PRELUDE TO A SATURDAY NIGHTER

Thesis
Submitted to
The College of Arts and Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree
Master of Arts in English
By
Angela F. Jacobs

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Dayton, Ohio
August, 2010
PRELUDE TO A SATURDAY NIGHTER

APPROVED BY:

Prof. Albino Carrillo, Faculty Advisor

Dr. Stephen Wilhoit, Faculty Reader

Prof. Joseph Pici, Faculty Reader

Dr. Sheila H. Hughes, Department Chair
ABSTRACT

PRELUDE TO A SATURDAY NIGHTER

Name: Jacobs, Angela F.
University of Dayton

Advisor: Prof. Albino Carrillo

This thesis pertains to the forgotten women dramatists of the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance of the 1920’s and 1930’s. It is divided into two parts: Preface and one-act drama. The Preface addresses the problems and issues when researching these women, namely the fact that there is little research devoted solely to their contributions to the movement. Set in the home of Georgia Douglas Johnson in late summer of 1929. Johnson is one of the most prolific women dramatists of the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance, whose works expanded even into the Civil Rights Movement, the one-act drama consists of a meeting between Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston, who is most notable for her non-dramatic works, despite the fact that it was in drama that she first made her mark. The first scene, set in the parlor, attends to the issue of race and how each woman goes about addressing their own representation of how race affects the African American community. In the second scene, the women are in the kitchen and address the most pressing issue of gender relations within the African American community.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Prof. Albino Carrillo, for taking the time during this busy summer to direct my thesis and give constant encouragement and guidance for this creative piece. I would also like to my readers, Dr. Stephen Wilhoit and Prof. Joseph Pici for taking the time to review this text. I would like to thank my supportive family and friends for their encouragement and aid in this project. Their enthusiasm has truly fueled this labor of love.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the women dramatists of the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance for their insight and courage in breaking down the gender barriers that plague even artistic communities.
PREFACE

Drama was a major component in the Harlem Renaissance. Aside from poetry and music, drama was one of the main genres African American artists used to transmit their own understanding of what it meant to be African American at that time. In fact, many of the most prolific Harlem Renaissance dramatists were women. Unfortunately, when I embarked on this project, I realized I did not have any exposure to these women dramatists, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. I was very interested in having a better understanding of the women dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Renaissance. However, I ran into several problems while researching these dramatists, namely that there is not much research devoted to them. I found that I am not the only one who knows little about the contributions of these women and their work in solidifying the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Renaissance as a very significant period in the lives of African Americans and African American artists. However, this is not to say that there is little appreciation for their works and efforts.

While working on this project, I realized that there were several questions to which I wanted answers:

1. What is the contribution of the women dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance? Because so much focus within the Harlem Renaissance is on the poets and even novelists of this movement, where did the dramatists fit in?

2. How did these women address the experiences of African American women within the larger context of the African American experience at that time? Although it
would appear evident that these women would address race issues in their works, I wanted to know about their treatment of gender, a much-underscored issue from this movement.

3. What role did drama play in the Harlem Renaissance? As stated earlier, the poets and even novelists have so far garnered the most attention during this movement, but I wanted to know more about drama. If so many of the poets wrote in an aural manner, how much did the actual aural format of drama play a role in disseminating newer and even truer images of African American lives?

When recounting my own exposure to the Harlem Renaissance, there are certain names that are synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance: Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, to name a few. However, there are countless African-American women writers, particularly playwrights, whose names are not known to the general public. Between 1918 and 1930, eleven black women published a total of twenty-one plays, mostly one-act in length (McKay 152).

According to McKay, “the heralds of black women’s published dramatic writings in the 1920s were Rachel and Mine Eyes Have Seen, the first written by Angelina Weld Grimké, the second by Alice Dunbar-Nelson” (154). Rachel was originally presented by the NAACP in 1916, and claims fame as possibly one of the few full-length plays to come from the organization at the time (154). It was the NAACP’s first attempt to use drama to focus national attention on racial oppression. Of the twenty plays that followed Rachel, written by black women during the Harlem Renaissance, nine had central concerns connected to the conflicts of race and gender issues (156). The versatility in
their writings show that the female playwrights set as their agenda to trying to find a place for themselves in this genre during this time.

Other than the issues of race and gender, other African-American women playwrights wrote about issues that are still prevalent today. One example is Mary Burrill, who published a play in the Birth Control Review that centered on poor, rural, uneducated black women. Her play illustrates how one particular “group of women, caught in the vice of race, poverty, and sexuality, can experiences unnecessary despair and entrapment” (159).

Because of the shared experiences of these women dramatists, many forged lifelong friendships with their contemporaries. Georgia Douglas Johnson had friendships with Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Johnson’s plays, like her friends’, showed that women writers were not only critical of social problems connected with race and gender issues originating outside the black community, but also concerned about the internal problems that perpetual ignorance and self-destruction can have within the group. These writers were concerned with racial matters, and they expected men and women to work together on all areas of the problems they faced. “They were interested in producing images that represented the lives of black people as honestly as they could” (164). Although they did not reach the fame or obtain proper recognition for their efforts, they left their mark on the literature of their day (164).

While doing research for this topic, I was quite thankful to find a few volumes dedicated to women dramatists in general and of the Harlem Renaissance, and especially that there were so many women playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance. Some of these volumes include African American women playwrights : a research guide, edited by
Christy Gavin and *The Cambridge companion to American women playwrights*, edited by Brenda Murphy. I chose to focus on Zora Neale Hurston and Georgia Douglas Johnson after discovering their works and details about their lives. Both were part of the Harlem Renaissance, but in different areas and wrote according to their understanding of how the black experience should be portrayed.

During the 1920’s and 1930’s, up until their deaths in the 1960’s, these women were quite well known for their contributions to the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Renaissance. According to Judith L. Stephens, “the Harlem Renaissance [was] a special time in the evolution of black women playwrights in America because they produced a drama that is both woman centered and racially conscious while struggling to find a place for themselves in a developing theatre tradition” (“The Harlem Renaissance” 99). This assessment is quite true for the works of Hurston and Johnson, who both featured either mainly female protagonists or female characters who made great impacts on the turn of events of the plot. In fact, what both women truly have in common is their focus on the poor, black women of the South, women whose voices were lost to the general public. What these women, along with the other African American women dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Renaissance, did was provide “the burgeoning black drama with feminine perspective” (101), thus combating the male-centerededness of the overall movement.

