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Zora Neale Hurston: Scientist, Folklorist, Storyteller

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This paper examines the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston and her contribution to American literature in the 20th Century. While previous critical analysis of Hurston's work has focused primarily on her most popular novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this paper examines Hurston's career by taking a holistic approach to the body of her literary works. Hurston's early career as an anthropologist is shown to provide a foundation for her later interest in folklore. In turn, her connection and participation in the Harlem Renaissance gave Hurston's writing a nuanced and individualized style as part of the American modernist movement. Examining the tri-partite nature of Hurston's identity leads to the most comprehensive and accurate understanding of the works Hurston produced in her lucrative career as a scientist, folklorist, and author.

Zora Neale Hurston, one of the most prolific authors of the Harlem Renaissance, has not received the attention deserved by the quality and magnitude of her work. Although her work has not been fully represented in the literary canon, it has begun its slow ascent into the academic and critical realm. The delay in Hurston's inclusion into mainstream literary study is largely due to the eclectic and somewhat disorienting nature of her work. A trained anthropologist, Hurston's career took several radical turns as she sought to research and experience African-American culture, and to convey it through her writing. Hurston's work reflects her quirky and fearless personality, which defies limitation to a single genre or discipline. While she played a significant role in the rapid evolution of anthropologic practices in the early 20th Century, Hurston also spent several years recording one of the most extensive and authentic folktale collections about African-Americans living in the American Southeast. Finally, Hurston participated in the Harlem Renaissance in a radical new way that was rejected by most of her Modernist colleagues. These three stages of Hurston's career are very closely related and contribute to her vast, prolific, and somewhat baffling collection of work. Hurston's identity as a writer is based in her equal passions for anthropology, folklore, and African-American Modernism. The combination of these experiences allows her to portray a nuanced and extensive representation of African-American cultural identity.

Most criticism of Hurston's work centers on her most well-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937. While this novel is a prime example of Hurston's style and her connection to Eatonville, Florida, her hometown, it lacks the specific connection to her career as a folklorist and anthropologist. Additionally, unlike her collections of folklore or her other novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does not incorporate elements of folklore in combination with Modern fiction tendencies, both of which are essential to understanding Hurston's identity as an author. Rather than focusing on this novel that has already been extensively discussed, this paper will examine Hurston's other work and her identity as an author, folklorist, and anthropologist. First, Hurston's training and background as a scientist will be discussed, providing a foundation to understand her work with the Harlem Renaissance and Modernist literature, which ultimately led to her interest in folklore. While extensive research has been done on Hurston's life, very little of it has examined her work holistically, taking into account her richly diverse experiences. The summation of these experiences must be considered to attain an accurate depiction of both Hurston, and her relevant and profound body of literature and science.

I. Education and Early Anthropologic Career

To truly comprehend Hurston's mixture of ethnography and folklore, one must understand her background and education. Born and raised in Eatonville, Florida, Hurston began to "write stories and poems" at an early age, but quickly realized that "she would have to leave if she wanted to write anything people might actually read" (Lawless 156). Hurston recognized that her perspective was limited, and sought direction at Columbia University, studying anthropology with well-known anthropologist Franz Boas. Critic Elaine Lawless writes that "Boas had done ethnographic fieldwork with the Eskimo," rejecting the traditional method of anthropologic approach and arguing that the Eskimo people were "pretty much like everyone else on the planet" (158-9). Boas's style of anthropology had a significant impact on Hurston that is demonstrated through her personal, first-hand approach in her anthropology and her fiction. As Lawless states, Hurston "wrote what she knew" incorporating her anthropologic training into her localized folk experiences to create beautiful and engaging stories that are unique and relevant to readers (164). Hurston's ability and willingness to completely immerse herself in the culture that she was studying made her interesting to Boas, who was seeking to redefine anthropologic processes. Together, they represented the movement that shifted anthropology from a formalized, objective method to Hurston and Boas's approach, which collapsed "the distance between observer and observed and extricate[ed] the anthropologic gaze" (Farooq 56). As American anthropology "shifted its angle of inquiry in questions of cultural determinism from a position of affirmation... to a position of challenge," Hurston began her field research and laid the foundation for a long career of studying people, cultures, and herself (Farooq 51). During her training at Columbia, and her early years of field research, Boas was a monumental influence

in Hurston's development as an anthropologist.

Hurston's work was also directly impacted by the influences of her other two mentors: Charlotte Osgood Mason, and Langston Hughes. Each supporter of Hurston had a different agenda, and Hurston catered her communication to each of them, creating a three-part identity in her career. Charlotte Mason, Hurston's "wealthy patron of the primitive," was interested in African-American folk culture; while Langston Hughes, Hurston's closest tie to the Harlem Renaissance, encouraged her to focus her efforts on writing Modernist literature designed to convey the African-American experience (Ward 301). These sponsors represent two different aspects of Hurston's career that operated in conflict but ultimately contributed to her development as a writer after she began to move away from formal anthropology.

