

## Decolonizing Ethnography: Spirit Possession and Resistance in *Tell My Horse*

**Kevin Meehan** is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Haitian Studies Project at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Meehan's essays and reviews have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Narrative*, and *The Nation*. His book, *People Get Ready: Comparative Approaches to Cultural Decolonization in African American and Caribbean Studies*, is forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi.

---

My paper begins with a problem in narrative politics.<sup>1</sup> Can we possibly sort out the conflicting tendencies of Hurston's problematic narrator in *Tell My Horse*, who inscribes both the liberating tradition of African American travel writing and the oppressive weight of imperialist culture in the Caribbean? The solution begins with realizing that Hurston's narrator is not the locus of authority—or the sole locus of authority—in the text. In fact, there is a constant parade of informants who talk back to the roving narrator, criticizing her judgments and refusing—more and more frequently as the narrative unfolds—to cooperate with her fieldwork inquiries. As such, this ethnographizing narrator functions more as a persona, as a character in a larger ethnographic drama. Once we dethrone Hurston's roving narrator, we can then look for clues to the narrative politics of this background drama, which, in my view, has a strong anti-imperialist message. In fact, Hurston adapts and adopts the language of vodou spirit possession as a strategy for staging scenes of social protest, and in her descriptions of Caribbean culture, fables of self-reliance increasingly come to displace the fables of dependency that mark the early part of the text. On several levels, then, Hurston actually reconstructs an anti-imperialist ethnographic rhetoric that repudiates the instrumental marketplace logic that would convert Haitian and Jamaican cultures into exotic, spicy morsels and/or manipulable social science data. Ultimately, Hurston refuses to serve up Haiti or Jamaica, either in easily digested popular stereotypes or authoritative ethnographic pronouncements. She not only presents, then, a criticism of ethnography and the dominant travelogue tradition of representing Caribbean culture, Hurston also elaborates a model for decolonizing

# Obsidian

cultural production that is consistent with the legacy of African American and Caribbean solidarity a primary liberatory force in the hemisphere.

## Fire Tales

About halfway through the text, after a mytho-prophetic account of Haitian history and a catalogue of vodou deities and their characteristics, Hurston begins to present scenes of vodou culture in process. At this point, she has traveled to the Isle de la Gônavé, located in Port-au-Prince Bay, about thirty nautical miles west-northwest of the Haitian capital. This location was made notorious in the cultural mythology of the Occupation with the arrival of Faustin Wirkus, a Marine Corps sergeant who, in 1923, was parachuted in to oversee tax collection and was, in time, allegedly crowned king by the island's ten thousand inhabitants. Hurston has disparaging things to say about Wirkus, who in a sensationalistic autobiography styled himself "the white king of la Gônavé" (134). What interests me here, though, are the stories she records concerning some stone relics scattered about the island, left behind by the long-since-extirminated Taino population. The stones are priceless to the Haitians, who consider them to be sacred, inhabited by lwa, or vodou spirits, yet American Marines—Wirkus's subordinates—are collecting the stones for their own use as souvenirs, marketable trinkets, or museum pieces. In itself, this scenario captures much of the logic of unequal exchange that characterizes cultural imperialism (Schwarz 178). One of Hurston's stone tales, however reveals a particular form of indigenous backlash against the American bureaucratic war machine:

We heard about one famous stone that had so much power that it urinated. It was identified as Papa Guédé, who had ordered it to be clothed, so it wore a dress. It attracted so many people and cause so much disturbance indoors that the owner had it chained outside the door. One of the American officers of the Occupation named Whitney saw it and finally got it for himself. It was a curious idol and he wanted it for his desk.

