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# ANALOGOUS STATES

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE, ZORA NEALE HURSTON, AND THE  
PERFORMANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

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9 December 2016

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## ABSTRACT

The dissertation presents J. M. Synge and Zora Neale Hurston as autoethnographic researcher-practitioners who employed important cultural forms in their theatre, such as the *keen* and the *cakewalk*, in order to challenge the representational caricatures that contributed to the racialization of both the Irish and African Americans. Using ethnographic material, Synge and Hurston locate such performative rituals in their proper cultural contexts, thereby giving a representation of them that audiences might consider authentic, while also writing against the stereotypes associated with the cultures under discussion. Yet Synge and Hurston's claims to authenticity and cultural intimacy, through the use of ethnographic practices, is undermined as the material created was intended for the theatre, an artificial space. Thus, Synge's and Hurston's flawed research practices reveal moral binds of performance ethnography as cross-cultural studies was becoming a significant aspect of anthropology prior to the development of performance studies. This intervention not only impacts the fields of Irish studies and African American studies but also has broader implications in performance studies. Further, this project has the potential to impact the way in which cultural anthropologists incorporate literary criticism and theory into their work.



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when it was needed, and spent hours on the phone with me as I lamented the process. She has always been there, and I suspect she always will. The mom I inherited the day I got married has treated me as one of her own for the last fifteen years. After the death of her husband—my beloved father-in-law—Mom traveled to Vermont with us and spent nearly two and a half years with us, taking care of our daughter and taking care of us. She traveled to conferences with me, woke up early, went to bed late, washed dishes, did the laundry, cleaned the house, bought groceries, cooked dinner—basically, Mom made sure her family was well provided for while her son worked long hours as chef and her daughter-in-law sat away in quiet room reading and writing. I know that she does not understand the labor involved in PhD research work, but she never stops supporting or loving me. I am also grateful my journey brought her back “home,” to Ireland, after a forty-five-year absence. My husband moved around the world to help me reach this goal. I am grateful for his love, unwavering support, and partnership. Greg, you are my match in every way, and I will be forever connected to you because of the beautiful surprise we received at the beginning of this PhD process. Máire Coileáin Kinyon (Collins), thank you for joining this family. Thank you for your laughs, cuddles, and love. Thank you for your understanding all the days Mommy had to go to work and was unable to play with you. Thank you for being you. You are the best gift I have ever received. I love you, little one.

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## CHAPTER I

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### ANALOGOUS STATES

#### INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I establish John Millington Synge and Zora Neale Hurston as autoethnographic researcher-practitioners who use their theatre to reimagine the performative aspects of Irish and African American culture. By examining the scope of Synge's and Hurston's work, this dissertation concentrates on the praxis of performance ethnography within larger cultural revival movements, paying special attention to how these works furthered the transnational and intercultural relationship between the Irish and African Americans. To realize this goal, I focus on a selection of major plays from each author's oeuvre, including each author's major ethnographic publications.

A question might arise as to why one might compare Synge and Hurston, two writers who are ordinarily treated as being very different from each other. John Millington Synge was an Irish author born 16 April 1871, while Zora Neale Hurston an American author born twenty years later on 7 January 1891. Synge was an active participant in the Irish Literary Revival and Hurston an active participant in the movement now referred to as the Harlem Renaissance but known at the time as the New Negro Movement.<sup>1</sup> Further, Synge's plays were an essential aspect of the foundation of Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1904. As such, his theatre actively participated on a national stage with larger conversations and

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<sup>1</sup> "Harlem Renaissance" is a term coined after the movement had passed.

raised larger conversations regarding authenticity and identity at a crucial time in Ireland's history. Theatre was not as critical to the New Negro Movement. Yet, while Hurston's plays were seldom produced in her lifetime, retrospectively her theatre became a central aspect of the Harlem Renaissance at the same time that African Americans used other creative projects to redefine their position in post-slavery U.S. society. Both authors were quite well known at the time that they were actively writing, but Synge died long before Hurston's career was established. So while Hurston's literary agent, Elizabeth Marbury, connected her to Irish writers George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, there are no records that indicate a direct link between Hurston and Synge. Nevertheless, throughout this dissertation I will draw out important similarities between the two. Besides the fact that Synge and Hurston used comparable writing methods, employing cultural anthropology and ethnographic records to build creative productions, each problematically used primitivism in investigating communities they claimed to be cultural insiders in. There are many other parallels between the two authors that have been mentioned or noted in other critical studies but that until now have not been fully investigated. Yet, besides detailing the analogous aspects of each author's oeuvre, I will also highlight important differences when pertinent. Even outside of race, nationality, and gender, there is much that is dissimilar about the two authors and their work. For instance, Synge's literary career was cut short due to his death, several weeks shy of his thirty-eighth birthday. The body of work he left behind consists of some poetry, some prose, one major ethnographic text, and seven plays, five of which were staged during his own lifetime. Further, while the poetry, prose, and theatre he produced during his

short literary career was dynamic, the five completed plays remain the most discussed aspect of his oeuvre, with the prose usually mentioned only as an extension of the plays and his poetry rarely investigated. And, in significant contrast to Hurston's theatre, since Synge's death his plays have continuously been staged, in Ireland and around the world.

Hurston, on the other hand, lived until she was sixty-nine years old and was a remarkably prolific writer. She was the author of four novels, three ethnographic collections of folklore, an autobiography, dozens of short stories, at least twelve plays, and countless reviews and articles for publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Journal of American Folklore*. And this only includes works that scholars know of. For example, the manuscript of *Every Tongue Got to Confess* (2001) was recovered in 1975, fifteen years after the author died, and there may still be other works yet to be discovered. It was not until 1997 that librarians at the Library of Congress realized that much of Hurston's "lost" work, including many of her plays, had been stored there.<sup>2</sup> Scholars knew of the existence of some of her theatre, but the majority of Hurston's theatre was thought to be lost. *Color Struck*, which was never staged, is well known because the play won second place for drama in *Opportunity* magazine's first literary contest in 1925, and *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, which was not staged during Hurston's lifetime, is well known among Americanist scholars because Hurston and Langston Hughes co-wrote the play. The authors had been close friends during the height of the Harlem Renaissance era, but, as Hughes wrote on his copy of *Mule Bone*, stored at Yale's Beinecke

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<sup>2</sup> Hurston stored work at the Library of Congress before her death in 1960.

Library, “This play was never done because the authors fell out” (*Mule Bone* 10). And while most of Hurston’s theatre has never been staged, all of her plays were written with production in mind, and a number of the sketches she wrote did make it to production. On 15 September 1931, sketches Hurston wrote appeared in *Fast and Furious: A Colored Revue in Thirty-seven Scenes*, along with the work of eight other writers. *The Great Day*, a collection of sketches “structured around a single day in the life of a railroad camp” (Hemenway (178), premiered 10 January 1932 after a barrage of debilitating circumstances. As such, while the show was positively received, it was only performed once. *From Sun to Sun*, a re-formation of *The Great Day*, had two showings in 1933.<sup>3</sup> And *Singing Steel*, another re-formation of *The Great Day*, had two showings in 1934.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately the lack of funding for theatre written and produced by African American artists seems to be the reason that the majority of Hurston’s theatre remained unproduced.

Despite such an impressive body of work Hurston died in relative obscurity, with none of her books in print at the time of her death. Hurston was a bold figure in a world that did not appreciate such confidence in blacks and abhorred it in women. Her politics often went against what might be considered reasonable for a person in her position. Firsthand accounts from her male peers conjured an image of a woman who did not recognize proper boundaries and needed to be controlled.<sup>5</sup> When she died, she was penniless, living in a nursing

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Hemenway’s *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* for detail on these productions (205).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> See *Jump at the Sun* by John Lowe Part 1 “Sunrise” (49-84).

home, and fellow residents of the home did not have enough money to bury her, let alone purchase a gravestone to mark her plot. Eventually the story of her death and financial situation made the news, and money poured in from old publishers and old friends, just not enough money to properly mark her grave.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the early 1970s that some of her work was brought back into circulation, thanks to the work of Alice Walker and Robert Hemenway.<sup>7</sup> And while her fiction, especially her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is regularly read and discussed by readers around the world, and her fiction and folklore have been thoroughly analyzed by critics, her theatre remains largely unproduced and marginally investigated.<sup>8</sup> By investigating Hurston's theatre I am able to directly determine the impact of ethnography on her work. As I will detail throughout this dissertation, Synge's work significantly influenced the work of Harlem Renaissance era writers, including Hurston's. My decision to investigate the most neglected aspect of Hurston's oeuvre—her theatre—allows for a comparison with Synge's theatre and encourages a reassessment of Hurston's oeuvre in its entirety.

This is a focused study of Synge's and Hurston's theatre that not only concentrates on the intersections of these two movements but also on how their work converges, I argue that the authors' ethnographic and creative projects privilege those aspects of Irish and African American vernacular culture that contributed to each cultures's marginalization: Irish and African American

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<sup>6</sup> See *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* by Carla Kaplan (18).

<sup>7</sup> See *Looking for Zora* by Alice Walker published in *Ms.* magazine 1975(18)

<sup>8</sup> Her fiction and folklore have been packaged and repackaged into numerous collections and children's books but not her plays.

performative rituals, folk practices, and vernacular speech. The Irish Renaissance was an inspiration to Harlem Renaissance writers, and Hurston, always a lover of folk culture and stories, mentions her affinity for Irish folklore in her writings. While the themes, methodologies, and aesthetics of Synge and Hurston differ from each other, their theatre and their ethnographic materials show important similarities that reveal new areas for investigation and new methodologies.

Functioning as interpreters for different vernacular cultures, Synge and Hurston use the theatre to create performed ethnographies: narrative scripts of culture that attempt to establish Irish and African American identity beyond their racialized bodies. Yet, in privileging vernacular culture and vernacular cultural practices, the authors seem to promote the idea that their fieldwork allowed them to locate the essence of Irish and African American identity. Synge's and Hurston's performed ethnographies present the cultural practices within each culture as metaphors, representative symbols for the entirety of Irish and African American culture respectively. Thus their plays, in some respect, attempt to be performed transcriptions of their fieldwork as ethnographers. Hurston's ethnographic research on theatre puts into practice the theoretical dimensions of her scholarly research, resulting in a cultivated language that is intended to give the representational presence of African American culture on stage. Yet the inability to find venues in which to stage her productions restricts the final versions of her plays to the written form. Had there been a theatre community to develop her theatrical productions, the plays might have been more significantly developed and could now be just as important to her canon as her fiction and prose. Synge's trips to the Aran Islands were not scholarly endeavors, and his

theoretical work is more grounded in his theatre than his travel writing. Consequently, Synge's ethnographic work is not as theoretically driven as Hurston's appears to be. Yet his theatre is able to capitalize on what turned out to be shrewd observations, allowing him to produce much more sophisticatedly developed theatre.

In connecting my research with larger conversations about transatlanticism, I am able to theorize the way in which two authors, one on each side of the Atlantic, signified and conceptualized race. I investigate such subjects as cultural imitation, exchange, and hybridity in transatlantic modernism by explaining the thematic, methodological, and aesthetic divergences as well as the occasional overlaps between these authors. As they relate to this study, Sieglinde Lemke's and Michael North's developments in transatlantic modernism are crucial. In building on key texts specifically within studies of the "Black and Green Atlantic," I conduct research into the work of Synge and Hurston as a method of broadening the approach to critical race studies. Particularly I build on the work of the Irish-black cultural exchange as identified in the work of Theodore W. Allen, Noel Ignatiev, Eric Lott, and David R. Roediger, among other scholars, which even more directly speak to this specific cultural dynamic. As the studies of racialized and marginalized peoples continue to develop past strictly binary cultural relationships, I am invested in complicating and expanding notions of center and periphery in transatlantic modernism.

While the legacies of Synge and Hurston were managed quite differently immediately following their deaths, both are now considered vital contributors to the shaping of modern drama. David Krasner, who realizes how significantly

Synge influenced African American writers at the start of the twentieth century, writes that Synge “paved the way for a modern drama consisting of one-act folk plays” (*Modern Drama, Volume I* 177). Krasner also notes in the second volume of *A History of Modern Drama* that Hurston’s fiction influenced African American female playwrights, such as Ntozake Shange (author of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*), and suggests that Hurston’s work encouraged Shange to write material that “reflected black women’s speech,” used a combination of “dance and music,” and revealed to audiences “the anguish, joy, and hopes of black women without men in the cast” (*Modern Drama, Volume I I* 257).<sup>9</sup> And Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins write that Shange absorbed from Hurston “a demonstration that long fiction could be successfully sustained by a female character” which influenced how Shange treated female characters in her theatre (513). Further, Synge and Hurston each intended to create some form of theatre that would be construed as authentic (this is a complicated term which will be explored in more detail later), and to construct accurate presentations of people who were otherwise frequently caricatured. This perspective allows the present-day critic to reflect on how impossible a task it is to stage authentic representations of true Irishness or blackness and how such an endeavor was bound to undo any possible notion of an authentic theatre. Similar to an aspect of the ideological construction of race, authenticity is a fiction and a construct used by Others to refute claims made against them. Thus, when Synge and Hurston claim authenticity, one must acknowledge that it was their way of enshrining themselves in Irishness and

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<sup>9</sup> Shange speaks to this point directly in an interview with Esther Beth Sullivan, 11 January 1991.

blackness, with a genuine appeal by both authors to refute blatantly racist depictions of Irishness and blackness on stages in Ireland, England, and America. This dissertation will argue that their use of ethnography was a way of differentiating themselves from other dramatists who claimed authenticity simply by virtue of being from the community that had been construed as Other: writers such as Dion Boucicault, Bert Williams, and George Walker. And while the theatrical space disrupts any possibility for authenticity, I will also argue that the fact that the claim of cultural intimacy on both Synge's and Hurston's part falters in its delivery proves the impracticality of the endeavor. Synge's and Hurston's critics, at the time they were writing and now, can easily dismantle their depiction of this "truth"—which evidences how difficult a task it is to produce any sort of stable identity, authentic or otherwise. This dissertation thus sets out to show how both Synge and Hurston can be explored in the context of their efforts to construct forms of identity that would be seen as authentic, and the critical reaction to both also gives rise to intriguing parallels.

### **Representational Theatre**

The preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* attempts to assert Synge's authority to be the voice of the Irish peasants he writes about. It begins: "In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers" (CW IV 53). The declaration that he is closely and personally familiar with the words of the people is also meant to mitigate the negative reaction Synge correctly anticipates the

play will receive. The preface is dated 21 January 1907, which is, according to Christopher Morash's details of the event, five days before *Playboy* premiered to "a bedlam of hisses and yells in the auditorium" in the last ten minutes of the final act. The reversal in the audience's reaction to the play, which was initially favorable, was set off by actor Willie Fay as Christy referring to "a drift of Mayo girls standing in their shifts itself" (132). And while the word "shift" is infamously credited with setting off the theatregoers' disapproval, a note to Synge from Lady Gregory 14 January 1907, in which she writes that she feels they were "beginning the fight for our lives" (Saddlemeyer 205) suggests that the worry that *Playboy* might be poorly received began when the play first went into production.

In at least two other instances Synge introduced plays with words of self-defense. The preface to *The Tinker's Wedding*—a play I investigate in chapter 3, in regard to the play's repudiation of marriage—is not so forceful in its pronouncement. Mostly it reads as an apology for the way Synge's depiction of the priest might be interpreted. And while Mary Burke contends that the preface to *Tinker's* might just as easily be construed as a warning to those who would interpret the play as an instructive document that throws illumination upon actual tinkers' lives and morals" (*Tinkers'* 66), I argue that this preface, written 2 December 1907, is another declaration by Synge that he has an intimate understanding of "the country people" (CW IV 3). The fact that Synge knows that in "the greater part of Ireland" people live a "rich, genial, and humorous" life is proof of his supposed authority. Further, while Synge uses that humor to create a play where a priest is bound and gagged for refusing to marry a couple of tinkers, he writes that the Ireland he knows "will [not] mind being laughed at without

malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies” (CW IV 3).

However, it is in the opening pages to *The Aran Islands* (1907) that Synge makes his most vigorous authoritative assertion that his work lays claim to a proper representation of the Irish peasantry. Synge writes:

In the pages that follow I have given a direct account of my life on the islands, and of what I met with among them, inventing nothing, and changing nothing essential. As far as possible, however, I have disguised the identity of the people I speak of, by making changes in their names, and in the letters I quote, and by altering some local and family relationships. I have had nothing to say about them that was not wholly in their favour, but I have made this disguise to keep them from ever feeling that too direct use had been made of their kindness, and friendship, for which I am more grateful than it is easy to say. (CW II 48)

The claim here not only provides authority but also provides a sense that what Synge presents in *The Aran Islands* is as close as the reader can get to such experiences without going to the islands himself or herself. And since most of the plays are drawn from Synge’s experiences traveling around Ireland, accounted for in *The Aran Islands* as well as his collected articles *In Wicklow, West Kerry, and Connemara*, this introduction, in addition to the aforementioned prefaces, suggests that the plays are to be read as little more than transcriptions of his experiences. As Hélène Lecossois writes in “Pampooties and Keening: Alternate Ways of Performing Memory in J. M. Synge’s Plays,” Synge seems to be using the

“introductions or prefaces in his works” to continually affirm “the transparency of his position as an observer” (139). Yet what Synge does, whether deliberately or unintentionally, in his writings that introduce the main work, and especially in the introduction to *The Aran Islands*, is draw attention to the entire text as something that has been manufactured, a space where “nothing essential” has been changed. This space where “nothing essential” has been changed leaves the reader wondering, what does Synge consider “essential”?

Further, the introductions also broadly draw attention to his position within the communities of investigation: an outsider attempting to provide an insider’s point of view. The self-conscious presentation in the introduction positions *The Aran Islands* as something contrived, a place where the lines are blurred between what actually happened and the “direct account” narrative of Synge’s life on the islands instead of the truthful account the “inventing nothing, and changing nothing” statement leads a reader to believe in.

Synge’s claim of “inventing nothing, and changing nothing” is, in many ways, also an attempt at reassuring that his is a representational theatre. Further, the fact that the basis for his theatre is drawn from material where nothing was invented or changed also appears to be a direct response to Boucicault’s dramas, which claimed authenticity simply by virtue of being the Other. Nicholas Grene writes in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, “Authenticity and authority have been issues in Irish drama as far back as Boucicault, as far forward as Friel. Every dramatist, every dramatic movement, claims that they can deliver the true Ireland which has previously been misrepresented, travestied, rendered, in sentimental cliché or political caricature” (*Politics of Irish Drama* 6). Thus the

quest by the “Irish” dramatist is routinely to dispute mischaracterizations rather than the stage Irishman that dates to before Shakespeare’s Captain Macmorris of *Henry V* or any of Boucicault’s characterizations of Ireland. Synge’s words in his prefaces suggest that he desires to avoid promulgation of “ignorance of the Irish character” as he sees the work of Boucicault had done.

The words from two different contemporary but undated playbills for *The Colleen Bawn* seem to prove that Boucicault was attempting to cast his dramas as accurate representations of Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Synge used the introduction to *The Aran Islands* and the prefaces to *Playboy* and *Tinker’s* to directly engage his predecessor. That is to say that Synge’s introduction and prefaces attempt to cast his dramas as doing something new and unrelated to the dramatists that preceded him and that his work should not be equated with Boucicault’s. Both playbills are for 1860 productions at Laura Keene’s Theatre. In one, *The Colleen Bawn* is heralded as a “New Irish Drama” with a “New Irish Overture” (Pisani 188). The other offers this quote:

Ireland, so rich in scenery, so full of romance and the warm touch of nature, has never until now been opened by the dramatist. Irish dramas have hitherto been exaggerated farces, representing low life or scenes of abject servitude and suffering. Such is not a true picture of Irish society. (Walsh 74)

The words here foreshadow Synge’s own claims of offering insight into an Ireland that has been previously misrepresented and poorly depicted. But Synge’s theatre

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<sup>10</sup> Might be from the same playbill just two different images, excerpts

is rooted “in fieldwork and ethnographic conventions of representation,” as Gregory Castle argues in *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (99). The fact that Synge’s prose, particularly in *The Aran Islands*, gives Synge’s dramas foundational support should immediately lead the reader or viewer to believe that Synge’s intent is not to humiliate those whom he depicts on stage: rather Synge desires the reader or viewer to “nourish the imagination” as “people in every country” require. Synge’s assertion of authority and authenticity are additionally meant to eclipse any claims Boucicault might have had on an authentic Ireland.

It is also clear that the Irish Literary Theatre movement desired to eclipse Boucicault’s connection to Irish drama. The claim of replacing “buffoonery” with “ancient idealism” relates not only to the stage Irishman broadly but very specifically to the way that Boucicault represented Ireland and Irish people in the theatre. Yeats directly addresses this point in his October 1901 editorial in *Samhain* when he writes that Irish dramatists are misdirected in sending the Irish Literary Theatre “imitations of Boucicault” rather than plays that attempt to mimic “Ibsen, the one great master the modern stage has produced” (Yeats *Collected Works* 8). Yet the problem in both Synge’s and Boucicault’s claims of authenticity is that the authors assume achieving a true depiction of Ireland on stage is attainable. Lionel Pilkington writes in *Theatre and Ireland* that the Irish Literary Theatre’s mission to replace “buffoonery” with “ancient idealism,” presumes “a single fixed identity that can be established” by a national representative (12). Moreover, according to Pilkington, the “outright rejection” of the pejorative figure immediately dismisses the possible nuances of stage

performances (12).<sup>11</sup> Boucicault was one of the most popular dramatists of the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, and his works presented staged depictions of Irishness and blackness even though the authenticity of his representations was often claimed in describing his productions.<sup>12</sup> In *Playboy*, a play I examine in chapter 4, and other Synge productions an appreciation of Boucicault is clearly apparent. But Synge's use of the stage Irishman figure is a challenge to the stereotype and not a support of it.

After a showing of *The Shaughraun* in 1904 at Queen's Theatre, Dublin, Synge wrote a "literary note" for *The Academy and Literature*, describing the play as having "a breadth of naïve humour that is now rare on the stage" (CW II 398). Further, Synge decries the fact that "the absurdity of [Boucicault's] plots and pathos has gradually driven people of taste away from his plays, so that at present time few are perhaps aware what good acting comedy some of his work contains" (CW II 398).<sup>13</sup> It is also in this theatrical review that Synge put forth a claim that he works to enact in his own theatre. He states that the productions of the Irish National Theatre Society have "preserved . . . a great deal of what was

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<sup>11</sup> I agree with Pilkington's argument as it concerns the stage Irishman. Even though Pilkington is specifically addressing theatre as it concerns Ireland, the statement also seems to apply when looking at black actors who performed in blackface, such as Bert Williams. However, the argument becomes more difficult to defend when looking at the use of blackface minstrelsy by white actors. Jewish and Irish immigrants in the United States were the primary users of blackface in the nineteenth century, but the device was still used throughout the twentieth century—and is used today.

<sup>12</sup> See Deirdre McFeely, *Dion Boucicault: Irish Identity on Stage* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> James Weldon Johnson uses very similar language when discussing dialect writing. He writes, "Negro dialect is naturally and by long association the exact instrument for voicing this phase of Negro life; and by that very exactness it is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos" (*Book of American Negro Poetry* 41-2). This is the same piece in which Johnson writes that "the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish," a phrase I will examine more thoroughly in chapter 4.

best in the traditional comedy of the Irish stage” but that they also worked “to put an end to the reaction against the careless Irish humour of which everyone has had too much” (CW II 398). While his appreciation of some elements of Boucicault’s work is evident, Synge also denounces both the “typical Stage Irishman,” which the famed dramatist clearly embodied, as well as the fervently “anti-stage Irishman” attacks of his era. In a footnote in the same article, Synge writes

that half the troubles of England in Ireland have arisen from ignorance of the Irish character, ignorance founded on the biased views of British and Irish historians and on the absurd caricatures which infest the majority of plays and novels dealing with Irish folk and affairs. Lever, Lover, Boucicault and “Punch” have achieved much in the way of making the Irish character a sealed book to Englishmen. (CW II 397)

Indirectly, it is also possible that Hurston’s claim of presenting a “real Negro theatre” is a reaction to Boucicault and other minstrelsy representations of blacks in American theatre. As Richard J. M. Blackett writes in *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War*, “In the heat of the public debate over the Civil War, minstrelsy’s caricatures came increasingly to be interpreted as fair representations of the Negro’s character” (45–46), and as I will discuss in this section, Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* was an aspect of that conversation. Boucicault was one of the most successful playwrights and actors of the nineteenth century, and his play *The Octoroon* has been intermittently staged throughout the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, in 1916 an all-black troupe, the Lafayette Players, performed a version of *The Octoroon* with Charles Gilpin as Jacob McCloskey in whiteface.<sup>15</sup> More directly, and more plausibly, the assertion of a “real Negro theatre” in Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is not only opposed to Du Bois’s quest to establish a “real Negro theatre” but also building on Bert Williams and George Walker’s billing as “Two Real Coons.” Hurston’s use of the cakewalk in *Color Struck*—a play I investigate in chapter 2—suggests that it is likely that Hurston is repudiating minstrelsy’s use of the dance while simultaneously elaborating on Williams and Walker’s work.<sup>16</sup>

Similar to the stage Irishman, the history of blackface in the theatre also dates back to the Elizabethan era, but it is with the manifestation of this figure in the nineteenth century that claims were made to capture true blackness based on empirical data. And while other white actors were known for their blackface minstrel routines in the early nineteenth century, the actor believed to have popularized blackface as an art form was Thomas Dartmouth Rice. Rice’s famous song and dance “Jump Jim Crow” became so well known that the term “Jim Crow” was later used as a pejorative term against African Americans and subsequently as a term referring to legal restriction of the movements of African Americans in the South. “Daddy Rice,” as he billed himself, insisted that his performance of blackness was based on his witnessing a black man by the name of Jim Cuff or

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<sup>14</sup> See Sarika Bose’s introduction to *The Octoroon: The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Edition* regarding recent productions a 2010/2014 production by American playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and a 2013 BBC radio adaptation by British playwright Mark Ravenhill (Boucicault *The Octoroon: The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Edition* 7-19)

<sup>15</sup> See Marvin McAllister’s *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Most certainly rejecting Williams’s use of blackface.

Jim Crow.<sup>17</sup> A supposed account of Rice's first appearance as "Jim Crow" and the "circumstances—authentic in every particular—under which the first work of the distinct art of Negro Minstrelsy was presented" (Nevin 610), are recounted in an 1867 *Atlantic Monthly* article. The author, Robert P. Nevin, writes:

There was a negro in attendance at Griffith's Hotel, on Wood Street, named Cuff,—an exquisite specimen of his sort,—who won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotels. Cuff was precisely the subject for Rice's purpose...After the play, Rice, having shaded his own countenance to the "contraband" hue, ordered Cuff to disrobe, and proceeded to invest himself in the cast-off apparel. When the arrangements were complete, the bell rang, and Rice, habited in an old coat forlornly dilapidated, with a pair of shoes composed equally of patches and places for patches on his feet, and wearing a coarse straw hat in a melancholy condition of rent and collapse over a dense black wig of matted moss, waddled into view. The extraordinary apparition produced an instant effect. (609)

According to Nevin, "Jim Crow's" first appearance was so magnificent and successful that "the next day the song of Jim Crow, in one style of delivery or another, [was] on everybody's tongue" (610). Rice's blackface depiction, along with countless others in the nineteenth century, became so ubiquitous that, according to Eric Lott in *Love and Theft*, "white people [generally] believed the

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Dartmouth Rice performed around the world, including at Dublin's Royal Irish Theatre (Rauner Library).

counterfeit.” And while there were occasionally “winks and nudges folded into claims,” the “blackface hieroglyph” became in the minds of many “simply, ‘negroes’” (20). The complete expropriation of blackness in the United States makes Bert Williams and George Walker’s decision to bill their act as “Two Real Coons” in 1896 that much more understandable.



The Kings of Comedy

Bert Williams and George Walker

ca. 1898.



WILLIAMS & WALKER  
"THE TWO REAL COONS."

### The Two Real Coons

Bert Williams and George Walker

ca. 1896.

Williams and Walker had met by chance while they were both in San Francisco in 1893. In a *Theatre Magazine* article published in 1906 and titled "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," Walker wrote: "In 1893, natives from Dahomey, Africa, were imported to San Francisco to be exhibited at the Midwinter Fair. They were late in arriving in time for the opening of the Fair, and Afro-Americans were employed and exhibited for native Dahomians. Williams and Walker were among the sham native Dahomians." After having the experience of pretending to be Africans, the two men "were permitted to visit the

natives from Africa.” Walker describes this moment as a turning point for the two men and their career. In Walker’s description, coming in close proximity with native Africans for the first time—after imitating them in the fair—gave the men the tools they needed to “delineate and feature native African characters” in their own performances. The two performed for a period at the Midway Theatre in San Francisco and then turned their attention to New York, performing in traveling shows along the way. Once they arrived in New York they managed to book a show on Broadway as “Two Real Coons,” a title that played on the racial slur “coons” and was often used in minstrelsy to describe blackface performers and performances. The excitement in Walker’s tone at realizing what the duo’s niche should be is quite evident in the article. There is no calculated or measured appreciation of how complicated and problematic such performance is. Moreover, as Williams and Walker both aspired to be successful performers, the two entertainers teamed up, with Williams performing in blackface.

Race is a social construct that also has a factual foundation. In promoting their partnership as “Two Real Coons,” Williams and Walker play into the narrow boundaries that race exists in: race as simultaneously true and false. If there is any room around the narrow margins within the social construction of race and identity, Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859) might be able to contain that space. In the exploitative and racialized melodrama, Boucicault’s wife Agnes Robertson played the central character of Zoe, the tragic mulatto or octoroon who is in love with her father’s nephew George but refuses to marry him due to the South’s anti-miscegenation laws. An octoroon could very apparently be “white.” As a person of one-eighth African heritage (one white parent and the other a quadroon), an

octoroon might be able to conceal his or her African lineage, but the Scotland-born Robertson had no African heritage to speak of. In playing Zoe, Robertson was able to capitalize on what she had always done best as an actress: play multiple roles in a single performance. Also in *The Octoroon*, Robertson inhabited the spirit of minstrelsy without the burnt cork as her visually white skin gave the audience the implication of hidden blackness and consequently suggested that an authentic octoroon was on the stage. Eventually killing herself, Robertson's Zoe also reconciles the revulsion one might have had at racial mixing.<sup>18</sup> Zoe absolves George of creating children with tainted blood while Robertson's version of the performance absolves the play of an actual interracial kiss. With *The Octoroon*, Boucicault built on the duplicity of race: Robertson's white skin could be hiding her dirty blood. As Williams and Walker did with "Two Real Coons," Boucicault uses what might actually be factual in the real world to promote a theatrical production.

It was during the performance of this duplicitous minstrel melodrama in 1860 that Boucicault created the first of his major Irish plays, *The Colleen Bawn*. As Scott Boltwood writes in "The Ineffaceable Curse of Cain': Race, Miscegenation, and the Victorian Staging of Irishness," while *The Colleen Bawn* was "avowedly not intended to be an 'Irish Octoroon,' [the play] anticipates the racial conflation of Irish and African that the English ethnological imagination scientifically argued for beginning in the 1880s" (384). As I will examine later in this chapter, in the mid-nineteenth century the Irish were routinely racialized as being "white" Africans. By use of such phrases as "négres blanc," "Celtic Calibans,"

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<sup>18</sup> The suicide takes place in the American version. The play received a happy ending in London.

or “Africanoid Celts,” the Irish and those of African descent were aligned as sharing not only physical traits but cultural and behavioral characteristics also. In creating a drama that follows the hoped-for intermarrying of a landed classed gentleman to a beautiful peasant, Boucicault situates what he had done with his American minstrel to a form that represented his Irish roots. Boucicault’s constructed likeness to American theatrical racial masking and performance was not missed at the time of the debut of *The Colleen Bawn*. According to Deirdre McFeely, “The *New York Times* welcomed it as a new form of Irish drama, declaring of other Irish dramatic fare that ‘like negro [sic] minstrelsy, this fashion of fun has gone out of date’” (12). As such, when the *Times* speculated that the blackface minstrel show was no longer relevant, the first of Boucicault’s Irish plays supplanted it. To maintain the similarities further, Robertson plays the role of the inappropriate love interest, Eily O’Connor, with the title (*cailín bán*—literally “white girl” but suggesting “blonde”) overtly describing her race.

The whimsical interplay with language and race that Williams, Walker, and Boucicault engage to sell their performances speaks to the anxieties present in the nineteenth century around race. In a world where white actors could be financially if not critically successful masquerading as blacks, Williams and Walker differentiate themselves from other popular performers by suggesting that they possess a quality of “Africanness” or “blackness” that cannot be duplicated. Boucicault’s plays suggest that the possibility of blacks appearing as whites or Irish peasants disappearing into the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class threatens racial stability. Rather than acquiesce to a world that allows racial duplicity to succeed, Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* and *The Colleen Bawn* assert that

one must stay true to who one really is: Zoe is not white and thus cannot marry, and Eily works to Anglicize her “vulgar” customs but is encouraged to remain true to her authentic self. In response to Eily’s comment that “Hardress bid me not to sing any ould Irish songs,” Father Tom replies, “May the brogue of ould Ireland niver forsake your tongue—may her music niver lave yer voice—and may a true Irishwoman’s virtue niver die in your heart!” (Boucicault *Selected Plays* 208). Moreover, if Boucicault’s dramas serve as “a prototype for the Irish stage persona,” as Paul Maloney argues in *The Britannia Panopticon Music Hall and Cosmopolitan Entertainment Culture* (90), then the dramatist’s claims to delineating “the Irish peasant” works to abolish such representations of the Irish.

In a Williams and Walker or Boucicault production, accurately making sense of the authentic cultural identity of blacks and Irish is crucial to play’s success. The dramatists argue that their representations of culturally identifiable characters directly oppose the blackface minstrel or the staged Irishman. Each performer uses what had previously been determined as accurate to reveal a precisely articulated “coon” (in the case of Williams and Walker) or Irishness (in Boucicault’s position), and as a result, Williams, Walker, and Boucicault identify the blackface minstrel and staged Irishman, respectively, as inauthentic representations of each culture. Yet Williams and Walker not only use the highly inflammatory word “coon” in their production, Williams also blackens his skin as to make the portrayal more “authentic” and believable to white audiences. Boucicault’s characters distort language, practice vulgar customs, and are highly emotional. Williams and Walker’s and Boucicault’s characters end up becoming what the performers had determined was inauthentic.

Similarly Synge and Hurston suggest that their theatre directly opposes staged Irish and blackface minstrel characters. Yet their characters too distort language, exhibit great emotion, and practice vulgar customs. Are Synge's and Hurston's productions comparably "authentic," using the Irish and African American heritage of the playwrights to sincerely delineate Irish and African American characters? Perhaps. But what Synge and Hurston claim differentiates them from say Williams, Walker, and Boucicault is not just the innate authoritative nature of being able to claim Irishness or blackness since childhood. What differentiates Synge and Hurston is their use of the burgeoning field of cultural anthropology. As Hurston writes in the introduction to *Mules and Men*, she had learned that with "the spy-glass of Anthropology" she had permission to collect folklore, a genre she was familiar with "from the earliest rocking of" her cradle (1).

Ultimately Synge's and Hurston's performed ethnographies also reveal many of the dilemmas an autoethnographic researcher-practitioner faced when compiling dramas long before autoethnographic researcher-practitioners, in addition to anthropologists and ethnographers, were contemplating the place and the limits of cultural representation by authoritative outside observers. In this dissertation, I frequently note the many ways the African American Hurston was mirroring or building on the work of the Anglo-Irish Synge. However, her development as an autoethnographic researcher-practitioner seems completely independent of his influence.

W. J. Mc Cormack details in *Fool of the Family: A Life of J. M. Synge* that while in Paris Synge avoided the artist community and focused on studying.

Using Stephen MacKenna's memoirs, Mc Cormack writes that rather than spend his time with "the aspect of French life typified by the boulevards of Paris" Synge immersed himself in his studies and lectures (146). These studies and lectures in Paris "took," as Richard Fallis writes, and with the instruction of Henri D'Arbois de Jubainville and the influence of Anatole le Braz, Synge left Paris with a methodology that would impact and mold his future career (Castle 99). Hurston became interested in ethnographic research and fieldwork while at University. Hurston was studying at Barnard College (Columbia University's women's division) when a professor handed a paper of hers to Franz Boas. Not only did Boas have considerable influence on modern anthropology, he seems also to have shaped how Hurston would approach her work as a writer in her career. Robert Hemenway writes in *Zora Neal Hurston: A Literary Biography* that while "anthropology and art are not incompatible vocations, they can imply different uses of personal experience. When Hurston became fascinated with anthropology, she acquired the relatively rare opportunity to confront her culture both emotionally and analytically, both as subject and as object" (21-2). Thus, while I contend Synge's writing, and *Riders to the Sea* in particular, did impact Hurston's fiction and theatre, both authors seemed to become autoethnographic researcher-practitioners independently.

### **The Green and Black Atlantic**

It is important to acknowledge, as Peter O'Neill and David Lloyd do in *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, that the Irish and Africans began circling each other around the Atlantic as far back as the

sixteenth century. At the time, Africans were being captured and forced into slavery in the Americas, and the Irish were often forced into leaving their homes as well, migrating to unknown conditions, hoping for a better life, and often working as indentured servants.<sup>19</sup> Even still, for all these similarities, the comparable racialization of both groups brought about divergent results: the Irish eventually were able to attain full citizenship in both Ireland and the Americas by “becoming white” as Noel Ignatiev put it in his 1995 study of the same name, while those of African descent were denied citizenship in the United States and beyond. Consequently, the similarly applied racialized oppression both groups experienced in circum-Atlantic contexts gave rise to dramatically dissimilar results.

The various texts concerning what is now commonly referred to as the Black and Green Atlantic each tend to reference culture from the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, these texts seem to have inspired the evaluation of the intersections between Afro-America and Ireland. As the work of evaluating the cross-connections between the two groups was initiated at the end of the twentieth century, the vast majority of these texts reference U2, *The Crying Game* (1992), and *The Commitments* (both the popular 1991 film and the 1987 book that the film is based on). U2 is usually referenced because of the 1984 song “Pride (In the Name of Love),” which the band wrote honoring Martin Luther

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<sup>19</sup> This period is rather muddled in terms of language. “Slave” was used, but the Irish were never subjected to the conditions of chattel slaves and very quickly (historically) became indentured servants and then “low-class” or poor whites. See Matthew Reilly’s dissertation “At the Margins of the Plantation: Alternative Modernities and an Archaeology of the ‘Poor Whites’ of Barbados” for an understanding of “Cromwellian slaves” (105). Also, many of the “Cromwellian slaves” sent to Montserrat eventually became slave masters. See Donald H. Akenson, *If the Irish Ran the World: Montserrat, 1630–1730* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999).

King Jr.; due to the fact that the band's sound in the 1980s was clearly influenced by black American gospel music and the blues; and finally due to the album and film *Rattle and Hum* (1988), featuring BB King. *The Crying Game* examines how the dimensions of race, gender, and nationalism have historically affected the quest for social justice in the Irish context. And *The Commitments* is brought in either to challenge or uphold character Jimmy Rabbitte's declaration that the Irish are Europe's "niggers." In Roddy Doyle's novel, he says, "The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads."

They nearly gasped: it was so true.

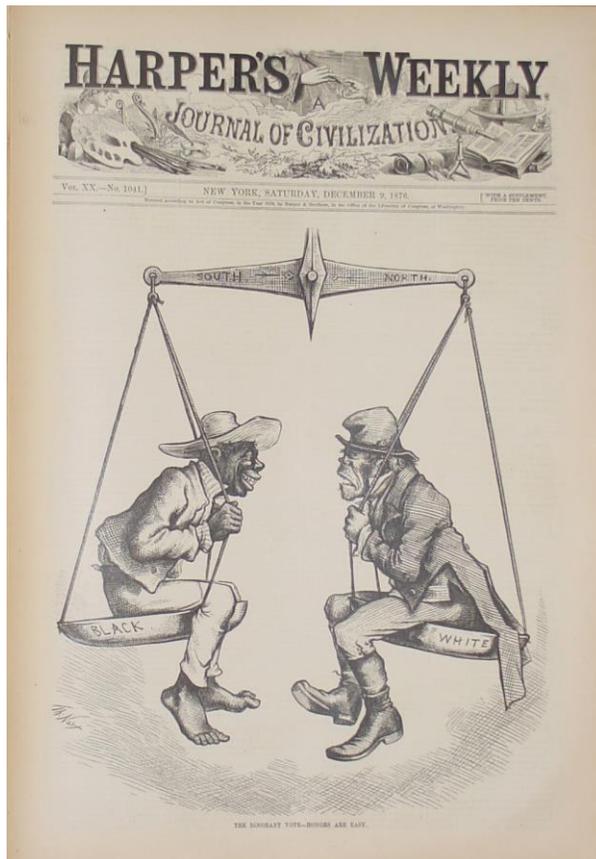
—An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin' everythin'. An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers of Dublin—Say it loud, I'm Black an' I'm proud. (9)

Texts concerning the Black and Green Atlantic also usually reach back to the nineteenth century and mention two key moments that connect blacks and Irish. One moment is the meeting of Daniel O'Connell and Frederick Douglass when the latter went to Ireland in 1845 to give a series of lectures against slavery with O'Connell, known in Ireland as the Liberator. O'Connell was fervently antislavery and is famously quoted as questioning not only "the perversion of mind and depravity of heart" of those Irish emigrants in America who supported American slavery but, significantly, their *Irishness* (Loyal National Repeal). To the Committee of the Irish Repeal Association, 11 October 1843, O'Connell wrote, "How can the generous, the charitable, the humane, the noble emotions of the Irish heart, have become extinct amongst you?" His letter continues:

How can your nature be so totally changed as that you should become the apologists and advocates of that execrable system, which makes man the property of his fellow-man—destroys the foundation of all moral and social virtues—condemns to ignorance, immorality and irreligion, millions of fellow-creatures—renders the slave hopeless of relief, and perpetuates oppression by law; and, in the name of what you call a Constitution!