Hurston's initial training and passion for anthropology gave her the ability to study folklore in a genuine and accurately subjective way, which in turn gave her the necessary tools to make her later fictional works purposefully subjective. She chose to directly involve her own identity in her scientific work and her writing, choosing to be "very present in both her ethnographic work as well as her fiction, deliberately and fervently creating and disrupting authenticity" (Farooq 54). Many critics argue that this choice represents a disregard for accuracy and truth; however, close study of her collected works suggests that Hurston believed truth would be found through subjective, experiential interaction. While it is difficult to define Hurston's identity and impossible to limit her career to one category, the influences of her three mentors represent the three conflicting forces at play in her career.

Zora Neale Hurston began her career as an anthropologist in search of understanding that seemed to exist just beyond the typical anthropologic process. While Hurston seemed to be passionate about her field of study, she also recognized the "larger cultural and scientific struggles" of anthropology in a changing society (Farooq 62). Hurston understood that her field of study relied on the knowledge of conscious and usually suspicious people, who wanted to know "why [she] had come there and what [she] wanted" (*Tell My Horse* 22). As a result, Hurston began to represent herself as "both educated ethnographer and one of the folk whom she travel[ed] to study," thereby moving away from her scientific training and toward her own style of research. The traditional approach, of objectively studying a culture through observation of pre-planned ceremonies and performances, simply did not serve Hurston's intentions of gaining truly accurate insight into the cultures that she studied (22). Although her initial work was in the typical style of anthropology that favored objective analysis based on removed observation, Hurston adopted a much more organic process that involved her direct participation in the cultures and customs that she was studying. Her book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, published in 1938, is a perfect representation of her anthropologic style and approach. In the book, Hurston records her experiences in Haitian culture and includes her own interior thoughts and viewpoints throughout her narrative about the Haitian people and their customs. Due to Hurston's decision to act as a "participant-observer" (Staple 62) and her frustration with typical ethnographic fieldwork, which limited her ability to involve herself personally in her work, Hurston began to vacillate "between her emerging career as a writer and her lingering desire to become a professional anthropologist" (Cotera 75). Critic Maria Cotera argues that Hurston's first extensive field research project "may well have initiated [her] shift from anthropology to folklore," blending ethnography and storytelling into her work (79). While conducting field research for anthropology, Hurston began to understand the limitations of her scientific process and moved toward incorporating anthropology into her fictional writing.

Hurston's work in Jamaica is full of first person, experiential research that demonstrates the value of alternative methods of fieldwork. Hurston makes it clear that she has no interest in "staged affairs," but only wishes to experience and write about ceremonies in their "natural setting and sequence" (22). One of the many cultural rituals Hurston discusses in her book takes place early in her time in Jamaica after she persuades the village leaders to take her on a boar hunt. After much "talking and begging and coaxing...a hunting party was organized" (31), giving Hurston the opportunity to observe an important ritual, but also the structural dynamics of the community. The hunt, usually comprised of men only, "consist[ed] of four hunters, the dogs and the baggage boy" (31). The ad-

dition of Hurston to their party was unorthodox, but allowed her to observe the action first-hand. While her presence most likely influenced the interactions she observed, Hurston attempted to integrate fully into the community. This method, which she called “self-experience,” gave Hurston valuable insight into the details of the ritual, such as superstitions about sharpening weapons and the method of killing the hog (31). Following the protocols of traditional anthropologic research methods would have limited Hurston’s perspective of the local Jamaican culture due to their reluctance to openly discuss their cultural norms. Rather, her participant-observer method supported her purpose to truly experience the culture she observed.

In a later portion of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston explains her intentions through her research, which supports both her work as an anthropologist and as a folklorist and writer later in her career. While *Tell My Horse* is comprised of anecdotal stories and individualized events, Hurston makes it clear that her purpose was much more focused and directed than it might seem on the surface:

What I was actually doing was making general observations. I wanted to see what the Maroons were like, really... I wanted to see how they felt about education, transportation, public health and democracy. I wanted to see their culture and art expressions and knew that if I asked for anything especially, I would get something out of context... So I just sat around and waited. (23)

While it might appear that Hurston’s approach was subjective, perhaps even apathetic, in reality her method was quite deliberate and standardized. She correctly recognized that to get accurate data she had to overcome the barriers that existed between scientist and observed community. By patiently integrating herself into the culture, making general and informal observations, Hurston was allowed to see a completely new side of Jamaican and Haitian culture that had been hidden away from other anthropologists, making her research extraordinarily effective and important.

