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## Crossing the Threshold: Zora Neale Hurston, Racial Performance, and *Seraph on the Suwanee*

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The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song. —Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)

In this passage from *Mules and Men* (1935), Zora Neale Hurston explains the difference between insider and outsider knowledge, the power of play or masking, and the complexity of creating an artistic subjectivity within specific racial and gendered spaces. The unstable power differential (and latent erotic language) between black and white shapes and limits the cultural exchange between subject and spectator, where black culture is a possessed object the anthropologist can “play with and handle,” and yet the black collective can maintain a private hidden self through “feather-bed resistance.” Hurston uses the pronoun “I” in the above passage to embody the singular voice of the observed black folk, but she also uses the pronoun “we” in the text to mark her place in this collective identity. She explains, “You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, ‘Get out of here!’ ” (18). This delicate cultural exchange between the black community and the white purveyor reflects the tensions in Hurston’s dual role as both subject and ethnographer.<sup>1</sup> Within her cultural work lies Hurston’s struggle both to maintain an unexploited “say and song” and to exhibit publicly vernacular culture. While the interaction between a reticent black community and interested white strangers upholds a symbolic boundary that encourages a bifurcated performativity (the “play toy” is different from that which is kept behind closed doors) Hurston straddles the divide between folk and observer as a “threshold figure” located at the crossroads of inter- and intraracial cultural exchange (B. Johnson 279).<sup>2</sup> Mirroring her duality in *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s literary corpus includes the recurring image of a performing, border-crossing figure that marks the writer’s shifting position regarding the promotion and dissimulation of black vernacular traditions and the possibilities and limitations of racial performance.

From her first published short story “Drenched in Light” (1924), personal essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928), and autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) to her most disliked, most “unsuccessful,” and perhaps most paradoxical text *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Hurston articulates an evolving discourse on cultural exchanges between black and white in her characterization of the threshold figure. In this essay, I explore Hurston’s complex attitude toward race, performance, and folk culture by examining her intertextual reiterations of the threshold figure characterized as a talented child. “Drenched in Light” and *Seraph* are not necessarily autobiographical tales, but they are fictional revisions of the personal girlhood accounts depicted in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” and *Dust Tracks* in which a young Hurston dances and sings in the presence of the white passersby. By engaging the well-intentioned play yet unsettling performance of a child, Hurston increases the threshold figure’s liminality. As a child in the midst of development, the threshold figure can maintain creative integrity despite the social repercussions of her performance. Moreover, Hurston can express nostalgia for her childhood innocence while

critiquing the development of her racial consciousness. Like a child who is not full grown, Hurston's representation of the threshold figure evolves throughout her body of work. It is important to read Hurston's persona across texts and genres in order to critically engage her discourse on racial performance, including her own public performance through writing.<sup>3</sup> In the afterword to *Dust Tracks*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that "Hurston wrote herself, and sought in her works to rewrite the 'self' of 'the race,' in its several private and public guises, largely for ideological reasons" (294). I maintain that both Hurston's fictional and autobiographical accounts of black folk performance and interracial cultural exchanges contribute to her public construction of self and her discourse on race.

In each subsequent text Hurston does not simply study folk "business" and its appropriation by audiences. She also theorizes the interaction between black and white and the relationship between the insider and outsider by reimagining racialized sites of culture and performance. Each of Hurston's threshold figures returns to crucial questions concerning black artistry and white appropriation. Yet the potential answers that these figures pose become increasingly problematic, even as the representation of a performing black female child is reworked throughout her publications. With each depiction of racial performance, the commodification of black folk culture becomes more explicit and the public critique of the black female body more pronounced in Hurston's writings until the publication of *Seraph*. This final novel bares the racial and gender consequences of popular public performance, punctuating Hurston's discourse on culture and black female subjectivity.

Reading across the texts not only enables a more layered understanding of Hurston's earlier cultural work as an anthropologist and contributor to the Harlem Renaissance but also importantly establishes *Seraph* as significant to her oeuvre. Although *Seraph* is a white-plot novel with only minor black characters, the novel is a culmination of Hurston's work on exploring the social implications of young black girls performing for white audiences. Another vehicle for Hurston's "writing self," *Seraph*'s cultural exchange, in which a white boy encourages a dress-clad black girl to stand on her head and to expose inadvertently her vagina to white spectators, revisits the mediated exchange theorized in *Mules and Men*; the pleasure of being colorfully ethnic expressed in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"; the delight in white patronage depicted in "Drenched in Light"; and the black community's critical gaze examined in *Dust Tracks*. *Seraph* refigures these racialized moments of the threshold subject. The novel is Hurston's final attempt to rewrite and reconcile the problematic.

Although *Seraph* was lauded when first published, few contemporary critics have read the novel intertextually with Hurston's earlier works because it does not fit readily within the black feminist theoretical framework that has helped to establish the writer's prominence within the African American literary tradition. In *The Negro Novelist* (1953), Carl Milton Hughes recognizes the 1940s as a return to the white-plot novel tradition begun by Charles Chesnutt, and he views the period and its new thematic focus as a broadening of the African American novelist's perspective. Claudia Tate argues that white critics embraced *Seraph* because it endorses traditional perspectives on race and gender unlike the protest fiction exemplified by Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940). While *Seraph* initially earned measurable success, the book's potential gains were quickly overshadowed by allegations against Hurston of sexual misconduct with a child in 1948—though these allegations were subsequently dismissed (Carby xiii). *Seraph*'s move away from Hurston's traditional black focus and less than empowering white female protagonist garners critical ambivalence, establishing the tenuous position of the text in relation to black feminist theory. When *Seraph*'s protagonist, Arvay Meserve, concludes her narrative on the ocean's horizon embracing universal motherhood, she fails to reach the self-empowering conclusion Janie Crawford attains when she returns to Eatonville and pulls in the horizon like a big fish net in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Mary Helen Washington criticizes,

“[A]pparently, Zora wrote this strange book to prove that she was capable of writing about white people. . . . It was as though, in abandoning the source of her unique esthetic—the black cultural tradition—she also submerged her power and creativity” (21). Though Hurston writes the novel in the hopes of transgressing publishing apartheid and brokering a film contract (Carby x), many critics label the text a failure because Hurston’s white characters sound like the black folks of Eatonville.

The male characters in the two novels do, in fact, speak the same colloquial and patriarchal language, but the similarities between Janie’s first husband, Jody Starks, and Arvay’s husband, Jim, do not negate the significance of their racial distinction. Images of blackness are not the only signs of racial representation, and, thus, reading Hurston’s depictions of whiteness as unracialized would limit the discursive layers of the text. Tate argues that Hurston uses Arvay’s whiteness in *Seraph* as a tool to enact the writer’s “revisionary ambition” to rewrite the issues of romantic love present in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (148). Similarly, Ann duCille notes that *Seraph* models white women’s romantic fiction to complicate the novel’s representation of rape, an ambiguous treatment of sexual violence that “rarely rears its problematic head in African American literature” due to “what sexual vulnerability has meant for black women historically” (127). Additionally, Hurston’s deliberateness in creating a white-plot text for commercial success exposes the novel’s fundamental racial politics. My reading of race in *Seraph* does not usurp Hurston’s focus on gender; instead, it builds on the work of Tate, duCille, and Deborah Plant by further unpacking the novel’s concerns with femininity and sexuality, with a focus on the text’s modes of racial performance and its contributions to the cultural debate introduced in Hurston’s earlier work.

