Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)

contexte & enjeux / context & issues

Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

IV. Zora Neale Hurston's "Real Negro Theater" and the Negro Unit of the Federal Theater Project in New York · C. Raynaud
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Le *Federal Theatre Project* (*FTP*) constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteure en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration* (*WPA*) dirigée par Harry Hopkins. Federal Theatre Project *(1935-1939) : contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et les figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is a singular adventure in the history of American theater, unprecedented at the time and never repeated at such. Headed during its four years of existence, from 1935 to 1939, by the author, playwright and director Hallie Flanagan, it is part of the program set by the Roosevelt administration as part of the New Deal, within the Work Progress Administration (WPA) directed by Harry Hopkins. Federal Theatre Project *(1935-1939): Context and Issues* is the first French volume on this essential period in the history of American theater. By combining cross-disciplinary approaches and case studies, this volume, which brings together contributions from researchers and artists, aims to shed light on the blind spots and forgotten figures of this period of American theatrical history, considering that these omissions themselves tell us something about the historiography of this period and, in turn, about the contemporary views we can take on it. The book is resolutely transdisciplinary, as was the FTP, with articles on theater itself, but also on music and film.

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QUATRIÈME PARTIE

Figures féminines et processus de légitimation

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S "REAL NEGRO THEATER" AND THE NEGRO UNIT OF THE FEDERAL THEATER PROJECT IN NEW YORK

Claudine Raynaud
Paul-Valéry University – Montpellier 3

HURSTON AT THE NEW YORK NEGRO UNIT: CROSS-INFLUENCES OR CLOSE FIT?

This article first assesses Zora Neale Hurston's brief participation in the New York Negro Unit of the Federal Theater Project in 1935. As critics primarily focused on her fiction, her collections of folklore, and her essays, her theatrical endeavors have been somewhat downplayed.[1] Yet Hurston repeatedly expressed her wish to play a major role in establishing a Negro theater. The first prizes she won in 1925 were for two plays: *Color Struck* and *Spears*. Although the manuscript of the play she wrote for the Negro Unit did not survive, the context of the productions of the FTP, and more specifically its Negro Units—Haitian hoodoo (Orson Welles's *Macbeth*), adaptations of Greek plays to an African American setting, or the production of plays that dramatized the condition of Black workers—echoes Hurston's own repeated attempts at bringing black life and expressive culture to the stage. It is my contention that contemporary productions of Negro Units help establish correspondences with her aborted 1935 endeavor, and that parallelisms can be drawn between Hurston's output and some of the plays produced under the aegis of the FTP.[2]

1 This emphasis is shifting. Hurston's plays have been anthologized in Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell (eds.), *Collected Plays*, New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2008. Ten of her plays have been digitalized and are held at the Library of Congress. With the exception of *Mule Bone* (1930) that has received consistent critical attention, thanks to George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and *Color Struck* (1925), the other plays have not been thoroughly studied. See *inter alia*, Jennifer A. Cayer, "'Roll Yo' Hips and Don't Roll Yo' Eyes:' Angularity and Embodied Spectatorship in Hurston's play, *Cold Keener*," *Theater Journal*, vol.60, no.1, March 2008, pp.37-69. Contemporary productions of Hurston's plays have nonetheless drawn sustained critical commentaries.

2 Within the scope of this essay, I limit myself to establishing the basis for a broader contextual study of Hurston's relationship to, or even congruence with, the work of the Negro Units of the FTP in terms of cross-influences and echoes, based notably on an analysis of the texts.

Albeit short-lived and *de facto* poorly documented, Hurston's work within the New York Negro Unit in 1935 took place in the context of the nationwide creation of Negro Units. Twenty-three were created across the country.[3] Placing her theatrical production within that larger perspective thus allows to assess, on the one hand, how prevalent the themes that concerned her were at the time and, on the other hand, how affected she was by the conflicting issues related to the representation of black life and culture on stage, issues that other playwrights and stage producers also had to contend with. One must recall that the dramatic or comic treatment of "Negro experience" was not the sole province of the Negro Units. Eugene O'Neill (*The Emperor Jones*, 1920) and Paul Green (*In Abraham's Bosom*, 1926) wrote and produced plays about black life and history. The lingering minstrel tradition, the vaudeville, and the stereotypes attached to them made it difficult to produce authentic black drama. They framed theatrical productions as comedy, thus precluding any serious treatment of the condition of Black Americans.

On the opposite side of the spectrum was the radicalism of the Federal Theater at the hands of social and political activists. Hurston was anti-communist. Her distinct choice not to bring forth the oppression of the American Blacks in her productions meant that she was doomed to be the butt of virulent criticism, even on the part of her peers. Indeed, while she claimed that she did not belong to the "sobbing school of Negrohood,"[4] Richard Wright attacked her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), on the grounds that her characters fell within the minstrel tradition.[5] The poet Sterling Brown also criticized her book of folklore *Mules and Men* (1938) for its failure to address black people's bitterness and Harold Preece decried its lack of political commitment.[6] Engaged in a similar debate over theatrical productions, radical leftists and the black bourgeoisie had contradicting expectations as to what would or

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3 For a thorough study of radical Black theater in that era, see Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theater in the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2020. For a more general overview, see Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2009; Jane Matthews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1967.

4 Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928), in Cheryl Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York, Library of America, 1995, p.827.

5 "Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre the minstrel technique that makes 'white folks' laugh." (Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses*, October 1937, p.23.)

6 Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, Urbana-Champaign, U of Illinois P, 1977, pp.219-220.

should be staged in the Negro Units.[7] That political and artistic environment, rife with tensions over the content and form of black art, throws a light on Hurston's own dramatic output, as well as on her other endeavors in the performative arts, such as the concerts she produced. Her desire was to have her folklore material brought to the stage in plays that drew heavily on that content.[8] Anthropological fieldwork met and led to Black theater.

THE NEW YORK NEGRO UNIT OF THE FTP AS CONTEXT FOR HURSTON'S THEATRICAL WORK

In the fall of 1935, Hurston joined the "Negro Unit" of the WPA's Federal Theater Project in New York, based in the Lafayette Theatre, with John Houseman and Orson Welles as directors, who were replaced by three black directors, Edward Perry, Carlton Moss, and H.F.V. Edward, a year later (**fig.1**). Hurston was hired as a "drama coach" and worked on the production of Frank Wilson's *Walk Together Chillun*, a social drama with negro spirituals.[9] The play revolved around the labor dispute between New York State workers and migrants from the South brought to the city as cheap labor. Hurston, who was busy trying to have her book of southern folklore *Mules and Men* published, had little money at the time. In August 1935, she left Eatonville for New York and signed on with the FTP for $23.86 per week.[10] A letter to Carl Van Vechten dated September 6 explains: "Every day I have been running from place to place thinking that I'd be placed for a job before night. [...] But I kept getting put off and my feet got more tired and my spirits lower. But it looks like I am really going to have a job now."[11] She was subsequently asked to write a play that was never produced, a black folk adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that she delivered in a week. She also mentions in a letter to Edwin Osgood Grover, dated December 29, another play that may be an adaptation of her short story "Spunk:"

7 See Melissa Barton, "Speaking a Mutual Language: Negro People's Theater in Chicago," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol.54, no.3, Fall 2010, pp.54-70.

