

The Folk Preacher and Folk Sermon Form in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

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"I had been pitched head-foremost into the Baptist Church when I was born. I had heard the singing, the preaching and prayers. They were a part of me" (Dust Tracks 206-7).

No matter how much she rubbed her head against college walls or how cosmopolitan her perceptions became, Zora Neale Hurston remained a part of the religious folk tradition into which she was born. Her father a traveling Baptist minister, her mother the superintendent of the Sunday School, and her community a group of faithful church-goers, Hurston was indelibly impressed with the beliefs and practices of the Afro-American Southern Baptist religious tradition. Many of the characteristics of that tradition, particularly of the folk preacher and the folk sermon, are to be found not only in Hurston's fiction and in her nonfiction essays but also in her autobiography. The persona in *Dust Tracks on a Road* is akin to the folk preacher, and the narrative is comparable to the folk sermon. Hurston's knowledge and understanding of the sermon are perhaps to be expected. However, it is significant that her use of sermonic form and rhetoric was not restricted to her fiction or limited to academic discussions of the preacher but was also used to structure her own ideas and inform her own socio-political writings. For, as Larry Neale states in his profile on the author, Hurston had considered the folk preacher as Afro-America's "only true poet," an authoritative and forceful wielder of words (1974:162). So it is utterly significant that Hurston's narrative voice is in many ways analogous to that of the folk preacher, a powerful individual.

In general, the folk preacher, usually male, is part of the folk community whose ethos he has internalized. He must possess oratorical abilities which are derived from the community. But as Hurston points out in a letter to James Weldon Johnson, oratorical skills are not enough. The preacher must have and be able to effectively display histrionic skills.¹ Johnson echoes Hurston's conclusions in his preface to *God's Trombones*: "The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor" (1927:5). Hurston's writings are infused with an oral quality which speaks to the reader. In *Dust Tracks*, she makes use of various examples of oratory derived from the community. Like the folk preacher, she tells stories, folktales, and jokes and also gives renditions of prayers and sermons. More often than not, these examples of oratory are dramatically cast; settings are described, characters speak in dialogue, and the dialogue sets forth much of the action. Her renditions are nothing less than a "performance."

Hurston's use of folk materials is not only traditional, but it also serves an important purpose. As Arna Bontemps points out in his introduction to *The Book of Negro Folklore*, "The Negro preacher has had a vital role, not the least important of which has been the awakening and encouragement of folk expression" (Hughes and Bontemps 1958:xiii). As a collector of Afro-American folklore, Hurston celebrated and encouraged the use of Black folk expression. She also worked to see the songs and dances she collected dramatized and concertized: for, like the preacher of God's word, she "resolved to make them known to the world."

The lore Hurston presents in *Dust Tracks* is also characteristically humorous. She believes, as does the folk preacher, that humor is a vital part of the folk community. And any representative of "the people" must have a sense of humor. Bontemps writes that the preacher had to be entertaining and "comic when comedy was needed" (xii). A good sense of humor made the preacher "one of the folk," but he must also be authoritative. His role as shepherd of the flock also required him to teach, inform, admonish, and lead his congregation as well as inspire and uplift them. "What he gave, and what they picked up was hope, confidence, a will to survive" (xiii).

The characteristics which are considered attributes of the folk preacher—and of Hurston—could describe any leader within the folk community. Oratorical skills—a good straining voice, histrionics, and humor—are not exclusively ministerial attributes. The one important attribute which distinguishes the folk preacher from the civic leader is that the folk preacher's authority to lead is derived from God and is

affirmed or denied by the church. He must receive "the call," the divine summons. Like her characters, John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, and Moses in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and like most folk preachers, the narrator in *Dust Tracks* also receives the divine call. Receiving the call is a complicated phenomenon. It entails visions and conversions, confusion and resistance to the call, suffering, and finally conviction and/or acceptance. We can better see Hurston's use of these conventions by comparing her story of visions and conversions to that of actual preachers in Bruce Rosenberg's *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* and in Langston Hughes' and Arna Bontemps' *The Book of Negro Folklore*.

