

Being and Metaphor

There is more to be said about the concept of being, and particularly about the relationship between concepts of black being and metaphor, but first a fair amount of context is necessary to ensure our understanding of the discourses surrounding these concepts. This context will permit us to see more clearly how African American philosophical metaphors appeared in the literature well before Du Bois's seminal work in *The Souls of Black Folk*, even as they have persisted throughout the modern and postmodern periods in the aftermath of Du Bois's pivotal contributions.

African American philosophical metaphors have long demonstrated a penchant for voicing being or consciousness, and yet they have consistently participated in a genealogy of African American and, more broadly, Western philosophical thought whose historiography largely excludes them. Beginning with the classical period and granting significant attention to the modern contributions made by Zora Neale Hurston, chapter 1 discusses a number of theories specific to philosophical uses of metaphor in both African American and white Western aesthetic discourses before addressing its regular appearance in African American literary and cultural expression. Chapter 2 examines in detail the evolution of thought on the role of philosophical metaphor in African American literary theory, criticism, and philosophy, in particular.

Most of us understand metaphor generally as an ornament of language. African Americanists have long noted metaphor's capacity to enact what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called parodic signification.¹ In the African American tradition, these might be such metaphors as "you sho' is propaganda," and "sobbing hearted," both of which Zora Neale Hurston gives as examples of metaphor in her 1934 essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression." However, while metaphor certainly operates as this sort of linguistic and textual embellishment—what some philosophers of language

call “mere” or “fancy” metaphor, but what I will refer to more pertinently in this instance as vernacular metaphor—it also functions in modes that may be characterized as philosophical. On the one hand, vernacular metaphors constitute what Samuel Taylor Coleridge saw as the “primary imagination,” which “perceives and operates within the ordinary world” through language (Hawkes 47). Philosophical metaphors, on the other hand, “[re-work] this world, and [impress their] own shape upon it” (47) in such a way that they reveal their epistemological potential and ontological qualities. These might be such metaphors as “I’ll make me a world,” which James Weldon Johnson uses in his 1927 poem, “The Creation.” Johnson’s metaphor carries at least two senses: in the first sense, the poet indicates an intention of creating a world around him or her; in the second sense, the poet collapses the distinction between self and world by articulating his/her intention to remake him/herself as a world, as a sphere of habitation for the spirit, soul, and mind. Such an image of world-creation connotes systemic knowledge. Philosophical metaphors are said to accomplish this world-making process through such modes as resemblance, deviance, and analogy. The especial focus of this study is upon those modes that are described as epistemological and ontological, those that, like Johnson’s metaphor, are specifically concerned with the nature and meaning of being.

Western philosophical inquiry into the intersecting nature of metaphor and being dates back to the time of Plato and Aristotle, and actually appears in the works of both philosophers.² Metaphor has today remained at the center of a number of contemporary debates on being alive in much continental philosophy for two related reasons. First, as the aesthetician Clive Cazeaux puts it, “the fact that key epistemological concepts have metaphors at their root, for example, ‘mirroring,’ ‘correspondence,’ [and] ‘sense datum,’ is taken as evidence of the contingent, communal, subjective basis of knowledge” [sic]; and second, “because metaphor (as a form of dislocated or dislocating predication) works by testing the appropriate with the inappropriate, it is seen as a means of challenging the boundaries whereby one subject defines itself in relation to another.”³ That Aristotle, even more so than Plato, stands at the center of this epistemological but transgressive contemporary perspective on metaphor is central to this debate, as witnessed in the work of the Italian philosopher Guiseppe Stellardi. Aristotle’s perspective on metaphor provides the foundation for both a semantic theory of metaphor and for what Stellardi calls “a possible conjunction between poetics and ontology, which if carried forth to its logical consequences, would place metaphor right at the heart of the processes of knowledge acquisition.”⁴

This conjunction between poetics, ontology, and epistemology explains why Aristotle's definition of metaphor is largely considered to found the cornerstone of contemporary metaphor theory. While his *Rhetoric* contains a detailed treatment of tropes, Aristotle's major treatise on metaphor appears in the *Poetics*, a classical work on the origins of tragic drama and epic poetry, and one of the earliest works of western literary theory. There he defines metaphor as "the application [to something] of a name belonging to something else" (108). In Aristotle's analysis, metaphor is defined in four modes, each of which entails a "movement" or shifting of meaning. The definition is extended and fairly laborious, but it must be grasped if we are to understand the fundamental workings of metaphor.