With an explicit focus on whiteness and an implicit discourse on blackness, *Seraph* engages similar themes concerning gender, sexuality, and race as Hurston’s other writings. For example, Christopher Rieger observes the same natural motifs in both Janie’s and Arvay’s narratives, and he claims that Arvay reaches an empowering conclusion, like Janie, by specifically revaluing her metaphorical and metaphysical role as mother.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, *Seraph* manifests a complex racial and gender discourse in its acknowledgment and critique of white patriarchal society’s appropriation of cultural blackness, a topic that is addressed more subtly in Hurston’s aforementioned short story, essay, and autobiography *Dust Tracks*. Highlighting the dialogue between *Seraph* and the “cultural paranoia” over the purity of whiteness, Chuck Jackson argues that the 1920s and ’30s discourse on eugenics influences Arvay’s shame about her “white trash” heritage and her subsequent obsession with purity, morality, and inter- and intraracial difference (642). Interestingly, the final novel that submerges Hurston’s creativity is as rooted, I argue, in playful masking and vernacular traditions as prior texts centered on the black folk, with its deconstruction of racial binaries and satirization of what Matthew Frye Jacobson terms “variegated whiteness” (89). Belinda Kelsey’s headstand, Kenny Meserve’s success as a jazz musician, and Arvay’s self-conscious performance of southern white femininity in *Seraph* spotlight the entire novel’s concerns with racial performance. As a threshold figure, Belinda’s cultural exchange with Kenny underscores the discourse on black female performing bodies Hurston presents throughout her opus, including not only her prose and letters but also her personal ties to southern folk culture and her performance of fetishized primitivism during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>5</sup>

Hurston’s coding of racial and sexual difference undergirds all of her texts, differentiating between the black folk performance as private art and how it is read by black and white audiences. As a result, her threshold figure, a black child who does not anticipate any danger in performing in the presence of whites, walks the line between masked artistry and minstrelsy. Generally, the discourse on interracial cultural exchange and intraracial difference in Hurston’s work celebrates white patronage of black folk art and condemns the black community’s critical stance

toward black bodies performing for white audiences. Prefiguring E. Patrick Johnson's work on black performance, Hurston's writing similarly cautions the black community "to be cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity, the ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding" (3). Modifying the representation of racial performance from "Drenched in Light" to *Seraph*, Hurston moves from recognizing the distinct richness of black folk culture (in contrast to the cultural lacking of whiteness) to acknowledging black and white cultural interdependence. However, even as Hurston demonstrates the fluid exchanges between black and white in *Seraph*, Belinda and Kenny's performance in the novel straddles the fence between artistic production and cultural exploitation. The children's exchange characterizes them as a "metonymic miscegenated couple," a literary trope for a cultural union in which the performance of white male subjectivity is intimately tied to what it means to be black and female (Brody 10).<sup>6</sup> With Belinda's naked exposure, *Seraph* no longer simply affirms the benefits of white patronage, as seen in Hurston's earlier work, but also critiques white misappropriation of vulnerable black bodies. Hurston's final novel is a simultaneous acknowledgment and disparagement of what Eric Lott describes as popular culture's "love and theft" of black folk culture.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the processes of American cultural hybridity affirmed in Hurston's previous treatments of black folk performance, *Seraph* returns to the interracial exchange between the black artist and the white observer in *Mules and Men* and metaphorically opens the door to sexual exploitation and fetish when Belinda stands on her head and exposes her genitalia. Like the racial performances of the threshold figures in Hurston's other texts, Belinda's exposed performance in *Seraph* demonstrates the writer's efforts to venerate black folk while she questions the normativity of whiteness. With each revision of her threshold figure, Hurston attempts to reconcile the divide between black and white and the binary performance of black artists. On one hand, the representation of racial performance in Hurston's body of work claims the mutability and interdependence of black and white culture. On the other hand, it maintains the racial and sexual difference inherent in white appropriation of oppressed black female bodies. These conflicting goals result in irony on both sides of this dichotomy. Ultimately, "Drenched in Light," "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *Dust Tracks*, and *Seraph* reveal Hurston's racial performance problematic, in which art is complicated by who performs, who watches, and who benefits. Both black and white audiences' critiques of the black female performing body—heightened by a need to censure black female sexuality—create a "racial mountain" for artistic desire and Hurston's attempts to preserve black folk culture.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Racial Performance Problematic: Isis, Hurston, and the Primitive Stereotype**

Within the trajectory of Hurston's work, black women's racial and sexual vulnerability creates tension between subjection and desire in the racialized performance. A black girl's desire to perform before a white audience conflicts with the black community's desire to maintain its autonomy. Not only does a black child interacting with whites threaten the community's safety, but her singing and dancing for white entertainment conjures a destructive caricature of minstrel performance that threatens black collective subjectivity. In "Drenched in Light," "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and *Dust Tracks*, Hurston signifies on antebellum stereotypes of "innocent" black children: non-threatening, simple, imitative pickaninnies. The formulaic cast for such racist imagery is a "harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped,

whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle 7). I am not reducing Hurston’s characters to the minstrel stereotype. Instead I read Hurston’s representation of racial performance as a “lens through which to read a political crisis” (Lott 9), a crisis that coalesces the public and the personal. Her repeated and revised representations of racial performance reveal her efforts to do two things. First, Hurston personally attempts to reconcile herself to the childhood moment in which she develops her racial consciousness. Secondly, Hurston engages the contemporary public debates about the legitimacy of a distinct and viable African American cultural tradition.

Hurston’s short story “Drenched in Light” introduces her discourse on the racial performance problematic and initiates her commitment to articulating the value of southern black folk culture. Isis Watts, the text’s eleven-year-old black female protagonist (called Isie by her family), is known as “the joyful,” and her antics provide the moral for the short story’s title (*Complete* 17). As a child who loves to sing and dance, she is not a tragic little black girl but is “drenched in light.” Despite the disapproval of her grandmother (who is named after Hurston’s own grandmother), Isie loves to sit at the gatepost and watch the white travelers on the road pass by. She is characterized as a child full of curiosity who means well, but her grandmother criticizes, “You’re too ’oomanish jumpin’ up in everybody’s face dat pass” (17). Isie’s grandmother fears that Isie’s naïve actions may be read as not so innocent, and Isie’s dancing at a local carnival brings these fears to fruition. Inspired by the music, Isie shirks her chores and attends the festival imitating a Spanish dancer. By the time her grandmother finds her, Isie is standing in the middle of a “gaping” audience, costumed in her grandmother’s new red tablecloth, “reeking” of lemon extract, and dancing like a “gypsy” (22). Moved by her desire to perform, Isie appropriates gypsy custom and costumes her dancing black body in exotic sexuality.

Facing physical disciplinary repercussions, Isie is saved by the intervention and patronage of lost white tourists. In exchange for directions to their hotel, the tourists give Isie a ride back to her grandmother’s house. Additionally, before Isie’s grandmother can punish her for the spectacle, the white woman offers to pay for the tablecloth and requests an encore of Isie’s performance: “The little thing loves laughter. I want her to go on to the hotel and dance in that table-cloth for me. I can stand a little light today” (25). In essence, the woman not only offers to pay for the tablecloth, but she also pays for Isie. She explains, “I want brightness and this Isis is joy itself, why she’s drenched in light!” The exchange between the grandmother and the woman implies that Isie is being commodified and culturally appropriated at the same time that she is being esteemed and valued. When the grandmother offers to get Isie cleaned and combed for her trip, the woman insists that she likes the girl as she is. Walking the thin line between fetish and agent, Isie gets a patron for her art and the white woman gets an opportunity to absorb authentic black folk culture. “Ah’m gointer stay wid you all,” Isie asks her new benefactress while the woman’s male companion jokes that she has been adopted by Isie. Pleased by the thought of being tied permanently to black expressive culture, the white woman ends the story affirming, “I want a little of [Isie’s] sunshine to soak into my soul. I need it” (25). The woman’s needy desire for light signals her latent desire *for* Isie and *to be* Isie just as the grandmother’s desire to make Isie presentable for the public performance suggests the elder’s intentions to impede the child’s self-expression and safeguard her from misappropriation.

