Teaching Zora
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Abstract: Zora Neale Hurston has been defined by many as a black conservative, as a transformative figure almost like Bill Cosby who brought black and white America together by emphasizing individual responsibility over systematic change. But a close examination of the body of her work shows another face. She continued to evolve, canceling and sometimes radically contradicting her earlier perspectives as she gained more knowledge of what her white audiences expected from black authors. In her earliest stage of writing, she played the role of a happy negro in order to gain her audiences' financial and moral support, but as she grew to be more self-confident, she began to reveal her true face, honest with the anger and sorrow damned up inside. In her later works, she even satirized the happy negro she used to play; she mocked at the very white conservatives she used to try to please, those who opted for individual responsibility against systematic change. Fully, she expressed what she had always believed in—that her people would never gain complete equality unless the whole system changed. "Teaching Zora" examines the journey Hurston had to travel to reach the place where she could explicitly tell what she had always told implicitly. It is in a way about the liberal who she was and whom she had to conceal.

Zora Neale Hurston has been an icon in American literature, and trying to teach her as a human being to my undergraduate literature students has been a challenge, to say the least. As anyone who tries to bring an icon down from the pedestal would have to, I find myself bracing for a harsh criticism and perhaps a downright emotional assault from my students whenever I try to present her as who she was, not as who they believe she was. White students revere her; they unanimously exclaim about her ability to keep her spirit so exuberant in the face of oppression. Black students take pride in her; they see her as an example of how far a black woman can travel in achieving independence and autonomy. Both parties say, "She was born and raised in a town where black people governed themselves. Spared from the harsh reality of racism in her childhood, she grew up with self-confidence and made herself into a role model for black women and black people."

Probably, her single most significant contribution was to portray black women as being capable of standing alone without men. Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the prototype. If not the first author to describe a strong black female protagonist, Hurston was probably the first black female author to create a black woman character who was endowed with the courage to separate herself from black men and therefore was daring enough to claim priorities independent of black men's preoccupation with race. Most likely, in the history of
African-American women's literature, Hurston was the first one to treat gender as an exclusive category, and as such, she has been drawing eulogies from both black and white male and female teachers. United by the will to promote women authors from the traditionally least recognized groups, both sexes in both races have been motivated by an impulse to champion her. Hurston was found to be a singular voice that had been forgotten; she wasn't a white male and additionally, she wasn't a black male preoccupied with race.

Ever since Alice Walker, a woman who eventually became an icon herself, re-discovered Hurston in the seventies, teachers from all areas of American literature have hurriedly joined hands to praise her and to place her in a sanctuary where nobody could touch her. "Ah! Here is a woman who single-handedly soared above everything pulling her down!," has been their unanimous praise, and such has been the uniform acclaim from my students to whom Hurston had been presented by their former high school and college teachers. It almost seems as if these students of mine were being rushed by the emotional adrenaline of hero worship, by a crowd psyche ushering them into a flurry of admiration that leaves no opening for critical thinking. It seems as if they, after having made Alice Walker into an icon, have made her hero, too, into an icon, as if they felt they would be dirtying one icon if they dirtied another.

Even after Walker herself told them about how Charlotte Osgood Mason, her sponsor during the Harlem Renaissance, wielded narrative dictatorship over her, deleting and adding lines as she liked, it seems to me that most teachers, black and white alike, love to lose their intellectual balance in their approach toward the canonized author. Because I haven't been able to talk to every English teacher who teaches Zora Neale Hurston and because I haven't had a chance to encounter every student to whom Hurston had been presented by their former teachers, I admit I have no right to generalize and to reach the conclusion that all teachers presenting Hurston re-hash the same one-dimensional faith in her. But having now taught college English for over 28 years and having included Hurston in every literature and WGST course I have ever taught, I can safely guarantee that none of my students came to any of my classes with adequate information about the revered author. All that they could ever share with the class was the cliche—that she is one of the most admired African-American women authors and the bravest one at that. As I started to tell them about the ambivalent relationship between her and Mason, they began to demonstrate a visible intellectual discomfort and even a flat denial. Strongly, they resisted anything that didn't accord with their reverence toward the iconic author. Let me describe what happened in one of my senior classes, Twentieth Century Women
"Hurston really enjoys her heritage," one student proudly said, reading from "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," . . . This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within. . . I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. . ."

