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Reclaiming Humanity in Literature:
A Dialectical Analysis of Zora Neale Hurston and Her Critics

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Literature and other arts are supposed to hold up the mirror to nature. With only the fractional “exceptional” and the “quaint” portrayed, a true picture of Negro life in America cannot be. (Zora Neale Hurston, “What White Publishers Won’t Print” 121)

Abstract

The literary debate involving Hughes, Locke, Wright and Hurston was provocative not only because of the past relations between the authors, but also because of its implications as to what should constitute Black writing, which was making its first serious efforts to establish its Blackness and Americanness as two potentially harmonious entities. This article examines the Hurstonian mission to revitalize the humanity of the Black community in the eyes of both the dominant white culture and the Black community itself. Hurston achieves this by exploiting the rich tapestry of Black folklore and Black dialect – an effort that encapsulates the essence of the Harlem Renaissance. However, her literary detractors misapprehended this rehumanizing project, finding her writing lacking in relation to their ideals of Black expression, Black perfection, and New Negro identity. The article further explores the implications of Hurston’s rehumanizing project for both the Black communities of that time and future generations.

Keywords: rehumanization, folklore, Black dialect, self-expression, New Negro, Harlem Renaissance, Black perfection

Introduction

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks spoke of the centrality of the vernacular for the true expression of Black consciousness; for her, the vernacular creates a rupture in standard English which allows for “resistance” and “rebellion”; there is no doubt in her mind that incorporating that tongue “forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies. . . . It is absolutely essential that the revolutionary power of Black vernacular speech not be lost in contemporary culture” (171).

Zora Neale Hurston embarked on her anthropological and literary career along the same lines. Mirroring hooks, Hurston resolutely championed the Black vernacular as a fundamental channel for artistic expression, making it integral to her novels. Her commitment to linguistic authenticity, stemming from her Barnardian aspirations (her anthropological training under Franz Boas, which emphasized cultural preservation and linguistic authenticity), was so strong that she refused to translate *Barracoon* into standard English, despite the editor's demands. This steadfastness came at a great cost: the work remained unpublished until 2018, long after her death.

Hurston not only passionately upheld the Black vernacular tradition, but she also avidly pursued Southern folklore, traveling extensively to amass a cherished collection of cultural treasures that served as the foundational material for her literary works. Cudjo Lewis' promise of stories from “Afficky Soil” elicited from Hurston a response tinged with eager anticipation, reminiscent of a child enthralled by bedtime tales; when Cudjo forgot to keep his side of the bargain, she would push for it: “Do you remember any of the stories your mama told you?” (*Barracoon* 38), an impatient Hurston would imploringly ask Cudjo.

Recording these stories to use as foundational elements in her fiction was met with significant contention. She faced fierce opposition on the part of her fellow New Negro colleagues, who were not as enthusiastic

as she was about her literary vocation. This essay examines the concerns raised – and assaults mounted – by Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright – among others – about Hurston's subject matter and literary methodology; these concerns are at the crux of what created the Harlem Renaissance: one, the question of Negro writing and what should constitute it; two, how this writing should represent Negro identity and consciousness—such as moving past the Old Negro, Black creativity, modernity, and self-expression; three, how folklore – a true marker of Black culture, creativity, and language – should address these concerns.

These prominent male Harlem figures – Locke, Wright, and Hughes – criticized Hurston's work for several specific reasons: allegedly reviving minstrelsy, lacking seriousness, perpetuating demeaning stereotypes of intellectual inferiority, appealing to white audiences due to its primitive overtones, dwelling on past traumas the New Negro sought to overcome, and employing folktales and Black dialect reminiscent of the rural South. These viewpoints collectively cast her work in a deeply negative light.

