

An Island Occupied: The Interpretation of the U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed*

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Within one year of each other, two young African American female anthropologists went to collect material on Haitian folk culture, dance, music and vaudun¹: Katherine Dunham in 1935 as a student of Melville Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston in 1936 as a student of Franz Boas. Their experiences in Haiti were to become a fundamental component of their respective culture and performance theories in their encounter with colonial, cultural, and political traditions that differed significantly from those in the United States, but which also had haunting similarities based on shared West African cultural roots, the Middle Passage, and the history of slavery in the Americas.

In Haiti, Hurston expanded her research on and literary utilization of diasporic folk traditions in the Americas and published her Haitian research in *Tell My Horse* (1938). Long considered “deficient,” both as anthropology and as literature due to its pastiche structure, it is currently being reassessed in the context of a rereading of Hurston’s research and writing in particular, as well as of anthropological texts as constructed narratives and “fictions” in general.²

Dunham utilized her Haitian research in her work with the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe throughout the world, in Hollywood films such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), and *Mambo* (1954), and

¹ There are variant spellings of Haiti’s traditional religion. I will use the Creole spelling favored by Dunham, the U.S. spelling favored by Hurston when referring to her research, and the given variant for other sources.

² Clifford Geertz has pointed out the significance of the second and third order of the construction of ethnographic description, i.e., that ethnographic texts are fashioned as “fictions” (14-15). Deborah Gordon notes: “Simultaneously travelogue, a piece of journalism and political analysis, conventional ethnography, part legend and folklore with art criticism and commentary thrown in, Hurston’s text voices conflicting visions of what fieldwork involved - a kind of knowledge that enters Mead’s letters from the field but not her ethnography” (154). Also see Lionnet-McCumber’s discussion of *Dust Track on a Road*, in which Hurston “opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed, (248), referring to Hurston’s autobiography as “autoethnography.” See also Bordelon and Walker.

also in what was to become the foundation of the “Dunham technique” of dance instruction. Throughout her life, Dunham has published numerous scholarly essays and lectured extensively on her anthropology research. In 1954 she published *Island Possessed*, a predominantly autobiographical presentation of her work as a dancer and anthropologist, as well as her initial and subsequent research and life in Haiti.

In my paper I would like to explore the reaction of these multiply-marked outsiders – as women, as African Americans and as USAmericans - to the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) in the period immediately after American troops had withdrawn and the scars of the past and continuing U.S. economic and cultural domination were still strongly felt: How is U.S. imperialism presented and interpreted in Hurston and Dunham? How do race, gender, and class act as major determinants? How does the anthropological “othering” of the Haitian object and, in turn, the “othering” of Dunham and Hurston by the Haitian subject affect their interpretation and narrative?

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* is divided into 3 parts. The initial section, “Jamaica,” casts Hurston as an anthropologist, travel writer as well as cultural and political analyst. After introducing Colonel Rowe, the leader of the Maroon colony of Accompong, as her informant, Hurston situates herself amongst renowned anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits “who had been there and passed a night.” She explains that Rowe had told her how “someone else had spent three weeks to study their dances and how much money they had spent in doing this”(23). This “someone else” was Katherine Dunham. Condescendingly, Hurston establishes herself and her methodology as superior to this unknown and unmentionable other:

I kept on day by day saying nothing as to why I had come. He offered to stage a dance for me also. I thanked him, but declined. I did not tell him that I was too old a hand at collecting to fall for staged-dance affairs. If I do not see a dance or a ceremony in its natural setting and sequence, I do not bother. Self-experience has taught me that those staged affairs are never the same as the real thing. (22-23)³

³ The correspondence between Melville Herskovits and Hurston deposited at the Herskovits Archives at Northwestern University reveals significant rivalry between Hurston and Dunham. In a letter to Herskovits from “Accompong town,” dated July 30, 1936, Hurston states that in the visitors’ book she found “that Catherine [sic] Dunham had been there last year carrying out the program that I had mapped out for the Rosenwald gang. I can afford to laugh at them, of course, but their littleness is astounding.” She expresses her amazement that Dunham did not stay for what she refers to as the “big, big thing” and notes that “you have not seen Maroon ceremonies unless you see that.” Herskovits’ reply of September 28, 1936 is noticeably cool: “Let me, however, set you straight concerning Katherine Dunham and her program. The Rosenwald Fund is not responsible for her stay in Jamaica, though even had I known it, it

Yet Hurston unabashedly embarks on her civilizing mission by convincing the unwary Maroons that they “ought to” and build a stove and she designs “an affair of rock and cement”(31). When the Maroons resist taking her on a wild hog hunt, she hounds them until they agree: “But I kept on talking and begging and coaxing until a hunting party was organized”(31). So much for unstaged events.⁴

