Document generated on 07/24/2025 9:39 a.m.

Culture

ZORA NEALE HURSTON
Writing Culture

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Volume 10, Number 1, 1990

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080934ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1080934ar

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)
2563-710X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Mason-Grant, J. (1990). ZORA NEALE HURSTON: Writing Culture. *Culture*, *10*(1), 49–60. https://doi.org/10.7202/1080934ar

Article abstract

The life-work of novelist/essayist/folklorist Zora Neale Hurston has been recently and lovingly salvaged from the black hole of literary oblivion. This reclamation occurs during a time of increasing attention paid to marginalia within various discourses of theory. This theoretical and historical coincidence has inspired me to question the continued relegation of Hurston's life-work to the realm of "the literary" and the virtual absence of any serious exploration of its anthropological significance. In this study, therefore, I turn to Hurston as a writer of culture. I argue that Hurston's work exemplifies the increasingly complex contemporary "field" in which anthropologists write culture, and thus animates the contemporary rethinking underway regarding the process, product and status of ethnographic writing. Her writing of culture weaves intriguingly back and forth over the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, white culture and black culture, wealthy urban class and poor rural class, and, perhaps most interestingly, 'subject'–anthropologist and 'object'-culture. In tracing the sense in which Hurstons's work continuously problematizes such simple we-they oppositions and the search for a singular voice, I argue that the theoretical insights of deconstruction take us a long way in understanding the politics of representation at work in Hurston's heterogeneous texts, and help us to rethink their status as 'representational'.

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON: **Writing Culture**[1]

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The life-work of novelist/essayist/folklorist Zora Neale Hurston has been recently and lovingly salvaged from the black hole of literary oblivion. This reclamation occurs during a time of increasing attention paid to marginalia within various discourses of theory. This theoretical and historical coincidence has inspired me to question the continued relegation of Hurston's life-work to the realm of "the literary" and the virtual absence of any serious exploration of its anthropological significance. In this study, therefore, I turn to Hurston as a writer of culture.

I argue that Hurston's work exemplifies the increasingly complex contemporary "field" in which anthropologists write culture, and thus animates the contemporary rethinking underway regarding the process, product and status of ethnographic writing. Her writing of culture weaves intriguingly back and forth over the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, white culture and black culture, wealthy urban class and poor rural class, and, perhaps most interestingly, 'subject'-anthropologist and 'object'-culture. In tracing the sense in which Hurstons's work continuously problematizes such simple we-they oppositions and the search for a singular voice, I argue that the theoretical insights of deconstruction take us a long way in understanding the politics of representation at work in Hurston's heterogeneous texts, and help us to rethink their status as 'representational'.

L'oeuvre complète de la nouvelliste/essayiste/folkloriste Zora Neale Hurston a récemment été tirés avec amour du trou noir de l'oubli littéraire. Ce sauvetage a eu lieu durant une période où une attention accrue est portée à l'art marginal et ses divers discours théoriques. Cette coïncidence historique et théorique m'a poussée à m'interroger sur la constante relégation de l'oeuvre de Hurston au royaume du «genre littéraire» et sur la quasi-absence de toute exploration de son contenu anthropologique.

Je crois que le travail de Hurston donne un exemple du «champ» de plus en plus complexe à l'intérieur duquel les anthropologues écrivent la culture, pour ainsi alimenter l'actuelle remise en question du processus, du produit et du statut de l'écriture ethnographique. Ses écrits sur la culture vont et viennent de manière fascinante entre la fiction et la non-fiction, la culture blanche et la culture noire, la classe urbaine riche et la classe rurale pauvre et, ce qui attire particulièrement notre attention, entre le «sujet-anthropologue» et l'«objet-culture». En retraçant la manière avec laquelle l'oeuvre de Hurston traite avec complexité de simples oppositions de type «nous-eux» et la recherche d'une voix unique, j'affirme que les approfondissements théoriques de la déconstruction viennent grandement éclairer les politiques de représentation à l'oeuvre dans les textes hétérogènes de Hurston, et qu'ils nous aident à repenser leur statut de «représentatifs».

I. Sketching The Field

> Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most significant unread authors in America.... What follows is openly intended to stimulate further interest in her art.... It should be acknowledged from the start that it is a white man's reconstruction of the intellectual processes in a Black woman's mind. That is not an irrelevant fact, either sexually or racially; people falsely impressed with the mythical 'objectivity' of criticism and the presumed 'universality' of literature will claim that it is. They are wrong.... A published author belongs in a special way to the world of culture

> — he is subject to the inquiry of any reader who would seek his example and learn his truth.... The existential irony making criticism frustrating is that one's acceptance or rejection of such burdens is a process of self-discovery, a condition of becoming. This leaves the critic in the same tentative position as the artist: he creates offerings.
>
> (Robert Hemenway (Hurston's biographer) 1972:109)

My voice joins the Zora Neale Hurston revival now in full swing, thanks largely to Robert Hemenway's caring biographical attention and Alice Walker's loving publication of a collection of Hurston's writings. This celebration of the life-work of a black woman folklorist/novelist/essayist is a double-take of sorts at least partly enacted in the spirit of restitution for paternalistic, often scathing dismissals of it by earlier critics. The salvaging of Hurston's life-work from the black hole of literary oblivion occurs during a time of increasing attention paid to marginalia; this co-incidence has inspired me to question the continued relegation of Hurston's life-work to the realm of 'the literary' and the virtual absence of any serious exploration of its anthropological significance[2]. It is with this broad question in mind that I turn to Hurston as a writer of culture to explore what her work has to show us about the politics of representation.