8 In 1929, she transcribed Lovelace's sermon that was dramatized as *The Sermon in the Valley*. It was presented by the Gilpin Players in Cleveland in 1931 and revived by the same company in 1934. Black theater in the 1930s went beyond the creation of the Negro Units (Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1990, p.18). For the purpose of this essay, the emphasis falls on the FTP.

9 The two-act play run from February 2 to February 26, 1936 for a total of 29 performances. The choral arrangement was made by Leonard De Paur and the scenic design by Manuel Easman. The lead roles were held by Alonzo Bosen, Julian Costello, and Cornelius Donnelly.

10 R. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.218.

11 Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, New York, Doubleday, 2002, p.358.

> I am on this Federal Negro Theater project and I have been called to do a play within a week and believe it or not, I did it and got it accepted. I am requested at public places and make some of them besides getting some reading done and some work on another play which I think is all set so far as acceptance is concerned. [12]

In her *Lysistrata*, Hurston adapted the Greek play, which stages the women of Athens, Sparta, and Thebes, to a Florida fishing community. The plot of Aristophanes' comedy has the women go on a sex strike to stop their husbands from going to war and thus end the Peloponnesian war. Hurston's adaptation was considered unsuitable as it "scandalized both Right and Left by its saltiness," [13] and was not produced. Unfortunately, the manuscript did not survive. [14] In his autobiography, Houseman wrote that she was "their most talented writer on the project." [15]

Trained as an anthropologist under Franz Boas and working also with Melville Herskovits, the author of plays and short stories, Hurston was a celebrated writer by the time of her hiring on the Federal Theater Project. She had published *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and six of her essays had appeared in Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). She was also busy at the time with the writing of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* for her publishers. However, as her theatrical works, as well as the various positions in the thirties as drama teacher at Rollins College, and later at Bethune, attest, she was also pursuing the dream of creating a "real Negro art theatre." Her letter to Langston Hugues of April 12th, 1928 explains her project which was to be nourished by the folklore collected in Florida and the Bahamas: "Did I tell you [...] about the new, the *real* Negro art theater, I plan? Well, I shall, or rather *we* shall act out the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naiveté of the primitive 'bama nigger. Just that with naive settings." [16]

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12 *Ibid.,* p.363.

13 John Houseman, *Run-Through*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1972, p.205.

14 Historian Tiffany Ruby Patterson, who mentions the play as *A Negro Lysistrata*, explains that she looked for it in the following archives and could not find it: John Houseman papers at UCLA Library Special Collection, at the Federal Writer's Theater Project at George Mason University Libraries, and at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York (*Zora Neale Hurston and the History of Southern Life*, Philadelphia, Temple UP, 2005, n.18, p.211).

15 J. Houseman, *Run-Through*, *op. cit.*, p.205.

16 C. Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.116 (emphases Hurston's). She also mentions "the real Negro theater" she intends to set up in Eatonville in a 1932 letter to Edwin Osgood Grover (*Ibid.*, p.259).

1. Zora Neale Hurston and three boys in Eatonville, FL
(photos taken during Lomax-Hurston-Barnicle recording expedition in Florida),
Alan Lomax collection, June 1935, retrieved from the Library of Congress

Her fieldwork as a folklorist and her urge to become a successful creative writer found an outlet in staging concerts and musical revues. *Meet the Mama*, her musical play, was written as early as 1925. She strove towards her goal in the context of the white patron-black writer relationship that she had established during the Harlem Renaissance with her "Godmother," Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, as early as 1927. As Hurston's patron, Mason forbade her to use the material she collected for commercial purpose.[17] Undeterred, Hurston relentlessly sought to produce performances that would translate to the audience the authenticity of black expressive culture, unadulterated by a white

17 The musical *The Great Day* and its various versions bear traces of that demand. The acknowledgements of the program of the 1932 production nonetheless read: "This work of salvaging surprising portions of original primitive Negro life has had spiritual and material support from Mrs. Osgood Mason of New York" ("*The Great Day*: a program of original negro folklore" [1932], Prentiss Taylor papers, 1885-1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution). The play *The Fiery Chariot* may have been added to the show to make up for the suppressions.

vision of black art or rearranged to cater to white taste. However, the majority of her theatrical endeavors appears to have been beset by financial troubles and uneasy work relationships with the administration of the various universities where she attempted to be hired, but also with her colleagues and artist friends. Her falling out with Langston Hughes over the authorship of the play *Mule Bone* (1930) is the most notorious and best documented of such episodes.[18] That she should not remain long within the New York section of the FTP strikes a similar pattern of concurring and antagonistic goals and of difficulties over asserting her own vision for black theater. First and foremost, it points to how reliant she was on financial support. Her involvement was interrupted this time by her pursuit of a university degree and, understandably, the funding that supported that venture, a prestigious and generous Guggenheim fellowship.

Hurston indeed left the Federal Theater Project after she received that fellowship,

which led her first to Jamaica, then to Haiti where she conducted fieldwork. Orson Welles's celebrated *Voodoo Macbeth* was staged on April 14, 1936 while Hurston was in Haiti. This immersion in Caribbean voodoo practices and rituals resulted in her ethnographic travelogue, *Tell My Horse* (1938), which records her initiation into secret societies (**fig.2**).

2. Zora Hurston, half-length portrait, standing, facing slightly left, beating the hountar, or mama drum, 1937, retrieved from the Library of Congress

18 See the edition of the play followed by the documents of the controversy by George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Mule Bone*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1993.

She had left the theatre for what Michel Leiris would later theorize as the "lived theater" of black expressive culture and religion.[19] Such an undertaking stands in direct line with her interest in Florida folklore and hoodoo practices that constitute the last part of *Mules and Men*.[20] It also stresses her necessity to collect first-hand material which would later be channeled, with as little tampering as possible, into her productions and performances and bear the stamp of authenticity.

All over the country, the Negro Units produced a number of plays that resonate with Hurston's own concerns: black folklore and its heroes, black historical legends, black workers' everyday life. Conjointly with Welles's heavily documented black *Macbeth*,[21] the New York Negro Unit also produced *Conjur' Man Dies*, after Rudolph Fisher's novel, adapted by Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps, in March-April 1936. The play deals with superstition and the occult among Harlem Blacks. Besides being part two of *Mules and Men*, conjure is an important element of Hurston's "Spunk" and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Following *Conjur' Man Dies*, the actor-writer J. Augustus Smith had two plays produced. *Turpentine*, co-authored with Peter Morrell (June 1936),[22] dealt with labor camps in the South (to which I shall return at the end of this article).

19 Michel Leiris established a distinction between performed or play-acted theater ("*théâtre joué*") and lived theater ("*théâtre vécu*") that troubles an outside observer's perception of these rites. In 1958, while conducting research on spirit possession in Ethiopia, the French ethnographer realized that there was a certain amount of self-reflexivity, a doubleness, on the part of those involved in rites of possession (*La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*, in *Miroir de l'Afrique*, ed. Jean Jamin and Jacques Mercier, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, pp.1047-1061). For an analysis of Leiris's "lived theater," see Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, *Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought*, New York, Lexington Books, 2015, pp.127-142.

20 That section is a reworking of her scholarly work that had previously appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore* (Fall 1931), and which the publishers asked her to include in the book, along with an autobiographical storyline.