Rosenberg interviewed several Baptist preachers and noted their response to "the call":

According to the clergymen I interviewed, the calling to the church comes from God. There is no other way. In nearly all instances, as with [the Reverends] Lacy, Brown, and McDowell the calling comes against the will of the preacher. On one occasion Lacy said that he did not want to preach when he first felt the spirit of God come to him, and he resisted for many years. . . . He says a voice came to him then and said, "The next time it will be death. . . ."

Lacy tells another story about a friend who was deathly ill and who called out, "God if you spare me I'll do what you want, and become a preacher." God did and the man kept his promise. (1970:22-3)

In *The Book of Negro Folklore*, one preacher testified that in seeking God he spent "seasons at fasting and praying." But it was only when God called him that he began to change. "God started on me when I was a little boy"; then God "began to show me things":

Once while I was sick I saw in a vision three people and one was a woman. They looked at me and said, "He is sick." The woman said, "I can cure him." So speaking she took out a little silver vial, held it before me and vanished. . . . (1958:258)

After his visions, God directed him to "Go preach my Gospel."

In *Dust Tracks*, Zora Neale Hurston attests to similar experiences. After running out of her yard to avoid punishment for a childish prank, Hurston writes that she came to a vacant house where she experienced her visions.

I had not thought of stopping there when I . . . set out, but I saw a big raisin lying on the porch and stopped to eat it. I sat and soon I was asleep in a strange way. Like clear stereopticon slides, I saw twelve scenes flash before me, each one held until I had seen it well in every detail, and then be replaced by another. . . . I knew that they were all true, a preview of things to come, and my soul writhed in agony and shrunk away. . . . I did not wake up when the last one

flickered and vanished, I merely sat up and saw the Methodist Church, the line of moss-draped oaks, and our strawberry patch stretching off to the left. (1984:57)

Many of the motifs in Hurston's vision parallel those found in religious tradition: The eating of strange fruit, falling asleep, panoramic viewing of events, religiously symbolic numbers. The twelve scenes which flashed by may be symbolic of the twelve disciples or the twelve gates to the city. The assertion of the truth of the vision, the shrinking from it, and the return from extraordinary to ordinary scenes are part of religious tradition. As in the traditions of mystical literature, the call and the visions which accompany it come when the individual is alone, usually in some isolated environment. And these experiences usually begin in childhood. "I do not know when the visions began," Hurston writes. "Certainly I was not more than seven years old, but I remember the first coming very distinctly" (56). Her visions occurred for an extended period of time. And like the preacher, she resisted the "call" implicit in them.

I was weighed down with a power I did not want. I had knowledge before its time. I knew my fate. . . . Often I was in some lonesome wilderness, suffering strange things and agonies

I asked myself why me? Why? Why? A cosmic loneliness was my shadow. Nothing and nobody around me really touched me. (57, 60)

Nevertheless, the author writes,

Oh, how I cried to be just as everybody else! But the voice said No. I must go where I was sent. The weight of the Commandment laid heavy and made me moody at times. I would hope that the call would never come again. But even as I hoped I knew that the cup meant for my lips would not pass. I must drink the bitter drink. (59)

In the latter passage, the author acknowledges the voice and decides she must heed it. Like most Afro-American preachers and laypersons, she compares herself to Christ. Weighed down with the sins of the world and facing crucifixion Christ prays for deliverance, but at the same time accepts his fate, saying, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42 King James version). Shortly thereafter, Jesus is tried and crucified, but arises to a new life. The author also considers all she had to suffer as trials. The end of her trials would bring the beginning of a new life for her. The anonymous preacher in *Negro Folklore* suggests that the trials or temptations of those who are called are an instance of God's way of purifying an individual and

bringing her or him to conviction and conversion—to a new life in Christ (Hughes and Bontemps 1958:260).

Hurston's visions foretold both her trials and subsequent new life.

I knew that I would be an orphan and homeless. I knew that while I was still helpless, that the comforting circle of my family would be broken, and that I would have to wander cold and friendless until I had served my time. . . . There was no turning back. . . . And last of all, I would come to a big house. Two women waited there for me. . . . When I had come to these women, then I would be at the end of my pilgrimage, but not the end of my life. Then I would know peace and love and what goes with these things and not before. (1984:57-58)

The two women who would signify the author's "resurrection" are not unlike the women in the preacher's vision who said, "He is sick. . . . I can cure him."

