

## **ALASDAIR PETTINGER**

**Alasdair Pettinger is an independent scholar based in Glasgow. His research interests include transatlantic abolitionism and representations of 'race'; in the mid 19th century; travel writing; and the cultural history of 'voodoo', specifically the deployment of this term in historiography, fiction and ethnography in (mainly North American) texts from 1800 to the present. He edited *Always Elsewhere*, an anthology of travel writings of the Black Atlantic (Continuum 1998) and has published articles in *New Formations*, *Studies in Travel Writing*, *Journal of African Travel Writing*, and *Research in African Literatures*. This paper draws - in part - on material previously published in "'Talking Patriots": Americans, Haiti and the "Negro Problem"', *Studies in Travel Writing* 1 (1997), pp141-69.**

---

The Society For Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers  
edited by Sandra Courtman  
Vol.3 2002 ISSN 1471-2024  
<http://www.scsonline.freemove.co.uk/olvol3.html>

---

### **American Possessions: Hurston and Dunham on Haiti**

**Alasdair Pettinger**

#### **Abstract**

This paper considers two travel accounts, written by two African Americans who first visited Haiti shortly after the end of the US occupation in the 1930s. Both Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham critically engage with the prevailing tendency of North American accounts to dehistoricize Haiti in an attempt to identify the timeless essence of racial character. Hurston and Dunham, by contrast, explore parallels and interconnections between Haiti and the United States that force the reader to appreciate the complex internal histories of both countries, evident in their different responses to the white *houngan* Dr Reser.

---

## I

My interest in Haiti grew out of research I did more than a decade ago for a PhD, which, by way of several case studies, examined how travellers of various kinds have tried to make sense of what might - for the sake of convenience - be called 'voodoo', from the letters of a Dutch merchant on the West African coast at the beginning of the eighteenth century to the ethnographic writings of Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s.

Hurston was of particular interest to me because, while she studied anthropology at Columbia University in New York, grew up in an all-black town in Florida, familiar with the practices of root doctors and conjure men and women, which figure strongly in her fiction and in her study of 'Negro folklore' she published in 1935, *Mules and Men*. These practices have more than a casual connection with the religion of voodoo (or, more properly, *vodun*, or *vaudun*) in Haiti, which she visited in 1937. (Incidentally: it was during her time there that she drafted her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*).

I first want to sketch out something of the context for this visit - and the book, *Tell My Horse*, she wrote on her return.<sup>1</sup> Haiti loomed large in the public imagination of the United States since its establishment as an independent republic in 1804, particularly in relation to the debates over slavery before the Civil War commonly evoked as a threat or a promise, depending on one's political persuasion. But first-hand accounts of the country only became widely available to a North American audience in the wake of the invasion by US marines in 1915, beginning a military occupation that lasted until 1934.

The unfamiliarity of this audience is assumed by the various official and independent reports on the Occupation written at the time and shortly afterwards, which help their readers understand the Haitian situation by offering historical and geographical parallels closer to home. One author entitles a chapter of his survey, 'Reconstruction', suggesting similarities between occupied Haiti and the occupied Southern United States following the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Another, trying to convey its size, its density of population, compares Haiti to Vermont, and then to Mississippi.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps the most graphic instance of this interpretation of the Caribbean in American terms is a rather startling map of the country, on which is superimposed New Jersey and parts of Pennsylvania, with - for no apparent reason - Trenton taking the place of Port-au-Prince.<sup>4</sup>

A progress report on the first fifteen years of the Occupation claimed that Haiti 'constituted ... a unique laboratory for social, economic and administrative paternalism.'<sup>5</sup> For the authors of travel accounts of the period, I would argue, it was the occasion for another kind of experiment: the scientific observation of 'the Negro'. Preoccupied by a related set of North American concerns, these visitors believed Haiti provided the answer to the much discussed 'race question' in the United States. Notwithstanding the fact of the Occupation, these authors tend to overlook the presence of Americans (including themselves) and place a great deal of weight on particular figures or scenes which for them convey vital information about 'the Negro' - in, as it were, controlled conditions, and thereby uniquely able to illuminate the wisdom of granting or withholding certain social and political rights enjoyed by other sections of the population.

