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A MAJOR LEAP: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AS A POSTCOLONIAL SELF

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ABSTRACT

This article is a curtain raiser of a self, of an African American voice which lays bare the multiple voices buried deep into the conscience. The study of *Dust Tracks on a Road* – an autobiography of Zora Neale Hurston, affords an insight into the life of black women of the twenty first century. Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography has been denounced as shallow and dishonest. However, a close reading of the text in terms of its narrative strategies and persona links the work to the African American continuum. It argues that a distinct woman's voice must be heard in order to understand how the female experience may be different from the dominant male tradition, but, equally authentic. Her attempt to voice the voicelessness of black women has focussed on the question of the mercury identity of the postcolonial writer of the modern era. Her autobiography proves to be a significant living voice of a conscious figure deftly winding up the aroma of the black women and the women in general.

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INTRODUCTION

It was Zora Neale Hurston's mother who "exhorted her child at every opportunity to jump at de sun." We might not land on the sun," Zora Neale Hurston reflects, " but at least we would get off the ground."1And that is what exactly she has done. Raised in an all black town of Eatonville, Florida, though she moved north at the age of thirteen, she spent a year at Howard University studying with influential African American scholar Alain Locke. Carl Van Vechten met Zora Neale Hurston when she was working as a secretary for the writer Fannie Hurst. They shared a close friendship thereafter. Zora is picturesque, witty, electric, indiscreet and unreliable. Such is the opinion of her friends, and the latter quality offers material for analysis.

Zora Neale Hurston is a novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist whose fictional and factual accounts of black heritage remain unparalleled. Zora Neale Hurston is recognized as an important writer of the Harlem Renaissance, an era of unprecedented achievement in the black American art and literature, during the 1920s and early 1930s. Although, she influenced the writers such as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, interest in her has only recently been revived after decades of neglect. The world has finally rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston. Her books are back in print, a new wave of African American women writers

have claimed her as their literary ancestor, and today's generation is eagerly exploring Eatonville and its citizens in the nation's classrooms. Zora must be somewhere, riding high and having the last laugh. Appropriately when the *New York Times Book Review* published a front-page piece of Zora Neale Hurston, they included her photograph. It reads: "Zora looks out at us, laughing, from the front seat of her Chevy, during one of her folklore collecting trips in the South."²

"[...] I have touched the four corners of the horizon, far from hard searching it seems to me that tears and laughter, love and hate, make up the sum of life" (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 348).

MULTIPLE VIGNETTES

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), consists of sixteen chapters; three more chapters have been added by her biographer Hemenway in the 1984 edition of this autobiography and are titled as 'appendix' which were omitted by Lippincott in the original publication. In this autobiography, the centrality of Hurston's childhood is evident in the attention she gives in it. Roughly, the first section of her autobiography is devoted to the memories of Eatonville, its folk culture, her family, the convergence of these elements in molding her sense of separateness – not from the community, but as someone within the community whose sense of quest, whose need to journey to the horizon, necessitates a movement beyond the community's borders. In the last section of *Dust Tracks* (hereafter cited as *Dust Tracks*), she turns her attention to particular topics. She moves to friendship, to love, to religion, and the final global perspective – "Looking Things Over." And, in the final paragraphs of her autobiography, she returns to the problem of race.

The autobiography of Zora Neale Hurston contributes to the mystification of Zora Neale Hurston, who, as Joanne Braxton remarks, remains "one of the most enigmatic and elusive figures in black American literary history."³ The secular and spiritual tracks in a developmental path turn to "dust" since they do not stick. In this way, Melvin Dixon notes simply that the title defines Zora Neale Hurston's "preference for mobility."⁴

Readers of the printed text seldom contemplate that they might be treading in a minefield of excisions, deletions, changes-sometimes willed by the author, other times imposed by the editor[s]. Many readers have sensed what they perceive to be too much art, too many changes in rhythm and tempo, and too many vibrations in Zora Neale Hurston's one book-length attempt to define herself. Certain critics also believe that her autobiography rings false. In the introduction to the 1969 edition of *Dust Tracks*, Darwin Turner, who has been occasionally hostile toward Zora Neale Hurston, calls the book "perhaps the best fiction she ever wrote;"⁵ later arguing in his own book, *In a Minor Chord*, that *Dust Tracks* illustrates Hurston's "artful candor and coy reticence, her contradictions and silences, her irrationalities and extravagant boasts which plead for the world to recognize and respect her."⁶ And, Robert Hemenway admits that the book can be "discomfiting" because "like much of her career, it often appears contradictory."⁷