This preacher's visions, however, did not prevent his continual participation in "worldly ways" before finally submitting himself to the call and God's directions. The Reverend Lacy likewise resisted complete submission until he was threatened by death. And in spite of Hurston's trials as accounted in *Dust Tracks*, she, too, did not completely submit to the call until she was threatened with death. And like Reverend Lacy's friend, she made a bet with God. Hurston writes that her illness of appendicitis required her to have an operation immediately.

When I was taken up to the amphitheatre for the operation I went up there placing a bet with God. I did not fear death. . . . But I bet God that if I lived, I would try to find out the vague directions whispered in my ears and find the road it seemed that I must follow. How? When? Why? What? All those answers were hidden from me. . . .

I scared the doctor and the nurses by not waking up until nine o'clock that night, but otherwise I was all right. I was alive, so I had to win my bet with God. (145-6)

This impending death Hurston describes served as a catalyst to recall her earlier experiences, renew her commitment to the call, and reconsider its portents. Her bet with God and her earlier determination to heed "the Commandment" and go where she was sent indicate her belief that God had some specific task for her. She was to suffer but not in vain. Her suffering would lead her not only to peace and love, but it would also strengthen her and lead her in directions which were not yet clear.

It is important to note that Hurston does not write that she sought her visions through "fasting and praying." They came to her

unsought. In her essay titled "Conversions and Visions" in *The Sanctified Church*, she writes,

The vision is a very definite part of Negro religion. It almost always accompanies conversion. It almost always accompanies the call to preach. In the conversion the vision is sought. The individual goes forth into waste places and by fasting and prayer induces the vision. . . . The call to preach is altogether external. The vision seeks the man. Punishment follows if he does not heed the call, or until he answers.

In conversion, then, we have the cultural pattern of the person seeking the vision and inducing it by isolation and fasting. In the call to preach we have the involuntary vision—the call seeking the man. (1983:85-7)

The visions in *Dust Tracks* do not seem to be intended to structure the work as Robert Hemenway suggests in his critical biography of Hurston (1977:282-3). As the various uses of sermonic rhetoric in her works show, Hurston knew the forms and formulae, the why and wherefore of religious practices too well to use them totally unaware. Rather, the visions seem to serve to identify the author as a special individual who, in the latter part of the narrative-sermon, realizes the destiny the visions portend. As a point of reference which serves to describe and explain the author and her "success," the visions never become "insignificant" as Hemenway suggests (282). For success in *Dust Tracks* has less to do with achievement in the Anglo-American sense of the term than it has to do with the Afro-American goal of equality and freedom. This the author achieves—if only in her autobiography. The visions, then, become a point of departure for the author, as folk preacher—a rite of passage into a less restricting and oppressive existence. As the last vision indicated, the author would have more positive experiences. She writes that the passing of the last vision brought the commencement of her professional career. It was one avenue to her goal of equality and freedom. The woman in the vision, declared to be Mrs. Osgood Mason, had "the key to certain phases of my life. . . in her hand" (1984:309). The key was the financial support she needed to get her folklore collecting expedition and her career—her personal liberation—under way.

Hurston writes that she was not sure what the vague directions were that God whispered in her ear. Given the directions she took after her illness, it appears she interpreted the whispers as saying she must continue to struggle to formally educate herself and to go where those roads would lead her. One road seems to have been her career as anthropologist and folklorist; another, her career as an ethnographic writer. It is as a writer, specifically, that Hurston speaks again of the

voice to which she responds. In the discussion of her writings in the chapter titled "Books and Things," she alludes to a mystical voice—"the force from somewhere in Space"—which commands her and again gives her no choice but to become a literary artist (212-213).

II

Zora Neale Hurston professes a divine inspiration which recalls the Biblical writers who are said to have been inspired by God. "You take up the pen when you are told, and write what is commanded" (213). *Dust Tracks* then, is a sacred text, a sermon. On this basis, any of Hurston's texts could be considered "sacred." However, *Dust Tracks* is a special case in that, first of all, it is not intended as fiction but as "truth," as are Biblical texts. And whatever the factual truths may be about the events in *Dust Tracks*, the narrative intentionally represents the author as one who was, like the Biblical prophets, called by God and whose experiences compare with those associated with the Biblical prophets.

