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## Common Reader

### Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Commentary and Questions  
By Anna Lillios

**Instructor Note: This instructional guide has been solely developed by Dr. Anna Lillios, UCF Professor of English and Academic Director of the annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival for the Arts and Humanities in Eatonville, Florida. This guide should not be shared without permission.**

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942.  
NY: HarperPerennial, 2006.

Brief Biography of Zora Neale Hurston [Appendix A]

Toni Morrison claims that Hurston “is one of the greatest writers.” Alice Walker calls Hurston her “aunt” and located her unmarked grave in Ft. Pierce, Florida. With her roots in Eatonville, Florida, Hurston went to Harlem and sparked the Harlem Renaissance, which changed the course of American literature. Hurston wrote *Dust Tracks on a Road* in 1942.

In an 11 February 1943 letter to her friend and Rollins College President Hamilton Holt, Zora Neale Hurston complains that, “she didn’t want to write [*Dust Tracks on the Road*] at all, because it is too hard to reveal one’s inner self” (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* 478). She rebelled against writing a straightforward autobiography that would purportedly tell the truth. Understanding the slippery nature of reality, she wanted to control how she

would tell her story, privileging poetic truth. Used to wearing masks as an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century black female, Hurston was fully aware of how an author could construct self-identity and reality. Above all, she wanted to do justice to the portrait of her hometown because Eatonville had always been the locus of her self-esteem and race consciousness. Alice Walker calls it her site of “racial health.” Hurston’s friend, Florida author of *The Yearling*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, notes that Hurston is “proud of her blood and proud of her people.”

However, Hurston was forced to leave Eatonville in 1904 after her mother died. She was only 13 years old at the time. Eventually, she received a scholarship to study anthropology at Barnard College in New York City during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston’s research in anthropology and her experiences with other artists during the Harlem Renaissance inspired her to look at her native town from new perspectives. Thus, in composing her memoir she wanted the freedom to break the mold of the typical autobiography and create a work that reflected her own personality and the fact that she was an adult looking back on her childhood.

## Chapter 1—My Birthplace

### A. Storytelling

How to tell one’s life story is an issue for everyone, including Hurston. Jim Loehr (a world-famous psychologist at the Human Performance Institute in Lake Nona, who has trained many world-class athletes, global business leaders, and military officers and special ops forces how to perform at their optimum best) believes in the power of storytelling as a means of shaping one’s destiny. “Your story is your life,” he claims in *The Power of Story* (NY: Free Press, 2007). Beyond the way we experience the events of our lives, it is the way we interpret those events, which define our psychological, physical, and spiritual health—and success. According to Loehr, it is possible to re-calibrate our life by re-shaping its narrative.

Peter Guber (who wrote the movies, *Rain Man*, *Batman*, *Midnight Express*, and *The Kids Are All Right*) concurs, claiming that we tell stories to move and connect ourselves to other people, provoke our memory, and give us a framework for understanding ourselves. They are, in fact, “the cornerstone of consciousness.” He goes on to explain a further function of storytelling: “The psychic lever that opens the brain to the power of stories is the ability to form

mental representations of our experience.” It is the left hemisphere of the brain that has mechanisms that make these representations, by taking “information spewed out from other areas of the brain, the body, and the environment” in order to synthesize this material in a coherent story (Guber).

Hurston exhibits the impulse to invent the story of her life at the beginning of *Dust Tracks on the Road*. She starts the memoir by narrating:

I was born in a Negro 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—charter, mayor, council town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.

In fact, Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, in the Deep South in 1891. I’ve seen the Hurston family Bible, which records her birthdate, as 1891, and her birthplace, Notasulga, Alabama. Hurston took extraordinary liberties with her birthdate, claiming she was born anywhere from 1901—1910. Perhaps she wished to appear more modern by being born in the new century.

### Discussion Questions

1. Does the fact that Hurston alters the time of her birth and its place affect your perception of the “truth” of the events that she is retelling in *Dust Tracks on a Road*? Do these facts matter?
2. How do you interpret the narrator’s words at the beginning: “I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place had had their say.” What does this statement foretell about her and her story?
3. The narrator describes Eatonville as “hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.” How do you interpret this statement?
4. What image of herself is she trying to create by moving her birthplace out of the Old South and into the new frontier of Florida?
5. Is Hurston connecting her genesis with Eatonville’s in this chapter?
6. What biographical elements of her life’s story does Hurston use to create the myth of her self? How does she create her self-identity?
7. How do these elements contribute to Hurston’s worldview?

8. We also form communal and national stories about our lives. What happens when personal, communal, or national stories are out of sync?
9. Do you have a recurrent narrative that you tell yourself about your own life? Does this story reflect the reality of your life now that you are at the university?

## B. The Founding of Eatonville

Hurston reports that Eatonville came into existence because three white ex-Civil War officers, looking for adventure on a ship bound for Brazil, changed course and landed instead in central Florida. Florida was still an unsettled, wild frontier at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Hurston notes: “This had been dark and bloody country since the mid-seventeen hundreds. Spanish, French, English, Indian and American blood had been bountifully shed” (2).

In contrast to its bloody past, Hurston highlights the equality and harmony that existed when the pioneer whites and blacks founded Maitland and Eatonville. She tells how: “the Negro population of Maitland settled simultaneously with the White. They had been needed, and found preferable employment. The best of relations existed between employer and employee” (5). She emphasizes the positive aspects of the relationship: “Good pay, sympathetic White folks and cheap land, soft to the touch of a plow. Relatives and friends were sent for.” Furthermore, she points out that the founders “were, to a man, people who had risked their lives and fortunes that Negroes might be free” during the Civil War (5). She then tells how whites and blacks came together to “hold an election,” and a black man, Tony Taylor, was elected mayor. Another prominent black, Town Marshal Joe Clarke, soon wondered, “why not a Negro town?” Two white men, Josiah Eaton and Lewis Lawrence, purchased land that Clarke could then buy, thus incorporating the town, the first all-black town in the U.S.—on August 18, 1886. Since then, Hurston claims, “White Maitland and Negro Eatonville have lived side by side for fifty-five years without a single instance of enmity” (6).

With this account of her town’s founding, Hurston rewrites the town’s early history. First of all, it was actually incorporated a year later on August 18, 1887. She also claims that Tony Taylor was the first mayor. But, according to *Maitland Milestones*, he was an alderman, not the first mayor. And he attained this position only because the Florida State Constitution required that both white and black citizens be represented on a town’s council, in order for it to be incorporated. However, Eatonville Town Historian Frank Otey states that Tony Taylor was the first mayor but introduces the idea that there may have been a

“political rift” that caused him to serve only one year. He also offers another explanation for the town’s founding: "Joe Clarke had a long-standing desire to found a town and that lending support to the establishment of Maitland was merely his way of “working the white folks” (2).

From today’s perspective, the Town of Eatonville presents its own account of the town’s founding in a centennial publication published in 1987:

This all-Black community was an outgrowth of the white municipality of Maitland which had been incorporated three years earlier in 1884. It appears that the all-white community of Maitland found the Blacks and the area they inhabited to be somewhat "unsightly" and wanted them to move to another area. It was at this time that one Josiah Eaton, who had helped establish Maitland, offered to sell the Blacks a rather large parcel of land one mile to the west of Maitland.

