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THE BLACK PETROMODERNISM OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON:  
ENERGY, RACE, AND MOBILITY

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

by

STUART MULLET

August 2021

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis situates Zora Neale Hurston and the folk communities in her oeuvre within the context of modernity's dependencies on fossil fuels. Such a disciplinary context provides an energy footing for our understandings of African American migrations in the twentieth century—which radically transformed the nation on multiple levels—and it illuminates the communal values that undergird Black approaches to petromodern forms of mobility. Furthermore, by engaging the Black spaces of the South, my argument begins filling a gap in the energy humanities. Few scholars in this field engage deeply those populations and regions that disproportionately experience the underbelly of petromodernity and that are often excluded from discourses of modernity and modernization. Thus, my readings of Black Southern spaces offer a fuller understanding of the meanings of the U.S.'s carbon dependencies. Additionally, I take this theoretical framework into an argument on Hurston's literary modernism, revealing a distinctly modern orality in Hurston's representation of the folk and rupturing critiques of her settings and characters as ahistorical and nostalgic.

## DEDICATION

For Natalie and Auden, who have weathered this project alongside me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks first and foremost to my chair, Jay Watson, for walking with me throughout the writing process, offering creative and scholarly support, and for inspiring me to dig deeper into the realm of fossil fuels during my first year at the University of Mississippi. My committee members, Leigh Anne Duck and Caroline Wigginton, also played a vital role in this thesis, giving incisive and generous feedback. I am indebted to these wonderful scholars for helping me turn out a work I can take pride in.

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## INTRODUCTION

Transformations in production and consumption, communication, spread of information, travel, and civil rights, among many other things, characterize American modernity. These changes are each worth studying in their own right, but I want to consider the subterranean energy powering this multi-faceted and complex modernization—or as Marshall Berman terms it, this “maelstrom of modern life.” Along with Stephanie LeMenager, I call this fossil-fueled maelstrom “petromodernity” in order to consider the world we live in by its fossil dependencies. Such an optic alerts us to modernity’s ecological relationships and burdens. Yet these burdens become blurred by the very manifestations they fuel. Think of how easy it is to turn the thermostat up on a winter evening without considering the increased consumption of natural gas, a carbon fuel whose extraction and distribution is part of the anthropogenic nature of modern production and consumption. Modern pleasures and comforts have become privileges taken for granted, making it hard to imagine, much less enact, other ways of living in the modern world. Yet an attunement to fossil fuels doesn’t just make us more aware of our carbon footprint; it also offers a fruitful lens with which to elucidate the varying ways communities have made a way for themselves in the fast-moving and fast-changing modern world. As the earth continues to suffer from our present energy regime, it becomes needful to seek out modernisms that offer alternative practices to the prevailing rituals of petromodernity.

In this effort, my thesis engages the rich, generic breadth of Zora Neale Hurston’s fiction—her novels, short stories, and theater—and situates these texts in an increasingly oil-

dependent culture, enriching petro-studies by reading Black experience of (and as) energy in an increasingly regulated, violent, segregated South. Hurston, as an anthropologist collecting and describing the rich, complex culture of the Southern rural folk and as a fiction writer intent on portraying the Black modernism within these rural spaces, enriches our understandings of modernization and how that development gets distributed across racial, class, and regional distinctions. As Leigh Anne Duck writes, “despite an extensive system of laws and enforced behaviors designed to prevent the appearance of cultural change, the region was experiencing profound transformations” (*A Nation’s Region* 8-9). Duck argues that, although oppressive hierarchies are inconsistent with the liberal idealisms of the U.S. (and of modern petroculture), the Jim Crow South was not so removed from the nation as to be somehow immune to modernization. Southern citizens, then, Black and white, seized on the new possibilities generated by the extraction and burning of what Bob Johnson terms “prehistoric carbon.” Reading Hurston in this light complicates dominant understandings of fossil fuel energy, offering new understandings of the racial stratifications and the national transformations that emerge from and within Black petromodernity. Her writing offers a unique window into how Southern Black communities participated in, facilitated, and experienced modernity; and while carbon energy may at first seem a fringe material in her oeuvre, it persistently rises to the surface in complex and generative ways, illuminating a Black petromodernism. This introduction thus begins by zooming out and outlining modern energy. From this planetary point of view, I steadily zoom in—moving through a global view of energy transition and its costs, dialectic frameworks of oil, and forms of fossil-fueled mobility—to a reading of Hurston’s first published short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” which points us to a Black petromodernism in her fiction.

## Energy and Modernity

Outside of coal, natural gas, and oil, there is the solar economy. As Vaclav Smil articulates it, before oil, all civilization makes up a “solar society dependent on the Sun’s radiation, which energizes a habitable biosphere and produces all of our food, animal feed and wood” (225). In order to heat homes, eat, clothe themselves, and so on, people depended on the solar energy system that provided renewable resources (crops, trees, wind and waves, and the like.). This is also the realm of somatic energy, where, before fossil fuels, horses, mules, oxen, and humans all labored in workspaces and where humans depended on animals or their own two legs for personal transportation. Other transportation needs were also met by somatic units such as animals, human and nonhuman. Even bringing light to homes was dependent on mammals, with whale oil providing this part of this service.

With the discovery of coal and oil came what many in the energy humanities refer to as “the transition.” We have thus become, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, not just biological agents but geological ones who “reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself” (206-207). In an overarching sense, what this geological transition achieved was unprecedented development and growth socially, politically, and economically. Christopher Jones begins his study of energy in American modernity by observing,

Americans have been the world’s most profligate energy consumers for more than a century. . . . This ever-increasing reliance on energy has helped the United States become the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation. It has also given its citizens unparalleled access to creature comforts. At the dawn of the twenty-first century,

Americans can be cool in the summer and warm in the winter, fly thousands of miles in a few hours, savor produce grown on other continents, and choose from a bewildering array of cheap and disposable products. A lifestyle that was once reserved for royalty is now within the reach of most members of the middle class. (1)

Jones's term, "bewildering," resonates in discussing this remarkable growth that prehistoric carbon fueled from the 1800s to the present. As J.R. McNeill has written, fossil fuels fueled "something new under the sun." McNeill gives more perspective when, after tracing energy usage through human history, he posits that

No other century—no millennium—in human history can compare with the twentieth for its growth in energy use. We have probably deployed more energy since 1900 than in all of human history before 1900. My very rough calculation suggests that the world in the twentieth century used 10 times as much energy as in the thousand years before 1900 A.D. In the 100 centuries between the dawn of agriculture and 1900, people used only about two-thirds as much energy as in the twentieth century. (15)

More comparisons could be made that would be just as breathtaking and bewildering as these, but suffice it to say that oil and its carbon siblings were utterly integral to twentieth-century modernization and have brought about planetary transformations. Extraction of resources has defined modernity, and these resources saturate every aspect of modern life, from food to media to clothing and to travel. The philosopher Martin Heidegger, for instance, put it this way: "The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry" (50). Heidegger's metonym of the gas station succinctly conceptualizes modern energy in that the earth becomes a repository for prehistoric, subterranean

minerals that have the potential for limitless transformation and power. It isn't that the premodern world didn't see the earth as a resource or as fuel but that premoderns didn't experience the unprecedented possibility that moderns do with coal, oil, natural gas, electricity, and so on—and it is precisely the new possibilities generated by subterranean minerals that characterizes this energy transition as the birth of modernity. Prehistoric carbon as fuel created extraordinary potentialities materially, economically, politically, and socially, which in turn ramped up this Heideggerian metaphor of the earth as a fossil-fuel dispensary for modern life.

On a fundamental level, fossil fuels powered modernization, increasing production efficiency and gains. David Hughes writes in his study of Trinidad's oil culture that “[o]ne U.S. gallon of crude oil contains the labor equivalent of nearly six hundred person-days. As this potential came to light, hydrocarbons enhanced the productivity of human labor” (58). Many energy critics make similar claims about the astonishing efficiency increases made possible by fossil fuels. Johnson observes that by the mid-1900s, “the average farmer . . . put in the same amount of hours but [was] five times as productive as his father and grandfather” (*Carbon* 19). Such increases in production are important for understanding petromodernity, but Hughes' goes on to caution oil scholars not to understand the fossil economy as a clean break from the solar economy: “Backed by [state and corporate] interests, hydrocarbons have driven more [human labor] activity” (59), increasing rather than relieving the labor intensity of much modern life. Hughes concludes that “[t]here has been no energy transition, only the layering of fossil on somatic power” (59). To be clear, fossil fuels have changed the nature of somatic labor, as in the automotive industries, in which workers' movements become repetitive, based on their efficiency in simple tasks at one small point in the system of production. In the modern energy

regime, somatic labor gets augmented, disciplined, and narrowed into the inhuman rhythms of fossil-fuels.

This increase in production is costly in a variety of ways. Fossil fuel extraction has environmental repercussions, which, like the nonrenewability of prehistoric carbon, punctures modern idealisms of infinite growth and potentiality. Biomass as energy cannot sustain the level of production needed to support nutritional, housing, and traveling needs of the global population, so whether it's running out of resources or making the earth less and less inhabitable by increasing the levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and warming the earth, carbon energy risks Malthusian disaster. We need a new energy transition that sustains both human beings and the planet they inhabit. But it is important to note that fossil fuels felt like a similarly necessary transition in the modern era precisely because they brought relief to the difficulties under the former energy ecology. As Johnson notes, "Without the ecological relief provided by that larger [fossil] energy foundation, . . . the world would be . . . ill fed, ill clothed, and ill housed, poorer not simply out of social injustice . . . but out of ecological necessity" (*Carbon* 27). Fossil fuels made these constraints obsolete for rich nations like the U.S. But what happens if we run out of oil with no alternative energy system that can sustain the current status quo? Our carbon dependencies have brought us to a precarious moment environmentally, and anxieties increase over the eventual loss of the modern "energy foundation."

Another cost of petroleum-fueled production is the centralization of power in corporations and the state. Timothy Mitchell observes that the transition to coal transformed the political fabric of American democracy, and labor movements in coal and railroad industries sprang up with remarkable traction politically. Coal production requires a large laboring force, and miners took advantage of their integral position in modern production to create political and

economic change: “Coal miners played a leading role in contesting work regimes and the private powers of employers in the labour activism and political mobilisation of the 1880s and onward. . . . With the same pattern found in Europe, waves of industrial action swept across the world’s coal-mining regions in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and again after the First World War” (19-20). Yet, as Mitchell points out, despite the new political possibilities that coal offered, the rise of oil, with its lower volume of laborers and more technologized forms of transportation, undercut the accomplishments of coal miner labor activism, as power became more centralized in private oil corporations—and in the state as well. States and corporations facilitate fossil fuels not only for increasing their workers’ efficiency but also to control workers themselves. According to Matthew Huber, this control is not just in the workplace but “in the realm of social reproduction.” Reading Antonio Gramsci’s work on the mechanized workplace, Huber writes that capitalists made “contrived attempts to morally police workers’ sexual habits, alcohol consumption, and wage expenditures” (32). Deborah Clarke offers historical evidence of this as well, writing that Henry Ford “sent inspectors from his Sociology Department out into Detroit to gather information on his employees. They asked, among other things, about marital status, religion, citizenship, savings (including passbook number), value of house, hobbies, number and ages of children, health, and name of the family doctor” (47). Ford also required all foreign, non-English speaking workers to learn English from American teachers (Clarke 47). These biopolitical efforts by states and corporations fostered a uniformity that would lower aleatory factors in the labor force, offering predictable and docile laboring units in production and social reproduction. “In other words,” Clarke writes, “Ford created the mass-produced man, efficient and interchangeable” (48). Modern energy, then, plays a dynamic role in the disciplining of the individual as a unit of the (working) population. The centralization of

corporate and state power in the realm of fossil fuels gives an energy platform for state biopower and population management.

On top of this fossil-fueled biopolitics, petromodernity is characterized by uneven flows of energy. Energy companies' extraction practices decimate swaths of land and distribute harms through automotive emissions, highway construction, or oil pipelines. Think of the fast-sinking Louisiana Gulf Coast where oil pipelines and corporate manipulations of levees devastate former freshwater ecosystems with the influx of saltwater. For the Houma, Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, and other Indigenous tribes on the Louisiana coast, their ancestral lands are vulnerable.

Petromodernity perpetuates the settler colonial practice of Native American removal which began long before the transition to fossil fuels (LeMenager 110-11 and Johnson *Carbon* 9). Not everyone in the U.S. experiences oil in the same way, not everyone has equal access to petroleum products and energies, and not everyone can avoid the risks created by fossil fuel extraction, production, and use. For poor African Americans, as we will see in Hurston's fiction, finding good working conditions, reliable cars, and money for petromodern products and experiences isn't always easy. These issues of removal and access are continuities or modern rearticulations of longer, preindustrial violences of settler colonialism and the slave trade. Hughes' observation stands firm in light of these issues: the utilization of prehistoric carbon by the state became a layering of fossil fueled politics on older structures of power. Power takes on new appearances and sometimes new forms with carbon energy, but old logics and hierarchies tend to remain.

Lastly, there is a spiritual cost to modern energy that is worth highlighting. Marshall Berman pushes readers to see a fundamental interconnectedness between the material world of modern energy and the modern human being. One of the "pervasive facts of modernity," he

writes, “[is] the interfusion of its material and spiritual forces, the intimate unity of the modern self and the modern environment” (132). Thus, as we continue moving toward Hurston’s Black petromodernism, we should do so in such a way that accounts for this interfusion. Fossil fuels and the self interweave, both materially and psychically. Moderns ingest petroleum products, such as Benadryl, and they feel the high velocity of the car: both experiences demonstrate physiological and psychological formations at work. But the environment and the self are in reciprocal relation as well. Modernization, Berman writes, “nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own” (16). This interaction between the human and the modern environment is Berman’s very definition of modernism, which he defines as “a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world” (6). Modernism(s) arises from the modernization of people’s inner life, people who must then seek to find their way—or even foster change—in the maelstrom around and within them.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa lays out an argument on the promise of social acceleration which further clarifies the modern difficulties for the self. Acceleration in communication and mobility promises humans the “taste [of] life in all its heights and depths and in its full complexity” (91). But the reality of acceleration fails to follow through in giving humans more time to experience life more fully. Much as Hughes observed that fossil fuels, while taking on a lot of the work required to power production, paradoxically increases somatic labor rather than making it obsolete, here Rosa writes that the modern acceleration of communication and travel has a similar effect. While moderns can have more experiences than ever before, the very technologies that makes these experiences possible bring about so many new options that it

would be impossible to realize all of them. Thus, we find ourselves unable to experience the fullness of modernity “no matter how much we increase the pace of life” (92). Advances in production and productivity powered by mineral energy have the opposite effect of what many might expect, making it more difficult to make oneself at home in the modern world.

Energy is a slippery materiality, one difficult to define and understand coherently. What results from this opacity is an array of critical frameworks for making meaning out of the mystery. What many critics conceptualize are what I call dialectics: opposing, contradictory, and/or mutually dependent elements and experiences of modern energy. These dialectics offer ways to illuminate these subterranean substances and the ways modern culture utilizes them. Bob Johnson articulates an erudite dialectic in his latest work, *Mineral Rites*. This dialectic understands oil as both “the leverage of modern life, the fulcrum on which modern populations pivot” (3) for the middle and upper classes, and the “fossil unconscious—this repressed underside of the fossil economy” (5). This fossil unconscious takes shape by displacing Indigenous peoples, colonizing peripheral (is)lands, facilitating exploitative labor, etc. Furthermore, the fulcrum of modernity depends on the fossil unconscious: American demand for commodities, a high quality of life, easy and pleasurable modes of transportation, efficient production and shipping of goods all depend on oil drilling and piping in the Gulf Coast as well as other places on the periphery of modernity.

Other dialectics occupy space in the energy humanities as well. Take Frederick Buell’s theorization of catastrophe and exuberance. Quoting William R. Catton, Jr., from whom he borrows these terms, he writes of exuberance as “a faith in progress so strong that ‘the idea that mankind could encounter hardships that simply will not go away’ was not just unlikely but in fact ‘unthinkable’” (71). This optimism of eternal human progress is coupled, however, with the

breaking of levees, destructive oil spills, and other disastrous spectacles of petromodernity. This latter aspect is catastrophe, and together, exuberance and catastrophe are “materialized as historically specific forms of capitalist triumph and oppression, of environmental domination and destruction, and of human liberation and psychic and bodily oppression” (74). Catastrophe and exuberance coexist, or as Buell puts it, “epic catastrophe came with epic actions” (76). Unlike Johnson’s, Buell’s dialectic is not so much codependent as overlapping; in other words, both catastrophe and exuberance are dynamic, powerful, and pleasurable to the point that there may not be much of a meaningful difference between them in the end. Buell’s framing, then, gets at the unprecedented dynamism and potentiality of oil and the affect that arises in witnessing and experiencing that power—as fuel for both disaster and humanmade creations. In the realm of affect and the visibility of oil, Stephanie LeMenager conceptualizes oil with a dialect of “petroleum aesthetics” and “petromelancholia.” In her chapter on the aesthetics of petroleum in which she discusses automobility and media, LeMenager writes of oil as the cardiovascular system of modernity, arguing that “We have learned to expect of oil maximum motility and liveliness, as if it were blood” (101). This liveliness of oil is present in the destructive and creative aspects of oil culture. For instance, LeMenager reads the media’s attention to disasters and people’s desire to view these disasters as close up as possible as an expression of modernity’s love for and pleasure in oil: “Visual, kinesthetic, acoustic (‘hissing’), tactile, olfactory—oil touches us intimately, and everywhere. That’s entertainment” (101). In many ways, LeMenager’s conceptualization of petroleum aesthetics articulates the ways people and cultures experience and express the exuberance and catastrophe of oil. Petromelancholia, on the other hand, is the grief not so much over oil’s adverse effects but over the possibility that we may run out of time or resources before we experience the fullness of what humans can achieve

through oil. It is the “melancholy of oil dependence” (141) and all the international geopolitical power moves, political and economic corruption, and harm that such dependency perpetuates. It is also the angst over being so dependent on oil that the loss of this resource is “tantamount to human extinction” (106). Additionally, and importantly, both petroleum aesthetics and petromelancholia represent the ways in which moderns avoid engaging in alternative, ecologically conscious forms of energy. There are still other dialectics. Peter Hitchcock theorizes oil in terms of velocity—in that “oil has sped up its operative matrix in industrialization, urbanization, and circulation” (46)—and viscosity—in that “oil secretes a paradoxical inertia that defies, to a great degree, enthusiastic attempts to overcome its hold on everyday life” (46). Hitchcock brings together Johnson’s fulcrum with the slowness of the very substance of oil, or more specifically, pitch. Oil is inert for a much longer amount of time than its momentary firing as fuel. And Randy Schroeder writes in his reading of accidents in the petromodern, high-velocity age, that, “in a petroculture . . . ingenuity and the accident are co-dependent” (362). This is slightly different from Buell’s understanding of fossil-fueled catastrophe, which for Schroeder becomes not just an effect but a source of petromodern creativity.