Zora Neale Hurston is the most well known of the writers chosen. Although she is better known as a novelist, she was also a dramatist and was a journalist of sorts, having written for several newspapers and magazines even up until her death. According to Cole and Mitchell in *Zora Neale Hurston: collected plays*, Hurston’s plays were treated as
“diversionary or supplementary material for understanding her novels” (xv). However, Hurston first began in the theatrical world, working alongside a woman named “Miss M—” when Hurston was twenty-four years old (xvi).

Despite the fact that many regarded Hurston’s collaboration with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone* (1931) as Hurston’s first foray into playwriting, it was actually her play *Color Struck* (1925) that garnered her recognition and awards from the Urban League publication *Opportunity*. *Color Struck* focuses not on the elite black culture represented by the Harlem Renaissance, but the “folk,” the rural black culture generally disregarded by many of the black artists and proponents of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston was very interested in reclaiming the culture of the poor, black Southern people, while simultaneously, according to literary historian Barbara Johnson, deploring the “appropriation, dilution, and commodification of black culture” (qtd. in Krasner, “Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity,” 114). In this regard, readers can understand why Hurston wrote Emmaline (a poor, black Southern woman) as the protagonist in *Color Struck*; Emmaline represents the other, the people outside of history Hurston sought to depict in her plays.

Outside of simply reclaiming the cultural significance of the poor, black, Southerner, Hurston’s play *The First One* shows Hurston taking a step back from making a stance for rescuing those outside of history. In this drama, she reworks the ninth chapter of Genesis. According to Cole and Mitchell, the story of Noah cursing his son Ham and his progeny into servitude “was frequently used by slaveowners in the antebellum period to explain the origin of the black race as a people destined to servitude” (63). Unlike Emmaline, Ham is rescued from hating his black skin by the love of his wife Eve. In this
regard, Hurston offers a more hopeful glimpse of blackness, with Ham and Eve leaving the company of Noah and the rest of the family (representing the white world) in favor of a world of “sunshine, love, and music” (63). The overall feel of this play reflects Hurston’s continuous theme of celebrating black culture without a constant reminder of the overt hardships caused by slavery and segregation.

As for Johnson, she was the most prolific woman dramatist of this movement, the person who helped bring the Harlem Renaissance out of its focus on Harlem and helped make the New Negro Renaissance a national movement. Coming out of Washington, D.C., Johnson used her home as a hub for African American artists to gather and share their ideas.

Georgia Douglas Johnson initially broke out on the scene through her first two poetry books, *Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* in 1918 and *Bronze: A Book of Verse* in 1922. Johnson’s biographer wrote that the death of Johnson’s husband, Henry, was a “‘turning point’ point in her life, one that would free her creative impulses” (qtd. in Krasner, “The Wages of Culture,” 133). Like Hurston, Johnson was uncomfortable with the black elitism plaguing the growing black aesthetic, desiring instead to depict what she termed the “average Negro life” (Krasner 136). She contributed to the New Negro Renaissance via her drama, especially in regards to their political nature, being an active participant in the NAACP’s antilynching campaign.

According to Krasner, Johnson, along with fellow playwright Willis Richardson, sought to combat the immoral stereotype of African Americans, seeking to create “dramatic representations of racial pride, moral virtue, and resistance to oppression” (“The Wages of Culture,” 132). Johnson was very concerned with showing the negative
and primitive nature of slavery and its impact on African Americans, no matter their socioeconomic status. Her earlier plays, *Blue Blood* (1926) and *Plumes* (1927), featuring the plight of Southern African American women, were highly celebrated in *Opportunity*. *Blue Blood* and *Plumes* are Johnson’s most published and produced dramas (Stephens, “Introduction,” 19).

In both plays, the main characters are Southern black women who must make drastic decisions without, and outside of, male influence and input. In *Blue Blood*, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple, though coming from different socioeconomic statuses, are confronted with a devastating truth: their children share the same white father. Though it is not stated how Mrs. Bush became pregnant with her daughter May, Mrs. Temple recounts her rape and the eventual birth of her son John. This shared truth connects the women the way their children’s wedding was supposed to have: it forever bonded them to the realities of their existence, crossing class lines.

Though *Plumes*’ plot concerns some aspect of class issues, its primary focus appears to be entirely gender-based. Although Stephens claims the play concerns poverty and death (“Introduction,” 19), the conflict between Charity and Dr. Scott takes center stage as Charity confides in her friend Tildy her concern over the cost of heart surgery for her daughter Emmerline. Certainly Charity wants to do whatever it takes to save her daughter; she is likewise concerned with what she believes to be Dr. Scott’s true motives for the surgery: exploiting her for personal gain. Throughout this play, both Charity and Tildy demonstrate a strong distrust towards the doctor, which is further enhanced when the doctor attempts to appeal to Charity’s maternal instinct as he pushes for Emmerline’s costly heart surgery.
In looking at both dramas, which Johnson categorized as “Primitive Life Plays” in her own catalogue of her works, both plays have another defining feature: the kitchen. Stephens notes, “By featuring middle-aged black southern women as central characters and locating the action in their kitchens, [both plays] established a female-centered precedent for most of Johnson’s later plays and placed a generally ignored population on the American stage” (“Introduction,” 20). In essence, both of Johnson’s plays highlight the struggles these women faced by using the one place typically associated with women, the place that, in many regards, served as their sanctuary and their prison.

Because of the impact drama has had on the documentation and representation of the African American experience, when discussing the power of drama, it is best to prove drama’s power by using it. According to Krasner, “dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to eradicate the legacy of minstrelsy” (“Negro Drama,” 57), which consisted of degrading portrayals of African-Americans. One of the goals of the African-American dramatists was to create the New Negro Soul onstage, by portraying characters having “moral values, familial bonds, education, dignity, integrity, and work ethic” (57). In 1926, DuBois stated that there were four fundamental principles of Negro Drama. They must be:

1. About us. They must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. They must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. The theater must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near
us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people (58).

