

5-1-2015

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“He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my
mind”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Anthropological Gaze

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Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah

Lawrence College

May 2015

Abstract

“He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Anthropological Gaze

Natasha Sanchez

This thesis explores the life and anthropological merits of Zora Neale Hurston’s literary works. I focus specifically on Hurston’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* to bring to light her critique of Western society. This thesis argues that Hurston purposefully utilized anthropology as a tool to switch the anthropological gaze upon white Western culture, thereby constructing the West as “other.” She masterfully bridges the gap between two disciplines: literature and anthropology. Through this argument I highlight just how academia has overlooked Hurston’s scholarly voice in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as well as answer the question: how will our reading of Hurston change if we view her in this new light? Overall, this project establishes a different narrative regarding the life and legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, one of America’s most controversial African American writers of the Twentieth Century. In this creation of a new narrative, it is my hope that this thesis will add to the field of Women’s History.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Tracy M. King-Sanchez, who introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston when I was fourteen. Your passion for Hurston has inspired me and your love acted as my anchor throughout this incredible two-year journey.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank both my director Priscilla Murolo and my thesis advisor Lyde Cullen Sizer for their tremendous direction and support throughout this process. These wonderful professors have helped me shape my voice as a women's historian. Thank you to professor Carol Zoref for your personal guidance during this exciting yet stressful experience. Thank you to my brilliant professor Alwin Jones for encouraging me to continue my studies on Zora Neale Hurston and to pursue this degree in Women's History. I would be remiss in not thanking my amazing professor Matilde Zimmerman who read my thesis in its final stages. Without her instruction during my first year of college, I would not have discovered my passion for history. Thank you to the incredibly helpful archivists at the George Smathers Library, Moorland-Spring Research Center and Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library. Without your generosity, I would not have been able to obtain the documents used in this thesis. I would like to give personal thanks to my loving father for his role as my quasi-editor and for all of those trips to the airport while I conducted research in Florida. Finally, thank you to my intelligent and powerful women's history classmates. This beautiful cohort has inspired me to work hard, dream big, and keep fighting for more inclusive (her)stories.

In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed into the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.

Zora Neale Hurston
*Mules and Men*¹

An Introduction to Hurston's "Spy-Glass of Anthropology"

When I was growing up, Zora Neale Hurston was a household name among my female relatives. Compared to my white peers, who spoke of classic writers such as James Joyce, Charles Dickens or even the Bronte sisters, my inspiration was unusual. This was a gift from my family to me: Hurston wrote not of the self-made man but of the lone black woman and her journey toward self-actualization. She challenged the stereotypical male narrative by highlighting the hypocrisy entrenched within acclaimed male-centric stories. Her critique of the self-made man was pointed, for it unveiled the structures of white supremacy and patriarchy more than it unpacked the notions of individualism.

Hurston's work held meaning that moved me to my core, despite my inarticulate fourteen-year-old self. My first encounter with Hurston began as I was struggling emotionally at a high school where I did not belong. It was a small school district in an even smaller town where all of my classmates had known each other since pre-school. Walking down the main hallway toward the cafeteria was like being a brown speck drowning haplessly in a river of white waves. Invariably, I felt isolated, frustrated with daily

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men in Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles* ed. by Cheryl A. Wall, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 9.

occurrences that were completely foreign to my peers: being told my hair looked better straight rather than in its natural curly state; being the immediate spokesperson when exploring black narratives in all-white classrooms; fearing backlash from my peers whenever I discussed race or racism. Responding to my rather depressed state, my mother gave me her personal copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, feeling it would be an effective book to help me cope with my isolation. *Their Eyes* could provide me with an image of a black environment that I had been removed from as I struggled with being an outsider in such a foreign and unwelcoming town.

Janie Mae Crawford saved me from the deep depths of a quiet inner voice that told me that I would never find my own worth. Janie was an inspiration. Her own treacherous path to discover her voice began as her grandmother thrust her into womanhood. Her young, passionate, and impressionable disposition left her grandmother feeling as though she had no choice but to her marry her off to a man who could provide for her and keep her safe. Her grandmother's impending death created a sense of urgency; she needed to explain to Janie the way the world worked, to give her a way to evade the worst of it. "So," she said,

de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fur it tuh be different wid you.²

Hurston's description of black women as the mule of society rang true to me, succinctly describing my own observations about the disparate ways American society valued white men, black men and black women. This novel revealed to me worlds peopled by only black

² Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In *Zora Neale Hurston: Novels and Stories: Jonah's Gourd Vine/Their Eyes Were Watching God/Moses, Man of the Mountain / Seraph on the Suwanee / Selected Stories* ed. Cheryl A. Wall, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 186.

people, worlds with their own challenges, where black women had to negotiate their way between the needs and expectations of others to find their self.

Hurston's assertion that black women were the "mules of society" followed me throughout my time in higher education. With this quote in mind, I was able to examine gender dynamics in all facets of Western society and culture. The multitude of black and feminist literature courses I took provided me with the opportunity to study Hurston and her fiction. I was able to place her texts alongside younger black feminist texts written by Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and others, that embodied the women-centered narrative pervasive in Hurston's novels and short stories (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and "Sweat," to name just two).

Yet at the heart of Hurston's work was another scholarly discipline: anthropology. This, she explained, was at the center of her understanding of the world, and it informed all she did. Hurston received a degree from Barnard, studied under Franz Boas, the father of modern anthropology, and wrote three books based on her research. Largely unacknowledged in the literary world, Hurston's anthropological training explains a great deal about the ways she saw, understood, and translated the world to herself and her readers.

After my exposure to anthropology in undergraduate years, I became aware of the pitfalls of late nineteenth and twentieth century anthropology and its often imbalanced relationship to non-Western cultures. Hurston, too, was aware of that disconnect. Rather than subscribing to this Western tradition, she used its tools to explore and validate the culture and experiences of rural southern blacks like herself. While I did stumble across a few literary critics who mentioned Hurston's anthropological training, it was rare that her texts were analyzed with that training in mind. Instead of the critics' seeing her work as revealing truths

about the ways communities interacted culturally, Hurston was described as offering social and political commentary.

It was not until I began my journey in graduate school that I gradually understood that Hurston was fundamentally an anthropologist, rather than just a cultural or political critic. My work is meant to contribute to the scholarly narrative, giving credit to her creative work by emphasizing and exploring its anthropological contributions. More important, I wanted to present Hurston as both a scholar and a writer, one who melds the intellectual and the creative, the observer and the illustrator.

Although she was a renowned author and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston was also a controversial public figure during the second quarter of the twentieth century, her most active period as a scholar and writer.³ Her widely known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and her somewhat misleading and profoundly censored autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* sparked debates across academic disciplines when they were published. They continue to do so today, more than seventy years later.

In the thirty-five years since black scholar, author, activist and feminist Alice Walker revived Hurston's work,⁴ academics and readers have re-engaged with the debate over the

³ See: Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 5.; M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 10-13.; Deborah Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 2.; Andrew Delblanco, "The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston," *Journal of Black in Higher Education*. 18, (1997-1998): 103-108.; Hazel V. Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre. (New York: Oxford University Press: 1994), 28-43.

⁴ Alice Walker, a Sarah Lawrence College alumna, embarked on a journey to rediscover Hurston and her work. She traveled to Hurston's hometown, interviewed the townspeople and purchased Hurston a gravestone. This article revived Hurston's work in academic circles. See Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston", *Ms. Magazine* (March 1975), 74-79, 84-89. for more information about Walker's journey.

value of Hurston's legacy.⁵ Much of the debate has centered on her political stance, either labeling her as apolitical or aligning her with unpopular radical views.

Much of the scholarship available depicts Hurston as a writer of folklore. While scholars have argued that Hurston's occupation as an anthropologist informed her fiction by incorporating her lived experiences in the rural South, they have yet to fully bridge the gap between literary criticism and anthropology. This fusion would fully represent her career as a scholar who utilized her research, as well as her personal experiences, to shape her creative writing. Hurston's fiction deeply valued her rural southern black culture that the greater society deemed ignorant and unworthy of being included in either literary or academic domains. Much like her fiction, Hurston's nonfiction work reflects a calculated pursuit of (rural) southern black culture and its deep connection to the overall study of anthropology.

The main Hurston scholarship with which I am in dialogue includes Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977), Valerie Boyd's *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2003), Margaret Genevieve West's *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (2005), and Deborah Plant's, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (1995). Additionally, writing on Zora Neale Hurston such as Susan Willis's "Wandering: Hurston's Search for Self and Method," (1993) and Claudine Raynaud's "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," (1992) are amongst the many articles I discuss in order to further my analysis.⁶

⁵ See Plant, *A Biography of the Spirit*, 1.

⁶ Books: Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, (New York: A Lisa Drew Book-Scribner, 2003).; Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995).; Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977).; Margaret Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture*, (Gainesville:

Hemenway's *A Literary Biography* and Boyd's *Wrapped in Rainbows* both examine the life and legacy of Hurston, although they differ greatly in presentation, intended audience and overall argument. Hemenway, a scholar of literature, published his biography in 1977. He admires and assesses Hurston's politics, writings and interactions with others. The first of its kind, this biography served as a foundation for younger academics to expand the scholarship on Hurston and her work. The scholars I make mention of later in this thesis refer to Hemenway's biography often in order to support their own arguments regarding Zora Neale Hurston. Journalist Valerie Boyd's biography is a celebration, reading much like a story. Boyd structures her book to pay homage to Hurston's literary career. This construction of Hurston and her life is fluid, leaving room for contradiction – something Hemenway avoids.

