ESSAY BY ANDREW DEBLANCO FROM REQUIRED READING...

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The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston

In the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston was among the Negro darlings of New York white society. Of all the "Niggerati," as Langston Hughes put it, she was "certainly the most amusing." Having come to town in 1925 at the suggestion of her instructors at Howard University (where she had taken classes while working as a maid and manicurist), she burst into the circle of black writers and the white patrons whom they escorted to Harlem nightspots. She signed her letters to white friends "Your pickaninny, Zora," and was known for her flamboyance, her pranks (she once lifted subway fare from a beggar's cup, with a promise to repay him later), and her brazen talk. "I never expect to have a greater thrill than that wire gave me" was how she remembered receiving the telegram informing her that J. B. Lippincott would publish her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). "You know the feeling when you found your first pubic hair. Greater than that."

It was at Barnard College, which Hurston attended on a scholarship arranged by one of her benefactors, that she learned that the rural black speech with which she had grown up in the South

was an object of anthropological interest for white intellectuals. At Barnard she became a protégée of the revered anthropologist Franz Boas, whom, to the delight of his cowed white students, she called "Papa Franz" to his face. Charmed by her insolence and intelligence, Boas dispatched her to Harlem, where she was assigned the task of disproving theories of Negro inferiority by measuring the skulls of pedestrians. Then he sent her South to collect lore.

After graduation, Hurston became, like many talented writers in the early 1930s, a kind of vagabond reporter, subsisting on fellowships arranged by Boas and on a stipend provided by one of her New York patrons. The understanding was, as she put it in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), that she would "tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down." In Florida, Louisiana, and the West Indies, she gathered material that she would eventually use in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a fictional reconstruction of her parents' lives in the black community of Eatonville, Florida, and in her folklore collections, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938).

Her life, she reported later, "was in danger several times . . . [because] primitive minds are quick to sunshine and quick to anger." While on the road she sometimes lived in her car (which she named "Sassie Susie"), carried a revolver (pearl-handled) when the situation seemed to require it, and sent off an occasional sketch for publication. "In one case," as she later recalled, about a Hoodoo initiation ceremony in New Orleans, ". . . I lay naked for three days and nights on a couch, with my navel to a rattlesnake skin which had been dressed and dedicated to the ceremony." By the mid-1930s, Hurston had a recognized byline in

academic journals, where she published articles on Negro dance and musical traditions, and in general magazines, to which she contributed profiles and reviews. With the publication in 1937 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel of great vitality and erotic power that she wrote "under internal pressure in seven weeks" while researching religious practices in Haiti, she became a minor literary celebrity.

In much of her writing, Hurston was preoccupied with the destructive force of love, which renders a woman vulnerable to a man who cannot subdue his compulsive need for new conquests. Testing this theme in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in which she told the tale of her father's inconstancy, she explored the proximity of passion to violence for a black man whose sphere of authority is circumscribed within a domestic circle, outside of which he controls nothing. She understood how a wife becomes both an idol and a torment to such a man. "Ain't never no man tuh breathe in yo' face but me," says John to his wife in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, with a threat that comes from the depth of his soul. If she deceives him, "Ahm goin' tuh kill you jes' ez sho ez gun is iron."

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston relinquished the mobility of the omniscient narrator who had moved in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* between the consciousnesses of husband and wife. In the new novel she continued to write in the third person, but the voice speaks almost exclusively from within the mind of the woman who stands at the center of the tale, Janie Crawford. This is a book of extremely intimate emotion, "dammed up in me," as Hurston later put it, until she found the form into which it could be released. She had broken off an affair with a much younger West Indian man (she was nearly forty when they met, he was twenty-three) with whom she had been "soaked . . . in ecstasy,"

but who had had fixed ideas about a woman's dependency to which she could not bring herself to conform. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, in part, a testament to their doomed passion.

Like *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the new book is set in a world in which white people exist only as flickering shadows. But there is a more vivid sense of their oppressive presence, too, a sense of how hard it is for any black family to make a dignified life out of scraps from the white man's table. Janie, raised by a grandmother who was born into slavery and raped by her master, is the repository of the old woman's dreams and the object of her protection. At the first sign of Janie's sexual awakening—which Hurston evokes beautifully in a scene where the girl "stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees . . . [and watched] a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom"—her grandmother arranges a marriage to a respectable farmer. He is a solid man who chops enough wood to keep the stove hot and "keeps both water buckets full." When the girl objects that she feels nothing for him—"But Nanny, Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wantin' "—she is admonished for her romantic fantasies, for feeling that he is "desecrating the pear tree" in which she had beheld "the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace" of the bee.

