

Game for None, Game for All: Verbal Contentions and Life Affirmation in De Turkey and De Law

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston, a Harlem Renaissance African American female writer in the 1920s, grew up at Eatonville, an all-black community in Florida. Her three-act play *De Turkey and De Law* (1930), set in Eatonville, is the writer's recollection of her childhood. Eatonville folks in the play are talk masters. They everyday congregate on the front porch of Joe Clarke's general store. Loading their mouths with various repertoires of talks, these human weapons are ready to fire. In no time, the porch turns into a verbal battlefield. Hinted from the war metaphors, the everyday verbal contestation on the front porch represents the Eatonville townspeople's survival strategy as black and individual. At the same time, the shrewd oratorical skill practiced in the contestation reflects the playwright's assertive individualism or her survival strategy as a black and a woman. It is worth noting that such verbal contestation functions as driving force for humor and comic elements prevalent in the play and, therefore, reveal independently or collaboratively the town folks' will for survival and way of affirming life. Throughout *De Turkey and De Law* are discovered recurring types of verbal contestation. Among them, two remarkable patterns are 1) talk relay and 2) lying contest. This paper examines the dynamism within which Eatonville folks' will for survival mingle with the mentioned verbal efforts and develops into an affirmative vision of life.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, *De Turkey and De Law*, folksy humor, verbal contestation, lying contest, talk relay, no win situation, affirming

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston, African American female writer in the 1920s, grew up at Eatonville, an all-black community in Florida. Her three-act play *De Turkey and De Law* (1930) is set in Eatonville, and regarded as the writer's recollection of her childhood. Eatonville folks in the play turn out to be talk masters with "folksy humor" and "shred oratorical skill" (Peters, 1998, p. xiv). Every day they gather at the front porch of Joe Clarke's general store, loading their mouths with various repertoires of talks. Without exception one mouth declares a war of talk, which is immediately followed by counter talks by other mouths. In no time, the porch turns into a verbal battlefield. The everyday verbal contestation represents the Eatonville people's survival strategy as black and individual. At the same time, the shrewd oratorical skill practiced in the contestation reflects the playwright's "assertive individualism" (Peters, 1998, p. xii) or her survival strategy as a black and a woman. Of interest is that such verbal contestations serve the driving force for comic elements prevalent in the play and, therefore, express the town folks' way of affirming life. Throughout *De Turkey and De Law* are discovered recurring types of verbal contestation. Among them, two remarkable patterns are 1) talk relay and 2) lying contest.

Talk Relay

Talk Relay, the most prominent verbal contestation pattern in the play, relies on 'turn-taking' techniques, that is, "an A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants" (Levinson, 1983, p. 296). The ultimate goal of turn-taking is to control the talk session by discontinuing or interrupting the current talker and, instead, bringing up his or her talk. In pragmatic linguistic terms, every talk relay session has its own set of rules shared by the participants of conversation, and the rules of talk require syntactic units such as sentence, clause, phrase and lexicon to be shared by the talkers (Sacks, 1974, p. 702, 720-21). Likewise, the turn-taking rules in the talk relay determine the rights or obligations to participate in verbal contestation. And the talk relay takes a form of game that requires such elements as player, rules and competition.¹

The talk relay pattern in the play allows onlookers, both characters and readers, to hear multiple versions of tales about a single topic. For each talk session, contestants in most cases tell stories of an identical topic, with trivial differences in word choice and sentence style. Given the virtually identical topics, the matter is not the difference in contents among the stories but in the turn-taking action itself. Consequently, the primary concern in every talk relay is put on a series of 'who' questions: Who is the current talker? Who is the turn-taker? Who is the last turn-taker or winner of the turn-taking game?

The most frequent method of turn-taking employed in the play is a 'following suit' technique. This tactic is to imitate the current talker's narrative pattern including word

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his posthumous publication *Philosophical Investigations*, gives serious thought to the definition of game. He admits it impossible to say something common to all forms of game, but he induces "similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" among what we call game, which are playing, competition and rules (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 27-28, 48-52, 61-72).

choice and sentence style. A good example is found in the trial scene of Act 2 in which Sister Lewis and Sister Taylor are bickering each other.²

SISTER LEWIS. (*Jumping up and starting across the aisle. She is restrained, but struggles hard.*) Lemme go, Jim Merchant! Turn me go! I'm goin' to stomp de black heifer till she can't sit down.

SISTER TAYLOR. (*Also struggling*) Let her come on! If I get my hands on her I'll turn her every way but loose.