While some critics argued Hurston’s research and work has “apparent unreliability [and]...inconsistency or fragmentary nature,” *Tell My Horse* suggests that Hurston’s research was not as unplanned and questionable as it might seem at first (Walker 387). Hurston deliberately takes an informal and first-person approach to conveying her research, and chooses not to remove herself from the experience in order to record Haitian and Jamaican cultural events. Rather, Hurston “subtly and deliberately signals her position as both an outsider observer of black culture and as an insider within it” (Farooq 56). Her direct interaction with the people and customs of the local communities sets her research apart from that of other anthropologists at this time, and allows her to input her own experiences into her research. Her fascination with local culture and folk traditions gave Hurston an almost unparalleled ability to understand, study, and convey information about African-American culture in the American Southeast, as well as the local traditions in Haiti and Jamaica. Unlike many of her colleagues in the anthropologic world, Hurston believed that culture must be observed in a natural setting because “staged affairs are never the same as the real thing” (*Tell My Horse* 22-23). In other words, Hurston spent her time as an anthropologist searching for truth, which she found—somewhat ironically— by taking an entirely subjective and inherently unscientific approach. Hurston understood the failures of an objective approach when she interacted with “men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores” but refused to allow Hurston into their community and cultural knowledge (Ward 306). When her approach shifted to a very non-traditional method, the volume and quality of her research increased by a large degree. Hurston realized that she had to “dress as they did, talk as they did, live their life, so that [she] could get into [her] stories the world [she] knew as a child” (Ward 308). In other words, Hurston shifted her process from applying formalized research techniques to realizing that “knowledge production occurs not in the absence of culture but through cultural immersion” (Sorensen 8). Perhaps, then, Hurston recognized that her subjective approach to research allowed her to come much closer to the truth and authenticity of the cultures that she studied.

II. Finding Facts in Myths: Hurston's Transition to Folklore

In 1936, during her trip to Jamaica and Haiti, Hurston began to move away from anthropology and focus her efforts on the “rich history of folklore” (Farooq 55). Hurston’s fascination with folklore covers a multitude of areas including her anthropologic work in Haiti and Jamaica, folklore, and even re-imaginings of biblical narratives. Her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, which was published in 1939, is perhaps the most comprehensive example of her ability to blend history, tradition, and myth. The novel describes the life of Moses in the context of an epic adventure story. Hurston uses the framework of the biblical account of Moses, but creates a much more complicated and multi-faceted story about Moses the character, rather than Moses the biblical hero. Critic Beth Harrison argues that Hurston’s novel “reshaped the Moses legend” by incorporating “acknowledgement of the traditional Western canon (in the story of Moses) but also a recognition of... African roots” (207). Essentially, Hurston acknowledges the folk tradition of both white and African-American culture, successfully creating a story that establishes her work as a folklorist who crosses cultural boundaries and genres.

As Hurston herself explains, Moses is traditionally thought of as an “old man with a beard” who “had some trouble with Pharaoh about some plagues and led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and on to the Promised Land” (*Moses* vii). This mass-culture version of Moses, Hurston points out, is quite limited because there are several other concepts of Moses in Asia, the Near East, and even Africa (vii). These legends of Moses have nothing to do with his interaction with the Israelites, but rather his ability to communicate with and even command a god, which in African traditions, makes him worthy of worship (*Moses* viii). Hurston’s novel is a comprehensive study of Moses which entwines the myths of Moses with her own imagination to create a novel that reflects her ability to revitalize folklore into full-length novels of great literary merit. Critic Beth Harrison argues that *Moses* can, and should, be read as a parallel narrative between Moses’s “leadership among the Hebrews” and Hurston’s attempt to be a “serious student of anthropology, and a gifted writer” trying to “secure her place” (200). Yet again, Hurston’s identity and career is inextricably tied to her work as a folklorist and writer. Hurston’s Moses struggles throughout the novel to discover and understand his identity because of its complicated nature. Similarly, Hurston’s own career, and arguably her personal identity, was tied to three distinct fields of work, molding her into a multi-faceted and complex scientist, folklorist, writer, and woman, who was deeply moved by human experiences and desperately wanted to convey those experiences to her readers.

Hurston’s skill in combining different genres of folklore is evident throughout *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. When the Israelites are finally freed from the Egyptians, Hurston expands and complicates the biblical account by combining it with other folktales, and by describing the reactions of the Israelites – a detail that readers do not receive from the biblical account. The biblical version of this point in the story simply states that “all the Israelites did just what the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron. And on that very day the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions” (Exodus 14:50-51). Hurston expands these two verses into a lengthy and thorough description of the Israelites’ reaction to their freedom, which did not include “the sound of cymbals and exultant singing and dancing” as Moses had expected (180). Rather, Hurston states that “the people cried when Moses told them” and that “Goshen was very still. No songs and shouts” (180). The only exception to the Israelites’ stunned silence is the insertion of a song of praise from an unknown Israelite slave. Hurston writes this outburst by using the first few lines of an African-American spiritual song, and adapts it to fit the context of the Israelites’ own struggle for freedom:

Free at last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty I’m free at last! No more toting sand and mixing mortar! No more taking rocks and building things for Pharaoh! No more whipping and bloody backs! No more slaving from can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night! Free! Free! So free till I’m foolish. (180)