21 Interestingly, song writer Lawrence Gellert describes the interactions between the white producers and the black cast of 800 as a "plantation system" (Bruce M. Conforth, *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics*, Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2013, p.150). Excerpts from the play can be viewed in a propaganda film from the WPA: Orson Welles (dir.), "*Voodoo Macbeth*" (4 min.), in Edgar Smith (dir.), *We Work Again*, black and white moving picture, Works Progress Administration, 1937, 15 min. 12.

22 J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell, *Turpentine*, New York, 1936 (poster retrieved from the Library of Congress). "Gus" Smith, who, like Hurston, was a Florida native, wrote the screenplay for the film *Drum o'Voodoo* (1934) directed by Arthur Hoerl, based on his three-act play *Louisiana* (1933). The play premiered at the Majestic Theater on February 20th, 1933; it included spirituals, voodoo drums, and a sermon in a Baptist church. Morrell was a white playwright who also worked on the musical *Africana* (1933) and radio plays.

Hurston celebrates these rural settings in *Mules and Men*, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and in a 1939 essay.[23] *Just Ten Days* (1937), a social melodrama centering on a family crisis during the Depression, toured the streets of New York to from August to September.[24] Outside of New York, the Chicago Unit produced *Big White Fog* by Theodore Ward in 1938,[25] while the Seattle Unit staged an adaptation from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* by Theodore Browne in 1937 that one might compare to Hurston's own failed attempt. In addition to that play, Browne also wrote *Natural Man* about the Black folk hero John Henry, *Go Down Moses* that dealt with the abolitionist legend Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, and the musical revue *Swing, Gates, Swing* (1937). In her books on folklore, Hurston related the legend of the heroic railroad worker, the subject of sundry folk ballads.[26]

HURSTON'S BLACK MUSICAL THEATER AS CONGENIAL TO THE SPIRIT OF THE FTP?

Hurston's numerous contributions to the theater in the 1920s and 1930s accounted for her being hired on the FTP. She could indeed be considered as one of the jobless playwrights that the WPA sought to help. She had joined the Howard Players in 1920. Her plays *Color Struck* (later published in *Fire!!*) and *Spears* (later published in *The X-Ray. The Official Publication of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority*), had been distinguished in the literary contest of *Opportunity* magazine in May 1925. In July 1925, when she completed *Meet the Mama*, one can trace an involvement with the Harlem based Krigwa Players. Founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1926 as an appendage to *The Crisis* magazine, the Krigwa Players (Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists) was

23 See Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, ed. Robert Hemenway, Urbana-Champaign, U of Illinois P, 1984, pp.177-184; *ead.*, *Cross City*, Cross City, Florida State Archives, 1939, pp.1-5. See also note 65 below.

24 It featured Frank Alvin Silvera of the Boston Federal Theater.

25 *Big White Fog* (April-May 1938, Chicago Negro Unit) is set in Chicago during the height of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s. It depicts an African American family coming to grips with oppression (Garveyism, capitalism, communism, color stratification). For an analysis of black masculinity in the play, see Kate Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure, and Redemption in Theodore Ward's 'Big White Fog'," *African American Review*, vol.43, no.4, Winter 2009, pp.557-576.

26 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op. cit.*, p.230, and pp.233-236; *ead.*, *Works-in-Progress for* The Florida Negro," in C. Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, Library of America, 1992, p.879. John Henry was also the hero of another play by that title written by Frank B. Wells (1936).

a Harlem-based theater company created to reflect his goals for the "Negro Little Theatre."[27] Hurston sent Du Bois two plays that he did not publish.[28] In 1927, her play *The First One* appeared in Charles S. Johnson's *Ebony and Topaz*. In 1930, when she collaborated with Hughes on *Mule Bone*, she also worked with Porter Grainger on *Jungle Scandals*. She copyrighted *Mule Bone* as *De Turkey and the Law* and canceled the production of the play in 1931, when she broke with Hughes. She titled her sketches for *Jungle Scandals* as *Cold Keener*. The same year, she also contributed sketches to the Broadway musical revue, *Fast and Furious*.

Another endeavor in the performing arts enlightens Hurston's stint at the Negro Unit. Three years before joining it, Hurston engaged in the production of a Negro folk concert entitled *The Great Day* (**fig. 3**).

3. "The Great Day: A Program of Original Negro Folklore" (1932), Prentiss Taylor papers, 1885-1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

27 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," *The Crisis*, vol.32, July 1926, pp.134-136.

28 Du Bois's vision of the talented tenth and his conservatism concerning gender roles and proper behavior clashed with Hurston's depiction of Southern life. The young Turks opposed him in *Fire!!* Alain Locke published *Color Struck* in *Fire!!*, and then in *The New Negro* (Alain Locke, "Fire: A Negro Magazine," *The Survey Graphic*, vol.58, 1925, pp.10-12).

This experience is related in a chapter of the new edition of *Dust Tracks on the Road* established by Cheryl Wall for the Library of America in 1995. As it had been left out of the 1942 edition, its erasure contributed to minimizing Hurston's dedication to public performance.[29] The concert program for the John Golden theater of *Great Day* bore a text by Alain Locke explaining that the show was a "cycle of Negro folk-song, dance and pantomime" collected during a four-year travel period (1927-1931).[30] In his presentation, Locke insisted on the primitivism in the rendering of black life. The first "concert," or example of the musical theater that was popular at the time, included a performance of *The Fire Dance*.[31] Qualifying Locke's appreciation, dance history scholar Anthea Kraut analyzes the show as a break away from the minstrel tradition and the evidence of a deep understanding of diasporic black culture:

> Hurston's staging of a West Indian folk-dance cycle within a program of southern-US black folkways constituted an important turning point in the history of stage representations of black vernacular dance idioms, helping to re-orient those idioms away from the racist legacy of blackface minstrelsy and toward an understanding of how African-derived expressive forms arrive on American shores.[32]

Hurston's position vis-à-vis black folklore, her desire to have the material she collected staged with minimal changes, ran counter to the divisions between the different expressive arts of the WPA (music, theater, dance) and to their choices in matters of aesthetics (**fig. 4**).

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29 For an analysis of the changes between the manuscript of *Dust Tracks* and the published version, see Claudine Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth: Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject*, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 1992, pp.34-65.

30 "*The Great Day*: a program of original negro folklore" (1932), art.cit. In 1929, she had collected Bahaman dances and over the three subsequent years she garnered tales, songs, and sermons in Florida, Alabama, and New Orleans.

31 *From Sun to Sun*, a version of *The Great Day* was presented at other New York venues. It now included *The Fiery Chario*t. It was staged at Rollins College and toured as *All De Live Long Day* throughout Florida, while another version of *The Great Day* was performed in Chicago as *Singing Steel* in 1934.

32 Anthea Kraut, "Everybody's Fire Dance: Zora Neale Hurston and American Dance History," *S&F Online*, vol.3, no.2, Winter 2006, n.p.

Fig. 4. Hurston rehearsing a group of performers for *Sun to Sun* (originally published in *Theater Arts*, April 1932), Zora Neale Hurston collection, University of Florida.