“Voodoo in Haiti,” Part III of *Tell My Horse*, is Hurston’s presentation and performance of her Haitian Voodoo research. Much of her presentation of Voodoo can be read in the tradition of sensationalist travel writing on Haitian atavism, such as William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929), J. H. Craig’s *Cannibal Cousins* (1934), or the even earlier John Durham’s *Diane, Priestess of Haiti* (1902), which includes a fictional U.S. journalist who calls for “a good voodoo story, eating babies and all that sort of thing” (qtd. in Dash 48). Such narratives are traditionally rife with sensational, voyeuristic reports on cannibal rites and zombies; Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* is no exception - replete with a photograph of “Felicia Felix-Mentor, the Zombie”(180), as her own contribution to or possibly parody of this genre. Hurston opens with the story of a voodoo mambo who, when asked, “What is the truth?” replies by “throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs....

would not necessarily have made any difference, since there is no reason on earth why two persons should not study the same people. On the contrary, there is every reason why this should be done.... Incidentally, since Katherine Dunham is primarily interested in the study of the dance, I do not think that you will find her material conflicts with yours.” In an April 6, 1937 letter from New York addressed to “M. J.” Hurston tries to explain her previous objections to Dunham’s work since she realized that Herskovits “seemed cross” and she felt that he should understand that she has “nothing against her [Dunham] and could in no way be jealous of her work.” Hurston relates her version of how she lost her Rosenwald fellowship when she had gone too far, and in her own words, had “sassed out ... “Pres. Jones of Fisk,” who was the friend of Dr. Embree of the Rosenwald Foundation. She had told him that she thought “he ran his school like a Georgia plantation, with him as ‘Mr. Charlie’ and members of the faculty being ‘good niggers’ ... By the grape vine from Fisk I heard that Charles S. Johnson, who has not been friendly to me for years [sic] was boasting that it wouldnt [sic] be long with me and that he was grooming Catherine [sic] Dunham for the place [to do a doctorate].” She now also thought the “Maroons are highly overrated. They are the show piece of Jamaica like a Harlem night club.” This, among others, was the explanation Hurston gave for her objections in her original letter from Accompong. Personal rivalry of this sort is not surprising considering the scarcity of funding during the Depression and the added pressure on African Americans and women. I could find no similar correspondence about Hurston between Dunham and Herskovits in the Katherine Dunham files at the Katherine Dunham Special Collections in the Morris Library of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

⁴ In a letter dated April 6, 1937 from Hurston to Herskovits this passage is quoted almost verbatim: “The Col. was very disappointed when I refused to have a dance put on. He tried to shame me by telling me how much Miss Dunham spent. I didn’t tell him I had more experience in the field than she. I merely told him that I wanted to come again around Christmas time”.

It is considered the highest honor for all the males participating to kiss her organ of creation, for Damballah, the god of gods, has allowed them to come face to face with the truth”(113-114)⁵.

Sandwiched between Hurston’s construction of herself as budding anthropologist in Jamaica and her more and sometimes less serious portrayal of Haitian voodoo, she feels called upon to comment on Haitian history and politics in Part II of *Tell My Horse*, “Politics and Personalities of Haiti.”

Both Hurston’s and Dunham’s text are embedded in an elaborate African American discourse on Haiti. The Haitian revolution of 1804 under the leadership of Toussaint L’Overture made Haiti the first black republic and gave Haiti a special symbolic status for many African Americans:

The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome are evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved. The transformation of the slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement. (James IX)

Attempts, mostly unsuccessful, to colonize Haiti with ex-slaves go back to the early abolitionist movement. During the U.S. occupation of Haiti, the NAACP led an active campaign opposing the occupation. In a letter to Woodrow Wilson in 1915, W.E.B. Du Bois had immediately expressed his concern over the occupation and sent James Weldon Johnson to Haiti in 1920 to report for *The Crisis*. According to Johnson, the United States:

Should get out as well and as quickly as it can and restore to the Haitian people their independence and sovereignty. The colored people of the U.S. should be interested in seeing that this is done, for Haiti is the one best chance the negro has in the world to prove that he is capable of the highest self-government. (qtd. in Dash 50)⁶

⁵ Michael Dash notes that “Like the Orient, Haiti emerges as an inexhaustible symbol designed to satisfy material as well as psychological needs. Images of mystery, decadence, romance and adventure are not arbitrary in either case but constitute a special code, a system of antithetical values which establishes radical, ineradicable distinctions between the Subject and the Other, West and East, the United States and Haiti”(1-2). The direction of this gaze was, of course, also reversed: “The strangeness of the United States had become a curiosity to be tirelessly catalogued and observed in the memoirs and travel books of Haiti’s self-styled ethnologists. The former was depicted by Haitians as an objectionable moral landscape that would corroborate the prerogatives they had ascribed to themselves”(19). Black Americans are portrayed as degraded: “Ludicrous and deformed, they were kept at a distance, morally and culturally, by Haitians who regarded themselves as superior because they were no longer enslaved”(20).

