What a Character: Zora Neale Hurston’s Autobiographies

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Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a complicated text that reflects a complicated woman, and one that falls somewhere between the categories of autobiography and biography. While the work cannot be completely discounted as autobiographical, it contains themes surprisingly reminiscent of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Like Johnson’s autobiography of a fictional man, Hurston’s account contains hard to believe situations that lead readers to question its authenticity and verisimilitude. Additionally, Hurston’s stance on the race issue, a preaching of one view while practicing another, leads to questioning. Further, *Dust Tracks on a Road* exhibits similarities, sometimes freely admitted by Hurston, to her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* so that a reader begins to question which of Hurston’s texts is the better autobiography. Ultimately, the reader concludes that *Dust Tracks on a Road* simply displays that Hurston was first and foremost a novelist, and this work tells the “autobiography” of her most successful character -- Zora Neale Hurston.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* contains several similarities to James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* that may or may not be intentional. It first must be noted that Johnson’s text “fooled many readers with its authentic tone when first published anonymously in 1912,” since it was in fact a fictitious account (Note iii). Hurston accomplishes the same task. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as an actual book, clearly identifies itself as an autobiography. It states so on the cover (Yet ironically it is listed in many library catalogues as a biography, perhaps because autobiography is often considered a sub category of biography). This creates the same dilemma that faced Johnson’s readers, whose text’s title identifies it as an autobiography. These texts call themselves autobiographies, but the reader soon begins to question this naming. General trends in both works influence this, but specifically both narratives exhibit four major areas of similarity that contribute to their questionable authenticity: narratives of their narrators’ mothers’ deaths that force them into the world to face racial issues head on, larger than life literacy narratives, narratives about travel with “sponsors” that lean toward hyperbole, and controversial dealings
with racial issues.

Hurston gives an account of her mother’s death that is surprisingly reminiscent of Johnson’s account of his mother’s death; moreover, both characters experience abandonment and an initiation into the world as results of their mothers’ demises. Both accounts begin with an illness preceding death. Johnson’s character recalls: “My mother barely had strength to attend the closing exercises of the high school when I graduated; and after that day she was seldom out of bed . . . my mother realized . . . that she was mortally ill” (Johnson 22). Hurston recollects: “I knew that Mama was sick. She kept getting thinner and thinner and her chest cold never got any better. Finally, she took to bed” (Dust Tracks on a Road 63). Both mothers succumb to death after long illnesses, and both children are subsequently exiled which ultimately leads to their initiations. The ex-colored man establishes financial independence and finds his way in the world, which ultimately leads him all over the world. It leads him first to the train station and an eye-opening life experience. He heads for Atlanta University where he is robbed and left homeless and hopeless: “If the reader has never been in a strange city without money or friends, it is useless to try to describe what my feelings were; he could not understand. If he has been, it is equally useless, for he understands more than words can convey” (Johnson 29). Hurston’s initiation into the world is more of a racial initiation. After her mother’s death, she travels to school in Jacksonville where she learns, perhaps for the first time, that she is colored. “Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl,” she states rather simply (DTR 70). In a work where race issues are prevalent, but downplayed as Hurston almost always did, this statement is significant. It is likely that the account of Lucy Hurston’s death is fairly authentic. The only question that remains is one of hyperbole. It is highly likely that Hurston related this account with some exaggeration, not least of all because she remembered her mother’s death with some resentment (Hemenway 15). Further, she was a storyteller and collector of folklore from the beginning, as is displayed in Dust Tracks on a Road, where she begins with the history of Eatonville. “I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say,” Hurston says, “so you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may
interpret the incidents and direction of my life” (DTR 1).