It was not in Ireland you learned this cruelty. (Loyal National Repeal)

Another key example from the nineteenth century mentioned in these texts is the 9 December 1876 *Harper's Weekly* cover captioned "The Ignorant Vote-Honors Are Easy."



"The Ignorant Vote: Honors Are Easy"

Harper's Weekly

Thomas Nast

9 December 1876

The illustration, by Thomas Nast, seems to be commenting on the travesty of the African American and Irish American vote. Depicted as equally abused and unworthy of civil rights, a “coon” on one side of the scale, representing the black Republican vote, is balanced on the other side of the scale by a stereotypical Irishman with a simian countenance, representing the white Democratic vote. Even though the two “ignorant” votes by the African American and the Irish American men cancel each other out, Nast suggests in his depiction that neither group is capable of making intelligent electoral decisions in the growing American democracy. “The Ignorant Vote-Honors Are Easy” is significant in this key moment from the nineteenth century examining the Irish and African Americans together, but it is not an isolated incident. Lewis P. Curtis Jr.’s *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (1971), Liz Curtis’s *Nothing but the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (1984), and Richard Dyer’s *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997) all examine similar images from the period as examples of how the Irish have been racialized and how such images were used to depict both blacks and the Irish as inferior.

Curtis’s text extensively documents the way in which “Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic” attempted to discover mental and physical features of the Irish that connected them to simians or anthropoids (2). He starts the text by examining Gustave de Molinari’s phrase “négres blanc” (26). Molinari uses the phrase in *L’Irlande, le Canada, Jersey: lettres adressées au journal des débats* (1880) to effectively link the “white negroes [sic]” to the black simian.<sup>20</sup> “Négres

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<sup>20</sup> From *L’Irlande, le Canada, Jersey: lettres adressées au journal des débats* (1881): “Leurs journaux favoris ne laissent échapper aucune occasion de traiter les Irlandais comme une race

blanc” (or “white negroes,” as it appears in translation in the *Times*, 18 September 1880) seems to accurately grasp the consistent and popular assumption after the 1860s that certain physical and cultural features of the Irish marked them as a race of “Celtic Calibans” quite distinct from the Anglo-Saxons. The phrase also seems to suggest that the Irish provide a tracable connection between Europeans and blacks.

Curtis uses this connection to argue that the scientific “simianizing” of the Irish Paddy was cemented by anthropological and ethnological work of mid-nineteenth century. He writes that the “Reverend Wentworth Webster reported to the Anthropological Institute in 1872 on the physical and mental traits of Basques, black Celts, and fair Celts in Spain,” connecting physiognomical characteristics of the black Celts to vices such as gambling (19). Curtis also notes the work of other anthropologists, significantly that of famed Victorian ethnologist Dr. John Beddoe (1826–1911), who created the “Index of Nigrescence.” The index attempted “to quantify the amount of residual melanin in [one’s] skin” in hopes of proving what Curtis outlines was already happening in the cartoons and illustrations of the Victorian era: that the Irish were “Africanoid Celts” (20). Essentially Beddoe determined that the Celts were darker than others in the British Isles and that their “accute prognathism”—protruding jaw—belied their “African genesis” (20).

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inférieure, un variété de négres blancs, et il suffit de jete les yeux sur le Punch pour apercevoir la différence qu’ils établissent entre la robuste et saine personnification de John Bull et la méchante figure osseuse du maigre Pat” (Bean). Translated it says that the “English newspapers allow no occasion to escape them of treating the Irish as an inferior race—as a kind of white negroes [sic]—and a glance at Punch is sufficient to show the difference they establish between the plump and robust personification of John Bull and the wretched figure of lean and bony Pat” (L. P. Curtis, Jr. 1).

Such ludicrous and grotesque depictions of Irish and African Americans were quite common in the United States and the United Kingdom by the end of the nineteenth century, with simian physiognomy frequently used to illustrate the subhuman nature of each group, but “The Ignorant Vote-Honors Are Easy” is the signature image Black and Green Atlantic scholars use to convey this.

Both Liz Curtis and Richard Dyer build on Lewis P. Curtis’s work to illustrate that “colour is not the only visible physical characteristics that is used to designate white people white” (Dyer 42). Liz Curtis, whose *Nothing but the Same Old Story* traces media representation and bias during the Troubles, locates anti-Irish racism in the work of Victorian ethnologist Beddoe. She surmises that the coverage of the Troubles in England can be directly connected to the Fenian “Paddy” images of the Victorian era that suggested that the “traces of ‘Negro’ ancestry” in the Irish evidenced them as African descendants and explained their savagery and ineptitude” (55).

In *Racism in the Irish Experience*, Steve Garner introduces the “ideological non sequitur, ‘there’s no racism in Ireland because there’s no black people’” (141), which challenges the idea of exploring racialization in the Irish context in two ways: that racism cannot exist internally without the presence of nonwhite bodies and that discrimination against the Irish only existed outside a sectarian framework.<sup>21</sup> As to the first point, there is significant evidence that nonwhite, and specifically people of African descent, have been present in Ireland

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<sup>21</sup> Garner is building on Robbie McVeigh, who uses “There’s No Racism Because There’s No Black People Here” as the title of his contribution to *Divided Society: Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern Ireland*, edited by Paul Hainsworth (London: Pluto Press, 1998) (11-32).

dating back to the ninth century.<sup>22</sup> As to the second point, racism has long been present in Ireland in very specific ways. Outside of the simian images, the most common way of exploring racialization in the Irish context has been to detail prejudices the Catholic “indigenous” population faced. But, as Garner points out, “at least two other groups” have been the object of the racialization process in Ireland: “Travellers” (aka Pavees) and Jews.<sup>23</sup> Garner continues by explaining that it is the culture of these “three nominally white groups” that are “literally ‘denigrated’ or blackened so that their status lies either between ‘black’ and ‘white’ or in both at once” (142).

As Lewis P. Curtis noted, the image of the Irish as simian did not solely exist in the United Kingdom. In *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), David Roediger details how the denigration of Irish people in caricatures and elsewhere eventually assisted in the creation of white racial formation in the United States. The convergence of black and Irish in antebellum United States created a tension where, as Roediger notes, being called “an ‘Irishman’ had become nearly as great an insult as to be called a ‘nigger,’” with many nativist Americans believing that the “Irishman was a ‘nigger’, inside out” (133). But, while Irish immigrants and African Americans were considered to be equally abased groups in the eyes of many nativists, the declaration by O’Connell that there were Irish emigrants in America who supported American slavery suggests that the Irish rejected being aligned with African Americans and used their white skin as a means of distancing themselves

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<sup>22</sup> See chapter 3 in Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience*. (69-90)

<sup>23</sup> In chapter 3 of this dissertation I explore the status of Travellers alongside African American migrant labor.

from them. Roediger writes that the U.S. Democratic Party assisted in this endeavor by emphasizing the “natural rights within a government ‘made by the white men, for the benefit of the white man’, a formulation that appealed to Irish Catholics in large part because it cut off questions about their qualifications for citizenship” (144). Thus, as “The Ignorant Vote-Honors Are Easy” cartoon suggests, it is the invitation into the Democratic Party that makes whiteness available to the Irish, specifically the Catholic Irish.

Both Roediger and Noel Ignatiev centralize white racial formation in the move by Irish Americans into the Democratic Party. Ignatiev writes:

The Irish did not vote Democratic-Republican and then Democratic out of sentimental attachment to those who gave them the vote. The Democratic Party eased their assimilation as whites, and more than any other institution, it taught them the meaning of whiteness. (89)

Becoming Democrats did help the Irish move from the conflated status with African Americans in the antebellum era, yet twelve years after the Civil War “The Ignorant Vote-Honors Are Easy” exhibits that the Irish had not moved far up the hierarchical racial scale in the postbellum era. The famous *Harper’s Weekly* cover proves that, heading into the twentieth century, the Irish still existed in an indeterminate region between black and white.

The relationship between the Irish and African Americans that appears in *How the Irish Became White* and *The Wages of Whiteness* explores the transformation of various European migrant groups to the United States in the nineteenth century into the all-inclusive identity of whiteness. The texts not only explore the process by which Irish emigrants assimilated into American society to

become “white,” they also focus on the process of racial formation and exclusion as it was practiced in Ireland. Yet, while both of those texts detail and address Irish oppression in Ireland, Roediger and Ignatiev argue that Irish immigrants and their descendants in the United States went to great lengths to avoid the discriminatory exclusion they had experienced in their home country. They conclude that Irish American workers, primarily, began to self-identify as “white” and participated sometimes in violent behavior in order to distance themselves from non-European American labor.

The early twentieth century is a crucial moment for this study, but the relationship between Ireland and Afro-America does not begin then. As mentioned above, the Irish and African Americans had comparable circum-Atlantic experiences, and, while the consequences of racialization play out differently for each group, the similarity of their mutual experience of being othered led to multiple shared encounters over centuries. Yet, while these further support the interconnectedness between Ireland and Afro-America, it was not until the Harlem Renaissance that black American authors began using the Irish experience as a way of directly affecting the quality of black American lives. In using literature and the arts as a way of inspiring racial consciousness, blacks in the United States directly suggested the Irish Renaissance as an exemplary model. As for the Irish, this measure would not be reciprocated until the Troubles broke out in the late 1960s, when the U.S. civil rights movement would initially model how a civil disobedience campaign might be achieved.

## **Early Twentieth-Century Literature of the Green and Black Atlantic**

Competition for jobs and the steady Irish climb into whiteness continued to distance Irish Americans and African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century, but that did not stop the writers of the Harlem Renaissance from looking to Ireland for inspiration regarding social, political, and cultural transformation.

In the 1925 title essay that defined the Harlem Renaissance generation, “The New Negro,” Alain Locke calls on Harlem artists to seize “upon [their] first chances for group expression and self determination,” and hoping that “[w]ithout pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia” (7). Locke also specifically points to Synge as an artist the New Negro writers could turn to for specific guidance about how to go against the tide among the older generation of black writers who, according to Locke, insisted that “art must fight social battles and compensate social wrongs” (50). He writes:

Just as with the Irish Renaissance, there were the riots and controversies over Synge’s folk plays and other frank realisms of the younger school, so we are having and will have turbulent discussion and dissatisfaction with the stories, plays and poems of the younger Negro group. But writers like Randolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Eric Walrond, Willis Richardson, and Langston Hughes take their material objectively with attached artistic vision; they have no thought of their racy folk types as typical of anything but themselves or of their being taken or mistaken as racially representative. (50)

For his part, James Weldon Johnson calls on “the colored poet in the

United States [to] do what Synge did for the Irish” and “find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation” (*Book of American Negro Poetry* xl).<sup>24</sup> He also wrote about Ireland and the Irish people in the editorial section of the influential African American newspaper the *New York Age* (1887–1953). In these articles, including one that specifically considers the “Irish question,” Johnson frequently juxtaposes what he frames as Irish colonization by British rule with the African American experience and the “African for Africans” movement. In an article titled “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Clansman,” published on 4 March 1915, Johnson questions the wide distribution of *The Birth of a Nation*, which was scheduled to be the first American film privately screened at the White House, and cites Irish American protests of films and plays that portrayed stage Irish characters to support African American protesters. He writes: “The 100,000 colored citizens of this city [New York] stand united and determined to see that [*The Birth of the Nation*] shall not be produced in such a manner as will misrepresent and vilify us as a race” (*Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson* 13). Frequently in the pages of the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded and edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, similar analogies between Ireland and Afro-America were considered as well.

Locke, Johnson, and Du Bois not only influenced Harlem Renaissance writers but also helped shape many of their careers, including Hurston’s.

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<sup>24</sup> Willis Richardson also comments about the playwright Synge. See *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 438.

Interestingly, few of the critics that compare the movements, most significantly Tracy Mishkin, note the reproach Synge experienced for his perceived patronizing of indigenous folk Irish culture and the infusing of standard English with “the idioms, rhythms, and syntax” (Mathews 9) from the Irish language. What her contemporaries assailed Hurston for, they hailed Synge for achieving in his writing.

Of all the Harlem Renaissance writers who drew on a depiction of a colonized Ireland and the success of using art as a device to end that colonization, Claude McKay went further than the aforementioned authors in comparing the Irish system of oppression with the oppression of blacks. McKay, whose travels around the world earned him “the moniker of ‘Playboy of the Harlem Renaissance’” (Jenkins 279), joined international protests against British colonialism and wrote articles connecting Irish and African diasporic oppression, including the most famous of these articles, “How Black Sees Green and Red.” Moreover, Irish Revivalist folklorists significantly affected much of what McKay wrote. McKay was a Jamaican by birth, and Lee M. Jenkins uses that fact to help establish him as Afro-British in “‘Black Murphy’: Claude McKay and Ireland.” Jenkins writes that McKay’s “political position” and his writings “owed much to his association with Irish radicals” (288). While Synge’s technique with dialect is evident in the manner Johnson captures the lyricism of African American preachers in *God’s Trombones*, McKay’s affinity for Ireland is present in his work, from his poetry to his novels.

Because of the clear impact that the Irish Renaissance had on the Harlem movement, African Americanists tend to mention one or more of the connections

noted above. George Hutchinson details some of the significant connections and influences George Bernard Shaw, Yeats, Synge, and James Joyce had on Harlem Renaissance writers, even highlighting the frequency with which Synge appears “in discussions of how to treat black ‘dialect’ in the [nineteen] teens and twenties” (*Harlem Renaissance* 111). Michael A. Chaney uses the influential representation of Irish writers on Harlem writers to examine the “international dimensions” and “transnational shape of the movement” which, according to Chaney, are too often limited to discussions of the movement’s national impact and significance in contrast to the very international explorations of the Harlem writers themselves (41).

If only in a limited capacity, African Americanist scholars have understood the influence of the Irish Renaissance on the Harlem Renaissance. Yet the same cannot be said of Irish studies scholars examining literature from that same period. Synge’s use of dialect considerably influenced black writing, from the work of Harlem Renaissance writers to the work of Amiri Baraka and Derek Walcott, among other black writers throughout the twentieth century. Yet many Irish studies scholars, including the critics I cite in this study, do not typically consider how Synge’s work influenced such authors. One aim of this dissertation, accordingly, is to illustrate how such a comparative perspective might prove enriching to Irish studies more generally.

For example, there are considerable discussions concerning Synge’s use of language. In *J. M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971*, an article by Alan J. Bliss discusses the homogeneity of Synge’s dialect. He writes that there have been many criticisms of the dialect Synge created for his theatre, mostly because “all

Synge's characters speak alike" (43). Essentially this criticism is derived from the fact that there is an array of classes and Irish regions displayed in Synge's plays, but the nuance of the different dialects one would hear in Ireland is not reflected. Bliss counters such arguments by stating, "The language of Synge ought to be subject to the same mode of criticism as Shakespeare's verse: is it or is it not a suitable medium for poetic drama?" (55). In the same collection, Seamus Deane writes "Synge's Poetic Use of Language" not to discuss "Synge's use of poetic language" but "poetic language" itself (127). In the article Deane shows an awareness of the similarities between Synge's language and that of non-Irish writers from the same period—but does not refer to African American writers whose work Synge influenced. Similar to Synge, the non-Irish writers Deane mentions would have tried to merge an oral tradition with a more "cosmopolitan language of pallid joylessness—one fading, the other encroaching" (131). A mention of Hurston's material would have been fruitful in this context.

In *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*, Nicholas Grene dedicates an entire chapter to Synge's use of dialect. In the chapter, "Development of Dialect," and throughout the text, Grene considers the perceived "artificiality" (56) and "created authenticity" (29) of Synge's constructed dialect. Grene writes that the process "by which the dialect [Synge] heard was elaborated into the language of the plays, was not simple selection but a radical reshaping. It was a method of creation which suited Synge temperamentally" (*Synge* 83). According to Grene, the "plastic medium" eventually proves the cultivated material we recognize as Synge's Hiberno-English dialect (*Synge* 83). And, while the vast majority of work on Synge's dialect concerns the political dimensions of the vernacular speech in

his plays, Mary C. King's contribution to *A J. M. Synge Literary Companion* concerns Synge's "preoccupation with the nature of language itself" (192). King argues that Synge's interest in language most likely started at home, with his mother's focus on a literal interpretation of the Bible. The switch of his attention to Ireland's "peasant language" thus was "an attempt to confront and resolve the tensions in his Ascendency experience," which was the decline of the Ascendency class during his lifetime (192).

There are also many discussions of Synge's influence and impact on theatre outside of Ireland. In *A Centenary Tribute to J. M. Synge 1871–1909*, of the twenty-three contributions, four of the articles consider Synge's non-Irish influence. The articles look into how Synge's work has contributed to theatre in "the Arab World," in Japan, in France, and in Germany. And in *Interpreting Synge*, Martin Hilský's contribution, "Re-imagining Synge's Language: The Czech Experience," examines the cultivation of Synge's dialect into both the standard Czech and then "the colloquial Czech of the variety commonly spoken in Prague" (152). Hilský not only considers the major Czech translations of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), he also works through the debates regarding Synge's use of language, the paradox of Synge's words "since literary or poetic language never is, nor can be, mere transcription of 'real' or 'overheard' language" (152). Ultimately, in detailing of how language operates in *Playboy*, Hilský articulates how he was able to create his own translation of the play. However, as I will illustrate below, Declan Kiberd, author of *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979), *The Irish Writer and the World* (2005), and *Inventing Ireland* (1996), among other works, seems to be the first major Irish studies critic to observe an

awareness of the African American dimensions of Synge's influence.

By 1997, Irish studies scholars were acknowledging a direct connection between the Irish and Harlem Renaissances. However, more typically, the connection was made in a brief mention rather than a serious consideration of how significant the work of the two renaissance movements are related to each other. For example, in "Irish American Modernism" (2014), Joe Cleary distinguishes Irish American literary modernism from the "roughly contemporaneous Irish and African American modernisms" (175). Cleary argues that the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, and Eugene O'Neill, among other Irish American writers, does not share the similar contextualization of regional and racial identity of Irish modernists. Moreover, he suggests that "there was no equivalent either to an Irish or Harlem Renaissance that served as a common crucible of renewal" (176). Irish American writers neither conceive of their writing in a particularly "Irish" sense, nor does their writing address an Irish American cultural revival or a larger identity crisis of acceptance.<sup>25</sup> While Irish and African American literature was a significant aspect of larger political questions of distinction, individuality, and the rights of the collective, the work of Irish American authors seemed to operate singularly in the rejection of "an Irish American ethnic identity" and the adoption of a more complex "Americanness" (178). Yet, in "From Nationalism to Liberation" (1997), Kiberd directly connects Synge's use of dialect to African American writing by recalling the Johnson quote

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<sup>25</sup> Cleary writes: "For purposes of abbreviation, the term 'Irish American' refers hereafter to Irish American writers [of] Catholic background. As the case of Cowell reminds us, there are many Irish Americans of Protestant origin, commonly self-designated 'Scots Irish' or 'Scotch-Irish.' But the writers considered here emerged from an Irish American Catholic background and will be assessed in the context" (11).

on the “technique of Synge” (*Writer and the World* 154).

More frequently, however, Kiberd has used the work of Yeats to exhibit an awareness of how interrelated African American culture and Irish culture can be. When examining “Easter 1916,” in “The War against the Past,” an essay first published in 1988, Kiberd writes that in infantilizing “the fallen rebels in much the same way as they obligingly, if unconsciously, infantilised themselves,” Yeats’s poem “ends by hinting that the rebels were really children, not full moral agents, and therefore forgivable—as far beyond or below the law as a black in the American South in the mid-nineteenth century” (*Writer and the World* 174). And, more recently (2006), in “Yeats and Criticism,” Kiberd briefly refers to the use of the vernacular in African American writing to address a larger point about the use of Hiberno-English in writing during the Irish Renaissance. In the article, Kiberd explores a range of Yeats’s critical writings as postcolonial critiques, which he states are the “founding documents” in the larger movement of “cultural decolonization” (“Yeats and Criticism” 125). Further, Kiberd suggests that Yeats supported the idea that “Hiberno-English—the dialect spoken by the country people who still thought in Irish while using English words—should be given official recognition” (“Yeats and Criticism” 125). For Kiberd, the “colonized” minds of Irish people prohibited even the possibility of a formal usage of Hiberno-English, such as in universities and in newspaper articles, which would have elevated the hybrid language of the people. Instead, the Irish opted to forgo “the idiom forged out of the trauma of language-loss in nineteenth-century Ireland” rather than preceding the debates in African American communities regarding “the validity of using dialect in African-American texts” (“Yeats and

Criticism" 125).

Throughout Kiberd's other works on modern Irish literature, including other articles in *The Irish Writer and the World* and most notably *Inventing Ireland*, he continues to show an awareness of twentieth-century African American culture and occasionally comments on the shared sensibility of Irish and African American literary authors. This ranges from a comment in the introduction to *The Irish Writer and the World* about "Seamus Heaney's redefinition of the 'bog myth'" and how it is "probably modelled (in his case) on the 'black-is-beautiful' movement which he witnessed in Berkeley in the early 1970s" (*Writer and the World* 3) to awareness that Sean O'Casey's writing had particular influence "among emerging black writers" in early twentieth century and that Hughes was especially fond of O'Casey's "Irishmen" (*Inventing Ireland* 221).

In classic conversations of the cultural connections between Irish and African American writing or, more specifically, the Irish and Harlem Renaissances, there is a minimal awareness of how important the two movements are for each other. And, especially when considering the Harlem Renaissance, the writers of that era used the Irish Renaissance as a model to construct a philosophical and artistic movement of cultural regeneration and distinction from the traditional. Yet not until the 1980s and 1990s was a concrete awareness of these influences and similarities among scholars on both sides of the Atlantic fully acknowledged. In fact, while the transatlantic turn in Irish studies of 1980s and 1990s brought an awareness of the intersections between Afro-America and Ireland, most often Kiberd and other Irish studies scholars

who examine Ireland as a postcolonial state connect Ireland to the peoples of the African diaspora rather than singularly to Afro-America.

Scholars such as Kiberd, Luke Gibbons, and David Lloyd reference the connections between Ireland and people of the African diaspora or other “nonwhite” peoples mostly as a way to draw attention to the manner in which the Irish have been racialized. Gibbons notes in his article “Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History” (1981), that the words “white” and “native” are often referred to as “mutually exclusive” categories, ignoring Ireland and the Irish people who have been “both ‘native’ and ‘white’ at the same time” (“Race against Time” 95). Gibbons suggests that it is because the Irish have white skin that “the Irish question” leads theorists such as Sheridan Gilley to wonder “at what point vague talk about Celtic character amounts to ‘racial prejudice’” (“Race against Time” 96).<sup>26</sup> In “Unapproved Roads: Ireland and Post-Colonial Identity,” an essay published in 1995, Gibbons builds not only on these ideas but also on work from Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* (1994) and Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* to expand an understanding of how Irish identity interrelates with peoples of the African diaspora. More particularly he examines how Irish and African Americans share “a bitter legacy of servitude and ignominy”

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<sup>26</sup> In the article, Gilley writes, “Not that instating these weakness I wish to refute all proper comparison between ‘Saxon’ attitudes to Irishmen and Negroes, for such a comparison can be made in more or less sensible forms, and there are points of similarity, for example, in the American nativist responses to a variety of ethnic minorities, including Irish immigrants and Negroes. But I do wish to refute the easy equation of the two, an equation which neglects all the important differences between them” (191). For the complete perspective from Gilley, see “English Attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780–1900” (81-110). For a similar analysis, also see Roy Foster’s *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011). In the text, Foster refers to the “historical sleight of hand, or some selective amnesia about the tangled racial origins of most inhabitants of the island” (89) and questions “whether the generalizations of simple racial prejudice against the Irish really apply” (193).

that should exist outside of the white-nonwhite racial binary since “the Irish historically were classified as ‘non-white’, and treated accordingly” (*Transformations in Irish Culture* 175). Gibbons’s exploration brings the reader to the moment at the end of the twentieth century when the “free play of hybridity and cultural mixing” between Irish and African Americans poses challenging questions regarding how identity is bartered through such cultural exchange (*Transformations in Irish Culture* 172). He writes: “Another way of negotiating identity through an exchange with the other is to make provision, not just for ‘vertical’ mobility from the periphery to the centre, but for ‘lateral’ journeys along the margins which short-circuit the colonial divide” (*Transformations in Irish Culture* 180).

Lloyd uses similar language in his article “Ireland after History” (2008). Lloyd argues that it is the “apparent whiteness of the Irish” that has typically precluded them from “being identified with peoples of color” (“Ireland after History” 382). He argues that such a position is challenging: “What slips in here at the foundation of the argument is both the problematic history of racialization and a prior assumption, masked by the racial issue, as to the incomparability of the Irish experience to non-European ones” (“Ireland after History” 382). In “Ireland after History,” Lloyd is building on some of the key concepts he first developed in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1993). Using the framework Frantz Fanon created in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1959), Lloyd complicates “the precepts of bourgeois nationalism” that occur in the formation of the postcolonial intellectual (*Anomalous States* 3). Lloyd writes that the politics of aesthetic culture formation

can occur in “anomalous states” that must be conceived “outside the terms of representation” (*Anomalous States* 89).

And again, when examining the articles in *The Irish Writer and the World*, Kiberd uses the Négritude movement, and especially the work of Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor, to articulate a better understanding of Ireland as a postcolonial state. This point is particularly evident in “White Skins, Black Masks: Celticism and *Négritude*” (1996) and “From Nationalism to Liberation” (1997). “White Skins, Black Masks: Celticism and *Négritude*” pulls its name from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, and in the article Kiberd works through the relatable instances of Ireland’s decolonization process to the eventual struggle that will take place across the African continent “forty years” after “Europe’s only European colony” was able to withdraw (133). In this article, Kiberd also uses the cross-cultural comparative model to examine the significance of the “Irish experience to that of other emerging nations” (133). In “From Nationalism to Liberation” Kiberd returns to the writers of the Négritude movement to again justify the use of a comparative framework within Irish studies. He also suggests that a psychological decolonization is needed to move a people beyond nationalism to liberation. Kiberd specifically builds on Fanon’s ideas to gesture toward “the realization of the raceless society,” which might allow for the attainment of liberation (157).

The work that Kiberd, Gibbons, and Lloyd began in the 1980s moved Irish studies toward a more transnational approach. Instead of viewing Ireland’s highly complicated and contested history through an insular and nationalistic perspective, these three theorists began examining Irish history and culture as

analogous to what they claimed were similarly oppressed histories and cultures. It is not by coincidence that major critics in Irish studies began taking this approach in the 1980s. Violence in Northern Ireland was steadily increasing after nearly three decades of continuous conflict. This of course does not include the violent circumstances of the early 1900s that led to the partitioning of Northern Ireland and what was then the Irish Free State. Shortly thereafter, African and African American studies, and diaspora studies in general, were transformed by the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). In this book, Gilroy challenges the approach of several academic disciplines by suggesting that instead of approaching modernity through the specific lens of "nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity," cultural critics should realize that these values "are characteristically modern phenomena" (Gilroy 2). The text specifically examines the African diasporic experience by reconsidering the way in which the African American tradition is evaluated. Instead of viewing the culture within its national borders Gilroy considers the European and African influences that helped shape African American ideology. The approach was particularly transformative because Gilroy examined how black identity was shaped by circum-Atlantic experiences resulting from the transatlantic slave trade. Ultimately Gilroy argues against "ethnic absolutism" in general. He writes:

In opposition to both nationalistic or ethnically absolute approaches, I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the

modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective. (Gilroy 15)

Significantly impacting Americanists scholarly approach, Gilroy's seminal text strongly informed the work of many later scholars, including Gibbons, Lloyd, Liam Kennedy, John Brannigan, and Diane Negra. As such, the transnational approach to Irish and American literature was reexamined through the holistic perspective of Gilroy's text.

*Transformations in Irish Culture* (1996) is a collection of essays that Gibbons wrote between 1983 and 1995. Its preface, introduction, and final article, "Unapproved Roads," display a more specific awareness of the cultural connections between Irish and African Americans, evidencing the effect Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* had on Gibbons's writing. Further, the articles also exhibit development toward the concept of a Green Atlantic using Gilroy's theory regarding the Black Atlantic. Gibbons suggests that the "similar uprooting" of the Irish "after the atrocities of the 1798 rebellion and the devastation of the Great Famine" led to a disbursement of Irish people around the Atlantic (*Transformations in Irish Culture* 6). The Irish experience of forced emigration is not the same as the forced disbursement and enslavement of African peoples. Nevertheless, there are similarities between the Irish and their circum-Atlantic descendants to that of the African slaves and their circum-Atlantic descendants. Moreover, according to Gibbons, "the Irish did not have to await the twentieth century to undergo the shock of modernity: disintegration and fragmentation were already part of its history so that, in a crucial sense, Irish culture experienced modernity before its time"

(*Transformations in Irish Culture* 6). This position most obviously builds on Gilroy's concept of a Black Atlantic, but it also develops out of the work Gibbons, Lloyd, and Kiberd constructed when they, according to Lloyd, moved Irish studies away from the "symptomatic of the continuing meshing of Irish cultural nationalism with the imperial ideology which frames it" (*Anomalous States* 37). The postcolonial perspective of deconstructing essentialized Irish identity, like the work of Gilroy, in turn led to revolutionary work in the way Irish studies scholars approached Irish literature.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars such as Kennedy, Negra, and Brannigan have provided an awareness of the cross-cultural experience of Irish and African Americans. Unlike their forbears, the new critics have fully integrated a consideration of interrelated Irish and African diasporic history, culture, and literature. Kennedy, Negra, and Brannigan have constructed arguments that directly theorize on Irish identity in relation to blackness. For instance, in *Race and Urban Space in American Culture* (2000), Kennedy explores how Irish Americans, African Americans, and other marginalized nonwhites have been racialized in urban American spaces. According to Kennedy, of particular interest to the text is how literary memory functions in "selected urban novels by Irish-American and African-American authors" that attempt to reconstruct significant historical and cultural events in relation to the present circumstances of the authors (53). This point of inquiry is particularly important considering, as Kennedy recalls, the "ethnic revivalism" that occurred in 1970s America (53).

The essays collected in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and*

*Popular Culture*, edited by Negra (2006), answer the editor's call to examine how Irishness has been presented, co-opted, and ultimately performed in contemporary Irish and American cultures. Negra writes that at the time the text was published, Irishness provided a consistent form of "global capitalism" that enabled "a form of discursive currency, motivating and authenticating a variety of heritage narratives and commercial transactions, often through its status of 'enriched whiteness'" (1). Thus, even though the Irish are fully white, their contemporary racialized status of Irishness in a post-Celtic Tiger, globalized world still manages to draw comparative analysis with black American identity.

Brannigan's *Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture* (2009) attempts to reread critical modern Irish texts, including James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer*. Brannigan's goal is to establish that in the post-Celtic Tiger era race and multi-ethnicism are depicted as being new to Ireland, yet racial hierarchy and emphasis on racial difference has long been part of Irish identity and culture. Further, Brannigan claims, there is a suggestion in contemporary Irish culture "that racism persists [only] at a popular or folk level" but that the Irish state and its "political representatives" discourage the adverse reaction to the newly integrated, multiethnic Ireland (8). However, Brannigan's text argues against such claims. He writes that "race and racism in Irish society did not begin with contemporary sociologists [and] . . . that many writers and artists, whether they were themselves adherents or critics of racial ideologies, exposed the functional dependence of the Irish nation-state upon race, in various guises, from its foundations" (11). Thus *Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture* works to detail the ways in which racialization has historically existed in Irish literature

and culture long before, as the 2004 referendum of the Irish constitution suggests, “the ‘flood’ of refugees and asylum seekers’, particularly from Africa” landed in Ireland to lay claim to a European, Irish citizenship (8).

The use of the phrase “Green and Black Atlantic” or “Green Atlantic” might lead some researchers to believe in a parallel traversing experience for Irish emigrants to the Americas and African slaves who first crossed the Atlantic via the middle passage. For the most part, Irish studies scholars who have taken up this comparative approach have avoided the equation of those two separate and unique transatlantic experiences. Nevertheless, going back the eighteenth century, the Irish have drawn parallels between the enslavement of black Africans and the marginalization of Irish Catholics in Ireland. In 1792, the Belfast newspaper the *Northern Star* published “The Negroe’s Complaint” and “The Dying Negro,” poems that attempted to draw sympathy for enslaved Africans while also suggesting that the Irish were metaphorically “slaves” in their own country. In “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” Lloyd borrows Toni Morrison’s term “rememory” in consideration of how “the Irish Famine (1845–51) constituted a crisis of representation not only for those that underwent it and witnessed it but also for those who live in its wake” (“Indigent Sublime” 56).<sup>27</sup> In the footnote, Lloyd goes on to write that, in the context of the Irish Famine, Morrison’s term “rememory” “seems particularly apt given her deployment of it in relation to the Middle Passage, an atrocity that for many the Irish experience of the coffin ships recalled” (56). And the shared memory of hardship and pain

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<sup>27</sup> David Lloyd publishes earlier as: *The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger* in *Representations* Vol. 92, No. 1 (Fall 2005), pp. 152-185 Published by: University of California Press.

does join the two transatlantic experiences. Yet the texts that are fundamental to understanding the development of the Green Atlantic continually construct arguments that focus on cultural similarities between Ireland and Afro-America rather than the cultural productions of Irish and African Americans. It is my position that the comparative relationship between those artistic contributions, rather than the singular focus on cultural similarities, will further our understanding of the performance of race. It is through the cultural productions of Irish and African Americans that my study concentrates on.

In the 1990s, Tracy Mishkin's *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances: Language, Identity, and Representation* (1998) was the first study to not only acknowledge the overlap between Irish and African American literatures but also to devote an entire project to consider comparatively the historic significance of, and the similarities and differences between, the two movements. As I have outlined, before the publication of *The Irish and Harlem Renaissances* no previous study had seriously considered the two movements even though there was sufficient evidence linking them. For instance, Kiberd references African American modernists or renaissance authors, such as Hughes and Johnson, but does not examine the similarities in depth. A comparative study is not the main goal of the aforementioned texts. In Mishkin's text, both movements are investigated at length to evidence the intersections between them. Instead of a brief acknowledgement, Mishkin outlines a basic understanding of both movements and then illustrates the artistic and political similarities between them. In this respect, Mishkin's text is important and innovative.

Yet Mishkin's study remains in its nascent stage because she does not

provide deep analysis on specific authors of the renaissances, which would have bolstered her claims of a connection between them. While many critics have highlighted Synge specifically as an influence on the Harlem Renaissance, few studies have concretely illustrated what it is that Synge accomplished as a playwright and an ethnographer that may have helped develop similar strategies in Harlem Renaissance writing. Mishkin writes that authors on both sides of the Atlantic were propelled by “the past, the peasants, and religion” in their work, but she neglects effectively to illustrate these tendencies in the work of Irish and Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Synge and Hurston (69). Mishkin’s study, while accurately detailing the many layers of Irish and African American historical connections at the beginning of the twentieth century, stops short of fully illustrating the manner in which Irish and Harlem Renaissance era writers used memory, marginalization, and language to reconstruct their “nation within a nation” (69). My work moves to build on and enhance Mishkin’s study.

Since Mishkin’s book, other studies have moved to expand the foundational material she established. *Blackness and Transatlantic Irish Identity: Celtic Soul Brothers* (2010) by Lauren Onkey focuses on Irish and African American culture from the latter part of the twentieth century. Onkey primarily examines the way in which Irish artists such as Roddy Doyle and Van Morrison describe themselves as inheritors of African American culture to assert their own “blackness.” In *Haptic Allegories: Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic* (2013) Kathleen Gough builds on Gilroy and Joseph Roach’s concept of “surrogation” to show how five key moments in Black and Green relations have been performed and gendered. Through a comparative

examination of slavery and the famine, the Irish and Harlem Renaissances, Jim Crow segregation and the Irish question, the civil rights movements in America and Northern Ireland, and globalization in Celtic Tiger Ireland, Gough focuses her cultural study entirely on performance.

In this study, I examine Synge and Hurston's texts, particularly their performed ethnographies and the ethnographic material that the performed ethnographies are based on, to establish the authors as autoethnographic researchers. I use their material to exemplify how a comparative analysis of Irish and African American cultural productions, particularly Irish and African American literature and theatre, contributes to a scholarly understanding of the performance of race. I attempt to better understand how racialized peoples and a performance of their cultural practices function in artificial spaces such as the theatre.

Victor Turner and his wife Edith Turner describe performed ethnographies as a methodological approach to "aid students' understanding of how people in other cultures experience the richness of their social existence . . . in accordance with cultural expectations" (33). Synge and Hurston use performed ethnographies to present depictions of culture that join the discursive and the experiential and exist somewhere in between. In actively joining their qualitative research with their artistic cultural products, Synge and Hurston prove Richard Schechner's position that performed ethnographies exist "between theatre and anthropology" by providing what Dwight Conquergood suggests is a negotiation of "the binary opposition between theory and practice" ("Performance Studies" 145). By scripting ethnographies, Synge and Hurston attempt to stage a

representational Irish and African American culture, respectively, theatrical presentations that challenges previous inauthentic depictions of Irish and African Americans, such as the Paddy and blackface caricatures.

### **Irish Influences on African American Writing**

Since the famed meeting between Frederick Douglass and Daniel O'Connell, black writers have frequently made a case for Irish “freedom,” even up to the 1990s, highlighting the way in which the Irish struggle for civil rights in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland had been akin to the post-slavery African American quest for civil rights in the United States. In two articles in 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois first notes how “the Irish question,” in addition to the “sins” against Rhodesia, India, and Egypt, diminishes his appreciation for England. He writes that he was “raised in an atmosphere of admiration—almost of veneration—for England” (“England” 107) but that the reverence for the land and its people decreased as his knowledge grew of what England had done to people of color around the world. He ends the article titled “England” by stating:

There are two paths out: Ireland, India, and Egypt must become independent, self-governing, states. Home rule must be granted to the West Indians and civilized West Africa. The natives of South Africa must be delivered from the Union of South Africa. Either this, or the world must gird itself anew to meet a tyranny which looms as portentous as the God-defying dreams of Germany and which portends even greater bitterness, because it involves the up-striving and embittered darker races of the whole earth. (108)

Acknowledgement of the fact that the Irish are not actually people of color but were treated as he saw other nonwhite peoples being treated around the world is never made in this article. In a follow-up article titled “England, Again,” Du Bois writes that his “England” article received criticism for supporting Ireland and its people when Irish Americans were responsible for so much vitriol, hostility, and violence toward blacks in America.<sup>28</sup> Yet while acknowledging the damage Irish Americans caused to the relationship with blacks in America, especially since there have been Irishmen and Irish Americans who led and instigated “the riots against Negroes in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York, during the nineteenth century, in nearly all cases” Du Bois writes that “one cannot indict a whole nation, nor can excuse a national wrong, because of individual right, or past desert. Ireland today deserves freedom. She has suffered, and suffered horribly, at the hands of Englishmen” (“England, Again” 237-38).

Since knowledge of Synge’s plays first traveled across the Atlantic, black authors in America have consistently praised what Synge himself claims to accomplish in his writing. Synge’s use of dialect and, as Alain Locke suggests in “The Drama of Negro Life,” the assumption that Synge’s work should be used as a source of inspiration to black writers who strived “to beautify the native idioms of [Negro] folk life” in an attempt to recover “the ancestral folk tradition” appear to have also influenced Hurston. There is no direct connection that I can locate

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<sup>28</sup> Du Bois specifically references riots and the marginalization. He writes that “the riots against Negroes in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York, during the nineteenth century, in nearly all cases were instigated and led by Irishmen. More than this: today, the decisive influence in the American Catholic Church, which keeps black priests out of her pulpits, is the Irish influence,—for the mother Catholic Church is not, and never was, anti-Negro. Her black priests and bishops have for a thousand years sat in her counsels, and the first Catholic bishop of North America, was a full-blooded Negro” (237).

between Synge and Hurston, but as I explain in more detail throughout this dissertation it is more than likely that she knew of the author and that his work, specifically his use of language, influenced how she approached writing dialect. In addition to regular mentions of Synge by her contemporaries throughout the Harlem Renaissance years—I will detail below—it can be inferred that Hurston was aware of Synge and his work because she informs her readers on multiple occasions that she has had an interest in Irish literature since childhood.

In the 1942 collection *Twentieth Century Authors*, edited by Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, Hurston wrote a two-page autobiography. Toward the end of the profile Hurston lists the names of some writers she likes. She writes, “In authors I like Anatole France, Maxim Gorky, George Bernard Shaw, Victor Hugo, Mark Twain, Dickens, Robert Nathan, Willa Cather, Irvin S. Cobb, Anne Lindbergh, the Chinese philosophers, and Sinclair Lewis. I read every bit of Irish folk material that I can get hold of” (695).<sup>29</sup> The list, a sampling of Hurston’s literary preferences, illustrates how far-reaching her reading tastes were. However, what is also revealed is that Irish literature is a subject she follows. Besides “every bit of Irish folk material that [she] can get hold of,” Hurston mentions Shaw as a writer she reads.<sup>30</sup> In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston also writes of a life-changing moment when she was in “fifth grade reading” and she received a box of books from two white ladies in Minnesota she had previously met when they visited Eatonville; along with at least four other books, *Gulliver’s Travels* is in the box (*Dust Tracks* 34–39). The books Hurston received in that

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<sup>29</sup> No black writers listed.

