

Playing the Dozens: Towards a Black Feminist Dramaturgy in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston

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Best remembered as a novelist, fiction writer, essayist, and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston's extensive work as a playwright has been largely overlooked in evaluating her contributions to Black theatre. Many of her plays were imagined lost until 1997, when the Library of Congress recovered a previously unknown body of her work that Hurston submitted for copyright between 1925 and 1944 as unpublished plays.^[1] Rutgers University Press published the first full volume of Hurston's plays in 2008.^[2] Scholarly explorations of her playwriting legacy remain at a comparatively early stage. Yet, in those small number of plays published before 1997, including *Color Struck* (1926), *The First Ones* (1927) and *Mule Bone* (1931) (co-authored with Langston Hughes), performance scholars can see a style of playwriting that presents a stark contrast to Hurston's more popular contemporaries.

Hurston was an anthropologist, auto-ethnographer, and playwright, and as such, many of her plays featured characters that reappear across her collection. Her plays also included many of the same rituals and customs that she witnessed and participated in during her fieldwork in Black Southern folk communities. Along with exploring Black Southern folk vernacular in her dramas, Hurston also included songs, games, and other rituals such as popular word play performatives like signifying, woofing, and playing the dozens. Hurston's exploration of Black Southern folk culture plays did not validate Eurocentricity as a necessary pre-condition for recognizing, understanding, and affirming Black experiences (an approach popular among her contemporaries, including Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary P. Burrill, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson). Hurston's plays also often failed to fit within the parameters of the propagandistic style theatre aimed at racial uplift. Thus, for many scholars of Black theatre, Hurston's early plays have eluded easy categorization. However, I argue that by using dramaturgical analysis to explore Hurston's plays – particularly her focus on the community game popularized in many Black communities called "playing the dozens"—students of Black theatre can access a radically different set of Black folk characters for the stage aimed at reconfiguring prevailing models of blackness *and* Black womanhood in the early twentieth century. This short essay offers some first steps towards developing a Black feminist dramaturgical lens to contextualize Hurston's contributions to Black theatre. While my approach is still a work in progress, I hope that it will offer a catalyst for considering Hurston's early plays in a different light, and for developing further discourses around Black feminist dramaturgy.

Hurston developed a method of playwriting that drew upon her work as an anthropologist and auto-ethnographer to depict everyday Negro life in Black Southern rural communities.^[3] In particular, she affirmed Southern Black folk women identity by depicting her women characters in ways that transcended familiar archetypes and stereotypes.^[4] Hurston revealed Black women's social networks in her plays, and even though few of her works were staged during her lifetime, the networks she depicted offer insight into larger processes of Black cultural formation. For example, in *De Turkey and De Law* (1930), a play based on a collection of short stories from Hurston's field work as an anthropologist

and auto-ethnographer (*The Bone of Contention* and *The Eatonville Anthology*), the audience sees Black women who negotiate the intersections of sexism and personal autonomy in their community on a daily basis. Exploring Hurston's dramaturgy here suggests how her field research could have contributed to the ways audiences, particularly Black women, saw themselves onstage during a time when minstrelsy attempted to strip our humanity from us. Hurston included Black Southern folk rituals and customs that also contributed to how these practices nuanced conflict and character relationships in her plays.

In *De Turkey and De Law*, Hurston presents the town of Eatonville that becomes divided when best friends, Dave (a Baptist) and Jim (a Methodist) fall in love with the same woman, Daisy. Tempers flare, and Jim assaults Dave with a mule bone. Jim is arrested and put on trial for assault, a trial presided over by the town's major, Joe Clarke. The town's Baptist and Methodist folks attend the trial. The Methodist women refuse to believe that Jim will get a fair trial since Mayor Clarke is a Baptist and the trial will take place in the Baptist church. The Baptist women want to make sure justice is served. The trial gets off to a rocky start when the Methodist women are bullied by the Baptists. The church men and women engage in what Hurston describes in *Mules and Men* as playing the dozens,^[5] a comical exchange of personal insults and verbal attacks.^[6] Like other rituals she observed during her field research in Eatonville, playing the dozens is a dramatic device that helps to authenticate and ground character interactions. These verbal battles reveal both the power structures of the community as well as the complex network of personal relationships, marital relationships, gendered power structures, and perhaps most importantly, the rituals that govern their interactions.

The purpose of the game, according to cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine, is to "display linguistic virtuosity for an audience of peers."^[7] In *Turkey*, the dozens is a way for Hurston to explore character relationships and dynamics that also contribute to the conflict in the play. For example, the game is usually played by only men, but in *Turkey*, both women and men play the game, which contributes to the animosity and antagonisms. Whereas the Baptist men and women want the trial to continue from their position of power in the church, the Methodist women use the dozens to push for accountability and fairness by attempting to discredit and shut down anyone that would marginalize their voices. They always stop just short of physical violence. While characters playing the dozens may make verbal threats toward each other, the purpose of the dozens is not to cause physical harm to one's opponent. The dozens provide a nonviolent method for social control and community advocacy.^[8] Rather than settling grievances using physical force, players advocate for themselves and the communities using verbal duels.^[9] For example, when Mayor Clarke threatens the women with physical harm by sending in the bailiff, Lum Bailey, Hurston uses the dozens to dismantle male authority. She sows the seed of doubt over Bailey's ability to actually, as Clarke commands, "shut dem women up or put 'em outta here."^[10] Methodist women, Sister Taylor and Sister Lewis, use their familial relationship with Bailey to remind him that they are his mother-figures and elders and can easily "knock every nap of yo' head one by one."^[11] Lum Bailey retreats and the women celebrate a victory until Mayor Clarke steps in.

