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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
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ADDRESS

Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness: Scholarship and Activism

Emilie M. Townes

John strode across infinity where God sat upon his throne and looked off towards immensity and burning worlds dropped from his teeth. The sky beneath John's tread crackled and flashed eternal lightning and thunder rolled without ceasing in his wake.

Way off he heard crying, weeping, weeping and wailing—wailing like the last cry of Hope when she fled the earth. Where was the voice?

Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology, Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect St., New Haven, CT 06511, USA. E-mail: emilie.townes@yale.edu. This address is dedicated to the memory of three colleagues whose work embodies scholarship and activism: Catherine Bell, Rosemary Skinner Keller, and Letty Russell. May their insights continue to push us to excellence in scholarship and teaching; may they also trouble us to use our knowledge to enhance our society for both the common and uncommon good. An earlier version of this address was delivered on May 17, 2008 as the Alumna of the Year Address for the University of Chicago Divinity School, Chicago, IL entitled "The Dancing Mind."

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He strained his eye to see. None walked across the rim bones of nothingness with him, but the wailing wailed on. (Hurston 1934: 87)

THIS PASSAGE IS FROM *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the first novel by anthropologist, folklorist, and novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston. Written in 1934 in three to four months, the book is based loosely on her parents' lives through the stories of John Pearson, a minister in the small Black Florida town of Eatonville, and his wife, Lucy Potts and other women in the town. Hurston uses the biblical passage of Jonah 4:6–11 for the novel's title as she depicts Pearson as the gourd vine; weaknesses and destructive tendencies are the worm that destroys the vine.

Hurston's work has been incalculable in helping scholars recognize the importance of folklore in theological and ethical reflection. In her essay "Conversions and Visions," Hurston, as a sociocultural anthropologist, seeks to recover the role of vision in Black religion—noting that it almost always accompanies conversion and always accompanies the call to preach (1934: 32–34). She then explains that along with traditional conversion vision there are variations such that "[T]he imagination of one may carry him to the last judgment and the rimbones of nothing, the vision of another may hobble him at washing collard greens. However, in each case there is an unwillingness to believe—to accept the great good fortune too quickly. So, God is asked for proof" (1934: 32). Then, in classic Hurston fashion, she details the lengths to which folk will go to avoid the salvation that is found in conversion—fruitlessly.

Hurston uses the phrase "rim bones of nothing" again in her classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After the death of her husband, the tyrannical Joseph Starks, the main character, Janie, is enjoying her freedom and though not oblivious to the new suitors who come calling, Hurston writes, "All that they said and did was refracted by her inattention and shot off toward the rim bones of nothing" (1937: 93).

However, it is her use of "the rim bones of nothing" in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* that has echoed with me over the years since I first heard Katie Geneva Cannon's redaction of the phrase in the early 1990s for a conference theme: Walking Across the Rim Bones of Nothing. It is from Cannon's redaction of "None walked across the rim bones of nothingness with him" (1934: 87) that I have titled this address.

Now, it is clear from how Hurston uses the phrase that rim bone china is not what she has in mind. Hurston points us elsewhere: to that space beyond Eliade's *axis mundi* (the center of the world) or Van Gennep's liminality (the transitional ritual space in initiation between

sacred and pollution).¹ This eschatological space of nothingness is not the egolessness of Eastern philosophies or Sartre's stubborn attempt to vindicate the fundamental freedom of the human being against determinism (Sartre, 1956).

Hurston points us to that space in which creation itself enters our lives in ways too deep for words and only sounds and images roil our souls, challenges our vision. And, I want to suggest, our scholarship. To walk across the rim bones of nothingness is to know that there is more there than what we can account for by the precision of our analysis or the depth of our intuition. Walking across the rim bones of nothingness as scholars of religion means we take all that we have learned, all that we hope to say, research, and teach, and place it in a space of the ultimate unknown where the immensity of our world drops from our scholarly teeth into a global creation where we recognize that our scholarship, our form of the conversion vision, can be put to good use in the fiercely mundane as well as in the fastidiously erudite.