We will argue that, despite what they claimed, Hurston's fiction had the potential to help rehumanize African Americans, whose humanity had been rebuffed for centuries by the various machinations of white supremacy; furthermore, that potential was materialized to a great extent by dint of folklore and the Black dialect. Her continued readership and recognition as a successful anthropologist bear witness to her enduring relevance and the power of her work in reclaiming Black humanity. Rehumanization was fundamental to the Harlem (Re)naissance. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (v), and the elimination of the color line is synonymous with rehumanizing a people who were viewed as less than human by the white patriarchal society of the 20th century. This study illustrates how Hurston's fiction significantly advanced the central aim of the Harlem Renaissance – rehumanizing the Black community – and how the idea of Black perfection – espoused by Locke, Hughes, and Wright – worked to the detriment of this cause, the central premise being that it unintentionally led to further dehumanization by attributing hyper-human qualities to Blackness. We will analyze the central ideas and texts of these Harlem authors to show that Hurston's

fiction was nothing less than an effort to reinstate a humanity that her male detractors failed to notice.

Despite the heated debates around Hurston's literary approach among her Harlem contemporaries, broader scholarly research provides divergent viewpoints on her contributions and the criticisms she faced. Research on Hurston portrays her as a complex writer who was ahead of her time in many aspects, such as defying linguistic conventions and transforming writing practices (Ndi et al. 158; Pinckney 98), striving for autonomy and portraying “adventuresome, defiant and triumphant womanhood” (Lupton 47), and engaging in anti-racist endeavors (Williams 190). She is also lauded for her powerful depiction of Black self-determination and feminism (Glover 45), her ability in weaving folklore with Black identity (Crabtree 55), and her adept celebration of “Black vernacular speech and Black culture” (Larkin 65).

But Hurston has encountered her fair share of criticism, not just from literary contemporaries, but also from scholars and researchers and even writers who helped her emerge from anonymity, such as Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington. Rejecting *Seraph on the Suwanee*, due to its apparent incompatibility with her other literary productions, Washington describes it as “[a]n awkward and contrived novel, as vacuous as a soap opera” (21). Some scholars have voiced concerns raised by Wright, Hughes and Locke for her “[a]ppearing untroubled by systemic racism and thus resembling characters on the minstrel stage” (Larkin 65). She was also criticized for her political incorrectness, such as her comments on the efficacy of the Jim Crow system (Delbanco 106). Even Walker, the writer most influential in resurrecting Hurston, questions some of her political announcements in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (Introduction to Part 2 151). She was also accused of plagiarism in some of her anthropological endeavors (Pinckney 94).

Despite these criticisms, very few scholars have adequately acknowledged Hurston's literary brilliance in restoring a truly human status to Black Americans, who were often painted as lesser beings by white supremacists or as idealized figures by writers like Locke. Very few studies have probed Hurston's knack for blending folktale and dialect with substance – an emphasis on the humanity of the Black community, which

was often denied by the predominantly white American society during the Harlem Renaissance. This humanity was also jeopardized and undermined – albeit with good intentions – by her Black colleagues (Wright, Hughes and Locke), who attempted to paint an angelic and unrealistic picture of the Black individual.

Lesley Larkin attributes this rehumanization project to Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1982), but we contend that it began decades earlier with Hurston, who viewed and represented the Black community on a truly human level. This view of the Black community stood in stark contrast to the reductionist terms in which white audiences regarded Black people, as well as to the idealized portraits painted by her Black literary detractors. Bill F. Ndi et al. are among the few scholars who have credited Hurston with her rehumanization mission, and who have articulated Hurston's dexterity in reviving the Black dignity:

It is evident that Zora Neale Hurston's preoccupation in her writing is with her humanity as well as the humanity of others. She seems not to dwell on the differences or similarities that push humans apart or bring them together. . . . Zora Neale Hurston, the undomesticated, the untamed, did all striving for the preservation of Black human dignity, Black folk memory, and Black folk memory means as well as for herself. (159-161)

Ndi et al. did not, however, demonstrate how she achieved this through her literary works. They linked her rehumanizing efforts to her social activities rather than her literary and artistic productions, such as her enrollment in the "Niggerati" group, which was dedicated to combating racism, sexism and the suppression of alternative modes of sexuality. This article will indicate that Hurston succeeded in her project through transformations in content and form, her use of the Black vernacular – contrary to the norms of her literary critics – her criticism of intra-communal sexism and her representation of the Black community in straightforward human terms. The latter was juxtaposed with an espousal of Black perfection by figures such as Hughes and Locke. To this end, we will present the different viewpoints that her contemporary critics had about Black writing and Black art, and, subsequently, demonstrate how Hurston's view of art and Black writing prevails over theirs.