These couplings—modern fulcrum/fossil unconscious; exuberance/catastrophe; petro-aesthetics/petromelancholia; velocity/viscosity; and ingenuity/accident—while they provide multiple angles for understanding a complex energy regime, demonstrate the difficulty in framing modern energy coherently. In Amitav Ghosh’s review of Abdelrahman Munif’s fiction, an essay often referenced by oil critics, he describes the oil encounter as “bafflingly multilingual” and understands experiences of oil as “lived out within a space that is no space at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogenous, and international” (30). Ghosh’s concern is conventional literary form’s insufficiency at expressing oil, yet what he illuminates are the

facets of oil that make it difficult to narrativize and understand. Oil and its ancient carbon counterparts lack meaning due to temporal and spatial, not to mention socio- and geopolitical, complexities. Yet while these dialectics differ to varying degrees, demonstrating the inherent opacity of petroleum, they attempt to mine the paradoxical, complex, subterranean mysteries of fossil fuels and how political, economic, and cultural structures have utilized these substances to deepen the global rich's dependency on prehistoric carbon. Together, they demonstrate the fruitfulness of understanding oil in various ways rather than in a singular or suitable form, as Ghosh seems to wish for. They also offer a layered interpretive framework, becoming analytical tools for making sense of oil encounters in the modernist writing of Hurston. Yet while these dialectics, particularly that of Johnson, observe "modernity's basement" (energy's disparities and uneven distributions that disproportionately effect marginalized communities), rarely does the field dwell within these basements to understand petromodernity more deeply. In this vein, Hurston informs these dialectics, giving a needed Black optic to enhance and challenge conventional, Euro-dominated framings of energy.

### Defining Automobility

Before zooming in too far, however, I want to turn to modern mobility, which is burdened by individualistic ideals and nationalism. While there are multiple forms of fossil-fueled travel that have varying goals—planes, trains, and automobiles meet transportation needs, but planes, trains, and trucks also ship goods all over the globe—I want to focus on what is perhaps the quintessential mode of fossil-fueled American mobility: the car. I focus here also because Hurston's engagement with petromodernity often, though certainly not always, involves

automobility. Americans conceive of automobility as, one, distinctly American, and, two, a form of individualistic expression. Today, American motorists filling their cars at a Marathon gas station will read “Fueling American Freedom” on the pump. Indeed, Deborah Clarke quotes Jean Baudrillard when she writes, “by driving in America, ‘you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you.’ American cars and drivers . . . reflect American identity” (54). The conformity that car manufacturers attempted to establish in their factories reflects this as well—i.e. Ford requiring non-English speaking workers to learn English. For Americans, the car offers a set of capabilities and values so fundamental that we have largely organized the nation around this petroleum-fueled facet of modern life. *Boston Globe* writer Jeff Jacoby argues in 1995 that “at the deepest level, our cars are a tangible expression of our most important values. Freedom. Choice. Privacy. Individualism. Self-reliance” (qtd. in Seiler 42). The “our” suggests the Americanness of Jacoby and his readership; thus, cars offer *Americans*, “at the deepest level,” autonomy, pleasure, and possibility.

These values, however, are complicated, hollow, and fragile, and a critical lens quickly demonstrates this. Perhaps the most succinct demystification of automobility’s supposed autonomy comes from sociologist John Urry, who writes, “the ‘car-driver’ is a hybrid assemblage of specific human activities, machines, roads, buildings, signs and cultures of mobility” (26). Here Urry troubles the prefix, “auto,” by illuminating the broad array of dependencies the individual motorist assumes in order to feel independent. The myth of automobility, then, can be deconstructed socio-politically and economically. Cotten Seiler, for instance, makes a biopolitical intervention in automotive criticism, arguing that the mass motorization became an effective form of Foucauldian governmentality:

As automobility achieved sway over the practices of everyday life and transportation policy, it simultaneously provided to powerful institutions a myriad of new techniques by which they could know, and therefore shape and manage, subjects. Most importantly, automobility emerged as a “technology of the self,” organizing a compelling mode of self-government anchored in liberal notions of freedom. (14).

Automobility creates a normative mode of being, and instead of offering individual freedom it disciplines the individual with greater technicality and permeation. Biopower expands with automobility and overrides the autonomy of the individual consumer. Think also of the regulatory processes that accompany driving: the driver’s license—which is also a form of state identification—driver evaluations, traffic stops, car registrations, speed limits, and toll road checkpoints, to name just a few (see Sorin 76 and Seiler 65, 108-9). Rather than making populations more slippery due to increased mobility, automobility broadens and deepens the level at which the state is capable of discipline and regulation.

The automotive industry itself, which is woven into this system of biopower as I argued earlier, also exposes the fragility of the individual freedom that automobiles supposedly offer. There is a paradoxical relationship between the collective, uniformist production of cars and the autonomous pleasure of driving and consuming cars. Whereas mass automotive production fosters, in Clarke’s words, a “mass-produced man,” the car promises an escape from the loss of individuality in the workplace—a mechanized mode of self-expression rather than the conformity of industrial labor. Mimi Sheller discusses the “emotional responses to cars and feelings about driving [that] are crucial to the personal investments people have in buying, driving and dwelling with cars” (224). Automobility is filled with contradictory affective experiences: it is the feeling of speed, but also the feeling of car trouble on the highway shoulder;

the feeling of driving a new car, but also the feeling of acquiring a vehicle registration and paying for gas; the feeling of freedom through movement, but also the feeling of being stopped by police. Manufacturers, Sheller notes, market automobiles toward the pleasurable feelings the car offers consumers. This kind of branding attempts to offset the unpleasurable experiences of automobility as well as the loss of individuality that occurs in mass production. This masking or offsetting of standardization might also be said of driving itself. Both purchasing a vehicle and the emotion-packed act of driving give “one the illusion of individuality and escape from mass culture while rendering one’s sense of the material body all the more dependent on it” (Clarke 48). Understanding the materiality, politics, and production of the automobile quickly punctures the idealisms Americans thrust upon it. And if we remember Berman’s definition of modernism, these automotive experiences trouble the striving of individuals in making a home for themselves in a mass-produced and high-velocity world.

Automobility also represses environmental harm—not just the harm of emissions but the carbon dependencies of automotive travel and production. Bob Johnson engages this in his writing of the modern road system: “Movement today is . . . mostly disembodied. . . . I am carried [in the car] by little charges of combustion converted into forward movement that send me hurling uphill. That disembodied labor makes the self feel as though it extends beyond the corporeal body, and it unconsciously feeds our psychic attachments to fossil fuels” (*Mineral* 97-98). These psychic attachments and the feelings that accompany driving are part of the environmental challenge of automobility—it deters environmental activism. Sheller’s purpose in writing her article on “automotive emotions” is to raise the importance of affect in conversations on energy and travel alternatives in contemporary environmental discourse. She writes, “A key overlooked aspect of car cultures is the emotional investments people have in the relationships

between the car, the self, family and friends, creating affective contexts that are also deeply materialized in particular types of vehicles, homes, neighbourhoods and cities” (229). Emotional investments create an effect in which people become too invested in automobility—or in which automobility becomes too critical to relational ties and/or individual aspirations—to consider ecologically conscious alternatives. Discussing the car’s antagonism to environmental justice, Johnson writes that the road itself “becomes more abstracted the more insulated we are from it. . . [Automotive travel] minimizes the real work (and energy) entailed in the global transfer of resources, bodies, and goods” (109). Indeed, LeMenager notes that some highways were constructed specifically for scenic drives, and those who mapped these routes wanted “landscape features . . . allocated generously to hide ecological wounds” (79). Automobility contains hollow symbolisms, but its insularity and movement distract drivers from the geological implications of their mobility.

Considering American idealisms, the capillary biopolitical governance, the mass production and consumerism, and the environmental harm that the automobile fosters, defining automobility becomes quite complex. Seiler, for instance, conceptualizes automobility as a Foucauldian apparatus: “More than merely a set of policies or attitudes cohering around cars and roads, automobility comprises a ‘multilinear ensemble’ of commodities, bodies of knowledge, laws, techniques, institutions, environments, nodes of capital, sensibilities, and modes of perception” (6). This is a helpful definition, but I would add that a definition of automobility must also cohere around dependencies on oil, environmental costs, the uneven distribution of automobility in American modernity—particularly in the U.S. South—and the impact of automobility on the modern self. This is of particular importance as our dependencies on fossil fuels and demands for a certain way of life continue to degrade a vulnerable globe. In other

words, an attention to fossil fuels in our definition not only gives an energy footing to the aspects that Seiler articulates in his definition but illuminates the environmental and psychic impact of the car. Defining automobility must thus account for the repressed material framework of car culture, the rhizomatic, subterranean root system of automotive modernism. In sum, we might define automobility with three overarching facets: as an uneven distribution of mobility, feelings, and selfhood, which varies along class, racial, and other socioeconomic lines; as an apparatus that fuels American ideologies and expands state governance; and as a system that relies on fossil fuel extraction and industrial production, which in turn exacerbates climate change not just through vehicle emissions but through complex networks of energy flows.

#### Toward Hurston's Black Petromodernism

With this definition in mind, and with this larger context of modern energy, I want to elucidate through the work of Zora Neale Hurston a Black petromodernism since race is too often neglected as an important facet for understanding modern energy. As Berman might ask, how do African Americans make a home for themselves in the maelstrom of petromodernity? Many scholars detail insightful conceptualizations and tracings of the transformative modernization that coal, natural gas, and oil fuel, my reading of Hurston fosters deeper understandings of the remarkable sociopolitical transformations that are brought about by those populations within the fossil unconscious. Think of the vast array of changes that were brought on by the fossil fueled Great Migration, in which millions of Black Americans—seeking a way out of bondage and suffering—traveled North by train, bus, and automobile, altering the nation's politics, economics, arts, and much more. Instead of focusing on the transformations of production and

the repercussions from that “fulcrum,” my study peers into the underbelly of Southern Jim Crow and illuminates the Black petromodernism within that space.

Slavery, according to Hughes, anticipates the utilization of oil in modernization. Writing of Trinidadian governor Josef Chacon, Hughes argues that Chacon “treated bonded people as a substance to be obtained and consumed” (35)—enslaved people were to Chacon “energetic objects” (38) which created a mundanity around human slavery, largely skirting the fraught moralities around the institution. For Hughes, energy’s lack of moral conscience derives from “the lasting innovation of plantation slavery: a cultural understanding of production through long-distance, high-volume energy transport” (40). In other words, conceiving of Africans as labor units to be extracted for production is a logic petromodernity perpetuates in this sense that “distant reserves of subterranean oil and coal replaced Africans as energy units awaiting extraction” (40). The moral failure of slavery in the modernizing world prior to oil and coal correlated to a degree with the moral failure of climate change. Moderns accrued more energy units through coal and oil without undoing the entrenched logic of old, exploitative systems, which has troubling consequences not just for African Americans but for the entire globe. Hughes’ study, with its attention to race, demonstrates how an attention to specific spaces within the fossil unconscious can illuminate the entrenched logics of ecologically harmful practices and lifestyles. In this vein, my study keeps Black experience in the segregated South in view, seeking out meanings within these spaces not immediately recognizable as modern. Focusing this study on Southern Black experience enhances our understandings of what the shift to fossil fuels means on literary, historical, and national levels.

To begin articulating a Black petro-modernism, I want to start with Hurston’s first published short story “John Redding Goes to Sea.” Hemenway has choice words for this story,

calling it “a groping, stumbling attempt to capture the folk ethos, overladen with sentimentality” (19). A petro-reading of “John Redding,” however, complicates Hemenway’s unenthusiastic take. Hurston’s story, full of eloquent prose and rich, pastoral description of the Florida ecology, demonstrates that from the outset of her career, she is attuned to the ways industrial, fossil-fueled industrial developments impact rural Black Southerners, and in this story she portrays a Black femininity which resists the adverse effects of oil capitalism on Black communities.

As a child John Redding throws sticks into the St. John River behind his house to “watch them sail away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world and John Redding wanted to follow them” (1). This dream of world travel defines John’s life and he carries it into his adulthood. He fears, though, the implications of this metaphor, namely that the river’s weeds will snag him and keep him from traveling the wide world. The weeds indeed snag John Redding in the form of his mother, Matty, and wife, Stella, the former of whom is particularly resistant to his hopes of leaving Florida. Hurston, in other words, tells a story of futile attempts at mobility by a Black rural Southerner. John’s desire for travel is a desire for petro-fueled forms of travel, which would include nautical travel on the ocean toward the wide world—indeed one of John’s escape attempts is joining the U.S. Navy, a military fleet powered by oil. But with family commitments hampering this desire, John tells his father that “I feel that I am just earth, soil lying helpless to move myself, but thinking. I seem to hear herds of big beasts like horses and cows thundering over me, and rains beating down; and winds sweeping furiously over-all acting upon me, but me, well, just soil, feeling but not able to take part in it all” (10). This is the feeling of living in a modern nation without access to its fulcrum, to borrow from Johnson. The ease of mobility experienced by white bourgeois Americans is out of John’s reach, and this metaphorical sense of self that John feels with the inert soil is related to his relationship with the sticks he threw into

the St. John River as a child. Later in the story, John says that when he sees dust (migrating soil particles) “sailing down the road,” he moves out of their path, not wanting to “stop ’em ’cause they’re on their shining way—moving!” (10). John, a self-identified “dreamer” desires to be like sticks floating down the river or like the dirt upturned by wind, carriage, or automobile, on its “shining way.” He dreams of participating in the motile modernity that penetrates even his rural Florida hometown but which he can’t quite seem to embody himself.

What is striking about Hurston’s story is that Southern structures of white supremacy are not explicitly the reasons for John Redding’s immobility. What keeps John from travelling, in other words, is feminine impediments rather than white ones. Ironically, it is not until John gains some level of mobility that (racialized) governance gains hold of him, controlling him at the level of the body. White structures set John into motion. A storm threatens to destroy a bridge in mid-construction spanning the St. John River. Mr. Hill, the builder of the bridge, drives his car through the Black neighborhood trying to recruit workers. He tells them, “It’s the bridge. The weather bureau says that the rains will be upon me in forty-eight hours. If it catches the bridge as it is now, I’m afraid all my work of the past five months will be swept away, to say nothing of a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of labor and material” (11). Through Mr. Hill’s involvement with road construction through Florida, Hurston depicts a modernizing South. Moreover, bridge materials are petroleum products, or as Johnson calls them, “congealed energy”: the “tough, soaring, and sprawling world of steel, glass, and concrete” manufactured with the help of fossil energy and often directly out of petroleum and its derivatives (*Mineral* 3). With his deep desire to participate in petromodernity, or to feel “rains beating down . . . and winds sweeping furiously over-all acting upon [him],” John Redding offers to help Mr. Hill—and Hurston narrates that he does so “with a great deal of energy” (11). By offering himself as a somatic energy resource, he

becomes a form of biofuel and puts himself in a position to be exploited along with the minerals that make up road construction.

Stella and Matty seem to see the position John has put himself in. John runs into the house to get his work clothes and to tell his wife and mother: “‘Mamma, I am going to work all night on the bridge.’ There was no answer. He turned to his wife. ‘Stella, don’t be lonesome. I will be home at day-break.’ His wife was as silent as his mother” (12). Their silent condemnation of John for assisting in the project is consistent with their values of family ties over modern travel. But the bridge’s proximity to their neighborhood evokes concerns over modernity’s impact on Black communities, and that proximity, along with their John being “whirled away” by the white capitalist’s car, adds a layer of complexity to their response. Highway construction has often occurred at the expense of poor communities of color, according to Robert Bullard, who calls this phenomenon “routes of transportation apartheid.” Bullard writes that

transportation construction and infrastructure projects cut wide paths through low income and people of color neighborhoods. They physically isolate residents from their institutions and businesses, disrupt once stable communities, . . . and subject residents to elevated risks from accidents, spills, and explosions from vehicles carrying hazardous chemicals and other dangerous materials. (4)

Transportation projects often divide rather than “bridge” racial populations. This modernizing South, creating automotive routes through Florida, spans the very river John Redding sent sticks down toward the sea and the wide world as a child. John’s wife and mother may be concerned not only with John’s safety but about the ways that petromodern infrastructure will impact their community and their nonhuman ecology—the bridge, for instance, may imperil the vibrancy of the river. If they’re concerned about their ecosystem’s wellbeing due to the highway construction

project, then John's subjection to precarious labor for Mr. Hill would inspire resistance as well: their silence denounces the continued subjection of Black people to life-threatening labor amid disaster.