The first mode of metaphor takes place in the movement "from the genus to the species," or from a general concept (a genre or universal type) to its outward form or specific manifestation. The metaphorical example Aristotle gives is, "Here stands my ship." In this instance, the verb "stands" functions as the genus, which takes the place of the species, "lying at anchor." The metaphor then consists in drawing the image of a ship "lying at anchor" to the mind of the reader via the use of the genus "standing." The second mode comes about when metaphor moves in the opposite direction, that is, when the species takes on the function of the genus. An example of this mode is found in a quote Aristotle draws from the work of the poet Homer: "'truly has Odysseus done ten thousand deeds of worth': for [the species] 'ten thousand' is [part of the genus] 'many,' and Homer uses it here instead of 'a lot.'" An instance of the third mode, in which metaphor moves from one species to another, is found in such a phrase as "[killing a man by] 'draining out his life with bronze,'" that is, with a weapon made of bronze. This example provides a metaphor whose core is, essentially, a metonym. (A metonym is a word that is used as a substitute for something with which it is closely associated. In this case, the word "bronze" comes to stand in for a dagger or sword.) And lastly, metaphor may operate "according to analogy," where " b is to a as d is to c ; for [the poet then] will say d instead of b , or b instead of d " (Aristotle 108). In the analogical mode of metaphor, the poet is free to make outright substitutions of words that evoke similar imagery or that carry similar meanings, and that therefore test the limits of meaning conveyed in each word. As an example, Aristotle writes, "the wine-bowl stands to Dionysus as the shield does to Ares: so [the poet] will call a wine-bowl 'shield of Dionysus' and a shield 'wine-bowl of Ares'" (109).

Aristotle considers metaphor the most important of the five principal tropes, the others being simile, metonymy, personification, and synecdoche.

Indeed, in the *Rhetoric*, he concludes that “simile is also a metaphor; the difference is but slight,”²⁵ and that metaphors can likewise take the shape of metonymy and synecdoche. Aristotle allows that writers may employ catachresis (which is more than simple malapropism) in the making of metaphors by inventing relationships between images, objects, and actions. To do this, the writer must take advantage of definitions accepted in the language-culture, such as “to scatter seed is to sow” (109) if he or she wishes to invent a metaphor such as “[scattering] radiance from the sun,” which “has no name,” or whose semantic and logical relationship was heretofore nonexistent (109). The writer may then turn about to say, “sowing god-wrought radiance,” a metaphor whose inventive conceit is ensured only by the participation of the reader or auditor. The success of innovative metaphors depends fully upon the reader/auditor’s being able to understand the relationship implied in the metaphor itself. In other words, the metaphor must make sense in the culture and society in which it is expressed, even if the relation it claims is distant. It is nonetheless important to note that each of the modes of metaphor described by Aristotle implies a logical relation that ties the terms of the metaphor together, and thus we see that metaphors can indeed serve ornamental purposes, but they can as well serve as propositional structures of meaning.

From Aristotle’s definition, we see that metaphors can be words or phrases; they can be simple or complex. In the *Poetics*, they are described as a type of dynamic naming that can also be, especially in the fourth mode, analogy, vehicles for making new meaning and for reasoning. Importantly, Aristotle identifies them as the cornerstone of specific sorts of aesthetic language use in various genres of writing, particularly epic poetry and drama. Central to our understanding of metaphor and its use in African American literature is that Aristotle points toward mimesis, or representation, as foundational to metaphor, for in transferring the name of one thing to something else, there must be present some sort of recognition of the word that makes the transference work. In other words, metaphors make sense because they lead the reader or auditor to recognize the similarities between two seemingly disparate concepts or actions, as in “sowing god-wrought radiance.” Hence (and this point Aristotle does not make directly) metaphor itself may be understood as inherently paradoxical, even as it extends toward a provisional unity of thought. Metaphor presents a continuity within an apparent discontinuity.

This dialectic of metaphor, wherein metaphor effects the displacement of one sense or meaning by substituting another, by claiming the nearness

(contiguity) of another conceptual image whatever its semiotic distance, obtains not only between the similar and the dissimilar (between sameness and difference), but also between the written and the spoken. The oral/aural seems to be as significant as writing to the role of metaphor in literature, especially since metaphor serves, in speech as well as in writing, to make the spectator of the play or reader of a poem “see” things that would not otherwise be perceived. Aristotle writes that the “liveliness” of metaphor is achieved by “using the proportional [analogical] type of metaphor and by being graphic (i.e., making your hearers *see* things).” And by “‘making them see things’ I mean using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity” (*Rhetoric* 190. Italics in original).

Effective and ingenious metaphors, Aristotle argues, exploit this dialectical relation between the aural and the visual, the oral and the literate, for their function. What is more, Aristotle, in underscoring the importance of action (“things as in a state of activity”) as well as perception (“making your hearers see things”), makes clear the centrality of agency and embodiedness to the conception and success of metaphors. For only bodies, whether they be human, animal, or celestial (as in plants, stars, and galaxies, which we significantly and metaphorically refer to as heavenly bodies), can undertake activity, and only human beings are thought capable of using advanced reasoning, engaging in action as they perceive differences and conceive linguistic innovations. Thus, from the inception of the history of the theory of metaphor, there courses the importance of representation, displacement, and epistemological deviance. Aristotle underscores the centrality of sound, sight, speech, and writing to successful and powerful metaphors. And, perhaps most critical to the purposes of this study, Aristotle makes clear the relation of phenomenological presence and metaphor, casting into clear relief the bond between ontology (as a central element of metaphysics) and the ordinary and poetic uses of metaphorical language.

The paradoxical nature of metaphor—its process of articulating discontinuity within continuity, its recognition of similarities in dissimilar entities, its collocation of the written and the oral/aural, and its simultaneity of transcendence and immanence—makes it uncommonly well-suited to the double-voiced character of modern African American cultural forms such as Spirituals, the blues, and gospel music. Metaphor simply abounds in the African American vernacular tradition. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the Sorrow Songs, which Du Bois treats at length in *Souls* as early African American poetry set to music, not unlike the early poetry of Europe sung in feudal and pre-modern monarchical lands by troubadours.