As sacred text, *Dust Tracks* shares some of the same characteristics as the folk sermon. Bruce Rosenberg explains that the Biblical text of the sermon is read first and is followed by the context, a prosaic explanation of the text. Then the message the preacher derives from that text is preached and/or chanted.² Hurston's title essay, "The Sanctified Church," demonstrates that she understood well the format of the chanted sermon. In "The Sermon," also in *The Sanctified Church*, she transcribes a sermon wherein the spoken part (text and context) is designated and the chanted part is noted by its metrical delineations (1983:95-102). As with all oral performances which are written down, the sermon loses some of its distinguishing features which depend upon the dynamics between speaker and audience—folk preacher and congregation. Nevertheless, some aspects of those dynamics are noted or otherwise implied. For instance, the rhythm of the preacher's delivery is suggested by the poetic delineation, and the written "Ha!" of the preacher serves to indicate the audible breathing which is an integral part of the oral performance.

The sermonic structure and other characteristic features of the sermon, such as those discussed above, are found in the *Dust Tracks* narrative. As that of a chosen prophet, Hurston's life is itself an implied text, an actualization of God's work. The context, which explains and describes that life, is given in chapters one through eleven. The doctrine derived from those chapters and applied to everyday affairs is "preached" in chapters twelve through fifteen, the

more controversial chapters in the autobiography. The final chapter serves as a cooling down from the fervor of the latter chapters and as a testimonial of personal salvation and fellowship. In comparing *Dust Tracks* to the folk sermon, I do not suggest that *Dust Tracks* follows in every respect the folk sermon form, nor that it was intended to. Some of the elements which characterize the folk sermon are intentionally introduced in the narrative, yet others seem to be more a consequence of psycholinguistic phenomena wherein internalized language structures are revealed in the speaker's performance. It is not obvious that Hurston intended to write a sermon, but because so many sermonic features characterize the narrative, it is obvious that the author's internalization of religious ritual, specifically that of the sermon, has in fact influenced the structure and tone of the autobiography.

Ecclesiastical and Biblical diction are some of the linguistic aspects of *Dust Tracks* which are indicative of ways in which the folk sermon influences the narrative. These aspects are most obvious in the chapter on religion, but they appear consistently throughout the narrative. "God," "Old Maker," the "Devil," "congregations," and "multitudes" are but a few examples of the ecclesiastical terminology which pervades the work. Phrases and sentences of Biblical diction and allusion are also abundant: "king of kings" (170); "Strange things must have looked out of my eyes like Lazarus after his resurrection" (117); "Just because my mouth opens up like a prayer book, it does not just have to flap like a Bible" (265); "He could not sing like Peter, and he could not preach like Paul" (276).

Although folk sermons are usually based on a Biblical text and sometimes rely on extended Biblical passages to support the preacher's explication or interpretation of the opening text, the complex syntax and grammar of the Bible is not characteristic of the sermon as a whole. In syntax, grammar, and vocabulary, the folk sermon is simple. *Dust Tracks*, too, is stylistically uncomplicated—on the surface. *Dust Tracks* is written in the language of the folk. Hurston addresses her audience in the vernacular. And the metaphors, similes, aphorisms, and proverbs which render folk expressions poetic and folk sermons dynamic are an integral and significant part of the narrative. They allow for the creation of such poetic passages as this one:

The Master-Maker in His making had made Old Death. Made him with big feet and square toes. Made him with a face that reflects the face of all things, but neither changes itself, nor is mirrored anywhere. Made the body of Death out of infinite hunger. Made a weapon for his hand to satisfy his needs. This was the morning of the day of the beginning of things. (1984:87)

This passage, cast in Biblical expression, imagery, allusion, and rhetoric, conjures up a picture of God, the creator, ironically creating death, as opposed to life, on the first day. The passage is also representative of narrative and dramatic exempla, which are important sermonic features (Rosenberg 1970:47).³ The two working together serve to intensify the poetic quality. The narrative exempla tell a story about the creation of death. The dramatic exempla enumerate death's descriptions and duties, thereby heightening the narrative and dramatic effect. Both the narrative and dramatic exempla create a rhetorical schema, which, on the one hand, allows the preacher flexibility in creating a story and buys him time to consider his next lines. And on the other, it allows the preacher to set up poetic structures, establishing a basic rhythm which leads him to chant his sermon.