Tellingly, the spectacle of disaster is backstage in Hurston's text, and we don't view its destruction firsthand. John is whirled away by automobile, but that speed is fleeting and quickly disappears from the reader's view. When the storm arrives, the reader remains at the Redding's: "The wind rushed down the chimney blowing puffs of ashes about the room. It banged the cooking utensils on the walls. The drinking gourd hanging outside by the door played a weird tattoo, hollow and unearthly, against the thin wooden wall" (12-13). The elemental power seems to collide with the automotive project in which John Redding participates. Later Hurston describes palm trees rattling and pine trees groaning. Readers get an account of the storm at the doomed bridge, but it is secondhand. The account of the bridge collapse comes from Fred Mimms, who tells Alfred that the river carried three huge pine trees "as fas' as 'press train" toward the bridge and all the laborers, and the impact destroyed the bridge and submerged the men (15). The spectacle of bridge collapse, its affect and sounds, is not present. Hurston refrains from the exuberance and catastrophe that Buell theorizes, as well as LeMenager's "hissing" and "olfactory" petro-aesthetics, to tell a story of Black petromodern experience. Hurston is interested less in the overt speed and power of modernity than the alternative, communal, and cultural experiences of Black Southerners within petromodernity, and she is deeply critical of those modes of expression that cloud these experiences. Put another way, Hurston's Black characters experience a kind of petromodernity that mainstream understandings of oil fail to capture. She keeps "the spectacular" from obscuring Black familial and communal values as well as the uneven distribution of mobility offered by petromodernity.

The poor rural Black Floridians occupy not an antimodern space but a modern one in which they utilize modernization in alignment with their own unique goals and values. Indeed, John Redding desires the power and speed of modernity, and he volunteers to join Mr. Hill not only because the bridge project represents American modernization but because it places him in the system of power and motion. The fault of John, then, according to his wife and mother, is that he fails to recognize the cost of such participation. Hurston keeps African American culture and experience centered, highlighting how petromodernity can threaten familial and communal ties and cause premature death. Hurston narrativizes Black Floridians who experience oil but who are not invested in oil in a way that LeMenager and Buell's framings can illuminate. The end of Hurston's story affirms such a claim. Alfred spots his son's lifeless body afloat on a piece of timber the morning after the storm, heading "toward Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world—at last" (16). The scene registers the collapsing boundaries between the vehicle and tenor of the stick metaphor that begins the narrative. With obscure connotations of Crucifixion, John Redding, his side pierced by steel, becomes a stick floating down the river toward Jacksonville and the wide world. The chiasmatic structure of Hurston's short story reveals, along with other narratives I'll take up in subsequent chapters, the stakes of Black mobility. A bridge carries passengers across the St. John's River, but only the river can carry John away from his hometown. Valued as little more than a somatic energy unit by the avatars of American infrastructure—the bridge builder in his car—he travels, but only once his somatic capacity has been wasted, consequently severing family ties as Matty and Stella feared. It is suggestive that Hurston begins her published work by narrativizing the corporeal and cultural risks of Black mobility within an increasingly fossil fueled South.

Such a reading brings about questions, centered on the speed of modern disaster and of the offstage positioning of Black mobility despite its critical significance to the plot. One might ask whether Hurston's stories are antimodern given their resistance to what Aldous Huxley called "the one genuinely modern pleasure," speed (qtd. in Duffy 17). But again, Hurston is operating on a different ethic, epistemology, and cultural history to which petromodernity is both a help and hindrance—in other words, she writes an alternative way to be modern. To frame that achievement properly, I want to consider the automobile in her story. American motorization changed the landscape of the nation, materially and symbolically, and it not only marked the U.S. as distinctly modern but deepened the nation's dependencies on and love for oil. In "John Redding Goes to Sea," published at a time when the process of mass motorization was in full swing, reshaping African American experience, Hurston places the car at a pivotal point in the plot: the beginning of John's travels away from Florida—or the beginning of his end. The car, ephemeral as it is in the story, fuels a pivot in the plot—specifically, a pivot away from family. It breaks cultural ties and endangers Black passengers, and this overrides the American idealisms of autonomy and pleasure that the car embodies. As Enda Duffy puts it, for many Americans, cars offered remarkable speed, which "was envisioned not only as pleasure but as a measure of extraordinary personal power" (8). It is no surprise, then, that African Americans have used automobiles for liberatory purposes. But in this early Hurston story, automotive transportation confines and disciplines rather than liberates—it reduces John Redding to an expendable energy source, subordinating him to economic considerations and transporting him not to freedom but to death. Because of this complicated relationship to automobility, we see in Matty and Stella particularly a Black alternative to the ecological destruction of American oil consumption—a communal ethic which provides an essential context for Black pursuits of mobility and freedom.

“John Redding Goes to Sea” shows not only Hurston’s engagement with American petromodernity but how African Americans in the rural South engaged their changing ecologies. The Black petromodernism of Hurston’s short story gives further insight into the affect, dynamism, and politics of fossil fuels, challenging the energy humanities to lean into those repressed, racialized spaces of modernity. But other analyses of this story might articulate a counter-reading which accuses Hurston of provincialism, a privileging of less mobile African Americans while the nation was experiencing a vast Black migration due in part to new modes of fossil fueled travel. If this is the case, her petromodernism is a problematic one. Yet while this story seems to privilege a Black inertia rather than an interregional Black mobility, it introduces themes of community and familial bonds that permeate much of Hurston’s fiction as the thematic ground upon which to take up the ethics of migration.

Indeed, her other stories center Black Southerners who are not outside of the world of petromodernity but within its networks and experiences, whether they’re working on the railroad, traveling by car, struggling to afford fuel, or discussing corporate oil. Unlike John Redding, Hurston’s other characters enact a contested yet liberatory praxis of migration, and the following chapters read these movements within the Jim Crow South. My next chapter reads Hurston’s dozens, porch conversations that are competitions in wit, humor, and imagination. In these dozens, oil bubbles to the surface, creating rhetorical possibilities and demonstrating its ubiquity in Black Southern spaces, as well as its presence in Black oral traditions. I call these “petro-dozens,” and they appear predominantly in an early theatrical work titled “Filling Station” from her revue, *Cold Keener* (1930), as well as in her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Reading these two texts not only illuminates Black engagement with fossil fuels in Hurston’s fiction but also demonstrates the way her representation of petromodernity matured, beginning

with the car and then spreading out into the wider network of corporate oil. My second chapter continues broadening out from the car in order to trace a Black energy history. This tracing is really a chronological petro-reading of Hurston's novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), described by Robert Hemenway as "less a narrative than a series of linguistic movements" (192). My reading instead engages the novel—or its protagonist, John Pearson, rather—as a witness to the petromodernization of the South, from the somatic regime of the plantation, through coal-powered trains, to oil and car culture. Such a reading demonstrates Hurston's intention of expressing a complex modernism of the folk. The petromodern experiences of Hurston's characters thus challenge conventional understandings of the meanings of fossil fuels and Hurston's literary modernism.

CHAPTER 1 – PLAYING THE PETRO-DOZENS: BLACK RHETORICS OF OIL IN  
“FILLING STATION” AND *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

*The used car-dealer . . . will lie like cross-ties from Montreal to Mexico. The car is delivered “as is” so that anything wrong is just too bad after you have traded. They know how to dope them too so that the first 50-100 miles will go just dandy. Then the trouble commences. . . . [N]obody knows what inconvenience I have suffered fooling with old cars. Always something to fix. Money I ought to spend on work is spent on the old can and keeping me strapped.*

– Hurston in a letter to Langston Hughes, winter of 1929-30 (*A Life in Letters*, 156)

*Oh de white gal rides in a Cadillac,  
De yaller gal rides de same,  
Black gal rides in a rusty Ford  
But she gits dere just de same.*

– A jook song from Hurston’s essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (947)

*The overall product of a “successful” life is expressed through the material requisites of oil-based privatism—a home, a car, a family.*

– Matthew Huber (*Lifeblood*, 21)

The Black poetics of Hurston’s fiction demonstrates a striking rhizomatic structure. In his landmark book, *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant differentiates a single, dominant, and totalitarian root from the rhizomatic network of relation. He describes this rhizome as “an enmeshed root system . . . spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root” (11). Speaking from a Caribbean context, Glissant provides insight into the African American poetics of those states along the Gulf Coast where Hurston sets much of her fiction. I would argue that the entanglements of oil and

automobility—with their accompanying symbolisms and industries—within the Black folklore of Hurston’s oeuvre present this kind of rhizomatic network of relation. Automobility, for instance, enters this root system, but Black storytellers refuse it totalitarian status. Instead, it becomes part of a larger framework of African American expression, spirituality, and experience. In Hurston’s stories, oil and cars become the subjects of Black dozens and storytelling, but they get molded, redirected, and broken down to conform to the larger rhizomatic system of African American expression. Or as Hurston herself puts it in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use” (944).

Modern energy’s lack of hierarchical dominance in this rhizomatic structure doesn’t mean that oil plays no dynamic role there. It certainly provides new and groundbreaking shoots and buddings in African American experience and storytelling, but as Hurston writes in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” for African American storytellers,

nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for . . . use. God and the Devil are paired, and are treated no more reverently than Rockefeller and Ford. Both of these men are prominent in folklore, Ford being particularly strong, and they talk and act like good-natured stevedores and mill-hands. . . . The automobile is ranged alongside of the oxcart. The angels and the apostles walk and talk like section hands. (942)

This adaptability of African American folklore and the lack of hierarchy between God and Rockefeller, stevedores and Henry Ford, or oxcarts and automobiles demonstrates a poetics of relation at work—a rhizome of African American mythology and petromodern experience. This

chapter thus peers into this Black, subterranean, and modern space from which Hurston's fiction emerges.

Hurston's modernity, particularly as it pertains to political issues, has been a contested issue among Hurston scholars. My argument suggests that if Black folklore engages the geological shifts taking place in modernization, and is a genre "still in the making," as Hurston writes, then folklore is a collective and distinctly modern cultural expression—and in its improvisation, its attunement to the present, it is a strikingly modernist literary practice. Indeed, African American folklore engages the most visible institutions of modernity—in this case, oil magnate John D. Rockefeller and automotive industry icon Henry Ford—and interestingly it doesn't emerge in New York, Detroit, or Cleveland but in the rural South. Yet this location has earned Hurston critique, perhaps the most prominent being Hazel Carby's incisive questioning in 1990 of the academy's warm reception of a rural African American poetics at a time when African Americans in U.S. cities were experiencing increasing systematic injustice—and she critiques Hurston for focusing on Southern rural settings despite the dynamic event of the Great Migration in the first half of the twentieth century. Carby writes, "Hurston did not take seriously the possibility that African-American culture was being transformed as African-American peoples migrated from rural to urban areas" (76). But her critique not only disparages Hurston for not taking Black urbanization seriously but goes on to suggest that her focus on Southern rural spaces was a politically questionable reaction to the "dramatic transformations within black culture" (76) as a result of these migrations. Hurston's fiction and anthropological work, the argument follows, are "discursive displacement[s]" of that transformation, her rural settings obscuring African Americans' dynamic roles and experiences within American history and modernity (77). The folk of the rural South, in Carby's argument, are located in a nostalgic space

outside of not just modernity but history itself (79). What Carby's critique has rightly accomplished is a check on tendencies to read Hurston's accounts as *the* authentic sources of African American culture—Hurston's oeuvre is part of a much larger network of African American expression—a simplistic reading that consequently represses pertinent urban issues. Carby's critique is also part of almost a century of Hurston criticism disparaging her politics and representation of African American culture. Richard Wright, Hurston's most well-known critic, wrote a short but scathing review of *Their Eyes*, saying she “exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (25). Carby's essay—and others like it—is a kind of continuation of Wright's disparagements. For almost a century now, critics have engaged this fiery debate over Hurston's politics and representations.

My thesis responds to this critical conversation by positing that Hurston's attention to cars and oil gives a national (even an international) and modern context for her work. Carby organizes much of her argument around a rural-urban dichotomy; oil, however, transformed the nation through modernization in ways that the rural-urban dichotomy cannot really capture and may in fact mystify or obscure. Even the more pastoral stories like “John Redding Goes to Sea” demonstrate an oil-conscious narrativization. Where oil surfaces, a national and cultural investment in modernized production and mobility is implicated. Carby's simplistic dichotomy fails to recognize the modernity of the South and thus mistakenly reads Hurston as writing a Black South that is both singularly authentic and outside of history.

Rather than spending more space critiquing Carby's argument, however, I want to note why her and Wright's critiques are so necessary and vital to the vibrant scholarship of Hurston which continues to fill journals and books in the humanities. Paradoxically, critiques of

Hurston's perceived nostalgia and ahistoricity have fueled a rich discourse and deeper understanding of Hurston's modernity. Scholars have had to prove Hurston's modernity, not only taking issue with Carby and critiques like hers but—more importantly—elucidating the history and modernity within Hurston's representations of the folk. Martyn Bone finds contention with Carby's critique of Hurston in his insightful reading of intraregional and transnational labor in *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, concluding that, "by failing to consider either the intraregional movements of rural black Southerners or the transnational border crossings of Caribbean immigrants, it is Carby's reading—not Hurston's writing—that discursively displaces the (extended) South of black folk" (774). Apart from this inimical line of argument throughout his essay, however, Bone nicely historicizes the novel in his discussion the 1928 Lake Okechobee hurricane and Caribbean migrant labor. Jee Hyun An takes a more generous, though still critical, line of argument, positing that while Carby's claims are understandable given the urban context in which she writes, they lack deep textual understanding—or in her words, they require "much closer and cautious examination of how the space of South is being delineated in the text" (379). In an insightful reading of the novel's "migratory spaces of 'home'" and its representation of migrant labor in the South, she concludes that Carby's claims "do injustice to Hurston's novel that embraces the black vernacular and folk culture as vital to the survival for Southern blacks but nevertheless delves into the racial injustices embedded in the space of 'home' with an unflinching eye" (391-2). Leigh Anne Duck, on the other hand, does not disagree with Carby so much as question her narrower claims regarding Hurston's representation of the folk. While Duck argues that there is a displacement at work in *Their Eyes*, particularly of Jim Crow segregation (288), she disagrees "that a writer who so convincingly portrayed her own ability to negotiate cultural differences in *Mules and Men* could two years later deny the

possibility of intercultural communication, or that the writer who so vigorously argued for the recognition of ‘folk’ culture as a viable way of life would aestheticize that culture, and isolate it in time, strictly for the pleasure of bourgeois subjects” (283). Duck’s essay gives a deeper understanding of Hurston’s complicated and contradictory politics—Hurston sees a need for societal change, “for participants in that culture to receive political and economic justice,” but the “process . . . might alter its autonomous African-American communities” in compromising ways (Duck 266). Thanks to Carby’s provocative essay, albeit narrow in its scope, a rich wealth of scholarship on Hurston’s literary depth, complexity, and historicity emerges. With Carby and Wright as their springboard, critics have illuminated a fascinating modernity in Hurston’s writing, and my hope in this thesis is to contribute to such an animated literary discussion by delving deeper into the tensions between “cultural maintenance and societal changes” (Duck 288).

Indeed, “John Redding Goes to Sea” introduces these tensions. John Redding’s lack of access to modern mobility, for instance, is a problem in regard to his community’s socioeconomic vulnerability; yet his mother’s resistance to his mobility is understandable in light of the natal alienation that his mobility threatens. A reading of Hurston through the lens of oil engages this conflict, generating readings that avoid provincialism or anachronism and demonstrate a transformative Black participation in American modernity. This participation, I argue, suggests that mobility and communal ties are not so much in conflict as in a hierarchical relationship. As Hurston writes, “we are an outdoor people accustomed to communal life” (“Characteristics” 945). Communal ties inform the utility, even the morality, of mobility: John Redding desires mobility for its own sake, not out of a larger communal ethic, which may be his mother’s fundamental basis for rejecting his yearnings. Thus, Black petromodern travel in

Hurston's fiction is valued on the basis of relational ties rather than dominant American individualistic values. More broadly, Black modernity is informed by a long history of familial and communal disruption, harsh labor conditions, and lost African roots. This history informs Black participation in petromodernity within Hurston's oeuvre, and it undergirds the practices, songs, and stories that African Americans express. To begin elucidating this, I listen as Hurston's characters engage in the dozens, verbal wars of wit which she defines in "Harlem Slang"—an unedited manuscript which would later be condensed and edited into "Glossary of Harlem Slang"—as "low-rating the ancestors of your opponent. Most unsafe game unless you are well armed" (232). In *Their Eyes* they are also defined as "contest[s] in hyperbole . . . carried on for no other reason" (63). These verbal competitions appear throughout her work, but I want to look particularly at their presence in the skit, "Filling Station," from her 1930 revue, *Cold Keener*, as well as in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Tellingly, the dozens in these stories persistently engage fossil fuels, and for this reason I call these oily verbal competitions "petro-dozens" in order to keep the rhizomatic relationship between Black storytelling and American oil culture in view. In these texts, I argue, Hurston narrativizes the Black oil encounter, depicting African Americans engaging petromodernity not to participate in dominant American culture on an assimilationist model but to utilize new energy possibilities for their own creative and liberatory purposes.

#### Dilapidated Hant Catchers: The Automotive Modernism of "Filling Station"

"Filling Station" stages oil encounter through two Black motorists in need of petroleum. The skit centers the petro-dozens, but it also offers a more material account of Black experience. The

skit's setting is in the title—a gas station—but interestingly Hurston also sets this on the border between Alabama and Georgia. The main characters, Ford Driver and Chevrolet Driver, are named by their consumption choices, which suggests a Fordist influence on the tale. Mass motorization was in full swing by 1930 when this skit was written, and as Matthew Huber writes in his discussion of mass homeownership and automobility, one's "very life [was] seen as a product of your entrepreneurial choices" (21). Yet the characters' consumption also evidences their poverty. Ford Driver, coming from Alabama, "*rattles up to the pump*" in a "*dilapidated*" Model T while Chevrolet Driver drives in from the Georgia side in an "*old and battered*" vehicle (77-78). The skit exposes a limited access to automobility. The characters' ramshackle vehicles suggest their precarious socioeconomic status, and this is confirmed by how little gas they can afford, shown in the first few lines when Ford Driver enters in his Model T:

Proprietor: (Sleepily) How many?

Ford Driver: Two.

Proprietor: Two what?

