

WE SEE WITH THE SKIN

On Zora Neale Hurston's Methodology



Lenox Avenue

Sayant Johnson

Roshanak Kheshti

WE SEE
WITH THE SKIN



BLACK OUTDOORS

Innovations in the Poetics of Study

*A series edited by J. Kameron Carter
and Sarah Jane Cervenak*

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PREFACE

Thinking with Hurston

Do we invent them? Are ancestors, like history, a convenient fiction of the present, a fantasy relation, like the one we have with our parents? Or do they invent us, our makers, through whom we understand ourselves, make sense of ourselves, situate ourselves? Zora Neale Hurston is an unlikely ancestor of mine. She was born in Notasulga, Alabama, sometime between 1890 and 1900. I was born in Iran fifteen years after she died. She had no children of her own (hers is the circle on the kinship diagram that does not link to a triangle, the end of the line for her genes and the genes of the patriarch whose progeny she refused to propagate), yet she found her way to me through her material traces, movements and sounds, in part as a result of the stewardship of her niece, Lucy Anne Hurston (and Alice Walker, who pretended to be her niece).¹ We are made reverent to our disciplinary fathers; this book is an homage to our undisciplined aunty, one who broke every rule, forging an entirely new path that led out of anthropology in the formation of countless aesthetic and intellectual movements, including, as I will argue, performance studies, my undisciplined disciplinary home.

In the tradition of queer, speculative genealogies like Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, this project is motivated by a desire for Hurston as a transgressive figure who ignored geographic and social boundaries, forging new paths that I have been inspired to follow. Though she eschewed

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motherhood, Hurston was an aunty. Kareem Khubchandani presents the aunty as a transgressive figure: “Aunties are women, femme, and queer figures adjacent to or at the periphery of a nuclear family formation. . . . Aunty can name a biological relation . . . or a generational one . . . but aunties can just as well be strangers. As a form of kin, aunties blur the boundaries of family.”² And Rhonda Cobham-Sander has more specifically theorized the central role played by aunties across anglophone Caribbean cultures, “Aunts loom large in Caribbean society. . . . Anglophone Caribbean speakers frequently use ‘auntie’ as an honorific to address any woman whose role in relation to them involves nurture or authority—from teachers and neighbors, to cousins, godparents, and ‘pumpkin vine’ family friends.”³ And finally, in the tradition of Alice Walker, we can imagine this form of kinship as “a simple, but I feel profoundly *useful*, lie. ‘I am Miss Hurston’s niece,’” she blurted out to the employee at Eatonville City Hall, where she went in search of the names of anyone living who may have known Hurston.⁴ Whether or not Khubchandani, Cobham-Sander, or Walker intended the intergenerational pumpkin vine to stretch across time, into archives, I take the liberty of laying claim to Hurston as my South-South aunty.

The strange geopolitical concept of South-South cooperation became actualized for me as an Iranian growing up in the South during the so-called Iran hostage crisis. My family moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1978, just before the Iranian Revolution, so that my father could attend Tennessee State University (TSU) as an international student studying architecture. As a historically Black university (HBCU), TSU was pressured to “integrate” by attracting more White students, but few White Americans were drawn to the urban campus. When Iranian students discovered they qualified for what we could today call “diversity” scholarships intended for White students (Iranians are categorized as White by the US census), scores came to Nashville in the late ’70s and especially after the revolution in the 1980s. Tennessee State University inadvertently became an HBCU with a large minority of international students from Southwest Asia. Despite the US census attempts at whitening Iranians, within the South, our brownness was perpetually remarked and acted on, and the institutionalized anti-Black racism of the South was made unambiguous to us on a visceral level.

My diaspora was just one of many who were subjects of resettlement in the South. Others were Laotian, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Cambodian refugees produced by US wars; together we were thrust into a racial hierarchy as minoritized subjects placed in what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call “the undercommons,” where we, as Jack Halberstam has put it, made

“common cause” with the Blackness that had always been relegated to the *under* status there.⁵ Despite our geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and historical diversity, we were suddenly browned.⁶ We collectively created what José Esteban Muñoz has described as the “brown commons,” categorically, educationally, and affectively immersed in “a sphere of being with, between, across, and alongside each other” within “a mode of knowing, the aesthetic rationality, that correlates with this ontological condition.”⁷ Similar to the case of queer Black-Brown Afro-Cuban sensibilities foregrounded in Muñoz’s corpus, my childhood in the de facto segregated South of the 1980s “is a case that contests the established ways in which black and brown are held out as separate or separable in the mainland imaginary.”⁸ While we were structurally stratified within a white supremacist order that conditionally absorbed *some* as model minorities while forever relegating Black being to the under status, beyond that white supremacist order, we kids also shared *another South*, south of both the global South and the American South, within our very own brown commons.

Scattered Archives

After the revival of her fiction in the 1970s, most notably as a result of Alice Walker’s forensic work, Hurston has been hailed as a great aunty to so many world-changing movements, including womanism, Black feminism, and feminist anthropology.⁹ Walker writes with such melancholic jubilation of the moment she finally found Hurston’s unmarked grave, a metaphor for the recovery of her work, revealing to her the long genealogy of Black women writers from which Walker had been orphaned due to the misogyny and white supremacy of the American literary canon. Hurston’s writing was under the worst circumstances destroyed and under the best circumstances mislabeled and hence misplaced in the archive, displaced in the collected letters and works of countless others, her own archival collections later painstakingly assembled piecemeal by librarians at the University of Florida.¹⁰ Hurston’s work has often been understood as apolitical at best and conservative at worst. But the prolific body of critical feminist writing that has seriously engaged Hurston’s work over the last several decades has helped to reframe its significance.

The scavenger hunt for her material traces has revealed for me a figure who placed herself and her body at the center of her work, but not in the way that we imagine for the struggling artist who fiercely promotes their art because others cannot understand its significance. Hurston placed her body

in the work as an ethical practice that both protected African American cultural patrimony from predation and enabled her to become a conduit in a tradition of cultural exchange that I interpret in this book as “together feeling,” a collective form of sensibility that transfers a uniquely African American way of knowing that she simply notes as “we see with the skin.”

Years later I would come to Zora Neale Hurston as an anthropologist working outside of anthropology, having been a transplant to the American South (via Iran), a Muslim dispossessed, and someone preoccupied with experiments in form. Hurston was an anthropologist working marginally within the discipline, a Southerner who became so in the North and someone always experimenting with form and representation. She actualized the anthropological truism *defamiliarize the familiar*: Though raised by a Baptist preacher, she recognized the presence of Islam in Afro-diasporic spiritual practices. I found in her prolific corpus precedents for everything from performance theory to synesthesia, from theories of the Middle Passage to spirit possession. The unruliness of her practice is an inspiration, her unboundedness a lesson, her grace in the face of unrelenting racism and misogyny a feat. Her meticulous ethnographic research was culled for creative exploration not only by those in her writerly inner circle but by her patrons and academic mentors as well. She had the rare distinction of experiencing acclaim early in her lifetime, though (or perhaps because of) she succumbed to an alienated and impoverished anonymity in her final years. By now, a case need not be made for her as a towering figure of the twentieth century; instead, I aim to shed new light on her contributions to theories of race and spirituality as well as to the distribution of the sensible.

It was while conducting research at the American Folklife Center for my first book, *Modernity's Ear*, that I stumbled upon the curious and unorthodox methods Hurston employed to collect songs in African American communities throughout the South and the Caribbean. In that project I focused on Hurston's decision to record herself singing African American work songs, children's rhyming songs, and spiritual songs, instead of recording the people who introduced her to those songs. This counterintuitive and unconventional practice represented for me not only her efforts toward the rematriation of that knowledge but her understanding of herself as a guardian of those knowledge keepers who held that knowledge for others within their own communities rather than for the ethnographic archive, what I came to describe as her “phonographic refusal” and her “sonic infidelity.”¹¹ From that moment forward I was bitten by the Hurston bug, growing in awe of her, not only as a celebrated writer but as an innovator of methods, in

particular, performance methods that sought to ensure cultural matrimony to the African diasporic communities with which she worked. Her actions reveal that, unlike her contemporaries in anthropology, she understood dispossession and sought to counter the parasitic and expropriative social scientific techniques that facilitated it. What was so strikingly unusual was that she used her own body and voice to do so.