Many of the Spirituals date back to at least the eighteenth century, at the inception of the modern period. Canonical Spirituals such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” do not simply allude to the promise of home represented by the lines referring to an afterlife in heaven (“Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus / Steal away, steal away home”), but also evolve over time to suggest the metaphorical train of the underground railroad, which would carry the slave northward to earthly freedom. The Spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” puts forward analogical metaphors that consist in drawing an implicit comparison between the situation of the Jews in captivity and that of African slaves in bondage, a lyrical gesture that has been made explicit in such eighteenth-century writings as the narratives of Quobna Ottobah Cugoano⁶ and Olaudah Equiano. Many scholars agree that “Go Down, Moses” is a transgressive song of open protest, a defiant melody that might only have been sung in the absence of white slaveholders and overseers.⁷

Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century blues songs, which evolved from Spirituals and work songs, are widely characterized as double-voiced expressions of concerns and care.⁸ Their lyrics operate via metaphor, allusion, and innuendo. The double-voiced character of the blues is described by Albert Murray as being at once sacred and profane, a duality that supports what I see as the evolution of the use of metaphor in modern African American literature. Witness the “How Long Blues,” first recorded in 1928: “The brook runs into the river, the river runs into the sea / If I don’t run into my baby, a train is going to run into me / How long, how long, how long?” The repeated interrogatory phrase “how long?” is drawn from the Spiritual and gospel traditions, which regularly produced songs that queried God on the duration of human suffering. (How long must earthly suffering endure before the slave reached her heavenly rest? How long would men’s sins prevail before the vengeful coming of the Lord?) Various elements of metaphor contribute to the figurative nature of language in the “How Long Blues”: the repetition of words and themes; the play of orientational tropes (as discussed by Lakoff and Johnson, 15) that capitalize on sundry uses of the prepositional phrase “run into”; and the echoing of the first line by the second. Billie Holiday’s “Fine and Mellow” (1939), one of her more memorable blues performances (many commentators agree that while Holiday at times recorded blues standards, she was more of a jazz vocalist than a blues singer⁹), employs metaphor more forthrightly: “Love is just like a faucet / It turns off and on / Love is just like a faucet / It turns off and on / Sometimes when you think it’s on, baby / It has turned off and gone.” We understand the simile, the explicit comparison—Aristotle’s

“full blown” metaphor—between love and a faucet, as a humorous trope employing ontological and somewhat personified descriptions of “love” and “faucet” because popular Western culture understands “love” as a capricious human sentiment that we may hope to contain (through the controlling mechanism of the faucet), but can never quite manage to fix.

The literature of African America is no less ripe with metaphor than its oral tradition. Metaphor is seen in its earliest examples, beginning with the often discussed “trope of the talking book” in the eighteenth-century narratives of John Marrant (*A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia) Born in New-York, in North-America*, 1785) and Olaudah Equiano (*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, 1789), among others.¹⁰ Sojourner Truth’s metaphors of “substance” and “shadow,” and her ontological declaration of herself as a “sign unto this nation,”¹¹ along with Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s layered framework of metaphor, memory, testimony, and being in *Sketches of Southern Life*, punctuate the mid-nineteenth century in preparation, as I show in chapter 4, for Du Bois’s metaphoric of black ontology in *Souls*. Likewise, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask” anticipates the “two-ness” of African American existence expressed most poignantly and poetically by Du Bois nearly a decade later. Dunbar most famously writes: “We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes/This debt we pay to human guile/With torn and bleeding hearts we smile/And mouth with myriad subtleties.” The mask of which Dunbar sings foreshadows Du Bois’s figures of the “veil” and the “color-line,” as well as the latter’s germinal trope of “double consciousness.”

Standing at the crossroads of a metaphorical and ontological tradition of modern black expression, Du Bois develops these tropes at length and with eloquence not only in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but across his oeuvre, as I discuss in chapters 5 and 6. In the African American literary tradition, Du Bois’s tropes are rivaled in importance only by Ralph Ellison’s metaphor of “invisibility” as elaborated in *Invisible Man*. Du Bois’s metaphoric provide a bridge between Dunbar’s “mask that grins and lies” and the invisible man’s determination to “yes ’em to death” with false acquiescence. Just as Ellison’s narrative inherits much from Du Boisian metaphoric, it also underscores the crucial sense of double consciousness that provides the motivity to *Souls* as well as to James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), which is taken by many critics to be a model for Ellison’s novel.¹² Johnson, in one of his narrator’s more explicit moments, writes that

the “delicate” and “subtle” concerns that weighed upon the thought of the “coloured man” gave

every coloured man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race. I have often watched with interest and sometimes with amazement even ignorant coloured men under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics maintain this dualism in the presence of white men. (*Autobiography* 21–22)

Ellison, whose protagonist likewise suffers from a multiple sense of being akin to double consciousness, begins *Invisible Man* with a chiasmus (from the Greek for “a placing crosswise”), a metaphorical construction resembling an “X,” not unlike the image of the crossroads that figures so prominently in the blues music Ellison loved: the novel’s prologue is actually the introduction to the memoir of the narrator, who tells us near the conclusion of the novel that the “end was in the beginning” (*Invisible Man* 431). We the readers know that even as the end is in the beginning, the beginning is also in the end; the past is prologue to the present time of the novel.