These words demonstrate Hurston’s ability to blend written history, current social issues, and myth. On the surface, Hurston is simply giving the Israelites a voice, however her incorporation of an African-American spiritual suggests that she is purposefully connecting the plight of the

Israelites to that of African-American slaves. This blending allows her to successfully re-invent a story that retains the mystery of folklore and the currency of modern social commentary. Hurston's re-telling of the story of Moses could also be seen as a creation of a new version that includes a broad amalgamation of cultures, in turn creating a more holistic narrative. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* represents Hurston's attempt to convey the "authentic...cultural liberation" for both the Israelites and modern African-Americans (Harrison 200). Hurston utilizes folklore to invent her own fictionalized version of a traditional narrative that is more inclusive than a single cultural folktale, and explores the complications involved in identity and freedom.

III. Hurston's exploration of Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance

Hurston eventually left her anthropologic and folklorist studies in Haiti and the American South to move to New York City and join the Harlem Renaissance movement. Her decision to leave field research and focus exclusively on her work as a writer shaped the rest of her career. While living in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston had the opportunity to meet, befriend, and work with authors like Langston Hughes, who would have a large impact on her writing style and subject matter. The Harlem Renaissance, which "proliferated a mosaic of cultural and racial experience," was an ever-changing landscape of artists attempting to create their own definition of Modern literature (Kemp 789). Although she embraced the ideals and style of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston never lost her fascination with culture and folklore that she had developed as an anthropologist. Like the Harlem Renaissance, which vacillated "between escaping conventions and connecting to them," Zora Neale Hurston sought to find her own voice as an author and a folklorist (Kemp 793). Hurston's transition to the Harlem Renaissance marked her transition from science to literature, even though her anthropologic background would impact her writing for the rest of her career.

Even though her career as a writer primarily developed during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's views on race are quite different than those of her contemporaries. Unlike many of her fellow African-American writers, Hurston chose not to focus her writing on social injustice, or the harsh realities of racism that was pervasive throughout American society. In fact, critic Cynthia Ward argues, "if Hurston had any single consistency, it was her frequent and vehement denial of being a spokesperson for an oppressed race" (303). Instead, she chose to write stories that often did not include racial tension, and she certainly did not make it a main theme in most of her work. Ward explains: "Hurston herself was more particularly concerned with class tensions among African Americans" than the racially based struggles of African Americans in the early 20th Century (306). Rather than writing stories of oppression, Hurston saw African-American culture as an untapped resource of rich experiences and as a fountain of potential for a strengthened American cultural identity. The most comprehensive collection of these stories was published in 1995 as an anthology entitled *The Complete Stories*, and contains dozens of short stories, essays, and folktales. In her short story "High John De Conquer" Hurston points out that John De Conquer, a monumental figure in Southern African-American folklore, can serve as a source of comfort and hope for all Americans, regardless of their race:

Maybe, now, we used-to-be black African folks can be of some help to our brothers and sisters who have always been white. You will take another look at us and say that we are still black and ethnologically speaking, you will be right. But nationally and culturally, we are as white as the next one. We have put our labor and our blood into the common causes for a long time. We have given the rest of the nation song and laughter. Maybe now, in this terrible struggle, we can give something else – the source and soul of our laughter and song. We offer you our hope-bringer, High John de Conquer. (*Complete Stories* 139)

The myth of High John De Conquer is present throughout Hurston's folklore collections, and takes a slightly different form each time she presents it. However, in this case, Hurston focuses on

High John's super-human ability to "beat the unbeatable" and "finish it off with a laugh" (140). High John, who often was portrayed as a defender of African-Americans, is presented in this story as a defender of all Americans, regardless of their race. Hurston's portrayal of racial issues in her writing somewhat distanced her from other writers in the Harlem Renaissance; however, her emphasis on African-American culture as a source for literary inspiration made her a vital contributor to the Harlem Renaissance.

Defining Modernism in its relationship to African-American literature poses several problems because the Modernist movement inherently catered toward white, European writers. However, critic Melissa Kemp argues that "African-American manifestations of Modernism are at once unique and connected to mainstream manifestations" (780). In other words, while African-American Modernism exists separately, it "needs, and builds from" the white American and European Modernist movements (Kemp 780). In addition to the Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston's concept and application of Modernist principals set her apart from her fellow writers. While Modernists attempted to "offer up a mirror to the world" and to "represent consciousness, perception, emotion, [and] meaning," Hurston strove to reflect individuals rather than the broad ideologies touted in most Modernist fiction (Kemp 780). Nihad Farooq succinctly points out that while other Modernist writers in the Harlem Renaissance sought to define a singular identity for African Americans, Hurston chose to focus her writing on the self: "In other words, through these unstable navigations between self-possession and self-assertion and communal accountability, Hurston's subjects neither succumb to an alienated sense of double consciousness nor do they espouse a naïve belief in a coherent, unified black culture" (60). The individuals in Hurston's work, with the exception of Moses, do not fight ideological battles or try to identify the hidden truths of reality. Rather, Hurston interests herself in everyday experience, which she argues "is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making...nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low" for study and representation (Sorensen 5). Like her decision to include her own subjective experiences in her anthropologic research, Hurston makes a conscious choice to focus on the individual in her fiction. As a result, while her work became part of the Harlem Renaissance and is traditionally considered Modernist, it possesses a unique perspective and focus. Therefore, just as she created a new method of research in anthropology and brought science to folklore, Hurston creates her own literary style that defies a singular genre classification.