The short story revolves around one thematic: though poor and black, Isie is not tragic but rich in artistic talent and black folk culture. Biographer Robert E. Hemenway identifies the story as “a statement of personal identity” and a “manifesto of selfhood, an affirmation of [Hurston’s] origins” (10, 11), and many critics read the story as reflecting Hurston’s efforts to maintain agency as she struggles to secure an audience. The white couple and the grandmother in the story function as a “triad

[that] suggests a metaphor for the struggle to control black art. . . . Isis, the subversive artist, remains true to her self and emerges triumphant: She has gotten the best of all three” (West 27). Although Isie’s love for performing may best her grandmother’s censure and the white couple’s fetishization, the conclusion of the story still confirms the high stakes of her performance. While the text critiques the grandmother’s disciplinary response to Isie’s womanish ways and artistry, there is also space to feel discomfort with Isie’s adoption and touring with the white couple. The short story gestures toward what Hurston continues to grapple with in her later work. She attempts to prove that there is no misfortune in being black by documenting the traditions of black culture while both valuing and problematizing white “adoption” of black folk.<sup>9</sup>

In her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston further complicates this cultural exchange by more explicitly addressing the black community’s fearful censure of such performances. The essay is an account of the day Hurston becomes “colored” (*I Love Myself* 152), detailing how her new racial consciousness changes her interaction with the world while she maintains that there is no tragedy in being black. Through her performances, young Hurston not only distinguishes between herself and the world but also differentiates between white and black, between those who appreciate her art and those who cannot. At the beginning of the essay, Hurston’s childhood understanding of race is divided into a binary of the rooted and the mobile: blacks are people who reside in Eatonville, whites are people who pass through. Similar to Isie, young Hurston watches everything from her gatepost. This recurring site in Hurston’s texts is the crossroads of interracial social interaction and exchange. Whereas unspoken social codes in the South demanded that African Americans step off the sidewalk with low-cast eyes so that whites could pass, the gatepost and the road become an accessible “performance site” in which young Hurston can enact a prideful subjectivity and transgress such racial boundaries (White and White 161).

For young Hurston, the road is a “[p]roscenium box for a born first-nighter,” a space in which she can gain agency via her gaze at and interaction with whites (*I Love Myself* 152). It is a performance site in which she can catch a show of white people acting out their travels or she can give a pageant of her own. From the gatepost, Hurston greets the white travelers with a “Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin?” and offers to “go a piece of the way” with them down the road (152). In *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994), Carole Boyce-Davies constructs a theory of migrating subjectivities by modeling Hurston’s relationship to traveling strangers. Going all the way home with the white travelers (or certain theoretical frameworks) would mean “taking a route cluttered with skeletons, enslavements, new dominations, unresolved tensions and contradictions” (46). Thus, going a piece of the way “means negotiating, articulating, and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses” and is “inherently a statement which assumes agency” (47).

Hurston avoids being fixed into a stereotype by only going “a piece of the way” with the white travelers, and she gains white admiration that is both affirming and commodifying despite the brevity of her encounters. She recalls: “They liked to hear me ‘speak pieces’ and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn’t know it” (*I Love Myself* 152). Due to Hurston’s desire to perform, she receives unsolicited change in exchange for her “speak[ing] pieces” and dancing. Young Hurston views this as strange because if the audience understood her, they would know that she would dance for free until they paid her to stop. Though the white spectators’ solicitation of her performance proves their appreciation of her talent, their payment for her performance also signals their commodification of her artistic desire.

In comparison, Hurston juxtaposes whites’ commodification of her performance with the black community’s critique. She remembers that “[d]uring this period,

white people differed from colored to [her] only in that they rode through town and never lived there" (*I Love Myself* 152). Yet her performances at the gatepost crystallize the differences between black and white. After describing whites' response to her artistry, she writes: "The colored people gave no dimes." In contrast to white travelers who mistakenly offer her money, black audiences do not pay Hurston for her show because they "deplored any joyful tendencies in [her], but [she] was their Zora nevertheless" (153). The black community refuses to commodify and patronize her "joyful" activities (linking young Hurston to Isie) because it is uncomfortable with how white audiences might exploit her performative desire. In other words, the black community's refusal to patronize Hurston is a refusal to participate in her commodification. Furthermore, the lack of monetary exchange between the black audience and the child-artist signals the conflict between the black community's collective consciousness and young Hurston's individual identity. Hurston's performance of individual consciousness transgresses unwritten social codes regarding whites and threatens communal disaster.<sup>10</sup> Though she is "their Zora," Hurston's performance unsettles the protection an all-black community provides its residents from economic, cultural, and sexual exploitation. The black community maintains a space for the child, but it rejects her artistic desire. Despite her interaction with white travelers, she belongs to the black community as "their Zora." However, the black community's response to her performance asserts her individuality and initiates her racial consciousness.

The black community in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" tries to protect Hurston but consequently isolates her from it in its effort to safeguard her from the world at large. The community teaches black children to avoid interracial contact to prevent repercussions against the collective and to shelter the child from those desires that encourage crossing the black community's boundaries regarding curiosity, adventure, and any interests in whites. This censoring dynamic between the child and the community is further complicated by Hurston's gender. Although "going all the way" with white strangers would distance her from the community, "going a piece of the way" and ultimately returning emphasizes that "'home' . . . is one of the principal sites of domination and conflict for women" (Boyce-Davies 49). The young black female performer faces the greatest critique of her art and her transgression of racial and gender conventions at home, with her grandmother, or from the black community. As she reflects on her developing racial consciousness in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston theorizes the significance of sexual difference. A black girl "going all the way" with white strangers intimates cultural as well as sexual vulnerability, just as the white strangers' payment for young Hurston's performances suggests the potential for sexual exploitation in the commodification of her art. Hurston differentiates between the artist and the audience, between the performer's pleasure and the audience's amusement, between the child and the community. While each relationship is complicated by inter- and intraracial politics, each distinct role Hurston plays in the racialized cultural exchange is additionally shaped by sexual difference.

Hurston reiterates her racial and gender distinction at the end of the essay when she, as an adult, compares her emotionally "primitive" response to jazz with her white male companion's inability to "feel" the music. When Hurston listens to the jazz musicians, she explains, "I yell within, I whoop; . . . I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way." While Hurston's pulse "is throbbing like a war drum," her companion drums the table with his fingers. Identifying a cultural gulf between herself and her white male friend, Hurston ends the account by concluding, "He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored" (*I Love Myself* 154). Again, Hurston constructs whiteness as an absence of cultural vitality in the presence of rich black expressive culture. In this reflection on being so colorfully ethnic, Hurston differentiates blackness from whiteness by aligning black female sexuality with exotic primitivism. Yet, employing the trope of a miscegenated couple, Hurston defines *her*



subjectivity in juxtaposition to what is white and male. She argues for the value of a black vernacular tradition in this jazzed moment—in which she can maintain her private pleasure and be the subject of racial and sexual envy without being exploited. Alice Walker writes that this self-depiction is “Zora Neale Hurston at her most exasperating. . . . [T]his essay presents two stereotypes: the ‘happy darky’ who sings and dances for white folks, for money and for joy; and the educated black person who is, underneath the thin veneer of civilization, still a ‘heathen’ ” (Hurston, *I Love Myself* 151). As exasperating as it is, Hurston’s negotiation of the minstrel and exotic primitive images does not refute the stereotypes for the black collective but allows her, as an individual, to enjoy the art of play and masking and to indulge in the erotics of liberated self-expression.