Dust Tracks is never consistent; not with itself, not with the conventions of autobiography in general or those of African American autobiography, nor with the facts of Zora Neale Hurston's life, and nor with what probably were its author's real feelings about racial politics. The individual persona who is both the subject and object of *Dust Tracks* is not the homogenous, unitary, and autonomous protagonist of conventional autobiography, but heterogeneous, fragmentary, and inextricably, in various ways, part of the culture and society in which she lives. Instead of satisfying traditional conventions *Dust Tracks* focuses on the life of Hurston's imagination, on the psychological dynamics of her family, on retelling community stories, on depicting the character of certain friends and on Hurston's ambiguous pronouncements about race. In doing so, *Dust Tracks* portrays an individual persona that resists reduction to a coherent, consistent unity and instead portrays a person of many words who is in tension with the world in which she moves. In calling *Dust Tracks* unreliable, critics are arguing that Zora Neale Hurston does not represent herself truthfully and that the book is a deceptive and unfaithful representation—although it "may be the best fiction Zora Neale Hurston ever wrote." According to Maya Angelou, "It is difficult if not impossible, to find and touch the real Zora Neale Hurston" in *Dust Tracks*.⁸ For Elizabeth Fox Genovese, "Hurston's autobiography singularly lacks any convincing picture of her own feelings."⁹ And, Mary Helen Washington accuses *Dust Tracks* of "at all times deftly avoiding self-revelation."¹⁰

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography is so blatant a celebration of the self as unique, is such an overt denial of her position as a soldier in the struggle for racial equality, that even her admirer Alice Walker describes *Dust Tracks*, "For me, the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote in her autobiography. After the first few chapters, it rings false" (*Dust Tracks* Foreword xvii). Hemenway renders what, with a few important exceptions, has become a consensus view: "Her total career, not her autobiography, is the proof of her achievement and the best index to her life and art. Only when considered in total context can the book be properly assessed, for it is an autobiography at war with itself" (Hemenway 276). The disparity between the freshness and the originality of her other writing and the evasive ambivalence of this text cannot be explained simply as evidence of a failing talent. It is more feasible, however, that the irritating circumspection of the work springs from a struggle at self-definition in a society that had already labelled her as *Black*. Hurston's lifelong concern with the self and its limitations (those imposed from without and from within) is, of course, the natural, perhaps even the proper subject of an autobiography.

Zora Neale Hurston understood the immense complexity of producing her autobiography. In one of her Pittsburg Courier articles on Ruby McCollum, she makes this observation: "The greatest human travail has been in the attempt at self-revelation, but never, since the world began, has any one individual completely succeeded. There is an old saying to the effect that : "He is a man, so nobody knows him but God."11 This remark is not cited as an apology for *Dust Tracks*. It is clear that, despite their inherent limitations, Hurston saw the value of those forms of writing that place the self at their centre, and it is clear that she worked according to what she believed were her own gifts and limitations—what one might call her own ethics of self-representation. Hurston's goal was self-definition rather than intimate self-disclosure (though much of what she reveals is of an intimate nature). *Dust Tracks* is full of direct statements about Hurston's Eatonville upbringing, her subsequent travels, her desires and beliefs. Yet, as an artist, Hurston knew that she could best reveal her quest for self-knowledge, her contradictions, and her mode of imagining by means of indirection and direct indications. The title of her autobiography, with its many connotations, is an appropriate clue to the book that follows.

As the writer of her own life, Zora Neale Hurston's problems were compounded by the fact that she refused to produce the kind of text described by Stephen Butterfield in his commonly accepted definition of African American autobiography. Hurston's life-writing is not in the male tradition identified by Stephen Butterfield, one framed to arouse anger and indignation as a spur to collective action. The brand of liberalism that runs throughout Hurston's autobiography is the radical individualistic strain, and in her insistence on her own individuality—her desire to tell her own unique story—Hurston's autobiography bears more resemblance to Ellen Glasgow's *The Woman Within* or *One Writer's Beginnings* than to the autobiographies of African American men. Instead, she writes in a tradition associated increasingly with black women autobiographies; one that draws form and tone from the oral tradition of the Blues, a mode associated with self-expression and discovery. Experimental reality in the Blues is subjective, allowing the singer to meander a road and record the emotional tensions of the journey. Clearly, Hurston's autobiography, the very title of which embodies a vision of life as a journey, is in this tradition, and the tracks made in the dust are unique to herself. No matter what her success, however, she never forgot her humble beginnings: as she herself quotes in the autobiography: "From the depth of my inner heart I appreciated the fact that the world had not been altogether unkind to Mama's child" (*Dust Tracks* 3).