<sup>30</sup> She and Shaw shared the literary and theatrical agent Elisabeth Marbury, and Hurston mentions Shaw’s name in a letter (Kaplan 256) and in *Tell My Horse* (8).

box seemed to have had an impact her future career as there is a possibility that Hurston borrowed a line from Swift's tale. While in the kingdom of Luggnagg, Gulliver informs the reader that upon introduction he must signify to the king with the phrase, "My tongue is in the mouth of my friend" (234). This is how Gulliver introduces his interpreter. The connection to Hurston's "mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf," said by Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (*Their Eyes* 9), could be a coincidence. However, the fact that Gulliver turns out to be a quite skilled linguist, who quickly masters the fundamentals of "alien languages and even [becomes] an expert translator" (66), makes it seem possible that Hurston is signifying the Irish author in *Their Eyes*. This point also seems particularly feasible considering what Carole Fabricant claims were Swift's own complex ideas around language. In "Swift the Irishman," Fabricant writes that Swift simultaneously wanted to "'fix' the English language and purge it of all eccentric or non-standard vocabulary" while "delighting in colloquial and dialectical forms of speech, in made-up vocabularies, and in all those aspects of language most susceptible to variation and change" (66). The mix of a formal language with a constructed colloquial language is present in many of Hurston creative works. Examining one of her earliest publications, "John Redding Goes to Sea" (1921) might give insight into understanding the influence Irish writers, particularly Synge, and possibly Swift, had on Hurston.

The title of the short story might give pause to a reader familiar with Synge's work. But since Hurston does not seem to mention Synge or any of his works by name it is impossible to ascertain solely from the similar titles, "John Redding Goes to Sea" and *Riders to the Sea*, whether Hurston used Synge's play

as a map for her story. However, upon reading the story of the young man who desires to venture out onto the sea against his mother's pleadings, the connections between the two pieces becomes more evident. John's desire to "wander to far countries" (3) is met by constant resistance from his mother. Throughout the short tale he begs his mother to let him go, but she meets his pleas with constant weeping and lamenting. When he grows older, John considers going out into the world without his mother's blessings but says to his father, "What can I do against mamma! What man wants to go on a long journey with his mother's curses ringing in his ears?" (10). After a tempest has raged through the small village by the sea, John's mother and wife stand "wrapped in woolen shawls" along with "dozens of women [who] had arrived at the scene of the disaster" (14) while John Redding's dead body floats off "tuh sea" (16). The many connections between the two stories more than suggest that Hurston was familiar with Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, but the diversity of language in the story "John Redding Goes to Sea" seems to confirm it. It is not that those who read John Redding's story as revealing the "folkloric texture" of "Hurston's childhood," such as "the world of witches and signs, superstitions and remedies" (Hemenway 65-66) are inaccurate. This claim, made by Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway, is valid and also plausible. But, when "John Redding Goes to Sea" is read alongside Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, it appears that his writing style, which similarly infuses the "oral-aural tradition" of Irish vernacular culture into the play, compelled Hurston to experiment with the incorporation of varied language styles (educated John speaks Standard American English while his parents speak in a black southern vernacular dialect) and with the merging of religious

traditions (Matty Redding believes John's desire to go out to sea is the work of "conjure" while her husband considers that type of religious practice "low life mess") (3). The recognition that the most commented on feature of Hurston's writing, the distortion of English in order to imitate black vernacular speech patterns, seems to have developed out of what she saw in Swift's and Synge's work has not been previously recognized. As Hurston's style develops, the narration of her works is typically written in Standard American English while her characters speak a common southern vernacular dialect.<sup>31</sup> And, as I highlighted above, a claim often written in regard to the inaccuracy of Synge's dialect is that all of his characters, regardless of regional or class differences, speak the same. In chapter 4 I examine how Hurston incorporates the African American oral tradition into her writing. Starting with Henry Louis Gates Jr., critics have found Hurston's dialectical style an essential aspect to critiquing her work. And what I have discovered in this study is that this fundamental characteristic of Hurston's work appears to have developed from techniques first experimented with by Irish authors.

Before the 1990s, the transatlantic turn in Irish studies presented a marginal to negligible representation of how the Harlem Renaissance was impacted by the work of Irish Renaissance writers. Before that moment, Irish studies scholars more frequently drew on writers of the African diaspora to make larger arguments about Irish racialization on both sides of the Atlantic and to present arguments on the (post)colonial identity of Irish people and of Ireland itself. More recently, however, critics have centered a discussion of how Harlem

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<sup>31</sup> Black, white, rich, and poor share a little-varied speech.

Renaissance era writers and black writing and culture broadly have impacted an understanding of race in contemporary Irish culture. And, given the obvious influence Synge had on the Harlem Renaissance era writers, I would suggest that his influence is not limited to how they used the African American dialect. Moreover, while it can be argued that the Harlem writers were aware of Synge's *Playboy* and possibly some of his other plays (he is nearly always characterized as a dramatist), knowledge of Synge's ethnographic work and the influence that work had on his oeuvre is less evident in the African American context. Thus, the approach of this study is unique. In these pages I concentrate on how two writers independently used ethnographic material to shape their folk-dramas. This transatlantic approach to Synge and Hurston will contribute to a broader understanding of their individual oeuvres. Yet, more importantly, through this concentrated focus on Synge and Hurston, scholars will have a clearer understanding on how the cross-currents of literature in the Black and Green Atlantic have continually built on each other since the Douglass and O'Connell meeting in 1845 and perhaps since the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade.

### **Inside/Outside Transatlantic Modernism**

In *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North argues, as Eric Sundquist does in *To Wake the Nations*, that the white and the black are unequivocally intertwined. Of Anglo-American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, North writes, "It is impossible to understand either modernism without the other, without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared, and to the political and cultural forces that were constricting that language at the very

moment modern writers of both races were attempting in dramatically different ways to free it” (11). Essentially, North argues that white American modernism does not exist without African American modernism, thus getting locked in the black-white binary.

In *Primitivist Modernism*, Sieglinde Lemke takes the argument further by asserting that African art forms greatly inspired the transatlantic modernist movement. Lemke’s study concentrates on black and white modernist productions from Pablo Picasso to Josephine Baker, Nancy Cunard, Alan Locke, and other prominent artists and critics to articulate her argument. In her introduction, “Was Modernism Passing?” Lemke asserts, “Instead of juxtaposing white modernism with a ‘black counter-modernism,’ as Houston Baker does in his important study, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, I have sought to trace how both are inextricably interrelated” (3). Lemke argues that the movements developed simultaneously and focuses her study on mirrored relationships and “aesthetic collaborations” in black and white artist communities (3). Again, the emphasis of the conversation focuses on separating black modernism from white modernism and the interdependent development of modernism. That there was no white without black and no black without white rings true on many levels, and not just within the context of modernism.

While Lemke pushes on the interconnection between white and black to include “Africanism,” what I propose in this study is that the concept needs to be examined further. I argue that “whiteness” and “blackness” are actually what critics are examining in the construction of modernism. Thus, the conversation cannot be limited to “the *pas de deux* in which white and black cultures have

engaged” as Lemke attempts to do (6). The conversation around the connections between various modernist art must extend to the more general understanding of how “blackness” and its antithesis “whiteness” were contrasted in the modern era, and then, more specifically, how cultures associated with blackness inspired modernists.<sup>32</sup>

However, such criticism of modern art could lead back to what Lemke does in her study, associating “blackness” specifically to people of the African diaspora or, as Gilroy refers to it, people of the Black Atlantic. But the equation of blackness to the black body unnecessarily limits “blackness” to what is visually black. As Gilroy states in the introduction to *The Black Atlantic*, “the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas” were a fact of African diasporic cultures (6). Perhaps it is in the hybridity of all transatlantic cultures, in particular the people of the Black and Green Atlantic, that this approach to modernism can begin.

In this dissertation, I examine those aspects of Irish and African American vernacular culture that contributed to each cultures’ marginalization: Irish and African American performative rituals, folk practices, and vernacular speech. This work complicates the current understanding of race by comparing Irish peasant culture with African American southern culture. Moreover, in linking the two, we might begin to draw comparisons between all preindustrial societies—across racial and national borders—furthering our global understanding of race as it was signified and conceptualized in transatlantic modernism.

In chapter 2, “Inside/Outside Folk Culture: Performing Cultural

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<sup>32</sup> See “Primitivism and Empire” by James Knapp, Mark Phelan’s “Fair Play Synge,” and “Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival” by Sinéad Garrigan Mattar.

Autonomy in *Riders and Color Struck*,” the keen and the cakewalk are examined to exemplify how the association of such performative practices contributed to the marginality of Irish and African Americans. In portraying authentic representations of Irish and African American folk culture on the stage and by incorporating reinterpretations of Irish and African American performative rituals, Synge and Hurston use their theatre in an attempt to preserve folk traditions that had been generally disparaged. In the plays I investigate, I focus on aspects of Synge and Hurston’s use of ethnographic material as it connects to their theatre.

In chapter 3, “Repudiation or Recuperation: Itinerate Women and the Marriage Ritual in Synge’s *The Tinker’s Wedding* and Hurston’s *Polk County*,” I investigate the retelling of Synge’s and Hurston’s authentic experiences in the comedies *The Tinker’s Wedding* and *Polk County*. Whereas in chapter 2 I focus on the marginality of Irish and African performative rituals, in “Repudiation or Recuperation” it is not the focus on a universal performative rite—the wedding ritual—that evidences these culture’s marginalized state, it is the participation of the marginalized cultures in the wedding ritual that illustrates the effect modernity was having on these vernacular cultures. Moreover, in directly staging folk stories, Synge and Hurston illustrate that their ultimate goal is the preservation of these insular and very specific types of Irish and African American cultures.

Finally, in chapter 4, “The Male Folk Hero: Artists of the Oral Tradition,” I look at the authors’ most successful plays to investigate how each used reinterpretations of the unique rhythms of Irish and African American vernacular

spoken traditions to highlight the beauty of dialects that had generally been disparaged. It is the speech that Synge and Hurston cultivate for the theatre from what they heard people speak while constructing their ethnographies that is most significant about their work. In the chapter, I illustrate how the authors were able to almost seamlessly marry Irish and African American oral traditions with the western European literary tradition and its perceived superiority, further elevating the multiple literacies of Irish and African American cultures. The oratory performance of the male leads in each play speaks to the importance of masculinity in each culture.



## CHAPTER II

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### INSIDE/OUTSIDE FOLK CULTURE: PERFORMING CULTURAL AUTONOMY IN *RIDERS* AND *COLOR STRUCK*

#### INTRODUCTION

The use of the *keen* in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and the cakewalk in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1926) encourages audiences to focus on performative rituals in traditional Irish and African American folk cultures respectively. As I discuss throughout this dissertation, Synge and Hurston used the theatre to portray representations of Irish and African American folk culture on the stage and to give spectators the opportunity to see, hear, and otherwise experience performative aspects of traditional Irish and African American folk culture. In addition to drafting scripts that attempt to stage representational Irish and African American performative rituals, the emphasis on interpreting the unique rhythms of vernacular spoken traditions and of directly staging collected folk stories is evidence of this goal. This chapter focuses on narrative scripts that highlight the aspects of Synge's and Hurston's use of ethnographic material as it connects to their theatre in order to expose how these representational features exist inside and outside each culture.

Keening, *caointeoireacht* or *caoin* in the Irish, is the practice of lamenting over a corpse; women in a departed person's family traditionally performed the *keen* for the dead.<sup>33</sup> However, a woman, or women, could be hired to perform the

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<sup>33</sup> The OED lists keening (the word) specifically identified as Irish in origin. Hurston uses the specific word to describe someone lamenting in *Mules and Men* and both versions of *Spunk*.

keen if no one in the dead person's family was available or able to carry out the task. The practice of keening turns the lament into a poetic reflection on the dead person's life and the feelings that those keening might have for the dead. Described by Williams and Ó Laoire as a "ritualized discourse that existed to manage the private and collective grief of the family and the community," keening has "deep roots" in Ireland; it is also a way to keep the departed in the mind of the bereaved through the expression of continued sorrow over the departed person's body (91). In focusing the audience's attention on keening, Synge highlights in *Riders to the Sea* not just the lost lives in Maurya's family, but also the theme of loss in general. Thus, the keening that occurs on stage might remind audiences of pre-famine Ireland, when practicing keening was more common, but for others the keening might recall the aftermath of the Great Famine, which resulted in the mass emigration of Irish people and in the erosion of traditional Irish vernacular culture: the disappearance of traditional Irish customs, such as keening, patterns, and Samhain.<sup>34</sup> Traditional Irish customs such as these are generally associated with wakes and holy well pilgrimages and were the most frequently targeted practices for elimination by Catholic clergy. As Lawrence Taylor states in *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, "In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Catholic bishops of Ireland began to oppose the holy well pilgrimages" and especially those practices that were seen as "excesses" (53). Irish Catholic clergy sanctioned behavior in Irish peasants that they saw as sinful, indulgent, uncontrollable, or exceptionally

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<sup>34</sup> Samhain means November in Irish and is the root of modern Halloween. However, instead of celebrating Samhain in Ireland, Halloween is most commonly observed.

pleasurable, and they used the same language that some Protestants used, such as the word “excesses,” to condemn what they saw as errors of the Catholic Church during and after the Protestant Reformation. With the keen, Synge thus directs the audience’s attention to what he sees as evidence of a disappearing Ireland. The castigation of Irish vernacular traditions by the Irish Catholic Church initiated a loss of cultural individuality in favor of conformity. Performing the keen not only provides a representation of Irish culture; with the performance of the keen at the end of *Riders*, Synge proposes the lessening of the Irish Catholic Church’s ecclesiastic power, thereby strengthening Ireland’s cultural autonomy.

The cakewalk is not the focus of *Color Struck* but, compared with the presentation of the keen in *Riders*, it lasts for approximately seven to nine minutes and proves to be an integral aspect of the play, displaying one of the unique literate techniques African American southern cultures performed.<sup>35</sup> If performed as it was in African American life, the cakewalk would take up most of the third scene in Hurston’s one-act play. The specific origins of the cakewalk dance are still unknown. However, among African American studies scholars, from Richard Newman to Eric J. Sundquist, it is generally accepted that

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<sup>35</sup> Both Schechner and Conquergood have written on the expanded understanding of “literary.” Schechner writes: “Another way of understanding what’s happening is to regard our time as witnessing an explosion of multiple literacies. People are increasingly ‘body literate,’ ‘aurally literate,’ ‘visually literate,’ and so on. . . . These multiple literacies are “performatives”—encounters in the realm of doing, of pursuing a throughline of action. A shift is occurring, transforming writing, speaking, and even ordinary living into performance” (4). In “Street Literacy,” Conquergood considers the ways in which “ethnographic theories and field methods” have changed literacy research by creating space to consider “multiple and nonstandard literacy practices, variously called ‘local literacies,’ ‘vernacular literacies,’ and ‘grassroots literacies’” (“Street Literacy” 354).

cakewalking was begun on southern plantations by slaves as an imitation of the formal ballroom dancing they had seen their masters conduct. In “Afro-American Notes,” a column that ran weekly in the *Pittsburgh Press*, it is suggested that “the French Negroes in Louisiana” started the dance. The column, from 1897, continues: “It is probably a close imitation of some old French country dances, with such eliminations and additions as only the fun-loving minds of a volatile Creole could suggest. . . From New Orleans it spread over the entire South and thence the North” (Glasco 273). In addition to the cakewalk being an appropriation of European ballroom dancing, two contemporary American colloquialisms derive from the dance, further complicating the already muddled etymology of its origins as a dance: “cakewalk” itself, which implies that a task is easy, and “take the cake,” which is often used to suggest how a person far exceeds others in a particular task or field. In Hurston’s *Color Struck*, John and Effie “take the cake” by “unanimous decision” (*Color Struck* 44). The stage directions read: “Great enthusiasm. The cake is set down in the center of the floor and the winning couple parade around it arm and arm” (*Color Struck* 44). The cakewalk was a common feature of southern African American culture during the time Hurston was a child, and the presentation of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* is therefore drawn from those lived experiences, like so much else in Hurston’s oeuvre. Cakewalking was also widely used as a closing feature of minstrel shows and would have been a common practice in the South during Hurston’s formative years. Robert Hemenway expresses in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* that “Hurston knew from childhood the quality of folkli[f]e” and that she contributed the “authentic folk experience to the esthetic mix of the

Renaissance” (51). As such, it can be argued that her work as an autoethnographic researcher began with those childhood experiences she would frequently draw from for her art. In reclaiming the cakewalk, Hurston’s incorporation of the dance not only works as a celebration of representational African American identity and culture; its presentation in *Color Struck* completely disregards the use of the cakewalk in blackface minstrelsy and constitutes a rejection of the underlining assimilation efforts of the New Negro aesthetic.

This chapter explores Synge’s and Hurston’s use of the keen and the cakewalk in the plays *Riders to the Sea* and *Color Struck* in order to further an argument about the international dimensions of both the Irish and Harlem Renaissances, movements customarily explored through entirely nationalistic frameworks. Through diverse methodological approach I aim to show how both writers set out to challenge previous representations of these important cultural forms, both of which had become debased and rendered stereotypically in the broader culture. Using ethnographic material, Synge and Hurston located the keen and the cakewalk in their proper cultural contexts, thereby giving a representation of them that audiences might consider as authentic, while also writing against the stereotypes associated with the cultures under discussion.

### **The Keen**

The use of the keen in *Riders to the Sea* is drawn from the ethnographic work that Synge had engaged in before committing his talents to the theatre. Synge generally developed most of his productions by using material he collected from

his travels, and he routinely drew from experiences that he had either witnessed or been told about when traveling around Ireland. *Riders* is a reimagining of a number of Synge's experiences on the Aran Islands. The practice of keening is mentioned throughout the play, but it is in the last moments of the production in which he stages an actual keening session. It is through the keening that the marginal status of the situation, the culture, and the cultural practices of the Irish peasantry are revealed. The representation of the keen is also the means by which Synge comments on the cultural autonomy of the Irish peasantry more generally. As the modern world encroaches on this preindustrial society—specifically the Aran Islands, but by implication more broadly on the Irish peasantry in general—traditional Irish culture becomes viewed as irrelevant and undesirable. In Synge's estimation, artifacts and practices from traditional Irish culture, such as the keen, need to be preserved in order for the Irish peasantry to maintain their cultural independence, which the author placed a premium on, ranking it over political independence.

In *Riders*, “the long nights after Samhain” are approaching, and Maurya says she will “have no call now to be going down [to the holy well] and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain” (CW III 25). Thus in *Riders*, not only is the keen used, but also many of the actions of Synge's main character are ancient customs that were particularly disdained by the Catholic Church. The attention to these customs consequently dismisses the normalizing effect the Church's stance on these ancient practices had within Ireland. In his travel writings, Synge refers to holy wells and discusses witnessing keening during his time on the Aran Islands, and he draws *Riders* directly from his personal

experiences.<sup>36</sup> With his first staged play, Synge displays folk culture in Ireland's capital city to directly confront the ways in which the conforming efforts of the Irish Catholic Church are changing the Irish peasantry.

Synge observed the *keen* in a number of instances during his trips to the Aran Islands. Sometimes he directly states that what is happening is “the wild *keen*, or crying for the dead” (CW II 74). At other times he implies what is happening and leaves the reader to determine that “the wild imprecations” of a woman from “one of the most primitive families on the island” (CW II 89) are also cries of mourning and loss. In the latter instance, the woman is lamenting the loss of “the hearth she had brooded on for thirty years” and cursing “the strange armed men who spoke a language she could not understand” and who enforced her eviction (CW II 89). An outsider who does not go to an old woman's “wake for fear [his] presence might jar upon the mourners” (CW II 74), Synge hears the “inarticulate chant” like many other outsiders (CW II 56): as wild and “uncontrollable” (CW II 89). But Synge's perspective is also more distinct and appreciative than that of other outside observers. He has adoration for the islanders, and he is able to discern the difference between the lament for a “woman over eighty years” where “the grief of the *keen* is no personal complaint for the death” (CW II 75) and the lament for “a young man who had died in his first manhood” (CW II 160). Of the young man's death and the *keen* for him,

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<sup>36</sup> In part 1 of *The Aran Islands* Synge is talking to the *seanchaí* (storyteller or historian), old Mourteen. He writes that while they are walking they turn “to look at an old ruined church of the Ceathair Aluinn (The Four Beautiful Persons), and a holy well near it that is famous for cures of blindness and epilepsy” (CW II 56). While the two are sitting near the well, “a very old man” comes up to them and tells them why the well is considered successful and famous. This story is a source for Synge's play *The Well of the Saints*.

Synge writes: “For this reason the keen lost a part of its formal nature, and was recited as the expression of intense personal grief by the young men and women of the man’s own family” (CW II 160-61). The keen in *Riders*, inspired by this young man’s story, is presented as an aspect of interior Irish vernacular culture, and the following presentation of how the keen was perceived as inauthentic by outside observers to Ireland is pertinent. From the twelfth century to the nineteenth century, outside observers had found the pre-Christian ritual inauthentic and offensive. Presented in the 1818 collected edition of John Dunton’s works, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton*, “Some Account of My Conversation in Ireland” reflects on the time Dunton spent in Ireland throughout his life, in hopes of giving “a brief but general character of Ireland” (615). In the account, written in 1699, Dunton gives a description of an Irish funeral, and the keen in particular, that helps in understanding how outsiders viewed the practice. He writes that the Irish have “a custom of *howling* when they carry any one to burial; and screaming over their graves, not like other Christians, but like people without hope” (616).<sup>37</sup> He continues denigrating the custom by writing that he found the “bawl” to be “extravagant” for the “disarmed Rebels [who] have a will, though not the power, to cut our throats,” and he suggests that he found the custom to be a disingenuous expression and inauthentic (616). He writes:

They do hire a whole herd of these crocodiles to accompany the corpse; who, with their counterfeit tears and sighs, and confused clamour and noise, do seem heartily to bemoan the departed Friend; though all this is

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<sup>37</sup> Dunton’s emphasis.

with no more concern and reality, than an Actor on the Theatre for the feigned death of his Dearest in a Tragedy. (616)

The keen, as presented by Dunton, is inauthentic because “a whole herd of . . . crocodiles” is hired to accompany the corpse to the burial site. While the genuine outpouring of emotion of grieving women might not have appeared superficial to an outside observer of the keen, the hiring of keening women seems to be what made the custom that much more insincere to outside observers, as Dunton vividly illustrates above. The fact that Synge attempts to elevate the keen through a theatrical presentation, considering Dunton had denigrated the ritual specifically because of its theatricality, articulates how the custom jostles between high and low forms depending on audience perception.

Long before the Protestant Reformation, the “barbarous custom of roaring aloud” (W. H. A. Williams *Creating Irish Tourism* 172) had been commented upon by “visitors to Ireland since the twelfth century” (Lysaght 65). However, by the nineteenth century, the “dry-eyed cry” or the “Irish howl” became so well known that the keen was one example of the exotic must-sees for tourists when visiting Ireland. Among tourists to Ireland, W. H. A. Williams notes in *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland*, the British found the exact image of the Irish they expected when confronted with Irish mourning practices, “examples of exotic behavior” manifesting “Paddy’s inexplicable, stereotypical alternation, between exaggeration and sham” (*Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character* 76). The keen was a spectacle and a curiosity an outsider had to witness.

Outside observers who already had a negative view of the Irish understandably disdained the *keen*: within it they saw the mixing of the sacred and profane in Irish religious practices. Yet even writers who viewed Ireland and the Irish favorably, such as Ireland-born Anna Maria Hall (published often as “Mrs. S. C. Hall”), fluctuated between an acknowledgement of the practice as seasoned and skillful but also primitive and overemotional. In “A Week in Killarney,” Hall describes her first experience with the *keen*:

The first time I heard the death-chant was under the following circumstances. Three or four persons, of whom I was one, started one morning to spend the day amidst some wild scenery in a lonely part of the country. A storm came on; the rain descended in torrents, and no shelter had we save an overhanging ledge of rock, half way up the rock. After having remained in the shelter this afforded for some time, we thought we heard some strange sounds borne along on the wind. (111)

David Lloyd notes in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* that “descriptions of the practice by English writers hesitate between the recognition of its professional and often formulaic nature and its appropriation as a sign of Irish subjection to and indulgence of violent and unpredictable emotion” (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* 206). Sean Ó Súilleabhán describes Anna Hall as “an Englishwoman, who visited Ireland more than once in the company of her husband” (136), but that description is not entirely accurate.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, as a British author, Anna Hall

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<sup>38</sup> It is accurate to call Anna Maria Hall British, and she might have self-identified as English, but she was born in Ireland, lived there until she was fifteen, and later traveled to Ireland regularly. Most people would define such a person as Irish. Her background is very similar to Boucicault, for example, who is almost always described as Irish. The travel guides on Ireland

writes a description of the keen that easily fits into the model Lloyd puts forth. Moreover, Anna Hall's Dublin birth gave credibility to her writings on Ireland and her descriptions of Irish life. In fact, it seems as if her descriptions of Ireland were often considered by her British and American readers as revealing "true to the life" insights on the "delineations of Irish character" (156).<sup>39</sup>

In *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, and History* (1841–43), a three-volume travel guide that Hall wrote with her husband Samuel Carter Hall, she interrogates the poetic nature of the keen. From her account of the keen in that text and in "A Week in Killarney," it is clear that Hall has reverence for the practice. Yet, in describing the first time she "heard the death-chant," Hall's emphasis on the lament as "wild" seems to assert a stereotyped image of Ireland and Irish peasantry: romantic but peculiar and primitive. In her estimation, the Irish language is odd, "strange sounds borne along on the wind" as the mourners were "singing in the Irish language"; the Irish landscape is unruly, "wild scenery in a lonely part of the country"; and the Irish weather is brutal: "a storm came on; the rain descended in torrents" (111).

Ó Súilleabhán also notes in *Irish Wake Amusements* how problematic it was for Anna Hall that women were hired to keen at a wake. Quoting *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, and History*, Ó Súilleabhán highlights the following passage: "They live upon the dead, / By letting out their persons by the hour / To mimic

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she and her husband produced were quite popular, and she also wrote other texts thematically based on the island, including *Stories of Irish Peasantry* (1840) and *The White Boy* (1845).<sup>39</sup> See the *Country Gentleman*, vols. 5–6, where her writing is described as "true to the life" (156); the *Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* 24, where Mrs. Hall's "delineations of Irish character" are described as "unrivalled" (108); and *Monthly Review*, which states that "Mrs. Hall's delineations of Irish character and manners cannot be exceeded for truth; they are in fact too strictly, too severely real" (151).

sorrow when the heart's not sad" (M. a. M. S. C. Hall 87-88). So even though Anna Hall appreciated the poetic nature of the keen, the practice, along with other wake amusements, was "ill keeping with solemnity of the death chamber, and [the] very disgraceful scenes are, or rather were, of frequent occurrence; the whiskey being always abundant, and the men and women nothing loathe to partake of it to intoxication" (87).

The claims of inauthenticity and disrespect for the dead by outside observers seem to misunderstand the tradition and practice of waking the dead, which as a custom was not limited to Ireland but observed in other cultures around the world as well. In *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), Edmund Spenser suggests that one of the main *problems* with the Irish keen was that the "impertinent" old custom of "lewd crying and howling" (364) connected Ireland to other cultures. For Spenser, the Irish "Scythians" or barbarians and "their lamentations at their buryals, with dispairfull out-cryes, immoderate waylings" (364), connect to African diasporic culture. In particular, he writes that the keen is "not proper Spanish, but altogether heathenish, brought in thither first either by the Scythians, or the Moores, that were Africans" (364). He references Egyptian waking practices as well.

Intriguingly, both Synge and Hall also appear to connect the Irish practice of keening to some aspect of African diasporic culture. In a letter to Molly Allgood, dated 13 May 1907, Synge reflected on an exhibition he had seen: "The Somali village [was] especially curious. A bit of the war-song the niggers were singing was exactly like some of the keens on Aran" (*Letters to Molly* 132). There is no direct mention of the relationship of the keen to African diasporic culture

that I can locate in Anna Hall's writings. However, on 6 May 1853, Anna Hall called on Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had traveled to England. That day, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, often called "the Black Swan," was also calling on Stowe. Greenfield sang for the impromptu audience the minstrel song, "Old Folks at Home," "first in a soprano voice, then in a tenor or baritone" (Stowe 284). Hall's reaction was very positive: "Mrs. Hall was amazed and delighted . . . she was really astonished and charmed at the wonderful weight, compass, and power of [Greenfield's] voice" (Stowe 285). In *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, and History* Anna Hall provides a similar reaction to the keen: "It is sometimes astonishing to observe with what facility the keener will put the verses together, and shape her poetical images to the case of the person before her" (226).

The perception of the keen as inauthentic and crude by outside observers might lead one to believe that the denigration of those customs by outsiders was the reason for the steady decline of traditional wake customs in Ireland after the famine. Outside observers of the keen, such as Dunton, Spenser, and Hall, seem to "other" Irish land, character, and customs in a way that disparages the people of western Ireland. While cultural practices such as the keen contributed to the way Irish peasantry were racialized, the decline of traditional Irish wake customs was more a result of how Irish clerics observed these practices than how outsiders mocked them. The tradition of keening in Ireland was widely practiced before the Famine, and the decline of keening as a cultural tradition is generally attributed to the Catholic Church's harsh stance on the ritual, which included as punishment for its practitioners anything from exclusion from spiritual rites to excommunication. Lloyd suggests that "the decline of practices like waking and

keening” in post-Famine Ireland can also be attributed to “a new and melancholy sense of propriety and punishment” (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* 73). Lloyd argues that the “segmentation” of Irish land isolated homesteads, and then the “catastrophic loss of population to famine, disease and emigration” negatively transformed Irish culture, specifically Ireland’s oral culture (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* 73). Lloyd characterizes such events as aspects of “colonial modernity,” which seems to correspond with the idea that Synge was putting forth in his work: that the uneven colonization of Irish vernacular culture was slowly becoming a more successfully transformed cultural formation.

There is a sense of urgency in Synge’s tone in *The Aran Islands*. This sensation comes across in a number of passages, but one instance stands out. While on Inishmaan, on a walk with Michael, Synge realizes that Pat Dirane had come to visit with him. Dirane is “the story-teller old Mourteen had spoken of,” and Synge wants to engage him immediately (CW II 60). However, Michael tells Synge that there is no need to change their plans. He says, “Let you not be afraid, there will be time enough to be talking to him by and by” (CW II 61). Michael is correct, and when they return from their walk, “old Pat was still in the chimney corner, blinking with the turf smoke” (CW II 61). Nevertheless, throughout the writing of *The Aran Islands*, Synge felt as if he was competing with time in his efforts to save the remnants of this culture. On some level, Synge was correct. Dirane died in 1898, the same year that he and Synge had met and spoken, meaning that Dirane’s stories did need to be transcribed quickly. Kerby Miller articulates in *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration* that prior to “the Great Famine the Irish Church lacked the means to

fully order, much less homogenize, Irish Catholicism”(25). Thus, from another perspective, the ancient traditions urgently needed to be cataloged because, with the approach of the twentieth century, Ireland was shifting from a country that intertwined paganism and Catholicism to a country beginning to reject its native Catholicism in favor of a more normative form. The imbalanced transformation from paganism to Catholicism was partly a result of the way in which Irish Celts were allowed to convert to Christianity. Due to “Ireland’s peripheral location” and because “Christianity was not enforced in the same way there as it was in Britain by the Roman state,” there was “an accommodation between the Pagan religion and the new Christian faith” (99). But as a unified form of Catholicism (Christianity) began to be practiced in Ireland to promote a unified (non-English) nation, the minimizing of differences in the Irish population meant the eradication of vernacular cultural practices. Kirby Miller writes that the “sheer body of surviving folklore materials is itself crucial” and indicates that the recalcitrance of Irish vernacular culture, whatever the magnitude of archival folk material, also reveals how emigration effected the Irish landscape, as the materials were mostly from regions where “before the Second World War . . . emigration was disproportionately concentrated” (30).

The “Most Reverend Dr. Gallagher” of the Diocese of Leighlin, a Catholic bishop known for his dedication to the Irish language, declared in 1748 that the practice of keening was “heathenish,” “unchristian,” and “shameful,” and that “no such practice is found in any other Christian country” (Taylor 52).<sup>40</sup> The statutes

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<sup>40</sup> Gallagher was appointed Bishop of Raphoe in 1725. In *Collections relating to the Dioceses of Kildare and Leighlin*, Rev. M Comerford recounts a narrative that suggests that in 1734 soldiers

of Clogher of 1789 stated “that abuses and scandals in as much as they are said by the people to be committed by all the vigils of the dead commonly called ‘wakes’ . . . should be vigorously restricted by pastors and eventually abolished” (Rafferty 101). In 1813, the Diocese of Cashel and Imelac connected the lament with “backwardness” and “inauthenticity” (Wilce 133). In essence, by the end of the eighteenth century, Catholic priests were united in condemning funeral excesses and abuses. The lapse between initial condemnation of Irish wake practices by outside observers—which predate the Reformation—and the response of Catholic clerics seems to be in line with how Catholicism was managed in Ireland prior to the Counter-Reformation. Before the implementation of the Tridentine Mass, Ireland was known to observe Gallican Rites, which were openly mixed with traditional customs. However, in an attempt to combat the diverse observance practices throughout Europe, and in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church pushed “uniformity with the mainstream of Counter-Reformation Catholicism in Europe” (39-40). Up until 1640, “Catholicism did not, in early-modern Ireland, seek its identity in defiance of Protestantism, it clung to a defensive rather than an offensive motivation” (Forrestal 41). However, after 1640 the Church enforced more uniform practices of Catholicism throughout Europe. In Ireland, where the Catholic Church started to play a more significant role in policy combating funeral excesses and abuses, such as keening,

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targeted the bishop, requiring him to find “a safe retreat in one of the islands of Loch Erne, where he remained concealed for a year” (76). It was there that Gallagher wrote a volume of sermons in Irish first published in Dublin in 1736. Rev. Canon Ulick J. Bourke, M.R.I.A., published the volume in English in 1877. In the preface of the original publication, Gallagher wrote: “I have composed the following discourses for the use of my fellow-laborers principally; and next for such as please to make use of them, that they may preach them to their flocks, since my repeated troubles debar me of the comfort of delivering them in person” (xii).

the Church was influenced and defined by Ireland's relationship to Protestantism and the state.

In *Occasions of Faith*, Taylor argues that the Catholic bishops of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be described as being “more Protestant than the Protestants themselves—to coin a phrase” and their decidedly late reaction to keening follows the lead of the Counter-Reformation (Taylor 53). This quest to improve the standards of moral behavior among Irish Catholics can be traced to the implantation of the Tridentine Mass (1570) and the Catholic synods in Ireland organized during the seventeenth century. From 1600 to 1690, twelve synods were organized to “legislate for the abolition of funeral abuses” (Forrestal 121), three prior to 1640 and nine thereafter. The influence of the Eleven Years' War (1641–53) politicized the synods, which were during this period “to all intents, political meetings” (Forrestal 75). And, as the Catholic hierarchy played a significant role in Gaelic regions' interactions with Protestantism and the state, those customs viewed as immoral, un-Christian, and sexual were deemed funeral excesses and strictly forbidden. Such customs included, according to the “diocesan synod of Dublin, in 1686,” “singing disgusting old songs, or [playing] disgusting games” and allowing “buffoonery to advance, and the memory of the dead to be made light of” (Forrestal 120–21). Thus, starting with the Counter-Reformation, and well into the nineteenth century, Catholic clerics were just as instrumental in condemnation of Catholic peasantry as Protestants themselves. And as Lloyd discusses, the “catastrophic loss” (*Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* 73) of Irish people during the

nineteenth century further eliminated whatever remained of traditional Irish vernacular culture.

The resulting internalized denigration of Irish customs seems to have been initiated by multiple sources, as both external and internal sources condemned Irish wake practices. Ultimately, however, I argue that the determination of the Irish Catholic Church to homogenize how the Irish people observed Catholicism is primarily to blame for the disappearance of traditional Irish vernacular culture. And when Synge composed and then consequently staged *Riders*, it was perhaps with this mind-set that he approached the text.

In *Riders*, Synge capitalizes on the liminal status of the keen as representing both an internal quality of traditional Irish life and recognition that the keen was condemned both by the Irish Catholic church and outside observers. This blended presentation makes the staging of a keening session in *Riders* particularly nuanced but also connects Synge's play to Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* (1874), which had previously staged a keening session. Yet, while the presentation of the Irish wake and the keen in *The Shaughraun* attempts to support Boucicault's claims to present a "true picture" of Ireland in his plays, the comedic nature of *The Shaughraun* undermines such claims. As Nicholas Grene writes in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, Boucicault's presentation of the keen normalizes "what is [a] strange and potentially disturbing" spectacle (16). In *The Shaughraun*, before the keen is performed, Boucicault has prepared his audience to laugh and "enjoy the spectacle as pure comedy" because they know that Conn is not actually dead (Grene 15–16). However, when Maurya and the other women begin keening on the stage there is nothing humorous about the moment.

Maurya begins the final lamentation in *Riders* after she attempts to meet Bartley and take back “the dark word” she put on him. Pressed by Cathleen and Nora to stop the keening and tell the girls “the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms” (CW III 19), Maurya explains that on her way to the spring well she saw visions of her two youngest sons: Bartley “first on the red mare” and then “at the grey pony . . . there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet” (CW III 19). It is at that moment that the old woman knows all the men in her family, including her two youngest sons, are no longer living:

I’ve had a husband, and a husband’s father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they’re gone now the lot of them. (CW III 21)

After Maurya shares her vision, Cathleen joins her in keening not only for her two brothers but for all the men in her family and, in many ways, for the still living members of her family as well. “It’s destroyed we are from this day. It’s destroyed, surely,” she says (CW III 19). Cathleen believes in her mother’s vision and immediately supports the idea her mother previously initiated, that without any living male relatives she, her mother, and her sister have no way to earn income and will eventually fall into poverty and will possibly die as a result. With Michael’s body “after being found in the far north” (CW III 19), Nora is saddened by the confirmation of one brother’s death, but she refuses to accept her mother’s vision or the fact that Bartley, who just left their home, is also dead. Nora turns to the more widely accepted spiritual practice observed in this home, Catholicism, as assurance that Bartley is alive. She says: “Didn’t the young priest say the

Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no living son?" (CW III 21). The contrasting of the old forms of worship and ritual—seeing visions and keening—with newer, modernized worshipping—Catholicism—recalls to the viewer at once the disappearance of traditional Irish culture and the way in which the Irish Catholic Church is altering Irish vernacular culture. The young priest does not follow the Church's clear directive that the old, pagan traditions must be abolished; as the viewer or reader of *Riders* knows, the young priest is aware that Maurya is keening. In fact, since Maurya is joined in the keening by a number of island women at the end of the play, it can be discerned that the young priest never reprimands any of the women on the island for an abuse the Catholic Church suggests can be punishable with excommunication. Catholicism has long been asserted as an aspect of traditional Ireland. In "Irish Horror: Neil Jordan and the Anglo-Irish Gothic," Brian McIlroy writes that "the Roman Catholic Church" is an example of "traditional Ireland and its institutions" (134). In *A Whisper of God: Essays on Post-Catholic Ireland and the Christian Future*, Richard Clarke writes that at "the head of any list of characteristics of 'traditional' Ireland would also have appeared the description 'deeply religious' [and Catholic]" (22). And in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity*, Gladys Ganiel argues that in contemporary Ireland a religiosity exists that is not exclusive to the Irish Catholic Church (19). However, my argument asserts that Synge sees modern Catholicism as at odds with true traditional Irish culture. Rather than Irish Catholicism being seen as the opposite of progressivism, Synge portrays conversion to Catholicism as how Ireland first experienced mass social reformation. As presented in *Riders*, Irish vernacular

culture exists both in the past and in the future. The islanders live in a world where the premodern qualities of their culture still remain, but the observer of the play knows that the continuing effects of modernity—the homogenization of Irish Catholic practices—will eventually eradicate these customs.

Starting with the Counter-Reformation, and going well into the nineteenth century, Catholic clerics were just as instrumental in promoting the condemnation of Catholic peasantry as Protestants were. And as Lloyd discusses, the many losses Ireland suffered during the nineteenth century—from famine to emigration—further eliminated whatever remained of traditional Irish vernacular culture. The initial staging of *Riders*, as well as all subsequent performances of the play, work to preserve keening. Moreover, all other references to Irish vernacular culture in the play, such as the references to the Samhain ritual and to the holy wells, make *Riders* a cultural artifact that simultaneously recalls ancient Irish traditions while illuminating the way in which such traditions eventually disappeared.

### **The Cakewalk**

In one of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects of the 1930s, a former slave was recorded discussing the practice of cakewalking as an example of a moment when the slaves would attempt to find a mental escape from their captivity and entertain themselves. The slaves “dressed up,” arranged their quarters in a more “formal” manner, and then began the high-step dance routines, not only imitating their masters but mocking them as well. Eventually the mockery evolved into a more serious entertainment ritual for slaves, and by

the end of the nineteenth century cakewalking had evolved into as much of a formal dance routine for African Americans as ballroom dancing was for affluent, wealthy white Americans.

It is also suggested that cakewalking arose not only from the desire to enjoy some aspects of slave life but also as an activity where men and women could socialize. In the same “Afro-American Notes” column that discusses how significant the cakewalk was to the Pittsburgh community, it is mentioned that “at a cakewalk a man might legitimately show his preference for a woman and then publicly claim her for a wife. In effect the cakewalk was not different from the old Scottish Marriage which required only public acknowledgement from the contracting parties” (Glasco 273). Marriage was a rite denied to slaves, and the history associated with the cakewalk—being perceived as an imitation by the outside community—allowed the ritual to be perfect for a marriage ceremony.<sup>41</sup> Barbara Lewis highlights how as a marriage rite the cakewalk has all the elements of a wedding ceremony and celebration: “the couple, the costume, the cake” (133).

