Mule Bone Kills De Turkey: Hurston and Hughes’s Artistic Contention on Black Folk Comedy

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I. Introduction

*Mule Bone*, written jointly by Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes largely between late March and June of 1930, has been credited as the ‘first’ attempt by African Americans to create a genre called black folk comedy. Such significance accredited to the play, on the other hand, arouses a suspicious curiosity for a couple of reasons. Firstly, *Mule Bone* was not, in a strict sense, a complete realization of the mentioned first attempt. The first black folk comedy project originally grew out of Hurston’s idea, and Hughes participated in the project as a collaborator by accepting her proposal for collaborationship. The collaboration project was discontinued in the mid-course due to the artistic dispute between the two writers and, subsequently, what we have regarded as the first attempt of American black folk comedy came to remain uncomplet-ed, which is the real status of *Mule Bone*. Secondly, the title ‘Mule Bone’ itself has nothing to do with Hurston’s original plan for the project. Faced with the discontinuation of the collaboration project, Hughes collected what had been done by the time and filed it for copyright at the Congress Library. In the course Hughes entitled the unfinished edition ‘Mule Bone.’ Meanwhile Hurston also prepared her own edition of the collaboration project and filed it for copyright under the title of ‘De Turkey and De Law.’ In short, what is known as the first American black folk comedy actually existed as the two different editions with different names. Furthermore, two different destinies were waiting for each edition: Hughes’s would be widely read, publicly performed and canonized as the first American black folk comedy while Hurston’s and its title would fall into obscurity for almost seventy years until discovered in the storage room of the Congress Library in 1997.

The complex behind story related to the birth of the first American black folk comedy raises several questions as following: why have the
two editions had to be doomed to different destinies?; what is the truth of the artistic dispute, the primary cause for the discontinuation of the collaboration project and the subsequent birth of the two editions with different destinies?; how do the two editions differ? In answering the questions, this paper attempts to reach the true nature of artistry Hurston tried to realize through the first black folk comedy project.

II. ‘Mule Bone’ Controversy

It was 1925 that Hurston came to know Hughes for the first time. From then on, their relationship as colleagues rapidly developed. Toward the end of the summer this year, they decided to found “a Negro quarterly of the arts” called *Fire!!*, along with other young African American artists (Hughes 235). In the culmination of their artistic comradeship, Hurston, in a letter to Hughes postmarked on April 12, 1928, disclosed her secret plan for an authentic African American theatre or what she called “the new and the real Negro theatre” that would be built on “folk tales with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive ’bama Nigger” (Hemenway 115) and, therefore, would be “a really new departure in the [African American] drama” (Gates “Tragedy” 9). In another letter on May 1, 1928, Hurston even proposed Hughes a fifty-fifty collaboration on the project. In March, 1930, the two writers set out the collaboration project, that is, the writing of black folk comedy that, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states, would be “reshaping completely the direction of the development of African American literature away from the blind imitation of American literature” (“Tragedy” 10). Considered an event of great historic significance, such a departure in African American drama is seen as a response to the contemporary African American playwrights’ longing for their own theatre true to the black experience in America. As Carme Manuel notes, African American playwrights in the 1930s were confronted with two questions: “how to actualize the oral tradition in written form” and at the same time “how to recreate that vital force on stage” (78). In response to the questions, Hurston and Hughes strived to

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1In addition to Hurston and Hughes, the founding members of the magazine included Wallace Thurman, John P. Davis, Gwendolyn Bennett, Bruce Nugent, and Aaron Douglass. The first issue of *Fire!!* was published in November of 1926.