The land was bought by Joseph Clarke, who would be one of the first Mayors of Eatonville. Clarke in turn sold the land within the bounds of Eatonville (which was named after Josiah Eaton) to any Blacks who wished to settle there.

It appears that Florida, and the Maitland area in particular, unlike other southern states after the Civil War, took a more moderate attitude toward the Blacks who had finally been given equal rights under the 13th and 14th amendments. However, this was easier said than done and many Blacks suffered under the hands of local whites who did not want to lose their power. From all accounts it appears that this was not the prime factor in establishing the all-Black community of Eatonville. ("Town of Eatonville" 18)

*The Eatonville Speaker*, the city's weekly newspaper, also refers to the racism that existed at the time in a notice published on 22 January 1889, announcing that land was for sale in Eatonville for people wishing to escape racism. Land had not been available previously, because “so great was the prejudice then existing against the Negroe [sic] that no one would sell the land for such a purpose.” The title of the notice and its final exhortation emphasize racial difference rather than assimilation in the founding of the town: “Colored people of the United States: Solve the great race problem by securing a home in Eatonville, Florida, a Negro city governed by Negroes . . . and not a white family in the whole city!” (“Town of Eatonville” 18).

Eatonville Historian Frank Otey raises a “historical enigma” of the period, questioning, “why the freedmen seemed to suddenly want to break away from an economically thriving and racially harmonious town [Maitland] to risk possible failure in the chartering of another municipality.” He answers with the following explanation: “Joe Clarke had a long-standing desire to found a town and that lending support to the establishment of Maitland was merely his way of ‘working the white folks’” (2).

In creating the story of her life and her community, Hurston shapes it into a vision of life as she sees it. Distorting the truth to fit the myth of black empowerment corresponds to Hurston's lifetime agenda of abolishing race as a consideration in judging human worth. Her self-identity and pride are founded on this rock of racial equality and on the notion that whites wish to help blacks because their lives are intertwined. On the other hand, the historical record paints a grim picture. In Hurston's defense, it is not surprising that she would wish to sweep all the unpleasant facts under the carpet and glorify the heroism of her town's founding fathers, which included her own father, Reverend John Hurston, the town's third mayor, who served from 1912 to 1916.

### **Discussion Questions**

10. Who should tell the story of a community or a nation? Do you believe that the history of the United States has been recorded objectively? If not, what has been left out of the story?
11. Justify Hurston's shaping her own vision of the town's founding.
12. What stories do you know about your own town's founding? Is race, gender, or class a consideration in these stories?

## **Chapter 2—My Folks**

1. In this chapter Hurston begins by recounting the story of her parents' courting and marriage. Her mother, Lucy Potts, says that John Hurston was so persistent in wooing her that, “she made up her mind to marry him just to get rid of him” (8). What does she mean? What does this statement imply about their connection? Is this a valid reason to get married?
2. Many people believed that Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Potts, who was considered “the prettiest and smartest black girl,” was “throwing herself

- away” by marrying John Hurston, who was born “over the creek.” How do class differences affect their marriage? I have toured Hurston’s birthplace in Notasulga, Alabama, and crossed over the creek to visit the Potts’s homestead, which still exists in a quiet, rural area. It represents an upper class property in comparison to the sharecroppers’ residences “over the creek.”
3. On the other hand, John Hurston was born to a white plantation owner. How would this background shape his character and destiny?
  4. Hurston paints an idyllic portrait of her childhood home, with “cape jasmine bushes” on the side of the walks in front and “plenty of orange, grapefruit, guavas, and other fruits” in the back yard. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings in *Cross Creek* claims, “There is of course an affinity between people and places.” Do you find such an affinity between Eatonville and the young Zora? How does the Eatonville setting affect her character?
  5. Hurston was very close to her mother and missed her terribly when she died in 1904, when she was only 13 years old. Her mother’s most noteworthy advice to her children was to “jump at de sun” (13). Hurston explains: “We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful. Let well enough alone. It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit. He was always threatening to break mine or kill me in the attempt” (13). Hurston’s mother, in contrast, didn’t want to “squinch her spirit.” Which parent gives the best advice?

### **Familial Abuse**

Hurston relates instances of familial abuse in a fairly humorous tone in this chapter. Yet, a reader today sees all sorts of red flags. Men, such as John Hurston and Uncle Jim, are portrayed as philanderers who provoke their wives to potential violence. Hurston’s mother “[rides] herd on one woman with a horse whip” (11), and Aunt Caroline goes after her rival with an axe.

In Zora Neale Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the main character, Amy Crittenden, laments the fact that the legacy of slavery has caused men, such as her husband Ned, unthinkingly to abuse their children: “We black folks don’t love our chillun. We couldn’t do it when we wuz in slavery. We borned ‘em but dat didn’t make ‘em ourn. Dey b’longed tuh Old Massa. Twan’t no use in treasurin’ other folkses property. It wuz liable tuh be took uhway any day. But we’s free folk now. De big bell done rung! Us chillun is ourn” (5).

As a trained anthropologist, Hurston understood the bitter consequences of slavery upon the African American man and woman. She was before her time

in recognizing that by denying the black male the opportunity to take possession of his life, he was denied his manhood. She also recognized that without a strong father figure in the family, the black woman was forced to adapt masculine qualities as head of the household. Consequently, the male characters disintegrated into weakness, which often resulted in physical and mental abuse not only to his family but to others. On the other hand, the black woman shouldered the burden of bringing strength to the family.

This sequence of events illuminates the oppressive situation of Afro-American life after the Civil War, particularly regarding the rancorous relationship between the sexes. From the perspective of the present day, Toni Cade Bambara agrees: "One of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between men and women" (Patterson x).

Orlando Patterson in *Rituals of Blood* describes slavery's devastating legacy: "the single greatest focus of ethnic domination was the relentless effort to emasculate the Afro-American male in every conceivable way and at every turn" (xiii). Slavery, according to Patterson, as an institution, undercut and destroyed African American males' vital roles as husbands and fathers:

[slavery] was most virulent in its devastation of the roles of father and husband. The reason is obvious. Slavery was quintessentially about one person assuming, through brute force and the legalized violence of his government, absolute power and authority over another. The slave was reduced in law and civic life to a nonperson. He or she was socially dead as a legal entity (a person with independent capacities or rights or powers) and as a civic being (a recognized member of the sociopolitical order). As a person in law and civic society, the slave did not exist but instead was a mere surrogate of the master. Hence, the status and role of husband could not exist under slavery, since it meant having independent rights in another person and, in both the U.S. South and West Africa, some authority over her. Fatherhood could also not exist, since this meant owning one's children, having parental power and authority over them. Both infringed upon the power of the master and were therefore denied in law and made meaningless in practice. (27)

Fatherhood was, at best, a "marginal role" for African American men, according to Patterson. It was not a "base of self actualization"; instead, it was "a

site of shame and humiliation” (21). As a slave, Ned could offer his children nothing: “no security, no status, no name, no identity” (32).