In a pedagogically sound way, I gently disagreed with the student. I told her about Mason's expectation of the primitive from black authors during the Harlem Renaissance. "You might be right," I said. "But Hurston was a complicated, sophisticated woman. It is highly unlikely that she thought black people were primitive. She was probably responding to Mason's request for the primitive from her African-American protege."

As another student asked me, almost offended by having her idol disparaged, "What is your evidence?," I drew in a long breath to quell my frustration and returned with a smile, "There is no evidence since there is no way to get a crystal clear separation between her own writing and Mason's editing. But one can apply well-educated speculations. One can connect the dots."

I devoted the rest of the class hour to comparing a series of her writing. Pointing at the places in "How It Feels to be Colored Me," in which I suspected her spewing out the lines Mason had in mind, I also told them about parts in her other works, including her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, her essay, "The 'Pet' Negro System," her non-fiction, Mules and Men, and her essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print. From "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," I read her famous statement regarding slavery, "Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me; from Mules and Men, I quoted her calling Mason a "great soul"; from Dust Tracks on a Road," I reminded them of her writing, "One thing impressed me strongly from this three months of association with Cudjo Lewis. The white people had held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true, and exploited us. But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw was: my people had sold me and the white people had bought me. That did away with the folklore I had been brought up on—that the white people had gone to Africa, waved a red handkerchief at the Africans and lured them aboard ship and sailed away. I know that civilized money stirred up African greed. . ."; from her "The 'Pet' Negro System, I recited, ". . . Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same Negro shall be perfect in his sight. Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his own Negro to wane"; and from
"What White Publishers Won't Print," I remembered, "The American Negro exhibit is a group of two. Both of these mechanical toys are built so that their feet eternally shuffle, and their eyes pop and roll. Shuffling feet and those popping, rolling eyes denote the Negro and no characterization is genuine without this monotony. One is seated on a stump picking away on his banjo and singing and laughing. The other is a most amoral character before a sharecropper's shack mumbling about injustice. Doing this makes him out to be a Negro 'intellectual.' It is as simple as that."

I explained to my students that in her earlier works, including "How It Feels to Be Colored Me (1928)," *Mules and Men* (1935), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she not only issues a pardon to her white audiences for the historical crime of slavery but also pays tributes to them by calling a censorious white woman a "great soul." Then, I told them how she changed her narrative stance in her later works such as "The 'Pet' Negro System (1943)" and "What White Publishers Won't Print (1950)." In these two essays, she doesn't show hesitation in indicting her white audiences who have an erroneous attitude about African-American people; one group of whites believes that as long as they take care of one negro they select from among all the negroes in town, they are solving the problem of racism; the other group reduces a whole race into the Other, into a type without human complexities. While one group conveniently eschews the large responsibility of changing the system by opting for a painfully narrow, condescending alternative—of one individual patronizing another—the other group is bent on perpetuating the dehumanizing stereotype.

In my class, I expressed my disagreement with the critics who defined Hurston as a black conservative. According to these critics, she greatly emphasized an individual's responsibility to enhance one's own life and thought little of changing the whole society. From my perspective, they were mistaken because they saw only one face of hers and missed the many others. In "The 'Pet' Negro System" and "What White Publishers Won't Print," she is obviously pained—not mildly but acutely—by the smug complacency of her white audiences who only wished to perpetuate the status quo in America's race relations. In these two last essays, she overtly shifts her attitude toward America's racism. From the internal revolution she claims that should take place in each individual African-American, she later changes her focus into the external changes that must occur in the society on the whole. In other words, she disavows the very essence of the conservatism she used to actively promote in her earlier
works, in transition toward a liberal standpoint in her later works.

