ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S REWORKING OF THE REVUE FORM IN *COLD KEENER*

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Abstract

This paper entitled "Zora Neale Hurston's Reworking of the Revue Form in Cold Keener" argues that while the popular entertainment form of the Revue in 1920s largely presented stereotyped images of African American people, Hurston sought to transform it by bringing in authentic representations of African American folk life. Cold Keener, a work consisting of short pieces unconnected to each other thematically or stylistically, is shown to acquireartistic and structural integrity when seen as a revue. Hurston's engagement with the revue form is also seen to be connected with her understanding of black aesthetic principles based on fragmentation, "angularity" and "asymmetry," and an important step in her experiment of developingthe performative aspects of black vernacular and cultural traditions that interested her both as an artist and an anthropologist. It is suggested that the effort to transform the revue, and the experiments with the performance pieces she developed in the process, lead to her more mature plays such as Spunk and Polk County.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston; *Cold Keener*; Revue; African American drama; Harlem Renaissance

Revue is a type of variety show that combines music, dance, comical scenes or vignettes, and other performative acts for an evening of entertainment. "In the years between the world wars," as Laurence Maslon says,"nothing on Broadway catered to Manhattan nightlife like the revue" ("Rise of the Revue"). He further notes that during "the Roaring Twenties, nearly 150 revues opened on Broadway," and that the shows continued to be popular through the Depression Era in the 1930. The genre of the revue, along with musicals, vaudevilles (comedy shows), spectacles, and opera provided entertainment to the audience, generated huge profits for the owners of theatre companies, and opened abundant performance opportunities for a variety of artists such as singers, song writers, dancers, and actors. The revue, however, had a problematic relationship with African Americans in the period of its rise, the 1920s, which is also the period of the Harlem Renaissance and the age

of the "New Negro[1]." Simply stated, the relationship is contentious because on the one hand it provided the sorely needed employment opportunities to African American artists and performers,other the hand, it perpetuated the stereotyped, comical, and negative images of African American people in the theatrebecause the genre was heavily influenced by the legacy of blackface minstrelsy.[2] The owners of theatrical troupes and companies that controlled the entertainment industry were all white. The absence of financial control dictated that the black artists had no creative control either. The fact that white people also formed the majority of the audience ensured that no change in the representation of African American images and identities could take place. Given this situation, the leading Harlem Renaissance artists and thinkers had pulled themselves away from these popular shows, choosing to focus instead on developing alternative forms of black drama. W.E.B.DuBois believed that black drama should address itself to the struggle of African American people against racism and contribute to changing the social and political realities. In order to encourage black drama to be "about us, . . . by us, . . . for us, . . , [and] near us," he had created a theatre company called Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre[3] in 1925 ("Krigwa 1926," 134). Alain Locke too subscribed to the view that commercial theatre held no future for serious dramatic productions, though he disagreed with DuBois in his vision of the nature and purpose of African American drama. Preferring a more literary kind of drama, he encouraged schools and colleges to patronize playwrights and small theatre groups to create and exhibit their work. Thus, in the broad opinion of the African American writers and thinkers, this turn of the serious black drama away from the glamour and glitz of Broadway was not only creatively right but also inevitable given the economics of the theatre industry.

Zora Neale Hurston, now acknowledged as one of the leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance, did not agree with the mainstream view about the nature and future of black drama. Not only did she have creative disagreements with DuBois, Locke, Langston Hughes and other writers of the age, she was also not willing to give up the effort to mount successful productions on Broadway. She nurtured the ambition of becoming a popular entertainer in the theatre industry, and while this dream may be seen as financially naive given that she did not have any secure financial backing for her ventures, it was an idea for which she had firm creative convictions. On the one hand, she disagreed with DuBois, Locke, and others in her

[1]The term "New Negro" was used by Alain Locke in his book *The New Negro* (1925) to designate the African American people in the early decades of the Twentieth Century who, having migrated to the northern states, were not willing to submit to racial oppression, and were more ambitious, confident and assertive than the "old Negro" in the South.

[2]Comical shows performed by white actors and musicians who painted their faces black and caricatured the singing and dancing of slaves for the entertainment of white audiences. The influence of these shows is seen as going well beyond the theatre in forming stereotypical images of the African American people in popular imagination that continue to persist.