What follows is an elaboration on a revelation I experienced through a South-South dialogue across time with Hurston, a chosen ancestor. My approach is a *thinking and feeling with* that arose for me through a divining process. I have felt at times like a misfit in this task, questioning to what extent I am the best person for the job. However, when I consider the way Hurston's work grabbed hold of me and would not let go, I have humbly developed a method of thinking and feeling with and alongside Hurston, whose praxis contains insights about a Black Southern sensory order hidden in plain sight. The early-to-mid-twentieth-century fugitive sensorium her work documents seems especially pertinent to our times. I engage a dispersed and segregated archive to elaborate upon how what Hurston did then matters now. I begin with a dubious starting point: "we see with the skin," five words that appear in one sentence, in one unpublished short story, which function as the theory and guiding principle of this book. These five words curiously appear and disappear in posthumous publications of her first known short story, "Black Death," which I begin the book with.¹² Please start there.

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Black Death

Zora Neale Hurston

We Negroes in Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of. He is a materialist with little care for overtones. They have only eyes and ears, we see with the skin.

For instance, if a white person were halted on the streets of Orlando and told that Old Man Morgan, the excessively black Negro hoodoo man, can kill any person indicated and paid for, without ever leaving his house or even seeing his victim, he'd laugh in your face and walk away, wondering how long the Negro will continue to wallow in ignorance and superstition. But no black person in a radius of twenty miles will smile, not much. They know.

His achievements are far too numerous to mention singly. Besides, any of his cures of "conjures" are kept secret. But everybody knows that he put the loveless curse on Bella Lewis. She has been married seven times but none of her husbands have ever remained with her longer than the twenty-eight days that Morgan had prescribed as the limit.

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Hirma Lester's left track was brought to him with five dollars and when the new moon came again, Lester was stricken with paralysis while working in his orange grove.

There was the bloody-flux that he put on Lucy Potts; he caused Emma Taylor's teeth to drop out; he put the shed skin of a black snake in Horsos Brown's shoes and made him as the Wandering Jew; he put a sprig of Lena Merchant's hair in a bottle, corked it and threw it into a running stream with the neck pointing upstream, and she went crazy; he buried Lillie Wilcox's finger-nails with lizard's feet and dried up her blood.

All of these things and more can easily be proved by the testimony of the villagers. They ought to know.

He lives alone in a two-room hut down by Lake Blue Sink, the bottomless. His eyes are reddish and the large gold hoop ear-rings jangling on either side of his shrunken black face make the children fly in terror whenever they meet him on the street or in the woods where he goes to dig roots for his medicines.

But the doctor does not spend his time merely making folks ill. He has sold himself to the devil over the powerful black cat's bone that alone will float upstream and may do what he wills. Life and death are in his hands—he sometimes kills.

He sent Old Lady Crooms to her death in the Lake. She was a rival hoodoo doctor and laid claims to equal power. She came to her death one night. That very morning Morgan had told several that he was tired of her pretenses—he would put an end to it and prove his powers. That very afternoon near sundown, she went down to the lake to bathe, telling her daughter, however, that she did not wish to go, but something seemed to be forcing her. About dusk someone heard her scream and rushed to the lake. She had fallen in the shallow water at the edge. The coroner from Orlando said she met her death by falling into the water during an epileptic fit. But the villagers *knew*. White people are very stupid about some things. They can think mightily but [illegible in original manuscript].

But the undoing of Beau Diddely is his masterpiece. He had come from up North somewhere. He was a waiter at the Park House over in Maitland where Docia Boger was a chamber-maid. She had a very pretty brown body and face, sang alto in the Methodist choir and played the blues on her guitar. Soon Beau Diddely was with her every moment he could spare from his work. He was stuck on her all right, for a time.

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They would linger in the shrubbery about Park Lake or go for long walks in the woods on Sunday afternoon to pick violets. They are abundant in the Florida woods in winter.

The Park House always closed in April and Beau was planning to go North with the white tourists. It was then Docia's mother discovered that Beau should have married her daughter weeks before.

"Mist' Diddely," said Mrs. Boger, "Ah'm a widder 'oman an' Doshy's all Ah got, an' Ah know youse gointer do what you orter." She hesitated a moment and studied his face. "'Thout no trouble. Ah doan wanta make no talk 'round town."

In a split second the vivacious, smiling Beau had vanished. A very hard vitriolic stranger occupied his chair.

"Looka heah, Mis' Boger. I'm a man that's travelled a lot—been most everywhere. Don't try to come that stuff over me—what I got to marry Docia for?"

"'Cause—'cause"—the surprise of his answer threw the old woman into a panic. "Youse the cause of her condition, ain'tcher?"

Docia, embarrassed, mortified, began to cry.

"Oh, I see the little plot now!" He glanced maliciously toward the girl and back again to her mother. "But I'm none of your down-South-country-suckers. Go try that on some of these clod-hoppers. Don't try to lie on *me*—I got money to fight."

"Beau," Docia sobbed, "You ain't callin' *me* a liah, is you?" And in her misery she started toward the man who through four months' constant association and assurance she had learned to love and trust.

"Yes! You're lying—you sneaking little—oh you're not even good sawdust! Me marry you! Why I could pick up a better woman out of the gutter than you! I'm a married man anyway, so you might as well forget your little scheme!"

Docia fell back stunned.

"But, but Beau, you said you wasn't," Docia wailed.

"Oh," Beau replied with a gesture of dismissal of the whole affair. "What difference does it make? A man will say anything at times. There are certain kinds of women that men always lie to."

In her mind's eye Docia saw things for the first time without her tinted glasses and real panic seized her. She fell upon her knees and clasped the nattily clad legs of her seducer.

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“Oh Beau,” she wept, struggling to hold him, as he, fearing for the creases in his trousers, struggled to free himself—“You said—you—you promised—”

“Oh, well, you ought not to have believed me—you ought to have known I didn’t mean it. Anyway I’m not going to marry you, so what’re you going to do? Do whatever you feel big enough to try—my shoulders are broad.”

He left the house hating the two women bitterly, as only we hate those we have injured.

At the hotel, omitting mention of his shows of affection, his pleas, his solemn promises to Docia, he told the other waiters how that piece of the earth’s refuse had tried to inveigle, to force him into a marriage. He enlarged upon his theme and told them all, in strict confidence, how she had been pursuing him all winter; how she had waited in ambush time and again and dragged him down by the lake and well, he was only human. It couldn’t have happened with the *right* kind of a girl, and he thought too much of himself to marry any other than the country’s best. The worst sin a woman could commit was to run after a man.

So the next day Eatonville knew; and the scourge of tongues was added to Docia’s woes.

Mrs. Boger and her daughter kept strictly indoors, suffering, weeping, growing bitter.

“Mommer, if he jus’ hadn’t tried to make me out a bad girl, I could look over the rest in time, mommer, but—but he tried to make out—ah—”

Docia broke down weeping again.

Drip, drip, drip, went her daughter’s tears on the old woman’s heart, each drop calcifying a little the fibers till at the end of four days the petrifying process was complete. Where once had been warm, pulsing flesh was now cold heavy stone that pulled down, pressing out normal life and bowing the head of her. The woman died, and in that heavy cold stone a tiger, a female tiger—was cut by the chisel of shame.

She was ready to answer the question Beau had flung so scornfully at her old head: “Well, what are you going to do?”

Docia slept, huddled on the bed. A hot salt tear rose to Mrs. Boger’s eyes and rolled heavily down the quivering nose. Must Docia awake always to that awful desolation? Robbed of *everything*, even faith? She knew then that the world’s greatest crime is not murder—its most terrible punishment is meted to her of too much faith—too great a love.

She turned down the light and stepped into the street.

It was near midnight and the village slept. But she knew of one house where there would be a light; one pair of eyes still awake.

As she approached Blue Sink she all but turned back. It was a dark night but the lake shimmered and glowed like phosphorous near the shore. It seemed that figures moved about on the quiet surface. She remembered that folks said Blue Sink the bottomless was Morgan's graveyard. All Africa awoke in her blood.

A cold prickly feeling stole over her and stood her hair on end. Her feet grew heavy and her tongue dry and stiff.

In the swamp at the head of the lake, she saw Jack-O-Lanterns darting here and there and three hundred years of America passed like the mist of morning. Africa reached out its dark hand and claimed its own. Drums, tom, tom, tom, tom, tom, beat in her ears. Strange demons seized her. Witch doctors danced before her, laid hands upon her alternately freezing and burning her flesh. She cried out in formless terror more than once before she found herself within the house of Morgan.

She was not permitted to tell her story. She opened her mouth but the old man chewed a camphor leaf or two, spat into a small pail of sand and asked:

"How do yuh wanta kill 'im? By water, by a sharp edge, or a bullet?"

The old woman almost fell off of the chair in the amazement that he knew her mind. He merely chuckled a bit and handed her a drinking gourd.