Raynaud's descriptive essay explores the controversy behind Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Although it was Hurston's most successful book, black literary critics and writers took umbrage with her lack of portrayal of the struggles of blacks in America. Raynaud challenges critics of *Dust Tracks* by highlighting the profound discrepancy between Hurston's manuscript and the original published autobiography. Hurston's white publishers were adamant about removing sections and entire chapters that spoke negatively of Hurston's personal struggles with being an African-American woman in predominantly white-male spaces. Hurston also explicitly reflected on her disapproval of Roosevelt and America's entry into World War II, supposedly to fight racism and genocide

University of Florida, 2005). Articles: Claudine Raynaud. "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *De-Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 34-57.; Susan Willis, "Wandering: Hurston's Search for Self and Method," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993), 110-127.

overseas. This explanation for U.S. involvement conveniently ignored America's own racist and imperialist practices.⁷ Following in Raynaud's lead, I look carefully at what was left in and what was left out of the text published in 1942. Hurston's manuscript is of absolute value to my thesis and directly challenges the critics of *Dust Tracks*.

Susan Willis's essay argues that Hurston's narratives are intentional in structure, syntax, vocabulary and character development. Willis analyzes *Dust Tracks*, as well as Hurston's compilation of folklore *Of Mules and Men*, to make the conclusion that their narrative structures are in fact indicative of Hurston's situation as a Southern black woman in a white man's academic field of study. Willis suggests that Hurston subverts white academia and black respectability politics through language, vernacular and her overall character development. Harlem Renaissance writers were in debate over notions of respectability – a debate prevalent within the politics of black writings.⁸ Hurston, in rejection of such politics, cultivated a sense of authenticity regarding rural southern black culture by incorporating black vernacular within her writing. Her characters were representative of black southerners' values and their experiences.

Overall, the secondary sources I consult serve as reference points throughout this thesis. They express the challenges of attempting to accurately describe the life of a complicated woman. Hurston scholars portray just how important Zora Neale Hurston has

⁷ Claudine Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *De-Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 48-52.

⁸ Much of the art and scholarship that sought to maintain black respectability promoted the inherent value of blacks in America while rallying behind the image of the educated black northerner. This is part of a greater movement called The New Negro Movement, although Hurston refers to this in *Dust Tracks* as the "Negro Renaissance." For more information, see Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 682.; Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995, 1-13.

been to the creation of modern-day American society.⁹ Yet, in many of the secondary sources I access, the omission from the conversation of Zora Neale Hurston's achievements and scholarship as an anthropologist is emblematic of American society's continual unwillingness to view Hurston as worthy of scholarly credentials. I ask, how would it change the reading of Hurston's work if we did examine her in this new light?

Dust Tracks on a Road was Hurston's autobiography published in 1942. It was widely received by white critics and readers alike. Unfortunately, Hurston encountered criticism from black critics for her perpetuation of racist ideologies. Today there still exist critics who discredit Hurston for pandering to her white publishers. Why are Hurston's readers so intent on discrediting *Dust Tracks*? It is through this question that I directly address and counter notions posited by scholars and readers (particularly her contemporaries) who viewed Hurston's fictional and autobiographical work as lacking scholarly and political perspectives. In order to make sense of Hurston's politics, one must know and understand the difference between the original manuscript and the published version of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I establish on Hurston's portrayal of her years at Barnard College and studying under Franz Boas at Columbia, as well as her research on folklore for her patroness Charlotte Osgood Mason. I discuss Hurston's personal correspondences with her patroness Osgood Mason, mentor Boas, and good friend Langston Hughes.

It is evident that Zora Neale Hurston vastly contributed to the field of anthropology with *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. In turn, what must be considered is how Hurston has criticized and redefined the discipline of anthropology through her creative writing. Hurston's most contested book, her 1942 autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is evidence

⁹ All of the secondary resources pertaining to Hurston express, in various ways, just how important Hurston is to the overall study of literature, anthropology, folklore and African American history.

of that. My thesis explores Hurston's life, focusing primarily on vital moments within her academic and professional life; delves into Hurston's unaltered edition of her autobiography of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and explains Hurston's choices when narrating her own life and her use of anthropology as a weapon that exposes the ills of the developed Western world.

#

You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed of resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

Zora Neale Hurston
*Mules and Men*¹⁰

Hurston's Wandering Self

Zora Neale Hurston's assessment in the excerpt above is from the introduction to her first anthropological book *Mules and Men*, which highlights the perspective of the anthropological subject. Hurston explains the difficulties of observing black communities due to their reserved interactions with anthropologists. More important, Hurston explicitly emphasizes the blatant ignorance of the white educated observer. It shifts power and places black anthropological subjects in control of what they speak and, therefore, what is recorded. Hurston, too, had difficulties upon her initial research trip in the South. Only when she realized that she held insider information as a southern black woman raised in a similar

¹⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in *Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles* ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995), 580.

environment, did she gain confidence and power as a black woman in an academic field dominated by white men. She no longer had to prove her intelligence by sanitizing her speech, utilizing proper English and academic jargon in place of the colorful and metaphorical idioms that were pervasive in rural southern black communities. She could simply be Zora Neale Hurston, a boisterous, witty, scrappy and creative black woman from Eatonville, Florida.

Hurston's identity as a researcher teetering between Ivy League educated and rural black southerner provided her with a different outlook, particularly within the field of anthropology. That "feather-bed of resistance" accompanied Hurston to Harlem, where she encountered many white people eager to know her story. She may have recorded a public history of her life, reviewing all of her accomplishments, mistakes, worries, tragedies, and celebrations, but Hurston was no fool. She understood that she had to tread lightly because, as she states in *Mules and Men*, white people knew "so little about us."¹¹ Her connection to her hometown and her observations of its customs, religious practices and rituals, stories, and jokes were incorporated in her autobiography. Insight gleaned from her observation of social and cultural interactions observed as a child and later as an anthropologist to anticipate the motivations and the perspectives of her white readers.

Before Zora Neale Hurston was hailed as an important voice of the twentieth century, Hurston was an assertive and precocious black girl from Eatonville, Florida. She was born on January 7, 1891.¹² Throughout her adult life Hurston frequently lied about her age, telling others she was younger than she was. She was the fifth of eight children born to preacher and three-term mayor of Eatonville, John Hurston and poet and home educator, Lucy Ann Potts,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For more information about Hurston and her age, see Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 3.

later Lucy Hurston.¹³ The Bible was Hurston's first piece of literature and it fueled her passions for reading, writing and storytelling throughout her life.¹⁴

Eatonville would serve as the nucleus of inspiration for Hurston's career in searching for folklore and the beauty in seemingly undesirable environments, that is the black rural South.¹⁵ Small, self-sustaining and one of the first incorporated black towns in the state of Florida, Eatonville was entirely composed of black people; the only whites were visitors or those passing through to neighboring towns. This racial makeup provided Hurston with a sense of confidence in herself as an individual due to the lack of whites within this locale.¹⁶

Hurston was an observant child who took after her mother in personality and spirit. Her mother encouraged her to reach for her goals, no matter the obstacles, much to the dismay of her father. John Hurston felt that encouraging Hurston's vocal nature would have "dire" consequences. She reflects on her father's reaction to her strong-willed spirit by recounting, "The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue."¹⁷ The tension between her parents was a result of Lucy's educated and more middle-class background, which often stirred up feelings of insecurity in John, who came from a poorer, less educated

¹³ Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit*, (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007) 14-17.; Hemenway, 15.

¹⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road in Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles* ed. by Cheryl A. Wall, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 594-595.

¹⁵ Patterson, "Portraits of the South: Zora Neale Hurston's Politics of Place" in *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, 32-49.

¹⁶ See section "The Founding of Eatonville," in chapter "A Place Between Home and Horror" in Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005), 71-82.

¹⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 573.

home. It provided some of the context for Hurston's famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.¹⁸

When Hurston was just thirteen, her mother died, severing the bond between John Hurston and his children.¹⁹ Hurston attributed her now aimlessly wandering self to her mother's death; "That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit."²⁰ Soon thereafter, she went to school in Jacksonville, bouncing around between various schools and homes. At the age of fifteen, she began working as a maid for white families but soon found that neither was she made for domestic work, nor was she able to ignore the incessant sexual harassment she received from her male employers. During one of her breaks from school, Hurston was involved in a physical altercation with her stepmother, permanently alienating Hurston from her family.²¹

After cutting ties with Eatonville, the only town she knew and loved, Hurston struggled to find employment. Eventually she joined a theater troupe that traveled the South to perform shows. She became the assistant to one of the actresses, who took to teasing Hurston for her naiveté, her colloquialisms and her dark skin.²² Hurston did not consider her colleague's actions as racist, but rather as a sign of affection.²³ Upon their travels to Baltimore in 1917,²⁴ Hurston would begin to contemplate the idea of returning to school.²⁵

¹⁸ Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 33-34.

¹⁹ Boyd, 58.; Hemenway, 17.; Plant, 20-21.

²⁰ Hurston, 618.

²¹ Boyd, 68-64.; Plant, 23.; Hurston, 640-644.

²² See Hurston, 651.

²³ Hurston explains that teasing had no "malice in it. Just their idea of good backstage gags. By the time they stopped it, it seemed that I was necessary to everyone." See Hurston, 653.

²⁴ Hurston's nameless employer (Hurston wants her employer to remain nameless) was leaving her job to get married. Rather than push Hurston to stay at the troupe, she encouraged Hurston to re-enroll in school. During their travels through Virginia and into Baltimore, Hurston's employer inquired about schools. For more information see Hurston, 662.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 665-667.

It was only when Hurston decided to muster up the courage to re-enroll in school, that she began a life-altering journey. In the evenings Hurston took classes at Morgan Academy, now titled Morgan State University.²⁶ In order to attend school she had to convince her teachers she was the same age as her peers by changing her year of birth. It was obvious to her teachers that Hurston was mature not just in intellect, but also in life experience. Hurston recalls occasions when her teachers would leave her in charge of the class because she was far more advanced than her classmates,

Whenever Miss Clarke, our English teacher, was absent, I was put in charge of the class. This happened time and time again, sometimes for a whole week at a time. With history it was the same. Once I had the history class for nearly a month and had to be excused from my other classes.²⁷

She graduated from the academy in 1918, after one year, and went on to attend Howard University. Due to rather infrequent schooling, Hemenway notes, Hurston took a year to attend Howard Prep to build up a foundation necessary to succeed in college. She received her Associate's Degree from Howard in 1920, working part time as a waitress and manicurist to offset the cost of her tuition, but she would not officially leave until 1924.²⁸

Despite Hurston's intelligence, she did not live up to her potential during her time at Howard. She excelled in the classes she loved—like literature—but did not do well in the classes she detested, physical education being one of them.²⁹ Still, it was not the grades that made Hurston's time at Howard so vital to her career, it was the connections she made with black professors, advisors and students. With English literature as her passion and writing as

²⁶ Howard Prep was attached to Howard University. Hurston explains this on page 668.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 671.