[3]Regina M. Andrews explains that the name Krigwa "came from the *Crisis* Guild of Writers and Artists (Crigwa) -- Dr. DuBois's original gathering of writers and artists. The group name was spelt with a "C" at that time, but within a short time it was changed to Krigwa (Mitchell 69).

vision of drama, on the other hand, she was also extremely critical of the standard Broadway revues. Commenting on a popular Broadway show, for instance, she says that shows "like "Dixie to Broadway" are only Negro in cast, and could just as well have come from pre-Soviet Russia," implying that the representation of black folk in these shows was completely foreign to the lives and identities of real black people ("Characteristics" 63). The show to which she refers, *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), was an all-black revue produced by Lew Leslie, a white man who decided on a simple formula: "everyone backstage, including director, conductor, scriptwriters -- white; everyone on stage -- black" (Hatch 247). While the show was enormously successful, and created black stars such as Shelton Brooks and Florence Mills for their singing, dancing and comedic skills, the continued appeal of the show for the patrons still lay in the stereotyped images of the black people. Hurston, on the other hand, wished to create more genuine and authentic shows based on the real culture of the black people. She once wrote 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 [Alabama] Nigger" (Hemenway 115). The idea of "real"black theatre based on folk culture sprang from Hurston's belief that the traditional culture of the African American people contained immense dramatic opportunities. This culture, however, was to be found not among the people who had migrated to the North but in the rural black communities of the American South. The Great Migration of the African American people to the North in the early decades of the twentieth century had created new opportunities for education, arts, and culture. Hurston herself was part of this generation of the "New Negro," who were in the vanguard of the cultural efflorescence of the period called the Harlem Renaissance. However, while the leading figures of the age, such as Locke and DuBois, as well as contemporary playwrights such as Georgia Douglass Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimke and many others focused on the lives of the folk who had migrated to the urban North, Hurston continued to put her faith in the traditional culture of the rural South. That is where, she believed, the real drama and "the greatest cultural wealth of the continent" were to be found (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* xxiii). Born and raised in the South, Hurston had an innate understanding of and love for the traditional black culture, which was further deepened by her later work as an anthropologist and ethnographer. She made several trips to various parts of the South including Florida and Louisiana to collect folklore, stories, songs, sermons, children's games, voodoo practices, and other cultural material. Her vision of black theatre lay in bringing this material to the stage -- she wished that the folklore she had collected could, as Hemenway puts it, "live in music and movement" (178).

This essay focuses on Hurston's efforts to create performances in the tradition of the revue, but transform the genre by bringing in "genuine" traditional black American folk forms in place of the distorted, stereotyped images. While her dream of Broadway success never materialized given the lack of funding and other reasons, the argument here is that the

effort to transform the revue, and the experiments with the performance pieces she developed in the process, lead to hermature plays such as *Spunk* and *Polk County*. In other words, the nuts and bolts of her dramatic vision are to be found in her revues, particularly *Cold Keener: A Revue*. In her essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), Hurston articulates some central ideas of her vision of art, particularly drama which was the literary form she felt most committed to. Hurston starts "Characteristics" by claiming a natural and an innate connection of drama with black culture: "The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama" (31). She talks about the "negro" being famous the world over as a mimic and observes that this mimicry is an art. She justifies this claim by demonstrating two important aspects of drama in black life: the composition and structure of black vernacular on the one hand, and the general propensity of black folk to dramatize all action. The preeminent aspect of thedramatic quality in black culture for Hurston lies in black speech: "His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile" (31). She found the vernacular richness and creativity of black speech in the folklore, songs, jokes, and other verbal heritage of the community that she documented as an anthropologist. Hurston also gives us some idea about the structural uniqueness of the black aesthetics in concepts such as "asymmetry" and "angularity." In Hurston's view, the principles of fragmentation, swift changes in action and perspective, and irregularity of structure are to be found in traditional African as well as African American music, painting, sculpture, and decorative practices. Calling asymmetry "a definite feature of Negro art," she illustrates her ideas of asymmetry and angularity with examples from poetry and dance, and talks about the "abrupt and unexpected change" that mark their structure. These structural principles of asymmetry and angularity were particularly suited to the revue, a form that was not bound by a plot or structure and included variety and sudden transitions from one item to another. The idea that an artistic structure could be built on the principle of variation, difference, irregularity, and sudden shifts in theme, tone, and perspective was in direct contravention to the ideas of realistic theatre dominant in Europe and lately in America too in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. But the idea of an "unstructured" structure that Hurston found innately present in black aesthetic would work well with the popular revue format. This would have been Hurston's inspiration to develop shows with authentic black cultural forms that were amenable to the revue format.