"Dip up a teeny bit of water an' po' hit on de flo',—by dat time you'll know."

She dipped the water out of a wooden pail and poured it upon the rough floor.

"Ah wanta shoot him, but how kin ah' 'thout . . . ?"

"Looka heah." Morgan directed and pointed to a huge mirror scarred and dusty. He dusted its face carefully. "Look in dis glass 'thout turnin' yo' head an' when he comes, you shoot tuh kill. Take good aim!"

Both faced about and gazed hard into the mirror that reached from floor to ceiling. Morgan turned once to spit into the pail of sand. The mirror grew misty, darker, near the center, then Mrs. Boger saw Beau walk to the center of the mirror and stand looking at her, glaring and sneering. She all but fainted.

Morgan thrust the gun into her hand. She saw the expression on Beau Diddely's face change from scorn to fear and she found it in herself to laugh.

"Take good aim," Morgan cautioned. "Yor cain't shoot but once."

She leveled the gun at the heart of the apparition in the glass and fired. It collapsed; the mirror grew misty again, then cleared. "You'll find things alright when you git home," Morgan said.

In horror she flung both money and gun at the old man who seized the money greedily, and she fled into the darkness, dreading nothing, thinking only of putting distance between her and the house of Morgan.

The next day Eatonville was treated to another thrill.

It seemed that Beau Diddely, the darling of the ladies, was in the hotel yard making love to another chamber-maid. In order that she might fully appreciate what a great victory was hers, he was reciting the Conquest of Docia, how she loved him, pursued him, knelt down and kissed his feet, begging him to marry her,—when suddenly he stood up very straight, clasped his hand over his heart, grew rigid and fell dead.

The coroner's verdict was death from natural causes—heart failure. But they were mystified by what looked like a powder burned directly over the heart. Probably a cigarette burn.

But the Negroes knew instantly when they saw that mark, but everyone agreed that he got justice. Mrs. Boger and Docia moved to Jacksonville where she married well.

And the white folks never knew and would have laughed had anyone told them. He who sees only with the eyes is very blind.

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Introduction

FIVE DISAPPEARING WORDS

Spiritual and religious journeys can beget revelations as disclosures of truth or insight from supernatural beings. “We see with the skin” hit me like a revelation that would not quit; I have rarely felt that I have had any choice in the matter of writing this book. These words have echoed in my head like an inner voice; you could say I have been under a spell.

It all began with a fateful trip to Johnson City, Tennessee, with my mother and my then two-year-old, to visit the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University to consult Mary Barnicle’s archives. Barnicle was one of the many recordists who commissioned Hurston as guide through the Black South. I was searching for audio recordings Hurston had conducted and found myself in an archive that was segregated until the late 1950s. Despite having since been integrated, the archive seemed to want to archive segregation, as I observed in my notes, “A majority (if not all) of the iconography at the archive is of White Appalachians and their cultural production. No visible representation of Native or African American Appalachians.”

I realized that Hurston’s voice had been trapped in this White archive since the 1930s. Listening to those recordings, I could faintly hear Hurston joining, directing, correcting, and generally unable to refrain from participating as just a field guide, though there was no mention of her as a vocalist.

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Then, I noted, “It sounds as if there is print-through or bleed through on some of the recordings due to the presence of an echo, though this could have been an ambient effect of the hall or room. Not sure what they were recording on (maybe tape). CORRECTION: I LATER LEARNED THAT ALAN LOMAX AND STETSON KENNEDY RECORDED ONTO ACETATE SO THERE SHOULD BE NO BLEED THROUGH GOING ON.” Not only could I hear Hurston on these recordings but there were also resonances there that I could not explain. The more I pursued Hurston’s recordings in other archives, the more such questions arose for me, including subsequent encounters with what Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús calls “co-presences,” or assemblages of spirits or possessions on her audio or film recordings or within her writing.¹ Twelve years later, and the mystery of how Zora Neale Hurston sustained such a prolific, multimodal creative life under Jim Crow terrorism, which not only necessitated substantial financial backing (finessed through a combination of patrons, grants, rent parties, writing income, and teaching) but formidable spiritual and motivational support, has been revealed. It was in the story “Black Death” that I received my first clue to what that must have looked like. And just as in those first recordings I encountered in Johnson City, “Black Death” contained co-presences that I could not initially explain.

“We Negroes in Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of,” opens Hurston, continuing, “He is a materialist with little care for overtones. They have only eyes and ears, we see with the skin.” When I first stumbled upon this short story, the opening lines arrested me; I was struck by the title and gripped by the prose. Something performative happened in the encounter. Just as Ruth Wilson Gilmore asks in *Abolition Geography*, “How is literary production a political act? What theoretical work might be hidden in a story, a character type, a way of telling?”² I sensed a profound theoretical, spiritual, and political declaration in the five words “we see with the skin.”

“Black Death” was one of six works Zora Neale Hurston submitted to the 1925 *Opportunity* magazine writing contest, three of which (*Color Struck*, “Drenched in Light,” and “Spunk”) won and were chosen for publication.³ In “Black Death,” Hurston illustrates a Black world in which justice is sought in the conjure and root work of a hoodoo doctor, working at the intersection between plants, magic, spells, healing, and death-dealing.⁴ “Black Death” follows a scorned Docia Boger, on whose behalf her mother, Mrs. Boger, seeks revenge on Beau Diddely, the playboy from somewhere up North who seduced Docia, left her pregnant, and promptly disappeared.

The story tells of a world white Southerners refused to acknowledge and that Black Southerners dared not question. This story of revenge, helped by the hoodoo doctor Old Man Morgan, was not a story *Opportunity* magazine sought to feature, a story that depicts a system of extrajudicial justice that Black folk living within twenty miles of Orlando dared not question, a form of justice laughed off by White Orlandoans as mere Black superstition.

“Black Death” would not be published for another seventy years, when Henry Louis Gates Jr. included it in the collection *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories*. Yet the 1995 version is decidedly incomplete, as it omits what I found to be the important five words. I consulted biographer Robert Hemenway’s papers at the University of Kansas and found a typeset version of the manuscript, but it, too, omitted the critical five words. Then I went to Fisk University, where Charles S. Johnson’s papers are housed. Johnson, who went on to become president of Fisk University, was editor of *Opportunity* magazine in 1925 and held the contest that discovered the likes of Hurston, Langston Hughes, and others. There I found the original 1925 manuscript, the very one submitted to the magazine, and it, too, omitted the five words I sought. Ultimately, I found the version that did include “we see with the skin” in the anthology *Harlem’s Glory*, published in 1996.⁵

I share this background information to situate “Black Death” as a text with multiple iterations we may thus consider unfinished, making it a complex work with which to think. Because it was not published during Hurston’s lifetime and because she was known to have revised her unpublished works in her efforts to maintain a steady income stream, we are left with multiple versions of the same story. Why the critical five words around which I organize this book appear and disappear over the course of its revision remains a mystery, so I began the pursuit of the version I had initially encountered. But I wondered: Could one write a book inspired by these five words? And why write a book about five words, which appear and disappear over time, from a short story titled “Black Death”? Because I read in those five words a revelation that changes how I perceive race and embodiment, this book pays homage to that revelation by elaborating upon its significance. Thus, “Black Death” is a frame through which I read Hurston’s corpus, for it reveals a spiritual realm and a fugitive sensorium that sets into relief the theories, methods, and forms she would become known for posthumously.

The seventeenth-century concept of the sensorium describes the instrumentalization of the sensory apparatus in the service of cognition and rationality.⁶ *Fugitive sensorium* is the term I give to that which falls

outside, is in excess of, is disciplined out of, or is simply unfathomable to the European Enlightenment and American Southern Jim Crow sensorium. Fugitivity was a taken-for-granted ontological condition within Hurston's ethnographic work in out-of-the-way places like work camps, sawmills, jook joints, and migrant labor communities. "All of these places have plenty of men and women who are fugitives from justice. The management asks no questions. . . . In some places the 'law' is forbidden to come on the premises to hunt for malefactors who did their malefacting elsewhere."⁷ If a sensorium was initially imagined as that which is shared in common, constituting a common sense, then the fugitive sensorium in Hurston's corpus flies under the radar of white supremacist surveillance and law ("They have only eyes and ears") where it simply does not make sense. Hurston's body of work considers the racialized, and more specifically the Southern and Caribbean, Black body as a site of knowledge formation—through a poetic notation of the performative interplay of senses—and chronicles the Black collective knowledge produced within this fugitive sensorium.