Not only was the parental bond broken between African American males and their offspring but also the one that bound men to women. Patterson raises a series of questions that highlight the powerlessness that also occurred in their role as husbands:

Could he monopolize his partner’s sexual services and guarantee that her progeny were in fact his own? Could he protect her from the sexual predation of other men? Could he at least partly provide for her materially? Could he prevent her from being brutalized and physically punished by other men? Could he prevent her from being torn from the place where she was brought up, bundled like cargo, and sold away from him, her children, her kinsmen, and her friends? If the slave could do none of these things, then the role of husband had been devastated. (32)

### Discussion Questions

6. Do Patterson’s views explain the dysfunctional relationship between Hurston’s mother and father in Chapter 2?
7. What should women do today if they find themselves in such a relationship? [If students find themselves or see a friend in an abusive relationship, seek assistance at UCF Cares: <http://cares.sdes.ucf.edu/>]
8. Is it possible for abusers in an abusive relationship to reform? What does it take? What does it take to re-build trust?

## Chapter 3—I Get Born

In this chapter, Hurston relates the unconventional way she was born and given a name. More importantly, she reveals two aspects of herself that are inherent from the day she comes into the world: her wanderlust and her resemblance to her father, who, before her birth, had himself succumbed to “travel dust” (23). Yet, her father—by leaving Notasulga, Alabama, the Old South—is able to make a new life for himself and his family.

Hurston's portrays her father in a near epic-heroic manner in *Dust Tracks*. She imagines him as a masculine force of nature as he first enters Eatonville: "Into this burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged-individualistic setting, walked one day a tall, heavy-muscled mulatto who resolved to put down roots" (7). She describes his exterior: "he had a build on him that made you look. A stud-looking buck like that would have brought a big price in slavery time" (8). Beyond the physical, she looks into his soul: "I know that I did love him in a way, and that I admired many things about him. He had a poetry about him that I loved. That had made him a successful preacher" (68).

On the other hand, she knows that her father did not want her. He is so disappointed that she was not born a son that he threatens to slit his throat. Hurston explains: "one girl was enough... I don't think he ever got over the trick that I played on him by getting born a girl... He was nice about it in a way. He didn't tie me in a sack and drop me in the lake, as he probably felt like doing" (19).

Not only does Hurston resemble her father in appearance—she admits she looks "more like [her father] than any child in the house" (19)—but she also shares his interest in spirituality. Whereas, her father engages in conventional religion as the moderator (pastor) of the Macedonia Baptist Church in Eatonville for many years, Hurston later in life would be initiated as a hoodoo priestess. Hoodoo, or American voodoo, is a religion that allows women to participate fully in its rituals unlike the Baptist church of her father. In fact, John Lowe calls Hurston a "griot," which he defines: "A griot frequently inherits his father's role, and as a sacral/social/scientific teller of tales—and, most significantly, her father's tale—Hurston signified that she alone of her siblings has been bequeathed the prophetic/narrative mantle and voice" (93). Hurston is never interested in the preaching required of her father in organized religion; instead, she is fascinated by the stories that come from religion.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the "white man of many acres and things," who assists at Hurston's birth, while her father is working "for months" a distance from home? Is there any suggestion that the white man might be a surrogate or spiritual father?

2. Do you believe that humans are born with inherent qualities that shape their whole lives or do environment and experiences play a greater role? What are your inherent qualities? How were they influenced by your environment and experiences?

## Chapter 4—The Inside Search

1. In this chapter, Hurston explores “the why of things.” She describes herself as a “crow in a pigeon’s nest,” because of her persistent, inquisitive nature, which seeks to answer “why.” What does her inquisitive nature teach her about life? What does she learn from being an outsider? How did you learn your lessons in life?
2. Hurston also gains wisdom from the “robust, grey-haired, white man,” who takes her fishing. Scholars have not identified who this man was and why he kept appearing in Hurston’s life. What does she learn from him? Have you had a mentor in your life?
3. While giving advice, the grey-haired, white man exhorts her: “Snidlets, don’t be a N---.” Hurston feels the need to define the N—word by explaining that “in this sense,” the word “does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race” (30). Do you think her definition justifies using the N—word? Do you think it’s appropriate for hip hop artists to use it today? What statement are they making about language and race? Do you believe that they are de-sensitizing the word by using it in ordinary speech? [For the record, I never use the word. In class when I’m teaching Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and could justify using the word as authentic for the times, I still avoid using it. Its connotations are still too racist and unfair].
4. Hurston continues discussing the wanderlust theme that she uses to define herself. Discuss examples in this chapter that illustrate her fascination with the far horizon. In the chapter, she writes: “My soul was with the gods and my body in the village” (41). Is she admitting that she lives in a fantasy world?
5. Hurston tells the story of her love of reading, nurtured in part by white women from the North whom she meets in Eatonville. They are

- impressed by her performance in school and send her a box of books after they return home. The books that Hurston reads form the basis of Western civilization, such as the Greek myths, the *Bible*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Gulliver's Travels*, etc. Interestingly enough, the women also give her a copy of *Scribner's Magazine*. Later in life, Hurston would become a Scribner's author and work with the most famous editor in American history, Maxwell Perkins, who edited the work of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe. Unfortunately, Perkins died two months after he began working with Hurston. She would publish her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, with Scribner's.
6. Hurston's reading is racially homogeneous: she does not mention reading any books by African or African American authors. What remnants of African stories or myths would she find in Eatonville at the turn of the last century? What do you think she missed by not hearing these stories as a young person? Do you think not learning about her racial heritage provoked her later interest in anthropology?
  7. How significant do you think Hurston's visions of the 12 scenes were? She claims: "It is one of the blessings of this world that few people see visions and dream dreams" (44). Why?

## Chapter 5 – Figure and Fancy

The pillars of Hurston's Eatonville are the church, the school, the family—and the porch of Joe Clarke's store. According to Hurston, the store is "the heart and spring of the town" (45). It was built by Joseph E. Clark, who was the founder of the town and a model for Jody Starks in Hurston's most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But the real Joe Clark, born in Georgia in 1859, does not resemble the Joe Clarke that Hurston creates in *Dust Tracks*, according to Town Historian Frank Otey: "The mean-spirited character of 'Clarke' with an 'e' does not equate with the real 'Clark' . . . who helped establish guide and supported a women's lodge, 'Household of Ruth (67),'" (a benevolent church society to which Hurston's mother belonged).

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is storytelling so important to the young Hurston? What do her stories reveal about her inner life?
2. What are the elements of a good story and a good storyteller? Is there a standard formula that should be followed? Why does Hurston call the storytelling sessions in Eatonville “lying” sessions?
3. Analyze the story about how God gave the races their colors. God’s arbitrariness in assigning different colors to different groups of people corresponds to Hurston’s belief that “the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less” (“How It Feels to Be Colored Me”). She later studied race theory with Professor Franz Boas of Columbia University, who taught his students about racial equality and the fact that there is no such thing as a “pure” race. In *Dust Tracks*, what is Hurston’s attitude toward whites, i.e. the grey-haired man and the women who gave her books? Does pigmentation matter “more or less” in Eatonville?
4. Discuss the symbolism of the porch in this chapter as the center of communal life in Eatonville. As gendered space, i.e. only men are allowed to sit on the porch and tell stories, how is communal life impacted?
5. At the end of the chapter, Hurston mentions hoodoo for the first time. In one of her stories, the narrator says: “The old woman was said to dabble in hoodoo...” (60). What is hoodoo? How does it fit in with the type of stories that Hurston is retelling in this chapter?