⁶ Rice, in his 1938 review of *Tell My Horse*, also remarks on Hurston’s positive view of the Occupation: “Then she remarks upon the good fortune of the Haitian population in having been, at last, freed from the terror of banditry and tropical politics... she could not have read the late Dr. James Weldon Johnson’s articles which appeared in the *Nation*

Langston Hughes had visited Haiti in 1930 and published his *Popo and Fifina (Children of Haiti)* with Arna Bontemps in 1932 and C.L.R. James published his now classic *Black Jacobins* in 1938.

In 1915, Haiti's President Sam Guilleume had been brutally murdered by an angry mob that blamed him for the murder of over one hundred prisoners in their cells. Against this violent background and "claiming the need to recover debts and restore order, the Marines, invaded Haiti" (Dash 395). In a chapter entitled "Rebirth of a Nation," which rings programmatically in its association with D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Hurston castes her description of this invasion in prophetic, biblical terms, very effectively using the elements of prophesy to structure her support of the Marine Occupation:

For four hundred years the blacks of Haiti had yearned for peace.... A prophet could have foretold it was to come to them from another land and another people utterly unlike the Haitian people in any respect. The prophet might have said, "Your freedom from strife and your peace shall come when these symbols shall appear. There shall come a voice in the night. A new and bloody river shall pour from a man-made rock in your chief city [the decapitation of Guilleume?]. There shall be a Day and the Day shall mother a Howl, and the Howl shall be remembered in Haiti forever and nations beyond the borders shall hear it and stir. Then shall appear a Plume against the sky. It shall be a black plume against the sky which shall give fright to many in its coming, but it shall bring peace to Haiti. You who have hopes, watch for these signs. Many false prophets shall arrive who will promise you peace and faith, but they are lacking in the device of peace. Wait for the plume in the sky."(65-66)

Ending her chapter on Haitian culture and politics, she completes her prophecy, providing closure in the prophetic peace of the Marine Occupation: "The smoke from the funnels of the U.S.S. Washington was a black plume with a white hope. It was the end of the revolution and the beginning of peace" (272).

I can only speculate on Hurston's motivation in writing such millennial jingoism⁷: perhaps she believed it, which would accord with her generally conservative politics; considerations in reference to the Guggenheim Foundation, patrons⁸, editors⁹, or potential buyers of her book (according to

during the summer of 1920. The hardships inflicted by the occupation upon all but the merchants of Haiti have not been forgotten." (qtd. in Gates 24).

⁷ Hurston's text echoes Faustin Wirkus's *The White King of La Gonave* (1931) in its description of the attitude of the "primitive" Haitians concerning the presence of the Marines: "we [Americans] were sent to spank them as agents of an angry god or we came to protect them from new tyranny as the agents of a god" (qtd. in Dash 28).

⁸ The 1938 edition was dedicated to Carl Van Vechten (Wall 1995).

⁹ For a discussion of the effects Hurston's editors had on her text see Crosland.

Hemenway, Lippincott anticipated good sales [248]) provide a possible explanation; another factor was assuredly her general resistance to being classified according to her race rather than as an individual¹⁰ and to ‘race men,’ who had made the opposition to the U.S. Occupation of Haiti their cause; or finally, and this I would consider pernicious,¹¹ she used this monumental occurrence in Haitian history as an exercise in developing mythic/biblical style and voice.¹² J. Michael Dash in his *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (1988) sees only “unmitigated contempt” in Hurston’s attitude toward the Haitians: “In this regard Hurston has the dubious distinction of being the only black writer who actually approved of the American Occupation” (58).

Not only Hurston’s political position but also her mix of genres puzzled her contemporaries. Elmer Davis notes in his October 1938 “Saturday Review” article:

Tell My Horse is a curious mixture of remembrances, travelogue, sensationalism, and anthropology. The remembrances are vivid, the travelogues tedious, the sensationalism reminiscent of Seabrook, and the anthropology a melange of misinterpretation and exceedingly good folklore....That Miss Hurston loves Haiti is obvious, but there is a general feeling that the material was not completely digested. (qtd. in Gates 24-25)

Certainly, the impressionistic pastiche of style and content in *Tell My Horse*, which causes her biographer, Hemenway, to evaluate this as “her poorest book,”(248) is the very reason she is currently being reread as a postmodern precursor.¹³ One can read many sections of this text as her refusal to smooth over the difficulty of her position as participant observer, as both an insider and an outsider to the culture being studied. But her jingoism, even if it were

¹⁰ “I don’t see life through the eyes of a Negro, but those of a person” (qtd. in Hemenway (289).