Both narratives also exhibit literacy and travel narratives that tend toward the unbelievable. For example, in reading *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* one identifies an image of a “too good to be true” character. The character accomplishes everything he sets out to do, no matter how difficult. Not only is he a master musician with little or no effort, but he also has numerous literacy narratives including English, Spanish, French, and German. Perhaps the most unbelievable language narrative is his Spanish experience, where he “was able in less than a year to speak like a native. In fact, it was [his] pride that [he] spoke better Spanish than many of the Cuban workmen at the factory” (Johnson 34). His only explanation of this fact is that he “discovered . . . a talent for languages as well as music” (Johnson 33). As the saying goes, if it seems to good to be true, it probably is; and indeed, Johnson’s text has been discovered as fiction. Hurston also includes a rather “too good to be true” literacy narrative in her work. She describes reading “Gulliver’s Travels [sic], Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales” as a nine year old (DTR 39). These texts were offered to her by the two benevolent white women who visited her school, ironically her first patrons. While nothing is impossible, it remains very unbelievable that a nine year old would be reading *Gulliver’s Travels* for enjoyment, a work that most high school students struggle with. Further, most college students never read Norse Tales, so why should a reader believe that Hurston read such texts at such a young age? It simply leans toward the unbelievable.

In addition to the unbelievable literacy narratives, both authors include hard-to-believe travel narratives. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* the character travels with his “sponsor,” or as Johnson labels him, his “millionaire friend,” all over Europe. The patron initially rescues the narrator from the murder at the Club, saying “‘You don’t want to be mixed up in such an affair . . . I decided last night that I’d go to Europe tomorrow. I think I’ll take you along’” (Johnson 58). Then the millionaire friend hops from country to country whimsically, either to suit his own fancy, or possibly just to impress the narrator who has never seen any of the cities. They travel from Paris to London, Holland and Berlin, and of course the narrator learns a new language.
everwhere and practices the ones he already knows. It is all very surreal and hard to believe.

Like the Ex-Colored Man’s trip to Europe, Hurston recollects a car trip through New England and Canada with her friend, and employer, Fanny Hurst. They drive all over the place from New York to Saratoga Springs, Niagara Falls, Canada, Hamilton and others, just because Fanny thinks Zora ought to have the experience: “‘Zora! You mean to tell me that you have never seen Niagara Falls? . . . Oh you must see the Falls” (DTR 196). Like the millionaire friend, Hurst may be simply fulfilling her capricious nature, but she also seems to want to show Zora around. The important thing, however, is the mythic or exaggerated feel of it all.

Since Johnson’s text has been proven to be fictional, these associations contribute to the sense that Hurston’s work also contains fictional elements. One bit of evidence supporting this actually comes from Dust Tracks on a Road when Hurston extends a thanks to Johnson: “James Weldon Johnson and his wife Grace did much to make my early years in New York pleasant and profitable. I have never seen any other people who could be right so often and, charming about it at the same time” (DTR 271). This passage comes from one of Hurston’s chapters, “The Inside Light -- Being A Salute to Friendship,” found in the Appendix of the text. It is apparently one of the chapters heavily edited by the publisher, since “Dust Tracks was by far Hurston’s most heavily edited book” (Wall 198). This passage tells readers two things. First, that Hurston was familiar with Johnson and, presumably, his work, since she was an educated woman. Further support of Hurston’s knowledge of Johnson’s text is the fact that The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man was republished under Johnson’s name for the first time, with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten, notably a mutual friend, in 1927 amid the thriving environment of the Harlem Renaissance (Kostelantez 20). The personal relationship between Hurston and Johnson is also highlighted in the Introduction to Kenneth Price’s and Lawrence Oliver’s book Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson when they note that as one of the “major catalysts” of the Harlem Renaissance, “Johnson encouraged Black writers and artists to ‘interpret the artistic beauties of Harlem.’ Many of the writers who took up the call and became major contributors . . . received Johnson’s personal attention and support, including . . . Zora Neale Hurston” (13). Second,
Hurston’s tribute passage would seem to indicate that the two were friendly, on good terms, and that she looked to him as an influence. Further, this mention of Johnson may even act as a sort of subtle clue by Hurston about her fictionalization. In the Appendix chapter of “My People, My People,” another of the heavily edited chapters, Hurston makes a seemingly cutting and humorous portrayal of Johnson that may actually serve as an allusion to Johnson as the ex-colored man. Hurston discusses the issue of passing and observes, “this passing business works both ways . . . We have white folks among us passing for colored . . . Take James Weldon Johnson for instance” (DTR 237-238). She proceeds with a clever contrast between Negroes and Johnson, which without some knowledge of Hurston’s sense of humor seems terribly cutting, showing that Johnson neither “grins” nor “parades,” but “smiles” and “proceeds” (DTR 238). The telling allusion though comes in her blatant denunciation of Johnson as a Negro: “don’t get the idea that he is not welcome among us. . . He has more than paid his way. But he just is not a Negro” (DTR 238). When this declaration stands beside the ex-colored man’s forfeiture of his race the allusion begins to form: “I had made up my mind that . . . I was not going to be a Negro” (Johnson 91). Thus Hurston sets Johnson in the same light as the ex-colored man in a manner that seems to suggest not only her knowledge of Johnson’s text, but also to perhaps hint of her fictionalization.

