CHAPTER – IV

SELF ASSERTION IN AUTO BIOGRAPHIES

You don’t have to be antiman to be pro-woman

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Autobiography has been the prominent form of writing among African-Americans for more than a hundred and fifty years. The genre has adopted the artfulness and rhetorical structure more usually identified with fiction. Black autobiography made itself a popular form that signified the totality of the African American autobiographers and often transgressed the narrow boundaries of fiction and autobiography. Autobiography is an activity that takes place from outside rather than inside, representing a dominant mainstream of Euro American perspectives, promoting the sovereignty of the private “I” as the basis of the genre. They perceive this self-knowledge, knowing itself only in isolation and forever remaining hidden behind its public version. “Unsaturated” from the world of its environment, it is timeless, unchanging, absolute, ineffable self that no one else knows. Language cannot capture such a self, and produces only a mask behind which the true self hides.

Autobiography, Janet Varner Gunn suggests, is not the mask that hides the true self, but the revelation of alienated, displayed or representative self, joined to the world through an understanding of shared humanity. Instead of “the private act of a self-writing becomes the cultural act of a self-reading” against the back ground of time, place, race, class gender and other variables that define individual members of particular groups. Born in Eatonville, Florida, America’s first incorporated black community, an “all negro” town, at some unidentified point of time near the turn of the century, Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist, describes in her autobiographical Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) how Hurston “used to climb to the top of one of the huge Chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate, and look out over the world”(DT 2). She poignantly recalls her experiences from her childhood to her fifties: “I have been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky
mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands” (DT 9), is her official autobiography and her last fully completed literary work.

Most autobiographies depict the life of the author from beginning to end. The structure of Dust Tracks on a Road is unconventional because she chose to highlight certain key elements of her life, not necessarily those elements readers may have thought interesting or significant. Hurston focuses on certain moments, events and people. By doing so she controls the reader’s view of her. It is obvious she did not just write an account of her life, but that she was aware of her readership and critics, and therefore presented herself ambiguously and evasively. A link can also be established between Hurston and the main character of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Janie’s memory is a selective and personal one when she shares the events of her life story with Phoebe. Hurston’s memory is a lot like Janie’s in Dust Tracks on a Road. They both “forget all those things they don’t want to remember and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (DT 231). Also like Janie, Hurston was a product of the environment she grew up in. Her story must include her environment because that is what shaped her. As Walker puts it, Dust Tracks on a Road represents Hurston as an individual “that is heterogeneous and inseparable from her environment” (DT 388).

Young Zora Neale was anxious to behold all that a full life might afford the individual. Further on in that autobiography the author tells us, “It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like.” Similarly, in the very first line of her novel we are provided with the reflection that “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board”. Hurston then goes on to explain how some of those ships came in with the tide while others “sailed forever on the horizon, never out of sight” (TE1). Even those men, who do not attain their dreams, have at least at some point in their lives, to envision themselves fulfilling their fantasies. At sixteen, the age when the search for identity is most profound, Janie slips out of her grandmother’s house and imagines “being a peer tree in bloom!.” She envisions complete fulfillment; however, it must be noted that she identifies not with
another person, but with a part of Nature. As a “tree” she will be in possession of great strength, awesome beauty, and communion with the world of Nature (TE.5).

Hurston's experience of growing up in the self-governing black town of Eatonville, Florida, set her apart from most of her Harlem Renaissance colleagues whose childhood included “an indoctrination in inferiority” as they came of age in a culture dominated by white people who routinely passed judgment on non-whites (Boyd 144). At Barnard, where she was the first African American woman to earn a degree in Anthropology, and later as a writer navigating through the world of white publishers, she was often positioned as an outsider within. Even so, the racial self-confidence engendered in her childhood led her to question what she knew was the myth of white superiority. Hurston often threw caution to the winds with her frank comments about the notion of white specialness. In observations that were edited out of her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, she wrote, “I just think it would be a good thing for the Anglo-Saxon to get the idea out of his head that everybody else owes him something just for being blond,” a view, which she felt was held by two-thirds of the white population (DT 261-62).

As Hurston implies at the beginning of her autobiography, “I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me” (DT 3), Hurston does not merely write her autobiography down but on the contrary, she lets it rewrite and re-make her identity. In this sense, Hurston’s autobiography seems to echo Paul de Man’s persuasive argument that “life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but cannot suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may produce and determine the life” (69). An autobiographer, in Janet Varner Gunn’s views, is a ‘self-reader’ who has to, retroactively, read and understand the stories of her own life before she may write about her life, thereby examining her ‘self’ from the “outside in, not inside out”, or in other words, from the position of the other side of lived past which the reader self-occupies (Gunn 6). In other words, Gunn claims, as a ‘writer-self’, an autobiographer is simultaneously a reader-self, (re)reading her past experiences and re-defining her identity as she writes down her own “biography”. Autobiography is thus “a process of recollection, bringing together
the parts of a self that has been fractured by time” (Childs 150). Rather than reflecting the wholeness of a self in writing, autobiography, in fact, clearly shows how a fragmented self is recollected and thus reconstructed through the very process of self-writing. Dust Tracks on a Road provoked on two kinds of response. The autobiography at the time is sure to attract a lot of attention considering that few African American women had written an autobiography.

Hurston’s autobiography does not give much insight into her personal life, to the disappointment of many readers, but it shared her attitude towards many issues, especially the way black people are viewed and the way in which they view themselves. On the one hand she is praised for her complexity in revealing her life story and experiences. On the other hand her unconventional autobiography was put under scrutiny, especially those elements of Dust Tracks on a Road where she is vague and untruthful about certain key facts in her life. This has led some critics to call the autobiography unreliable or imaginative. Also her attitude towards race is commented on. Phil Strong suggested in his review that Hurston surpassed racial and ethnic boundaries and that the autobiography is “heartening to anyone white, black or tan” (in Jones,10). “She is awarded the Anisfeld Award in Race Relations and is sought out as a public speaker” (King, 119). Not all critics and readers were pleased with Hurston’s attitude towards race. Darwin Turner addresses Hurston as “an imaginative, somewhat shallow, quick-tempered (Rayson,41). Moreover, for many of her contemporaries the autobiography is further proof that Hurston would do anything to get her work published. Her black colleagues blamed her for pleasing the white mainstream reader, while many white reviewers used the biography to deny the existence of racism. However, what needs to be remembered is that Hurston’s work is revised and that chapters, in which she criticizes “whites for feeling superior to other races, were omitted” (120). Any criticism she received, whether good or bad, is therefore based on an incomplete text. Hurston was aware that publishers would alter her work; she knew what “White publishers won’t print” (120). Yet she has produced an autobiography that addressed issues of sex and race and the impact these classifications had on her life.
According to African American writers, the personal experiences were political and communal at the same time. For black female writers, the communal experiences have already been intricately woven into personal ones. Moreover, the black community respects the uniqueness of its own experiences. Their autobiographies were more concerned with re-viewing the collective experience of black community from the lens of gender. Then, they not only made records of their lives but also exposed and challenged the limitations which were imposed both on them and on the black community as a whole. In other words, African American female writers would show the readers how the white race is inferior to the black race and what they wanted to do further is to invent or recreate the racial truth for themselves and the black community so as to find out a new world. Hurston portrays in her autobiography that:

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and standoff and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that” (DT 14).

Hurston’s works are classified as folklore, or ethnography, and confined to a locale in the American South; Mules and Men would seem to have as its object of investigation the stories that convey the values of this particular "folk" and the African-Americans who repeat these stories. Initially published in 1935, seven years before Dust Tracks on a Road - the text Hurston and her publishers advertised as autobiography - Mules and Men also presents Hurston as both observer and observed, as narrator and protagonist, in a fashion analogous to the role of the narrator in overtly autobiographical writing. Although Robert Hemmenway suggests that, in Mules and Men, Hurston "worked hard to make sure that her personal saga did not become the book's focus," he describes her as a "master of ceremonies," implying that she is, if not the "focus," at least the orchestrator of events” (166). In Mules and Men, her own activity provides a gap onto which various folk tales are adorned,
whereas in Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston constructs her life in such a way that many events and characters acquire mythic implication; in her folklore, that is, she tells her own story, while in her autobiography, she includes much "lore." Since Hurston does not confine the life she writes about in her autobiography to the lifetime of her physical self but rather contextualizes and extends it temporally within the history of her community, these two texts can be read as situated against or written onto each other. Hurston relies on her anthropological gape, on the lens of her discipline, not only to observe and erect African-American Southern rural culture but also to examine and construct and to some extent obscure her own place within that culture. In both books, she relates lore of the self as well as lore of the folk. Although many literary autobiographies express an individual's achievement of subjectivity through literacy, through writing subjectivity into a text, Hurston resists this tradition because her subjectivity has been previously constructed in terms of folklore. Much of what gets written down here is a challenge to discover or create a self by writing down personal memory than it is an attempt to reproduce the stories.