By the late 1800s, cakewalking was an integral aspect of southern African-American culture. According to “Afro-American Notes,” “The gayest feature of the end-of-century decade was the cakewalk. Hardly a dance or a ball or bazaar or fair was held that did not have as its climax this colorful, graceful feature” (Glasco 273). In “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” Brooke Baldwin explains that the evolution of cakewalking into an art form, for slaves and former

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<sup>41</sup> In Chapter 3 of this dissertation I consider the denial of the marriage rite to African Americans.

slaves, links the imitated dance routine to the traits of the various African cultures that remained in American society by this point in U.S. history. By concentrating on the “syncopation or suspended beat, polyrhythmic structure, signifying, improvisation, and responsoriality” of the music African Americans used at cakewalks, Baldwin argues that the cakewalk has roots in sub-Saharan Africa (Baldwin 211). For anthropologist Harold Courlander, the particular strides of the cakewalk dance were more reflective of dance in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria than European ballroom dances (Baldwin 210). The exact origins of the ritual are less important at this juncture than is acknowledging the significance that the cakewalk has roots in African diasporic culture, particularly African American culture, and Hurston’s use of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* asks the audience to be aware of those connections.

The cakewalk was a featured aspect of blackface minstrel routines. Richard Kislán notes in *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre* that in the mid-1800s minstrels often ended the first half of the performance with a walk-around, where “performers alternated in executing a brief specialty at the center of the company’s semicircle” (22). David Wondrich states in *Stomp and Swerve: American Music Gets Hot, 1843-1924* that, by the 1870s, “when minstrel shows started staging the walkaround as a cakewalk,” it was because the solo performance of the walkaround often included the ensemble and the performance resembled the cakewalk (63). Eventually the first act of minstrel shows at the end of the nineteenth century usually ended with a staged cakewalk. Cakewalking became such a regular feature of minstrelsy that it had an international connection, including an Irish connection. In October 1904, eight

months after *Riders to the Sea* premiered in Dublin and two months before the Abbey Theatre opened its doors, *In Dahomey*, written and produced by black artists, opened at Dublin's Theatre Royal. The *Irish Times* proclaimed the cakewalk to be "a distinct novelty" (9). The newspaper's description of the production assures the audience that they will be able to revel in "an unusual degree of curiosity," not only by seeing the all-black performance but also in the opportunity to witness a cakewalk, a dance the paper describes as retaining distinct characteristics "of the dusky race. Many have imitated it, but none can excel the originals of this unique dance" (9).<sup>42</sup> In a similar way to how the keen was viewed by outside observers, the white audiences viewing the cakewalk on plantations and the audiences of *In Dahomey* at Dublin's Theatre Royal see the dance as an oddity not to be missed.

Separate from appropriating African American southern culture—both slave and post-slave African American male culture—the theatrical practice of blackface minstrelsy was performed mostly for the amusement of northern whites. Historically, blackface minstrelsy has been understood not only as a way to assert white supremacy in the North but also as a way for "nonwhite" immigrant Europeans, such as the Irish and Jews, to assimilate into mainstream white American culture. Thus, cakewalking as an American tradition becomes an intricate illustration of American appropriation and assimilation. American identity has no embryonic culture with which to connect, and as the various immigrating populations changed the American landscape, so too did American

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<sup>42</sup> It is also noted in the article that "the audience will constitute the judges of who has won the coveted cake" (9).

identity change. Consequently, cakewalking also reflects fundamental aspects of American identity formation. The first white audiences of the cakewalk (white plantation owners) most likely did not fully understand its satirical nature and that slaves were lampooning the grandiosity of formal ballroom dancing. Eric Sundquist notes in *To Wake the Nations* that the slaves' power to mock their masters "was no doubt carefully circumscribed" even though the liberating nature of such ridiculing resulted in minstrel-stereotype casting of African Americans that lingered well into the twentieth century (*Wake the Nations* 282). The initial response to witnessing the cakewalk was at the time fortuitous for slaves, who openly mocked their masters, and when white Americans began imitating the cakewalk it was as a parody of slaves and their failed attempt to imitate white European high culture. Minstrelsy practitioners did not view incorporating the cakewalk into minstrelsy as an act of appropriation. Thus, the cakewalk as a standard feature of blackface minstrelsy was another way to humiliate African Americans.

Both Richard Newman in "The Brightest Star: Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk" and Terry Waldo in *This Is Ragtime* detail how the dance as it appeared in the late nineteenth century was formulated by "blacks imitating whites who were imitating blacks who [had been satirically] imitating whites" (467–68; 25). In her 1934 article "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston begins focusing on this type of imitation within American cultural history specifically as it relates to blacks. She writes: "The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama" ("Characteristics" 24). In

defining “drama” as the “Negro’s universal mimicry” Hurston challenges the white framing of African American culture as displayed through blackface minstrelsy. The use of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* also challenges African American representation that had become synonymous with blackface minstrelsy. Soyica Diggs Colbert states in “Drama in the Harlem Renaissance” that Hurston’s use of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* “foregrounds the influences of minstrelsy” (93) and challenges popular American beliefs in regard to the talent of African Americans. This point is especially accurate since from approximately 1830 to 1920 white Americans paraded around North America with their faces darkened by burnt cork, attempting to parody African American identity. As Eric Lott describes in *Love and Theft*, “The minstrel show has been ubiquitous, cultural common coin; it has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence” (4). African American performative folk rituals, like the cakewalk, were so firmly appropriated by the twentieth century that it was believed that “even in [the Negro’s] native antics—the songs and dances peculiar to plantation life—he finds a superior on the stage in the imitation darkey of the white man” (358). That comment, written by popular nineteenth-century theatre critic Deshler Welch in the 26 June 1886 issue of the *Theatre*—a pictorial magazine that he cofounded and edited—might have resonated with the majority of white Americans who in 1886 would have at some point in their lives been entertained by minstrelsy.<sup>43</sup> And while the Welch article significantly predates Hurston’s “Characteristics,” I argue that the

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<sup>43</sup> See Paula J. Massood, *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 41.

majority of America would have still held onto such beliefs by the time Hurston wrote *Color Struck*.

In that same article, Welch details why “there is none, nor is there likely to be” a successful “colored actor on the American stage” (358). To Welch, and to those Americans who agreed with his line of thinking, African Americans could only “imitate” behaviors, giving them the ability to entertain their audience but not become dramatists or actors representing “the finer thoughts, sentiments, and emotions” (358) of a character on the stage. Mimicry and imitation are an aspect of theatre, but such suggestions insinuate that only those parodying African American culture are capable of authentic African American representations. By basing her essay “Characteristics” on mimicry and imitation as it relates to drama and the Negro, Hurston directly engages those Americans whose thinking would have aligned with Welch’s. “Characteristics” appeared in Cunard’s *Negro Anthology* (1934), an impressive collection of work from artists around the world aimed at challenging racism and oppression and which is nearly an ethnographic study of the “Negro” in itself. *Negro* presents contemplations on the pathology of racism as well as the anger and cultural achievements of the world’s most dynamic black talents including Hurston, Louis Armstrong, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Arthur Schomburg, not to mention important nonblack twentieth-century writers.<sup>44</sup> “Characteristics” also outlines Hurston’s methodology for the ethnographic research and the reporting

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<sup>44</sup> *Negro* also has an Irish connection. Samuel Beckett was a close friend of Nancy Cunard and translated nineteen of *Negro*’s contributions. In *Beckett in Black and Red*, Alan Warren Friedman refers to Beckett’s contribution to *Negro*, calling it “substantial in quantity as well as quality” (xxx), but it is an aspect of Beckett’s work that has mostly been ignored by scholars.

of that material she will shortly assemble in *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1937). In addition to “Characteristics,” Hurston had other articles published in *Negro*.

Everything is derivative, and “what we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas,” Hurston argues in “Characteristics” (“Characteristics” 27). Thus, while it is impossible for anyone to be entirely original, for Hurston, the “Negro is a very original being” because everything that “he” does is imitated (“Characteristics” 25). She continues:

While he lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country. . . . Everyone is familiar with the Negro’s modification of the white’s musical instruments, so that his interpretation has been adopted by the white man himself and then re-interpreted. (“Characteristics” 28)

By foregrounding the aspects of African American culture one might consider primitive or, as Wright stated three years later in his review of *Their Eyes*, the aesthetic characteristics of black expression “that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh,” Hurston lauds blacks’ appropriated mannerisms, gestures, and speech as flattery. Ultimately Hurston asserts that such practices are irrelevant, if for no other reason than while “the use of Negro material by white performers” is pervasive, “I have never seen one yet entirely realistic” (“Characteristics” 31).

Analyzing the loss of traditional Irish vernacular culture can assist in evaluating the loss of African American vernacular culture in the United States.

The borrowing of African American folk rituals through minstrels and the commodification of African American folk stories by authors such as Joel Chandler Harris denigrated the original purveyors of those rituals and stories, leading African Americans to reject their own culture.<sup>45</sup> In focusing *Color Struck* on the color line and using a co-opted performative ritual that had an equally complex history, Hurston confronts not only the effects of white skin privilege on the African American community, she also asks African Americans to preserve their folk culture regardless of how it is perceived by white Americans.

Michael North notes in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature* that “the most significant thing about ‘Color Struck’ is that it makes no reference to” the notorious history of the dance. In Hurston’s play, he writes, “The cakewalk is a black rural ritual that has no reference to anything outside itself, certainly not to the possibility that its routines and usages might provide ammunition for white stereotyping” (176-7). Much of African American folk culture had been formed on plantations and then was stolen by white Americans. That “theft,” as Lott describes it, helped sustain white supremacy in America. He writes that blackface minstrelsy “was organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery” (3-4). For Hurston, it was more important to save and reclaim African American folk culture than to allow white America to dominate African American

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<sup>45</sup> In a letter to Thomas E. Jones, Hurston wrote: “I also decided that the world ought to know about the folktales of Negroes. The Uncle Remus tales were true in spirit and wonderfully done, but hardly scratched the surface” (Kaplan 316). Harris was a first-generation Irish American born out of wedlock. His parentage was problematic for him throughout his life.

stories and performative rituals. It is also important to remember that Hurston believed that “the use of Negro material by white performers” was more a form of flattery than a true depiction of black expressions (“Characteristics” 31). She wrote: “Everyone seems to think that the Negro is easily imitated when nothing is further from the truth. Without exception I wonder why the black-face comedians *are* black-face; it is a puzzle—good comedians, but darn poor niggers” (“Characteristics” 31). With the presentation of the cakewalk in *Color Struck*, Hurston elides the hundred-year history of blackface minstrelsy and presents the dance as if it had never been associated with blackface performers.

*Color Struck* begins on a segregated railway car in Jacksonville, Florida. The characters speak of “darkies” and “yellow faces” in a dialect that distinguishes them as southern African Americans of a particular era and class. Dinky says to Effie: “Howdy do, Miss Effie, you’s e lookin’ jee’ lak a rose. Fack is, if you wuzn’t walkin’ ‘long, Ah’d think you wuz a rose” (*Color Struck* 36). The African Americans on this railway car are happy, jovial, and seemingly very content with their lives. Nevertheless, there are two conflicts the reader is confronted with: the crowd on the railway car is debating who will win the annual cakewalk they are all headed to, insisting the winner must be from Jacksonville. “I hope somebody from Jacksonville wins this cake,” says the Railway Conductor, “I wanta taste a piece of that cake on the way back tonight” (*Color Struck* 37).

The second tension in *Color Struck* centers on the color line. From the stage directions for scene 1: “The ascending curtain discovers a happy lot of Negroes boarding the train dressed in the gaudy, tawdry best of 1900” (*Color Struck* 35). Everyone is happy except the “black woman” Emmaline Beazely

(*Color Struck* 35). Emmaline is very uncomfortable with the attention her boyfriend John Turner, “a light brown-skinned man,” is giving Effie, “a mulatto girl” (*Color Struck* 35). This conflict is evident from the following passage:

Dinky: Don’t y’all skeer us no mo’ lak dat! There couldn’t be no cakewalk ’thout y’all. Dem shad-mouf St. Augustine coons would win dat cake and we would have tuh kill ’em all bodaciously.

John: It was Emmaline nearly made us get left. She says I wuz smiling at Effie on the street car and she had to get off and wait for another one.

Emma: You wuz. I seen you looking jes’ lak a ole cheesy cat!

John: I wuzn’t. I never gits a chance tuh smile at nobody—you won’t let me.

Emma: Jes’ the same every time you sees a yaller face, you takes a chance.  
(*Color Struck* 37)

In this excerpt, John and Emma are promoted as the most skilled cakewalkers in the area, and the tension in the African American community around dark skin and light skin, especially dark-skinned and light-skinned women, is brought to the readers’ attention. Hurston credits Franz Boas with giving her the “spy-glass of Anthropology,” endowing her the authority to collect black folktales and the lens to view those tales properly (*Mules and Men* 1). But it was chronicling the “lies” that she heard at Joe Clarke’s storefront as a child that Hurston first developed her skills as a researcher. While her studies with Boas allowed her to perfect her methodology and practice, Hurston’s work as an autoethnographic researcher began on the front porch of Clarke’s general store in Eatonville, Florida. Clarke was the first mayor of Eatonville in addition to being the proprietor of the town’s general store and the town’s postmaster. And, as she writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, “Joe Clarke’s store was the heart and spring of

the town” (45). A central character in Hurston’s development as an ethnographer, Clarke is also a character who plays a significant role in Hurston’s fiction and theatre: he appears in ten Hurston pieces, and *Color Struck* is his first appearance.<sup>46</sup>

It was also in her hometown that Hurston learned what it meant to be color struck. Hurston claims that she “became colored” after leaving Eatonville (“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” 152). She suggests that because she lived exclusively “in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida” up until she was thirteen, and that the only white people she knew “passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando,” that somehow she escaped the negative associations with blackness that the larger black American community experienced (“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” 152). Hurston suggests that those African Americans who grew up having daily interactions with white America often became “tragically colored,” and she associates those who “belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood” with not only having a lack of autonomy but also with being limitedly defined by their color. She writes:

I left Eatonville, the town of oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was a little colored girl. I found out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run. But I am not tragically colored. (“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” 152)

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<sup>46</sup> Joe Clarke is most famously known as the inspiration for Joe Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). However, in addition to that novel and this play, he appears in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mule Bone* (1935), *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), “The Eatonville Anthology” (1926), “The Bone of Contention” (1929), “Sweat” (1926), and “Uncle Monday” (1929).

Yet Hurston reveals at the beginning of *Dust Tracks on the Road* that even without the presence of white bodies, African American people created a hierarchical scale based on class and on color. When Hurston reiterates the story of how her parents met, the reader learns that colorism was introduced to her long before her arrival in Jacksonville, for, in the story, her mama could not help but noticing that her father's "grey-green eyes and light skin stood out sharply from the black-skinned, black-eyed crowd he was in" (8). Martha Gilman Bower describes being color struck as when "what we see influences what we know, or think we know, about an individual" (9), and based on her retelling of the events, Hurston's maternal grandmother decided that because of John Hurston's light skin and light eyes, he "was always 'dat yaller bastard'" and she presumed him to be "a certain white man's son" (9). Moreover, many of the stories and some of the music that Hurston collects in *Mules and Men* reflect the colorism that existed in black America and probably in the Eatonville of Hurston's youth.

Throughout the beginning of the play the audience is reminded that Emma and John are considered the most proficient cakewalkers in Florida. When Joe Clarke is introducing the cakewalkers, he says, "And for Jacksonville, the most popular cakewalkers in de state—Miss Emmaline Beazeley, and Mr. John Turner" (*Color Struck* 44). The stage directions that follow: "Tremendous applause. John rises and offers his arm grandiloquently to Emma" (*Color Struck* 42), but as we know, Emma decides she will not participate in the cakewalk. On stage, "The place has been divided by a curtain of sheets stretched on a rope across from left to right. From behind the curtain there are occasional sounds of laughter, a note or two on a stringed instrument or accordion. General stir. That is the dance hall"

(*Color Struck* 43). The space in front of this sheet is where John and Emma are having their conversation. It is here that Emma's unease with performing the cakewalk is illustrated:

Emma: (*Pleadingly, and clutching his coat*) John, lets we all don't go in there with them. Let's we all go home.

John: (*Amazed*) Why, Emma?

Emma: 'Cause, 'cause all them girls is going to [be] pulling and hauling on you, and—

John: (*Impatiently*) Shucks! Come on. Don't you hear the people clapping for us and calling our names? Come on! (*Color Struck* 39)

Unfortunately, Emma does not hear or see anything outside of her jealousy and her colorist obsession.

Emma does not acknowledge that the reason Effie is available at the cakewalk competition is that Sam has deserted her. "Where's Sam, Effie?" Ada asks Effie in the play's first scene. She replies, "Lawd knows, Ada" (*Color Struck* 39). When approached by Old Man Lizzimore in scene 2, Effie is again asked if Sam is at the competition, to which Effie responds: "(*Embarrassed*) Naw suh, he ain't" (*Color Struck* 36). Emma ignores Effie's embarrassment and desertion. Even though Emma's partner John is present and committed to dancing the walk with her, Emma centers her attention on the color of her skin in relation to the color of Effie's. In her mind, Sam's desertion has made Effie available to John and not the tarnished, discarded woman one might see. While Emma argues, "Oh—they yaller wrenches! How I hate 'em! They gets everything they wants"

(*Color Struck* 40), Emma refuses to acknowledge that Effie does not have, and presumably wants, Sam.

After John storms into the dance-hall portion of the stage, the scene ends with Joe Clarke announcing, from behind the curtain, that “Miss Effie Jones will walk for Jacksonville with Mr. John Turner in place of Miss Emmaline Beazeley” (*Color Struck* 43). Scene 3 begins with Emma springing to her feet and flinging “the curtains wide open” (*Color Struck* 44). Not only has Emma decided she will not participate in the competition, she refuses to leave the festivities. Instead, Emma “stands staring at the gay scene for a moment defiantly then creeps over to a seat along the wall and shrinks into the Spanish moss, motionless” (*Color Struck* 44). Emma is too enraged to participate but refuses to distance herself completely from the “gay scene.” Her hatred of the “blackness” of her skin and her obsession with European standards of beauty, prevents her from contributing to the gay display of an African American ritual. In Emma’s mind “blackness” is despised while “whiteness” is favored, yet, upon having the opportunity to participate in an enthusiastic display of “blackness”—a dance that represents both African American oppression and subversion to the oppressive regime—Emma chooses to sit out the cakewalk, scowling.

When John and Effie, as expected, win the cakewalk competition, and the entire cast on stage is bursting with enthusiasm for the successful cakewalking couple, “The Jacksonville quartet step upon the platform and sing a verse and chorus of ‘Daisies Won’t Tell.’ Cries of ‘Hurrah for Jacksonville! Glory for the big town,’ ‘Hurrah for Big Jack.’” Emma meanwhile “buries her face in the moss” (*Color Struck* 44). Emma has let the outside world’s condemnation of the

“blackness” of African folk rituals, and the “blackness” of African American skin, reflect inward. She accepts the European view of blackness and, in doing so, becomes the character that we meet at the play’s end. John describes Emma as a woman who “so despises her own skin that she can’t believe anyone else could love it” (*Color Struck* 45). And because she “couldn’t see,” as she explains to the doctor her reason for not getting him more quickly, Emma’s child is dead, and she is left on stage alone, “rocking in an even, monotonous gait, and sobbing” (*Color Struck* 50).

The problem in African American society as Hurston puts forth in *Color Struck* is those who despise their own skin so much that they cannot “believe anyone else could love it.” Throughout the play John makes it clear that he is not attracted to Effie and that he loves Emma. “De darker de berry, de sweeter de taste” John says to Emma when they first arrive at the dance hall (*Color Struck* 41). His interactions with Effie are always those of a gentleman being kind and cordial to a lady, not of a man lusting after a woman. While John does exhibit his own particular obsession and fetishization of color—his wife of seventeen years was not “some high-yaller dickty-doo” as Emma postulates—“Naw she wasn’t neither,” says John to Emma’s assertion, “She was jus’ as much like [Emma] as [John] could get” (*Color Struck* 46). Yet it is Emma who throughout the play comments, notices, and obsesses about the color of her and other women’s skin. Emma refuses to participate in the cakewalk because she believes John is “carryin’ on wid dat punkin-colored old gal” Effie. As I stated before, “It was Emmaline nearly made [John and her] get left” as she believed John “wuz smiling at Effie on the street car and she had to get off and wait for another one”

(*Color Struck* 37). When John returns after twenty years to marry her, Emma lets her sick child die for fear of leaving the “half-white skin” girl alone with the man she loves (*Color Struck*). Emma’s obsession with color extends to all aspects of her life and is entirely responsible for her being left broken and alone. The final stage directions to *Color Struck* read:

He [the doctor] departs. She puts the pill-box on the table, takes up the low rocking chair and places it by the head of the bed. She seats herself and rocks monotonously and stares out of the door. A dry sob now and then. The wind from the open door blows out the lamp and she is seen by the little light from the window rocking in an even, monotonous gait, and sobbing. (*Color Struck* 50)

Emma is destroyed. She asserts at the end of scene two, “Oh, them half whites, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs—everything!” (*Color Struck*), but Emma is the one who leaves John even though she believes that “he went and left” her (*Color Struck*). Hurston is famous for believing in the Horatio Alger myth, even in the face of rampant racial prejudice, and her assertion that the dark-skinned woman needs to take responsibility for her participation in institutionalized racism follows triumph-over-tragedy thinking. Those obsessed with color within the black community, such as Emma, are self-destructive when blaming the darkness of their skin for loss of opportunities. As articulated by Emma, “The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones” (*Color Struck*). While it is important to acknowledge that, generally speaking, the color line did have a more destructive effect on darker-skinned people and that, even in the black community, “black” or

dark-skinned African Americans experience prejudice, it must be stressed that it is Emma who privileges lighter-skinned over darker-skinned people in the play.<sup>47</sup> Besides the instigated argument with John regarding Effie, Emma's daughter is "a very white girl," implying that after John, instead of entering a relationship with another black man, she participated in a sexual relationship with a white man. John suggests that Emma go get the nearest doctor, who might be an African American doctor in the segregated South. He says, "Here take some money and get a good doctor. There must be some good colored ones around here now" (*Color Struck*). But Emma snaps: "(Scornfully) I wouldn't let one of 'em tend my cat if I had one!" (*Color Struck*). After Emma finally gets the doctor, the audience sees he is white. Emma has let American racism dictate standards of right and wrong, good and bad. Black, and anything associated with blackness, is for Emma degraded and unworthy of equality, while its opposite, white and whiteness, deserve ultimate superiority.

In *Color Struck* the cakewalk is one of many African American rituals that needs to be preserved. While the story of John, Emma, and Effie provides the frame for the audience to consider, it is clear from the stage directions that Hurston intended the seven-minute "strut" to be the *pièce de résistance*. During

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<sup>47</sup> Hurston's collected folk material even highlights some of this prejudice. The lyrics from "Mule on De Mount," preserved in *Mules and Men* and in the Zora Neale Hurston collection at the Library of Congress, references the perception of "coal-black" women in African American culture: "I don't want no coal-black woman for my regular / I don't want no coal-black woman for my regular / She's too low-down, Lawd, Lawd, she's too low-down" (Hurston *Mules and Men* 264). Of the song, Hurston says: "The most widely distributed and best known of all Negro work songs. Since folk songs grow by incremental repetition the diversified subject matter that it accumulates as it ages is one of the evidences of its distribution and usage. This has everything in folk life in it. Several stories to say nothing of just lyric matter. It is something like the Odyssey, or the Iliad" (Hurston *Mules and Men* 264).

the time the cakewalk is on the stage, the music features what Hurston considered traditional African American culture. On stage, the orchestra consists of a “guitar, mandolin, banjo, accordion, church organ, and drum,” and when the cakewalk is set to begin, the orchestra plays and sings “Way Down in Georgia” (Hill 108). The orchestra features almost all of the instruments associated with traditional African American vernacular culture. Upon investigation, there are a number of songs associated with “Way Down in Georgia.” Nevertheless, from a song about a soldier from “way down in Georgia” to a song about a man going “way down in Georgia” to bring his baby back, to a minstrel gag where the refrain is “way down in Georgia,” each song reflects either antebellum or postbellum southern vernacular culture. Moreover, the fact that Emma segregates herself from participating in the most important display of African American vernacular culture in this play illustrates Hurston’s concerns about how destructive the underlining assimilation efforts of the New Negro movement were to traditional African American rituals.

While many of Synge’s plays have regularly been staged since their debut, in Ireland and around the world, Hurston’s theatre has not been as popular. As a written document, *Color Struck* helps preserve the cakewalk as a significant aspect of African American vernacular culture, but without a forum to present the ritual in, *Color Struck* serves more as evidence that those traditions are already lost. Instead of recalling how such traditions as the cakewalk were an integral aspect of African American folk culture, *Color Struck* becomes as much of a lost artifact as the cakewalk itself.

## **Conclusion**

Zygmunt Bauman writes that the “universalizing ambitions of emerging nation-states, that later became ubiquitous, and arguably the most salient, trait of all modernization” eventually resulted in a “pan-European unification” that saw Jews, and possibly other “minorities,” unable to conform completely whether they wanted to assimilate or not. And while he argues that the Irish were recalcitrant “to that characteristic nineteenth-century model of assimilation and acculturation by way of ‘likeness’” (44), the eventual loss of Irish vernacular culture evidences that no level of reluctance the Irish had to modernization could have saved traditional Irish culture. With Irish Catholic clergy condemning Irish peasants for their excesses at wakes, what is revealed is that the internal censure of Irish vernacular cultural practices, concomitant with expressions of approval for cultural practices that unified Ireland with the wider Catholic community, generated assimilation results in Ireland similar to what the Irish immigrants experienced in the United States and the United Kingdom.

By the time that Synge visited the Aran Islands, the effects of unification efforts had resulted in communities that were slowly losing their ancient customs. Of these consequences, Synge writes:

Kilronan, the principal village on Aranmore, has been so much changed by the fishing industry, developed there by the Congested Districts Board, that it is now very little to distinguish it from any fishing village on the west of Ireland. The other islands are more primitive, but even on them many changes are being made, that it was not worth while to deal with in the text. (CW II 47)

This passage is one example that Synge provides of the disappearance of traditional Irish culture. Compared to the description of the rest of Ireland, Synge speaks of the Arans as if they are the remains of traditional Irish culture, yet even the big island, Árainn Mhór, has already lost its individuality in his estimation. Of the lack of distinctiveness on Árainn Mhór, Synge writes: “In spite of the charm of my teacher, the old blind man I met the day of my arrival, I have decided to move on to Inishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe” (CW II 47).

At the end of part 1 of *The Aran Islands*, Synge leaves the islands and returns to the mainland, stopping in a “hotel full of tourist and commercial travellers” (CW II 102). Being back on the mainland and in Galway is disconcerting for him. He describes the experience as follows: “The sort of yearning I feel towards those lonely rocks [the Aran Islands] is indescribably acute. This town, that is usually so full of wild human interest, seems in my present mood a tawdry medley of all that is crudest in modern life” (CW II 102-3). The use of the word “tawdry” as it relates to Galway is of particular interest because Synge also uses the word in “A Landlord’s Garden in County Wicklow.” Written 1 July 1907, it is one of the essays Synge published in the *Manchester Guardian*. Here Synge details a different aspect of dismantled Irish life: instead of focusing on the loss of traditional Irish culture, this article focuses on the disappearing Ascendancy class from which Synge comes. The article’s theme can be stated as this: “The tragedy of the landlord class . . . and the innumerable old families that are quickly dwindling away” (CW II 230-31). In “A Landlord’s Garden,” “tawdry” is used to describe the “poor” houses that now sit “[w]here

good and roomy houses were built a hundred years ago” (CW II 231). Thus the efforts of the Irish Catholic Church to eradicate ancient Irish cultural practices have also had an effect on the Ascendancy, the minority Anglo-Irish class that controlled a majority of Irish land. Of this class, Synge writes that “[m]any of the descendants of these people have, of course, drifted into professional life in Dublin, or have gone abroad” (CW II 231). While Galway is “a tawdry medley of all that is crudest in modern life” (CW II 47), the space of the “Landlord’s Garden” is tawdry because of the houses that were at present built there. But “tawdry” is used in both instances to describe not only the quality of the areas and its buildings but also how sordid and distasteful the areas seem to Synge. In Synge’s prose, urbanized Galway and Dublin become the physical embodiment of a new Ireland, the places to which Michael from Inis Meáin and the descendants of the landlords, the descendants of rural, old Ireland, drift. As such, the cities become the antithesis to the “primitive” Arans—the physical space Synge prefers at that moment.

When the Dublin audience is presented with the keen at the end of *Riders*, Synge is staging an aspect of traditional Irish vernacular that he desires to save. The play in its entirety can be read as a critique of the perseverance of Old World folk traditions competing with a modern world considering the struggle between Maurya and her sons. From one perspective, Maurya is just attempting to prevent Bartley’s death as, at this point in the play, she has lost seven men in her family to drowning accidents at sea. As she explains to Bartley before he leaves the boat, “If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?” (CW III 9). From

another perspective, *Riders* is also about an old woman not wanting to move forward with life. Bartley explains to Cathleen and Nora, “It’s hard set we’ll be from this day with no one in it but one man to work” (CW III 9). In his absence, Bartley begins to explain to Cathleen and Nora what the women will need to do to maintain their property. “BARTLEY [*working at the halter, to CATHLEEN*]. Let you go down each day, and see the sheep aren’t jumping in on the rye, and if the jobber comes you can sell the pig with the black feet if there is a good price going” (CW III 9). Yet Maurya replies, “How would the like of her get a good price for a pig?” (CW III 9). Maurya sees no way for her and the girls to survive without a man, but, even with one man, the family of four has little chance of survival without the women taking on some traditionally masculine roles. Bartley is trying to bring in extra cash by heading to Galway, and he is instructing the girls on the work that will need to be done. As P. J. Mathews explains in “Re-thinking Synge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, “Maurya’s refusal to give her blessing to Bartley’s enterprising journey over sea to Galway explains why life on the island has sunk below subsistence” (Mathews 9). In many ways, the reason the island remains “the most primitive that is left in Europe” (CW II 53) from Synge’s critical perspective is because the old will not embrace the new. But like Maurya’s requests to the men in her life not to leave the island and chance their lives to the sea, her recalcitrance to the new is ultimately exerted in vain.

In *Color Struck*, it is exactly the opposite situation: the new refuse to acknowledge the old. Besides the general practice of minstrelsy, it can be argued that at the time Hurston wrote “Characteristics,” the foremost example of American performative ritual appropriation was the cakewalk. As an art form,

cakewalking illustrates the manner in which African Americans appropriated European American culture as a form of resistance to their enslaved status, with white Americans re-appropriating the ritual as an attempt to denigrate black American culture. Thus, *Color Struck* is more than a play about the color line, where “its only memorable scene is a cakewalk” (Hemenway 47). Considering the argument and counter-arguments Hurston presents in “Characteristics,” the cakewalk in *Color Struck* is presented with certainty and is evidence of Negro ingenuity. Emma’s rejection of the dance becomes completely aligned with her rejecting not only traditional African American culture, but the blackness of her skin as well.

The ethnographic material Synge and Hurston accumulated might have been attempts on each author’s part to detail and reveal representations of the Irish and of blacks in the Americas. *Riders* and *Color Struck* are self-consciously aware dramas that show how the authors were attempting to provide theatrical mimesis of culture that somehow interlocks subject and object. The depiction of the keen and the cakewalk in the plays I discuss in this chapter suggest that Synge and Hurston use the performative rituals to illustrate that it is possible to present a quality of Irish and African American culture in art. The inside/outside representation of the keen in *Riders to the Sea* and of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* promotes a critique of conformity, where the sacrificing of folk culture and identity in favor of assimilation is disparaged. By focusing on, incorporating, and staging actual folk rituals, presenting these rituals in a space where the audience can see, hear, and experience the performative aspects of traditional Irish and

African American folk culture, Synge and Hurston challenge boundaries between the real and the fictional.



## CHAPTER III

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### REPUDIATION OR RECUPERATION: ITINERATE WOMEN AND THE MARRIAGE RITUAL

#### INTRODUCTION

It is not the disparagement of performed ritual in Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* and Hurston's *Polk County* that encourages the audience or readers to reconsider how stereotypical images of the Irish and African Americans are formed. Rather, by participating in the wedding ritual, the outliers in the plays themselves serve as a symbol of disregard for the constructed hierarchical classism within Irish and African American culture and further destabilize notions of the inauthentic in Irish and American theatre. Moreover, the rejection of marriage in the tinkers' case and the celebration of marriage in the case of the sawmill workers suggest that in *The Tinker's Wedding* and *Polk County* the audience or readers are meant to focus on what the most ostracized members of Irish and African American societies believe in regard to marriage. The marginalized status of the tinkers and sawmill workers is celebrated in each play; the plays do not attempt to extend racist notions of each group. The reader or viewer must then focus on how each group approaches the marriage ritual; the rejection of marriage in *The Tinker's Wedding* and the acceptance of marriage in *Polk County* is the primary focus.

Even though the title of Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* seems to suggest that a marriage ceremony will be presented, the wedding that the audience is encouraged to imagine—a Catholic wedding between Michael and Sarah, officiated by the priest in a church— never occurs. Rather than celebrating a

legally and formally recognized covenant between Michael and Sarah, by the end of the play the participants are celebrating the rejection of marriage. Such an outcome is typical in Synge's plays, as the institution is often depicted as constraining and restrictive. In *The Shadow of the Glen*, Daniel Burke accuses Nora Burke of being a "bad wife," fakes his death in an attempt to prove it, and after it appears that Nora will take Michael Dara's offer of marriage, Dan reveals himself to be alive and banishes his wife from their house. Michael refuses to save Nora, and his offer of marriage disappears, leaving her to walk into the unknown with the Tramp. In *The Well of the Saints*, Mary and Martin Doul are perfectly content in their marriage and with their occupation as beggars—until the Saint comes into their lives and cures their blindness. The play ends with the couple leaving their community and Mary telling them all, "I'd liefer live dark all times beside him, than be seeing in new troubles now" (CW III 147). In *When the Moon Has Set*, religious ideology has destroyed the possibility of finding happiness in marriage for Colm's uncle but given him the chance at recovering it when he and Sister Eileen reject religion. And in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the examples of potential marriages range from young women being married off to weak men and old widowed women attempting to marry young men, all for the sake of expanded economic opportunities. Further, the play celebrates liberated, traveling people who reject Christian bourgeois values and marriage, such as Christopher Mahon. After all, Mahon is "the only playboy of the western world" (CW IV 173). Instead of being concerned with the legitimacy of one's partnership, in the plays Synge seems to suggest that being treated justly and being in a relationship that allows one to maintain his or her independence is more

beneficial than the acceptance of one's peers. Moreover, in rejecting marriage in these plays a broader statement is being made about Ireland and the Catholic Church (and perhaps all religious affiliation): that the relationship between the people and the Church is not equitable, that it is more advantageous for the Irish populace to be on its own without the Church's support, and that marriage and the Irish Catholic Church must be repudiated rather than Irish people continue to be mistreated and abused by the nation's religious leaders.

In Hurston's *Polk County*, marriage is presented as a reparative institution that will compensate some of the characters in the play for the wrongs that they have experienced and for the injustices that have been done against them. By the end of the play, Leafy and My Honey are successfully married. Dicey, Nunkie, and Ella Wall attempt to use voodoo to "hack all of 'em a lick or two" to effectively stop the wedding, but the deviant plan fails (*Polk County* 306). The ceremony is performed by a preacher in "pantomime" (*Polk County* 306) so that the audience can see but not hear the exchanging of vows, while the audience hears the cast singing the gospel hymn "Troubles Will Be Over."<sup>48</sup> And the men and women in the camp do believe getting married will solve any problems that they might have. Do-Dirty asserts, "This marrying business is nice. Us could have been having fun like this all the time, but we didn't have no sense" (*Polk County* 358). Lonnie claims, "Things is going to be better now. Folks everywhere will look upon us more. Us can make things more better all around" (*Polk County* 361).

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#### NOTES

<sup>48</sup> The refrain of the song: "Troubles will be over, Amen / Troubles will be over Amen . . . I see the light-house, Amen" (*Polk County* 326).

In *Meet the Momma*, marriage is treated comically. At the opening of the play, Peter Thorpe is dreading running into his mother-in-law, who lives with him and his wife at their hotel in New York City. Peter “ain’t been home since yesterday” and must have an “alibi” to explain his philandering before his wife’s mother “comes sniffing and whiffing around” (*Meet the Momma* 3). While Carrie treats her husband’s absence calmly, her mom hurls verbal insults at Peter and hopes to break up her daughter’s marriage. The banter between Peter, Carrie, and Edna continues as they travel across the Atlantic to Luababa, West Africa. When they arrive, the group learns that in Luababa mothers-in-law are killed as soon as their daughters marry, pleasing Peter with hopes of getting rid of Edna. But by the end of the play Peter and Carrie are happy, Uncle Cliff and Edna are preparing to marry, and Peter has convinced the new chief of Luababa to let mothers-in-law live.

In *Spunk*, Evalina is unhappily married to Jim Bishop, and she treats her husband coldly and with contempt. Even still, after it becomes clear that she has moved on with Spunk, Jim decides he is going to get his wife back and challenges Spunk. Jim “got down on his hand and knees and crawled up behind the log [Spunk] was setting [on] and tried to cut [him] in the back,” which results in Spunk shooting Jim. After Spunk serves time on a chain gang, he and Evalina are married and expecting a child. The seemingly happy ending to their story is overshadowed by the obligato Ruby sadly hums over Spunk and Evalina’s song at the end of the production.

In Hurston’s plays, just like in her fiction, marriage is described in a multitude of ways. Marriage is good, bad, enjoyable, distressing, restrictive, and

liberating. Ultimately, marriage in Hurston's world is a normal aspect of life, and a relationship between a man and a woman can end disastrously or harmoniously. However, rather consistently, Hurston's characters assert that marriage can be a reparative and fruitful union when both parties are respected and treated as equals. In Hurston's world marriage is not presented as a permanent institution: once the relationship ceases to be an egalitarian partnership, the relationship usually dissolves. And typically it is the woman who leaves her man. Further, the legal status of the relationship is irrelevant. While the "papers" in *Polk County* provide evidence to outsiders that the marriage is valid, giving Leafy Lee the respectability she seeks, Hurston suggests that a person should be more concerned with how he or she is actually treated by his or her partner instead of being concerned with legal status (an external concern). If one's partner treats one justly, the legality of the union is of no importance. However, if one's partner treats one unfairly, Hurston's works suggests it is better to no longer be involved with such a person. And always, in or out of a relationship, Hurston's characters are encouraged to maintain their independence. In Hurston's plays, black women must be respected for their service to the African American community; if they are treated properly, the relationships they are in will survive.

As performed ethnographies, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *Polk County* reconstruct the authors' real-life encounters with Irish and African American vernacular culture and are derived directly from each author's ethnographic material. Both *The Tinker's Wedding* and *Polk County* are directly related to ethnographic material they collected. I have argued previously that in scripting

performed ethnographies the authors' goal is to challenge previous inauthentic images that had been conferred onto them by outside observers, such as how John Dunton and Deshler Welch had denigrated Irish and African American performative culture, respectively. The use of ethnographic materials in their theatre suggests an attempt on each author's part to stage representational Irish and African American culture. However, in *The Tinker's Wedding* and *Polk County* it seems that the authors fail to portray what can be considered "representational," for the transient characters in their plays follow stereotypical behavior. By making the tinkers "lusty, hard-drinking, and violent" (Flood 75), as Jeanne Flood argues in "Thematic Variation in Synge's Early Peasant Plays," in many ways Synge's play perpetuates stereotypes about Irish Travellers specifically and Irish people in general. Similarly, Hurston also perpetuates stereotypes of African American people in *Polk County*. As Roger D. Abrahams argues in "The Negro Stereotype," a consistent depiction of blacks as "animalistic, supersexual, childish, lazy, and criminal" was imposed on African American identity in the postbellum era (229). Hurston's theme of a group of itinerants casually cohabiting and readily changing sex partners directly engages the myth of African Americans as sexually uninhibited. In regard to both Irish Travellers and migrant sawmill workers, it is such misconceptions, and most likely the impoverished status of these itinerant people as well, that assists in both groups being internally marginalized by members of their respective communities. Thus, in proposing that each play is representational, Synge and Hurston seem to encourage the derogatory portrayal.

Irish Travellers, or “Tinkers,” are of a different ethnic population from the settled Irish community (and have been legally defined as such in Ireland since 2002), They have been routinely discriminated against in Ireland (in England and America), making the group further marginalized than the Irish peasants Synge typically wrote about in his plays. Thomas Alan Acton describes in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity* that Travellers have historically represented to many in the Irish community the ways in which the Irish have been racialized in general. He writes that “arranged marriages, large numbers of children, violent feuding between different groups of families” (31), not to mention images of “drunken, lazy, stupid, ignorant, violent and superstitious” Irish people, characterized both anti-Irish and anti-Traveller racializations (48). Such stereotypes in regard to Travellers perpetuate stereotypical images of all Irish people. And, because many in Ireland see Travellers as landless peasants who refuse to assimilate and as a racial Other, Travellers have consistently been marginalized within the larger Irish society.