The apparitional nature of the ciphered, poetic, and mythic verse "we see with the skin" is an aesthetic education that calls out like faint ancestral echoes heard by some and not others.⁸ These five unverifiable, disappearing words etch Hurston's critical race aesthetics as an origin point for numerous genealogies that have come to be foundational to political, scholarly, and epistemological modalities today. It is an example of what Rizvana Bradley calls "black aesthesis," which she coins to describe "what emerges in the cut between black existence and black nonbeing."⁹ Skin functions for Hurston as not only a haptic interface between an interiority and the surrounding world but as a performative medium, an organ that can see. I consider how Hurston's understanding of *Black skin as seen and as seeing* offers radical insight into racialized perception and Black consciousness.

In this book I reframe Hurston's corpus as a culturally inflected theory of sensibility that she herself never didactically spelled out but rather performed, in which skin is a porous, sensing medium that is more than an organ or organization for perception. "We see with the skin" figures as the conceptual framework through which her aesthetic theory can be fleshed out. The synesthesia she maps there depicts a disorganization of a common sense that refuses the ordering of the aesthetic, which, as David Lloyd argues, is a "racial regime of representation" and which Rizvana Bradley calls the "racial regime of aesthetics."¹⁰

Despite the title "Black Death," Hurston's declaration that "we see with the skin" illustrates what Kevin Quashie terms an "aesthetics of

aliveness” and “a poetics of being” that, like “reply,” the Lucille Clifton poem Quashie analyzes, “marshals looking as a constitutive act of black being.”¹¹ This looking is worldmaking for the characters in Hurston’s story. It is a looking that sees a spiritual capacity held by hoodoo doctor Old Man Morgan that is life-giving and death-dealing. In this world, Black death is not in White hands. Seeing with the skin enables a parallel sensory order, a Black synesthetic sensibility unknowable and nonsensical to white supremacist sensory hierarchies, enabling a Black ontology that is hidden in plain sight.

This enigmatic and little-known short story encapsulates the fugitive sensorium at the center of Hurston’s philosophy. In this especially short short story, Hurston establishes a poetics that masterfully renders a most complex Black Southern world order, fully aware of its untranslatability to the White one and even, perhaps, to the Black Northern one. An incredibly complex representation of Southern Black womanhood, it establishes what we have come to know as genre-defining (and defying) Morrisonian story-telling tropes, including a revenge murder motivated by Black motherly love, complex personhood rendered through Black Southern dialect, an apparition in the mirror, and forms of justice that White man’s laws could never govern. Through the centering of the magic of root work, “Black Death” represents the Southern Black as well as Hurston’s own journey from dispossession to possession via conjure.

Conjure, Spirit Possession, and Hoodoo

We See with the Skin is a journey with Hurston from dispossession to possession via the spiritual, synesthetic, and poetic praxis of conjure work. Initially, we follow Hurston from beloved native daughter of the bucolic, all-Black village of Eatonville, Florida, through a loss of innocence in her early teens by way of a rude awakening into Jim Crow racism. This dispossession from what Alice Walker describes as a “community [that] affirmed her right to exist, and loved her as an extension of itself” is a paradigmatic moment of coming into race consciousness, what Hurston calls a “sea change,” which I explore in chapter 4.¹² This sea change is weathered, in part, through the revivifying world of hoodoo. “Black Death” features hoodoo tropes and symbols that would become central to Hurston’s praxis: the drum, images and sounds signifying Africa and its Caribbean diaspora, the wayward woman, vigilante justice, lakes, swamp, roots, plant medicine, and the Black outdoors.

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I pursue seeing with the skin—a seemingly impossible, enchanted, fugitive sensory capacity—as a methodology and a manifestation of Hurston’s aesthetic theory. As Hurston’s corpus illustrates, conjure, root work, and magic are critical to Southern Black thriving. These practices are also central to Hurston’s methodology for both knowledge production and her own survival. *We See with the Skin* follows Hurston as she follows Black Southerners in their work with spirits. In her corpus we find a postbellum, Black interiority emergent in the Deep South during the Jim Crow period. Through a careful calculus between opacity and vulnerability, modesty and vulgarity, she achieves a delicate balance in a poetic prose that presents an autotheoretical life writing.

Like the trickster figures she represents in her work, Hurston was herself a boundary crosser, ever walking the fine line between fact and fiction in a generic experimentalism that furthered her ambition for complex renderings of Black life. While her PhD mentor anthropologist Franz Boas claimed that she could uniquely access “the true inner life of the Negro,” Hurston in fact outlines in the idea of “feather-bed resistance” the inaccessibility of this authentic “truth.”¹³ Instead of giving the White man what he wants, a “decoy” is “set . . . outside the door” for him to play with.¹⁴ Hurston’s notation of the cultural practice of “feather-bed resistance” in *Mules and Men*, considered to be the most “ethnographic” of her works, represents an overt denial of the mythic notion of “truth” in the very nonfiction context a reader would expect to find it.¹⁵ Instead, she and her interlocutors refer to the stories told within Black cultural spaces as “lies.”

Both Hurston’s fiction and nonfiction publications were based on the same research.¹⁶ Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley have retrospectively named Hurston’s form as surrealist, due in part to her rejection of binaries like true/false, conscious/unconscious, fiction/nonfiction, and fantasy/reality. The seriousness with which she took hoodoo and her calling out of the white supremacy at the heart of its denial expressed itself formally in her surrealist style. Rather than a facile emphasis on uplift, her performative practices of transliteration conveyed dialectal details that brought nuance and regional distinctions to Black speech, which her detractors interpreted as primitivist portrayals of the race. This calculus came at a cost, of course, causing her to be imagined as one of the most divisive figures of the Harlem Renaissance as well as alienating her from the professional fields for which she was being groomed.¹⁷ In response, she irreverently proceeded onward, collecting and publishing more and

more “lies” in the medium of Black speech, chronicling the formation of new materialities and alternative formations within African American and Caribbean culture. Hurston’s devotion to folklore represents for me an ontology of *being in fiction*.

She herself set out many decoys as she became identified by song catchers like John and Alan Lomax and Mary Barnicle as *the* native informant whose expertise would guide them to the “authentic” deltas and turpentine groves of their aural imaginaries, where the “undiscovered” blues would await their microphones.¹⁸ But rather than record local performers, she sang the tunes herself, utilizing her voice to both interrupt the culture industry’s prioritization of race music as well as the Harlem elite emphasis on Black respectability.¹⁹ As Daphne A. Brooks argues, Hurston’s singing of an African American repertoire for the archive “intervenes in what she believed to be the so-called hegemony of Harlem Renaissance Black concert hall culture with its refined music, sounds that she abhorred for, in her opinion, watering down the voices of the folk.”²⁰ Hurston recorded and performed a Southern Black repertoire of culture through her own body in a manner that established the methodological foundations of Black performance theory. I explore throughout this book how, as Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez argue, Hurston “emerged as an originary theorist concerned with aesthetic composition of black performance.”²¹ Hurston’s work chronicles how the Black body reclaims knowledge and intervenes in a history of dispossession from that knowledge by becoming the site of its reinscription, and how this body interfaces with and functions as a protectorate of a complex interior world.

Black Movement Ethnography

The unorthodox methodological theory book you hold in your hands is inspired by Hurston’s unorthodox praxis of foregrounding the Black peasant and agrarian cultures, languages, movements, and songs of the early-to-mid-twentieth-century Southern US and Caribbean. In the tradition of scholarship that understands methods from below, this book examines the prolific work of an early anthropologist to chart an alternative genealogy for ethnographic research. Research and knowledge production are, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith has put it, profoundly important political domains and “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other.”²² As I show,

this struggle was underway within the discipline of American anthropology at its very founding and has left us with a rich legacy of work that has been underappreciated within the discipline's field formation, indicating that performance and Black study were in fact foundational to American anthropology, as evident in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Yet it has taken a century for what Graciela Hernández referred to as Hurston's "experimental ethnographies" to be understood as ethically, aesthetically, and intellectually prudent, serving as models for others.²³

Hurston's contributions to aesthetic theory and philosophy emerge through a praxis that chronicles both the crisscrossing of senses deployed by Southern Black folk as a survival strategy and a radical refusal of normative modes of sensing. Her theory was seldom spelled out as such—she almost never told the reader what to conclude—but showed in what Robert E. Hemenway has referred to as "Hurston's contextualism; the explanation occurs in the form of an argument between the storytellers" or within a dialogic, musical, or performance event.²⁴ Hurston's embodied praxis is an origin point for a number of performance methods, including performance ethnography, a politically inflected and highly interested research method in which the practitioner engages in what D. Soyini Madison calls "co-performative witnessing," a collaborative praxis of cultural production.²⁵ For Hurston, cultural production is art practice, and indeed, her life as a cultural worker exemplifies this ethos; her study of culture was in the service of making culture and her theory of culture-making was an aesthetic philosophy. Hurston's synesthetic theory is synesthetic practice, employing the body to filter the world into manifold formal outcomes.

