

The “Jook” and Zora Neale Hurston’s play *Polk County*

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Abstract

The essay analyses the significance of the “the jook” (commonly spelt as the juke) in Zora Neale Hurston’s works, especially in her most mature play, *Polk County*. It is argued that Hurston, deeply interested as she was in the traditional black culture of the south, found the space of the jook rich in many vernacular, cultural, and performative traditions of the black people. The jook was a “fun house” where poor black men and women met after their hard day’s work at the railroad construction site or at a saw mill to play, drink, dance, sing, fall in love, or fight. It was the place where along with music and dance the most lively and dramatic verbal exchanges took place: the tall tales described by terms such as the “mule talk,” “playing the dozens,” “lying sessions,” specifying, and woofing. The jook has been seen as the place where blues music was born, but what is special in Hurston is that she sees it also as the birthplace of black theatre. This essay is devoted to demonstrating the significance of the jook in Hurston’s vision of black theatre and its centrality in her play *The Polk County*.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston; the Jook; *Polk County*; Blues music; African American drama

“Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz” (Hurston, “Characteristics 40).

“The real Negro theatre is in the Jooks and the cabarets” (Hurston, “Characteristics 45).

Stephen Henderson, writing about African American poetry, observes that “certain words and constructions (e.g., rock, jelly, jook) seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight [in African American culture], so that whenever they are used, they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels,” and create “a massive concentration of Black experiential energy” (quoted from Baker, 8). In Hurston, the term jook (commonly spelt as juke) certainly creates all the emotional and psychological effects

that Henderson dramatically describes, but that is only one part of the significance of the term in her work. Jook for Hurston is not only an evocative word that creates all this energy, but one that she concretizes and fills with definite meanings: it is a localized and historicized space that is the “cradle” of much of the black music and dance, a space marked by intensity, energy and sexual charge, and the place where some of the most dynamic social exchange among black men and women took place. Hurston is not the only one to have talked about the jook as the birthplace of blues music, but she remains unique in positing this space as the source of the “real Negro” theatre. Hurston refers to the jook in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and in her anthropological work *Mules and Men*, and describes it in detail in her critical essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” In her dramatic works, she brings it creatively to life as the space at the heart of her most mature play, *Polk County*.

Hurston’s interest in literature, theatre, and the performative arts on the one hand, and her work as an anthropologist on the other, had one thing in common: her belief in the living, dynamic culture of the black South, both as a subject of art and as folklore and cultural practices worthy of being studied and recorded. This interest in the traditional culture of the rural South distinguished her from the majority of Harlem Renaissance artists who were more focused on the experiences of the Black people who had migrated to the urban North¹. Hurston’s vision of theatre, especially in her later plays, is based on the vitality and dramatic quality of traditional black culture and folklore. She believed that “the greatest cultural wealth of the continent” lay in the black South (Hurston, *A Life in Letters* xxiii). In her theatre, she wished to bring alive the inventive richness of the black vernacular -- the folk tales, the tall tales, songs, sermons, lying sessions -- that she believed to be part of the inherently dramatic world of the black folk. In her essay “Characteristics,” she twice mentions the jook as the source of the “real Negro theatre.” As quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, she says that “the real Negro theatre is in the Jooks and the cabarets” (43). Again, rejecting the depiction of black culture in popular Broadway shows, she says, that the “Negro theatre, as built up by the Negro, is based on Jook situations, with women, gambling, fighting and drinking” (41). In these and other observations, as well as in the play, *Polk County*, the jook is seen as the heart of the black community where

¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of African American people lived in the South. After World War I, large numbers migrated in search of employment opportunities that were opening up in the industrial North. The push factors were poverty, problems associated with sharecropping, and Jim Crow laws which had made life in the South very difficult. This movement from the rural South to the urban North also set the stage for Harlem Renaissance and Alain Locke’s concept of the “New Negro.”

the most vital social interactions including love, jealousies, fights, gambling, singing, and dancing take place. It is the place where emotions are also transmuted into art. In the context of Hurston’s drama, the jook may be seen to represent, and be a metonym for, the most dramatic elements of black folk culture. While in her earlier plays such as *Mule Bone*, *Cold Keener*, and *Spunk*², Hurston was already working with the folk material she had collected in her trips, in her final play, *Polk County*, she locates the drama in the space where she had found some of the most dynamic experiences of the southern culture, the jook in the black community.