Briefly, let me provide a few brief examples:

- Author of perhaps the most famous travel book on Haiti of the 1920s and 30s, *The Magic Island* (1929), **William Seabrook** finds the spirit of the place captured in

Maman Celie, to whom he feels ‘united by the mystical equivalent of an umbilical cord, as if I had suckled in infancy at her dark breasts, had wandered far, and was returning home.’<sup>6</sup> Her home and its surroundings bask in an endless summer of leisure and abundance. Children run naked, fruit everywhere: sure signs that we are in the presence of a noble savage.

- In *Black Bagdad* (1933), subtitled ‘The Arabian Nights Adventures of a Marine Captain’, **John Houston Craige** tells a story told him about another marine stranded in the bush after his plane crashed in a remote area of the country. Surrounded by a band of rebel guerrillas under a notorious leader, he is killed and prepared for dinner. And ‘so,’ he tells us, ‘Papillon skinned Mike Morris there by the ford of Canot River after the ancient *caco* fashion. He started at the shoulder and raised a tab of skin an inch wide, then tore this down to the waist as one tears a strip from a roll of adhesive plaster.’<sup>7</sup> And so on. In contrast to Seabrook, who opposed the Occupation, Craige’s archetypal Haitian is a depraved cannibal.
- Neither figures appear in the account of **James Weldon Johnson**, African American poet, novelist and civil rights activist. The Haiti that appears in the chapter of his autobiography *Along This Way* devoted to his visit, is not coded as primitive but as civilized. He is attracted to examples of independent black achievement, whether this is represented by a neat and tidy peasant garden, a polished staging of Molière in one of the capital’s best schools, or - in the scene that is made to bear the most significance - the huge one-hundred-year-old Citadel in the North, which he compares to the pyramids of Egypt.<sup>8</sup>
- **Melville J Herskovits** was a pupil of the founding father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, and carried out fieldwork in the Mirebalais valley in the 1930s. The emphasis of his monograph is different again. Setting himself up in explicit opposition to sensationalist accounts such as Seabrook’s, he is keen to stress the mundane, unremarkable, ordered quality of everyday life. Thus, his description of a *vodun* service draws on the conventions of the Anglo-American pastoral and resembles nothing more than the genteel formalities of a Sunday school picnic, complete with bespectacled priest, a grove of trees, a grassy meadow, the confluence of two brooks.<sup>9</sup>

All four writers find a very different ‘Negro’ in Haiti, and therefore support very different answers to the American ‘race problem’. Nevertheless they have much in common, placing particular emphasis on scenes and figures that are felt to convey an unchanging essence, and thus not surprisingly focus on remote rural areas; or (in Johnson’s case) a monument of engineering achievement that took place a century before. The absence of all but a few passing signs of the military occupation, paradoxically reflects American concerns, which are sometimes made explicit.<sup>10</sup> But the Haiti that is supposed to illuminate those concerns has all the hallmarks of the mythological, locked in another world and time.

## II

Hurston’s account at first glance appears to fit this pattern. It would be easy to find passages in *Tell My Horse* that sound like Seabrook, Craige, Johnson or Herskovits (thus prompting many critics to dismiss her account as undigested, ambivalent, lacking discrimination. and so on),<sup>11</sup> but the fact that she can sound like all of them should alert us

to the curiously 'quoted' feel of her text. Her preferred medium is free indirect speech, deployed in such a way that you can never be sure whether the opinions expressed are her own, whether she is in agreement with them or not.

In one scene, at an insane asylum, she records the voices of the various patients and their doctor, all talking at cross-purposes. One recites La Fontaine's fables, another tells Haitian folktales, another offers confused fragments of world politics, the American doctor himself adopts the rural idiom of the Ozarks. It seems to me the porch might serve as a figure for the text itself. The doctor asks if she is annoyed by them. 'Oh, no,' she replies, in a remark that might be construed as offering advice to her readers. 'It is very interesting. Let them go on.' (TMH, p254).

