministers in Reconstruction generally preached a highly patriarchal vision of family life (86).

4. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* seeks to understand black women's working lives and resulting domestic identities from slavery to the present. Jones further argues that Reconstruction-era black families' efforts to restructure their own worlds, through a division of labor, were "thwarted by oppression" as black women remained vital contributors to the household income (4).

Chapter 3
McKay's Jamaican Folk:
Negotiating Identity and Modernity in *Banana Bottom*

> Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
> And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
> Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
> I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
> Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
> Giving me strength erect against her hate.
> Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
> Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
> I stand within her walls with not a shred
> Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
> Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
> And see her might and granite wonders there,
> Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
> Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.
>
> — Claude McKay, "America"[1]

Claude McKay's sonnet "America" paradoxically expresses exclusion from the American dream within one of Western poetry's oldest and storied poetic genres. Never breaking from the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, McKay opens with a mixed metaphor, personifying his adopted nation as a woman who feeds and then savagely destroys him like a tiger. The sonnet "America" also laments the "cultured hell" in which McKay finds himself and likens his task as a writer to a rebel "front[ing] a king in state." McKay's "America" beautifully communicates an intellectual double consciousness, fixing his image of America between the poles of commitment and detachment. Finding himself geographically removed from his peasant roots in Jamaica and psychologically isolated in segregated America, McKay led a life of voluntary exile in Europe and Morocco for much of the 1920s and 1930s (Tillery 127). As the Great Depression dried up funds for black writers, McKay settled in Tangiers, Morocco and began work on his final novel, *Banana Bottom*.

Published in 1933, two years before *Ollie Miss* and four years before *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Banana Bottom* examines the intersection of race, gender, and colonialism within the folk community of Banana Bottom, Jamaica. The novel begins with twenty-two-year-old Tabitha "Bita" Plant's homecoming to Jamaica. Bita has been abroad for seven years, receiving an education in England. A flashback explains the reason for her trip: her childhood rape by Crazy Bow, a bi-racial fiddler local whites knew as a "colored Paganini" (*Banana Bottom* 10). Although Crazy Bow was successfully charged and sent away, Bita's reputation gained a moral blemish, as the folk of Banana Bottom made up a song about how "Crazy Bow was first." Bita's father, affluent farmer Jordan Plant, then turns to the white missionaries Malcolm and Priscilla Craig, who adopt Bita into their home in the all white missionary town of Jubilee. The Craigs decide to use Bita as an experiment, to show how an English education could transform a native girl "by careful training….by God's help" (*Banana Bottom* 17). McKay tells the story of Bita's life from her homecoming to her marriage, ending with a brief epilogue that portrays her as a content wife and mother. *Banana Bottom*'s key distinction remains the depiction of an educated protagonist capable of thinking through the dilemma of double consciousness in a manner different from Ollie and Janie. *Banana Bottom* shares elements of *Their Eyes* and *Ollie Miss*; McKay romanticizes the culture of the black peasantry much like Henderson and, like Hurston, constructs this journey to the folk through the double consciousness of his female protagonist.

Banana Bottom attests to the applicability of Du Bois's theory of double consciousness to members of the African Diaspora other than the African American. Despite Du Bois's scathing review of McKay's earlier novel, *Home to Harlem*, McKay

regarded Du Bois as one of his heroes.[2] McKay writes in his autobiography that *The Souls of Black Folk* "shook me like an earthquake" (*A Long Way From Home* 90). To an even greater extent than the folk communities in Hurston and Henderson's American South, the folk of Banana Bottom, Jamaica experience an internal struggle between their black heritage and the European influence that has been imposed upon them through Christianity and lingering colonialism. Franz Fanon usefully extends Du Bois's concerns specifically to the Caribbean. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon proposes the value of psychological study to understanding problems of race, "the confrontation of 'civilized' and 'primitive' men creates a special situation—the colonial situation—that only a psychological analysis can place and define" (Fanon 66).