²⁸ Hurston, 671-674.; Hemenway, 18.

Hurston attempted to finish the full Bachelors Degree but was unable to due to illness that kept her out of school for an extended period, as well as her lack of funds. For more information see Hurston, 681.

²⁹ Hemenway, 18.

her gift, she was encouraged by multiple professors to join Howard's literary club, The Stylus. It was formed and overseen by Alain Locke, a philosopher, Rhodes Scholar, and Harvard graduate.³⁰ Locke later became Hurston's mentor, as well as a formidable figure in the Harlem Renaissance. It was under Locke's tutelage that Hurston was prompted to move to New York City in 1925 in pursuit of her writing.

Nineteen twenty-five was an exceptional year for Hurston. After her move to Harlem her play *Color Struck* and her short story "Spunk" both won prizes from which *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, published the two.³¹ "Spunk" was also chosen for Alain Locke's groundbreaking anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which incorporated the fiction, poetry, essays, and visual art of established and up-and-coming black artists during the early twentieth century.³² Hurston was later invited to the *Opportunity* dinner where she would receive third place for her work. These successes pushed her to make connections with influential men and women who would help bolster her career.³³ At this dinner Hurston met author Fannie Hurst, who took an interest in her. As a result she offered Hurston a job as her secretary and later as a personal driver (Hurston was a terrible typist). Hurst and Hurston developed a great friendship, even if it did at times result in tension due to Hurst's whimsical and liberal naiveté and Hurston's assertive and vocal personality. Nevertheless, in her autobiography, Hurston adoringly reflects on a time when she and Hurst drove up to Niagara Falls on a whim because Hurston had never been to Canada.³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ *Color Struck* and "Spunk" were precursors to Hurston's anthropological books. These texts describe her interest in folklore and rural southern black life. They were published in *Opportunity* the magazine of the National Urban League.

³² Hemenway, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴ For more information on her trip to Canada with Fannie Hurst see Hurston, 735-737.

Although she gained a means to an income through Fannie Hurst, it was a meeting with another influential white woman that opened doors for Hurston as an intellectual.³⁵ Annie Nathan Meyer, a novelist and one of Barnard's founders, admired Hurston's high-strung and independent personality. Meyer invited Hurston to study at the prestigious women's college as its first black student, aware of Hurston's talented writing and her intellectual mind.³⁶ Hurston attributed her love for anthropology to her time at Barnard.

While at Barnard she was given the opportunity to conduct research with renowned anthropologist and Columbia professor, Dr. Franz Boas. Franz Boas was an influential anthropologist, named the "Father of American Anthropology" for his unique perspective on culture and race.³⁷ During this time Hurston also studied with female anthropology professors Ruth Benedict and Gladys Reichard and fellow student Margaret Mead. Boas found Hurston's intelligence, spirit and rural southern background to fit well with the study of anthropology, particularly her interest in folklore.³⁸ Their relationship extended far beyond the casual mentor-mentee relationship, instead developing into a pseudo father-daughter relationship. Hurston even took to nicknaming Boas "Papa Franz," a nickname he did not object to.³⁹ Their relationship was vital to Hurston's growth as she began the process of refining her anthropological gaze.

³⁵ Hemenway, 21.

³⁶ Myrna Goldberg, "The Barnard Connection: Zora Neale Hurston and Annie Nathan Meyer" in *All About Zora: Proceedings of the Academic Conference of the First Annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts, January 26-27, 1990; Eatonville, Florida*, ed. Alice Morgan Grant, (Eatonville, Florida: Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc.: 1991), 86.

³⁷ For more information on Franz Boas, please see Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press: 1998), 99-108.

³⁸ Boyd, 114.; Hemenway, 63.

³⁹ Hurston, 683-684.; Boyd, 114.

Hurston so impressed Boas with her intelligence that in February of 1927, she was awarded a research fellowship to conduct fieldwork in Central Florida for six months. Boas had worked with outside donors to collect funds in order to make this research fellowship possible. Her job was to travel throughout the South, collecting African American folklore which included songs, lies, jokes and dances.⁴⁰ This was Hurston's dream come true; she was finally able to prove to academics the value of studying her own culture. Unfortunately, Hurston soon found that her fieldwork was much more challenging than she had originally anticipated. She was confronted with the reality that she simultaneously existed as a black woman born and raised in rural Florida and as an Ivy League educated, metropolitan black woman. Hurston came back to New York without having effectively engaged with her subjects. Her unoriginal findings incited disappointment from Boas, but she used that experience as fodder for her next research topic: hoodoo and African American religious practices.⁴¹

Soon thereafter, Hurston began to understand the plight of academics continuously in search of funding for their research. In September of that same year, Alain Locke introduced Hurston to older, white and wealthy patroness, Charlotte Osgood Mason. Osgood Mason was responsible for funding artists such as Langston Hughes, and in December of 1927, in funding Hurston herself. Osgood Mason required that Hurston and all of her other beneficiaries call her Godmother. She had Hurston sign a contract giving to Godmother legal ownership of all the research and writing Hurston produced. Additionally, she required that Hurston not use her findings for creative purposes such as writing novels, short stories or

⁴⁰ Hurston, 687.

⁴¹ Hemenway, 93.

even poems.⁴² There were times when Hurston deliberately went behind Osgood Mason's back, consulting with close friend Langston Hughes on her latest creative piece. Despite the overt control Osgood Mason exerted, Hurston presented herself as respectful of her patroness's wishes.⁴³

Between the years 1928 and 1931 Hurston remained indebted to Godmother, anxiously awaiting the day she could gain full creative and artistic autonomy.⁴⁴ The end of their official contract was also the end of Hurston's strong friendship with writer Langston Hughes. The correspondence between Hurston and Hughes between the years of 1928 and 1931 explores their aspirations, fears, and struggles with writing, both creatively and academically. Hurston often speaks of her research, eager to write essays and books on her observations down South. Older than Hughes, she provided mentorship as he began his own studies. In one letter, she reveals to him how during her fieldwork in the South she met a man who lacked the funds to buy Hughes's latest book. Hurston wanted this man to experience the journey of reading Hughes's text and gave this man her personal, signed copy. It was her hope that this man would then spread the word about Hughes's work.⁴⁵

⁴² Godmother was aware of Hurston's literary career. To establish control over Hurston's Godmother eliminated the possibility of Hurston falling back on her creative writing in order to escape the contract. Godmother herself had anthropological training but was too old to conduct her own research. See Boyd, 156-159, 168.

⁴³ Hurston, 688-689.

See Langston Hughes Collection 1927-1930. Personal Correspondences Box 82. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.; Alain Locke Papers. Collection Box 164-38. The Moorland-Spring Research Center, Howard University, D.C.

⁴⁴ Because Hurston required funding after their initial contract ended, it took Hurston two more years before she could fully access her research to use for her creative work. See Hemenway, 104-109.; Plant, 41-42, 49.

For correspondence between Hurston and Hughes, see Langston Hughes Collection, Personal Correspondences, Box 82.

⁴⁵ Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, Langston Hughes Collection, Box 82, Folder 1587, August 16, 1928.

The unfortunate rift between Hughes and Hurston erupted over the legal rights to their play *Mule Bone*. The play began while Hurston conducted her fieldwork under Godmother's contract. It was also during this time that Hughes ended his own contract with Godmother because of his frustrations with her excessive need to control his creative process.⁴⁶ Hurston and Hughes worked together on the play, but tensions arose after Hughes brought on a third collaborator, a woman Hurston disliked. The details behind this conflict vary depending on who is telling the story, but *Mule Bone* resulted in Hughes and Hurston falling out in 1931.⁴⁷

The year 1931 was a year of failed projects, *Mule Bone* one of the biggest. Hurston had been contracted to direct two revues *Fast and Furious* and *Jungle Scandals*. Both were considerable commercial failures. Additionally, Hurston began working on a concert entitled "The Great Day," which preoccupied her for three years. "The Great Day," according to literary scholar Robert Hemenway, was an "artistic success" but brought Hurston no revenue from this project.⁴⁸ She was bitter about this experience. In her censored chapter "Concert" in *Dust Tracks*, she claims famous composer and choir director Hall Johnson stole "The Great Day" from her.⁴⁹ She goes on to tell her readers that he directed a successful Broadway play three years later using her stolen material.

Despite three years of unsuccessful projects, Hurston published her short story "The Guided Six Bits" in 1933, which gained the attention of well-regarded publisher Bertram

⁴⁶ Hughes needed money but no longer wanted to be under Godmother's control. He was frustrated and angered by her fetishizing blacks and wanted to end his contract with her. His initial split with Godmother hurt Hughes tremendously. It caused Hurston to placate Osgood Mason and support a depressed Hughes. See Boyd, 203.

⁴⁷ For more information about *Mule Bone* and the subsequent falling out of Hurston and Hughes, see Boyd, 198-217.; Hemenway, 136-158.; Langston Hughes Collection 1927-1930: Personal Correspondences Box 82.

⁴⁸ Hemenway, 181.

⁴⁹ Hurston, 804-808.

Lippincott. Subsequently, Lippincott published her novels, including her first, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in 1934. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston gave voice and praise to black preachers such as her father, whose sermons were poetic despite their lack of a formal education and somewhat debauched lifestyle.⁵⁰ The reviews for *Jonah's Gourd Vine* were not great; Hurston became upset by her white critics and their racist readings of her novel.