The drama created by such sermonic stylistics is further intensified by the militant action of the Old Testament. As the Reverend John J. Jasper said in his sermon, "De Sun do Move," "de God of peace is also de man of war" (Hughes and Bontemps 1958:228). This affinity to Old Testament action and militancy is also seen in *Dust Tracks*. The author writes that she preferred the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament she found the kind of action she liked, and she admired the Biblical David, who was symbolic of that action. Locked in her mother's room after "a licking one afternoon," she turned her attention to the Bible—"the only thing in there for me to read."

I hapened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested. David went here and he went there, and no matter where he went, he smote 'em hip and thigh. Then he sung songs to his harp awhile, and went out and smote some more. Not one time did David stop and preach about sins and things. All David wanted to know from God was who to kill and when. He took care of the other details himself. Never a quiet moment. I liked him a lot. (1984:54-5)

The author portrays herself as a righteous militant akin to David. Inspired by the old White man of her childhood, who is depicted in the manner of an Old Testament prophet, to "tell the truth and then if you have to . . . fight." She is always ready, like David, to "stand and give battle" (41, 21).

III

As Rosenberg's work shows and as Hurston's analyses of traditional church services in *The Sanctified Church* imply, the folk preacher's delivery is basically spontaneous and sometimes extemporaneous. But even with the varied rhetorical strategies at

hand and sometimes because of them, the folk preacher generally moves from point to point in more of an associational pattern as opposed to a strict linear progression. This movement and attention to the audience account for the discursive nature of the sermon. Rosenberg writes that in the orally presented prose sermon, "logical development from sentence to sentence occurs more frequently than in chanted sermons . . ." (1970:10). He writes that "it is in the nature of sermons to use examples, proverbs, parables, etc.," and that the "welding together [of] such illustrative materials with set passages and phrases" often defies a consistent "principle of organization" (33). In *Images of the Preacher in Afro-American Literature*, Walter C. Daniel suggests that it is this "irrational structure" of the sermon which authenticates it (1981:50). But what appears to be illogical or irrational in the sermon is usually only superficially illogical or irrational. Rosenberg states that there is generally a specific theme, sometimes a single line of scripture, on which the sermon is based. "That single line may be expanded in many ways" (1970:34). (In *Dust Tracks*, the main theme is self-empowerment, and the varied, seemingly contradictory ideas set forth in the narrative are instances of the author's expansion upon that theme.) The associational nature of the sermon allows for flexibility and for digression. But even the digressions are recognized sermonic features and are an integral part of the folk sermon. An apparent "principle of organization" is less important than the form and the effect of religious ceremony. Hurston explains in *The Sanctified Church* that "Beneath the seeming informality of religious worship there is a set formality. Sermons, prayers, moans and testimonies have their definite forms" (1983:83).

James Weldon Johnson describes the sermon as "a progression of rhythmic words" (1927:5). Beginning in prose, it gradually progresses to chant and an emotional climax which frequently culminates in song, then recedes to a calm summary of message, testimonial, or extension of fellowship. The unfolding of the *Dust Tracks* narrative parallels the overall rhythmic pattern of the sermon as Johnson describes it. Chapters one through eleven are basically prosaic, though some passages are characteristic of the chant. Chapters twelve through fifteen have more of the emotional fervor which accompanies the chant, and chapter sixteen is the cooling down.

The rhythm of the chant depends on the talent and style of the preacher. In *Dust Tracks*, the rhythm is indicated by the author's diction, syntax, and sentence structure. Several passages are suggestive of the rhythm of the chanted sermon, but some more closely approximate the chant. For instance, note the rhythm of this passage

and the characteristic sermonic expletive which punctuates it. Also, note the narrative and dramatic exempla and the characteristic sermonic "and." (This passage appears in traditional paragraph form in the narrative. Here, I have rendered it in suggestive metrical delineation):

The primeval in me leaped to life. Ha!
 This was the very corn I wanted to grind. Fight!
 Not having to put up with what she did to us through Papa!
 Direct action and everything up to me.