It was dance (*The Fire Dance*, with the subtitle *An African Grotesque*, included: "The Jumpin' Dance," "The Ring Play," and "The Crow Dance");[33] it was singing (such as the song "Halimufack"[34] or the Spirituals); it was music; it was drama. Hurston wrote one-act plays and championed a view of staging black culture that clashed with dominant opinions. For instance, her desire to have Negro spirituals sung as they were in the South, and not adapted and altered, stands in direct opposition to Helen Tamiris and her dance ensemble's interpretation of the spirituals and protest songs. In her essay, "Spirituals and Neo Spirituals" (1934), Hurston states:

> There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adapters based on the spirituals. Under this head come the works of

33 Zora Neale Hurston, "The Crow Dance," vocals with clapping by Z.N. Hurston, F.W.P. Halpert, Stetson Kennedy, 1939 (audio recording). A Dance Unit of the WPA was also established, but it was disbanded in 1938.

34 *Ead.*, "Halimuhfack," vocals by Z.N. Hurston at Federal Music Project Office, Jacksonville (FL), on June 18, 1939 (audio recording).

> Harry T. Burleigh, Rosamond Johnson, Lawrence Brown, Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson and [John Wesley]. All good work and beautiful, but *not* the spiritual.[35]

Modern dancer Helen Tamaris starred in a successful dance drama that used spirituals and protest songs sung by a black chorus as a backdrop to her performance. Opening on May 1937 at the Nora Bayes Theater, the concert *How Long Brethren?* was divided into three parts. The first part was a series of five spirituals performed by the Federal Theater Negro chorus, and the second part consisted in four solos pieces that Tamiris danced to the spirituals. The third and final part, entitled *How Long Brethren?*, saw her and her dancers perform to the Negro protest songs that Lawrence Gellert had collected in the South during his assignment to the Atlanta unit of the FTP (**fig.5**).

The music score was by Elie Seigmeister.[36] Tamaris also choreographed eight Negro

spirituals which were performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in April 1939 with six other short dances in a program shared with Hanya Holm.[37] The dancer's understanding of black culture as a foil to white dancers clashes with Hurston's goal to remain true to unadulterated African American artistic creations placed center stage. The show was a piece of Popular Front propaganda. This opposition on aesthetic—but also in effect racial—grounds partly explains the reception of Hurston's own productions. Were they not too close to "nature" for white culture's tastes? The primitivism that was lauded was also understood, framed, and shaped from white culture's point of view.[38] Hurston fought for a theater of unmediated expression, untampered slices from "Negro life." She thus contributed to supporting black performers and was not alone of that opinion, as this comment by *The New York Age*

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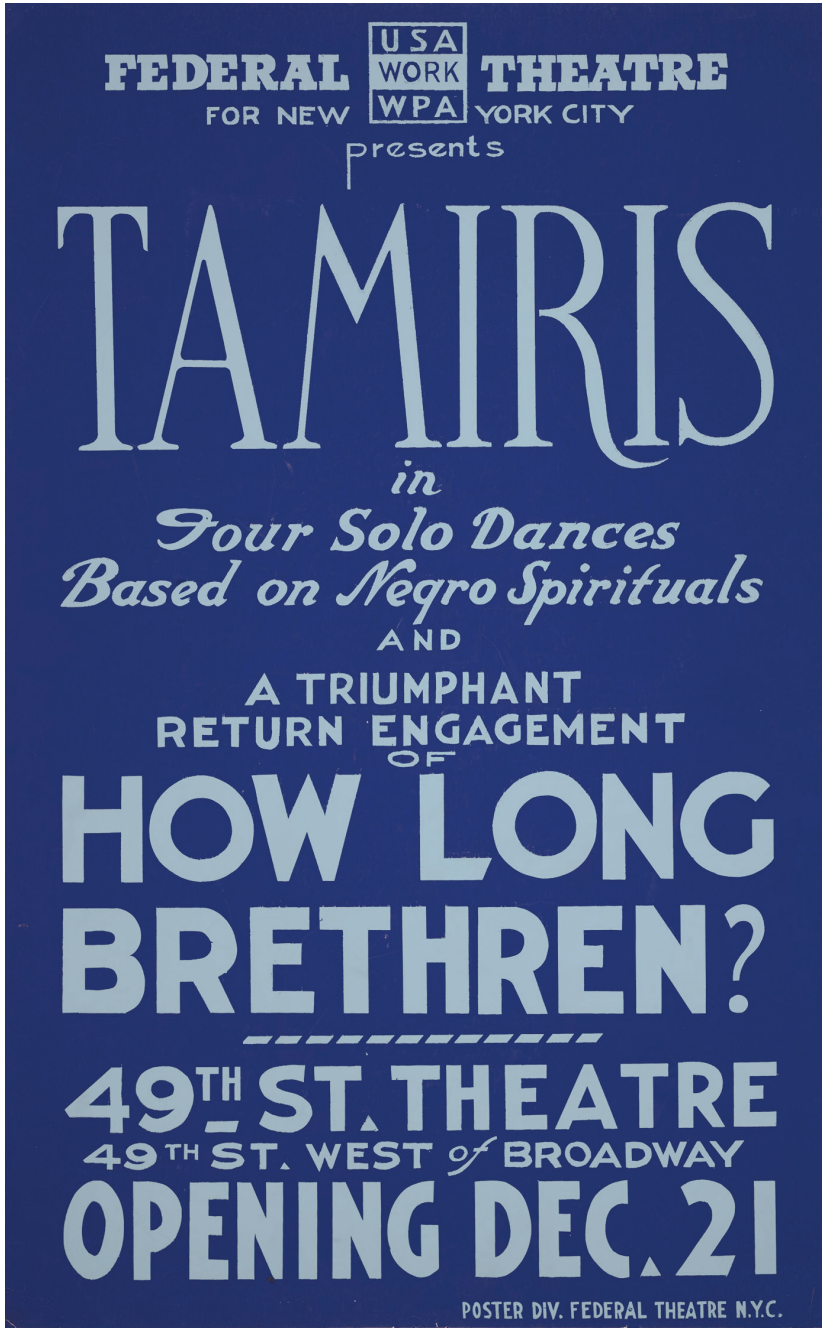
35 *Ead.*, "Spirituals and Neo Spirituals," in *The Sanctified Church*, Berkeley, Turtle Island, 1981, p.80. (emphasis Hurston's).

36 Lawrence Gellert was the brother of the illustrator and communist activist Hugo Gellert who worked for *New Masses*. The book of protest songs was compiled by Lawrence after he visited lumber camps and met with African Americans on the Southern chain gangs. He was part of the Atlanta unit of the WPA. Lawrence Gellert's biographer, Bruce M. Conforth, has assembled evidence that Gellert may have made up the songs.

37 Gellert gathered these songs in his *Negro Songs of Protest*. In her book, Hallie Flanagan stated: "To the singing of a Negro Chorus and music by Genevieve Pitot,Tamiris and her group danced seven episodes of Negro life all simple in pattern but dramatic in intensity." Hallie Flanagan, *Arena. The Story of the Federal Theater*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1940, p.199.

38 Dance historian Susan Manning reads the production along racial lines: "Can the feminism of *How Long Brethren* be separated from its metaphorical minstrelsy? The answer, I would suggest, is no." ("Black Voices, White Bodies: The Performance of Race and Gender in 'How Long Brethren'," *American Quarterly*, vol.50, no.1, March 1998, p.27.)