The only place in which Hurston felt secure was—herself. Truly a woman who kept her own counsel, Hurston referred to the source of her innermost thoughts as the only place in which she could escape societal limitations and censorship and freely express herself. There, in the inner regions of the self, she found affirmation, a place to heal, a place of restoration and recovery. There, she nurtured a spirit of resistance that enabled her to survive and continue. It is there that Hurston constructed alternative images of herself to stand in opposition to the controlling, stereotypical images of black women, images that were devised in a society built on black woman's objectification and subjugation.

As, the single most important link between the different phases in black women's autobiographies, Hurston's autobiography commands preliminary assessment. Hurston should be understood as a woman who

was, regarding her self-representation, concerned primarily with a “self” unconstrained by gender in particular and condition in general. Her life made her an expert on anger and fear. Determined to become a respected person, to become someone, she wrestled—not always gracefully or successfully—with the expectations of those around her. She wrote about primitives, she satirized her peers, and she searched for her heritage. But, she found scant satisfaction in her search. Upon closer examination, she seems to be a wanderer—talented artist, perhaps the most talented African American writers of the decade, who searched in creativity and in life for some intangible satisfaction which she failed to find. She tried to reconcile high and low culture by becoming Eatonville’s aesthetic representative to the Harlem Renaissance, and when she discovered that this was an unsatisfactory role, she turned to the professional study of folklore as an alternative (Hemenway⁵⁶). In the Introduction to *Dust Tracks*, Hemenway cites another statement in which Hurston expresses her “feeling of disappointment” about the autobiography: “I don’t think that I achieved all that I set out to do. I thought that in this book I would achieve my ideal, but it seems that I have not yet reached it [...] it still doesn’t say all that I want to say” (xxxviii). She writes in the autobiography, “I regret all of my books. It is one of the tragedies of life that one cannot have all the wisdom one is ever to possess in the beginning” (*Dust Tracks*212).

It is not that Zora Neale Hurston had neither the will nor the ability to reveal the “real Zora”, but rather that there is no one single, hidden, inner real self to reveal. What she did reveal was a literary representation of a complex and varied human being. Hurston, in her troubling autobiography, unmistakably identifies the problematic relation between her private self and her self-representation. Attentively read, she reminds that more often than not the autobiographies of African American women have been written from within the cage. Frequently they sing with the voice of freedom, but always they betray the confinement from which that freedom is wrested.

Hurston’s voice in *Dust Tracks* reflected the realities of the era. In writing her autobiography, Hurston stood poised as a cultural interpreter, a link between the rural black South and the urban liberal North. Because of her simple style, humor, and folklore, Hurston deserves more recognition than she ever earned. In all her contradictoriness and complexities, Hurston succeeds in portraying her real self, which is all that any autobiographer can hope to do. One emerges from the book with a strong feeling for the person, not the literary artist. Hurston makes herself live in all the inaccuracy and conceit of revelatory self-expression. She adorns herself with the protective shield to defend herself against the volley of questionnaires, expressing doubt on a black woman and a second-class citizen.

CONCLUSION

Since times immemorial, women have witnessed ‘a double colonisation’. They are doubly colonised—by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones, too. Hence, a feminist narrative cannot escape complicity with colonialism and in its turn constructs a different form of mastery over Africa entirely in keeping with colonialist values. Nellie Y. McKay explains how the marginal position of Zora Neale Hurston as an autobiographer positioned between black and white cultures and readerships shaped the problematic status of *Dust Tracks*. This helped to turn it into a textual “statue” of selfhood (to use Zora Neale Hurston’s own metaphor) rather than the flesh-and-blood self-representation that many readers have expected to find in the book.

Given the sense of both individualism and cosmic residence, one can see why, in the conclusion of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston mentions her desire to read Spinoza and the mysticism of the East in her old age. Her system of belief is consistent with that of Spanish Jew whose chief work, the *Ethics*, holds that everything in the universe is related and that recognizing this interconnectedness leads to intellectual love of God. Somewhere between Hurston’s historical data and spiritual mystery is the whole woman. This Hurston, as revealed in her autobiography, must be examined ‘with a harp and a sword,’ so that a comfortable master narrative about her does not marginalize those experiences about which she wrote that affect a fuller understanding of her. We may seem to be staring at the dark, but our eyes are watching God.

In autobiographies, this will-to-forget gains momentum by cultural and moral motivations. To assist the subjects of postcoloniality, to live with the gaps and fissures of their condition and learn to proceed with self understanding – it projects an ameliorative therapeutic recovery. Zora Neale Hurston’s race suffers from

conscious web of coercion and seduction. And, her elaborate colonial self recovery requires full recognition of the secret, of what I am. Re-visiting her past, she has revealed and promoted the construction of a unified revolutionary Self. With the account of the colonial crippling loss of 'home' and being a 'wanderer' of the fleeting dust, she tracks the web-like inclusiveness of a secured insecure Self...

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