

# The Politics of Black Joy



# The Politics of Black Joy

*Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism*



Lindsey Stewart



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS  
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Copyright © 2021 by Northwestern University. Published 2021 by Northwestern University Press. All rights reserved.

Northwestern University Press  
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

Copyright © 2021 by Northwestern University. Published 2021 by Northwestern University Press. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stewart, Lindsey (Lindsey L.), author.

Title: The politics of Black joy : Zora Neale Hurston and neo-abolitionism / Lindsey Stewart.

Description: Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021009869 | ISBN 9780810144132 (paperback) | ISBN 9780810144118 (cloth) | ISBN 9780810144125 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Hurston, Zora Neale—Criticism and interpretation. | African American philosophy. | Joy—Political aspects—Southern States. | Joy—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC B947.A37 S74 2021 | DDC 191.08996073—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021009869>

*To Cheryl A. Wall, whose mentorship and  
scholarship showed me the way*



## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	<i>ix</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	
The Trouble of Black Southern Joy	1
<b>Scene 1</b>	
“I Ain’t Thinkin’ ’Bout You”	27
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
“Sing[ing] a Song to the Morning”: The Politics of Joy	29
<b>Scene 2</b>	
“The Past and the Future Merge to Meet Us Here”	45
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
“An Object of Pity”: Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Rise of Abolitionism	47
<b>Scene 3</b>	
“She Don’t Gotta Give It Up, She Professional”	67
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
“Tak[ing] the Indian Position”: Hurston within and against the Abolitionist Tradition	69
<b>Scene 4</b>	
“Slay Trick, or You Get Eliminated”	95
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
“Winning [Our] War from Within”: Moving beyond Resistance	97
<b>Conclusion</b>	
The Politics of Joy in the Time of the Coronavirus	117
Notes	125
Bibliography	181
Index	195





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people to thank. Thanks to the time and energy and love that many of the faculty at Calvin College showed this highly inquisitive student during their years as an undergraduate student. Thanks to the faculty at Pennsylvania State University who managed to make a philosopher out of me, despite the odds. And thanks to the faculty at Wellesley College for their generosity of time and spirit in helping me to get the mentoring and intellectual stimulation I needed—and a special thanks to Mary Kate McGowan for arranging our monthly feminist studies meetings with yummy treats! Many thanks to the students and faculty of the University of Memphis, who have provided a wonderful environment for me to continue my work on Black southern life. Thanks especially to my student, Jasper St. Bernard, for his help in editing the first draft of this manuscript.

Thanks to the many Black women in the professional discipline of philosophy who went before me and mentored me, both near and far: Kathryn Sophia Belle, Kristie Dotson, Denise James, Anita Allen, Kris Sealey, Devonya Havis, Jacqueline Scott, and Denise Melton. Also, many thanks to my Black feminist colleagues who have encouraged, pushed, and sustained me on this journey: Axelle Karera, Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou, Tempest Henning, Imani Perry, Cynthia Greenlee, Kameelah Martin, Kinitra D. Brooks, Birgitta Johnson, Alexandria Smith, and Regina Bradley. And thanks very much to the group that participated in the feminist research seminar on Beyoncé at the University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender for lively and fruitful conversations about *Lemonade*.

None of this would have been possible without the steadfast support of my family, friends, and wonderful husband, Danny J. Smith. Thanks to you all for your patience, energy, time, and love.



## Introduction



# The Trouble of Black Southern Joy

Finally, in this long trek through three hundred years of Black life, there was joy, which is what I mostly remember. The part of our lives that was spent neither on our knees nor hanging from trees.

—Toni Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History”

The red beans were in a salad. As I stared at the cold, dry beans in a diffident salad bar at a typical college cafeteria up North, I could not fathom why they had not been slowly simmered in their own sauce, as I was accustomed. Back in Louisiana. Truth be told, it was not until that moment that I truly understood that the South was not the whole world. And as I moved through various halls and classrooms, coffee shops and dinner parties, I learned, soon enough, that “the South” was instead a world of paradoxical meanings for those I encountered. Although many northerners, Black and white, heartily agreed that there was surely good food and good times to be had “down South,” it was also simultaneously assumed that Black life down here is ultimately untenable.<sup>1</sup> These paradoxes were present when a white professor politely accused me of cheating on an essay, saying “I just had to meet you because you wrote this excellent essay *and* you come all the way from Louisiana.” The paradoxes were present in the exotic excitement of colleagues when they learned I was from Louisiana and in the disappointment that crowded their faces as soon as I gracefully declined to tell them horror stories of Hurricane Katrina. They were present when Black northern friends would tell me all about their grandmama’s pound cakes that filled their dreams and the Mississippi police cars that fueled their nightmares. In many of these interactions, I found myself relying upon ways of evasion that I had learned growing up: feigning bewilderment, downplaying pain, or pretending not to know much about the things they asked after. I didn’t know why I didn’t want to give them these stories. It’s not as if I didn’t have these stories to tell. What I did know was that I ought to reject the pity they slid toward me, even when it was hidden behind apparent praise. This pity attached to Black southern life made it difficult to assert the joy that Toni

Morrison mentions in the epigraph, the joy that had sustained my life, my mother's, and her mother's in the face of many toils and troubles we endured "down South."

These paradoxical views of "the South" are deeply rooted in our national imaginary. In our schools, media, and national stories, Black life in the South is sometimes pitched as so devastating that no one would ever seriously entertain the thought of living here. At the same time, Black life in the South is also rendered in nostalgic terms, as the "good old days" or a place to have a "real good time." On the one hand, the South is presented as the site of Black tragedy, bearing the brunt of the nation's sin of racism. On the other hand, the South is often portrayed as a land of Black enchantment, as the hub and home of much-celebrated Black cultural products, such as our food, music, and dance traditions. However, the type of joy that Morrison speaks about cannot be captured by such schemas of devastation or nostalgia, tragedy or enchantment. Although the South burgeons through and through with racism, our oppression is not so totalizing that it chokes out every tender shoot of Black joy. And that Black joy cannot be reduced to the truncated versions served up to tourists in Popeye's commercials, Bourbon Street parades, and voodoo dolls. I know this because of my own upbringing.

To be sure, my upbringing included some experiences that my northern friends assumed. I remember the jolt of being called a "nigger" by a small white boy in my youth. He'd launched the word at me without either of us knowing what it truly meant, but we knew sure enough that it was not a thing to be said. And once he had said it, he got the results he wanted. I ceased to play with the little white girl he had boldly deemed to be his "girlfriend." I also remember the fear that gripped me when my mother took me to a barbecue shop that was, unofficially, whites only. Upon our entrance, I immediately sensed our unwelcome in the frowns that graced those in the restaurant. When we reached the front counter to order, we were asked if we were "sure [we] didn't want to go around back to wait." My mother was a study in stubbornness and refused to budge, even as I begged her to let us leave without staying for the food we had ordered. I was too young to understand why she stayed put, but I was old enough to be afraid for our welfare. I shook with fear in the backseat of our car the whole way home.

But the place where I grew up was also shaped in ways that extended beyond the tragic stereotypes my northern friends imagined. My childhood was largely spent crisscrossing the Mississippi River to spend time with my maternal grandfather in Darrow, Louisiana, and my maternal grandmother (or *maman* as we call them) in Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Both are largely Black communities situated between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Both have rich, complicated histories that are not simply ones of Black death and devastation. Sporting the largest free Black population outside of New Orleans during slavery as well as the first Black mayor (in the nation) during Reconstruction, Donaldsonville especially has a legacy of Black political

agency, cultivated in the heart of the “sugar parish,” that often gets eclipsed by our assumptions of Black devastation in the South.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, my upbringing is sown with scenes of Black joy. The simply sinful spread of crawfish, corn, and potatoes under the oaks in my grandfather’s yard as my extended family ate and ate until the cicadas chimed in with our music late in the evening. Birthday horse rides at the stable of my great-uncle, the (self-proclaimed) first Black cowboy in Ascension Parish. The glee my *maman* exhibited when she searched newspapers for dear, dead friends, eager to participate in the veneration of the dead through celebratory “homegoing” rituals. The seriousness with which my *maman* delivered a bit of wisdom when I was frightened by her beloved horror films: “it’s not the dead you have to fear, but the living.” The hushed tones with which my mother informed me that my *maman* had only seen a “hoodoo woman” once and how that woman “sure did fix” a loved one. Above all, I had a fierce sense that what I witnessed and participated in could not be reduced to merely a reaction against the racism that brands this region in our national imagination. In fact, I was acutely aware of how much of our everyday lives seemed to not revolve around white folks.

