

2018 MSSU Research Symposium

Final Abstract

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Just Playin': Collective Oral Communication in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston concludes her essay, "Folklore and Music," by analyzing black laughter:

"The Negro is determined to laugh even if he has to laugh at his own expense. By the same token, he spares nobody else. His world is dissolved with laughter." For Hurston, the sound of black laughter is particularly unafraid: unafraid of self-degradation, of offending others, and of jerking at the stitches that bind reality together. Hurston demonstrates her laughter-theory with a poker match, in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By teasing and showboating, Hurston's characters use humor to find truth, to express truth, and to manipulate the truthful probabilities of their game. I will argue—through a close reading of a single paragraph—that Hurston's black laughter sounds musical, beautiful, and unafraid. But it is also sinister; beneath the poker players' rhyme, rhythm, and rhetorical craft lies an undeniable insecurity—a fearful intra-racial echo of the racism they have endured.