

**THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON:
A POSTMODERN WRITER BEFORE HER TIME**

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ABSTRACT: The recent trend in Anthropology has been to focus on new ways of representing ethnographic experience through the use of interpretive techniques in writing. Although these postmodern approaches are innovative, there are superlative examples of multi-vocality and the mixing of genres in early ethnographic writing. Zora Neale Hurston was one such writer. An African-American, she studied the rural blacks from the South, Haiti, Jamaica, and her home town of Eatonville, Florida, and reconstructed their lives and folklore in her novels and ethnographies. We must question why such a gifted writer and ethnographer is rarely read by anthropologists, despite her re-emergence and recent fame in literary and popular circles. An examination of her work shows why her obscurity in anthropology should not continue.

Zora Neale Hurston was an African-American novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist who lived between 1891 (approximately, as she was very secretive about her date of birth) and 1960. Hurston was a prolific anthropological writer, a protege of Boas, and prescient about current interpretive anthropological trends, yet she remains an obscure figure in anthropology. She came from a rural and segregated southern background where she later did much of her field work. Her segregated youth gave her a distinctive view of race and consequently about the world, often setting her apart from both Whites and Negroes of her day. Some accused her of pandering to Whites and thus participating in White racism. Others perceived her as a reactionary, and in some ways she was. As a Black woman of her time, however, she was in a dependent position, relying on Whites for financial support. She was a prolific writer; her works include two major ethnographic books, many shorter ethnographic pieces, four novels, multiple short stories and essays. It is for her fiction, however, that she is most well known. She was part of the "Harlem Renaissance" in the 1920s and '30s and has been rediscovered as one of the greatest African-American women writers.

Hurston was a student of Boas' at Barnard College/Columbia University and so was very much a part of the tradition that included Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Hurston's ethnographic work and her fiction focus on the African-American folk experience, particularly folklore. She also did extensive work on voodoo (or more properly, according to Hurston, hoodoo). She did her field work in the American South, Haiti, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. In both Haiti and the South, Hurston studied under several voodoo priests and became initiated into their societies. Since her participation in voodoo was not restricted in any way, she participated in ceremonies that affected romantic relationships and in one case apparently caused death. A consideration of Hurston's life work led me to question the distinctions between literature and ethnography. The more that I read and think about Zora Neale Hurston, the more the distinctions between these genres are blurred. What is ethnography? What is fiction/narrative? Is it style of writing or is it content? Or is it both? Perhaps the distinctions have always been blurred and the distinctions themselves are false. In doing this project I have been struggling with these issues of representation. Zora Neale Hurston's writing, both what we would call her ethnography, and her fiction, contain a deep

understanding of what and whom she is writing about and has an impressive narrative style which draws the reader into the experience. How do we distinguish between the two? Her writing is a deeply felt expression of people's lives, and the things they do, see, and feel.

This distinction ties in with the difference between the study of folklore and the study of the "real" lives of people. Again, this may be an artificial dichotomy. Folklore is just as real an insight into the tellers as their daily experience because these "big old lies" (which is how the people describe their folktales) are an important part of the people's lives just as "real", for instance, as their marriage patterns. Folklore is an expression of sentiment, thought and world view masked in what we would call myth. Hurston's ethnography is narrative, her fiction has the quality of folklore and ethnography.

It is important to remember in looking at these issues that Hurston was studying her own "culture" and thus her perspective is very personal. Her representations of people in her ethnography and her literature reflect an empathetic understanding, yet she stands apart. She addresses this stance in her introduction to Mules and Men:

I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folk-lore'.

In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in 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 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 (1935:17).

This type of self reflection contrasts sharply with someone like Paul Rabinow (1977), who is awkward and sees himself as completely separate from those he studies, constantly struggling to make some kind of connection with people. Her empathy and connectedness to and with people allowed her to go beyond surface representations. But Hurston had something other than her empathy, something intangible, which gave her access to people and their trust. Perhaps it was her style and nerve, or perhaps her scorn of pretense, as Langston Hughes suggests:

Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemit on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting, and measure it (Quoted in Walker 1983:101 from The Big Sea by Langston Hughes).