Hurston identifies with herself because she has told them. Both texts, then, “can be discussed in terms of their autobiographical impulses, for each has among its objects knowledge of Hurston herself” (Boxwell 606). Indeed, Joanne Braxton argues that the folklore is more efficacious as autobiography than is Dust Tracks on a Road, since Hurston's voice in the folklore is less self-conscious: "These volumes are in some ways more successful as forms of symbolic memory than [is] Dust Tracks" (153). In neither text is Hurston exclusively the narrator; she is always the narrated. In this sense, both texts adhere to a primary characteristic of all autobiographical writing: They construct several versions of the "I" present in the text, and these versions of "I" are neither wholly separate from nor identical to each other. For Hurston, these generic complications are compounded by her situation, which demands that she describe a community of which she both is and is not a member; her present textual persona functions within this community as if she is a member, whereas her biographical persona realizes the degree to which she is not a member.
As an ethnologist in the rural South, Hurston is both inside and outside; to the extent that she has accepted this doubled and, at times, conflicted status as identity and her situation became uncomfortable. Because of the tendency of ethnography to eroticize its object of study, an ethnographer practicing autobiography would have forced to negotiate between a disciplinary practice which could sometimes seem to construct characters as odd or quaint and a simultaneous desire to represent herself realistically rather than romantically; “in this sense, auto-ethnography could be argued to be an oxymoronic term” (Raynaud, "Rubbing" 38; Carby 75-76.). A child of Eatonville, Florida, Hurston returns there on her first trip as a professional ethnographer, not because, she said, "so that the home folks could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet," but "because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger" (Mules 2). While her claim that she didn't desire adulation might have been sincere, she nevertheless hoped to exploit her community's hospitality, persuading its residents to speak so that she might write.

Hurston's activity might have been without "hurt, harm or danger" to herself, but the community's resistance to her questions indicated that they have perhaps sensed some danger to themselves. At the very least, the nature of oral culture has shifted when stories were cast in the permanence of print since a significant characteristic of the stories conveyed orally is their demand to be revised as they were retold. Although the men in Eatonville did consent to relate "them old-time tales" (Mules 8), her trip was not entirely successful because outside of Eatonville, where residents knew her immediately as Zora, “very little was said directly to me and when I tried to be friendly, there was a noticeable disposition to fend me off”(Mules 60) Although she spent her childhood among these tales, she is suspected of merely impersonating a member of the rural community: "They all thought I must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind. . . The car made me looks too prosperous" (Mules 60-61). She responded by impersonating someone on the other side of the law, "a fugitive from justice," specifically a bootlegger (Mules 61). As her ethnographic career progressed - particularly as conveyed in the second section of Mules and Men, which describes hoodoo practices in Louisiana - Hurston is able to
"go native" successfully precisely because she already is a native. She is simply a local. She is accustomed to hearing folk tales similar to the ones she collected. She became apprenticed to hoodoo practitioners because she accepted these practices as authentic (Robert Hemmenway 122). By the time she has constructed her ethnographic text, she has acquired experiential knowledge of the efficacy of the hoodoo that she describes. Although she have continued to notice events in terms of their ethnographic value, her anthropological lens is positioned, perhaps, at a different angle than that of other conventionally trained anthropologists; she has made no claims to objectivity.

In Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston is more explicit about her initial inability to be simultaneously both insider and outsider; she could not shed one person for another as easily as she must if she is to succeed: Her life for the first six months is disappointing. She has found out later that it is not because she has no talents for research, because she did not have the right approach. The glamour of Barnard College is still upon her. She has dwelt in marble halls. She knows where the material is all right. But asks, carefully accented Barnardese,

Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?" The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at her and shook their heads: “. . . . Oh, I got a few little items. But compared with what I did later, not enough to make a flea a waltzing jacket. Considering the mood of my going south, I went back to New York with my heart beneath my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley. (Dust Tracks 127-28)

These lines clearly expresses, the narrative self is constructed similarly in both texts as an individual able to critique her situation analytically and simultaneously at ease, expressing that critique in colloquially figurative speech. This flea-sized waltzing jacket not only indicates the minuscule number of stories that Hurston has collected but further suggests the vibrant character of the material itself, undermining any desire to perceive these stories as discrete, inert objects. Further, this image recalls Hurston's "tight chemise" cited earlier, the garment that constrains her from
recognizing her culture as folk; both figures metaphorize clothing in order to demonstrate Hurston's inability to proceed with her anthropology while she is situated either entirely within or entirely beyond the boundary which distinguishes folk from academic culture (Mules 1).

Hurston's material is still more complicated; however, since the "life" that she is writing about is neither clearly individualized nor comprehensively revealed. Although in urging her to write an autobiography, her publisher has asserted that Hurston's success in itself deservedly warranted an autobiography in the conventional sense, the success of an unique individual rising above circumstances and proving her mettle. “Although Hurston frequently presents herself as different from many of her peers, the story she tells is not of the rugged American individualist” (Hemenway 279). She consistently attempts, in other words, to portray herself as a member of a community even when her ability to communicate with her neighbors is compromised by her "Barnardese." And the emphasis in both books shifts between the life and the self, the "bio" and the "auto"; the "graph" then is unable to stabilize any of the fluid boundaries of the self or the life, particularly that slippery border between them. Hurston's investment in the "graph" is itself debatable, since she identifies her own past as part of her folklore while identifying that lore as an event which shifts according to the telling. These texts are not specifically literary autobiographies; Hurston mentions her books only briefly, although she frequently refers to the evolution of her consciousness, in childhood, as a reader and storyteller. More significantly, perhaps, is the disjuncture between Hurston's understanding of herself as a member of a particular community and the memberships that her readers would assign to her. Identifying herself as a member of the African-American rural community while collecting her ethnographic material, Hurston has insured her success not only among the members of that community - she is eventually able to gather the material - but also among her potential readers, who, to a great extent, would read her precisely. Hurston's conflict has occurred initially when she has turned her “objective” anthropological gaze upon her subjects, and eventually also herself, while acknowledging the emotional resonance this culture retained for her (Hemenway 62). For her initial readers, however, tension arise when she has
constructed herself as also a member of national and international community’s by commenting on national and international events, a declaration her editors were unwilling to accept.

The historical shift in terminology is important for identifying herself as a "Negro," Hurston would be identifying herself as by definition "not white"; to the extent that "American" has been historically (culturally, if not always legally) collapsed into "white," Hurston would have been unable to identify herself as both "Negro" and "American" because the power of definition resided with the dominant culture, whose members practically perceived no necessity to identify themselves in terms of their own race. Individuals who have described themselves in terms of race were perceived by the dominant culture to be holding, at best, dual citizenship, a situation that was both unusual and suspect in the United States. A term such as African American would have sounded disconcerting at best, for "American" is inclusive only to the extent that individuals were not perceived as retaining another citizenship. Individuals could not be simultaneously marked as the other and unmarked as American. If, as Gates suggests that:

dark skin constitutes an individual as a "cipher" - that is, both a code and a non-entity, a code for zero - then an African American would be deciphered by whites only according to skin, and any experience beyond the one clearly related to skin color would be invisible to whites and declared non-existent. (291)

So Hurston, to be read, to be comprehensible, must be marked by the stylus of race, which erases some identities as it inscribes others. This history, however, is, if not exactly apocryphal, certainly influenced by its communal construction and oral transmission. In her determination to contextualize her life for her reader, Hurston appears to begin at a beginning well before her individual beginning, but she leaves this beginning undifferentiated in time. Hurston states that:

"It all started," she asserts without providing a clear grammatical antecedent to "It." One could assume that "It" refers to Eatonville, but such an assumption would not be entirely accurate, since "it all started with three white men on a ship off the coast of Brazil." Since Hurston
has already declared that Eatonville is "a pure Negro town," white men on a ship would seem to be irrelevant (Dust Tracks 1).