Similarly, Hurston briefly reflects on her racialization, gender difference, and censure in her autobiography *Dust Tracks*. Not surprisingly, the text is self-conscious and performative in the way Hurston employs the genre. Washington labels it “a strangely disoriented book,” and Walker finds that the text is “filled with evasion, posturing, all kinds of self-concealment, though it is ostensibly an autobiography” (Hurston, *I Love Myself* 19, 27). Not only does this text retell Hurston’s racial performance in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” but it also reexamines the triad relationship between Isie, her grandmother, and her white patrons. In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston acknowledges that her offer to “go a piece of the way” with white travelers who pass her gatepost “must have caused a great deal of amusement among them” (34). Despite their paternalism, Hurston implies that her initiation of these interactions asserts her exceptionality and prevents her from being exploited, for she adds: “my self-assurance must have carried the point, for I was always invited to come along.” Nevertheless, her parents punish her for traveling with the white strangers by whipping her. Moreover, her grandmother, who “had known slavery,” is worried by her “forward ways.” “They’s gowine to lynch you, yet,” her grandmother warns, “Youse too brazen to live long” (34). Her grandmother’s fears are rooted in the danger of a self-empowered black subject who gazes back at whites who pass her gatepost.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the social threat Hurston’s gaze poses, her grandmother’s warning is an acknowledgment of Hurston’s sexual vulnerability due to her racial and sexual difference even though Hurston’s performance is not sexual in intent. Hurston’s grandmother, like Isie’s grandmother, voices the black community’s fears for the safeguarding of young Hurston’s racial and gender identity.

Read in concert, “Drenched in Light,” “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” and *Dust Tracks* create an intertextual discourse in which Hurston attempts to narrate and understand her conflicted experiences with white and black audiences. Articulating the double-voiced narration common to memoirs, young Hurston and adult Hurston struggle to make the critical connections between her desire to perform for and interact with whites, white travelers offering her coins for her performance, and the black community’s critique of these exchanges. Though young Hurston enjoys white tourists’ appreciation of her songs, she does not understand that the black community is trying to protect her from the potential threats that whites pose. As an adult, however, Hurston is more self-conscious of the implications of her performance in *Dust Tracks* even if she does not explicitly acknowledge the fetishization of a white gaze. It is difficult for informed readers not to connect Hurston’s interaction with the travelers at the gate post to her relationship with her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, who demanded that Hurston “must tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down” upon return from her research trips (*Dust Tracks* 145). While Hurston’s project preserves black folk culture, she perpetuates an image of the exotic primitive in her performance of vernacular traditions. Hurston makes the critical connections between her burgeoning racial consciousness, her artistic desire, and her public writing self if not explicitly in each of the three texts, then in the time and discursive space

between them. Repeating and revising the initial moment of racialization, Hurston exposes the implications and consequences of racial performance by heightening the potential danger of such exchanges in each subsequent text even as the child-artist claims agency. The dialogue initiated in these three texts is continued in *Seraph*. Isie's and young Hurston's artistic subjectivity are dangerous because they *could* be violated, killed, or exploited, and in *Seraph* Belinda's subjection literally is exposed.

Hurston returns to the problematic of the young black female performer to examine the ways in which artists and audiences are socially constructed in terms of race, class, and gender. Moving from her life to her writing self, from the crystallization of her racial consciousness in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" to the revisions of her racialized performance in *Seraph*, Hurston progresses further and further away from "home." Young Hurston goes a piece of the way; Isie is adopted; and Belinda is removed from the writer's black roots. As her final word on the subject, *Seraph* explores the convergence of artistic pleasure, sexual exploitation, and cultural appropriation. Hurston constructs a "humorist's mask" in order to employ exotic stereotypes for her own ends (Lowe 21), and, as Genevieve M. West argues, Hurston uses the trope of primitivism subversively to critique social hierarchies and how they inform social and artistic norms. Yet *Seraph* marks a slight shift in Hurston's positioning. Whereas Hurston's early work subtly implies that the threshold figure is racially and sexually vulnerable, Hurston concretizes this in *Seraph* with the naked exposure of Belinda's body. There is less ambiguity about the consequences of racial performance in *Seraph* because Kenny's sincere appropriation of black folk culture is problematized by Belinda's exploitation. Nevertheless, *Seraph* reiterates Hurston's commitment to promoting folk culture and interracial cultural exchanges. Thus, the novel maintains some ambiguity regarding the child-artist's racial performance. As in Hurston's early work, *Seraph* does not convey a firm stance on how to actualize an authentic folk performance. The novel's racial performance, which is both in the content of the text and part of the text's cultural production, points to the boundaries described as culturally mutable yet socially fixed in *Seraph*.

### ***Seraph's* Revisionist Text: Folk Bodies Performing Race, Class, and Gender**

**T**he premise of *Seraph* centers on Arvay Meserve's struggle to find love and security within her inter-class marriage despite her fears that her "white trash" background permanently taints her as unworthy. Arvay's inferiority complex stems from her poor, rural background, and it manifests in her behavior toward various racialized and classed subjects: the Kelseys, the black family who works for her family; the Corregios, the Portuguese family who works for her husband; and any whites she deems economically or morally impoverished for fear they will taint her own whiteness. "Even niggers," she angrily tells her landowning husband, "is better than [my family] is, according to your kind" (*Seraph* 126). Arvay's understanding of race is caught within the historical transition in which racial discourse moved away from whiteness as an amalgamation of various races (defined by religion, skin tone, hair, and cultural values) to a theory of ethnicity and a monolithic white-black racial dichotomy in which "race itself was recast as color" during the 1940s (Jacobson 129). Arvay maintains the idea of different white races (she disapproves of Kenny dating Felicia Corregio) while she confirms and affirms her own whiteness through her distinction from blackness. Nevertheless, Arvay believes that her whiteness is probationary, and her insecurities color her ideas on class and culture and maintain racialist tones.

Arvay's class and racial fears trouble her relationship with her husband, Jim, and are projected on to her children Earl, Angeline, and James Kenneth, Jr. (called Kenny).

Arvay's youngest child is the fulfillment of her wish to give Jim the son that he desires—one that represents the eugenic ideal of Jim's distinguished family lineage and one worthy to inherit the legacy Jim builds with his distillery, citrus grove, and shrimping ventures. Moreover, Kenny reveals the intraracial differences between "white trash" and bourgeois whites as a foil for his older brother. Despite his "perfectly white" hair and eyelashes, Earl resembles Arvay's "queer" Uncle Chester with his bestial mannerisms (*Seraph* 67). In contrast, Kenny is the "spitting image of Jim. Couldn't have been anymore like Jim if Jim had spit him out of his mouth" (106), linking him to the Greek god Zeus and thereby to foundational white patriarchal myths. Even though Jim is described as "Black Irish" (7), Arvay is relieved by this resemblance because Kenny provides her with a degree of legitimacy in her cross-class marriage, unlike Earl's racialized deformities and predation.<sup>12</sup>

Although Arvay and Jim are Kenny's biological parents, Kenny is a cultural hybrid and the artistic product of Arvay and Joe Kelsey, the Meserves' black laborer. Arvay is in constant fear that her "cracker" background will manifest itself in Kenny as it does in Earl. And, unbeknownst to her, Kenny takes his natural, racialized musical talent from Arvay's musical skill. Kenny has a talent for playing "darky" music, and he quickly learns how to play the pick box from Joe, whose instruction later ensures Kenny's commercial success at playing ragtime and jazz (202). Kenny's artistry and its rootedness in African American culture eventually transform his musical talent into another feared sign of Arvay's "white trash" background; however through his commodification of Joe's daughter, Belinda, Kenny publicly emerges as a normative white male subject.