Perhaps the best representation of Hurston's version of Modernism is in her vision and portrayal of herself. Hurston's short story, "Drenched in Light," published very early in her career in 1924, operates as a fictional re-telling of Hurston's own experiences during her childhood and adolescence. In the story, Isie Watts, a "little brown figure" with a tendency for sitting "atop of the gate post and hail[ing] the passing vehicles," meets and is temporarily taken in by two white women (Complete Stories, 21-24). The women, who "smelt faintly of violets," discover Isie by accident but express a desire to "adopt" Isie and take her with them for entertainment and ironically, a sense of light (Hurston, 23). While Hurston emphasizes the "whiteness" of the out-of-town visitors, Isie is the one with "Brightness and...joy itself" (25). Hurston's emphasis on race in "Drenched in Light" is particularly interesting because she typically wrote about childhood as a "non-racialized time" (Lawless 165). However, when read in the context of Hurston's work as a part of the Harlem Renaissance, and her journey to define her own sense of Modern fiction, the racial aspects of Isie's story find their place among the many other aspects of Hurston's writings, and connect to Hurston in a very personal way.

Isie's experience directly mirrors Hurston's own experiences as a child, solidifying the connection between the self and Hurston's understanding of Modernism. Hurston writes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, published in 1942, that she "used to take a seat on top of the gate post and watch the world go by" (33). Like Isie, Hurston often interacted with "white travelers" who would sometimes invite her to ride along with them for a while. Hurston writes that she eventually "came to know two other white people for [herself]. They were women," and recollects her fascination with the women's fingers, which were "long and thin, and very white" (34-5). Just as Isie seems fascinated with the whiteness of the women's skin, Hurston wanted nothing more than to re-examine the skin of her new benefactors, a vivid memory that almost certainly provided the

basis for “Drenched in Light”. This anecdote from *Dust Tracks on the Road* represents Hurston’s frequent exploration of a “fluid and multidimensional self that refuses to allow itself to be framed and packaged” (Walker 90). Neither Isie nor Hurston’s identities can be definitively pinned down, which reflects not only Hurston’s view of Modern fiction, but also her view of her own career. Like Isie, Hurston’s “self-representation is interrelated with what and whom she encounters” (Walker 391). In this case, both children encountered racial difference for the first time while retaining their own naïve understanding of their identity and the environment that surrounded them.

The similarities between Hurston’s own childhood and her fictional work suggests that she transferred the participant-observer model from anthropology to fiction, inserting her own subjective experiences into the experiences of her characters. “Drenched in Light” is just one of many examples of Hurston incorporating her own personal experience into her creative works. However, she tells the stories as if they are completely removed from herself and exist on the same plane as the information she collected through her anthropologic research. Examining Hurston’s body of work, including stories like “Drenched in Light,” inevitably leads to the realization that much of Hurston’s work “came from her deep wellspring of personal knowledge, intuition, gumption, and drive” (Lawless 155). “Drenched in Light” is just one of countless examples of Hurston’s ability to create a new and unique work of literature that is nevertheless rooted in and inextricably entwined with her own identity, experiences, and work. Lawless describes Hurston as an author who “brought to ethnographic research, to the art of writing about folklore and Southern black life, the creative impulse in many different and overlapping genres, while always serving as a personal model for staying true” to her identity as an author, storyteller, and social scientist (153). Hurston’s “creative impulse” is present throughout her work, from her early ethnographic research, to her full-length novels. Very few authors have such a wide variety of skills and perspectives that are successfully incorporated into their work while retaining an established and clearly defined identity, even if that identity crosses dividing lines.

Understanding Hurston’s identity as a writer is not, and should not be, a simple process. A gifted storyteller from an early age, Hurston’s life is a folktale in and of itself. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, has all the stylistic components of Hurston’s novels and her re-telling of folklore. Ward describes this approach as a narrative structure somewhere “between story conversation and business” in which Hurston imposes “her own subjectivity into a supposedly objective scientific discourse” (309). It is quite clear that Hurston knew exactly what she was doing when she wrote deceptively simple stories about African-American folk culture. Even her autobiography, presented as factual and straightforward, has several inconsistencies with her other works, and known facts about her (Ward 302). It would be tempting to assume that Hurston was careless and naïve about her readers. However, extensive study of her work demonstrates that her process was deliberate, from the earliest moments of research to the final stylistic choices. Hurston’s intentional blurring of fact, and emphasis on her own identity reflected in the identities of her characters is the defining characteristic of her own brand of Modernism that existed simultaneously within and separate from the Modernist literature in the Harlem Renaissance.