The suggestion that black itinerant workers entered and exited sexual relationships at will and that they cohabitated with unmarried sexual partners could possibly be seen as contributing to the myth that African Americans were promiscuous and sexually deviant. One of the claims made against African American men during the antebellum period was that black men would rape white women if they were allowed to go free. Much of this misled anxiety around black men as victimizers was generated by the liberties white male slave owners

took with black female slaves.<sup>49</sup> The paradox of miscegenation fears also meant that black women were considered culpable for their rapes. As Michelle Kuhl writes in her article “Countable Bodies, Uncountable Crimes: Sexual Assault and the Anti-Lynching Movement,” white “southerners had often blamed black women themselves for ‘seducing’ their masters” (142). As a result, by the twentieth century African American women were presumed to be promiscuous and sexually available. This stereotype, imposed onto black women by mainstream white American culture, was even taken up by nonwhite Americans. William Hannibal Thomas wrote in *The American Negro* (1901) that “while slavery wrought immeasurable evil in the slave white holding class of the South, its possible inequities bred a moral debasement in negro women” (14). In the text the U.S. Civil War veteran outlines how African American people contributed to their continued marginalized status in America. His tome is particularly harsh on African American women. He writes:

Innate modesty is not a characteristic of the American negro women. On the contrary, there is observable among them a willing susceptibility to

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<sup>49</sup> White slave owners most likely took liberties with many of their slaves, regardless of gender or age. The taking of black women is well documented in American historical texts and on the bodies of African Americans, as the range of skin colors among African American people is seen as “proof” that white men raped black women during the antebellum era even though miscegenation was illegal. Sally Hemings and Martha Jefferson were half-sisters, and Betty Hemings, Sally’s mother, was a mulatto. Thomas Jefferson began his relationship with Sally Hemings when she was a teenager, and the probability of other white slave owners engaging in nonconsensual sexual relations with teenage girls (or younger) is very likely. What remains undocumented is evidence that white slave owners participated in a variety of sexual fantasies including homosexuality and pedophilia. Whereas sex between a man and a woman, even nonconsensual sex, could be perceived as normal and thus was openly discussed, sex with a small child or a person of the same sex would be quite taboo. However, it is hard to imagine having access to all those slaves, all those bodies, and slave owners not engaging in a range of sex acts.

their blandishments of licentious men, together with a widespread distribution of physical favors among their male friends . . . the grossly depraved among them exhibit considerable animal affection, and readily yield to caresses that consciously lead them to destruction. Marriage is no barrier to illicit sexual indulgence, and both men and women maintain such relations in utter disregard of their plighted troth. (183-84)

Thus, a play where one of the main female characters refuses to legitimize her sexual relationship by getting married and in which the wedding of one of the lead male characters is interrupted by a woman he casually and briefly had intimacy with might have contributed to concerns that African American people were sexually liberated. Such a label would have been unwelcome at the time Hurston wrote *Polk County*.

To understand the history of marriage as an institution and its significance is a long and complicated process. It is neither my goal to examine that history in these pages nor can I dedicate in this document the necessary space to detailing the history of Irish and African American marriage practices in their entirety. However, it is possible to simplify the origins of marriage as an institution that “converted strangers into relatives and extended cooperative relations beyond the immediate family or small band by creating far-flung networks of in-laws” (Coontz 5). The historian Stephanie Coontz details in her book *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (2005) that marriage has historically been about shoring up economic and social resources for individuals. For those of substantial economic means, marriage was a way to “hoard or accumulate resources” and also to wield political control within their social group; for those

in “lower classes,” the economics of marriage were still significant but on a smaller scale and for far more “immediate” goals, such as the question of whether the prospective in-laws might be helpful or detrimental to the participants’ future (Coontz 6). Thus, the stability associated with Western society’s ideas about traditional marriage comes from the social and political stability that the institution created within communities.

The permanence of marriage would have helped to create social and political stability in a variety of communities, especially concerning religious marriages. Yet sawmill camps as Hurston sees them, whether correctly or incorrectly, present a contradictory image of permanence. The possibility for stability within the sawmill community, both socially and politically, directly opposes the image Hurston puts forth in her work. “Everyone lives temporary,” Hurston writes in the scene and setting section (*Polk County* 273). She continues: “They go from job to job, or from job to jail and jail to job. Working, loving temporarily and often without thought of permanence in anything” (*Polk County* 273). The lives that she has scripted, inspired by those “authentic” encounters that Hurston consistently reiterates she had, are similar to the lives of Synge’s tinkers. Both the tinkers and the sawmill workers are people an outsider would not expect to be legally married or to want marriage. Yet, unlike the characters in *The Tinker’s Wedding*, the main characters featured in *Polk County* have a legitimate and what one might now consider a rather traditional wedding ceremony. Moreover, the three other featured couples in *Polk County* express that they are planning to be married under similar conditions in the immediate future. To Do-Dirty’s assertion that the “marrying business is nice,” Stew Beef

says, “That’s a fact. You just wait till next month when me and Laura B stand up” (*Polk County* 358). Few Clothes chimes in, “Man, but me and Bunch is going to really break it up” (*Polk County* 358). Not only are the women eager to get married, but their men seem to be excited about the prospects of marriage as well.

At some point in each play, the reader or viewer knows why Sarah Casey and Michael Byrne and Leafy Lee and My Honey are planning to marry. Sarah is hoping to gain respectability so that no one “has a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself” (xx). When pressed and insulted for agreeing to participate in the wedding ceremony, Michael says, “If I don’t marry her, she’d be walking off to Jaunting Jim maybe at the fall of night; and it’s well yourself knows there isn’t the like of her for getting money and selling songs to the men” (CW IV 35). Michael’s position is that marrying Sarah will somehow permanently bind her to him. And even though Mary challenges Michael’s opinion by saying that a woman will leave “when she’s a mind to go” (xx), Michael hopes that in proving to Sarah that he will do almost anything for her, including marrying her, will make her want to stay with him indefinitely. Their partnership is based on economic survival, on a sense of trust and obligation.

Leafy Lee wants to marry because she was raised to believe in the institution, and she refuses to let her values or virginity be compromised unless she is rewarded with marriage. When Box Car asks, “Miss Leafy, which would you rather be, a lark a-flying, or a dove a-setting?” (*Polk County* 331), Leafy replies by stating that whether she remains unmarried or decides to marry is completely

dependent on how she feels about her suitor; whether “she was in love or not” (*Polk County* 332). Leafy then sings a song that attempts to illustrate how someone can enter her “room.” She sings:

It was the full moon with his light  
That brought you  
And brought love  
In the night.  
He wove your wish right into mine.  
With a kiss  
That was bliss  
So divine  
Made you near  
Ever dear, ever true—Ah that moon!  
In my room  
Ah, the moon! (*Polk County* 332)

From this excerpt of the song, it is evident that anyone who wants to enter into a sexual relationship with Leafy needs to be a man she is in love with. While the song is not overtly sexual, the lyrics clearly lay out that Leafy has sexual desires. Previously Leafy informed Big Sweet that she would remain a virgin until she was married. And, as Leafy has just stated, unless she finds someone she loves, she will remain a virgin “lark a-flying.” Being aware of Leafy’s position, My Honey knows that if he wants to fulfill his sexual desire for Leafy, he must enter into a legally validated union with her.

But if the purpose of marriage is to establish stability in a community, then it is important to challenge Synge's and Hurston's claims of authenticity in regard to these texts, as there seem to be quite a few contradictions. When both plays open, it is clear that each community is controlled by a transient approach to life. Hurston states in the scene and setting section that the sawmill camp in Polk County, Florida, is "ephemeral in every way" (*Polk County* 273). She writes, "The murderous fight of today is forgotten tomorrow and the opponents work together in utmost friendship inside of twenty-four hours" (*Polk County* 273). Similarly, the first lines of Synge's play seem to suggest that, for Sarah, the decision to marry is also connected to a transitory emotion, rather like the nomadic lives of the tinkers themselves. Michael asserts that "since the moon did change," Sarah started her talk of weddings and getting married. Their exchange continues:

SARAH [musingly]. I'm thinking there isn't anything that ails me, Michael Byrne; but the spring-time is a queer time, and it's queer thoughts maybe I do think at whiles.

MICHAEL. It's hard set you'd be to think queerer than welcome, Sarah Casey; but what will you gain dragging me to the priest this night, I'm saying, when it's new thoughts you'll be thinking at the dawn of the day?  
(CW IV 7)

Sarah's desire to marry might be about gaining respectability, as she reasons later in the play, but the initial desire to marry is coming from passing emotions that are directly opposed to her desire to make her situation more stable and permanent. By comparing and evaluating the historical data on marriage practices in both Irish Traveller and sawmill worker communities in relation to

the ethnographic material Synge and Hurston collected and then based these plays on, perhaps it is possible to understand better the contradictory images within these particular performed ethnographies. Through such a comparison, I argue that in focusing on a form of permanence—marriage—in transient communities, Synge and Hurston emphasize how fleeting marital relationships truly are. The suggestion is, of course, that marriages are never permanent, even among respected members of any society, which makes the legality of said partnership inconsequential. In the rejection of marriage in Synge’s play and the acceptance of marriage in Hurston’s, the authors stress that a successful and equitable partnership is only achieved when both parties are satisfied and respected.

### **Irish Travellers and Marriage**

In using the title *The Tinker’s Wedding*, Synge is preparing the audience for an event that seems unlikely, asserting that “tinker” and “wedding” are two words that the audience would not normally put together. It must be noted that within the context of Irish history, specific details about Irish Travellers are limited, obscured, or completely missing. However, from the information that is available on Traveller culture, it is safe to assert that the likelihood of a young Traveller woman being allowed to be in a relationship with a man or, as Michael says, “going beside [Michael] a great while, and rearing a lot of them” without being married, is unlikely (CW IV 7). Nevertheless, when at the beginning of the play Sarah Casey has decided, after many years and many children with Michael Byrne, that she wants validation of their relationship and the respectability and

acceptance of the larger Irish community that comes with holy matrimony, the viewer or reader of this play is supposed to believe that the notion of marriage for Sarah and Michael is ridiculous. Mary Byrne's character and comments emphasize this position. When Mary realizes that the priest has invited Sarah and Michael to the chapel, Mary speaks "with amazement and consternation" and says: "Going to the chapel! It's at marriage you're fooling again, maybe? It was for that you were washing your face, and after sending me for porter at the fall of night the way I'd drink a good half from the jug? Is it at marriage you're fooling again?" (CW IV 35). Mary's words to Sarah suggest that marriage among their tinker community is not only considered unnecessary, it is seen as a ridiculous ideal that "washed" people participate in and not people who sleep in ditches along the side of the road. But Sarah asserts that she has a "right to a decent marriage [just] as any speckled female [who] does be sleeping in the black hovels above" (CW IV 35). She answers Mary in the affirmative, "It is, Mary Byrne. I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself" (CW IV 35).

While Michael Byrne is willing to participate in the Catholic marriage rite with Sarah, he too does not see why it is necessary to do so. At the play's opening, Sarah is "eagerly" (CW IV 7) awaiting "his reverence" who "does be [at the doctor's office] playing cards, or drinking sup, or singing songs, until the dawn of day" (CW IV 13), and Michael is forging a tin wedding ring for Sarah's finger. "[B]ut what will you gain dragging me to the priest this night" (CW IV 7), Michael asks Sarah while they wait for the priest in the ditch by the road.

Moreover, Michael and Sarah's union is solidified from their first day as partners, and it could be that both Michael and Mary are emphasizing this point to Sarah in an attempt to understand her desire to be married by a priest at this point in her life. As Michael hurriedly tries to finish Sarah's ring she begins urging him to "make haste, or herself will be coming with the porter" (CW IV 9). Michael grows impatient with Sarah and threatens to assault her: "I'll be making haste maybe to hit you a great clout; for I'm thinking it's the like of that you want" (CW IV 9). Michael continues, and it is revealed that not only has Michael used violence to control Sarah previously, he "clouted" Sarah in the ear the first time they met. He reveals:

I'm thinking on the day I got you above Rathvanna, and the way you began crying out and we coming down off the hill, crying out and saying, "I'll go back to my ma," and I'm thinking on the way I came behind you that time, and hit you a great clout in the lug, and how quiet and easy it was you came along with me from that hour to this present day. (CW IV 9)

Relationships within the Irish Traveller community are strictly controlled as far as women are concerned. As Michael illustrates in the quotation above, one day he "got" Sarah, and she was more than resistant to this coupling. Jane Helleiner argues in *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* that after the Great Famine, Traveller marriages "involved little property transfer, marriage at a young age, and a very low rate of non-marriage" (*Irish Travellers* 181). While one could be led to believe that Traveller marriage practices are strictly connected to "the legacy of an outdated peasant tradition," Helleiner argues that viewing "Irish Traveller marriage practices as peasant survivals obscures the significance of arranged marriage for Traveller life in the past and at present" (*Irish Travellers*

181). Helleiner continues to state that Traveller parents arrange these relationships to prevent coupling with non-Travellers and also to keep their children within the community. Thus, the matchmaking practice keeps the marginalized community insular and isolated. Since Sarah was most likely given to Michael by her parents, it really was foolish of her to threaten to “go back to” her ma, a point with which she almost agrees. Sarah says, “And a big fool I was too, maybe” (CW IV 11).

The getting of Sarah on the hill above Rathvanna could be argued as a type of matrimonial rite, and perhaps this is the “tinker’s wedding” Synge wanted to highlight in the play. While Sarah eventually realizes that her union with Michael was inevitable at that point in her life, the “maybe” suggests she perhaps wanted more than to be “gotten.” Perhaps, even at the beginning of her relationship with Michael, she was not rejecting the union with him, like she is not rejecting the relationship with Michael when the audience meets the two of them in the ditch on the side of the road. In the past, she was rejecting the manner in which the union came together. The audience is not privy to the information that would explain why Michael and Sarah were not legally wed that day, yet Sarah’s comment about wanting “a decent marriage” suggests that she and Michael underwent some form of ceremony. What the audience does know is that while Sarah agrees her relationship to Michael is mostly bound, she feels that the marriage rite she experienced, being “got . . . above Rathvanna,” is not how she wants her relationship to be defined.

In Synge’s preface to *The Tinker’s Wedding*, he states that “I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind

being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies” (CW IV 3). This self-conscious acknowledgement on Synge’s part appears to be addressing the possible reaction that *The Tinker’s Wedding* could have received from the Irish public. But because the play was never performed during Synge’s lifetime or in Ireland until mid-twentieth century, it is impossible to know how the public would have received it.<sup>50</sup> The suggestion is, of course, that because the play readily abuses, attacks, and ultimately condemns the priest *The Tinker’s Wedding* would have stoked anger among Irish nationalists and Irish Catholics who were already dissatisfied with the manner in which Synge’s dramas seemed to rather aggressively demean the Irish peasantry and the virtue of Irish women. When the play did premiere at His Majesty’s Theatre in London, 11 November 1909, approximately seven months after Synge had died, Yeats walked out of the theatre after the first act perhaps because he saw the play supporting such an assertion.<sup>51</sup>

Synge’s preface statement can also be thought of as an accentuation of the play’s validity even though the image of tinkers in the play does not match what is known about Irish Travellers from that period. The statement also suggests that Synge is one of “their own” and that the comedy is that of an insider jesting with his own people. The play is not meant to deride the Traveller community or the

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<sup>50</sup> According to Ian Walsh, *The Tinker’s Wedding* was first performed in Ireland by the 37 Theatre Club in 1953. It was first performed at the Abbey in 1971, the centenary of Synge birth.

<sup>51</sup> Two letters from Yeats discuss *The Tinker’s Wedding*. Ronald Schuchard suggests Yeats walks out because it was an awful production. In 1905 Yeats writes, “This morning Fay and Synge and myself considered the tinker play with a view to performance and publication in Samhain but decided that it would be dangerous at present” (Yeats *Volume Iv* 190). Both letters address how the play might anger public. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume IV, 1905-1907*.

Irish peasantry. To validate the disparity between Synge's image of tinkers and the apparent reality of Irish Travellers, in *Tinkers'* Burke bases her argument about *The Tinker's Wedding* on "Synge's imaginative engagement with the tinker within a broader history of literary and historiographic discourses of peripheral populations within the British Isles" (*Tinkers'* 19). As such, Burke argues that "it is a critical fallacy to read his tinker characters as naturalistic portrayals of 'real' Travellers with whom he came into contact" (*Tinkers'* 19). While I agree with Burke's position that the characters in *The Tinker's Wedding* do not portray "naturalistic portrayals of 'real' Travellers," I would propose that this reading of *The Tinker's Wedding* does not fully acknowledge the work Synge did as an amateur ethnographer. Synge's depiction is flawed, but it is not a deliberate distortion. In basing the story directly on his ethnographic material, Synge attempts to portray a representation of Irish Travellers, whom he sees as being liberated from the confines of conservative values, such as marriage, property ownership, permanence, and most importantly, liberated from the Irish Catholic Church. As such, Synge's tinkers seem to be more like tramps than actual Irish Travellers.

The play is drawn from Synge's personal experiences traveling in Wicklow, as documented in "The Vagrants of Wicklow" and "At a Wicklow Fair: The Place and the People." The "critical fallacy," as Burke asserts, is to ignore the reliance of *The Tinker's Wedding* on Synge's research and his witnessing of what Burke writes are the "'real' Travellers with whom he came into contact" (*Tinkers'* 19). Irish Traveller culture is almost entirely an oral culture. My argument regarding Synge's work is that he is primarily focusing on the vernacular aspects of Irish

culture. Consequently, if he wanted to portray successfully a realistic depiction of Irish life, an inclusion of Irish Travellers would have been important to Synge's overall work as an author.

In "The Vagrants of Wicklow" (1906) and "At a Wicklow Fair: The Place and the People" (1907), the articles that *The Tinker's Wedding* is drawn from, Synge recounts his interactions with vagrants, tramps, and tinkers, detailing his fascination with and admiration for the poor wanderers of Ireland (in many ways, the three main tinker characters in the play are a conflation of each of these distinctive groups). The story of *The Tinker's Wedding* was told to Synge by a "herd." He writes:

"That man is a great villain," said the herd, when he was out of hearing. "One time he and his woman went up to a priest in the hills and asked him would he wed them for half a sovereign, I think it was. The priest said it was a poor price, but he'd wed them surely if they'd make him a tin can along with it. "I will, faith," said the tinker, "and I'll come back when it's done." They went off then, and in three weeks they came back, and they asked the priest a second time would he wed them. "Have you the tin can?" said the priest. "We have not," said the tinker; "we had it made at the fall of night, but the ass gave it a kick this morning the way it isn't fit for you at all." "Go on now," says the priest. "It's a pair of rogues and schemers you are, and I won't wed you at all." They went off then, and they were never married to this day. (CW II 229)

This collected and documented story is an almost accurate synopsis of *The Tinker's Wedding* (1909). Synge, however, does make a few changes and adds the

character of Mary Byrne to the play. Also, as I have discussed previously, it is the young woman, Sarah, who insists on the marriage. Michael is not actually interested in getting married but is devoted to being Sarah's partner and to keeping his family together, especially because Sarah brings in most of the family's income. With the addition of Michael's mother Mary, she becomes the "great villain" of the story instead of the male tinker.

Synge's play encourages the idea that tinkers, or Irish Travellers, typically reject marriage, change partners, and live highly uncontrolled lives that completely reject modernity. In this way, it seems as if Synge says that what is unique, or perhaps mythological, about Irish Traveller culture is in fact truth. Whereas Hurston's characters at the sawmill camp attempt to negotiate the boundaries between a current understanding of traditional marriage and their nontraditional lifestyle, Synge's characters are unable to participate in the contemporary understanding of traditional marriage at all. Synge's tinkers' prelapsarian state is entirely incompatible with what the contemporary era now considers traditional marriage.

The idea that Irish Travellers are unable to assimilate into a modernized world was not unique at the time that Synge wrote *The Tinker's Wedding*. Anti-Traveller racism in Great Britain was on the rise around the time of the *fin de siècle*, and, as noted by sociologist Helleiner, the nineteenth-century study of Gypsies became popularized. British Gypsologists incorporated Irish Travellers "within the broader context of Celticism that drew upon racist and gendered discourses and iconography to support the British colonial project in Ireland" (Helleiner "'Women of the Itinerant Class'" 276). To this end, the Gypsy Lore

Society, founded in Great Britain in 1888, at least twice documented in the late nineteenth century that tinkers were known for unusual and unethical marriage practices.

One of the founders of the Gypsy Lore Society, David MacRitchie, was a Scottish folklorist and antiquarian. In his book *Ancient and Modern Britons, a Retrospect*, MacRitchie refers to London's Smithfield Market, which was historically frequented by unhappily married Englishmen hoping to sell their wives.<sup>52</sup> As of 1888, MacRitchie suggests that Smithfield Market is still used by tinkers and Gypsies because the custom of wife swapping is a custom that "is not quite obsolete" among this group. He writes, the "place that is most celebrated as a wife-market, Smithfield . . . is likely among such people [tinkers and Gypsies] [where] this custom is still kept up" (*Ancient and Modern Britons* 286). In the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (1889), MacRitchie details the "distinct Gypsy element in the tinkers of Ireland" and recounts some of their specific oddities as told to him by "an Irish lady, resident of the county of Limerick" ("Irish Tinkers and Their Language" 351).<sup>53</sup> MacRitchie uses the claim to support his position that tinkers have "very curious custom[s] . . . namely, that of exchanging wives" ("Irish Tinkers and Their Language" 352) and of having "budget" wedding ceremonies "where the man and woman jump together, hand and hand, over the

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<sup>52</sup> MacRitchie suggests in *Ancient and Modern Britons* that ancient Britons were dark-skinned people and links modern Gypsies and tinkers to Africans.

<sup>53</sup> Helleiner has herself been connected with the Gypsy Lore Society. "'The Tinker's Wedding' Revisited" was published in the conference proceedings of the tenth annual meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society, North American chapter, March 25–27, 1988, Wagner College, Staten Island, New York, commemorating the centennial of the Gypsy Lore Society. Helleiner references MacRitchie's research in both that article and her book *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (2000).

'budget'—as the box containing the materials used by a tinsman is called" ("Irish Tinkers and Their Language" 351).<sup>54</sup> The informant also suggests that "by jumping back again, a divorce may be obtained!" ("Irish Tinkers and Their Language" 351). Presented in the journal as scientifically acquired facts, both references are immediately reiterated by other writers.

In 1898, American folklorist Frederick S. Arnold cites MacRitchie in "Our Old Poets and the Tinkers." The article aims to understand the "vagabond class" in America and also references John Sampson's 1891 article, "Tinkers and Their Talk," which states that the "distinct caste" of Irish tinkers "intermarry among themselves, often with but slight regard for the rites of the Church, or the table of prohibited degrees. Their exchange of wives, moreover, is a civility extended to members of the clan" (204). Arnold uses MacRitchie's and Sampson's research as proof that "tinkers all over the British Isles and America" "have certain customs of their own, particularly that of wife-swapping" (218). Whether such claims have validity is not important; the importance lies in the fact that such claims were attributed to Travellers as a way of othering them and their culture. In subscribing to the notion that Irish Travellers rejected marriage or had a liberated approach to sexual partnerships, *The Tinker's Wedding* reinforces perceptions of Irish Travellers instead of accessing details specific to Traveller culture.

In "Irish Tinkers or 'Travellers,'" Pádraig Mac Gréine begins the process of dispelling misconceptions about Irish Travellers that other researchers such as

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<sup>54</sup> This connects to the African American custom of jumping over a broom to symbolize a wedding ceremony when marriage was a rite denied to slaves.

Helleiner have since confirmed. Burke contends that “the term ‘tinker’ was uncontroversially deployed in dominant culture” prior to the 1960s (“The Well of the Saints and the Tinker's Wedding” 43). Yet in 1931 Mac Gréine wrote that while “tinkers” was the most common terminology to refer to “those itinerants who are to be found wandering here and there through Ireland,” they themselves rarely used the term (171). He wrote that they “refer to each other as ‘travellers,’ and they dislike the term tinker” (Mac Gréine 171).<sup>55</sup> Also of interest to this study, Mac Gréine wrote that most of the Irish Travellers he connected with were Catholic, a point they stressed as a main difference between themselves and Roma. He quotes a Traveller as saying, “They [Roma] aren’t Catholics, sir, and we never mix with them!” (175). Mac Gréine continues:

They are all Catholics, however, being baptised in the church nearest to where they are born. . . They attend Mass every Sunday and approach the sacraments at least once a year. Individually, most of them have a favourite priest to whom they prefer to go to Confession. This is also the case when they wish to get married. I have been told on numerous occasions of one priest who is said to have married more “travellers” than any other priest in Ireland. Among tinkers, the standard of sex morals is very high, although many people think to the contrary. (Mac Gréine 175)

The tinkers in *The Tinker's Wedding* are imagined as being negligent Catholics but Catholic nonetheless and the priest's exact opposites. Synge's favor clearly is aligned with the tinkers as they have the ability to go “any place walking

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<sup>55</sup> Even though Mac Gréine notes that Irish Travellers do not care for the word “tinker” and bases the article on the very distinction between “tinker” and “traveller,” the author continues to use “tinker” throughout the essay as a way of referring to Travellers.

the world” (CW IV 23), a life the author saw as having “many privileges” (CW II 202). But *The Tinker’s Wedding* also supports the idea that they freely enter and exit sexual relationships. Nicholas Grene suggests that “Synge is a little inclined to blur distinctions between one type of vagrant and another” (*Synge* 88), a point made evident in “The Vagrants of Wicklow” and *The Tinkers Wedding*. Similarly to how England’s vagrancy laws criminalized nomadic people by terming them all “vagrants,” Synge’s belief that “there are many privileges” to a nomadic lifestyle obscures the reality of what “walking the world” actually means (CW IV 23). This point is especially crucial if the person walking the roads is a woman who is “rearing a lot of them.”

Grene articulates in *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* that the “tradition of free love which is implied in *The Tinker’s Wedding*” is obviously a Syngean invention (*Synge* 107). From Grene’s perspective, not only do the tinkers reject traditional marriage rituals, they are imagined as being able to change sexual partners at will. Moreover, I put forth that the tinker characters Synge puts on stage are not the wild, romantic vagrants who embody the “arts” that he conceptualizes in “The Vagrants of Wicklow” (CW II 208). The realities of a nomadic life do not coalesce with the beautiful poverty he envisions. Thus, Synge’s earnest observations in the various *Manchester Guardian* articles, including “The Vagrants of Wicklow,” are different from his poetic vision. When he brings this vision to *The Tinker’s Wedding*, these inconsistencies are ever more present. According to Grene, Synge’s “tinkers, supposedly, have no experience of orthodox institutional religion,” yet throughout the play the tinkers address the priest “as ‘holy father’ or ‘your reverence’” (*Synge* 107). The

unattached and uninhibited tinkers of Synge's imagination are not only removed from real Irish Travellers, they also do not match the characters he has actually created. This point is especially relevant for Mary Byrne and Sarah Casey.

The priest is encouraged to marry Sarah and Michael "for nothing at all," so that Sarah does not become the "old, wicked heathen" both he and Sarah consider Mary to be. After the priest accepts Mary's offer and commiserates with her while the two of them enjoy a few "sups" together, Mary's inquiries become "heathenish," and Sarah uses Mary's "hard abominations" to turn the conversation back to Sarah and Michael's possible nuptials. As the "PRIEST goes towards the left," presumably offstage and back to his quarters, "SARAH follows him" (CW IV 21). "In a low voice" Sarah says to him, "And what time will you do the thing I'm asking, holy father? [F]or I'm thinking you'll do it surely, and not have me growing into an old wicked heathen like herself" (CW IV 21). The priest agrees with Sarah's point. He responds, "I'll marry you . . . for I wouldn't be easy in my soul if I left you growing into an old, wicked heathen the like of her" (CW IV 23).

In addition to being "heathenish," a life on the roads has turned Mary into a bawdy female who holds no reverence for any of the other characters in the play except for herself. Mary's execution ballad about Larry, her seemingly false suggestion that she has "never heard any time . . . a real priest saying a prayer" (CW IV 21), and her necessity to "be drinking when there's drouth on" her (CW IV 19) causes the priest to call her an "old flagrant heathen" and provokes him to

“stay no more with the lot” (CW IV 23).<sup>56</sup> Yet the assertion that a proper marriage ritual will save Sarah from ending up like Mary seems to be misleading. In earlier drafts, Synge suggested that Mary had been married at least twice. In this version Mary and Michael share a surname, unlike Sarah who is identified by what we can assume is her maiden name, Casey. A legal marriage in Ireland as of the late nineteenth century constituted “a marriage solemnized by any such clergyman, whether publicly or privately,—at whatever time or place, and in whatever form or manner between parties competent to intermarry” (Green 975). Thus, the suggestion that Mary has indeed been legally married and participated in a common law marriage ritual seems to undermine the idea that Sarah and Michael’s participating in a Catholic marriage ritual will in any way benefit Sarah and save her from becoming like Mary.

Mary also seems to be the play’s heroine since it is due to her actions that Sarah and Michael’s wedding is canceled. Yet, with all of her flippant behavior toward authority in the play, especially toward the priest, Mary is shown to be dependent on drink. and her need to “be drinking when there’s drouth on” her would in reality be nothing to laugh at. Moreover, as the play’s heroine is

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<sup>56</sup> When Mary returns, singing an excerpt of “The Night Before Larry Was Stretched,” or in the Dublin/Newgate Cant it was spoken in, “De Night Afore Larry Was Stretch’d,” the priest becomes even more offended by the request that he associate with the tinkers. Her ballad is believed to be an authentic street ballad from the eighteenth century “‘collected’ in Dublin by someone whose identity is unknown, [and was] written down in a way which reflects the pronunciation and vocabulary of the speech of the late eighteenth-century underworld” (Carpenter 430). The song details Larry’s fete the night before his scheduled execution and describes him as defiant and unrepentant. “Let you not be shy of us your reverence. Aren’t we all sinners, God help us!” Mary says to the priest and invites him to stay and share a “sup” with her (CW IV 17).

constructed to be everything the priest is not, the scene in the first act when they share a “sup” of alcohol proves the two are actually more alike than dissimilar.

Yet most of the contradiction in Synge’s imagined tinker lies in Sarah Casey. Sarah longs to assimilate into sedentary Irish culture as much as she longs to be observed by them as an equal. Her quest for “a decent marriage as any speckled female does be sleeping in the black hovels above” best illustrates this desire (CW IV 35). Thus, in seeking “a decent marriage” she is imagined as being a free woman seeking confinement by approaching the priest and insisting she and Michael are properly wed. However, in presenting glimpses of Sarah’s life, Synge reveals that she was “got” on the hill “above Rathvanna . . . crying out and saying, ‘I’ll go back to my ma’” (CW IV 9) and that she has been “going beside [Michael] a great while, and rearing a lot of them” (CW IV 7). With a constructed image of a female in a forced partnership that has produced a number of children, how is Synge imagining Sarah as already free?

In earlier versions of the play, Sarah was called Nora, but besides the fact that Michael suggests that Nora and he marry “in the chapel of Rathvanna” and that is where Sarah was got (CW III 51), there is very little that is similar about Sarah Casey and Nora Burke.<sup>57</sup> Nora is coming from a loveless marriage, with a man who “was always cold, every day since [she] knew him,—and every night” as well (CW III 35). Nora escapes a restrictive and seemingly brutally confined marriage. In leaving her home and wandering into the unknown with the tramp, Nora acknowledges that any respectability that comes with being lawfully wedded did nothing to make her happy, so she accepts the disrespectability of a life

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<sup>57</sup> See Appendix A, *The Tinker’s Wedding*: Worksheets and Commentary. Polk County?

walking the roads. Nora's rejection of the sedentary life and her quest to try the nomadic life does not romanticize nomadism. In fact, when Nora "gathers a few things into her shawl" and leaves her house with the tramp (CW III 57), the audience is afraid for her as she herself acknowledges that she is "destroyed surely" as she is pushed "out to get [her] death walking the roads" (CW III 55). And while the tramp does assure Nora that she will "not be getting her death" by going off with him (CW III 57), the tramp showing up at her home, after "walking to Brittas from the Aughrim fair" on "a wild night," hungry and with no place to sleep, best illustrates what the future holds for Nora as a tramp's companion (CW III 33). Nora's story does challenge the flaws that are imagined as being a part of a bourgeois, sedentary life, but what would have been really radical is Synge having Nora venture off alone, rejecting all partnerships and becoming a true tramp.

In the rejection of marriage, Synge imagines freedom for tinkers, tramps, and really all of his vagrants. It may be possible that such freedoms exist for men. But for females, a life walking the road does not mean they will be able to dissociate from confining of gender roles. Traveller communities are historically masculinized and marginalized outcasts of Irish culture. Female Travellers are consequently further marginalized, both within the settled Irish community and within the Traveller community as well. As Synge imagines Sarah, it would be much harder for her to walk away from her life whether Michael had decided to participate in the Catholic wedding ceremony or not. Synge's constructed partnership between Sarah and Michael is just as restrictive for Sarah as it is for settled Irish women. Not only does Sarah have "a lot" of children with Michael,

he was able to control her at the beginning of their relationship with a “clout” to the ear. It seems implausible that he would be unable to control her with force at this point in the partnership, traditionally married or not. Mary’s point is valid: “paying gold to his reverence [will not] make a woman stop when she’s a mind to go” (CW IV 35). Nevertheless, as Sarah has yet to walk away from her partner and their children, it is unlikely that she will walk away from them in the future. It is clear that the “queer” mood Sarah is in has her seeking respectability (CW IV 8), but, as imagined by Synge, becoming respectable is the only aspect of her life that would change with a legal wedding.

Whether the facts regarding the structural aspects of Traveller communities were known to Synge at the time he wrote *The Tinker’s Wedding* is not important. Considering that details about Irish Travellers’ lives and communities are still difficult to assess, it is probably safe to assume that Synge and the majority of the Irish public did not have intimate knowledge of the inner working of Irish Traveller relationships. What is significant is that throughout the play, Sarah asserts that it is important that the larger Irish community recognizes her as a proper and dignified woman. Sarah believes such an acknowledgement will be attained after she participates in the private and Catholic wedding ritual.

Sarah desires to have a legitimate wedding that will formalize her union with Michael. She has made up her mind that having a Catholic wedding is a “right” that she has earned, but ultimately Sarah’s desire relates to her understanding of respectability. Sarah believes that as the “Beauty of Ballinacree” she has the admiration of other tinkers and tells Michael so (CW IV 11). While Michael dismisses this notion, Sarah is convinced that she possesses something

special and that she stands apart from the rest of her community. With a legitimate marriage, a marriage performed by a priest in a church, Sarah believes that not just tinkers but members of the settled community will also recognize her as special and give her the respect she believes she deserves. Sarah emphasizes that the need for a Catholic wedding is because she has a “right to a decent marriage,” so it is not just marriage that Sarah is “fooling” at again. Her quest is not for a “tinker’s wedding” at all but for what she considers a more traditional Irish marriage rite: a Catholic wedding officiated by a priest in a church. Most importantly, the attempt at “a decent marriage” for the marginalized Sarah and Michael encourages the most persistent question from the moment that the play begins: why is it that Sarah wants a marriage that differs so greatly from the relationship standards of her tinker community, not to mention the seemingly concrete relationship that she appears to already have with Michael? The tinker marriage that Sarah and Michael share seems more valuable than the Catholic marriage rite Sarah is insisting upon.

With *The Tinker’s Wedding* Synge argues that legality does not equate with legitimacy. The freedom Synge imagines Sarah and Michael to have comes from their rejection of the Catholic Church’s definition of marriage. And the initial repudiation of Mary by Sarah, in insisting on a legal wedding, actually leads the viewer or reader to believe that had Sarah and Michael become legally wed, there is a greater chance of Sarah becoming like Mary Byrne, an old flagrant heathen. Yet Sarah’s dismissal of Mary actually ends up saving her from this fate. Sarah now has a chance not to fall victim to what is displayed as the result of marriage: loss of name, loss of self, loss of individual identity, and loss of agency.

In forcing the priest to swear an oath to them and in rejecting the values of the Catholic Church, Sarah's individual identity remains intact. She remains Sarah Casey, free to walk the world and to partner with Michael for as long as she chooses. The mock wedding between the priest and Sarah reveals contempt for the institution of marriage in general and for the Irish Catholic church specifically. As presented in this play, the affiliate of the Irish Catholic Church already alienates the tinkers for disavowing the settled life, and from the priest's perspective not even marriage would elevate the tinkers to respectability.

At the end of the play, Mary convinces Sarah and Michael that because of his conviction, any oath made in the name of God will bind the priest to his word. To remind the priest of his "oath until the end of time" (CW IV 49), Sarah puts on the priest's finger the ring originally intended to be her wedding ring. Thus, the permanent verbal contract between the priest and Sarah mirrors a wedding ceremony. In placing her ring on the priest's finger, Sarah takes the unnamed priest at his word and solidifies their contract: he will never inform on the tinkers, and Sarah will refrain from "making talk of marriage or the like of that" (CW IV 49). The parodied wedding ritual between the unnamed priest and Sarah also confirms that Sarah, whose heart is "scalded with the fooling," vows not to let Michael harm the priest for insulting her (CW IV 49). The ring on the priest's finger not only serves as a reminder of the "oath until the end of time," it also feminizes the priest. Thus, the ring also becomes a symbol of the priest's subordination and ownership. The parodied wedding ritual repudiates the institution of marriage and marks the priest as no longer belonging to God but to the tinkers. Michael and Mary help to facilitate the nuptials by officiating and

witnessing the partnership before God. In *The Tinker's Wedding*, like in the majority of Synge's plays, where risk is weighed against benefit, the reward is worth repudiating both marriage and religion.

### **Sawmill Workers and Marriage**

In Hurston's *Polk County*, Leafy Lee and My Honey's wedding takes place in the woods, on the sawmill camp's picnic grounds, but besides its informal location, the wedding is a rather conventional ceremony. Leafy is "dressed all in white with a veil," and My Honey is wearing a double-breasted suit (*Polk County* 358). The couple has a "[b]ought license, a finger-ring and everything" that one would expect at a wedding (*Polk County* 333). More importantly, the nuptials are officiated by a minister instead of a "commissary license," making Leafy Lee and My Honey's marriage a legally and spiritually validated union (*Polk County* 339). Unlike the attempt to create "a decent marriage" that was examined in *The Tinker's Wedding*, My Honey and Leafy's marriage has all the makings of the respectability that Sarah was initially longing for.

Before Leafy Lee and My Honey's wedding, unions on the sawmill camp were not solemnized with "bought licenses," but they were still viable partnerships. Prior to Leafy's visit, couples entered into partnerships that seemed to provide a sustainable structure that the families needed to thrive. As Lonnie complains about the time the women are taking to get dressed for the wedding, he proposes that the delay is an aspect of being in a relationship with a woman. He says, "I reckon us men just have to put up with you. We can't git along without you. But you sure got funny ways" (*Polk County* 358). And "put up with" each

other is just what the couples have been doing. When Bunch finds out that Leafy Lee and My Honey are going to be legally wed, she tells Big Sweet, “I aint seen a marriage on this job since I been here and thats going on seven years” (*Polk County* 328). One can reason that she and Few Clothes have been together for a significant portion of that time and that their relationship is viable is that the couple has a system that each person respects and benefits from. When Few Clothes is playing cards he realizes that he has run out of money and asks Bunch for another “two-bits.” She replies, “Naw! You wasted up seven dollars pay night skinning. You gimme this to keep, and I’m a-going to do it too” (*Polk County* 319). Few Clothes works for the money and Bunch manages it. Nevertheless, by the end of the play Few Clothes and Bunch are planning to marry. They accept that their relationship needs to be validated by “papers” rather than the system of trust that they have built between each other. From the moment Leafy arrives at the Lofton Lumber Company the social dynamics of the sawmill camp change: the majority of the couples at the camp decide that they want legally defined marriages, and the commissary marriage process becomes inadequate.

From the outset, Leafy’s role as a female in the community is made clear. An African American woman with light skin and straight hair, she is positioned against the other women who live at the camp; her lack of a boyfriend and her virginity make her even more rare and desirable to the men. In her scene and setting description, Hurston describes women on sawmill camps as “misfits from the outside” (*Polk County* 273). She continues to describe them as

Seldom good looking, intelligent, or adjustable. They have drifted down to their level, unable to meet the competition outside. Many have made time

in prisons also. Usually for fighting over men. They too pack knives. No stigma attaches to them for prison terms. In fact, their prestige is increased if they have made time for a serious cutting. (*Polk County* 273)

Thus, Leafy is distinctly different from the other women living at the camp. While Leafy might have been “wandering” like many of the other women at the camp, she has maintained the middle-class values she was raised with. Leafy uses a name that her “mama give [her] when [she] was born” (*Polk County* 298), she has managed to stay a virgin because she has “never been in love with nobody that was in love with [her]” (*Polk County* 301), and she has come to the camp “for a reason, and not for a season” (*Polk County* 298). Sex is put forth as a tool women itinerants use as a means to survive, and ostensibly Leafy has been able to maintain her virginity because she has been able to care for herself financially. This point is made evident when Big Sweet says to Leafy, “I wanted to be virgin my ownself. I always said that I was going to be one till I got married, when I was growing up, and I meant to, too. . . . Papa died when I was fifteen, and times got mighty hard. It was too expensive for somebody in the fix I was. I couldn’t afford to be a virgin” (*Polk County* 301). Yet while the desire to be married was something Big Sweet always held on to, when the itinerant workers begin to marry, Big Sweet chooses not to marry, even though she is the main facilitator of those marriages.

It is clear why Leafy wants to marry. She was reared to be married and has lived her adult life as a woman with expectations to be married (she is still a virgin, after all). However, for the other women at the camp, marriage has long been a result that they have not been expecting. Marriage is permanent, and

people at the camp live “temporary” lives. But by the end of the play, Hurston’s sawmill camp is becoming more stable than was previously described. Not only are the characters discussing the possibility of marriage, they also seem to have no plans to move on in the near future, by, for example, going to another sawmill camp or heading to the North. Again, just prior to the preacher marrying My Honey and Leafy, Lonnie claims that “[t]hings is going to be better now. Folks everywhere will look upon us more. Us can make things more better all around” (*Polk County* 361). For Lonnie and the entire sawmill community, My Honey and Leafy’s marriage signals that the people who live at this particular sawmill camp no longer want to be looked upon as African American outcasts. Instead of outsiders looking down on them as physical embodiments of the remnants of slavery, outsiders will turn to the sawmill community for righteous examples of how African American lives should be led. The desire to marry, especially for the women living on this camp, appears to be about the need to be seen as respectable by the outside African American community.