Ford Driver: Two pints. (78)

Later, Chevrolet Driver asks for a gallon since he's "goin' way over in Alabama" (79)—an ironic statement since he fuels his car just a few feet from the Alabama state line. Rationing fuel is apparently a Black humor trope, for a very similar exchange appears in a 1923 issue of the Black newspaper, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, in a column titled "Heard Around Town." "Heard Around Town" was a small section of the *Norfolk Journal* for humor and witticisms often involving cars and romance. Next to a picture of a cartoon figure who appears to be in blackface goes this story: "Hello Friends: A Missouri paper runs this story, with every indication of it being the real thing: 'T'other day a fellow wheezed his Ford up to a Filling Station and ordered a

half gallon of gasoline. The man at the pump station seemed petrified with astonishment until a bystander explained, “Probably trying to wean it”” (7). Hurston is staging the folk and bringing its tropes to the modern stage. The *Norfolk* blurb has multiple interpretive implications, one of course being that the bystander makes a joke at the Ford motorist’s expense. Yet the impoverished Ford motorist, like the motorists in Hurston’s skit, purchases no more fuel than he needs, suggesting that he exercises a much higher level of automotive efficiency, knowing exactly the amount of fuel he requires to reach his destination. This joke, adapted by Hurston at the beginning of her skit, hints at a more responsible practice of consumption by these poor Black motorists skimping on fuel, albeit by necessity.

Hurston apparently appreciates this humor and compounds it by placing “a very expensive and ornate cap on the radiator” of Ford Driver’s Model T (78). The Proprietor of the filling station does not respond to Ford Driver in petrified astonishment as in the *Norfolk* account and seems rather unfazed—but he is in on the joke. When Ford Driver asks him to “look her over and tell me just what you could make her look like a brand new car for,” he tells him “You see it’s like this. This car needs a whole heap of things done to it. But being as you’re a friend of mine—tell you what I’ll do. I’ll just jack that radiator cap up and run a brand new Ford under it for four hundred and ninety-five dollars” (78). The slighted Ford owner desires the feeling of having a brand-new car, but it is clear he can’t afford a new car nor the maintenance necessary to refurbish his current dilapidated one. He can’t even afford a new Model T, one of the most affordable cars on the market.

Sheller writes that the “‘feelings’ being generated around cars can be powerful indicators of the emotional currents and submerged moral economies of car cultures” (224). Enda Duffy also describes the experience of high, automotive speeds as “feeling modernity in [one’s] bones”

(4). Car manufacturers advertise through the affect of automobility, selling their goods by promoting the feelings they generate. Chevrolet Driver demonstrates this, bragging on his vehicle to Ford Driver by branding it as a generator of pleasure and speed: “You can’t talk about no Chevvie now. They got everything that a good car need. Speed! Oh, boy!” (81). Hurston’s Black motorists desire the thrill of automobility and the pleasure of a technologically sophisticated machine, but they lack the funds necessary to participate fully—the Ford motorist affords merely a shiny new radiator cap that only highlights the poor state of the rest of the car. The feeling of automobility—or even modernity—is unevenly distributed within a racialized modernity.

The play’s setting, a gas station, further hampers these desires for automotive speed with its center-staging of petroleum dependencies and exchange. As LeMenager notes, the gas station “marks a halt and an exchange, cash for fuel, that complicates automobility conceived as happiness and freedom” (87). It is telling that Hurston sets a skit on Black automobility within a liminal space where oil and economic needs trouble the automotive pleasure of modernity. Setting these petro-dozens at a gas station, Hurston reveals the multilayered constraints that Black motorists face. With two pints of gas, Ford Driver will not get far before facing another “halt and an exchange.” In their petro-dozens, these motorists imagine feeling modernity in their bones; but in reality, their felt experience is an automobility that constantly “*rattles up to the pump*” (78)—an ephemeral, spasmodic mobility, which is an alternative corporeal experience of modernity to the kind of velocity-driven phenomenology Duffy conceptualizes.

The dozens of this story, however, do not immediately start with the subject of Black automobility but rather with Jim Crow. This sets the petro-dozens that follow within the high stakes context of racial segregation, suggesting a distinctly Black and liberative meaning of the

automobility that these characters experience and imagine. Ford Driver, who comes from Alabama, asks Chevrolet Driver how “you Georgy folks starvin’,” later adding that the angel Gabriel “might have to knock some of them Georgy crackers in de head, but you n\_\_\_\_\_ will be all ready and waitin’ for the trumpet . . . ’Cause dem crackers y’all got over there sho is hard on zigaboos” (79-80). Indignant, Chevrolet Driver declares, “We got *nice* white folks in Georgy! But them Alabama red-necks is too mean to give God an honest prayer without snatchin’ back amen!” (80). Their banter continues, comparing the segregation practices between their states. Georgia’s racism is so severe, says Ford Driver, that “one day they lynched a black mule for kickin’ a white one” (80), and they are so committed to segregation that Black laughter is separated from white—to which Chevrolet Driver retorts that even harsher practices are carried out in Alabama. While their banter is humorous, seemingly making light of troubling, racist terror, it reflects a trope of African American expression within white structures of power and control, according to John Lowe, in which enslaved Blacks argue over the merits of their masters (88). As Frederick Douglass writes in his *Narrative*, “it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others” (31-32). These “quarrels” could be understood as antebellum dozens, for Hurston’s Black motorists engage in a similar debate over the “relative goodness” of their segregated states. Their argument over Georgia and Alabama’s Jim Crow laws, however, does no redeeming work for either state. In fact, the longer the dozens go on in this subject, the more draconian each state appears. What is on the surface a competition over which state better suits African Americans is really a hard-hitting disparagement of violent segregation in the South, an exposure of the lengths to which white people go to subjugate,

terrorize, and humiliate Black communities. Such a violent and racist context raises the stakes and changes the meanings of accessing (or rather struggling to access) fuel.

Reading this as a backdrop for a larger conversation on Black automotive modernism, however, the two men's comparison of their states has other meanings. Gretchen Sorin notes in *Driving While Black* that it was very important in interstate travel for African Americans to know the nuanced segregation laws in each state below the Mason-Dixon. In 1930, every Southern state practiced some level of segregation, but the implementation was not identical among, or even within, every state (Sorin 22). Hurston's motorists suggest that Jim Crow permeates the motorway itself, which fails to offer an escape from racialized policing and legislation. In this sense, their petro-dozens become a gathering of knowledge, an exchange of information that aids each of them as they navigate the Jim Crow South in their cars.

Their dozens transition from racial segregation to a petro-dozens of automotive experience when Ford Driver says, "They don't 'low y'all to ride no faster than ten miles an hour. If you ride any faster—you liable to get in front of some white folks." Chevrolet Driver quickly counters that Black Alabamans are only allowed drive "Fords so you can't pass nobody" (80). The speed of petromodernity, according to these Black motorists, is created for white people, partitioned from Black experience. Hurston's motorists begin their petro-dozens with an observation of limited access to oil's velocity. Furthermore, their vehicular woes and rationed fuel-spending trouble the automobile as a tool for socioeconomic ascendancy. Seiler is quick to note how the liberal notions of automobility failed to include motorists of color:

From the earliest days of automobility, overlapping and mutually sustaining racist laws, social codes, governmental regulation, and commercial practices have attenuated the mobility of the black driver: segregated roadside mechanical and medical aid, food, and

shelter; the discriminatory membership policies of motoring organizations . . . ; profiling of minority drivers by law enforcement and regulatory agencies; the racial-spatial politics of highway planning and placement, especially in urban areas; the racebound economics of auto financing and insurance underwriting; and the venerable practice of general police harassment for “driving while black.” (108-109)

Seiler’s astute attention to the uneven experience of automobility gives further evidence of the kind of policing over which Hurston’s motorists debate. Georgia’s racialized speed limits (according to *Ford Driver*) provide an abbreviated genealogy of the “profiling of minority drivers by law enforcement . . . and the venerable practice of general police harassment for ‘driving while black’” that Seiler articulates.

From segregation arose the need for travel information that would aid Black motorists in evading white violence. Victor H. Green’s travel guide, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, founded in 1936, attempted to meet this need. In her work on Black automobility, Sorin reveals the complexities of *The Green Book*, which had multiple effects. Green’s goal was “to make travel as easy and stress-free as possible for black motorists” (Sorin 181). *The Green Book* listed Black-friendly establishments in a wide range of cities, towns, and states. The book, according to Sorin, was an essential tool for traveling safely in America. As a travel guide, by listing Black businesses, it supported Black entrepreneurialism, though this gained it criticism as perpetuating the separation of the races—even though Green was himself an “avowed integrationist” (Sorin 181). Sorin writes that this guide “advocated civil rights by implication, in supporting the Negro traveler and finding ways for black Americans to ‘vacation without aggravation’ in the segregated United States” (212). Other travel guides did not engage racialized restrictions in the

U.S., so Green's guide was in high demand, aiding Black travelers and supporting the Black businesses they patronized.

Hurston's skit, written in 1930, formulates the petro-dozens into an oral travel guide that aids Black motorists before *The Green Book* was available to them. Furthermore, Hurston's characters expose the limitations of *The Green Book* in ameliorating the array of roadblocks to safe driving that Black Southerners uniquely experienced. In the introduction of a 1946 issue, the guide very briefly explains its purpose, namely providing "facts and information that the Negro Motorist can use and depend upon" (1). Yet this information primarily regards businesses accommodating to African Americans rather than information regarding segregation laws and policing practices in various Jim Crow states. This is due to Green's goals for his audience—he hoped his guide would "appeal to white supporters of integration as well as to black travelers" (Sorin 181). Perhaps details about Jim Crow laws would limit his audience, yet Hurston's motorists reveal a need for such a guide that Green's interests in profits and customer base neglect to take account of. The Ford and Chevrolet drivers' suggestions of racialized speed limits offers one clue here, namely that Black drivers needed information *while* they were driving during Jim Crow—not just when they needed a hotel, gas station, or rest area. If automobility enacts the petroleum aesthetic of Stephanie LeMenager, in which driving is associated with "being alive" (80), that petroleum aesthetic is itself Jim Crowed in Hurston's skit. Where LeMenager astutely points out that automobility is in many ways compulsory, in Black Southern experience that automobility is also highly regulated on a racial level. Thus, an effective guide might inform on which roads and highways (or portions of roads and highways) were especially precarious for African American drivers. Or it may give helpful legal advice—which Ford Driver implies is needed, telling Chevrolet Driver that the new Fords "will have a lawyer in the tool

box” (83). While Hurston’s skit does not delve more deeply, historical evidence also reveals a demand for helpful information for Black motorists while they were driving. The *Chicago Defender* gives account of countless stories of racist violence, many of which include adverse experiences of automobility. One in particular occurred in 1920 in Florida:

Wintering in Florida turned out to be more than a mere round of pleasure for Dr. and Mrs. W.R. Groover (white). . . . [They] were driving by automobile from Lakeland to White Springs when they noticed a crowd near a swamp. Mrs. Groover remarked that it must be a country funeral, . . . [but] as their came closer to the men they found themselves confronted by a man hanging from a rope. . . . “An amusing incident occurred,” is the way the Evening Telegram of Lakeland, Fla. referred to the lynching, “when three or four cars drove up with tourists from the North. The first machine was driven by a Colored chauffeur, and when the men responsible for the dead man saw this cloud arrive on the horizon they immediately ordered him to get out of the car and shake hands with the lynched man who was dangling from a tree.” (1)

This anecdote starkly and succinctly portrays the stakes of driving—even chauffeuring whites—in the South for African Americans. A travel guide that lists Black-friendly establishments does not protect Black motorists from such chillingly violent and traumatic occurrences while driving. Early in the history of mass motorization—in the case of this Florida lynching, over a decade before Green published his guide—Black motorists required in-depth knowledge of sociopolitical institutions and practices wherever they were in order to participate in American automobility. My point is not just that *The Green Book* only partially met this need but that Black folklore could and did fulfill this need. There’s an oral expressivity that meets Black automotive needs where print culture fails them.

In this vein, African American folklore becomes an organizing mythos—an epistemological grounding for understanding, utilizing, and navigating mass automobility. The petro-dozens of this skit move further into their cultural values by engaging the modern phenomenon of velocity. The Black motorists put no limits on what their cars can do, both of them reaching the speed of sound, one of them perhaps anticipating a sonic boom as well:

Ford Driver: Dat's a lie and otherwise you ain't really seen a Ford run yet. Now I was going down to Miami and I had dat old car doing seventy eight, man.

Chevrolet Driver: I went dat same road and had mine doing ninety.

Ford Driver: I mean I was doin' seventy-eight on the curves, otherwise I was doing a hundred and fifty.

Chevrolet Driver: That was draggin' along. I was doin' two hundred and wasn't pushin' her. Fact is, I was in second.

Ford Driver: Man, I was doin' one hundred fifty in first. By the time I got as far south as Jacksonville, I was really running. Man, I come down that Florida Number Four going faster than the word of God! I was doing three hundred in second.

Chevrolet Driver: Aw, yeah, you was on Number Four. I seen you. I was goin' four hundred miles an hour when I passed you and I thought you was having tire trouble. I didn't know you was moving.

Ford Driver: You'se a seven-sided liar. I passed you before you got to St. Augustine, and I was airing out at eight hundred miles an hour.

Chevrolet Driver: And I come by you so fast till my wind said "wham!" (81)

These petro-dozens become a contest in kinetic energy—an argument over the degree to which these motorists participate in a high-velocity modernity. Indeed, referencing Aldous Huxley,

Duffy writes that speed “is the only new pleasure invented by modernity” (1). His book argues that the automobile “offered to masses of people that rarest of things: a wholly new experience, the experience of moving at what appeared to be great speeds and the sensation of controlling that movement” (4). The two motorists in Hurston’s skit, then, compete not just over whose car is fastest but over the degree to which they corporeally feel modern in their driving. They seek those “‘feelings’ being generated around cars,” that Sheller writes about (224). To reach the speeds they purport is to be modern in the fullest sense, at least according to Duffy and Huxley. Duffy’s work of velocity is additionally helpful, though, in that he theorizes it as deeply political. Gaining speed means subverting the forces of immobilization that are Jim Crow laws, though this liberatory aspect of velocity is accompanied by the regulatory processes that Seiler elucidates in his understanding of automobility (108-109).

While their hampered automotive experience seems to fall outside dominant notions of automobility, however, these motorists heap their own symbolisms, stories, and hopes on the car, articulating a distinctly Black automobility. This happens in various ways, but primarily as the two men transition from the physics of automotive speed (such as the “wind sa[ying] ‘wham!’”) to an interweaving of modern technology with African American spirituality and folklore. Their speeds increase upward into supernatural scales: Ford Driver brags, “Know what, man? De angels in heben ain’t flew a lick since de new Ford come out. . . . ’Cause de minute God seen them new Fords, he called up Detroit long distance and told Ford, ‘Send up ten thousand brand new Fords for my angels to get around in.’ And, man, them angels is giving Jerusalem Street and Amen Avenue an acre of fits” (82). Cars are such disruptive modern technologies that they top the capabilities of angels and principalities, shapeshifting the architecture of heaven itself. This is certainly a celebration of human achievement—not unlike the Futurist poet and modern speed

worshipper, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who writes in “The New Religion-Morality of Speed” that modernity’s temporal potentiality is so powerful it renders old religious forms obsolete. He argues, “Today [Christian morality] has lost its reason for existing, because it has been emptied of all divinity. . . . Human energy centupled by speed will master Time and Space” (57). While the Black motorists do not purport a vanishing of old religion—indeed, they incorporate automotive modernism into their religious stories—they instead see the possibility for dynamic ontological, epistemological, and religious transformation through the car. If Marinetti is right in seeing religion as somehow antimodern, African American religion doesn’t fall into that category for Hurston. In sum, these characters recognize automobility as a realm of unique possibility for African Americans not only to become increasingly mobile but to deepen cultural ties, beliefs, and practices.

This unique possibility is articulated when Ford Driver suggests that the car is a modern tool for African American remembrance. He recounts an instance in which he saw “a gang of hants” go past his house: “My old man been dead ’bout three years and I seen him wid these other hants and I wanted to ast him something he forgot to tell us before he died, so I jumped in dat Ford and run dem hants down and overtook ’em. Yessuh! Dat Ford is a hant-catcher” (83). Feeling modern as a Black motorist in this conversation is not simply about achieving individual power and freedom. It becomes a tool for maintaining important familial connections that would otherwise be severed. In the same vein, Chevrolet Driver replies that “Mr. Sloan molded me a motor and put it together and equipped her, and I throwed in some gas and oil and led dat hant parade into Diddy-Wah-Diddy” (83). Hurston defines “Diddy-Wah-Diddy” in “Harlem Slanguage” as “Another suburb of Hell, built on since way before Hell wasn’t no bigger than Baltimore. Where the folks in Hell go for a big time. All the good joking, barbecues, fish-frys,

etc. are held” (229). Automobility as speed transcends time and space, as Marinetti emphasizes. Yet this transcendence takes on African American meanings—not as replacing spirituality qua Marinetti but as giving the living access to the spiritual realm. Within these suggestions at the car’s metaphysical transcendence are references to cultural beliefs, memory, and ancestry, which demonstrate a collective consciousness, one that looks toward using and understanding automobility for shared rather than individual freedom. This is a major departure from the individualist rhetoric of American car culture—and from Hurston’s dim view of the automobile in “John Redding Goes to Sea.” In these petro-dozens, the Black motorists do not compete over vague idealisms of progress but about stronger connections to Black cultural roots and communities due to automotive technologies. Indeed, Hurston herself would later utilize the car as a tool for collecting folklore, which is a function similar to the memory work, or hant-catching, that Ford Driver imagines. By suggesting that Black automobility strengthens memory, maintaining cultural richness, Hurston may be trying to resolve those inner tensions between modernization and cultural integrity with which she and many of her critics wrestle. While her skit demonstrates multiple meanings of automobility for Black Southerners, the car as a tool for Black memory suggests that modernization may not be altogether antagonistic to cultural identity and well-being.