Each text exhibits examples of racial issues that were controversial at the time, in Johnson’s text the issues centered on the ex-colored man’s decision to pass. The narrative follows the struggles of a mulatto man trying to define his position in a segregated society. However, in the closing chapters Johnson gives the ex-colored man a series of decisions that lead him to pass. First the ex-colored man chooses to claim neither race: “I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race” (Johnson 90). Not long after this he makes the decision “that since [he] was not going to be a Negro, [he] would avail [himself] of every possible opportunity to make a white man’s success” (Johnson 91). Finally, the ex-colored man proclaims himself white: “I am an ordinary successful white man” (Johnson 99). For the reader this is an astonishing and perhaps shaming proclamation. Thus Johnson closes his
novel with great controversy.

Like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston portrays complex racial issues, but contradictorily she doesn’t necessarily deal with them. The note preceding Johnson’s text quite rightly claims: “Johnson created a fictional narrative which continues to engage readers with its portrayal of the complexity and paradox of American racial attitudes” (Note iii). Hurston’s racial issue workings are much more complicated.

The most complex problem created in *Dust Tracks on a Road* stems from the paradox that exists between Hurston’s statements and her actions. Hurston adamantly claimed to have no race prejudice: “I have no race prejudice of any kind. My kinfolks, and my ‘skinfolks’ are dearly loved” (*DTR* 231). She also by her own statement means to deny any race issue: “Still if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here” (*DTR* 192). While these two statements are relatively consistent with each other they are not consistent with the novel or Hurston’s life work. Hurston was a collector of folklore, specifically Negro folklore. This was her life’s work, and she loved it. However, by this she also celebrated the life of Negroes, which complicates the comprehension of her statement that “There is no *The Negro* here.” Further, the woman who denied racial identification and supported integration was an early Black Nationalist and a Republican conservative; still further proof of the personal contradiction (Hemenway 5). Yet, this is the same woman who wanted a black man thrown out of the white barbershop where she worked as a manicurist: “I did not participate in the melee, but I wanted him thrown out, too. My business was threatened” (*DTR* 135).

Even the early chapters of *Dust Tracks on a Road* celebrate the Negro. Hurston sets up Eatonville, quite proudly, for the reader as an all African American town: “I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town” (*DTR* 1). This greatly complicates the novel for those who unlike Hurston cannot “dwell in negative consciousness,” to use John Keats’ terminology. As Robert E. Hemenway, Hurston’s biographer, stated: “Personally, Zora Hurston was a complex woman with a high
tolerance for contradiction” (5). Perhaps he sums it up best: “Zora seems to be both an advocate for the world in racial terms, and the celebrant of a unique ethnic upbringing in an all black village” (Hemenway 276). While this is true, it doesn’t make the complexities any more palatable.