Poor reviews prompted Hurston to turn back to academia. In 1935 she decided to pursue a PhD in anthropology from Columbia University. It took only two years for her to become disillusioned. The year 1935 was also the year that Hurston's nonfiction book *Mules and Men* was published. The book was a compilation of stories, jokes and experiences that Hurston had collected during her travels in the South in 1927. Hurston had to wait a few years until she was completely separate from Osgood Mason and free to return to the research that became the basis for this book.⁵¹ Reviews were mixed, but not as hurtful or upsetting as her first book's reviews.

A year into her studies at Columbia Hurston received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship to pursue anthropological work in both Jamaica and Haiti. During her time in Haiti, she spent two months writing her second and most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Published in 1937, Hurston's novel was praised by white critics and unjustly critiqued by black critics such as Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, and even her own mentor, Alain Locke.⁵² *Their Eyes* was unique in this period for black American literature because it veered from the usual narrative. Typically, black writers attempted to explain the black

⁵⁰ Hemenway, 194-195.

Margaret Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture*, (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2005), 69-76.

⁵¹ Hemenway, 218-224.

⁵² For the reviews of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Richard Wright and Alain Locke see, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, (New York: Amistad, Penguin USA, 1993), 16-25.

experience in white American by criticizing white supremacy and questioning American democracy. Rather than address these issues, Hurston examined black communities that subjected their own to oppression and second-class citizenship, especially black women. Communist and vocal political writer, Richard Wright felt Hurston perpetuated black male stereotypes, reaffirming the perceptions of blacks held by racist whites. Additionally, he felt that Hurston's flowery language and female-centric narrative did nothing to advance the cause of ending Jim Crow and achieving equality for blacks.⁵³

Refusing to dwell on black critics' scathing reviews of *Their Eyes*, Hurston published two books in consecutive years. In 1938, based on her research in Jamaica and Haiti, she published *Tell My Horse*, a compilation of anthropological journal entries. The book was unsuccessful, mostly because of its structure. Unlike *Mules and Men*, which relies on anecdotes, *Tell My Horse* reads too scientifically. Regardless of its cold reception, she went on in 1939 to publish her next and arguably most underrated novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Hurston conceived and wrote the novel during her active participation in the Federal Writers Project in Florida.⁵⁴ Critics felt this novel was too lofty and that her appropriation of Moses as representative of the African American struggle too brazen. Black critics, once more, described Hurston's characterization of Moses as minstrel-like, arguing that she again perpetuated caricatures of black people as uncultured.⁵⁵

In 1942, Hurston published her critically acclaimed autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. While in California visiting a friend, Hurston wrote about her experiences struggling to find employment, her journey toward becoming a writer and anthropologist, her political

⁵³ West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture*, 115-116.; Hemenway, 240-243.; Henry Louis Gates, 16-17.

⁵⁴ West, 160-166.

⁵⁵ Hemenway, 256-257.

beliefs that were continuously questioned, and her complicated relationships with mentors, patrons, colleagues, family members, husbands and friends.⁵⁶ Yet *Dust Tracks* was controversial due Hurston's self-presentation. Rather than acknowledge her blackness, she merely painted herself as an individual entirely separate from her race. Furthermore, her lack of portrayal of a racially divided America through Jim Crow and segregation upset many black critics. The book was awarded the John Anisfield award for advancing understanding of racism and appreciation for cultural diversity in 1943.⁵⁷ It was later revealed that her autobiography was heavily censored by Lippincott, calling into question whether *Dust Tracks* would have received this award for race relations had all of Hurston's original content stayed in place. Nonetheless, *Dust Tracks* was Hurston's biggest commercial success.

The years following the publication of *Dust Tracks on a Road's* marked the beginnings of Hurston's downward spiral. Although she was awarded the opportunity to write various articles on World War II and integration in news sources such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *American Mercury*, Hurston would never again be as successful as she had been during the previous twenty years. Frustration with critics prompted her poorly executed and poorly reviewed *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published in 1948.⁵⁸ The novel's main characters were white, which confronted the hubris of white authors who endeavored to write black stories, according to Hemenway.⁵⁹ The novel depicts the lives of boorish white people. Arguably, it reflects Hurston's subconscious hope that in some way she could make a point

⁵⁶ For information about California see Hurston, 717-718.

Hurston was married twice, each marriage resulting in a divorce. See Hurston, "Love" in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 743-753.; West, 169-171.; Hemenway, 274-277 for more detail.

⁵⁷ Claudine Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," In *De-Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 34-57.

⁵⁸ West, 215-217.; Hemenway, 307-309.

⁵⁹ Hemenway, 308.

about the presupposed superiority of whiteness, both in the construction of her characters and her role as black author narrating a white story.

The year 1948 wrecked havoc on Hurston's personal life, when she was falsely accused of molesting a 10-year-old boy. This accusation shocked Hurston for the event supposedly occurred while Hurston was conducting research in Honduras. Despite an unwavering alibi, Hurston was brought to trial. It took much convincing on her lawyer's part, but eventually the charges were dropped. Yet, the consequences were personally damaging. A news outlet even published a story about Hurston's trial, despite the prosecution dropping the false charges after the trial began, further slandering her name.⁶⁰

Following this incident, Hurston attempted to bounce back by becoming more political in the 1950s. She took to publishing controversial essays in various magazines and newspapers that spoke of racial disparities in America, such as the violation of black voting rights, segregation, and the relationship between white publishers and black authors. These topics did not portray Hurston in the most positive light. The most controversial of all her published pieces was her letter to the editor of the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1955. Titled "Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix," this published letter denounces the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. She did not want black children subjected to the intense racial hatred harbored by the faculty, staff and student body of white schools that black children were forced to attend. She received a backlash from blacks for publically expressing her discontent and, they charged, projecting an image of a self-hating black person. The arguments in most of her published work during this period were perceived as contradictory to her lifelong career as a scholar of black folklore. Opposing images of Hurston—a scholar of black art on

⁶⁰ Hemenway, 319-322.; West, 217-221.

the one hand and an Uncle Tom⁶¹ on the other—were so stark that she lost legitimacy amongst her black readers.

The mid-1950s marked a turn for the worse in Hurston both physically and emotionally. She became disillusioned with American democracy, individualism and republicanism because of her continual mistreatment as a black woman. In and out of poverty, Hurston no longer held a steady job. The last ten years of her life were difficult; she received unemployment checks, her health was in poor condition, and publishers and editors continuously rejected her writing. When looking for work, she was told on several occasions that she was overqualified for jobs like working in factories, and her manuscript *Herod, The Great* was rejected multiple times, remaining unpublished.⁶²

In October 1959, Hurston was hospitalized after a stroke she had earlier that year rendered her incapable of living alone. On January 28, 1960 Zora Neale Hurston passed away due to hypertensive heart disease. She died penniless at a hospital. It took a week for those she kept in contact with (friends, family members and former students) to gather up enough funds to hold a small service. They were unable to afford a gravestone, so she was buried in an unmarked grave.

Her rather isolated lifestyle and destitution at the time of her death were heartbreaking. Many of her books had gone out of print; she had nothing in savings to go toward funeral arrangements, and, more tragically, someone ordered all of her belongings to be burned after she passed away. By good fortune, Patrick N. Duval, a black sheriff, was sent on behalf of Majorie Alder,⁶³ who kept Hurston's belongings after her death, to check up on

⁶¹ West, 228.

⁶² Hemenway, 343.

⁶³ Majorie Alder was a news correspondent from the Miami Herald. She found out about Hurston's passing and the trunk from Hurston's neighbors and immediately went to save Hurston's personal

those belongings. To his dismay, someone had already started burning Hurston's personal items. Ordering the person to stop, he called the fire department to put out the fire. He and the firefighters salvaged what they could, although some documents were beyond saving due to water damage. Without the generosity of Majorie Alder and the quick-thinking intervention of Patrick Duval, Hurston's photos, letters, and manuscripts would have been lost forever.⁶⁴

Hurston herself may have instructed hospital personnel to destroy her belongings. While there is no concrete evidence that points in this direction, it seems unlikely that Hurston was rendered entirely incapable of establishing some method of control, even in her most vulnerable state. This is not to deify a woman who was undoubtedly human, but rather to put forth a suggestion that Hurston may have desired to maintain an air of mystery after her death. Whether or not the fire was deliberately enacted by Hurston's orders is relatively unimportant. What should be understood is Hurston's continual battle for autonomy in creating a personal, academic and creative narrative that was not subject to the assumptions and expectations of others.

belongings. For more information see Norma Jean Lutz, "Biography of Zora Neale Hurston" in *Zora Neale Hurston (Bloom's Biocritiques)*, ed. Harold Bloom, (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers: 2003), 46.

⁶⁴ Lutz, "Biography of Zora Neale Hurston," 46.

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What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no. But I said to myself that that was not what was expected of me, so I was afraid to tell a story the way I wanted, or rather the way the story told itself to me.

Zora Neale Hurston
*Dust Tracks on a Road*⁶⁵

Hurston's Anthropological Gaze in *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Zora Neale Hurston's most controversial book at the time of its publication was her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. It continues to be regarded as such, given its factual inconsistencies, its lack of a political stance, and the narcissistic quality of how she places herself in history.⁶⁶ Published in November 1942, when Hurston was fifty-one, the book describes her disjointed relationships with her family, friends and colleagues, her grueling journey toward formal education, and the ups and downs of her professional life. Critics assert that Hurston's self-portrait is inaccurate, underreporting and altering the realities of the Jim Crow South and racial injustice in the North.

In his essay, "From Eatonville, Florida to Harlem: Zora Neale Hurston has Always had What It Takes and Lots of It," African American writer and literary critic Arna Bontemps took issue with many aspects of *Dust Tracks*, at the same time as many white critics were applauding it for its intimate portrayal of a black woman's struggle. Bontemps claims Hurston, "deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America – she ignores them."⁶⁷ This assessment denies the intentionality behind Hurston's

⁶⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 713.