While some might not deny that such experiences of Black joy in the South exist, many remain wary of the political uses of Black southern joy in our national, public sphere. Black southern joy, for instance, was once used to justify our enslavement. Slave masters pointed to singing slaves as if a sliver of joy meant that we were content with our oppression. Used in this way, Black joy was reduced to enchantment, stripped of its critical power, and fashioned as the romance of Black life in the South. Though it is less often used to bolster an argument for slavery these days, Black joy in the South is still sometimes used against us. This can be seen in how a narrative of Black southern enchantment is frequently spun to evade the civil rights movement’s demands for political inclusion and recognition in our institutions across the nation.

Consider the tourism narratives (or curated national stories) of post-civil rights New Orleans. As Lynnell Thomas notes, the inclusion of Black culture in current New Orleans tourist narratives is largely due to pressure from the civil rights movement. During the civil rights movement in south Louisiana, local African Americans lobbied for more inclusion in public stories about the region. The irony, however, is that Black southern “culture” came to be widely celebrated in the post-civil rights public sphere, even as Black communities continued to struggle with forms of institutional racism.<sup>3</sup> As such, these tourist narratives began to overrepresent Black southern culture in the national public sphere while also “displac[ing] and distort[ing] the political and moral project of the civil rights movement.”<sup>4</sup> That is, the tourist industry (and, I would say, the national public sphere more broadly) answered the political demand for inclusion merely symbolically, not institutionally. The tourist industry included rosy stories of Black southerners in the brochures

and tours as if Black faces in pamphlets would absolve the insidious legacy of slavery. To tell the story in this way makes it look as if the disparities in wealth and health that Black New Orleanians are still facing is due to their own accord, not the racist institutions that persist in the nation. For Thomas, this is how the tourist industry in New Orleans could market the “desire” for a nostalgic southern past of Black culture, while also denouncing the current Black population of New Orleans as a zone of “disaster.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Black southern culture came to be heralded, even as Black southerners continue to be looked down upon nationally.

It’s a curious tension: the vast celebration of Black southern culture right alongside wide pronouncements of the political devastation of the Black people who continue to live here. This dialectic of Black enchantment and Black tragedy can be seen in both popular culture and the academy. In both arenas, Black southern culture is often teased apart from Black emancipatory politics, so that Black southerners are rendered artistically enchanting but (ultimately) politically tragic. For instance, a celebration of Black southern culture can be seen in the public fervor over Beyoncé Knowles’s visual album, *Lemonade*. Many have devoted much analysis to the rich, jubilant allusions to Black southern culture in this visual album. Many have also praised Beyoncé’s stances on Black politics in snippets of the album—such as her references to Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and Black Lives Matter. However, in popular culture, the connection between Beyoncé’s Black southern joy and her progressive politics is more ambiguous, even tenuous. Considering a political climate in which overrepresentations of southern Black culture are used to temper complaints of racial injustice, some question the motives behind Beyoncé’s engagement with southern Black culture. Some suggest that Beyoncé’s engagement with southern Black culture simply reflects her shrewdness as a capitalist; as such, her album is not the pro-Black or Black feminist anthem it is frequently taken to be.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this way, Beyoncé’s engagement with southern Black culture is mere commodification, rather than the wellspring from which her Black emancipatory politics issues.

While there is some value to this critique, it also reminds us that there is a deep reluctance to link southern Black culture with Black emancipatory politics in the public sphere. Perhaps this reticence can be seen more starkly in the shock that northern white liberals displayed at the recent election of Alabamian Democratic Senator Doug Jones, which was brought about largely by southern Black women’s votes.<sup>7</sup> As Cynthia Greenlee observes, “the surprise and awe of Americans over the Alabama outcome reinforces the ludicrous notion that Black Southerners have been out here twiddling our thumbs and waiting for the liberation bus to stop in Dixie.”<sup>8</sup> The shock reveals the assumption that we lack political agency. As such, Greenlee rightly criticizes those who assume “that Black Alabamians have been ground into passive dust by the potent and public racism for which their home state has long been known—and were going to be MIA at the polls.”<sup>9</sup>

We can also see this tension in the academic recovery of Zora Neale Hurston's work in the 1980s and 1990s. Although initially erased from her place in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston has largely been recovered by Black feminists since Alice Walker's 1975 essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" in *Ms.* magazine. And in the 1980s and 1990s, Hurston's work came to be widely celebrated. For example, her work on Black southern culture became integral to academic curriculums in high schools and colleges.<sup>10</sup> As Hazel Carby notes in "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," this ecstatic celebration of Hurston and Black southern culture in the 1980s and 1990s occurred alongside the further entrenchment of institutional racism in our communities. In this fashion, Hurston was used in school curriculums to increase Black representation, even as racism stubbornly persisted in those very same institutions. Especially in the South, where some were working to present a "new" image of the region as one that had learned from and been strengthened by its history of violent racial strife.

Like Beyoncé's reception in popular culture, the connection between Hurston's southern Black joy and her progressive politics in academic scholarship is ambiguous, and much more tenuous. Although Hurston is widely celebrated for her contributions to southern Black culture, her racial politics have a more complicated legacy. So complicated that we often shirk going near it. There have been few book-length treatments of Hurston's expository work devoted to tracing her development as a philosophical and political theorist of race.<sup>11</sup> Her essays have especially been undertheorized. Perhaps this is because, in her essays, her commitment to southern Black joy caused her to take political positions that put her out of step with her contemporaries, such as her public denunciation of the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools.<sup>12</sup>

Due to these (often vexing) polemical stances, Hurston's theoretical contributions to racial politics have often been rendered murky, at best, or dismal, at worst.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in her 1978 essay "Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," Barbara Smith introduced an important distinction to facilitate the recovery of Hurston's politics. Smith showed that Hurston's fictional works exhibited a "sexual politics" that informed intra-racial rather than interracial politics.<sup>14</sup> This was an important point to make in the larger context of debates about Black liberation. For during this time, Hurston became a powerful symbol of the intra-racial gender politics that often got erased in appeals to a Black nationalist agenda or models of Black power.<sup>15</sup> This method of recovery was also highly successful; we would not have so much of Hurston's work available to us without it. And since Hurston's recovery in the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a proliferation of works devoted to further developing the intra-racial, and especially feminist, politics in her literature and folklore material. However, this tactic of recovery included conceding to Hurston's critics that some of her interracial political views were tragically mistaken, even if we were sympathetic to the logic behind those views.<sup>16</sup>

There is some benefit in placing Hurston and Beyoncé side by side in this discussion. The two have striking similarities. With strong connections to the blueswoman tradition, both are invested in creating a southern Black aesthetic, especially one with ties to the Gulf Coast region.<sup>17</sup> And although Hurston and Beyoncé are separated by long decades of Black political movements, racial gains in the public sphere, and radical shifts in society due to legal desegregation, there remain strong similarities regarding both the conditions of Black life and their use of Black affect in the public sphere. For instance, both in Hurston's time and Beyoncé's own, violence against Black and brown peoples often still proceeds without legal repercussions. And while Jim Crow legally expired with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it has been resurrected through the mass incarceration of Black and brown peoples since the 1970s. The most salient similarity for us is how Hurston and Beyoncé both insist upon performing southern Black joy in the public sphere. Their magnum opuses, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Lemonade*, have both faced criticism on this score, due to concerns over the dangers of publicly performing Black joy amid our oppression.<sup>18</sup> While their critics may appreciate the role of Black joy in Black liberation, some remain reluctant to elevate southern Black joy to an emancipatory political tradition. Much like the erotic and deeply gendered, southern Black joy has come to be devalued in Black political discourses.