McKay's relationship to Du Bois remains the most complex of all three novels. Du Bois believed double consciousness connected to a discourse of self-mastery and re-shaping, which can lead to the black individual's integration into American society. Like *Ollie Miss, Banana Bottom* questions the validity of that lens and the necessity of it producing an integration with Western society, yet through a protagonist truly capable of thinking through these implications. *Banana Bottom* charts Bita's growing freedom to move between various fixed identities, fashioning a modern heroine who can productively synthesize Western intellectualism and folk values. McKay examines double consciousness and Bita's resulting negotiation of these identities in three dimensions: her folk cultural belonging, romantic partnerships, and self-image.

Before detailing Bita's dilemma of joining culturally with the folk, McKay describes the atmosphere of her homecoming and distinctions of folk village Banana Bottom and missionary town Jubilee. McKay says in an author's note "this story belongs to the Jamaican

period of ht early nineteen hundreds," placing it on the same timeline as Hurston and Henderson. Initial descriptions of heroine Bita critically do not allow access into her mind, as we first hear her homecoming described through an omniscient narrator. The narrator tells the reader that Bita's homecoming was an exciting event for her family in Jubilee and the white missionaries in Banana Bottom, "for she was the only native Negro girl they had ever known or heard of who had been brought up abroad" (*Banana Bottom* 1). McKay implies Bita is but a project for Jubilee, "the Reverends Malcolm and Priscilla Craig were responsible for that" (*Banana Bottom* 1). Like the Washburns in Hurston's text, the Craigs provide Bita material resources and perhaps cause that initial moment of conflict with white society. McKay, however, does not provide this initial moment of the white world intruding upon the black conscious, rather the novel traces folk culture intruding back upon the ideal 'lady' the Craigs have cultivated. A detached narrator tells the reader: "Bita had had seven years' sound education. Priscilla Craig had conceived the idea of redeeming her from the past by a long period of education without any contact with Banana Bottom, and at the finish she would be English trained and appearing in everything but the color of her skin" (*Banana Bottom* 31).

Immediately before providing a moment of double consciousness, McKay foils the vibrant folk celebration with Jubilee's dry missionaries on Emancipation Day, which is celebrated in many former British colonies to commemorate the emancipation of African slaves. McKay notes Emancipation Day "was more stimulating to blacks than Christmas….there were many festivities, sacred and secular" (*Banana Bottom* 48). McKay also hints at the Craigs' disapproval of a good, "civilized" girl participating in the celebration. The omniscient narrator, likely signaling the Craigs' point of view, notes: "the

tea-meetings were the best, but Bita wouldn't be able to go, for they were discountenanced as low and rowdy affairs among the respectable church elements" (*Banana Bottom* 48). McKay even uses geography to hint at the rigid and impassible cultural division between Jubilee and Banana Bottom, "the journey [to Banana Bottom] was like climbing a winding path up a straight mountain and zigzagging down again, dropping into a long oblong valley fenced by a river on one hand and ferny hills on the other" (*Banana Bottom* 50). Thus, before developing his protagonist, McKay presents the separation and distance between the two cultures, paving the crossroads that Bita stands at throughout the novel.

The interplay of Bita's homecoming meal and her recalling of the "Crazy bow was first" song indicate her double consciousness and reveal the simultaneous nostalgia and shame she associates with Banana Bottom. Nostalgia for her upbringing and old friends draw Bita to Banana Bottom to celebrate Emancipation Day, yet McKay presents a psychological split that makes a peaceful immersion back home impossible. She reflects on Anty Nommy's cooking: "it was pure native cooking and serving, home cooking such as Bita was used to as a girl, and it tickled deliciously her palate..." (*Banana Bottom* 53). Bita contrasts the native cooking with the food she eats in Jubilee, "it was just not the same at the mission table" (*Banana Bottom* 53). This represents affection and attachment to her cultural traditions from childhood. During this meal, however, Bita also recalls the local song "Crazy Bow was first," her Christian moral consciousness intruding into the warmth of the folk meal. Even though the shame of her rape is theoretically erased by Europe, the Craigs, and her newfound refinement, the tune of Crazy Bow "had remained in Bita's life and often came humming in her head at the most unexpected moments" (*Banana Bottom* 53). Thus, the Christian principles—theoretically taught to erase the moral consequences