⁶⁶ See Harold Preece's review of *Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Tomorrow*, the February edition.

⁶⁷ Arna Bontemps, "From Eatonville, Fla. To Harlem: Zora Neale Hurston Has Always Had What It Takes, and Lots of It," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, (November 22, 1942), 3.

autobiography and her description of her life as a black woman in America. Bontemps's description negates the possibility that Hurston was forced to omit certain material, such as her personal experiences of racism. Other critics, especially black critics, viewed Hurston as egotistical,⁶⁸ or felt her book would justify Jim Crow.⁶⁹

Those moved by *Dust Tracks* rave about the book's power and how it speaks volumes regarding Hurston's personal struggle to make a name for herself. Other literary critics, white critics in particular, by and large held this book in high regard. White reviewer Beatrice Sherman extols Hurston for her courageous story telling and asserts, "Her story is an encouraging and enjoyable one for any member of the human race. Any race might well be proud to have more members of the caliber and stamina of Zora Neale Hurston."⁷⁰ The unanimous praise from white critics stems from their experience of a raised consciousness as Hurston unravels preconceived notions of race by recounting her daily interactions as a black woman. This acts as a defining moment that forces white readers to become aware of their privilege.⁷¹ To the books white reviewer's, Hurston's triumph proves the American Dream exists, despite the racial, economic and social inequalities pervasive in the first half of the twentieth century. White readers can walk away from *Dust Tracks* without feelings of guilt or having to truly recognize racial inequalities in America.

⁶⁸ Harold Preece's review of *Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Tomorrow*, the February edition. He states *Dust Tracks* is "the tragedy of a gifted mind, eaten up by an egocentrism fed on the patronizing admiration of the dominant white world."

⁶⁹ Roy Wilkins, "The Watchtower," *New Amsterdam News*, February 27, 1943. Wilkins responds to Hurston's assertion that Jim Crow is effective by stating, "Now is not the time for Negro writers like Zora Hurston to come out with publicity wisecracks about the South being better for the Negro than the North." To see where Hurston states this, see Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 678-680.

⁷⁰ Beatrice Sherman, *The New York Times Book Review*, November 29, 1942. 44.

⁷¹ Sherman and Phil Strong make bold statements about Hurston's autobiography as universal. They do not take into account what is left out, such as her other feelings about Jim Crow, the war on Japan, the sexual harassment of black women by white men, and other controversial topics. See Strong, "Zora Hurston Sums Up," in *Saturday Review of Literature* (28 November 1942): 6-7.

In 1943, *Dust Tracks* received the John Anisfield Award in Racial Relations,⁷² an award given to books contributing to the national conversation about the state of race relations and promoting racial unity.⁷³ There is tremendous irony that *Dust Tracks* received such an award, for trenchant discussions of race, sexuality and gender, and the history of American imperialism were removed from the edition published in 1942. Contemporary literary scholars, including Claudine Raynaud, note Hurston's white publishers, Bertram Lippincott and Tay Honoff, censored the published version of *Dust Tracks*.⁷⁴ The manuscript version, written in July of 1942, included four additional chapters ("My People, My People," "Seeing the World as it is," "The Inside Light," and "Concert") that were not published.⁷⁵ Raynaud suggests that Hurston's publishers felt certain parts of her manuscript were too controversial – sexually explicit, racially uncomfortable, or politically incorrect – for (white) readers.⁷⁶

Scholars are now able to reinsert Hurston and her narrative back into the 1940s zeitgeist. Reading the manuscript of *Dust Tracks* permits a richer analysis. By contrast, the expurgated edition published by Lippincott and Honoff in 1942 is apolitical and reveals little

⁷² See Claudine Raynaud. "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *De-Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 36-37.; Boyd, 369.

⁷³ Raynaud. "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth?," 38-39.

⁷⁴ Zora Neale Hurston's manuscript can be found in the James Weldon Johnson collection in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Her manuscript is four folders (11-14) and comprise of both handwritten and typed sections. The texts that I will refer most often in the following three sections, "Race as Arbitrary," "Black Women, Sexuality and Gender Inequality," and "The Hypocrisy of American Democracy" were omitted from the published autobiography in November of 1942. Additionally, referring to uncensored letters and essays are also imperative in presenting and contextualizing her political stance on certain principles. These letters and essays can be found in the Zora Neale Hurston Collection in the George A. Smathers Library at the University of Florida at Gainesville. This collection consists of typed and handwritten correspondences, unpublished stories and essays, published stories and essays, as well as pictures. See Raynaud, 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

about Hurston's anthropological mind. This edition mentions neither World War II and The Great Depression, nor issues of racism. Its whitewashed presentation oversimplifies the personal narrative of a complex, educated and politically aware figure. To ignore the censorship is to do injustice both to *Dust Tracks on a Road* and to the woman who wrote it.

Below, I provide an in-depth analysis of Hurston's portrayal of race, gender and sexuality, and American democracy in passages deleted from the published version of *Dust Tracks*. Although it has since been published, I refer to the unexpurgated version of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as Hurston's manuscript edition and the expurgated version as the published edition. Along the way, I consult Claudine Raynaud's article on the censorship and draw on personal correspondence between Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Charlotte "Godmother" Osgood Mason.

These sections incorporate an anthropological framework that unpacks issues of race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, and power in a Western setting. These categories are represented in the analysis of Hurston's perspective on Barnard and receiving her funding from Godmother; Hurston's observations regarding the construction and classification of race; Hurston's portrayal of black women as threats to patriarchy; Hurston's astute awareness of America's unwillingness to recognize its imperialist practices. I offer possible explanations as to why her publishers felt the need to censor her autobiography. Additionally, I present an argument as to how and why this does a disservice to Hurston as an individual and as an anthropologist. By flipping the anthropological gaze onto Western culture, Hurston forces readers to see their own culture as "other."

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, written in July of 1941 and published in November of 1942, is an in-depth, analytical take on her personal journey

from a black girl born in Eatonville to an accomplished anthropologist and published writer. Some scholars have referred to this body of work as an “autoethnography” due to Hurston’s unique construction of scenery that reveals information about Hurston and provides substantial context regarding her cultural background.⁷⁷ She establishes a detailed history of her hometown and her parents in order to unveil her own story. Structured much like an ethnography, *Dust Tracks* reads in the voice of an ethnographer recording the spoken word of her anthropological subject.⁷⁸ Additionally, by removing the focus from herself and placing it onto various people, places, and events and on a broader scale, culture, society and politics, Hurston keeps her audience at a distance.

The published edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* consisted of sixteen chapters, starting with the history of her hometown and ending with an overall reflection of her life. Structured in chronological order, Hurston places emphasis on her childhood before her mother’s death, her teenage years after her mother’s death, and her time conducting research in the South. Unlike most autobiographies, Hurston’s voice switches between personal and anthropological, hence the use of the term “autoethnography.”

Hurston dedicates a whole chapter in *Dust Tracks*, entitled “Research,” to her ethnographic and folkloric studies in order to paint the beauty of her relationship to her research. In this chapter she has established herself as a serious anthropologist that deserves to be acknowledged for her topics, her subjects and ultimately, her findings. The rest of *Dust*

⁷⁷ For analysis on *Dust Tracks* as an autoethnography see: Alice A. Deck, “Autoethnography: Zora Neale Hurston, Noni Jabavu, and Cross-Disciplinary Discourse,” in *Black American Literature Forum*. 24(2), (Summer 1990), 237-245.; Francoise Lionnet, “Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1990), 241-267.

⁷⁸ Ethnography is the study of people and cultures. Autoethnography is a melding of two perspectives, the personal (auto) and the collective (ethno).

Tracks serves as an anthropological observation on American society that comments on various people, cultures, experiences, and ideologies. She emphasizes the experiences of black people in multiple settings and places herself in the background, simply adding depth and a personal touch to her highly politicized and critical explorations.

Hurston's prose in *Dust Tracks* specifically targets white readers. Her deployment of language, and more important, her tone partially reveal her intentions. Adept at analyzing cultures and people, Hurston takes into account the cultural, political, societal, and economic backgrounds of her readers. Certain stories deeply reflect her feelings; others are simply critical observations of circumstances, rendering the average white reader incapable of deciphering her true emotions. This is a method of establishing control over her own narrative, a narrative she was continuously told did not belong to her. By employing her "spy-glass of anthropology,"⁷⁹ Hurston establishes her culture as worthy and questions the superiority of Western culture.

Hurston's interrogation of Western society is a reflection of her training as an anthropologist. Hurston anticipated that there would be a shift in anthropological methods. She found that certain practices routinely used by ethnographers and folklorists did not work well with the research she conducted. Hurston's inability to adjust to standard methods of research was a direct result of her association with the culture she studied. Her position as a black woman raised in the rural South studying rural southern black people, rendered the traditional rules of fieldwork and research inapplicable. Rather than adopt an impersonal approach to observing black people, Hurston pushed aside her Ivy League training to reflect

⁷⁹ Refer to the introduction of *Mules and Men* about the "Spy-glass of anthropology." See Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 9.

on her childhood. She harnessed the language spoken by her family and used her gift for storytelling to captivate her subjects.

In turn, the people she studied opened up a world of complexity and creativity to her as a form of acceptance. Her first anthropological book *Mules and Men*, published years after her initial research, reflected on those very experiences. It incorporated the “lying sessions” she witnessed at the town store, the beautiful stories that were passed down from generation to generation, and the religious practices that fused Christianity with traditional African rituals.⁸⁰ What made Hurston a talented and prolific anthropologist was her active participation in the activities she recorded. She refused to merely watch her subjects engage in their cultures; instead Hurston became one with her subjects, beckoning her Eatonville blood to course through her veins.

Topics of race, gender and sexuality, and imperialism are discussed in the deleted sections and chapters of *Dust Tracks*. Race is deconstructed in relation to the white gaze in her revised chapter “My People, My People.” The inability of black women to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with white women is unpacked and explored in the published chapter “Backstage and the Railroad.” Finally, Hurston admonishes the West, especially America, for imperialist practices in the deleted chapter “Seeing the World as It Is.” Employing her anthropological gaze, she unforgivingly deconstructs and challenges Western ideologies and practices.