Alain Locke believed that the folk play would suffice, looking to “nineteenth-century German Romanticism as his model for black folk drama, as well as Ireland’s early twentieth-century Little Theatre Movement as a theatrical paradigm” (Krasner, “Negro drama,” 58). Zora Neale Hurston believed that looking to Europe or white critical traditions as models would violate the essence of Negro folk drama. She wrote that “real Negro theatre” is in the Jooks and the cabarets, believing that Jook joints, honky-tonks, rural churches, and everyday southern life set the stage for pure folk drama (59).

A tutee of Locke, Georgia Douglas Johnson was part of the “genteel movement” in poetry and letters. After her husband’s death in 1925, she became the most influential female playwright of the Harlem Renaissance. She turned her home, referred to as the S Street Salon for “Saturday Nighters”, into one of the most renowned intellectual meeting grounds for artists and scholars. Among her regulars were Locke, DuBois, Gregory, Grimké, Richardson, Hurston, Burrill, and Marita Bonner. Johnson used her home as “a spiritual and intellectual center for many of the most well-known Harlem Renaissance” (McHenry 252), while also opening up her home to unknown artists as well. In fact, Hurston was one of the artists who visited Johnson’s home during one of Johnson’s “Saturday Nighters.”

Because of this connection, I chose to set this one act within Johnson’s home during the early summer of 1929. For one, this setting would be plausible, even as an informal visit. Johnson may have hosted formal get-togethers for artists, but she was considered to be a “woman of tremendous energy” (McHenry 267) who undoubtedly would have been
open to meeting with a fellow artist one-on-one. The reason for setting this play in early
summer of 1929 was because, much like the rest of the nation, the stock market crash in
October 1929 caused a major shift in America’s priorities, as well as the priorities of
African American artists. While working on this project, I chose to focus on Johnson’s
and Hurston’s views of race (with Hurston’s works as the focus) and gender (with
Johnson’s works providing the focus).

Aside from choosing a realistic and plausible setting for my one-act, I also chose
to use dialect to distinguish between Johnson and Hurston. Because they come from
different social backgrounds, it would make sense for them to speak differently,
especially since I have seen specials on Hurston in which she retained her southern drawl.
To best capture their dialectical differences, I chose to emulate the type of
characterization used by Johnson in her play, Blue Blood. In this play, set in Georgia
shortly after the Civil War, Johnson sought to differentiate between the mothers of the
bride and groom by the use of dialect. Because both women were of differing social
classes, it was fitting to show this distinction in their speech, not just through their
reactions to the shocking circumstance of the play (both women realize their children are
fathered by the same man). Although this can be seen as a stylistic choice on Johnson’s
part, she, like Hurston, sought to have some sort of authenticity in her works by capturing
the speech of the common African American. As Stephens notes in her “Introduction” to
the collected works of Johnson’s plays, Johnson’s dialogue and use of dialect “attests to
her sensitivity to the spoken word and her skill in reproducing human speech that is an
integral part of her characters” (10). My goal, while working on this project, is to utilize
dialect in an attempt to capture some semblance of authenticity to my project so that each woman would ring true.

However, I encountered other issues while reading their works and working on my project, such as social class and generational attitude. Johnson is older than Hurston, by almost 20 years, and therefore would have a different understanding of how best to approach representing the African American experience on the stage. Johnson’s works show an artist battling with how race and gender issues cross class lines, especially since Johnson was part of the black middle class of Washington, D.C. However, Hurston grew up with more humble beginnings, her works showcasing more those less privileged. She took a more radical approach than always expected of her, which sometimes took a strong protest approach and sometimes bordered on blatant commercialism.

No matter their differences, what I ultimately learned from both women was that the voice of the Harlem Renaissance is more than a musical and jazzy cadence. In many regards, it is a voice for all ages and circumstances. By having a better understanding of all the various artists of the Harlem Renaissance, I have a better understanding of how the work of these artists led to the efforts of the artists of the Civil Rights Movement. I truly hope that my one-act can serve the same function that my predecessors’ work has had on successive generations: to entertain while simultaneously educating, but also commemorating those artists who came before me.
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Prelude to a Saturday Nighter

(A One-Act Play)

Characters:

Georgia Douglas Johnson, dramatist, poet, and hostess, AGE 52

Zora Neale Hurston, dramatist, fiction writer, and guest, AGE 38

Place: Georgia Douglas Johnson’s home at 1461 S Street, NW, Washington, D.C.

Time: Sometime in early summer 1929

Scene 1

Setting: Late afternoon. Salon of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s home in D.C. on S Street.

The room is slightly elongated, with three windows at the east end. Each window is set in its own wall and well-centered. In front of the windows are two plush upholstered chairs in delicate floral prints and an armrest-level circular table between them. On the right of the room is a wooden piano lined with picture frames. On the left is a long wooden table covered in an embroidered table runner, also lined with picture frames. Lights slowly fade up to reveal scene. Johnson, wearing an ankle-length dress with a lace collar and leather shoes, enters downstage left with a silver tray with two crystal glasses. Zora Neale Hurston is sitting in the left armchair. She wears an ankle-length dress and leather shoes. She smiles warmly when Johnson enters the room.

Johnson: (setting the tray on the table between the chairs and sitting down in a plush armchair.) Well, I’m so glad Alaine had us meet. He told me so much about your work.
**Hurston**: *(laughing)* Don’ get me started on him.

**Johnson**: *(smiling)* You shouldn’t be so hard on him. He means well.

**Hurston**: Oh, I’m sure he does. Just got a funny way of showin’ it.

**Johnson**: *(picking up a glass of water.)* Here, have some water. *(Hands glass to Hurston who takes it and nods “thank you.”)* I suppose it’s all a matter of perspective. *(She picks up her glass and takes a sip of water.)*

**Hurston**: *(takes a sip.)* Yeah. I guess you’re right. *(Looking out the window.)* D.C. isn’t at all what I expected. It’s nice here, but I jus’ love me some Harlem. There’s so much life there, don’ you think?