## Chapter 6—Wandering

This chapter describing Hurston’s mother’s death may be the most poignant and heartfelt of the whole memoir. Hurston would sorely miss her mother’s presence in her life till the end of her days. Her mother had encouraged her to “jump at de sun.” Sadly, no one else would give her the unconditional love and support that her mother had given her.

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the battle that rages over Hurston’s mother’s corpse between Christian and hoodoo burial rituals. Describe these rituals and their symbolic meaning. Does Hurston do enough to carry out her mother’s

- final wishes?
2. This chapter is entitled “Wandering,” which corresponds to Hurston’s view of herself as a wanderer. But it is one thing to seek the far horizon as an adventurer and another to be forced out of one’s home with nowhere to go. How hard is it for Hurston to leave home?
  3. For the first time in her life Hurston realizes when she moves to Jacksonville that she is “a little colored girl.” How does this perception affect her identity thereafter?

## Chapter 7—Jacksonville and After

1. This chapter covers the years after Hurston’s mother died in 1904. Scholars call this period Hurston’s “lost decade,” because there is little evidence documenting her whereabouts and activities. She was homeless, struggling to live in survival mode. What does she have to do to get by?
2. Hurston rages against her stepmother, Mattie Moge, only a few years older than she, whom her father married less than five months after her mother died. Hope Edelman in *Motherless Daughters* explains what happens to a young girl when she loses her mother:

The loss of a parent during childhood is one of the most stressful life-cycle events an individual can face, but without a forum for discussing her feelings, the motherless daughter finds little validation for the magnitude of her loss. And without this recognition she feels like a feminine pariah, apart and alone... Researchers have found that children who lose a parent need two conditions to continue to thrive: a stable surviving parent or other caregiver to meet their emotional needs and the opportunity to release their feelings. (xxiii, 8)

Does Hurston have these two conditions in her life? Is she justified in confronting her stepmother? Are they acting out the evil stepmother/daughter myth?

3. How does Hurston's view of her father change during the controversy with her stepmother? Why does he abandon Hurston?
4. What personal qualities does it take to survive extreme adversity? Can you think of examples of people who have had difficulties in their lives and were able to conquer their demons? If you have faced difficulties in your life, how did you overcome them?
5. Is Hurston able to triumph over the obstacles she faces in her young life? What is your opinion concerning the way she handles adversity?

## Chapter 8—Back Stage and the Railroad

This chapter describes a segment in Hurston's life—when she joined a Gilbert and Sullivan vaudeville troupe—that is totally opposite to her upbringing as the daughter of a Southern Baptist minister in an historic all-black town. Yet, this experience may have engendered her lifelong dream to be a dramatist and write plays for Broadway. She was to realize her dream eventually; her play *The Great Day* played for one night on January 27, 1931, at the John Golden Theatre, before it ran out of money.

### Discussion Questions

1. Hurston begins the chapter with a bleak description of poverty. Does her description below ring true? How does poverty affect the individual's—and—her spirit?

There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in a sickly air. People can be slave-ships in shoes. (87)
2. Hurston's poverty forces her to work as a domestic childcare worker for a period of time. While in the employ of Mrs. Moncrief, she is threatened with sexual abuse by Mr. Moncrief. How well does Hurston handle the situation? Are there any consequences for her attempted abuser? Is the fact that she is black make Hurston a potential victim of Mr. Moncrief's advances?

3. Describe the lifestyle of the itinerant theatrical performer. Which of its elements attract Hurston?
4. How does Hurston relate to her employer, Miss M—? What is the nature of their relationship? Is it a positive employer/employee connection for Hurston? Is this connection clouded by the sexual overtones to their interaction?
5. When Hurston visits Miss M—'s home in Boston, she learns a terrible family secret. Does the family deal appropriately with the situation? Does this secret explain Miss M—'s behavior?
6. What do the Gilbert and Sullivan actors teach Hurston about life and art in the 18 months that she lives among them?
7. How does the cast—the “thirty-odd people made up of all classes and races living a communal life”—give her a type of family sorely missing from her life? Explain why the multicultural nature of the cast, which makes her “not conscious of [her] race no matter where [she] may go,” will become an ideal throughout her life.

## Chapter 9—School Again

1. Hurston metaphorically describes the obstacles she faced in getting an education: “always I had that feeling that you have in a dream of trying to run, and sinking to your knees at every step in soft sticky mud. And this mud not only felt obscene to my feet, it smelled filthy to my nose. How to pull out? (122)” What are the obstacles she faces? Did you face obstacles in your own quest for a higher education? What did you do to confront and overcome these difficulties?
2. Hurston is forced to work as a waitress, a maid, and a manicurist to earn money for school. How do these real-life experiences in the workplace fuel her desire to get an education? Do they also contribute to her education? Do you have a part-time job that gives you more than just an income?
3. How does Hurston begin to articulate a path in life? When she suffers from appendicitis, she promises God that if she recovers she will “find the road it seemed that I must follow” (122). What measures does she take to

- find this road? Describe your own process in finding a path in life. Have you taken advantage of UCF Career Services or are you searching on your own?
4. Throughout her life, Hurston was fortunate to find the mentors she needed. At Howard University she studied with Lorenzo Dow Turner and worked with Alain Locke on the school literary journal; in New York City while attending Barnard College, her mentors were Annie Nathan Meyer, Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Charles Johnson, and Fanny Hurst. What are these mentors' accomplishments and what do they contribute to Hurston's ongoing education?
  5. One of Hurston's teachers at Morgan, Dwight O. W. Holmes, sparks her imagination by introducing her to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "Kubla Khan." In this poem, Coleridge describes a magical fountain that derives from his reading of William Bartram's *Travels* (1791). Bartram writes about his visit to Salt Springs in Florida in 1774: "...in front, just under my feet, was the enchanting and amazing chrysal fountain, which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute, forming a bason [basin], capacious enough for shallops [small boat] to ride in, and a creek of four or five feet depth of water, and near twenty yards over, which meanders six miles through green meadows, pouring its limpid waters into the great Lake George." Coleridge read this description and transformed it into poetry:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething...  
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced: ...  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail...  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.  
Five miles meandering with mazy motion  
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

What does Hurston's appreciation of this poem tell you about her love of nature and her belief that an ineffable experience can be translated into words? She would movingly describe the power of a hurricane in her

