

1991: Original Broadway Production of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Antimusical *Mule Bone* Is Presented

by Eric M. Glover
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The 1991 Lincoln Center Theater (LCT) production of Langston Hughes (1902-67) and Zora Neale Hurston's (1891-60) 1931 antimusical *The Mule Bone* represents a milestone in Black theater history. The 1991 production resurrected a historical collaboration between two major Black artists *and* it used their work to offer a pointed critique of the 1990s New Jim Crow and US carceral system. In *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp argues that in an antimusical, Black performers direct and turn the form back on itself by ironically reflecting the conventions of the genre.^[1] The Black performer in an antimusical simultaneously deals critically with the form as a system of white supremacy while engaging in song and dance. In the brief exploration below, I focus on two episodes in *The Mule Bone*—the first, a trial set in a Black church, and the second, a song that depicts Black stowaways on train cars. Each suggests how the original 1931 work and its 1991 adaptation make milestone interventions in performing the policing of Black bodies in the Jim Crow and New Jim Crow eras respectively. Hughes and Hurston, like activist Michelle Alexander, had new ways to address problems, such as violence against and surveillance of black bodies, if only readers had paid close attention to their alternatives to practices that would produce the profit-driven prison industrial complex

Animated by a staged reading held in 1989 at the Rites and Reason Theatre (RRT),^[2] Providence, where playwright and director George Houston Bass^[3] laid the groundwork for reimagining the *The Mule Bone*, Lincoln Center picked up where Rites and Reason left off. Lincoln Center gave the antimusical the presentation that had eluded its authors back in the 1930s in part because of The Theatre Guild's Theresa Helburn's conceptual bias against it and in part because of the falling out between Hughes and Hurston during their collaboration on the work.

Thus the 1991 production of *The Mule Bone* becomes significant for premiering a book and a score written, directed, choreographed, and designed largely by a Black creative team. Bass wrote a prologue and an epilogue introducing Hurston as a character, composer Taj Mahal set five of Hughes's previously published poems to music, director Michael Schultz and choreographer Dianne McIntyre helped performers give characters body and voice, and scenic designer Edward Burbridge and lighting designer Allen Lee Hughes transformed the physical setting of Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theater into Jim Crow-era Eatonville.^[4]

Building on the early Black musicals of Eubie Blake, Will Marion Cook, and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Hughes and Hurston levy a critique of Jim Crow in everyday life—a critique thrown into bold relief against what Michelle Alexander calls “the New Jim Crow,” the mass incarceration that builds on the legacy of Jim Crow using custom and law to secure a disproportionate amount of Black people incarcerated through the three-strikes rule for violent-felony convictions and the War on Drugs.^[5] Thus, the Lincoln Center production marks a milestone in Black theater because Schultz and McIntyre's

interpretation helped to reclaim Hughes and Hurston's places as radical political philosophers.

Hughes and Hurston's *The Mule Bone*, based on Hurston's short story, "The Bone of Contention" (1929), about a political and religious fight between Baptists and Methodists, tells the story of a bromance between two figures in 1924 in Hurston's hometown, Eatonville, in Orange County, Florida. In the short story, Dave, an angler, a Baptist, a hunter, and a local Nimrod, and Jim, a hen thief and a Methodist, do not have a bromance. In the musical Dave and Jim are transformed into a Baptist and a cakewalker and a guitarist and a Methodist, respectively.

The events of *The Mule Bone* unfold around Dave and Jim's characters. "Ain't they playin' somewhere for de white folks?" Daisy Taylor, the object of both Dave and Jim's affections, asks.^[6] Dave and Jim arrive from a performance engagement in a nearby all-white town and they treat the citizens of Eatonville to song and dance. They perform their song, "But I Rode Some," with Dave dancing the cakewalk and Jim playing the guitar. Their desire to win Daisy drives the action forward but Dave stands in the way of Jim's desire. Daisy chooses Dave but Jim lams him over the head with a mule bone in anger. Jim must stand trial before a judge and jury of his peers. "Now, who's gonna take me home?" Daisy asks.^[7]

Act 2 takes place in the Macedonia Baptist Church which also serves as the courtroom. As James R. Grossman notes, "African-Americans in general looked to the church as an institution independent of white domination,"^[8] suggesting that in this instance the church may have offered a site to administer Black rather than white justice. Joe Clarke, mayor of Eatonville, presides at the bench and other citizens serve in the capacities of defense counsel (Reverend Simms), prosecution (Elder Long), and town marshal (Lum Boger). The church gallery is full of Dave and Jim's supporters, the division between Baptists and Methodists becoming more and more pronounced. Joe finds Jim guilty of assault against Dave and makes Jim leave town, rehabilitate himself, repent for his sins, and return in no less than two years. "We colored folks don't need no jail," Lounger, a citizen of Eatonville, declares.^[9] However, Dave and Jim repair their relationship and run away together.