¹¹ “It has been suggested [by Hemenway] that Hurston unconsciously tried to commit academic suicide by plagiarizing the material on the last living survivor of the last slave ship Cudjo Lewis, perhaps this is her attempt at further academic suicide – the death of her anthropology career. I would love to be sympathetic – consider this burlesque on travelogues and objectified science – but this would, to me imply, that Hurston instrumentalists her subject, turning her Haitian subjects into instrumentalized object, subject to the most destructive of imperial gazes.” (Jacobs ??? 332 - 335)

¹² While in Haiti from April-December 1936 she completed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and was writing *Moses, Man of the Mountain* during 1937 and 1938, the year when *Tell My Horse* was published. (Wall 1023-1025)

¹³ “Hurston breaks with the conventions of the monograph in ways that anticipate post-modern methods and assumptions by foregrounding her membership and participation in the communities under her consideration and parading the often intrusive means through which she managed to collect materials. Beyond this crucial issue of how she positions herself, Hurston’s statements reveal an inconsistent relationship to her methods and materials” (Jacobs 339).

meant ironically, goes far beyond an implicit critique of anthropological discourse. In her *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* Lynda Hill comes to the following conclusion about "Characteristics of Negro Expression," another extremely "slippery" Hurston text:

Sorting out parodic references in "Characteristics" is a prickly pursuit, because Hurston's experiments with form remain tempered by her conservative typology. I do not think it is fair to say that her work operated as the kind of social critique ordinarily attributed to parody. Her work's parodic dimensions derive from her use of folk humor, always replete with mockery, including self-mockery. Parody must necessarily sting and bite the would-be targets. When critical comments are not aimed at the folk, as in "Characteristics," but at an intellectual elite controlling the discourse used to talk about and speak on behalf of the folk, any attempt at parody may be canceled out or recede into careful manipulating of language and manners, something akin to what Homi Bhaba calls "sly civility." (45-46)

It is her comments not only on Haitian politics, but the blanket judgments she issues on the Haitian people that make it so difficult for this reader to consider this text irony or parody. A few examples serve to illustrate this point:

The Haitian people are gentle and lovable except for their enormous and unconscious cruelty. (82)

Or:

That brings us to the most striking phenomenon in Haiti to a visiting American. That habit of lying! It is safe to say that this art, pastime, expedient, or whatever one wishes to call it, is more than any other factor responsible for Haiti's tragic history.... Certainly at the present time the art of saying what one would like to be believed instead of the glaring fact is highly developed in Haiti.... This lying habit goes from the thatched hut to the mansion, the only difference being the things that are lied about. (81-82)

She reports on a conversation with an unidentified Haitian:

We are a poor country that has been made poorer by an Occupation forced upon us by the United States.... All we know is that the Marines saw that our country was rich and so they came and robbed us until we grew tired of it and drove them away. But what can a weak country like Haiti do when a powerful nation like your own forces its military upon us, kills our citizens and steals our money? (84-85)

Hurston attributes this Haitian's interpretation to self-pity:

If I did not know that every word of it was a lie, I would have been bound to believe him, his lies were that bold and brazen. His statements presupposed that I could not read and even if I could that there were no historical documents in existence that dealt with Haiti. I soon learned to accept these

insults to my intelligence without protest because they happened so often.
(86)

One could interpret this passage as Hurston giving a voice to the viewpoint of the Haitian lower class, playing the devil's advocate by voicing "official" U.S. policy position, but this posture would be lost on most readers. Yet, there is another potential explanation for the slippery nature of this text. Hurston may well have had at least two, if not more, audiences in mind: the insider (African Americans, or those who opposed U.S. imperialism in Haiti) can identify with the hyperbolic, oxymoron of her double-edged signifying and recognize that she means just the opposite of what she seems to be saying, whereas outsiders to the performative nature of signifying may well be led to agree with statements supporting the jingoism of those in power and take her statements at face value.¹⁴ As Dash notes:

The travel writer's choice of anecdote, the novelist's description of protagonists, the poet's terminology not only affect the way we think and feel but, even when new situations present themselves, we are tempted to recall and dwell on stereotypes which have never really vanished. (Dash X)

It is a difficult high-wire act to negotiate and I, for one, question the success of Hurston's endeavor – if, indeed, it was her endeavor in the first place.