Not unlike Toni Morrison's image of the dancing mind in which we meet each other in the "dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one—an activity that occurs most naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in" (1996: 7–8); walking across the rim bones of nothingness encourages us to tease through the possibilities and the realities, the hopes, the dreams, the nightmares, the terrors, the critique, the analysis, the plea, the witness—all that is done in the academy, in the classroom, in the religious gatherings of our various communities, in those quiet and not so quiet times in which we try to reflect on the ways in which we know and see and feel and do. Conversion visions of the sort we have are demanding and yet can be playful. However, they must always be done with precision and rigor.

I.

W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the exemplary thinkers of the twentieth century, offers an important admonition in this work we do as scholars. Writing just one year after the publication of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Du Bois states:

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not

¹ See Eliade (1961) for a fuller discussion of Eliade's concept of the Center and Van Gennep (1960) for a fuller discussion of van Gennep's use of liminality. Victor W. Turner (1969) expanded on van Gennep's early work.

remember that Daniel Webster got drunk and only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner, or that Thomas Jefferson had mulatto children, or that Alexander Hamilton had Negro blood, and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth (1966, 722).

These are sobering words for me as a social ethicist who uses social history as part of my methodology. When I first read this insight from Du Bois, I found it echoed within me as much as his more famous insight, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (1999: 5). I have felt the impact of his words time and again as our studied, selective amnesia or willful oblivion has painted a perfectly simplistic picture of a complex, fascinating, dynamic, and peculiarly American society with restlessly changing cultures and demographics.

We are encouraged to remember the good or dwell on the bad at the exclusion of the other. This is bad history because it does not tell the truth of the living and breathing that goes on between these two poles of the human drama. It should caution all of us in religious and theological studies to be circumspect in our research, writing, and teaching when we veer too far one way or the other without considering what lies in between. Because, like history that paints perfect men and women and noble nations through selective methodologies, our scholarship can lose its value and vision as incentive and example.

I suspect that most if not all of us would agree that an imperative for our scholarship is that it be rigorous, relentless, and responsible to the issues of the day while pushing our understanding of what is before us in our modern/postmodern worlds. What I want to add here is that our scholarship should *also* help map out strategies for creating a more just and free society and world. Shake dancing with despots in the name of scholarly exchange is tricky business. Calling others and ourselves into *human* behavior is exhausting. However, I believe this is part of what our work can and must address.

Long before I came across Du Bois' insights, Chicago rigor, or Northwestern fire, I was shaped by two strong influences that taught me the importance of working to incorporate truth telling in my scholarship and the potency of wisdom in my teaching. The first were the old Black folks of my grandmother's generation who helped raise me.

and i can still hear them now

those older black women of my grandmother's generation

miss waddell
miss rosie
ms. montez
ms. hemphill
cousin willie mae

as they visited with each other (it was never called gossip)

in their kitchens
front yards
beauty shops
porches (stoops were a city thing in southern pines, nc)
sunday school classes
church socials

i can still here them now

the older black men of my grandmother's generation

mr. waddell
mr. press
bad bill
mr. hemphill
monkey joe

as that sat and discussed (it was never called gossip—that was what the women did)

in the barber shop
under the tree of knowledge outside the barber shop
out in the front yard or side yard tinkering with their cars
after church
during the church socials

yes, i can still hear them

and you know, the only person i thought was older than these folks was god

and because they were old

i was taught they had wisdom
or should have

and they knew things that i thought i could never know because i couldn't believe that i'd ever be as old as they were

because they were special
they had something that sustained them in a tightly drawn color-lined southern and west southern pines

divided by u.s. route 1
 and money
 and power
 and privilege

from the white folks they worked for in their kitchens, yards,
 driving their cars, buying their groceries, tending to their dogs and
 horses, and carrying their golf clubs

they were a white starched shirt, best hat wearing crew on sunday
 morning

and i simply loved being in their presence

sitting quietly and saying nothing so that they would forget i
 was there (or did they)

and do grown folks talk about life and living and losing and
 loving

they did not live a life tinted by rose colored glasses

instead, they turned to the joy they found in the lord
 and the strength they found at the altar to put their children through
 college

if that's where they wanted to go
 and love all the children in that small community
 because that's what grown folks are supposed to do

and in that love they taught us more than our abc's and our plus ones
 and times tables

they taught us what it meant to be wise by their actions and not just
 their words