Ellison’s structures of time and space in *Invisible Man* were, as is well known, strongly influenced by Richard Wright’s 1944 novella, *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Wright highly valued and regularly profited from textual metaphors that revealed both a critical ontology and a critical epistemology, such as those pioneered by Du Bois. He calls our attention to metaphorical matters of the text when he opines, in the 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (which, in chapter 7, I read in context with earlier aesthetic statements on the role and function of tropes in literature written by F. E. W. Harper and Du Bois), that the “image and emotion” of literature “possess a logic of their own.” He insists that affect and imagery—including, specifically, figures of language such as conceptual metaphors that approach the level of catachresis—are capable of granting form, meaning, and access to a new and better world. Like *Souls* before it, *The Man Who Lived Underground* paradoxically points the way to life in such a world through the complexity of its philosophical metaphors. I see Wright’s fundamental metaphor of psychic and bodily descent as emblematic of the ways in which archetypal ontological tropes of death and life, guilt and freedom, time and space, memory and oblivion, and dreaming and waking facilitate the African American text’s demand for a new and better world.

A Philosophy of Ordinary Black Being: Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression"

Wright would, of course, implicitly (though not explicitly) distance himself from Du Bois and other earlier black writers in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Nonetheless, "Blueprint," an indispensable piece on African American language, culture, and political aesthetics regarding the function and mission of the artist, was published three years after what was probably the single most important essay on African American language to appear before World War II, Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934). In many ways, Wright and Ellison alike would profit from the insights on vernacular expressions of black being that Hurston documents in "Characteristics" and puts into play in her fiction, though Wright in particular would distance himself from Hurston's art.¹³ Hurston's discussion of metaphor as foundational to African American vernacular expressions such as the blues and folklore, and as relational to its social context resonates in crucial ways with Aristotle's classical discussion of metaphor in the *Poetics*. Thus it actually advances the question of ontological metaphor towards what mid-twentieth-century philosophers would come to call the philosophy of ordinary language.

A product of what is now known as the "linguistic turn" in philosophy during the 1950s and 1960s, the philosophy of ordinary language emerged in contrast to analytic philosophy. While the latter treats with some suspicion what it sees as language's tendency toward opacity, ordinary language philosophy claims that meaning resides precisely in the use of words, that words mean what they are used to mean in certain contexts. Though Hurston is generally not read within the context of this discourse, she is, in fact, the first African American literary and cultural critic to have published a piece specific to language, sociolinguistics, and cultural expression among African Americans before 1950,¹⁴ and thus her short piece on language is the most pointed and, perhaps, most important work of sociolinguistics and the philosophy of ordinary African American language produced prior to the Black Aesthetic movement. It therefore bears an extended discussion, after which I will elaborate the ways in which Hurston, Wright, and Ellison engage Du Bois's theory of metaphor in its insistence upon a philosophical grounding in the exigencies of everyday black being.

The original venue for Hurston's essay, published the same year as her first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). Edited by the British shipping heiress Nancy Cunard, a

poet, writer, and biographer whose passion for African and African American culture and history was well known in transatlantic circles, *Negro* was not only large and broad in scope (it contained at least 231 entries and was divided into seven sections, including “America,” “Negro Stars,” “Music,” “Poetry,” “West Indies and South America,” and “Africa”), it also boasted of such African American contributors as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Arna Bontemps. White authors who contributed to the collection included William Carlos Williams, Theodore Dreiser, and Cunard herself. The then fledgling writer Samuel Beckett, whose most famous work is the play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), undertook a number of translations for inclusion in the work. Among these is the piece “Murderous Humanitarianism,” submitted by The Surrealist Group in Paris and signed by André Breton, Paul Éluard, and René Char, among others.

Negro constituted something of an act of daring. While *The New Negro* (1925) was presented by its editor, Alain Locke (who also contributed to Cunard’s anthology), as the voice of the Harlem Renaissance, the throaty song of the New Negro poet and intellectual in the United States, *Negro* laid claim to the world as its stage. In her anthology, Cunard implicitly framed the cultural artifacts of African-descended peoples as “diasporic.” The term exists nowhere in her Foreword to the work, yet it is silently spoken from each page comprising the text. She also framed the book as one that responded to the needs of the Negro through the activism of the Communist Party, and this she did explicitly.

Hurston seems to have been oblivious to Cunard’s purpose. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she makes no note of her involvement in producing *Negro*. In fact, she does not mention it at all. The very structure of Hurston’s essay on “Negro expression” appears to serve a specific purpose quite apart from that of Cunard. Hurston’s goal seems not to have been the disruption of any sort of authority—imperialist, capitalistic (these were Cunard’s stated aims for *Negro*), or otherwise. She strikes one as being much more intent upon expressing what she describes, in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, as the beauty of “Negrodom” and the complexity of its expression, which she chronicled not through the singular practice of writing, but multiply through story, song, and dance.