But a more appropriate figure for her unusual style might be that of spirit possession. Hurston explains it in terms of the personality of the individual being displaced by that of a *loa* or god, and behaving accordingly. Thus, for instance, one possessed by Guedé ('pronounced geeday', TMH, p222), may 'sometimes ... dictate the most caustic and belittling statements concerning some pompous person who is present' (TMH, p221), statements they would never think of making under normal circumstances. A loa is often said to manifest him or herself by "'mounting" a subject as a rider mounts a horse' (TMH, 220-1) and the first word a horse speaks when mounted - and thus announcing the start of a possession - is *Parlay Cheval Ou* (*Tell My Horse*).

The fact that Hurston chooses this expression for the title, and thus the very first words of her book, surely invites us to read it (at least in part) as a spoken through rather than by its author. In addition, spirit possession, although it often usually induced in a definite ceremonial context, may also occur without warning to a non-initiate, and can also be simulated. It thus captures very well the ambiguous multi-voiced text Hurston uses to challenge the notion of Haiti as self-identical, corresponding to a single mythical form. *Tell My Horse* does not so much try to answer the 'negro question' as to put the very category of 'the negro' in question.

Katherine Dunham, another African American, first visited in 1936, the year before Hurston. She too studied anthropology - at Chicago and Northwestern Universities - and combined her social scientific interests with a career not primarily as a writer, like Hurston, but as a professional dancer and choreographer. 'It was with letters from Melville Herskovits ... that I invaded the Caribbean,' she begins her book, written much later than Hurston's, in 1969.<sup>12</sup> With a beginning like that, the punning title of *Island Possessed* clearly suggests a place claimed not just by otherworldly spirits, but other countries, even young anthropology students.

Dunham doesn't invite us to read her own text as spoken by the gods, although she is aware of the way travel books aspire to 'possess' the place and people they represent. Nevertheless, like *Tell My Horse*, her book is many things. It frequently moves suddenly forwards and backwards in time, juxtaposing reminiscences of particular events and passages of more general observation and reflection, so that it is impossible to determine where the main narrative breaks off and a digression begins. Several chapters of *Island Possessed* are taken up by a very detailed account of her *lavé-tête*, the first stage of *vaudun* initiation, describing scenes of possession. We get glimpses of her developing career as a dancer and her successful touring company. And the book is also the record of a close friendship - perhaps even love affair - with Dumarsais Estimé (who became president in

1946 until exiled in 1950), and charts Haitian political history - as she revisits the island several times over nearly three decades - through the subsequent regimes of Paul Magloire and François Duvalier, who came to power in 1957. In her characterization of the three presidents, Dunham draws on the rhetoric of spirit possession, as she sees uncanny resemblances between them and early leaders of the republic - Toussaint, Christophe and Dessalines, respectively. Perhaps this is no more than the result of them 'modelling after heroes' (as she puts it) and yet she believes that there is something more going on in the case of Duvalier, whose 'total change of personality' over the first few years of his presidency she finds hard to explain any other way .

Hurston too devotes a substantial portion of her text to the 'Politics and Personalities of Haiti', considered by many critics to be the weakest part of her book. Certainly the opening chapter of this section, 'Rebirth of a Nation', which, with its cinematic evocation of the American invasion, seems to suggest that the events of 1915 mark a welcome turning point after a century of internal turmoil, just as D W Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* celebrates the rebirth of the South in 1877 after the humiliation of Reconstruction (TMH, pp65-72). And yet this doubly conservative view is followed by a number of other parallels, which indicate that the situation is rather more complex.

She goes on to compare the two moments of national liberation (from France in 1804 and from the United States in 1934). Of the leaders of the first revolution, she finds, on the one hand, 'realists' (such as Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe) who, in her view, appreciated the depth of the problems in creating an independent Haiti, the difficulties faced in trying 'to make a nation out of slaves', and, on the other, 'talking patriots' who deceived themselves and others that the country's problems were entirely due to outsiders, waved the flag, and reflected on imaginary past glories. The second revolution too has leaders of both types. And, furthermore, the parallel is extended to contemporary black leaders in the United States, where a new generation has grown impatient with the pompous rhetoric of 'race men' and who 'want to hear about more jobs and houses and meat on the table' (TMH, pp73-82).