"It" is not even the idea of Eatonville, since Hurston will subsequently reveal the genesis of the idea of Eatonville, but perhaps "It" is the chance, or possibility, of Eatonville.

Hurston moves from her birth to introspection. Yet the vast majority of the introspection she reveals occurs in her childhood, and the questions she continues to ask throughout the text remain the questions of a child. Hurston, in other words, describes how she becomes herself in terms of her private self rather than approaching her private self through her public self, or through the persona her readers ascribe to her; she does not construct her autobiographical self as one authorized by her previous authorial activity. So though she is writing an autobiography specifically because she has produced previous texts and hence readers, she does not approach her written self, the "I" in her autobiography, as a reader examining a writer, or as a private individual investigating a public presence, but rather as an individual whose primary life is private. She reveals enough of the life of her imagination to clarify how she has become the individual called Zora Neale Hurston and not the author classified as Zora Neale Hurston. For the most part, she writes as if unaware that one will read her autobiography through his familiarity with the rest of her works.

Hurston created an additional opportunity for legend to develop around her by refusing to walk until what seemed to her family to be an unusually late age. From the moment she took her first steps, however, she acquires the urge to reach the horizon, the place where time and space meet. Her wanderlust united interiority with distance, for she describes it as an "inside urge to go places" (DT 22). Since in her childhood she could go to the places physically, she burrows inward in order to travel imaginatively. Hurston frequently describes her life as a pilgrimage, implying that travel has both purpose and destination. Indeed that purpose is destination. Simultaneously, “Hurston portrays the structures of her childhood beliefs as whimsically naive and reveals that her journey throughout childhood was ever toward disillusion” (Raynaud, "Rubbing" 34). Hurston’s initial portraits of herself present her
as a girl who assumed a rightful existence in the world and who believed in the power of desire to achieve its own fulfillment. When the child Zora's beliefs were contradicted by empirical fact, Hurston's tone is ironic, though she generally retained sympathy for the longing that ignited the child's imagination and has created her fanciful mistakes. She opens her first example with an anecdote that ominously foreshadows her mother's death:

Naturally, I felt like other children in that death, destruction and other agonies were never meant to touch me. Things like that happened to other people, and no wonder they were not like me and mine. (Dust Tracks 26)

At times Hurston does seem to have been a peculiarly introverted and isolated child, living in a world inhabited only by characters of her own creation, namely Miss Cornshucks, Mr. Sweet Smell, Miss Corn-Cob, Reverend DoorKnob, and the Spool People. These found-toys, personalities become semi-permanent tenants of her imagination, until her consciousness shifts and they fail to satisfy:

They all stayed around the house for years, holding funerals and almost weddings and taking trips with me to where the sky met the ground. I do not know exactly when they left me... One day they were gone... (D T 56-57).

Hurston's allusion to Midas is puzzling, since she apparently constructs Midas's gold as positive; clearly Midas's gold is "real," and substantial as opposed to gilt, but the point of the myth is that Midas's gold is undesirable (or that Midas's desire is undesirable). Perhaps the gold of memory is inevitably Midas's gold; perhaps in longing for her "halcyon days," Hurston is acknowledging that those days are desirable only while they remain unattainable. If Midas is among the "heroic shapes" constructed of clouds, then the "halcyon days" that occurred long before Hurston's birth, and the "age when children are fit company for spirits" is a mythic age. Hurston's longing for these idealized days of childhood together with her discomfort as a child, suggests that one of her interests in this text is resolving that ambivalence.

Significantly, Hurston spent not merely an extraordinary chunk of her childhood wrapped in these fantasies, but she also devoted five pages of her autobiography to
them. This tendency is consistent throughout *Dust Tracks on a road*, and one must eventually question Hurston's motive in so privileging the interests of her childhood. Clearly, she considers the part of her childhood prior to her mother's death - that is, prior to her own adolescence - as the most pleasant phase of her life, and she may also consider it the most interesting. She may also be using these episodes to explore the life of her imagination, and the relationships among her childhood fantasies, her adult life, and her task of creating an autobiography, for she concludes a subsequent incident, one which also foregrounds her vivid childhood imagination as she persuades her peers that a neighbor has a secret life as an alligator, with the statement that "my phantasies were still fighting against the facts," a statement which the reader might be sorely tempted to revise into the present tense (DT 60).

Hurston’s entire disillusion did not occur as a direct, and perhaps expected, effect of her maturation however. “Her emphasis on community throughout her autobiography might be an attempt to overcome her exclusion from it, to guarantee her inclusion by reconciling herself to her difference from it” (Lenz 105). She lost her sense of her inherent right to a place in the world, and the universe was "happy to break a few rules," for her sake when she was enrolled at a boarding school subsequent to the death of her mother, when she became, in effect, a charity case, because her father failed to pay her fees (D T 26). Hurston is confronted by this fact as if she herself is responsible, though the goal of the reprimand was more likely to shame her than to insure payment:

Every few days . . . I was called in and asked what I was going to do. After a while she [a woman Hurston identifies only as the "Second in Command"] did not call me in, she would just yell out of the window to where I might be playing in the yard. (DT 77)

Hurston's growth is here expressed in terms of diminishment; as her age increases, the strength of her spirit decreased. Here, one might suspect that any sunlight which surrounded her achieved only gilt. This profound disillusion has occurred from outside her community by virtue of her exclusion, but also from her natal community. For soon after her mother's death, she is excluded from Eatonville
to a school in Jacksonville. Although Hurston has earned her fees by scrubbing stairs, at the end of the school year, she was entirely without any position: “I kept looking out of the window so that I could see Papa when he came up the walk to the office. But nobody came for me. Weeks passed, and then a letter came. Papa said that the school could adopt me” (DT 79). The school declines, sending her literally up the river on a paddle boat with the price of a ticket in her pocket. As all journeys ended up for her, the trip itself was exciting, despite the impetus for it. Because her father remarried, her home no longer resembled a home for her; although she might keep her eyes on the horizon, although she might retain a destination, she lost her point of departure. Hurston describes this least expected emotional separation from her father as a beginning to a much longer pilgrimage, characterized by poverty and alienation:

My vagrancy had begun in reality. . . . There was an end to my journey and it had happiness in it for me. It was certain and sure. But the way! Its agony was equally certain. It was before me, and no one could spare me my pilgrimage. The rod of complement was laid to my back. I must go the way. (DT 83-84)

Hurston knows the way and the end because she has been receiving visions for several years. These visions portray her emotional homelessness and are therefore significant to this chapter. She again links landscape to her interior life, as if she is somehow simultaneously mendicant and eremite:

So my second vision picture came to be. I had seen myself homeless and uncared for. There was a chill about that picture which used to wake me up shivering. I had always thought I would be in some lone, arctic wasteland with no one under the sound of my voice. I found the cold, the desolate solitude, and earless silences, but I discovered that all that geography was within me. It only needed time to reveal it. (DT 83)

Hurston is constructing these visions, which has more symbolic than narrative value. Although these visions demonstrate that she has access to supernatural knowledge, they themselves neither drive the plot nor reveal Hurston's character to such an extent as, for example, her childhood fantasies do. Her experience of the visions is elaborated only when they are introduced, and when Hurston perceives them for the
first time. Then, she describes the experience of having the visions, though she does not describe the visions themselves: Certainly I was not more than seven years old, but I remember the first coming very distinctly. . . . I saw a big raisin lying on the porch and stopped to eat it. There was some cool shade on the porch, so I sat down, and soon I was asleep in a strange way” (DT 41-42). Hurston’s experience at school kept her "shrunk up inside" (DT 41), here, her soul is said to have "shrunk away" (DT 41); yet here she accepted the incident as justified. She perceived these forthcoming events as inevitable and hence necessary, while the abuse of power she experienced at school is not only unnecessary but also futile. Since she seems determined to present herself as unique elsewhere, her attention to her fantasies, which is a "normal" childhood experience, rather than to these visions, would seem to subvert her intent; her tendency to present herself both as typical and singular can be read as contradictory impulses. Simultaneously, her insistence on her life of fantasies as unusual can be interpreted in terms of degree rather than kind. If many children engage in fantasies, their fantasies may not be so elaborate or extended as Hurston's.