. . .
 I wanted her blood,
 and plenty of it.
 That is the way I went into the fight,
 and that is the way I fought it. (1984:101-2)

The following passage, also rendered in suggestive metrical delineation, is representative of an extended passage in "Research" (179-83) which is indicative of the fusion of chant and song, an essential aspect of the sermonic performance. It focuses on "Polk County," describing the work and work-songs, the play and pleasure of the women and men who work on the railroad or at the saw-mill and turpentine jobs in the day and who tell tales, sing songs, and dance, drink, and fight in the jooks at night. The songs of the workers and the mood of the place mingle and blend with the narrative voice to create a dramatic pastiche of chant and song. Often the preacher takes up the words and melody of a song and makes it an integral part of the performance, creating the antiphonal or call-and-response aspect of the sermon (Rosenberg 1970:39). This is obviously the case as the narrative voice in this passage chants and/or sings lines which are influenced by folk songs collected in the text. The passage is punctuated with the sermonic expletives of "Polk County!" and "Hah!"; and the narrative passage tends to take on the fervor and tone of the songs recorded:

Polk County. The clang of nine-pound hammers on
 railroad steel. The world must ride.

Hah! A rhythmic swing of the body, hammer falls,
 and another spike driven to the head in the tie.

Oh, Mobile! Hank!
 Oh, Alabama! Hank!
 Oh, Fort Myers! Hank!
 Oh, in Florida! Hank!
 Oh, let's shake it! Hank!
 Oh, let's break it! Hank!
 Oh, let's shake it! Hank!
 Oh, just a hair! Hank!

The singing-liner cuts short his chant. The strawboss relaxes with a gesture of his hand. Another rail spike down. Another offering to the soul of civilization whose other name is travel. (Hurston 1984:180-1)

The chants creates the rhythm of the sermon, and the rhythm is reinforced by repetition. "Repetition not only comforts, of course, but it adds to the mounting emotional intensity nearly as much as does rhythm." Repetition aids the folk preacher in formulating the next line. And because of the time pressure, "he is more inclined to build his narrative in patterns of sequences, known as the parallelism of oral style. . . . Idea builds upon idea. Image builds upon image as a series of incremental repetitions increases in emotional pitch" (Rosenberg 1970:106). Parallelism is evident in the Polk County passage cited above and is nicely illustrated in this passage, rendered in suggestive metrical delineation:

He predicted dire things for me
 I was going to be hung before I got grown
 Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue.
 Mama was going to suck sorrow for not beating
 my temper out of me before it was too late.
 Posses with ropes and guns were going to drag me out
 sooner or later
 on account of that stiff neck I toted.
 I was going to tote a hungry belly
 by reason of my forward ways. (Hurston 1984:21)

These parallel clusters are what Rosenberg describes as formulaic systems which the preacher draws on to facilitate his delivery as well as to illuminate and explicate his subject and create, by association, new clusters or formulae (1970:108-9). These formulaic systems are apparent in *Dust Tracks*; so also are the formulae of stock phrases and themes, which are largely memorized. They may or may not be original formulations. Some may be borrowed from a text, from other preachers, or from tradition. And they may also be frequently repeated—exactly or in near approximation—within a given sermon as well as in other sermons of the same preacher (Rosenberg 1970:51). This intertextual quality of stock formulae is also prevalent in the *Dust Tracks* narrative. There are many narrative formulae which characterize oral art. But what distinguishes those peculiar to folk sermons are their ecclesiastical and Biblical nature. For instance, the phrase "from the earliest rocking of my cradle" is usually uttered in traditional folk prayers, as this excerpt from a traditional prayer shows: ". . . You have been with me from the earliest rocking of my cradle up until this present moment. You know our hearts, our