A striking feature of Hurston's life-work is the curious confluence of disdain and respect, the admixture of dislike and affection, which is exhibited in the now growing body of literature through which Hurston 'lives on.'.[3] The diversity and range of exchange which her life-work has propagated spurs important questions about the nature of her survival. The intriguing and ambiguous tone and gesture of these texts suggest that she survived, not in spite of, but because of her situation in a highly charged and complex field of differences.

As Hemenway's insight suggests, situatedness is central to the interest in and reading of Hurston. However, situatedness is never quite something which can be properly represented, for it is constituted by an infinity of power relations. Nonetheless, it can (it must) be insinuated by exemplification. I am a woman, like Hurston. I am white, unlike Hurston. These are not mere neutral differences; they are differences which are inscribed within and by a sexist and racist society. Our mutual situatedness in regard to only two differences, race and gender, works to significantly problematize the possibility of locating clear centres and margins by shifting the limits which mark positions of privilege and oppression, not only between us, but within us. With Gayatri Spivak (1988: 103-117) I suspect that the best one can do in order to sense the politics of centrism and marginality at work in any project of representation, is to explore the ways in which one's own situatedness moves against any inside/outside distinction.

My offering here will be to suggest that the politics at work in Hurston's anthropological practice begin to emerge when we read her life-work as not only a *narration* of shifting limits, but a *negotiation* of the field of double-edged constraints and opportunities within which she forged a work-life. Her life-work thus 'represents' by *exemplifying* that complex field of ethico-socio-political forces. Yet, to explore the representative character of Hurston's texts in these terms is to significantly challenge the modernist understanding of representation as mimesis, of language as a medium which makes manifest the 'bare facts' of reality, or lived experience. In exemplifying heterogeneity, Hurston's texts ineluctably require us to theorize its possibility in language.

Specifically, then, my theoretical case locates its challenge at the level of language, that material which has had to bear the burden of sustaining a preoccupation (to the point of distraction) with the separation between fiction and fact. Language has been measured almost exclusively in terms of its 'adequacy to the facts'; this myopia has sustained a tired notion of representation which has, in turn, perpetuated the dominating assumptions about scientific writing which have functioned to relegate the work of Hurston to the clearly nonscientific, clearly nonscholarly realm of fiction.

My voice thus not only joins the Hurston revival but through it, the polyphony of recent challenges to these theoretical assumptions which have marginalized her life-work in the field of anthropology. Even though the majority of Hurston's work, from novel to folklore collection to autobiography to essay, inscribes the rural Black South that was her home, this corpus has remained an improbable source for an 'accurate' cultural representation, one that would 'live up' to anthropological standards. The assumptions enabling this preclusion are what interest me in this exploration. Most straight forwardly and at minimum, my task is to introduce Hurston to an anthropological readership. More complexly, I feel this task can only be undertaken by challenging the disciplinary conventions of anthropology — both its deep-seated empiricism and its literary conventions — which have helped keep Hurston's work from

being considered as 'properly anthropological.'

It should be noted that, even though Hurston's texts have rarely been appealed to for their specifically anthropological representation, many have sought unified pictures, identities of some sort, in her corpus. Those who have attempted to read Hurston's life-work only with the aim of extracting a unified semantic content — a picture of African-American culture, a political stance, a personal identity[4] — have generally been left holding an inconsistent, contradictory piecemeal thing in their hands, a monstrosity by scholarly standards. This has contributed to the vast dissonance in critic-response to Hurston which I will document in section II of this paper. What I hope to show is that if one attunes to Hurston's many voices, rather than attempt to reduce them to one authentic voice, her life-work proves to be an extraordinarily rich cultural representation. Her acquired Northern Barnardese superbly cut by her Southern black idiom, her now-bitter-now-full-of-laughter tone, her rich deployment of metaphor, all work together to sound the struggle of a life lived through and constituted by a confluence of conflicting ethico-socio-political agendas. The significance of this for Hurston's ethnographic writing will emerge in section III.

Our attention to Hurston's 'anthropologized' writing will motivate an important rethinking about the process and products of ethnographic writing, a rethinking I will begin to elaborate through the insights of deconstruction in section IV. As I have indicated, language is central to this rethinking. I don't believe language is up to the task demanded of it by modernist expectations, that is as the transparent or symbolically encoding representor of reality. The mirror metaphor has run its course and done its damage.[5] Hurston suggests that language is like money, legal tender for getting what you want (1934: 39). It is indeed time to seriously explore the role of language as a material force in the (often tricky) negotiation of a lived life, an exploration which will impel us to (re)consider the politics of (cultural) representation.