Also, in Hurston's ethnography, particularly her research on voodoo, she throws herself into the experience--the focus is far more on participation than on observation. As ethnographer, she does not stand apart or above the people she studies because Zora did not see her education as a means to separate herself from her rural past. Instead, it gave her the opportunity to delve more deeply into her roots. These different techniques will be discussed more extensively later in the paper.

I first want to focus on some of Zora Hurston's ethnographic work. Her two books

Mules and Men (1935), Tell My Horse (1938), and a collection of shorter ethnographic pieces in the book The Sanctified Church (1983), show her gift of literary expression and ethnographic detail. Mules and Men is a book based on her research in the American South, specifically in Florida, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. The first two thirds of the book is a collection of folklore, which she collected both in her home town of Eatonville, Florida, and elsewhere in the South. In it are a multitude of folktales with names like "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men", "How Brer Gator Got His Tongue Worn Out" and "Ole Massa and John Who Wanted to go to Heaven" loosely grouped into chapters. There are only two headings in the book and these are to separate the folklore and the hoodoo sections; none of the chapters are titled.

It is hard to distinguish context from content in Hurston's work. Although folklore is the focus of her study, she simultaneously represents the context of the folklore while presenting the folktales themselves. One does not supersede the other. The reader is placed on the store porch or at a party or in the swamp or lumber mill where we hear the people speak, argue, and banter amongst themselves. One way the multivocality of her writing is created is through dialogue. Hurston sometimes explains the dialogue by identifying individuals, the family relationships, and the historical tensions between people. The folktales are never presented out of context. They grow out of the dialogue, each person competing to tell a better lie to Zora and then those listening criticize the last story saying that it's not true or that he or she just made that one up. Conversation between the individuals during these "lying contests" is as important as the tale itself. Hurston often reveals much about the lives of the people--how they speak and embellish the English language with metaphor, double descriptive, and use of verbal nouns. Double descriptive is the use of a word with the addition of another "action" word thereby creating a picture of the noun. "Sitting-chair" and "kill-dead" are two examples that Hurston gives of double descriptive (cf. "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in The Sanctified Church: 1983).

The final third of Mules and Men is about voodoo and her experiences during her apprenticeship in voodoo in and around New Orleans. Hurston travelled extensively seeking out voodoo doctors and then studying under them. Her understanding of voodoo grew from her time spent living and actively participating in voodoo. She did not stand back and criticize the morality of voodoo nor did she question the effectiveness of voodoo. Rather she presents voodoo as she sees it. The reader is to decide if voodoo is moral and whether or not there is a causal relationship between the ceremonies and a man's subsequent departure or death. In Mules and Men she describes one encounter:

First I had to get ready even to try this most terrible of experiences--getting the Black cat Bone....When dark came, we went out to catch a black cat...When the water boiled I was to toss in the terrified, trembling cat. When he screamed, I was told to curse him. He screamed three times, the last time weak and resigned. The lid was clamped down the fire kept vigorously alive. At midnight the lid was lifted. Here was the moment! The bones of the cat must be passed through my mouth until one tasted bitter. Suddenly, the Rooster and Mary rushed in close to the pot and he cried, 'Look out! This is liable to kill you. Hold your nerve!' They both looked fearfully around the circle. They communicated some unearthly terror to me. Maybe I went off in a trance. Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from

all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don't know. Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don't know. I don't know.

Before day I was home, with a small white bone for me to carry (1935: 272-273).