As I go on to show throughout the book, Hurston's praxis included sound (folk songs and Black speech) and movement-based traditions (dance and migrancy), which she encountered through a perpetual state of motion, navigating the Mason–Dixon line as she moved from one field site to the next. This attention and commitment to movement took her throughout the African diaspora, from her work with Oluale Kossola (a.k.a. Cudjo Lewis) in 1927 to her stagings of the Bahamian fire dance and her performance ethnographies on hoodoo in the Caribbean and US South in the 1930s.²⁶ The intersection between her lived experience and that of Black interlocutors who claimed her as one of their own resulted in an ethnographic methodology that featured a fugitive sensorium and ethnographic output that was performative in nature, a tradition in African American dance history scholarship that VèVè Clark has called "research to

performance.”²⁷ Her designation of African diasporic peoples in the Americas as “folk” indexed the primacy of the displacement that transformed culture in situ to culture on the move. Chronicling this African diasporic culture on the move, Hurston sensed the changes and similarities between diasporic sites and nuanced inflections of power.²⁸

The focus of Hurston’s ethnographies has had a mixed reception, ranging from accusations of appropriation and fetishization to idealism and primitivism (Richard Wright famously accused her of perpetuating a tradition of minstrelsy). But almost a century later, Hurston’s critical interventions into the epistemology of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot would later coin the “savage slot” are more obvious.²⁹ Her work was entirely contrary to the anthropology of her day, which, according to Lee D. Baker, lost interest in African American culture, seen as too assimilated with white culture and, when it wasn’t, considered too pathological, its cultural essences distorted by poverty and racism.³⁰ Trouillot has pointed out that the anthropology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was fixated on the noble savage, rooted in nature and emblematic of utopian ideals lost to civilization, and that “a Black utopia was impossible” within this purview.³¹

Hurston’s corpus provides a radical alternative to this anthropological genealogy. Often including the use of new technologies in the field, she produced multigenre and multimodal documentaries of Black working and peasant classes in states of worship or repose, in relationship with wilderness and industry, representations that belie both the ethnographic as well as popular archive. Photography, film, and audio recordings enabled her to render an aesthetics of Black Southern life. I read all these forms in an examination of her political commitment to representation (and nonrepresentation) as nonreductive, as a refusal of the respectable, uplifted Black subject made legible to a White Southern as well as Black Northern elite. She refused both Black respectability as well as the subalternization of the Black South.

The declaration “we see with the skin” illustrates Hurston’s centering of a fugitive sensorium, underscoring what D. Soyini Madison has identified as a central tenet in Black performance theory: “As much as black performance theory is about politics, entangled within history and power, it is also an enterprise and labor of the senses. The gift of performance theory is its distinct attention and indebtedness to the sensory as the senses actualize temporality, enliven desire, and embrace beauty across the poetics of bodies and the aesthetics of their creations. Performance theory honors

and heightens the gravitas of the senses as gateways to the symbol-making body, its sonics, and its existential truths wrapped in art and purpose.”³²

Hurston’s work not only emphasizes the senses, but it centers a perceptual reconfiguration—what in neuropsychology is called synesthesia. As I illustrate throughout the chapters, Hurston poetically exploited the synesthetic logic at the heart of race thinking—*being colored*—revealing not only its absurdities but also its surrealist hyperbole and its excessive signification; furthermore, her performance ethnographies cataloged an undercommons through what she called “Negro expression” or Black speech acts, songs, and dances that performed entirely different logics than practiced in the commons. And through hoodoo she expressed a sensibility that could animate the object status of *being colored* with the power of a return gaze; Hurston documents through the fugitive sensorium of conjure work how Black skin can see.

“We see with the skin” declares that there is an undercommons occupied by Black Southerners living under Jim Crow terrorism, a haptic-visual sensibility practiced outside of a white supremacist common sense that is worldmaking and legitimating of Blackness. Throughout the book I explore this question of *the commons*, whether understood as that which is held in common, be that a common sense, commonly held resources, or in the case of Harney and Moten’s concept of “the undercommons.” They theorize the undercommons as a space of refuge sought by the “subversive intellectual” within the “modern university” who—despite all attempts by supervisors and managers to discipline them—is able to “disappear into the underground, the downlow low-down maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.”³³ Though primarily focused on the American university, “the undercommons” can be extrapolated far beyond this provincial site, more broadly applied to any sequestered spaces or sensibilities that have given safe harbor to “*the undercommons of the enlightenment*,” one where, in Harney and Moten’s own words, a “thinking through the skin” can take place.³⁴ Their recourse to the skin, considered alongside Hurston’s, reveals how the undercommons is not just a place but also a sensibility constituted by and constituting what I call an *undercommon(s) sense*. This notion represents both a domain of feeling as well as synesthetic forms of sensibility that give rise to logics of collective embodiment sequestered beyond the reach of Enlightenment and Jim Crow systems of discipline and punishment.

South-South

Hurston's work carved out a space within the American South for a global South through an otherwise sensibility. As José Esteban Muñoz has described of the collaboration between Isaac Julien and Venezuelan-born dancer Javier de Frutos—a Black queer filmmaker from the global North and a brown queer dancer from the global South—the South signifies both a degeneration as well as what he calls the “unbecoming” and “undoing” of the southerly move. “In North American vernacular English, to say a venture or a project has ‘gone South’ is to indicate that it too has become undone or has simply failed . . . illustrative of what the South represents in a certain alterity, marked as negative within the purview of a North American dominant ideology of bias and projected fantasies of contagion and affective particularity attached to brown bodies from the South.”³⁵ The “unbecoming” that the South makes possible is both the result of the alterity of the South in relation to the North as well as an “undoing” of normative sexuality that Muñoz reads into Julien's aesthetic. Muñoz reminds us that there are places even farther south than the continental United States, that descent farther south brings with it possibilities of unbecoming which push against the identity politics of race, gender, and sexuality. This unbecoming and undoing has both made Hurston into an enigmatic figure always venturing farther south and made possible the South-South exchange between us within the pages of this book.

The aesthetic education I received as a brown child from a working-class family growing up in the American South sensitized me to what I would later encounter in Hurston's incredible body of work in which she considers the “problem of the color line” as a condition that not only segregates “colored” but can also be experienced as a “colored feeling.”³⁶ For example, in the play *Color Struck* or the essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (discussed in chapter 4), in which she famously writes “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. . . . But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall,” Hurston playfully—yet incisively—underscores the synesthetic logic and affective experience of what Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o call her “colored feeling.”³⁷ When put in dialogue with José Esteban Muñoz's notion of “feeling brown” and an attunement “to the brown and black sense of the world that Muñoz describes throughout *The Sense of Brown*,” “colored feeling” transmutes from an affect to a sense.

As Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o note in their introduction to Muñoz's posthumous *The Sense of Brown*, a shift to the senses is an access

point to interiority. “Sense is, among other things, a conduit between a porous self and the world. Sense and the senses are how we experience, know, and relate interior to exterior worlds, the self to others.”³⁸ While the affective nature of brownness is initially presented in Muñoz’s thinking as “excess” or a depressive disposition (“Feeling Brown, Feeling Down”), it transforms to a commonly held sense, a knowing of “a brownness that is our commonality.”³⁹ The “brown commons” performatively comes into being through a shared sense of feeling brown. Muñoz’s feeling brown or Hurston’s feeling colored represent experiences perceptible through a crisscrossing of senses. Colors are by definition perceived and cognitively registered visually; feeling color indicates a perceptual rearrangement. Whether emergent in Hurston’s work or elaborated posthumously in Muñoz’s, performance studies contains a Black and brown genealogy of synesthetic engagements with the world.

Hurston’s synesthetic theory is the result of a grounding in the undercommons of Black Southern sensory relationality that ventured ever farther and farther South, as indicated in *Tell My Horse*, her book on Haitian and Jamaican voodoo. Within this undercommons, “see[ing] with the skin”—in part an effect of racist anti-Blackness—results in the networked relationality of a body politic and ontology that informs Hurston’s methodology and inflects her practice. The claim “we see with the skin” represents the wholesale rejection of the dominant White establishment and the white supremacist common sense that it proliferates, an aesthetic common sense hinged on, in Jacques Rancière’s words, “the distribution of the sensible.” He explains, “A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. . . . These forms turn out to be prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics.”⁴⁰ The distribution of the sensible establishes both the commons and its constitutive outside: what Muñoz refers to as the brown commons and Harney and Moten call the undercommons.⁴¹ When this *other* commons is insisted upon, it opens vistas onto alternative sensibilities, ontologies, and epistemologies. “We see with the skin” is a synesthetic sensibility which does just that.