II. Exploring the Shifting Limits

> Hurston could be read not just as an example of the 'noncanonical' writer, but as a commenter on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference.
>
> Barbara Johnson 1987b:173

Born into the self-governing all black town of Eatonville, Florida, Zora Neale Hurston was thirteen before the purity of her childhood was violated. She entered the 'outside' world and discovered she was something importantly different — a little coloured girl. This world, governed by white men and Jim Crow laws, was a world in which survival would not come easy. From the tales told during the 'lyin' sessions' on Joe Clark's store-front porch, it was a long climb to the scientific inquiries which took place in the marble halls of Barnard. Hurston quickly learned the twisted turns of the road. She discovered that her disadvantage was her advantage. She had something which the (white) knowledge and power brokers in New York City wanted — the folkways of the rural Black South.

Hurston was first lured to New York by the flurry of Black intellectual activity which was the Harlem Renaissance. Her first writings were published in the journal *Opportunity*, a publication pivotal in initiating the Harlem Renaissance. The influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Blacks writing during the twenties, thirties, and forties was strong indeed. The Black intellectuals, the "well-bred Negroes" "newly infatuated with things European" (Walker 1977: xiii), were determined that a certain image of Blacks be put forward. They understood themselves to be transformers of the racial attitude prevalent at the turn of the century. The aim of the Harlem Renaissance was to:

> stress black achievement rather than black problems. A positive self-image...was considered the best starting point for a better chance. Inequities due to race might best be removed when reasonable men saw that black men were thinkers, strivers, doers, and were cultured, like themselves. (Huggins 1971: 5)

There were political tensions within the Harlem Renaissance movement about how best to achieve this 'proper image'. The earlier writers of the twenties were working to develop a specifically Black aesthetic, while later writers were more concerned to put forward a stronger voice of resistance in protest against racist oppression.

Hurston's work emerged in the midst of this evolution. While it was initially embraced by this group of young Black intellectuals, by the time Hurston had learned the streets of New York, her productions were caught in the intellectual crossfire and were generating uneasy criticism. The most frequent frustration of Hurston's contemporaries was her focus on 'the Negro farthest down' — the lowly folkways of the Southern uneducated Negro. Because of this focus, Hurston was often seen as failing to represent the Black race in a favourable way, thus blocking the transformation of attitudes

toward the Negro. Her work was taken to reinforce the notion that "the Negro is incapable of profiting by experience or of understanding the deeper mysteries of life." (Ford 1936: 10)

Hurston's perceived 'lack of identity' with the proper face of her race was often combined with the charge of a lack of understanding of the historical burden which she bore as a Black. In an early article titled "How It Feels To Be Coloured Me", Hurston writes:

> I am not tragically coloured. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all....Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less.
>
> Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past....
>
> I have no separate feelings about being an American citizen and coloured. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My Country, right or wrong. (Hurston 1928 in Walker 1979: 153-55)

These words, written in 1928, sound the voice of Hurston which sought to suppress racial difference by embedding it within a transcendent, unified whole. At least, she made out that racial difference was secondary to other, more important things. This is the voice which inspired the following sort of unforgiving criticism:

> Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America — she ignores them. She has done right well by herself in the kind of world she found. (Bontemps 1971: 95)

What indeed are we to make of Hurston's apparent ignorance?

Darwin Turner suggests a possibility; one, I might add, which was insinuated by many of Hurston's critics. His reading of her autobiography suggests that it implies that "the road of her life was a series of stepping stones generously provided by white patrons." (Turner 1971: 91) Hurston's autobiography is puzzling in many regards, particularly if one is after self-disclosure. Those to whom she extends the most gratitude are almost all white: There was the white man who happened along in time to assist in her birth and warned her in her childhood never to "act like a nigger". There were the white women visitors who, impressed by Hurston's recitations in elementary school, sent her gifts from the North. There was Anna Meyer who assisted Hurston in being among the first Negro graduates from Barnard, and Fannie Hurst to whom Hurston was a not-very-good secretary, and Franz Boas with whom she studied anthropology. And (curiously unmentioned by Turner) there was the wealthy white benefactress, Charlotte Mason, who sponsored Hurston while she collected folklore in the South. There were more, of course. But the point is made. Turner charges Hurston with a myopia which favoured the white man over the Black, for which he offers two explanations: Either Hurston was a hypocrite, concealing her resentment of white America in order to get published, or she was immature and insecure enough to genuinely enjoy the paternalism of her white friends. (Turner 1971: 94)

Turner has not been alone in his condemnation. Hurston has been variously charged with everything from ignorance of the Negro predicament to contempt for the Negro race. Some assumed she was just naive. But many saw her ignorance as a betrayal, a deliberate forgetting of who she was, possessed of some 'helpless' subconscious urge to gratify the ego of her white friends.(Ikonne 1981: 184, 187) Others charged that Hurston "deliberately assumed a role designed to gain assistance from white people." (Turner 1971: 92) The criticism was levied by friends as well, in more insidious, satirical tones:

> In her youth [Zora Neale Hurston] was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy 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... She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie', in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly coloured Negro. (Hughes 1986: 4)

Langston Hughes wrote these words. He was a close friend of Zora's, with whom she frequently corresponded until a falling out. Somehow she generated a deep unease among her Black contemporaries, the result of which was that most never took her quite seriously as a scholar. Seen as "superficial and shallow" (Turner 1971: 120), she was excluded from this respect.

