

Dialect and expression in mule bone



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“ The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama.” (Hurston, 830) In her own words, Hurston captures the gritty picture she paints in the highly disputed early 20th century drama, “ Mule Bone,” co-written by fellow Harlem renaissance icon Langston Hughes. “ Mule Bone” is set in a fictionalized version of Hurston’s hometown, an all black community in Eatonville, Florida where she spent the early years of her teen life living with her father following her mother’s death. Hurston’s earliest memoirs indicate that the Eatonville of her childhood, much like the Eatonville of the stage, had two churches and no jail. Based on the short story “ A Bone of Contention” which Hurston penned in 1929, “ Mule Bone” draws heavily from Hurston’s anthropological work which she compiled from visits to all black communities in the southern United States. Hughes and Hurston collaboratively worked “ A Bone of Contention” into a running dialogue set for the stage, however; this project would eventually tear the two authors apart after discrepancies in the text became insurmountable. As a piece of social criticism, “ Mule Bone” is much like other comedies, however; the high level of diction stemming from what linguistic scholars have recently named African-American vernacular English (AAVE) set a new standard in realism for African-Americans on stage. Standard English (SE) has been studied in volume after volume of deep structure analysis and lexical origins, only recently has AAVE received the same attention in the form of through analysis that SE has enjoyed for years. Researchers have found the main differences between AAVE and SE lie in subtle rule changes. Where AAVE allows for consonant cluster reduction, the absence of the copula, invariant or habitual forms of to be, time reference markers, and multiple negation

(Mufwene, 1) SE does not have such allowances. So much of Hurston's voice relies on the accurate portrayal of AAVE. A voice which Holloway describes as " recursive; it begins, it names, it activates, it calls us back to a primal ground." (Holloway, 113) Hurston was striving to write a dialogue which, until this point, had been poorly recorded and often stereotyped African-Americans as dim-witted, primitive and wild. In her highly acclaimed anthropological essay " Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston sums up the realization of a pure black dialect and comments on the unnatural dialogue credited to the Negro so far: " If we are to believe the majority of the writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of " ams" and " lses." Fortunately we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself." (Hurston, 845-846)Dialect is a term linguists struggle to define as one cannot set firm boundaries around a shapeless, often regional form of speech. Tracing history and the introduction of Africans to America, researchers have roughly sketched out the origins of what is now covered by the umbrella label AAVE. Originally Pidgin French (later known as Creole) and Pidgin English were derived from Portuguese. These languages were spread to West Africa, and the first African-Asian trade involving the west Pacific, including India, China, and later Hawaii, brought the seeds of African-American English all across the globe. Charles S. Johnson, a prominent scholar of African-American English surmised that " Negro dialect turns out to be a repository for the seventeenth century speech of the first English colonizers," (Dillard, 39) this theory, along with others that rely on berating African-American culture as the " white man's castoff," fell by the wayside as more scientific research was done on the structure of AAVE; revealing the blending of both

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native tongues and new forms of Pidgin English as the origins of African-American English in the United States. Deeply seeded in the Portuguese origins from which AAVE seems to have stemmed is the fundamental difference most noticeable to most SE speakers. Dillard examines a sentence such as: An' so I comin' down an' she out there blabbin' her mouth told my sister I was playin' hookey from school. In which, he explains, there are no lexical anomalies from SE, nor any alien forms, although sometimes usage is casual and "illiterate," it follows many of the same conventions as does SE. (Dillard, 40) However, it is the syntactical analysis of AAVE that reveals the most information. Dillard points out that an obligatory category in SE: verb tense, can be ignored in what he refers to as, Black English. While it is interesting to peruse these volumes of thoroughly dissected AAVE, it is important to remember Hurston and Hughes' goal in penning "Mule Bone;" the accurate portrayal of the language of life in a racially un-oppressed southern black community. Hurston failed to capture the elusive dialect in perfect written form, insofar as researchers are concerned, as often she substitutes more readily recognizable structures in place of the hard to read, more accurate written compositions, which she could have transcribed from tapes gathered during her anthropological studies. None the less, Hurston and Hughes managed to convey the sounds of AAVE, its subtle inflections and outlandish expressions, which in consideration of the theatrical backdrop "Mule Bone" enjoyed, remains of higher importance than their choice of spelling. Hughes seems to have played a lesser role in designating the reality of dialogue in "Mule Bone" as critics have commented on other literary work he published as "stale, flat, and spiritless." (Redding, 73) Further examination of his literary track record reveals that as Hughes matured and

