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Mobility and Identity in Ladee Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins*

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Abstract: This article examines themes of mobility and identity Ladee Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* (2017). I use the lens of mobility studies to closely analyze the novel's two primary characters, Johnny and Eloise, and the ways in which their cross-Florida road trip is both a literal and symbolic journey to self-discovery for each. In addition, I look at W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston as inspiration for Hubbard's novel and explore the role of storytelling as central to each character's process of identity formation. I furthermore consider the novel's Florida setting as particularly fertile ground for interrogations of mobility, given the state's place in the literary and national imaginations as a nexus of movement, ultimately asserting that reading *The Talented Ribkins* within this context can only illuminate its commentary on racial justice.

Introduction

There are several interviews in which Ladee Hubbard has discussed the inspiration for her 2017 novel, *The Talented Ribkins*. The title is a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth," which advocates for liberal arts education for African Americans. In it, Du Bois argues that "[t]he Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," (209) and that "the problem of education . . . is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (209). *The Talented Ribkins* takes up this idea of "exceptional" African Americans born with "gifts or talents" through the Ribkins, an African American family with special powers. The protagonist, Johnny, for example, can create perfect maps of places he has never laid eyes on;

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his cousin, Simone, can change her appearance, and his niece, Eloise, can move objects with her mind.

The novel follows Johnny and Eloise as they take a road trip across Florida. Over the course of their journey, Johnny shares with Eloise stories of his past and time with the Justice Committee, a group of Ribkins who used their powers for equal rights advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement. His stories—like Du Bois' "The Talented Tenth"—emphasize the importance of education for African Americans, while also helping to inform Eloise about Black history more broadly. For this reason, *Publishers Weekly* called Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* "an ambitious . . . attempt to explore new dimensions of the struggle for racial justice" ("The Talented Ribkins").

Hubbard's Florida-based road trip novel also draws on the work of Zora Neale Hurston—specifically *Mules and Men* (1935)—especially given its emphasis on mobility and storytelling. "Hurston does not just write about place," notes Erin Wedehase, "she also writes about how humans maneuver through different spaces to solidify cultural and individual identities" (29). *Mules and Men* describes Hurston's literal journey through parts of Central Florida and New Orleans to collect stories from African American folklore. Yet, it is also a metaphorical journey, as several critics such as Cheryl Wall and Houston Baker have noted and, as Alasdair Pettinger describes, "to the heart of black female experience and identity" (177). Hubbard's novel is similarly concerned with movement and identity. In fact, Johnny's mapmaking is central to his identity and his road trip across Florida with Eloise is a crucial part of both characters' journeys to self-discovery. Through close reading and using the lens of mobility studies, this essay, therefore, examines *The Talented Ribkins* and how its theme of mobility/movement relates to issues of identity. I assert that reading Hubbard's novel within this context can ultimately illuminate the novel's commentary on racial justice.

Mobility Studies: Hurston as "Pioneer"

An understanding of mobility studies is first central to exploring *The Talented Ribkins* and its emphasis on movement. As Marion Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce note in the introduction to *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, the field is most associated with the social sciences,

but has recently become popular with humanities scholars, principally in the areas of literary and cultural studies. They note the broad scope of movements that mobilities comprises,

> from the large-scale technologies of global travel, to transnational interconnections, to everyday local mobilities, including journeys by foot, road, rail, air, and sea, at local, regional, national, and transnational levels. Mobilities studies recognizes that mobility operates at multiple scales of meaning, any and all of which constitutes a society's mobile culture. (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2)

Stephen Greenblatt's "A Mobility Studies Manifesto" similarly contends that mobility refers to movement in a literal sense: "[b]oarding a plane, venturing on a ship . . . or simply setting one foot in front of the other and walking" (250). These are just some examples of the literal "physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement" (250). But movement can also be metaphorical: "between center and periphery, faith and skepticism, order and chaos, exteriority and interiority" (250). It can also include "hidden as well as conspicuous movements" (of people, but also of) "objects, images, texts, and ideas" (250). One sees this logic, for instance, in a clear precursor to *The Talented Ribkins*: Zora Neale Hurston.