As described by Hurston, there are not too many reasons for women to be at the lumber camps except as sexual partners for men, thus the desire to be in legally validated marriages as a quest for respectability seems valid. The idea that women are seen entirely as sex objects is made very clearly when Leafy first arrives at Polk County. The first observation of her by the women at the camp is that Leafy looks “like she is white,” however that notion is immediately dispelled. After hearing Leafy talk, Laura B notes that Leafy “seem like she colored from the

sound” (*Polk County* 294).<sup>58</sup> Yet because Hurston’s depiction of life at the labor camps shows it limiting nonsexual possibilities for women, the next assertion by the women is that Leafy is there to couple with one of their men as a way of supporting herself. Of Leafy, Dicey Long says: “She done heard about the money our mens makes on this job, and she done come in time to make pay-day”; Dicey insists that Leafy is a “fan-foot” (*Polk County* 296). American dialect dictionaries describe a “fan-foot” as a woman who brazenly courts the favor of men. In *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary*, Stephen Calt states that black Americans, specifically, would use “fanfoot” to pejoratively describe a promiscuous woman. He writes that the use by black Americans was most likely building on the “archaic British slang term” “fen,” “or from its original standard English meaning of mud or filth” (89). Calt argues that the suffix, “foot,” may have a “similarly archaic basis” connecting to the act of copulation in Early Modern English (89). Essentially, Dicey is insinuating that Leafy is a prostitute, and Dicey’s unsubstantiated claims about Leafy’s character illustrate how desperate Dicey is to have the “white looking” woman rejected by the community. When Big Sweet joins the conversation, Dicey continues defaming Leafy. She says Leafy is

a regular old strumpet making pay-days. Just somebody on the road somewhere. Color struck, too. Crazy about that little color she got in her face, and that little old hair on her head. You ain’t going to like her a bit. And she’ll be after Lonnie and My Honey and everybody else right off.  
*(Polk County* 297)

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<sup>58</sup> I explore the “sound” of blackness in chapter 4.

Dacey is threatened by Leafy's arrival and immediately works to have the community reject her. Dacey is described as "a homely narrow-contracted little black woman who has been slighted by nature and feels 'evil' about it. [She] suffers from the 'black ass'" (*Polk County* 271). In addition to being a "short, scrawny and black" woman, Dacey is an envious person who lacks any true chemistry with men. Further, Dacey does not understand what love means and is imagined as being used for sex and then discarded. Hurston writes that what Dacey "passes off as deep love is merely the determination not to be outdone by handsome women" (*Polk County* 271). Further, Dacey is "extremely jealous of Big Sweet" (*Polk County* 271), a woman who is also described by Dacey as having "white" features.

The play takes audiences through nearly two months of life at the sawmill camp. If performed in its entirety, it would have an approximate running time of four hours. Over the course of the nearly two-month period, Leafy and My Honey become closer, and Dacey is further alienated from the community. From the beginning of the play, Dacey has blamed Lonnie and Big Sweet for "taking My Honey away from me" and "keeping him laying round [their] house night and day" (*Polk County* 292). Leafy's immediate acceptance within the community further foregrounds how much of an outcast Dacey is among the people in the camp, a community of outcasts. When the final act of the play opens on Dacey in her shack, some insight is provided as to why Dacey remains on at the camp even though no one there likes her. Dacey's lament suggests that she wants, maybe even needs, to find a man; that she longs for the same kind of recuperative value in simply coupling that the rest of the people at the camp see in legally marrying.

But, alas, because of “the crime right in [her] looks,” Dicey has come to realize that she is “just another kind of mule” (*Polk County* 351). As Dicey prepares to leave the camp, she “[k]eeps looking about to miss nothing,” because she knows that when she leaves the Lofton Lumber Company she plans never to return again. Dicey’s lament also expresses that her troubles hinge on the same problems that consumed Emmaline Beazely: being color struck. She laments:

If Leafy Lee would shoot me dead  
And weigh me down with red hot lead  
It will be only a regrettable mistake.  
But if I scratch her yellow skin  
It is a deathly, mortal sin  
They’ll put me in the chair and let me bake.

(*Polk County* 351)

Immediately readers of Hurston’s *Color Struck* recognize the contrast and conflict between dark-skinned and light-skinned women in the African American community. And Hurston puts the onus of rejection on the “black”-skinned female rather than the African American community that subjugates dark-skinned women and subjects them to marginalization and conjecture. From one of Hurston’s earliest creative projects to one of her last, the theme of women being color struck consistently appears in her work.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama*, Pearlie Mae Fisher Peters writes that many of the assertive women in Hurston’s work are represented by the mulatto woman who steadfastly retains “Black speech rituals, even though she could freely alienate herself from Black culture by passing the white world of class and privilege if she so desires. Surprisingly, she proves herself to be more assertive and musically talented in Black rituals than her dark-skinned counterpart” (32).

Besides providing sexual favors or companionship for men, the women in *Polk County* and in *Mules and Men*, the ethnological text the play is based on, have traditionally specific gender roles. While Hurston suggests in *Polk County* that life at the Lofton Lumber Company is tenuous and transient—the opposite of traditional living—the social dynamics of the relationships she created in the text seems to directly counter this suggestion. In *Polk County*, even before marriage becomes widely adopted as a practice at the camp, the couples mirror the relationship model of male breadwinner and female homemaker, a model that became customary in the twentieth century. And in *Mules and Men*, not only do the relationships mirror that model, the folklore does too. In a discussion about work, Jim Presley asserts that while “God made the world[,] de white folk made work” (*Mules and Men* 74). To clarify how white people made work, Jim Allen tells a story about “a great big bundle” that God laid “down in de middle of de road” (*Mules and Men* 74). The bundle stays in the road “for thousands if years” until “Ole Missus said to Ole Massa: ‘Go pick up dat box, Ah wants to see what’s in it.’” Instead of opening the box himself, Ole Massa instructs “de nigger” to get him the box, and, instead of opening the box himself, “de nigger” stumbles over it for some years until finally his woman becomes curious about its contents. The story continues: “So she run and grabbed a-hold of de box and opened it up and it was full of hard work. Dat’s de reason de sister in black works harder than anybody else in de world. De white man tells de nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife” (*Mules and Men* 74). While still in Eatonville, Hurston was listening to “woofing” about the differences between men and women. Gold and Gene are playing the dozens when Gold attempts to outdo Gene by telling a quick

tale about how black people became “so black.” Her story suggests that blacks are so black because on the day in heaven that God decided to give “all de nations . . . color,” the black people did not show up. The angels Raphael and Gabriel were sent to find “de colored folks” and, once found, “they all jumped up and run on up to de th’one and they was so skeered they might miss sumpin they begin to push and shove one ’nother. . . . So God hollered ‘Git back! Git back!’ And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, ‘Git black’” (*Mules and Men* 30). The funny story puts Gene out, and George Thomas chimes in with quips about how women have “ruthers . . . plenty of hips, plenty mouf and no brains” (*Mules and Men* 30). The woofing and dozens between the sexes continues, with the interactions and the folklore all suggesting that the perception of “de man makes and de woman takes” (*Mules and Men* 34) seems accurate. Male labor is elevated and made to seem more valuable than female labor, which is primarily confined to the home, because men are financially compensated for their labor.

In *Polk County*, Lonnie describes the standard for a good man. In contemplating whether or not Leafy will want to marry him, My Honey asks Lonnie, “You reckon Miss Leafy think I’m any good, sure enough?” (*Polk County* 307). Lonnie indignantly replies, “Think you any good? Youse a good man. Work regular, don’t gamble and don’t git drunk, what more can a woman want out of anybody?” (*Polk County* 307). Being able to support himself and his partner with steady income, not to mention the lack of debauchery, is the value of a good man. The value of a good woman seems to be defined in the labor that she provides to her man. Outside of women needing men “to make payday,” the women at the camp are shown to be responsible for packed “buckets” for the men’s lunches and

dinner (*Polk County* 286). They will leave a job to escape a disgruntled partner (*Polk County* 291) or go to different job to rejoin a favorable partnership (*Polk County* 295). The women at the camp are also expected to maintain the home, and even Lonnie refers to Big Sweet and Leafy as “housekeepers” (*Polk County* 303). Thus, similar to what is shown in *Mules and Men*, the value of a female is determined by what she can give the men in her life.

Even though the couples in *Polk County* are not married, they are behaving like those in modern traditional marriage. Coontz writes that by “the end of the 1950s even people who had grown up in completely different family systems had come to believe that universal marriage at a young age into a male breadwinner family was the traditional and permanent form of marriage” (229). That is the relationship framework in *Polk County* whether the inhabitants are legally married or not. William P. Jones notes in *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (2005) that sawmill camps were conducive to this relationship model as “women were almost entirely excluded” (57) from employment within the lumber industry, and consequently labor in the “all-male industry reinforced gender inequalities” within the household (56). Thus the reading implicitly laid out in Hurston’s narrative, that the women in *Polk County* are primarily there for sexual companionship, appears accurate. Historical data also supports the notion that labor opportunities for women on sawmill camps were limited. The historian Joan Jensen claims that while women were rarely employed by sawmill camps they did serve “the lumber economy by cooking, cleaning, laundering, running boarding houses and small shops, and providing sexual services for the males who dominated the work

force” (51). Jacqueline Jones writes that these types of services, which are “vindictively termed women’s work” (2), could be liberating for black women. Further constrained than white women by gender and race to “exploitable labor” fields, poor black women were limited to “black women’s work’ that paid much less than” the women’s work that white women performed (2). Jones argues in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* that black women often “sought new kinds of employment as alternatives to domestic service and fieldwork,” labor that could be tied to slavery (117). While these tasks are not examples of work that a twenty-first-century woman would describe as liberating, it is easy to see the appeal of the camps to a writer such as Hurston, who consistently avoided writing about white oppression. Women on sawmill camps could still be described as occupying menial labor tasks at the camps, but they were in service to black men and were not regularly working for white mistresses and masters (although women would sometimes need to pick up extra work to help feed their families). In *Polk County*, Bunch runs a boardinghouse, and, while the other women appear to be dependent on their men for economic security, outside of financial resources the women in *Polk County* appear to be able to look out for themselves and their own interests. Thus being married or not married would not actually change any of the women’s positions. While the presence of children might alter a woman’s desire to be legally tied to her partner, only two of the ten children listed in the cast have speaking roles, making their impact on the play and the marital outcome insignificant. Moreover, those two children, described to be “about fifteen,” would be entering the workforce soon and not need financial support

from their parents (293). Even for the couples in the play with children—who Hurston does not identify—the explanation for most of these couples’ desire to marry seems elusive. Thus, the only logical reason for the enthusiasm around marriage in Hurston’s construction of the sawmill camp must be for recuperation of black female identity.

As I have stated previously, images of black women in general American society were less than positive. And these negative views were shared and distributed by both black and white Americans. In the 30 January 1904 article “The Negro Woman—Social and Moral Decadence,” the white Eleanor Tayleur comments on the fallen morality of Negro women since the end of slavery. She writes that the “most anomalous and portentous figure in America today is the negro woman” (266). Tayleur also writes that little account of black women has been taken “in the discussion of the race problem . . . [but] if the key to that dark riddle is ever found, hers must be the hand that first discovers it” (266). “Women mold the character of a people,” she writes. And because “it is eternally true that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world,” black women are culpable for what ails black America in her estimation. But Tayleur does not limit her rumination on the degeneracy of black America to black women, using the article to also discuss black men and the failures of marriage in black communities. She writes that the marriage relationship among “the vast majority of” Negroes does not reflect “the marriage relationship as white people understand it” (269).<sup>60</sup> Tayleur believes that black men rarely work, but when they do, “the average

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<sup>60</sup> Notice the similarity of this argument to how tinker marriages were described in the nineteenth century journal articles.

negro man manifests absolutely no sense of obligation about providing for his wife and children” (269). Lastly, Tayleur particularly singles out the celebratory custom of ending the workweek in the juke joint drinking and dancing. For Hurston, the Saturday night custom at the juke joint was incredibly important to African American culture because, “Musically speaking, the Jook is the most important place in America” (“Characteristics”). But Tayleur sees the practice as overly indulging. She writes that if given the opportunity, a black man, “if he works,” will generally spend his wages on “pleasures and vices” (269). Tayleur’s plea is not necessarily one that hopes to save the black. Assimilation is not the desired result. She writes the article because it is the duty of white women to save “these Hagers who have been thrust out into the desert of their own ignorance and superstition and sin, they will raise up Ishmaels whose hands shall be against our sons forever” (271).<sup>61</sup> However, for African American writers, such as William Hannibal Thomas and E. Franklin Frazier, assimilation is their desire for drawing attention to what they see as the sexual failings of black women.

In addition to degrading black women as complicit in “illicit sexual indulgence,” Thomas writes that “immorality” is “so deeply rooted” in blacks that “they turn in aversion from any sexual relation which does not invite sensuous embraces, and seize with feverish avidity upon every opportunity that promises personal gratification” (183-84). He continues denigrating black women by stating that they regularly and “unresistingly betray their wifely honor to satisfy a bestial instinct” and that “every notion of marital duty and fidelity is cast to the

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<sup>61</sup> Hagar is Abraham’s maid the bearer of his firstborn son, Ishmael. Ishmael is generally referred to as an outcast. African Americans are typically referred to in African American literature as Hagar’s children with black women as Hagar.

winds when the next moment of passion arrives” (183-84). Blacks, generally speaking, according to Thomas, are so inclined to sexual promiscuity that “marital immoralities . . . are not confined to the poor, the ignorant, and the degraded among the freed people, but are equally common among those who presume to be educated and refined (183-84). Further, while most black women marry young, Thomas asserts that there are some women who enter into spinsterhood but that this status is “due either to physical disease, or sexual morbidity, or a desire for unrestrained sexual freedom” (183-84). Thomas suggests that a serious reframing of how sexual partnerships and marriage are approached is needed among African Americans. While the message is addressed to all of black America, Thomas specifically calls attention to the licentious ways of African American women as mostly needing readjustment. The implication, of course, is that once sexual liberation is contained, limited, and regulated within the African American community, all of black America might be able to enjoy civil liberation because all African Americans will have the respect of white Americans. In his groundbreaking study *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), even Frazier underscores the idea that those who work “in sawmills, turpentine camps, or on the roads” are simply “solitary wanderers” in his chapter “Roving Men and Homeless Women” (273) and that promiscuity and the “constant changing of spouses became the rule with the demoralized elements in the freed Negro population” (97).

For both William P. Jones and Jacqueline Jones, the perception of southern African American communities as lacking respectability due to promiscuity was more myth than actuality. W. P. Jones specifically blames the

Black Ulysses figure perpetuated in the book *Rainbow Round My Shoulder: The Blue Trail of Black Ulysses* (1928) as being the nadir for the myth. Written by sociologist Howard W. Odum, the narrative weaves together stories, songs, and folktales around the travels of John Wesley Gordon (Black Ulysses). Much like Hurston will do in *Mules and Men* seven years later, according to Steven C. Tracy, “Odum does attempt to provide community context for the folklore in the text” (Odum xxxii). W. P. Jones contends that Odum “understood black southerners as essentially incompatible with modernity” (2). He continues, saying that according to Odum, “[w]hen individual black men entered the industrial workforce . . . they were forced to sever their ties to families and communities and to wander the South as outcasts, like Ulysses, the tragic hero of Greek myth” (2). And while Hurston denounced Odum’s work in a letter to Alain Locke—writing that Odum’s “The Negro and His Songs” “is inaccurate in a dozen places,” among other failures (Kaplan 118)—W. P. Jones believes that Hurston, like Odum, saw the lives at sawmill camps as “essentially alienated by the process of modernization in the South, and that they could either succumb to—but never influence—its development” (4).<sup>62</sup> W. P. Jones argues that Hurston makes this purposeful framing of sawmill communities in an attempt to put forth the image that black sawmill life was unaffected by twentieth-century modernization.<sup>63</sup> His main argument is that Hurston dedicates an entire section of *Mules and Men* to

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<sup>62</sup> The title of W. P. Jones’s book *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* is a reformulation of Odum’s theory.

<sup>63</sup> To some degree he is inaccurate on this point as well. Hurston’s framing of southern black culture does obscure many harsh realities in order to put forth an image of these societies as ideal. But it is not that these societies are “unaffected,” it is that modernity is destroying southern black America. The sawmill killing all the men in “Spunk” seems to best illustrate this point.

the African American religion “Hoodoo” but neglects to acknowledge Christianity as an aspect of African American life on sawmill camps. He writes that Hurston makes “no reference to mill town churches” in *Mules and Men* even though “a mill town of the size of Loughman would almost certainly have been home to a permanent African American congregation by the late 1920s” (69). Hurston’s projection of sawmill camps as essentially transient communes instead of permanent homesteads of African American families is also established in *Mules and Men*, and according to W. P. Jones, by omitting “any reference to baseball or jazz” (80), making “no reference to union campaigns” (141), and making no reference to the “racial violence that [had] occurred . . . within the previous decade” in the towns she visited collecting material for the book (141), Hurston obscures rather than provides accurate detailed insight into southern African American life. For W. P. Jones, this point is especially significant, considering Hurston had contact with “resettled survivors of the 1923 Rosewood massacre” (142) yet never even alludes to the tragedy.<sup>64</sup>

Hurston’s very narrow framing of southern lumber sites does exclude historically accurate information, such as the many town churches these communities would most likely have had, in order to play up the differences in sawmill communities rather than their similarities. While in reality sawmill

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<sup>64</sup> I can find no mention of the Rosewood massacre in Hurston’s corpus. Yet, while working on the WPA project between 1938 and 1939, during the Great Depression, Hurston uncharacteristically wrote a moving and scathing piece about white violence toward black residents in Ocoee, Florida, a town close to her beloved Eatonville. The piece, simply called “The Ocoee Riot,” details the events leading up to Julius “July” Perry’s lynching. Occurring 2 November 1920, which was Election Day, the incident began when Mose Norman, another black farmer, went to the polls and was turned away. The lynching of Perry, the death of other African American residents, and the destruction of African American property resulted in Ocoee remaining an all-white town until 1981.

communities might have much in common with other African American communities, sawmill life might also share commonalities with a wide variety of other American communities. And, as is apparent in this chapter, the characterization of sawmill communities by outside observers in terms of marriage practices and sexual availability of the women is quite similar to the characterization of Irish Travellers, their marriage rituals, and how Irish Traveller women were viewed as sexually liberated. But focusing on the similarities rather than the differences would have made the characters in her play, *Polk County*, and her text *Mules and Men*, more ordinary than she would have her readers believe about African American communities. Hurston also puts forth the image that the lumber mill camps were refuges from white oppression, a position that is absolutely fiction. In describing the white Quarters Boss in *Polk County* as “a poor white who would be a misfit outside of the job he holds, which is to keep order in the rough, lawless Negro quarters, where at least one person is killed every pay night. He is a little bit of a bully, but avoids trouble if he can” (*Polk County* 272), Hurston asserts that any white person working in the industry is equally likely to be disrespected outside of the lumber mill camps as the black workers. And although the Quarters Boss is meant to be read as comedic relief, his character still possesses power and authority over all the black workers. The Quarters Boss does exile Big Sweet from the camp, and it takes a plea from Lonnie to the Big Boss, another white man, to get this decision overturned. Even though Hurston attempts for her play to prove black autonomy, she herself reveals that black sawmill workers have not completely escaped racial oppression.

In playing up the differences and peculiarities of sawmill life, Hurston's omissions are more revealing than she may have intended them to be. While half of *Mules and Men* is dedicated to Hoodoo, Christianity is not completely absent from the first half of the text. As I illustrated above, many of the folktales Hurston retold are centered around religious ideology. The stories told might concern frivolous or inconsequential matters, such as why blacks are so black, but the roots of the stories typically demonstrate a belief in God and an acceptance that there is a heaven and a hell. In fact, the devil is a frequent concern in the black folklore Hurston gathered and retold. Further, while in Eatonville Hurston includes Pa Henry's prayer which she overhears while talking to Gene and Gold and expresses dismay over the fact that there are "two churches in Eatonville" (*Mules and Men* 26). Hurston does, however, omit the presence of churches in regard to the camps around Mulberry, Pierce, and Lakeland, Florida. Of the camps in Pierce, Hurston only writes that the "company operating the mines . . . maintains very excellent living conditions" (*Mules and Men* 157). Specifically, Hurston writes, "The cottages are on clean, tree-lined streets. There is a good hospital and a nine-months school. They will not employ a boy under seventeen so that the parents are not tempted to put minors to work. There is a cheerful community center with a large green-covered table for crap games under a shady oak" (*Mules and Men* 157). In such a community there definitely would have been at least one church. The omission on Hurston's part does seem to support W. P. Jones's reading of her text. However, the folklore that Hurston collected in the Florida communities reveals that the people believed in God and were Christian, even if the author attempts to obscure this association. Lonnie Barnes, seemingly

the inspiration for Lonnie in Polk County, tells a story about Noah and woodpeckers. The story, an explanation of “why a peckerwood got a red head today—’cause Ole Nora bloodied it wid a hammer” for sneaking around while everyone was on the ark, trying “to peck himself some wood” (*Mules and Men* 102). Right after this story is told, Black Baby tells a story about Noah and Ham that attempts to explain “why de possum ain’t got no hair on his tail today” (*Mules and Men* 103-4). In the story, “Ole Nora” and his son Ham “loved to be playin’ music all de time” (*Mules and Men* 103).<sup>65</sup> And while W. P. Jones sees the mentioning of an “itinerant preacher and his two female assistants” as Hurston’s “one account of Christianity in Loughman” (69), he neglects to acknowledge the aforementioned references of the Bible and the fact that on the page just before the itinerant preacher arrives, Big Sweet, Joe Wiley, and others were engaged in a woofing session that highlights their religious beliefs and knowledge.<sup>66</sup> Big Sweet threatens Joe with her “Tampa switch-blade knife” if he “try to take dese few fishes he done caught where shacked up” the night before (*Mules and Men* 137). When Joe challenges her, Big Sweet replies, “Ah been baptized, papa, and Ah wouldn’t mislead you” (*Mules and Men* 137). Excited by the “threats and brags,” Gene Oliver chimes in and exclaims that “Big Moose done come down from de mountain. Ah’m gointer be at dat jook tonight to see what Big Sweet and Ella Wall gointer talk about” (*Mules and Men* 137). With the “Big Moose” reference in

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<sup>65</sup> The story of Ham is often used to explain black subjugation. The story connects to Hurston’s play *The First One* (1927). In the story Ham loves to play music, which he is doing when he sees his father naked. The play seems to predate even Hurston’s first, failed trip to the South to collect folklore (Hemenway 87), so it is possible, even likely, that the idea of Ham being a musician and loving music was a typical feature of African American folktales.

<sup>66</sup> The “little drama of religion,” which is how Hurston refers to the incident with the itinerant preacher, happens on pages 139–42.

connection to coming down a mountain that appears to relate to Moses, it is apparent that all of the people Hurston collects folklore from are not only Christians familiar with the Bible, but that they also consistently use the Bible to support beliefs about the world and to bolster their positions in arguments. Again, while Hurston might omit a direct reference to a subject, such as churches or white oppression, her writing reveals it.

From this perspective, the marrying of people in *Polk County*—people that might have already been married in reality—makes more sense. The recuperation is possible to the potential audience. Hurston’s work does attempt to highlight how African American communities are distinctive in a myriad of ways, but her overall desire is to elevate the cache of African American culture and rituals. While I argue in the following chapter that the dynamics of Hurston’s male heroes more easily access African American aesthetic forms such as signifying, work songs, folklore, and the blues, Hurston’s female characters are not ignored in this respect. She does attempt to consistently give dignity to African American women in areas that have been lacking. In addition to Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who discovers her voice, Delia in “Sweat” figures out a way to escape an abusive husband, and Big Sweet in *Mules and Men* and *Polk County* is illustrated as being able to compete with the men in verbal wordplay—games of boasts and slurs—as well as in physical confrontations. In this respect, Hurston’s *Polk County* claims that the women in sawmill camps deserve respect and reverence for what they contribute to African American communities. Through the men from Hurston’s theatre, an audience is able to access African American labor history and the aesthetic forms associated with that history more readily.

However, in *Polk County*, specifically through the marriage ritual, Hurston acknowledges the labor that African American women give to black communities. Essentially it is the recovered humanity that black female characters experience in the play that explains the quest to marry in *Polk County*. Further, these women are not drawn as mother figures, a typical symbol of continuity within America as it relates to African American women. The women in *Polk County* are acknowledged through domesticity but also through physical strength and sexual satisfaction. Children are nearly absent from the production, which is another obscurity of African American life and a flat-out omission in regard to female existence. Nevertheless, while in Hurston's world the reality of marriage is not always recuperative, in *Polk County* Hurston asserts that black women need to have a certain stature in African American communities and that they need to be validated for the labor—domestic, sexual, or otherwise—that they give to black communities.

A significant portion of Hurston's work is concerned with the complexities of marriage. Nevertheless, in relation to Hurston's work as an author, even when a person commits adultery or betrays his or her partner, legally bonded marriages are defined as respectable, and the disreputable people are castigated. In "Muttsy" (1926), the title character "quit[s] de game" so that he can be the husband of an innocent and delicate young woman named Pinky. Instead of spending his days gambling, drinking, and running women, Muttsy works as a foreman so he can be the husband of the righteous Pinky. In "The Eatonville Anthology: The Head of the Nail" (1926), Daisy Taylor is known as "the town vamp" because she engages in salacious affairs with married men (*Complete*

*Stories* 67). The only two single men in town will not have anything to do with Daisy: one man is “engaged to the assistant school-teacher,” and the other, Hiram Lester, “had been off to school at Tuskegee and wouldn’t look at a person like Daisy” (67). By the end of the story Laura Crooms, the wife of the man Daisy has had the most “prolonged and serious” affair with, has beaten Daisy down into a ditch, and Daisy moves to Orlando. But the most significant example of a connection between respectability and marriage occurs in Hurston’s most famous novel. Published seven years before *Polk County, Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) depicts legitimacy and respectability as they relate to black women and marriage as crucial aspects of the story.

When Janie is sixteen and begins to feel herself blossoming into a woman, Nanny attempts to crush her sexual desires and leads her to believe she is wrong for feeling aroused. “Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!” thinks Janie as the foliage and flora are blossoming the spring she is sixteen, “with kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world” (*Their Eyes* 11). Entranced by the “pollinated air,” Janie feels encouraged to kiss Johnny Taylor, a “tall and lean” boy who “in her former blindness she had known as shiftless” (11–12). Nanny wakes to find “Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss” and declares to Janie that that kiss “was the end of her childhood” (12). To Nanny, black women are unable to be free “to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another” (13) because “[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (14). Nanny explains:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is

in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks" (11)

The confrontation with Nanny after the kiss with Johnny Taylor leaves Janie's pear tree "desecrating" (11), and it takes the experience of three marriages before Janie can "hear the wind picking at the pine trees" again (11), a reconnection of her sexuality to nature. Because of Nanny's fear for Janie's security and well-being, after this kiss Nanny immediately marries Janie off to the much older Logan Killicks, a man Janie describes as looking "like some old skullhead in de grave yard" (11). Nanny does this after declaring Janie a woman because of the legacy of rape in their family. Born into slavery, but not long before the Civil War, Nanny was born into a situation where her master repeatedly sexually assaulted her. Those encounters led to a pregnancy, and Janie's mother Leafy is born. When she was only seventeen, Leafy's "school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped [her]" (19). That encounter also led to a pregnancy, and Janie was born. In a fight to keep Janie from be raped or taken advantage of, Nanny not only sees marriage as a sign of respectability, she also sees marriage as a protection against sexual violence. Yet Janie remains unconvinced.

Just before her marriage to Logan, "Nanny and the other old folks" (22) tell Janie that love will follow her marriage. They say that "husbands and wives "always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (22). Janie is "glad for the thought" but cannot help feeling like marriage is "destructive and mouldy" (*Their Eyes* 22). In contrast to the image of marriage that Hurston puts forth in

*Polk County*, marriage in *Their Eyes* might be a sign of respectability, but with the prestige and economic security also comes sadness, loneliness, and a lack of sexual fulfillment.

The relationships at the sawmill camps might not be respectable to someone like Nanny and people who do not associate with sawmill or itinerant workers, but the relationships do not appear to be devoid of sexual desire. And like Janie, when her third marriage to husband Tea Cake is over, it is understanding sexual fulfillment, being independent, and being able to speak for herself, not marriage, that finally allows Janie to be comfortable in her own skin. Without marriage, the women at the sawmill camp seem already to possess the freedom that it takes most of Janie's life to find. Instead of enjoying their independence and difference, the rush to marriage seems more about conformity than anything else.

Even after Leafy and My Honey's wedding, Hurston positions the relationship between Big Sweet and Lonnie as ideal: they love deeply and remain unmarried. The rejection of commonality and conformity is not Lonnie's desired outcome, however—he wants to marry. Lonnie is the person who believes that the site of Leafy and My Honey's wedding is like a “dream,” while suggesting, “Things is going to be better now. Folks everywhere will look upon us more” (*Polk County* 361). Big Sweet is the person in that relationship that chooses to remain unmarried. After Lonnie receives a letter saying Big Sweet and Charlie, a man from another sawmill camp in Mulberry, have been playing him “for a fool,” Lonnie decides he is “through with” Big Sweet (*Polk County* 361). He says: “I ain't got no time to fool with you, and neither take up no time with you. I'm going

down to the railroad station and grab the first thing smoking” (*Polk County* 326). But when Lonnie and Big Sweet get to talking, and she explains the “one time when [Charlie] begged [her] so hard” to go to Mulberry and give him a chance (327), Lonnie concludes that the incident between Charlie and Big Sweet is unimportant. Lonnie declares that “I loves you harder than the thunder can bump a stump” and announces that he had asked Big Sweet for her hand but that she turned him down (328). He asks, “How come you won’t marry me like I asked you to?” (328). In response, Big Sweet proposes that getting married is for “common folks.” She asserts that she and Lonnie “got this big love that nobody ain’t never had be-fore. Us don’t have to run to the courthouse and git papers and witnesses to prove if we is guilty” (328). Even though Big Sweet sees marriage as an opportunity to gain respectability for the women on the sawmill camp and quite possibly displace racialized myths in regard to hypersexual African American women, she refuses marriage for herself.

In both plays, marriage is promoted as a performative ritual the “common folks” participate in. Unlike the keen or the cakewalk, unique performative rituals that connect to the traditions of a distinct community, everyday and average people of any community can relate to and participate in a marriage ritual. Sarah’s desire to marry in *The Tinker’s Wedding* is inspired by her desire to be accepted and respected by the Irish community at large, regardless of how dirty her face is and regardless of the jobs she must do to survive. If any insults are hurled at her, she wants to be able to advise her abuser that she is a legitimately married Irish woman who deserves to be admired and respected for her labor on behalf of her family. Sarah’s desire to marry also suggests that she does not want

to be perceived as a problem to the non-Traveller Irish community, not to mention non-Irish outside communities. Yet by the end of the play, Sarah has rejected this desire. She neither desires respectability any longer, nor does she see marriage as a viable option for gaining respectability.

However, Leafy, before she comes to the camp, shares the values of the common people. Instead of changing to become more like the residents of the sawmill community, they change to be more like her. Unlike the itinerants in *The Tinker's Wedding*, Hurston's itinerants agree that respectability comes with legitimate marriage, and they determine that they desire to attain said respectability by getting married. Throughout the play, beginning with the "scene and setting" section, Hurston constructs transience and otherness in *Polk County*. By deciding to marry, just as Leafy and My Honey do, the residents of the sawmill community prove that they long to be seen as equal members of the larger African American community. By choosing to marry, the itinerants of the sawmill community are choosing to disrupt their singular identification with the Old Negro. They also long to break away from the stigmatizing racialization that limits their opportunities, and, with marriage, they hope to be recognized for their contributions to the African American community instead of being denounced as "the chrysalis of the Negro problem."

### **Conclusion**

The tinkers and the sawmill workers in these plays exemplify the most isolated figures of Irish and African American societies. They are marginalized, impoverished people who are looked down upon by people both inside and

outside their rather insulated worlds. Their decision to participate in the wedding ritual illustrates that they no longer want to be viewed as occupying those marginal spaces within the larger Irish and African American communities. To the characters in these plays, marriage symbolizes the respectability that members of the settled community have, and their attempt to participate in the marriage ritual speaks to their desire to be included and accepted. The Travellers and early-twentieth-century sawmill communities are imagined as possessing the prelapsarian ideals of each culture, yet the participation of these communities in the wedding ceremony challenges the reader or viewer to consider why the women in these plays want to participate in legally validated wedding ceremonies. Instead of being content with or participating in the forms of wedding and marriage that exist in their respective communities, Sarah Casey and Big Sweet insist that the marriages in these two plays meet the modern world's definition of the wedding rite and marriage. Synge's and Hurston's use of Travellers and sawmill workers exhibit how certain populations of marginalized people are further disenfranchised by modernization. The presentation of the folk people in these plays shows them as representatives of these Irish and African American communities, yet as my research details, Irish Travellers and African American migrant workers were clearly outliers in their respective communities. In exploring outlier Irish and African American communities, the constructed racialization of Irish and African Americans is considered more broadly, and an understanding of how race is performed is further illuminated.



## CHAPTER IV

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### THE MALE FOLK HERO: ARTISTS OF THE ORAL TRADITION

#### INTRODUCTION

Black literature is often noted for its use of orality. In an attempt to convey the significance of an oral tradition to the African heritage of the Americas and also to destabilize the strict definition of literacy as constituting reading and writing, black authors have often used a black vernacular dialect to give their literature the quality of being orally communicated. The various techniques of using the vernacular dialect in black writing have been both lauded and derided. In the introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* James Weldon Johnson states that “the colored poet in the United States needs to do something like what Synge did for the Irish” and “find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation,” but he condemns black writers for reducing black speech to a rendering of anything more than “humor and pathos” (*Book of American Negro Poetry* 41-2).<sup>67</sup> By 1927 Johnson had declared that the use of “traditional Negro dialect . . . is absolutely dead” (*God’s Trombones* 8), but he conceded in 1932 that there is a way of successfully “infusing literature with the racy living speech of the Negro in certain phases of *real* life” (*Brown* 8).<sup>68</sup> Works that recall the history of the African oral tradition in the Americas by transmitting to the reader of prose and poetry the quality of

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<sup>67</sup> Specifically addressing the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

<sup>68</sup> Emphasis in Johnson’s quote.

black speech have been called “speakerly” texts. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates defines a speakerly text as one “whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition,” and Gates argues that Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was the first speakerly text in the African American tradition (*Signifying Monkey* 195). Subsequently, the “illusion of narration,” which Hurston uses in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, among other pieces, has become the feature of Hurston’s writing most consistently drawing comment (*Signifying Monkey* 195).

Hurston uses Janie’s self-discovery and self-reflective voice in *Their Eyes* to expose the silencing of women—an act that occurs across national and racial boundaries, to celebrate how one woman is able to articulate an awareness of self, and to celebrate that woman’s ability to tell *herstory*. This success counters the oppression by men (and sometimes women) that Janie has experienced throughout *Their Eyes*, and the success of finding her voice is also meant to be shared with other women in Janie’s community. Before her story is recounted, Janie declares that after she tells it to Pheoby, Pheoby is free to share the tale with anyone she chooses. Janie says, “Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ ’em nothin’, Pheoby. ’Tain’t worth de trouble. You can tell ’em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s jus de same as me ’cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (*Their Eyes* 6). The declaration that Pheoby can speak for her emboldens the claim Pheoby makes at the end of the novel, after Janie has finished with her story. Pheoby says, “Lawd. . . . Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin’”

(*Their Eyes* 192). Janie's self-realizations have empowered Pheoby and also made her more self-aware. By the end of *Their Eyes*, at least two women in the village have found their voice. But while Janie's discovery of voice is impressive, especially considering that discussions of female empowerment would not become popular until forty years after the novel was published, claims of Hurston's female folk hero (or heroes) as the embodiment of black folk expression in literature do not fully engage the vocal powers of Hurston's *male* folk heroes. Moreover, while *Their Eyes* and Hurston's other prose effectively generate the parameters of what a speakerly text is meant to do, it is her dramas that are meant to actually continue a form of the African American oral tradition through performed theatrical presentations. *Their Eyes* and Hurston's other prose give the impression of being orally communicated, but Hurston's theatre makes the most startling and effective use of vernacular speech in order to represent the heritage of creatively rendered oral and aural forms, representing what can be termed the "oral literary tradition" in African American culture. All the voices of Hurston's heroes seem to carry the weight of her main objective as an autoethnographer—which is to provide an insider's perspective on the varied literacies African American culture provides. But her male figures are able to define their identity entirely removed from their romantic engagements, whereas Hurston's female heroes are primarily recognized and reflected on in regard to the men in their lives, confining these female heroes to the domestic sphere. In an attempt to access and capture African American cultural history, especially as it relates to oral culture, Hurston provides details on the oral forms created during the production of African American labor, such as work songs, from an

entirely masculine perspective. Yet African American women historically participated in labor outside of the home in a similar proportion to African American men, and black women too participated in the singing that accompanied fieldwork and prison labor (though in a much more limited capacity). In this respect Hurston gives audiences access to African American cultural history that seems to exclude women. Hurston's male heroes are self-important egotists who break all the rules and tend to suffer little consequence for their actions, whereas their female counterparts tend to suffer for openly expressing opinions that oppose the status quo. Consequently, when Hurston provides insight into African American oral culture from the male perspective, that male voice speaks for the entire African American community, while the voice of African American females in her stories focuses almost exclusively on how black women interacted and responded to black men. Thus, when the aesthetic forms of African American female culture are provided by a Hurston female hero, such as Big Sweet in *Polk County*, these are accessible because that female is relating to the audience her experiences about the men in her life. However, Hurston's male heroes are enabled to present black folk expression without any reference to the ups and downs of their love lives. They, of course, do praise and lament their lovers, but Hurston's male heroes always represent the authoritative figure. In *Spunk* the title character exerts command over the community through the power of his voice, and with that voice intricacies of African American oral cultural history are revealed.

In Ireland, not only was Synge's use of blasphemy against God and specifically the Catholic Church condemned and controversial, so was his version

of Hiberno-English. Tracing the development of the Abbey Theatre from 1904 to 1978, Hugh Hunt notes some of the problems Synge's language presented. Of the premiere of *The Well of the Saints* in 1905, Hunt writes that objections to the language of Synge's plays were frequently made in rehearsals, particularly the many references the play makes to "the Deity" (63). Once *The Well of the Saints* was performed, Synge's constant critic Arthur Griffith wrote that the language in the play was "less Irish than Whitechapel Cockney," and a reviewer in the *Freeman's Journal* wrote, "The point of view is not that of the writer in sympathetic touch with the people he purports to draw his characters" (Hunt 63). Thus actors and the Irish public objected to both Synge's version of Hiberno English and to his use of blasphemy. By the time Synge published *The Playboy of the Western World*—his most celebrated and denounced drama—he included in the preface an acknowledgement of the gestures and language of the Irish people as inspiration for the play and authorized himself as a person who had diligently collected "the imagination of the people, and the language they use, [which] is rich and living" (CW IV 53) in order to recount a linguistically faithful drama. He asserts, "In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers" (CW IV 53). And it is in *Playboy*, as well as in all of his other work, that Synge attempts to harness what he sees in the everyday life of Ireland. He writes:

In Ireland . . . we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of local life has been

forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks. (CW IV 53)

Yet another similarity between Synge and Hurston is the vocal power conferred onto the male folk hero as compared with the vocal abilities of the female folk heroes. Maurya is vocal throughout all of *Riders to the Sea*, and from the beginning of the play the reader or viewer is clearly aware of Maurya's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. When the play opens, Maurya's daughters, Nora and Cathleen, discuss her mental state; it is immediately made clear that Maurya is overwhelmed by the loss of life in her family. In fact, Maurya is responding to the recurring deaths by "crying and lamenting" so much that the young priest says, "She'll be getting her death" (CW III 5). It is also through Maurya that the reader or viewer is able to access significant aspects of Irish vernacular tradition. The reader learns of the import of visions, holy wells, the Samhain, and, most importantly, keening. Yet by the end of the play Maurya has made it clear that she has finished being vocal. Maurya begins the final lamentation in *Riders* after she attempts to meet Bartley and take back "the dark word" she put on him. Pressed by Cathleen and Nora to stop the keen and tell the girls "the fearfulest thing any person has seen, since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms" (CW III 19) and Maurya explains that on her way to the spring well she saw visions of her two youngest sons. It is at that moment that the old woman knows all the men in her family, including her two youngest sons, are no longer living. With the burial of the last man in her family she has no plans, or need, to be vocal anymore.

After the death of her husband, Dan Burke, Nora finds her voice and informs the reader or viewer of *The Shadow of the Glen* that she was an unhappily married woman. And with the discovery of her voice, the reader or viewer is able to access what marriage might have been like for women at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Nora reveals that without her husband or any children, now that Dan is dead she has “a hundred sheep beyond on the hills, and no turf drawn for the winter” (CW III 33). She reveals that Dan “was always cold, every day since [she] knew him,—and every night” (CW III 35) and that throughout her marriage she was “lonesome” (CW III 37). But once Dan comes back to life, a ploy he used to trap his “bad wife” (CW III 43), Nora is effectively silenced again. Cast out of her home, Nora is bound “to get [her] death walking the roads” (CW III 45).