In her life, Hurston must have negotiated the distinction between being perceived as unique and being eroticized. Occasionally, she describes herself as simply different from others, regardless of the race of those others, though her interpretation implicitly is that her trait is the superior one: "I was miserable, and no doubt made others miserable around me, because they could not see what was the matter with me, and I had no part in what interested them" (DT 85); "I wanted what they could not conceive of" (DT 86); Hurston describes, “I have read many books where the heroine was in love for a long time without knowing it. . . . That is not the way it is with me at all. I have been out of love with people for a long time. . . . But when I fall in, I can feel the bump” (DT 181). When she describes how others, especially white acquaintances, have perceived her as unusual, she is much less comfortable. When this has occurred during her teenage years, she argues that this reaction is independent of race, though, as years passed, she has acknowledged the significance of such a reaction. Working as a lady's maid to a singer when she is a teenager, Hurston is singled out for teasing by many members of the company. Although she attributes this reaction to her speech rather than to her skin color, her
description of these interactions raises questions about her interpretation “I was the only Negro around. But that did not worry me in the least. I had no chance to be lonesome, because the company welcomed me like, or as, a new play-prettty” (DT98). It did not strike her as curious that she never even thought about it. Now, she can see the reason for it. In the first place, she is a Southerner, and has the map of Dixie on her tongue. The people who mingle with her are all Northerners accept the orchestra leader, who has come from Pensacola. It is not that her language is bad, it is the idioms. The northerners does not know of the way an average Southern people, white or black, is raised on simile and invective.

Though Hurston can argue that this reaction is based on her speech, a regional rather than racial characteristic, her presentation of this experience indicates that the other members of the company interpreted her speech as a racial characteristic; they didn't realize that white children also speak figuratively. Their attribution of her speech to her race is much more significant than her assertion that such a belief would be mistaken. Hurston claims that "anybody whose mouth is cut cross-ways is given to lying" (DT 192), she does not clarify whether that lying is with intent to entertain through exaggeration or to deceive through misrepresentation. She generalizes that African-Americans characteristically provide satisfying, if not informative, answers to intrusive questions, and she includes herself among those who cultivate this practice:

We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing... The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantry. (Mules 2-3)

Language need not create vulnerability for the speaker. According to another folktale, language can actively protect the speaker. In this tale, Mr. Jim Allen, an employee of a mill, whom Hurston visits in Polk County, reveals why a snake can be poisonous, and this snake could easily signify any marginalized group. In giving the snake poison, “God instructs him, 'When they trumps on you, protect yo’ self' ”(Mules
When the snake appears to be over-zealous in his self-defense, Jim Allen claims “Ah can’t tell who my enemy is and who my friend is. You gimme dis protection in my mouf and Ah uses it” (Mules 97). To the extent that this snake can represent human beings, the protection would be language rather than literal poison, since language is the individualizing characteristic humans hold in their mouths. Yet on other occasions, lying, in its negative sense, is linked to race, or to racial epithet, though Hurston again attempts to discount the specifically racialized nature of the comment with a footnote: "The word Nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race" (DT 30). Yet, the word Nigger, however specifically it is defined, cannot fail to connote dark skin. It can be transferred across races, as Hurston claims. If characteristics of a "Nigger" include weakness and contemptibility, then another "weak, contemptible person" could be metaphorized as a "Nigger." But the word itself does not lose its racial valence. During this incident, Hurston received advice from the "white man who had helped me get into the world," a white man who, subsequent to his performance as midwife, had demonstrated a particular interest in Hurston” (D T 30).

Hurston declines to comment, either to the man or to the reader, on this advice. We have already seen, however, that one doesn't necessarily "lay [one's] self open by lying" (Dust Tracks 31); the "feather-bed resistance" Hurston describes is itself an instruction in how to "fight it out" (Mules 2, Dust Tracks 31). Hurston concludes Mules and Men with a story that indicates that she herself may be offering "feather-bed resistance," that the joke is on the reader. Hurston tells the story of Sis Cat, who is once reprimanded by a rat for failing to wash before she ate. When the cat stops to wash, to practice her manners the rat escapes. Subsequently, the cat claims: 'Oh, Ah got plenty manners, . . . . But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards” (245-46). Fooled once, the cat is twice wise. She's perfectly comfortable with the possibility that she will be perceived as ill-mannered, as uncivilized, perhaps even in the right circumstances as exotic, because her poor manners are strategic. Sis Cat understands the self-interest of the rat that purports to instruct her for her own good. Sis Cat recognizes the fact that conformity to the rules of her prey will guarantee her defeat and eventual demise. So when Hurston
concludes *Mules and Men* by signifying on this tale, she seems to declare herself the one who laughs last: "I'm sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin' my manners" (DT 246). The intriguing question for readers, of course, is who plays rat to her cat. One could assume that the rat represents the folktales that Hurston has caught, but a more probable, if uncomfortable, interpretation is that Hurston is positioning the reader as her rat. Susan Willis suggests that:

> We might say that Hurston's project is analogous to cursing the master. But because her medium is the narrative, rather than oral language, she can't take refuge down at the gate and do her cursing in private. Instead, she must do her "specifying" in the form of a book Ole Massa can hold in his hands and read on his very own porch (113).

Hurston demonstrates how truths are constructed and reconstructed. For Hurston, “truths” are almost always proven on the basis of the self’s misrecognition of what the self is and what it wants rather than on its recognition. As a novelist, who perceives “lying” as a likely “truth” (Gilmore 106), Hurston further shows the reader how the so-called truth could be retold in her own way. “By admitting her lies, Hurston comes closest to the truth” (Krasner 116). Autobiographies in this sense are not more real than fictions. Both autobiographies and fictions are all narrative-based, and are all “verbal fiction in that they are all structured, selected, invented and shot through with a kind of literariness such as metaphor, allusion and juxtaposition” (Childs 151). In her essay “Art and Such,” Zora Neale Hurston describes the pitfalls of political writings; she notes that the stifling of originality, particularly in African-Americans’ works concerning race issues, was detrimental to the texts’ literary value. Hurston herself was pushed to write politically; for instance, “Bertram Lippincott used his publishing prerogative in requesting that Hurston fall in line with the prevailing ‘colored person tells all’ syndrome that was flooding the American markets at this time” [Harris-Lopez 51]. Hurston, however, is uncomfortable sharing too much of her inner self, so she fills her non-fiction works, *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, with folk tales. The folk genre, then, allows Hurston to “set something outside the door of her mind for [the white man] to play with and handle, so that her
deepest thoughts and feelings can remain hidden” (MM 3). The use of folklore, however, has another purpose, namely, to “transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (Bell 73). Folklore, then, is a form of social commentary that validates communal practices and evaluates social norms. As such, folklore is affected constantly by its context.

African-American folklore, in particular, “stems from residual elements of the oral tradition of Africa, each fulfilling a psychological and social need in the lives of slaves, fused with the leading white and indigenous native American culture. This syncretism process created a new system of shared symbols that, even though complementary, was different in pattern and emphasis from both its European and its African antecedents” (Bell 74-75). Thus, African-American folklore is comprised of multiple sub-genres, a concept which Hurston explores in her non-fiction works Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road. By paying homage to multiple folklore genres, Hurston creates a holistic picture of the African-American folklore identity, notably; she recognizes that Western myth, African forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque all influence the African lore of the American South. In doing so, Hurston creates a more complicated picture of African-American folklore: she reveals that myth, a term used to denote Western mythology, communicates the heroic identity. African forms reinforce communal identity. Fairy tales provide relatable archetypes, and the picaresque novels promote gender stereotypes. Then she moves beyond these forms to subvert genre expectations thereby creating a new folklore that is representative of her contemporary African-American experience. Placing Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road in comparison with each other, however, requires the two works to be generically similar. For example, both Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road are labeled as non-fiction even though they contain a number of significant literary elements.