**Johnson**: *(smiling)* It’s not as progressive as I would have hoped. No place is, I suspect.

**Hurston**: *(surprised)* What do ya mean “not as progressive”? Why, it’s the most progressive city in the whole U.S. It jus’ can’t be beat.

**Johnson**: *(taking another sip of water)* There’s still much more work to do.

**Hurston**: Yes, I know. *(pause)* Thank you so much for invitin’ me into your home. I have wanted to come to one of your gatherings. Langston’s told me so much about you and work.

**Johnson**: *(laughs)* I’m sure he has. I’m just glad to do my part. I mean, there’s still so much more to do if there’s to be any progress.

**Hurston**: I know exactly what you mean. I jus’ don’ understand how a white person can honestly believe that he or she could possible understand a black person. If you ain’t black, how you supposed to understand what it means to be black?
**Johnson**: Exactly! That’s my point. We’ve got to work very hard if America is to see exactly how the Negro really is.

**Hurston**: All that “doe-eyed” ignorance gets on my nerves. Who would be happy bein’ a slave? Not to mention, jus’ because a person lives simply, don’t mean he’s ignorant. Perhaps he’s jus’ happy with what he’s been given in life.

**Johnson**: (pause) Yes, you’re quite right. We’ve all been given a certain lot in life. It’s up to us to know what to do about it. But you have to admit, there’s the point about wanting more out of life, you know? Suppose what those white writers are really trying to tell us is that we should want more and not be so accepting?

**Hurston**: (sets glass down. She slowly gets up out of chair and leans of the back of it, staring at Johnson) So, am I to understand that what you’re arguin’ is that perhaps those crude images are really secret codes?

**Johnson**: More like social commentary.

**Hurston**: (shaking her head) No, no no. That whole ignorant black people image is just a way for them to remind us of what they believe is our lot in life. If it were up to some of ‘em, we’d still be in slavery!

**Johnson**: (laughing lightly; setting glass down) Zora, you and I both know you’re right. All I’m saying is that it’s worth looking at it from a different perspective. Perhaps it’s not all a deliberate attempt to demean us. Just simple ignorance. An ignorant mind creates ignorant characters. Sometimes, it’s as simple as that.

**Hurston**: (looking off in the distance) Hmmm…You know what? I don' think I ever
really thought about it like that. *(smiling)* Makes sense though. So tell me more about your work. I heard you were called the “lady poet.” How’d ya earn that distinction? Sounds awfully gentle. You a gentle writer? One who only writes about what ladies should write about, like cooking and cleaning after some man?

*(Both women laugh.)*

**Johnson:** Truthfully, I always just wanted to write. I did write some gentle poems before my husband passed away a few years ago. First, there was *Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* in 1918 and then *Bronze: A Book of Verse* in 1922. *(pauses briefly; stares out blankly)* “I write because I love to write... *(looks at Hurston)* and I was persuaded to try [drama by Zona Gale] and found it a living avenue.” ¹ *(she laughs lightly; taking a sip of water)*

**Hurston:** It’s true drama is quite a lucrative avenue.

**Johnson:** Ever since my husband died, I had to do something to keep my boys and I afloat. Now, don’t get me wrong. Drama isn’t just a means to an end. It’s alive like no other form of writing.

**Hurston:** You know, “Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized...Everything is acted out.” ²

**Johnson:** *(laughing)* Don’t I know it! But you’re also known as short story writer, right?

**Hurston:** Oh yes. *(Takes a sip of water.)*

**Johnson:** How’s that’s affected your work as a dramatist? Do you hope people will remember you for your work as a dramatist or fiction writer?
**Hurston:** *(stares out window for a moment)* Perhaps they'll jus' remember me, is all I can hope for.

**Johnson:** So what’s your philosophy on writing?

**Hurston:** You know, everybody’s got their own truths. Their own experiences. As a people, all we can ask is that we show the world who we really are.

**Johnson:** I hear that.

**Hurston:** But not just what others say about who we are, and that includes those intellectual types like DuBois.

**Johnson:** You don’t agree with his “Talented Tenth”? *(she laughs)*

**Hurston:** You an’ I both know you’d be the only one of us who’d qualify.

**Johnson:** Oh come now, Zora—

**Hurston:** Now, now, jus’ hear me out, Georgia: why should the Negro go from allowin’ someone else, white people, to tell us how and who we are, to allowin’ those “race champions” to do the same? Why? Jus’ because they black like us? I don’ agree with that at all.

**Johnson:** *(nodding her head)* I see what you mean.

**Hurston:** And not to be mean or anythin’, but have you noticed that the vast majority of those “race champions” have the lighter skin? Like Alain and W.E.B.? *(Johnson chuckles lightly while sipping her water)*

**Johnson:** You are quite right. It’s easier for us to talk about how we should be represented when we’ve been given all the opportunities our darker brethren were never given.

**Hurston:** You know, I wrote somethin’ about that. *Colorstruck.* Deals with issue of
“colorism”, how some in the black community value lighter skin for sexual and economic terms.  

**Johnson**: It’s a shame we have to deal with all this.

**Hurston**: What I can’t understand is how so many of us can hate ourselves so much, we refuse to let someone else love us. *(Johnson nods.)* I mean, with my character Emmaline, she’s so caught up in her own color, she won’t let John love her. In fact, she’s practically made up a conspiracy behind it! : “Oh, them half-whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody wants! The men, the jobs—everything! The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored.”  

**Johnson**: I’m sure she’s got a point, though. The world is kinder to lighter people.

**Hurston**: True, true. But I don’t believe we darker people should resort to self-hatred, nor do I believe that we should blame lighter folks for our troubles. I mean, we can’t go around blamin’ white people for judgin’ us based on our color, if we do the same thing!

