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Rediscovering Zora's Contradictions

Imagine Zora Neale Hurston as powerful and sarcastic as she can get – writing in a sophisticated, mock-biblical mode, humorous and raw, subtle, entertaining, and yet wildly critical of black parvenus in New York City at the times of the Harlem Renaissance. Well, all this is what a recent literary rediscovery has brought back to light for the first time in more than eighty years – five short stories that Hurston had originally published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* between 1927 and 1933, and that had been virtually forgotten since the time of their appearance.¹ The first four of the unearthed short stories belong to that period of time in which, while studying in Manhattan, Hurston was an active if somehow controversial protagonist in the black literary Renaissance. This was a time in which Hurston, first as an undergraduate in anthropology at Barnard College and then as a graduate student at Columbia University, was closely associated with other emerging black literary voices of the time – among them, Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman – whose impatience with the gradualistic policy of the black intellectual elite she substantially shared.²

Those years between 1925 and the end of the decade are practically absent from the account she makes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, even though they coincide with the height of the literary Renaissance in Harlem and with the broader artistic movement in which Hurston played a relevant part. What she doesn't say about her hectic life in that crucial part of the Twenties, however, one can somehow deduce from the fictional account that both of her friends made – Thurman in his irreverent, often hilarious novel *Infants of the Spring*, which appeared in 1932, just a couple of years before his untimely death, and Hughes in his autobiographical *The Big Sea*, published at the end of the Depression in 1940. To say that the two writers were nice with their old friend Zora,³ who meantime had moved South to do anthropological fieldwork in Florida, would not be correct, for in portraying her under fictional disguise, both of them stigmatized some of her major defects – such as her tendency to fool white patrons and friends by pretending

to be the black prodigy they wanted her to be, even though all her black friends knew she was “playing a game” (Huggins 130).

Sweetie May Carr, the character Thurman tailored on Hurston's silhouette, is quite explicit about all that – she ruthlessly exploits her status as an African American, knowing that the ball may come to an end any day, and she is determined to take advantage of what she deems the substantial naïveté of many a white patron: “I have to eat. I also wish to finish my education. Being a Negro writer these days is a racket and I'm going to make the most of it while it lasts. Sure I cut the fool. But I enjoy it, too” (230). And even Hughes, whose mildness was renowned in his friends' circle, did not miss the opportunity to pitch nicely in with his beautiful sense of irony, reminiscing about Zora's capacity to interpret her role with consummate ability:

In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as a daughter of a travelling minister of God. She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect “darkie,” in the nice meaning they give the term – that is a naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro. (239)

Hurston's own performing talent – a quality that had helped to make her popular among the Harlem literati – must have somehow inspired her when writing the five short stories published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, for most of the female characters in them seem to share with their author that very ability to “cut the fool,” while deeply enjoying the acting, too. “The Book of Harlem” and “Monkey Junk”⁴ are the first two stories of the group in which Hurston displays her capacity to use the mock-biblical storytelling mode. Both center on gender relations that produce the virtual annihilation of the male protagonists who have come to Harlem from their rural hometowns to achieve success with the fabulous women of the black Mecca. In both cases, the boastful young men, thanks to the money with which their fathers have generously provided them, end up getting married to two women who play the part of the virtuous lovers in a convincing way. Not only do they deceive their credulous male partners, eventually managing to deprive their husbands

of a substantial part of their money, but the women also get away with crystal clear consciences.

These two short stories, however, have rather different endings. “The Book of Harlem” ends on a note of mild irony as the protagonist, Jazzbo, “called upon a damsel of great beauty and he asked her if she be a virgin and she answered him yes, and so they were married and he bought her fur of the mink, and much fine raiment and a sedan of twelve cylinders.” In “Monkey Junk,” instead, the protagonist “who thought that he knew all the law and the prophets,” in the end is badly scorned and defeated by his foxy wife. Summoned to testify in court in their divorce trial, she manages to turn into such a seductive liar when she takes the stand that she wins over the sympathy of the entire jury, including that of the male judge, whose ruling leaves the husband no other option but to return “unto Alabama to pick cotton.” Hurston’s portrait of her anonymous protagonist, who is both a vicious schemer and a great performer, shows how effective and intensely humorous her writing can get, as when she illustrates the lady’s determination in using the art of fascination:

43. And she gladdened the eyes of the jury and the judge leaned down from his high seat and beamed down upon her for verily she was some brown.

44. And she turned soulful eyes about her and all men yearned to fight for her.

45. Then did she testify and cross her knees, even the silk covered joints, and weep. For verily she spoke of great evils visited upon her. (573-74)

It is in spare passages like these that Hurston succeeds in being particularly convincing, while at the same time showing her ability to arrange a spicy scene out of a handful of appropriate narrative ingredients. All that Hurston needs to draw a highly humorous sketch like that is just a pair of “soulful eyes,” a glimpse of a knee, and maybe a few tears.

The third story of the group, entitled “The Back Room,” is by far the most literary one among those published in the *Courier*, with frequent echoes of such turn-of-the-century classics as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Subtly and quite intricately autobiographical, the short story revolves around a portrait in Lilya Barkman’s

back room, the description of which in the text is strangely reminiscent of a rather famous painting by James A. Porter, entitled *Woman Holding a Jug*, representing a young black woman whose features are more than vaguely similar to Hurston's.⁵ Apart from the several intriguing coincidences between Zora's life and that of the short story's protagonist – among them their tendency to lie about their ages – “The Back Room” offers a lively image of Harlem's upper class life in the Twenties – an image that becomes particularly penetrating once the author's modernism gets a chance to fully display its expressive potential, as, for example, in the following passage:

Twelve o'clock.... Everybody being modern. Cigarettes burning like fireflies on a summer night. A Charleston contest with a great laundry show. Hey! Hey! Powder gone, but a lively prettiness taking its place. A wealthy woman in the foolish forties giggling on the shoulder of a twenty-year old. (579)

Also in this case, what immediately strikes the reader is the caption-like style of those sentences, as if, instead of reading a short story, one were dealing with the stage instructions of a piece for the theater. It is only the beginning of the narrative, but like all consummate writers Hurston seems to know perfectly well how to turn to her own advantage that critical part of the text: a few brisk strokes, and the right atmosphere for an animated story is set.