they even told us what to watch for to tell if what they were saying was
 true

evil is as evil does
 stay out of corners
 keep your legs together
 a hawk always circles his prey

and if one of them exhibited the negative side of the wisdom they shared

we knew it and even failure (or humanness) became an occasion to
 learn what it meant to love the lord with all you heart, mind, soul, and
 body

yes, i still hear them

ummph ... ummph ... ummph
 lord, jesus
 say amen, somebody
 have mercy
 sucking of teeth
 low whistle

and i see them

proud black people who knew when to bend and not break
 going to their jobs
 making a way out of no way
 succeeding
 failing
 being human all the time

but the wisdom and giving of it never left

because they believed with every ounce of their being that they had to
 pass good things on to the next generation
 and the one thing they had that no amount of the ku klux klan, paddy
 rollers,² or sheriff departments could take away—even with fire houses

² Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is the name of past and present secret organizations in the United States, primarily in the South, that advocate White supremacy through threat, intimidation, and violence. The first KKK was founded in 1865 by Confederate Army veterans, after the Civil War and aimed their violent methods at Blacks, Jews, Roman Catholics, and other racial and religious minorities. The Klan's excesses and the anti-lynching work of figures such as Ida B. Wells, prompted a backlash among southern mercantilists and the KKK declined from 1868 to 1870. This first Klan was destroyed by President Ulysses S. Grant's prosecution and enforcement under the Civil Rights Act of 1871.

A second Klan was founded in 1915 and grew rapidly in another period of postwar (World War I) social tensions: rapid growth rates in major cities, immigration (from the South and eastern Europe), and racially charged labor tensions. In addition to the earlier list of targets, anti-communism and nativism were added to the fold. The practice of lynching and ceremonial cross burning were used to threaten and kill their targets. This revival of the Klan reached its peak in membership in the mid-1920s (approximately 4–5 million men) but fell rapidly during the Great Depression and World War II. See Shawn Lay, "Ku Klux Klan in the Twentieth Century" in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* a web-based encyclopedia, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Home.jsp> for more details on these figures and the ones current membership figures below.

Today, the KKK is composed of independent groups that oppose the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation. They enjoyed the support of many southern police departments in the 1950s and 1960s and were responsible for the murders of civil rights workers and children and the assassination of NAACP organizer Medgar Evers. Researchers estimate there are more than 150 Klan chapters with 5,000–8,000 members nationwide. The U.S. government classifies them as hate groups.

Paddy rollers were a slave patrol. They often circulated in the slave quarters at night to try to prevent escape attempts and to discourage slaves from learning to read and write. They also hunted down escaped slaves and took them back into slavery.

and lynching trees

was what they knew about life and how to survive it and even thrive

they had what ethicist and former aar president peter paris calls practical wisdom

so these exemplars of practical wisdom help me keep the time beat

remind me of, or teach all of us about where we've come from

so that we are not tempted to make decisions in thin air

but instead lean into the thick isness of our lives

the agonies and the ecstasies

to find our bearings for the journey

this wisdom, this way of truth-telling, is not showy, but it is steady

it helps folk know how and more importantly what to look for in living

it brings the past in the present and the present into the future

so that we remember we are a people in time and of time

and nothing we do puts us outside of time

and this is important because we can never get away from the history that brought us here

even if we do not know it

and it is dangerous to be in a position where we cannot remember what we

never knew (Cannon 1998: 167–77).

My second early influence is literature. Throughout my life, I have always learned a great deal from writers and poets. I speak primarily not of those who deal with dense theo-ethical discourse and reflection, but of writers like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Tina McElroy Ansa, Alice Walker, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Carson McCullers, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Amado, Chinua Achebe, Nikki Giovanni, Robert Frost, Sonia Sanchez, Nikky Finney ... the list goes on and on. Their ability to turn the world at a tilt, just so, to explore our humanity and inhumanity challenges me in ways that theories and concepts do not.

As a child, I was transported to Troy by Homer and devoured all I could about Greek and Roman mythology. The idea of gods seemed quite novel to one who was growing up to "Jesus loves me this I know ..." Apollo and Athena took me out of my daily musing on Jesse Helms and fire hoses and White folks' spit. I could enter, through

Homer's prompting, a different time and place where I learned that maybe the holy could be capricious and not always stern.