Not only had Hurston studied African American folk culture and was certainly well aware of the performative aspects of "putting on master"; she had utilized "lying" and "porch talk" as African American oral art forms in *Mules and Men* (1935).¹⁵ Could it be that Hurston simply didn't get it in Haiti? Perhaps she did not realize that she might not be seen by Haitians as Zora Neale Hurston, the individual, but as, regardless of her race, a representative of a privileged class from a nation that had recently occupied her host country? Could it be that the racial assumptions, with their attendant solidarity that would make her less of an observer and more of a participant

¹⁴ Domina notes the same problem in reference to *Dust Tracks on a Road and Mules and Men*: "although whether she perceives a doubly audience [or not] ... those who will decipher the code and those who will fail to recognize it - is unclear." (206)

¹⁵ Hurston specifically mentions "porch talk" in *Tell My Horse* when she describes the time she spent with Dr. Reser, the white officer in charge of the state insane asylum where she took her photo of the Zombie: "So I took to spending time on his porch when I was not busy otherwise. We would play cards and swap tales and listen to the harmless lunatics who wandered about the grounds and occasionally came up to the screened to beg a cigarette or say something that seemed important to their crippled minds." (246) The burial of Simalo, the goat, in *Tell My Horse* (98) strongly resembles the burial of the mules in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (94-97), an example of Hurston's use of her research in her fiction.

and that stood her in good stead for her research in the United States,¹⁶ actually failed her in Haiti? Did she fail to recognize not only her own othering of the Haitian subject, but also the othering of the anthropologist from the United States - a direct representative of an imperial, colonial force that had only very recently withdrawn from Haiti - by the Haitian subject? A very conflicted position indeed.

Her prophecy comes to closure at the end of this section on Haiti:

I predict that this state of affairs will not last forever. A feeling of nationalism is growing in Haiti among the young. They admire France less and less, and their own native patterns more. They are contending that Voodoo is not what is wrong with Haiti. The thing fettering the country is its politics and those foreign priests. Well, anyway, there is Haiti as it is... (92)

Hurston recognizes a home-grown Haitian nationalism freed from French cultural domination and U.S. political imperialism, yet she then undercuts this recognition with her off-handed, shoulder-shrugging manner, remaining slippery and refusing to be pinned down to the end, leaving the reader with the desire for a key to decipher her hieroglyphics.

Island Possessed was written in Dakar, Senegal in 1969 while Katherine Dunham was participating in the preparation of the first Pan-African Festival at the invitation of Leopold Senghor. Subsequent to her childhood memoirs, *A Touch of Innocence* (1959), *Island Possessed* is an autobiographical account of Dunham's many years in Haiti and her multi-faceted career. Like Hurston, Dunham initially establishes her authority as anthropologist:

It was with letters from Melville Herskovits, head of the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University, that I invaded the Caribbean – Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, passing lightly over the other islands, then Haiti again for the final stand for the real study. (3)

And she, like Hurston, associates herself with many “big names,” such as Jean Price-Mars, Haiti's most notable anthropologist; Louis Borno, Haiti's former puppet president under the Occupation; Sténio Vincent, Haiti's president at the time of her visit; and Dumarsais Estimé, Haiti's future President.

Her choice of military diction “invaded” and her return again for the “final stand” thematizes the offensive, aggressive nature of the anthropological outsider attempting to penetrate the culture of the native other. But she distances her own more noble form of invasion from the political aims and

¹⁶ She reported on the negative effect of the Barnard accent she had acquired when she tried to collect folklore in her native Florida (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 174-175))

cultural effects of the U.S. military invasion and subsequent Marine Occupation: “When I arrived in Haiti not long after the exodus of the Marines, there were still baptized drums hidden in hollow tree trunks and behind waterfalls” (3). She elaborates on this again much later in her work:

These drums of Ville Bonheur, village of the Black Virgin of Haiti, had been hidden behind a waterfall during one of the Occupation “purges” of vaudun temples and, traditionally unpainted and unstained, glowed with the usage of time like old museum pieces. (123)

In this complex gesture to position herself in respect to race, gender, class and culture, she locates authenticity among the lower classes and rural peasantry, defining them as the “true” Haiti, and contrasts the Marine’s disregard for Haitian cultural autonomy while simultaneously emphasizing her reverence for the single most powerful symbol of Haitian self-definition – the drums of vaudun. These drums provide a means of communicating with the ancestors and the gods back in “Na Guinee,” the African homeland, symbolizing Haitian self-definition and resistance to slavery as well as the U.S. Marine Occupation:

Of my kind I was a first – a lone young woman easy to place in the clean-cut American dichotomy of color, harder to place in the complexity of Caribbean color classifications; a mulatto when occasion called for, an in-between, or “griffon” actually, I suppose; most of the time an unplaceable, which I prefer to think of as “noir” – not exactly the color black, but the quality of belonging with or being at ease with black people when in the hills or plains or anywhere and scrambling through daily life along with them. (4)

She claims she is a “first,” but specifically mentions that William Seabrook, Harold Courlander and Melville Herskovits had preceded her – but they were white and male, emphasizing race and gender as important analytical distinctions. More significantly in our context, she points to the complexity of intercultural understanding due to the significant differences between U.S. and Haitian society in general and racial classification in particular.