In 1930, Hurston took the copyright for a series of sketches under the title *Cold Keener*: *A Revue*[4]. *Cold Keener*, a collection of nine short pieces, is not a "play" in any conventional sense of the word in which the various parts are connected with each other thematically, nor does the work have a structure of exposition, development, and denouement

[4] Hurston had worked on these sketches with a collaborator named Porter Grainger with the title *Jungle Scandals*. The version copyrighted by Hurston was called *Cold Keener.*

associated with the modern realistic play. To enumerate the range of subjects, situations, characters and locations she deals with in her short plays is in itself an instructive exercise. The longest among these sketches is not more than eight printed pages and the shortest is about one page. The pieces offer a remarkably wide range of dramatic situations and characteristics of the black folk. There is great diversity in the locations at which these plays take place: the border between Alabama and Georgia, heaven, a shack in any city, a Florida swamp, Lenox Avenue at 135th Street, Deep South, Harlem, Railroad track in Florida, a Sawmill Jook House, Waycross Georgia, Washington, D.C., and New York. The pieces are written in vernacular dialect and in Standard English, in prose and poetry, with realistic characters and symbolic characters such as birds and animals, with varying degrees of humour and pathos and so on. However, *Cold Keener* acquires artistic and structural integrity when seen as a revue. What is remarkable about this work is its variety of themes, styles, locations, and contexts, which are meant to focus on different aspects of the black folk material and their dramatic potential. In 1927 and 1928, Hurston had travelled to Florida and Louisiana to collect folklore and traditional cultural practices as part of her anthropological work under the famous anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University. She had witnessed and recorded a great deal of traditional black cultural material. In their sheer range of styles and subjects, these short pieces bear witness to Hurston's need to experiment with the dramatic potential of the folk material. In *Cold Keener*, Hurston focuses on exhibiting black vernacular forms such as folktales and the conventions of "lying," "woofing," and "tall tales," as well as performative arts of black dance, blues, work songs, children's songs, and music.

For Hurston, black speech is among the most important dramatic aspects of black culture, and many of her pieces in *Cold Keener* as well as her other plays such as *MuleBone* are concerned with bringing out the linguistic riches of black speech. In "Characteristics," she emphasises the dramatic qualities of black language, such as abundant use of metaphor and simile, the double descriptive (high-tall, low-down), and the verbal nouns (funeralize). Therefore, in many of her plays the verbal exchange itself assumes the focus as dramatic action, rather than merely being the "dialogue" that communicates actions.The verbal exchange demonstrates inventiveness and dramatic imagination, and produces amazement and humour in performance. It is common for her characters to engage in a contest of words, metaphor, images, tall-tales, "lies," and exaggeration to show-off their ingenuity and out-do each other. As in her full-length play *Mule Bone*, in some of her shorter pieces too, the verbal exchange is itself the dramatic action and content. The first piece of *Cold Keener*, "The Filling Station" is a good example. It is an exchange of words between a Ford owner from Alabama and a Chevrolet driver from Georgia who crack jokes at each other's expense, making tall claims first about their respective states, Georgia and Alabama, and then about their respective cars, Chevrolet and Ford. They exhibit an immense amount of resourcefulness and creativity in their exchanges and that is the whole point of the piece. There's an abundance of metaphors and similes that make the language very visual, or as

Hurston put it, the "interpretation of the language [is] in terms of pictures" (Characteristics 31). The entire piece is an example of "woofing," or idle boasting. This inventive "lying" and telling tales is a form of creative expression which is indulged in for its own sake and not for an ulterior purpose. This had the potential to be enormously funny and entertaining on the stage. For instance, the Ford Driver boasts about his car: "The Ford is going to be so you won't have to tell 'em. It will know what you're thinking and tell 'em itself," [the observation has turned out to be remarkably prescient, almost, about the self-driving cars in our own time!] and again that "the new Fords will have a lawyer in the tool box -- as soon as you have a collision, the lawyer will spring right out and begin to collect damages" [which may come true sometime, for all one knows!] (82, 83). The exchange of words can become real enough at times to provoke violence, although "Filling Station" avoids violence and ends with the two drivers threatening each other and leaving. As Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell comment, "'Woofing' is a slice of African American life, where playful banter and insults are as much a game as a round of checkers" (Hurston, *Collected Plays*201).