Yet the ground swell of Black dignity and creative intelligence which emerged with the Harlem Renaissance did so within a solidly apartheid social organization which had to be negotiated by every one of those 'New Negroes'. As I hinted earlier, there

is a gaping absence in Turner's discussion of Hurston: he never mentions Charlotte Mason. The tone of Hughes' passage effectively masks the fact that he himself was a beneficiary of Mason's patronage, a woman who reportedly had such a powerful hold on him that breaking with her made him physically ill. (Hemenway 1977: 104)

Indeed, the field expands in complex ways when one focuses on the relationship between the Black artists of that period and their white patrons. Charlotte Mason was an amateur anthropologist who had spent some time living among the Plains Indians while financing a project of collection. She was taken by many of her ex-proteges to be buying herself a little primitivism, "indulging her fantasies of Negroes." (Hemenway 1977: 107) From Hurston she wanted a display of aboriginal sincerity, a bit of the authentic voice of the "Negro farthest down" — one is assured in this case she meant down the great chain of Being, and not down South.

The 'loving friendship'[6] between Hurston and Mason, sustained by what Hurston once called a psychic bond, was sealed by a contract. The contract signed with Mason, who preferred to be called 'Godmother' by her proteges, promised a regular monthly allowance to do field work. The cost of this support was that Mason would reserve exclusive proprietary rights over the collections of folklore. As well, there was a limitation on Hurston's correspondence during this period, presumably because Hurston could not be trusted to know what to do commercially with the materials she collected. (Hemenway, 1977, 109-110) What Mason did trust Hurston to provide was a private showing of the authentic voice of the Negro farthest down. And she got what she wanted.

Mason was drawn to Hurston because she seemed an unspoiled child of nature'. And Hurston's performances of 'darkie stories' were convincing enough to sustain her performance of a deeply felt devotion toward 'Godmother' Mason. Yet, she was known to wink in collusion at her Black friends when her back was turned toward her white audience, apparently delighted with her own use of what she later satired as the Pet Negro System. But most of Hurston's Black friends were not playing her game, because they saw it as self-indulgent hypocrisy which did nothing to change prevalent attitudes toward the race.

Just what was Hurston's game? Can we be assured that the wink betrays the real Zora Neale Hurston, lets us in on her secret agenda, and thus provides us with the decoding key to her real cognitive intentions or her genuine emotions?

The following poetic tribute is a particularly extreme example of Hurston's puzzling performance:

> Out of the essence of my Godmother
> Out of the True one
> Out of the Wise one I am made to be
> From her breath I am born
> Yes, as the world is made new by the breath of Spring
> And is strengthened by the winds of Summer
> The Sea is stirred by its passion
> Thus, I have taken from the breath of your mouth
> From the vapour of your soul I am made to be
> By the warmth of your love I am made to stand erect
> You are the Spring and Summer of my existence.
>
> (Hurston in Walker 1979: 12)

The tone of hopeless servility is sickening, indeed. This poem, and other letters to Mason, reveal an unpleasant dimension of Hurston. The excessiveness of this poem inclines one to dismiss it as anomalous, or along with Turner, to dismiss Hurston as either grossly naive of the power relationship between herself and Mason, or too willing to stoop to it. But the poem is not anomalous. And the tendency to dismiss the excessiveness tends to blind us to the ways in which the 'strategies' being employed are recognizable, indeed quite familiar, to most of us. A double take, with the wink in mind, is in order.

The poem might as plausibly be heard as a successful exploitation of a hopelessly absurd system. This white patron who valorized the 'naive, childlike, sweet, humorous and highly coloured Negro', got what she wanted from her Godchildren at the literal expense of financing those brilliant scholars and writers in their propagation of a transformation in racial attitudes. We might read the poem's grossly lavished praise as the operation of a double edge, a barely hidden mockery which shifts between Hurston as the naive 'happy darkie' to a genteel white benefactress who has just got taken. Just who, we might instructively ask, was using whom? This question will sharpen our focus when we come to Hurston's anthropology.