IV. Hurston's tripartite career: Ethnography, Folklore, and Fiction

After her time working in New York City as part of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston went home to Florida, and completed an in-depth study of African-American folklore and culture. While she utilized her anthropologic training and was supported in part by Franz Boas, Hurston’s trip provided her the stories that would lay a foundation for the rest of her literary career, while keeping in close contact with Langston Hughes and other major figures of the Harlem Renaissance (Kaplan xxii). It could be argued this trip was the turning point in her career, and served as a starting point for a new phase of her style as a writer (Kaplan xxix). In the introduction to Hurston’s collection of folktales, Carla Kaplan points out that while Hurston is iconic for her authorship of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her first love was “African-American folklore... a people’s artistry and sensibility, their humor, their grievances, their worldview” (Kaplan xi). Although the collection of her work in Florida, entitled *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, was not published until 2001, long after Hurston’s

death, the individual stories it contains represent Hurston's style as a folklorist and writer, and provides the material she needed to create Modernist fiction.

Every Tongue Got to Confess is a comprehensive study of African-American culture in Hurston's home communities in and around Florida. Despite her decision to pursue a career of writing instead of one centered on scientific study, Hurston was still "committed to the systematic study of folklore as an academic enterprise" even though formal study of folklore had not entered the academic arena yet (Kaplan xxv). Her prioritization of "authentically black cultural forms" is evident throughout her work, however it is especially useful in *Every Tongue Got to Confess* (Sorensen 6). Hurston's book is a virtually unedited collection of folktales that she collected while traveling throughout Florida analyzing folk culture. Hurston's compilation, which contains dozens of folktales, is organized into categories, and includes the names of the tale-tellers under each story. This organizational structure and recognition of the source of each story contributes to the scientific basis of a deceptively simple collection of stories. Through her straightforward and simplistic approach, Hurston eases readers into the folktales and culture of her childhood. Critic Leif Sorensen points out that Hurston's use of folklore, as her chosen method rather than anthropology, allows Hurston to convey a more accurate portrait of the culture she studied:

Hurston's folk framing of the text enacts a reversal of the basic power dynamic that underwrites scientific folklore studies: instead of ethnography explaining folk tales, folk tales explain ethnography, retaining bits and pieces of ethnographic propriety as "manners." That is to say, ethnographic collecting does not... consume folklore and arrange it into an authoritative, definitive collection of folk tales in their standard and variant forms. Instead, folkloric modes of creative appropriation and adaptation that Hurston has claimed as proper to black folk culture consume the form of ethnography.(8)

Essentially, Hurston chooses to reverse the typical method of conveying folklore by providing the information in a "breezy, conversational style that defies objective reportage" (Harrison 96), and purposefully including tall tales, and other ridiculously comedic stories. It is extremely clear that Hurston values the input of the experiences of the storytellers, whether those experiences are 'accurate,' 'real,' or 'verifiable.' *Every Tongue Got to Confess* serves as an example of Hurston's conscious decision to defy genre boundaries, and to tell her own stories, and the stories of the people that she researched and interacted with so deeply.

While *Every Tongue Got to Confess* is virtually free of Hurston's authorial voice, *The Eatonville Anthology*, published in a book for the first time as part of *The Complete Stories*, is an exemplary representation of the cohesion of Hurston's folkloric and fictional writing styles. Each section of Hurston's account of Eatonville is numbered and begins with the name and distinguishing characteristic of individuals in the community. This structure is typical of a normal ethnographic anthology, however the anecdotes described are clearly exaggerated and contribute to the fictional aspects of the collection. At one point, Hurston increases the scientific tone of the *Anthology* in section VII, which describes "Joe Lindsay [who] is said by Lum Boger to be the largest manufacturer of prevarications in Eatonville," then proceeds to present "Exhibit A" to provide an anecdote meant to prove the validity of the account (63). The scientific methodology reflects Hurston's ethnographic background, but it is tempered by the folkloric content of the entries, creating a tension in Hurston's writing style, and a unique record of Eatonville. Some critics argue this tension is intended as subtle criticism or parody of traditional anthropologic methods. However, when one considers the body of Hurston's work, it seems more likely that *The Eatonville Anthology* is yet another example of Hurston creating a "parallel between Modernist and contemporary ethnographic literature" (Harrison 103). In *The Eatonville Anthology*, Hurston uses the structure of an anthropologic report but uses her own method of creating and developing the identity of Eatonville and its residents, supporting her multi-faceted identity as both a researcher and a writer.