Two pieces in *Cold Keener*, "Cock Robin" and "Mr. Frog," work with animal characters but represent very different moods and styles. While "Cock Robin" is a fairly realistic piece with characters thinly disguised as animals, Mr. Frog, on the other hand, is a surrealistic piece that is set in "A Florida swamp" in a time "When Animals Talked" (94). Animals have multi-dimensional associations in the context of African American people. Slavery involved the buying, raising, and selling of black people like animals. Animal references were used to dehumanize black people and justify their enslavement. In a reversal of this representational structure, African American folklore is replete with tales about trickster figures such as Brer Rabbit, who uses wit to turn the tables on the opponent. These stories worked as parables for the ways in which the oppressed people managed to achieve victories against the master and upset the hierarchy in some ways. "Cock Robin," with a wide range of animal characters of birds, fish, and even Bull and Beetle but set in a coloured town, humanizes the birds and animals in the manner of a fable. It deals with the killing of the Cock Robin character who goes around seducing the female birds who then lay blue eggs. The birds congregate and decide to "funeralize" Cock Robin and the play turns convivial with the characters planning the details of making the shroud, bearing the pall, mourning, tolling the bell, and ending with all deciding to "have one grand consolidated, amalgamated fraternal parade" (89). This piece would have provided opportunities for a variety of costumes and for acting and dancing in the animal postures, walk, gait etc. Hurston, herself, for instance participated in some productions in a crow dance. In "Mr. Frog," a very different abstract piece, the action is concerned with the marriage of Mr. Frog with Ms. Mousie, but the interest lies in the elaborate and imaginative setting that asks for water "seen through the cypress and magnolia and pine trees," and Spanish moss hanging from the trees. It shows South Wind, North Wind, East Wind and West Wind dancing and swaying the trees as the sun sets and hundreds of fire-flies swarm over the place (94). There is a chorus of frogs that provides the

rhythm to the entire action. It also incorporates dance and presentation of certain marriage rituals.

Some pieces are more straightforward in being direct dramatizations of folktales, such as "Heaven," a folktale included in Hurston's book *Mules and Men* about a man called Jim who died in the Johnstown flood of 1889 and went to heaven. Jim receives his wings and in spite of being warned, begins to fly prematurely and crashes. He ends up losing his wings and settles down with his guitar consoling himself with the thought that he doesn't care about losing his wings: "I was a flyin' fool when I had 'em" (93). Hurston's stage instructions show elaborate costumes and a variety of music including the harp, the guitar and the mouth organ in the play. "The House that Jack Built" works with a recitation of the popular nursery rhyme "the house that Jack built" (105-110). In a scene set in an "Old-fashioned schoolhouse" in "Deep South," De Otis is unjustly persecuted by the teacher till he overwhelms everyone and himself with a long, sustained recital of the poem, and finally lies on the floor, "shivering in rhythm" (105, 110).

An important piece, "Jook," was based on an idea that was to grow in Hurston's mind and become the centre of her vision of African American theatre. Jook, or juke as it is commonly spelt, was originally the club house in the saw mill and turpentine black workers communities. It was the space where after a hard day's work at the saw-mill or laying a railway line, men and women met to socialize, gamble, sing, dance, or even fight. Describing the jook, Hurston says that it "is a word for a Negro pleasure house. It may mean a bawdy house. It may mean the house set apart on public works where the men and women dance, drink and gamble. Often, it is a combination of all these" ("Characteristics" 40). She defines the jook joint as an important place for American music in the form of the blues songs and ballads: "For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as the blues" (40). In the short sketch entitled "Jook" in *Cold Keener*, Hurston shows the dancing, the singing, the card-games, the noise, the laughter, the tears all merging into each other to form intensely lived moments of time. The blues mood also extends to "Railroad Camp," also a musical piece that dramatizes workers at a "Railroad track in Florida" (116). Men at work "spiking rails with sledge hammers" use the "wham" of the hammer to keep time in their singing. The blues mood pervades as the gang works and sings.

A very different and realistic piece, *Lenox Avenue*, is set in Lenox Avenue, 135th Street, New York, which is an iconic Harlem location. The backdrop shows the intersection and houses and possibly a rotating screen that shows vehicles whizzing past, while the actions consist of various characters going about their business under the watchful and slightly threatening eye of the traffic officer at the intersection. With swift brush-strokes, Hurston vividly delineatessundry characters such as a young man knitting sweaters, a young couple, a middle-aged couple, a preacher who moves across the stage and reveals the drama in their lives. The scene, the characters, and the dialogues are all very realistic and yet the piece acquires an expressionistic compression.