Hurston's later writings support the inclination toward the second-take suggested above. By the early forties, Hurston was under her own power on the West Coast in a reflective enough mood to be writing her autobiography, an improbable situation for this daughter of the lowly South. The thirties had proven to be an exciting and productive time for her. She had published three novels, two folklore collections, and several short fictions. The forties found

her producing articles like "The Pet Negro System" (1943 *in* Walker 1979 : 156-163) in which Hurston 'gives a reading' from 'The Book of Dixie', which is critical of the very system within which she flourished:

> Now it says here, "And every white man shall be allowed unto himself a Negro. Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish...Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his own Negro to wane." (Hurston in Walker 1979: 156)

Hurston's clever satire incisively pinpoints the "underground hookup" which "tends to stabilize relations" and "works to prevent hasty explosions" among blacks and whites. (Hurston, *in* Walker 1979 : 160) Hurston understood very well how she participated in perpetuating the very system which racially oppressed her. Her "Crazy For This Democracy" (1945 *in* Walker 1979 : 165-169) irreverently plays havoc with FDR's phrase "the arsenal of democracy" by turning it into the "arse-and-all of democracy". These articles, and many others which more openly display bitterness, were published in Black journals. But do we rest assured, finally, that these pieces put forward Hurston's authentic voice?

With Barbara Johnson[7], I want to suggest that the search for an 'authentic voice' flattens, and thereby misunderstands the complexity of the system which is displayed in Hurston's life-work. Hurston and her Black contemporaries were engaged in a process of pushing limits which had not been pushed before. But those who put forward a singularity of voice and purpose do so at the expense of suppressing the lived difficulty of enacting that transformation. Hurston was both indebted to and bitter about the petting system. She was both grateful to and resentful of white patronage. She both loved American democracy and despised it. What has made her writing frustrating to those who seek in it singularity of voice is that she was unable to hide the irreducibly double-edged quality of the process of change. She was most certainly not the only one of her contemporaries who had to negotiate this catch 22; she was simply among the few who did not hide it successfully. It is arguably the case that Hurston's extraordinary creativity emerged, not in spite of this experienced double-edge, but as an effect of it.

In turn, the effect of Hurston's 'self-difference' is that her texts resist the grounds which would enable definitive answers to questions like 'Who is the Negro race?' The project to define and establish a race-identity is a project which frustrated her, and about which she was often critical. Later in her life, this criticism was voiced openly — in her earlier works, it had to be lifted from between the lines. Yet, to read Hurston as someone who dealt with the race problem by ignoring it seems a dismissive reading. Though she refused to answer the question 'Who is the Negro race?', she nonetheless responded to it endlessly and tirelessly. Her life-work suggests that, although the question sought an impossibility, it nonetheless could never be set aside as unimportant. Rather, it should be understood to have multiple answers, even from a single person, a single corpus, and its multiple answers can only be strategically played out against one another, through time, and within specifically charged contexts.

Of course, the contexts of Hurston's life-work continue to change. Hurston's audience has grown and shifted in her wake; in her death she continues to survive, grow and even transform. If the politics of race explicitly badgered Hurston during her life, the politics of gender operated only implicitly in her texts until recently when Black feminists began "searching for their mother's gardens"[8]. Gender is inscribed in equally multiple and unsettling ways in Hurston's texts. From the ex-slave Nanny who desperately wants her granddaughter Janie to marry a Black man with property to Janie's three-marriage movement toward a liberated love, from the tragic liberation of the abused washerwoman Delia to Missie May who lovingly accepts her role as subservient wife, Hurston's texts play out the double-jeopardy without ever reducing its difficulty to singular answers. They thus have important implications for those who would seek a unified, homogeneous, feminist voice.[9]

The task of this paper, however, is to consider what lessons multivocality as self-difference has for the writing of culture by exploring how Hurston's texts play out the politics of that representation. I turn now to the Eatonville anthropology.

III. Eatonville Anthropology

> 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 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 1935: 3)

The scientific enterprise was initially quite seductive for Hurston. Franz Boas, Hurston's anthropological mentor, was simultaneously committed to objective research and liberal racial views. He played an important role in debunking standard physiological determinants of Negro inferiority; extraordinarily, Hurston herself entered the streets of Harlem, calliper in hand, to collect data meant to assist Boas in his effort to disprove such claims. Boas was particularly interested in the African survivals in African-American culture, and was convinced Hurston could help him as a documenter of this culture. Hurston, deeply impressed with Boas' "genius for objectivity," was proud indeed when he arranged financing for her initial fieldwork through the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, offering to oversee the project himself (Hemenway 1977: 89).

Although Boas expressed some concern that Hurston tended to be "a little too impressed with her own accomplishments," he assumed nonetheless that:

> she could enter the black folk milieu at a different level from that of most previous collectors. The problem was that white collectors, no matter how earnest, liberal, kind, sympathetic, and well meaning, were always...outsiders looking in. (Hemenway 1977 : 89)

This daughter of Eatonville, with the "map of Florida on her tongue", promised to make new breakthroughs in collecting African-American folk tales.

But Hurston's initial return to Eatonville, in her shiny grey Chevrolet, threw into sharp relief the dual consciousness that had taken shape in the years she had been in the North.