In Mules and Men, Hurston creates the events that are large narrative arcs which exist over the individual recordings of folklore. Notably, she spends much
of the text talking about her flirtations with the men of Eatonville, which ultimately escalates into a fight among Lucy, Big Sweet and her. Though these events may have occurred during Hurston’s ethnographic study, their presentation in *Mules and Men* follows a literary structure, the climax of which transports the reader between parts one and two of the text. By including narrative arc, Hurston uses literary elements to switch gears and begin her discussion of hoodoo; she also justifies her hasty retreat from Eatonville. Thus, the literary elements included in *Mules and Men* are both entertaining and functional; furthermore, they do not take away from the text’s accuracy, but rather enrich Hurston’s work by adding excitement to the narrative.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* also contains passages that are literary in form and function. For example, Hurston includes long narratives discussing her interaction with Miss Corn-Cob and Mr. Sweet Smell, fictional characters that she has created during her childhood. Though these passages do little to illuminate Hurston’s life experiences, they depict the development of her imagination. Thus, by including these stories Hurston emphasizes her creativity and imagination with the world at an young age. She also highlights her ability to create a literary narrative by showing character growth and plot development through the lives of Miss Corn-Cob and Mr. Sweet Smell. As a result, Hurston reveals her particular proclivity for creating literature within her autobiography. While these stories probably are based on facts, in the sense that Hurston truly have played with corn husks at a young age, their factual value is nearly negligible when compared with the way in which the literary elements enhance the reader’s perception of Hurston. Consequently, Hurston’s combination of the literary and factual elements adds depth and richness to her works one critic in particular, James Clifford, notes that from the seventeenth century on fictive and non-fictional works were often considered to be distinct genres containing very specific elements. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, he comments that “Literary texts were deemed to be metaphoric and allegorical, composed of inventions rather than observed facts; they allowed wide latitude to the emotions, speculations, and the subjective ‘genius’ of their authors” (5). Novels have become a creative outlet for those who wanted to tell stories.
Ethnographers, on the other hand, were cultural scientists whose purpose is to examine and expose the inner workings of an exotic culture. The disparity between the two genres, particularly in terms of their purpose, left no room for interpretation. This cut-and-dry philosophy has, unfortunately, been used by many Hurston critics, including Alice Walker, who have noted that “Novels offer us the authentic self, and ethnographies offer us authentic others. In the novel, we have access to, and in fact sometimes occupy, the interior of characters; in the ethnography, we access the interior of a group of others” (John Laudun 45). Though Walker’s intent is to distinguish further between literature and ethnography, she effectively provided a means by which one can read the two genres into one another.

In Mules and Men, the readers certainly see “interior” folk practices of the people of Eatonville. At the same time, Hurston provides the archetypal characters of Big Sweet and Lucy, who have a protagonist-antagonist relationship. She also provides a multifaceted portrayal of herself as ethnographer, folk participant, and desirable female. Similarly, in Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston provides the readers with the “authentic self” in all its creative and manipulated forms, as well as historical figures who has aided Hurston throughout her tumultuous life. By including characters who exist on both sides of Walker’s dichotomy, Hurston creates a new, albeit intricate, way of looking at literary nonfiction; as critic D.A. Boxwell notes, “Hurston shift[s] the stable ground of traditional anthropology by the ways in which she presents the self in the act of participating in, and subsequently recording, the ‘folklore event’” (Boxwell 606). Hurston’s inclusion of the self in both Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road not only subverts anthropological expectations, but also challenges conventions related to autobiography.

Traditionally, autobiographies have been viewed as similar to ethnographies: both provide an in-depth, factual description of a particular person or culture. The difference between the two is subject: ethnography examines a particular group, while autobiographies describe an individual being. By overlapping these two themes, that is, by including a description of self within her analysis of culture, Hurston becomes a part of the folk which she studies. Domina aptly describes the intersection between
autobiography and ethnography in Hurston’s non-fiction by commenting that in Hurston’s view, the generic distinctions between ethnography and autobiography are: in Mules and Men, her own activity provides the narratorial grid onto which various folk tales are inscribed, whereas in Dust Tracks on a Road Hurston constructs her life in such a way that many events and characters acquire mythical significance; in her folklore, in other words, she tells her own story, while in her autobiography, she includes much “lore” (DT 1). By recognizing the similar generic function of Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road, Domina, a critic makes an attempt at establishing the value of folklore in these works; however, she does not make the connection between folklore and social commentary. In Hurston’s non-fiction works, social issues, whether serious or entertaining, lie at the heart of folktales. For example, when visiting the men at the lumber yard, Hurston utilizes the “Old Massa” accounts to reflect the folk tellers’ social context. The tales portray how John, a slave, frees himself from the bonds of “Old Massa” through his intelligence. The men in the labor camp, similarly, free themselves from the demands of the white culture by rejecting the orders of the swamp boss; their engagement with folklore furthers this sentiment by uniting the men around folktales, or the specific expression of their community. In Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston pushes folklore further by deftly exploiting the genres of myth, African folktale, fairy tale, and picaresque tales and highlights the African folk experience for contemporary society. Thus, an analysis of each of these genres reveals Hurston’s deep perception of African identity through folk culture.

At the very beginning of her autobiography, Hurston places herself within the African folk community and describes the “memories within that came out of the material that went to make me” (DT 1). Here, Hurston demonstrates that her identity has been shaped by myth and lore that preceded her birth. Soon after, she reaffirms her connection to folklore by recounting the lore that she read as a child: “Gulliver’s Travels, Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales” (DT 390). By citing these texts as highly influential on her during her childhood, Hurston reveals her connection with the folklore of other cultures. Furthermore, she places these tales in comparison with the “lies” told on the porches
of Eatonville. Hurston’s fascination with these legends, then, is completely understandable; for her, one form of folklore informs the other, creating a rich and complex image of existential concerns. By collecting African-American lore, then, Hurston places her culture’s lore alongside the memorialized one to construct “a bridge between the ‘primitive’ authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts” (Box well 616). The end result is two works, *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, both of which employ folklore to create a holistic picture of the African folk identity. Hurston’s birth, in particular, uses mythic images to establish her distinctive identity. For example, her birth narrative includes many “generic conditions of a legend: She is born in dire circumstances, saved through outside intervention, prophesied over, named somewhat mysteriously, threatened with natural disaster in the form of a hungry sow, and perhaps subjected to hoodoo” (Domina 5). Although the myths found in *Mules and Men* connects Hurston’s birth to African American folklore, a comparison between Hurston’s birth narrative and Greek myth does prove fruitful. The legend of Hercules, in particular, mirrors Hurston’s own journey, a fact which is not surprising because “Of the Greeks, Hercules moved [her] most” (DT 39). These similarities begin at birth, when both Hercules and Hurston were saved from death by an unlikely hero.

Hercules, the son of Zeus and his human conquest Alcmene, is targeted by Hera, Zeus’ wife, because he is evidence of Zeus’ infidelity. To prevent Hercules’ birth, Hera placed a curse on Alcmene. When Alcmene’s servant, Galan, became aware of this plot, he divulges to Hera that Hercules was already born; she consequently removed the curse and unwittingly grants the child life. Soon after, Hercules’ heroic identity was established through prophecy. In a similar way, Hurston’s birth was marked by traumatic circumstances that ultimately determined her heroic nature. She is born in seclusion, and was saved from death by a stranger. This man, who was not given a name in the text, has become emotionally invested in Hurston’s upbringing; in particular, with moral advice to mould her character: “never let nobody spit on you nor kick you. Anybody who takes a thing like that ain’t worth the powder and shot it takes to kill ‘em, hear?” (DT 31). Though not prophetic, these words built Hurston’s moral character. Furthermore, these conversations have shaped
Hurston’s heroic qualities by providing her with laws and rules by which to live amoral life: “Truth is a letter from courage. I want you to grow guts as you go along. So don’t you let me hear of you lying” (DT 31).

Hurston’s interactions with the stranger have established her as being morally superior to other human beings; when he told her not to “be a nigger,” she was careful to note that “the word nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a contemptible person of any race” (DT 30). Thus, when Hurston has lived by the stranger’s moral codes, she behaves in a way that emphasized her moral nature. The rest of Hurston’s heroic identity is established through her subversion of the Hercules story. Perhaps the simplest way Hurston has played with myth is by highlighting her father’s discontentment with her gender: “I don’t think he ever got overhead trick he felt that I played on him by getting born a girl, and while he was off from home at that” (DT 19). She also has subverted conventional naming traditions by being named after something exotic, rather than something directly related to her lineage or heroic nature. Her name, Zora, is mysterious in origin, but Hurston speculates that it came from a book, or perhaps is written on a box of Turkish cigarettes” (DT 21). The ambiguity surrounding her name differs greatly from that of Hercules, whose name literally means “for the glory of Hera”; it is an ironic designation, considering that he was born of a union between Zeus and one of his human conquests. The greatest distinction between these two figures, however, was the manner of their early adventures. While Hercules went into Nature in order to conquer it, Hurston went into the world to discover the beauty it had to offer. Hurston demonstrates her connection to Nature by creating her own myth:

Naturally, the world and the firmaments careened to one side a little so as not to inconvenience me […] For instance, for a long time I gloated over the happy secret that when I played outdoors in the moonlight, the moon followed me, whichever way I ran (DT 26).