5. *How Long Brethren? 2* (poster retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200216079/)

columnist Ebenezer Ray makes clear: "We are among those who feel that the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre should remain, because of its financial benefit and furtherance of their art to Negro performers, but we also feel that this Unit should justify its existence as a source of community entertainment. It should awaken from its lethargy."[39]

TWO BLACK *LYSISTRATAS*: COMEDIES WITH SOCIAL COMMENTARY?

The Negro Units of the 1930s tapped into the flourishing of Black art and cultural effervescence now known as the Harlem Renaissance, of which Hurston was a prominent member. If she qualified as a deserving impoverished black artist, yet again, her own view of stage direction might have run counter to prevailing opinions. The director of the Federal Theater Project, Hallie Flanigan, explains in her 1936 essay, "A Theater for the People," that the project was created during the Great Depression to give work to the unemployed actors and technicians (stagehands, electricians, costume designers, builders, prop-handlers) who worked in the theater.[40] Among the nation's unemployed, the African Americans were indeed the most numerous. Her text explains that laid-off artists, craftsmen, etc. in the theater trade found work through the structure of the WPA; these workers also achieved awareness of their role in society. She thus acknowledges the political and educational purpose of the program. With this goal in mind, Flanagan decided to establish FTP units across the country to bring theater to the people. She did this under the advice of the celebrated black actress, Rose McClendon.[41] McClendon had gained prominence in the 1920s for her roles in Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1927) and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1927). She also starred in Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* (1935), before her untimely death in 1936. She had advised the Harlem Experimental Theater since 1927. However, McClendon is reported to have insisted on a white director for the New York Negro Unit with experience rather than a black director. Beyond professionalism and talent, what was at stake was indeed racial dynamics. Hurston was fighting to have her position as a black

39 Ebenezer Ray, "Dottings of a Paragrapher," *The New York Age*, February 12, 1938, p.6.

40 Hallie Flanagan, "A Theater for the People," *The American Magazine of Art*, vol.29, no.8, August 1936, pp.494-503.

41 On Rose McClendon, see Jay Plum, "Rose McClendon and the Black Units of the Federal Theatre Project: A Lost Contribution," *Theatre Survey*, vol.33, no.2, November 1992, pp.144-153. On Flanagan's effort to find jobs for unemployed black playwrights, see Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol.59, no.1, January 1974, pp.38-50.

director recognized. Here is what she says about Frank Merlin, the white director of *Run, Little Chillun*, Hall Johnson's play for which he also acted as music director:[42]

> My play 'Mule Bone' has been asked for by the Little Theater in New York. Same director as *Run Little Chillun*. I am wondering whether to send it there or to produce it myself here. I have a very good opening. Since all funds for the play and everything else can be had right here. I am wondering if I could not do a better job of interpreting Negro material than any white director ever could.[43]

Hurston could not be more explicit about her wish to produce her own plays and not leave that position up to white directors.

A comparison between Hurston's unpublished play, *Lysistrata*, and the play produced by the actor turned playwright, Theodore Browne of the Seattle Negro Unit, that bears the same title, may also clarify what was at stake in black theater directed by black playwrights for a black audience. Browne's *Lysistrata* was an adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy. The Greek play had actually been produced in the 1930 at the Philadelphia Theater Association and then at the New York Theater on 44th Street with Miriam Hopkins in the title role.[44] In Seattle, Browne's play was produced at the Orpheum Theatre in 1936. Browne started this project after the success of the play he had directed, George Sklar and Paul Peter's *Stevedore*,[45] and his acting in André Obey's

42 *Run, Little Chillun* (March 1-June 17, 1933) is a play in four scenes: "The Parsonage in a small Southern town;" "The Meeting Place of the New Day Pilgrims;" "Toomer's Bottom;" "Hope Baptist Church." It was performed at the Lyric Theater in New York (213 W. 42nd St.); the theater became a movie house in 1934 after a string of flops.

43 Letter to Alain Locke, October 29, 1934, quoted in C. Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.321.

44 Norman Bel Geddes was the stage designer. The New York version, with horse play and slapstick, is said to be a toned-down version of the Philadelphia production.

45 Here is Sarah Guthu's summary of the play's action: "George Sklar and Paul Peter's piece of labor agitation-propaganda (agit-prop) explored the confluence of class and racial prejudice. In the play, a white woman who threatens to expose her extramarital affair is beaten by her lover. Rather than reveal the truth—and her infidelity—the woman claims that a black man attempted to rape her. Police scour the city, picking up as many black men as they can, harassing them and putting them into lineups" ("Negro Repertory Company: Lysistrata," in *The Great Depression in Washington State Project*, Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, U of Washington, 2009, n.p.). Florence James and her husband signed for two shows with the FTP. They had worked on *In Abraham's Bosom*. See also T. Redd, "Stevedore in Seattle: A Case Study in The Politics of Presenting Race on Stage," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol.7, 1995, pp.66-87.

Noah,[46] a gospel chorus musical that had opened on April 28, 1936.[47] As Welles had relocated his *Macbeth* from Scotland to an unknown West Indian island reminiscent of the Haiti of King Christophe, Browne moved the setting of his play from Ancient Greece to the fictional African country of Ebonia (**fig.6**).

Like its Greek source, the play described how the women waged their own struggle for peace by refusing to have sex with their husbands. They went on a sex strike until the men stopped fighting wars. Sarah Guthu gives a brief description of the play whose typescript is located in the George Mason University Libraries: "Browne's adaptation stayed close to the original script, with a few alterations. He added three choral numbers, which seem to have rapidly become one of the most popular features of Negro Repertory Company productions, to the play. He eliminated the lesbian woman."[48] The production was halted after only one performance, since it

was considered too risqué; an opinion that echoes the rejection Hurston's *Lysistrata* had suffered. Dan Abel of the WPA, who had not seen the play, closed it down on the grounds that it was bawdy and indecent. Hallie Flanagan, as head of the FTP, sent her assistant, Howard Miller, to help find a solution. Browne himself assessed the situation as follows: "Instead of transgressing a generalized moral standard *Lysistrata* violated Seattle socially and ethnically coded definition of 'decency' that was tantamount to a structure of cultural and racial control."[49] The play also shut down because Franklin Roosevelt's administration did not like the change of setting that might cost him the support of Southern democrats. Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia in 1935 as part of the colonial expansion of his fascist regime that already occupied Libya, Eritrea, and Somaliland—countries that thus constituted Italy's African colonies.

New York *Living Newspaper* project's recent production of *Ethiopia* had been censored and rapidly shut down for the same reason.[50] The Seattle Negro Repertory Theater may have also been the victim of dissentions between the Federal Theater Project and the WPA, as the following comment makes clear:[51]

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46 The play ran from April 28 to July 8, 1936.