Belinda and Kenny's cultural exchange reflects the paternal relationship between their families in which the Kelseys enable the Meserves' construction of whiteness. For example, Joe encourages Jim and Arvay's romance, and he represents the black folk traditions undergirding the novel. Introduced with his singing, Joe enters the text as a "disembodied blues voice," marking him as a "representative of black folk culture" (Lowe 285). During Arvay and Jim's honeymoon, Joe arranges for the black community to serenade the couple with the blues, spirituals, work songs and ballads that move Arvay to tears. Additionally, as Jim's "pet Negro," Joe is central to Jim's development as a capitalist entrepreneur (Joe secures Jim's labor force as his liaison with the black community) and as a patriarchal husband (*Seraph* 61). Joe gives Jim suggestions on how to tame Arvay's stubbornness regarding their impending nuptials. He advises Jim that he must "[m]ake [women] knuckle under. . . . Take 'em and break 'em" (46). Joe encourages Jim to bridle and break Arvay's spirit, and, subsequently, Jim rapes Arvay to ensure that she marries him.<sup>13</sup>

Kenny and Belinda's cultural exchange models their parents' paternalistic example, adding a racialized sexual discourse to the text by recalling exploitative stereotypes of black female bodies. Though Jim and Arvay may "find vicarious pleasure in black modes of expression they themselves are unable to master" (Lowe 286), Kenny achieves mastery over black folk traditions through his childhood relationship with Belinda. As images of blackness serve to define ideals of whiteness, Belinda's subjection functions as a space for Kenny's eight-year-old self-definition.<sup>14</sup> Three months older than Belinda, Kenny admires his "faithful follower" because she "was persuaded that he was very smart and showered admiration in various ways upon him" (108). Complementing Kenny's sense of privilege and mastery, Belinda's "artistry" is a talent in which he takes sincere pride: "[h]e would even have been jealous, but he had taught it to her. Even though the pupil now surpassed her master, Kenneth was not jealous. She was a product of his skill" (108). Although Belinda's artistry affirms Kenny's mastery, her perfection does not earn her the same privileged subjectivity.

In fact, her skill is an artistry that Kenny can commodify, from which he can profit, and by which he enters the public sphere of white male subjectivity. The text notes that "Kenny got no public notice, and deserved none, until he was eight years

old,” and that “[i]t was through [his] friendship [with Belinda] that Kenny came to public notice, and Arvey came to tears” (108, 109). When Kenny and Belinda take a trip to the train station, he capitalizes on the opportunity to publicly display Belinda’s talent. “Mister! Mister!” Kenny asks a man nearby, “Want to see Linda stand on her head?” Kenny innocently initiates the performance, and, in response, the man smiles, tosses Kenny a quarter, and says, “Sure thing. Let Belinda stand on her head” (109). Although Kenny never articulates a desire for money, the man initiates the commodification of Belinda’s art. Without Belinda ever saying a word, her talent is negotiated, priced, and exchanged between the boy and the man.

Kenny does not usher in the transformation from harmless child’s play to a deft commodification of Belinda’s body, but he is a quick study in the art of exchange and negotiation, modeling Jim’s ability to prosper through intimate yet exploitative relationships with African Americans. Kenny capitalizes on the excitement he and Belinda receive when she displays her talent. However, neither child understands that the white audience is not amazed at Belinda standing on her head but, rather, is amused by her exposed bottom: “Belinda was innocent of underwear. She was there on her head, with her short percale skirt hanging over her face, with her shining little black behind glinting in the sun” (110). The language of the text suggests that Belinda is “innocent” of *wearing* underwear just as she is “innocent” of the *knowledge of* underwear. It is her lack of privilege in *having* and *knowing* that signifies on her position within the social hierarchy and her place outside the public sphere as she invokes the stereotype of a scantily clad pickaninny. The image of her exposed buttocks, which we can read also as her exposed vagina, conjures for us images of the sexual exploitation of Sarah Baartman.<sup>15</sup> Belinda and Baartman are connected by their exposed buttocks as fetishized objects publicly on display. Yet the text also notes that Kenny is “innocent” of sexualizing Belinda’s body. Not only does he not intend to expose her genitalia, but also he has seen Belinda’s bare bottom so many times that “he paid no attention.” In fact, making an Edenic reference, the text remarks, “As yet the two had no idea of nakedness” (110).

Within the unassuming humorous language of naïve child’s play resides the unsettling veiling of Belinda’s face and the display of her buttocks in the sun’s spotlight.<sup>16</sup> While Belinda remains the silent object of the gaze, Kenny’s mastery enables him to turn their innocence into profit. A male spectator initiates the commodification, but a female witness identifies the performance as a distasteful spectacle. At the sight of Belinda’s bare behind, the woman scolds, “You shameless little rascal, you! Turn that child down!” However, “Kenny [is] surprised and evermore hurt at such lack of appreciation of art.” Indignant at the lack of respect for Belinda’s skill, he ruminates, “Here was the greatest artist of her time, and some fool hollering to turn her down” (110). Although Kenny affirms Belinda’s artistry, Belinda’s naked Otherness excludes her talent from being gazed upon as Art.<sup>17</sup> Inscribed with racial and class markers, Belinda’s performance digresses from the beauty of High Art into a degrading moneymaking scheme. As the woman yells at Kenny to “turn her down,” Kenny barter in an inverted system of trade. He figures if they will pay to see it, they will also pay to *stop* seeing it. Like an auctioneer, Kenny shouts, “Fifty cents to turn her down!” With amused encouragement from the travelers, Kenny commodifies Belinda’s talent as spectacle. Before Kenny turns Belinda down, he encourages her to wiggle her lower extremities, further escalating the supposed horror of her exposed, dancing black body. In reward of Kenny’s ingenuity, he and Belinda share applause and collect over nine dollars in her skirt.

At eight years old, the children do not understand the implications of their play; however, Belinda’s performance is critical for Kenny’s public introduction as an empowered white male subject and his identity as a privileged master of the bodies of black folk culture. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder confirms that “Although [the children] are too young for their relationship to be sexual, it is—like the adult ones in

the novel—built on female debasement and service to men” (109). The children struggle to make sense of the woman’s negative reaction (they conclude that she is “[t]etched in the head”), but the female onlooker and Arvey quickly realize the implications of Belinda’s exposure (*Seraph* 111). The reproaching female onlooker stands in for Arvey, whose obsessive investment in the purity of whiteness and fears of her sexuality require that she tearfully interpret Kenny’s mastery as her own disgrace. Both Arvey and the female audience member condemn the children’s performance. Yet, just as Saidiya Hartman differentiates between a witness to and a spectator of racial subjection, Arvey is a symbolic spectator (demonstrated by her subsequent scolding of Belinda) and not a witness (like the white woman at the train station) because her intraracial insecurities prohibit her from empathizing with Belinda.

Though Arvey would like to distinguish herself from Belinda’s display, Belinda’s lack of underwear exposes Arvey’s close relationship to black women’s oppression. Arvey creates her middle-class white femininity by ascribing sexuality to her racial and class Others. Arvey’s transference of white female sexuality onto the black female body occurs in two moments. First, for Arvey, Belinda’s performance threatens Kenny’s normative whiteness as well as Arvey’s class “passing” and ascension into the cult of true white womanhood. Stereotypes of black women’s sexuality are established historically to justify white men’s sexual desire for and abuse of black women, and they are perpetuated to exclude supposedly “hypersexual” black women from the ideals of womanhood. Similarly, the children’s artistic spectacle confirms Kenny’s mastery by virtue of his white male privilege, and Belinda is stereotyped as a libidinous threat to Arvey. For the community, Belinda’s commodification affirms both father’s and son’s mastery: “That Kenny Meserve! He took after his Pappy all right. Nobody but a Meserve would have thought up such a thing” (112). Kenny’s ingenuity is an affirmation of Jim’s manifest destiny; their surname, Meserve, is a command to all: “me serve” or “serve me” (Tate 151). In contrast, Arvey proclaims, “I try to raise my children clean and right. I don’t intend to have nobody around here toling a young’un of mine off and leading him astray” (*Seraph* 112). While young Hurston’s interaction with whites in her autobiographical works poses a danger to the black community, Belinda’s performance threatens the morality and purity of Arvey’s whiteness.