### The Dialectic of Black Enchantment and Black Tragedy

The political devaluation of southern Black joy has its roots in an emancipatory Black political tradition that mandates an emphasis on our racial oppression in the public sphere. This political tradition is one that stretches back to the abolitionist movement, where the suffering of the enslaved was used to prove the moral reprehensibility of slavery. During the antebellum-abolitionist period, we were right to be wary of how some fashioned southern Black joy into an argument for our enslavement. And we are right to remain wary of how this argument continues to be used: when the celebration of Black southern culture in the public sphere becomes a way to evade addressing structural oppression. However, there is an important insight that gets lost in all our wariness of southern Black joy. In our haste to rid the public sphere of southern Black joy, we miss the danger in confining our stories to racial sorrow. Put another way, we miss how the aesthetic exaltation of Black southern culture and the political depreciation of Black southern agency, the displays of Black enchantment and Black tragedy, are linked. Certainly, the overrepresentation of Black southern culture can be used to bolster racism. But so too can the reduction of Black life to the oppression we face, which constitutes a severe underrepresentation of our agency. While we have become savvy at noting how Black joy is used to uphold racial oppression by



our opponents, we are less apt to diagnose how the racism of our liberal allies is fed by stories of our abjection as well.

Grappling with the political effects of southern Black joy, assessing when and how it might be useful in the public sphere, means revisiting the context in which the dialectic of Black southern enchantment and tragedy first emerged: the abolitionist's staging of Black sorrow and the minstrel's show of Black joy. As a dialectic, there is an underlying logic that holds the two positions together in tension. Namely, there is shared anxiety about how whites perceive the inner lives of Blacks. Moreover, both sides share a presumption that Black life is tragic without white intervention. On the part of the slave owners, Black life is seen to be tragic without the "civilizing" benefits or forced "guidance" of enslavement. On the part of the abolitionists, Black life is seen to be tragic without northern, white political intervention to secure our emancipation. It seems that in the end, both sides are deeply afraid that when you cut open the hearts of Black folk, you will not, as they assume, find white folks there. The abolitionist's forecast of tragedy and the minstrel's chicanery of joy continue to echo in our representations of southern Black life as well.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, due to the persistence of abolitionist discourse, Black joy in representations of southern Black life is rendered politically and morally suspect as "nostalgia" or as an evasion of Black suffering. On the other hand, due to lingering vestiges of pro-slavery southern sentiments, Black southern culture is celebrated as an achievement of racial progress, masking the way that racism persists in the nation. However, to fully delve into Hurston's contributions to racial politics and philosophy, we must be willing to wade into the uncomfortable waters of southern Black joy.

In *The Politics of Black Joy*, I develop Hurston's contributions to political theory and philosophy of race by introducing the *politics of joy* as a response to this dialectic of Black enchantment and Black tragedy. That is, I read Hurston's performances of southern Black joy in the public sphere as her way navigating the dialectic representations of southern Black life in our national imaginary, as just noted. In Hurston's treatment of southern Black joy, she lays bare the terms upon which the southern dialectic of Black tragedy and Black enchantment proceeds—centering how white folks define our lives. Her performance of joy in the public sphere refuses, rather than entertains, those terms. As a concept, the politics of joy also aims to capture the corrective that Hurston provides by bringing southern Black joy into the public sphere in this way. While both sides of the dialectic persist in our national imaginary, it is the North that won the Civil War. It was thus the northern abolitionist that got to dictate how "progressive" stories of southern Black life were told nationally. As such, Hurston's performances of southern Black joy also reveal the lingering hold of abolitionist discourse in the public sphere. In other words, her performances of southern Black joy reveal the implicit requirement of demonstrations of Black abjection for political recognition in our national public sphere.

During our own time, the political significance of Hurston's emphasis on southern Black joy is a refusal of the neo-abolitionist mandate that we emphasize sorrow in our representations of Black life. When it comes to representations of Black life, neo-abolitionism captures the impulses (or, more strongly, mandates) to emphasize sorrow and mute joy, to dial down our pleasure and turn up our pain, in pursuit of white, northern liberal allies. I use the term "neo-abolitionism" to hearken back to the abolitionist discourse that informed Black writing during the antebellum period and to shed light on the lingering abolitionist norms and rhetorical strategies in contemporary Black political discourse. The prefix "neo-" here registers that the originating condition for these strategies (slavery) has been significantly altered (upon the "emancipation" of the enslaved), while also marking the afterlife of these strategies in US public discourse.

I develop the term "neo-abolitionism" from Hurston's criticisms of abolitionist discourse in her essays. We can see Hurston taking up some of these themes in her 1938 essay "Art and Such," part of her contribution to the Florida Federal Writers' Project.<sup>20</sup> The Writers Project's vision for the essay was a history of the artistic contributions of African Americans in Florida. Perhaps out of immense frustration, Hurston instead chose to write an essay that criticized a contemporary racial politics that restricted Black art to portrayals of Black suffering. "Art and Such," along with Hurston's other writings for the Florida Federal Writers' Project, was ultimately dropped from the manuscript and left unpublished for decades. The recovery of this essay has lent much-longed-for insight into Hurston's views on art for scholars.<sup>21</sup> As Cheryl Wall remarks, the essay provides "rare and useful insights into Hurston's understanding of African American literary and artistic traditions and of herself as an artist."<sup>22</sup> Seen in this light, "Art and Such" also presents something of a puzzle to Hurston scholars. Who exactly is her target in this essay? Some scholars argue that Hurston is critiquing her fellow Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Alain Locke and Richard Wright, in the essay.<sup>23</sup> However, as Wall notes, "she does not mention the Harlem Renaissance here or anywhere in her writings. Given its subject, the omission in this essay seems especially curious."<sup>24</sup> While I agree that Locke and Wright are in the background of "Art and Such," Hurston explicitly names the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, which suggests that abolitionists are the main target of her criticism. Indeed, in this essay, Hurston attributes the mandate to center oppression in our stories of Black life to the tradition of abolitionism. As such, I aim to move scholarly discussions of Hurston's racial politics away from the Harlem Renaissance and toward the influence of abolitionism (through her refusal of it) within her writing.<sup>25</sup>

Although my development of the politics of joy and my critique of neo-abolitionism take place within the context of Hurston's racial politics, these concepts touch upon broader topics and trends in race and gender studies. For instance, many feminist and race scholars have argued that a narrow focus

on resistance has caused us to miss other modes of agency that the oppressed exhibit.<sup>26</sup> When we reduce agency to resistance, we act as if our reaction to oppression is the only thing that defines us. By reconceiving Hurston's views on race through the politics of joy, I also aim to critique the dominant trend of reducing agency under oppression to resistance. I do this not only by emphasizing the dangers of limiting our emancipatory imaginary to resistance, but also by offering other modes of agency for analysis and study, such as joy. While resistance foregrounds an oppositional relation between oppressed and oppressors, joy foregrounds a flourishing relation of the self to the self (or, in the case of Black joy, how Black folks relate to each other). In this way, my understanding of joy is like what Audre Lorde describes as the "erotic," which functions as a critical source of self-definition. The erotic, which provides "the open and fearless underlining of [our] capacity for joy," encourages us to "live from within outward" and "illuminate[s] our actions upon the world around us" so that "we are responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense."<sup>27</sup> Seen in this way, the truly erotic for Lorde, along with the Black joy which I am advocating, can become much more than naive nostalgia or exotic enchantment. Rather, Black joy can become an internal barometer by which we assess the ways our social environment inhibits or enhances our flourishing.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, this view suggests that Black joy is often reduced to minstrelsy in popular culture, similar to how the erotic is shrunk to the pornographic, precisely *because* of its potential power.<sup>29</sup>