SISTER LEWIS. Just come on out dis church, Lucy Taylor. I'll beat you on everything you got but yo' tongue and I'll hit dat a lick if you stick it out. (*to the men holding her*) Turn me go! I'm going to fix her so her own mammy won't know her.

(Act 2, scene 2, 14; underlines added)

Sister Lewis opens the talk session with two similar expressions, “Lemme go” and “Turn me go.” The following sentence begins with the ‘I’m going to-’ form. Sister Taylor takes her turn and responds beginning with “Let her come on!” She immediately adds a sentence beginning with the ‘I’ll~’ form. Sister Taylor composes her talk with the identical narrative styles the opponent employs, with some modification, to suit her own taste. For instance, she replaces ‘me’ and ‘go’ with the opposite word choices like ‘her’ and ‘come.’ In addition, she substitutes ‘I’ll~’ for ‘I’m going to~’ and fills the following space with her preferred slandering expression. Sister Lewis’s opening and Sister Taylor’s response present a set of turn-taking rules: 1) to begin with a clause in the imperative mood, containing ‘me’ and ‘go’ or opposite word choices; 2) to add a clause that contains ‘I’m going to~’ or similar sentence form. Taking her turn, Sister Lewis repeats the ‘following suit’ tactic employed by Sister Taylor, according to the rules.

Another example of following suit tactic is found in the argument of Reverend Singletary (Baptist) and Reverend Simms (Methodist) during the same trial of Dave (Baptist) and Jim (Methodist). Singletary and Simms appear in court to take a brief for Dave and Jim, respectively. First, Singletary mounts the pulpit to read his Bible. He quotes a passage that will, as he wishes, prove the defendant Jim guilty.

SINGLETARY. (*Reading*) It says here in Judges 18:18 dat Samson slewed three thousand Philistines wid de jawbone of an ass.

SIMMS. (*On his feet*) Yeah, but dis wasn't no ass. Dis was uh mule, Brother Mayor. Dismiss dis meetin' and less all go home.

SINGLETARY. Yeah, but he was half-ass. A ass is uh mule's daddy and he's biggern uh ass, too. (*Emphatic gestures*) Everybody

² Two town's young men, Dave and Jim, are in love rivalry each other over Miss Daisy. They go out hunting to get her a turkey and to win affection from her. After successfully killing an old gobbler turkey, they begin a fight over the ownership of it. In the course, Jim strikes Dave on the head with a hock-bone of a mule, found on the ground. The personal quarrel develops into the trial at court. The court becomes a battlefield between the two opposite sides in personal and social levels: Dave vs. Jim; Baptist Church vs. Methodist Church where each of the young men belong. The two religious factions take places on either side with an aisle between them, supporting their own brother, Dave and Jim, respectively.

knows dat – even de lil chillun.

(Act 2, scene 2, 33; underlines added)

Singletary's interpretation of the biblical passage is summarized into the following syllogism: 1) the jawbone of an ass is a guilty weapon; 2) Jim hit Dave's head with the mule bone; 3) Therefore, Jim is guilty. As a response, Simms broaches his talk with an opening expression 'Yeah, but.' It is a tactful trick. The assent term 'Yeah' delivers an expectation that Simms agrees with the previous talker Singletary and, therefore, there will be no more turn-take. However, the following word 'but' immediately frustrates the expectation, revealing Simm's real intention. Right after the word 'but,' he pinpoints a loophole in Singletary's logic and turns the opponent's weak point into a favorable factor for his own argument. Accordingly, Reverend Simms unfolds his own syllogism: 1) an ass bone is a guilty weapon; 2) Jim hit Dave not with an ass bone but with a mule bone; 3) Therefore, Jim is not guilty. To survive the talk session, Singletary needs to serve a talk at least equal to Simms's in terms of power and effect. Upon the unexpectedly roundabout and surprising attack from Simms, and having no time for consideration, Singletary hastily picks up Simm's tactic.

Lying Contest

Another prominent pattern of verbal contention found in the play is 'lying contest.' Like talk relay, the goal of the contestants in this game is to control the talk session by interrupting the opponent's lies or lying action and instead presenting his or her lies. The lying contest techniques largely depend on the repetitiveness of lies related to a single or identical topic. Adding to this, the lying contest puts stress on the difference in 'scale' of the lies. In short, the key to the art of lying in the contest is twofold: 1) to relay the previous lie, and 2) to make a bigger lie than the previous one.