The only piece perhaps that has a political reference with a nod towards the colonial context is "Bahamas" that shows two men from Harlem, Joe Wiley and Good Black, traveling to Bahamas to join Emperor Jones as he prepares to travel back to Africa with his "conquering Black legions" to expel the Europeans from there (112). This play, which seems to work in the context of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement, and also invites comparison with O'Neill's 1920 play *Emperor Jones*, is however purged of all serious, political context and meaning. Besides the structuring device of the travel back to Africa, the play has no serious statement to make on the issue, and the stage business is concerned with the festivities, songs and dances to welcome Joe Wiley and Good Black to Bahamas and to celebrate the departure of Emperor Jones and the others to Africa. Hurston seems to uphold the uplifting effect of the idea of a return to Africa, without getting involved in any debate around it.

A production of *Cold Keener* was planned under its earlier title *Jungle Scandals* in 1931, but it was cancelled. However, another work that she created in the format of a revue, titled variously as *The Great Day* (1932), *From Sun to Sun* (1932), and *All de Live Long Day* (1934), received several productions and was praised. It was performed on Broadway for a single evening on January 10, 1932 but toured Florida successfully for a while and gathered good reviews. Unfortunately, the full scripts of the shows have not survived, but the program sheets as well performance reviews are available, and one can glean some idea of the show from these. The performances were built on the concept of a day in the life of the black railroad workers. The shows begin with the "Shack Rouser" song to wake the sleepy workers. This is followed by the scene of the workers at the laborious task of building the railroad, and the labour is accompanied by work songs that Hurston had gathered during her collecting trips. Evening shows children at play and the various games and children's songs created these scenes. These were followed by scenes built around the tradition of black sermons by itinerant preachers and the singing of the spirituals. The jook scenes set in the evening included the powerful bleus songs and the social exchange such as telling the folktales or engaging in "woofing" and "lying." Alain Locke in his program note gave it high praise:

> "Great Day" is a stage arrangement of part of a cycle of Negro folk-song, dance, and pantomime collected and recorded by Miss Zora Hurston over three years of intimate living among the common folk in the primitive privacy of their own Negro way of life. It is thus a rare sample of the pure and unvarnished materials from which the stage and concert tradition has been derived; and ought to show how much more unique and powerful and spirit-compelling the genuine Negro folk-things are" (quoted in Cole and Mitchell 365).

While artistically Hurston had succeeded, other impediments such as lack of funding and the fact that she did not own the rights to the material she had collected made it impossible for her to replicate the success in any enduring manner. However, she developed these ideas in her later plays.

As suggested earlier, working on the revues helped Hurston develop her mature dramatic style.The short pieces included in *Cold Keener* were to prove of great value in her later work and one can see the parallels between her sketches in the revues and scenes in her more structured later playssuch as *Mule Bone*, *Spunk*, and *Polk County*. In her best-known play, *Mule Bone*, she sustains her focus on the verbal exchanges and the "woofing," "lawing and jawing" that marks "Filling Station" but sets it within dramatic and locational contexts such as a town store-front where people gather in their spare time or a church meeting. In this play, which she began with Langston Hughes but finished on her own due to a quarrel between them, the plot becomes a frame for the material that she had earlier presented in a revue format."Railroad Track in Florida" may be seen as the nugget out of which another of Hurston's mature play, *Spunk*, grew. Her final and best-structured play *Polk County* especially can be seen to incorporate elements and echoes from *Cold Keener*. The short piece "Jook" is expanded and becomes the heart of the play both in terms of the dramatic locale and the mood.

Max Reinhardt, the famous German director, on seeing the musical comedies and revues of the 1920s in his visit to New York, was struck by their novelty and observed to Alain Locke:

> "It is intriguing, very intriguing, these musical comedies of yours that I have seen. But, remember, not as achievements, not as things in themselves artistic, but in their possibilities, their tremendous artistic possibilities. They are most modern, most American, most expressionistic. They are highly original in spite of obvious triteness, and artistic in spite of superficial crudeness. To me they reveal new possibilities of technique in drama, and if I should ever try to do anything American, I should build on these things" (Quoted in Hay 20-21).

Hurston's vision for her dramatic work can be seen in the context of the insights provided in Reinhardt's ideas: of using and continuing the valuable elements in the contemporary forms and in creating expressive artistic representations. These goalswere in line with her search for authentic representations of the black folk as well as her commitment to the traditional folk culture and the unique expressive possibilities of this material.

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