Father, And all de ranges of our deceitful minds . . ." (Hurston 1935:27). Though this phraseology and others like it are colloquial, it is the context in which these phrases are uttered which make them of the church. Hurston uses this phrase, not only in the *Dust Tracks* narrative, but in her other works as well. In the narrative, she writes, "From the earliest rocking of my cradle days, I have heard this cry [My People! My People!] go up from Negro lips" (1984:215). "My heart beneath my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley" is also from traditional folk prayers. The narrator uses this phrase in *Dust Tracks* to describe her mood after her unfruitful folklore collecting trip: "Considering the mood of my going South, I went back to New York with my heart beneath my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley" (175). "Often I was in some lonesome wilderness" (60); "I had always thought I would be in some lone, arctic wasteland" (115); and "My knees dragged the basement of Hell" (323) are all variations of the same phrase and mood.

Such phrases are essentially rhetorical. Those which are more thematic are more consistent and prominent throughout the text and throughout Hurston's work as a whole. They subtly underscore and reinforce the major theme in the *Dust Tracks* sermon as well as in Hurston's other works: self-empowerment, a theme basic to the Afro-American (religious) tradition. "Zig-zag lightning and grumbling thunder," "with sword in hand," and "I stood on the mountain" are stock phrases symbolic of stock themes which figure significantly in Hurston's work and in folk sermons based on the Old Testament. They each suggest metaphors symbolic of strength and power. "Zig-zag lightning-thunder" phrases occur most frequently in *Dust Tracks*, and they also occur in contexts wherein power or strength is the subject. For example, "You, who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust" (286). And, "Papa thundered, 'Get up and take dat young'un outdoors! . . . If I hear one grumble, I'll . . . bust de hide on you!'" (98-9). Significantly, Hurston writes that during her initiation as hoodoo priestess, she had "strange exalted dreams": "In one, I strode across the heavens with lightning flashing from under my feet, and grumbling thunder following in my wake" (191). In this ceremony, she writes, "The symbol of lightning was painted on my back. This was to be mine forever" (192).⁴

Phrases featuring the sword also occur in contexts dealing with power and strength. Allusion is made to Constantine who started "out on his missionary journey with his sword" (275). More importantly, Hurston uses this symbolic phrase in reference to herself:

"I am in the struggle with the sword in my hands"; and, "I am still in there tussling with the sword in my hand" (280). The sword is symbolic of battle and the spirit of struggle. The mountain is symbolic of strength and endurance. They both combine in this statement to signify the author's sense of self-empowerment: ". . . I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands." The phrase imaging the mountain is most prominent in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. In *Moses* and in the *Dust Tracks* passage, the mountain symbolizes Moses' and Hurston's strength, power, and endurance. This image, along with the symbolic images of lightning and thunder, imply their likeness to God.

IV

The "message" in *Dust Tracks* is that individualism and achievement are the avenues to self-empowerment.⁵ Each chapter in the narrative emphasizes these values, and the focus is on the individual. The author, as folk preacher, requires the individual to look to self, follow the "inner urge," and work for what one wants. She remonstrates against Afro-Americans for "crying" about their condition and praying about it when the "powers that need to be brought into exertion is within" them.⁶ Hurston suggests that her people follow her example: "I do not pray. I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny" (278). The power for change is individual and internal. The author strongly argues these beliefs in the chapters "My People! My People!" and "Religion." Further, she argues that in order to achieve individual power, it is necessary for Afro-Americans to renounce the past of slavery and Reconstruction, as sinners had to renounce their worldly ways, and "settle for from now on" (284). Unencumbered by history, they, like she, could work, struggle, and direct their own destiny. They could be free and autonomous.

In the last chapter, "Looking Things Over," Hurston ends with a testimonial to the faith of individualism and an extension of fellowship to friend and foe. In the characteristic role of the preacher who chides the congregation for their pretension and hypocrisy, she warns her congregation against the vice of race prejudice while simultaneously offering them the salvation of individualism as she has experienced it. And she extends the hand of fellowship to both Blacks and Whites alike: "So I give you all my right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you. . . . Let us all be kissing-friends," she implores (286). This act of fellowship is another formality of the Afro-American religious folk tradition. Personal tes-

timony and the extension of fellowship are typical folk sermon closures. It is also a ritual characteristic of the "Love Feast" or "Experience Meeting," a meeting held either the Friday night or the Sunday morning before Communion. Since no one is supposed to take communion unless he or she is in harmony with all other members, there are great protestations of love and friendship. It is an opportunity to reaffirm faith plus anything the imagination might dictate" (266-7).