of the rape—only caused her to see the sexual encounter through a different, more shameful lens that then extends to her cultural upbringing as a whole. Returning to Banana Bottom, the site of the rape, causes these feelings to reemerge, in the form of a double consciousness, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (*Souls* 11)." However, in presenting this struggle within a female, McKay already modernizes Du Bois' s concept. Du Bois's description retains masculine imagery and perhaps even excludes the black female. McKay presents the two unreconciled strivings in a feminine body, through Bita's pulls to Banana Bottom culture and missionary mores upon her return home.

McKay utilizes the external reactions of others to heighten this moment of double consciousness on Emancipation Day, much like Hurston does with Janie and the black school children. McKay elaborates on the cultural discomfort between her and the native black community of Banana Bottom as she enters a party following the meal at Aunty Nommy's. The villagers gape at the "the transplanted African peasant girl [the Craigs] had transformed from a brown wilding into a decorous, cultivated young lady" (*Banana Bottom* 11). Bita remarks that she "had to call those she remembered to approach her...if she was timid the village was quite intimidated" (*Banana Bottom* 51). Bita feels a distance from her relatives, who cannot relate to "college, French, and piano" (*Banana Bottom* 53). Reflecting on her return to Jamaica, Bita notes "I don't know if I'm going to like it this time as I have before…It has changed. Or I have…" (*Banana Bottom* 55). Throughout the rest of the novel, Bita's psychological anxiety moves her between Jubilee and the seductive folk community. Her transforming cultural identification then becomes predicated on movements that force her to recognize and negotiate this double consciousness.

Bita's double consciousness, developed on Emancipation Day, produces an existential crisis as she chooses between the Christian behavior expected of her and folk cultural rituals, exemplified through the dance at the tea meeting. When colorful local Englishman Squire Gensir first asks Bita to attend a folk dance, she maintains "we church folk can't dance like that" (*Banana Bottom* 72). Bita responds as a cultivated, pious woman, remarking that she cannot attend the tea meeting with him: "…there are some things you are not always free to do even though you may want to. All depends on your position" (*Banana Bottom* 73). However, that old friend Kojo Jeems would be drumming, "Bita felt disappointed" (*Banana Bottom* 73). Bita begins to reconsider the invitation of Squire Gensir, "a gentleman who had traveled and traveled, contacting with all classes of humanity, high, middle, and low…and had resigned and retired to his bush hamlet of remote colony" (*Banana Bottom* 74). The Squire can be seen as a sanctioning figure that allows Bita to affirm an African/Jamaican world view, while slightly remaining on its periphery.[3] Bita "thought it would make all the difference if she went like a spectator to a tea-meeting with a person like Squire Gensir" (*Banana Bottom* 74). Bita thus manipulates her English ties with the Squire to attend the dance, learning to negotiate her various identities rather than choosing one or the other.

McKay romanticizes Bita's choice to dance with the folk, yet her expectations gained from Western moral decorum intrude and prevent a total immersion. Once she rebelliously attends the dance, Bita feels affirmed by the Banana Bottom community, "her body was warm and ready for that native group dancing" (*Banana Bottom* 84). As Bita joins the dance, "tingling with sweet emotions," McKay presents her joining of the folk as a naturalist choice: "wiggling and swaying and sliding along, the memories of her tomboyish

girlhood rushing sparkling over like water cascading over one bathing upon a hot summer's day" (*Banana Bottom* 84). Yet, this moment of folk culture, while contrasting with the pretention of the missionaries, does not guarantee Bita's immersion back into her native environment of Banana Bottom. The next day, Bita finds herself not at the tea dance, but back in Jubilee, kneeling with Mrs. Craig praying to God and "imploring forgiveness for sinful doubts" (*Banana Bottom* 93). Bita's psychological war does not magically end with folk music, but rather she learns an ability to move between the two cultures and freely appropriate her identity at will, a theme McKay continues with Bita's choice of romantic partners.