The Roots of Discord

The specific reasons behind the criticisms of Hurston's literary orientation can be summarized as follows: Wright, Hughes, and Locke argued that her use of Black vernacular in her writing revived the minstrel tradition, which they believed made Black culture a target of ridicule. It would make white people laugh, as Wright would emphatically put it: "Her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley" ("Between Laughter and Tears" 25). Additionally, they found the themes and characters in her fiction unappealing to their cause, regarding her characters as derogatorily primitive.

Locke reflects this in his Opportunity column: "progressive Southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public loves to laugh with, weep over and envy" ("Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*"). Langston Hughes did not consider Hurston's themes and characters to carry the weight or seriousness that he believed literature should convey: "She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the south" (*Autobiography* 185). Hurston also writes about slavery and Black trauma, which Locke vigorously dismisses in *The New Negro* (we will refer to these points later). They also had issues with Hurston's personality and scholarly practice; they also disliked her benefits from white patronage; her resembling a "happy darkie" figure also caused contention amongst the men; lastly, her portrayal of her unthreateningly naïve and childish characters with their acquiescence to the "ole massa" caused the consternation of these male voices of the New Negro cause. For instance, Hughes would unequivocally quip:

Of this 'niggerati' Zora Neale Hurston was certainly the most amusing. Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books – because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. . . . To many of her white friends, no doubt she was a perfect "darkie", in the nice meaning they gave that

term – that is a naive, childlike, sweetly humorous and highly colored Negro (*Autobiography* 185).

Hurston is also construed as an opportunist, whose pursuit of art is stained and marred by lowly materialistic desires. In *Infants of the Spring*, Sweetie May Carr (the fictional stand-in for Hurston) is described by Raymond Taylor (Wallace Thurman) as a bohemian who is particularly adept at passing for a successful artist. When explaining the reasons for Sweetie's indifference to "the intricacies of writing," she says:

Sure I cut the fool. But I enjoy it, too. I don't know a tinker's damn about art. I care less about it. My ultimate ambition, as you know, is to become a gynecologist. And the only way I can live easily until I have the requisite training is to pose as a writer of potential ability. Voila I get my tuition paid at Columbia. I rent an apartment and have all the furniture contributed by kind-hearted o'fays. I receive bundles of groceries from various sources several times a week. (Thurman 142)

These mud-slinging renderings are further highlighted by the fact that they are all directed by male writers. To what extent this impacted their appraisal of Hurston's writing is another matter, but it surely informed part of their critique. As Ndi et al. argue, race and gender had much to do with the criticism that she received:

African-American authors bid a swift retreat from Hurston's new manner of self-expression and cultural affirmation. A perplexing question is why the literary establishment, mostly in New York City, was so eager to close ranks. Such a clean break has as much to do with class as it has to do with race and gender. Zora Neale Hurston deserved praise but what she got was derision. (161-162)

It should be noted that some of these critiques come from writers who were purportedly gay (Locke, Hughes, and Thurman), and if there are any assumptions that gay men and women shared a common cause and alliance, this is shattered when an important part of this criticism has a gender-inflected hue in it. In an influential article entitled "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism," Marilyn Frye dispels any notion of solidarity between gay men and lesbians, arguing that gay men, despite

their marginalization, align themselves with heterosexual patriarchal values and principles. Frye asserts that many gay men are “more loyal to masculinity and male-supremacy than other men” (132) and notes that gay male culture often reinforces the same values of male dominance and woman-hating present in straight male culture (132-133). She emphasizes that disdain for women and their bodies are commonly practiced by gay men: “contempt for women and physical disgust with female bodies are overtly accepted as just the other side of the coin of gay men's attraction to men” (140). This suggests that gay men, like heterosexual men, often perpetuate the patriarchal structures that oppress women, thus undermining any potential alliance with lesbian feminists.