In 1927, Hurston had taken a reverse journey from New York to Eatonville and Polk County in Florida and later to New Orleans, Louisiana to collect folklore and record cultural practices. Eatonville, the first all-black incorporated town, was the place where she had spent her childhood and where her father had been the first black Mayor. The town had a formative influence on Hurston, and her love for and understanding of traditional culture sprang from her childhood experiences. Not very far from Eatonville was a place with a very different character, and one that Hurston was stepping into for the first time: the Polk County turpentine and lumber work camps, populated by workers of various backgrounds: itinerant workers, fugitives from law, convicts leased to private firms by the State, gamblers, Christians, families as well as single men and women, all supervised by a white overseer. The Everglades Cypress Lumber Company near Louthman that Hurston visited was located in the wild and insect-ridden swamps in the vast pine forests, or as Hurston puts it, the “primeval woods of south-central Florida” (Hurston, *Polk County* 272). The work camps were dangerous places because these communities were ruled over by white bosses and were mostly out of reach of the law and the police for any crimes committed here. The conditions were extremely oppressive for the black people who formed the majority of the labour force. The abolition of slavery had created a shortage of labour and in the wake of the failure of Reconstruction, an oppressive system of forced labour had fallen in place in the South. In his essay, “Forced Labor in the Florida Forests 1880 - 1950,” Jerrell H. Shofner talks about an investigation held by the Florida legislature in 1921 that revealed “conditions -- not limited to the single camp but existing throughout the turpentine belt -- which were revolting to the most hardened person” (21).

Not unaware of the exploitative, oppressive racial context of the work camps, Hurston does not foreground these either in her play or in her other books because her primary interest

² Hurston’s play with the same title as her story “Spunk” is a different work from George C. Wolfe’s dramatization of Hurston’s stories, entitled *Spunk*. Hurston’s play was discovered in the Library of Congress in 1997 along with her other writings after being unknown for decades.

lay in recording and preserving the vernacular and cultural riches of the traditional rural black folk. For Hurston, the camps were a treasure house because these included people from various parts of the South who brought along with them stories, folktales, songs, tall-tales, children's games, and other practices from different regions. The heart of the community in the work camps were the jook joints, where men and women met in their free hours to gamble, dance, drink, and socialize. Given the difficult working conditions and the itinerant nature of the folks in the community, the danger of violence and fights breaking out was always present. This mix of factors brought an edgy intensity to the social exchanges in the jook. While Hurston recounts being in danger and almost losing her life in some encounters in Polk County, the experiences here were among the most productive ones of her anthropological excursions and gave her material for much of her creative work after this period. It also formed her idea of the kind of theatre she was trying to create: a theatre based on the inherently performative elements of the culture including song, dance, folktales, and other beliefs and practices. In the jook joints of this place, Hurston also met the originals of her most powerful characters in the play *Polk County*: Big Sweet, the woman who is so brave and powerful that she is "two whole women and a gang of men," and who has a quick temper but also a generous and kind heart; Ella Wall, the voodoo lady who is "primitive and pagan", and "has the air of a conqueror"; Dicey Long, the evil woman who "suffers from the 'black ass'"; Lonnie, the character in the tradition of High John de Conquer, the flying African; My Honey, the singer who loves his "'box' (guitar)" (Hurston, *Polk County* 271). These figures are presented as intense, independent, possibly aggressive and violent, and often larger than life, and nearly all of them sing the blues.

Blues are not only the musical product and expression of the jooks, but also the texture and color of the experience in this space. Blues music is a product of a particular historical, political, and social context of chattel slavery and Jim Crow laws. In addition to being a musical form, blues is also a term signifying a certain ethos. The mixing of tears and joy, sorrow along with its musical transcendence, the recognition by the audience of the individual suffering expressed by the singer resulting sometimes in laughter -- all come together to create a mood which is significantly different from mere sadness and melancholy. Along with the experience of loss and suffering, there is a feeling of fortitude, tenacity, determination, and hope in the lyrics that in some ways beats the misfortune. As the lines of a song sung in a short piece called "Jook" go:

Say, look here sweet baby, you sho don't know my mind

When you see me laughing, laughing just to keep from crying.