> My first six months were disappointing. I found out later that it was not because I had no talents for research, but because I did not have the right approach. The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was all right. But, I went about asking in carefully accented Barnardese, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?" (Hurston 1942: 174)

Hurston's attempt at emulating scientific objectivity by being a documenter of culture did not suffice once she was in 'the field', her territorial home. She had to figure out how to entice those tales out of her old friends; she had to find an old voice to do it:

> "Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y'all know a plenty of 'em and that's why Ah headed straight for home."
> "What you mean, Zora, them big old lies we tell when we're jus' sittin' around here on the store porch doin' nothin'?", asked B. Mosely
> "Yeah, those same ones about Ole Massa, and coloured folks in heaven, and —oh, y'all know the kind I mean."
> "Aw shucks," exclaimed George Thomas doubtfully. "Zora, don't you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing. Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?" (Hurston 1978 reprint of Hurston 1935 : 9)

So begins Hurston's narrative about the collection adventure itself which required a good deal of inveigling, some lyin' tales of her own offered along the way. In Polk County, she was met with closed mouths until she shifted in just the right way:

> "Miss, you know uh heap uh dese hard heads wats to woof at you but dey skeered."
> "How come, Mr. Pitts? Do I look like a bear or panther?"
> "Naw, but dey say youse rich and dey ain't got de nerve to open dey mouth."...
> ..."Oh, Ah ain't got doodley squat," I countered. "Mah man brought me dis dress de las' time he went ot Jacksonville. We wuz sellin' plenty stuff den and makin' good money. Wisht Ah had dat money now." (Hurston 1978 reprint of Hurston 1935 : 68)

A tale of a bootlegging fugitive from justice sounded reasonable to Hurston's questioners. A clever slip into another tongue won their confidences. Hurston was thus able to manipulate the art of tall-tale-telling, to wear it as a mask, in order to get behind the veil and give the reader the insider's stories. Boas was pleased:

> It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanour by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life. (Hurston 1978 reprint of Hurston 1935 : x)

But as Barbara Johnson's incisive reading of *Mules and Men* suggests, a double-take is in order (Johnson 1987b: 172-184). Just who is wearing the mask and who is being unmasked? The following provocative introductory passage by Hurston invites important questions about veils and masks, and other such play toys:

> Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside

> influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And 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. (Hurston 1978 reprint of Hurston 1935 : 18)

Hurston's professed faith in scientific objectivity seems to slip away as this passage unfolds. Is she the prober, or the withholder? When "The Negro" becomes "we", does Zora's seeming acquiescence to the project of cultural penetration slip into an evasive featherbed resistance? Are her intentions honourable? Or are her hidden emotions betrayed here? Does she mean to openly write the soul of this "homely life", this nonliterate culture? Or is *Mules and Men* a writing put outside the door of Hurston's mind for the reader who so wants to know into her culture's business that he'll seize it and go away satisfied, not knowing what he's missed.

This subversive quality of Hurston's writing is further implied when *Mules and Men* ends with an unexpected tale. It is unexpected because the entire second half of the book is devoted to hoodoo practices, not tales. Then suddenly, without explanation, Hurston closes off her narrative reportage by telling this tale:

> Once Sis Cat got hongry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat 'im. Rat tried and git loose but Sis Cat was too fast and strong. So jus' as de cat started to eat 'im he says, "Hol' on dere, Sis Cat! Ain't you got no manners at all? You going set up to de table and eat 'thout washing yo' face and hands?"
>
> Sis Cat was mighty hongry but she hate for de rat to think she ain't got no manners, so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone. So de cat caught herself a rat again and set down to eat. So de Rat said, "Where's yo' manners at, Sis Cat? You going to eat 'thout washing yo' face and hands?
>
> "Oh, Ah got plenty manners," de cat told 'im. "But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards." So she et right on 'im and washed her face and hands. And cat's been washin' after eatin' ever since. I'm sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin' my manners. (Hurston 1978 reprint of Hurston 1935 : 251-2)

This extraordinary ending leaves us wondering just what manners Hurston is using here. What pleasantries has she come to master? Who is the cat and who is the rat? As Johnson suggests, one cannot help wondering who, in the final analysis, has swallowed what? The reader? Mason? Boas? Hurston herself?

Zora, with her open-faced laughter, seems to be wearing the Cheshire Cat's grin. What are we to make of the performance to which we have been treated? Just whose side is she on?

IV. Writing A System of Differences

> One can begin by transgressing one's own usual practices, by indulging in some judicious time-wasting with what one does not know how to use, or what has fallen into disrepute. What the surprise encounter with otherness should do is lay bare some hint of an ignorance one never knew one had.
>
> -Barbara Johnson (1987c:16)

The uneasy meeting of Black politics, white money, and scientific inquiry charge Hurston's anthropological enterprise with a strongly subversive quality. The difficulty, however, is that it is ultimately impossible to tell for whom she performs. Her presentation negotiates the threshold which separates 'us from them' — Black from white, wealth from poverty, and scientific knowledge from folk wisdom — not by translating one into the other, but by playing them off one another in a way that resists ultimate determination. She is a double agent. Her performative use of language operates a coded resistance — not one which we can ultimately decipher by finding the correct decoding key — but one which subverts the very possibility of locating an authentic, univocal, intention.