**Johnson**: I hear that! But you notice we do it all the time. In fact, if a man can get him a lighter woman, he’ll do it. In fact, isn’t it always the case that if two lighter-skinned people marry, people get all offended, like it’s all a set-up to make darker people feel bad? *(Johnson and Hurston laugh.)*

**Hurston**: Perhaps they got a point.

**Johnson**: Perhaps. Because as we both know, some people say, “I never did believe in “lights” marrying, no how, it’s on-lucky...”Dark should marry light.” *(Both women laugh.)*
**Hurston:** (gets up and goes to piano, gently touching its keys; picks up some photos, then puts them back) But you know what? We got to stop all that foolishness and live like blessed children of God. No sense in actin’ all unhappy about things we can’ change.

**Johnson:** (watching her) Though, sometimes, that is easier said than done.

**Hurston:** Indeed, but I can’ really complain. I got me a scholarship at Barnard.

(Laughing; turns to face **Johnson**) I’m the firs’ Negro they ever let in. Hope I’m not the las’!

**Johnson:** (laughing) I’m sure you’ll do us all proud.

**Hurston:** I truly aim to discover more of the world while I’m there. I jus’ have a hard time thinkin’ about how best to approach showin’ people who we are. I mean, does it all have to be so serious all the time?

**Johnson:** Well, as a former educator, I know how powerful words can be. I look at drama as a means of educating, not only our own, but others as well. Seeing our lives acted out is much more powerful than just merely reading about them in some book.

**Hurston:** It’s funny you say that. When I firs’ entered Barnard, I had every intention of studyin’ theatre, since I did work with Miss M— before she got married.

For eighteen months I worked backstage and I thought to myself: *Wow, this is the life!*

**Johnson:** What changed?

**Hurston:** I couldn’t get into the drama class, but I think I found somethin’ much better now.
Johnson: You mean, Franz Boas?

Hurston: Oh yes. He taught me that in order to understand someone’s culture, I had to understand their language. You have to not just understand what people are like through an interpreter, but truly strive to record everythin’ you can about a people in their own language. I feel that workin’ with him has started to really open my eyes to how best to go about documentin’ our experience, you know?

Johnson: What would you say has changed?

Hurston: Well, I always thought we should celebrate our lives as a people without regard to outsiders and their influence on us.

Johnson: So, the black experience minus mention of whites?

Hurston: Yes. Why must we always write in regards to how white people have treated us? Isn’t it quite obvious how we’re bein’ treated? Do we really have to keep talkin’ about it as if we’re all suffering all the time?

Johnson: (nodding her head) You know what? I quite agree. Certainly, I write to educate of the various experiences of the Negro; but it’s important to show our world from different angles, such as class.

Hurston: Exactly! Jus’ think: everythin’ we do is a result of slavery, so why constantly talk about it? Why can’ we talk about what we’ve made of ourselves? How we’ve persevered?

Johnson: (smiling) I like that!

Hurston: (getting up from seat) You know how we like to dance and entertain ourselves when it’s jus’ us? (Johnson nods) Such as the cakewalk.
(Hurston dances the cakewalk while humming a tune. Johnson laughs and claps to provide a beat to Johnson’s humming. Hurston stops and both women laugh)

Hurston: See? Why can’t we jus’ write about the aftermath of slavery? We’ve done such great wonders considerin’ all we’ve been through as a people? (Sitting) And why not make it entertaining too? That’s the problem with Locke and DuBois; they take themselves too seriously. Sometimes you jus’ gotta celebrate how far we’ve come in order to show how much more we can do and accomplish.

Johnson: Oh yes, you’re quite right. (Gets up and goes to the piano. Picks up a picture frame, shows to Hurston) This is my late husband, Henry. He was an attorney and was even appointed by president Taft to be the Recorder of Deeds for D.C. in 1912. In terms of your stance on the black experience, I think the fact that a black man, only a few decades removed from slavery, could become an attorney is quite remarkable, let alone get an appointment from the president himself. (She stares at photo) He was a fine man, too. (She places photo back onto piano) Zora, you and I may have different opinions on how drama should be used, but we both rightly agree that it makes an impact.

Hurston: I jus’ feel we shouldn’ limit ourselves to one stance. Our lives aren’ all sad and lonely. We experience joy jus’ like the white folks do.

Johnson: (resuming her seat) Yes, and not all of them are bad. In fact, I’ve been working with George E. Haynes on the National Interracial Conference in order to increase understanding between blacks and whites.

Hurston: Isn’t he from Fisk in Tennessee?
Johnson: *(surprised)* You’ve heard of him? He and his wife moved here and he was appointed special assistant to the U.S. secretary of labor.

Hurston: Now that’s somethin’ major.

Johnson: Oh yes. He and I both feel that the only way for us all to get on together peacefully is for us to meet on common ground and really try to have an understanding. Truthfully, as a people, we shouldn’t keep pointing the finger. We can’t keep acting like only white people are the problem. Slavery is the problem and we’re all still dealing with it one way or another, no matter our social status or hometown.

Hurston: It’s funny you say it’s slavery that’s the problem. Didn’t white people create it? I mean, there are still some white folk who believe we should still be slaves. Some have even gone so far to quote the Bible to justify themselves, Genesis 9.

Johnson: Oh I know about that. I don’t understand where they get that, though. So, because Noah cursed Ham, black people were destined to be servants?

Hurston: *(laughs drily)* I wrote about it in *The First One*. Noah cursed his son Ham and his progeny into servitude. It’s my take on it. How I feel about that whole incident.

Johnson: Now, why exactly would Noah feel that strongly against his own son? Surely seeing your father naked wouldn’t amount to a curse?

Hurston: Well, as I wrote it, Noah and Ham were both drunk when the incident occurred, with Ham just bein’ jovial and Noah bein’ drunk and coerced into cursin’ Ham because his other sons’ wives were jealous of Ham’s favor.
**Johnson:** We can’t just be happy for each other, can we?

**Hurston:** But Noah doesn’ jus’ curse Ham and his children into servitude, he also curses him to be black too.

**Johnson:** Ha! And thus the link to our lot.

**Hurston:** *(nodding)* “He shall be accursed. His skin shall be black! Black as the nights, when the waters brooded over the Earth!”

**Johnson:** But did he mean it? I mean, he was drunk after all.

**Hurston:** Oh no. *(Johnson shakes her head.)* But it’s just as well. I mean, did out ancestors really know what they were gettin’ themselves into when they started tradin’ each other?