Frye's assertion holds true especially when the use of the Black dialect is traced in the male writers of Harlem. Paul Laurence Dunbar is noted for his dialect poetry, and Sterling Brown vociferously strove to write about the Black experience and the Black culture in the rural south by digging into an authentic Black folklore, but they were not lambasted as harshly as Hurston was. Based on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s “Harlem on Our Minds” (1-4), the concept of the Black Renaissance can be traced back to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Gates Jr. outlines four distinct Black Renaissances, with the first occurring at the turn of the century, particularly in the late 1890s to early 1900s, as seen in the works of Dunbar, Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and others (“Harlem” 2). During that period, figures like Dunbar and Du Bois were contributing significantly to the intellectual groundwork for what would later evolve into the Harlem Renaissance. If we accept Gates' argument that the first Black Renaissance began in the late 1890s and early 1900s, marked by figures such as Dunbar and Du Bois, and, furthermore, if we acknowledge that this period laid the intellectual groundwork for the Harlem Renaissance, why is Dunbar's poetry not brushed aside as “facile sensuality” (Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears” 25), “childlike” and “perfect darkie” (Hughes, *Autobiography* 185), and “pseudo-primitive” (Locke, “Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”)?

The New Negro Vision: Contrasting Approaches to African-American Literature

Even if this last reason behind the unequivocally harsh disparaging of Hurston by Locke, Hughes and Wright is excluded, and a focus on the linguistic, thematic, and literary aspects of their disparagement is given, there arises the question as to what kind of art, fiction and literature they pursued as an ideal cause for the New Negro. This is best highlighted in Locke's Harlem manifesto entitled *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925). Locke, in this highly influential and frequently cited book, announces a willingness on the part of the mass community of "the Negro Americans" to move beyond the Old Negro and embrace the New Negro, particularly because the Old Negro is beset by a moralistic sentimentalism that is the subject of study by the "The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader," both Black and white, all of whom cannot account for the complexities of the New Negro (Locke, "The New Negro" 3), who is equipped with the power for "self-expression" and artistic explosion (Locke, "The New Negro" 5); however, the New Negro does not and cannot steer this self-expression and artistic energy by means of old ways. "Popular melodrama, "past controversy," and projections of the Negro in rural settings – such as slavery accounts that risk portraying the Negro as primitive and uncivilized – are often seen as eliciting sympathy at best, or, more extremely, derision, and must be dispensed with (Locke, "The New Negro" 5). Yesterday's sorrows have dimmed, tomorrow is bright with the possibility for "self-expression" (Locke, "The New Negro" 5) and taking the responsibility to account for one's failures and achievements, to not use white discrimination as an excuse for shame and failure (Locke, "The New Negro" 8). The Negroes' migration "northward" and "city-ward," according to Locke ("The New Negro" 6), has brought about a milieu for a new consciousness revolving around a "life in common" rather than a "problem in common" (Locke, "The New Negro" 7). The New Negro cannot afford to allow himself to be condescendingly taught without a possibility for new relationships, for he is ready to learn and to teach. He cherishes the opportunity for a "positive self-direction" and abhors "self-pity," since self-pity belongs to the Old Negro and the past (Locke, "The

New Negro” 8). Now, we see a “fundamentally changed Negro,” powerful enough to smash “the idols of the tribe” (Locke, “The New Negro” 8). The New Negro is no longer regarded “en masse” and is demanding, quite forcefully, his individuality, that had long evaded him under the guise of a soulless mass devoid of any consciousness and identity (Locke, “The New Negro” 6). His only identity was a problem, a “myth” that could not be resolved (Locke, “The New Negro” 3). However, now, he is ready to claim his individual space, his individual voice through a “new vision” (Locke, “The New Negro” 6).

To unleash this “self-expression” and “self-direction,” the New Negro artist and writer cannot stomach anything that does not paint a perfect and pure picture of him. In sum, he cannot deal with and produce stock characters from the old days of slavery; nor can he deal with the rural South in the aftermath of Emancipation and Reconstruction for it reminds one of shock, unfathomable ordeals, and trauma. He wants to be a perfect man with an eye towards the present and the future (Locke, “The New Negro” 3-16).