Hurston’s pride about Eatonville brings to light one of the most important and well-known facts that makes her autobiography prone to questions of fictionalization and verisimilitude. Hurston’s birth date has never been a solidly fixed fact, partially by her own doing. She claimed at different times to have been born in Eatonville on January 7 in the years 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, and 1903. One family member claimed Hurston’s birth date to be in 1891 (Hemenway 13). The 1900 census recorded a Zora L. Hurston born in January 1891 in Alabama (Wall 143). There are various postulations as to why Hurston altered her birth date, but of course, none can be proven. Cheryl Wall speculates in her work *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* that “Hurston invents a mythic autobiographical self that she derives from her ability to claim a very specific place, her ‘home,’ Eatonville” (27). If this were true, it makes an even greater impact on the contradiction of Hurston’s racial issues. However, it remains that Hurston fictionalized things to suit her needs, which is neither a condemnation nor an affirmation, but rather a fact.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* contains similarities, sometimes astonishingly similar, to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, so that it becomes questionable which conveys the truer autobiography of Zora Neale Hurston. Like Hurston’s discovery from Jacksonville of being “a little colored girl,” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the main character, Janie, discovers her own coloredness at a young age: “‘So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing . . . where Ah wuz s’posed to be . . . Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: ‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 9). Perhaps the two discoveries show opposite sides of the same coin, or in this case author; that is, the character Janie couldn’t express a neutrality toward her race, and the character Zora couldn’t express her emotion at discovering her race. Kathleen Hassall notes in one essay that in *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston “presents Hurston -- or rather she presents an assemblage of fictionalized
Hurston’s” (161). By fictionalizing both characters, Janie and Zora, so that they represent different parts of the whole Hurston perhaps accomplishes a sort of autobiography.

Aside from her own characterization, Hurston’s characterization of Joe Starks aligns very closely with that of her father in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Both men are strong-willed and powerful, but most convincing point is this passage, which could be applied to either Joe or John: “It was after his marriage that my father began to want things . . . So he heard about folks building a town all out of colored people. It seemed like a good place to go. Later on, he was to be elected Mayor of Eatonville for three terms, and to write the local laws” (*DTR* 9). Like John, Joe wants more things after he’s married. He travels to Eatonville because “when he heard all about ‘em makin’ a town all outta colored folks, he knowed dat was the place he wanted to be” (*TEWG* 28). Also, Joe is indeed elected Mayor several times.

In addition to the similarities between John and Joe and herself and Janie, Hurston also admits to modeling the relationship, at least in emotion, between Tea Cake and Janie after her own with Albert Price III. “The plot was far from the circumstances,” she writes, “but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (*DTR* 211). It would logically follow that if Hurston designed the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie with the emotion she held for Price, then she would identify herself with Janie. Hemenway considers *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “to express Zora Hurston’s own hopes for a meaningful place in a male-dominated world much better than her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*” (6). The case may be larger than that. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* may in fact express more in general about Hurston than *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Interestingly, this autobiographical content is not limited just to *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston’s first novel, also contains autobiographical content. It fictionalizes Hurston’s parents’ marriage. In fact, the characters’ names are the same as her parents, John and Lucy. While it doesn’t necessarily contain her private life, it does use some of the Hurston family autobiography (Hemenway 189).

*Dust Tracks on a Road* represents a complex work from a complex woman and writer. It
certainly contains some autobiographical content, but falls somewhere betwixt autobiography and biography. Many critics, in fact, generally consider it to be an incomplete and perhaps false image of Hurston and the African American Experience (Plant 10). Maya Angelou notes that in *Dust Tracks on a Road* “Zora Neale Hurston chose to write her own version of life” (viii). Darwin Turner described it as “the best fiction Hurston ever wrote” (qtd Plant 10). Hemenway observes that *Dust Tracks on a Road* “is an autobiography at war with itself” (277-278). Aside from whatever traditional critics believe, *Dust Tracks on a Road* certainly echoes Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* creating questions of authenticity. It absolutely gives a confusing and contradictory stance on racial issues. It certainly aligns beautifully at times with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and all of these points cause doubts about Hurston’s authenticity within *Dust Tracks on a Road*. However, two things remain. First, as Hemenway states, “Above all, [Hurston] was a sophisticated writer who was never afraid to be herself” (5). Second, Hurston was “always more of a novelist than a social scientist” as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out (297). Ultimately *Dust Tracks on a Road* displays the work of a master novelist. It tells the story of Hurston’s most famous character, the one she lived daily including all the fictionalized points. It is the autobiography of a character named Zora Neale Hurston.
Works Cited