**Johnson:** Economics can be quite the powerful master over even the best of us.

**Hurston:** Yes. But like Ham’s wife, we must accept our lot in life. She didn’t turn away from him or her son when they were both cursed black. In fact, she told him, “Let us go before you awake and learn to despise your father and your God.” If we’re gonna be mad at white people for slavery, why not be mad at God also for puttin’ us in this position? *(Johnson nods.)* So how exactly do you mean it’s slavery to blame and not white folk?

**Johnson:** What I’m saying is that we as black people need to take responsibility for our own actions instead of acting like everything must automatically be blamed on someone else. And one way of doing that is acknowledging the widespread effect of slavery on our psyches. I mean, just think, would we be having this conversation if our people hadn’t gone through the devastating effects of slavery? *(Hurston nods, her eyes fixed onto the carpet.)* And another
thing—and this is quite important to me—we mustn’t go blaming white people for everything because without them, some of our greatest leaders wouldn’t even exist.

**Hurston:** *(perking up)* Like who?

**Johnson:** Frederick Douglass, of course!

**Hurston:** You’re kiddin’ me?

**Johnson:** That’s my point about not blaming white people for everything, not make them out to be villains for all our suffering. In so many instances, myself included, they are as much a part of us as we are of them.

**Hurston:** I see your point. Without white folk, I’d never have danced the cakewalk nor found a new way of looking at my own people. Through Franz Boaz.

**Johnson:** And without black people, white people would still be trying to live off the land and would never have found time to ballroom dance so that the cakewalk could be created.

*(Both women smile and laugh)*

**Johnson:** I don’t know about you, but I sure could use some coffee. “There ain’t nothing I’d rather have than a good strong cup of coffee.”

**Hurston:** *(laughing)* Gotta love that Southern dialect. The South is the heart of our experience as a people and it’s such a shame that the people and customs there aren’ regarded more highly.

**Johnson:** *(gathering the water glasses)* Yes, I know. As much as I am a part of the D.C. atmosphere and scene, I’m still just a girl from Atlanta, Georgia at heart.

**Hurston:** *(getting up and stretching)* Quite true, quite true.
Johnson: *(will tray in hands)* But you know what? Dialect is more than about capturing the location of a person or even trying to reflect how others talk. Dialect can also capture the spirit or essence of a person, no matter his or her station in life or place of origin. It's so important the total black experience be expressed, especially class interactions. I'm sure you agree?

Hurston: Of course. There's more to us than a bunch of oppressed folk runnin’ around crying at our misfortunes. *(She laughs and Johnson smiles)*

Johnson: I'll just take these to the kitchen and be right back. *(She heads towards the door of the parlor)*

Hurston: You know what? I think I'll join you. I many not be much for the domestic realm, but it never hurts to pretend.

*(The ladies exit laughing, stage left. Lights fade to black.)*
Scene 2

Setting: Johnson's kitchen at the back of the house. Lights slowly fade up. Johnson enters with tray of glasses from upstage right. She places the tray on the countertop on the opposite side of the room, between the metal sink and gas stove. A window is set above the sink, giving a view of a small garden in the back of the house. Across from the sink is the counter that can also double as a makeshift breakfast nook. To the left of both counters is the pantry, which stands adjacent to the other entrance into the kitchen and the door to the backyard. Near the entrance facing the stove is a metal icebox. Johnson puts the glasses in the sink and busies herself with preparing the coffee while Hurston enters a few seconds later.

Hurston: (leaning against the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room) Tell me, Georgia: How have you found the strength to continue on without your husband?

(Johnson gives Hurston a quick glance over her shoulder.)

Johnson: (her back still turned fixing coffee) Remember what I said about writing drama?

Hurston: (nodding) Mhmm...

Johnson: (placing the kettle onto the stove) I may not have every one of my dramas published or even produced, but it does help me in my endeavors.

Hurston: (pausing before answering) I hope this don’t sound too mean, but –(she
shifts her weight looking down at her feet) it doesn’t sound like you wrote a whole lot when you were married. Why is that?

**Johnson:** *(slowly turning around, her head tilted to the side)* You know what? I remember writing and really wanting to write, but I don’t recall having much encouragement to do so, you know? *(Hurston nods)* My husband was a good man, a good father, an excellent provider, but—*(pausing)* He didn’t like me doing things that didn’t involve the children.

**Hurston:** So he didn’t like you being anything other than a mother? *(Johnson nods her head)* Hmmm...That always seems to be the case, huh? Man reducing woman for his own needs and desires.

**Johnson:** You know how men can be, especially the ones from the middle class.

**Hurston:** *(laughing)* Oh yes, ‘caus the poor men sure can’ afford their women not working!

**Johnson:** *laughing* Only if they want to starve!

*(The women continue laughing. When it starts to die down, Hurston looks around, seeing the empty counter, she quickly straightens up.)*

**Hurston:** Say, would it be too improper if I grabbed us a couple of chairs so we can have a seat while we wait for the coffee?

**Johnson:** Of course. I’ll help you.

*(They exit momentarily, each returning with a chair. They set them up next to the counter by the nearest wall.)*
Johnson: (leaning with her arm propped atop the counter, her head resting on her hand. Her eyes down) It’s funny how the men we love don’t always treasure us like they should.

Hurston: nodding Mmmm... What I don’t understand is why they so scared of us doin’ great things? I mean, as a wife, I’d think any glory you achieve would cast him in a good light.

Johnson: Oh yes.

Hurston: Especially with your husband! My goodness, he was in the political realm, yeah?

Johnson: He had rather great political aspirations. He was so smart and driven. But someone had to stay home with the children.

Hurston: (chuckling) What? The nanny was on holiday when he was away?

Johnson: (smiling) Oh! Yes! There’s something to be said about a nanny with perfect timing! (Johnson and Hurston laugh) No, I was the nanny.

Hurston: Were you happy jus’ watchin’ the kids?

Johnson: I love my children very much.

Hurston: (placing her hand on Johnson’s hand resting on her knee) That’s not what I asked.

Johnson: (starting to tear up) You don’t understand. I’m a middle class woman; it’s my job to be a good mother and wife. That’s my job.