The supplication that we all be "kissing-friends" may well be, in fact, only a protestation dictated by Hurston's imagination. Though she may play on her harp like David, she also stands on the mountain with a sword in hand. And like David, she is prepared for battle. Hurston, in this instance of unctuous peroration, is typical of early Afro-American folk preachers who disguised their radical ideologies and revolutionary tendencies with the cloak of peaceful religious contentment. Though their masked rage sometimes gave way to open rebellion, it more often found recourse in "the same subtle use of suggestion and innuendo as we find in spirituals. . . . Subterfuge, sabotage, fraud, trickery, foot-dragging and other behavior patterns of resistance were insinuated into the daily intercourse with white people in the guise of stupidity and obsequiousness, as a tactic of simple survival" (Wilmore 69, 73). Survival is necessary if struggle is to continue and freedom is to be won. In the *Dust Tracks* sermon, the author, as folk preacher, exhorts the values of individualism and achievement as essential to the struggle for freedom and equality.

Dust Tracks has been described as rambling, roving, erratic, confused, and chaotic—adjectives often used to describe folk sermons. Whether viewed as an autobiographical narrative or an autobiographical sermon, and regardless of the author's conscious and unconscious narrative choices, *Dust Tracks*, like the sermon, is a unified work with a unitary voice. It is a projection of the author's coherent point of view and her concerted intention to realize it: a point of view which advocates defiance, self-empowerment, and self-determination.

Notes

- 1 Larry Neale quotes from Hurston's letter in his article (162).
- 2 Rosenberg distinguishes the chanted sermon, the kind of sermon Afro-American folk preachers deliver, from the nonchanted one. In the former, the preacher abandons the text and is taken over by the spirit. The sermon at this point becomes chanted and

poetic. In the latter, the sermon is basically "orally presented prose" and is characterized by its conversational oratory and conversational, nonchanted, speech (9-10).

3 In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston's discussion distinguishing characteristics of storytelling and religious expression suggests a stylistic difference between narrative and dramatic exempla. She writes, "In storytelling 'so' is universally the connective. It is used even as an introductory word, at the very beginning of a story. In religious expression 'and' is used. The trend in stories is to state conclusions; in religion, to enumerate" (68). (This article originally appeared in *Negro: An Anthology*; Nancy Cunard, editor. My source is *The Sanctified Church*.) Although the quoted passage has features of both exempla, it tends to be more characteristic of the dramatic exempla of religious expression. The omission of the connective "and's" in this instance is perhaps a consequence of the author's conforming to the stylistics of written composition.

4 Hurston's account of her induction into the hoodoo priesthood is most significant. It is not only another indication and actualization of her self-empowerment, but it also marks her as a religious leader. Gayraud Wilmore explains that the Afro-American folk preacher evolved from African priests who practiced conjure. "Actually, not a few of them were among the shipments of slaves from Dahomey and Togo, and it is they who must have formed the original cadres out of which the earliest Black preachers . . . began to emerge as the leaders of the slave society" (23). These Black preachers, as "conjure-men" or "Voodoo doctors," used their powers to inspire slaves to resistance and revolt. "Whenever we find [Voodoo] converging with pneumatascopic elements in Black religion in America, as in the earliest days, we can expect to find a militant, religiously inspired rejection of white values and white control" (29). Wilmore's ideas are evident in *Dust Tracks* and even more so in *Moses* where the author has cast Moses in the role of the greatest conjure man who ever lived.

5 These ideas are based in part on Marion Kilson's essay, "The Transformation of Eatonville's Ethnographer." She writes: "Despite alterations in literary form and perspective, two fundamental value orientations underlay all Hurston's writing: an emphasis on individualism and an orientation towards achievement" (112).

6 From Reference C.L. Franklin's sermon, "Moses at the Red Sea," in Rosenberg (107-8).

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