Besides Pegeen Mike, whom I will discuss thoroughly below, Sarah Casey is the most vocal of Synge’s female heroes. In *The Tinker’s Wedding*, “since the moon did change,” Sarah has been having “queer thoughts” and has decided she wants to get married. As such, she constructs a plan that convinces her partner to get married and a random priest into marrying them. But Sarah’s voice is silenced by the end of the play. After a succession of misadventures and the biased judgments from the priest, Sarah says, “My heart’s scalded with the fooling; and it’ll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that” (CW IV 49). Many of Synge’s female heroes do have big voices, and with those voices the reader or viewer is able to access many aspects of traditional Irish vernacular culture. However, with the preface to *Playboy*, and the play itself, Synge emphasizes that the voices of the Irish people and the stories he has heard

are the most significant of the culture. He writes that when he was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* he “got more aid than any learning could have given, from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house,” where he had been able to hear the private conversations of the house maids (CW IV 53). In Synge’s prose, many narratives are collected so that the reader gets a full understanding of how important storytelling is to traditional Irish culture. And similarly to Hurston’s theatre, Synge’s plays are intended to carry on a form of the Irish oral tradition through performed theatrical presentations. Yet while women inspired Synge in overheard conversations, Synge’s male folk hero Christy Mahon makes the most startling and effective use of vernacular speech in order to represent the oral literary tradition in Irish culture. Christy’s voice seems to carry the weight of Synge’s linguistic quest as an autoethnographer: to preserve a version of Hiberno-English that celebrates both the Irish and the English languages as being fundamental to Irish tradition.

Synge’s and Hurston’s characters are showcased in a wide range of stories that attempt to display Irish and African American cultural identity. And one of the more fascinating aspects of the authors’ oeuvres is their seeming ability to give a voice to folk people who have historically been observed, commented on, and critiqued, but who had little opportunity at the time each author was writing to express their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions—not to mention the banal experiences of their lives. Moreover, the populations that Synge and Hurston are drawing material from were primarily illiterate (many in the west of Ireland could not read or write in Irish let alone English). By the authors’ emphasizing the importance of orality in their works and the ability of both to marry almost

seamlessly their respective oral traditions with the Western European literary tradition—a tradition perceived to be superior to the folk/oral tradition—Synge and Hurston further elevate both Irish and African American culture as having multiple literacies. That it is to say, while each author recognized that many in the population of their focus could not read, historically, each culture had a rich tradition of verbally communicating to express competence and knowledge rather than expressing these in a written form. By concentrating on and emphasizing the various spoken traditions of the Irish and African Americans in their work, and promoting awareness in regard to orality and vernacular literacy, Synge and Hurston preserved aspects of each culture that theorists such as Walter J. Ong would expand on in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the start of *The Playboy of the Western World* Christy Mahon is aimlessly walking the roads after “killing” his father, and at the beginning of *Spunk*, Spunk is walking along the railroads, picking his guitar, and looking for work. Yet throughout the course of each play, the men use their words, which are either sung or appear to be sung to the spectator, to tell their histories and subsequently reveal intricacies and intimacies that each author deemed important to each culture. By storytelling and through the use of the Irish and African American vernacular speech that Synge and Hurston are known for aestheticizing in their work, both men are able to reinvent themselves from being lonely wanderers to instead becoming true folk heroes, admired and respected by their communities. Christy and Spunk use the art of storytelling to demonstrate their ability to exert command over their male peers while also seeming sexually desirable and eloquent to the women with whom they interact. In the discussion

that follows, I examine the way in which Christy Mahon and Spunk use speech to perform the oral tradition in order to display Irish and African American cultural heritage in a seemingly naturalistic manner.

### **The Irish in the English**

As an idiom, the conjunction of “play” and “boy” has its roots, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, in Hiberno-English. While “play-boy” first referred to boys who performed theatre, Gerald Griffin, Irish author of *The Collegians*, used “playboy” in the early nineteenth century to suggest the suave manner of Kyrle Daly.<sup>69</sup> A middle-class schoolmate of the well-positioned but insecure Hardress Cregan, Kyrle is described as “a popular character amongst all his fair acquaintances. He had, in addition to his handsome appearance, that frank and cheerful manner, not unmingled with a certain degree of tenderness and delicacy, which is said to be the most successful in opening the female heart” (Griffin 43). When, in the novel, “playboy” is used in its then-current colloquial form, it is after the handmaiden Syl Carney has fawned over Kyrle in a rather “officious” manner, but Kyrle still responds to her in his “usual manner, by complimenting Syl on her good looks—wondering she had not got married, and reminding her that Shrovetide would be shortly coming round again; in return for which the pretty Syl repeatedly told him that he was ‘a funny gentleman’ and ‘a great playboy’” (Griffin 74). Thus, when Pegeen Mike spits out “Quit my sight” (CW IV 173) at Shawn Keogh, terminating any possibility of their becoming

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<sup>69</sup> *The Colleen Bawn* by Dion Boucicault is based on Griffin’s novel. The keening that occurs in this play is seen as a spectacle.

engaged again, and begins lamenting over Christy Mahon's departure, crying, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world" (CW IV 173), it is the colloquial notion of "playboy," first used by Griffin, that is evoked. Yet when Christy first appears in the play, he is far from the playboy Pegeen declares him to be by the play's end.

Pegeen's fiancé Shawn Keogh first describes Christy by saying that the "queer dying fellow's beyond looking over the ditch" (CW IV 67). When Christy finally makes his way into the Flahertys' pub, Synge's notes describe him as "a slight young man" who is "very tired and frightened and dirty" (CW IV 67). His appearance is clearly disheveled; Pegeen's first words to him as she serves him a glass of porter: "You're one of the tinkers, young fellow, is beyond camped at the glen?" (CW IV 67).<sup>70</sup> However, when Christy declares, "I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week" (CW IV 73), without evidence of his crime, Christy is immediately cast as the most "daring fellow" in the pub (CW IV 73). Moreover, with his assertion that "the peelers never followed after [him] the eleven days that" he was "walking forward facing hog, dog, or divil on the highway of the road" (CW IV 75), Christy begins to be seen as brave and feared. Thus, by simply stating that he killed and buried his father and then walked away without a care for the consequences of his actions, Christy transitions from queer and tinkerish

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<sup>70</sup> Pegeen serves the unknown wanderer a "glass of porter" so it seems important to note that even though Christy's appearance makes her question whether he is a member of the settled class, she initially shows willingness to serve him his porter in a glass and engage him in conversation. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, tinkers in this era would have been expected to take their porter away (for example, Mary Byrne is given her porter and then takes it to go). In an earlier draft of *Playboy*, Synge noted that Christy was "more like a farmer than a tramp" (CW IV 66), which seems to confirm that although Christy is disheveled and possibly dirty, there is some aspect of Christy's character that encourages the people in the pub to welcome Christy and makes him feel comfortable enough to begin telling his story.

to an idealized figure in this pub. Nevertheless, he is still quite far from the image one might imagine of a playboy. But by the end of the first act, when Pegeen and the Widow Quinn are fighting over Christy, Christy is transforming into the playboy Pegeen declares him to be at the play's end. And the reality that Christy's attraction is primarily located in his performance of speech, in his voice, is even more evident.

After Shawn sends the Widow Quinn to spy on Christy and Pegeen, Pegeen confirms Shawn's emasculation and her rejection of their union by saying that she "wouldn't wed him if a bishop came walking for to join us here" (CW IV 91). Pegeen is also so convinced of Christy's ability to woo and seduce women that she accuses Christy of "walking the world telling out [his] story to young girls or old," using the "talk and streeleen" he has proven himself to have to get into "every cot and cabin where [he has] met a young girl on [his] way" (CW IV 79-81). Thus, it is essentially not the killing of his father that has allowed the boy to become a man. The sexual appeal the women of this community sense in Christy, the reason he becomes the playboy, is the suggestion that Christy walks the world telling his story of killing his father. And it is Christy's lyrical language that simultaneously evokes poetic imagery while re-creating an English form of the Irish language. With Christy's performance one can see how Synge uses *Playboy* to reject violence as a way of overthrowing patriarchal rule and emphasizes that language is the best way to overthrow a hegemonic state.

Theatre is not indigenous to the African American or Irish traditions. The beginnings of African American theatre trace back to the early nineteenth century, when William Henry Brown founded the African Grove Theatre in New

York City, where Ira Aldridge began his theatrical career. However, it is not until the mid-twentieth century, when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) debuted on Broadway, that African American theatre enjoyed extensive critical success and acknowledgment.<sup>71</sup> Defining the origins of Irish theatre can be a challenging task, depending on whether one is identifying Anglo-Irish theatre, which dates back to the seventeenth century, or Irish-language theatre, which officially began to mature in the twentieth century. The ascendance of Irish theatre during the Irish Literary Revival is defined by its desire to merge indigenous Irish cultural heritage with English-language productions behind the ultimate goal of unifying Ireland under a shared sense of cultural identity. This approach to the artistic movement, and the dominant influence Irish theatre has enjoyed since then, illustrates how successful the Irish Literary Revival was. Nevertheless, many in the Irish-Ireland movement were resistant to the development of the Irish Literary Theatre at its inception. At nineteen, a zealous Patrick Pearse declared the Irish Literary Theatre needed to be strangled "at its birth" ("Passing of Anglo-Irish Drama" 7). And while obviously overly inflammatory, the sentiment was shared by others. The idea for Pearse and others in the Irish-Ireland movement was that the creation of an Irish theatre out of plays written in English was decidedly not Irish. On 1 September 1900, D. P. Moran wrote an editorial in the *Leader* that stated, "We deny the possible existence of such a thing as Irish literature in the English language" (119). And while W. B. Yeats received an extraordinary amount of insults in fin de siècle

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<sup>71</sup> Hansberry is inspired to become a playwright after seeing *Juno and the Paycock*. I explore this point further in the conclusion

Ireland, no other Anglo-Irish writer seemed to infuriate those in the Irish-Ireland movement more than Synge.<sup>72</sup> Philip O’Leary states in *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation*, “During his life all of Synge’s work, with the exception of *Riders to the Sea*, was condemned in the Dublin Gaelic press” (337).<sup>73</sup> And, as I mentioned in regards to *Riders* in chapter 2, O’Leary also notes that even *Riders* was mocked by some spectators for lacking the authenticity Synge so desired.

Over the course of time, what O’Leary calls an “uneasy alliance” developed between the Gaelic Revival and the “Irish” Renaissance, with Pearse eventually praising and sentimentalizing Synge. In 1913, after Synge’s death, Pearse changed his mind about the writer. Pearse conceded that Synge was “one of the two or three men” who helped to establish Ireland as worth consideration in the rest of the world” and in whose “sad heart there glowed a true love of Ireland” (*Collected Works* 76). And as early as February 1900, one can find support for the Irish Literary Theatre in the Gaelic press. O’Leary quotes and translates a “more thoughtful and no less representative view” of the Anglo-Irish Renaissance by a *Fáinne an Lae* contributor less than a year after Pearse’s unfavorable declaration regarding the “Mr. Yeats’ precious ‘Irish’ Literary Theatre” (281). The contributor writes:

It is not right for us to forget that English is here and that it will, it seems, be used by the Irish as long as it is used by the English themselves. . . . In

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<sup>72</sup> For a full account of the strenuous relationship between Synge and the Irish-Ireland movement see *Synge and the Irish Language* by Declan Kiberd, pages 19-53.

<sup>73</sup> For a more broad account on what O’Leary calls an “uneasy alliance” between the Gaelic Revival and the “Irish” Renaissance, see *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921: Ideology and Innovation*, pages 281-354.

the best sense we will have two languages from now on, and it is worthwhile to cultivate both of them to the best of our ability. (O'Leary 354)

The tension between those of the Gaelic Revival and the Irish Literary Revival could be described as carrying on throughout most of the twentieth century. While the initial moments had passed, and long after the partition, Declan Kiberd suggests that the false dichotomy of two separate Irish literatures encouraged (and encourages) an intellectual partition. Unfortunately, the varying views from people who supported or believed in the aims of each movement, which were little more than affiliations, often got entangled with the more virulent politics and ideological beliefs associated with the quest for a united and independent Ireland.

It is important to acknowledge the tension over the use of English in Irish literature in a study that aims to investigate how Synge's performed ethnographies, his theatre, actively participated on the national stage in larger conversations of authenticity at such a crucial time in Ireland's history. However, what is more germane to this study and this chapter is how the language in Synge's plays, especially in *Playboy*, functions outside of the Irish-English debate. And since Christy Mahon's performance of the oral tradition is voiced through Synge's own Hiberno-English, the study of how vernacular speech functions in his theatre overall is important. In focusing on Synge's language I am evaluating the hybridity of modern Irish culture. His characters do speak English but, as Synge has written and developed for them, a very Irish English. In many ways, the language is neither Irish nor English, but some combination of both.

That is to say that while *Playboy* and Synge's other plays are written in English, it is hard to ignore that the language his characters use is greatly impacted by a language that is distinctly not English. I contend that the language that influenced and impacted Synge's writing was the country's native Irish language.

Both Willie Fay and Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, two actors who performed in Abbey Theatre plays at its founding, commented on how different and difficult the language of Synge's plays was. In *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, Fay notes that the speeches in Synge's plays "had what I call a balance of their own and went with a kind of tilt" (138), and in *The Splendid Years*, Nic Shiubhlaigh comments that initially she "found Synge's lines almost impossible to learn and deliver" (42). She continues:

It was neither verse nor prose. The speeches had a musical lilt, absolutely different to anything I had heard before. Every passage brought some new difficulty and we would all stumble through the speeches until the tempo in which they were written was finally discovered. I found I had to break the sentences—which were uncommonly long—into sections, chanting them, slowly at first, then quickly as I became more familiar with the words.

Kiberd notes in *The Irish Writer and the World* that it is the use of "assonance and alliteration" in Synge's work that "made strict demands, not only on the poet, but also on the reciter who was expected to bring out the subtle potential in every vowel and consonant" (*Writer and the World* 80). These ideas regarding Synge's use of sound repetition were first developed in Kiberd's *Synge and the Irish Language*. In that text, Kiberd argues that Synge's knowledge of the

Irish language significantly affected how he wrote in English. This hybridity of Synge's language is what has seemingly most attracted writers of the African diaspora to his work. Seamus Heaney too looks at Synge's hybrid language and, whether knowingly or unknowingly, echoes Johnson's phrasing in his essay on Derek Walcott, "The Murmur of Malvern." In the essay Heaney states, "I imagine he [Walcott] has done for the Caribbean what Synge did for Ireland, found a language woven out of a dialect and literature, neither folksy [n]or condescending, a singular idiom which allows an older life to exult in itself and yet at the same time keeps the cool of 'the new'" (23). In a specific discussion of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*," a poem in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* collection, Heaney places Walcott in the tradition of other Irish writers who not only wrote in English but also understood the political implications of what creating Irish literature out of the English language meant. As Paula Burnett argues, Walcott, like Heaney, understood that writing in the English language places both writers in "the English literary tradition" itself (130). The benefit of writing in the colonizer's language is that the colonized is given access to "all that has been written in the language," which makes Walcott, Heaney, and perhaps any other writer creating literature out of a contested language free to reappropriate the language as he or she sees fits (130).

Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" opens with four lines that appear to revisit William Langland's fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*, and, in naming his essay "The Murmur of Malvern," Heaney alludes to both Walcott and Langland. Burnett says that this "intertextual signifier" positions Walcott as not only a recipient of the English literary tradition but also as one who is continuing

that tradition, rather than exoticizing Walcott as a nonwhite Caribbean writer who excels at writing in the English language.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Gates's argument regarding "[t]he use of dialect in Afro-American poetry" suggests that in the mutation of the English language in black writing, the "literate language" is turned upon itself, "exploiting the metaphor against its master" (*Figures in Black* 172). He writes:

Afro-American dialects exist between two poles, one English and one lost in some mythical linguistic kingdom now irrecoverable. Dialect is our only key to that unknown tongue, and in its obvious relation and reaction to English it contains . . . a verbal dialect, a dialect between some form of an African antithesis all the while obviating the English thesis. (172)

Gates has applied his theories on dialect in black writing to Hurston's and Walcott's works, yet I argue that this understanding of dialect in English literature can be applied to Synge's writings as well (and perhaps other Irish writers too). In many ways, what is occurring in Synge's writings is what Gates says black diasporic writers have consistently done and that seems to evidence how influential Synge was on that first full generation of black artistic expression. In molding his vernacular speech out of both Irish and English, Synge cultivates an oral speech that allows the spectator to hear everyday Irish people speaking the way he heard them, and the vernacular speech of his plays also highlights how metaphoric Hiberno-English is. Thus, the hybridity of Synge's cultivated

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<sup>74</sup> Burnett argues that, in their praise of Walcott's mastery of English, some other literary giants who write in English have been condescending and foreground not Walcott's talent, for which there is obvious reverence, but "Walcott's exoticism as seen from the white-dominated literary establishment" (130).

language changes his writing from simply an English language to a truly Hiberno-English language. And, in *Playboy*, because Christy's poetic language best exemplifies Synge's hybrid vernacular speech, the act of creating an Irish vernacular language out some form of the English language disrupts "the nature of the sign = *signified/signifier* equation itself" (H. L. Gates, Jr. *Signifying Monkey* 51). By turning the "metaphor on the master," Christy becomes both *Playboy's* and Ireland's hero, attempting to lead the players of both contexts to freedom from patriarchal rule by simply telling a good story.

Each time Christy "kills" his father, he frees himself from the binds of oppression. With each "murder," Christy's confidence increases and he finds the power within to not only tell his story but also the ability to completely embody the hero and the hero's story. At the beginning of the play, Christy is a frightened young man who is only able to say that he has committed some sort of awful and unnamable crime. "Aye; it's maybe something big" (CW IV 69), says Christy as Michael attempts to find out what crime he has committed. By the opening of the second act, Christy's narrative about killing his father has been refined into a "grand story" (CW IV 103), such a "long story you'd be destroyed listening [to it]" (CW IV 101). Moreover, the audience learns that Christy has told his story at least "six times since the dawn of day" after "Pegeen Mike *comes in with a milk can and stands aghast,*" finding Christy drinking, "*arms linked*" with local girls and the Widow Quin (CW IV 105-07). To dispel her anger, Christy again attempts to woo Pegeen with the of story how he killed his father (CW IV 107).

Throughout the play Synge highlights the importance of voicing one's story and emphasizes that the art behind a truly magnificent tale is the speaker's

ability to re-create and embellish, sometimes as he is in the process of telling the story. When Michael comes back from Kate Cassidy's wake, he demonstrates that Christy is not the only one in the play who is able to voice a great tale. Of the wake Michael says, "And wasn't it a shame I didn't bear you along with me to Kate Cassidy's wake, a fine, stout lad, the like of you, for you'd never see the match of it for flows of drink, the way when we sunk her bones at noonday in her narrow grave, there were five men, aye, and six men, stretched out retching speechless on the holy stones" (CW IV 151). Christy, possibly recognizing another storyteller, realizes that Michael appears to be taking liberties and replies, uneasily, "Is that the truth?" (CW IV 151). Similarly, as with Michael in the example above, Christy's voice and tale are significant because he is able to re-create the narrative as he goes along, narrating how he murdered his father and embellishing as necessary to make the story more spectacular. Further, Christy's story is significant because it is through the telling of his dad's murder that he finds his voice. The significance of the spoken word is also illustrated when the people of the town learn that Christy did not actually murder his father, and shortly thereafter when Christy declares, "I'm master of all fights from now" (CW IV 173).

Immediately after Michael has blessed the union between Christy and Pegeen, Pegeen learns that Old Mahon is not actually dead. From her perspective, Christy's deception is that he had coaxed fame and recognition "after doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear" (CW IV 161), that he knowingly lies after realizing that the original blow to his father's head did not kill him, and that he "kills" his father in front of the crowd to prove

his dominance. As Pegeen articulates, “A strange man is a marvel with his mighty talk; but what’s a squabble in your back-yard and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there’s a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (CW IV 169). Christy is shamed, dismissed by his true love, and seen as a town idiot. Or, again in Pegeen’s words, Christy becomes nothing more than “a Munster liar and the fool of men” (CW IV 161). But as quickly as his talk had turned him into a hero, his words redeem him again—at least in Pegeen’s estimation— after his shaming, when Christy effectually understands that it was not being the hero, gallantly standing up to the patriarchal monster that freed him. Rather, it was the discovery of his voice that allowed him to become his own man.

When Christy initially understands the strength of his words, he is still vulnerable to Old Mahon’s goading, recalling in one instance that his voice had set him free, only to resort to violence in another instance, when his father threatens his newfound and uneasy self-reliance. Thus, as Christy is acknowledging that words, not violence, gave him his independence, Old Mahon’s baiting still has control over him. The exchange goes as follows:

Christy. If I am an idiot, I’m after hearing my voice this day saying words would raise the topknot on a poet in a merchant’s town. I’ve won your racing and your lepping and. . . .

Mahon. Shut your gullet and come on with me.

Christy. I’m going but I’ll stretch you first. (CW IV 165)

Even though, in the moment before, Christy recognizes that speech and storytelling are more powerful than physicality, when provoked he resorts to violence, determining that it is necessary to “murder” his father again. But after

the second murder proves just as unsuccessful as the first, Christy resolves to be his own master rather than letting another control his destiny. And it is in this moment that Christy truly understands how he went from “likely gaffer” to hero. He says, “Ten thousand blessings upon all that’s here, for you’ve turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I’ll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day” (CW IV 173). When he first arrives, the image that Old Mahon presents of Christy is very different from the character that the audience meets in the play. Before “killing” his father, Christy was “the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet, the way the girls would stop their weeding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon’s” (CW IV 123). And when Christy learns of his father’s “coming back to life, and following” him, Christy is reminded of the man he was before and is once again weighted by patriarchal oppression. But after “murdering” his father a second time, nearly being sent to the gallows, and experiencing again the resurrection of his father, Christy realizes that it is not the violent act that has freed him from patriarchal rule, it is his voice.

The world that *Playboy* takes place in is violent. The first news of violence during these times in Ireland comes at the moment Pegeen and Shawn agree that she should not spend “twelve hours of dark” in the pub alone while her father and most of the other men in the village attend “Kate Cassidy’s wake” (CW IV 57). It is here that the reader or viewer learns that attacking a “peeler” and “maiming ewes” are just two examples of crimes committed in the area (CW IV 59). When Michael begins Christy’s interrogation, he proposes that there might be a

justification for any offense Christy has committed, a proposition that reinforces the idea that this period of Irish history is troubled and conflicted. In *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*, Kiberd refers to this period as a society “in the throes of a land war, as the last phase of the campaign against feudalism in Ireland is enacted” (*Inventing Ireland* 166). Consequently, because of “the broken harvest and ended wars,” the “larceny” Michael assumes that Christy committed suggests that the conflicts the Irish people have recently endured could make good people commit bad acts (CW IV 69). Described by D. E. S. Maxwell as a “nightmare” in *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891–1980*, the following list includes threats to individuals, primarily women, and to threats to the government: “tinkers” (63), “the thousand militia . . . walking idle through the land” (63), young women followed “on a lonesome night” (69), land “grabbed” from decent farmers (69), forceful evictions by “landlords” (70) with assistance from “agents” (69), “a sprinkling . . . among the holy Luthers of the preaching North” that have married “three wives” (71), those off “fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers” (presumably for the opportunity to fight British soldiers) (71), and “the loosed khaki cut-throats, or the walking dead” (75). All the aforementioned threats, which affirm that this nightmarish society is “in the throes of a land war,” undermine the settled class’s ability to maintain a stable, bourgeois-valued society. Throughout *Playboy* discussions of the modern world are often aligned with queerness. Pegen is a “queer daughter” (63) and Michael is a “queer father” (63). On more than one occasion, Christy is referred to as “queer,” from the “queer fellow above going mad or getting his death” (65) to the “queer kind to bring onto a decent

quiet household with the like of Pegeen Mike” (75). Hangings supposedly bring the people “queer joys” (109). Queerness is associated with “global modernity” as Patrick Mullen argues in *The Poor Bigger’s Tool: Irish Modernism, Queer Labor, and Postcolonial History*, but queerness in *Playboy* is also connected with violence. In order to return to a sense of normality, it is necessary to reject violence. The tradition and quality of storytelling in this moment becomes the way in which this odd and unconventionally violent world can find peace. At the end of the play, Pegeen not only refers to Christy as a playboy; in her estimation, Christy is “the only playboy of the western world” (CW IV 173). And recalling Syl Carne’s ingratiating manner to the charming manner of Kyrle Daly, the reader or viewer remembers that a true playboy would not be violent. He would always find a way to talk his way out of trouble.

As with Synge’s other heroines, Pegeen Mike is known for the weight of her voice and is vocal throughout the play. At the beginning of the play Pegeen is abrupt and rude with her fiancé, Shawn, and she is the first to challenge Christy when he comes into the bar claiming to have done “maybe something big” but will not say what it is that he has done. She is forceful with her language and threatening to anyone who challenges her. In addition to regularly sharing her opinion with the town, or anyone who finds himself or herself in her pub, Pegeen is also known for openly changing her opinion. When Christy is wrenching over the thought of either returning to a life of “torment” living with Old Mahon or running “off like a vagabond straying through the Unions,” Sara suggests that he ask Pegeen for aid. She says, “Her like does often change” (CW IV 163). Though the remark is snide, it is evident that Pegeen does change her mind often over the

course of the three acts. At the start of the play Pegeen is making a list of items she will need to get married to Shawn Keogh while they wait for the dispensation that enables blood relatives to marry. Yet by the end of the play, when the “gilded dispensation” has finally arrived, Pegeen has decided she no longer wants to marry Shawn. She tells her father that the dispensation has arrived too late and that Christy Mahon is the man that she has decided to marry now. Yet when Old Mahon shows up, and Pegeen learns that Christy did not murder his father, she rejects Christy. She says, “That’s it, now the world will see him pandied, and he an ugly liar was playing off the hero and fright of men!” (CW IV 163). But then Pegeen changes her mind again, and at the play’s end she declares Christy “the only playboy of the western world.” Christy’s vocal power lies in the poetry of his words. His capability to tell a good story is his strength. However, similar to the other Synge heroines, Pegeen’s voice is not only perceived negatively, it is also evidence of her fickleness (remember that Sarah’s “queer thoughts” are a result of the change in the moon). Whereas Christy is praised for his words and made out to be the playboy, Pegeen is described as common and treated with insolence. Synge’s *Playboy* is a determined defense of the power of language over violence and a forceful celebration of how the English language was transformed by the Irish language. But it is also important to recognize that the celebration relates only to the male star of the play rather than to both the male and female leads.

### **The Voice in the Text**

As exhibited in Synge’s plays, Hurston’s works pay tribute to oral traditions and the power of language. Effective storytelling, admiration for commanding voices,

and creative rendering of oral and aural forms are abilities exhibited by many characters in most of Hurston's works. Further, it is through language that Hurston's characters demonstrate their strength and, when necessary, transform their circumstances. Before Janie tells her story to Pheoby, Janie's identity has been defined by Nanny, Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake but never by herself. Yet through the power of storytelling, Janie is transformed into a person who can deflect others' criticisms of her, and she embodies self-confidence. That assurance is best exemplified in Janie's words to Pheoby at the beginning of the *Their Eyes*. She says, "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's jus de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (*Their Eyes* 6). Through storytelling Janie and Pheoby make discoveries about their self worth and have a better understanding of their world. Nevertheless, while it is important to note that there are many examples of expressive and confident women in Hurston's works, my argument is that the male figures in Hurston's works make the most effectual use of vernacular speech in order to represent African American heritage. This point is particularly valid in the way Hurston's male heroes tell their stories. In addition to Janie, Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Big Sweet in *Polk County*, and Evalina in *Spunk* are all examples of verbally expressive women in Hurston's works. The choice of these women to reject silence is crucial to Hurston's oeuvre. However, in the aforementioned pieces, each of these women's voices are primarily raised in concern to the men in their lives whereas the male leads in Hurston's works, and these stories in particular, are expressive independently of their romantic entanglements. From Joe Clarke and John

Parsons to Lonnie Price and Spunk Banks, the men in Hurston's works are given the freedom to express their needs, wants, and desires outside of their love for their partners. This point is particularly valid when Hurston focuses attention on the aesthetic forms African Americans created while at work. In detailing how Spunk's use of verbal expressions allows him to exist in the play independently from his relationship with Evalina, I argue that Hurston gives Spunk an opportunity most of her female characters have been denied: the chance to perform his own story.

*Spunk* is a reimagining of an earlier Hurston work, a short story from 1925 with the same name. It appears that Hurston looked to Shakespeare, in addition to Synge, for literary guidance at the beginning of her career, as "Spunk" (the story) draws heavily on *Hamlet* and concentrates on the themes of the supernatural, lust, murder, and revenge. Yet when Hurston redrafts the play in her own literary voice she also gives the main character his voice as well. In the short story, the title character has no voice; *his story* is told by the men of the town acting as a Greek chorus. But in the play, Spunk is silent no more, and with that voice he has the ability to thrive and survive.

The short story "Spunk" appears to follow Shakespeare's *Hamlet* more closely than the play does, while the play, *Spunk*, leans more to what Hurston might have considered a natural image of African American life. This is specifically an image of African Americans Hurston consistently attempted to project in her career: an African American culture completely removed from the oppressions of white America. In this, African American culture was not derivative but blossomed from a culture that existed in Africa prior to the slaves

being brought to the Americas. In both the story and the play, the African American culture presented by Hurston exists outside of a black-white dichotomy that one might expect to find in texts set in early-twentieth-century America. Recalling Eatonville, the community within the short story (and within the play) is not beholden to traditional American rules of law, and the people in this community choose whether to participate in the law that the “white folks” control. In the short story, after Joe’s death, the male members of the community talk of locking Spunk up “until the sheriff should come from Orlando” (“Spunk” 29), but not one of these men acts on this talk. When Spunk does go on trial for Joe’s death, the trial is a short one, with Spunk walking out of the courthouse as a free man. In the play, after Jim’s death, Spunk voluntarily walks over to the sheriff and invites anyone in the community wanting to testify for or against him to join him. Similarly in the play, Spunk and the community choose whether or not they will follow American laws. When Spunk balks at the idea of being placed under arrest by a deputized posse, not one of the men physically challenges Spunk’s authority to police himself. He says: “If anybody puts their hands on me, just like God sent me a pistol I’ll send him a man. That’s the reason I always tried to stay out of trouble—so nobody wouldn’t be tying me up like I was some cow! I’ll go on over and tell the white folks what I done and how come I done it and everybody can come testify. But don’t touch me” (*Spunk* 249). Spunk’s rejection to possibly being treated as if he were a cow also rejects the African American history of being treated as chattel. Spunk and this community participate outside of the American (white) justice system.

To further illustrate the voluntary disenfranchisement of this community from American societal norms, in the story and the play Joe's and Jim's deaths go unpunished by the established justice system. In the story, Spunk tells the chorus that Joe "sneaked up an' tried to kill me from the back, but Ah got him, an' got him good, first shot" ("Spunk" 29). The killing is described as a "clear case of self defense," and the chorus informs the reader that "the trial was a short one, and Spunk walked out of the court house to freedom again" ("Spunk" 29). In the play Jim's death is still considered self-defense but Spunk is sent away to work on the chain gang, getting "ninety days for toting a gun" (*Spunk* 259). In the story, retribution is delivered via supernatural forces. After Joe's death in the story, Spunk and Lena continue their very public affair, with Spunk conspiring to marry Lena and make her his own wife. But before Lena and Spunk can marry, Spunk is killed by the "singing, snarling, biting, circle-saw" and on his deathbed claims, "Ah bleeve Joe pushed 'im mahself" ("Spunk" 29). Prior to Joe's death, Spunk rode the logs down at the saw mill "jus' like he struts round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty" ("Spunk" 26), but after Joe's death, Spunk becomes afraid and nervous, at the mill and everywhere. According to the chorus, he has good reason:

Well, night befo' las' was the fust night Spunk an' Lena moved together an' jus' as they was goin' to bed, a big black bob-cat, black all over, you hear me, black, walked round and round that house and howled like forty, an' when Spunk got his gun an' went to the winder to shoot it, he says it stood right still an' looked him in the eye, an' howled right at him. The thing got

Spunk so nervoused up he couldn't shoot. But Spunk says twan't no bob-cat nohow. He says it was Joe done sneaked back from Hell!" ("Spunk" 30)

However, in the play, while Spunk is sent to the chain gang for the crime of carrying a gun, even there his presence is treated as if he is voluntarily participating in the American justice system. Spunk has a collegial relationship with the captain of the chain gang (a white man), and they treat each other like coworkers rather than the prison boss and prisoner they are. While out working on a highway, Captain Hammer gives Spunk a cigarette and match, and when another convict mocks Spunk by suggesting that Evalina is stepping out on him while he is on the chain gang, Captain Hammer defends Spunk and chides the other convict. Further, when Spunk walks off the chain gang after receiving a "Dear John" letter from Evalina, Captain Hammer threatens to kill him but allows Spunk to get far enough away before firing three shots. Ultimately all of the shots miss Spunk. After Spunk runs away from the chain gang, the rest of his sentence is commuted because the sawmill boss tells the town sheriff that "he need Spunk in the mill so he could meet his contract to some lumber" (*Spunk* 259). And immediately after his legal issues are settled, Spunk announces that he and Evalina are married and will be expecting the arrival of a baby boy. The changes that Spunk's tale undergoes from short story to theatrical production gives the title character, and the aspects of African American culture he is performing, more agency.

In addition to Spunk and his community existing outside of the normal rules of law, the presence and importance of the supernatural in both the story and the play—via Hoodoo in the play—calls attention to an African American

identity and culture that are influenced by a folk identity that the slaves brought to America. Hurston emphasizes that all aspects of this society exist in a space that is decidedly separate from mainstream America—from the way the town is governed to how religion influences its members' beliefs. And since Spunk in the short story faces retribution via supernatural forces, rather than through the white U.S. government, Hurston suggests that a rich cultural heritage is far superior to the rules of law. But while both the story and the play work effectively in proving that there was an African American culture completely removed from the oppressions of white America, that African American culture was not derivative, and that African American culture blossomed from a culture that existed in Africa, by giving Spunk a voice in the play Hurston highlights one's voice as the most effectual rendering of African American vernacular culture in literature.

*Spunk* opens on a railroad work crew, with a man acting as the “singing-liner” leading the crew in coordinated and rhythmic music. The music that the railroad workers are making—the work songs—are intended to help them accomplish the arduous work of maintaining the railroad. The lines from the boss and the singing-liner give insight into how railroad work songs helped railroad work crews, physically and emotionally, to manage their labor and get through the work day. The boss calls out the instruction, and then the singing-liner sings out to the crew how it needs to be done. As a result, the men respond accordingly to the signing-liner's calls, not the boss's. For instance, in scene 1, Boss says: “Line another one before you spike. Come on bullies!” but the men do not act until the signing-liner has sung his command. He says: “All right. Nine hundred

pounds of steel in place!” (*Spunk* 230). It is then that the men “grab up bars and jump into place.” The singing-liner continues:

Come on if you’re coming, let’s go if you’re going!

When I get in Illinois

I’m going to spread the news about the Florida boys

Shove it over! Hey! Hey! Can’t you line it?

Ah, shack-a-lack, a-lack, a-lack, a-lack, a-huhn!

Can’t you move it?

Hey! Hey! Can’t you try?

In response to his singing calls, “The men grin and work furiously. He sings five verses and men join in chorus” (*Spunk* 230). This display of the railroad crew’s labor and the music they created to manage it also features another fundamental aspect of African American oral culture, call and response. When Spunk makes his appearance, the men’s music, and thus their work, is interrupted by “the picking of a guitar and a baritone voice singing sketchily” (*Spunk* 230). In one scene, Hurston not only introduces the play’s hero, she also manages to present multiple layers of African American oral tradition through the railroad crew’s work. However, while the performance of oral culture and masculinity are promoted in the singing-liner and the rest of the crew, it is through Spunk that these elements are most predominately featured.

In rewriting “Spunk” Hurston boldly gives the title character his voice, and this act allows Spunk to narrate his own story. Narrating one’s own story is of course what Hurston wants those who represent traditional African American culture to be able to do. Previously, in the short story, *his story* is narrated by all

“the men lounging in the general store” (“Spunk” 27), including Elijah Mosley, Walter Thomas, and Ike Clarke. These “loungers” tell the story of “the fallen giant” laid low by “teeth of steel” and the supernatural. But in the play Spunk not only lives up to the myth—conquering the saw and the supernatural—he is also allowed to voice his own story. It is the act of voicing his own story that allows Spunk to survive. In both iterations Spunk masters the saw at the mill when he first comes to town, yet in the short story the reader learns of this accomplishment through the “loungers.” In the play, when Willie Joe, Oral, Blue Trout, and Admiral try to imitate the rhythm Spunk has with the saw, Spunk walks into the scene to “tell” and “show” how he controls the saw. With the men acting as if they are the saw, they provide the pitch and hum before Spunk chants to his audience what he does to make the saw willing to submit to him. Spunk explains to the group how he talks and listens to the saw in order to control it. He says:

Before the log gets there the saw is grumbling to itself and saying “I done cut a tree into a board, done cut a board into a box.” By that time the log is there. And the saw is glad so it can go to cutting. That’s wat it loves. Cutting. Filling up its jaws with trees. Spitting out sawdust and lumber. So when it hits a log it laughs like the horse in the valley of Jehoshophat.  
(Spunk 235)

Then Spunk tells the spectators how the saw continues to talk to him, how he is able to listen and “answer it back” (*Spunk* 235). His answer comes in the form of a lyric, which he sings to his spectators—both those in the play and those watching the play. Oral, the first to acknowledge Spunk’s vocal power, says that

he wishes he “could be there to hear [Spunk] talking to that old saw. It’s done killed several ’round here” (*Spunk* 235). The illustration of how Spunk talks and listens to the saw seems to connect him directly to the tradition of call and response in African American oral culture. Through Spunk’s actions, the history of African American orality is demonstrated for both the audience on the stage and for the audience watching the actors perform. Hurston does not make Spunk’s work life visible to the spectator(s), but she does use this scene so that Spunk can perform the work that he does at the mill, and that is what is on display in this scene. Even though Ruby enters this scene “proudly on Spunk’s arm,” in this moment the focus is on Spunk’s ability to dominate the saw through speech. Essentially Hurston is asserting that African American culture can overtake the encroaching of modernity through the power of speech. The “singing, snarling, biting, circle-saw” is unable to eliminate Spunk in the play because his voice gives him the power to save himself. Ruby’s presence, Spunk’s love interest at this point in the play, is irrelevant. Unlike Hurston’s heroines, Spunk’s story and his abilities are displayed entirely separate from his sexual desires and the marriage tradition. Spunk has come into this town as an unknown entity and by the second scene of the play transformed himself into an essential member of the community without being significantly attached to any females. Further, Spunk has also displayed to all of his spectators how capable a worker he is solely through effective rhetorical strategies.

Spunk’s leadership and assurance stay with him even when he is sentenced to do time in prison. As I mentioned earlier, the prison captain treats Spunk with deference, but Spunk is also able to lead the chain gang, and he uses singing to

get them to work harder. At the beginning of the prison scene “a dozen convicts are working on the highway in their stripes” (*Spunk* 250). The men are singing while they are working, but the captain tells the audience (or reader) that the men are sullen and moving slowly. He asks, “Can’t you all find nothing to sing besides that damn mournful tune?” (*Spunk* 250). The song the men are singing seems to express sorrow about their confinement. The lyrics of the song indicate that they are “blind” but still being driven, yet the lyrics also suggest that the men have restrained confidence that they will persevere. They sing, “It’s a hard rocky bottom and it must be found” (*Spunk* 250). Nevertheless Captain Hammer is still unhappy with their music and their work. As he and Spunk interact cordially, Captain Hammer looks at the “other convicts and scowls.” He says: “Hey, you bastards, get to work!” (*Spunk* 251). The convicts do not respond to him or to the suggestive way he “fingers his rifle” (*Spunk* 251). But when Spunk sings and begins to work hard, the men follow his lead. Everyone on stage even begins to laugh. Rather than singing a song simply about getting through the work, suggesting that they “can make it if [they] take [their] time,” Spunk sings a song about enjoying and taking leadership of the work. He sings, with the rest of the chain gang joining in:

Got on the train didn’t have no fare

But I rode some, I rode some

Got on the train, didn’t have no fare

Conductor asked me what I’m doing there

But I rode some, I rode some

Well, he grabbed me by the hand and he led me to the door

But I rode some, I rode some

He grabbed me by the hand and he led me to the door

Hit me over the head with a forty-four

But I rode some, I rode some. (Spunk 251)

H. Bruce Franklin writes in *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* that the songs convicts sang were meant to “pace collective labor” and that the songs made “it possible to survive under the most brutal and degrading conditions, conditions designed to reduce them to work animals” (29). When the men sing without Spunk leading them, they are unable to make the song uplifting. The song is morose, and their labor is sluggish. However, when Spunk leads he sings with such authority that the men are able to forget their circumstances. They work hard and feel good about the work that they are doing. Spunk’s song also asserts that he ignores those who attempt to control him and that he disregards established protocols. He rides the train, the way he rides the saw, and the way he “rides” another man’s wife, he “jus’ don’t give a kitty” about what society says he is not supposed to be able to do.