The gift and challenge of being an avid reader is that I love to read a fine writer at work. They help me "see" things in tangible ways and "feel" things through intangible means.³ Good writers teach us that there is a world in our eye, but it is not the only one. We can and must consider the eyes, the worlds, of others. Allowing these worlds to rim bone walk, to dance or to collide with one another causes us to grow and to change our angles of vision in our work from the straight and narrow to akimbo.

II.

To walk across the rim bones of nothingness means that we may need to tarry a bit before we attempt to be rational, critical, analytical, precise, and rigorous in our scholarship and teaching. I know that in my own scholarship, I more often than not crash and burn if I fail to think through first: Why am I doing this? In fact, why do any of us do the scholarship we do? Teach the classes that we teach?

Here, I am talking about more than we do the scholarship we do because we are interested in it, or care about it, or are passionate about it, or we think it is necessary. These are more than appropriate personal scholarly benchmarks for our work and they should and must be part of what we do when we engage in trying to understand, defend, debunk, question, cajole, illuminate in our research and writing. I am focusing more on what, for me, is the important first step of rim bone walking: why the research in the first place? Because I believe that what should drive our research in large measure is that we are exploring traditions that have driven people to incredible heights of valor and despicable degrees of cravenness. In other words, the research we do is not a free-floating solitary intellectual quest. It is profoundly tethered to people's lives—the fullness and the incompleteness of them.

I use the image of tethering intentionally because I do not want to suggest that our work is *circumscribed* by the traditions we explore or not, but rather that we are consciously and perhaps at times unconsciously responding to the drama of history lived in creation and we cannot or we should not proceed as if we are engaged in ideas as if

³ When I turned to looking at evil, in my book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006), I realized that I would be bound by untenable, unproductive, and ultimately boring ways if I approached such a study on theodicy solely through the realm of concepts and theories.

people are not related to them. Another way to say this is that I don't believe that scholarship is or should be an objective enterprise.

Here, I am not equating objective with rigorous. They aren't the same thing at all and I will always argue for deep-walking rigorous scholarship. What I am arguing against is the kind of disinterested research tact that doesn't figure in that our work is going to have a profound impact on someone's life in some way and some how. I worry when we think that we are *only* dealing with ideas and concepts as if they have no heart and soul behind them. If they matter to us, they will matter to others.

We should do our work with passion and precision and realize that we should not aspire to be the dip sticks for intellectual hubris. I am well aware that I am arguing against some of the foundational assumptions in my training and yours, where the scientific research model and its attendant view of reality give us a solid grasp of disciplinary content and methodologies.

I do appreciate and actually enjoy the ways in which the University of Chicago formed me as a scholar and researcher to explore ideas with gusto and to trust the trail my research leads me in rather than to steer it into the lanes I'd rather travel, but the one thing I am very well aware of is that this training did not teach me how to be scholar *and* teacher in the schools where I have been on the faculty. It did not prepare me for the calls in the wide variety of communities that ask me (and you) to help them think through the issues they face and to translate my public lectures into the everydayness of their lives to develop survival strategies and to encourage them to trust the integrity of their own insights.

Our training hopes that we are smart enough to fit out disciplinary work with "contexts as different as the religious studies department of a major university or the ministry concerns of a small Roman Catholic diocesan seminary."⁴ This is a tall order and working our way through this is one of those vocational or professional challenges that we may not speak of often or choose to suffer through on our own and in silence unwisely.

One rather mundane place to begin unpacking this is with the mission statement or description of the aims of the department or in the oral culture as values and ideals are repeated—statements that set a benchmark. The one at Yale Divinity School is New England succinct:

⁴ Email exchange with William R. Myers, Director of Leadership Education, The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Fall 2006.

To foster the knowledge and love of God through critical engagement with the traditions of the Christian churches in the context of the contemporary world. Or its logo version: Faith and intellect: preparing leaders for church and world.