Later, after she has endured two dutiful marriages, Janie explains her grandmother's thinking to a friend:

> [Nanny] was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me—don't keer whut it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She didn't have time tuh think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin'. De object wuz tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin' extry and Ah ain't read de common news yet.

This is Janie's retrospective account of how she had become parched in the keeping of her first husband and why, when Joe Starks, "a cityfied, stylish dressed man," coaxed her away from her servitude, she jumped at the chance.

But life with Starks turns out to be just another episode of stool-sitting, this time behind the counter of his general store, where he installs her as a decorative clerk. "The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again." Hurston often described with cruel precision the slackening of a man's body ("he had let his waistline go a bit," she wrote about her West Indian lover, "and that bespoke his inside feeling"), but she always preserved enough sympathy to catch the hints of fear and self-hatred in his expression as he watches the damage inflicted by time:

> One day she noticed that Joe didn't sit down. He just stood in front of a chair and fell in it. . . . He didn't rear back in his knees any longer. He squatted over his ankles when he walked. . . . His prosperous-looking belly that used to thrust out so pugnaciously and intimidate folks, sagged like a load suspended from his loins. It didn't seem to be part of him anymore. Eyes a little absent too.

When Starks dies, Janie, now a woman in her forties, pines again for the kind of "self-crushing love" she has felt only as an unquenched longing.

"Self-crushing love" finally arrives in the form of a young man known as Tea-Cake. A drifter in his twenties, he seems "a glance from God," as if he were "crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps." Even as she is drawn to him, Janie is warned and scolded and clucked at by her friends. Her grandmother's lesson—that love is "de very prong all of us black women gits hung on"—is rehearsed for her again. She has learned from her own experience, after all, that a man's ministrations to her desire can be just a spasm between stretches of indifference or abuse. So at first she withholds herself, suspecting that Tea-Cake's professions of hot love are merely "night thought[s]" and that he will resume his cool scheming in the morning.

As love overwhelms Janie and sweeps her along toward tragedy, Hurston fills the novel with glimpses of women who have been destroyed by falling for younger men—Annie Tyler, for instance, "who at 52 had been left a widow with a good home and insurance money." Wearing "under-sized high-heel slippers [that] were punishing her tired feet," she runs off with a young flatterer, "her body squeezed and crowded into a tight corset that shoved her middle up under her chin." Then, a few weeks later, she turns up discarded, with "all the capers that cheap dye could cut . . . showing in her hair . . . her hanging bosom and stomach and buttocks and legs . . . draped down over her ankles." In this image Janie sees a premonition of herself.

After the exertion of writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston had two more novels in her. The first, published in 1939, was *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, a zany burlesque of the Book

of Exodus that recasts the prophet as a kind of jive godfather. Ever since she had been captivated as a child by the stories of the Old Testament, Hurston had admired the Jews for having "a God who laid about Him when they needed Him":

> I came to start reading the Bible through my mother. She gave me a licking one afternoon for repeating something I had overheard a neighbor telling her. She locked me in her room after the whipping, and the Bible was the only thing in there for me to read. I happened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested. David went here and he went there, and no matter where he went, he smote 'em hip and thigh. Then he sung songs to his harp a while, and went out and smote some more. Not one time did David stop and preach about sins and things. All David wanted to know from God was who to kill and when. He took care of the other details himself. I liked him a lot.

Now, with a kind of antic reverence, she expropriated the story of the Jews' redemption under Moses as an exemplum for contemporary black life. The trouble is, she retells it with a mix of bombast and parody that one would expect from a collaborative screenplay by Cecil B. DeMille and Spike Lee. It becomes a blackface farce: "We remember the nice fresh fish we used to get back there in Egypt every day," the grumbling Jews recall about the good old days under Pharaoh. "Nice sweet-tasting little pan-fish and a person could get all they could eat for five cents. Unhunh! . . . and the leeks and onions and plenty garlic for seasoning!"

And nearly ten years later, in 1948, came *Seraph on the Su-*

teanee, a psychological portrait of a white couple, of which Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, has aptly said that its main male character "becomes a shrimp-boat captain for the sole purpose of demonstrating Hurston's knowledge of shrimping."