Although I will not go as far as to say that she turned into a liberal toward the end of her writing career, I feel I can safely make the observation that her perspective went through a visible transformation as she aged and gained a physical as well as emotional distance from her earlier writings. To put it in another way, I feel I can fairly assume that she perhaps found herself less constrained by narrative inhibitions, free from Mason's grip and therefore from the need to conceal herself so severely. Because, even without Mason, she still had to be accepted by white audiences in order to be published and earn money, she had to remain diplomatic. In her later works, however, she was no longer dependent on her censor for every penny she could get and therefore was spared from the obligation to spew lines directly coming from her. As, in her later works, she was free to make a transition from concealment to disclosure, I may go as far as to claim that she was free to reveal what she had truly thought from the beginning but had been afraid to say. Because she still had to be approved by white audiences, I doubt she gained a total narrative freedom, but by the time she was writing "The 'Pet' Negro System" and "What White Publishers Won't Print," she was at enough ease to openly criticize white audiences' condescending treatment of black authors. Why else would she mock at their expectation of the comic darkies, at the very expectation she so brilliantly and subserviently accommodated in her "How It Feels to Be Colored Me?" when she described herself as a happy little negro girl who sang and danced for white people who gave her "generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop." It seems to me that Hurston, the famous black conservative of her time, might have been a closet liberal whose liberal thoughts were never given a chance to be expressed. Or, it seems to me that she might have evolved to harbor liberal thoughts eventually when she was given the intellectual leisure to look back at who she had been in her youth. At any rate, it remains undeniably clear to me that in her later writings, she with little hesitation reveals her belief in both—in systematic changes as well as an individual's responsibility. Had she lived longer, I venture to believe, the famous black conservative author might have evolved to become a renowned black liberal who didn't mince her words about who she had been from the beginning or who she became later in her life.

"What bothers me deeply," I explained to my students, "is that both black and white teachers have made her into a black conservative catering to white Americans' wishful thinking, into the one and only, into the one exceptional African-American woman who ought to be
separated from the vast majority of her people. They have made her into a transformative figure of Bill Cosby type, into America's Dad who shifts the burden of racism from the system into each individual's shoulders and therefore issues a pardon to his white audiences. They have made Hurston into America's sister, into an all-American who does the same thing and conveniently absolves her white audiences. They are choosing a simplistic pedagogical path of reducing very complex human beings into icons. Only, they do it more for her because she was discovered posthumously and never had a chance to receive the recognition she deserved. They feel sorry for her and try to overcompensate."

From my talk with a dozen or so of high school and college English teachers, I have gathered the impression that most of them do not even know the relationship between Hurston and Mason and that the ones who know it choose to turn a blind eye to the dark side of the relationship. "I want to preserve the beauty," white teachers, some of whom teach college seniors, declare. "I don't want to do the job of separating Hurston from Mason in concrete detail. It's also risky because there's no way to find out whose line is whose." "I don't want to disturb my students," black teachers, some of whom teach advanced literature classes in college, confess. "White students feel ashamed because it is a white woman who kept her from being honest. Black students feel embarrassed because a black woman whom they so admire was poor enough to become a beggar for a white woman. I just tell them the one supported the other financially."

As much as I understand why these teachers stop short of stepping into what they see as being "risky," as far as I am concerned, they seem to be using the "risk" as an excuse to avoid doing one of the most important jobs they have to do when presenting the famed African-American author; they are concealing the information without which their favorite author cannot be read as a human being. I agree that there is no way to be crystal clear about who wrote which parts. But I am of the belief that if taught without an in-depth discussion of her relationship with Mason—without an effort to commit the "risk" of speculating in specific and lengthy detail what lines were added and deleted to please the white godmother—the famed Hurston would remain to be nothing but a one-dimensional figurehead. It is painfully clear to me that white teachers, particularly white female teachers, are motivated by guilt; they chant their mantra, "One cannot be a feminist and a racist at once," and wish to hide the truth about a white woman, one of their own, having been a racist. Equally obvious to me is that black teachers, particularly black female teachers, are driven by pride; they feel humiliated to acknowledge how deeply a
black woman, one of their own, had to kowtow to a white woman. They don't want to commit an act of literary blasphemy.

Vaguely acknowledging that Mason heavily censored her writing line by line, both camps choose to remain oblivious of what kind of final result such censorship must have produced; eagerly agreeing how the penniless protégée must have had to cater to the rich matron's narrative whims by cranking out pages after pages to accommodate the latter's sense of superiority, they seem forgetful of what sort of manuscript such process must have yielded. They only shake their heads in disbelief at how disturbing such relationship must have been; they do not enter the work of trying to identify in concrete detail the specific textual places that illustrate the outcome of such an unsettling dynamic.

Consciously or subconsciously, they turn a deaf ear to the powerful white woman's speeches threatening to drown out the powerless—and yet resistant—black woman's voice; willingly or unwillingly, they turn a blind eye to the governing one's narrative mandates over the governed one's pages. Instead of examining the ways in which the former pronounces herself in the latter's text—or more accurately, instead of elucidating the concrete manners by which the latter embeds her own true feelings despite the former's dictates—they choose the easy pedagogical path of believing as if the latter's narrative were the latter's. To reiterate, when it comes to the necessity of having to accept the unpleasant fact that a rich white woman held an editorial supremacy over a poor black woman, teachers of all camps, black and white and male and female alike, remain surprisingly abstract, astonishingly generous toward both of the women involved. After fulfilling in brief abstraction the obligation to acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the two, they can't wait to enter the everlasting journey of manifesting reverence toward the godlike woman who kept shining through the pitch black cloud. By avoiding the details, they try to whitewash the history.