“Characteristics” unfolds in twelve parts: “Drama”; “Will to Adorn” (which treats metaphor and simile, the “double-descriptive,” “verbal nouns,” and “nouns from verbs”); “Angularity”; “Asymmetry”; “Dancing”; “Negro Folklore”; “Culture Heroes”; “Examples of Folklore and the Modern Culture Hero”; “Originality”; “Imitation”; “Absence of the Concept of Privacy”; “The

Jook”; and “Dialect.” I will limit my discussion to the two sections of the essay that are most pertinent to the focus of this study: “Drama” and “Will to Adorn.”

It should not be lost on us that Hurston, like Aristotle, approaches her theory of figurative language through a discussion of human action, human drama. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines metaphor as reliant upon mimesis—representation—for its formation. He addresses metaphor not simply through a discussion of the parts of speech, but also through the major genres of his day: epic poetry and tragic drama. Primary or “primitive” epic poetry such as that composed by Homer—whose work Aristotle prized above almost any other poet—was largely oral. Indeed, it was mimetic—it was *performed* and, because of its metaphorical innovations, it bore, as Alexander Pope saw it, the mark of inventive genius.¹⁵ In speaking of metaphor, which is her major concern in the first two sections of the essay, Hurston likewise insists upon the importance of the relation between metaphor and mimesis, and she does so in terms of the dramatic mimicry that she sees at the center of black cultural life.

The “Negro’s universal mimicry” is “evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama,” Hurston writes (1019). In a way that reflects the anthropological work she had been carrying out since 1926,¹⁶ Hurston’s discussion of the drama that characterizes everyday Negro expression analyzes it in something of a naturalistic way, that is, with regard to environmental and social relations, and, perhaps most importantly, in relation to vernacular culture. (As an anthropologist, Hurston makes clear throughout the essay that her focus is the black “folk” or what she calls the “average Negro” [1022] and not middle-class African Americans, whose culture is, in her eyes, derivative of that of whites.) The peculiar language that Hurston sees the Negro employing in his/her self-expression is highly imagistic and replete with terms capable of enacting the drama of black existence. “His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures” (1019), Hurston insists.

Hurston’s choice of “interpretation” as a key term in this phrase appears quite deliberate. She might instead have chosen the word “translation,” which would indicate a movement or transference of meaning across the boundaries of two or more different linguistic and social contexts. While “translation” indicates an articulation of meaning across language’s own limits, “interpretation” would instead indicate the act of taking meaning to a point of exchange and there rendering it otherwise in a gesture of displacement. Where translation appears to be directly linked to language

as it is written, interpretation refers to language as it is spoken. Thus by choosing "interpretation" as a critical term of analysis, Hurston remains true to her goal of discussing the performative (mimetic) aspects of Negro vernacular expression (performance in language being one of the central tenets of the philosophy of ordinary language). "Interpretation" permits Hurston to shed light on what she sees as the dramatic and mimetic nature of African American speech as it displaces white American norms, and there, for her, lay the very essence of African American culture.

Hurston goes on to argue that everyday African Americans routinely use metaphorical analogy in their version of American English: this newly interpreted language is expansively employed to "describe [one act] in terms of another," and this sort of systemic analogy is the basis for "the rich metaphor and simile" that characterize folk expression (1019). These metaphors are, to Hurston's mind, "primitive," since it is "easier to illustrate" meaning by way of pictures "than to explain because action came before speech" (1019). In fact, she concludes, the Negro "thinks in hieroglyphics." And this compared to the thought process of "the white man," who "thinks in a written language" (1020).

The analogy Hurston provides ("Let us make a parallel," she writes) in support of her controversial contention that the Negro's "language and thought are 'primitive'" is striking. It underscores the significance of her decision to employ the term "interpretation" rather than "translation." Interpretation highlights an act of not only excavation, of tunneling through layers of signification in order to attain to a deeper, hidden meaning; it also emphasizes the act of exchange Hurston sees at work in black vernacular expression. We should recall that the "parallel" that Hurston draws itself functions as an analogy, a tropological form that Aristotle deems to be one of the four fundamental types of metaphor.¹⁷ Beginning with yet another metaphorical construction, a simile, described by Aristotle as a "full-blown" metaphor,¹⁸ Hurston writes: "Language is like money. In primitive communities, actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later for checks in certain usages" (1019–1020).

Hurston likens the barter system, an early system of trade characterized by economists as cumbersome and inconvenient, to the Negro's ostensibly "primitive" use of language. Bartering evolved into a more sophisticated monetary system in which coin came to be exchanged for goods. We might add that the use of money in lieu of barter allows for a more extensive network of exchange in a marketplace. Barter severely limits the number of

players in a market, because it largely eliminates intermediaries or “middle men”: it demands that those who wish to make the exchange make it more or less directly with one another. Bartering seems to be, like the so-called “primitive” Negro expression Hurston describes, a system in which the only ones who can participate are those who “belong” to the language community in question, those who are situated in the cultural tradition of the local place. Quite possibly, it is the anthropologist in her that leads Hurston to see the Negro’s expression in such naturalistic terms. Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics whose work I discuss further below, built his analysis of human language in good measure upon similar concepts of value and exchange, though Saussure was more likely to value the “check words” that Hurston attributes to whites.