⁸⁰ Hurston’s fieldwork explored the folklore of the rural South. She unpacked the use of “playing the dozens” where people made fun of one another. She recorded its function and purpose within that culture. Hurston also held a contest for the townspeople to come up with the best lie (she calls this her “lying sessions”). For more information on Hurston’s fieldwork, see Hurston, “Research” in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 687-712. Also, refer to *Mules and Men*.

That *Dust Tracks on a Road* has virtually nothing to say about its author's time at Barnard seems intentional for multiple reasons. At first, it seems rather odd that Hurston's milestone status as the first black student to study at this prestigious women's college, did not inspire her to reflect in depth about her experience. Hurston candidly states that she had "no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard," and how she considered herself "Barnard's sacred black cow."⁸¹ Such statements leave little room for interpretation, establishing Hurston's control of her narrative. To speak of racism renders her powerless as the only black body in a white institution, enticing white readers to take pity on her situation. She makes clear that her time at Barnard was spent showing "the white folks that I had brains," giving her white classmates and white readers something positive to observe.⁸² Proving her merit later in the chapter, she describes studying under prominent anthropology figures such as Dr. Gladys Reichard at Barnard and eventually Dr. Franz Boas at Columbia.

Barnard becomes representative of Hurston's education, intelligence and acceptance by elite white America. This depiction is repeated throughout *Dust Tracks*, particularly in Hurston's manuscript version of the chapter "My People! My People!" This version purposefully situates Hurston's white readers as voyeurs of black stereotypes. Whites are allowed to peer inside the public and private spaces of black lives but are never given full access into the thoughts and experiences of the black stereotypes she provides. Moreover, Hurston inserts herself within this narrative: her presence is vital in constructing the scenery and tone of the opening anecdote.

The beginning of this chapter locates the reader on a crowded subway car heading downtown from Harlem. The two main characters are college students, one female and one

⁸¹ Ibid., 683.

⁸² Ibid., 684.

male whom she names Barnard and Yale respectively. Barnard and Yale are black students, trained at elite, wealthy, white institutions; their intelligence bought them admission to Ivy League schools. Hurston does not provide additional specifics about Barnard and Yale, but she does present her readers with a scenario. Everyone in the subway car encounters an ill-mannered black man who loudly taunts the black passengers on the train. This leaves Barnard and Yale with few options, forcing them to experience their embarrassment by this man under the scrutiny of a car-load of whites.

Instead of narrating the true feelings of Barnard and Yale (their embarrassment and frustration), Hurston turns a calculating eye to the whites in the subway car. Unlike *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, this chapter of *Dust Tracks* purposefully summons her white readers to take part in this situation. As Hurston explains,

Barnard and Yale sit there and dwindle and dwindle. They do not look around the coach to see what is in the faces of white passengers. They know too well what is there. Some are grinning from the heel up and some are stonily quiet. But both kinds are thinking "That's just like a Negro." Not just like *some* Negroes, mind you, No, like all. Only difference is some Negroes are better dressed.⁸³

Such an observation forces white readers to confront what is likely to be their own perception of blacks. The reactions of white people within this anecdote reflect the reality of race during the 1940s. Their discomfort raises awareness of the knee-jerk prejudices that occur when blacks and whites are in mixed company. It indicates that blacks as bystanders are aware of white reactions and must learn from early on to face those judgments. The judgments work to further divide races, especially if whites operate under the assumption that all blacks are incapable of socially acceptable behavior.⁸⁴

⁸³ Hurston, 774.

⁸⁴ Hurston explains that many blacks often hate public settings enforced by Jim Crow. This forced segregation leaves many blacks frustrated, particularly on the subway. Hurston explains that whites

This scenario is prototypical of the anthropological gaze Hurston deploys as she begins to unravel the ills of Western society. Anthropology, as Hurston encountered it at Barnard and Columbia, made rural blacks from the South an object of study by urban whites from the North. In this instance, Hurston switches roles in an act of defiance. It is a direct challenge to her patroness Charlotte “Godmother” Osgood Mason, who contracted Hurston to study the rural and exotic. Godmother, an amateur anthropologist, enjoyed exploring exotic cultures, much different from her own as a rich white American woman.⁸⁵ That relationship was often wrought with tension and the need to establish control. In a letter to Langston Hughes in 1928, Hurston explains to Hughes how excited she was to start writing what would later become *Mules and Men*. She writes, “I can *really* write a village anthology now, but I am wary about mentioning it to Godmother for fear she will think I am shirking but *boy* I think can lay em something. Now I told you I must not publish without her consent.”⁸⁶

Hurston’s subtle dismissal of Godmother’s contract was an act of resistance against white control. She continues to employ this “feather-bed of resistance” by rejecting whites’ prejudiced presumptions of blacks and blackness. Hurston divides the chapter “My People! My People!” into seven sections, A through G. Each section showcases an anecdote that reflects a specific stereotype illustrative of black life. The title of the chapter reflects feelings of shame and embarrassment regarding one’s race, specifically if another black individual

are unsympathetic to the struggles of segregation and implies that they respond by stating “you are all colored aren’t you? So why not all together? If you are not all alike, that’s your own fault. Once upon a time you were all alike. You had no business to change. If you are not that way, then it’s just too bad. You’re supposed to be like that.” See Hurston, 774.

⁸⁵ Plant, *A Biography of the Spirit*, 41.

⁸⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Langston Hughes Collection 1927-1930: Personal Correspondences* (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut) *Box 82*. Folder 1587 (1-3). April 28, 1928.

perpetuates a stereotype in the presence of whites. Hurston explains, “Certain of My People have come to dread railway day coaches for this same reason. They dread such scenes more than they do the dirty upholstery and other inconveniences of a Jim Crow coach. They detest the forced grouping.”⁸⁷ The words “my people, my people” refer to the fragmented relationships that exist within black communities, thanks to white supremacy and self-hatred.

At the end of each of the chapter’s sections, Hurston offers the phrase “my people,” which differs in connotation from the chapter’s title. The phrase “My People” represents acceptance. Hurston embraces her people for these seemingly ignorant characteristics and actions because they reflect a culture and a history of oppressed people. These traits are to be celebrated and not rejected. These sections are categorized into two main themes: self-expression and action. Sections B, E, F, and G represent self-expression. They describe how blacks express themselves through language, lineage, and theatrics. Action refers to sections A, C, and D, which represent blacks and their inability to agree with other black people, their lackadaisical attitudes, and their ignorance when money is involved.

Section A of “My People, My People,” reflects the inability for blacks to agree with one another. Hurston’s use of sarcasm and humor to depict the inherent disagreements between blacks are intentional. She first makes it apparent to her white readers that blacks are dissimilar because of their continual disagreements. Her concluding sentence, “So when you find a set of folks who won’t agree on a thing, those are My People,” is symbolic of that. Hurston also uses this section to highlight just how whites in power create rifts in black unity and progress. To make this evident, she refers to a “folk-tale of the white man who hired five men to take hold of a rope to pull up a cement block.” When these five men completed their job with ease, they became agitated. They asked their boss why he needed five men when it

⁸⁷ Hurston, 774.

was realistically a one-man job. The boss responded with, “I just wanted to see five Negroes pulling together once.”⁸⁸ At first glance, the white boss appears to be doing these men a favor by attempting to connect them, but in actuality, this job was purely for the boss’s amusement. It also supports the notion that blacks are incapable of finding a common ground because of white supremacy.

Section B of this chapter expounds on Hurston’s idea that black people are creative with their words. Hurston opens this section with, “If you have your doubts, go and listen to the man. If he hunts for six big words where one little one would do, that’s My People. If he can’t find that big word he’s feeling for, he is going to make a new one.”⁸⁹ Rather than ridicule her people for these characteristics, Hurston provides examples of words that are created by uneducated blacks such as “bodacious.” Not only does it describe the context of their statement or question, but also it becomes a part of the southern African American vernacular. The characteristics presented are used ironically through Hurston’s construction of prose and her use of tone. By presenting the most absurd of characters, she works to disprove the prejudiced beliefs about blacks harbored by whites.

Conversely, after embracing racial pride in “My People! My People!” Hurston rejects this same notion in her succeeding chapter “Seeing the World as It Is.” Hurston opens the chapter with a discussion of race. She does not resort to sarcasm, hyperbole and anecdotes as she does in “My People! My People!” Instead, Hurston takes to theorizing in order to deconstruct the meaning of race. Her anthropological gaze assesses race as an arbitrary categorization with no inherent value, because people exist as individuals rather than races.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Hurston, 776.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ For more information about Hurston unpacking race, see Hurston, “Seeing the World as it is,” in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 782-788

Hurston's training as an anthropologist is apparent, particularly as she deconstructs and subsequently, denounces the meaning race pride. Race pride separates individuals attempting to connect cross-culturally and, Hurston argues, it is "another sign that the human cuss is determined not to be grateful."⁹¹ Race pride becomes an excuse to implement ideologies and practices, such as racism that divide people from one another. Hurston carries the framework of anthropology with her to deconstruct race. Ironically, anthropology is the same framework that holds historical ties to the notion of racial pride. Anthropology as a discipline originated as an effort to assert the white West's innate superiority over the rest of the colonized world.

Simultaneously, Hurston begins to unpack the pitfalls of race solidarity. Similar to racial pride, race solidarity establishes unity within races. Both are detrimental to humanity, Hurston argues. She writes "how can race solidarity be possible in a nation made up of as many elements as these United States? It could result in nothing short of chaos."⁹² Making this argument pertinent to blacks, she posits that race solidarity contradicts the essence of democracy and the American Dream by implying that blacks can never assimilate.