The theorization of joy in *The Politics of Black Joy* also has strong resonances with scholars working to shift the discussion of agency under oppression from acts of resistances to practices of refusal.<sup>30</sup> In cultural anthropology, Carole McGranahan has stressed that refusal is not simply "another word for resistance."<sup>31</sup> Rather, these are distinct modes of agency. In indigenous studies (Audra Simpson) and Black feminist scholarship (Saidiya Hartman), the politics of recognition is one way that refusal is distinguished from resistance.<sup>32</sup> While resistance can, as Angela Davis argues, enable us to switch positions in the game of recognition, refusal is a rejection of the game altogether.<sup>33</sup> And that rejection is both world-breaking and world-making, both negation and generation.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the mode of agency signaled by the politics of joy cannot be captured by the category of resistance. Instead of directly protesting oppression, Hurston's emphasis on Black joy was more like a refusal to entertain the white gaze. That is, she strove to maintain an emotional indifference toward whites, relegating them to the periphery of a Black world.<sup>35</sup> Rather than actively fight against whites, she refused to pay them attention. And her refusal, I argue, exposes the terms and limits of political recognition from whites when pursued as a remedy for social injustice. In other words, Hurston's insistence upon Black joy places pressure on the public demand of Black abjection for political recognition. This allows her to raise the question that Hartman also raises in her critiques of abolitionist discourse: "for whom does one expose the [pained Black] body?"<sup>36</sup> As such,

to embrace the politics of joy is also to participate in a “refusal to offer Black suffering as the raw material of white pedagogy and enjoyment.”<sup>37</sup>

Although negative, refusal is also deeply generative because it prompts us to, as Hartman says, “produce a thought of the outside while in the inside.”<sup>38</sup> I argue that this is an important issue with which to grapple, given the resurgent popularity of the formulation of Blackness as “social death.”<sup>39</sup> Such formulations force us to ask, as Christina Sharpe does in *In the Wake*, “what exceeds the hold?”<sup>40</sup> My primary example of what may indeed exceed the hold is *root work*, those practices of conjure that Hurston analyzed as an anthropologist.<sup>41</sup> Root work is a touchstone of West African religious practices that persisted even as slavery sought to erase our cultural ties to the continent.<sup>42</sup> Root work has also been a source of innovation in the New World through its blending with Native American and European folk traditions.<sup>43</sup> For Hurston, root work is an important site for working out the politics of joy. These practices are often, in her essays, one space where Hurston can decenter whiteness or refuse the white gaze in her analyses of Black southern life. In this way, she draws upon the rich reserve of refusals that root work stores in African American culture: refusals of respectability politics, of religious patriarchy, of the state, of cultural assimilation, and even of the Black tragedy that neo-abolitionism assumes.<sup>44</sup>

*The Politics of Black Joy* develops Hurston’s theoretical contributions to racial politics primarily through her essays. Three prominent texts that have also worked through Hurston’s gender and racial politics using her essays are Deborah G. Plant’s *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom*, Susan Meisenholder’s *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick*, and Lynda Marian Hill’s *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*. Covering a wide range of Hurston’s fiction and essays, Plant incorporates Spinoza and Nietzsche into her analysis in order to situate Hurston’s “individualist philosophy.”<sup>45</sup> Contextualizing Hurston’s views on race and gender through the lens of individualism, Plant argues that Hurston’s individualism was an approach that helped her “survive systematic sexism, racism, and classism, strengthened her will to resist negative controlling images, and empowered her to overcome Anglo-American cultural hegemony.”<sup>46</sup> Criticizing previous scholarship for analyzing race and gender “in isolation from one another” in Hurston’s work, Meisenholder interprets Hurston’s writing on race and gender as “hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.”<sup>47</sup> Drawing upon Hurston’s 1943 essay “High John de Conquer,” Meisenholder’s interpretation highlights how Hurston “developed her themes from a position of racial and sexual subordination that required indirection, masking, and ambiguity too often seen simply as conventionality and conservatism.”<sup>48</sup> As such, Hurston’s written views on race and gender are more trickster than truth, relying upon “a much more subversive approach to the problem of audience, one based on a shrewd assessment of complex power relations.”<sup>49</sup> In her *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*, Hill brings together several

disciplines (anthropology, theater, literature, women's studies) to theorize Hurston's controversial views on race, culture, and class as part of verbal artistry and performance, rooted in Black cultural expressions.<sup>50</sup> After several of the above texts were published, many of Hurston's lost essays, letters, and nonfiction were published in Cheryl Wall's anthology *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, Carla Kaplan's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, Pamela Bordelon's *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project*, and, most recently, Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* edited by Plant.

My own method in *The Politics of Black Joy* has been informed by Cheryl Wall's recent *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn*, to whom this book is dedicated. Drawing upon Hurston's 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Wall further develops Hurston's concept of the "will to adorn," a register of Black aesthetics. Wall argues that African American essays as a genre also exhibit the "will to adorn," which is an "attitude towards language . . . an impulse towards embellishment, an understanding that language did more than convey information, and a commitment to beauty as a cardinal value."<sup>51</sup> I am interested in this register, "the will to adorn," because it does not fit squarely into the mode of protest writing. Adornment enables us to shift away from reactive responses and toward a kind of relation to the self that joy exhibits. During the Harlem Renaissance, this turn to adornment was related to an acute awareness of the intransigence of racism. As such, the will to adorn also reflects a pessimism toward racial politics that Black essayists felt at that time. "It was a lack of progress," Wall writes, "rather than an absence of interest that led Black leaders to concentrate on arts rather than politics."<sup>52</sup> This is important to stress, for without such racial pessimism, the southern Black joy for which Hurston advocates whittles down to the minstrel's nostalgia or Black enchantment. Hurston's essays are an especially rich site where this pessimism over political recognition and performances of ecstatic Black joy interact in ways that produce a strong dissonance with our common conceptions of racism and racial politics.<sup>53</sup> As such, in *The Politics of Black Joy*, I privilege Hurston's essays rather than her fiction in my analysis of the political dissonance that her displays of Black southern joy wreaked in the public sphere.

### The Politics of Joy

The politics of joy is rooted in the ways that Black southerners have often negotiated the dialectic outlined above: the tension arising from the simultaneous romanticizing and catastrophizing of our lives down here. In *This Ain't Chicago*, sociologist Zandria Robinson has described this negotiation as "country cosmopolitanism" which "draws on the tropes of the rural

South . . . but decenters, reconfigures, and relocates them for consumption and production in the urban South and beyond.”<sup>54</sup> When it comes to the national narrative of the “racist South,” Robinson found that many respondents performed a peculiar indifference regarding their experiences of racism, claiming not to “study” white folks.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, respondents claimed not to need to “study” white folks due to the intimate, intergenerational knowledge of racism that they have gained by living in the South.<sup>56</sup> This response of indifference enabled respondents to turn the negative associations of rural, “country” America (i.e., racism) into a positive type of “cosmopolitanism.” That is, respondents were able to turn their collective experiences of rural, southern racism into a kind of cultural, cosmopolitan capital, whereby they “claim[ed] an epistemological superiority over non-southern Blacks.”<sup>57</sup>

This performance of indifference also drew an emotional boundary, carving out a space in their inner life that whites could not determine. Put another way, respondents drew a line where white folks supposedly could not go or get to them emotionally. Robinson writes that through their indifference, or “in denying or rejecting the feeling” of the pain of racism, respondents “contended [that] they are overcoming the feeling, not letting the debilitating effects of racism take hold.”<sup>58</sup> In this way, their response of indifference plays down the pain of racism in order to “emphasize their agency.”<sup>59</sup> As a result, their performances of indifference demonstrate “a way in which [they] ha[ve] the upperhand.”<sup>60</sup> Their responses were also framed by a spiritual backdrop. Instead of “studying” white folks, they often “studied” a “higher Master.” “Regardless of their relationship to spirituality or religion, respondents draw on decidedly religious and/or spiritual language to navigate race, class, and regional tensions,” Robinson reports, and “[respondents] contend that a divine power orders their interracial steps.”<sup>61</sup> Put more strongly, the spiritual turn made possible their performance of indifference—their “studying” of spiritual matters made it possible to *not* “study” white folks.<sup>62</sup>

The respondents in Robinson’s study neither deny that racism occurs in the South (romanticize) nor affirm that racism has devastated them (catastrophe). They acknowledge that racism occurs, but they choose not to “study” it. In this way, their response of indifference maneuvers through the dialectic of Black catastrophe or Black romanticism, Black tragedy or Black enchantment, without the entanglement of either side.