Dunham clearly situates herself in the complex Haitian color/caste system with its 128 categories of racial identification¹⁷ and clearly admits that she

¹⁷ James elaborates: “As they [the mulattos] began to establish themselves, the jealousy and envy of the white colonists were transformed into ferocious hatred and fear. They divided the offspring of white and black and intermediate shades into 128 divisions. The true Mulatto was the child of the pure black and the pure white. The child of the white and the mulatto woman was a quarteron with 96 parts white and 32 parts black. But the quarteron could be produced by the white and the marabou in the proportion of 88 to 40, or by the white and the sacatra, in the proportion of 72 to 56 and so on all through the 128 varieties. But the sang-mêlé with 127 white parts and 1 black part was still a man of colour.

manipulates her position “when occasion called for,” while politically, academically and emotionally aligning herself with black folk. But Dunham, if indirectly, also points to the fact that Haitians also study and classify her: a first, a woman, a woman of color, single, young. It is around these categories that she structures her representation of herself and her analysis of Haitian culture and politics.

Finally, this passage also assigns Hurston’s research a clear secondary status and can be read as a response to Hurston’s snide verbal non-recognition of Dunham in *Tell My Horse*, as well as possibly a response to Hurston’s less than kind 1942 review of “Journey to Accompong,” the publication of Dunham’s research in Jamaica. Certainly therefore, *Island Possessed*, at least in parts, can be read as an intertext with *Tell My Horse*, Dunham’s “writing back” to Hurston.¹⁸

It is essential to keep in mind that Dunham’s text was published 31 years later than Hurston’s. The political climate within the United States and Haiti, as well as the relations between the two countries, had radically changed: the initial thaw in U.S.-Haitian relations was marked by the change from U.S. Gunboat Diplomacy in the early twentieth century to Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy during the Depression. Internationally, World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and African Independence had followed. The discourse on race within the United States had also changed fundamentally in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and rising Black Power.

Beyond the overall change in political climate, Dunham had subsequently spent many years living in Haiti and had traveled around the globe with her

It all reads like a cross between a nightmare and a bad joke. But these distinctions still exercise their influence in the West Indies today.” (43)

Winn states: “Compared to Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States is not just racist, but color-blind: people are either black or white. In the other Americas, a more complex consciousness of color sees black and white, but also recognizes many shades in between” (277).

¹⁸ In her January 12, 1947 *New York Herald Tribune* review of “Journey to Accompong,” Hurston notes that “In a more comprehensive work, the material in ‘Journey to Accompong’ would have been compressed into a single chapter.” She calls the material “thin,” thereby denying Dunham’s work the status of legitimate scholarship: “After all, thirty days in a locality is not much in research and hardly affords time enough for the field-worker to scratch the surface. Therefore it is to the tremendous credit of the author that she has achieved such an entertaining book.” The title of her review, “Thirty Days Among Maroons,” dishes out Hurston’s first blow by underlining the brevity of Dunham’s stay (8 VII). This is particularly interesting in that Hurston had used Herskovits’ “one-night” in Accompong to legitimate her own status as anthropologist in the opening of *Tell My Horse*. Three months later (March 9, 1947) in the same newspaper, Hurston wrote a notably more positive review of “Trinidad Village” by the “eminent sociologist-anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits” in “The Transplanted Negro” (20 VII).

dance troupe. Touching on her changed perspective over the years, she notes: “Only much later did I realize how often I had committed the unpardonable, said the unforgivable, done the unacceptable”(166). The passage of time as well as Dunham’s later more intimate knowledge of Haitian society accounts for many of the differences between the two texts.

The tension between Haiti’s europhile identification with France and the negative attitude towards the United States are reflected in Dunham’s account of her arrival: A typical immigration officer, “condescending, resentful, suspicious, sadistic,” took minutes to settle in a chair, adjust his pince-nez glasses and dawdle through the passports of a number of fellow passengers, leaving Dunham, “a perspiring student of ‘dance and anthropology’”(9), with a great deal of time to contemplate her standing in the eyes of this petty arm of the Haitian government: “My passport would make me to some degree *persona non grata*. I counted on color to offset this, but then there was to offset *that* my sex and class – the student class, very hard to place”(10). When he began to speak in French and she answered “in kind, imperfect though it must have been ... Everything changed.... he looked deeply into my eyes and hoped to see me in town at the immigration office for further ‘formalities’ within a day or two”(11).