It must be pointed out that, from the perspective of Claude Lévi-Strauss, to reference the thought of yet another modern sociolinguist and anthropologist, such expression does not indicate the “ineptitude” of so-called “primitive people” for abstract thought, as Hurston argues in her essay. Hurston insists that a more evolved, conceptual language expressed in “check words” remains the province of whites. Lévi-Strauss, who regarded highly the work of Hurston’s mentor, Franz Boas, takes the counterview:

It has long been the fashion to invoke languages which lack the terms for expressing such a *concept* as “tree” or “animal,” even though they contain all the words necessary for a detailed inventory of species and varieties. But, to begin with, while these cases are cited as evidence of the supposed ineptitude of “primitive people” for abstract thought, other cases are at the same time ignored which make it plain that the richness of abstract words is not a monopoly of civilized languages. In Chinook, a language widely spoken in the north-west of North America, to take one example, many properties and qualities are referred to by means of abstract words: “This method,” Boas says, “is applied to a greater extent than in any other language I know.” The proposition “the bad man killed the poor child” is rendered in Chinook: “The man’s badness killed the child’s poverty”; and for “The woman used too small a basket” they say: “She put the potentilla-roots into the smallness of a clam basket.”

In every language, moreover, discourse and syntax supply indispensable means of supplementing deficiencies of vocabulary. And the tendentious character of the argument referred to in the

last paragraph becomes very apparent when one observes that the opposite state of affairs, that is, where very general terms outweigh specific names, has also been exploited to prove the intellectual poverty of Savages. . . . The proliferation of *concepts*, as in the case of technical language, goes with more constant attention to properties of the world, with an interest that is more alert to possible distinctions which can be introduced between them. This thirst for objective *knowledge* is one of the most neglected aspects of the *thought* of people we call “primitive.” Even if it is rarely directed towards facts of the same level as those with which modern science is concerned, it implies comparable *intellectual application* and methods of observation. In both cases the universe is an *object of thought* at least as much as it is a means of satisfying needs. (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1–2. Emphasis added.)

Lévi-Strauss’s conclusions, of course, appeared in 1962, well after the publication of Hurston’s “Characteristics” and after Hurston’s death in 1960. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss not only quotes Hurston’s mentor, Franz Boas, in his critical comments countering the supposed lack of abstract thought among so-called “primitives” (above, I have highlighted Lévi-Strauss’s references to the “concepts,” “knowledge,” “thought,” and “intellectual application” of such to peoples); he also echoes Ferdinand de Saussure’s pioneering findings.¹⁹

In his authoritative 1914 work (published posthumously by his students as the *Course in General Linguistics*), Saussure opined that “[s]cholars were . . . wrong in assuming that the absence of a word proves that the primitive society knew nothing of the thing that the word names” (*Course* 225). In “Characteristics,” Hurston seems unwilling substantiate her notions of what she calls black “primitive” expression, which in some ways went against the prevailing linguistics of her day. Yet we can be certain of the force of her opinion, delivered through the tropological form of analogy: if Negro expression is primitive expression likened to a primitive system of trade known as bartering, and if bartering is itself a limited form of economic interaction, it becomes clear that, in Hurston’s logic, the “primitive” forms of metaphor used by the class to which Hurston refers are largely viewed by members of that group itself as closed social media of exchange that unfold within what James Weldon Johnson referred to as the “freemasonry of the [Negro’s] own race” (*Autobiography* 22). These forms

thus require their own interpretation from someone inside the group, a task that Hurston readily takes up.

The implication one draws from Hurston's analogy is that systems of language likewise evolve as systems of exchange wherein language not only carries concepts that are embellished by human linguistic inventiveness and enhanced by the drama of human experience, but also, on quite another register, carry an exchange value relative to a sense of community, social class, and even racial and ethnic identity. While Hurston's stance on the "primitive" nature of African American expression ignored significant aspects of Saussure's and Boas's theories of primitive language, her adaptation of a value-based perspective of language was not out of line with the currents of linguistic theory in the 1920s and 30s. Indeed, it had been sanctioned in Saussure's *Course*.

Saussure had largely been concerned with value in relation to synchronic linguistics, but made it clear that value was of "prime importance" to the general study of linguistics. For him, language is a system of "pure values" whose "characteristic role" is "to serve as a link between thought and sound" (*Course* 111–12). In defining more pointedly the role of value in language, Saussure returned to his conclusion regarding the arbitrary nature of the sign:

Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance*. These views give a better understanding of what was said before about the arbitrariness of signs. Not only are the two domains that are linked by the linguistic fact shapeless and confused, but the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary. If this were not true, the notion of value would be compromised, for it would include an externally imposed element. But actually values remain entirely relative, and that is why the bond between the sound and the idea is radically arbitrary. The arbitrary nature of the sign explains why in turn the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value. (*Italics in original*, 113)

Having addressed the question of linguistic value, and being duly careful to avoid the sense of essentialism carried by the notion of language producing a "*substance*" rather than a "*form*," Saussure would eventually come

to issues of race and ethnicity in relation to language. He felt certain that “a common language [would not imply] consanguinity, that a family of languages [does not necessarily match] an anthropological family” (222), but he did believe that ethnic identity was reinforced by common language usage: “The social bond tends to create linguistic community and probably imposes certain traits on the common idiom; conversely, linguistic community is to some extent responsible for ethnic unity. In general, ethnic unity always suffices to explain linguistic community” (223).