Hurston takes into account the history and contemporary state of American racism and its perilous effects on both whites and blacks. And Hurston insinuates that the current state of racism in America does not allow for deep bonds across races. In a letter she wrote to famous Dutch translator and close friend Margrit Sabloniere in 1955, after further disillusionment with democracy and individualism, Hurston is skeptical of whites who

⁹¹ Hurston, 783.

⁹² Hurston, 785.

befriend blacks.⁹³ Making a concerted effort to choose her white friends, despite years of criticism from blacks claiming that she pandered to wealthy whites, Hurston writes

I actually do feel insulted when a certain type of white person hastens to effuse to me just how noble they are to grant me their presence. But unfortunately, many who call themselves “leaders” of Negroes in America actually are unaware of this insulting patronage and rejoice in it. It is not that I have a race prejudice, for it is well know that I have numerous white friends, but they are friends,⁹⁴ not merely some who seek to earn a spurious “merit” by patronizing Negroes, or by seeking political advancement through our votes.⁹⁵

Hurston fleshes out the way liberal-minded whites exercise their white privilege, particularly in interactions with blacks. Her friendships with whites are meaningful but she refuses to placate whites in desperate need of controlling their black friends. The difficulties of establishing such friendships lie in dishonesty, fear, and power.

The evidence of Hurston’s life convinced her that relationships between blacks and whites were most often fraught, and rarely, if ever, open or close. This position is most eloquently revealed in a memory from her mid-teens that she shared in her manuscript. It concerns a time when she worked as a maid for a white family. Hurston recalls the anxiety and fear she felt as she stood on the doorsteps of homes belonging to affluent white families when responding to a job listing. Her youthful face deterred many employers from hiring her, but she needed the work nonetheless. Although Hurston was turned away many times, a

⁹³ Margrit Sabloniere was a famous Dutch Translator for many black writers. She translated *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Dutch for copies in The Netherlands. For more information refer to Hurston’s archives at Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

⁹⁴ Hurston underlines this in her letter. It is a method of italicizing the word “friends.”

⁹⁵ Letter from Hurston to Margrit Sabloniere, *Zora Neale Hurston Papers*, Box 1, Folder 57, Dec. 3, 1955.

handful of families took pity upon her, reluctantly giving her an opportunity to prove herself. She failed miserably.

Hurston was a terrible domestic worker, she revealed, more interested in reading her employer's books than in dusting them. Through Hurston's humorous vehemence in reporting her incompetence, it is clear that she rejects the assumption that black women and girls are inherent domestics, even as society at the time routinely funneled black girls and women into service work. Instead, Hurston shows herself as an intellectual whose natural place was with a book much like the ones she came to write.

Despite her poor performance, Hurston did befriend some of her female employers who regarded her as a companion. One employer, Mrs. Alice, was a young, beautiful, white woman married to an older, slightly less attractive, wealthy white man. Mrs. Alice knew Hurston was uninterested in cooking and cleaning, so she allowed her to play with the couple's children instead. With her days free, Alice could leave the house and socialize. When she was not socializing, she took to making Hurston dresses, buying her hats, and conversing with her.⁹⁶ Their relationship was one of reciprocity: Alice felt safe knowing her children were in good hands and young Hurston found a family that loved her.

Inevitably, Hurston was fired. This became a trend amongst the families she worked for during her mid-teens. In part, she was fired for not executing her job properly. On the other hand, Hurston realized years later that the husbands of the wives she befriended were jealous of their friendship. The husbands felt a black teenage girl's befriending their white wives, so free from conventions, threatened their authority and control. Alice and the other beautiful young wives, once contained through the imperative of the children and lacking confidence given their isolation from the outside world, were now able to experience life on

⁹⁶ Hurston, 640.

their own terms. Hurston not only provided help with childcare, but also, because she knew the world better than these sheltered women did, acted as a source of information and a catalyst for their independence. Here was a poor young teenager, navigating a difficult social world with aplomb: could they do less, given their easier social path and older age? They came home respecting Hurston even more, casting their husbands' protective and directive role into shadow. Hurston was undoubtedly a threat to the patriarchal order.

After this experience, Hurston understood the consequences of befriending her white female employers, but she did not anticipate the sexual harassment she would receive from her male employers. The following story was edited out of the *Dust Tracks* manuscript in 1942,⁹⁷ in part, one imagines, because Hurston's detailed description leaves no room for her white readers to misconstrue the information she provides. This incident occurred during her time working for the Moncriefs, an older white couple with obvious marital problems. Mrs. Moncrief was bedridden since the birth of their only child decades prior, leaving her both bitter and helpless. Mr. Moncrief, inconvenienced and frustrated by his wife's mental and physical state, looked for female sexual companionship elsewhere, particularly in young, naive, working-class black women. In his mind, Hurston was a perfect target.

This experience not only taught Hurston about white male sexual predators; it also taught her to be wary around their white wives. She describes this time working under the Moncriefs as uncomfortable and vows to "never tell another wife," about her lecherous husband.⁹⁸ After her shift ended in the evenings, Mr. Moncrief would follow Hurston to her apartment and took to what she describes as "waylaying"⁹⁹ her. One specific night, Mr. Moncrief propositioned Hurston to run away with him to Canada, leaving his undesirable marriage and

⁹⁷ The chapter was edited in the published edition to remove the details of this encounter.

⁹⁸ Hurston, 642.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

wife behind. Each night on her walk home he would continue to proposition her, until she threatened to tell his wife. When Hurston reluctantly revealed the story to Mrs. Moncrief, she received an unexpected and unwarranted reaction. Instead of directing her hurt and anger at her inappropriate husband, Mrs. Moncrief turned her anger, frustration and disgust towards Hurston. At first she tried to calm a distraught and disturbed Hurston, but that compassion and understanding quickly turned into hatred. Mrs. Moncrief states,

You haven't been lying here for three years with somebody hoping to find you dead every morning. You don't know what it means for every girl who comes in hailing distance to be mixed up in your life. You don't know what it means to give birth to a child for your husband and find that your health is gone the day the baby is born and for him not to care what becomes of the baby or you either. God: why couldn't he leave you alone?¹⁰⁰

The emphasis on *you* is important because it implies that Mr. Moncrief, a sexual predator, stooped low not by being a sexual predator but by propositioning Hurston, a black teenager. There was neither regard for the sexual harassment Hurston experienced, nor was there an acknowledgment that Mr. Moncrief's actions were inexcusable. Hurston makes obvious to her readers, particularly her white readers, that she had done nothing wrong in this situation. Still, she left her job that night, ostensibly as the guilty party.

This incident, and the fact that it was excised from the published memoir, is telling. Mrs. Moncrief's emphasis on the word *you* reveals white supremacy and misogyny working in tandem. Mrs. Moncrief is subjected to sexism and its powerful role in the construction of marriage; her bedridden state reflects her perceived powerlessness in her marriage. Yet, it also apparent that Mrs. Moncrief reinforces structures present in white supremacy mirrored in her statement "why couldn't he leave *you* alone?" This rhetorical question reveals just how white women within these spheres perpetuate white dominance, striving to maintain a level

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 643.

of superiority over black women. It is imperative that readers remember Hurston's situation as a maid, for Mrs. Moncrief purposefully hires Hurston while already aware of Mr. Moncrief's infidelity and abuse of young black women. It seems that Mrs. Moncrief, for all her grief, may be looking for scapegoats and targets for her jealousy. She is, after all, entirely dependent.

Hurston uses this particular story to dismantle the stereotype of black women as inherently licentious and manipulative. She portrays white men in particular as the true manipulators who exert their dominance over women. She accomplishes this by ending her anecdote with a plan to finally rid herself of Mr. Moncrief. Frustrated with his continual pursuit despite telling his wife, Hurston seemingly accedes to his request. In his pursuit of Hurston, Mr. Moncrief states,

I am not the kind of man to be worried with so much responsibilities. Never should have let myself get married in the first place. All I need is a young, full-of-feelings girl to sleep with and enjoy life. I always did keep me a colored girl. My last one moved to Chicago and left me without. I want a colored girl and I'm giving you the preference.¹⁰¹

In the interest of protecting herself, knowing Mrs. Moncrief will not, Hurston pretends she will meet up with Mr. Moncrief at her apartment so that they may run away together. Instead, she packs her belongings and leaves her apartment for good, not giving him any indication of where she is. Mr. Moncrief waits for hours, unable to comprehend that Hurston might be uninterested in his advances. Hurston's plan reveals her fiery independence and strong sense of self: she has made the harasser into the dupe.

Hurston's anthropological eye is at work in this story. Mr. Moncrief's choice of a "colored girl" reveals the intersectionality of white supremacy and misogyny; he "chooses"

¹⁰¹ Hurston, 643.

the most vulnerable members of society and patronizingly expects to be honored for it. His off-putting statement, “I want a colored girl and I’m giving you the preference,” brings to the foreground issues of power, miscegenation, and rape. This story also draws attention to the unfair power dynamics present within the private sphere between black female domestic workers and their white male employers.

Yet Hurston understands that not all black women are fortunate enough to withstand unwanted sexual advances by white men. She reveals to readers that some months later Mr. Moncrief left his wife, took all of their money and stole from others, ultimately running away with a young black secretary working for a local doctor. Hurston does not condemn the nameless black secretary; instead, she is emphatically blames Mr. Moncrief and other white men like him who stymie interracial female friendships by perpetuating white supremacist and patriarchal values.

By establishing America’s practice of racism and sexism on its own soil, Hurston provides a solid foundation for portraying America and other Western countries’ interactions within non-Western societies. White supremacy and patriarchy have deep roots in the history of the West that have impacted those very interactions. Paternalism, white supremacy, xenophobia, and imperialism are all negative results of the West’s relationship with non-Western countries and became the basis for Hurston’s censored chapter “Seeing the World as It Is.”