McKay's narrative shifts from a discussion of double consciousness and folk belonging and union to intimate individual belonging and union with another. McKay expresses Bita's double consciousness through her various suitors, who become symbols of British ideals and the folkways of Afro-Jamaica.

Bita's relationship with Hopping Dick Delgado signifies a desire to culturally and sexually belong with her native culture and rebel against the pious Craigs. Following the Crazy Bow affair of her childhood, Bita's relationship with the Craigs and chaste lifestyle ostensibly "rescues" her from the blemish of a premature sexual experience, according to Helen Pyne-Timonthy in "The Black Woman in the Work of Claude McKay." The character Hopping Dick who "even though he was not educated or refined, had a way about him of approaching a woman that was tantalizing," marks Bita's first voluntary physical connection with someone (*Banana Bottom* 110). Hopping Dick functions as a Tea Cake figure. Like Tea Cake to Janie, he is a means to Bita's own inward growth, allowing her to critique the confined life the Craigs have charted for her. As Hopping Dick wished good-bye to Bita, the sign of a

lingering warmth in her hand communicated to him something of that sweet sensation experienced when a wary or timid or hesitant spirit reacts favorably to a positive one" (*Banana Bottom* 201).

An easy criticism of Hopping Dick suggests that McKay imposes a raw primitive to counter the chastity of the missionaries, utilizing a discourse of the primitive to critique colonialism, if you will. However, Hopping Dick remains more stylized, allowing McKay to present him as a healthy phase of exploration for Bita, he "was a dandy thing, a great and ever-welcome dancer and buyer of things at tea meetings" (*Banana Bottom* 40). In fact, Hopping Dick's attraction to Bita's friend Yoni and inability to see Bita as anything other than "a fine lady at the mission" and the resultant triangle relationship prevents Hopping Dick from being locked into that pattern of Bita's answer to sexual desire (*Banana Bottom* 224). In fact, through Hopping Dick, Bita learns a sexual freedom itself, that McKay, like Henderson implies has an origin from the folk.

Bita's refusal to marry Herald Day, a black missionary minister, signifies her growing ability to negotiate double consciousness and act against missionary expectations, without feeling the pressure of a good, Christian "match." When the Craigs discover her relationship with Hopping Duck, they suggest she marry the reverend Herald Day acts as a solution to her impurity, "what could a cultivated Negro girl from the country hope for better than a parson" (*Banana Bottom* 101). McKay places characters such as Herald Newton Day at the willing disposal of the missionary elite; Day has no double consciousness, but chooses to be at one with the Western, Christian world, "I thought that perhaps only a white woman could help me. One having a pure mind and lofty ideals like Mrs. Craig" (*Banana Bottom* 100). However, Bita refuses to be fixed within this identity as

"a pure-minded white lady" (*Banana Bottom* 98). At his suggestion, Bita does not nod gratuitously, but asserts: "But whatever I was trained like to or to be….I am myself" (*Banana Bottom* 98). In acknowledging her "training" as separate from herself, Bita connects with double consciousness. Yet, this recognition causes her to positively identify her true feelings, "Bita realized she could not love him" revising Du Bois's notion that double consciousness has to necessarily be agonizing, but rather shows her that being one with Western society is far too simplistic and improbable (*Banana Bottom* 100). The relationship ultimately foregrounds that "she might just break out one day with something that would destroy irreparably the whole fabric of the plan that had been so carefully charted for her" (*Banana Bottom* 110).

The book's final chapters show Bita falling in love with Jubban, her father's farm hand. Jubban remains a naturalist choice, a man literally from her home, who "possessed a deep feeling for the land and was a lucky-born cultivator" (*Banana Bottom* 291). Bita professes, "she had no craving for Jubban to be other than what he was, experienced no hankering for that grace and refinement in him that soothsayers said was necessary to an educated person… he was in no way a hindrance to the intellectual side of her life" (*Banana Bottom* 313). Amritjit Singh, in *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, adeptly argues that McKay strives for a synthesis of "instinct" and "intellect" in Bita's development, with culminates under her relationship with Jubban (Singh 54). Thus, even though McKay ends the book in the pattern of the traditional marriage plot, *Banana Bottom* retains modernist pretensions for its portrayal of a female protagonist who join and reshape combinations of identity where she sees them as desirable, apart from the limitations of any of the particular tradition.