In spite of Saussure’s insistence on the centrality of the linguistic community when it comes to evolving a system of language, in late twentieth-century theory, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. emphasized—after a fashion that seeks to critique what he characterizes as a pertinent oversight—Saussure’s assurance that the “signifier . . . is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter.”²⁰ (Curiously enough, however, in his theorization of African American vernacular expression, Gates does not locate African American vernacular speech along the diachronic/syntagmatic x-axis of Saussure’s model—the axis of dynamism and change—but along the synchronic/paradigmatic y-axis, the static axis of language to which Saussure grants the preponderance of his attention as he formulates his theory of structuralist linguistics. I shall return to this point shortly.) Yet Saussure’s conclusion should ultimately be read in its fuller context. Saussure’s comment that the signifier is “fixed, not free” should be interpreted only in the greater context of his ideas regarding the simultaneous, but seemingly incongruous “immutability and mutability of the sign” (74). As Wade Baskin, editor of the English translation of the *Course* puts it, “It would be wrong to reproach F. de Saussure for being illogical or paradoxical in attributing two contradictory qualities to language. By opposing two striking terms, he wanted only to emphasize the fact that language changes in spite of the inability of [individual] speakers to change it” (*Course* 74ff). Although Saussure was quite clear in arguing that no single member of a linguistic community could alter the course of language, he did agree that through an innovation (made by one or more speakers of whatever race or ethnicity) subsequently adopted by the group, a community of speakers could indeed alter language. The ability of language to evolve through linguistic communities is especially important in understanding diachronic language, which is mapped along the x-axis. Saussure writes:

[E]verything in diachronic language is diachronic only by virtue of speaking. It is in speaking that the germ of all change is found. Each change is launched by a certain number of individuals

before it is accepted for general use. . . . the new form, repeated many times and accepted by the community, [becomes] a fact of language. But not all innovations of speaking have the same success, and so long as they remain individual, they may be ignored, for we are studying language; they do not enter into our field of observation until the community of speakers has adopted them. (*Course* 98)

It is useful to return to Hurston with Saussure's words in mind. As we have seen, Hurston grants close attention to the African American community of speakers, but does not ignore whites. When writing of white communities of speakers, or of persons belonging to various European ethnic groups (which Hurston does not specify), she deems their language to be more highly evolved: "Now the people with highly developed languages have words for detached ideas. That is legal tender" (1020). By contrast, she argues, the "primitive man," and by implication Hurston here refers to the Negro, "exchanges descriptive words." Even if a so-called "primitive" being such as the Negro is possessed of "detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact," Hurston maintains, he must first refashion this vocabulary and "add action" so as to "make it do [sic]" (1020). This is the reason for such "characteristic" Negro expressions as "sitting-chair" and "chop-ax," Hurston tells us. She juxtaposes these sorts of Negro expression, which she terms "double-descriptives" and which she also describes as metaphorical action-words, against what she deems abstractions or concepts used primarily by whites. The Negro "has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (1020).

There is something unsettling about the ease with which Hurston assigns "true" Negro expression the label of "primitive" and associates advanced thought and expression with whites alone.²¹ And it is striking that she is less than progressive in her views regarding the possibilities inherent in black speech and knowledge. Yet in arguing assiduously that Negro words are action words and are of a piece with the oral culture of which they form the largest and most significant element, Hurston's analysis accomplishes an extraordinary measure from the perspective of contemporary theory. While poststructuralism has tended to characterize metaphor rather simplistically as a form of verbal and literary ornamentation that is inexorably tied to the transcendent and the abstract (and placed firmly on Saussure's vertical synchronic/paradigmatic y-axis), Hurston insists upon its predicative

qualities, in which metaphor performs acts of verbalization that exemplify the immanent and the embodied, the everyday. Put otherwise, Hurston argues, *avant la lettre*—that is, before the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, and before the revolution in metaphor theory that was ushered in by Paul Ricoeur’s work on the topic in 1975, and before Gates’s work in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988)—that metaphor does exactly what poststructuralists claim it cannot do.²² She demonstrates that it is living rather than static, and this living quality of metaphor permits us to draw further conclusions: that metaphor moves capriciously between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic lines of Saussure’s axis of language; that it is epistemological, such that it is capable of voicing the structures of meaning at work in a community; and that it is ontological—it is immanent and embodied at the same time that it gives expression to the fluid and living ideals of a group of people.