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Synesthesia

Enlightenment laws of aesthetic judgment are based on an observer's or listener's capacity to evaluate notions of beauty and pleasure through the higher senses of seeing and hearing distinguished from the lower senses of touch, taste, and smell. The biopolitical effect of this organization is the creation of five separated senses standardized across bodies deemed capable of reason through their capacity to discriminate between them in the production of a *sensus communis*. If aesthetics enunciates particular forms of sense experience held in common and if this being in common through sensibility is the precondition for political action, there is a law of sensibility that organizes this perception that goes unnamed and underexamined, what Jacques Rancière describes as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. As he has argued, "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."⁴² Thus, "who [has] a part in the community of citizens" is determined, in part, by the hegemonic distribution of the sensible.⁴³ Inclusion into this political order requires the adoption of ways of seeing, notions of space and time, proper speech, and characterizations of noise that are preordained. Failing to do so results in exclusion from the community of sense and hence the political order organized through that shared sensibility.

The common sense through which European notions of beauty, terror, and the sublime are established is arrived at through the training and disciplining of sense perceptions, affects, desires, and phobias through the Western epistemology of the five senses. This training has as its ideological aim to concretize while making invisible the racialized logic at its core; aesthetic judgment is discriminatory in both senses of the term—it trains the perceiver to discriminate between sense organs while deploying sense organs to discriminate between environmental phenomena. Observation with the eyes, for instance, has historically functioned for *some* as a citational practice through which an empirical gaze is enacted, inaugurating *some* as witnesses whose testimonies carry empirical weight. Simply having eyes does not make one a witness; those eyes must have the capacity for judgment, thus constituting the testimony of a White observer as the standard for the transcendental I/eye. Aesthetic judgment—which is also moral judgment—makes invisible its own racialized logic, invisibilizing whiteness

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to itself. The rational comes into being through adherence to these white supremacist conceits of Enlightenment liberal subject formation, which require reason as a prerequisite to rights claims.

Reason arises from the internalization of civilizational laws established to distinguish human from animal; the human subject emerges by being subjected to the “laws of man,” and the animal to the “laws of nature.” Race discourse hinges on this very binary, distinguishing human from animal and thus justifying capitalist accumulation and colonial expansion through the institution of chattel slavery and settler occupation. Hurston was well aware of this fact and challenged the racism of aesthetic judgment by amassing a formidable body of ethnographic fieldwork that upheld forms of beauty and pleasure deemed shameful and baneful to liberal humanist ideals. Hurston understood how, in the context of the Jim Crow South, seeing with skin was the lower order of sensibility to which Black perception was relegated. But it was that very context that allowed it to fly under the radar and provide a domain of undercommon(s) sense imperceptible to Jim Crow.

Hurston’s corpus is one of animacy, plant medicine and plant intelligence, malevolent and benevolent spirits, lies, phytomorphs, and visions. It is an all-out rejection of the liberal humanist ideals of aesthetic judgment. “We see with the skin” is both a violation of this sensibility as well as an affront to the tenets of aesthetic judgment. Furthermore, the “we” of seeing with the skin undermines ego formation and hence disrupts the self/Other dyad on which liberal humanism relies. It describes collective sensory and aesthetic phenomena that upset and/or disrupt the preeminence of the liberal humanist ego, that possessive individual constituted in opposition to its Other(s), the self who is proprietor of a singular free will. Knowing oneself in opposition to others and a surrounding world is at the heart of Enlightenment liberal philosophy. “We see with the skin” contorts, complicates, reorganizes, distorts, enhances, and remaps how the perceiving body is situated in relation to others and the surrounding world, thus thoroughly undermining liberal subject formation.

Zora Neale Hurston’s synesthetic theory—seeing with skin—critically spoke back to Enlightenment distinctions of perception and the senses. In Hurston’s work, synesthesia represents a social and political condition in which Black skin can see, revealing the fundamentally flawed, deracinated, and genderless premises of aesthetic theory; instead, seeing with the skin is presented as a theory and praxis of a Southern Black aesthetics. “We see with the skin” chronicles ways of knowing in the undercommons that are disabled, devalued, and disciplined within the commons. It was neither

Hurston's nor my goal to bring the synesthetic into the commons but to go to the synesthetic where it is, to go to the site of the body, which is at the center of her work.

In Hurstonian aesthetic philosophy, this undercommon(s) sense is shared by a "we" whose experience does not "make sense" to the White people of Orlando. She understood that poor Southern Black folk did not share in the American political commons but were in fact structured as its outside. Thus, Hurston's brilliant claim "we see with the skin" is a declaration that "we," who are segregated from the so-called common sense, perceive the world in an entirely different way, through the skin.

Hurston pursued embodied knowledge in sacred and profane sites, all the while concerned with the magic, spirits, lies, and haunting ways that Africa traveled through space and time within the American South and Caribbean. Thus, I analyze not only her fiction but her films, audio recordings, ethnographic field notes, and political essays through the framework of the undercommon(s) sense she declares in her earliest writing. This undercommon(s) sense is often read as deviant, or what I have been calling fugitive, because it does not abide by the hegemonic distribution of the sensible, limited to the five sense organs that work distinctly. Thus, hers can be said to be a synesthetic methodology.

Within the Aristotelian order of the five senses, synesthesia represents a disorganization of modes of perception.⁴⁴ It is a crisscrossing of sense perceptions such that colors may be tasted, heard as audible, smelled, or felt. Such a perceptual breach raises a number of questions: Is synesthesia a disability? Is it a racialized form of perception? Does it queer the synesthetic person? Synesthesia is pathologized within neuropsychology as a neurocognitive disorder in which "a sensation in one part of the body [is] produced by a stimulus applied to another part."⁴⁵ Its disability designation normalizes the Aristotelian organization of the five senses constructing synesthesia as a nonnormative, atypical phenomenon. Conversely, seeing with the skin, which is by definition synesthetic, is understood as an ability by Hurston ("They have only eyes and ears, we see with the skin") and a refusal of the hierarchy and organization of the senses in so-called normal perception.⁴⁶ It is a racialized-gendered form of perception that takes an otherwise deracinated, ahistorical system and situates it in bodies that are products of their material circumstances.

Anthropologist Alan P. Merriam differentiates what he calls "true synesthesia" from "culturally derived synesthesia."⁴⁷ True synesthesia can be summarized as the neurological condition described above, while

“culturally derived,” or what he also calls “forced” synesthesia, is variable cross-culturally but tends to be consistent within a culture, as in cases where geographic directions or musical scales correspond to colors. Anthropologist David Howes has theorized a similar distinction between what he calls “constitutional synaesthesia”—the pathologization of individual cases of synesthesia within neuropsychology—and “cultural synaesthesia”⁴⁸—the historical materialist account of sensibility as a product of a social body and its environment. Notions of “cultural” or “forced” synesthesia are relevant to Hurston’s pronouncement “we see with the skin” because “we” are distinguished from “they” who have only eyes and ears. “We see with the skin” is not only a theory of a social body with a forced cultural synesthesia but it is a theory of racialization as well. Hurston’s synesthetic theory takes not only culture and history into account but power and race. “We see with the skin” is a synesthetic claim that both acknowledges that there is a racist order that imposes what Frantz Fanon would later term a “racial epidermal schema” onto the racialized subject’s consciousness, while also laying claim to a reorganization of the senses as a method with which to engage the world differently.⁴⁹

The etymological origins of synesthesia in the Greek prefix *syn*, meaning “together,” and root *aesthesis*, meaning “feeling,” are instructive for how I define Hurstonian synesthesia. “We see with the skin” describes a collective form of synesthesia as *together feeling* exclusive of the hegemonic community of sense that does not see with the skin. Conceiving of synesthesia as “together feeling” represents a nonnormative psychosomatic and somato-epistemological order that is both a theory of culture as well as a theory of sensibility. I define *synesthesia* as “together feeling” for two reasons: (1) It allows for thinking sensibility not limited to the Aristotelian organization of the senses (which links the body’s modes of perception to particular organs, corresponding eyes with seeing, ears with hearing, etc.); instead, it brings the senses together in novel and historically specific ways, and (2) it allows for a networked sensibility that goes beyond the individual to the collective body. Like Rancière’s definition of sense perception as that which discloses something in common, “we see with the skin” is a commonly held sensibility, which arises as a collective consciousness that reroutes the collective unconscious of white supremacy. Unlike Rancière’s reading of the normative aesthetic distribution of the sensible, where, one by one, individuals are interpellated into a commonly held understanding of sense perception, discursively hailed into a hegemonic form of political experience, to “see with the skin” is a synesthetic distribution of the sensible

across a body politic, a “we” who perceive in a manner that is aesthetically incomprehensible to the “hustling, bustling white man.” It is a Southern Black collective political consciousness of together feeling. Here *together feeling* signals that the senses work together to result in unexpected sensory perceptions *and* that bodies work together to form a collective sensibility.⁵⁰