Frustratingly, perhaps, Hurston leaves us to make up our own mind on the exact significance of her deployment of these comparisons and contrasts. But the very fact that she makes parallels between Haiti and the United States at all means that Haiti cannot be doomed to occupy a mythical *other* place and time (as it is in many travel accounts), but is rather coeval with its more powerful northern neighbour. Dunham too reinforces this by highlighting the direct connections between the two countries, and the traffic between them. She refers to Haitians assimilating some of the crude slang of the US marines (IP, p95), to Americans and others coming under the spell of Haiti, for instance Pierre, the Haitian-Italian bar owner, whose business interests extended to Puerto Rico, Florida and Las Vegas (IP, p238). She attends voodoo ceremonies in New York (IP, pp245-46), and, securing a rare interview with 'ti Couzin, a notorious *bocor* with a reputation for creating zombies, finds him 'a wise though uneducated man' with whom she can discuss topics such as 'the military training, schooling, black nationalism, and secret-society aspects of the [Black] Muslims' in the United States (IP, p198). If the emphasis on such border-crossings runs the risk of giving the impression that Haiti and the United States 'possess' each other on equal terms, at least they do make sure that Haiti is no more plausibly going to tell us about 'the Negro' than is the United States.

### III

Hurston and Dunham do not refer to each other in their accounts, though it is unlikely that they were unaware of each other's existence: either from their anthropological training in the United States (Melville Herskovits knew them both) or because they met many of the same people in Haiti. One of these individuals in particular interests me and this is Dr Reser (or Reeser, as his name is spelt by Dunham).

Dr Reser is the doctor at the asylum mentioned earlier, who tells Hurston he's not strictly a doctor, but was formerly a pharmacist's mate in the US Navy (TMH, p247). After eleven years in Haiti he had become a famous 'houngan (Voodoo priest)', familiar with 'the inner secrets' of the religion. 'This white American,' she says, with typical exaggeration, 'is better known than any other living character' in the country (TMH, pp245-46). Given that a major theme in Hurston's work as a whole is to undercut prevailing notions of black nationalism and the self-identical 'Negro' on which they rest (critics often miss the fact that she likes to mention that the black township where she grew up, Eatonville, Florida, was founded - and named after - a white Union soldier) it's fitting that the one character she devotes most space to in *Tell My Horse* is a former American navy man, with 'Nordic body' but African 'soul' (TMH, pp246-47). Hurston talks about him in almost reverential terms: at one point in the text she is Peter to his Christ, at another she is Moses to his God (and her next book after *Tell My Horse* was *Moses Man of the Mountain*, whose hero is (in an unusual twist) Egyptian and not Hebrew, and therefore in the terms of the African-American allegory it tells, white, not black). Hurston rarely explicitly reflects on her own position as an American 'invading the Caribbean' as Dunham does, but by devoting her penultimate chapter to Dr Reser, the complexity of American involvement in Haiti is made clear, and of course signals that she did not go there in order to find 'the Negro' in the pure state.

Dunham became friends with the Doc too, but her attitude towards him is more restrained, and she is actually closer to his Haitian mistress, Cecile. She describes him as having 'set himself up and been accepted far and wide by houngans, the priests of vaudun ... as a "horse" of Guedé' as if she is not entirely convinced by his claims; and she hints that possession may have simply been a convenient excuse to get drunk and be obscene (IP, p19). Knowing him over several decades, she observes his later decline, as, in what could be a parody of Hurston's adulation, she notes how subsequently

alcohol .. dulled his histrionic and anecdotal aptitudes and a rather crafty poor white trash quality took over where a good and sensitive soul had started out. Perhaps this later personality took over after he had gone back from Haiti and spent time in Florida. Perhaps Haiti was all just too much for him, or the dipping in magic, as in the case of his predecessor, the one he really hoped to emulate, the creator of the myth of the Magic Island, William Seabrook (IP, p20).