The Diverging Aesthetics of Hughes and Hurston

This is not intended to mean that these male Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not wish to write about racial conflicts and discrimination. It does not show that they did not intend to write about the ugly aspects of the Black experience either. Hughes was a prolific voice in the articulation of race, Blackness and the ugly. In his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he rejoices in his will to address the color line, the intent to be as much Negro as possible and to paint the ugly and the beautiful together:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. (694)

He even sarcastically mocks both Black and white readerships for imposing on Black artists “limitations” on what they should and should not write:

O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,” say the Negroes. Be stereotyped, don’t go too far, don’t shatter our illusions about you, don’t amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,” say the whites. (“The Negro Artist” 693)

Hughes laments the restrictions placed upon artists for what literature they should create and encourages his young colleagues to explore any material they deem fit with absolute freedom, a freedom that he does not extend to Hurston:

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. . . . And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. (“The Negro Artist” 693)

His license for using the ugly is different from the one employed by Hurston. His version of the ugly is not appalling to him because out of it emerges a beautiful, perfect Negro who is heroically wrestling with his sufferings and who eventually surmounts them. Out of Hurston emerges no heroism, no beauty, and no “temples for tomorrow” (Hughes, “The Negro Artist” 694), only a pile of misrepresentation, melodrama, whites’ ideal of Black primitivism and Bohemia. “Romantic” and “the ugly” exist in both Hurston and Hughes but are seen quite differently by Hughes. For him, Hurston’s romanticism is read as melodramatic hysterics, and the ugly in her works is an ill-advised, untimely and unwelcome picturing of trauma. The ugly in his works is a truer version of romanticism for out of it is crafted a noble Black man in spirit, culture, politics, and life in total. Hurston’s engagement with folk-lorish hokum, in his view, is ugly beyond repair whereas his ugliness constructs beauty; it is sublime. This is the reason for part of the tension between Hurston and Hughes, whose feud is

described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as “the most notorious literary quarrel in African-American cultural history” (“A Tragedy” 5).

Black Consciousness and Folklore in Art: A Disagreement Between Wright and Hurston

As for Wright’s rendering of Hurston’s fiction as “facile sensuality,” it can be traced back to his influential manifesto entitled, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), where he articulates his robust view of Black consciousness and how this consciousness should be materialized in writing. For Wright, a Negro writer should function as a responsible agent who possesses the challenging task of depicting the Black experience in a nuanced and comprehensive way. To accomplish this, the writer should have a full awareness of history throughout centuries as if experiencing it tangibly within a lifetime (Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” 221). Furthermore, Wright argues this consciousness is central to the creation of art that fulfils its function, which is to write for the Black public rather than for a select bourgeoisie caste who often segregates itself from the rest of the community (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 216). The Black writer should address the general Black community, especially the working class, who have aspired to lift themselves in society in a more genuine way than the petit bourgeoisie, so as to mold “those lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals” (Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” 216); therefore, self-consciousness and self-criticism on the part of the Negro writer is key to bridging the gap between him and the Black masses. One of the ways to gain such self-consciousness is to have a deep understanding of Black culture which represents itself through “(1) the Negro church; and (2) the folklore of the Negro people” (Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” 215). The Negro church functions as an “antidote for suffering and denial,” and it is still for many Black folks the only guide to “personal dignity”; however, it is the more empowering folklore that helps the Negro achieve complete self-expression:

It was, however, in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from

mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a Black mother to her Black daughter on the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a Black father to his Black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns – all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed (Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” 215).

Folklore is of utmost significance, since it is a culture that totally belongs to the Negro and that has assisted him in expressing his consciousness and “emotional attitudes” (215) with its potential for galvanizing individuals into action. Wright laments Black writers’ failure to deepen this folk tradition as it culminates in a fruitful communication between them and their people; however, these writers’ notion that with individual achievement they could move past “the harsh lot of their race” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 216) prevented them from enriching their people’s invaluable source of artistic self-expression.