The Haitian guard attached to Whitney's station told him that it would urinate and not to put it on his desk but he did so in spite of warning and on several occasions he found his desk wet and then he removed it to the outdoors again. They said he took it away with him to the United States when he left. (*Folklore, Memoir and Other Writings* 401)

## Obsidian

While somewhat oblique as a criticism of the Occupation (even though the implications of pissing on state papers seem straightforward enough), this vignette inscribes a narrative politics of resistance that emerges even more explicitly when the identity of the lwa inspiring the prodigious stone is traced throughout the text. Pap Guedé is described in a subsequent chapter as:

. . . the deification of the common people of Haiti. The mulattoes give this spirit no food and pay it no attention at all. He belongs to the blacks and the uneducated blacks at that. He is a hilarious divinity full of the stuff of burlesque. This manifestation comes as near a social criticism of the classes by the masses in Haiti as anything in all Haiti. [...] he bites with sarcasm and slashes with ridicule the class that despises him. (494)

Even more important in deciphering the narrative politics in *Tell My Horse* is the fact that Hurston's title links her text with the protest of Papa Guedé's servitors. "Tell my horse" is an English-language equivalent of the Kreyol phrase "parlay cheval ou," which is uttered by devotees to signal the onset of spirit possession by Papa Guedé. The lwa mounts a subject "as a rider mounts a horse," and, guided by the spirit-rider, "the 'horse' does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden." (495) Hurston also insists that serving Pap Guedé can be a means for expressing veiled or coded protest by those who "are feigning possession in order to express their resentment general and particular. That phrase, 'Parlay Cheval Ou,' is in daily, hourly use in Haiti and no doubt it is used as a blind for self-expression." (496) In my view, this identification with the lwa of social protest serves as the crux of Hurston's larger text-building strategy; "tell my horse" is a blind for Hurston's own self-expression, allowing her to criticize the U.S. presence, but also the locally compounded practices of race, class, caste, and gender oppressions that Caribbeans inflict on one another. In Hurston's hands, then, ethnography becomes "possessed;" she makes it speak in a language of indigenous protest. In addition, though, I think we should view *Tell My Horse* as a critique of ethnography as a form of knowledge and see Hurston as working to produce a dissenting form of transnational culture grounded in the logic of a decolonizing contact zone. In particular, *Tell My Horse* manifests the sort of "critique of the commodity form" Paul Gilroy has associated with African diasporan manipulations of public space (Gilroy 198).

## Obsidian

To specify how this oppositional framework applies in Hurston's case, we have to recall the description of anthropology as "the child of imperialism" and consider how ethnography collaborates at a crucial moment in the history of Empire by coding and commodifying indigenous cultures—producing them in ways that maintain a subordinate relationship to metropolitan power.<sup>2</sup> Working mostly with Latin American models, Armand Mattelart has characterized the postcolonial process generally as one of global restructuring beyond the network of nation-states. Formerly colonized territories and the people who live in them are both objects and subjects in this struggle—players as well as the price vied for by multinational capital. Mattelart defines the terms of the struggle of third world peoples as a fight between dependency and self-reliance. In particular, this period of restructuring political economies beyond the framework of nation-states is characterized by the increasing use of cultural technologies to help solve the political problems that inhibit the further accumulation of capital:

... the culture industry, and in a broader sense the information industry, is increasingly considered in our societies not only as an economic way out of the crisis (notice that information has been set up as an essential factor of production, a basic resource), but equally as a political way out of the crisis [in accumulation] (one no longer talks only of the information industry but also the information society). As a producer of consensus between groups and classes, as much as the national as at the international level, it is called upon to participate in the restructuring of attitudes or to use the words of [Zbigniew] Brezinski, who takes his desires for reality, to allow a 'new planetarian consciousness' to be elaborated. (14)

Even progressive and radical ethnographers must contend with the way in which anthropological labor helps manage the transition from direct colonial rule to indirect neocolonial domination (interestingly, *Tell My Horse* looks at examples of both) by packaging indigenous cultures. In this analytic view, ethnography figures as a culture or information industry apparatus that serves the interests of multinational capital by commodifying or streamlining ethnographized cultures for smoother insertion in a revised global order. This insertion can occur through any number of forms ranging from ethnographic films (*The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Dances With Wolves*, *The Serpent and Rainbow*, etc.), to country profiles for the World Bank or U.S. Agency for