In Dust Tracks, Hurston’s perceptions of the moon constitute her earliest engagement with story-telling. As she grows, Nature continues to play a significant role in her fictional creation. For example, while shucking corn for a family dinner,
Hurston composes a lengthy narrative about Miss Corn-Shuck, Miss Corn-Cob, and Mr. Sweet Smell. When their adventures fail to provide her with any sense of creative satisfaction, Hurston begins to create stories around human subjects. One reason Hurston writes about real-life situations is to determine her understanding of the African-American identity, which she explores through African folk forms. In particular, she comments on social issues, particularly education. To show her transition from childhood tales to more serious matters, Hurston describes her engagement with the African folk form:

> There is an age when children are fit company for spirits. Before they have absorbed too much of earthly things to be able to fly with the unseen things that soar. There came a time when I could look back on the fields where we had picked flowers together but they, my friends, were nowhere to be seen. (DT 56-57)

Here, Hurston regretfully elucidates the loss of her child-like imagination by referencing Midas; thus, her stories become girt in the hands of their aging creator, a person whose mind has become so disconnected from childish things that she can no longer resurrect the spirits of Miss Corn-Cob or Mr. Sweet Smell. Though Hurston’s loss of childlike wonder is certainly regrettable, it also moves Hurston to write about humanity at large: “It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes inherent difference, no” (DT 171). Hurston’s tales analyses the human experience that emphasize a collective human identity through the form of the folk tale.

Hurston develops the African folk form further in her discussion of education. Here, she uses social commentary to express the disparity between educational standards for African-Americans and Caucasian Americans. *Mules and Men*, for example, includes two folk narratives concerning education. When it is compared with *Dust Tracks on a Road*, these tales reveal the strengths and weaknesses within formal education, as well as Hurston’s own educational experience. In the first tale, a man sends his daughter to school, hoping that she will return with skills and help their family. The limitations of her education are quickly
revealed, however, when he asks her to create a formal written expression for an abstract sound. Since she is unable to complete the task, the father assumes that her education has been worthless. In a similar way, Hurston confronted similar sentiments when she returned to Eatonville after receiving college degree. Though her immediate family is highly educated, Hurston knew that formal education is not well regarded in her home community for two main reasons: firstly, education’s focus on literature and philosophy had no practical application in the community of Eatonville during the 1930s; secondly, education acted as a social distinguisher.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston depicts both conflicts by describing her attempt to collect folklore from African-American communities of the South. She notes that her earliest efforts resulted in failure, “Because I did not have the right approach […] I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese” (DT 144). Instead of talking with Hurston, the interviewees distrusted Hurston because of her use of formal discourse; in fact, they might not have even understood that their neighborhood tales were “folk tales and folk songs” (D T 144). Furthermore, they were uncertain of Hurston’s motives because they could not see the academic value of collecting and chronicling the folk tales of their communities.

The connection between folklore and education, then, reveals that formalized education is not valued in African-American communities of the South because it did not recognize non-Western forms of scholarship. Although Hurston’s engagement with anthropology and ethnography suggests that she has replaced the imaginative world of her childhood with objective scientific study, her academic publications *In Mules and Men*, for example, Hurston includes her own telling of folk tales within her anthropological accounts. In doing so, Hurston not only places herself within the community being studied, but also interacts and creates fictional narratives for the purpose of enriching her text. By framing *Mules and Men* with her own fictive works, Hurston establishes herself as both creator of and participant within the folklore event. Hurston has, in essence, compared herself to a folktale character, one eminently worthy of emulation. Hence, *Mules and Men* ends in a creatively affirmative act of self-mystification, “a process which is sustained into her
autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, which begins by describing the unlikely and fantastical founding of her hometown of Eatonville, Florida” (Box well 61). From there, the book develops and subverts traditional folklore patterns by describing Hurston’s birth, adolescence, and adult life. The form of the fairy tale, in particular, is used because it gains specific emotional reactions from readers.

In Hurston’s autobiography, the Cinderella story forms a narrative arc that shows Hurston’s growth from the state of being a poor, undesired child to the state of a successful scholar and writer. One noticeable similarity is that both Hurston and Cinderella lose their mothers at a young age: “Mama died at sundown and changed a world, that is, the world which had been built out of her body and her heart” (DT 67). As she grieves, Hurston analyzes her mother’s role within the family and concludes that:

> Her parents’ romantic relationship may have been marked by difficulties because her “mother took her over-the-creek man and bare-knuckled him from brogans to broadcloth, and I am certain that he was proud of the change, in public. But in the house, he might have always felt over-the-creek, and because that was not the statue he had made for himself to look at, he resented it. (DT 69)

Hurston highlights her parents’ marital misgivings, Hurston foreshadows that her father ends up with an inferior mate, or an “evil stepmother”. As a result, when the stepmother appears in the narrative, she is immediately criticized. Within weeks of the marriage, Hurston’s stepmother throws Sarah, the favorite daughter, out of the house. Sarah’s position as the “favorite daughter” is significant because it suggests that the un-named stepmother wants to establish herself as the female authority within the Hurston household and, to do so, she needs to remove the competition. This scene is also significant for one more reason: it gets Hurston’s blood boiling. In fact, she even goes so far as to threaten her stepmother by saying, “God, how I longed to lay my hands upon my stepmother’s short, pudgy hulk! No gun, no blade, no club would do. Just flesh against flesh and leave the end of the struggle to the hidden Old Women who sit and spin” (Dust Tracks 74). Though Hurston’s reference to the Old Women is
not explained, the texts that influenced Hurston provide a means by which to unpack Hurston’s narrative.

**The Three Spinners** by the Grimm brothers, for example, involves a cruel mother, a seemingly helpless daughter, and three spinners who function as “fairy godmother” types. They appear in Hurston’s own narrative too. In the tale, a mother beats her daughter for idleness and is reprimanded by the queen. To justify her actions, the mother claims that she is preventing her daughter from spinning too much. The queen, is delighted by this information, tells the daughter to spin the castle’s flax; by doing so, she will be eligible to marry the prince. Unfortunately, the daughter cannot spin, so she enlists the aid of three fairies so that she can marry the prince and live happily ever after. **The Three Spinners** reflects Hurston’s family situation by highlighting the cruelty of her stepmother and suggesting that the fate will rescue her. Though reference to this tale does not reappear in the text, Hurston continues building on its themes by discussing her own misfortunes.

Hurston, like her siblings, is heartlessly thrown out of her father’s house by her stepmother. Though Hurston is successful in her studies at the boarding school to which she is sent, she struggles in other ways, particularly when it comes to socializing with her peers; however, she comforted herself by imagining her fairy tale future: “When I would be grown and sit up in my fine palace eating beef stew and fried chicken, that duty-girl was going to be out in my backyard gnawing door-knobs” (DT 81). Unfortunately, Hurston’s fairy tale ending is not in sight. In fact, she is put to work, cleaning the school because her father and stepmother refuse to pay tuition fees. To avenge herself, Hurston gives her “evil stepmother” a beating. Though the exact time when this event took place is unclear (Hurston admits that she is playing with the chronology of events when she shares this story) she notes that she “began to scream with rage. I had not beaten more than two years out of her yet. “I made up my mind to stomp her; but at last, Papa came to, and pulled me away” (DT 77). Upon her defeat, Hurston’s stepmother deserts her husband and demanded a divorce. Hurston achieves a number of goals specific to fairy tales: she vanquished her evil stepmother, grew through suffering, and ultimately has met with success by pursuing her passions.
Hurston’s relationship has flourished for a period of eighteen months, a time in which she regained a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, or, as she states, “I had loosened up in every joint and expanded in every direction” (DT 116). As a result, Hurston has regained herself confidence and decided to return to school, later achieving her “fairy tale” ending by becoming an acclaimed author and folklorist. Thus, Hurston’s work, even that which is labeled as non-fiction, never fully separates itself from the fictive elements of folklore. Even her descriptions of life post Mules and Men fit into patterns established within folklore. For example, in Chapter Fourteen of Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston describes her romantic relationship with P.M.P. When recounting her affections, she claims that “God must have put in extra time making him up.” However, their relationship ultimately failed because they could not reconcile their views on gender roles” (DT 205). Perhaps the best way to understand their relationship is to look at a folk tale from Mules and Men. The story emphasizes how women, even in the traditional role of homemaker, gain power within marriage. Notably, the tale shows how God distributed power to the genders. While men are blessed with greater physical strength, women are given three keys:

Dis first big key is to de do’ of de kitchen and you know a man always favors his stomach. Dis second one is de key to de bedroom and he don’t like to be shut out from dat neither and dis last key is de key to de cradle and he don’t want to be cut off from his generations at all. (MM 33).