This immigration officer seems to have been impressed by more than Dunham’s rudimentary knowledge of French. Like Hurston, Dunham seems to have had her share of encounters with Haitian men: Louis Borno, Haiti puppet president under the Occupation, is portrayed as making Dunham feel “immediately at home and, what is more, important” (22) as well as making the first 16 mm film of Dunham, of which, as she points out, she was to make many more.

Dunham interprets the position of Louis Borno’s, Haiti’s puppet President during the Occupation: “had he resisted the government, unfortunately made up mostly of Marines from the southern United States.... When I saw the man, he bore the marks of suffering. But to Dumarsais Estimé, and many a Haitian nationalists he was a collaborator, opportunist, and traitor.” Dunham feels put upon to point out “the little that there was of to put in balance against the loss of national autonomy: that out of the Occupation and Borno’s presidency came new hospitals, public works, roads, elementary sanitation, and the fenced-in farm for the mentally disturbed”(25-26). Arguments supporting imperialism and dictatorships have changed little over the years.

The drums of vaudun, the language, the customs and racial distinctions of Haiti were not considered important by the Marines: “The Americans occupied Haiti with very little consideration for the customs, desires, and

habits of the people themselves, and with no wish, until the harms was done, to find out what the national character was like”(24). Dunham compares the role of U.S. imperialism in Haiti with racial politics in the South, touching upon the theory of internal colonialism put forward in the 1960s:

The State Department, never having been accused of this [Woodrow Wilson’s sensitivity and intellectualism], sent raw Southerners in as Marines to put peace into the troubled little black island, going through one of its characteristic blood baths, and made hell out of purgatory. Haiti was good practice ground for what goes on now between black and white in the United States of America, excepting that the Southern Marines were not accustomed to retaliation, nor were they accustomed to differentiating between degrees of blackness. (73)

“A friendship turned romance”(27)¹⁹ with Dumarsais Estimé, Haiti’s later president, has a momentous influence on the young Katherine Dunham. Due to her privileged position as an outsider, an academic from an industrialized nation with impressive letters of recommendation provided by Herskovits, she was in contact with levels of society surely closed to her at home. Dunham’s friendships with past and future Haitian presidents, and this applies equally to Hurston of course, are a far cry from her status in the United States of the 1930s.

Using a common convention that unites the narrative strategies of anthropology and travelogue, Dunham introduces a motley crew of local-color characters. In her description of the first stages of her initiation into vaudun, the *lave-tête*, she sketches a portrait gallery of her eight co-initiates. The negative effects of the Marine Occupation are evident:

Madame Ezméry Dessalines was pursued by bad luck with “husbands.” The answer probably lay in an initial mistake. Her first two children ... were testimony to fraternizing of a kind not so common as one would have imagined during the Occupation. Haitians, though poor, are proud. These boys, fair-haired, light-eyed, about ten years of age, had been sired by some Marine long since forgotten.... When the Marine set sail with the others of his kind evacuating Haiti, no means were left behind for either the care of his offspring or the appeasing of his indigenous mate’s gods. (85-86)

Vierge, another fellow initiate, was, according to Dunham, presented with the following courtship gifts by her friend Damien, who envisioned a legal marriage with her: “gunny sacks half full of the droppings of the prize cows imported from the United States during one of the bursts of paternalism which gave the Occupation a *raison d’être*” (86–87). One can virtually feel Dunham’s tongue in her cheek here.

¹⁹ Lover quote SIU

The Haitian system of polygyny, whereby it is a man's privilege to have several "wives placée," is also elucidated by Dunham. This custom is adopted by Doc, a "white Marine" doctor who ran the fenced in asylum where Hurston later took her zombie photograph and whose USAmerican wife had returned to Miami with their two children because she could not deal with the privileges accorded to men by Haitian society. Dunham found Doc living with Cécile:

Sometimes Cécile served table for guests at Doc's screened residence in the middle of the asylum compound, which he kept proper 'white palace' fashion ... if the guests were in high spirits and protocol permitted, ... Doc, with a twinkle in his turquoise-blue eyes, would begin to brag about Cécile's English acquired during the Occupation.... With a wide smile, gold tooth gleaming, Cécile would begin with "Come here, you f---g black bitch!" and gaily recite the list of endearing obscenities which constituted her English instructions from the Marines who had solicited her favors a few years earlier. (95)

So much for the civilizing mission of U.S. Marines.