- most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).
6. Hurston begins to write short stories while she is attending Howard University. One of these stories, published in her school literary journal *The Stylus*, caught the attention of Charles S. Johnson, who was the editor of *Opportunity Magazine*. Johnson urged Hurston not only to submit her stories to *Opportunity* and its literary contests but also to move to Harlem. When two of her stories, "Spunk" and "Drenched in Light" won prizes at the annual *Opportunity* banquet, Hurston moved to New York in January 1925—"with \$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope"—thus launching her writing career and indirectly, the Harlem Renaissance or what Hurston termed "the so-called Negro Renaissance" (138). Hurston is often mentioned as a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; in fact, her greatest work was published a decade later, when the Renaissance was winding down. In the early years of the Renaissance, Hurston's main contribution was to introduce a white audience to literature about blacks. Hurston wrote mainly short stories that featured her hometown of Eatonville, Harlem, and other black communities. These stories presented various images of black life, thus destroying the notion of a monolithic black culture. Her ability to encompass the complexities of black culture in her writings, her networking with black and white artists, and her fervent belief in the equality of all races helped define the spirit of the Renaissance. Based on what you've read about Hurston thus far in *Dust Tracks*, why was she poised to be such an influential figure in a black literary movement?
  7. Hurston was the first black graduate of Barnard College in 1928. She calls herself "Barnard's sacred black cow." What does she mean by this term? What are her educational and social experiences like at the school? Do her experiences at Barnard live up to her expectations?
  8. Hurston writes a paper on anthropology that captures the attention of Columbia University Professor Franz Boas, the founder of modern anthropology, whom Hurston calls "the King of Kings." When she attends a social gathering at his house and asks him whether she should call him "Papa Franz," he quips: "Zora is my daughter. Certainly!... Just one of my missteps, that's all." After the remark, Hurston notes: "The sabre cut on his cheek, which it is said he got in a duel at Heidelberg, lifted in a smile" (140). What do you make of this passage as it reflects on

- the relationship between a world-famous professor and a young, black female student?
9. Hurston quotes Booker T. Washington's notion, "that you must not judge a man by the heights to which he has risen, but by the depths from which he came" (141). Comment on the truth of this notion as it applies to Hurston's life up to this point. Can only a man rise to the heights?

## Chapter 10—Research

Chapters 10-11 center on Hurston's passions in life—her anthropological research and her writing. In fact, one pursuit nurtures the other. She writes anthropological fiction and does creative anthropology. And both spring from her inborn curiosity about life. Her scientific research which she calls "formalized curiosity... is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein" (143). Franz Boas, her professor at Columbia, after her graduation from Barnard College arranges for her to go back to her roots in central Florida and record all the African American cultural remnants she can find. Boas fears that African American folk songs and tales are dying out and need to be documented before they disappear from the communal memory.

After graduation, Hurston still needs to worry about finances and strikes a deal with a rich white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who is interested in collecting African American anthropology. For \$200 a month for two years, Hurston says: "I must tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down" (145). The only problem with this arrangement is that Mason wants to own the material. Needless to say, this Faustian pact has a bad end, and Hurston finally breaks it off to save her soul.

### Discussion Questions

1. Is Hurston's relationship with Mason a positive one for her? What effects do wealth, age, and race play in their connection?
2. In an attempt to give the reader "the primeval flavor of the place," Hurston presents raw anthropological material when she begins riffing on

- Polk County: "Polk County! Ah! / Where the water tastes like cherry wine. / Where they fell great trees with axe and muscle" (147). What types of information about a community do fiction and anthropology provide? Which type would you seek if you were to know the nature of a place?
3. Hurston relates an incident with Lucy that nearly costs her her life while she is doing research in Polk County. How much is Hurston to blame for the incident? Does she really understand the people she is investigating?
  4. Of all the female characters in Hurston's novels and stories, Big Sweet is the most heroic. She appears not only in *Dust Tracks* but also in *Mules and Men*, a collection of folk tales and stories compiled from Hurston's anthropological work. What personal qualities does Big Sweet possess? How does she rule over others in her community?
  5. Explain what role specifying and playing the dozens play in African American discourse? Describe Big Sweet's ability to manipulate language.
  6. When Hurston visits New Orleans, she undergoes hoodoo initiation rites (156-57). Robert Hemenway in his biography of Hurston notes that her experiences in New Orleans changed her: "Alan Lomax, collecting folksongs with her in 1935, remembers her as guarded and mysterious about her conjure experiences, maybe even a little frightened by them; the New Orleans ceremonies marked her for the rest of her life" (123). What is hoodoo? How does it differ from voodoo? What does Hurston learn from these experiences? Do you believe a scientist should personally undergo such experiments?
  7. After Hurston leaves New Orleans, she travels to the Bahamas to study the music of the "Bahaman Negroes," which "was more original, dynamic, and African, than American Negro songs" (157). The Bahamas would prove to be enormously creative place for her. On an earlier trip, she lived through the "terrible five-day hurricane of 1929," which would later be one of the inspirations for the hurricane in her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. On her 1932 trip, when she returned to New York, she staged a performance of Bahaman songs and dances at the John Golden Theater. Her aim was "to show what beauty and appeal there was in genuine Negro material, as against the Broadway concept" (158). She would create a show, "From Sun to Sun," "a dramatized presentation of Negro work songs," which she took on the road. She staged the show at Rollins College and recruited some of her Eatonville

- friends and neighbors to perform in it. Unfortunately, because of the racial restrictions of the times, only white people were allowed to be in the audience.
8. At the end of the chapter, Hurston recounts her meetings with Cudjo Lewis (Kossola), reputedly the last transported slave from Africa still living at the time. A fragmentary video of Lewis exists in the Library of Congress. Hurston listened to Lewis's stories about the kings of Dahomey who captured their enemies and sold them in the slave trade. She is most struck by her realization: "my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me. That did away with the folklore I had been brought up on" (165). What is the significance of this realization for Hurston as an African American and as an anthropologist?
  9. Hurston published an article based on her interviews with Lewis entitled "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver" in *The Journal of Negro History* in 1927. Unfortunately, William Stewart in 1972 discovered that Hurston had committed plagiarism of Emma Langdon Roche's *Historic Sketches of the Old South*. Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway claims that Hurston committed "academic suicide" with this plagiarism (96-97). The plagiarism wasn't discovered in her lifetime; yet, it existed in her own mind, thus effectively cutting her ties to the academic world, which would have condemned such an act. In May 2018, what Hurston actually wrote about Cudjo Lewis was published in a book entitled *Barracoon* (HarperCollins).
  10. At the end of the chapter, Hurston retells her "greatest thrill," which is "coming face-to-face with a Zombie" (168). She admits the experience was "utterly macabre" but concludes with her opinion about voodoo ceremonies: "I did not find them any more invalid than any other religion. Rather, I hold that any religion that satisfies the individual urge is valid for that person" (169). View a video in which Hurston relates her theories about zombies in a 1943 interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmKPjh5RX6c&t=7s> . Assess the scientific veracity of her statements.