Statements like this provide a marvelous opportunity to use the skill we spend years building—critical engagement. The Yale mission challenges me to think through how my scholarship and teaching might unfold in this environment to explore new directions, affirm old ones, and consider how to continue to grow. I also find that there's a bit of work to do to put them in conversation, but the attempt to do so may reap huge dividends, and I am most happy to report it is *not* the case that the majority of the faculty does not know what the statement says or that it is so ancient and unused that only Methuselah and his running buddies know it. It can be evoked during faculty hires to either support or argue against a candidate. However, what I find most valuable is that when we are being our reflective best as a faculty it prods each of us to re-think our work and how it does or does not reflect the quest to combine faith and intellect in the preparation of leaders for church and world.

Walking across the rim bones of nothingness does not lead to nowhere. Visions seldom do. But it does take work and attentiveness to decipher them at times.

III.

I am passionate about this because we live in times where our country needs those of us trained in the religious disciplines to speak up and into and with the public realm and we can do so, in part, through and with our schools and religious communities and the scholarship we do and share directly with the public with our students, with our trustees or boards, or boards of advisors or visiting committees. We amass an incredible amount of information—and yes, some of it is arcane. However, much more of it is about some things that can actually help folk come to know other peoples and cultures, other forms of the religious, other ways to make meaning out of faith stances, other understandings of the social and moral order of life, other ways to understand sacred texts, and the list goes on and on.

In other words, I believe that it is increasingly imperative that we engage religious discourses in the public realm—both in the United States and in international contexts, because we live in an increasingly polarized world in which religion matters as beliefs and practices and is a key element in identity formation and meaning making and

sometimes nation-building for people. We also must engage a larger academic community that can often be hostile, condescending, and magnificently ignorant of the religious—resorting to *ad hominem* rather than rigor. We cannot, as scholars and teachers of religion, absent ourselves from public conversations about religion.

Many of us shudder at the simplistic and cartoonish characterizations we see and hear about religious worlds we know to be complex and nuanced. The work we do can and must provide ongoing resources and support for those of us who comment on the religious events of our day in the public sphere. It enriches us as scholars and it strengthens the ability of our various schools to provide pertinent, informed, accessible, and (when appropriate) faithful information and resources to our students, the communities in which we sit, and the various religious institutions our schools may be representative of and responsible to. Why this scholarship? Because people need it to help make sense out of the chaos and spinning top of wars we now live in as part of the mundane and everyday in far too many people's lives. Why this scholarship? Because we have some gifts and we should use them.

IV.

Although I am heartened by much of what I see happening in theological education across this country, there is a side that is troubling and a challenge—particularly that which is done in the United States that can morph into intellectual hubris as global export and is didactic detritus from protestations that true knowledge is universal. As the old Black women who raised me used to say about such things: Ummmph ... ummmph ... ummmph.

Genuine intellectual engagement learns from a wide variety of sources and not solely from the echoes of our mind and intellect or from our various social locations or disciplinary expertise. There's a big world of religion out there to study and to know and this is an exciting challenge. The epistemology of knowledge that is represented in the study of religion may often be contextual. However, it is always fraught with our best and worst impulses. It is rarely pure objectivity. It is rarely disinterestedness, no matter how many rational proofs we come up with to argue to the contrary.

Scholarship that contributes to society recognizes this, embraces this, does not seek to obfuscate this, recognizes the utter humanity of this, and then begins with the concreteness of our humanity rather than in esoteric concepts abstracted from life that teach us or lure us into believing that it is better to live in an unrelenting ontological

suicide watch rather than a celebration of the richness and responsibilities of what it means to be created in the image of God, or the power of Dreamtime, or the balance of yin and yang, or the great cycle of life, and more.

To walk across the rim bones of nothingness means that the challenges become integrity, consistency, and stubbornness—not only objectivity as the sole marker of scholarly brilliance. These do not displace objectivity. No, they become part of our methodological toolkit as well *and* are as valued as the call for objectivity, because there is much to be said for holding ourselves accountable, which is, I think, ultimately what the call for objectivity in the religious disciplines is about. We just forget that a serious *and* capricious God has a hand in creation and our intellectual musings often forget God's laughing side. This makes too much of what we do humorless and inept.

When recognizing these things, we can do relevant scholarship, excellent teaching, learning, *and* activism with dancing minds that point to that vital triumvirate of love, justice, and hope. We are then moving from *concepts* in hermeneutical, historical, pastoral, theological, discourses to *tools* that demystify and deconstruct that help build and enlighten.