Hurston refuses to be a traditional housewife and thereby did not attempt to gain power through conventional routes. Rather, she took man out of the equation and instead focuses on her other love, writing. By doing so, Hurston subverted typical gender relations as portrayed in folklore has embraced her own unique feminine strength. Thus, Hurston’s life aligned with and negated folklore by moving beyond gender stereotypes. Masculinity, in particular, is rewritten in the picaresque. While the picaresque is most commonly associated with western adventures and Latin American tales in which two men travelled into the wilderness, Hurston used the genre to represent her as fitting both masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. For example, during her childhood Hurston portrays herself as an adventurous and, at times,
violent, individual whose sole desire is to explore the world beyond her immediate experience. She notes:

Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grows upon me that ought to walk to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like. The daring of the thing held me back for a while, but the thing became so urgent that I showed it to my friend, Carrie Roberts, and asked her to go with me (DT 27).

Hurston’s desire to venture beyond the known world sets her apart from other little girls, particularly Carrie Roberts, who ultimately decides to cancel the trip because she fears being punished for her adventurousness. Hurston has responded by physically assaulting Carrie, severing their relationship and ending their journey. As in the picaresque, the bond of the two central figures determines the success of the journey. For example, in Cormac McCarthy’s, All the Pretty Horses, John Grady Cole travels into Texas with his best friend Rawlins. The two friends, though frequently in disagreement, provide support for one another in a number of dangerous situations: being pursued by bandits, being imprisoned, and working on a branch. In the end, however, John Grady Cole and Rawlins separate when Cole decides to pursue a love interest rather than return to the United States with his friend. His journey ultimately fails, and, though there are many reasons for this failure, one central cause is his separation from Rawlins. Similarly, Hurston’s disagreement with and separation from Carrie causes their journey to come to an unsatisfying end. This, however, is the point where Hurston broke away from the conventions of the picaresque. Rather than allowing her relationship with Carrie to determine, or even influence, the course of her adventures, Hurston used her own feminine strength to break away from masculine expectations by creating space for her independent lifestyle.

One way in which Hurston asserts her own feminine power is through her engagement with dream-prophecy. In Houston A. Baker’s essay, Workings of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black Women’s Creativity, African-American wise women are attributed with three specific traits: “discernment, prophecy and
healing” (76). By imbuing herself with these characteristics, Hurston has become a wise woman who has achieved superhuman level of greatness. For example, Hurston has studied under the leading ethnographer of her era, Franz Boas, while facing familial and financial hardship. Under his guidance, Hurston collected the most comprehensive body of African American folktales and gained a reputation for her work as both anthropologist and novelist. Such greatness, however, is attributed to Hurston’s wisdom, or her discernment regarding tricky situations. Discernment is an element often missing from the picaresque. The leading characters tend more toward recklessness and spontaneity. As a result, Hurston’s ability to assess and navigate obstacles set her apart from her traditional male counterparts. For example, Hurston initially had trouble collecting African American folk tales because her education placed her in a social sphere separate from the men and women she interviewed. To make it more relatable, Hurston begins to present herself as a bootlegger. In doing so, she has explained her material wealth, her car and somewhat expensive clothing. Bootlegging also establishes Huston as a fugitive, or someone who does not conform to the expectations of the ruling class. As a result, Hurston regained her position in the folklore community. After all, “the essential feature of any identity system is an individual’s belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or, more accurately with what certain symbols stand for” (Spicer qtd in Dundes 8). For the African-American communities in Hurston’s study, then, folklore preserves and upholds a specific cultural identity, one with which Hurston, through her ability of discernment, is identified.

In addition to manipulating her identity masterfully, Hurston possesses the second trait of an African wise woman; she prophesies. Specifically in Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston organizes the story of her life around twelve dream-visions:

Like clear-cut stereopticon slides, I saw twelve scenes flash before me, each one held until I had seen it well in every detail, and then replaced by another. There was no continuity as in an average dream, just disconnected, scene after scene, with blank spaces in between. (DT 41-2)
Following this passage are twelve chapters that outline the major undertakings of Hurston’s life. Though Hurston does not describe her visions in detail, she does allude to these visions throughout the remainder of the book. In Chapter VI, for example, she notes that her first vision, “leaving the village home, bowed down with a grief that was more than common,” has come to pass (DT 71). Her later visions, on the other hand, must have deduced from the narrative. Less than half of the twelve visions are delineated in detail. The mysterious quality of the visions, however, does not negate that Hurston is, within the scope of her autobiography, imbued with the supernatural gift of foresight. Her skill, then, not only positions her as a participant within the folklore event but also subverts masculine identity of the picaresque. The final way Hurston subverts masculine expectations commonly attributed to the picaresque is through her ability to heal. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston engages in numerous rites intended to heal, or remedy, others’ illnesses through hoodoo. For Bernard W. Bell, hoodoo is an essential element of African-American folk culture because “Anti-Black racism” prevented the full participation of blacks in the dominant culture so that their need for symbols and values had to be filled by the ethnic subculture.

This process encouraged the retention, reinterpretation, and syncretism of Africanisms (e.g. hoodoo, conjuring or magic, dance, field holler, work song, and folk tale)” (p 75). Thus, hoodoo not only provided healing for members of African American communities, but also reinforced a specific cultural identity. By participating in hoodoo, then, Hurston reestablished her membership within the African subculture while simultaneously portraying her as possessing superhuman abilities. For example, Hurston notes that the ceremony of getting the black cat bone caused “great beast-like creatures [to thunder] up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! […] but] Before day I was home, with a small white bone for me to carry” (MM 211). In this example, Hurston makes it clear that she, through her participation in hoodoo, survived an experience that would have killed many others. These other-worldly skills also emphasize Hurston’s healing process in the hoodoo section of *Mules and Men,*
Hurston provides specific instructions as to how to solve a number of human problems. For example, she describes how “tying knots in a string can keep a man from committing adultery” (MM 203). By presenting the recipes in this manner, Hurston not only heals one particular relationship but also provides her readers with the means which could heal them. In doing so, Hurston underscores her role as an African wise woman: she discerns, prophesies, and heals. Though not a folk genre itself, hoodoo certainly functions as a folk practice which “transmit[s] knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce[s] conformity to [certain] social norms, validate[s] social institutions and religious rituals, and provide[s] a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (Bell 73). Thus, Hurston’s engagement with hoodoo makes tangible her fascination with the African American folk lifestyle.