In *The Eatonville Anthology*, Hurston also uses the social structure of the town to convey the cultural values of Eatonville's residents, while utilizing Harlem Renaissance Modernist techniques. Several sections of the *Anthology* present the "holistic, communal values of traditional African-American culture" (Duck 265). These values and traditions are emphasized through religion and

nostalgic “elaborate affairs” that remember the “good old days before the World War” (Hurstun 64-5). Despite the many flaws in the Eatonville community, the basic foundations of the town, including religion and nostalgic social customs, play an important role in the narration of Hurston’s *Anthology*. The town itself is represented in Hurston’s collection as a force that has sway over characters’ actions and fates. In Section X, Hurston describes an abusive marital relationship, but states that because the victim flamboyantly spoke in church out of “spite” for her husband, the “village let the matter rest” (64). The “village,” or the “town” as it is referred to in sections XI and XII, dictates the social acceptance or rejection of different lifestyles and social situations in Eatonville. Therefore, the value-system of the community is subject to the whims of popular opinion. Hurston’s representation of the social structure of Eatonville is subtle but specific, and effectively provides a “bolder expression of the African American experience” and the “individual’s relation to society” (Kemp 780), both of which are central tenets of the Harlem Renaissance and Modernist African-American writing.

The relationship between traditional folk culture and Modernism is also reflected in the content of the stories that Hurston chooses to include in *The Eatonville Anthology*. Section V, entitled “The Way of a Man with a Train,” tells the story of Old Man Anderson who has “never seen a train” (61). After taking his horse and wagon to the tracks, he becomes so frightened by the train “thundering over the trestle” that he runs away “with the wagon through the woods and [tears] it up worse than the horse ever could have done” (62). Old Man Anderson represents both the outdated and old-fashioned aspects of Eatonville and the kind of “dangerous nostalgia” feared by so many African American authors in the Harlem Renaissance (Duck 266). While this story certainly suggests that Hurston “found it difficult to reconcile the conflicting claims of cultural maintenance and societal change” (Duck 288), its deliberate inclusion suggests that Hurston viewed Old Man Anderson’s nostalgic attitude as a very real part of the culture of Eatonville, and the experience of African Americans in the South.

On a technical level, Hurston utilizes local dialect and formal narratorial diction in an attempt to reconcile her different approaches to conveying cultural information. Hurston’s work opens with a section entitled “The Pleading Woman,” which relates the story of Mrs. Tony Roberts who “just loves to ask for things” (59). Mrs. Roberts’s diction is over-the-top and comical, complaining that her husband “don’t fee-ee-eee-ed me” and claiming that “De Lawd loveth de cheerful giver” (59). Her local dialect invokes Hurston’s exploration of the “ways in which Black vernacular idioms and styles might inform” her writing, and the writing of other influential African-American authors (Cotera 86). However, Hurston, embracing her ethnographic training and background, breaks up the local dialect of the characters in the collection with formal and factual language. Hurston states that after receiving the desired food, Mrs. Roberts “departs, remarking on the meanness of some people who give a piece of salt meat only two-fingers wide when they were plainly asked for a hand-wide piece” (59). Obviously, Mrs. Roberts’s diction does not match the description of her statements. Rather, Hurston utilizes her training as an anthropologist to accurately and factually present a cultural phenomenon using the type of language one would find in the records of a field-study, or a real anthology. The diction of the characters throughout *The Eatonville Anthology* and the precise, third person descriptions of situations demonstrate the complexity of Hurston’s approach to conveying an entertaining, but accurate collection of stories. By mixing vernacular with anthropologic terminology, Hurston, continues to emphasize her deliberate choice to seamlessly combine social science and folklore, gaining the best aspects of both approaches, while writing her own piece of Modernist fiction.

Hurston distinguishes her final story in *The Eatonville Anthology* from the others by making specific stylistic choices that reflect her own identity as a tripartite writer. The last piece in the collection, XIV, stands out for a variety of reasons. The story opens during a time “once way back yonder before the stars fell,” immediately alerting readers that this particular section is unique from the others, which were told in present tense (70). The story is a fable-like explanation of why “the dog has been mad at the rabbit” because “the rabbit slit [the dog’s tongue]” (72). Essentially, the last section of the *Anthology* is a stereotypical folktale, with all the traditional components of folklore. However, this story is placed in a collection of supposedly real stories about real people in a real

town. Hurston cleverly slips this tale at the end of her collection forcing readers to recognize the myth-like aspects of all the stories in the collection. The final tale in *The Eatonville Anthology* solidifies this work as Hurston's "most effective attempt at representing original tale-telling" (Ward 307). Despite the appearance of a researched and exact representation of the Eatonville community, Hurston's *Anthology* is a folktale itself that possesses truth and exaggeration, fact and fiction. In essence, *The Eatonville Anthology* functions as an intersection between tradition and modernity: the central conflict in the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston does not prioritize one over the other, but rather seamlessly combines them, recognizing the flaws of each and inserting her own creativity to compensate for any weaknesses that either approach possesses.