Eatonville people's debate on Mrs. Simms gives a good example of the lying contest pattern. Reverend Simms, on his way to Joe Clarke's general store, meets a group of men gathering at the store porch. They greet him, inquiring about the health of his wife. The topic of the conversation abruptly shifts from Mrs. Simms's health to women's sizes. Thereafter the 'size'—big or small—becomes a main topic in the following lying sessions. Each talker gives a story about women's size. And the contestants vie for the mastery of lying and big-talking by maximizing or minimizing the size of women in their stories. Lige, for instance, talks about a woman who is as big as house. On the contrary, a woman introduced by Walter is as small as a drop of rain and as big as a grain of sand.

LINDSAY. Whuss matter wid Sister Simms—poly today?

SIMS. She don't keep so well since we been here, but I reckon she's on de mend.

HAMBO. Don't look like she never would be sick. She look so big and portly.

CLARKE. Size don't mean nothin'. My wife is portly and she be's on de sick list all de time. [...]

LIGE. Besides, Mrs. Simms ain't very large. She wouldn't weigh more'n two hundred. You ain't seen no big woman. I seen one so big she went to whip her lil boy an' he run up under her belly and

stayed up under dere for six months. (*General laughter*)
WALTER. You seen de biggest one. But I seen uh woman so little till
she could go out in uh shower uh rain and run between de drops.
She had tuh git up on uh box tuh look over uh grain uh sand.
(Act 1, 25-26; underlines added)

The lying session above shows a process within which turn-taking tactics are integrated to big-talking skills and, therefore, the pattern of talk relay develops into that of a lying contest. During the transition, the focus of talk session shifts from the recurring structural elements (sentence forms and word choices) to the themes dominant in different versions of big talk, and from formal repetitiveness to thematic repetitiveness. Now, the key to lying contest is how to maximize or minimize the depth and size of lies within a given theme, rather than just relaying the previous lies. Logic loses power in the lying session, since such intellectual reasoning is necessary to prove scientific and objective validity of talks. Instead, personal experiences and subjective judgments rule the validity of lies. Lige and Walter claim that they ‘saw’ the size of women in contention. Their alleged personal experiences make their big-talks credible and valid regardless of historical truth or falsity. Each contestant’s lie consequently becomes ‘a lie which is not a lie’ within his or her narratives. In this respect, Lige’s and Walter’s lies secure what is called ‘narrative truth,’ as the opposite to historical truth (Spence, 1982, p. 279-97).

The lying session moves on to a next round. This time, a topic jumps to the ‘size of snake’ with the issue of size remaining. Hambo and Lindsay, the main contestants in this round, vie for their mastery of big-talking. Hambo’s snake, for instance, is too big to move himself and so long enough to get to Middle Georgia without moving. Lindsay’s snake is not quite as big as Hambo’s, but it has a mysterious ability to grow ten feet long even after death. In addition, both contestants attempt to turn their lies into true stories. For the validity of story, each contestant puts emphasis on his personal experience of the snake in contention: Hambo ‘saw’ it and Lindsay ‘killed’ it. They even remember the name of the place—Kissimnee and Lake Hope, respectively—where they allege to having seen or killed the snake in contention.

HAMBO. Well, y’all done seen so much—bet y’all ain’t never seen
uh snake big as de one Ah seen down round Kissimnee. He was so
big he couldn’t hardly move his self. He laid in one spot so long he
growed moss on him and everybody thought he was uh log layin’
there; till one day Ah set down on him and went to sleep. When Ah
woke up ah wuz in Middle Georgy. (*General laughter. Two women
enter left and go in store after everybody has spoken to them*)

LINDSAY: Layin’ all sides to jokes now, y’all remember dat
rattlesnake Ah kilt on Lake Hope was ’most big as dat one.

WALTER. (*Nudgin’ Lige and winking at the crowd*) How big did you
say it was, Joe?

LINDSAY. He mought not uh been quite as big as that one – but jes’
bout fourteen feet.

HAMBO. Gimme that lyin’ snake! He wasn’t but fo’ foot long when
you kilt him here and you done growed him ten feet after he’s dead.
(Act 1, 26-27; underlines added)

Warren Shibles, in *Lying: A Critical Analysis*, defines lying as the “conscious expression of other than what we believe” with the primary purpose to “change the beliefs of others” (48, 57). In Danish philosopher Justus Hartnack’s terms, the proposed effect of lying is “to break rules contained in the logically prior concept of assertion” (as cited in Shibles, 1985, p. 83). Considering the purpose and the expected results of lying, the ultimate aim of each participant in the lying contest is to make an ideal or perfect lie that is not only believable to the other lairs’ ears but is also invulnerable to the others’ verbal counterattacks. In this respect, each contestant’s efforts to turn their lies into a narrative truth express a desire for the perfect lie that prevents future-challenges from other liars, and will make him the winner in the lying session.