To put it bluntly, they do nothing but dehumanize the good author by leaving her on the pedestal. By refusing to see her as a human being, her audiences in all camps fail to harvest the most desirable fruit awaiting the readers of literature—the joy of identifying one by one the series of narrative mechanism an author constructs in order to be heard through the silencing social forces surrounding her. None of the numerous American authors I have discovered thus far is more fascinating to me than Hurston in terms of the ability to bring so much ambivalent, complex, and hence provocative responses in a literary reader. She is assertive and subservient at once, inventing her own words and yet having to erase them to earn her patron's approval;
she is autonomous and dependent at once, wishing to tell her true feelings and yet having to conceal them; and she is dignified and servile at once, hoping to keep her head high and yet having to kowtow. She never saw herself as a powerless person, but she found herself to be a powerless person begging for pennies to buy bread and butter. She had to find covert means of being subversive, to come up with her own literary devices in order to say one thing and mean another. As a bundle of contradictions, she knew how to give her audiences the adventurous pleasure of finding the hidden objects in the elaborate drawings she produced. In my efforts to figure out these hidden objects, I believe I am a number one fan of hers. I plan to continue to be a number one fan of hers, to continue to present my beloved Zora as a human being, not as an icon.

"The further she went away from Mason, the closer she went to the truth," I envision myself spelling out for my students what I have always seen. "Later in her writing career, when she no longer had a close relationship with Mason, she could tell what was in her mind without a fear of being disapproved." I picture myself speaking, "But even when she was under Mason's watchful eye, she exercised her authorial independence and covertly inserted her own voice." I hear my students listening to me attentively, "In 'How It Feels to be Colored Me,' Hurston fiercely claims her autonomy and individuality. While fulfilling Mason's demand by saying she doesn't belong to the 'sobbing school of negrohood,' she writes in the same essay, 'Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.' I see this as her taking off the mask she had to wear in front of Mason—the mask of a subservient black woman who she had to appear to be to Mason. I think she's secretly declaring, 'I'm an individual, a human being who takes a great pride in who I am. I'm nobody's puppet.' I hear myself moving on to present another such covert message in *Dust Tracks on a Road,* "In one place in the book, she absolves her white audiences half way by blaming Africans for selling slaves, but in another place, she flatly acknowledges how racist whites can be. She doesn't mince her words on how she might be treated by whites for her 'impudent' tongue. She writes of what her father said to her, 'He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue.' Here, she recognizes that a black woman can be physically killed for saying something immodest, for speaking her mind. In different places in the autobiography, I see different faces of the autobiographer. Hurston is driven by an authorial anxiety, torn by the need to conceal and yet to
reveal what she thinks. She is suffering from an acute ambivalence, from her inner impulse to tell the truth and from her obligation to be palatable to her white audiences, to the ones from whom she needed narrative approval and sometimes money as she did from Mason."

I know I will continue to have to meet with resistance from the students who were "programmed" to worship the icon by their former high school and college teachers. I know one class session or even three wouldn't be enough to help them to unlearn what they had learned. But I feel giving up would be doing an injustice to my beloved Zora. If I stop making the effort, I'm afraid I would participate in perpetuating the deplorable phenomenon in education, the division between the higher knowledge possessed by the select few in an ivory tower and the common information shared by the many in secondary schools and colleges. The racial and class dynamic between the rich white woman and the poor black woman will go unnoticed by my students except in brief, shallow, and convenient abstraction; because they will remain unable to tell the specific ways in which the former put her words into the latter's mouth—because they will remain unequipped with the skills with which they can speculate which is which—they will not be able to reach any further than the point at which they regurgitate the hymns of hero worship. Because they will be left in the place where the pursuit of truth is dismissed for the reason that it would be impossible to clearly separate the two discordant voices—because there is no way to tell them apart from each other—they will go no further than settling with the well-known cliché that their icon had to cope with racism from a white woman as well as her white audiences. Lack of concrete evidence will be used as a justification to stop short of the scrupulous analysis of the textual details, to hush the so-to-speak ugly elements of the relationship. My students will have no choice but to assume that Zora's words are Zora's, with little more than vague guesses about another person's words. They will be left with none of the concrete examples coming from well-educated speculations that I believe are absolutely indispensable to understand an author as fascinating as Zora. I will, to put it brutally, end up perpetuating the silence I deplore, the silence that whitewashes the unpleasant facts of history one must recognize.