For Hurston, Negro expression, especially its metaphorical forms, is redolent of the everyday lives of ordinary African Americans. Again, it is important to note that Hurston’s analysis is a class-based one. This she herself argues when she differentiates between the “average Negro” and the “sophisticated” Negro, who has no real culture, in her estimation. In “average Negro” life, “[a] bit of Negro drama familiar to us all is the frequent meeting of two opponents who threaten to do atrocious murder one upon the other,” she narrates (1020). Significantly, this line stands alone as a paragraph in the essay; it marks a transition in the text, and serves to introduce the paragraphs that conclude the essay’s first section, “Drama.” In the wake of this declaration, Hurston renders language ironically and strategically mute. While for Hurston, the body takes the place of metaphorical language as a focal point, language still speaks from the silence of the mimetic: “Who has not observed a robust young Negro chap posing upon a street corner, possessed of nothing but his clothing, his strength, and his youth?” Hurston asks. Important to her is the innate drama that characterizes two young people who take on the mantle of performance, and that which they perform is the everyday use of black language. Such performance, such drama, Hurston argues, is inherent to the cultural traditions of black folk, just as Aristotle insisted—through his attention to epic, tragedy, and his fleeting reference to comedy—that drama is germane to the cultural traditions of the Greeks. As Hurston places her two actors in motion, their embodied genders speak their words for them. The body, and the social presence it affords them, seem to be all the two young players need. Through the body, the girl’s shoulders and hips put forth all the action. The “chap’s” eyes and posture “speak” with authority, she tells us, and “no one ever mistakes the meaning” (39). With this line, Hurston links her philosophy of ordinary language

with phenomenology and the black body with metaphorical expression, disallowing the possibility that any meaning could slip away in the process.

Hurston alerts us to something important here, but never quite arrives at crystallizing its significance; she seems more interested in the supposed “primitive” characteristics of the people she describes. Yet we can still get closer to the philosophical import of such performativity as Hurston illustrates. Reflecting upon the phenomenological possibilities inherent in ordinary language philosophy, such as that which Hurston employs, Paul Ricoeur writes that as an intellectual and philosophical project, phenomenology tries

to extract from lived experience the essential meanings and structures of purpose, project, motive, wanting, trying and so on. I note in passing that phenomenology [. . .] had already attacked problems which are now in the forefront of the school of linguistic analysis with the philosophy of action. But if it was phenomenology, it was existential phenomenology in the sense that these essential structures imply the recognition of the central problem of embodiment, of *le corps propre*. Anyhow, whatever might be the relation between phenomenology and existentialism [. . .] this kind of philosophizing did not yet raise any particular problem of language, for a direct language was thought to be available. This direct language was ordinary language in which we find words like purpose, motive, and so on. This is why I now believe that there is an intersection of the philosophy of ordinary language and phenomenology at this first level. (*The Rule of Metaphor* 316)

I take Ricoeur’s assessment of the relation between phenomenology and the philosophy of ordinary language to be particularly instructive to any reading of Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” which not only analyzes the levels of metaphoricity at work in black performativity and black vernacular discourse, but also posits a theory of embodied agency—action—alive in folk expression, even if she does not assess this language for its possible contributions to black knowledge and radical action, as does Richard Wright. One might say that Wright presents an example of the existential phenomenology of black knowing and black agency, indirectly extending Hurston’s focus on drama in everyday black life by introducing his reader to Bigger Thomas and Fred Daniels, two everyday “black boys” (like Wright himself) whose daily trials and heavy existential burdens were

meant to force upon readers the realities of black life by dramatizing black experience.

Ralph Ellison chose a different pathway in his fiction. Hurston's emphasis on black vernacular expression and the black body is cast into relief yet again when we consider that Ellison, who metaphorically rendered the black body "invisible" in his novel (implying that the ontological condition of invisibility was a universal human condition that applied to all African American men if not, in fact, all African Americans), challenged Hurston's and Wright's links between black corporeality and black epistemology and ontology. Even if in a differential fashion—one focused on literature as well as orality and mimesis, and concerned with black folk traditions as well as the crises of the emerging black middle class—Ellison is one of a small number of mid-twentieth-century African American writers who take up the task of characterizing black expression that Hurston began, in light of Du Bois's own articulations in *Souls*, near the close of the Harlem Renaissance. In doing so, Ellison returns us to the phenomenology of metaphor so wonderfully on display in Du Bois's work. It is a phenomenology that is rooted in black folk culture: Ellison trusts that black folk culture has a radical message to bring to the world. He anchors his phenomenology of black being in vernacular expression, and through his criticism of this expression, especially in the forms of the blues and jazz, elevates these vernacular forms to the realm of "high" art without wishing to "dry up the deep, rowdy stream of jazz until it becomes a very thin trickle of respectable sound indeed."²³

Likening the underlying message of his novel to the quest for existential identity each American must undertake, Ellison proffers the propositional metaphor of home as democracy and, by extension then, democracy as love (see "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," 1953). Democracy is the ideal that each American, of whatever color, must grasp, for it is only by realizing the ideal of democracy (a radical democracy, Ellison argues implicitly) that Americans can overcome the oblivion of invisible black being and corporeality, and live up to the moral call issued by the man for whom Ellison was named. Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom Ellison often referred, in a moment of ruminating and theorizing the state of American politics, called for politics as an expression of love. Ellison goes so far as to echo Emerson in the novel, prompting his protagonist to ponder this very point. In the final chapter of this study, I argue that Ellison's concern in deploying the metaphor of love as democracy is to give voice to a sense of homelessness or a crisis of belonging that culminates in a state of social invisibility and that is, itself, indicative of a crisis in American democracy. The black state