Unfortunately, the perfect lie or winning shot seems to be impossible in the contest. Towards the ending of the lying session, Hambo requests evidence from Lindsay by saying, “Gimme that lyin’ snake” (27). Lindsay cannot give the evidence and, therefore, his lie turns out to be a lie. Thus, Hambo’s request is expected to be a punch line that would bring Lindsay’s big-talk into nothing. However, the reality is different from the expectation. The ‘punch’ with such as destructive power finally turns back on Hambo himself. When Lindsay cannot provide the evidence, Hambo cannot, either. Neither Hambo nor Lindsay can be the winner in the game. Hambo’s final statement instead turns the entire progress during the lying session into a no-win situation.

Game for None, Game for All

The verbal contest patterns examined so far reveal some traits or phenomena that penetrate the everyday life of Eatonville folks, which is the ‘No-Win Situation.’

As mentioned in the beginning, every turn-taking pattern has its own rules. These rules are expected to determine the winning conditions in the given verbal contest. However, the reality in the play turns out to be opposite. The chance to be a winner is extended to a next round where the determination is deferred again and ever. As seen in Hambo and Lindsay’s lying contest, every punch line cannot be the winning shot, which brings the contestants to a next round again and ever. The result is the endless production of talks with the conclusion of the games is deferred indefinitely.

None of verbal contestants can be the winner in the verbal contestations. At the same time, they do not become a loser, either. With the promise of winning or losing deferred forever, the primary purpose and beauty of verbal contention such as talk relay and lying contest does not lie in terminating but in continuing the talk. Taking up his or her turn and presenting stories additively, contestants survive every session of verbal contests. In this respect, the no-win situation represents the Eatonville people’s will for survival as well as their strong attachment to life in the present. In the unpredictable and ever-changing life, they have to live out every moment of the present. As long as the end of life’s journey is unpredictable for them, their survival and continuation of life will last forever.

Should be mentioned is that all kinds of verbal abuse— including lying, big-talking, and swearing—presented during the verbal contestations in the play are harmless in nature. Eatonville folks’ act of lying is neither evil nor dangerous since they do not have bad intention. Therefore, they have no compunction about lying. On the contrary,

their lies bring happiness to life. Their sincerity in giving and taking the ‘harmless’ lies produces a sense of humor and good feelings and makes the readers smile and laugh.³ Their willingness to laugh at others’ flaws, rather than to feel pity for them, stimulates the zeal for producing additional flaws, which virtually forms an environment in which the flaws are accepted as natural, not prohibited as taboos. Flaws and laughs, becoming the cause and the effect each other, cooperate to create the mechanism of mutual proliferation.

Such ‘pro-life’ mechanism manifests the Eatonville folks’ humor in dealing with life. They laugh at, reduce and live out their flaws rather than to lament and internalize them. They neither negate nor shun imperfections such as poverty, discrimination and sufferings. Rather, they bring up, play with, and accept them as a part of life. Eatonville folks’ outspoken and confident presence illuminates their philosophical basis for survival, that is, the affirmation of life. In a precarious and ever-changing world, all we have to do is to live by accepting our imperfection as a part of life. Borrowing the expression of John Cage, Eatonville people’s affirmation of life takes the form of “purposeless play” that attempts “simply to wake up to the very life we’re living” (as cited in Tomkins, 1965, p. 73).⁴ The verbal contestation patterns featured in *De Turkey and De Law* manifest the Eatonville folks’ will for survival and way of affirming life. Seemingly the games for none where no winner exists, Eatonville folks’ verbal contestations ‘are’ the games for ‘all’ where anyone can be the winner.

³ Warren Shibles states about the relationship between a harmless lie and humor as follows: “Humor is created by the thought that there is a mistake, but one which is not thought to be bad or harmful. This, then, produces laughter or good feelings. If the mistake is taken as harmful, it can create anger rather than humor. Humor may be seen here as a way of giving insight into and clarifying the concept of lying” (Shibles, 1985, p. 173).

⁴ In John Cage’s concept of ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘chance operation’, each individual part is given equal importance and the Aristotelian notion of harmony based on hierarchy system is displaced. For Cage, the true function of art in our time is to open up the minds and heart of contemporary people to the immensity of changes so that they can wake up to the very life they are living. For him art and life are no longer separate entities as they have been in the past, but very nearly identical. Our life is art and the art is, in turn, no other than the affirmation of life (Cage, 1961).

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