Mayor Clarke operates from a position of power in the community. In the heated exchange between the Methodists and Baptists, Mayor Clarke remains an outsider in the game because of his relationship to the community. He does not see himself as part of the community so much as he is in charge of the community. He will not respect the nuances of the game and sees the women as a distraction rather than advocating for their right to have a voice in the community. In the same scene, Mayor Clarke admonishes Sister Nixon for talking during the trial. She turns on him and says,

You can't shut me up, not the way you live. When you quit beatin' Mrs. Mattie and dominizing her all de time, then you kin tell other folks what to do. You ain't none of my boss. Don't let you' wooden God and corn-stalk Jesus fool you now. Not de way you sells rancid bacon for fresh.[12]

Sister Nixon challenges Mayor Clarke by using his immoral actions toward his wife against him. Perhaps more importantly, she reveals the intimate sharing of knowledge across the community and the way in which that knowledge confers *power*. Clarke does not dispute Nixon's claims, but his anger at having been called out ripples throughout the courtroom. Sister Nixon's husband tries to smooth things over, by pleading with her, "Aw honey, hush a while, please, and less git started." [13] Sister Nixon obliges her husband and sits down. The trial continues. Although, it may seem that Sister Nixon yields to her husband, I believe Hurston gives the women more agency than initially appears. Sister Nixon does not apologize for her comments, and the other women in the play also feel free to speak out when they perceive an injustice or believe they are being treated unfairly.

Hurston uses the trial to present a community of dynamic, smart, witty, Black women, unafraid to challenge traditional gender norms. Hurston's depictions of Black women playing the dozens allow audience members to see the characters as more fully human onstage. [14] She uses the dozens as a way to inform a more realistic and empowered depiction of Black women that I argue, also, demonstrates her incorporation of her field research into her creation of Black women characters. [15] In *Turkey*, Hurston centers Black women's autonomy and helps Black women see a representation of themselves (or their ancestors) onstage. For today's audiences, *Turkey* highlights how Hurston dramatized her everyday interactions with Black folks and gave space for characters to explore Black expression onstage. [16]

In tracing connections between Hurston's ethnographic fieldwork and her playwriting, I have proposed a way of analyzing her plays that includes considering how Black Southern folk rituals and customs, such as playing the dozens, contributes to how contemporary scholars understand conflict and character relationships among Black men and women in *De Turkey and De Law*. In many ways, this form of Black feminist dramaturgy represents a paradoxical subject for this type of analysis of Hurston's theatre. Black feminist dramaturgy looks at play analysis and intentionality *in performance*. It centers the *audience's* response to the work, and in Hurston's case, it also highlights her process of exploring Black women's autonomy by distilling her field research into a theatrical experience. And yet, the majority of Hurston's plays have never been produced. Outside of a few productions of some of her more well-known works, [17] contemporary scholars have had few opportunities to experience Hurston's theatre in rehearsal and performance spaces. For me, this is where Black feminist dramaturgy truly lives. The process of playing the dozens *demand*s an audience to witness and affirm the ritual being enacted. These interchanges reveal deep layers of oral folk culture that offer interactive experiences for both performers and audience members—I hope that they will ultimately inspire a Hurston revival in the Black theatre.

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[1] William Triplett, "Hurston Plays Discovered; Find at Library of Congress May Shed New Light on Black Writer," *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1997/04/24/hurston-plays-discovered/70a6c41e-983b-4226-8597-8d0c2f620403/>

[2] Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), xv.

[3] Jennifer Staple. "Zora Neale Hurston's Construction of Authenticity Through Ethnographic Innovation," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 1 (2006): 62, *Gale Academic OneFile*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A182035988/AONE?u=uiuc_iwu&sid=AONE&xid=a100cad1 (accessed 12 March 2021).

[4] Henry Louis Gates Jr. "Why the 'Mule Bone' Debate Goes on." *New York Times*, 10 Feb 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/10/theater/theater-why-the-mule-bone-debate-goes-on.html>

[5] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men (1935)* (New York: 1st Harper Perennial Modern Classic, 2008), 13.

[6] Christine Levecq. "'You Heard Her, You Ain't Blind': Subversive Shifts in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 13, no. 1 (1994): 87-111, accessed 26 March 2021. doi:10.2307/463858.

[7] Lawrence W. Levine. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 347.

[8] Harry G. Lefever. "'Playing the Dozens': A Mechanism for Social Control." *Phylon* 42, no. 1 (1981): 76, accessed 29 March 2021. doi:10.2307/274886.

[9] Lefever, "Playing the Dozens," 80.

[10] Zora Neale Hurston, *De Turkey and De Law*, in *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, ed. Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 169.

[11] Hurston, *De Turkey and De Law*, 169.

[12] Hurston, *Turkey*, 172.

[13] Hurston, *Turkey*, 172.

[14] Norman Marín Calderón. "Afrocentrism, Gaze and Visual Experience in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Káñina* 42, no. 1 (2018): 261, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15517/rk.v42i1.33568> (accessed 23 November 2020), DOI 10.15517/RK.V42I1.33568.

[15] Staple, 66.

[16] Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzales, "'From Negro Expression to 'Black Performance,'"

in *Black Performance Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

[17] In 1932, Hurston's *The Great Day* premiered on Broadway and toured major theatres in New York City, Chicago, and Orlando. Additionally, Arena Stages in Washington D.C. produced a *Polk County* in 2002.

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