McKay finally chronicles double consciousness in Bita's self-image, chronicling her burgeoning freedom to move between both identities and synthesize them into one. Bita's swim in the river early in the novel reveals the double consciousness still embedded in her sense of personal belonging on her return from England, as her sexual expression comes into conflict with notions of modesty. Shortly after her return home, Bita goes swimming alone in Banana Bottom, "slipp[ing] off her slight clothes and plung[ing] into the water" (*Banana Bottom* 117). McKay first connects Bita's lack of clothes with feelings of safety and oneness with the natural environment of the river, "How delicious was the feeling of floating! To feel that one can suspend oneself upon a yawning depth and drift, drifting in perfect confidence without the slightest intruding thoughts of danger" (*Banana Bottom* 117). In a sense, this bodily escape from danger indicates a retreat from the conflict she feels between Banana Bottom and Jubilee. The "danger" remains anyone, white, black, or in between, infringing upon her solitude. Fanon notes, in *Black Skins, White Mask*, "whenever he is in the presence of someone else, there is always the question of worth and merit" (Fanon 156). Thus, when this solitude abruptly disappears, Bita still feels a need for her clothes, to protect her reputation and Christian modesty.

McKay quickly removes Bita's security as someone steals her clothes—her access to purity, whiteness, and Christianity. Double consciousness intrudes when Bita, ashamed of her naked body, accuses Tack Tally of hiding her clothes, becoming. Bita observes Tack Tally hiding in the bushes, and exclaims "you ugly monkey!...i'll have you arrested" (*Banana Bottom* 118). Thus, to express her feelings of anger, Bita rejoins white society not through her clothes, but by adopting its racism (by calling Tack a monkey) and threatening him with a legal system designed by whites to manage black workers. McKay portrays a

complex sort of consciousness, as the only way Bita can "join" with the West truly is through its racist attitudes. As Tack "plunges through the guinea grass," "Bita hastily covers herself with leaves before finding her clothes at the root of the rose-apple tree, "snatching them up and returning to the river bank she dressed herself" (*Banana Bottom* 118). Bita looks at Tack "in amused contempt and pity," just as Du Bois writes American society looks at the Negro. Despite the attraction to folk culture, Bita carries a simultaneous attachment to the Craig's missionary values in this incident.

As the book progresses, Bita becomes more and more immersed in Banana Bottom and prides herself on her blackness and her peasant roots; however her experience with the mirror proves that even this racial pride remains construed through the lens of the white world and Western culture. When Bita begins dating peasant farmer Jubban, it accompanies a burgeoning sense of her own natural beauty. In a scene very similar to Janie's mirror scene in *Their Eyes*, Bita stares in a mirror as "she caressed her breasts like maturing pomegranates, her skin firm and smooth like the sheath of a blossoming banana, her luxuriant hair, close-curling like thick fibrous roots…the infallible indicators of real human beauty" (*Banana Bottom* 264). Bita's newfound appreciation of her natural body coincides with an affirmation of her black identity: "Bita was proud of being a Negro girl. And no sneer, no sarcasm, no banal ridicule of a ridiculous world could destroy her confidence and pride…for she knew she was a worthy human being" (*Banana Bottom* 266). Nicholls asserts that Bita's reinsertion into the culture of Banana Bottom finds her "succumbing to the diachronic pressures of psychological determinism, [and] savingly inserted into the utopian world of the folk romance" ("The Folk As Alternative Modernity" 79). McKay closely connects Bita's self-analysis with nature, recognizing herself as a

summation of earth elements, pomegranates for breasts, bananas for skin, and hair like roots. Indeed, McKay presents a brief moment of folk utopia. According to Fanon, this type of psychological connection to the body structures the self, as it "creates a genuine dialectic between [the] body and the world" (Fanon 91). Yet, this moment proves only ephemeral, and Bita's final reflections while staring in the mirror mark the novel's most powerful representation of double consciousness.