Together feeling represents an embodied form of intersubjectivity similar to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty has referred to as “intercorporeality,” a dynamic embodiment that emerges through encounters with other human and nonhuman bodies.⁵¹ This intercorporeality happens at the level of the skin, as Michelle Ann Stephens describes, “The skin becomes the reflexive site where bodies can touch each other, can be touched by the other,” and from this she has concluded that “the *skin acts*.”⁵² As a threshold between interior and exterior worlds, the skin acts upon and is enacted upon. A transferential medium, it simultaneously performs and is performed upon, is both performative and the outcome of performativity.⁵³

I interpret Hurston’s methodology, practice, and form through what Jacques Rancière describes as “aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.”⁵⁴ In its capacity to “create new modes of sense perception,” Hurston’s work was (and remains) worldmaking and productive because it reflected the worldmaking practices of the communities she engaged. Rather than a deracinated and genderless process, “we see with the skin” declares that perception is situated, historical, and distinguished, perception is performative. Hurston focused her ethnographic research on intracultural spaces, sites, and geographies, what Sarah Jane Cervenak has called “Black gathering.”⁵⁵ Her corpus represents a collective ego and the skin as an intercorporeal connective tissue within enclaves that were almost exclusively Black and poor.

“We see with the skin” is a profoundly important theory of the body, perception, and the senses and thus a rich site to reframe questions of difference and politics. Hurston recorded not only the craft of escape from impositions of double consciousness or internalizations of white supremacist constructs of Black inferiority but also, more importantly, the *intracultural* performances through which Black subjects come to know Black subjectivity in a manner not reducible to the Black/White or self/Other dyad. Instead, the skin represents a transfer point that connects interior and exterior worlds, junctures where body and soul interact with environment, spirit worlds, multiverses, the unconscious, and dream states to produce *sensibility*.

To “see with the skin” is distinctly not eyesight. Instead, it is a form of perception that deploys the largest organ on the body to navigate social geographies and engage in a collective sensibility. “we see with the skin” names a racialized sense perception that is so hyperhaptic that it functions as a conduit for together feeling. As an expression of an intercorporeal experience of embodiment that spans human and nonhuman collectivity, “We see with the skin” knits together a subjugated collectivity into a common sense shared only by some. This collective ego is radical in the context of psychoanalytic theories on the narcissism and phallogocentrism of ego circulating during Hurston’s time. It refuses the normative White and phallic ego’s ideological function as “narcissistic libidinal cathexis,” producing instead a being in common.⁵⁶ “We see with the skin” is a nonegocentric and antinarcissistic declaration of an intercorporeal consciousness. “We see with the skin” is furthermore a reimagining of skin to be first and foremost a contact point for collective consciousness and will, rather than a phallic organ through which an individuated ego is constructed.⁵⁷

Working not only in a colonial setting but from within the Jim Crow South, “we see with the skin” upends not only the narcissism of the gaze but its interpellative power as well.⁵⁸ While for Freud the skin is the surface through which ego arises, for Hurston it is the organ that structures collective consciousness.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the pronoun *we* demarcates a collectivity, a union, an entire body who are up to something that white supremacist common sense cannot comprehend. This is the very “we” whose capacity for revolt and fugitivity has been the paranoid fantasy of white supremacists since pre-Columbian times. This entire body of “we” is doing something spectacular with skin. With these five words, Hurston dissolves the narcissistic, phallic, and egocentric for a synesthetic mode of perception that claims a collective Black will to power with a capacity for knowing unfathomable to white supremacy.

Hurston’s declaration “we see with the skin” is a claim that allows for an understanding of cultural production and collective participation beyond political representation in the public sphere, a preoccupation of the “race men” of her day. As Hazel V. Carby deftly argues, “race men” predominantly focused on a form of political representation and racial uplift that only the refined and civilized Black masculine intellectual could access and hence foster for the community.⁶⁰ Hurston performed neither Black masculinity nor upper-class refinement, and she certainly did not represent these qualities in her prose. Her focus on the lives, loves, and losses of the subaltern,

peasant classes who worked predominantly in the rural outdoors upset Northern, masculinist presumptions about whose representation could stand in for the race.



Within the following chapters, I take up Hurston's prolific oeuvre as a chronicle of, in Fred Moten's term, "performance [as] the resistance of the object."⁶¹ And, as he admits, "To record this improvisational immanence—where untraceable, an original rootedness and unenclosed, disclosing outness converge, where that convergence is articulation by and through an infinitesimal and unbridgeable break—is a daunting task."⁶² Hurston's was indeed a daunting task, one that required her to employ every possible medium available for recording during the early to mid-twentieth century, working liberally across media in a manner that was unheard of during her lifetime. Hurston's synesthetic methodology allowed her to record Black fugitivity for a Black fugitive archive; therefore, the chapters in *We See with the Skin* engage all the senses.

In chapter 1, "South: An Itinerary," I consider south as a direction (rather than a place) toward which Hurston was constantly oriented. I consider her discussion of "those fugitives from justice" who were the Black Southerners similarly oriented south, rather than, like so many others who followed the Great Migration, north toward industry and away from the painful reminders of servitude that Jim Crow indoctrinated.⁶³ In "South" we follow Hurston through a southerly sojourn among migrant farm and turpentine workers with an affinity for the Black outdoors. I further explore the phytomorphic phenomenon of "roots," a metonym for the root doctor as well as hoodoo itself.

In chapter 2, "Black Speech Acts," I explore Hurston's fugitive sensorium through her poetics of interpretation, her poetics of transliteration, her poetics of refusal, and her poetics of prose in a close reading of "Characteristics of Negro Expression," her 1934 essay on quotidian Black cultural production. This essay situates much of her own expressive style, including her "speakerly text."⁶⁴ Her choice to retain what Cheryl A. Wall describes as "the richness of black verbal expression" representing "how verbal agility conferred status within the community" made her a very controversial figure among her peers, yielding accusations of minstrelsy.⁶⁵ But it is precisely this verbal expression, what Hurston herself observed as "the will to adorn," that motivated the tendency of "decorating a decoration" that came to distinguish her as the most incredulous member of the

Harlem Renaissance, whose style has influenced legions of Black feminist novelists, poets, and theorists to this day.⁶⁶

In chapter 3, “Conjure Woman,” I examine Zora Neale Hurston’s corpus—her body of work—for a theory of the body, specifically a theory of racialized-gendered perception made manifest through conjure work. The book walks with Hurston on a journey from dispossession to possession through the conjure work that enchants skin with the power to see. Conjure work is centered here as the mechanism through which Hurston and her interlocutors convene with spirits to intervene in the earthly world. It is through her own experience of spirit possession that Hurston enters the fugitive sensorium. Through a close reading of representations of Hurston’s possession ceremonies, I lay out Hurston’s role as a progenitor of the Black feminist methodology of conjure.

In chapter 4, “Color: Scenes and Stages,” we follow along with Hurston as she undergoes a metamorphosis reminiscent of that oceanic event of the Middle Passage as she transforms from “Zora of Orange County” to a “little brown girl” over the course of a riverboat ride up the St. John’s River. Engaging Frantz Fanon, Fred Moten, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Hortense J. Spillers, I theorize Hurston’s complex mechanisms of address, which have yielded deeply revelatory and simultaneously opaque renderings of both her life and the lives of her interlocutors. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss *Barracoon*—part slave narrative, part African diasporan ethnography—as an unromantic, proto-Africana study and include discussions of two films: Hurston’s ethnographic film with Kossola, “Kossola: Last of the Takkoi Slaves in America, February 1928” and *Descendant* (Margaret Luce Brown’s 2022 film featuring Kossola).⁶⁷ Both films represent synesthesia (through environment, toxicity, trauma, film techniques, and degradation) and the ambivalent relations to American settlement experienced by Indigenous African former slaves (and their descendants).