## Chapter 11—Books and Things

After cutting ties with the academic world due to her plagiarism of the Cudjo Lewis story and cutting ties with her white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who “owned” her work, Hurston was finally free to use her anthropological material any way she wished. She first published *Mules and Men* (1935), which recounts her anthropological expeditions to the logging and work camps of central Florida. She still had material left over and stories to tell, but the scientific framework of anthropology in the past had limited her. She wanted to move against what her mentor, Franz Boas, had taught her: “[to let] the natives speak,” without any psychological interpretation from the ethnographer. Hurston felt the need to use her Eatonville stories more creatively and resented merely being her subjects’ recorder. An opportunity to further express herself creatively arose when Robert Wunch, a professor at Rollins College, with whom Hurston was collaborating on one of her theater productions, read her short story, “The Gilded Two-Bits,” to his class and then sent it off to *Story* magazine, which published it in 1933. The story caught the interest of publisher Bertram Lippincott, who wrote to Hurston. She replied that she was working on a novel but confesses to the reader in *Dust Tracks*: “Mind you, not the first word was on paper when I wrote him that letter” (173). Hurston quickly moved to Sanford on July 1, 1933, to write *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. She was evicted from her apartment on the same day that she received Lippincott’s letter of acceptance

### Discussion Questions

1. Hurston wrote a story entitled “Spunk.” What do you think about her own spunk in advancing her work? Have you ever promoted your own work because you believed in it?
2. In this chapter, Hurston describes her professional life as totally actualized. She’s found a way to interweave her passions in writing, research, and theater in a truly creative way. How hard is this to do? Is it worthwhile pursuing an art, even though you may have to struggle financially?
3. The May 2018 UCF Faculty Institute featured a session on “The Future of the Book” and discussed publishing in a digital age. Do you think the

- digital age is threatening the survival of the book? Do you read books? How many a year? Do you prefer to read hard copies or digital versions? Do you think a book is the right vehicle for a good story? Was the book the right vehicle for Hurston's stories?
4. Hurston complains: "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. 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" (171). She says she is "afraid to tell a story the way [she] wanted" and keeps silent for a number of years before she finally finds her voice (171). Do you think a writer should deal with a social issue related to gender, race, or class? What is the danger when a social issue is incorporated into a work of art? How have the best writers handled this situation, such as Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

## Chapter 12—My People! My People!

At the end of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston claims, "I have no race prejudice of any kind" (231) and in an appendix, she says: "...we are no race. We are just a collection of people..." (246). In other words, she believes in the equality of all people, no what their skin color is. So when she expresses the neutrality towards race—"I turn my back upon the past. I see no reason to keep my eyes fixed on the dark years of slavery and the Reconstruction" (253)—critics believe she is in denial about slavery or using a "masking" technique so that she doesn't have "to disclose and expose her essential self," according to Deborah Plant (3). Paul Lawrence Dunbar points out that blacks had to "wear the mask that grins and lies," in order to survive.

Hurston's contemporary male authors attacked Hurston on other grounds: they felt that she didn't deal with the social and political complexities and brutalities of race in her work. Richard Wright objects to her "minstrel" characters. Arna Bontemps claims that she "deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America—she ignores them." Ralph Ellison says that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "retains the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred" her work. He faults the novel for being "the story of a Southern Negro woman's love-life against the background of an all-Negro town into which the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude." Even contemporary

critic, Houston Baker in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, believes that Hurston's concept of slavery is based on her "naivete."

However, today's readers, such as Alice Walker, understand and celebrate Hurston's view of race by claiming that:

[Hurston] was exposing in [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*] not simply an adequate culture, but a superior one . . . That they could be racially or culturally inferior to whites never seems to have crossed her mind. . . . the quality I feel most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. (Bloom 63)

### Discussion Questions

1. Who exactly are Hurston's people? Are they really her people or is she being ironic? How do they differ from other groups of blacks? Is Hurston stereotyping here or mocking stereotypes?
2. What does Hurston mean when she says that the "bookless [i.e. uneducated people] may have difficulty in reading a paragraph in a newspaper, but when they get down to 'playing the dozens' they have no equal in America" (178)?
3. What is Hurston's view of race in this chapter? Does she believe that there is such a thing as "Race Solidarity"? Does she believe that any racial group in America can attain unity?
4. How does Hurston define a Race Man or Woman? Hurston admits that she is confused by the Race Champion who is "the better-thinking Negro" and wants "nothing to do with anything frankly Negroid" (189). What is the right way to think about race in America, in Hurston's view?
5. Interpret Hurston's conclusion: "So I sensed early, that the Negro race was not one band of heavenly love. There was stress and strain inside as well as out. Being black was not enough. It took more than a community of skin color to make your love come down on you. That was the beginning of my peace" (190).
6. "There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My

- people! My people!" (192). How does this view compare to today's views about race?
7. Compare this chapter with "My People, My People!" in the appendix (pages 235-46). How do these two chapters compare/contrast? Does the appendix chapter, by presenting the anecdote of the Yale-Barnard couple, realistically deconstruct white and black attitudes toward the two street performers in the Jim Crow coach? Does either race in the coach have the correct attitude, according to Hurston?
  8. In the appendix chapter, Hurston gives examples of African American characteristics. What is her purpose in listing these stereotypes? Is she commenting on the complexities of defining race?

## Chapter 13—Two Women in Particular

1. What is Hurston's theory of friendship? What does she seek in a friend?
2. Is there any significance in the fact that Hurston chooses to highlight one white woman, Fannie Hurst, and one black woman, Ethel Waters? What do you make of the contrasting details that Hurston uses to describe the two women: Hurst who plays with dolls (193) and enjoys pranks vs. Waters who is "deeply religious" and has "extraordinary talents" (199).
3. In the chapter, Hurston mentions that she finally meets Ethel Waters at a dinner party hosted by Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964). Hurston notes that the guests attending the dinner include: "Sinclair Lewis, Dwight Fiske, Anna Mae Wong, Blanche Knopf [of the publishing family], an Italian soprano, and my old friend, Jane Belo [a fellow anthropologist who worked along with Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead at Columbia University]" (198). This eclectic grouping of artists and intellectuals didn't come together by accident; it was due to Van Vechten's absolute genius in bringing people together across racial, gender, and class divides. He was a close friend of Langston Hughes, Hurston's best friend during the years she lived in Manhattan, and the literary executor of Gertrude Stein. A case can be made that Van Vechten was the most influential person in creating the Harlem Renaissance. As an art critic, he was first on the scene when new art was being created and was also first to introduce it to all of

- his friends. He was famous for his parties and for inviting white Manhattan to black Harlem. He also wrote a controversial novel, *N----- Heaven* (1926), which was the first novel written by a white author about the inside life of Harlem. What do eclectic friends, such as Ethel Waters and Fannie Hurst, contribute to Hurston's artistic life?
4. In the appendix chapter, "The Inside Light—Being a Salute to Friendship" (pages 267-77), Hurston broadens the circle of her friends to include Carl Van Vechten, Jane Belo, and Katharine Edson Mershon. She concludes by stating her opinion about friendship: "Friendship is a mysterious and ocean-bottom thing. Who can know the outer ranges of it? Perhaps no human being has ever explored its limits" (277). Does Hurston adequately demonstrate in these two chapters what her friends mean to her?

## Chapter 14—Love

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston portrays the devastating effects of patriarchy on two generations of women. The main character's grandmother, Nanny, warns her granddaughter, Janie Crawford, that a woman is "the mule of the world." Nanny has high aspirations for Janie. She wants her to marry a rich man of property: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (15).