Bita's musings on Blake's "The Little Black Boy" while staring in the mirror indicate her explicit utilizing of double consciousness as non-addling, but rather a tool to unify her life experiences. Critically, this occurs after her most real connection with physical blackness. Bita suddenly picks up a book of poetry by the mirror. "A splendid poem," Bita remarks of "The Little Black Boy," but cautions "not one to be recommended to an impressionable black child" (*Banana Bottom* 268). Reprinted in Appendix A, "Little Black Boy," recalls a conversation between a black child to an English child, in which the black child explains his skin is merely a cloud that will disappear in heaven.[4] In Bita's mixed reaction, one can see the influence of McKay's own biography, as a young intellectual in Jamaica, as well as that of Du Bois. Bita continues: "For it was murder of the spirit, she reasoned, to cultivate a black child to hanker after the physical characteristics of the white" (*Banana Bottom* 268). Yet Bita acknowledges Blake's greatness as a poet, "a precursor and king among the futurists…how perfect of music and phrasing, and far-reaching the implication of that thought…'when he from white and I from black'"(268). Bita's musings on Blake's poem then abruptly end, "if only she could rest her spirit tranquilly there" (*Banana Bottom* 268). Suddenly, her thoughts assume a stream of consciousness, "thus Marse Arthur's sottish remark pursued Bita there,"(*Banana Bottom* 268). Bita says that

Marse Arthur's remark of "only a nigger gal" continues to affect her "like a wicked imp created for irritation and mischief, that worthless phrase hovered above her loftiest thoughts and would not away, flitting around, and darting down into her deepest thinking and spoiling it" (*Banana Bottom* 268). McKay indicates Bita's realization that her knowledge of Blake does not eliminate the still racist world, perhaps broaching a dialogue with Du Bois about education being an arbiter of racial injustice. McKay rather proves that intellectualism can accompany the victims of racist comment, like Bita. For Bita, Blake's poem still retains meaning because she chooses to assign it such, despite resenting the society it hails from. Her freedom to synthesize her English schooling and native roots becomes McKay's modern promise.

In the book's final chapters, Bita marries black farmer Jubban, however, this marriage does not signal a conclusive joining of the folk. Even at the marriage ceremony itself, McKay inserts tension between Western rationality and folk superstition, with Bita at the crossroads. Banana Bottom celebrates Bita's marriage for weeks; at one event, Squire Gensir announces his return to England. Suddenly, chicken flew up in the air over the barbeque like wild birds. Bita's Anty Nommy remarks it is a sure sign of the Squire's impending death (*Banana Bottom* 308). Bita "mocked at Anty Nommy's superstition" (*Banana Bottom* 308). When they get the news of the Squire's death a few weeks later, McKay presents the news as a triumph of folk wisdom. Perhaps the the Squire's death signals his collapsing with the folk, whom he once admired from afar. The Squire also leaves Bita money, his will providing her the money, house, and material security Jubban cannot. Bita seems to have the best attributes of both worlds—a Jamaican husband rooted in native culture and the Squire's material symbols of the West. Reflecting on the Squire's

life, Bita makes a statement that possibly foregrounds her own life with Jubban: "And although the peasants admired [Squire Gensir], his high intellect and acute intelligence precluded himself from sinking himself entirely in the austere simplicity of peasant life" (*Banana Bottom* 309).

Banana Bottom portrays the post-colonial condition of the early to mid twentieth century, as capitalism and white culture threatened to uproot native traditions across the Caribbean, as well as the American South. The lives and aspirations of Afro-Jamaicans turn out to be remarkably similar to the concerns of African Americans in Florida, Georgia and Alabama. According to Amy Sickels, the protagonist- folk community relationship in McKay, like that of Hurston and Henderson, advocates "the power of African-American communities that are self-run, without any dependence on social, cultural, political, and economic systems dominated by whites" (Sickels 56). Through this communal effort, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay situate black life, individuality, and the modern subject's place in it. As a group, they accomplish the goal of "transfer[ing] the life of the people, the folk ethos, into the accepted modes of formalized fiction," an essential task of the black writer in the 1930s (Hemenway 56).