If mobility studies furthermore takes into account not just *how* we move, but *why* and, very importantly, it recognizes the ways in which these movements constitute practices of power, such as "who has the power to move, how society limits the power to move, and what happens to the larger community when it loses or gains mobile members," then Hurston's *Of Mules and Men* is a foundational text (Wedehase 31). Given that so much of both her life and her writing involve movement from one place to another, it is no surprise that Hurston has been named "a pioneer in the relatively contemporary field of mobility studies" (Wedehase 29). On the surface, the relation to *The Talented Ribkins* is perhaps less obvious than Du Bois', but it is still paramount. Hurston, in *Mules and Men*, "does not just document folklore but dramatizes the way in which the author collected it," Pettinger observes (175). Rather, it offers "a recreation of Hurston's engagement with the people she spoke to and whose words she transcribed. To a considerable extent, its subject is the practice of fieldwork itself" (Pettinger 175). This fieldwork, of course, could not be completed without Hurston's ability to get from one place to another. Importantly, most of Hurston's travel

in *Mules and Men* occurs by car—a Chevrolet, to be exact—which is a significant feature of her narrative.

This marks *Mules and Men* as an early example of a road-trip story. At its heart is a literal journey through parts of Central Florida and New Orleans; it is also a metaphorical journey, as it "utilizes movement to symbolize self-development" (Wedehase 32). In her travels to and through Eatonville, Arnold Rampersad notes, Hurston "effect[s] a genuine reconciliation between herself and her past, which is to say between herself as a growing individual with literary ambitions on the one hand and the evolving African-American culture and history on the other" (xvi). In Hurston's work, mobility has several levels of meaning and is intimately connected to identity. In addition to this, the collection is also, according to David G. Nicholls, "a 'hidden transcript' of everyday resistance [that] is exposed through the narrative frame with which she surrounds her transcription of 'folk' tales" (467). Hurston's road-trip story therefore interrogates how movement constitutes practices of power.

Mobility in *The Talented Ribkins*: Johnny's Identity Crisis

Like *Mules and Men*, Hubbard's *The Talented Ribkins* is also at once a road-trip story about a literal journey across the state of Florida and a figurative journey to self-discovery for its travelers, Johnny and Eloise. When the novel begins, Johnny is clearly in the midst of an identity crisis. He has just arrived at his dead brother Franklin's house—now occupied by Franklin's partner, Meredith, and their daughter, Eloise—in Lehigh Acres. He had never imagined coming back to Franklin's house and thinks about "all he'd been through since Franklin died, how hard he'd tried to put this place behind him only to find himself . . . right back where he'd started" (Hubbard 6). Now, at seventy-two years old, Johnny is a "peculiar old man [. . .] [o]ld and tired" (Hubbard 13). He thinks of himself as "[s]trange and pitiful, that was what his life had become " (Hubbard 10), and he questions his own value now, especially in light of his foray into crime. As his cousin, Simone, reminds him, he has let his talent go to waste. That talent is making maps, which he did as part of his activist work with the Justice Committee during the Civil Rights Movement; now, he sells his maps to crime boss, Melvin. Making maps is more than a talent, though—for Johnny, it is a core part of his identity; it is "not just what he did, but who he was" (Hubbard 6). Since the Justice Committee fell apart and Johnny became subsumed by criminal

life, he feels lost. His road trip with Eloise across Florida to dig up buried money, which he must use to repay Melvin or else Melvin will kill him, is his solution to this problem. The trip allows him a chance to reclaim pieces of his buried past and thus remember himself.

The primary way that Johnny reclaims those pieces of his past on this road trip occurs through storytelling. During their travels, Johnny frequently tells Eloise stories about his past and about the Ribkins family, and these stories help him recover lost parts of himself, aiding in his process of self-discovery. In one such example, during the first leg of their journey, *en route* to Fort Myers, Johnny tells Eloise about segregation and how it limited his mobility. It is the movement of the car, an old Thunderbird, and "a flashing view of the Gulf" (Hubbard 29) through the windows that prompt this memory; as the car "rolled down a wide boulevard full of superstores and car dealerships, pink condominiums and high palm trees" (Hubbard 29), Eloise asks Johnny if they're going to stop at the beach, which leads Johnny to recall how he and other Black people could only visit the beach "up the road" (Hubbard 29). Johnny also remembers that this beach has a fort, and tells Eloise about his first job out of college, before the Justice Committee, when he was working as a math teacher at a school in Lehigh and paid out of his own pocket to take his students on a field trip to this beach for Juneteenth so that he could teach them a lesson about how knowledge is like a fort. The metaphor here speaks to Johnny's belief that knowledge is power, and of the importance of education for African Americans. That Johnny visits this beach, once off limits to him during segregation, on Juneteenth is also significant. It is a moment of resistance in which Johnny recognizes that movement—his access to the beach—constitutes a practice of power. Johnny's limited mobility as a result of racism inspires his work—his identity—as an educator. Through recalling this story, he is able to remember how "[h]e'd been a different man back then. [. . .] "Young, idealistic . . . he'd truly believed he was going where he was needed most" (32). Sharing this story with Eloise, educating her about this part of his life, and also imparting on her the same lesson about the importance of knowledge allows him to recover this part of himself. The physical movement of the car, along with the more figurative movement of ideas, stories, that occurs within the space of the car, combines with the language of movement in this passage to further evidence how Johnny's identity is bound to his mobility. In this scene, Johnny's mobility contributes to his self-development, helping him to remember himself, to negotiate who he was and who he *is*, as a "talented" Ribkins advocating for racial justice.