Part of what is involved in crafting scholarship that will contribute to the academy and the lives of people beyond the library or our studies or our offices or classrooms is that we must think in more expansive ways than our disciplinary homes have often trained us to think with our intellect focused primarily on our scholarly navels. This is tricky business because in doing so, we may also be challenging the holy of holies in many of disciplines and reconfiguring the standards of excellence in them.

I am aware that this may be hard for many younger scholars and pre-tenure faculty to do while casting a realistically concerned eye to tenure and promotion issues and the very real concerns of family and survival. However, I have come to the place in my career where I think that too many of the standards of excellence in many of our disciplines are not only too low, they may well be irrelevant. So part of what I am asking us to consider tonight is how does our scholarship figure into this and how can we, together, think through the ways to juggle the academy and the folks we face in the classroom each day as students and peers and the many folks that they bring in the classroom with them who are not seen, not heard, but intensely effected by what we say based on the work we do.

Perhaps strategic schizophrenia is one answer. That we see our research running on at least two parallel tracks, one that tries to

continually call our disciplines into excellence and revelation, the other that has both feet firmly planted in the everydayness of living. Perhaps it is because I rather like coming from a signifying and unsettling population that I can put strategy and schizophrenia in the same sentence. However, I am incandescently clear that signification is arbitrary and frustrating, but I think that the critical engagement of dancing minds and rim bone walking that signification can evoke can lead us into fruitful interdisciplinary conversations that helps us turn to the other side of hegemony. Because signifying is a tool that can confuse, redirect, or reformulate the discourses of domination that are often at the heart of what we inherit in far too much religious scholarship. It is important to recognize that all of our disciplines in the academic study of religion have their own hegemonic edge. When working well, this makes tremendous contributions.

We are so much better at what we do when we begin to talk with colleagues in other disciplines and begin to explore questions, ideas, concepts, situations informed by another set of lenses that give us new vistas to explore. What arrogance we commit when we allow the boundaries of our training to determine what we can come to know, and when we refuse to use our intellect, research, teaching, writing, thinking in the public realm. We become scholars in a gated community and eventually no one will care where we live or look for our address.

Rather than desultory condemnatory judgment, I am challenging all of us to keep growing our scholarship large. Interdisciplinary work is only now being taken seriously in some graduate programs; some think that this is faddish or inept scholarship. However, having been raised in two interdisciplinary programs—at Chicago and at Northwestern—and having spent my early years immersed in interdisciplinary team teaching at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, MO, I learned quickly that you can't do interdisciplinary work without a main discipline as your intellectual home. Therefore, I am *not* arguing for an interdisciplinary toga party for our scholarship. I *am* suggesting that interdisciplinary work is crucial for those of us who are trying to open up the stuffy kitchens in our disciplines and invite all manner of folk to sit around the table. To do so we can use signifying as more than a clever language game: for in the hands of rigorous dancing minds, staring across the rim bones of nothingness, signification can debunk narrow and restricted scholarship masquerading as immaculate theological conceptions.

Like the Gramscian chess moves of hegemony, it is very important just *who* is doing the signifying and *why*. Allowing our minds, our scholarship to dance, we can welcome new conversation partners—not

to control or dominate—but to allow the richness of insights and experiences beyond what we know and don't know to fill our scholarship with deeper meaning, to beget more piercing analysis, to offer more trenchant critique, to be more relevant to the schools in which we work and the folks who are influenced by what we do. We develop skills and scholarship that help mitigate bravura spells of ignorance and arrogance that can be found even within the work of some of us trying to deconstruct and reconstruct our disciplines if not our religious households and schools.

V.

Hurston challenges us to stride across infinity, to look at the immensity of the sometimes literally burning worlds in which others and we live. To drop, no, to be committed to scholarship that is rigorous, accessible, and can be used as tools for insight, knowledge, and wisdom to build a more just world within worlds—this is truly a conversion vision.

It is also one with/by which we begin to take the first steps away from Du Bois' damning judgment that his study of history reveals "the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over" (1966: 722), and my musings on what this can mean for all of our disciplines. It is to begin intellectually to walk into a new future that is more vibrant, more humane, more alive with possibilities that engage others and ourselves.

It is serious work.

It is important work.

It is necessary work.