The knowledge shared by the select few in academia—that Mason's lines are virtually inseparable from Zora's—shouldn't remain to be the exclusive intellectual property of the elites; it should be spread among the masses of the Zora audiences. From my research thus far, I get the impression that even these select few critics remain shy of the very important job—of trying to put their fingers on the lines and paragraphs where they probably notice Mason's presence. I
suspect they, too, dread venturing into what they perceive as a "risky" area, bereft of the critical courage to open themselves for disapproval. In that they are more emphatic and less abstract in admitting the white godmother's intrusion, they travel a little further than most of the Hurston teachers I have met, but they nevertheless seem to opt to stay away from identifying the specific places in the narrative. How I wish they would go a little further! How I wish they would go all the way! If they go all the way and if I can present their analysis to my students, I can help them to make their privileged information to be more popular and to help to lessen the distance between the ivory tower and the mass education. As long as they explain the context regarding Zora and her patron and as long as they admit the risk—and the tremendous value—in playing such a guessing game, I feel certain they would be justified and welcomed by the many Zora lovers. After all, what would be the point of literary criticism without the risk of guessing games?

Finally, I hope I will continue to be able to present Their Eyes Were Watching God with the level of the pedagogical honesty I believe every Hurston teacher must possess and exercise. My students, the majority of whom is white, are so unthinkingly used to reducing the complex book into a black woman's feminist manifesto that they don't even feel embarrassed about missing the race dimension in the book. They are unprepared to see Joe Starks, Janie's sexist husband, as a product of racism ultimately, as a black man whose life is severely limited by racism and therefore tries to overcompensate by achieving supremacy within his small ethnic community. "I, too, think Joe Starks is deplorable," I will acknowledge. "He has no right to suppress black women just because he's suppressed by white men. He's immature."

I will tell my students about how Richard Wright vilified the novel because to him, the novel had nothing to do with what he believed should be the top priority of every black author, the race problem. "Richard Wright was as self-righteous as Joe Starks," I will explain. "He treated black women merely as an extension of black men. He didn't think black women had the right to refuse to be black men's adjuncts, to live independently from black men. According to him, gender as an exclusive category for black women writers was a narrative luxury, an arrogant display of a frivolous topic. To him, it was an intellectual betrayal." "More importantly," I will go on, "he wasn't perceptive enough to see what lies between the lines in the novel. He was too preoccupied with race issues to notice what troubled Hurston, too myopic to learn that black men's sexism added another layer of oppression for black women, that black women had to cope with the double damnation of racism and sexism at once." I will try to summarize, "Although Hurston doesn't directly indict her white audiences' racism, the facts of the novel
ample speak of the racist forces that drive Joe Starks to be so power-driven over his own people. Reading the novel, I hope we keep in mind both race and gender.” I will speculate, “While writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston still was in the early stage of her writing career. Fear and inhibition probably kept her from pointing her finger explicitly at her white audiences' racism. She could only *imply* what she wanted to say—about the racism of the people upon whom she was dependent for approval.”

From my experience in teaching college English, I have learned that every white student—yes, every white student—in my class overwhelmingly prefers *Their Eyes Were Watching God* over her later works such as "The 'Pet' Negro System" or "What White Publishers Won't Print." That one is a novel and that the others are essays, of course, explains part of the reason. But from my 28-year-long observation, I've had repeated chances to realize the fact that they prefer the one over the other mainly because the one gives them a chance to be mindful of gender at the cost of race. The one, in short, gives them an opportunity to blame the sexist black men and to conveniently confine their reading within the problems of the black community. It gives them an excuse to stay self-righteous, to shift the burden of racism onto the shoulders of each individual from that of the social system. Without a teacher presenting for them Joe Starks as a product of racism, they will continue to stay uninformed of the implication that lies under the narrative surface of the novel. They will continue to remain amiss of the absolutely critical need—the need to locate her under the large social context, to reflect seriously upon their wish to be absolved and to receive a pardon for America's racist history from a black woman.

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