We also can see the connection between the construction of white femininity and the racialized female body in Arvey’s thematic association with Belinda and a prostitute named Fast Mary. As Lorraine O’Grady argues, black and white bodies “cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West’s metaphoric construction of ‘woman’ ” (14). Like the maid in Manet’s painting *Olympia*, Belinda functions as the black servant girl in Hurston’s work, exposing Arvey’s own victimization within white patriarchy.<sup>18</sup> Meisenhelder identifies the affinity between Arvey, Belinda, and Fast Mary by their lack of underwear: Belinda reveals that she has no underwear when she stands on her head; Arvey loses her underwear when Jim rapes her under the mulberry tree; and at twelve, Kenny sneaks a peek under Fast Mary’s skirt when she sits on her porch stairs without any underwear.<sup>19</sup> This series of missing undergarments is “evidence that, no matter how comfortable [Arvey’s] life and no matter how much she feels like a Cinderella, her relation to white men often betrays surprising parallels to those of black women she distrusts and resents” (Meisenhelder 109). Since nowhere in the text is Fast Mary identified by her race, Meisenhelder’s own language represents the slippage between stereotypes of the black female body, the prostitute, and the working class, “white trash” female body. Belinda and Fast Mary are in a chain of sexually stereotyped Others from whom Arvey can distinguish her whiteness.

Arvey’s development of legitimate white female subjectivity is based on the denial of white patriarchy’s subjection of racial, ethnic, and working-class female bodies.

As a righteous Christian, Arvey casts Belinda's naked performance as a heathen display, and, as a disenfranchised wife, she interprets Jim's dismissal of the scandal as an affirmation of her powerlessness. Subsequently, Arvey initiates her own cultural exchange with Belinda, which defines her position as an empowered patron by indulging her charitable sensibility and fulfilling her role as the angel of the house. Because Arvey "so far forgave Belinda's little bare body," she gives Belinda all of her daughter's old clothes and a new white dress (*Seraph* 113). Belinda interprets Arvey's gifts as a sign of love and not social policing, and she declares, "Yes I is Miss Arvey's little girl too. . . . She gived me a pretty white dress for Sunday School . . . and a *pretty* pink ribbon for my head. Yes I is her little girl so!" (115; original emphasis). Echoing Isie's adoption in "Drenched in Light," Belinda's performance ultimately works to gain Arvey's approval. She receives money, clothes, and an association with white femininity as payment. In return, Arvey can assume the role of benevolent mistress.

Thus, Belinda and Kenny's performance at the train station not only establishes Kenny's mastery but also, in conjunction with Fast Mary, signals Arvey's fragile construction of middle-class white femininity. Like Hurston's previous treatment of interracial cultural exchanges, the black child-artist gains a white patron for her racialized performance. Although *Seraph's* depiction replicates the playful and masking language of "Drenched in Light" and "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston unequivocally increases the cost of such cultural exchanges in the novel. Though there may be some ambiguity about Belinda's artistic agency in her racial performance, there is no doubt that she is vulnerable standing on her head with no underwear. Moreover, Arvey is not cast as a white patron looking for a connection to black folk culture. She can confirm her whiteness only by patronizing those she deems economically and morally impoverished. She does not posit the richness of black folk.

In contrast, Kenny never struggles with such insecurities, and yet, as the other child-artist in the text, his character similarly exposes the construction of whiteness and signifies the text's discourse on the appropriation of black folk art. Though Kenny's musical talent exemplifies and affirms cultural hybridity, his unintentional subjection of Belinda in childhood taints his success as a musician in adulthood. In other words, Kenny is sincere in his appreciation of black culture, but his commodification of Belinda suggests that he also could exploit black vernacular traditions as a jazz musician. Kenny's racial performance stresses *Seraph's* concerns with the preservation of black folk culture. His cultural exchange at the train station parallels his proclivity for ragtime, blues, and jazz. His prideful claim to one cultural body as a child implies his belief in his rightful possession of the Other in adulthood. Jim explains to a hesitant Arvey, "Kenny claims that it is just a matter of time when white artists will take it all over. Getting to it's not considered just darky music and dancing nowadays. It's American, and belongs to everybody" (202). If, as Meisenhelder points out, "the fate of every black character in *Seraph on the Suwanee* suggests, living in Jim Meserve's world adulterates black culture and destroys a healthy black identity, both male and female" (114-15), then Kenny's naïve manipulation of Belinda and his command of black vernacular traditions similarly recognize the popularity of such artistic forms and critique its appropriation. In addition to the various universalizations of the black folk (dialect, music, dance, and bodies), the text's allusion to Stephen Foster, who sang of the Suwanee River in a parody of black dialect without ever having seen it, exposes Kenny's and the novel's acts of minstrelsy.<sup>20</sup>

Kenny's admiration of black culture is associated with the minstrel's misappropriation because the novel offers no room for the subjectivity of its black artists. Like Belinda, Joe only receives "changing-clothes" (*Seraph* 251) as a kind of "reparations" from the white minstrel to his black muse (Lott 59). Thus, Kenny contributes to Hurston's racial performance problematic, in which race and gender determine who is privileged in the relationships between artist and audience and artist and artist. Significantly, Kenny emerges from the dilemma as an empowered subject,

whereas Belinda cannot. While Kenny contributes to the intertextual conversation regarding racial performance Hurston begins in “Drenched in Light”—perhaps as a representation of her projected ideal self—it is Belinda’s performance that links *Seraph* to the writer’s early depictions of her performing childhood self. What are we to make, then, of the fact that the final representation of Hurston’s black child-artist exits the stage without subjectivity?

### Shut behind Closed Doors: Authenticity vs. Hybridity Debate

The representations of performing black girls in Hurston’s short story, essay, autobiography, and novel are threshold figures literally standing at the traveling crossroads (on the gatepost, by the road, at the train station) and mediating between interracial cultural exchanges. What Walker observes about Hurston’s public persona during the Harlem Renaissance holds true for each of Hurston’s depictions of performing black children: “Though almost everyone agreed she was a delight, not everyone agreed such audacious black delight was permissible, or, indeed, quite the proper image for the race” (“Zora Neale Hurston” 89). Moving chronologically between texts (from “Drenched in Light,” to “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” to *Dust Tracks*, to *Seraph*) Hurston’s representation of the threshold figure is increasingly complicated by racial and sexual difference. The racial performance in each revision is increasingly commodified by white audiences and censored (as well as censored) by the black community. With each textual evolution, the social currency of the black female body is more exploited. The threshold figure is not a spectacle because of her performance *per se* but ultimately because of what her performance exposes—her bare buttocks and her sexuality. Hurston’s earlier works critique the black community’s disparagement of the child-artist’s desire and affirm white patronage of black folk culture. As her exploration of this problematic evolves, Hurston’s work begins to question white patriarchy’s appropriation of blackness.

*Seraph*’s focus on white characters continues to evoke the complexity of black artistic subjectivity, identity, and agency present in all of Hurston’s works.<sup>21</sup> When read intertextually, Belinda’s headstand inspires new readings of the novel’s white plot, Hurston’s earlier versions of the threshold figure, and the writer’s later social politics. While most critics read “Drenched in Light” and “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” as Hurston’s affirmation of black artistic agency, the tone of these earlier published texts changes when placed in conversation with *Seraph*. Though Isie avoids a whipping by the end of “Drenched in Light,” she is free to perform only when she is culturally adopted by whites and leaves the black community. While Hurston confirms that she remains the black community’s Zora in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” her words indicate her outsider status despite her insider membership. In *Seraph*, Belinda is even more isolated because she has no community, no interaction with family, and no artistic affirmation. We cannot read Belinda’s character as anything but a re-writing of these earlier threshold figures. The question is: why this final revision?