What “Filling Station” suggests about Black driving during Jim Crow, then, is a different dialectic for understanding automobility as LeMenager might frame it—experiences of automotive pleasure contradicted and accompanied by negative feelings and experiences. Put another way, for mainstream white culture, automobility’s liberal symbolisms grew in compensatory response to Fordist production logic, according to Deborah Clarke (54), which disciplined the individual into a docile laborer, a single member of a much larger assembly

production, as articulated in my introduction. This forms a dialectic of mass production that disciplines the body and mass consumption that promises corporeal liberation from that discipline. Bob Johnson argues that the modern factory's production fostered a "shared somatic terror" (60) among laborers in repetitive automotive factory jobs where "working bodies frequently felt modernity's energies as a restriction, a constraint, a clamming up of the self—from the urethra to the brainstem—for the purposes of high-speed production" (*Carbon* 58-59). Automobility as the routine American individualistic practice was the dominant mode for both alleviating and perpetuating the loss of the individual within these modern industrial practices.

For Black motorists, however, such a dialectic collapses: accompanying the somatic terror of industrialized labor is a policed and uncertain automobility. To African Americans long aware that American capitalism, in Johnson's words, "regarded biological labor . . . as expendable" (*Carbon* 62), the car certainly had meanings related to the liberalism of dominant car culture, yet more seductive was, to borrow from Seiler, the possibility of "escape from Jim Crow: upward through socioeconomic strata and outward across geographical space" (108). Hurston sets "Filling Station" in the context of Black experience of the "restriction" and "constraint" of Jim Crow, a racial system we might articulate in this fossil fueled moment as a technologized, continuously flowing mass production of racial categories. Black hopes emerge in response to this form of racial production. As Sorin is quick to note, the car often meant more to Black motorists than to their white counterparts (xi). Rather than the mainstream, hollow idealisms of escaping mass production and accessing autonomy and selfhood, the car is freighted with more tangible hopes of social, political, economic, and cultural aspiration for Black motorists. In "Filling Station," then, a petro-dozens emerges within this context of a racialized segregation that permeates automobility, and these dozens not only attempt to subvert white

supremacy but to imagine the striking potentialities of Black automobility, both for avoiding Jim Crow and for enriching African American personal and collective experience.

### Dat Scoundrel Beast: Black Alternatives to Oil Capitalism

Automobility is one of the most visible representations of petromodernity. The car—its petroleum-fueled engine, greased tie rods and ball joints, carbon steel chassis, synthetic rubber tires, and the “congealed oil,” to borrow from Johnson, of the asphalt road on which it speeds—represents the most visible technological and spatial manifestation of modernity. Still, automobility is just one facet of a more widespread energy regime. What kind of culture does oil fuel that automobility might obscure or fail to reveal? Hurston engages these broader oil dependencies later in her writing career in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and she continues with themes of mass consumption and Black alternatives. What differentiates the petro-dozens of *Their Eyes* from “Filling Station” is that the novel engages the capillary presence of oil—its permeation of all aspects of modern life, including but not exclusive to mobility. Modern energy gets a fuller engagement in Hurston’s novel, demonstrating Black communities’ attunement to and practices within the complex maelstrom of petromodernity.

The petro-dozens of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begin with Dave and Jim, who engage in a war of wit and charm for the love of Daisy in the all-Black community of Eatonville, Florida. Dave claims that he’d “buy Daisy uh passenger train” while Jim promises her a “steamship and then . . . some mens tuh run it fur her” (69). Their back-and-forth progresses technologically as they continue:

“Daisy, don’t let Jim fool you wid his talk. He don’t aim tuh do nothin’ fuh yuh. Uh lil ole steamship! Daisy, Ah’ll take uh job cleanin’ out de Atlantic Ocean fuh you any time you say you so desire.” There was a great laugh and then they hushed to listen.

“Daisy,” Jim began, “you know mah heart and all de ranges uh mah mind. And you know if Ah wuz idin’ up in uh earoplane way up in de sky and Ah looked down and seen you walkin’ and knowed you’d have tuh walk ten miles tuh git home, Ah’d step backward offa dat earoplane just to walk home wid you.”

There was one of those big blow-out laughs and Janie was wallowing in it. (69)

With Jim’s petroleum-fueled “earoplane,” oil enters their dozens, becoming a rhetorical tool for humor and a realm of expansive comedic and wooing possibility. Petromodernity allows Jim and Dave to continuously one-up each other, but as they do they also provide a sketch of energy’s history in America, from train to steamship to Dave’s unspecified nautical machinery to Jim’s airplane travel. They also claim remarkable facility with these modern machines, which in turn authorizes their place within modernity. Put another way, the exaggerative humor does not demonstrate a lack of understanding of modernization but an exploitation of petromodernity for African American ends—ends that cannot be reduced to mobility since their goal is winning over Daisy.

Furthermore, these men do not just demonstrate a sophisticated knowledge of oil culture. They reveal values that transcend the “drill, baby, drill” ethic and eternal-growth idealism of oil capitalism. Dave’s offer to “take uh job cleanin’ out de Atlantic Ocean” suggests a Black Atlantic lens—one, as Paul Gilroy articulates, that understands Black identity and culture in transcontinental terms. Gilroy writes that such an identity formation brings about a double consciousness, or an “inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject” (36).

By cleaning out the Atlantic, Dave is not addressing oceanic waste dumping but Glissant's "abyss" of the sea, which he poignantly describes here:

Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. . . . Navigating the green splendor of the sea . . . still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (6)

Cleaning out the Atlantic means encountering the bones and chains of the millions of Africans who drowned during the Middle Passage, going back to the "vast beginning" of enslavement's violent and deathly disruption of Black subjects. Thus, cleaning out the Atlantic also means recognizing oneself as a diasporic being whose routes and whose ancestor's routes inform identity and mobility. Thus, Dave's offer to Daisy is one of recovering a memory of constricted and controlled movements, and such a history informs Black identities and interactions with systems of mobility in the present.

Another instance of Black alternative values occurs when Jim tells Daisy he would "step backward offa dat earoplane just to walk home wid you," insinuating that there are things more important than the speed of modern mobility. This is not typically the case in dominant culture where, as LeMenager notes for example in her reading of Ray Bradbury's "petrodystopia" fiction, "humans walking or even slowly driving, so as to utilize their senses in real time, can be classified as criminals" (72). Or take Marinetti's praise for the limitless possibility of speed as well as his disdain for the "[c]riminal slowness of Sunday crowds and the Venetian lagoons"

(58). Marinetti would probably scorn Jim's decision to step off an airplane to walk (slowly) with Daisy for ten miles. Indeed, Jim gives up new forms of energy for the old ones (somatic and solar), which, while more hospitable to romantic love, make him much more vulnerable—in the Jim Crow South—to criminalization. And Black criminalization in the South had serious repercussions. Jim makes a considerable sacrifice to abandon the airplane for Daisy in light of this, making it a substantial attempt to win over Daisy. Furthermore, the laugh that follows Jim's claim is layered with meaning, given this discourse on speed. If petromodernity is not just the provision of faster forms of travel but also a form of compulsory participation in modern acceleration, then the laugh encompasses more than the highly amusing image of a man stepping backward off an airplane for love: it acknowledges the political meanings behind that clever and decisive break from petromodernity. The community affirms Jim's freedom to participate in petromodernity without being confined by it. This politically resistant humor demonstrates that Marinetti's "new religion-morality of speed" does not exceed human love for Jim or his audience. Petromodern participation does not transcend communal values and cultural ties. Speed can too easily become another form of familial fragmentation which African Americans have experienced since being taken from their ancestral homes on slave ships bound for the similarly disruptive plantation economics of the U.S. South. Coming from this long transcontinental history, Eatonville's residents are not easily converted to the new modern deity of fossil fueled velocity. For Jim particularly, Daisy's love is much more valuable than the limitless and compulsory mobility of petromodernity.

Another competition of petro-dozens occurs in the same novel just a few pages earlier. Sam Watson and Lige Moss play the dozens masterfully, covering a range of modern and

folkloric topics, and spending a lot of time analyzing the local gas station, which I quote at length:

“Look at dat great big ole scoundrel-beast up dere at Hall’s fillin’ station—uh great big old scoundrel. He eats up all de folks outa de house and den eat de house.”

“Aw ’tain’t no sich a varmin nowhere dat kin eat no house! Dat’s uh lie. Ah wuz dere yiste’ddy and Ah ain’t seen nothin’ lak dat. Where is he?”

“Ah didn’t see him but Ah reckon he is in de back-yard someplace. But dey got his picture out front dere. They was nailin’ it up when Ah come pass dere dis evenin’.”

“Well all right now, if he eats up houses how come he don’t eat up de fillin’ station?”

“Dat’s ’cause dey got him tied up so he can’t. Dey got uh great big picture tellin’ how many gallons of dat Sinclair high-compression gas he drink at one time and how he’s more’n uh million years old.”

“Tain’t nothin’ no million years old!”

“De picture is right up dere where anybody kin see it. Dey can’t make de picture till dey see de thing, kin dey?”

“How dey goin’ to tell he’s uh million years old? Nobody wasn’t born dat fur back.”

“By de rings on his tail Ah reckon. Man, dese white folks got ways for tellin’ anything dey wants tuh know.” (65-66)

Here, Sam and Lige encounter the materiality of fossil fuels through the same medium as the Ford and Chevrolet drivers of Hurston’s skit: the gas station. In the novel, however, Sam and Lige peer more deeply into the gas station itself than do the motorists of “Filling Station.” They

do so by reading “dat great big ole scoundrel-beast,” a fitting term for a being representing the complexity, permeation, and opacity of oil. It is very likely they discuss the Sinclair Dino since they reference its long life as fueled by “dat Sinclair high-compression gas.” This Sinclair logo was a green apatosaurus and an effective marketing image that gained the oil company wide recognition and popularity. Sinclair became particularly famous for its extravagant World Fair exhibits throughout the mid-twentieth century, which depicted a wide range of life-size dinosaur species. According to one newspaper during the interwar period, “Sinclair uses dinosaurs in its motor oil advertising to impress on your mind the tremendous age of crude oils from which Sinclair Motor Oils are made” (qtd. in “Dinosaur Fever”). Oil allows moderns to tap quite literally into the prehistoric age. Thanks to Sinclair, motorists can put that prehistoric life (compressed for millennia into cheap energy) right into their tanks. While Sam and Lige are knowledgeable about Sinclair’s high-compression gas—which according to Sinclair was a 72-octane automobile fuel, a higher octane level than any other fuel on the market at the time (“1920s”)—and while they imply that they are motorists who frequent the filling station—“Ah wuz dere yiste’ ddy”—they spend the conversation picking apart the mythos of the Dino as a corporate branding image, analyzing its meaning and demystifying its untenabilities.

For one, their narrativization of the Dino becomes a way of analyzing and navigating oil culture. The scoundrel “eats up all de folks outa de house and den eat de house,” says one of the men. More than a ridiculous story, this gestures toward mass consumption, a fundamental facet of petromodernity. Thanks in part to oil, modernity produces seductive commodities—such as automobiles—that facilitate extravagant and irresponsible spending. As Mimi Sheller writes, “Car consumption is never simply about rational economic choices, but is as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving” (222). The consumerism of the dinosaur

thus implicates those who put prehistoric carbon in their gas tanks for the pleasure of driving. The Dino's appetite implies that, in a world powered and permeated by oil, any modern human can consume on this paleontological scale, can practice (or fall victim to) the destructive eating of the Dino. Deborah Clarke makes the canny observation that "[i]n the modern era . . . mass consumption was more than a façade; . . . it sustained modernity" (56). And if an uneven distribution of oil is intrinsic to petromodernity, this consumption also sustains precarity for those living nearer poverty. The motorists of Hurston's skit know something of this, struggling to afford cars, which reflects a likely similar struggle to support their housing and nutritional needs. This dynamic of petromodernity is captured by Sam and Lige's musings on the Dino-as-mass-consumer ingesting people and their houses.

Fordism was largely based on the idea that "the assembly line opened the door to mass consumption" (Clarke 41). It might be more accurate to say that the assembly line, or mass production, and mass consumption are mutually dependent. David Gartman notes this in Henry Ford's Five Dollar Day initiative that increased the wages of workers: "In return for the Five Dollar Day, Ford demanded of workers acquiescence to mass-production methods as well as a stable home life centered around major consumer durables that made them dependent on their high-paying jobs" (177). Ford's wage enacts this disciplining technique of the workers both within the factory and within the home that effectively manages populations to consume on unprecedented scales—to the point that life itself becomes measured by their financial practices. Such a move brings profits to Henry Ford since his wage increases made it possible for his workers to buy Fords, one of these "consumer durables." Huber would call this consumeristic push within Fordism for "a stable home life" the production and management of entrepreneurial life, which he describes here:

[T]he construction of a propertied mass of homeowners . . . creates a situation where your very life is seen as a product of your entrepreneurial choices. Your entrepreneurial capacities all combine to make a life—to make a living—for yourself. . . . In this particular imagery, “life” is not only expressed through the pillars of social reproduction—the mother and child—but is actively managed through a series of “investments.” . . . The overall product of a “successful” life is expressed through the material requisites of oil-based privatism—a home, a car, a family. (21)

What Huber calls “investments” certainly relates to the “consumer durables” that Gartman observes. The Dino as the corporate brand of Sinclair Oil presents in the African American imaginary a rhetoric of cultural glut, an environment of insatiable appetite that permeates every aspect of this “oil-based privatism” Huber describes. The Dino “eat[ing] up all de folks outa de house and den eat[ing] de house” becomes a fitting image of these corporate strategies of population management that permeate public and private life. Is it any coincidence that the U.S.’s biopolitical direction coincides with the economic and cultural transformation of mass production and consumption? The Dino’s appetite, then, offers a way to think about the complexities of oil’s seduction and the mass consumption and biopolitical governance it fosters.

This fossil fueled consumption gives us a new lens through which to think about Joe Starks and Tea Cake’s lifestyle differences. The former’s ascendancy to power perpetuates a logic of consumption and convenience—and his big house in proximity to the other townspeople’s smaller, humbler dwellings, smacks of plantation logic. Tea Cake on the other hand leaves a smaller ecological and economic footprint, and while, unlike Joe, Tea Cake drives a car, the car is a borrowed one—and one he’s had to work a long time to gain access to. “[B]een workin’ lak uh dawg for two whole weeks,” he tells Janie. “[P]uttin’ mahself tuh uh whole heap

uh trouble tuh git dis car so you kin go over tuh Winter Park or Orlandah tuh buy de things you might need” (109). And later, in the muck, Tea Cake and Janie “rattled nine miles in a borrowed car to the quarters” (130). Not only are these alternative experiences of automobility and further evidence of petromodernity’s uneven distribution of mobility, but they also reflect a lifestyle organized around mobility without being saturated by oil consumption. This means harnessing mobilities that aren’t always fossil fueled, along with conceiving of the car as a collective rather than private asset. Throughout the novel, then, and not just in her petro-dozens, Hurston expresses an alternative ethic of mobility by Black Southerners who are wary of an individualistic and consumeristic culture that perpetuates their socioeconomic troubles.

In their analysis of Sinclair’s marketing, Sam and Lige expose the limitations of the Dino as a corporate image. The two men, for instance, go on to puncture the mythos of the dinosaur by exposing the shoddy ways in which white epistemological structures produce and dispense information. When one the men gives the comical explanation for telling the age of the beast (“By de rings on his tail”), he concludes, “Man, dese white folks got ways for tellin’ anything they wants tuh know.” Sam and Lige question the shaky epistemological underpinnings of the prehistoric claims Sinclair Oil is making with its Dino, exposing the branding as a baseless and made-up tale in service of white desire—the Dino is a knowledge construction built to generate profit, not reflect reality. Thus, the men’s petro-dozens work out the symbolisms of the Dino in ways that critique mass consumption and exposes hollow corporate branding.

The turn to Black folklore reflects a final, distinctly African American approach to living in Southern petromodernity. The two men compare the Dino to “Big John de Conquer,” a mythological figure that emerged from antebellum African American culture: “Dey caught him [the Dino] over dere in Egypt,” one of the men says of the Dino, “Nature is high in uh varmint

lak dat. Nature and salt. Dat's whut makes up strong man lak Big John de Conquer. He was a man wid salt in him" (66). Hurston devotes a separate sketch to this "source and soul of our laughter and song" ("High John" 139). Constantly thwarting "Ole Massa" and promising ill to oppressors of African American people, John De Conquer is a "hope-bringer," a beloved figure in African American folklore who makes "a way out of no-way" for enslaved people in the antebellum South (139). And as the source of this laughter and song, he fuels the dozens we witness in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Because of the rhizomatic nature of the petro-dozens, a conversation on the fuel and history behind petromodernity turns seamlessly toward the energy of African American cultural poetics. To speak metonymically, John De Conquer and his near homonym John D. Rockefeller become an interconnected web of relation, and the latter gains no monopoly over these petro-dozens. By placing the dinosaur on the African continent, Sam and Lige formulate oil into African American epistemologies, locating the power of petromodernity within their own history and culture.

Such a subversive rhetorical move would potentially earn critique from Gilroy as Afrocentric, an example of what he calls "ethnically absolutist discourse" (1). Gilroy evaluates Afrocentricity as historically dubious, eliding the inevitable hybridization, or double consciousness, that results from being Black and American—in Gilroy's case, Black and English—to construct pure cultural identities and movements based primarily on Africa (189). "It seems," he explains, "that the complexity of slavery and its location within modernity has to be actively forgotten if a clear orientation to tradition and thus to the present circumstances of blacks is to be acquired" (189). This utilization of Africa as pure identity formation, Gilroy argues, neglects the centrality of slavery and cheap Black labor in modernity, and it fosters literary expression that brings us back to critical debates surrounding Hurston's historicity and

insularity. Gilroy's critique of Afrocentric writing sounds a lot like Carby and Wright's complaints about Hurston's representation of African American culture: "In the work of some African-American writers, they sometimes sanction a crucial and regrettable slippage from the vernacular and the popular to the provincial and the parochial. . . . [They] struggle to place their histories onto a bigger diaspora web but have no inhibitions about claiming a special status for their particular version of African culture" (191). In this vein, Gilroy might interpret Sam and Lige's analysis of the Dino as a dubious historicization that gives Africa and the life and power that emerges from it an unfounded superiority—they simply subvert white fantasy by replacing it with Black fantasy. Their association pursues racial purity, neglecting the complex hybridity integral to modernity.