Hurston: That’s why I avoid it.

Johnson: You’ve never been married?
Hurston: Well...regardless of whether or not I have, it’s not my kind of job. A gal like me isn’ interested in followin’ no man’s orders. I’m my own person.

Johnson: *(shaking her head)* I don’t understand why we’ve got to choose. Be a good wife and mother or be your own person.

Hurston: It isn’t fair, I know.

Johnson: But whose fault is it? I mean, this idea had to come from somewhere, right? I used to be an assistant principal before getting married. I was made to resign my post in order to be married. *(Getting up)* I refuse to believe that a woman is stuck in some preconceived role. Society can’t possibly be that close-minded. A woman should have the right to do what she wants, just like a man.

Hurston: *(smiling)* I quite agree. But what to do about it? I mean, “Shem’s wife is but a woman.”

Johnson: *(briefly pausing as she paces close to the pantry door)* Hmmm... *(she stops abruptly)* Write it!

Hurston: *(perking up)* Write it?

Johnson: Just think about it: We write about race, right? Why not write about gender?

Hurston: Don’t you think the men would reject it? I mean, you’re talkin’ about exposing a part of the black community no one really talks about. It’s a pretty strong issue, you know.

Johnson: What’s wrong with that? Talking about the effects of slavery is a strong
issue in our community. It practically broke us beyond any measure of understanding. It’s what led to our fractured gender relations.

**Hurston**: You think so?

**Johnson**: Oh, I know so. There’s a reason why so many of our men treat us like white men treat their women.

**Hurston**: *(laughing)* Like queens?

**Johnson**: Now you and I both know that isn’t really the case. White men treat their women like property *(slams hands on table)*. Why do you think they stopped wearing proper undergarments?

**Hurston**: You sayin’ they’re rebellin’?

**Johnson**: Yes. *(Sitting down)* And why don’t we do the same? Who says we have to write exactly the same way black men write?

**Hurston**: *(smiling)* I think I like where this is goin’...

**Johnson**: What’s the one thing we black women know better than our own men?

**Hurston**: We know ourselves.

**Johnson**: Exactly. How can we say that white people can’t write the black experience, but allow black men to write our experience? How are they supposed to know how we women think and feel?

**Hurston**: But on the same note, how can we women write the black male experience? Do we just leave them out of our dramas?

**Johnson**: Perhaps not all together. We can just write from our perspective. In fact, I’ve already done so. *(leaning in with a slight smile)* And I’m quite certain so have you.
**Hurston:** *(laughing)* Why do I get the sense that we’re in on some conspiracy.

**Johnson:** *(laughing)* It does feel that way, doesn’t it?

**Hurston:** It really does! But you do have a point. I mean, why should the men get all the glory? Not to mention what I said earlier about DuBois and Locke. Here are two men who’re tellin’ all of us how to write and why to write?

**Johnson:** That’s my point exactly. Although I agree with them that we as a people should use our talents to educate others, I would be remiss not to share what I know as a black woman, especially a mother. I guarantee that no man can possibly understand what it means to raise the very being who they gave birth to.

**Hurston:** I know we’re talkin’ about writing our own experience, but what do you think it could mean in the grand scheme of things? You know, the whole “showing how we really are”?

**Johnson:** Well, much like you, I believe that we can write dramas about our own communities. Yes, race will play a role within the work, but the dynamics of our own communities are just as important. It raises the question: How has race relations affected gender relations in our communities?

**Hurston:** It’s funny you say that exactly. I’ve always felt that we women have a voice that’s just as important as the men’s.

**Johnson:** Did you know I submitted two dramas to the *Opportunity*?

**Hurston:** Same as me.

**Johnson:** Yeah. Soon after my husband died, I was encouraged by Zona Gale to write dramas. She has had quite the influence on me.
Hurston: Didn’ she win a Pulitzer?

Johnson: *(smiling)* She sure did! For *Miss Lulu Bett* in 1921.

Hurston: See? That’s what I’m talkin’ about. We women ought to be encouragin’ each other. There’s so much we can accomplish, other than just bein’ a wife and mother.

Johnson: Well, I think there’s so much we can accomplish while being a wife and mother.

Hurston: *(laughing)* I’m sorry, Georgia. I know how that stuff is important to you.

Johnson: I can already tell you this: my first two plays do exactly what we’ve been talking about. I find it so interesting how much men depend upon us and how much we women shoulder when it comes to our families.

Hurston: That’s very true. I don’t know how many men tie their very existence to us women.

Johnson: When I was writing *Blue Blood*, I was really trying to show how it can be up to the women to make some of the most important decisions, decisions that can affect the community at large.

Hurston: We do have to hold so many, many secrets. *(Shaking her head)* Men jus’ don’t know.

Johnson: It’ so very true. I asked myself: What would happen if two people were planning on getting married, but there was a terrible secret their mothers were hiding? What if those two people shared the same father, but didn’t know it?

Hurston: *(turning up her face)* Oh, the scandal! A brother and sister can’ possibly
marry. That can’ be legal!

Johnson: *(laughing)* I doubt it.

Hurston: But, how can they share the same father and not know it?

Johnson: What if the one mother knew and was proud her child had blue blood, but
the other mother was passing her child off as her husband’s child?

Hurston: Blue blood, huh? It’s so overrated. No offense, of course.

Johnson: *(laughing)* Not at all. I’m very proud of my heritage, as you know. I don’t
hide anything. But what if it was a secret? Can I handle the secret identity of
my real father?

Hurston: I suppose it would all depend on the person.

Johnson: I think it depends upon gender. Men can’t handle not being able to protect
their women. “It’s the black women that have got to protect their men from
the white men by not telling on ‘em.”10

Hurston: Wow. That’s powerful.

Johnson: It really is. When the mothers find out that their children are siblings, they
knew they had to stop the wedding.

Hurston: How did the son handle it?

Johnson: Do you really think he could’ve handle the knowledge that his real father
raped his mother?

Hurston: Oh! Well that’s a different issue, isn’t it?