The last two of the rediscovered short stories, “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock,” are two different versions of the Caroline tale, one of the fourteen sketches that had already appeared under the heading “The Eatonville Anthology”⁶ in *The Messenger*, the influential New York Socialist magazine run by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen between 1917 and 1928. The central theme of both stories is the confrontation between Caroline, her husband, and his “side gal,” which takes place right in the middle of a Harlem street in the first story and in a private apartment in the second one. A considerable part of the appeal of both texts lies in the juxtaposition between a racy, rural Southerner like Cal'line and her apparently sophisticated husband who keeps trying to talk her into becoming affable and urbane, to no avail. As he will admit in the end, “Ah caint git the country out dat woman.” Caroline's axe, the convincing tool she sports in both versions of the tale, carrying it over her shoulder “like a

Roman lictor,”⁷ is both a lethal weapon and a symbol of power associated with ancient Rome’s magistrates, who happened to be all men. Significantly, once Caroline has administered her own justice by smacking the lady’s cheek and chasing her husband out the window on the fire escape, she prepares to march proudly down the street in triumph. Just as the old Romans used to parade with their war trophies, Caroline too decides to adorn her axe with the spoils of her victory, and as a final proof of her husband’s symbolic emasculation, she holds his trousers as a banner.

A fortunate event in itself for both Hurston and Harlem Renaissance scholars, the re-appearance of the five *Courier* stories was joined by Carla Cappetti’s additional rediscovery of two previously unpublished letters written by Hurston between 1936 and 1937, which, as the scholar candidly admits, “recently resurfaced from the abyss of my file cabinet and of my forgetfulness” (602). The letters, respectively addressed to Prof. Robert Redfield, a leading American anthropologist and, at the time, the Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, and to legend of ethnomusicology Alan Lomax, are valuable and illuminating in that they confirm Hurston’s ambivalent and substantially controversial personality, while at the same time they provide a telling example of her uncommon capacity to get down to business with her pen. In the first and less explosive of the two messages, written while she was doing field research in Kingston, Jamaica, Hurston tries to ingratiate herself to Prof. Redfield in such a disgusting way as to feel the need to conclude the message with the following sentence: “Please pardon my seizing you by the lapels this way but my enthusiasm for the material here has made me bold” (607). The second document, on the contrary, is of a totally different nature and could be fairly described as a veritable feast of insults and slanders, addressed to Lomax from Haiti – why he deserved such an outburst of unchecked rage may only be guessed – but the matter, obviously, must have been of some relevance to her. Sassy and belligerent as some of her most effective fictional characters, including the Cal’line of the short stories just discussed, Hurston seems to be perfectly at ease in telling Lomax she has had it, once and for all:

You knew no more about collecting folk-lore than a hog knows about a holiday.... It was just too funny assuming that white skin could fool black

brains.... You can lock doors against a th[ie]f, but there is no protection against a liar. (611)

The list of insolences could continue at length, but the point Hurston is making is clear enough, as the general tone of the letter, her hyperbolic accusations, and the sour euphemisms she often resorts to all indicate that she felt she had been badly victimized. Whether she really was Lomax's victim or not, at this point, is not as relevant; what seems to be noteworthy is that even though her reaction must have been dictated by an intense feeling of moral violation, its impact was certainly heightened by her impressive use of irony and creativity. Hurston, indeed, at her best.

Notes

¹ The five short stories by Hurston were recently rediscovered by Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors, who, as guest editors of a recent issue of *Amerikastudien* 55 (2010), republished them after more than eighty years, along with a new tale by Jamaica Kincaid, "America," and the essay "Ethnic Studies in the Age of the Tea Party," by Ishmael Reed.

² Together with Hughes and Thurman, Hurston participated in the short-lived experiment of *Fire!!*, a literary magazine by young African-American intellectuals and artists, whose contributors included also Aaron Douglas, Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, John P. Davis, and Richard B. Nugent. The first and only number of the magazine appeared in the Fall of 1926.

³ Hurston spent several years collecting African-American folk material throughout Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana. Most of that material was later published in *Mules and Men* (1935), one of the earliest collections of folktales to be edited by an African-American author.

⁴ The two short stories were the first to appear in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, respectively on February 12 and 19, 1927.

⁵ Even though James A. Porter's painting was finished in 1933, several particulars indicate its striking similarity to Lilya's portrait as it is described in the short story. The painter's last name is also directly evoked in the text by one of the characters, as "Porter David."

⁶ The sketches comprised in "The Eatonville Anthology" appeared originally in three instalments of *The Messenger* in the Fall of 1926, while the *Pittsburgh Courier* published the two tales in March, 1927, and August, 1933, respectively. Both "The Country in the Woman" and "She Rock" in *Amerikastudien* are edited and commented by M. Genevieve West.

⁷ The lictors (*fascēs lictoriae* in Latin) were bunches of light wooden sticks tied together, symbolizing the power of magistrates in ancient Rome; the bronze axe they surrounded was originally used as an instrument for capital punishment. In the same years in which Hurston's

short stories were being published, that same symbol had been appropriated by the fascist regime in Italy, whose name derived from that same object.

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