The presence of John De Conquer complicates such a critique. He embodies that African-derived "salt," yet folklore emphasizes his outwitting of overseers and plantation owners. Hurston's references to Africa demonstrate, as I have mentioned throughout this chapter, a diasporic viewpoint, not an Afrocentrism that avoids slavery as a fundamentally formative part of Black history. It's possible, then, that this John De Conquer connection may fit Hurston into the category in which Gilroy places Toni Morrison, whom he sees "drawing upon and reconstructing the resources supplied to [her] by earlier generations of black writers who allowed the confluence of racism, rationality, and systematic terror to configure both their disenchantment with modernity and their aspirations for its fulfilment" (222). Where Hurston differs is that she draws on earlier *oral* generations of Black communities, which, in these critiques of modern corporate branding, also express unique yearnings for modernity's fruition in Black contexts. Furthermore, Sam and Lige's historical location of the Dino bares the extraction logic of American modernity—in a shift from biological to mineral energy, the nation that

extracted African people for their labor force now extracts cheap labor in the form of prehistoric carbon, also found overseas. David Hughes, Andrew Nikiforuk, Bob Johnson, and Jean-Francois Mouhot are a few critics who note a similar continuity of logic. “By 1940,” Nikiforuk observes, “mechanical energy had placed approximately thirty-nine energy slaves at the service of every American citizen” (69). These numbers demonstrate the impact that petromodern lifestyles have on the earth, but here Nikiforuk also suggests that petromodernity’s habits of thought structure themselves around slavery, though it enslaves minerals instead of human beings. Sam and Lige suggest such a continuity and a transcontinental web of relation on which American modernization depends when they locate the Dino in Africa, connecting the scoundrel beast to their own African figures. This continuity is not an equivalence in terms of the morals of these energy regimes—fossil fuels ultimately empowered, as Sorin’s historical work so clearly demonstrates, the political, emancipatory movements that led to increased voting and civil rights for African Americans. Sam and Lige simply demonstrate an awareness of a continued exploitative logic. If their interpretation of the Sinclair Dino places a superiority in Black, or African-derived biology (“Nature and salt”), their critiques of American consumption and foreign extraction complicate this move. This is in fact a critical historical attunement, one that views consumption in light of a long history of (human and mineral) slavery.

These witty and folklorically grounded petro-dozens in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and “Filling Station” give readers a window into the rhizomatic structure of African American poetics—how Black Southerners engage modernity with their own distinctive epistemology and history, rearticulating it strategically for their own use rather than leaving their epistemologies and histories behind to assimilate to dominant patterns of thinking, feeling, consuming. What emerges, then, is an incisive and subversive scrutiny of American oil capitalism and a mapping

of routes through the complex spaces of Southern petromodernity. Automobility and the capitalistic and biopolitical system on which it runs (and helps to run) become measured by the extent to which they facilitate, impede, and/or strengthen Black culture and community. And the medium for articulating these critiques and complex evaluations is folklore, a tradition of storytelling that long precedes emancipation.

## CHAPTER 2 – “YEARNING FOR DISTANCE”: THE SHIFTING ENERGY OF MOBILITY

### IN JONAH’S GOURD VINE

*From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make. There were sharecroppers losing at settlement. Typists wanting to work in an office. Yard boys scared that a single gesture near the planter’s wife could leave them hanging from an oak tree. They were all stuck in a caste system as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay, and they each had a decision before them.*

– Isabel Wilkerson on the Great Migration (*The Warmth of Other Suns*, 8).

The geological energy shift that spurred remarkable modernization gave rise to new forms of mobility and therefore liberation for African Americans in the segregated South. Gretchen Sorin, for instance, makes the shrewd observation of the automobile’s vitality in the bus boycott that Rosa Parks spurred in the mid-1950s. Buses, a fossil fueled form of public transportation, organized their occupants by race with African Americans near the back of the bus or having to give up seating for white passengers—railroad transit was also fitted with these kinds of constraints for Black Southerners with the Jim Crow cars being nearest the soot-spewing engine. During the Montgomery boycott, Sorin notes that segregated bussing proponents wrote bus companies letters like, “if you hold out they will all eventually come crawling back to the buses” (qtd. on 44). And they might have been right had it not been for the automobile. “Key to the success of the bus boycott,” Sorin writes, “was the purchase of a small fleet of station wagons that picked up anyone in need of a ride and drove them to their destinations. Black cab drivers picked up walkers and charged them only ten cents, the cost of a ride on the city buses” (43-44). The strategy worked and “starved the bus system of passengers and revenue until the

public officials relented and eliminated separate sections in the buses” (44). Using new forms of fossil-fueled mobility, African Americans crumbled various structures of Jim Crow.

The story of the bus boycott represents a way Black petromodernity brought about liberatory potential, and this potential seems to accompany many Black experiences of fossil fueled changes in mobility throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. There is, in other words, a history of Black utilization of modern mobilities and speeds. National train routes and the more extensive infrastructural construction of motorways literally paved the way for the Great Migration in which millions of Black Southerners migrated north and west in search of social and economic traction. I want to follow Hurston’s cue and see how the Black South experienced and utilized these shifts in migration and infrastructure by reading *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) as a work that traces a Black energy history. John Pearson begins adulthood on his feet in the solar economy of the Southern plantation, leaving sharecropping and walking across the creek where, fueled by steam and coal, the train roars through Notasulga, Alabama. Indeed, by walking around Alabama, working on the railroad, riding on trains throughout the South, and finally, driving a Cadillac at the end of his life, John Pearson bears witness to the ways the modern energy transition impacted Black Southern communities. In this sense, I read John as an incarnation of these Black Southern communities, analyzing the African American migrations *within* the South just before and during the Great Migration period. Such an analysis responds to Carby’s insinuation that those who remained in the South were somehow outside Black migratory patterns—inert and obsolete. Illuminating these coal- and oil-powered intraregional migrations—we could also call them maneuverings through the precarity of Jim Crow—affirms the modernity of “the folk,” invalidating a reading of them as outside American modernization. Many have understood the South as a region on the margins (if not outside) of modernity and, as Leigh Anne

Duck frames it, have located it in a temporality lagging behind American liberalism and modernization (*A Nation's Region*, 5-6). This chapter thus seeks to enrich our understanding of American oil culture and Black modernism by analyzing Southern African American roles in these transformations, how they facilitated fossil fuels to shape not just a region but an entire nation. To demonstrate this, my analysis of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* reads John as a witness bearer, revealing Black Southern experience of petromodernity's rise into being.

Scholarship on *Jonah's Gourd Vine* focuses on Black culture and mobility. Martyn Bone, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, gives an important historicization of the intraregional and transnational labor in Hurston's novel. He argues that John is an "economic migrant," a highly mobile Southern Black laborer: "Through Pearson's frequent changes of location and employment, Hurston constructs a detailed narrative cartography of migrant labor patterns around the rural South—patterns more localized but no less 'monumental' than those involving the more familiar Great Migration to the urban North" (760-761). Bone alerts readers to the modernity of the South through African Americans' movements within it, and we might add that this intraregional migration is dependent on national modernization—such as railroad and highway construction. My thesis enriches these kinds of migratory analyses by bringing an energy footing of that mobility out into the open, along with the transportation infrastructure that enables it. Reading the potentiality of the railroad, Patricia Yaeger compares Hurston and Faulkner's depictions of trains in the modernizing South, arguing that Faulkner's representation in *Go Down, Moses* "fan[s] Agrarian flames. . . . [The train] becomes an emblem of the disappearing 'wholeness' of a mythic southern experience" (35). Yaeger demonstrates, in other words, Faulkner's complicity in placing the South in an anachronistic temporality. Hurston's representation, by contrast, "covers [John] in splendor" (36): witnessing the power of the train

fills John's mind with emancipatory possibilities. Yaeger reminds her readers that the materials of modernity, such as the train, are experienced by all Southerners, yet the differences between Faulkner and Hurston's representations demonstrate that such experiences occur "within completely different semiotic and cultural systems" (36). What modernization means for the white South is not the same as what it means for the Black South—and this is certainly the case during the era of racial segregation. Eric Sundquist takes on the meanings of locomotion to African Americans with a striking analysis of Hurston's depictions of the rhythms and dialects of Black Southern expression—whether on the railroad crew or in the pulpit—arguing convincingly that "Pearson's straining voice [is] to be read as marked by significant African retentions" (70). Such an argument demonstrates that the transatlantic slave trade did not completely obliterate African Americans' connections to their African heritage and ancestry. Or in Sundquist's poignant words: "Hurston's adducement of the African source of John's sermonic talent . . . is a way to deepen and strengthen the legitimacy and independence of African-American language as an ancestral inheritance capable of transcending slavery and Jim Crow" (77). Jay Watson also centers his analysis of *Jonah's* on Pearson's voice, reading him as a phonographic figure. Understanding the phonograph as a distinctly modern and cutting-edge anthropological device, Watson frames *Jonah's* as "a series of acoustic movements" (99), "a world pulsing with sound [that] documents the impact of these sounds on the life and career of Pearson, a man who becomes in a most literal way the voice of his people" (101). Pearson, then, records and replays the sonic and rhythmic facets of Black Southern life. This scholarship on the modernism of Hurston's 1934 novel offers a rich starting point for engaging more deeply the Black petromodernity of the text, focusing primarily on mobility in its somatic, locomotive, and automotive forms.

The policing of Black mobility has a long history. Law scholars K. B. Turner, David Giacopassi, and Margaret Vandiver note that the slave patrols emerged even before the formation of the U.S. (183), and that Black intellectuals have long argued these connections between slave patrols and modern policing; one example is W. E. B. DuBois' 1904 work, *Some Notes on Negro Crime* (184). These patrols, sanctioned by the Black codes, undermined Black mobility even as those codes underwrote, in Sorin's words, "the process of creating the American caste system that reinforced the notion of black people as second-class citizens (even though they were in fact citizens)" (10). Hurston's writing, as located in rural regions in the South, might be critiqued as a discursive displacement (to borrow Carby's rhetoric) of the value African Americans placed on mobility. Yet the story of Pearson's engagement with the shifting energetics around him ruptures such a critique. Black Southerners voiced a desire for mobility, and Pearson demonstrates that they took hold of new forms of movement to bring such desires to fruition.

"Two good footses hung onto me": Somatic Mobility within the Solar Economy

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* begins with a storm: "God was grumbling his thunder and playing the zig-zag lightning thru his fingers" (1). This occurs on a sharecropping farm belonging to John Pearson's stepfather, Ned. With only a few mules, Ned and his sons work the land trying to eke out a living. Hurston's first scenes of the novel mark this space as by defined by an elemental and biological energy system rather than a mineral one. Namely, the energy of an oncoming storm approaches as John and his brothers work in the field. Their experiences in the rural South in the late 1800s were shared by most African Americans at the time who, prior to the Great Migration, lived largely in rural Southern settings. Historians and cultural critics have laid out

the new forms of enforced Black labor that emerged after emancipation, namely how whites manipulated the difficult economic position of freed people to keep them working the land and unable to build capital. Even Black sharecroppers who did find financial success, as David Brown and Clive Webb note, “became the focus of racial violence by resentful whites” (183). Brown and Webb go on to detail the accounting alterations, steep loan interest rates, and theft that the planter class carried out to ensure the availability of free labor on their plantations. Because of this, “millions of rural blacks remained trapped in a downward spiral of poverty and debt, victims of the tyrannical reign of King Cotton” (183). John Pearson, with no access to education and abused by the jealous and power-hungry Ned for being a “yaller rascal” (46), grows up in this plantation economic regime within which his hopes for economic and social stability are dim.

But he dreams of leaving, telling his mother early in the story that he’s going to cross the Big Creek and leave Ned’s farm: “Ah ever wanted tuh cross over,” he tells her (10). Aware of the coercive servitude of sharecropping, John seeks freedom, saying at another point, “Dis ain’t slavery time and Ah got two good footses hung onto me” (8). Even the corporeal ability to move, according to young Pearson, suggests a liberative potentiality since slavery and its thoroughgoing restrictions on Black mobility are in the past. Not unlike John Redding in Hurston’s first published short story, John Pearson longs to leave his locale, seeking something better—namely, he tells his mother, to “make money, so’s Ah kin come back and git yuh” (11). In terms of energy, he seeks to leave a somatically arduous, racialized labor regime for more modernized forms of living and moving. Indeed, Pearson “ever want[ing] tuh cross over” is a desire for movement itself—for migration as a praxis of Black freedom, a way of evading white apparatuses of power and ensuring a level of autonomy. Even before Pearson encounters the

train and automobile, he dreams of a migratory life, yearns for distance rather than regionalist strictures. Hurston thus avoids the kind of pastoral Agrarianism in which rural Southerners live so harmoniously with the land that the racially and environmentally exploitative economic system becomes blurred or erased altogether. Slavery was structured to control and facilitate Black movement for white ends, so to move around the South outside of those overt structures was certainly something yearned for by African Americans. Pearson's adverse experiences on the neoplantation of sharecropping, not his first glimpse of the train, fuel (in part at least) this desire for mobility. Certainly, the coal-fired train roaring through Notasulga, this emblem of American modernization, dramatically augments this desire, but the desire is older than the modern energy transition.

It is much older, in fact, for Hurston illuminates a Black collective desire for mobility that goes back to the African roots of Black Southerners. This occurs during the barbecue Alf Pearson throws after the last of the cotton-picking is over. "That was a night," the narrator observes, "Hogs roasting over the open pit of oak coals. Negroes from three other plantations" (28). It is a night of music and dancing that reaches back at least as far as the antebellum plantation—for as Amy tells Pheemy, "Dis is jes' lak when Ah wuz uh girl" (30). The celebration also conjures, according to the narrator, the shores of Africa. The verses they sing reflect an opaque, folkloric, communal, and spiritual quality:

Ole cow died in Tennessee  
Send her jawbone back to me  
Jawbone walk, Jawbone talk  
Jawbone eat wid uh knife and fork.  
Ain't Ah right?

CHORUS: Yeah!

Ain't I right? Yeah! (30)

The words themselves almost seem void of meaning, though they likely reflect an African-derived religiosity—Joan Dayan, for instance, notes that the materiality of Haitian vodou is characterized by an “obsession with the details and fragments” (xvii). What seems more central, however, than the words themselves are the rhythms and choreography. Human bodies become the instruments—“the drum with the man skin that is dressed with human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone and speaks to gods as a man and to men as a God” (*Jonah's* 29)—and this shift to corporeal rhythms summons African history into the present. As Sundquist writes, Hurston deployed these African “retentions as a particular weapon against the calculated destruction of [Black] culture that accompanied slavery” (68). Thus, the conjuring of Africa’s shores shifts the narrative to a story of Black subversion during the transatlantic slave trade—which evokes the enforced migration of the Middle Passage that began the ongoing Black diaspora. Cuffy, an enslaved figure bound for the U.S. plantation, is stripped naked that he “might bring nothing away, but Cuffy seized his drum and hid it in his skin under the skull bones. The shin-bones he bore openly, for he thought, ‘Who shall rob me of shin-bones when they see no drum?’ So he laughed with cunning” (29-30). Metonymic Cuffy represents the retention of African cultural expressions by those shipped to the Americas on slave ships. He demonstrates that the work of cultural erasure by the American slave trade was not entirely effective. The Black Alabamans, then, utilize Alf Pearson’s barbecue to galvanize this memory, enacting a ritual to preserve that which the slave trade sought to erase. And according to the syntactically fragmented narration that follows, it is their choreography that ushers in African culture and religiosity: “Hollow-hand clapping for the bass notes. Heel and toe stomping for the

little one. Ibo tune corrupted with Nango. Congo gods talking in Alabama” (30). What these Black folks accomplish by their movement, then, is a rich act of remembrance.

Interestingly, from African remembrance emerges an ethic of mobility, a desire to bring a mobile liberation to their difficult lives in rural Southern Alabama. The verses continue:

Wisht Ah had a needle  
Fine ez Ah could sew  
Ah’d sew mah baby to my side  
And down de road Ah’d go.

Double clapping—

Down de road baby  
Down de road baby  
It’s killing mama  
Oh, it’s killing mama.

Too hot for words. Fiery drum clapping.

The evocation of the road heats up the performance, increasing the somatic energy levels as the performers turn to themes of mobility. These lines demonstrate a keen awareness of the white apparatuses of power in the Jim Crow South, and they do so by seeking *both* familial ties and mobility. In his erudite work on slavery, *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson provides the concept of “natal alienation” as a critical insight into the logics of white power. For Patterson, the term “goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations” (7). Familial separation was both a fear shadowing Black experience in the antebellum period and a fact of enslaved African Americans’ existence. Or as Patterson articulates this, “Not only was a slave denied all

claims on, and obligations to, his parents and blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants” (5). This threat to blood ties remains present for the maternal speaker of the song, who wishes for a needle. “Ah’d sew mah baby to my side / And down de road Ah’d go” says the mother, insinuating an alternative, communal mobility ethic. Indeed, mobility brings out a tension: going “down de road” is difficult to do as a family for Black Southerners, and sometimes natal alienation is the cost of such mobility. The historical context of slavery gives poignant meaning to what Pearson’s crossing of the Big Creek means for his mother, Amy. Tellingly, the reader is guided from this image of a mother sewing her child to her side and traveling down her road to Amy, who is the first to speak after the verse, saying “Less burn dat old moon down to a nub!” (31). The last lines of the verse, “It’s killing mama / Oh, it’s killing mama,” insinuate the traumas of natal alienation—the family dispersions brought by forms of (imposed) mobility during slavery—and Amy is engaging it fully, both grieving and desiring mobility. John seems to be aware of this acute tension, and he demonstrates a familial dimension to his intentions in crossing the Big Creek when he tells his mother he hopes to make enough money to return and take her across as well. Even in his early somatic migrations, Pearson continues to value and seek the wellbeing of those he leaves behind. More importantly, this collective desire for both familial ties and mobility demonstrates the stakes of and tensions within Black mobility. Placing value on familial bonds can threaten mobility, as in the case of John Redding; but a pursuit of mobility stretches those ties spatially, thereby threatening natal connectivity. For Pearson, though, a migratory life ultimately remains a liberative practice. Even though his mobility threatens him and his family with natal alienation, he risks that in the hopes that his mobility will offer them freedom from what’s “killing mama.”