Johnny's identity is tied together with his mobility. His Thunderbird, symbolic in that it serves as an extension of him, therefore plays a key role in his journey to self-discovery. For instance, Eloise calls the car "old" and "junky" (Hubbard 27). Johnny takes Eloise's comment personally because he recognizes that he himself—seventy-two, old, tired, and feeling he is lacking value—is a kind of antique. The Thunderbird furthermore serves as one of the novel's primary settings and a space where he shares stories with Eloise, particularly about his mapmaking and his work with the Justice Committee. When she asks if the Justice Committee was in the freedom movement, Johnny replies, "We were **with** the freedom movement. We were freedom movement adjacent. We were the freedom-of-movement movement" (Hubbard 29, emphasis mine). In this turn of phrase, Johnny demonstrates a kind of linguistic mobility; again, the language of movement ("in," "with," "adjacent") and language play (wherein "movement" at once refers to both an act of changing location and a group of people working together to achieve their shared goals) suggest an important connection between mobility and Johnny's identity. Again, the car's literal movement combines with the more figurative movement of ideas and stories, emphasized by the language of movement in this passage, to evidence how Johnny's identity is bound to his mobility.

Johnny's mapmaking, which was a central part of his work with the Justice Committee, is especially and intimately connected to his sense of self. As with his work in education, Johnny's mapmaking is an act of resistance shaped by his own limited mobility due to racism. He began making maps "for black drivers trying to navigate through the South on the interstate roads, telling them where to go if they needed gas or supplies" (Hubbard 47). He explains to Eloise, "Just being black, trying to get from one place to another without bothering nobody, seemed like a provocation to a lot of folks, so you had to be careful where you pulled over" (Hubbard 47). Sharing this story with Eloise is a means by which Johnny can remember this part of himself and his youthful efforts to effect change.

Johnny's mapmaking, central to his identity, is a means through which he recognizes how mobility constitutes practices of power. By sharing stories of his mapmaking with Eloise, Johnny is prompted to reflect on how "the distribution of mobility" (Hubbard 128) has historically been and continues to be limited for African Americans. Johnny is reminded of his limited mobility when walking through a mall with Eloise; he observes how "there were still certain doors he could not just stroll through, certain passageways other people would always keep locked to him" (Hubbard 120). This experience, combined with the stories he shares with Eloise on their car trip,

renews in Johnny a sense of purpose. It makes him realize what Meredith meant when, at the outset of their trip, she asked him to "help teach [Eloise] how to walk this world" (Hubbard 26). It is "what Meredith had wanted him to teach her. That you could come from something, even be something that made you stand out or off to one side, and still find a way to be strong and happy" (Hubbard 128). Telling Eloise about his mapmaking aids in his self-discovery as he finds purpose in helping her—a fellow Ribkins and a young Black woman—learn to navigate the world. It furthermore serves as an example of how *The Talented Ribkins* uses mobility to examine the ways in which movement can be used to regulate and also challenge structures of power. Johnny recognizes "who has the power to move, how society limits the power to move" (Wedehase 31) and he endeavors to impart this knowledge on Eloise.

Mobility and Eloise's Journey to Self-Identity

The road trip and the stories shared along the way also help Eloise negotiate her identity. Eloise knows little to nothing about the Ribkins. Her father, Franklin, died when Eloise was very young, and that is why she joins Johnny on this trip; as Meredith tells Johnny, "She needs somebody to help teach her how to walk this world. Somebody that understands" (Hubbard 26). Eloise has a Ribkins talent—she can catch objects thrown at her—but has no Ribkins family to guide her in how to put her talent to use. Johnny finds his purpose and a renewed sense of self by teaching Eloise about her family and their history of talents. He tells her more about her father, Franklin. She knows of his ability to climb things, but to this knowledge Johnny adds: "You know what your daddy was doing the last time I saw him? He was climbing a twenty-story building. [. . .] [Y]our daddy . . . just hiked his pants and scaled it. Went straight up the side like it was nothing" (Hubbard 117). Johnny talks proudly about Franklin's talent, instilling a similar pride in Eloise, and he also encourages her ability, calling it "beautiful" (Hubbard 69).