Hurston’s writing prior to *Seraph* negates racial difference and affirms cultural hybridity. In her short story, essay, and autobiography, Hurston proves the value of black vernacular culture by depicting whites’ appreciative patronage of the threshold figure’s performance. Moreover, the writer proclaims the vital contributions black folk culture can make to American culture given the cultural lack she associates with whiteness. Reading *Seraph* in conjunction with Hurston’s early writings reveals more similarities between Hurston’s body of work than previously critically engaged. *Seraph*’s discourse similarly bridges the cultural differences between black and white with Kenny and Belinda’s artistic exchange. However, *Seraph* maintains racial difference

by exploring the spectacle Belinda's exposed body causes at the novel's literal and symbolic crossroads.

Social context and political consequences determine the shift Hurston makes in *Seraph*. Although Nathan Irvin Huggins claims that by the time Hurston wrote *Dust Tracks* she was no longer "putting on an act" but "had become the act" (133), Hurston's revisions to her threshold figure suggest that she continued to question the boundaries of racial performance in her writing and continued to practice her own "act" in the production of these texts. Barbara Johnson argues that Hurston's "questions of difference and identity are always a function of a specific interlocutory situation—and the answers, matters of strategy rather than truth" (285). Hurston's final novel continues to promote the value of black folk culture even as it reconceptualizes racial performance. We can observe Hurston's shifting position on the authenticity of black folk performance with *Seraph's* depiction of both Belinda and Kenny as transgressive figures. Both child-artists challenge social boundaries, but they significantly experience cultural borderlands differently.

As a minstrel character in the novel, Kenny is not a threshold figure. Distinctly, his performance of black vernacular culture constructs him as a hybrid figure. Kenny's success as a jazz musician argues that cultural boundaries are permeable. Hurston acknowledges as much in her letters to *Seraph's* editor, Burroughs Mitchell, months before the novel's publication. In a missive dated October 2, 1947, Hurston writes: "Right here, I think that it should be pointed out that what is known as Negro dialect in the South is no such thing" (Kaplan 559). Hurston suggests that southern white dialect did not originate with southern blacks but vice versa. Then in a second letter dated "October Something Late, 1947," Hurston explains, "There is no more Negro music in the U.S. It has been fused and merged and become the national expression, and displaced the worship of European expression" (563). In this second letter, Hurston recognizes the contributions of black vernacular culture and endorses the idea of American cultural hybridity. "In fact," she expounds in the same missive, "it is now denied, (and with some truth) that it never was pure Negro music, but an adaptation of white music. That is as oversimplified as the former claim that it was something purely negroid" (563). With both letters, Hurston refuses claims of authenticity or purity by complicating what it means to be culturally black, white, and American. As Jennifer DeVere Brody concludes in *Impossible Purities* (1998), conceptualizations of purity and hybridity are constantly shifting; neither "white" nor "black" are ever pure but always hybrids. Likewise in *Seraph*, neither Kenny's nor Arvay's whiteness is constructed outside of relationships with racialized bodies. Both characters are always already hybrids.

Therefore, *Seraph* works in much of the same way as all of Hurston's writing—articulating an ambiguous critical discourse just beneath the textual masking. Kenny's success as a jazz musician makes him a cultural hybrid, but the narrative significantly differentiates him from Belinda. Specifically, the threshold figure struggles within her social confines while the hybrid claims cultural space. Kenny's ability to make "darky" music "American" shows his cultural mastery. This privilege is in stark contrast to Belinda's subjection, which is defined by her lack of underwear, the commodification of her body, and Arvay's critique. Though Kenny performs black vernacular culture as a hybrid figure, blackness is not always acted out but "rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the 'living of blackness' becomes a material way of knowing" (E. Johnson 8). As a threshold figure, Belinda embodies liminality. She symbolizes both lacking and knowing, holds insider and outsider status, and represents artistic purity and commodification. Unlike the hybrid, the threshold figure is always and already in danger of being exposed, vulnerable, criticized, or alienated in Hurston's work, even when she asserts artistic agency.

Thus with its hybrid and threshold characters, *Seraph* plays with the notion of racial difference with no real conclusion. Hurston appears to need both figures to



fully conceptualize racial performance. The novel argues that cultural hybridity is natural. Yet it also suggests that such cultural exchanges potentially are exploitative to vulnerable black bodies. Hurston differentiates between Kenny's appropriation and Belinda's ability to, in the words of *Mules and Men*, authentically have her say and sing her song. In the end, Hurston continues to waffle on the possibility of maintaining black folk culture's authenticity in the face of witnessing outsiders.

In addition to the content of the novel, the circumstances surrounding *Seraph's* publication reveal Hurston's concerns about popular culture's "determined effort to squeeze all of the rich black juice out of the songs and present a sort of musical octoroon to the public" (*Dust Tracks* 280). In fact, the novel's ambiguous racial politics showcase Hurston at her most performative. In her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950) she asserts that white publishers only accept limited characterizations of African Americans and thus reject her manuscript on the black middle class because of commercial market demands.<sup>22</sup> *Seraph* is Hurston's response to this rejection, and yet the novel concedes to such demands. In the essay, Hurston argues that stereotypical representations of blackness function as "mechanical toys . . . built so that their feet eternally shuffle, and their eyes pop and roll" (*I Love Myself* 171). As a result, black subjectivity is perpetuated as a flat stereotype in the popular consciousness, and "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America" (173). *Seraph* was published two years earlier than Hurston's observations; however, it does not directly challenge the invisibility of black subjectivity despite Hurston's call for more complex representations of black folk in "What White Publishers Won't Print." Instead, the novel demonstrates the complexities of whiteness, since the reading public cannot accept "a true picture of Negro life in America": white characters speak black dialect and signify, and black, white, and working-class women all share gender oppression with their lack of underwear. Ultimately, Hurston's representations of the hybrid and threshold figures in *Seraph* playfully engage market demands while leaving any denouement about racial performance inconclusive.

Hurston's oeuvre may be ambiguous but it is never indifferent. Her cultural work passionately promotes the public recognition of black folk, but Hurston apparently continued to struggle with the tensions between agency and commodification in black female performativity. Is it possible that Hurston gestures toward reading Kenny as the probable, ideal American hybrid? Or does Hurston propose privileging Belinda's experiential knowledge as a threshold figure? Read in concert, Hurston's short story, essay, autobiography, and final novel create a clear yet indeterminate discourse, one that constructively demystifies white racial myths and complexly highlights the bodies of black folk culture. Hurston utilizes the figure of the black child-artist in her writing to explore the consequences of racial performance while preserving the authentic joy of artistic expression. Although Hurston likely attempted to reconcile the tensions between audience and performer throughout the rest of her life, the threshold figure in *Seraph* is her final public testimony to the struggles of a black female performer. Consequently, *Seraph* is critical to understanding Hurston's corpus of black cultural themes, her theories on the performance of black vernacular culture, and her public persona as a black artist.

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1. Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo, for example, explores Hurston's dualities as both subject and anthropologist, as well as the writer's struggle both to represent the collective and to define herself as an individual in U.S. and Caribbean contexts. See Nwankwo, "Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography," *Radical History Review* 87 (2003): 49-77.

2. Barbara Johnson examines how Hurston negotiates her experience with difference (namely via her relationship to primitivism) through different rhetorical strategies in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” *Mules and Men*, and “What White Publishers Won’t Print.” Hurston depicts herself as a “threshold figure” in these texts, mediating between representations of black communities and white travelers, in an attempt to “make a statement about difference” (279).