With values stemming from African ancestry and community, not American idealisms—such as the seductive, commodified, and high-velocity characteristics of modern travel—the folk community takes to the road. Thus, we might say that Black Southerners’ struggles in agricultural systems of racialized labor and their somatic, choreographic, and African expressions lay the tracks for their ethic of mobility. Pearson embodies an autonomous, bipedal mobility in the beginning of the novel that is not yet shaped and atomized by the phenomenology of personal motoring.

#### “Black-and-dirty”: Locomotive Labor and Migration in the Black South

Understanding Black values on and needs for mobility illuminates John Pearson’s locomotive experiences. That dream of going “down de road” in Amy’s song gives modernization’s forms of mobility complex meaning. Take Pearson’s witness of the train that runs through Notasulga before having to return to his stepfather Ned’s sharecropping farm on the other side of the creek. He spends much less time grieving the possibility of losing his new love, Lucy, and much more (somatic) energy grieving the loss of close proximity to the train:

Then he came upon the songbook that Lucy's terrifying brother had given him when he joined the choir. There was a crude drawing of a railroad train on it. No, he couldn't leave Notasulga where the train came puffing into the depot twice a day. No, no! He dropped everything and tore out across the fields and came out at last at the railroad cut just below the station. He sat down upon the embankment and waited. Soon in the distance he heard the whistle, “Wahoom! Wahup, wahup!” And around the bend came first the smokestack, belching smoke and flames of fire. The drivers turning over chanting

“Opelika-black-and-dirty! Opelika-black-and-dirty.” Then as she pulled into the station, the powerful whisper of steam. Starting off again, “Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Opelika-black-and-dirty, Opelika-black-and-dirty! Auh—wah-hooooon”—into the great away that gave John’s feet such a yearning for distance. (41)

This poetically charged excerpt offers insights into what beholding the train means to John. He works on Alf Pearson’s plantation, not the train, yet John values working near the railway. In this way, John is on the margins of locomotive modernity—standing from a distance, watching and listening. From that margin the train holds powerful meaning, stirring in his feet that “yearning for distance”—a desire for fuller participation. In other locomotive encounters, John is able to interact with the train in various ways: he spectates and rides on trains, works on the railroad, and utilizes the train as a metaphorical vehicle for preaching the gospel. Considering Pearson as a witness to the railroad’s promise of Black modernity, then, enriches our understanding of Black modernism and of the ways fossil fuels transformed the nation. Fossil fuels didn’t just modernize the nation but were utilized by African Americans intent on making a life for themselves in the precarious plantation structures around them

Pearson loves the train yet for much of the story he relies on his own body to move around. He “tore out across the fields” on his feet to listen to the train one last time before returning to the other side of the Big Creek. Still, his somatic motility demonstrates a Black modernity. Here, Pearson’s modernity is characterized by a lack of access to modes of transportation themselves, yet he and his Black counterparts occupy pivotal roles in the apparatus of railroad transportation since Southern agricultural economics (in which many African Americans worked with their hands and on their feet) and railroad transportation were mutually dependent. Pearson’s race to the train track to see the locomotive one last time suggests an

awareness and appreciation of his own role within the modernizing nation and that that proximity to modern forms had transformative potential.

In this context, the train's words, "Opelika-black-and-dirty," have immediate meanings. Pearson is likely witnessing the Western Railway of Alabama which runs from Selma through Notasulga toward Atlanta ("Geographically"). Opelika is a town just east of Notasulga and probably the next stop for the train if it's headed east. "Black-and-dirty" alludes to the coal shoveled into the panting steam engine, as well as the Black (and soot-covered) bodies shoveling the coal. This awareness of the engine's inner workings and the locales along the train route suggests an understanding of Black labor's role in modernization—the recognition that the train system disseminated the goods made possible by cheap Black labor all over the nation.

Witnessing the train means witnessing modernization's reliance not just on Black labor but on Black *immobilization*—the retention of a cheap regional labor force—which demonstrates a social and racial disparity in modernity's most visible forms. By perpetuating cheap Black labor and limited Black mobility, the South modernizes. Yet the paradox is that train perpetuates this phenomenon of plantation labor exploitation while also filling John with hope, a "yearning for distance." As Patricia Yaeger writes, "The train becomes . . . a great cipher in his efforts to construct the edifice of black patriarchy in a world where all the power seems sewn up by whites" (36). In this racialized locomotive system, John sees possibility for socioeconomic ascendancy. The locomotive at once mechanizes Black liberation and Black oppression.

Pearson's grief at leaving Notasulga and taking that regressive trip back across the creek demonstrates this liberatory aspect of the train as well. In Notasulga he has hope that he can access the power and mobility of the locomotive. This might hint at why John's sorrow at losing this locomotive icon of petromodernity is more acute than at potentially losing Lucy: returning

across the creek hampers his own modernization—it pushes him further out along the margins of petromodernity and deeper into the old somatic regime of the plantation. To modernize for Pearson is to harness what to him is “the greatest accumulation of power he had ever seen” (*Jonah’s* 105) and to escape the constriction of sharecropping. Thus, Black petromodernity entails a struggle against old socioeconomic structures for a fuller, more volitional, and more recognizable participation in modern life.

This fuller experience is partially actualized when Pearson becomes a locomotive passenger, experiencing the “fiery-lunged monster” from within—and he is so enthralled with that experience that he seems not to mind the segregation he is undoubtedly undergoing. “To him,” the novel reads, “nothing in the world ever quite equalled that first ride on a train” (104). Admittedly, the car in which he rides may be a partitioned rather than a “colored”-only car; coaches designated solely for Black passengers were usually not as well-kept and ornate as the one Pearson rides in, with its “red plush splendor [and] gaudy ceiling hung with glinting lamps” (104). Other evidence, though, suggests that John’s car is near the engine: he “got off the train at every stop so that he could stand off a piece and feast his eyes on the engine” (104). Jim Crow cars, as Sorin notes, were “directly behind the engine, and soot poured into the passenger compartment” (28). It seems unlikely that a car decorated with “red plush splendor” and “glinting lamps” would be vulnerable to the soot of the engine, yet it is most likely, given the segregation practices of most Southern railroads, that John is seated not far from the engine. And since he loves the sonic and rhythmic, this proximity to the engine likely accentuates rather than frustrates his experience, soot risk notwithstanding. A Jim Crow car, then, may ironically give Pearson more pleasure in his locomotive experience than a whites-only car would have.

My point here is not that Pearson somehow finds segregation beneficial but rather that he demonstrates African American hopes in the “accumulation of power” that coal fosters. To him, the train is “a glorified thing” that increases the potentiality of Black mobility and expression, transcending the somatic modes of movement and labor that he has experienced up to this point. The power and liberation that he feels in the Jim Crow car and beholds at every stop is so great that even the terror and humiliation of segregation are mitigated, perhaps even mooted. Sorin writes of the automobile that it “expanded the freedom of movement and the opportunity to travel throughout the country for all Americans, but this freedom meant something different—and often, simply more—to blacks than to whites” (xi). A similar claim could be made for the train, which, well before the era of automobility, also expanded this freedom of movement and opportunity for African Americans like Pearson. The train, then, represents a fossil-fueled step toward increasingly effective forms of modern mobility that were utilized by millions of freedom-seeking African Americans. Fossil fuels transformed the nation, and trains were integral to that modernization. But Black communities utilized this modernization in their own ways and to even greater degrees, enacting their own national transformation through their fossil-fueled diaspora and along the way changing the political landscape of the states. Through his ride on the train, Pearson bears witness to the broader racial meanings and potentialities that undergird his exuberance.

Tellingly, he becomes a passenger out of an effort to escape arrest. Lucy’s brother, Bud, steals the Pearsons’ wedding bed as payment for a debt while John is away from home and while Lucy is recovering from giving birth. Incensed, John chases him down, beats him nearly to death, and finds himself facing imprisonment and the inevitable chain gang. In his account of the racialized section work in the South, Eric Arnesen writes that one strategy “seized upon by

Georgia railroad contractors and quickly emulated in other states of the former Confederacy was the convict lease” (10). John must find a way to evade the carceral, arrested mobility on which much of Southern locomotion depended, so he takes a train to Sanford, Florida. John’s hopes in the train “panting” through Notasulga toward Opelika come to fruition here by offering him a way to maneuver within the South, evading white structures of power. Gretchen Sorin reminds her readers that “many [African American] migrants had to sneak out of town to escape, as southern whites tried to prevent their labor force from leaving” (11). While Alf Pearson, the owner of the plantation where John Pearson works, helps John leave, the police and the chain gang illustrate the modes of mobility prevention that Sorin discusses. He still ends up working on the railroad, but as a paid laborer, not a chained convict.

John’s railroad labor, in which he endures the “strain, sweat and rhythm” of section work (*Jonah’s* 105), illuminates an additional Black role within the network of American locomotion, as well as a new site of Black expression. Understanding these aspects, however, requires some historical context. Railroad labor facilitated the movement of steam-powered engines running on coal, making railroad laborers part of a larger labor force involved in the mining, transportation, and use of coal. The amount and specific character of human labor required in this energy transition to coal was significant, and Timothy Mitchell writes that it transformed the labor politics of the U.S.:

Great volumes of energy now flowed along narrow, purpose-built channels. Specialised bodies of workers were concentrated at the end-points and main junctions of these conduits, operating the cutting equipment, lifting machinery, switches, locomotives and other devices that allowed stores of energy to move along them. Their position and

concentration gave them opportunities, at certain moments, to forge a new kind of political power. (19)

This newfound political muscle challenged the powerful corporations dependent on this large workforce. Labor strikes were an especially effective tool, according to Mitchell, “because of the flows of carbon that connected chambers beneath the ground to every factory, office, home or means of transportation that depended on steam or electric power” (21). The carbon dependencies of the modernizing nation thus gave coal workers remarkable sway in labor policy. Railroad workers were part of this body of coal labor not only because late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century locomotives ran on coal but because the system of railways sprawling across the U.S. was critical for transporting coal and making it accessible for industries, homeowners, and so on. Along with coal miners, railroad workers also sought fairer compensation and more accommodating labor policy. John Pearson works on the railroad as these political and economic changes are emerging—and Hurston did much of her anthropological work and the writing of this novel as these labor movements marshalled significant political power.

The Jim Crow South—and certainly *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*—complicates Mitchell’s observations, however, for according to Eric Arnesen, Black railroad workers in the main did not enjoy the political traction that coal workers gained. Instead, racial segregation “shift[ed] the balance of power toward employers and white labor” (83). Arnesen’s account suggests that, if Southern corporations and unions were antagonistic toward one another, one thing they could agree upon was the necessity of keeping Black labor cheap—that there was no place for African Americans in good-paying jobs. Through John Pearson, Hurston writes of Black labor experience that anticipates this history of increasingly powerful unions that both combatted

corporate labor exploitation while—paradoxically—undermining laborers of color. He earns a dollar a day (*Jonah's* 105), and if we account for inflation, that is equivalent to approximately \$27—or \$135 a week—in today's U.S. dollar. Even allowing for the low cost of early-twentieth-century living, Pearson's wage reflects the racial disparity of Southern development. The pay was still better than sharecropping, however; as Arnesen writes, "Black men seeking to supplement their families' income might take seasonal leave of the plantation in search of more remunerative employment" (10). Even in this context of racial exploitation, the fact remained that the wages of railroad labor were more attractive than sharecropping for most Black men.

For this reason, John's move from agricultural work to the railroad is indicative of Southern modernization. Hurston is not writing of a Black rurality that remains lodged in a vague, nostalgic past but of a South that is developing through an energy shift toward coal, fundamental to which was the growing railroad system being built by Black workers. The modernizing South she presents centers Black experience, illuminating the region's dependence upon Black workers to facilitate its use of coal. Thus, Black railroad workers were indeed "forg[ing] a new kind of political power" (Mitchell 19), yet that did not necessarily materialize in labor rights. Instead, they laid the tracks for the coal-powered migration helpful in navigating and escaping Southern racial terror—the kind of migration John Pearson depends on to avoid incarceration and the convict lease. If Black migration is a central facet to Black modernism, a modernism responding to the increasing and extensive policing and control of African Americans, then John Pearson's locomotive experience reflects this.

Railroad labor fostered an additional aspect of Black modernism in the south: folk expression. Indeed, much of the novel's attentions to Black expression emerge within these spaces of modernization. The railroad becomes a site where African American oral and musical

traditions—ones that emerged before emancipation—mimic and engage the fossil-fueled transformations of the nation. The aspect of mimicry is something Hurston describes in “Characteristics of Negro Expression”: “The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. . . . He does it as a mocking-bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated” (944, 945). Sundquist, Yaeger, and Watson develop Hurston’s point by paying close attention to the complex interconnections between sounds, music, cultural history, and mobility in Pearson’s railroad labor. These readings are interested in the work songs specifically. The rhythmic chanting of Alabama timber work—“‘Hanh!’ Up again, ‘Cuttin’ ties! Hanh!’” (60)—in John’s early adulthood anticipates the more complex and improvisational chanting and songs of the section work that earns him a dollar a day in Florida—“When Ah get in Illinois / Ahm gointer spread de news about de Floriduh boys / Sho-ove it over / Hey, hey, can’t you live it?” (106). Hurston collected this latter song during her anthropological work in 1933, using her novel to publish the folk tune.<sup>1</sup> Sundquist reads these work songs as a tradition “carried from the middle passage through slavery and beyond” (76). Like the songs at the barbecue on Alf Pearson’s plantation, these work songs are acts of remembrance, and their deeply cultural meaning is perhaps part of what draws John to the railroad work. In a similar vein, Watson notes that Pearson might enjoy working on the railroad because of his attraction to the train that drives through Notasulga: “Long before he labors directly in its service, after all, John has experienced the ‘fiery-lunged monster’ . . . as a living, laboring, ‘panting’ . . . creature whose ‘very sides seemed to expand and contract’ with the effort of breathing” (110). The rhythms of railroad work emulate not only the African retentions that Sundquist points out but the pulsing machinery of

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<sup>1</sup> She also put the song in another skit (“Railroad Camp”) in *Cold Keener*, the same revue from which “Filling Station” comes.

the locomotive itself. This aspect finds its ultimate articulation in John's final sermon, where he envisions God "grab[bing] de throttle / Of de well ordered train of mercy" and describes the Crucifixion as the derailing of "de damnation train," which "threw her cow-catcher in [Jesus'] side" (180, 181). John's sermon language utilizes the railroad labor as well. As a section worker, John "liked to swing the big snub-nosed hammer above his head and drive the spike home at a blow" (*Jonah's* 107). And in his sermon, the "snub-nosed hammer" reemerges: "When God / Stood out on the apex of His power / Before the hammers of creation / Fell upon the anvils of Time and hammered out the ribs of the earth" (175). Pearson thus takes on an explicitly locomotive embodiment and expressivity, enjoying the power he wields in his machine-like labor as well as the poetic and cultural possibilities the train and section work offer.

Yaeger, attuned to the musicality of Black railroad labor, also observes that section work makes for a succinct image of Black Southern economic history; so while she joins Sundquist and Watson in noting the rhythms and sounds of these scenes, she also points out what else results from John's labors. "Working on the railroad line," she writes, "John Pearson is able to send money home, and this money creates the conditions for another set of migrations" (48). Yaeger thus adds another layer to the railroad's formative effects on Southern Black culture, and that is migration. If Southern African Americans are intent on taking to the road (such as the mother who wishes to sew her baby to her side), then the superior wages of railroad labor allow for just such movement, whether within or without the South. Bone, in his "narrative cartography of migrant labor" (761), makes the strong case that Pearson's movements within the South demonstrate that the "mass movement to Northern cities was hardly the whole story of rural black Southern migration during the 1920s and 1930s" (765). In other words, many Southern Black workers moved away from agricultural forms of labor instead of simply moving North.

Part of the Great Migration is this underrecognized intraregional and economic migrancy in which Pearson participates, and his movement is thus indicative of modern experience for African Americans.

To these readings I would add that African Americans like John Pearson embraced the carbon energy transition to the degree that it offered an escape from plantation labor, a way to get out from under coercive white power structures. Mobility was a subversive praxis for African Americans in the racially segregated South. Thus, to work on the railroad is not only to remember African rhythms and sounds and to participate in modernization both as an embodiment of its machinery and as a laboring mechanism within its development, but also, through Black section labor, to undermine white supremacy by creating more modes of maneuvering within—or of outright escape from—Jim Crow. Black locomotive modernism, its labor and attendant expressivity, thus represent an experience central to the development of American modernity.

#### “Ho-o-ome”: Petroleum-Fueled Automobiles and Black Southern Selfhood

To set the stage for the automotive modernism in her text, Hurston begins with one of the most landmark events in American history: the Great Migration, in which an unprecedented number of Black Southerners—according to historian, James N. Gregory, that number is around eight million—turned North to escape the segregation and violence of the South and to find greater opportunities for themselves and their children. This Black migration was both a product and a galvanizing force of American modernization due to the Great War. Hurston makes clear such a connection, showing how the Great War and its coinciding economic surge in consumption and

production facilitated Black migration. Consistent with Hurston's historicization, Steven Hahn writes that "the Great Migration is commonly understood as the product . . . of the First World War. The war created, simultaneously, a massive industrial labor shortage in the Northeast and Midwest owing to conscription and the interruption of European immigration, and a massive demand for industrial production owing to militarization" (466). Gregory also articulates this historical context (24), as well as Isabel Wilkerson, who, in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, marks the beginning of the Great Migration at 1915 (8). These timelines, however, are complicated by the earlier sections of Hurston's novel, which reveal Black desires and forms of mobility that began long before the Great War.