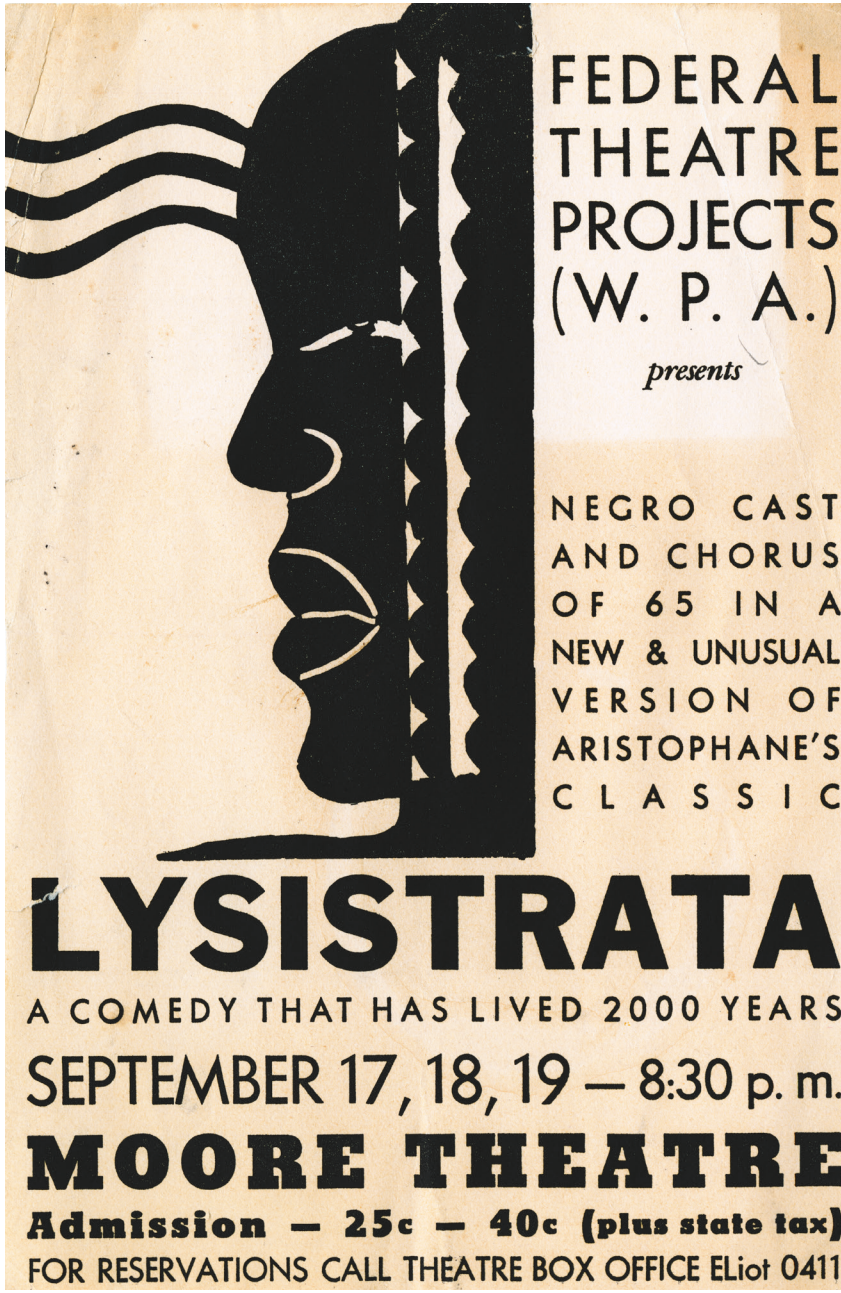
47 The play was performed at the Lafayette Theater from October 7 to November 28, 1936.

48 S. Guthu, "Negro Repertory," art. cit.

49 Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theater*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003, p.328.

50 Arthur Arent, "'Ethiopia:' The First 'Living Newspaper'," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol.20, no.1, March 1968 (20th Century American Theater Issue), pp.15-31.

51 The printed program of *How Long Brethren?* clearly states that the opinions of the play are not those of the WPA.



6. Poster of Theodore Browne's *Lysistrata*, Moore Theater
(courtesy of the University of Washington Library Special Collections division, Florence Bean James Papers [accession #2117-001, Box 6, Folder 11]).

The hierarchies of power between the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Theatre Project had never been clearly delineated. The two government institutions were supposed to function independently of each other, but in practice, the FTP frequently found itself subject to the WPA, which created both national and local frictions between both programs. *Lysistrata* served to solidify the independence of the Federal Theatre Project from the WPA, but unfortunately, the Negro Repertory Company's production was sacrificed in the process.[52]

Fig. 7. Scene from Theodore Browne's *Lysistrata*
(courtesy of the University of Washington Library Special Collections division,
UW Theaters Photograph Collection [PH Collection #236, Box 4, Folder 13])

As Lena Hill's comparative analysis of Browne's and Hurston's plays shows, what stands at the core of both works is the "complicated nature of black playwrights' turning to Greek humor on the 1930s stage."[53] The critic explains that Aristophanes' comedy is not devoid of political commentary. It is precisely that aspect that both black

52 S. Guthu, "Negro Repertory," art. cit.

53 Lena Hill, "A New Stage of Laughter for Zora Neale Hurston and Theodore Browne: Lysistrata and the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project," in Kathryn Bosher, Fiona Macintosh, *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, New York, Oxford UP, 2015, chapter 18.

playwrights transferred to their adaptations. Houseman recalls in his autobiography that Hurston's play had as its setting "a Florida fishing community where the men's wives refused them intercourse until they won their fight with the canning company for a living wage."[54] This southern locale was a "natural choice" for Hurston who had been brought up and had conducted fieldwork in Florida.[55] In Loughman, an important industrial center where, at one time, four lumber cypress companies were located, a section of the Everglades Cypress Company was converted into a canning factory in 1918. A decade later, the factory was on the verge of closing down when Hurston arrived.[56] Ron West has attributed the choice of the Greek comedy to white administrators projecting their Marxist political agendas on the black companies.[57] Yet Hurston's adaptation of Aristophanes might also follow from her own education and love of the classics. She mentions a book of Greek and Roman myths sent her by white ladies when she was a child, and cites Pluto and Persephone, in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.[58] Moreover, she took courses in the Greek and Latin classics at Howard. Although Hurston was a staunch anti-communist, her rendering of rural life is not exempt from political consciousness. Her transcription of folk life as it is, and specifically of black speech, with hardly any commentary by a narrator, leaves room for the reader and the spectator's assessment of power relations at these rural labor locations.

Hill sees Browne as using his play to address the 1930s African American socio-political reality. His Lysistrata is politically conscious as opposed to her friend and neighbor Calonice who accepts negative feminine traits while she is not entirely depicted in a comic way. Lysistrata appeals to female solidarity and stresses patriotism but, since the references to Ebonia are not specific, they allow the audience to substitute America for Ebonia. The play consequently turns into satire. Browne's *Lysistrata* places the urban-rural tension at the center of the debate and establishes a number of links with Welles's Voodoo *Macbeth* through allusions. Blacks living in urban areas looked down on recently arrived blacks as a result of the Great Migration. Hill cites three other arguments to prove her point as to the topicality of the adaptation. First, the context of sociologist Robert E. Park's work on African Americans who had migrated to the city.[59] The play can be

54 J. Houseman, *Run-Through*, *op. cit.,* p.205.
55 L. Hill, "A New Stage," art cit.
56 T.R. Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*, p.132.
57 See Ron West, "Others, Adults, Censors: The Federal Theater Project Black Lysistrata Cancellation," *Theater Survey*, vol.37, 1996, pp.93-113.
58 Z.N. Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, op. cit, p.47 and 53.
59 See Robert Park, *The City* (1925), Chicago, Chicago UP, 1984.