The second book, Tell My Horse, is about her experiences in Jamaica and Haiti studying voodoo and other facets of life in the Caribbean. Again this is a very personalized discussion. There are elements that make it seem more like an autobiography or travel book, as she is very much there and we, as readers, meet the people that she meets and hear her impressions of them, some of which are flattering, some not. Nor does she hide her own faults, her irritation at different people or for example, exhaustion and annoyance at traveling great distances over rough terrain in search of the wild boar (the anger is directed mainly at herself as the excursion was her idea). I had to keep reminding myself that this was ethnography. It is not that I don't enjoy reading traditional ethnographies, but they are often dense and, more importantly, distant. Rarely have I felt an aesthetic pleasure while reading them, but with Hurston the reading is far more an immediate sensual experience rather than an intellectual one. That is not to say that her work is not full of detail, fact, and thought. One is not merely reading something, rather, one is taking part in the experience with the author.

The Sanctified Church is a collection of shorter pieces, pulled together from different publications. The pieces range from descriptions of folk healers to more "anthropological" discussions of the ways and whys of Negro speech. She also discusses the institution of The Sanctified Church and relates some aspects of the religious ceremonies to African rituals of possession. Many of these pieces have an objectified feeling about them, partly because of the structure of the text, the topics are often separated into categories and there is often more explicit analysis of the material than in her two longer works. But still, there is her characteristic poetic and rich style of writing. There is also a subtext woven into some of her essays that carries more of a social or political message. Through the use of juxtaposition between White and Negro, she challenges racial stereotypes. In her explanations of "the jook" or "dialect" or "shouting" for example, Hurston often compares Negro English to White English, and she is not always flattering about Whites. "In the mouth of the Negro the English language loses its stiffness, yet conveys its meaning accurately. 'The booming bounderies of this whirling world' conveys just as accurate a picture as mere 'boundaries',..." (from The Sanctified Church 1983:81). Some comparisons are critical, others more illustrative:

I will make a parable to illustrate the difference between Negro and European. A white man built a house. So he got it built and he told the man: 'Plaster it good so that nobody can see the beams and uprights.' So he did. Then he had it papered with beautiful paper, and painted the outside. And a Negro build him a house. So when he got the beams and all in, he carved beautiful grotesques over all the sills and stanchions, and beams and rafters. So both went to live in their houses and were happy (ibid: 82).

Much of her discussion of Negro speech reminded me of Labov's article, "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (1969), where he demonstrates the clarity and beauty of Negro English. She, like Labov, is critical of stereotypes of Blacks and their mode of speech. She gives examples of how these stereotypes are represented in musicals, plays etc.:

If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of 'ams' and 'Ises'. Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.

I know that I run the risk of being damned as an infidel for declaring that nowhere can be found the Negro who asks 'am It?' nor yet his brother who announces 'Ise uh gwinter'. He exists only for a certain type of writers and performers ("The Characteristics of Negro Expression" 1983:67).

This article was originally published in The Negro (1934), an anthology by Nancy Cunard (of Cunard shipping). Although the article is critical, it clearly stays within the bounds of intellectual argument. Hurston does not explicitly address the issue of racism which is the ultimate cause of these linguistic stereotypes, nor how they perpetuate a Negative image of the Negro. But by correcting extant stereotypes through her writing, Zora implicitly does challenge racism and fights the system that she depends on.

In many ways one could say that Hurston's ethnography is incidentally interpolated into the text. As we have seen above, it is created by the use of several different writing techniques. Hurston's descriptions of the places and people are narrative in style and method. I use narrative to mean there is fluidity and grace to her language which often has the character of story-telling. It is "deep" and embellished description. I'll give some examples. The opening paragraph from Tell My Horse fuses the anthropological and the narrative by presenting fact within a deep and rich text:

Jamaica, British West Indies, has something else besides its mountains of majesty and its quick, green valleys. Jamaica has its moments when the land, as in St. Mary's, thrusts out its sensuous bosom to the sea. Jamaica has its 'bush'. That is, the island has more usable plants for medicinal and edible purposes than any other spot on earth. Jamaica has its Norman W. Manley, that brilliant young barrister who looks like the younger Pitt in yellow skin, and who can do as much with a jury as Darrow or Liebowitz ever did (1938:13).

and

[Colonel Calixe] is a tall, slender black man around forty with the most beautiful hands and feet that I have ever be held on a man (ibid:110).

and from Mules and Men

Before my first interview with the Frizzly Rooster [a voodoo priest] was fairly begun I could understand his great following. He had the physique of Paul Robeson with the sex appeal and hypnotic what-ever-you-might-call-it of Rasputin. I could see that women would rise to flee from him but in mid-flight would whirl and end shivering at his feet. It was that way in fact (1935:266).