McKay's singular accomplishment among the folk modernists remains his unique conversation with Du Bois and double consciousness, breaking a strict dichotomy of joining one society or another. With Bita, McKay portrays neither Janie's peripheral isolation from the folk or Ollie's joining with it, but rather an even greater freedom to negotiate and combine elements of multiple identities. The novel's final page find Bita reading Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* while she watches her son play in the grass. "Perhaps Pascal would have been incredulous if it had been prophesied to him that in future centuries a black girl

would have found in his words a golden thread of principle to guide her through the confusion of life" (*Banana Bottom* 314). Thus, at *Banana Bottom*'s end, McKay finds a place for the black intellectual within both Western tradition and the folk landscape, through a protagonist who contemplates and then overcomes a strictly addling double consciousness.

Endnotes

1. “America” was first printed in 1921 In *The Liberator* and included in *Harlem Shadows*, a collection of McKay’s poems. It is one of McKay’s most anthologized poems.

2. Du Bois attacked McKay’s licentious and gritty portrayal of Harlem street life, in a 1928 *Crisis* review, remarking: “[*Home to Harlem*] for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath” (202).

3. Tyrone Tillery argues Squire Gensir is a fictionalized version of McKay's mentor, Walter Jekyll (*Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* 131). Like Gensir, Jekyll emigrated from England to Jamaica and shaped McKay’s early writing. Jekyll helped publish McKay's first two poetry collections in 1912, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads.*

4. Originally published in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, “The Little Black Boy” imagines the thoughts of a young black child born in “the southern wild” of Africa. He notes that his skin is black, yet his soul is white like an English child’s. He explains how his mother told him his dark skin is only a cloud that will “vanish” in heaven. The poem ends with the black child noting he will “be like” the English child in Heaven, as both of their skins will disappear.

Conclusion

Hurston begins *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a now famous passage contrasting two approaches to hope and desire:

> "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon never out of sight never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (*Their Eyes* 1).

Hurston's words, stylistically mimicking oration, note her belief in women's ability to live within their dreams. Hurston transforms men into watchers and their dreams into ships that, if they should come in, never bear the hope they were supposed to carry. For women, the dream becomes the truth, and they maintain this subjective reality by manipulating their memories. In addition to the gender commentary, the "ships at a distance" passage also symbolizes a new, modern freedom to chase self-fulfillment and desire, which Janie pursues in her journey through the Florida folk. Rather than fixing her desires within the ship, Hurston gives Janie the capacity to maintain hope into the future, rather than be "mocked to death by Time."

Male writers Henderson and McKay also give their folk heroines this power, placing them as symbols and representatives of a modern folk, free from the nineteenth century's internalized racism and patriarchy. Their literal wandering through the South and Jamaica signifies a newfound freedom to organically and independently, "find out about livin' fuh theyselves," (*Their Eyes* 192). All three heroines seek self-fulfillment and define

themselves as individuals within larger communities and pass tales of the journey on to future generations—Janie to Pheoby, Ollie to son Jule, and Bita to Jubban and their son. Janie, Ollie, and Bita's freedom from traditional gender constraints indicates that rural, folk communities can indeed modernize with the rest of the world, yet also remember their past without being "mocked to death by Time." Thus, for Hurston, Henderson, and McKay, the liberation of black women becomes not merely a feminist journey, but an indicator of a modern promise. Whether the protagonist is alone, as in Hurston, with a baby, as in Henderson, or married and with children, as in McKay, the novels indicate women's freedom to reshape their own identities as they please, away from the boundaries of any particular tradition.

Hurston, Henderson, and McKay also illustrate a need for a wider geographical theorizing of American modernism. The novels cast the Global South as a worthy setting for artistic experimentation and change. Despite the black movement to the North following World War I, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay place their tales outside the Great Migration narrative. Other literature of the period painted an exodus from the South as liberation. Harlem Renaissance contemporary Nella Larsen illustrates such an example in her 1928 novel *Quicksand*:

> [Helga] gave herself up to the miraculous joyness of Harlem. The easement which its heedless abandon brought to her was a real, a very definite thing….It was as if she had passed from a heavy solemnity of a church service to a gorgeous care-free revel" (Larsen 214).