But Spunk’s disregard of the rules in most instances does not mean he rejects the ideals of masculinity. With Jim depicted as his exact opposite, Hurston outlines through Spunk’s character how masculinity is measured at the lumber camp. It is after being ridiculed for his cuckolding that Jim resolves to confront Spunk and Evalina about their affair. Confronted by the town regarding his inadequacies as a man, his inability to keep his wife, and the further debasement of his character due to his stalking the newly formed couple instead of moving on with another partner himself, Jim decides that the time has come to

confront Spunk and insist that Evalina return home. Jim says that “Spunk done gone too far” and asserts that he has come into the town’s center “in order to tackle ’em [Spunk and Evalina] when they pass” (*Spunk* 243). Jim proclaims that Evalina is rightly his and argues that theirs is a legitimate union by stating that he has the “papers” to prove it. He tells Spunk that they “went to the big court house and got the papers and stood up in her mama’s house and married. . . .Tell *me* that ain’t my wife!” (*Spunk* 243).<sup>75</sup> Jim’s declaration recalls the crux of Hurston’s *Polk County*. Big Sweet’s insistence that Leafy Lee and My Honey get married, with legitimate marriage papers, was intended to protect Leafy Lee and uphold her honor. But in this relationship the “papers” are depicted as irrelevant to securing a marriage. In *Spunk*, Hurston asserts that the strength of a man, and the ability of said man to fulfill his duties, keeps a marriage viable. The rest of the community has already determined that Jim “ain’t no kind of a man” because he let Spunk come in between him and Evalina (*Spunk* 243). Oral interjects that Jim is “a fool to keep hanging after Lina when she’s done told him she don’t want him and gone to living with Spunk” (*Spunk* 243). And with Spunk proclaiming that Jim’s “papers” are negligible in validating his relationship with Evalina, the ability to rule over a woman appears to be rooted in more than talk. Hurston puts forth that the culture Spunk represents needs to be preserved in all of its forms, which includes a visual dimension. Rather than suggesting that visual culture supersedes oral culture, Hurston seems to confirm that the visual, oral, and aural work in tandem.

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<sup>75</sup> Emphasis Hurston’s

In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* Walter Ong first began developing ideas that would lead him to believe that a “tension” exists between the visual and the aural and that they work in “opposition” (338). Terrence R. Wandtke argues in *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books* that in much of Ong’s work there is an indication that the “visual culture of the literate age “ will take away from orality. Wandtke instead suggests that there is a “synergy” between the visual and the aural, rather than a tension, and that the visual aspect of an “oral epic” is sometimes a necessary (80). Drawing on this line of thinking, I propose that with *Spunk* Hurston is ultimately arguing for the merits and tenets of an African American theatre. Building on her ideas in regard to the oft-repeated phrase “real Negro theatre,” Spunk not only represents the voice of African American culture; in his challenge to Jim’s masculinity and authority over Evalina, Spunk professes that one’s “talk” should be reinforced with a visual component. When Evalina conveys to Jim that she is “home” with Spunk and that she “loose him,” Spunk challenges Jim and his unsubstantiated talk:

([Spunk] involuntarily puts his arm about her) All right now, Jim. That’s the word with the bark on it. Now as long as a mule go bareheaded don’t you stop my wife on the streets no more and be nam-namming at her and trying to crumple her feathers. You talk your big talk to me. If you was a man my size I would have done stopped you. I ignores men your size. If there’s anything I hate worse’n no fight it is a poor fight. I hates to look imposing and bull-dozing. But you leave her be. I’m telling you. Let’s go,

doll-baby. Bye everybody. See you later. (They exit with admiring glances of all following) (Spunk 245)

Admiral is the first to speak after Spunk and Evalina leave. His utterance, “I hear you crowing, rooster! (To others) You have to give the man credit. He got grit in his craw” (*Spunk* 245), reinforces my argument in regard to how Hurston depicts Spunk. Spunk is not simply a voice, a representation of orality. Spunk is also representative of the multiple dimensions of African American oral culture, which also includes the visual. Spunk performs with his voice, but he also performs with his actions. Unlike Jim, who is only capable of talk, Spunk is also skilled enough to back up his talk with actions. His performance, like the culture he represents, is multifaceted. Ultimately, however, Spunk’s performance also affirms his masculinity, suggesting that there is an aspect of African American oral history that excludes Hurston’s female heroes.

Jim is silenced by Spunk’s crowing. He “stumbles back to his seat and sits with his head in his hands” while the others talk around (*Spunk* 245). He has been cuckolded and publically humiliated by his wife’s lover. Further, Evalina has “divorced” him and decided she is now Spunk’s wife. Jim has also been emasculated. Nunkie and Oral challenge his masculinity because his wife left him. Spunk suggests that because he is small and unable to physically confront Spunk, Jim is missing necessary qualities of successful masculine identity. And the decisive moment of Jim’s inability as a man is when Evalina dismisses Jim’s authority over her. Hurston continues to affirm that all dynamics of black folk expression are not available to her female representatives. Evalina does make the choice of who to be with, but both Jim and Spunk objectify her. She is possessed

first by Jim and then by Spunk. Her voluntary participation in the exchange from one man to the next does encourage an idea of female sexual freedom, but Hurston creates her to be a fulfillment to Jim's and then Spunk's desires. However, while Jim has the papers, Spunk possesses a greater quality, his voice. Spunk's hegemonic control extends over women as well as men and machinery, and the use of his voice has affirmed this control in each instance. When he and Evalina first meet he tells her that he "got a song made up in [him] for [her]," and the idea that Spunk is able to make up a song about her so "quick" wins Evalina over (*Spunk* 239). They spend their first few moments together singing and gesturing to one another. Nevertheless, while there is mutual attraction and love between Evalina and Spunk, Evalina is depicted as malleable and willing to conform to another's wants and desires, while Spunk is resolute in his requirements. Evalina responds and defers to the authority of others, whereas Spunk is an authority. At their first meeting, Evalina leaves Spunk because Jim has come back to the toe party with his father, and Jim demands that she "get out that boat" (*Spunk* 240). While later Evalina rejects Jim's authority over her, in this instance Spunk has not proven his strength, only voiced his blossoming affection. Further, the presence of Hodge Bishop, another patriarchal authority figure, seems to make Evalina reluctant to disobey her husband. But once Spunk has proven his strength, Evalina accepts Spunk's control over her. She fits what he wants, and she is willing to adapt. When Jim argues that the "papers" prove Evalina is his wife, Spunk says, "That don't make a woman yours. That don't mean nothing, Evalina is mine. God took and made her special for me" (*Spunk* 244). Spunk and Evalina were not made for each other. Rather she was made for

him. In fact, “God took and made her special for” Spunk. And because she was specially molded to fit Spunk just so, he possesses Evalina. Additionally, God’s authority reinforces Spunk’s own authority over Evalina and his claim to her. The gesture of Spunk “involuntarily” putting his arm about Evalina when he proclaims his title underscores the lack of authority she has in their relationship.

Before Spunk arrives at the toe party and performs how he gets the circle saw to conform to his will, the others in the community discuss the effect that he has had on the people in the town. Talking to Oral, Mrs. Watson wants to know just who Spunk is. She says, “All I can hear is the girls screaming over that new fellow that’s working at the sawmill. I can’t hear nothing but Spunk” (*Spunk* 233). Teazie interjects before Oral can respond to say that she has “heard” quite a bit about Spunk and is anxious about finally meeting him so that she can “see if he’s really like they say” (*Spunk* 233). The talk of the town works to emphasize the importance of listening as an aspect of oral culture as well as storytelling. Listening and “hearing of” a thing or a person recalls the manner in which oral culture was transmitted and survived: there had to be someone present to hear the telling. While Hurston promotes Spunk as the embodiment of African American orality, she also emphasizes that the participatory aspect of the culture and audience interaction goes beyond the passive reaction of a response. Rather than the listeners waiting for the caller or singing-liner or the facilitator of a story to engage their reaction, “listeners” help spread a story by also talking about it. The fact that one of the main listeners in Spunk’s story, and thus, one of the main distributors on Spunk’s tale, is a man named Oral reinforces Hurston’s point that the stories of the African American people are best circulated by mouth: voiced,

not written. The presentation of this material in a theatrical forum emphasizes her intent.

In her article, “Language, Speech, and Difference in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Cynthia Bond analyzes the celebration and privileging of “the representation of speech” in Hurston’s fiction (204). She writes of Gates’s argument in regards to the speakerly text and states that black authors use and signify the “texts that precede them” by foregrounding speech in their texts. The act of foregrounding speech in texts by African American authors is especially significant, Bond writes, because for “Afro-Americans, the literate tradition began as a crime, as we know it was illegal for black slaves to be taught to read and write” (203). Bond argues that “Janie’s ability to narrate her life” is a way for the novel to address the “black linguistic tradition” (203). In *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, Mary Ellen Washington writes that Janie’s voice is oft referred to as an “articulate voice.” She writes that most “contemporary critics contend that Janie is the articulate voice in the tradition [and] that the novel [*Their Eyes*] celebrates a woman coming to self-discovery and that this self-discovery leads her ultimately to a meaningful participation in black folk traditions” (237). Yet Washington also believes that the novel represents women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech” (237). She states that Janie, Hurston’s “articulate hero,” does not compare “to the power that Hurston is able to confer on [her] male folk hero[es]” (237). I agree that the celebration of voice and speech in Hurston’s text is one of the most important features of Hurston’s writing. And in terms of characters that are effectual representatives of Hurston’s celebratory style, it is important to

acknowledge that Janie's voice in *Their Eyes* encourages female empowerment. Nevertheless, Washington is correct in arguing that the power Hurston confers onto Janie, and other her female heroes, does not equal what is conferred onto her male "articulate heroes." However Washington does not fully express the silencing of Hurston's celebrated female characters. It is true that Hurston intended Janie—and most likely Big Sweet too, if not some of the other strong female characters—to symbolize "autonomy, self-realization, and independence" but that to Washington Janie seems "subsumed" and "subordinate" to her male counterparts, even Tea Cake (249-50). Moreover, the marginalization of Hurston's female heroes goes beyond how Janie, Evalina, or any of the other women, are objectified. Hurston confines these women's voices almost entirely to the domestic realm thus denying their voices from reaching to a multitude of spaces that the voices of their male counterparts could reach. Undoubtedly such a scenario exposes the strict parameters of patriarchy and the barriers women experienced when they challenged those limits. Nevertheless, Hurston revels in the accomplishments of her male heroes. At the end of the short story, Lena holds a wake for Spunk and laments "deep and loud" ("Spunk" 32); yet at the end of the play Spunk and Evalina sing to each other about "life," "flowers," and "love" (*Spunk* 268).<sup>76</sup> In the play, Spunk escapes punishment for Jim's death from the courts, from Jim's soul, and from any possible conjuring that Jim's father attempts to perform. Spunk may die in the short story, but when Hurston rewrites his story he not only lives, he succeeds.

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<sup>76</sup> See previous note regarding the obligato.

By the end of the play Spunk and Evalina have successfully coupled. Their future together seems filled with possibilities, and they appear committed to one another. Moreover, old Hodge Bishop ends up dying at the sawmill. Busy conjuring in attempt to seek vengeance for his son's death, Bishop ends up "pressed just as pretty as a flower" under the weight of a fallen log. His conjuring backfires on him. While the short story uses a symbol of modernity—the saw at the sawmill plant—to kill Spunk, in the play it is the old world, represented by Bishop and his use of Hoodoo, that is crushed under the weight of modernity. In the play, Spunk is the result of a merged identity between the old and the new, and it is his voice that makes this new identity possible.

### **Conclusion**

Gates's theories in regard to the mutilation of the English language in African American writing aptly apply to Synge's writing as well. It appears to me that use of these ideas is beneficial when analyzing Synge's work because his writing had such a significant influence on early-twentieth-century black writing. And while the concept of signifyin(g) pertains to African American cultural practices exclusively, language-play as a rhetorical strategy is often used in Irish writing and can be found in how Christy uses his voice in *Playboy of the Western World*. Further, since Gates uses many of Hurston's theories about black speech and writing to foster his philosophies, in a comparative study of Synge's and Hurston's work it makes sense that the concepts of signifying and speakerly texts are presented and applied to both authors' work.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, first published in 1988, Henry Louis Gates examines the work of Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, and Richard Wright. It is there that Gates first develops ideas about Hurston's use of voice in her texts, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The ideas developed in *The Signifying Monkey* are so crucial to the discussion of voice in Hurston's fiction that many scholars use them to build on when developing their own theories in regards to a Hurston text. Both Bond and Washington reference *The Signifying Monkey* in their aforementioned articles, as does Eric J. Sundquist in *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* when he examines Hurston's ability to translate vernacular speech into literary text. Specifically, Sundquist argues that Hurston's frequent practice of producing material that exists "between the oral and the written, the recorded and the re-created" (*Hammers of Creation* 50) gives John Pearson the ability to perform "the Lovelace sermon" in her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Thus, Sundquist considers how Hurston's prose captures the performance of oratory. And in *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston*, Karla Holloway uses the concept of the "speakerly text" to argue that Hurston's "novels are texts related by a lyrical narrative voice that...finally 'speak[s] itself' into literary being" (35).

In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates argues that residuals of African folk culture can be found in Ellison's, Hurston's, Reed's, and Wright's work, and that African American authors in general build on that tradition and then "signify"

that material to make it their own.<sup>77</sup> In signifyin(g), African American authors construct a hybrid, individualized voice within the written English language. This construction of language serves as a political act against the dominant culture. Signifyin(g), represented in the African American dialect of these oral texts, identifies who the black hero is in African American literature as his or her “talk” in a narrative is usually an elaborate form of boastful language. To develop these theories Gates himself builds on Roland Barthes’s concept of the “le texte lisible” (readable or readerly) and “le texte scriptible” (writable and writerly) and off from the Russian Formalist concept of *skaz*. *Skaz*, a Russian term for speech, was defined by Boris Eichenbaum to describe literature that has “an orientation toward the oral form of narration” (Bakhtin 191). “Speakerly text” is derived in opposition of Barthes’s readerly text and writerly text and Gates uses the concept to expand on Hurston’s ideas about dialect. In *Characteristics of Negro* expression Hurston writes that “If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of ‘ams’ and ‘Ises.’ Fortunately we don’t have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself” (“Characteristics”). Of *skaz*, “the phonetic, grammatical, the lexical patterns of actual speech” (165), Gates writes that “Speakerly texts privilege the representation of the speaking black voice...which Hurston and Reed have defined as ‘an oral book, a talking book’” (*Signifying Monkey* 121).

Yet while many critics have examined extensively Hurston’s speakerly texts, few have examined Hurston’s use of language in her plays. Yes, the concept

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<sup>77</sup> (Hurston *Mules and Men*)

of a speakerly text relates very specifically to fictional texts, broadly defined, especially considering that Gates is using the concepts of *skaz* and the readerly/writerly text to help formulate his theories. Nevertheless, it is in Hurston's theatre that black vernacular speech is meant to "represent an oral literary tradition" (*Signifying Monkey* 181) in African American culture. The construction of voice developed in Hurston's plays functions so that the African American oral tradition can be carried on through continuously performed theatrical presentations. If a Hurston novel is meant to give the illusion of narration, a Hurston play actually delivers said narration. Her ethnographic endeavors underscore this point. The literal speaking that occurs on stage, rather than the metaphoric speaking that occurs in on the page, should be realized to be the most important function of a Hurston theatrical presentation. Consequently, the questions of how vernacular speech is performed in her plays, and by whom, become of great importance. Hurston's heroines, in her fiction and her theatre, are given a voice that gives insight to their thoughts and feelings using the African American vernacular speech she cultivated to imitate "real" black speech. Nevertheless access into the lives of Hurston's heroines is consistently granted in relation to their male lovers. But Hurston's male heroes are defined independently. The audience is able to see their actions and movements detached from love interests.

One of the most vocal female characters in the Hurston plays is Big Sweet, a woman who is described by Hurston as having "the quality of leadership" (*Polk County* 271). As I argued earlier, Big Sweet envisions herself as the de facto leader of the Polk County sawmill camp community, and she uses her voice and her fists

to get this point across to anyone who disagrees with her or wants to challenge her. When the Quarters Boss reprimands Big Sweet for “lamming folks a mighty heap ‘round” the sawmill, she responds by saying, “No, I don’t bother nobody. They bothers *me*. Looks like to me, folks ought to improve up some” (*Polk County* 286). And the way people in the community “bother” Big Sweet, she declares, is by not following her partner’s lead. She says that “Lonnie is just a baby, in a way of speaking. He thinks everybody will just naturally do right, but I knows different. So I gets around to see to it that they do” (*Polk County* 286).

Through Big Sweet, Hurston attempts to portray a female character who has the will and ability to take charge and her male partner, Lonnie, is portrayed as simple and malleable. Yet in creating a world that seemingly has turned traditional gender roles upside down and has rejected many general societal rules, it appears that the same rigid conformations of traditional gender rules still apply at the sawmill. Big Sweet’s voice might be large but it is a large voice in the service of Lonnie, not necessarily Big Sweet herself. “It’s my lifetime pleasure to do what I know he [Lonnie] want done” Big Sweet says to the Quarter Boss (*Polk County* 285). In both *Mules and Men* and *Polk County*, Hurston positions Big Sweet as an equal to men. “Aw, woman, quit tryin’ to signify” Joe Willard says to Big Sweet after she threatens to “sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar-cure his hams” for being in someone else’s “bunk” the previous evening (*Mules and Men* 124). Willard is Big Sweet’s lover in *Mules and Men* and the use of signifying here indicates a boastful gesture. The community of men, who are normally known for being the main performers of signifying, rebuff Willard’s attempt to gain solidarity with the other men in order to stop Big Sweet from playfully and

boastfully using language to put him in his place. Instead of supporting Joe, the men acknowledge Big Sweet's skills at signifying and "specifyin'," as Wiley declares to the group. Big Sweet claims to use her voice in the performance of her independence but that assertion is defined in relation to the man or men in her life. She says:

You didn't figger Ah was draggin' behind you when you was bringin' dat Sears and Roebuck catalogue over to my house and beggin' me to choose my ruthers. Lemme tell you something, any time Ah shack up wid any man Ah give myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got de law in my mouth (*Mules and Men* 124)

Big Sweet's linguistic abilities, her use of African American vernacular speech to both engage her lover and her audience while at them same time flaunt her speech skills, attempts to perform her femininity in conjunction with what her name implies, "big" and "sweet." Yet Big Sweet's claims of having "de law in [her] mouth," her verbal authority, at least in this instance, lies in the man she is "shack up wid." Moreover, when Hurston features Big Sweet's greatness outside of the parameters of the ethnography, Big Sweet as a fictional character stars in a marriage play and her "big" voice is used to facilitate those marriages. The use of voice, or more specifically orality, is fundamental to all of Hurston's texts. And Hurston's texts recurrently enable heroic male characters to showcase their employment histories, their singing, and their storytelling abilities—in addition to insight into their thoughts and feelings—all through a performance that showcases the African American oral tradition. How orality is performed in her theatre illustrates how Hurston might have imagined the living speech of Afro-

America to be transmitted to future generations, but her privileging of the male heroic model seems to reveal an inconsistency.



## CONCLUSION

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Since the eighteenth century, parallels have been drawn between the enslavement of African Americans and the marginalization of Irish Catholics in Ireland. In 1792, Belfast newspaper the *Northern Star* published “The Negroe’s Complaint” and “The Dying Negro” in an attempt to draw sympathy for enslaved African Americans and to also suggest that the Irish were metaphorically “slaves” in their own country. In 1845, during his lecture tour of Ireland, Frederick Douglass wrote, “I see much here to remind me of my former condition,” suggesting that what he witnessed of the beginning of the Famine could be compared to slavery in the United States. Comparisons made between the Irish and African Americans continued through the twentieth century, with writers from both cultures gesturing toward each other in literature. Both Irish and African American studies scholars have noted these frequent comparative generalizations, but a detailed study of the actual similarities between the Irish and African Americans, one that also focuses on important differences between the two cultures, has not been completed. Using the work of John Millington Synge and Zora Neale Hurston, the study I have presented in this dissertation explores the theory and method of these artists and interlocutors to provide a concrete comparison of Irish and African American literature and culture. Further, my work draws attention to the international dimensions of both the Irish and Harlem Renaissances, movements typically explored solely through nationalistic frameworks.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive review on how literatures in the Black and Green Atlantic have continually built on each other since the Douglass and O'Connell meeting in 1845. Kiberd, Gibbons, and Lloyd have referenced the connections between Ireland and African Americans primarily to draw attention to the manner in which the Irish have been racialized. My study foregrounds African American literature as seeking affinity with Irish literature in order to further a civil rights agenda. Hutchinson (1995) details some of the influences Shaw, Yeats, Synge, and Joyce had on Harlem Renaissance writers, even highlighting the frequency with which Synge appears in discussions on the efficacy of writing in the black dialect. Chaney (2007) uses the influential representation of Irish writers on Harlem writers to examine the "transnational shape of the movement" which, according to Chaney, is too often limited to discussions of the movement's national impact and significance in contrast to the very international explorations of the Harlem writers themselves. I also situate Synge and Hurston as writing against Boucicault and Williams and Walker, dramatists who believed their representations of culturally identifiable characters directly opposed the staged Irishman and the blackface minstrel.

In chapter 2, I argue that the presentation of the *keen* and the *cakewalk* in *Riders to the Sea* and *Color Struck* challenges previous inauthentic images conferred onto the Irish and African Americans by outside observers, such as how John Dunton and Deshler Welch denigrated Irish and African American performative culture, respectively. The use of the *keen* and the *cakewalk* in their theatre suggests an attempt on each author's part to stage representational Irish and African American culture. The internal censure of Irish vernacular cultural practices, such as

the keen, by Irish Catholic clergy generated assimilation in Ireland similar to what the migrant Irish experienced in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the African American context, as an art form, cakewalking illustrates the manner in which African Americans appropriated European Americans' dances as a form of resistance to their enslaved status, with white Americans reappropriating the ritual as an attempt to denigrate black American culture. Thus, the cakewalk in *Color Struck* is presented as evidence of black ingenuity. The representation of the keen in *Riders to the Sea* and of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* promotes a critique of conformity, where the sacrificing of folk culture and identity in favor of assimilation is disparaged.

In chapter 3 I examine Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* and Hurston's *Polk County* in order to illustrate how, by participating in the wedding ritual, the outliers of the plays themselves serve as a symbol of disregard for the constructed hierarchical classism within Irish and African American culture. Thus, in the two plays it is not the ritual performed that is disparaged and that encourages the audience or reader to reconsider how stereotypical images of the Irish and African Americans are formed, it is the people themselves. Moreover, the rejection of marriage in the tinkers' case and the celebration of marriage in the case of the sawmill workers suggests that in each play the audience or reader is meant to focus on what the most ostracized members of Irish and African American societies believe in regard to marriage. The marginalized status of the tinkers and sawmill workers is celebrated in each play; the plays do not attempt to extend racist notions of each group. The reader or viewer must then focus on how each group approaches the

marriage ritual; the rejection of marriage in *The Tinker's Wedding* and the acceptance of marriage in *Polk County* is the primary focus.

Chapter 4 accesses the most noted feature of Synge's and Hurston's work, their use of dialect, by examining how the authors treat storytelling in the plays *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Spunk*. One of the fascinating aspects of the authors' oeuvres is their seeming ability to give a voice to folk people who have historically been observed, commented on, and critiqued, but who had little opportunity at the time each author was writing to express their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Moreover, the populations that Synge and Hurston drew material from were primarily illiterate (many in the west of Ireland could not read or write in Irish, let alone English). By emphasizing the importance of storytelling and the ability of both authors to marry almost seamlessly their respective oral traditions with the western European literary tradition—a tradition perceived to be superior to the folk/oral tradition—Synge and Hurston further elevate the multiple literacies of Irish and African American cultures.

The transnational aspect of the Irish Renaissance and of Harlem Renaissance writers has been infrequently explored. Moreover, Synge's use of dialect has considerably influenced black writing throughout the twentieth century. My work takes the necessary steps to investigate the international aspects of early-twentieth-century African American writers while also presenting a comparative dialectical critique of ethnographic interpretation in the work of Synge and Hurston. A comparative analysis of Irish and African American cultural productions, particularly Irish and African American literature and theatre, contributes to a scholarly understanding of the performance of race.

## **African American Writing and Irish Influences**

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* draws its title from Langston Hughes's "Harlem," and the content of Hughes's poem also shapes the structure of the drama.

It reads:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Hansberry *A Raisin in the Sun* 3)

The image of a "dream" drying up "like a raisin in the sun" addresses the main theme of Hansberry's play. The Youngers want a better life, which means moving out of the Chicago tenement that they share. Walter Lee wants to be an independent businessman. Beneatha wants access to superior education and to possibly become a doctor. Mama and Ruth have similar dreams: to own a home and for Travis to have a better life. Essentially, each person in the family craves access to some aspect of the American Dream. But with the realization of one of their dreams—the home in Clybourne Park that the Youngers refuse to give up—it can be argued that the reality of the play is that the rest of the Youngers' dreams might not actually come to

fruition. At the end of the play, after the family realizes Walter Lee has lost most of their money, the readers or audience are left wondering if the rest of the family's deferred dreams will similarly "explode." With the debut of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway in 1959, the dreams of black Americans were nationally recognized and included in the concept of the American Dream in a way that they had not been previously. The subsequent success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and all of the "firsts" that the original production was able to accomplish, often marks the play as the beginning of African American theatre. David Krasner writes in "Something's Going on Down Here That Concerns Me" that Hansberry deserves recognition as one of the foremost dramatists of the twentieth century. And yet she did not spring fully formed, nor does *A Raisin in the Sun* commence the history of African American theatre" ("Something's Going on Down Here That Concerns Me" 24). And while Hansberry had many African American artists from whom to draw inspiration, Krasner suggests that one of her "antecedents" was Hurston. Krasner argues that Hurston's use of theatricality in her work is inseparable from the black American experience and that this technique is one of the ways Hansberry builds on her forerunners. He writes that throughout Hurston's work "she underscores the inseparability of performance and the everyday within the context of the 'black experience'" (13). Adding to this, I contend that the attainability of the American Dream is a concept Hansberry builds on from Hurston. Whereas in Hughes's poem the deferred dream explodes, the fact that the Youngers do move out of the tenements and into the suburbs suggests that Hansberry believes the American Dream is still available to each of the Youngers at the end of the play. Hughes's poem rules out any possibility for hope; but one is likely to feel hopeful about the Youngers'

future at the end of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Higher education in the United States may no longer be available to Beneatha, but she plans to “go to Africa . . . [to] be a doctor” (Hansberry 151); and for Mama and Ruth, with the house, the possibility of a better life for Travis still exists. Similarly in *Color Struck*, the audience or reader is left to believe that the American Dream includes the black American experience. In the case of Hurston’s play, the American Dream is attainable if the black community embraces black autonomy.

As the cornerstone of American ideologies, the American Dream encourages Americans—and U.S. immigrants—to believe that all Americans are given the chance to reach their full potential in life. In terms of dreams, Americans are encouraged to have far-reaching dreams because hard work, perseverance, and determination can help you attain your goals. The Horatio Alger myth is a good example of the fulfillment of the American Dream. As I explained in chapter 2, Hurston, unlike the majority of her contemporaries, believed in the mentality that black Americans could reach all of their goals in spite of the many obstacles. She believed this even when she was working as a maid for a wealthy white family while her work appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, much to the surprise of her employer.<sup>78</sup> And while her frustration with American racism is evident in the articles she published with *Negro Digest*, such as “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience” (1944), “Crazy for This Democracy” (1945), and “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950), she regularly

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## NOTES

<sup>78</sup> Litwin writes, “Hurston became a cook and a maid to a wealthy white family. When the woman that hired her happened to come upon a story Hurston had written in the *Staurday Evening Post*, she was stunned. She had had no idea that her maid was an accomplished author” (98).

argued for black autonomy, both in her prose writing and her creative work. In *Color Struck* Hurston's quest for black independence and individualism is evident in Emma's destruction.

Theodore Allen points out in *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* that with the presence of Americans of African descent and indigenous Americans, racial oppression in America is a complex system of color consciousness that took on a complicated formation and greatly differed from ethnic and religious divides that separated various European groups in Europe. Allen refers to this construction of race formation in the United States as "the invention of the white race."<sup>79</sup> Thus those with white skin, or varying degrees of light skin, gained rights and benefits. Further, with the invention of the white race, European standards of beauty became the norm, and white women were set as the benchmark for ultimate desire. Hurston's construction of Emma in *Color Struck* portrays a woman who accepts the European relationship to blackness and

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<sup>79</sup> Allen writes that "while the adventitious factor of the English Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was a decisive condition for the seventeenth-century English option for racial oppression in Ireland, it was not the force that shaped the events that culminated in the establishment of racial oppression in continental Anglo-America" (Allen 14). So while oppressed Europeans, such as the Irish in Ireland, could previously bond with others in their social and economic class, including non-Europeans, in America European immigrants and African Americans were pitted against each other. Fearing solidarity among oppressed peoples, which Allen notes was seen as evident during the period of Bacon's Rebellion, Anglo-American members of the ruling class began privileging lighter skin. Allen discusses the events concerning Bacon's Rebellion in both volumes of *The Invention of the White Race*. In volume 2 he writes: "It is hoped that this material will prepare the reader to appreciate the historical significance of the role of bond-laborers in the event called Bacon's Rebellion, and the relation of that event to the invention of the white race" (Allen 148). Of the consequences of Bacon's Rebellion, also highlighted in Allen's text, Edmund Morgan writes: "[t]he answer to the problem . . . was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt" (Morgan 328). Ultimately, after Bacon's Rebellion, the resulting fear of cooperation among the lower classes led to a racist solution

whiteness. As Hurston outlines in this play and elsewhere in her oeuvre, being color struck is a problem plaguing African American society and immobilizes blacks from attaining their dreams. John might be color-obsessed, but he is not color struck. And because he did leave Emma, John is depicted as having had a successful life. He went to Philadelphia and married, and at the end of the play John has enough money in his wallet to share with Emma for a doctor and a taxi. But Emma is broken. All her years of despising “her own skin” has created a woman who never believed the American Dream was available to her because of her black skin. With the death of her daughter, Emma loses John too. Emma’s lack of self-confidence in black autonomy and black beauty dooms her.

Hansberry’s play is rooted in the African American experience because it is mediation on the availability of the American Dream to black Americans. That is a theme that runs throughout various texts by African American authors. And while the play begins with an examination of “what happens to a dream deferred?”, it ends with one dream realized and the possibility for others to be fulfilled. A consideration of how Afro-America contends with the idealism of the American Dream can be found in many texts by African American authors, including Hughes, Hurston, and Hansberry. As Krasner points out, Hansberry had many antecedents in the African American literary tradition from which to build and construct her drama. But anyone who has read or seen both *A Raisin in the Sun* and Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* realizes instantly that African American literature and theatre is not the only source Hansberry is drawing inspiration from. And thus, while I have argued at various moments throughout this dissertation that Synge’s writing significantly

influenced African American writing in the twentieth century, he is not the only Irish writer that inspired and influenced it.

In *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, Hansberry writes that while at a concert at the University of Wisconsin she heard a “woman’s voice, the howl, the shriek of misery fitted to a wail of poetry that consumed all [her] senses,” and immediately these sounds brought her back to her first viewing of O’Casey’s play and the character Mrs. Madigan (*Young, Gifted, and Black* 87). In the text, Hansberry speaks of O’Casey’s characters and O’Casey’s Ireland as if both are a part of her. She writes that “the Irish wail”—which I write about extensively in chapter 2—is born out of something that relates to “all of us” (87). Hansberry goes on to explain how important O’Casey is to her as a writer. In her estimation, he “is the playwright of the twentieth century” (90). She believes this because O’Casey writes about the totality of “the human personality” (90). She writes:

I love Sean O’Casey. . . . O’Casey never fools you about the Irish, you see. He shows the Irish drunkard, the Irish braggart, the Irish liar. . . . There is a genuine heroism which naturally emerges when you tell the truth about people. This to me is the height of artistic expression . . . because when you believe people so completely—because everybody has their drunkards and their braggarts and their cowards, you know—then you also believe then in their moments of heroic assertion: you don’t doubt them. (91)

Thus the relationship between *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Juno and the Paycock* is more than just their plot connections. From Hurston, Hansberry drew on the interconnectedness of theatricality and the black experience in the way that Krasner suggests. Also from Hurston, Hansberry realizes the possibility of black American fulfillment and a realization of the American Dream, as I suggest. And from O’Casey,

in addition to modeling her play after his, Hansberry was inspired to construct a variety of characters. Not everyone in the play occupies the same station or class. The majority of the characters are black, but they do not all have the same goals or dreams. There is good and bad and “heroic.” In her own words, the desire to construct varying African American characters is built on her belief that O’Casey took similar risks in his work, and that this made his characters more believable. “You don’t doubt them,” she wrote.

Besides Synge and O’Casey, other Irish writers who have influenced African American writing include James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, and Liam O’Flaherty. George Hutchinson writes, in *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, that Larsen always wanted to stay up on the latest reading trends. In 1927, a friend of hers was in Paris, and Larsen asked that friend “for some handkerchiefs and a copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 254). He continues: “Still banned in the United States, *Ulysses* would have to be bought at Sylvia Beach’s bookshop Shakespeare and Company, on the Left Bank, and essentially smuggled back to the States. Clearly Larsen wanted to keep up with the latest in modern literature” (254). In the introduction to Larsen’s work in *The Gender of Modernism*, Thadious M. Davis writes that Larsen “was an early reader of James Joyce’s fiction” and that her appreciation of his work is evident in her writing (Davis “Nella Larsen”). Davis writes that through Irene Redfield, “the central consciousness of *Passing*,” Larsen was able to present a different type of passing other than the racial passing that Clare Kendry participates in. He writes that with Irene’s character “Larsen experiments with the stream-of-consciousness technique and narrated monologues to explore the darker side of personality (jealousy, anxiety, rage) cloaked in material

comfort and social respectability” (211). In *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled*, Davis contends that Helga Crane, the main character of Larsen’s *Quicksand*, “is, in a sense, a portrait of the failed artist as a young woman of color” (*Nella Larsen, Novelist* 274) This depiction of the character stems from Joyce’s novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Whereas Stephen Dedalus’s journey might be described as empowering, in the African American experience the artist is unrealized and left unfulfilled.

Amiri Baraka was quoted throughout his career—and told me once personally at a dinner for the author in Galway—that he was passionate about Irish literature. In *Home: Social Essays*, written in 1961 when the poet was still known as LeRoi Jones, Baraka writes that being “black in society where such a state is an extreme liability is the most extreme form of non-conformity available,” and because of that “state,” black Americans should use their status to the best of their ability (188). He continues:

The vantage point is classically perfect—outside and inside at the same time. Think of the great Irish writers—Wilde, Yeats, Shaw, Synge, Joyce, O’Casey, Beckett, etc.—and their clear and powerful understanding (social, as well as aesthetic) of where they were and how best they could function inside and outside the imaginary English society, even going so far as teaching the mainstreamers their own language, and revitalizing it in the doing. (188)

Here Baraka calls on “the great Irish writers” in the same way that James Weldon Johnson called on Synge in 1922. The Irish writers and the Irish tradition of using one’s marginalized status as a source of empowerment are presented as a model for the black American author to engage and build on. Baraka also revisits the names of each of these writers in his long poem “In the Tradition” (1982):

(Like englishmen talking about **great** britain stop with tongues  
lapped on their cravats you put the irish on em. Say shit  
man, you mean irish irish Literature you mean . . . when they say about  
they  
you say nay you mean irish irish literature you mean, for the  
last century you mean, when you scream say nay, you mean yeats,  
syngé, shaw, wilde, joyce, ocasey, beckett, them is, nay, them is  
irish, they's irish, Irish as the ira)

Aside from the conflation of Irishness in the poem, even into the 1980s Baraka is still referring to “the great Irish writers” as kindred spirits “in the tradition” of the black American struggle for independence. This appreciation of and affinity with Irish literature is also evident in the “Crow Jane” (1964) poems, which draw quite directly from Yeats’s “Crazy Jane” figure.<sup>80</sup>

Further evidence of African American appreciation of Irish literature is found in the film *Uptight*. Made at the time of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, with a primarily black cast, *Uptight* (1968) attempts to capture the feeling of desolation and hopelessness that plagued Afro-America in the mid-1960s. The year 1968 was a particularly violent one, in the United States and around the world. While *Uptight* is a remake of John Ford’s 1935 film *The Informer*, Jules Dassin and African American cowriters Ruby Dee and Julian Mayfield use both Liam O’Flaherty’s novel *The Informer* and the Ford film to create *Uptight*. O’Flaherty’s novel was published in 1925, shortly after the Irish Civil War, so the theme of his novel is infighting between insurgents, whereas Ford moves the time of O’Flaherty’s novel back to the Irish War

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<sup>80</sup> Benston does what Gates calls a “Signifyin(g) revision” on the Jane figure in *Their Eyes, Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and both Jone’s and Yeats’s poems in (H. L. Gates, Jr. *Signifying Monkey* 133). My reading of Syngé’s *Playboy* also builds on the signifyin(g) tradition.

of Independence. Except for Gypo (who was already excluded from the IRA), Ford's film depicts the Irish insurgents as united against a common British enemy. O'Flaherty's *The Informer* reflects his frustration with his newly forming country. The novel is dark. It shows the depression, the depravity, and the despair the Irish people were facing in the aftermath of the Civil War. Ford's version concentrates on the Irish struggle for independence instead. Dassin, Dee, and Mayfield take these two representations of Irish conflict and repackage them into an Afro-American context. The film focuses on both black insurgency and the "civil war" brewing between members of the civil rights movement (which soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. would split into warring factions).

When *Uptight* premiered December 1968, the reviews were not favorable. Famed film critic Roger Ebert wrote 19 February 1969, that *Uptight* was a good but less than perfect film. He writes: "Dassin made a strategic error at the very beginning, when he chose 'Up Tight' as a remake of 'The Informer,' Liam O'Flaherty's novel (and John Ford's film) about the Irish revolution. The transplant doesn't work. The Irish and black revolutions have little in common, either in methods or in style" (Ebert). One critic berated Dassin for basing his film on *The Informer* and thereby "setting up an implicit comparison between the noble history of the Irish struggle for independence and such a paltry thing as black insurgency in America's inner cities" (Sheeran 6). Similarly, Jerry Watts argues in *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* that the inclination to compare the Irish and Afro-American situations "is enticing" but ultimately unsustainable. He writes that this

enticement no doubt stems from the enormous presence of these ["Wilde, Yeats, Shaw, Synge, Joyce, O'Casey, Beckett, etc."] Irish writers in twentieth-century literature and the fact that they were a subjugated group that had been victimized by economic exploitation, colonization, and vicious racism. Nonetheless, the case of the Irish writers is immensely different and probably incomparable to that of black American writers. (61)

Watts conflates the identities of the aforementioned Irish writers just as Baraka does. And Ebert does not realize that the book *The Informer* and the film *The Informer* are not concerned with the same moments in Irish history. Thus Watts, Ebert, and the unknown critic Sheeran references all miss specific nuances of Irish history in their criticism of how the referenced Afro-American projects relate to the Irish projects. It is not that the Irish and Afro-American experience is the same; there are many differences between Ireland and Afro-America. I do not think any of the aforementioned African American authors are suggesting that the Afro-American and Irish experiences mirror each other. It is that, similar to what I have detailed throughout this dissertation, the aforementioned African American authors read "Wilde, Yeats, Shaw, Synge, Joyce, O'Casey, Beckett, etc." and realized that there were intriguing similarities between Ireland and Afro-America. Hansberry, Larsen, Hurston, and even Hughes found that they could use an Irish author's work to tell a story about the black American experience. It is valuable to evaluate African American projects alongside the Irish projects that inspired them because, through the comparison, the way in which the two cultures actually intersect are revealed.

The influence of Irish literature on creative projects involving African American artists has continued into the twenty-first century. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana. Jay Barnes writes that the hurricane

is considered one of the deadliest hurricanes in America's history, "with an estimated death toll of over 1500" (356). The full extent of Katrina's destruction remains unknown because of the number of people the hurricane displaced. Barnes writes, "over 1.2 million people were under evacuation orders along the Gulf Coast when Katrina arrived in Louisiana" (356). Post-Katrina, the demographic make-up of New Orleans has shifted greatly. Lynn Weber and Lori Peek write in *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* that five years after Katrina, those returning to New Orleans "were more likely to be White [sic] and homeowners and have higher incomes...Blacks, poor or lower-income residents, parents with young children, and renters were clearly less able—or less willing—to return to the new New Orleans" (16-17). And as Simon Dickel and Evangelia Kindinger write in *After the Storm: The Cultural Politics of Hurricane Katrina*, those areas in New Orleans that attract the most tourists were rebuilt immediately, whereas "poor and black residential neighborhoods such as the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward" remained neglected (13).

In November 2006, one year after the hurricane, artist Paul Chan was inspired by the silence in post-Katrina New Orleans. He writes that "the barren landscape brooded in silence. The streets were empty. There was still debris in the lots where houses once stood. I didn't hear a single bird" (20). Capitalizing on the African American culture that has been an integral aspect of New Orleans "for as long as the United States has existed," Chan decided to produce Beckett's play as a site-specific feature in the city's Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward (41). Chan writes that unlike "the itinerate nature of those living in the United States' global cities, New Orleans's working-class locals are often the fifth generation to live in the same house and are therefore not uprooted so easily" (41). Two of the many themes of *Godot* are decay

and desolation. With a primarily black cast, Chan's *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* seems to capitalize on what Beckett might have intended for the play while also creating a new production that articulates how black New Orleanians might feel in the post Katrina era. There were four performances of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* November 2007 and all the performances were free to the general public.



Photo by Frank L. Aymami III. Wendell Pierce as Vladimir, J Kyle Manzay as Estragon, T. Ryder Smith as Pozzo and Mark McLaughlin as Lucky.

To dismiss the gesturing that Irish figures and African American figures have been making toward each other since before the Douglass and O'Connell meeting is to ignore the continuous and important connections the two cultures have repeatedly made. In comparing the work of Synge and Hurston, through their performed ethnographies, I have established a method in which a sustained argument can highlight valuable similarities and important differences between Ireland and Afro-America. The fact that so many Irish authors influenced such a wide range of African American authors throughout the twentieth century establishes that the Irish and African American situations are perhaps not immensely different and that they are possibly comparable.





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