seen as stating that women are fit to hold political roles; they can also be concerned by war since they provide the cannon fodder. Second, the play makes references to the racist stereotypes of the Reconstruction. Third, some of the dialogue brought home to theatergoers the fact that whites discouraged black education. This element features in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, a work that would have been known to the audience. Hill quotes a folktale from *Mules and Men* as further proof of the match between the Greek comedy and African American folklore. Indeed, in her collection of folklore, Hurston reports Mathilda's story that illustrates why women always take advantage of men.[60] Moreover, as the power dynamics of gender relations on the lumber camps attests, an aspect Hurston chronicled in *Mules and Men*, women held their own; as well as men, they were embroiled in fights and murders. Therefore representing them in a powerful role was also faithful to the reality of their lives and character. These women fought to bring to an end the oppression of their men in exploitative labor relations. Added to the theme of social justice, one may indeed conjecture that Hurston's depiction of powerful black women in her *Lysistrata* was reason enough for the rejection of her play. It is also in-fitting with the consistent feminist thread of her output, Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being the model of the free black woman.

SPUNK AND THE FLORIDAN WORKING CAMPS: RURAL MELODRAMAS

Hurston's choice of a fishermen's village for the setting of her *Lysistrata* fits the location of her play *Spunk*. It also calls forth the working camps that are the settings of Smith and Morrel's 1936 *Turpentine* and of her own later *Polk County*. Such locales were thus familiar to and a source of inspiration for black playwrights. A rewriting of her 1925 short story that was set in an all-black Florida rural town, Hurston's *Spunk* is a mixture of song, chants and ballads, dance, music, and dramatic elements. It was never produced. It is replete with folk elements taken from her fieldwork: she incorporates in the original story line of romance, jealousy, harrowing manual labor and tragedy, a toe party,[61] croquet matches, lining songs, and hoodoo rites. Sections of *Spunk*—notably the musical and dance interludes—may also have been staged as part of *The Great Day*

60 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op. cit.*, pp.35-39.

61 In *Mules and Men*, Hurston has one of the men she meets explain to her what is a toe party: "[...] they hides all de girls behind a curtain and you stick out yo' toe. [...] when all de toes is in a line, sticking out from behind de sheet they let the men folks in and they looks over all de toes and buys de ones they want for a dime. Then they got to treat de lady dat own dat toe to everything she want." (*Ibid.*, p.20.)

and *From Sun to Sun*. If *Spunk* had been produced, it would have been a fine example of how genuine elements from black folklore could be incorporated in a dramatic production of the "real Negro theater." However, the play's ending differs significantly from the original story that closes on the tragic death of the main protagonist, killed by one of the saws. The play's couple, Spunk and Evelina, can live together; it is the rival, not the lover, who dies. The change in plot might have been triggered by censorship or/and self-censorship, a happy ending, less politically charged, being deemed more suitable for the stage.

Fishermen and their wives inspired Hurston, as did her native Eatonville, but she was also drawn, as an anthropologist, to the lives of manual workers in rural sawmills, lumber or turpentine camps. J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell's *Turpentine*, produced in June 1936, bears comparison with Hurston's own production. Its subtitle, as it appears on the playbill, was "A Tale of Florida Pine Forests" (**fig.8 and 9**).

It was supposed to have been the first play put together by the Negro Unit. A play in three acts and ten scenes, it depicts the mistreatment of workers in the turpentine labor camps of Florida. *The New York Times* review of the play reads as follows:

> The authors—J.A. Smith and Peter Morell—have taken as their people the workers of a turpentine camp in Central Florida. It is a story of the subjection of the black to the white, and a plea for equality. The workers are starving, underpaid, harshly treated: unionization is the only s solution and so they seize it. As played at the Lafayette much of "Turpentine" is exciting as melodrama and just as much is moving as social document.[62]

The play was a huge production with more than eighty cast members; it stopped, however, after sixty-two performances.[63] Hurston had spent much time collecting the work songs of the men in the various labor camps she visited in the twenties. She eventually recorded them.[64] Much later, in 1944, her play *Polk County: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with Authentic Negro Music in Three Acts with Dorothy Waring*, resembles, at least in terms of its setting and its theme, Smith and Morrell's production. The issue as to whether Hurston was influenced by that play remains unresolved.[65] Hurston had travelled to Polk County and visited sawmills, lumber

62 Quoted in Kathleen M. Newman, *Radio Active*, Berkeley, U of California P, 2004, p.70.

63 Br.M. Conforth, *African American Folksong, op. cit.,* p.150.

64 "Wake Up, Jacob," vocals with hammering by Z.N. Hurston at Federal Music Project Office, Jacksonville, FL, on June 18, 1939 (audio recording).

65 The authors of the anthology of Hurston's collected plays also make this rapprochement (see Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, "Introduction," in Z.N. Hurston, *Collected Plays*, *op. cit.,* n.24, p.xxxi).

8. J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell's *Turpentine* at the New Lafayette Theatre, New York, 1936 (poster retrieved from the Library of Congress)

9. J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell, *Turpentine*, New York, 1936
(booklet retrieved from the Library of Congress)

and turpentine camps in 1928. She returned to Florida ten years later in May 1938 as a junior interviewer for the Federal Writer's Project.[66] During that later stay, she went to Cross City in Dixie County, Florida, to interview workers of the Aycock and Lindsay turpentine camp. Turpentine camps were isolated and known for their terrible working conditions and abuses. Her essay traces her travel on horseback through the pine forests with foreman John McFarlin, who explains to her that turpentine workers, unlike sawyers, no longer create songs:

> "No, Ma'am. they don't make up many songs. The boys used to be pretty ad [sic] about making up songs but they don't do that now."
> "If you don't make up songs while you are working, don't you all make some up round the jook?"
> "[No Ma'am], its like I told you. Taint like saw-mills and such like that. Turpentine woods is kind of lonesome."[67]

Hurston goes on to describe the trade and the different tasks peformed by the workers as accurately as possible.

The setting of *Polk County* is not a turpentine camp, but a sawmill. Hurston drew her characters for her play from the man and the woman, Lucy and Big Sweet, she had met at the lumber camp in Loughman in 1928. The character of Leafy Lee is a fictionalized version of Hurston herself and the play stages an episode that she had already related in *Mules and Men*, her attack and near escape.[68] The material of the play had also appeared in *De Turkey and de Law*, *Mule Bone*, *Spunk*, and *Their Eye Were Watching God*. Large sections of *Mules and Men* and of *Dust Tracks* indeed contain the same elements slightly transformed to fit their different format. She also used almost verbatim a dialogue from Act 3 of *Mule Bone* in *Their Eyes were Watching God*.[69] Such recycling is the hallmark of Hurston's creativity in its relation to black

66 After that stint in New York, she continued working for the WPA: as part of the WPA Florida Unit, two productions of her folklore were staged in 1939 under the title of *The Fire Dance*. Her writings have been collected in the following volume: *ead*., *Go Gator and Muddy the Water*, ed. Pamela Bordelon, New York, Norton, 1999.