Larsen's protagonist is "freed" from the history of the South, portrayed here as a solemn church service, through her migration to Harlem. Historian Joe Trotter argues the Great

Migration served as an emancipatory process owing to its contrast with the forced geographical migration during enslavement, noting: "these were voluntary movements, initiated by the individual or family, in pursuit of what they saw as their own best interests" (*The Great Migration in Historical Perspective* ix). Yet, the same voluntary movement appears in *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Ollie Miss*, and *Banana Bottom*. From Janie's journeys between Eatonville and the Everglades, Ollie's search for Jule, and Bita's journey to Banana Bottom, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay portray emancipation through individual freedom to chase identity. They intentionally ground their studies of the folk in the rural, Global South to show it can be a place of change, self-discovery, and freedom. Indeed, their mission was equal parts realism and romance. They sought to realistically portray everyday, rural folk, emphasizing their intelligence, self-awareness, and cultural vitality. Yet, this realism remains but a means to an end; in portraying the folk's worth, Hurston, Henderson, and McKay provide the root for a healthier and substantive modernity.

While the three protagonists and similar settings certainly indicate the writers' shared commitment to folk modernism, the respective heroines of *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Ollie Miss*, and *Banana Bottom* are not an identical woman. In many ways, their differences demonstrate the difficulty of the folk's collision with the modern, still racist world. Janie, through her mulatto skin, bank account, and initial resistance to tell the tale, demonstrates the pain of perpetually remaining on the periphery, of both white society and traditional black folk culture. Indeed, Hurston's protagonist perhaps indicates the growing pains of America's folk communities, with one foot into modern society and the other carefully guarding tradition. As *Their Eyes* ends with Janie's literal retreat

upstairs, perhaps she advocates for a similar retreat of the folk from American life and eschews the possibility of a harmoniously integrated society. *Ollie Miss*, with its peasant possibility, more adamantly refutes the notion that a double consciousness even remains necessary or beneficial; yet this romanticism seems a bit out of place with modernity at the same time, as Ollie has no bank account or passing ability to help her survive economic or medical hardships. Finally, Bita Plant expresses the need to escape Western conceptions of intellect, sexuality, and religion, yet can never psychologically achieve true freedom despite her lifestyle shift. McKay's Jamaican pastoral setting never fully wins against Bita's existential struggle. Thus, there remains a hint of ambivalence regarding the future at each tale's end, signifying a paradox of modernism. Despite their decidedly modern heroines, the novels appear uncertain as to how social change, cultural upheaval, and individualism will refashion the folk communities at large.

Alice Walker's now famous walk through a segregated Florida cemetery, up to an unmarked grave resulted in the lionizing of a previously unheralded figure ("In Search of Zora"). Indeed, for many years, Hurston had been literally buried under the perceptions that her work was chauvinistic, outdated, or overly romantic. However, studying Hurston in tandem with other folk modernists such as Henderson and McKay reveals an entire community of black writers composing with folk concerns in the 1930s. In attuning ourselves to the presence of a folk modernism comes the possibility of locating and redefining Southern, black communities on its terrain. Indeed, at present, scholarship on folklore remains but a footnote to work on the Harlem Renaissance. To use Du Bois's term, these "tiny worlds" remain much like Hurston's ships at a distance, as common perceptions

of the rural folk prevent the possibility they could be worthy modern subjects. In many ways, that is the dream Hurston, Henderson, and McKay lived in and consciously created.

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Appendix

Appendix A: William Blake, “The Little Black Boy,” from *Songs of Innocenc*e *and Experience* (1789)

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but oh! my soul is white.
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereaved of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And, sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say:

"Look on the rising sun, -there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

And we are put on earth a little space
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learned the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish, we shall hear his voice
Saying: `Come out from the grove, my love and care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice!' "

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;
And thus I say to little English boy:
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me.