Claudine Raynaud’s explains that Hurston’s chapter “Seeing the World as It Is” was censored for its explicit sexual descriptions, an unfavorable assessment of race relations in America, and a critique of the U.S. war with Japan. Hurston’s use of sarcasm to develop her argument strengthens her calculated attack on the hypocrisy of democracy, particularly on

America's combative relationship with Japan, America's Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America and Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Long criticized by black writers, scholars and literary critics for not addressing politics, in this chapter Hurston took direct aim at the subject.¹⁰²

Hurston begins her assessment of America by explicitly stating the West's jealousy when non-Western countries like Japan utilize imperialist and colonialist practices to gain power.¹⁰³ She asserts that America feels threatened and its response to this is to eradicate the opponent. Through her anthropological understanding of America and politics, Hurston creates a fictitious anecdote comparing America to the "Southern planter's bride."¹⁰⁴ She writes,

We [the Americans] are like the Southern planter's bride when he kissed her for the first time.

"Darling" she fretted, "do niggers hug and kiss like this?"

"Why, I reckon they do, honey. Fact is, I'm sure of it. Why do you ask?"

"You go right out and kill the last one of 'em tomorrow morning. Things like this is much too good for niggers."¹⁰⁵

The irony of this passage provides Hurston's readers with a stark depiction of America as jealous of countries like Japan. Showing her audience how America's actions are perceived rather than telling her audience is much more powerful and leaves little room for misinterpretation. Moreover, she harkens back to her anthropological training and her rural southern roots by creating folkloric-like analogies with scathing political messages, similar to

¹⁰² This refers to Hurston's biggest black male critics which include: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and later Alain Locke.

¹⁰³ Hurston continues this line of thinking by sarcastically writing, "Our indignation is more than justified. We Westerners composed that piece about trading in China with gunboats and cannons long decades ago. Japan is now plagiarizing in the most flagrant manner. We also wrote that song about keeping a whole hemisphere under your wing. Now the Nipponese are singing our song all over Asia. They are full of stuff and need a good working out," Hurston, 791-792.

¹⁰⁴ Hurston, 791.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the construction of *Mules and Men*. Hurston's use of sarcasm and personification to project her political opinions are meant to cut precisely at the fabric of America's political ideologies, exposing the ills of this country.

Hurston's repeated use of witty analogies should not to assuage her white readers. In actuality, she employs this trend to awaken her white readers from the slumbers of white privilege that allow them to turn a blind eye from the violence and oppression America has imposed on others. Her next analysis reflects a history of America's international policies with Latin America. Hurston refers to Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick Diplomacy and The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, as well as to The Good Neighbor Policy implemented by his fifth cousin Franklin D. Roosevelt two decades later. The twentieth century reflected a period of America's established political, militaristic and economic ties with Latin America. FDR implemented his policy to establish America's "non-intervention" in Latin America, desiring a stronger relationship between the two nations. Neither Hurston, nor Latin American leaders took Roosevelt's policy to be true.

As Hurston portrays in "Seeing the World as it is," America imparted democratic ideals to Latin American countries ironically to continue their economic control. Comparing America's quelling of smaller nations' independence movements to a doctor attempting to rid a patient of an illness, Hurston claims America considers

machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own. If the patient dies from the treatment, it was not because the medicine was not good. We are positive of that. We have seen it work on other patients twice before it killed them and three times after. Then, too, no matter what the outcome, you have to give the doctor credit for trying.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Hurston, 791.

This passage precedes her analysis of America's relationship with what she calls "The Little Latin Brother." Hurston urges her readers to understand that America's claim of being a good neighbor is meant to proclaim moral superiority over less developed nations. She writes, "A big good neighbor is a lovely thing to have. We are far too moral a people to allow poor Latin judgment to hinder good works." The Good Neighbor Policy provides American citizens with the illusion that America is helping "The Little Latin Brother," because "he is so gay and fiesta-minded that he is liable to make arrangements that benefit nobody but himself. Not a selfish bone in his body, you know. Just too full of rumba." The rhetoric around the Good Neighbor Policy as aiding Latin America by introducing democracy and capitalism veil the selfish reasons for America's ties with their "little Latin brother." It leaves no room for the American people to question America's true intentions. Additionally, Hurston provides her own facetious explanation of what America needs from a neighbor. She mockingly states, "He must be taught to share with big brother before big brother comes down and kicks his teeth in."¹⁰⁷ Her use of the word "share" insinuates America's desire for the resources readily available in Latin America. It becomes America's right to have access to these resources. The violence she displays in the phrase "kicks his teeth in," represents the violence America has shown the nations of Latin America when they are unwilling to "share" with big brother.

Furthermore, Hurston argues that the practice of democracy is a fallacy. Similar to Hurston's understanding of religion, she argues that democracy "never was designed to make our profits less."¹⁰⁸ The profits she mentions are the motivation behind America's expanding outward into new territories, occupying those lands, and enslaving people, even its own. Her

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

story of the Southern planter's bride also reveals the violence experienced by blacks in America. She harshly criticizes FDR's Four Freedoms, a speech he gave promising to protect the life and liberty of nations around the globe. Hurston's anger is a direct result of her experience as a black woman in a segregated and white supremacist nation that continues to enslave blacks by denying their economic, political and social mobility. She relies neither on the president, nor on his promises to ensure a better world because of the injustices endured by America's own citizens. She observes, "He can call names across an ocean, but he evidently has not the courage to speak even softly at home. Take away the ocean and he simmers right down." Hurston's frustrations coupled with her conflicted feelings about democracy are summed up best in her statement, "I will fight for my country, but I will not lie for her."¹⁰⁹

Hurston's refusal to lie about the history and practices of America is key in understanding her entire autobiography. Her critique of America aligns itself with her critique of Western anthropology; their similar methods of recording stories from the perspective of the oppressor, the West, and leaving unheard the voices and experiences of the oppressed. Just as she reconfigures Western methods of anthropology to explore the culture of her own people, Hurston reconfigures the political history of America to insert the perspectives of Japan, Latin America and African Americans.

¹⁰⁹ Hurston, 791.

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The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is always trying to know in somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.”

Zora Neale Hurston
*Dust Tracks on a Road*¹¹⁰

“The Theory Behind” Hurston’s “Feather-bed of Resistance”

At a distance, the “feather-bed of resistance” was a powerful tool that ensured the survival of the black communities Hurston studied. Up close, this resistance was a personal weapon that ensured the safety of her career after publishing her contentious autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.¹¹¹ Her publishers were adamant about removing certain sections and chapters that would incite fury amongst her white readers, the only public audience that was given consideration at the time. Black audiences and black readers were simply expected to accept certain factual inconsistencies and bear with a complete whitewashing of American history. Hurston had to choose between sticking to her convictions even if that meant never publishing *Dust Tracks on a Road* or editing out the highly controversial content in order to secure her financial and professional future as a working black woman.

Hurston’s publishers may have worried about releasing a narrative that was incongruous with the war effort. Hurston’s excised chapter “Seeing the World as it is,” is not a subtle critique of the West’s social, political, economic, and militaristic practices. Rather, her sarcasm bites as she questions the true reasons for America’s discontent with Japan, America’s contradictory and oppressive relationship with Latin America, and Roosevelt’s

¹¹⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 580.

¹¹¹ Tiffany Patterson in her book reflects on the tactics many small black towns in the South utilized in order to ensure the safety of their people and the survival of their town. For more information about survival, see chapter 3 in Plant, “A Place Between Home and Horror,” in *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, 50-90.

neglect of the oppression of black Americans. Although she emphasizes her willingness to “fight for my country,” in that same sentence she refuses to “lie for America.” Exposing the contradictions of American policies and revealing America’s true intentions in its relationship with other nations would threaten the blind faith many Americans had in their government. Additionally, worry about being accused of treason may have impacted Lippincott’s decision to remove the chapter.

The other expurgated chapters offered criticisms and observations about the construction of race and the dismissal of black women’s experiences. Specifically, Hurston chastises white America, blaming white supremacy and white privilege as reasons for segregation, the mistreatment of blacks, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of black men, and the hypersexualization and subsequent sexual abuse of black women. Her staunch ideas may have repelled white readers. J. B. Lippincott was the publishing company that issued all of Hurston’s books and it may have determined that association with her frustrated and critical scholarly analysis of white Western society posed too great a risk. At a time when America’s racial climate was only beginning to seep into the national conversation with movements such as the March on Washington, Lippincott would not have desired that publicity. It is evident that Hurston’s content in the manuscript edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* needed editing and not her actual writing.

Moreover, it can be surmised that upon completion of the manuscript version of *Dust Tracks*, the reader will find Hurston to be more confusing than ever before. In part, her ideas about black and white friendships are unsettling. She made friends with popular white figures of her time such as Fannie Hurst, Carl Van Vechten, and Annie Nathan Meyer and speaks highly of these friendships. Yet she expends considerable effort differentiating Carl Van

Vechten from the average white individual.¹¹² Her critique of the white gaze is unsettling and forces an internal reflection of the white reader. By the end of autobiography, white audiences are incapable of compartmentalizing Hurston, unsure of where on the political spectrum to place her fiction, academic work, autobiography, essays and personal interactions. She is a moving target.

Hurston was intentional in creating and perpetuating this distorted and complex image of herself. She was continuously inspected, poked and prodded by northern educated blacks for being too stereotypically black, wealthy whites intent on consuming the rural and exotic characteristics of Hurston's culture, white academics conducting research by racist and imperialist methods, and liberal white readers eagerly consuming her writing, hoping to gain insight into societies in which they would never set foot. To protect herself, she appeased all of these people at one point or another. She also re-appropriated anthropology, a tool once used to enforce imperialist practices and ideologies, and reversed its gaze in order to give a voice to her own culture and critically examine the white West. With this in mind, my theory that Hurston herself ordered that her belongings be burned does not seem so far fetched. The desire to escape the outsider's gaze in her final days may have prompted this order. There is no conclusive evidence to support my case, but it does fit with Hurston's demonstrable inclination to skim over her internal reflection and instead reflect on the external. To do so, is an act of defiance and it has established her a mysterious public figure.

¹¹² I reference the first few paragraphs of "My People! My People!" For more information, see Hurston, 773-774.

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