This is a response that we see modeled, decades earlier, in Hurston’s essays on racial politics. For instance, Hurston feigns indifference to the pain of racism in her 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Rather than allow the racism of whites to determine her sense of self, Hurston writes that she “does not mind at all”:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature

somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.<sup>63</sup>

We can also see Hurston performing this kind of indifference in her 1943 essay “The ‘Pet Negro’ System.” In this essay, she describes how racism in the South operates very differently than racism in the North.<sup>64</sup> And yet, in a curious encounter with a northern white liberal friend, Hurston feigns ignorance of these very dynamics:

It has been so generally accepted that all Negroes in the South are living under horrible conditions that many friends of the Negro up North actually take offense if you don’t tell them a tale of horror and suffering. They stroll up to you, cocktail glass in hand, and say, “I am a friend of the Negro, you know, and feel awful about the terrible conditions down there.” That’s your cue to launch into atrocities amidst murmurs of sympathy. If, on the other hand, just to find out if they have really done their research down there, you ask, “What conditions do you refer to?” you get an injured, and sometimes a malicious, look. Why ask foolish questions?<sup>65</sup>

Rather than confirm or deny her northern white liberal counterpart’s assumption of Black racial tragedy due to southern racism, Hurston feigns indifference, throwing them off guard. When her interlocutor insists upon stories of Black calamity, Hurston simply asks, “What conditions do you refer to?” And instead of observing the social cue to provide a tale of Black southern suffering, Hurston “drag[s] in the many Negroes of opulence and education” in the South.<sup>66</sup> In this way, she redirects her interlocutor to the local conditions in the South where some African Americans have turned the “Pet Negro” system to their advantage.

As an anthropologist, Hurston also witnessed this response of indifference in her own interactions with respondents. The game she seems to be playing above is embedded in the daily negotiation of power dynamics in the South, where certain things simply cannot be said to white folks without retaliation. Hurston reports in the introduction to her 1935 *Mules and Men*:

[Respondents] are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing.<sup>67</sup>



The interaction Hurston describes is informed by a deep understanding that the playing field between whites and Blacks is not equal. Her respondents cannot simply say “no” to nosy whites here. Instead, there is a performance of indifference that limits the emotional harm that whites can invoke in this scenario. “We let the probe enter,” Hurston writes, “but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.”<sup>68</sup> Put another way, we pretend we are not bothered by or are indifferent to their probing, but we never truly answer the questions they posed in the first place. It is here that we can also see how the politics of joy diverges from a politics of recognition. The tactic described in this passage is aimed at evasion of white folks and thus relies upon a deft calculation of white *misrecognition* (or not knowing “what he is missing”). Black respondents are not attempting to facilitate true understanding and respect within the other. Instead, Black respondents ascertain that the racism of their white interlocutors undermines even the possibility of recognition. So these respondents do what it takes to make white folks “go away” instead.<sup>69</sup> In this way, this response is more about creating and preserving the inward space to “say [our] say and sing [our] song” rather than “stud’n white folks.”<sup>70</sup>

The introduction of the concept of the politics of joy, developed out of Hurston’s essays, offers us many things politically, analytically, and aesthetically. Politically, the politics of joy includes a shift toward self-determination and a shift away from the pursuit of white political recognition; a refusal of assumptions of Black southern tragedy and inferiority; and a keen awareness of racial dynamics that remain intransigent, even while Black representation in the public sphere increases. Analytically, the politics of joy offers a change in focus and perspective, from the relations between oppressed and oppressor to the intragroup relations among the oppressed. Doing so positions us to analyze how we relate to each other, not just how we relate to our oppressors. Moreover, the politics of joy encourages us to engage with the cultural practices that make self-definition possible in our analyses of agency under oppression. The guiding example for this book is practices of root work, where the difference in interpretation (joy vs. resistance) is perhaps most stark. Aesthetically, the politics of joy positions us to approach Black southern cultural expression in a way that acknowledges yet decenters the racism of white folks. It broadens our engagement with Black southern cultural practices, so that we appreciate, as Hurston put it, that “Negroes love and hate and fight and play and strive and travel and have a thousand and one interests in life like other humans.”<sup>71</sup> Rather than mine Black southern cultural expression for moments of protest, the politics of joy casts Black southern cultural expression in a different register, such as the “will to adorn,” which foregrounds the relation to the self.<sup>72</sup> This aesthetic decentering of whiteness (i.e., Black-white relations in the South) can also render more visible the knowledge production of Black southerners.<sup>73</sup> That is, rather than portray us as victims of white southern horrors, this aesthetic decentering privileges the kinds of lives we have made in spite of it.



## Neo-Abolitionism

Hurston's emphasis on southern Black joy is jarring precisely because it violates a norm of Black political representation: a show of Black sorrow. In her work, Hurston ascribes this norm to neo-abolitionism. Breaking this norm, insisting upon southern Black joy, is not only a criticism of neo-abolitionism for Hurston, but a way to lay bare its problematic foundations. As such, Hurston's emphasis on southern Black joy in the public sphere paves the way for certain questions that are often neglected in scholarship on Black liberation. That is, much of feminist and race scholarship currently focuses on analyzing the various ways that slavery lives on in our public discourse, government policies, and day-to-day practices in the United States.<sup>74</sup> Less an object of study are the negative ways that abolitionist discourse continues to inform progressive, liberal politics. Ironically, neo-abolitionism can work to further entrench racism in liberal politics rather than abolish it.

We can see this in the relationship of neo-abolitionism to Black abjection. In her 1943 essay "Negroes without Self-Pity," Hurston suggests that abolitionist discourse implicitly made Black abjection the terms of our political recognition and advancement in the national public sphere. She writes:

Look back over your shoulder for a minute. Count the years. If you take in the twenty-odd years of intense Abolitionist speaking and writing that preceded the Civil War, the four war years, the Reconstruction period and recent Negro rights agitations, you have at least a hundred years of indoctrination of the Negro that he is an object of pity.<sup>75</sup>

One way to understand Hurston's claim (i.e., that abolitionist discourse renders "the Negro" into "an object of pity") is to consider what Audra Simpson notes about the stakes of gaining political recognition from a state that continues to oppress you. In *Mohawk Interruptus*, Simpson asserts that, for Indigenous peoples in North America, there are stories that are "always being told" about them. These are stories that settler-colonial states fashion about the Indigenous and reaffirm in public discourse to normalize their oppression.<sup>76</sup> Assent to these stories that are "always being told" about them is also the terms by which such a state will recognize the Indigenous politically.<sup>77</sup> For Hurston, abolitionist discourse, too, fashioned a story that is "always being told" about African Americans, a story to which we must assent in order to gain political recognition. That story is that we are "object[s] of pity."