Hurston uses language in such a way that she gives more than fact. Instead she gives the reader a textured and layered vision of the place. Its "deep" quality makes the reader an active participant in the analysis. Not everything is explained so we can, and I think are

expected to, draw our own conclusions. There is her interpretation of material, but the thought, mood, feeling, and fact are all intertwined so that we see many things going on; stories of people's lives are there within the descriptions of culture traits and the culture traits are in among the descriptions of the politics. The text is finely woven together where we see all the threads while simultaneously viewing the whole picture.

Combined with her own descriptions of people and places, she represents the people's own voices. The technique she uses is dialogic, where whole conversations are represented within the main body of the text, as opposed to in the appendices. This multivocality represents Negro styles of speech, and also more subtly reveals the intangible essence of black folk culture. Hurston uses dialogue in both of her major ethnographies and in some of her shorter articles. In Mules and Men there is a constant representation of speech dialogically, including her own, which both sets the stage for the folklore and other descriptions and is an effective narrative tool. A few examples will illustrate this:

Armetta sensed a hard anger creepin' into the teasing so she laughed to make Gene and Gold laugh and asked, 'Did y'all have any words before you fell out?' 'We ain't mad wid one 'nother,' Gene defended. 'We jus' jokin'.' 'Well, stop blowin' it and let de lyn' go on,' said Charlie Jones. 'Zora's gittin' restless. She think she ain't gointer hear no more.' 'Oh, no Ah ain't,' I lied. After a short spell of quiet, good humor was restored to the porch. In the pause we could hear Pa Henry over in the church house sending up a prayer:
... You have been with me from the earliest rocking of my cradle up until this present moment....(1935:42-43).

or

Jim Allen began to fidget. 'Don't y'all reckon we better g'wan inside? They might need us.'
Lonnie Barnes shouted, 'Aw naw--you sho is worrisky. You bad as white folks. You know they say a white man git in some kind of trouble, he'll fret and fret until he kill hisself. A nigger git into trouble, he'll fret a while, then g'wan to sleep.'

'Yeah, dat's right, too,' Eugene Oliver agreed. 'Didja ever hear de white man's prayer?' (ibid:119).

Dialogue is multivocal, but Hurston goes beyond just dialogue in her textual constructions. Her use of dialogue is combined with the interpolation of folklore, poetry, proverbs, and songs into the body of text (In Mules and Men and Tell My Horse the musical scores are put into the appendices, but lyrics can be found in the text). The songs and proverbs add to the depth of her writing and underscore her own descriptions and ideas. This multi-layered textuality renders meaning upon meaning where the poetry or humor is there to be absorbed along with the dialogue.

Despite her narrative style, or perhaps because of it, Zora Neale Hurston's ethnography is authoritative. Her authority is created in several different ways. By placing herself in the midst of what she is studying, she shows the reader that she was there and that we should

believe her. The fluidity of her writing combined with the placement of herself at the scene make the ethnography believable. Hurston's use of multiple voices is also effective because she shows us, in a very non-pedagogic way, how much she actually knows because the presentation of many types of information demonstrates the breadth of her knowledge.