Hurston, in contrast, believes that female empowerment shouldn't come from wealth and shouldn't be hierarchical, i.e. from "sitting on high," but should come from equality and the erasure of gender lines. Deborah Plant explains:

As an ardent individualist, Hurston practiced a politics of self that defied stereotypical conventions of sex and sex roles. In her personal life, she was able to embrace both masculine and feminine principles in a way that empowered her to achieve what she did. Hurston is not an anomaly, but part of a continuum of "manly women" that can be traced from the United States and other parts of the African Diaspora to the African continent itself. We can also look to Zora Neale Hurston as a model of empowerment. (7)

## Discussion Questions

1. Do Hurston's notions about self-empowerment correspond to her philosophy of love in this chapter? Do her beliefs about love hold up when she marries and, later, when she again falls in love?
2. Hurston's love affair with P. M. P.—Percival (Percy) McGuire Punter—was “the real love affair of [her] life” (207). She describes her feelings for him: “I did not just fall in love. I made a parachute jump” (205). He tells her: “...you've got a real man on your hands. You've got somebody to do for you. I'm tired of seeing you work so hard. I wouldn't want *my* wife to do anything but look after me” (207). He wants her to give up her career to stay at home. How does Punter view the role of a man in a marriage? How does Hurston view the role of a woman? Is there a way for a couple to compromise in such a situation?
3. At one point, the couple fights over this issue and Hurston slaps Punter's face. Unfortunately, she “had unknowingly given him an opening he had been praying for. He paid me off then and there with interest. No broken bones, you understand, and no black eyes” (209). What do you interpret these lines to mean? Do you think Punter is physically violent with Hurston? If so, what should she do in that case? Do you know of anyone who has or have you been in a similar predicament? Do you know where a person who has been abused, either emotionally or physically, can seek help? Do you think a couple, who have had a violent episode between them, can or should ever reconcile?
4. When Punter and Hurston finally separated, she was able to leave on a Guggenheim fellowship in March 1936 to do anthropological research in Jamaica and Haiti. While in Haiti, she began writing her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She was able to express her feelings for Punter in her portrait of the main male character, Tea Cake: “I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him [Punter] in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (211). Does writing provide a good means of recovery in an abusive relationship? What are other ways to restore good mental health?
5. Is there a pattern in an abusive relationship? Do you see any warning signs in Hurston's and Punter's affair? Could she have stopped the abuse?

6. Hurston notes: "So much for what I know about the major courses in love. However, there are some minor courses which I have not grasped so well, and would be thankful for some coaching and advice" (212). Do you think coaching helps to create a healthy love affair? Should there be courses in love? How do we learn about the nature of love and love relationships? Did Hurston learn about love from her parents?
7. Hurston admits that she's not an expert on love and what she says about it "may not mean a thing" (214). She concludes: "Anyway, it seems to be the unknown country from which no traveler ever returns. What seems to be a returning pilgrim is another person born in the strange country with the same-looking ears and hands. He is a stranger to the person who fared forth..." (214). Can our social scientists, psychologists, and doctors today prescribe the means by which we can attain a healthy love relationship? How would you define one?

## **Chapter 15 – Religion**

1. What are Hurston's religious beliefs? How do they correspond to her father's? What is her explanation concerning why people need religion?
2. Compare Hurston's views on religion to other issues about which she feels strongly, such as race and gender, and which she goes against mainstream views. Do you see any common elements that help define her character and how she forms opinions?
3. How does Hurston's view of the spiritual nature of the universe match her feelings of self-empowerment?

## **Chapter 16 – Looking Things Over**

1. Hurston presents the essence of her identity in this final chapter. What is her identity? Can you write a description of yours?
2. The appendix chapter, "Seeing the World as It Is" (pages 247-65), is much more revealing of Hurston's inner life than the final chapter, "Looking Things Over." In "Seeing the World as It Is," her perspective on life

broadens to include national and international concerns. As she explains: "Lord, give my poor stammering tongue at least one taste of the whole round world" (253). Her purpose is to sound the alarm about human bondage in the world, due to race. She believes that the survival of humanity depends on eliminating racial divides: "What the world is crying and dying for at this moment is less race consciousness" (250). Human trafficking is still a major problem in the world. Why hasn't this problem been solved? What needs to be done to eradicate it?

3. "Looking Things Over" ends with the following sentence: "Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue" (232). Why does Hurston use a flippant tone, which implies that the barbecue will never take place, to end the book? Can you think of a better way to end a memoir?

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## Appendix A

### Zora Neale Hurston's Biography

"I was born in a Negro 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—charter, mayor, council, town marshal town." Zora Neale Hurston declares in her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, that she is a child of the first incorporated African-American community, incorporated by 27 African-American males on August 18, 1887. Her father, John Cornelius Hurston, was the minister of one of the two churches in town and the mayor for three terms. In her small town she led a privileged position as the mayor's daughter and felt that she had a special destiny: "My soul was with the gods and my body in the village."

In reality, Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, on January 15, 1891. She often changed the date of her birth, to 1901, 1903, or 1910—perhaps, to be thought a child of the new century or to gain an advantage in appearing younger while being older. Hurston obscured the basic fact of her existence—that her father was from "over de creek" in Notasulga, a share-cropping former slave who married up. Hurston, instead, was like Athena, born of her father's head, a child of imagination, who insisted on creating her own, unique identity. Later in life, Hurston would become an anthropologist and scientifically study mythology and folk tales, but early on in her life she must have had a strong sense of her own mythologizing tendencies and believed that a *Story* about her genesis in the first all-black town suited her purposes as a special individual. Her biographer, Robert Hemenway, calls her "a woman of fierce independence," who "was a complex woman with a high tolerance of contradiction." In African-American terms, she was skilled in the art of "masking," disguising her inner life for her own purposes.

Perhaps, she began her masking career on September 18, 1904, the day her mother died. At Lucy Hurston's funeral, her family "assembled together for the last time on earth." Two weeks later, thirteen-year-old Zora Neale Hurston was forced to pack her bags and leave the only home she had ever known. "With a grief that was more than common," she began a life of wandering from one family member to another, never sinking roots for long in the Florida soil she loved. Her childhood had been idyllic in Eatonville, where the family moved the year or so after Hurston was born. Florida was the new South, in contrast to the Old Jim Crow South of Alabama. In her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes of her love of nature, of books and learning, and of *Story*-telling. She

recalls the Florida landscape: "I was only happy in the woods, and when the ecstatic Florida springtime came strolling from the sea, trance—glorifying the world with its aura." She also reminisces lovingly of her home as "the center of the world." Yet, the bigger world outside always beckoned to her: "It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like."

After her mother's death, Hurston was not allowed to explore the world on her own terms; instead, she was in a struggle for her very existence. Hurston calls the years, from 1904–14, her "haunted years," because her life was so dismal. Unfortunately, not many records exist from this period of her life, except for the fact that she moved to Jacksonville to live with her sister, Sarah, and brother, Robert. In Jacksonville, she learned that she was "a little colored girl." She was not able to get much education, probably, because she had to work, most likely as a maid; and her father sometimes did not pay for her tuition.

This desperate period ended when Hurston's brother, Robert, now a practicing physician, invited her to care for his children in Nashville, Tennessee. When he did not encourage her to attend high school, she ran off to become the personal maid to Miss M., a singer in a Gilbert and Sullivan troupe. Little is known about Hurston's first direct contact with the theater, but drama would become the great passion of her life. Even though Hurston was to gain her fame as a novelist, she would have loved to have made her mark as a dramatist. Her connection to the troupe ended in 1916, in Baltimore after Hurston had an appendicitis attack. Fortunately, her sister, Sarah, was living in Baltimore and Hurston stayed on with her.