3. I use the term racial performance in order to recognize the literal artistic acts in Hurston’s writing but also to acknowledge the performativity of racial identity. As Catherine Rottenberg argues in *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (Hanover: Dartmouth College P, 2008), it is important to recognize the ways in which subjects interpolate identity and act out social norms. Similarly, Daniel M. Scott III identifies a modality of performativity in the work of Hurston’s contemporary, Wallace Thurman. Scott argues that Thurman “collapses the dichotomies of identity to converge them into the tropes of the mask, the stage, and performance” in order to question the fixity of race in his 1929 novel *The Blacker the Berry* (330). See Scott, “Harlem Shadows: Re-evaluating Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*,” *MELUS* 29.3-4 (2004): 323-39.

4. Though classifying Arvay as protofeminist is an incredible suggestion, Rieger identifies similarities between Arvay and Janie by mapping the language Hurston uses in their respective bildungsromans. Both women are connected to trees (the mulberry and the pear, respectively, embody each woman’s sexuality), both struggle to negotiate the idea of “loving service,” both experience “a pain remorseless sweet,” both indulge in androgynous clothing through their relationship with labor, and both come to some sort of self-actualization at the conclusion of their narratives. While acknowledging the similarities between Janie’s and Arvay’s husbands, Carby argues in her foreword to *Seraph* that a feminist reading of the novel is difficult because “Jim Meserve, unlike Jody Starks, does not conveniently die so that his wife can get on with her life” (xv).

5. Critiques of the primitivism celebrated in the Harlem Renaissance attribute the perpetuation of the exotic stereotype to wealthy whites’ patronage of black artists. In *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice UP, 1988), Cary D. Wintz notes that although Hurston was comfortable with her relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, Langston Hughes eventually became frustrated by the conscious and unconscious limitations to artistic freedom the patron placed on him. In *Harlem Renaissance*, Huggins concludes that white commerce and white norms create a derivative art despite the intention to create a distinctive black voice.

6. Specifically through her reading of nineteenth-century literary, visual, and theatrical texts, Brody argues that black women (often represented as mulatto figures) are critical to Victorian constructions of white male English subjectivity.

7. Lott demonstrates that whites’ appropriation of blackness through blackface minstrelsy is a dialectic between “moments of domination and moments of liberation” (18). Minstrelsy is significant not in its racist portrayals of black stereotypes but in its “simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” in “minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation” (6).

8. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” Hughes writes, “The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high” (46). Hughes critiques both the black middle class and white audiences for not valuing and supporting the work of black artists who draw on black folk traditions. When the artist is a black female, the relationship between artist and audience is further complicated. Black woman’s sexual vulnerability, due to her racial and gender oppression, increases the exploitative potential of the artistic performance.

9. Langston Hughes explores a similar dynamic in his short story “The Blues I’m Playing” (1933). Although Hughes’s black protagonist attains a white patron for her art, she realizes that the financed trips to Europe and classical musical training isolate her from her true loves: her future husband and black folk culture. See Hughes, “The Blues I’m Playing,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis, ed. (1933; New York: Penguin, 1994), 619-27.

10. Reviewing Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), Ellison explains that the child-artist’s unconventional way of confronting Jim Crow exhibits an individualistic identity in conflict with the black community’s “pre-individual” consciousness (135). In construction of his individuality, Wright depicts the defining moments in his childhood as conflicts between his grandmother’s Seventh-Day Adventist faith, his mother’s efforts to instill in him a fear of whites that becomes its own “culture, a creed, a religion,” and his desire to read and write (74).

11. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s grandmother also voices the confining restrictions to black womanhood. Nanny’s solution to Janie’s budding sexuality is to marry her off to Logan Killicks.

12. Earl’s characterization resembles stereotypes of black male sexual predation. After he attempts to rape the Corregios’ daughter, he is hunted down in order to protect other white women that may fall victim to his bestiality, including Arvay, and is killed in order to protect Jim, the paragon of white patriarchal masculinity. Thus, Earl’s expulsion from society confirms his place outside normative white subjectivity.

Most critics read Earl's birth defects as a result of Jim and Arvay's first premarital sexual experience, which is termed a rape in the text.

13. In a parallel role, Dessie, Joe's wife, enables Arvay's middle-class privilege as the angel of the house—the seraph on the Suwanee. While Dessie's domestic labor is the foundation for Arvay's performance of true white womanhood, she also maintains Arvay's connection with her rural southern roots. Dessie feeds Arvay clay while she is pregnant with Earl, and Dessie is the midwife during his delivery.

14. Toni Morrison argues that minor black characters function as an imagined Africanism to shape ideals of rightness/whiteness. Hurston uses the Kelsey family similarly to complicate constructions of whiteness and black folk culture. See Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).

15. I would like to thank Arlene Keizer for pointing out that even though Belinda's bottom stands in for her genitalia, her vagina is not and cannot be mentioned in the text although it is obviously equally on display.

Similarly, in her poem "The Venus Hottentot," Alexander contrasts the hypervisibility of Baartman's body with the way in which she has been silenced historically. "Since my own genitals are public," Baartman's narrative voice in the poem claims, "I have made other parts private" (6). Interestingly, given the prevalence of such stereotypical imagery of black women and Hurston's academic pursuits, the writer probably had some knowledge of the historical figure. Hurston's mentor at Barnard was the renowned Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology and cultural relativism. In turn, Boas was a friend and colleague of Paul Rivet, the director of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, where Baartman's genitalia, a plaster replica of her body, and her skeleton were on display until 1982 (the museum returned Baartman's remains to South Africa in 2002).

16. Though not discussed in Jackson's article, Belinda's bare behind is another example of the anality in *Seraph* that brings to light the relationship between whiteness, waste, and abjection. The anal references classify Arvay's "white trash" background as inferior to pure, normative whiteness and identify African Americans as "always already lowly or 'trash'" (Jackson 648).

17. In *High Art*, the female nude is the symbol of Western femininity, policed and contained within the aesthetic discourse of sexuality. In contrast, the naked female body is the nude's "Other," characterized by class and racial markers. Jean Walton discusses the juxtaposition in "Re-Placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen, eds. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 223-51.

18. I read this scene functioning similarly to O'Grady's analysis of Manet's painting *Olympia*, in which the representation of blackness provides meaning for the image of whiteness. O'Grady identifies the Western female body as a "unitary sign" that "has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black" (14). Sander Gilman has a complementary reading of Manet's painting in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

19. Fast Mary only appears briefly in the text, but her presence provides evidence of Arvay's displaced sexuality. When Kenny looks under Fast Mary's skirt, he points and pokes fun at the fact that she is not wearing any underwear and calls her vagina a mulberry pie—the very fruit tree under which Jim rapes Arvay. When Fast Mary complains to Jim about the insult, Jim asserts in Kenny's defense that the boy is too young and innocent to know the meaning of what he said. Arvay dismisses Fast Mary's insult because of her racialized sexuality and class status.

20. Regarding Stephen Foster's appropriation of African American dialect and folk songs, see James Olney's analysis in " 'I Ain't Gonna Be No Topsy' Because 'Paris Is My Old Kentucky Home,' " *Southern Review* 37.1 (2001): 155-67.

21. Jarrett addresses the ways in which novels like *Seraph* are considered anomalies of African American literature. By "allowing race to overdetermine" one's understanding of the tradition, critics do not recognize "the various and frequent ways in which African American writers were working *beyond*" marginalizing essentialist paradigms by exploring white characters (2, 6). Jarrett suggests that we can better understand representations of race by examining those texts traditionally excluded from canons, anthologies, and literary histories.

22. Similarly, Carl Van Vechten, a counsel, contact, and colleague for many black writers during the Harlem Renaissance, criticizes black writers who "continue to make a free gift [of exotic material] to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains" (qtd. in Singh 35). Ironically, Singh argues that Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) "seems to have had a crippling effect on the self-expression of many black writers by either making it easier to gain success riding the bandwagon of primitivism, or by making it difficult to publish novels that did not fit the profile of the commercial success formula adopted by most publishers for black writers" (36).

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