

## In Zora's Footsteps: Experiencing Music and Pentecostal Ritual in the African Diaspora

**Melvin L. Butler** earned his Ph.D. in music from New York University in 2005. His published articles and reviews have appeared in *Ethnomusicology*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Black Music Research Journal*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and *Current Musicology*. He is currently an assistant professor of music at the University of Chicago, where his research and teaching interests center on music and ritual in African American and African Caribbean transnational communities.

Zora Neale Hurston's well-documented travels in the Caribbean during the 1930s—excursions that led to *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1990 [1938]) -- are part of a rich legacy of African American interest in these two countries. This legacy has had an undeniable impact on my work as an African American scholar and musician, with special regard to my ongoing ethnomusicological fieldwork in the Caribbean. The religious landscapes of Haiti and Jamaica have changed profoundly since Hurston did her fieldwork there in the 1930s. Still, perhaps more than any other form of expressive culture, music and ritual serve as profound markers of Haitian and Jamaican identities in the Caribbean

and around the world. In this article, I conceptualize Pentecostal music in terms of two distinct, yet overlapping, analytical frames. One frame considers musical practice in relation to Pentecostal ritual contexts in the United States, Haiti, and Jamaica. The emphasis is on the ways in which music is experienced within specified church services, in supporting congregational singing, ushering believers into a worship mode, evoking the Holy Spirit, and facilitating trance experiences. A broader analytical frame considers Pentecostal practices as they relate to the religious and musical landscapes of Haiti and Jamaica. Notions of musical appropriateness are juxtaposed against indigenous spiritual practices and commercial musical genres in both countries.

Hurston's ethnographic research in the Caribbean exemplifies for me a profound boundary-crossing endeavor not commonly embraced by scholars of color. As an ethnomusicologist whose faith intersects and overlaps with my research topic, I employ Hurston's work as a springboard for my own

# Obsidian

juxtapositions of African diasporic expressive culture. Exploring the musical and religious landscapes of Haiti and Jamaica, I strive also to reflect critically upon my own sociospiritual experiences as an African American Pentecostal as they relate to my constructed fields of study. My intention is thus to represent a three-layered description of Pentecostal practice as a dynamic form of transnational Black expressive culture localized in African American, Haitian, and Jamaican spaces. I contend that my particular positionality informs my research and writing and ultimately prompts a discursive reconciliation of the global and the local.

## **Contested Boundaries: Making Connections through African Diasporic Research**

Over the past several decades, one-sided media portrayals have reified Haiti and Jamaica in the minds of many observers. Many North Americans, in particular, consider Vodou and Rastafarianism intrinsic cultural attributes of those hailing from these nation-states. Mimi Sheller's *Consuming the Caribbean* (2003) stands out in this regard, as the author highlights the "deep layering and reiteration" of stereotypes of the Caribbean as exotically different from the United States and Europe (165-166). However, scholars have problematized static identity constructions by placing them in sociohistorical and political contexts. In his book, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*, Michael Largey raises critical questions about the role of Vodou in promoting particular notions of "Haitianness." What role did Haitian art music composers play in constructing collective identities within the Haitian transnational nation-state? And for what reasons did musicians, writers, and political leaders strive to depict Haiti as a "Vodou Nation"? Largey's ethnomusicological approach resonates with recent ethnographies of Caribbean expressive culture that stand in the long shadow of Hurston's work. Following Elizabeth McAlister's *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (2002), and Karen Richman's *Migration and Vodou* (2005), Largey provides valuable insight into the role of religion and musical practice in Haitian identity negotiations.

One of the distinguishing elements of Largey's work is its emphasis

## Obsidian

on the historical connections between Haitian and African American cultural commentators. Along with Hurston, African American leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes were clearly inspired by Haiti's history as the Western hemisphere's first black-led independent nation. Many African Americans even viewed Haiti as an alternate "home-land" during the nineteenth century, and Jean Price-Mars's push for Haitian educational reform borrowed, in turn, from Booker T. Washington's ideas about technical education (47). Anthropologist Deborah Thomas looks critically at identity constructions in Jamaica. Her ethnography, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (2004), focuses on the interplay of "blackness," "Jamaicanness," and "Africanness" as it pertains to class struggles and politicized discourses of cultural nationalism. Gina Ulysse's book, *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist and Self-Making in Jamaica* (2007) is a fascinating example of boundary crossing in African diasporic fieldwork. While critiquing hegemonic identity constructions of Caribbean women, the author provides reflexive account of working among ones "skinfock" (122; cf. Hurston 1979) in Jamaica. I have found Ulysse's work most compelling as I navigate my way through Caribbean locales, performing my identity as a "Black" researcher with complicated cultural, spiritual, and historical connections to those I study.

The multiple ties between Caribbean and African American spaces are a source of pride for me as I conduct ethnographic fieldwork, but I have often felt the need to reassert these connections as justification for my own research. On more occasions than I can recount, I have had to clarify my ethnic, racial, and national identity in response to false presumptions that a kin-based relationship is what draws to me to the Caribbean. "Well, no," I reluctantly respond, "I don't have family here—at least none that I know of." In both Haiti and Jamaica, I've enjoyed being able to "blend in" while conducting fieldwork, even though it usually becomes apparent rather quickly that my birthplace lies elsewhere. And in fact, despite my desire to bond via a shared African diasporic identity, a sense of exclusive national identity (e.g., "we are Haitian; you are American") is what holds sway in my interactions with Caribbean folk in Haiti, Jamaica, and in the United States.

# Obsidian

My first encounters with Haitians and Jamaicans came not in the Caribbean, but in Boston and New York City, where a multiplicity of black ethnicities commingle yet remain distinct, despite sometimes being lumped together by North Americans. When I moved to New York in 1994, I began working as a saxophonist, playing konpa, Haitian dance music, in the horn sections of popular bands such as Phantoms and Tabou Combo. It was through these experiences that another kind of boundary crossing, in the realm of musical expression, took place for me. As I began thinking seriously about pursuing a deeper study of Haitian music and culture, I took note of the strong emotional impact that konpa seemed to have on those who attended concerts and festivals. I would eventually discover that this genre, which “has become a symbol for Haitians in Haiti and the diaspora,” is negotiated in a variety of ways by Haitian Protestant and Pentecostals Christians (Averill, *Se Kreyol* 89).

## Critical Dialogue and Reflexivity in Ethnographic Writing

In the afterword to the 1990 reprint of Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, Henry Louis Gates writes at length about Hurston's profound influence on subsequent generations of writers. One of the “deeply satisfying aspects” of the rediscovery of Hurston's work in the 1970s is that, as Gates asserts, it led to the establishment of a “maternal literary ancestry,” especially for black women writers of the time. Nearly a half century after Hurston's death, contemporary scholars often highlight Hurston the novelist, while perhaps downplaying her work as a social scientist. But as one trained to study musical practice from an anthropological perspective, I am drawn to Hurston's work as a field researcher. Like Hurston, I conduct fieldwork in both Haiti and Jamaica, thus choosing to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. I am particularly attracted to the vividness of Hurston's ethnographic writing, as Gates puts it, “the density of intimate experiences . . . cloaked in richly elaborated imagery” (294). In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston flavors her descriptions with a not-so-subtle reflexivity, giving her readers a vibrant sense of the ways in which her Black identity impacts her participation in, and representations of, Haitian and Jamaican ritual expression. Perhaps it is here that I feel my own link to Zora Neale