The politics of representation are thus foregrounded in Hurston's life-work through the power of language to double mean. The modernist under-

standing of scientific representation, governed by an ideology of mimesis, has pushed this dangerous capacity of language to the theoretical margins. The ideology of mimesis commits us to a reproduction of reality which minimizes the effect of 'distorting' interventions, like human bias or the equivocations of language. That is, the true task of representing reality in modernist terms is to re-present it with as much vividness and perspicuity as possible; to let the voice of reality present itself with as little interruption or static as possible.

This ideology of representation is enabled by a particular account of language which can be sketched in these terms: Language is understood to operate within a linearly conceived space in which, for example, the written sign represents the spoken sign, which represents the idea, which represents the perceived thing. The order of this chain has changed historically with various philosophical orientations; the order is not crucial. Rather, what requires emphasis is that language is understood to operate as a 'vehiculator' of an already constituted semantic content which is transported through this system with no loss, no change, in meaning. The notion of self-evidence permeates this ideology, and generates a theory of the sign as re-presentation of the self-evidence, the presence, with which we encounter the objective thing-itself (or the idea, or the intentions, or the experience). Even when the sign is theorized as a metaphorical symbol, a coded expression of subjective meaning, it is nonetheless a representation of a semantic content which can be read off once properly decoded. Within this understanding of the communicative space through which language operates and meaning travels, there is no room for heterogeneity or interruption; all such interventions are considered accidental and distorting.[10]

An account of language as the univocal transporter of singularly proper meanings, whether literally read or metaphorically deciphered, cannot account for how the playful ambiguity of Hurston's anthropological text works to seriously undermine the very project of accurate representation. It cannot make sense of how her performances have been read and used in her wake by such a wide diversity of interested readers. It cannot account for the material difference language makes in a lived life, full of ambiguity and conflict and double-edged opportunities. Gloria Hull makes this provocative observation:

> When Black women 'speak', 'give a reading', or 'sound' a situation, a whole history of using language as a weapon is invoked. Rooted in slave folk wisdom which says: "Don't say no more with your mouth than your back can stand," our vocalizing is directly linked to a willingness to meet hostilities head-on and persevere. (Hull 1982: 200)[11]

Language as a material force deployed in the process of survival is neglected altogether by most philosophers of language who instead take scientific writing as the paradigm case of language at its best and most important. We need a rethinking of language which understands how, through all its equivocations, interruptions, and double-meanings, language operates as a currency, possessed most powerfully by the dispossessed, which negotiates a life.

The deconstructive lessons about language take us a long way toward such rethinking. Theorized as a code of relations language is understood to be constituted by elements of signification (letters, words, texts) which have no substance of their own, apart from the relations of similarity and difference which bind them to other elements. Meanings are capable of shifting as they are reworked and repositioned in new contexts. The movement of this shifting is theorized by the neologism 'differance', which combines the spatial verb 'to differ' with the temporal verb 'to defer'. Identities are thus taken to be 'differentially constituted', made possible only through their difference from and deferral of other differences.

The 'citationality' of language — the lifting and re-inscribing constitutive of language use — functions to remotivate meanings in ever-differing contexts. This may not be a radical process. Indeed, it is confirmed by the gradual etymological transformation of meanings. Yet, the deconstructive critique argues that even within smaller temporal frameworks, the range of meanings of language, of 'discrete' elements of signification (such as an utterance, or a given text) is a function of the complex field of (power) differences within which those 'texts' operate. Viewed deconstructively, no text is free of the movement of 'differance'. Each text, as a differential unity, harbours heterogeneous elements and thus bears the potential of 'breaking apart', of operating against itself. There is, in this sense, no proper, determinate meaning of a text. Texts are 'undecidable' in principle. That is, endless heterogeneity enables all texts to be endlessly reread and reworked.

It strikes me as a mistake, however, to assume that deconstruction opens the door to an anything-goes version of interpretation. Indeed, the point to be emphasized is that deconstruction attempts to

provide a theoretical understanding of language which relocates (not eliminates) the assumed constraints operating in the interpretive process. Readings are not normatively constrained by some abstract 'proper' meaning governing the text (or life, or utterance). Rather, readings are constrained by the ethico-socio-political forces constitutive of any reading moment. These constraints are many and powerful, and are often in profound tension with one another. They constitute the 'excess' which gets translated out in any singular reading of a 'text' — a piece or body of writing, a person's life, a culture.