In chapter 5, “Silent Shouting: Listening to Hurston’s Films,” I examine Hurston’s interests in spirit possession through her audio, film, and ethnographic recordings of the Commandment Keeper Church of Beaufort, South Carolina. As the first anthropologist to incorporate film into her ethnographic research, Hurston’s innovations in form have left an unconventional archive of motion pictures and sound recordings. Utilizing Hurston’s theorizations on African diasporic shout traditions, I deploy her notion of “silent shouting” to interpret her silent films as resonant. I additionally read the auditory anomalies on the audio recordings from this expedition as evidence of their possession.

NOTES

Preface. Thinking with Hurston

- 1 Hurston, “How It Feels,” 298.
- 2 Khubchandani, “Critical Aunty Studies,” 223.
- 3 Cobham-Sander, “Amital Queer,” 249–50.
- 4 Walker, afterword to Hurston, *I Love Myself*, 298.
- 5 Halberstam, “Wild Beyond,” 5.
- 6 Throughout the text I utilize contemporary capitalization conventions when referring to racial and ethnic identities like Black, White, and Latino. However, as Joshua Javier Guzmán explains, *brownness* represents an aesthetic sense of “belonging in difference.” Therefore, *brown* is not capitalized. See Guzmán, “Brown,” 27.
- 7 Chambers-Letson and Nyong’o, introduction to Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, xxxi–xxxii.
- 8 Chambers-Letson and Nyong’o, introduction to Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, xxxi.
- 9 Alice Walker erected a tombstone to be placed on Hurston’s unmarked grave with the engraving “Genius of the South,” a line that Walker borrowed from Jean Toomer’s poem “Georgia Dusk.” Walker, *In Search*, 107.

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- 10 See as well the Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Howard University's Moorland–Spingarn Research Center Special Collections, Washington, DC; the Library of Congress, Washington, DC; the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library Special Collections, Fisk University, Nashville, TN; the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City; the George A. Smathers Libraries Special Collections, University of Florida, Gainesville; the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence; and beyond.
- 11 Kheshti, *Modernity's Ear*, 125, 130.
- 12 Hurston's first publications were technically in the Howard University campus literary magazine, *Stylus*. "Black Death" and the other *Opportunity* magazine submissions represent her first nationally published works after her student days at Howard.

Introduction. Five Disappearing Words

- 1 Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santeria*, xiii.
- 2 Gilmore, "Public Enemies," 80.
- 3 Three other works were also submitted under various noms de plume—"Muttsy" by Xianthoppe, "Black Death" by Neal Hurs, and "Symphon-
esque" by Cudjo—but were not selected for publication.
- 4 Hoodoo is the Southern United States version of a dynamic set of syncretized African and Indigenous occult and spiritual practices performed by conjurers, root doctors, and sometimes Black priests.
- 5 Curiously, however, editors Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph credit the 1995 Gates publication as their source, even though that one varies slightly from the one in their anthology.
- 6 Walter Ong revitalized the concept in the 1960s by dispensing with the universalism of the seventeenth-century idea, explaining instead that sensoria vary culturally. See Ong, *Presence of the Word*.
- 7 Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 130.
- 8 Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*.
- 9 Bradley, *Anteaesthetics*, 29.
- 10 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 7; Bradley, *Anteaesthetics*, 9.
- 11 Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 2, 4.
- 12 Walker, foreword to *Zora Neale Hurston*, xiii.
- 13 Boas, preface to *Mules and Men*, ix.
- 14 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 3.
- 15 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 2–3.

- 16 Almost the entirety of the October–December 1931 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* was devoted to Hurston’s research on “Hoodoo in America,” and the story of Old Man Massey from Eatonville, Florida, mirrors Old Man Morgan from “Black Death” in substantial ways. The case of “John Wesley Roberts” is strikingly similar to that of Beau Diddely. “John Wesley Roberts was a hotel waiter. He came a stranger to the hotel in Orange County. Soon he was knee-deep in an affair with a village miss. When she discovered that she was to become a mother, she was the kind that expected marriage and let him know. It was funny to him.” Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” 400–401.
- 17 Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 162.
- 18 *Aural imaginary* is a term I use to describe the fantastical relationship formed with racialized sounds among some of the earliest sound collectors and deployed within the music industry in the production of “race records” and world music. See Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear*.
- 19 Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear*, 125–42.
- 20 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 129.
- 21 DeFrantz and Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*, 2.
- 22 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2.
- 23 Hernández, “Multiple Subjectivities and Strategic Positionality,” 148–66.
- 24 Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 173.
- 25 Madison, “Co-Performative Witnessing,” 826–31.
- 26 Her ethnography of Cudjo Lewis was published in 2018 as *Barracoon*. On her Bahamian fire dance productions, see Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk*. Hurston’s work on hoodoo appears as well in *Mules and Men*.
- 27 Clark, “Performing the Memory,” 188.
- 28 As Jemima Pierre has argued, “Diaspora entered the anthropological lexicon through the early ethnographic and theoretical work on the communities of African descent in the New World and has since attained new epistemological and political resonances.” Pierre, “Anthropology of Diaspora.” And as dance theorist Anthea Kraut has argued, “Hurston implicitly staged the similarities and differences between movement practices of the African diaspora . . . an important early moment of diaspora consciousness.” See Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk*, 136.
- 29 Trouillot has assessed anthropology’s role thus: “Anthropology fills a preestablished compartment within a wider symbolic field, the ‘Savage’ slot of a thematic trilogy that helped to constitute the West as we know it.” Anthropology and (what it has claimed as its proprietary) method ethnography have provided the proof that, as Trouillot continues, “the Savage of the primitive was the alter-ego the West constructed for itself.” Trouillot, “Anthropology and the Savage Slot,” 53, 64.

- 30 Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics*, 25.
- 31 Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot," 64.
- 32 Madison, foreword to *Black Performance Theory*, ix.
- 33 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 26.
- 34 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 27.
- 35 Muñoz, "Meandering South," 35.
- 36 Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*.
- 37 Hurston, "How It Feels," 155; Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o, introduction to *Sense of Brown*, xv.
- 38 Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o, introduction to *Sense of Brown*, xii.
- 39 Muñoz, *Sense of Brown*, 2.
- 40 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 12–14.
- 41 Muñoz, *Sense of Brown*; Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.
- 42 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.
- 43 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.
- 44 On the Aristotelian order of the senses, see Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima*.
- 45 While the literary definition of *synesthesia* is "the use of metaphors in which terms relating to one kind of sense-impression are used to describe sense-impressions of other kinds; the production of synaesthetic effect in writing or an instance of this." "synaesthesia, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, "synaesthesia," accessed June 15, 2022, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/synaesthesia_n?tab=meaning_and_use. I do not use *synesthesia* metaphorically here.
- 46 It is beyond the scope of this project to explore my reconsideration of synesthesia vis-à-vis the literature on neurodivergence and disability studies, a relationship in much need of exploration.
- 47 Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*, 93.
- 48 Howes and Classen, *Ways of Sensing*, 155, 156.
- 49 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
- 50 Jayna Brown has similarly identified the collective sensibility created by Black utopias, writing, "In feeling together, people experienced themselves outside of a binary relation to official, legal, juridical powers and instead as part of an alternative sociality." Brown, *Black Utopias*, 47.
- 51 On intercorporeality, see Weiss, *Body Images*, 5.
- 52 Stephens synthesizes psychoanalytic thinking on skin, race, and psyche on the way to her own exploration of the performative function of what she calls "skin acts," which are Black male performances that simultaneously acknowledge the interpellative power of the intercultural gaze and an

- intersubjective knowing contained in skin as contact zone between Black subjects. Stephens, *Skin Acts*, 19, 24.
- 53 Stephens, *Skin Acts*, viii.
- 54 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.
- 55 Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Black Gathering*, 6.
- 56 Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 67.
- 57 As Stephens has put it, “By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the onset of Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, it is the body with its epidermal skin and hardened physiognomy that is also understood in libidinal terms as fundamentally phallic.” Stephens, *Skin Acts*, 14.
- 58 Yancy, *What White Looks Like*, 8.
- 59 “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface. . . . The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body.” Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 20.
- 60 Carby, *Race Men*, 11.
- 61 Moten, *Black and Blur*, vii.
- 62 Moten, *In the Break*, 255n1.
- 63 Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 130.
- 64 On Hurston’s “speakerly text” see Gates, *Signifying Monkey*.
- 65 Wall, “Zora Neale Hurston,” 78.
- 66 Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 25.
- 67 See chap. 4, n. 69 for more on Kossola.

Chapter 1. South

- 1 Vazquez, *Florida Room*, 26.
- 2 Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, 272–73.
- 3 Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, xv.
- 4 Hurston, *Moses*, 11.
- 5 Morrison, “Rootedness,” 20.
- 6 Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*, 10.
- 7 Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 98.
- 8 Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.
- 9 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 148.
- 10 Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 129–30.