It seems to me paradoxical that Wright’s view of folklore as a “Collective sense of Negro life in America” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 216) and as an inexhaustible venue for self-expression is juxtaposed with his lambasting assertion that Hurston’s use of folklore is “cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley,” especially because she “seems to have no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction” (“Between Laughter and Tears” 25). It is not enough for him that she can catch the psychological movements of the Negro “folk-mind,” for her fiction stops at this point and fails to yield the complexity required for depicting the Black consciousness. For Wright, her fiction brings to mind the derogatory minstrel technique that is created for the white reader who feels situated within a safe space where they can satiate their chauvinistic taste of the Black life and of the Black art since it “evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (“Between Laughter and Tears” 25).

Wright is calling for a complexity of Negro life that makes it hard for the white reader to effortlessly decipher it, but, by doing so, he is falling into the same trap that he vociferously advised Black writers to eschew: the trap of writing for the Black bourgeoisie, and not for the Black masses who, “lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property. . . have access to a wide social vision and a deep social

consciousness” (“Blueprint for Negro Writing” 214). Moreover, as Hughes warned, Wright is inviting future writers to write as the white man does: “I want to write like a white poet; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white’” (Hughes, “The Negro Artist” 692), particularly as the white writer has proved adept at cloaking his fiction in a difficult complexity which calls for extensive decoding and uncovering meaning.

Moreover, we do not see Hurston’s fiction as cloaked in that facile sensuality, nor does Hurston herself. Margaret Gillespie points to the “hermeneutic complexity” in Hurstonian fiction by expounding on Hurston’s idea of a feather-bed resistance, which Hurston delineates in her introduction to *Mules and Men*:

The Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. 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 resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is always trying to know into 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. (qtd. in Gillespie par. 19)

As Hurston faced the gigantic task of pleasing a patron who pushed Hurston to write about her perceived primitivism in the Black culture (Gillespie, par. 19), and pleasing a Black readership that called for genuine expression of the Black experience in the modern era, she artistically employed the feather-bed technique, whose ultimate goal is to put the prober at bay by giving him a toy to play with and to communicate her true meaning to the true interlocutor. Hurston employs a code-switching and signifying tradition that serves as a polyvocal mechanism for communicating to different audiences. Her John the Conqueror and Brer Rabbit (trickster figures in African-American folklore) are not a thing of the past, as Gillespie puts it, but multi-faceted beings who were of

importance to the Black community of her time and to future generations, as they subtly portray the arduous task of surviving in a society that disavows their humanity (par. 3).

Hurston's Rehumanizing Ideal in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Barracoon*

We would argue that despite the concerns voiced by Locke, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and even Brown, Hurston's fiction has an inherent power to rehumanize the African-American community, since it shows the bright and dark sides of a community subjected to a Black and white epistemology imposed by white supremacy. White supremacy tends to flatten the world into a Black and white perspective: dichotomies shaped by notions of bad and good, evil and moral, low and high, the normal us and the abnormal other, citizen and foreign, without any shades of gray in between. Hurston's fiction, despite all its presumed stylistic problems, neither depicts Blackness as a site of intellectual and cultural inferiority, subservience to the dominant discourse, and unrecoverable trauma, nor does it depict it as a perfect, angelic, and completely changed entity that shuts its eyes to the flaws within and without it. As for the latter, Hurston foregrounds the gender line in ways that few of her contemporaries did. If the color line represents the barriers in the way that people of color strive for full integration into the American society, and if it prevents them from seeing themselves outside the notion of Blackness created by white supremacy, the gender line also prevents them from seeing their sexism and collusion with white supremacist notions of male-dominated heteropatriarchy. The crossing of the gender line can be seen most visibly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Jody and Tea Cake are two characters that remind Janie of her place in the world and of what happens if she crosses the gender line. Jody is an exemplar of a man of color that can easily metamorphose into a sexist and authoritative figure whose norms have been imposed by white supremacy. He gives life to the misogynist values defined by the white western ideology and shows that any man, no matter how marginalized, colored, or oppressed, can equal and even surpass white supremacist notions of male superiority. In the