Consider the ways that African Americans were historically constrained in their testimonies about their enslavement. Several scholars note that the marriage of slave narratives to the abolitionist cause overdetermined these testimonies of enslavement.<sup>78</sup> As Dwight McBride notes in his *Impossible Witness*, the overdetermination of their stories put these Black writers in a double bind. On the one hand, the potency of slave narratives relied upon

their being the genuine “truth” about experiences of enslavement. On the other hand, the authenticity or “truthfulness” of such narratives was measured by how closely they aligned with the abolitionist message. In other words, these narratives were considered “authentic” narratives, or secured uptake in their northern white audience, only if they bore witness to the abolitionist cause. As such, abolitionist discourse produced constraints upon exactly what Black writers could report of their own experiences of enslavement. Under these circumstances McBride asks, “how does one negotiate the terms of slavery in order to be able to tell one’s own story?”<sup>79</sup> In a slightly different way, when a story is “always being told” about “the slave” (whereby we “know them before they even speak”), how are Black writers to tell their *own* story?<sup>80</sup> For the intelligibility of their story is conditioned upon how well they adhere to the readerly expectations of sympathetic northern whites—or, as McBride puts it, the “prophecy of abolitionist discourse.”<sup>81</sup> For these reasons, McBride argues that the position of the “slave” is that of an “impossible witness.” The “slave” must tell the “truth” about slavery, but that “truth” has already been determined by the cause of abolitionism.

And the “truth” or “prophecy” of abolitionist discourse is Black suffering. For example, in her *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman draws attention to the spectacle of Black suffering in fugitive slave narratives.<sup>82</sup> Hartman observes that the “pained” Black body often stood as a testimony to the evils of slavery in abolitionist discourse.<sup>83</sup> Drafted within the genre of sentimentalism, slave narratives rhetorically staged the suffering Black body as a way to marshal the moral sentiments of white readers.<sup>84</sup> And so, several tropes of Black tragedy were mobilized in abolitionist discourse to evoke sympathy, such as the auction block, demoralizing whippings, and the idealization of motherhood.<sup>85</sup> These tropes established certain norms of representation in abolitionist literature, so that our stories were considered “truthful” only if we adhered to an abolitionist script of Black suffering and pain. Hartman rightfully questions why pain became the terms of identification with the enslaved in abolitionist discourse, such that abolitionists demanded a show of suffering as a requisite for their recognition of our humanity.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Hartman worries that abolitionist discourse also ran the risk of naturalizing Black suffering by linking such pain to the (ontological) condition of Blackness.<sup>87</sup> Put another way, does not the very abjection that made us recognizable as humans to white abolitionists also endanger our access to the very category of human subjectivity? For if part of what it means to be a human subject is agency and a sense of autonomy, stories of Black abjection may, in effect, undermine Black claims to such agency and autonomy. The question is not whether slavery was wrong (it was) or whether we suffered under it (we did), but what happens when a show of suffering becomes a requirement for political recognition.

For instance, in his *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass is explicit about the racism he faced within the abolitionist movement.<sup>88</sup>

Douglass tells us that white abolitionists insisted that he continue to play “the slave,” even after his successful escape. Instead of being encouraged to tell his own story, Douglass’s scarred Black body was used by white abolitionists as a “text” to confirm the “truth” of their cause. This can be seen when Douglass attempted to deviate from the abolitionist script. When Douglass tried to move away from divulging painful tales of his enslavement and toward a more philosophical indictment of whites, white abolitionists balked.<sup>89</sup> Douglass was to “give [them] the facts,” white abolitionists said, and they “will take care of the philosophy.”<sup>90</sup> In other words, he is simply evidence, a “fact,” for their cause; he is not a legitimate political actor or theorist in their eyes. As long as Douglass sticks to the message they have authorized, as long as he rehearses the suffering he experienced as a slave or shows the scars on his back, his story is considered authentic, their cause legitimate.<sup>91</sup> Douglass rightly struggled against his reduction to the figure of the “slave” when he addressed abolitionist audiences.<sup>92</sup> But he found that when he resisted this image, his credibility to speak for the antislavery cause was questioned. As Douglass reports, the more his story did not match up to “all the facts” his white abolitionist audiences already held concerning the nature of “slaves,” the less credible he appeared.<sup>93</sup> In search of room to grow, Douglass eventually broke with radical white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>94</sup>

Douglass, however, did not leave behind abolitionist rhetoric and tropes. Rather, he refashioned them for his own purposes. Consider, for example, his interpretation of Negro spirituals in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and My Bondage and My Freedom*. Jon Cruz argues that Douglass was responsible for a cultural shift in the interpretation of Black song-making. Once considered “alien noise” by whites, Douglass introduces Negro spirituals as “sorrow songs” that pack a powerful political message.<sup>95</sup> For example, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass admits that it would seem to some (i.e., white folks) that these songs are “unmeaning jargon” and “apparently incoherent.”<sup>96</sup> As such, Douglass inserts *abolitionist* meanings into these songs to render them intelligible to his audience. In this passage, Douglass claims that “the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery” than volume upon volume of antislavery philosophy.<sup>97</sup> This is because, Douglass writes, “every tone was a testimony against slavery . . . the hearing of these wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness.”<sup>98</sup> By linking the meaning of the spirituals to this enslaved “tale of woe,” Douglass makes the spirituals comprehensible to his abolitionist audience.<sup>99</sup> That is, the interpretation that Douglass proposes “makes sense” of these songs within the existing abolitionist discourse of the time: the abolitionist “prophecy” of Black suffering due to the moral evils of slavery.<sup>100</sup> “To those songs,” Douglass asserts, “I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.”<sup>101</sup>

Part of what made Douglass's interpretation of Negro spirituals so successful is that he tapped into the ways that Black affect was already being weaponized in the national debate over slavery. Instances of Black song-making were often used as evidence of Black joy. And Black joy, in turn, was weaponized by pro-slavery advocates to ensure our oppression. If slaves were happy, so the pro-slavery argument goes, then slavery must not be some moral evil. Because pro-slavery agitators often enlisted the "happy ducky" image of minstrelsy to bolster this argument, Douglass sought to reverse the minstrel's message in his interpretation of Negro spirituals.<sup>102</sup> By emphasizing the sorrow in Negro spirituals, Douglass turned the joyous Black song-making that was once ammunition for pro-slavery arguments into a weapon that abolitionists could wield.

Although the minstrel's grasp of Black song-making was a gross caricature of Black culture, minstrel shows were politically potent enough to provoke anxiety in abolitionists over any suggestion of joy in the enslaved.<sup>103</sup> This anxiety over Black joy can be seen, for example, in how Douglass takes great pains to banish joy in his interpretation of Negro spirituals. "It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake" than attributing joy to Black song-making, Douglass argues, for "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy."<sup>104</sup> Against the tradition of minstrelsy, Douglass asserts that Black joy was uncommon during slavery. Regarding his own life, Douglass reports that he "ha[s] often sung to drown [his] sorrow, but seldom to express [his] happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to [him] while in the jaws of slavery."<sup>105</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass follows up on this point, arguing that the "it is a great mistake to suppose [the enslaved] happy because they sing," for "the songs of the slave represent the sorrows, rather than the joys, of his heart."<sup>106</sup> Under this interpretation, any appearance of joy in the life of the enslaved is a farce. If we only look deeper, we will see that *even the appearance of joy* is really a witness to the evils of slavery.