As Hurston lost her bearings as an artist, her personal life fell apart too. Her relations became strained with her chief patron, Charlotte Mason, who held publication rights to the materials that Hurston had gathered on her expeditions in the South and who balked at her plan to adapt them for commercial theatrical performance. In the mid-1940s, Lippincott rejected two novels, one about wealthy blacks, the other set in Eatonville; and various other projects, including a biography of Herod the Great (for which she invited Winston Churchill to write an introduction), never came to fruition. After two short-lived marriages and an aborted engagement, she was falsely accused of molesting a young boy. Although the case was dismissed after an investigation, she never quite recovered, and spent her last years in ill health, working as a maid, an office clerk, and a substitute teacher. She died impoverished, in a Florida welfare home, in 1960.

If this life is a sad tale of talent dissipated, the posthumous career of Hurston's reputation is an entirely different story. Since the late 1970s, when she was acknowledged as an exemplary genius by a rising group of black women writers (Alice Walker arranged for a headstone to be placed in the cemetery where Hurston had been buried in an unmarked grave), her work has become a fixture in anthologies and on college reading lists. And now that the Library of America has issued a two-volume edition of her collected work, her status as a classic seems secure.

The fluctuations of Hurston's reputation constitute a precise register of the mood not only of American literary culture in the twentieth century but of the racial attitudes that have accounted for an important part of its context. In the 1920s and 1930s she was a curiosity, a brainy black girl who could coax "her people" to talk the old lingo so that it might be written down and preserved before it disappeared. Franz Boas, whose other students included Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and who had, according to Hurston, "no pet wishes to prove," was a forward-looking man skeptical of received platitudes about racial difference. But he was also trafficking in old notions about the distinction between deracinated city dwellers and country people whose ideas, as Jane Addams (writing about the "South Italian peasant") had put it at the turn of the century, "have come directly . . . from their struggle with nature."

What Boas had at hand a few blocks from Columbia was a living laboratory stocked by the post–World War I migration of rural Southern blacks to the Northern metropolis. And what Addams had said of her transplanted Italians seemed to apply equally well (if one substitutes cotton and tobacco for "olives and oranges") to the Negro. Country virtues become city vices:

> [He] comes from a life of picking olives and oranges, and he easily sends his children out to pick up coal from railroad tracks, or wood from buildings which have been burned down. Unfortunately . . . it is easy to go from the coal on the railroad track to the coal and wood which stands before a dealer's shop; from the potatoes which have rolled from a rumbling wagon to the vegetables displayed by the grocer.

For Boas and his colleagues, Zora Hurston was not only a useful agent for satisfying his own curiosity about this dislocated people but also a willing object of it. "From the earliest rocking of my cradle," she wrote in *Mules and Men*,

> I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.

With Hurston having agreed to serve Boas as a kind of espionage agent spying on herself, it is not surprising that her first debunkers were black. Alain Locke, her own teacher from her days at Howard, urged her to stop trying to distract white readers with amusing folktales and to turn instead to "social document" fiction. To some readers, Hurston's folklore collections seemed sanitized. "*Mules and Men*," wrote Sterling Brown, "should be more bitter; it would be nearer the total truth" if, for every comic story about a long-winded preacher or bumbling cuckold, there was an account of a beating or a lynching—experiences that were, after all, also preserved in black oral culture. Richard Wright was even blunter, decrying Hurston's "minstrel technique that makes the white folks laugh."

By the mid-1940s, Roy Wilkins was publicly attacking Hurston as a peddler of nostalgia for the Jim Crow South, where happy darkies putatively sang and danced on the farm. Ever since, this

implication that she pandered to white fantasies has remained a steady theme in Hurston criticism. In the 1970s, the historian Nathan Huggins called her a professional "folk" Negro, and, more recently, Ann Douglas, in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995), judged her an exception to the approbation implicit in her title. Hurston, she writes, "played shamelessly" to rich whites who fancied themselves the champions and guardians of "black vitality."

These critics have a point. Some of Hurston's characters run uncomfortably close to white-manufactured racial stereotypes. The young Joe Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a dandy with "silk sleeveholders" who could step without a costume change into *Porgy and Bess* (1935) as a stand-in for Sportin' Life. And the sycophantic women who come into Starks's store, "running a little, caressing a little and all the time making little urging-on cries" as he and his wife dispense delicacies from behind the counter, would make any casting director think of Butterfly McQueen.