If you ever been down you know just how I feel

I been down so long, down don't worry me (Hurston, *Collected Plays* 123)

An important aspect of the blues music in the jook, then, is its communal nature. As Albert Murray reminds us in *Stomping the Blues*, "with all its [Blue music's] preoccupation with the most disturbing aspects of life, it is something contrived specifically to be performed as entertainment" (45). As Nunkie sings the above lines in "Jook," couples do a slow and sensuous dance and occasionally join in the song. Hurston says that a jook is a "fun house," "where they sing, dance, gamble, love, and compose "blues" songs *incidentally*" (57 emphasis mine). This idea, that art is inherent in the lived experience, is also brought out in *Polk County*. Leafy Lee, a mulatto girl, comes from New York to Lofton Lumber mills, much like Hurston when she visited the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company, except with a different intention -- that of learning blues music. When Leafy hears My Honey play his guitar and sing, she calls him an artist and tells him that "if he was to go to New York and pick his box like that, he would be famous, and make a lot of money besides." My Honey dismisses the idea: "I just fools with this box 'cause I loves it better than anything else in the world. Nobody wouldn't be fool enough to pay money to hear nobody pick a box. That's something done for pleasure" (306). In the jook, the song and the dance are not divorced from life, but are almost an inadvertent product of the business of living life.

Polk County, one of the most well-structured of Hurston's plays, is like her other plays in being less focused on plot and character development than in performatively presenting aspects of black culture and delving into its innate dramatic elements. In a simple plot of love, jealousy, and its resolution, the play finds opportunities to perform not only the blues and the dances, or the folk arts such as children's songs, popular games, and hoodoo scenes, but also the dramatic quality of black verbal ingenuity. The vernacular conventions of the tall tales, the "mule talk," or "playing the dozens," "lying sessions," specifying, and woofing are for Hurston not merely the dialogue but the very stuff of the "real Negro" theatre. The jook scenes in the play are rich in action, emotion, and metaphorical language. There is, as usual in a jook, a piano and tables for dice and cards. Playing and singing are interspersed with modes of talk such as "lying" and "woofing" that are enjoyed for their sheer inventiveness and imagination. Characters engage in woofing, or stylized boast as the men try to impress the women with their exaggerated, dramatic claims. Sop-The-Bottom says: "I hates to tell you how really bad I is. I'm so bad till my

spit turns to concrete before it hits the ground.” And then he beats this boast with his next: “Fact is, I’m worser than that snake that was so poison that he crawled up and bit railroad track, and he was so poison that it killed the train when it come ‘long past” (321). These “lying sessions,” or tall tales, introduce both mirth and creativity into the exchange. The play is suffused with language adorned with dramatic metaphors, similes, and images. When Lonnie feels betrayed by Big Sweet, the dialogue itself takes on the lyrical and figurative qualities of the blues songs. Believing that Big Sweet has a relationship with Big Charlie, Lonnie says:

What is you done? You done fooled me. You done cut the ground from under my feet. You done put out the sun and muddied up all the water in the world. You done took off all my dreams. You done stuck my foot in the mire and clay, so I can’t fly no more. You done drove off the Great Crow (326).

The elaboration, the repetition in the sentence structure, the use of multiple metaphors -- all accentuate and dramatize the emotion. After being convinced by Big Sweet that he has been misled, Lonnie touches the highs of love, and his joy is expressed equally lyrically: “Now I can dream some more. . . I can fly off on the big wings. I can stand on ether’s blue bosom. I can stand out on the apex of power” (329). The jook is also a place, like the church, for spiritual experience in the form of communal singing and chanting. In an extremely powerful scene at the end of Act II, Sc iii, the group breaks out into a chant after Lonnie says with a sense of “sudden discovery”: “We’s in a cage! Like a mule-lot in a swamp.” As the chant, accompanied by drums “grows intense but not loud,” the group sings: “Trees falling on men and killing ‘em. Saw liable to cut you in two. Sundown, and nothing but these quarters to come to and keep on like that till you die” (348). Jealousies, rivalries, and violence are equally a part of this communal space. Dramatic tension is introduced into the plot when Dicey walks into the juke and refuses to participate in the sociality of dance and games because My Honey will not reciprocate her interest in him. Her intense jealousy finds expression in violent threats to Leafy Lee: “I’ll take my knife and go ‘round the ham-bone looking for meat. . . I’ll slice her too thin to fry” (313). What is dramatic in the play is not only the plot or the action, nor just the performative parts such as the dances and the songs, but also the very use of figurative language -- the metaphor, the simile, the verbal nouns -- that demonstrate the innate creativity of the folk and their “will to adorn” (Hurston, “Characteristics” 32).