One reason why Reser doesn't interest Dunham is that the common image of 'Haiti' and 'voodoo' in the American imagination had changed by the time she came to write her book in 1969.

If in the 1930s voodoo was figured in terms of race, encoding blackness, by the 1960s, partly because of the appropriation of voodoo by the Duvalier regime, symbolized above all by the menacing figure of the Tontons Macoutes secret police, it began to feature in a

deeply conservative post-colonial discourse that expressed deep cynicism about the possibility of any form of democratic government, even civilized society, in the 'Third World'. In that sense, travel accounts to Haiti from Graham Greene's *The Comedians* (1966) or Amy Wilenz's *The Rainy Season* (1989) elaborate similar themes in books about other parts of the world by V S Naipaul, Paul Theroux, Joan Didion and many others.<sup>13</sup>

Katherine Dunham appears to mirror this shift in placing voodoo in a broader international pantheon - as a dancer and anthropologist, she also engaged with other Afro-Caribbean religions, such as *santeria* in Cuba. In fact she had originally planned the book to be about 'all the gods who have walked through my life' and was to have called it *Letter from Rosia*, a *santera* in New York (IP, p271). But the fact that Dunham wrote her book in Senegal, where she subsequently settled, suggests perhaps a different attitude from the post-colonial conservatives. For her voodoo has a value which transcends its appropriation by the repressive Duvalier regime. Wise perhaps to avoid embracing it as a form of political liberation, she does celebrate it in more cultural terms as she describes participating in a ritual that took her 'out and above and beyond herself' (IP, p132), finding an ecstatic union with others that brings global references in its train: Nietzsche, Indian philosophy, and African dancing (IP, p136).

And in this way, I think, Dunham's realignment of voodoo may have something in common with a more radical strain of post-colonial thinking, represented perhaps by *After Europe*, a collection of essays on 'Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing', which has a painting of a Haitian *loa* on its cover. The introduction refers to this painting, and the work of Wilson Harris and Edward Brathwaite, and finds in spirit possession a perfect image of its editors' concerns:

If the landscape of post-colonial literature is necessarily marked by the inscriptions of dominant Western critical practice and its technologies of interpretation and control, it is also infused with a pulsating, though often silenced, subterranean energy which speaks to the post-colonial reader of *another* realm of semiotic 'meaning', *another* ground of interpretive community.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* [1938] (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). Hereafter cited as TMH.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwell Lee Montague, *Haiti and the United States 1714-1938* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940): Chapter XIV, esp pp238, 257, 262-63.

<sup>3</sup> Dexter Perkins, *The United States and the Caribbean* (London: OUP, 1947), pp28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Montague, *op. cit.*, p10.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur C Millsbaugh, *Haiti under American Control* [1931] (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1931), p2.

<sup>6</sup> William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (London 1929), p35.

<sup>7</sup> John Houston Craige, *Black Bagdad: The Arabian Nights Adventures of a Marine Captain in Haiti* (London 1933), p117.

<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* [1933] (London: 1990), p352.

<sup>9</sup> Melville J Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York 1937), pp159, 161, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson seems to make this clear in his remarks on his encounter with white labourers returning from the Panama Canal on his journey home: their racist sentiments prompting Johnson to look forward to economic, social and political reforms that would deprive them of force (*Along This Way, op.cit.*, pp355-56); Herskovits explores some 'wider implications' of his study in his final chapter, showing what light it may throw on the US "'Negro problem'" (*Haitian Valley, op. cit.*, pp303-4).

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Elmer Davis, review in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (1938) reprinted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K A Appiah (eds), *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993), p67; Darwin T Turner, *In a Minor Chord* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp117-18; J Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp58-60.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* [1969] (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), p3. Hereafter cited as IP.

<sup>13</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp216-27 for a discussion of this strain of contemporary travel writing.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, 'Introduction' to Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin (eds), *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pxxi.

---

This paper was given at Society for Caribbean Studies, Northern Seminar Series. Copyright remains with the author.

---

PLEASE USE YOUR BROWSER BUTTON TO GO BACK