same spirit, Tea Cake reminds Janie that love cannot stop him from wanting to give up the privileges granted to him by these long-standing values. He beats her to show that he has control over her (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 173-174). He is the most important person in Janie's life, and he still needs to show her that should she cross the gender line by seeking too much independence and undermining his position as the "boss," there will be consequences. It would have been melodramatic and facile had Hurston portrayed Tea Cake as a character free of this shortcoming, but she did not; this further proves her deep understanding of her community and her knack for portraying the complexities of intra-communal oppression. Similarly, it would have been unrealistic for Hurston to depict Tea Cake as merely a replica of Jody – albeit with a more romantic side to him – but she did not. She portrayed him as a multifaceted individual with shades of grey; he stands for the Black community: human, fallible, beautiful, ugly, just like anyone else.

Another instance of the potential power of African Americans for doing both good and bad can be seen in *Barracoon*, when Hurston refers to the role, big or small, of their African ancestors in the horrific practice of slavery and condemning their own folks to the horrors of the Middle Passage. Cudjo and many members of his tribe are taken captive when the neighboring kingdom of Dahomey attacks his tribe; they kill many and carry the heads of the slain and keep Cudjo and others in the barracoon for three weeks. Then, they are sold to Captain Bill Foster who takes them to his ship, *Clotilda*. They are then subjected to the sufferings of the Middle Passage for seventy days before they arrive in Alabama, where he is sold to the Meaher brothers. The human quality of the Black people depicted through all the good and bad that human beings can do is best foregrounded by Walker, in the foreword of the book:

Reading *Barracoon* one understands immediately the problem many Black people, years ago, especially Black intellectuals and political leaders, had with it. It resolutely records the atrocities African peoples inflicted on each other, long before shackled Africans, traumatized, ill, disoriented, starved, arrived on ships as "Black cargo" in the hellish West. Who could face this vision of the violently cruel behavior of the "brethren" and the "sistren" who first captured our ancestors? Who would want to know, via a blow by blow account, how African chiefs deliberately set out to capture

Africans from neighboring tribes, to provoke wars of conquest in order to capture for the slave trade, people – men, women, children – who belonged to Africa? And to do this in so hideous a fashion that reading about it two hundred years later brings waves of horror and distress. This is, make no mistake, a harrowing read. (Foreword x).

The idea that the enslavers in Africa may have feared for their own slavery should they not give the white man what he wants may hold true (Bennett), but it does not extenuate their role, big or small, in practice. The African enslavers may have feared that the Europeans would ultimately have their cargos of slaves and may have said, “better others than us,” but this excuse would not wash away their crime.

Hurston does not wish to show that the men of her folks are more oppressive and authoritative than other (white) men, but she intends to demonstrate that they have the potential to be as oppressive and domineering as the dominant culture; thus, she emphasizes the human nature of the New Negro in a way that Hughes, Locke, and Wright failed to do. We even argue that Hughes,’ Locke’s and Wright’s conceptualization of the New Negro had the unintentional effect of dehumanizing the Black individual in so far as they wanted to forge an ideal individual that did not bear much resemblance to reality. Complexity in the works of Locke, Hughes, and Wright defined itself as the many ways that the New Negro could engage in self-expression, self-direction without the white man’s tutelage, even if this self-engagement and self-direction could propose a limiting view of the Negro insofar as it aspired to show a positive view of him by rendering the negative and the ugly (not the sublime ugliness depicted by Hughes) invisible in the New Negro. In Hurston’s work, complexity defines itself as the good and ugly fused together, dark and light hand in hand, tyrannical and liberal attitudes, down-to-earth and sophisticated, pure and impure. This is most evident in her “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), where she clearly shows the human quality of her fiction and that of her subject matter:

Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the Black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use. God and the Devil are paired, and are treated no more reverently than Rockefeller and Ford.