And yet Hurston was not finally a trader in stock types. She did furnish her novels with long passages of tall-tale telling, and there are too many moments of Amos 'n' Andy buffoonery; but she refused to visit what she called the "museum . . . dedicated to the convenient 'typical,' "

> [where] there is the "typical" Oriental, Jew, Yankee, Westerner, Southerner, Latin, and even out-of-favor Nordics like the German. The Englishman "I say, old chappie," and the gesticulating Frenchman [live there, and] the American Negro exhibit is a group of two. Both of these mechanical toys

> are built so that their feet eternally shuffle, and their eyes pop and roll. Shuffling feet and those popping, rolling eyes denote the Negro, and no characterization is genuine without this monotony. One is seated on a stump picking away on his banjo and singing and laughing. The other is a most amoral character before a share-cropper's shack mumbling about injustice.

The real reason that Hurston's reputation declined between the 1940s and the 1970s was that as the civil rights movement led most intellectuals to regard Southern black folk culture as a residual symptom of slavery and segregation, the curatorial impulse of the 1930s, when Hurston had traveled with Alan Lomax, collecting samples of black folk music for the Library of Congress, gave way to the imperatives of integration and assimilation. Hurston's characters, who tend to speak in dialect, became faintly embarrassing. Her affection for the sealed black world in which she had grown up came to seem, in other words, politically retrograde.

But Hurston's politics had never been coherent, and it is a mistake, really, to take her opinions too seriously. She tended to shoot off letters to the editor or to blurt things out in interviews. Thus in 1943, tired of liberal patronizing, she remarked that "the lot of the Negro is much better in the South than in the North" and even went so far as to say to a reporter that "the Jim Crow system works," a statement that Wilkins characterized in *The Amsterdam News* as "arrant, even vicious nonsense." But only a year earlier she had written (in a passage in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that was deleted by her Lippincott editors but is now restored in the Library of America edition):

> President Roosevelt could extend his four freedoms to some people right here in America. . . . I am not bitter, but I see what I see. He can call names across an ocean, but he evidently has not the courage to speak even softly at home. . . . I will fight for my country but I will not lie for her.

And two years later she attacked the "the Jim Crow laws" for confining black people to "back seats in trains, [and] back doors of houses" where "the smallest dark child is to be convinced of its inferiority."

By the 1950s, Hurston had settled into a belligerent conservatism. She supported the presidential candidacy of Robert Taft. Construing the motives of black integrationists as a form of race embarrassment, she opposed the Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. "I saw no curse in being black," she had written in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, "nor no extra flavor by being white. I saw no benefit in excusing my looks by claiming to be half Indian." These are sensible sentences when read as comments on a certain kind of shame that takes root among people who have been trained in self-contempt. But when she offered the same sort of sentiment as a defense of segregated schools—"I can see no tragedy in being too dark to be invited to a white school social affair"—she revealed only her political naiveté, and consigned herself to oblivion for another decade.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, when a new aesthetic of racial pride emerged (always with a tinge of separatism), her reputation began to recover. "By the '60s," as Alice Walker wrote in 1976, "everyone understood that black women could wear beautiful cloths on their beautiful heads and care about the authenticity of things cultud *and* African." Zora had been there first. And so

Walker commended her to a new generation of readers, especially black women, for her sense of "racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex [and] *undiminished*" on their own terms.

It was in those years that Hurston the ethnographer and Hurston the segregationist gave way to Hurston the feminist. To students today, one of the most familiar passages in all of American literature is the grandmother's speech to Janie about the hard hierarchy of the world:

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

When one reads the stories that substantiate this passage, it becomes obvious that the feminist reclamation of Zora Neale Hurston was well-founded and overdue. Critics such as Wright had missed the essence of her vision, which was "documentary" and realistic from the point of view of black women, who tended to be subsidiary characters or glanced-at props in Wright's own fiction. Hurston was most compelling when she wrote about the plight of a black woman as the object of sexual exploitation by a white man, or as the focal point on which a black man concentrates his diffuse anger. "Ah can't die easy," Janie's grandmother says to the unpolluted child, "thinkin' maybe de menfolks white

or black is makin' a spit cup outa you." What seemed to some readers her preoccupation with sex was really a candid acknowledgment that, especially for black women, the craving for bodily pleasure was both an intimation of transcendence and a form of imprisonment.

Still, as long as Hurston remains susceptible to what are essentially political judgments (the feminist approval was oddly symmetrical with the disapproval thirty years earlier by Locke and Wright), her literary fortunes will continue to fluctuate with the temper of the times. Writing in the academic idiom of the 1990s, the critic Hazel Carby has recently charged that Hurston is a writer who "privileges the nostalgic and freezes it in time." At a time when millions of black Americans are coping with despair in the inner city, Carby asks, "[Has] *Their Eyes Were Watching God* become the most frequently taught black novel because it acts as a mode of assurance that, really, the black folk are happy and healthy?"