It is in this sense that any use of language, i.e. any 'text', is irreducibly political. Every reading is a 'misreading' in the sense that there can be no ultimately proper meaning of a text. This is the effect of undecidability. Hurston is constituted differentially by her ambiguous situation in a field of power relations: white and black, male and female, sophisticate and folk, wealth and poverty, science and art, objective and subjective. Her writing both inscribes and politically negotiates this tensioned field of double-edged constraints and opportunities. Her use of language enables her to play both sides of the field, to play them off one another, to use their dissonance as a transformative force. She is neither merely an objective anthropologist, nor has she simply gone subjectively native. Nor is she a synthetic unity, a native anthropologist who will 'subjectively access' to 'objectively tell' the real insider's story. To reduce her texts to one side or the other is to translate out that force which is both untranslatable and irreducibly at work in her texts, namely, their undecidability.

It is in this sense that any use of her texts (including my own) is a political act, an 'appropriation' by interested, situated readers whose interpretive translations provisionally repress the excess in her texts in order to strategically press her voice into the service of some project. But the provisional status of such representations, and the untranslatable excess which they ignore, are extraordinarily important to any understanding of the politics of representation, which is the politics of survival. For the ultimate double-bind is that survival depends upon that which is lost, but nonetheless at work, in translation. That is, our salvaging from the black hole of oblivion depends upon the effects of undecidability — the possibility of iteration in ever-differing contexts by newly situated readers. Of course, the profound burden of survival is that you can never fully anticipate how your life-work will be received and put into service.

NOTES

1. A condensed version of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Ethnology Society / Société canadienne d'ethnologie held in Ottawa, May 1989. The writing, presenting and subsequent publication of the paper was accomplished in large part as a result of Carole Farber's continuous encouragement. I thank Carole also for her unique facilitation of the graduate seminar in Anthropological Theory which gave birth to this paper. Thanks also to James J. Leach, who, with his usual clarity, insightfulness and caring attention, read and commented on an early draft of this paper.

2. As the final draft of this paper was prepared for publication, I was made aware of bell hook's new book Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (Toronto: Between the Lines Publishing, 1990) which contains an article entitled "Saving Black Folk Culture: Zora Neale Hurston as anthropologist and writer." hooks locates the fascination of Hurston's work at the juncture of fiction and science as I do, and is similarly inclined to explore, rather than dismiss, Hurston's apparent contradictions as a form of resistance to the demand for scientific objectivity in anthropological work. I am trying in this paper to develop the theoretical implications of such resistance for anthropology. I am grateful to Carole Farber for bringing this contribution to Hurston scholarship to my attention.

3. The notion that survival is obtained only through the implicit 'contract', the mutual debt, between author and 'translator' or interpreter (reader) is superbly articulated by Jacques Derrida (1985: 165-207).

4. In an analysis of Afro-American autobiography titled "My Statue, My Self", Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988: 63-90) suggests that Hurston's autobiography fails to clearly depict a self because, at least in part, Hurston aspired "to transcend the constraints of group identification by insisting on being a self independent of history, race, and gender..."(82) Fox-Genovese does locate a self-difference within Hurston, but she sees it as an impasse, a "deadlock" (83), which disabled Hurston in her attempts at self-depiction. I am attempting to ask a different question of Hurston's writing which read's her self-difference as an experienced complex dynamism, an irreducible effect of her historical, racial, gendered, and classed situatedness, and the generative force of her creativity.

5. In Anglo-American philosophy, Standard, nonidiomatic, 'proper' English has served as the paradigmatic model of language, and thus the proper object of language analysis. To my knowledge, no serious attention has been paid to dialect in philosophy. This body of language analysis has operated hand-in-glove with positivist scientific inquiry. While most social-scientific disciplines have entered a 'post-positivistic' era, I am convinced they have done so without fully analyzing the residue of positivist assumptions built into our understanding and use of language. Ethnocentrism permeates inquiry in subtle and complex ways.

6. Robert Hemenway cautions against reactionary mockery of the affection Zora may have legitimately had for Mason. Even so, he acknowledges the doubleness of the relationship: "It is unfair to interpret such a bond simply as Hurston's willing belief to insure patronage. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that Hurston did not recognize Mrs. Mason's wealth as a key to her future." (Hemenway 1977:108) The either/or choice implied is being 'deconstructed' and displaced in the present reading of Hurston.

7. I am indebted to Johnson's two marvellous readings of Hurston's work. (1987a and 1987b). I am, in effect, seeking here to extend her insights into the realm of anthropology.

8. The phrase comes from Alice Walker and suggests those overlooked corners of their fore-mother's lives in which creativity flourished despite unspeakable hardships (1983: 231-244).

9. There is, I think, a case to be made that the effect of the many dissonant black figures in Hurston's fiction is to problematize any unified race- or sex-identity. The categories 'black' and 'woman' might instructively be read against one another as a display of a radical heterogeneity.

10. This gloss of the mimetic conceptualization of language is from Jacques Derrida (1982: 307).

11. Lorraine Bethel affirms this insight in her article in the same volume (1982). The linkage to be drawn between black idiom and the blues, understood as a coded language of resistance, is fertile and important ground for language theory.

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