While the jook is a place set apart, there is also continuity and overlap between the jook and the other social spaces, as well as between the jook and the labor camp. In *Mules and Men*,

Hurston talks about the songs "sung in every jook and on every "job" in South Florida," the job being the work at the railroad camps and the sawmill camps. In some particularly evocative passages in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston talks about the workers as the "poets of the swinging blade," who presumably are the sawmill workers who are also the blues singers of the jook joints (147). In *Polk County* -- a long play divided into three Acts, each with three Scenes (except the first which has four) -- only two scenes are physically set in the jook with the rest taking place outdoors or in homes, but these spaces too are suffused with the spirit of the jook. One of the most powerful and theatrical "blues" scenes in the play is one that takes place in Dicey Long's bare shack that is just an "unpainted lumber and careless structure" (349). As Dicey hatches her plans to employ the voodoo man and Ella Wall to take revenge on Leafy Lee and My Honey, she bemoans her poor fortune in not being "pretty." This "lament" is represented on the stage in a group dance to the accompaniment of Dicey's song:

My looks is just a heavy load

That sends me down a lonesome road

...

I got big love, that I can't give.

I got a life, that I can't live.

Just all dammed up and turning to hate. (351-352)

This scene works against the grain of Dicey's role as a villain in the play and even as she sharpens her knife and expresses her determination to see Leafy Lee dead, a contrary movement of the blues lyrics and the dance interpret her as a sympathetic character, "a victim of relentless fate" (352).

Women occupy a particularly important space in Hurston's jook, and in *Polk County* she examines the question of colorism and sexism in the lives of women in the jook and in black communities. Women are subject to sexism in the jooks, unless they are able to match the black man in strength and independence, something that all the major women characters in the play do, including Big Sweet, Dicey Long and Ella Wall, with Leafy Lee being an exception because she is an outsider. Men talk about women as being sweet and evil. Evil women are "stingy" with food, are contrary, pull bed-covers, and dream "about hatchets and knives and pistols, and ice-picks and splitting open people's heads" (279). In the play, however, the question of evil women is problematized at multiple levels, and while some of the male characters are attributed the

colorist and sexist ideas, the play itself transcends these beliefs. Dicey Long, the very image of an evil woman in the play, is violent, jealous, and at odds with everyone in the camp. She pursues My Honey as her love interest and when My Honey shows preference for Leafy Lee, Dicey attacks Leafy in an incident based on Hurston's real experience in which she had nearly lost her life. While on the one hand Dicey's evil nature is on full display and is one of the prime movers of the action in the play, on the other hand it is also viewed sympathetically and justified in many ways. The play attempts to explain it in terms of psychology (which is significant because Hurston does not often delve into the psychology of her characters), biography, and social interaction. The suggestion is that Dicey is socially maladjusted and isolated because of her childhood experiences. The most important justification, however, comes in the form of colorism in the community. Dicey is "short, scrawny and black" and suffers from what the play calls "black ass," and is therefore envious of the attention and love given to lighter skinned women, such as Leafy Lee who is "a pretty yellow girl" (271). Dicey's violence and the threat that she's "going to make me a graveyard of my own . . . I'm going to cut up everybody that bother me" are seen to be spurred by her resentment and envy (290). As suggested earlier, the play does generate sympathy for her in spite of the role she plays. Hurston had put the issue of colorism at the centre of her earlier play *Color Struck* (1926), in which she had engaged with the experience of deep psychological trauma suffered by darker-skinned women because of the preference within black communities for lighter-skinned women. Emmaline Beazely, who is an outstanding cake-walk dancer and is loved by John Turner, a light brown-skinned man, is shown to destroy her own life as a consequence of the psychological effects of colorism. *Polk County* is dominated by powerful women characters, be their roles in the play positive and negative.

Conclusions

Hurston wished to create theatre by bringing various elements of the traditional black culture to the stage in their natural form, the "real" thing. During one of her collecting trips to the South, she had written to Langston Hughes: "Did I tell you before I left about the new, the *real* Negro art theatre I plan? Well I shall, or rather we shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive 'bama Nigger" (Quoted in Hemenway 115). In her plays, Hurston sought to bring alive the innately dramatic quality of the traditional lived culture of the black folk. In the jook, Hurston found one of the most fertile places for the circulation and exchange of the expressive quality of black folk vernacular practices, music, and dance. The jook is intimately connected with blues and blues aesthetic but for Hurston, the cultural capital

of this space exceeds even that brilliant product. She saw in the jook all the human, emotional, performative, dramatic, and linguistic material to create the genuine black theatre. Her most mature play, *Polk County*, is a powerful embodiment of the jook and its spirit, and the aesthetic of the jook overflows into the entire play. Also valuable in the play is Hurston's "feminist" appropriation of the space to create strong women characters.

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