This turn of events changed Hurston's life. She was finally able to attend school and enrolled at Morgan Academy. After graduation in 1918, she entered Howard University. At long last, Hurston was in a position finally to actualize her potential and associate with the brilliant minds of her generation. Lorenzo Dow Turner, who wrote *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, taught her African words and Montgomery Gregory directed her as a member of the Howard Players. His desire to establish a National Negro Theatre would become Hurston's lifelong dream. Hurston also joined a literary club, sponsored by Alain Locke, who encouraged her to publish in Howard University journals. She met other writers known as the "New Negroes" in Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary salon. These writers—Bruce Nugent, Jean Toomer, Alice Dunbar—Nelson, and Jessie Fauset, among others—would in the next decade become part of the core group of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hurston's literary career began when she submitted her work to journals and it was accepted. In 1924, she sent her second short *Story*, "Drenched in Light," to Charles S. Johnson, the editor of *Opportunity*, a publication of the

Urban League. Hurston's *Story* was not only published but received second prize in the annual *Opportunity* literary contest. The subject of "Drenched in Light" is Eatonville, which is, according to Hemenway, "her unique subject, and she was encouraged to make it the source of her art." Johnson urged her to move to New York City and by 1925, she found herself living in Harlem.

At the next *Opportunity* awards banquet in 1925, Hurston not only won more prizes for her work, but met Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Carl Van Vechten, Fannie Hurst, and Annie Nathan Meyer—all of whom would befriend and support her in the coming decade. Meyer, a founder of Barnard College, would assist Hurston into getting accepted into the college and awarded a scholarship. Barnard provided another turning point for Hurston. She began to study anthropology with Franz Boas, the father of modern anthropology, who believed in the distinctive culture of African Americans. Boas urged Hurston to do fieldwork in her hometown, in order to preserve her heritage that was slipping away.

In the 1920's, Hurston's literary and scientific interests in anthropology were merging. She used the knowledge of her native community and its people to deepen and complicate her stories. She aspired to be "the authority on Afro-American folklore," according to Hemenway, with her main interest in the "Negro farthest down." But, finances were always a never-ending problem. In 1927, Hurston accepted the aid of Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white New York woman, who was willing to fund Hurston's folklore expeditions as long as Mason retained control over how the material would be used. This devil's bargain would eventually cause Hurston to break her academic ties with her respected professors—although she did graduate from Barnard—and, on a psychic level, wear her down because of Mason's controlling nature. On the other hand, with the freedom from academic restraint and method this arrangement afforded her, Hurston was able to follow her own unique interests. She became intrigued by hoodoo and traveled to New Orleans to see how it was practiced and study the life of the priestess, Marie Leveau. Hoodoo appealed to Hurston, because women were allowed to play a prominent role in its rituals. Perhaps, she simply became her father's daughter, who was seeking an outlet for her spiritual side.

Around the same time that her relationship with Mason was at a breaking point (Mason eventually severed her contract with Hurston on March 31, 1931) and the country was heading towards the Great Depression, Hurston, desperate for an income, felt that the best vehicle for her work was the theater and the best type of production was a folk musical based on her memories of Eatonville. She was thrilled when her play, *The Great Day*, played for one night at the John Golden Theatre on January 27, 1931. Unfortunately, the play was forced to close,

because Hurston had no producers waiting in the wings to keep the production going. Instead, she took her dream south, to Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and staged two productions, *From Sun to Sun* and *All De Live Long Day*, in 1933 and 1934. Many people from her hometown of Eatonville acted in these plays; thus, her dream of a folk theater was partially realized.

Hurston's association with Rollins College was significant for another reason. Robert Wunsch, who was the theater director who assisted her in the staging of her plays, after reading one of her short stories, "The Gilded Two Bits"; sent it to *Story* magazine, which published it in 1933. The *Story* was read by publisher Bertram Lippincott, who wrote to Hurston asking if she had a novel that she could submit to him. Hurston replied affirmatively—and then on July 1, 1933, she moved to Sanford, Florida, to write one. She wrote *Jonah's Gourd Vine* by September 6 and was evicted from her apartment on the same day that she received an acceptance letter for her novel. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was published in May 1934. The next year Lippincott published Hurston's book of folk tales, *Mules and Men*.

Hurston now entered her prime creative period in which she pursued fiction, drama, and anthropology simultaneously. She had her *Opportunity* when she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in March 1936 and was able to travel to Jamaica and Haiti. While she was in Haiti she began writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, embodying all of her passion for her lover, Percy Punter, into the portrayal of Tea Cake. She completed the book in seven weeks and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published on September 18, 1937. She also continued her anthropological studies in voodoo in Haiti and published *Tell My Horse* in 1938.

After this peak period in her life, Hurston struggled to survive. She began working for the Works Progress Administration on April 25, 1938, and contributed folklore and interviews with former slaves to *The Florida Negro*, which was not published at the time. This job lasted until 1939, when the WPA was dismantled. Hurston had once again to search for a vehicle in which to express herself. Her dramatic efforts had led nowhere, her ideas for new novels were rejected, and she had no more folklore to record. According to Hemenway, "In a sense she was written out." Bertram Lippincott suggested she write her autobiography. When *Dust Tracks on a Road* was published in 1942, Hurston experienced a revival: she won the \$1,000 Anisfield–Wolf Award and was featured on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. A few years later, Hurston's writing career received another boost when Maxwell Perkins, the legendary Scribner's editor of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe; agreed to work with Hurston. Unfortunately, he died two months later and Hurston was deprived of his masterful guidance. Hurston did go on to publish in 1948 her last novel with Scribner's, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, a departure from her

usual cast of Eatonville characters. For this novel, her heroes and heroines are white characters.

Besides her difficulties in getting her work published, on September 13, 1948, a mother accused Hurston of molesting her ten-year-old son, who was mentally retarded. Although Hurston's passport proved that she was in Honduras at the time, she was devastated when the *Story* was splashed across the African-American tabloids. She sunk into a period of depression, even though Scribner's stood beside her and hired lawyers to defend her. She was acquitted of all charges when the boy confessed that he had falsely accused Hurston of the act.

During the next decade, Hurston made her living by selling occasional articles to popular magazines and working as a maid. She became obsessed in writing the *Story of Herod the Great* and was deeply discouraged when Scribner's rejected her manuscript in 1955. Money became a gnawing problem, as well as Hurston's health. She was evicted from her Eau Gallie home in 1956. In the next two years, she was hired as a librarian at Patrick Air Force Base in Cocoa Beach, but fired 11 months later. When she was fired from a substitute teaching position at Lincoln Academy in Ft. Pierce, she couldn't pay her rent. In 1958, Hurston suffered a series of strokes and entered the St. Lucie County Welfare Home. She died on January 28, 1960. Patrick Duval rescued her manuscripts from destruction when her possessions were being burned after her death. She was buried in an unmarked grave at the Garden of Heavenly Rest in Ft. Pierce. Thirteen years later, Alice Walker located her grave and placed a grave stone on it, citing as a reason: "A people do not forget their geniuses . . ."

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