This is an apposite question. The trouble, as with all criticism that restricts itself to questions about reception or ideology, is that it misses the basic reason the writer is worth reading in the first place. Hurston belongs among the American classics not because of her politics but because of her language. She was at pains to distinguish herself from "the great horde of individuals known as 'Race champions,' " to whom "no Negro exists as an individual—he exists only as another tragic unit of the Race." Some writers, Hurston charged, think there is bravery

> in following the groove of the Race champions, when the truth is, it is the line of least resistance and least originality—certain to be approved of by the 'champions' who want to

> hear the same thing over and over again even though they already know it by heart, and certain to be unread by everybody else. It is the same thing as waving the flag in a poorly constructed play.

Hurston's saving distinction was her exquisitely sensitive ear. She was sometimes out of tune, as when she tried to devise metaphors that were self-consciously literary ("there is a basin in the mind where words float around"). But when she deployed colloquial black speech and celebrated its ability to move beyond mere denotation, she was a spectacular writer, and the farthest thing from a flag waver. When, for instance, she describes a speeding train in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, she uses a word that perfectly conveys the sound of the wheels clicking over the track joints: it "schickalacked" over the rails. A girl walks "hippily" past a porch full of gaping men. A woman is only "mouf glad" rather than "sho nuff glad" when she tries to deflect with a forced smile her man's gathering anger. The phrase "sense you intuh it" functions as a verb that works much better than "tell" or "explain" to express how words transmit images and feeling from speaker to hearer.

Hurston was a brilliant transcriber of dialect, but this was only part of her achievement. When writing in her own voice, she renders the world in phrases that are palpable and wonderfully immediate; her mind moves rapidly from the general proposition ("there was nothing then to hinder impulses") to the particular illustration ("they didn't have zippers on pants in those days, guaranteed to stay locked no matter what the strain"). Here, by assembling a sequence of complementary images, she expresses the cost to her father of her mother's judgment that he had been born coarse and vulgar and had needed to be refined:

> I know now that it is a griping thing to a man—not to be able to whip his woman mentally. Some women know how to give their man that conquesting feeling. My mother took her over-the-creek man and bare-knuckled him from brogans to broadcloth, and I am certain that he was proud of the change, in public. But in the house, he might have always felt over-the-creek, and because this was not the statue he had made for himself to look at, he resented it.

This is a writer who understood that spontaneous image-making is the mark of a living language, that a shared language is the only conduit we have into the interior life of other people. In an essay in 1950 called "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston explains what drove her as an artist: the conviction that the writer must reveal the most intimate experiences of persons who have been looked upon as types. Through such revelations, the reader who has not been completely lost to the dishonesty of prejudice will recognize a common human bond:

> Argue all you will or may about injustice, but as long as the majority cannot conceive of a Negro or a Jew feeling and reacting inside just as they do, the majority will keep right on believing that people who do not look like them cannot possibly feel as they do, and conform to the established pattern. It is well known that there must be a body of waived matter, let us say, things accepted and taken for granted by all in a community before there can be that commonality of feeling. The usual phrase is having things in common. Until this is thoroughly established in respect to Negroes in America, as well as other minorities, it will remain impossible for

> the majority to conceive of a Negro experiencing a deep and abiding love and not just the passion of sex. That a great mass of Negroes can be stirred by the pageants of Spring and Fall; the extravaganza of summer, and the majesty of winter. That they can and do experience discovery of the numerous subtle faces as a foundation for a great and selfless love . . .

Hurston's real subject, and this is the reason her work will abide, was the universal disjunction between the limitless human imagination and the constrictions within which all human beings live their lives. She happened to know best how to exemplify this theme by writing about the lives of black women in the American South which in itself is cause for neither praise nor blame. She was caught in the paradox in which all major black American writers have been caught: she wished to honor her people by recording their uniquely tragic experience while at the same time refusing to cordon off that experience from the universal human condition of hope and dread.

Hurston rejected all the conventional categories—race, class, gender—by which some of her latest critics organize experience. Finally, she was not a Negro writer or (as she might be classified today) a "subaltern" writer or a woman writer. "Negroes are supposed to write about the Race Problem," she says in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. "I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color."