Examining the work as a whole, it becomes clear that Hurston's *Eatonville Anthology* demonstrates a tension between tradition and modernity, while existing as a work of folklore. Hurston successfully reconciles the three aspects of her identity to truly convey the "artistic representation...of the folk-spirit" which defined her hometown (Duck 265). One might attempt to define this anthology as a single genre of ethnography or folklore, but the collection of vignettes truly defies categorization. Hurston recognized that focusing on the "oral story she had collected in the field" was the most accurate portrayal of Eatonville, even if it included far-fetched folktales (Lawless 166). In other words, Hurston believed in the "power of the oral stories, the idioms, the music, the language, the disagreements that were all part of the black experience" in Eatonville, and throughout the American South (Lawless 166). This philosophy led Hurston to utilize her method of piecing together research-based information with first-hand cultural experience. Therefore, *The Eatonville Anthology* is a powerful joining of scientific representations of the community and a folkloric approach that captures the essence of Eatonville, the Harlem Renaissance movement, and Hurston as a Modernist writer.

Zora Neale Hurston's prominence as an author and anthropologist is largely due to her ability to blend folk culture with a research-based approach, giving her work a simultaneously subjective but authentic quality. *The Eatonville Anthology* represents a successful cohesion of tradition and modernity, two things that Hurston struggled to reconcile throughout her connection to the Harlem Renaissance. The formal structure of the anthology which blends the format of an anthropologic work with the localized diction and 'tall tales' of folklore immediately alerts readers that this particular collection of stories is attempting to do something different than typical anthologies or folklore collections. Rather than constraining the people and culture of Eatonville, Hurston is determined to "show the world the beauty and nuance of black American folk life" (Lawless 153). Eatonville, like Hurston, is nuanced, functioning as a physical representation of the aspects of Hurston's own identity that were constantly in a complicated and symbiotic relationship throughout her career.

V. Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston's career was long, prolific, and as complex as her writings. The work she did as an anthropologist paved the way for subsequent scientists to re-evaluate the process and methodology of anthropological field studies. Her time in Haiti and Jamaica, recorded in *Tell My Horse*, illustrates her insight and understanding of the cultures she studied, as well as the importance of shedding her identity as a scientist in order to attain a much more authentic and real representation of the communities with which she interacted. Critical analysis of Hurston's early career, paired with close examination of the anecdotal research in her book, demonstrates Hurston's refusal to be boxed in by convention or traditional methodology. Rather, her career as a scientist allowed her to start exploring her own identity and purpose.

As Hurston transitioned from anthropology to folklore, she began to write stories that blended traditions from a variety of cultures. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* represents Hurston's style of folklore that combines biblical narrative, myth, and her own touch of creativity to weave a folktale with depth and complexity. Similarly, *Every Tongue Got To Confess* blends Hurston's work as an anthropologist with her work in folklore. The collection of anecdotes, stories, and tall tales not only represents Southern African-American culture, but also Hurston's own identity as a folklorist. The

stories that she deliberately chooses to tell provide insight into her own perspective and understanding of the society around her.

The Harlem Renaissance also contributed significantly to Hurston's development as a writer, and the intersectional nature of her career. Stories like "High John De Conquer" allow readers to understand her perspective of race, while her autobiographical essays and opinion pieces clearly explain her relationship to and slight differentiation from Harlem Renaissance ideology. While her work is rarely overt in its commentary on racial issues, Hurston's underlying themes and motifs nevertheless come through her writing.

When Hurston began writing full-length fictional novels, short stories, and collections of her own fictional folklore, her identity as an author became even more complex. Her creation of *The Eatonville Anthology* has often been viewed as a reflection on her own complex identity, as well as a seamless blend of science, folklore, and fiction. Similarly, Hurston's autobiography and her short story "Drenched in Light" show her as a Modernist author who upholds tradition while embracing new literary inventions and possibilities, while being especially interested in exploring her sense of self and identity.

Placing Zora Neale Hurston into a category, box, or singular genre is impossible, and limits the incredible power of her work. Throughout her life, whether during her years as an anthropologist, or her time as a Modernist writer, Hurston ignored customs, trends, and standard methodologies in favor of her own unorthodox manner of creating stories. As a scientist, she went to extreme, sometimes even dangerous lengths, to find accurate, personal, and incredibly important information about the cultures she studied. As a folklorist, she crossed genres and collected tales from a variety of people groups, utilizing her creativity as a writer and her scientific knowledge as an anthropologist. Finally, Hurston found her place in the world of Modernist literature, where she could freely use all aspects of her training and passions to create literature that was, and continues to be, relevant, powerful, and deeply personal. When she is viewed through her many works, Zora Neale Hurston defies categorization, demanding through her extensive and diverse collection to be recognized as a multi-faceted, deliberately contradictory, and deeply insightful scientist, folklorist, and author.

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