The Mule Bone illuminates how theater invited Dave and Jim, the characters in the antimusical, to survive and thrive under Jim Crow. Dave and Jim earn their living by performing for white audiences.^[10] Dave and Jim's songs, framed as diegetic performances, clue the audience in to the fact that they are in control of who they are and what they want: "Dem foots done put plenty bread in our moufs," Jim says of Dave's dancing. Dave replies, "Wid de help of dat box, Jim," referring to Jim's guitar playing.^[11] Given that they have to contend with "two competing forces: the demands to conform to white notions of black inferiority and the desire to resist these demands by undermining and destabilizing entrenched stereotypes of blacks onstage [sic]," the audience sees "Dave" and "Jim" in the imaginations of white audiences juxtaposed against the "real" Dave and Jim.^[12] Dave and Jim's proxies, Hughes and Hurston, transform the minstrel stereotype that Dave and Jim perform to undertake social justice.

Through their songs and dances, Dave and Jim imagine alternative worlds for themselves. For example, they re-create their subjugation by white audiences in "But I Rode Some" but they also ironically find their antidote to the internalization of white supremacy. Dave and Jim's "But I Rode Some" tells the story of a stowaway on a train captured and beaten by a white conductor, before being thrown in jail and shoved onto a chain gang:

First thing I saw in jail

Was a pot of peas.

But I rode some,

But I rode some.

First thing I saw in jail

Was a pot of peas.

But I rode some,

But I rode some.

The peas was good,

The meat was fat,

Fell in love with the chain gang jus' for that,

But I rode some. (90)

Hughes and Hurston reflect on the fact that Black people in the 1920s-30s often experienced denial of a sense of place and displacement by taking up themes of escape and resistance in the musical number. Even in the face of violence, Dave and Jim resist: “Grabbed me by the neck, /And led me to the door, /Rapped me cross the head with a Forty-Four, / But I rode some!”^[13] The song structure itself has roots and routes both in the era of slavery and freedom and influenced other genres of popular music around the world.^[14]

Illicit travel by passenger train, often called “riding the blinds,” offered a dangerous way for Black passengers to experience a thrill of autonomy. They parked their bodies between the locomotive tender (coal car) and the “blind” end of a baggage car to hitch rides from the South to the North and everywhere in between. If conductors caught a Black person riding the blinds, conductors would (literally) throw the passenger from the train.^[15]

Through its strategic use of irony and subversion, the antimusical *The Mule Bone* is as much about the affective and cognitive powers of representational visibility as it is about Black people's resilience. It was important to Hughes and Hurston that their Black audience saw a community of Black characters enjoying and loving life--Jim Crow be damned--self-governing their city and supporting its citizens. Looking at its 1931 and 1991 histories alongside each other invites scholars of Black theater to imagine how artists working more than half a century apart have deployed their creative powers to combat patterns of systemic racism that echo across the decades.

[1] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton UP, 2006), 91.

[2] Rites and Reason Theatre, based in the Department of Africana Studies at Brown University, is dedicated to producing continental African and diasporic stage works.

[3] Bass, in his capacity as Langston Hughes's estate's executor, wrote two scenes for the production and he edited a critical edition of the script.

[4] As directed by Schultz and choreographed by McIntyre, the opening night cast of the original Broadway production assembled the floor and the walls of a general store which also served as a jook joint with barrels and crates. A train track, beginning off stage left in the fly loft, formed a semicircle around the general store. The opening night cast also assembled the Macedonia Baptist Church which also served as the courtroom, including multiple rows of pews that faced downstage center, a stained-glass window upstage center, and the bench located downstage right. A community of Black people developed through song and dance in some of the most arresting musical numbers in the video of *The Mule Bone* that is on file at the Theater on Film and Tape Archive at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York.

[5] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 55-56.

[6] George Houston Bass and Jr. Henry Louis Gates, *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life* (Harper Perennial, 1991), 58.

[7] Bass and Gates, 99.

[8] Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African-Americans since 1880* (Oxford UP, 2005), 90.

[9] Bass and Gates, 78.

[10] Musician Kenny Neal, a 1991 Theater World Award winner for acting, played the role of Jim and Eric Ware played the role of Dave.

[11] Bass and Gates, 125.

[12] David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African-American Theater, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1.

[13] Bass and Gates, 89-90.

[14] It follows what blues musicians refer to as the A-A-B pattern where the first, second, fourth, and fifth lines repeat and the remaining respond.

[15] Kusmer, 144.

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