Both of these men are prominent in folklore, Ford being particularly strong, and they talk and act like good-natured stevedores or mill-hands. Ole Massa is sometimes a smart man and often a fool. The automobile is ranged alongside of the oxcart. The angels and the apostles walk and talk like section hands. (84)

Her rehumanizing project is also very much apparent in her 1950 essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print," where she deplores that white America is not yet ready for the internal emotions of Negroes, and marginalized people in general. There, she casts lights on the publishers' refusal to publish anything that does not bespeak of a race tension, the Negro as a problem, rather than as a rich tapestry of internal feelings and motives which make him a complex being, deserving of respect. Romantic love stories, in which the Black character's thoughts and a wide range of deep human feelings are put on display, are rejected because, according to publishers, they are not there "to educate, but to make money" (118). Rather than pointing the finger at the publishers, whom she pardons for "they cannot afford to be crusaders" (118), she rebukes the general white Anglo-Saxon readers, who are indifferent to the internal life of "educated minorities" (118), and of marginalized people by extension. She opines that this indifference is rooted in "THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY" that tends to regard all non-Anglo-Saxons as "uncomplicated stereotypes" (118), because they are viewed as stock figures, inside this museum, who can easily be known because they have no "insides at all" (118). This "typical" outlook on the racialized other is more serious in the case of Black people, who, unlike less threatening and more familiar others, cannot afford to display any "untypical" element in them: "The whole museum is dedicated to the convenient 'typical'. In there is the 'typical' Oriental, Jew, Yankee, Western, Southerner, Latin, and even out-of-favor Nordics like the German. . . . However, the public willingly accepts the untypical in Nordics, but feels cheated if the untypical is portrayed in others" (119). She insists that for the sake of "the national welfare," it would be necessary to recognize the humanness of this racialized other, who can think, feel and exist just like anyone else: "it is urgent to realize that minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally,

according to natural endowment, are just like everybody else” (“Characteristics” 119).

This critique of the attitude towards Negroes as “uncomplicated stereotypes” who should always function as the orator of “a race problem” is what Locke, Hughes, and especially Wright accused Hurston herself of, but they failed to understand that her supposed simplicity was an ardent endeavor geared towards restoring and retrieving a lost human quality to her people and herself as a struggling writer of this community. And this endeavor refused to regard the Negro as a mechanical toy that makes predictable moves and also as a utopian and angelic figure out of touch with reality. Hurston believed that rejecting both extremes would benefit everyone, on both sides of the racial divide: “The realization that Negroes are no better nor no worse, and at times just as bonny as everybody else, will hardly kill off the population of the nation” (121). To that end, literature and art – of the Blacks, the whites and the marginalized – should be committed to this project of national (and trans-national) welfare: “Literature and other arts are supposed to hold up the mirror to nature” (Hurston, “Characteristics” 121).

Conclusion

In closing, Locke, Hughes and Wright judged it fitting to write off whoever and whatever betokened “the dusty spectacles of past controversy” (“The New Negro” 5), to portray a perfect image of the Negro as an indispensable vehicle for self-expression and self-direction, to portray the ugly as the sublime, to aspire for “serious fiction” (“Between Laughter and Tears” 25) devoid of comic strains, to dispense with the Old Negro, his themes of rural simplicity, and moralistic tone, to move behind anything that reeked of past trauma, most often traced in slavery narratives, and to call for the construction of urban characters situated in the complex milieu of modern cities. They found Hurstonian folklore and Black dialect incongruent with the notion of Blackness that they wanted to construct, but, in the long run, Hurston’s literature would triumph in its profound rehumanizing impact, surpassing the scope of their own literary endeavors. As we tried to show above, Hurston’s account of the Black

experience would show the ugly and the beautiful in the African-American world, and this is a completely rehumanizing gesture, since vilification and angelization would render Blackness unrealistic, superhuman and unhuman. Hurston's dexterity in rehumanizing the Black experience is evident in several ways: the lifting of the gender veil, the depiction of misogyny and its role in the cruel propagation of slavery – no matter how small or big. She also captures the human struggle to cope with the ordeal of slavery and the ingenuity required to forge a life beyond it following emancipation – achieved, in part, through what she termed “feather-bed resistance.” Additionally, her use of a rich dialect to convey the nuances of the complex Black experience further highlights her dexterity in the vocation to rehumanize. So does her effort to show that the Black community, like any other group of human beings, can achieve the highest levels of individual success when given the slightest chance, as her continued readership and scholarly status as a successful anthropologist clearly demonstrate.

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