Johnson: Once again, it all boils down to protection. We women have to protect our
men. Only the daughter knew and she chose to run off with the man who
really wanted to marry her.
Hurston: That almost sounds hopeful. But just think of what the women must’ve been goin’ through, havin’ that kind of secret, especially the rape. I’d be beside myself if that ever happened to me.

Johnson: Unfortunately, it happens all too often, especially not long after the Civil War, the time of Blue Blood.

Hurston: Yeah, if we think we don’ have any rights now...(she shudders slightly)

Johnson: One thing that truly struck me was when I was writing Mrs. Temple’s recollection of her rape; how she “cried out”, but “[t]here wasn’t any one there that cared enough to help.”11

Hurston: My goodness!

Johnson: But she got lucky. Her fiancé agreed to marry her anyways and pass her child off as his own. But what if she didn’t have that option? What if she had been discarded? There’s just something so poignant about the poor Southern black woman.

Hurston: They’re my favorite subjects. People just don’ seem to appreciate what those women go through. It’s important to give them a voice.

Johnson: It’s what I tried to do in Plumes.

Hurston: (smiling and nodding) You won Opportunity’s drama contest for that one. I remember.

Johnson: (laughing) Indeed. Did you get to read it?

Hurston: Unfortunately not, but I was told it was deserving. (The women smile at each other. Hurston looks over at the stove) Say, you think the water’s ready for the coffee?
Johnson: *(starting, jumping out of seat)* Oh! I completely forgot about the coffee.

*(She rushes over to the stove, removing the kettle.)*

Hurston: *(laughing)* Don’t worry. I sure didn’t. *(getting up and walking to the sink counter.)*

*(The women busy themselves making coffee in quiet. With their coffees, they return to their seats.)*

Hurston: So tell me abou’ Plumes. Is it likewise about race issues imposing upon gender?

Johnson: *(taking a sip)* It’s actually about two women sipping coffee.

Hurston: *(laughing)* No, really!

Johnson: *(laughing)* Alright, alright. But it really does involve two women drinking coffee. They just also happen to be waiting for the male doctor who might tell the mother he has to operate on her very sick daughter.

Hurston: I take it the mother and doctor don’ get along?

Johnson: Not at all. He’s this educated man and she’s a poor Southern woman trying to make ends meet.

Hurston: And her husband?

Johnson: Gone. There is no husband. It’s a completely female-centered world. In fact, like *Blue Blood*, I set the play in a kitchen.

Hurston: The woman’s realm? That’s to be expected.

Johnson: I’m rather surprised that the judges at *Opportunity* liked this drama.

Hurston: Why? It sounds just like how a man would like his women: right in the
kitchen where they belong. *(Laughs)*

**Johnson:** That’s actually what disturbs me. I mean, why is the kitchen the realm of the woman?

**Hurston:** It’s all about being domestic. Men like a woman taking care of him. Some men would starve without us.

**Johnson:** You sure you haven’t been married? *(Hurston shrugs)* Sure sounds like you have. *(Laughs)*

**Hurston:** All I’m sayin’ is that men are more comfortable when they’ve got somethin’ to control, like a woman. It all goes back to my stance that men can’t survive without women.

**Johnson:** Speaking of control, I remember how I felt when I was writing Dr. Scott’s character. You’ve been to the doctor, right Zora?

**Hurston:** They sure can a bunch of know-it-alls. Like they always know better than the rest of us. I mean, wouldn’t I know my own body?

**Johnson:** I actually drew inspiration from the different men I’ve encountered. He thinks he knows better than Charity, treating her like a child. He pushes her away when she wants to make sure her child is alright: “No. You stay outside and get your mind on something else. You can’t possibly be of any service. Now be calm, will you?”¹²

**Hurston:** *(shocked)* That’s so rude! What mother wouldn’t be concerned with the welfare of her own child. I’ll bet he tried to get more money out of her by suggesting some expensive procedure.

**Johnson:** Heart surgery.
Hurston: I don’ believe this. Was he white?

Johnson: I didn’t write that in. I felt that the main issue there was more about class and gender than race.

Hurston: (laughing) Yeah, even Negro doctors can be terrible in how they treat you. Like they better.

Johnson: Exactly. (Pausing) Zora, I’m so glad you came over.

Hurston: (smiling) So am I, Georgia.

Johnson: There’s just so much I needed to talk about, but just didn’t know it.

Hurston: Funny how things work, huh? Sometimes you think it’s gonna go one way, then it ends up goin’ another. It’s like my work. If any of them think I’m gonna hand over everything I find out about our people, they mus’ be jokin’!

Johnson: Really?

Hurston: What I mean to say is, there are some things we women got to keep for ourselves.

Johnson: (nodding) And there are some things we’ve got to let the whole world know about how we black women really are.

Hurston: I know I’m nobody’s background character.

Johnson: (smiling) Nor should any woman be made to feel that way.

(The ladies smile at each other, sipping on their coffees.)

Hurston: You know what, Georgia? I’m mighty glad I met you.

Johnson: As I am you.

Hurston: It’s so nice to meet someone I can agree and disagree with. It’s really
healthy to at least attempt to understand both sides to an issue.

**Johnson:** Well Zora, you’re more than welcome to come back here any time. I welcome one and all.

**Hurston:** You know, I'll have to take you up on that offer. *Standing up.*

**Johnson:** *(standing.)* I’m glad we got to talk without the others here. *(extends her hand.)*

*(Hurston shakes Johnson’s hand. Both women make their way to exit upstage right, then pause.)*

**Hurston:** So when you havin' your next get-together?

**Johnson:** Next Saturday. *(Smiling)* You coming?

**Hurston:** *(head titled to the side. Smiling.)* Don’ mind if I do.

*(Both women exit.)*

Endnotes


3. Cole and Lee 33. Introduction to *Color Struck*

4. From *Color Struck*, Cole and Lee 44

5. From *Blue Blood*, Stephen 64

6. From *The First One*, Cole and Lee 70

7. Ibid, 74
8. From *Plumes*, Stephen 77
9. From *The First One*, Cole and Lee 73
10. From *Blue Blood*, Stephen 73
11. Ibid, 69
12. From *Plumes*, Stephen 79
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