While trying to, one feels tempted to say with inevitable sensationalism, verify the existence of cannibalism, infanticide and zombies, Dunham and her Haitian friend Fred sneak back into a vaudun priest's camp and are caught:

... a man with the air of a sentinel spoke to us from the shadows. We had not seen him. There was no friendliness in his manner, and companions joined him to stand around us, glowering. I thought of the caco camps [revolutionary camps of peasants mercenaries] during the Occupation, or filibustier [sic] hideaways during the Revolution" (195).

As in all tales of adventure, she lives to tell the tale. But this narrative of the outsider caught as invader of another culture is in marked contrast to Hurston's construction of herself as the self-confident, indefatigable interpreter of Haitian culture who concludes that she knows how Haiti "is." It is the discourse of Dunham's self-doubt that is in marked contrast with Hurston's – Dunham's recognition of herself as an outsider, an intruder, or in her own opening words, as an "invader." I quote at length:

I have often wondered whether my reluctance to attach myself solely to the hounfor [a vaudun shrine] which I had known best and which was responsible for my spiritual protection in the vaudun, was because of the never-ending quest for the novel, the statistics gathering of the researcher, or another reason which had troubled me, beginning as a doubt and developing into a full-grown suspicion. I was, in short, not at all sure of my sincerity in these pursuits and there seemed to be no way to put myself to the test, to find out. Could Herskovits tell me, could Erich Fromm [a long-time friend], could Téoline or Dégrasse [her guides through initiation] tell me what part of me lived on the floor of the hounfor, and felt awareness seeping from the earth

and people and things around me, what part stood to one side taking notes? Each moment lived in participation was real; still, without arranging this expressly, without conscious doing or planning or thinking I stayed outside the experience while being totally immersed in it. After my “marriage” to Damballah [the paramount snake deity] I longed for some inkling, some indications of “possession”... I can now observe with some pity, even amusement, the newly traveled, ethnic-saturated, homesick-for-Chicago Iphigenia wondering what next to do to prove herself a scientist to her Alma Mater; the true scholar to her country; the selfless sacrificial maiden to her people. (227-228)

The magical moment when participation and observation, the fundamental tools of anthropology of the day, would become a unified whole never materialized: “The miracle did not happen”(234). Hurston may also have tried to reveal the impossibility of this melding into a unified participant-observer – where outsider becomes insider and vice versa in her hieroglyphic²⁰ text, but Dunham, perhaps with the advantage gleaned from thirty years of hindsight and a successful career outside the academy, could openly come out of the closet, revealing her involvement in anthropology’s “dirty little secret ... its masking or denial of the complexity of the intersubjective encounter between fieldworker and native as well as the power relations that result from this encounter”(Jacobs 332). Not only does the miracle not happen, it becomes, as it well must inevitably be, a moral problem - the breach between speaking *for* the other rather than *as* the other.

In the words of Ralph Ellison, both Hurston and Dunham try to “change the joke and slip the yoke.”²¹ In their status as USAmerican women of color, they are positioned in a totally new cultural, social and political system in Haiti – at times the beautiful, the young, the woman, at times the scholar and at others the (ugly) American. At times they manipulate and at times are victims of all of these positions. It is Hurston’s simultaneously stylistically brilliant but potentially politically fatal slippery ironic trickster tone that makes interpreting her position most difficult. If her text is meant ironically, then she, I believe, fails to pull it off, caught in the trap of her U.S. audience’s stereotyped preconceptions of a small black Banana Republic. For her audience, and perhaps even for herself, her account substantiates the existing stereotypes. The joke has not been changed - the yoke has not been slipped.

²⁰ See the discussion of Hurston’s hieroglyphic texts in Hill (pages****)

²¹ See Ralph Ellison’s discussion of Stanley Edgar Hymen’s portrayal of the trickster figure in African American folklore “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” in *Shadow and Act* (45-59).

The complexity of audience and mentorship are profound for both Dunham and Hurston: the Rosenwald and Guggenheim Foundations had allotted grant money; mentors such as “Papa Franz” Boas and Melville Herskovits required satisfaction; reports were to be written and books to be published; expectations were to be met - and then there were the dreams of “exploiting” the material for performative purposes that Hurston and Dunham shared.

It is their politics that most clearly separate Dunham and Hurston in their Haitian encounter. It is their pride in African American culture, with an equal accent on African and American, that fundamentally joins Dunham’s and Hurston’s research in Haiti. It is their analysis of the performative and functional nature of African diasporic culture in the Americas, as well as their performance of this culture in text and dance that remains their foremost and incomparable contribution.

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