

**Portraits of the South: Zora Neale Hurston's
*Politics Of Place***

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Abstract

Fiction, as Eudora Welty reminds us in her celebrated work *Place in Fiction*, requires the creation of a sense of place that renders a drama real enough to gain the reader's complicity. Welty's observation could be applied to the works of Zora Neale Hurston and her critics, both contemporary and present-day, were it not for one major complication-the role that politics played in the production, circulation, and consumption of African American fiction during the Harlem Renaissance and the role it plays today. Hurston's Janie is as subject to circumstances as much in motion as they, but bears with her a brooding power of inevitable development. The more she is threatened, the more resourceful she becomes. The more she is deprived, the more self-sufficient she becomes. When we look at the politics of Hurston's writing we see the problem in Welty's graceful argument.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, *Politics Of Place*, Racism, Materialism, Self-realization, , Civilize, Psychology, Monolithic.

At first sight, the politics with which Hurston and her critics had to contend seems simple enough. For many black writers in Hurston's time, the prevailing sense of the South was framed by the horrors of racism and the flight from those horrors. For them, representing the South outside that frame seemed at best beside the point and at worst possibly harmful to the struggle against racism. For other black writers, and especially for Hurston, that framing of the South and its people impoverished the depiction of both. It meant portraying black southerners without life, culture, or opportunity, and therefore without complexity. Hurston's sense of place is so vivid and so full of human complication that, paradoxically, it has prevented many readers from entering into her work, precisely because so much rides on how the South is depicted.

Among Hurston's readers, Richard Wright is perhaps the most influential. In his now well-known essay "*Between Laughter and Tears*," Wright accused Hurston of having no interest in serious fiction. He claimed that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had no "basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation," and that its prose. For Wright, Hurston may have managed to capture "psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes."

A first approximation of Wright's and Hurston's contrasting portraits of the South can be seen in the epigraphs. Wright's observations are haunted by a sense of despair, a sense that black life has somehow been stripped of emotional depth, Hurston's observations are brightly colored. If black people's emotions were naked and nakedly arrived at, this was part of the frontier spirit in which those people found themselves at that time. Hurston thus historicizes black feeling. Wright's black southerner, by contrast, lacks the feelings perhaps, Wright suggests, even the capacity for feelings that fundamentally define humanity itself. This, in Wright's view, was one of the tragic legacies of the racist oppression and apartheid that characterized the American South.

Both systems of oppression were violent, economically discriminatory, and segregated. Both regions challenged blacks to find safe spaces in which to live, where the impact of racism might be softened. But people believed then and believe today that the North allowed black people breathing room in a way that the South did not. The myth that the South provided few or no educational opportunities for black people, that police and courts oppressed them more harshly than in the North, that economic success was rarely if ever possible, that segregation was more rigid, persists in the minds of many Americans, white and black, even today. Although other writers Jean Toomer and Sterling Brown, for example painted a more complex picture of the South, one in which black people could forge a personal and cultural identity even against terrible odds, the myth of a monolithic South remains. Black migrants to the North soon learned that they would not find there the promised land of their dreams, but they made allowances for their new home while harbouring conflicting visions of the South, a place that was both home and dangerous.

Hurston and Wright both knew that racial discrimination was just as debilitating in the North as in the South. But Hurston rejected the notion that black people were defined by the conditions of their existence in either place, while Wright saw the South as a place where violence defined every aspect of black life.

Wright, like many intellectuals of the 1920s and '30s, viewed black southerners with ambivalence. Even if black culture creatively, one sees in the work of black intellectuals like Wright doubts the equality of the "Negro farthest down" with the educated and cosmopolitan elite. Many black writers and intellectuals privately harboured the belief that "the Negroes farthest down" brought violence on themselves by being immoral and uncivilized. The moral and well-behaved poor were candidates for moral and social uplift, for educational opportunities and protection from economic exploitation. The immoral and uncivilized poor were to be condemned or ignored; they were a source of shame to be hidden from view, if possible. Even as they fought bitterly against

white racism, black artist and intellectuals blamed the black masses for not doing more to “civilize” themselves.

This deep sense of doubt and shame about blackness could not be completely eradicated by tributes to the greatness of the African past or the creativity of black folk. Toomer wrote a lyrical masterpiece based on he saw and heard in the cane fields of Georgia, where he taught school for three months, but as an adult he fled so far from folk spiritually that he became a follower of a Russian holy man. Marcus Garvey’s celebration of dark skin and of Africa did not prevent his newspapers from advertising skin-lighteners.

The ambivalence of black intellectuals is understandable if we acknowledge the impact of racism on oppressed people, an acknowledgment that most black scholars and intellectuals have been unwilling to make. Hurston and her fellow African American writers worked in an intellectual and political climate in which people of African heritage were still regarded as naturally inferior. Hurston’s Janie is as subject to circumstances as much in motion as they but bears with her a brooding power of inevitable development. The more she is threatened, the more resourceful she becomes. The more she is deprived, the more self-sufficient she becomes. That inner stability and outer indomitability mark her off from anything that has gone before; these traits will not appear again before Alice Walker’s *Meridian* in the 1970s. The confinement of this phenomenon to women’s hands is perhaps telling itself, showing the capacity to bear not just children, or the continuance of life, but to bear life itself. It is a rare phenomenon, even among women.

The story of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is the record of black development from materialism and passivity (her grandmother’s belief that money and/or white patronage are the essence of a good life) to self-respect, self-reliance, and (qualified) self-realization. The difficulty of getting a bead on that self is severe enough. Hurston renders the stock scene of racial discovery with rare delicacy, complexity, and resonance. Not social prejudice or personal meanness but affection leads to Janie’s discovery that she is black. Without distinction, along with the white children of the family her grandmother works for, she has lived and played and been naughty and gotten; and in that spirit she is included in a photograph of the group. She looks for herself in the picture and where she is supposed to be sees only “a real dark little girl with long hair,” whom she does not recognize. “Where is me?”, “Ah don’t see me,” she complains. She has taken the image, perhaps the imprint, of her white companions. Stories must be full of human interest, short and simple words.

Even so, Hurston’s South remained personal. It was about family and friends, acceptable and unacceptable characters, love and hate, values and norms, social rewards and social punishments, spiritual strength and material practicality. Finally, it was about making sense of a world dominated by Jim Crow while trying to live a normal life. Conversely, Richard Wright depicted South and North abstractly; they were grounded in the general fact of racist discrimination rather than in the relationships that anchor human society.

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