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evolved as a human being, so did his writing. One critic's nostalgic view of Hughes reveals the disgust within a literary niche in response to his stronghold on his roots." While Hughes's rejection of his own growth shows an admirable loyalty to his self-commitment as the poet of the ' simple, Negro common-folk' – the peasant, the laborer, the city slum-dweller-, it does a disservice to his art." (Redding, 74) This diehard image of the common black man is the cornerstone of the " Mule Bone" community, and an important role Hughes facilitated transcribing " A Bone of Contention" into a feasible piece of dramatic text. Within " Mule Bone," concrete examples of Hurston and Hughes's regionalized diction are plenteous, the play is written strictly in dialect. Breaking these forms of speech into appropriate categories is essential in an analysis of the text. Hurston reveals in " Characteristics of Negro Expression," that the most basic language is one which relies on comparisons, rather than extensive descriptions to elaborate meaning. She supposes the inherent ease of parallelisms as the natural form from which all other descriptive speech is derived. And in doing so, Hurston recognizes African-American's as the contributors of broad, often natural similes and metaphors, the double descriptive (such as high-tall, little-tee-ninchy, kill-dead), and verbal nouns (such as funeralize, puts the shamery on him, and uglying away) to the English language. (Hurston, 832-833) " Mule Bone" is packed full of these elements, a few examples of the co-author's awareness to the vivid language associated with similes are as follows: I'd beat her till she smell like onions. (Bass, 52) I'd stomp her till she rope like okra. (Bass, 52) I'd romp her till she slack like lime. (Bass, 52) The first example is self explanatory, however the second and third are a bit more elusive in their meaning. Okra is a non-native English word introduced by African-Americans,

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one of the dozen or so words researchers formally recognize as African in origin, and refers to a particular kind of vegetable. The meaning is derived from the strings of goeey sap exuded by cooked okra when it's eaten. Hurston's simile paints the picture of a beating so severe; one might be left oozing blood. Slack like lime is a term which has apparently fallen by the wayside, as no formal explanation seems to exist. "Smell like a nest of yellowhammers" was another elusive term, yellowhammers are a type of bird, however; there is little to no evidence that shows any connection between the two. The characters within "Mule Bone" relate everything to a grounded understanding of their world. Every description involves something physical; a tangible piece of their surroundings that fundamentally represents the implied meaning. As an example, in the opening lines, Hambo retorts that his baldness doesn't matter because he "don't want nothin'-not even hair-between (he) and God." (Bass, 49) The description of old Brazzle's mule lends itself nicely as an example of the physical aspect of everyday speech. "He was so skinny you could do a week's washing on his ribs for a washboard and hang 'em up on his hip-bones to dry." (Bass, 53) Or, Clarke's description of Daisy "...a great big mango...a sweet smell, you know, with a strong flavor, but not something you could mash up like a strawberry. Something with a body to it." (Bass, 60) Several languages of West Africa denote the creation of man to a God beating a drum; the shockwaves of each beat resonating throughout mankind. This kind of primal being, a connection with the physical universe, comes to life as Hurston examines this feeling as related to African-American dance, she says: "...The performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running

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or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation." (Hurston, 835) This to Hurston is the embodiment of drama. Fundamentally, Hurston feels as though African-Americans are drama. She feels as though each aspect of the Negro life is dramatized, lifted above the mundane, and enacted, not lived. In conclusion, studying the development of AAVE in conjunction with the changing social atmosphere of the Harlem renaissance and the conversion of Hurston's short story to a dramatic work, has greatly increased the significance of the text as a piece of self-proclamation for the African-American in the early 20th century. The combination of Hurston's anthropological experience and Hughes's steadfast hold on his culture reaches new heights in the realization of a true to life representation of African-American life." Place was important to Zora Neale Hurston-she would spend most of her adult life in search of a place she could claim as her own-one that would support, with fervor equal to hers, her cultural nationalism, that would respect the legacies represented in the voices that she recorded-voices that evidenced the traditions of the world." (Holloway, 113) Holloway touches upon an important conclusion one comes to in viewing " Mule Bone" as a text among many others. Hurston and Hughes strove to find a place among the Zeke's of " The Octoroon" and the Jupiter's of Poe's " The Gold Bug," and succeeded wildly. The dialect of each character in " Mule Bone" lends itself to the subtle twisting and careful crafting applied by the co-authors. In a way, Hurston and Hughes celebrate themselves in the colorful use of dialect. To close, Holloway sums up the atmosphere one gets a feel for with this use of dialect, "... (it)

speaks of the primacy of the word, the instrumentation of literary talent and the metaphorical adornment of a culture that recaptures myth on its tongue and uses the adornment to represent itself as black.” (Holloway, 115) Works Cited Bass, George Hurston, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston: *Mule Bone: A comedy of Negro Life*. New York: Perennial, 1991. Dillard, J. L.. *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*. New York: Random House, 1972. Holloway, Karla F. C., ed. *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987. Hurston, Zora Neale. “ Characteristics of Negro Expression.” Wall, Cheryl A., comp. *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, memoirs, and other writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1995. Mufwene, Salikoko S., John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, John Baugh, eds. *African-American English: Structure, history and use*. London: Routledge, 1998. Redding, Saunders. “ Old Forms, New Rhythms, New Words.” Mullen, Edward J., comp. *Critical Essays on Langston Hughes*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986.