Although there is a personal element in her work, Hurston sometimes does objectify the material by pulling back and explaining it or by making comparisons that the reader can relate to. This is most clearly shown in the use of cross-cultural juxtaposition. Her use of juxtaposition reminded me of the work of Margaret Mead, but unlike Mead, her goal is not to institute reform in mainstream American society. Rather, it is used as a clarification device so that the reader can better understand the events that Hurston writes about. Or sometimes, it is used as a way to reveal and dispel stereotypes. Also, Hurston rarely uses footnotes nor does she ever cite the works of other anthropological writers, again this reminded me of Mead. [The lack of footnotes and citations can have the same effect as many because it shows that the ethnographer has a good grasp of the material and that he or she can be considered the exclusive authority.]

Hurston also uses photography to create authority, as this gives the reader visual confirmation of the written information. Unfortunately this technique is only found in her monograph, Tell My Horse, where people and places are shown that are discussed in the text. There is even a picture of a woman zombie that she met in Haiti, thus proving that zombies exist and that Hurston really saw one. Although zombification is now a generally accepted phenomenon, in Hurston's time the existence of zombies was considered apocryphal outside of Haiti, so her photograph had an added significance (cf. Del Guercio 1989). These different objectification techniques create some distance between writer and subject, but they also convey her knowledge and present a macro level view of the topic.

Periodically in the text, Hurston explicitly discusses her role as ethnographer and how she dispels a community's dis-ease with her presence. She sometimes writes about how she got information or presented herself to future "informants," many times exploring the situation before she tells the whole story about herself. In The Sanctified Church, there is a piece called "Mother Catherine" where we see how she meets one of her informants:

And so it seemed perfectly natural for me to go to my knees upon the gravel floor, and when she signalled me to extend my right hand, palm up for the dab of blessed salt, I hurried to obey because she made me feel that way. She laid her hand upon my head.

'Daughter why have you come here?'

'Mother, I come seeking knowledge.'....

The veil was brought and, with a fervent prayer, placed upon my head. I did not tell Mother then that I wanted to write about her. That came much later, after many visits. When I did speak of it she was gracious and let me photograph her and everything behind the walls of her Manger (1983:24).

I have been discussing at great length the blurring of styles in Zora Neale Hurston's ethnography, but to clarify the point it is also necessary to discuss the way these genres are also blurred in her fiction. There are two stories that I am going to discuss from Spunk, a posthumously collection of her short stories, that are good examples of this fusion. The first

story is called "Story in Harlem Slang". The title immediately gives a clue as to my point, because it could just as easily be an essay in a linguistic journal. In a sense it is linguistics, but the dialogue is fictional, although I would guess that it and some of her other stories contain composites based on her observations of people. But then fiction often is a composite of people, a representation in character form of real life that highlights what we usually don't or can't see.

This story is subtitled "Jelly's Tale". "Jelly", according to her "Glossary of Harlem Slang", which is in the same collection, means sex (I suspect that the glossary was put into this collection to aid the less versed reader in understanding some of the dialogue in the stories). The story is a combination of narrative and dialogue and is about a man called "Jelly". Much of it consists of a conversation between Jelly and a man named Sweet Back. So I was reading along...

Whenever he was challenged by a hard-head or a frail eel on the right of his title he would eyeball the idol-breaker with a slice of ice and put on his ugly-laugh, made up of scorn and pity, and say: 'youse just dumb to the fact, baby. If you don't know what you talking 'bout, you better ask Granny Grunt. I wouldn't mislead you, baby. I don't need to--not with the help I got.' Then he would give the pimp's sign* and percolate on down the Avenue. You can't go behind a fact like that (1985:82-83).

Wait a minute. I stopped. Here in the middle of fiction, or what I thought was fiction, there is a footnote explaining what a pimp is in Harlem slang. I looked at the story, then at the cover where it told me that this was indeed a collection of short "stories", and I thought.... Finally, I did conclude that this was a "story" and not an ethnography, but it was a difficult decision to make. I felt that way reading many of her stories, just as I had pondered her ethnography and wondered if these were just "tales" about voodoo.