Hurston took great exception to this banishment of Black joy within progressive, liberal circles. As several scholars have noted, Hurston's refusal to center sorrow in representations of southern Black life played a crucial role in her critique of other Black writers. In her 1938 essay "Art and Such," Hurston thematizes that refusal. She complains that the Black artist is placed under a political mandate to center sorrow in Black life:

Can the black poet sing a song to the morning? Upsprings the song to his lips but it is fought back. He says to himself, "Ah this is a beautiful song inside me. I feel the morning star in my throat. I will sing of the star and the morning." Then his background thrusts itself between his lips and the star and he mutters, "Ought I not to be singing of our sorrows? That is what is expected of me and I shall be considered forgetful of our past and present. If I do not some will even call me

a coward. The one subject for a Negro is the Race and its sufferings and so the song of the morning must be choked back. I will write of a lynching instead.”<sup>107</sup>

As Wall points out, in this essay Hurston is criticizing a tradition that “silences artists . . . who do not adhere to its dictates” forged during slavery.<sup>108</sup> Hurston also suggests that this mandate of Black sorrow was especially reinforced in the period just after the abolition of slavery. For instance, early on in “Art and Such,” Hurston identifies the period after Emancipation as a central moment when the privileging of tragedy in representations of Black life became crystallized into a “folk pattern.”<sup>109</sup> This period, writes Hurston, was the “age of cries.” “[The Black writer] rejoiced with the realization of old dreams and he cried new cries for wounds that had become scars,” Hurston writes. “If it seems monotonous, one remembers the ex-slave had the pitying ear of the world. He had the encouragement of Northern sympathizers.”<sup>110</sup>

This “age of cries,” the first twenty-five years after Emancipation, is extremely important for Hurston, since it encompasses the rise of neo-abolitionism. “This post-war generation time,” she writes, “was a matrix from which certain ideas came that have seriously affected art creation as well as every other form of Negro expression, including the economic.”<sup>111</sup> And Hurston is very specific about which “ideas” she is criticizing:

Out of this period of sound and emotion came the Race Man and Race Woman: that great horde of individuals known as “Race Champions.” The great Frederick Douglass was the original pattern, no doubt, for these people who went up and down the land making speeches so fixed in type as to become a folk pattern.<sup>112</sup>

This “folk pattern” resulted in a “Race attitude” that mandates that we emphasize sorrow in our representations of Black life.<sup>113</sup> And if we are in doubt as to just who she is talking about, Douglass started it, and those who “call spirituals ‘Our Sorrow Songs’” (i.e., W. E. B. Du Bois) have continued it.<sup>114</sup>

There are many reasons why Hurston might have alluded to both Douglass and Du Bois as targets of criticism in this essay. As many scholars have noted, the essay also harbors critiques of Black male leadership—especially Du Bois’s model of the “Talented Tenth.”<sup>115</sup> For instance, Hurston mocks the phenomenon of “double-consciousness” that informs their leadership. Instead of accepting that double-consciousness is representative of all Black life, Hurston attributes this phenomenon to the internalized racism of the elite class of Black men who got into Ivy League schools. “It was assumed that no Negro brain could ever grasp the curriculum of a white college, so the Black man who did had come by some white folk’s brain by accident,” Hurston surmises, “and there was bound to be conflict between his dark body

and his white mind.”<sup>116</sup> Moreover, Hurston criticizes the assumption that this elite class could know enough about the experiences of all Black folk to speak for them. “Any Negro who had all that brains to be taking a degree at a white college was bound to know every thought and feeling of every other Negro in America, however remote from him,” Hurston writes sarcastically, “and he was bound to feel sad.”<sup>117</sup> This latter criticism also characterizes how Hurston thought her approach to Black life differed from Black thinkers such as Du Bois. As she writes in a letter, “I tried to deal with life as we actually live it—not as the Sociologists imagine it.”<sup>118</sup> While Hurston attempts to “work from the middle of the Negro out,” she complains that Du Bois’s method is “propaganda,” a method that “never follow[s] actual conditions very accurately.”<sup>119</sup>

These criticisms (ironically) place Hurston on the “realist” side of a realist-romantic debate that Yogita Goyal notes structures much of Black political discourse. Although romanticism is exceedingly difficult to define given its multiple references—“as a genre, a mode, a set of representational strategy, a host of narrative concerns”—Goyal uses “romanticism” to refer to “a shift outside of realism into the sphere of the marvelous rather than the mundane, often organized around the motif of a quest into unknown territories (both physical and the uncanny zone of the self).”<sup>120</sup> Contemporary Du Bois scholars have noted how romanticism shaped not only *The Souls of Black Folk*, but the model of racial politics that Du Bois embraced in his early years.<sup>121</sup> As Goyal writes, “tracking Du Bois’s use of romance” can help “refin[e] our understandings of his famous conception of double-consciousness and the role of the Talented Tenth.”<sup>122</sup> One of the major benefits that romanticism lent to Du Bois was the ability to conceptualize Blackness, to unify our racial identity, in a way that would get uptake in liberal public discourse. As Goyal observes, Du Bois “finds romance at the core of the Black experience, represented most movingly by the sorrow songs.” Moreover, for Du Bois, his grasp of this romance “qualifi[ed] him” to be a “representative” of the masses of Black folk.<sup>123</sup> That is to say, the romance of Black sorrow, found in the “sorrow songs,” is what enables Du Bois to imagine Black folk as a unified community for which he can speak.

I want to emphasize that the romanticism that contemporary scholars track in Du Bois’s work was ultimately mobilized in the service of abolitionism.<sup>124</sup> Similar to slave narratives, Du Bois aimed to usher northern white readers into the “hidden world” of southern Black life, which was “opaque” to them and “prone to vicious misinterpretations” in popular, minstrel entertainment.<sup>125</sup> As such, Hurston’s critique of Du Bois’s style of leadership does not just refer to the use of romance or “propaganda” in depictions of southern Black life, but also captures how this romanticism was wielded within abolitionism.<sup>126</sup> Hurston seems to grasp the connection of abolitionism between Du Bois and Douglass by her claim that Douglass was the creator of

this “folk pattern” of leadership styles that privilege Black sorrow. Although Hurston references Du Bois’s moniker for Negro spirituals (i.e., “sorrow songs”) in her critique of this style of leadership, Du Bois first inherited this interpretation of Negro spirituals from Douglass. Against the backdrop of political mandates harbored within the moniker “sorrow songs,” Hurston asks: “Can the Black poet sing a song to the morning?” My primary foil for the development of Hurston’s criticisms of neo-abolitionism will be Du Bois because Hurston saw him as a central Black leader who found ways to refashion abolitionist discourse into a radical political tradition, even after the abolition of slavery. Within the political tradition that Du Bois raised, Hurston’s political and philosophical contributions to race theory tend to get buried.

### Root Work

Taking seriously Hurston’s criticism of neo-abolitionism, refusing the mandate that we reduce Black life to sorrow in the public sphere, means altering our analyses of southern Black life. It means, in Hurston’s work, shifting from a focus on our oppression to other areas of Black life. One example of how Hurston does this is her discussions of root work in her essays. Even now in scholarship, when root work is discussed in the context of emancipatory politics, it is most often interpreted as a means of resistance, which centers our relationship to our oppressors.<sup>127</sup> In contrast, Hurston uses root work to signal the politics of joy, a different model of political action that centers our relationship to ourselves. This model of political action emphasizes refusal over resistance, and strategic ruse over political recognition.

As Imani Perry observes in her *Vexy Thing*, root work has long been a staple of a feminist imaginary that challenges our conceptions of political order, progressive politics, and state recognition. Noting that the language of “witchcraft” was “applied to global spiritual forms that lay outside Judeo-Christian traditions,” Perry argues that the persecution of “witches” was “driven by a fear of what witches knew about different possibilities of social ordering, specifically those in which the feminine would not necessarily be subject to patriarchal authority.”<sup>128</sup> Blending the woodsy hags of Europe with the southern conjure woman, Perry draws upon a rich tradition in Black feminist thought where root work or conjure has often captured our emancipatory imagination.<sup>129</sup> Within the lexicon of witchcraft, Perry finds ways to “push us beyond integrationist feminism that simply calls for inclusion in the political and intellectual grammars of Western personhood” by refusing to equate “seeking patriarchy, ladyhood, or personhood for more people” with political liberation.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, there seem to be resources of refusal in the very stance of the “witch” toward the world. “The witches are engaged in doings



that are challenging,” writes Perry, “they are presenting ideas and orders that threaten to open up the dominant logic, shift the terrain of what is regarded as mattering.”<sup>131</sup>

Hurston, too, draws upon the lexicon of witchcraft, via root work, to signal a shift in “what is regarded as mattering.” In her 1943 essay “High John de Conquer,” Hurston models a shift away from a politics of resistance to a politics of joy. Both a trickster folk figure and a root used in hoodoo practices, John de Conquer stands as a kind of “patron saint” in the tradition of hoodoo.<sup>132</sup> In this essay, Hurston uses John de Conquer to remind us that resistance against oppression is not all there is to our liberation. She writes:

And all the time, there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no- way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jack pot with no other stake but a laugh. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within. Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the Black man whole and free. So he could use it afterwards. For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and lose his own soul?<sup>133</sup>

In other words, what is the point of winning the battle against oppression if you are not well in the end too? The question itself implies a distinction between resistance and joy, for it suggests that it is possible to resist our oppression and still “lose [our] own soul” in the process. In this passage on emancipation, resistance to or abolition of our oppression recedes into the background, while our relation to ourselves, our inward struggle for well-being, is cast into the center.