Importantly, mobility plays a pivotal role in Eloise's identity formation, too. It defines her talent—as it does her father's climbing talent and Johnny's mapmaking—which she is learning to use. When he discovers she has been hiding her true talent for fear of being offensive —that her "catching" is really "snatching," moving things with her mind—he assures her, "There's nothing wrong with being strange" and eagerly, "more than anything," he wants to "show it to people" (Hubbard 262-63). Johnny's eagerness to show off Eloise's talent and his encouragement puts her

on the path to finding her place, to embracing her identity. Here again, the figurative movement of stories also contributes to Eloise's self-development, teaches her something about who she is as a "talented" Ribkins.

The stops along the journey are equally significant, as they introduce Eloise to other members of the Ribkins family and to more stories that tell her about her family history and help her journey to identity. A stop at Simone's house, for instance, provides an opportunity for Eloise to learn more about the Ribkins' "legacy" and her place in the family. In addition to possessing her own unique talent—she can shapeshift*—Simone is an exceptionally significant figure in the Ribkins family in that she serves as an example of social and economic mobility, living a life of comfort and privilege in the "mini-mansion" gifted to her by her husband, the Judge (Hubbard 55). She encourages Eloise to see the value of upward mobility for herself: "Plus, you're a woman, so I'm sorry to say but that makes it doubly important that you know your worth. Because ain't nobody else going to tell you. Quite frankly, there's no such thing as a black woman who every amounted to anything walking around like they got something to apologize for. You've got to stand tall, child. Got to go out there and be strong no matter what" (Hubbard 55). The stories from other Ribkins such as Simone provide Eloise with a stronger sense of community. Beyond that, they help Eloise understand not just her Ribkins family, but her larger identity as a young Black woman trying to move through a world in which "the distribution of mobility" continues to be limited for African Americans, particularly Black women.

Florida as Significant Setting: Reclaiming History Through Movement

Finally, it is also important to take into consideration the novel's Florida setting: as particularly fertile ground for interrogations of mobility, given the state's place in the literary and national imaginations as a nexus of movement—travel and tourism, migration and immigration—but also, importantly, as a state with a vexed history of racial injustice. In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston acknowledges that she wanted to gather stories in Florida because it is "a place that draws people . . . from all over the world" (1). But Florida's reputation as "the sunshine state" has obscured some of its darker, Jim Crow-era history. The Florida setting, therefore, allows for Hubbard, through Johnny's journey, to recover some of that Black history that, like Johnny's money, has been buried. Johnny's memory of the segregated beach with the fort, for instance, is

likely inspired by Bunche Beach, the only Black beach in Ft. Myers during Jim Crow. It evokes other historic beach sites that are in danger of being lost to time, too, such as Jacksonville's Manhattan Beach, the oldest beach resort for African Americans in Northeast Florida. In Buena Vista, Johnny takes Eloise to a botanical garden that was once the home of the Ribkins patriarch, the Rib King: "It didn't look like this back then," he tells her, "When they settled here, all this was just a swamp" (Hubbard 124). He continues to explain how the area was a free Black settlement that was destroyed by white people in the next town over. The Rib King was the sole survivor. The decimation of this community conjures images of Rosewood, the historic Black town in Florida's Levy County that was the site of a racially motivated massacre. As Hubbard remarks in an interview with *The Guardian*, "So much is left out of official narratives of history . . . and yet so much is retained through stories and oral histories" (Lea). This is reflected in *The Talented Ribkins*, when Johnny remembers a time when Franklin told him, "Your map matters, history matters" (Hubbard 223). As we can see, making one's own map is a form of identity re-creation. Movement, in this sense, both exposes and elides power structures of identity containment. The novel's emphasis on movement is, therefore, ultimately an act of resistance, part of a larger quest to reclaim history.

Conclusion

The Talented Ribkins, through its emphasis on mobility and identity, demonstrates how stories matter, history matters. Johnny and Eloise's road trip across Florida is at once a literal and symbolic journey in which movement represents their process of identity formation. Through his travels with Eloise and through sharing stories of his past with her—particularly of his time with the Justice Committee and his mapmaking talent—Johnny can reclaim a lost part of himself; through teaching Eloise about her own talent and her history as a Ribkins, Johnny finds a renewed sense of purpose. Similarly, the road trip is significant for Eloise, too, as Johnny's stories and meeting other members of the Ribkins family help her understand who she is as a "talented" Ribkins. Looking at Hubbard's novel within the context of mobility studies can only help expand our understanding of its exploration of racial injustice, as its own effort in our current "freedom-of-movement" movement.

[1] The role of the supernatural in Hubbard's novel is an exciting and important area of inquiry, but it is beyond the scope of this essay. I leave it to other scholars to explore.

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