Hurston narrativizes this event in such a way that reveals her opinions of its monumentality. For one, she does this through changes in narration. Hurston's insightful historicization varies in voice, with speakers "erupt[ing] into the narrative, anonymous and irrepressible," as Watson describes them (106), but also with fragmented syntactic forms similar to another important moment in the text. Fragmented phrasing about the war's role in migration—such as "Armistice. Demobilized. Home in khaki" (148), and "World gone money mad. The pinch of war gone, people must spend. Buy and forget. Spend and solace. Silks for sorrows" (149)—echo the Alf Pearson barbeque where African shores enter through Black music and choreography—"Furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa, but whose soul sung around a fire in Alabama. Flourish. Break. . . . Hollow-hand clapping for the bass notes. Heel and toe stomping for the little one. . . . Too hot for words. Fiery drum clapping" (30, 31). In and around this change in syntax are voices of unnamed, synecdochal characters. One voice says, having returned from the war: "Yeah man, parlez vous, man, don't come bookooiin' 'round heah, yuh liable tuh git hurt" (148). Another represents Northern industrial work

recruiters: “George, haven’t you got some relatives and friends sown South who’d like a job?” (149). This kind of vocal variation and fragmented narration not only condense a complex history into a succinct retelling, they evidence important cultural moments in the text. At Alf Pearson’s barbeque, Africa, that faraway ancestral land across the abyss of the ocean, is conjured; with the Great War, modernity, through militarization’s facilitation of petromodern machines and production, is procured.

Hurston also illuminates the importance of the Great War and the ensuing set of migrations by gesturing toward the Black meanings of this event. She begins her description of this history with war’s mobilization of human bodies: “A fresh rumor spread over the nation. It said war. It talked of blood and glory—of travel, of North, of Oceans and transports, of white men and black. And black men’s feet learned roads” (147). Hurston’s succinct sequence, “of travel, of North, of Oceans and transports,” suggests a Black discourse of the transatlantic slave trade and African American pursuits of freedom (to the North). “Transports” and “Oceans” denote the hauling of cargo across the sea, invoking the history of the Middle Passage, while “travel” and “North” have more liberatory, forward-looking meanings. Through the war and its oil-fueled movements, Black communities “learned roads,” expanding north- and westward migration into a mass movement. Black Southerners placed high hopes in war as an opportunity for extending their freedoms and rights. As Eric Foner notes in *Forever Free*, his history of emancipation and reconstruction, African Americans believed their participation in the war would expedite their freedom and liberty: “More than any other single development, military service . . . placed the question of black citizenship on the national agenda. As an inevitable consequence of enrolling black men in the Union army, one U.S. senator observed in 1864, ‘the black man is henceforth to assume a new status among us’” (53). This hope continued into the

World Wars, when African American leaders encouraged Black enlistment as a way of fulfilling the nation's empty promises of freedom (Foner 227-228). Hurston also articulates this by utilizing imagery from the Old Testament Exodus of Israel: the cry "Goin' Nawth" "hung over the land like the wail over Egypt at the death of the first-born" (151). The Great Migration thus becomes the modern rearticulation of the plagues that forced Pharaoh's hand in freeing Moses' people. In Hurston's telling, war opened up liberatory possibilities by facilitating petromodern travel which troubled oppressive Southern structures.

Hurston likens the Black exodus out of the South to the Old Testament plagues: "Whereas in Egypt the coming of the locust made desolation, in the farming South the departure of the Negro laid waste the agricultural industry—crops rotted, houses careened crazily in their utter destruction, and grass grew up in streets" (151). The South, with its agricultural need for muscled hands as well, tried with limited success to combat the diminishing numbers of Black Southern laborers by policing carbon-fueled mobilities (i.e., trains). Hurston notes this as well, giving the migration an energy footing in her account, a larger carbon-dependent network of communication and travel: "The railroad stations might be watched but there could be no effective censorship over the mails. No one could keep track of the movements of cars and wagons and mules and men walking. Railroads, hardroads, dirt roads, side roads, roads were in the minds of the black South and all roads led North" (151). Petromodernity established new forms of mobility on top of older somatic ones—mobility through not just feet, wagons, and mules but now trains and automobiles as well—and this wider array of options made constraining and controlling Black mobility much more difficult.

The car, then, adds a new option for escaping the Jim Crow South, but in this account of the Great Migration it leaves an absence in the South rather than demonstrating a persisting

presence. In Hurston's, Hahn's, and Wilkerson's histories, headlights point North. But what kind of modernity do these Black emigrants leave behind—and what kind of modernity does their leaving generate? Wilkerson gestures toward this, observing that the Great Migration “would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system” (9). Hurston's novel, as well as her other writing, answers this question by suggesting that it does not leave behind a space void of Black mobility, fossil-fueled or otherwise. Hurston, as I argued in the previous chapter, narrativizes a Black automobility characterized by poverty and communal ties in “Filling Station” and *Their Eyes*. Such a narrativization suggests an optimism about what automobility might achieve for Black communities. Yet in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* she critiques an automobility characterized by wealth, status, individualism and pleasure—dominant notions and values of American automobility. Her narrative punctures these idealisms, demystifying the way the car fractures and disrupts relationships by inflating the self.

When John's wife, Sally, buys him not a rusty Ford or Chevrolet but a Cadillac, the purchase comes with significant implications. Cadillacs were large, luxury vehicles, which made Black Cadillac ownership subversive. As Seiler writes, “The car, as both commodity and symbol, affected the American economy, landscape, and social structure more than any other consumer product; and a given group's level of automobile use and ownership could be taken as an index of its participation in the ‘American way of life’” (113). Thus, to buy a Cadillac subverted dominant racial beliefs. In this vein, Sorin writes that “Black people driving cars contradicted popular notions of white supremacy” (67), and because of this, white Southerners felt threatened and would respond in violence. African American motorists, particularly those who drove luxury models, “driving through the wrong white neighborhood . . . might even be dragged from the car into the street” (67). Black Southerners purchasing Cadillacs, then, acted in

resistance against the racist economics of the Jim Crow South. Additionally, racist stereotypes and pseudoscience of African Americans as “the inferior race” undergirded white violence against Black car use and ownership. These dynamics underlie *Ebony* editor John H. Johnson’s thoughts on Black-owned Cadillacs: “The fact is, that basically a Cadillac is an instrument of aggression, a solid and substantial symbol for many a Negro that he is as good as any white man” (qtd. in Sorin 69). White supremacist hierarchies in the segregated South placed African Americans in subservient roles, and buying a Cadillac directly upset these social orders.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* demonstrates the socioeconomic dynamics of driving a Cadillac while Black, focusing on the responses by Southern Black communities. When John Pearson drives into his former town of Sanford, Florida, where he was a preacher, he is at once resented and revered due to his (wife’s) Cadillac: “He was affectionately called every vile name in the language and fed on cow peas” (194). Taking on the meanings of the Cadillac, John flouts his wealth to his former acquaintances, particularly to John Hall, the trustee of his former church. Years earlier, Hall had owed John four dollars after the latter lost his pastoral reputation and financial means. With his Cadillac sitting outside the church, John tells Hall that he has thirty rental properties and shows him “the huge roll of bills in his pocket” from collecting rent that month (194). Awed, Hall promptly pays John the four dollars back, and John, still resentful, seems to bask in this elevated status that his wealth has generated. This status gets him further attention from Sanford’s young women. From the earliest part of his stay, “girls in their late teens . . . admired [the Cadillac] loudly and crudely hinted for rides” (194). The most persistent of these young women is Ora Patton, who manipulates John into giving her rides in the car. Ora plays on the innuendo of her requests, exploiting an aspect of the Cadillac that gives John

another sense of prestige and pleasure: sexual power. The Cadillac provides John with social and masculine potency.

As intent as he is on staying faithful to Sally, John remains in Sanford much longer than he had intended, giving no overt reason for doing so. Originally planning to leave Tuesday, his departure stretches into the weekend (197). Sally had urged John to visit Sanford by himself, saying, “Ah don’t trust ridin’ so fur in dese cars, nohow” (193). She alludes to the social stature such a trip would offer, encouraging him to go not just to visit his friend Hambo but to “let dem n\_\_\_\_s see how well you gittin’ uhlong” (193). John opposes the idea of going alone, but Sally, reveling in this, insists. For her, John’s resistance to making the trip alone demonstrates his love for her, makes her feel wanted and powerful: “It was worth her own suffering ten times over to see him that way for her” (194). Yet what Sally may fail to realize is that the Cadillac’s symbolisms shape John into an object for consumption. In *Consuming Power*, David Nye defines the car as “a transient personal possession that seldom lasted more than a decade and could not be handed down through the generations. To the extent that the buyer invested personal meaning in a car, its obsolescence underlined how unstable the sense of identity can be when underwritten by consumption” (182). Nye’s note on the car’s transience insinuates the car’s problematics as it encounters the relational networks of Black communities. And John’s luxury automobile certainly gets “underwritten by consumption” as soon as he arrives in Sanford. Everyone, it seems, wants a piece of him: Hall wants him to preach again and revive the dwindling numbers of the Sanford congregation, which would bring a larger flow of money to the church and to Hall, and Ora wants “uh ride” as a means to John’s money. Indeed, Paul Gilroy reflects on Nye’s erudite observations in his own work on automobility, showing how this aspect of car culture

becomes a problem in African American liberation movements and identity formation. His argument is worth quoting at length:

[Black activists have been] drawn to the allure of speed, autonomy and privatized transport quite apart from their attraction to the automobile as a provocative emblem of wealth and status. Their enthusiasm for the car and the subsequent inability to see beyond its windscreen reveal how those movements and their conceptions of freedom have been transformed, compromised, distracted and diverted. From this perspective, freedom often entails little more than winning a long-denied opportunity to shop on the same terms as other, more privileged citizens further up the wobbly ladder of racial hierarchy. In other words, it would appear that a significant measure of respect and recognition capable of mediating or reversing the effects of subordination can now be simply bought or at least simulated. The desired social effects are to be conferred on purchasers by objects that they own, use or display. In their own eyes and perhaps also in the eyes of others, these subjected people become different at this point of branded visibility. (87)

I argued earlier that John Pearson desires the power and dynamism of the train puffing through Notasulga, that harnessing and experiencing such power centralizes his role in modernity and gives him more power over himself. The car offers a kind of shortcut, a way literally to buy into such a dream of harnessing petromodern power. In “Filling Station,” Hurston names the characters by their consumption choices; in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, John experiences a similar reduction of his self through his Cadillac—he is not named after his Cadillac but certainly viewed through and defined by the luxury car’s meanings. The car diverts Pearson’s original dreams of embodying locomotive power toward a machine that extracts and externalizes that power. Think also of John’s first time leaving the somatic plantation regime when he tells his

mother, “Ah wants tuh make money, so’s Ah kin come back and git yuh” (11). The car also distracts John from this familial commitment that undergirds his mobility. It renders his body inert within the machine and thrusts its own meanings on John’s selfhood. Not only does John’s self become reduced into the meanings of the car, he loses jurisdiction over his self. Neither somatic nor locomotive forms of mobility commit this kind of disempowerment.

Such a subject position gives John a false sense of importance and places his relational commitments in jeopardy. Hurston, in other words, critiques the conflation of the self with the automobile by showing how quickly John violates his commitments and community as a direct result of driving a luxury vehicle. Hambo, the relational tie who was the primary reason for John’s visit, fades into the background of the visit which is dominated by John’s struggles to evade the events brought on by the car—namely, Ora’s attempts at winning him over. This effect reflects Gilroy’s critique of a Black automobility that causes a class divide which alienates the wealthier members of Black communities from the poorer: “Car culture may be pivotal in foreclosing the possibility of any substantive connections between [the more privileged] and other less fortunate groups, both inside their own society and among the ‘third world’ folk who live within the veil of scarcity” (90). The Cadillac and its attendant meanings and set of experiences distracts John from maintaining “substantive connections” with his former community in which he was a pastor and leader. He instead gives in to the car’s seduction, allowing Ora to overcome his good intentions of returning to Sally and the keeping of his vows. Through John’s failures, Hurston bares the dangers of automotive pleasure for Black communities by critiquing the “auto” of automobility. The Cadillac possesses power over John, pinioning him into a kind of selfhood that disempowers and alienates him from himself and those around him. As Deborah Clarke writes of John and the Cadillac he drives, “The car may convey

status, but it does not appear to enhance power or agency. It simply makes being a man even more difficult by delivering him into situations of temptation” (68). This difficulty is brought on by the inflation of the self that the Cadillac fosters. Hurston’s automotive narrative in this novel is quite different from the Black Southern automobility elsewhere in her fiction, and it exposes the problems of car culture—the ways it fosters greed, hierarchies, and power dynamics that are detrimental to cultural bonds and commitments.

Indeed, Hurston isn’t finished critiquing the Cadillac when John fails once again to keep his marriage vows. Hurston rather concludes her foray into luxury car culture by killing off the automobile and the Black driver inside—certainly the most jarring moment of the text. John hurries home with the repercussions of his actions weighing heavily upon him: “The ground-mist lifted on a Florida sunrise as John fled homeward. The car droned, ‘ho-o-ome’ and tortured the man. False pretender! Outside show to the world! Soon he would be in the shelter of Sally’s presence. Faith and no questions asked” (200). In this melancholic state over his automotive experience, John fails to see a train approaching a railroad crossing: “The engine struck the car squarely and hurled it about like a toy. John was thrown out and lay perfectly still. Only his foot twitched a little” (200). There are multiple angles through which to interpret Hurston’s abrupt ending. If we read it as a critique of the luxury car, then Hurston doubles down on a biting critique of the Cadillac by offing it, insisting that it has no value for John nor his African American community. Hurston offers, in John’s automotive experience, a critique that largely anticipates Gilroy’s critique of car consumption as failing to offer substantive liberation.

We might also consider the wreck in terms of the car’s relationship to John’s self. Here, the droning of “ho-o-ome” by the car tortures John by exposing just how exiled he has become in his travels. He wants back into the secure space of Sally’s presence, “[f]aith and no questions

asked.” John’s self, however, is slippery. Perhaps the kind of selfhood that the Cadillac offers John, then, is seductive in its very materiality: here is a self that is forged steel and petroleum-powered, a material selfhood that he can really hold onto and wield after all those years of trying to grasp and gain ahold of his elusive self. But as his caving to Ora suggests, this automobile operates John rather than vice versa. Being on the move away from Sally in a Cadillac un-homes John and magnifies the elusiveness of his self—both the finding of and the control over it. As Bob Johnson writes, “modern automobility . . . keeps the natural world at bay, . . . [and] that insularity produces something like a “derealization” of the self, a self that sits “abstracted” from its body and the world it encounters diminishing the embodied knowledge we have of the world” (89). The car’s act of “derealization” deeply troubles John, abstracting him from his relational ties, cultural commitments, and, finally, from the reality of a train fast approaching the crossing ahead of him. John Pearson’s life as a cautionary tale, affirming that trope in Hurston’s fiction: the valuing of Black community in a modernizing and highly mobile world alienating humans from each other and the earth. Through his fraught experiences, John invites an alternative modernism that witnesses, seeks out, and engages petromodernity but also avoids and seeks escape from those materialities and experiences that disrupt cultural values already made tenuous by Jim Crow.

Yet the novel’s attention to locomotive modernism begs for a deeper analysis of this ending on the level of petromodern mobility. For one, the collision affirms John’s position as a witness to the rise of fossil fuels as the primary labor force of modernization—is it not disturbingly fitting that the witness bearer of this phenomenon dies in such a way? The implications on the level of petromodernity should not end with consideration for John, however, but should extend to locomotion and automobility as well. What does it mean for these forces (or

modernisms) to collide, and what does it mean for John to get caught in the middle of that collision? These are difficult questions to answer conclusively, but we might start by looking at what each of these modernisms looks like in the novel. With locomotive modernism, John Pearson sees dynamic potentiality not just in terms of the mobility that the train offers but in the ways he can embody and translate the machine through section work and locomotive imagery in his sermons. With the car, however, automobility and its powerful prefix fail to bring the kind of cultural hope and togetherness that the train offered. It instead creates a culture of consumption which shuffles those cultural practices—to which locomotive modernity was hospitable—to the background, bringing the car itself to the forefront. Locomotion invited mimicry and enabled African American mobility within the segregated South while the automobile monopolizes the cultural meanings in which it travels. This kind of distinction is similar to that of Timothy Mitchell, who, as I cited earlier, noted coal culture’s empowerment of the working class, the larger collective group; Mitchell also observes, however, that “oil, with its different locations, properties and modes of control, [weakened] the forms of democratic agency that a dependence on coal had enabled” (143). Perhaps this is why the train and the automobile collide rather than coincide: coal invites while oil suppresses collective enfranchisement and expression. These machines carry conflicting different sets of values and modes of being, and through the wreckage at the end of her novel, Hurston reveals such an antagonistic relationship.

This reading of the car is certainly complicated by Sorin’s history of Black automobility, which she rightly understands as fundamental to the Great Migration. Cars do not just disrupt Black culture and community: they offer ways of maneuvering and escaping segregation. Yet as my previous chapter argued, Hurston narrativizes just such a complicated history, revealing ways that the car can enrich African American life. Hurston’s cynical take on automobility in *Jonah’s*

*Gourd Vine*, rather than critiquing Black automobility as a whole, disparages the broader culture of consumption that her narrativizations of cars and oil continually reveal, whether through naming the characters by their consumption choices, dissecting paleontological marketing images, or exposing the repercussions of mainstream car culture on the self and the collective. John Pearson, in life and death, bears witness to these complexities and enrichments, and he adds another important facet to Hurston's broader understandings of petromodernity across her oeuvre.

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