67 *Id*., "Turpentine – Camp-Cross City," State Library of Florida, Stetson Kennedy Florida Folklife Collection, 1935-1991, Series 1585.

68 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, *op. cit.,* p.147; and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *op. cit*, pp.189-191.

69 In this scene, Jim and Dave engage in a courtship ritual, trying to outdo each other to win Daisy's favors, see Claudine Raynaud, "Signifyin' (on) Modernism: The Jagged Harmony of Their Eyes Were Watching God," *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol.154, no.1, 2018, pp.33-49.

expressive culture; it also illustrates her technique that consists, in the same gesture, in tampering as little as she can with the material. In so doing, she crosses generic and disciplinary borders. On the stage, one can argue, even more than on the page, the issue of authenticity, mediated by the black actors' performance and live presence, was at the forefront: black actors performed black lives.

Hurston's brief work with the FTP and the correspondence it entertains with other contemporary FTP plays allow us to draw certain conclusions. She carried on working along the lines that were hers: *i.e.* an inclusion of genuine elements of sundry black cultural practices (folklore, songs, music). That she failed to have her play *Lysistrata* produced can fall within the same pattern as other productions that were also caught in the crossfire of the conflicts between the WPA and the FTP. In addition, the radicalism of some of the plays of the Negro Units would have been at odds with her political beliefs. Her plays can nonetheless be seen as social documents of sorts. As most critics have argued since the 1980s[70] in a reappraisal of her work and statements, portraying the Negro "farthest down"[71] in his own words and highlighting the artistic expression (dance, song, music) and verbal talent of her people, in short being true to black culture, was also a political statement. The productions of the Negro Units in the 1930s show that she was not alone in thinking of putting the life of ordinary black workers, their folklore and their artistic productions on stage. Had she not been drawn in the direction of fieldwork at the moment when she integrated the New York Negro Unit, that environment might have been supportive, if extremely competitive and run through racial and ideological tensions. Playwright *and* anthropologist, Hurston wanted to combine both callings in her own version of a living *and* lived theater.

70 See *inter alia*, Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Ritual and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, Washington, Howard, 1996; T.R. Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston*, *op. cit.*

71 Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in C. Wall (ed.), *Zora Neale Hurston, op. cit.*, p.839.

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NOTICE

Claudine Raynaud, Professor of American Studies at Paul-Valéry University Montpellier 3, has taught in England (Birmingham and Liverpool) and the United States (Michigan, Northwestern and Oberlin). A Fellow at the Du Bois Institute (Harvard, 2005), she was vice president of the CEAA, has headed GRAAT, EAA (Tours), and has worked at the CNRS (ITEM). She is the author of *Toni Morrison: l'esthétique de la survie* (1996) and numerous articles on black autobiography (Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, Lorde, Angelou), Joyce and feminist theory. Her most recent publications are: *Troubled Legacies: Heritage/Inheritance in Minority American Literatures* (2015); *The Self as Other in Minority American Life Writing* (2019); "French Baldwin (on Screen): *le criminel artiste*," in *Of Latitudes Unknown: James Baldwin's Radical Imagination* (2019); "Breathing Statues, Stone Sermons, Pastoral Trails: Memorializing Truth," in *Traces and Memories of Slavery in the Atlantic* (2019); "The Uses of Enchantment: Instances of Magic Realism in Morrison's Later Writing," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magic Realism in the Twenty-First Century* (2020). She translated Sojourner Truth's *Narrative* (PURH) in 2017.

ABSTRACT

Short-lived and poorly documented, Zora Neale Hurston's work within the New York Negro Unit deserves to be examined in the context of the Negro Units. That environment throws light on her own dramatic and novelistic output, as well as the concerts or musical theater she produced. In 1935, Hurston joined the "Negro Unit" of the WPA's Federal Theater Project in New York, based at the Lafayette Theatre, as a "drama coach," to work on the production of *Walk Together Chillun* and asked to write a black folk adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that was never produced. The manuscript did not survive. Theodore Browne (Seattle Negro Unit) staged a production also titled *Lysistrata* (1937) while J.A. Smith and Peter Morrell's *Turpentine* (1936) bears comparison with Hurston's 1944 *Polk County*. Even if her stay at the Negro Unit was cut short, her desire to have her folklore material and her plays brought to the stage is reverberated by that environment.

Keywords

Zora Neale Hurston, Federal Theater Project, Negro Unit, African American art, Staged folklore, Musical theater, *Lysistrata*

RÉSUMÉ

Le travail de Zora Neale Hurston au sein de la *Negro Unit* new-yorkaise, bref et peu documenté, doit être étudié dans le contexte des *Negro Units*. Cet environnement éclaire sa propre production théâtrale et romanesque, tout comme les concerts et le théâtre musical qu'elle a réalisés. En 1935, Hurston rejoignit la *Negro Unit* new-yorkaise, basée au théâtre La Fayette, du *Federal Theatre Project* de la *Works Progress Administration* en tant que « conseillère en art dramatique » pour travailler à la production de *Walk Together Chillun* et écrire une adaptation du *Lysistrata* d'Aristophane, transposée au folklore noir américain : la pièce ne fut cependant jamais montée et le manuscrit n'a pas survécu. Theodore Browne (*Seattle Negro Unit*) mit en scène une pièce qui a également pour titre *Lysistrata* (1937) tandis que *Turpentine* (1936) de J.A. Smith et Peter Morrell peut être comparé à la pièce de Hurston, *Polk County* (1944). Malgré son passage éclair dans le *Negro Unit* de New York, son désir de mettre en scène le matériau du folklore noir et ses pièces de théâtre trouve un écho dans cet environnement.

Mots-clés

Zora Neale Hurston, *Federal Theatre Project*, *Negro Unit*, art afro-américain, Folklore au théâtre, Théâtre musical, *Lysistrata*

CRÉDITS PHOTO

VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip adresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, «Mr. Neil's Barn»The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

QUATRIÈME PARTIE

FIGURES FÉMININES ET PROCESSUS DE LÉGITIMATION

E-THEATRUM MUNDI

Collection dirigée par Julie Vatain-Corfdir & Sophie Marchand

La collection « e-Theatrum Mundi » considère le théâtre sous tous ses angles et dans tous ses états. Dans la continuité de la collection papier à laquelle elle est adossée, elle se veut un lieu de réflexion sur les diverses manifestations d'expression théâtrale à travers le monde, et rassemble des travaux de recherche sur l'écriture, le jeu, les pratiques et les formes scéniques, la mise en scène et le spectateur. Sa particularité est de proposer uniquement des volumes interdisciplinaires, en lien avec le Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires sur le théâtre et les pratiques scéniques de Sorbonne Université (PRITEPS), dont elle reflète les activités. En croisant les angles d'approche, la collection vise à provoquer des confrontations fructueuses entre les scènes, les langues et les méthodologies, dans le domaine des études théâtrales.

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Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

American Dramaturgies for the 21st Century
Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

Une œuvre en dialogue. Le théâtre de Michel-Jean Sedaine
Judith le Blanc, Raphaëlle Legrand & Marie-Cécile Schang-Norbelly (dir.)

American Musicals
Stage and screen/L'écran et la scène
Anne Martina & Julie Vatain-Corfdir (dir.)

La Haine de Shakespeare
Élisabeth Angel-Perez & François Lecercle (dir.)

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