The next story I'd like to discuss has the characteristics of folklore and is called "Cock Robin Beale Street". The story is created within the context of a conversation between two people, Uncle July and A'nt Dooby, (or are they people?) who are talking about Cock Robin. Uncle Dooby is mad as all get out that the white folks are "Going 'round letting on dat Cock Robin was a bird!" (Hurston 1985:70). But then, when he tells the story of Cock Robin all of the "people" have animal names like Brother sparrow and Brother Bull and the "birds" lay eggs (some of them are blue; Cock Robin got around that's why he was killed by a forty-four). Hurston challenges the reader's perceptions of reality by explicitly stating that Cock Robin was a person, but then giving every indication that indeed he was not. Her combination of animal and human traits into one indistinguishable whole is analogous to the way she interblends the genres of literature and ethnography and blurs the "line" between folklore and literature.

Bob Callahan, in his foreword to Spunk, discusses these very issues; he writes that:

With a writer like Hurston, however, the line between folklore and fiction simply does not exist: literature is continually returning to its aboriginal and folk culture roots; a confidence man is always becoming a trickster is always becoming a confidence man....[R]eal life is constantly turning into folklore, and folklore is

turning back into real life all the time. It is an amazing gift, very near to the core of the particular genius which this remarkable author ultimately came to possess (1985: xii).

Significantly, Callahan sees the separation between folklore and literature as false and that the two combine together naturally. Ethnography, also, must go back to its literary roots in order to be more expressive and complete. Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic work clearly fits into the postmodern framework in that it is narrative, contains a multi-layered text, and is hermeneutic. Its hermeneutic character, however, is less obvious than either the multivocality or the deep description. Although her writing develops in a hermeneutic way, she is not explicitly self critical nor self reflexive about herself nor her place as an anthropologist. We do not see her stepping back and looking at her progress or the progress of her work in the ethnography, even though she is present throughout the text. The lack of these characteristics in her writing, however, does not mean that Hurston's writing is not hermeneutic. There are more subtle ways that we see her understandings develop and change; her questions grow out of experience and out of the dialogue. She does not seek answers to a list of prefigured questions, but rather the questions are developmental and her understanding grows and changes through time. When looking at Zora Neale Hurston's work, it should be noted that her ethnography is obscure and is rarely read by anthropologists. I think it is important to explore some of the reasons why this is so, although most are really quite self evident. She was a black woman studying her own people--rural Negroes, in a time when being black and being a woman was not a benefit (nor is it now). Alice Walker confronts this issue in her dedication to an Anthology of Hurston's work:

It has been pointed out that one of the reasons Zora Neale Hurston's work has suffered neglect is that her critics never considered her 'sincere'. Only after she died penniless, still laboring at her craft, still immersed in her work, still following her vision and her road, did it begin to seem to some that yes, perhaps this woman was a serious artist after all, since artists are known to live poor and die broke. But you're up against a hard game if you have to die to win it, and we must insist that dying in poverty is an unacceptable extreme.

We live in a society, as blacks, women, and artists, whose contests we do not design and with whose insistence on ranking we are permanently at war (1979:4).

On top of all of this, Hurston focused on the folk culture of the Negro in all of its varied forms, including both its beauty and its faults. Her work is the celebration of the wondrous humanity of the Negro; she does not "attempt to make people something other than what they are. If the folks are colorist, that is shown; if they harbor self-hatred as well as self-love, that is left clear" (*ibid*: 27). This insistence on showing the real experience of the Negro and the "genius of Blacksouth folks" (Bambara 1983:7) made her somewhat of an outsider in Black circles of her day where there was an emphasis on "removing all traces of their rural black origins, when a high-class 'Negro' virtue was not to 'act ones color,' " (Washington 1979:15). Gender, race and "outrageous" individuality were all factors contributing to her obscurity in the annals of anthropology, but perhaps now that she has reappeared as a great force and "innate genius" in the history of African-American literature, she too will gain her much deserved recognition in anthropology.

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