Rather than banish Black joy or recast it in terms of resistance, Hurston points to how the laughter that John de Conquer brings can help us to “win within.” “Winning within” has little to do with our oppressors. “Winning within” is not accomplished by outward shows of force against the system (or “carr[ying] [our] heart in [our] sword”), but by being “armed with love and laughter.”<sup>134</sup> “Winning within” is not about the battle, but our inward state beyond the battle. It is a mode or an orientation that prioritizes our self-development, so that, as poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs put it, we will not be “saving up for a freedom we will be unfit for when we get there.”<sup>135</sup> For Hurston, if we neglect this realm of self-development we risk becoming “nothing but a cruel, vengeful, grasping monster come to power.”<sup>136</sup> We risk becoming the very thing we are opposing.

Hurston’s emphasis on laughter, love, and beauty in her analysis of root work in this essay suggests the register of adornment—where the relation to the self is primary—for interpreting these practices. By using this register, she can foreground how we relate to each other. And by focusing on what John de Conquer means to us, rather than how John de Conquer can be used



against our oppressors, Hurston can refuse the tragedy that is at the heart of neo-abolitionism. For instance, she refuses the abjection of Black life by showing us the joy that John de Conquer brought to the enslaved. Hurston writes that in the slave quarters, “Old John, High John could beat the unbeatable. He was top-superior to the whole mess of sorrow. He could beat it all, and what made it so cool, finish it off with a laugh.”<sup>137</sup> The ways that John de Conquer was used in enslaved Black life, as a source of strength, comfort, and humor, show that our lives were not wholly subsumed under sorrow as the abolitionist proclaimed.

Moreover, Hurston’s analysis of root work not only asks us to broaden our emancipatory imaginary beyond resistance, but it also encourages a wariness toward the political goal of state recognition. We can see this in how Hurston fashions John de Conquer into a Black southern aesthetic that contests versions of racial progress that would leave Black southerners behind. She writes:

So after a while, freedom came. Therefore High John de Conquer has not walked the winds of America for seventy-five years now. His people had their freedom, their laugh and their song. They have traded it to the other Americans for things they could use like education and property, and acceptance. High John de Conquer knew that that was the way it would be, so he could retire with his secret smile into the soil of the South and wait.<sup>138</sup>

During Hurston’s time, John de Conquer had indeed been “traded to the other Americans” for gains of political recognition in the public sphere, such as “education and property, and acceptance.” For many of Hurston’s contemporaries, root work was a dangerous superstition that held Black people back by confirming white assumptions of our inferiority and pathology.<sup>139</sup> The path to state recognition, the full gains of American citizenship, meant some amount of cultural assimilation, such as relinquishing these practices of root work. But High John’s “secret smile” suggests that perhaps the joke was on us in following this path. What would representation in the public sphere—education, property, and acceptance—cost us? And would it, in the end, only be a raw deal? Hurston did not live long enough to see how the coming civil rights movement indeed got the state to avow greater education, property, and acceptance, but she may have ascertained that these promises would cost us dearly. Hurston also seemed to know, as the “secret smile” suggests, that High John may have been buried, but he has certainly not been forgotten in the South. This is why Hurston references the “thousands upon thousands” in the South who still “do John reverence” by continuing root work practices.<sup>140</sup> And amid the racial violence and strife of our current moment, it appears that John de Conquer may have risen again through the recent turn of Black millennial faith practices to conjure.<sup>141</sup>

## Book Overview

*The Politics of Black Joy* makes the arguments outlined above in a series of chapters organized by close readings of Hurston's essays. I have chosen these essays as entryways into debates within Hurston scholarship and African American philosophy more broadly, such as issues of Black representation and political recognition, the use of Negro spirituals as a model of politics, white epistemic access to Black interior life, and modes of agency beyond resistance. Before each chapter, I provide interludes from Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade*. These interludes offer an example of the inner workings of the politics of joy in popular culture and are a contemporary illustration of the contortions that must be made to avoid both abjection and enchantment when expressing southern Black joy in the public sphere. Each contortion in the interlude is a microcosm of the larger analysis of Hurston's racial politics enclosed in the following chapter.

The book's first chapter, "Sing[ing] a Song to the Morning," begins with the famous debate between Richard Wright and Hurston over Black art. Within this debate, I develop a relationship between Hurston's performances of indifference toward racism and the politics of joy. While Wright took Hurston's emphasis on Black joy and her downplaying of interracial violence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as evidence of her nostalgia, naivete, and/or political conservatism, Black feminists have been arguing for decades that Hurston's work was inherently political. I build upon these Black feminist insights by highlighting the neo-abolitionist background that motivated Hurston's desire to present Black southern life as a site of joy through a close reading of Hurston's 1944 "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience" and 1945 "Crazy for This Democracy" at the end of the chapter. I argue that this strategy (the politics of joy via principled indifference toward white folks) is not an evasion of racism. Rather, it is motivated by a radical insight concerning the intransigence of racism when it comes to certain models of Black liberation.

In the next two chapters, I offer an extended development of the politics of joy in response to neo-abolitionism. In "An Object of Pity," I analyze how Du Bois uses Negro spirituals to refashion abolitionism in *The Souls of Black Folk*. I argue that it is this neo-abolitionist context to which Hurston objects in her criticisms of Du Bois's moniker, "sorrow songs." At the end of the chapter, I provide a close reading of Hurston's 1934 "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals" to demonstrate how the politics of joy informs the debate between Hurston and Du Bois over Negro spirituals. This move broadens the terms of their disagreement to the nature of racial progress, the refusals present in root work, and the political feasibility of cultural assimilation. In "Tak[ing] the Indian Position," I more fully develop an account of refusal in Hurston's work. As an extended interview with an ex-slave, Hurston's *Barra-coon* is a direct point of contact with abolitionist discourse. Placing Hurston

in conversation with the contemporary anthropologist Audra Simpson, I read *Barracoon* as an “ethnographic refusal” of the neo-abolitionist presumption of white epistemic access to Black interior life.<sup>142</sup> Drawing upon the insight that *Barracoon* was written alongside Hurston’s famous and controversial 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” I end with a close reading of this essay through the ethnographic refusals found in *Barracoon*.

In the final chapter, “Winning [Our] War from Within,” I take up insights in Hurston’s essay “High John de Conquer” to consider what mode of agency root work exhibits. When neo-abolitionism constrains us to read Black life through the lens of oppression, we end up privileging the mode of resistance in our discussions of Black political agency. Drawing upon the work of Toni Morrison as well as cultural anthropologists, I contest interpretations of root work that center resistance. By revisiting the context and cosmology of these spiritual practices, I aim to dislodge the preoccupation with resistance in our analyses of agency under oppression. I end the chapter by providing an interpretation of Hurston’s “High John de Conquer” as a meta-hoodoo tale that warns us of the dangers of neo-abolitionism, which reduces Black southern life to tragedy. In addition, aligning “winning within” with the politics of joy draws upon Black feminist insights concerning the emancipatory resources found within root work. To spin a conception of agency from the folds of root work is to, as Perry urges us, “rest our thoughts, at least for a moment, on [the witch’s] symbolic value for feminist thought.”<sup>143</sup> It shows us how root work can be a way to edify ourselves rather than “study” the oppressor. Moreover, as an exemplar of the politics of joy, root work highlights the central crossroads that Hurston traversed while writing about southern Black life: the contravening frameworks of minstrelsy and abolitionism that continue to eclipse Black southern joy in our political imaginary.