Hurston use of folk genres in Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road furthers this passion by allowing Hurston to become a participant within folklore: she alters old forms to reveal the ever-changing identity of both the African American folk community and herself. By doing so, Hurston recognizes the many cultures, European, African, and Native American that have influenced the African American folk community. She also acknowledges the implicit role that culture plays in shaping identity; consequently, Hurston’s non-fiction works argue that folklore is inseparable from an understanding of the self. Folklore, then, reveals an individual’s adherence to a movement from communal norms. For example, in Mules and Men and Dust Tracks on a Road Hurston is portrayed as someone who values African-American cultural and religious practices but feels that the African-American folk-community’s understanding of gender roles is outdated. Similarly, folklore allows Hurston to demonstrate the disconnect between her views and her community’s perceptions of formal education (and does so without pointing any fingers). Thus, Hurston uses folklore as a form of social commentary. In other words, she provides realistic descriptions of social issues without taking a political or moral stance. Reading Hurston through folklore, consequently, allows readers to appreciate Hurston’s complexity without placing socio-political significance onto her works. It also provides a lens through which to understand her.
Much of the difficulty with Hurston's autobiography, dubbed, “auto-ethnography” by Francoise Lionnet, lies in how she crafts a folk persona for her narrative alter-ego. Under the tutelage of renowned anthropologist "Papa" Franz Boas, Hurston learns to refine her research skills and adopts a more casual approach to data collection in order to avoid ostracizing or intimidating her subjects (128). Auto ethnography, in the sense that Hurston's narrative blends autobiographical and ethnographic elements, Dust Tracks on a Road is presented through the perspective of a participant-observer who carefully documents terms, aphorisms, and customs that she thinks may be unfamiliar to the reader. The inclusion of footnotes such as the one that explains that a "love feast" is a pre-Communion religious meeting complete with "great protestations of love and friendship" and examples of extemporaneous folk songs such as "Got on the train and didn't have no fare" sets a tone that is in keeping with social science research, although it also seems to poke fun at and exaggerate certain ethnographic conventions”(193, 133). Leigh Anne Duck argues that Hurston's work sought to insert the folk within a southern modernity. He observes:

[IT]hough she is generally celebrated as an artist whose work resisted racism by emphasizing the holistic, communal values of traditional African-American culture, she has also been widely dismissed as a writer whose representations of the 'folk' accommodated the racism of a nation quick to exploit 'undeveloped' people (265).

Some folklorists applaud Hurston for being the first to record southern dialect and customs from an insider's perspective. But other critics contend that Hurston's literary works provide an overly nostalgic, simplistic, and/or even primitive portrait of African American folk culture that could be manipulated to support white paternalism. Possibly Hurston's work is just too polemical, and her politics too conservative, in an era in which larger-than-life icons such as Bigger Thomas, Clare Kendry, and the "New Negro" dominated the black literary imagination. The work of the historical Zora Neale Hurston straddles the borders of literary categorization: it does not follow the period's model of heated "race literature" (epitomized by the
writings of Richard Wright); neither does it represent the complacent narrative of an apolitical or socially unaware woman.

Even in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston subversively records instances of paternalism on the part of mentors who have befriended her and who act as charitable sponsors. She employs considerable irony to critique some of these benefactors. Zora claims to share a "psychic bond" with her primary patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who also funded Langston Hughes. However, Zora's presentation of her benefactor is textured with judgment. Of her "Godmother," Zora observes: She was extremely human. There she was sitting up there at the table over capon, caviar and gleaming silver, eager to hear every word or every phase of life on a saw-mill "job." I must tell tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down. She is altogether in sympathy with them, because she says truthfully they are utterly sincere in living (DT 129). The borders that separate the bodies of "Godmother" Mason and Zora are fixed: Mason occupies a white space "up there" listening with amusement to the "dark," raucous doings of the African Americans from "farthest down." As Mason dines on exquisite delicacies, she demands that Zora reproduce the folk culture of working-class African-Americans. Unlike Zora's jobs as a maid, waitress, and manicurist, which were clearly defined in terms of physical labor, Mason's patronage supposedly, supported Zora's mental work, and her graduate studies in anthropology.

Zora was reduced to demeaning physical exhibitions that pantomime her research. As in the case of the Eatonville school-visitors discussed earlier, the gaze of a white benefactor on an African-American body leads to a performance on Zora's part. Because Hurston was dependent on the patronage of whites, she was not at liberty to directly criticize them or paint unflattering portraits of them, so she did so indirectly. Young Zora knew that she could not critique her school in the presence of visitors. Similarly, Hurston (the flesh-and-blood person) understands that it is advantageous for her to produce the sort of writing that her patrons would endorse. Thus, the historical Hurston have developed an implied author who allows readers to
recognize the narrator's naiveté and to become aware of the more complex social and economic issues that shaped her world.

In the book, *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson apply narrative terms to autobiographical studies and distinguish the "ideological I" as one of the producers of the autobiographical "I." The "ideological I," or "the concept of personhood culturally available to narrators when they tell their stories," represents the normative conception of personhood for the time and place of the "autobiographical act" (61). Smith and Watson explain that, "[b]ecause every autobiographical narrator is historically and culturally situated, each is a product of his or her particular time. We need, then, to situate the narrator in the historical notion of personhood and the meaning of life at the time of writing" (62). They also observe that some narrators challenge the prevailing ideology, while others emphasize ideological complexity or alter aspects of a story to support a prevailing ideology, as is the case in religious narratives. As a cultural narrative extolling the value of work and ambition, *Dust Tracks on a Road* both supports and overturns the prevailing ideology of the bildungsroman in the tradition of prominent American male writers such as Benjamin Franklin and Henry David Thoreau. Zora tells a typical coming-of-age story in the sense that she upholds the value of a strong work ethic and an optimistic spirit, while avowing to have led a clean life devoid of "coffee, liquor, nor any form of stimulant" (209). At the same time, however, the implied author makes clear Zora's distance from these white male models by relating her experience as a poverty-stricken girl, growing up in an all-black town, and her early dependence on the goodwill of strangers for everything ranging from rides out of Eatonville to getting support for her research.

Hurston condemn her refusal to universalize her experience and to incorporate more obvious race politics in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I contend that the attention the implied author devotes to describing how Zora refashions her body reveals Zora's preoccupation with class, indicating that she is very much aware of the sociopolitical and economic challenges experienced by non-white bodies. The implied author creates a narrative persona who compromises her behavior, seeking the approval of white patrons, because she views the transformation as contingent with
economic survival. The act of dressing herself in borrowed or hand-me-down clothes reflects Zora's desire to transcend the unglamorous reality of her Eatonville roots, reclassifying her identity into one more acceptable within elite academic institutions. Additional rituals of power and hegemony enacted on the radicalized body (for example, the school visitors' and Mason's "Godmother's" interest in watching the "spectacle" of black bodies) expose the extent to which the female black body is viewed as aberrant and peculiar, to the normalized white culture. In short, incidents that play out around the body evince resistance to the accusation that Hurston was not a civil rights advocate in her own way. Her narrator, Zora, might seem content to go along with the status quo, but the author allows readers to know the socio-economic circumstances that inform Zora's decisions. Although Hurston have opposed the idea of writing "race literature" that neatly served the spirit of racial uplift prevalent during her time, the body of her autobiography inscribes a world shaped by hierarchical imbalances. Despite the uneven opportunities presented to her, Zora does her best to succeed in her intellectual pursuits even if it means cloaking her resentment in the presence of her benefactors.

In many ways *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* provides more insight into Hurston’s childhood than *Dust Tracks on a Road* written in a little over two months during 1933; her first novel is autobiographical in terms of character rather than plot. Focusing on the relationship between the black preacher John Pearson and his wife, Lucy Potts, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* reflects Hurston’s ambivalent response to her father and the Eatonville community. Throughout the novel, John Pearson speaks in a voice resonant with the rhythms and images of the African-American sermon. Hurston presents a simplistically affirmative image of the black community. Highlighting the potential limitations of the call and response dynamic, Hurston’s ironic introduction to John’s sermon indicates her awareness that a powerful enough individual voice can manipulate the communal response in a way destructive to individual freedom. “The audience sang with him. They always sang with him well because group singers follow the leader” (JGV 269). Although most critics consider the contradiction between John’s eloquence and his lack of self-understanding an aesthetic fault, the tension expresses one of Hurston’s dominant feminist themes: the hypocritical
divergence of public profession and personal action condoned in males but condemned in women. Like Hurston’s own early life, Jonah’s Gourd Vine suggests that if a southern black woman is to reconcile herself with, and draw on, her folk heritage, she must be able to sing her own (blues) song and define her own (Jazz) reality.

Hurston’s relationship with her family is difficult to understand. Her relationship with her father is dynamic and turbulent. Childhood relationship with other siblings in her family is clouded and seems unimportant or little concern to her. As regards Lucy Potts, Hurston’s mother, and the effect of her death upon the Hurston family, Lucy Hurston is a strong figure and maintained unity within the Hurston household. Lucy Hurston is dominated by her husband and this left a strong impact on Zora Neale. The premature death of Lucy Hurston put an end to the cohesion of the family unit and also directly scarred Zora, who is nine years older at that time. She discloses in her autobiography that her mother particularly requested her that, after her death, she should prevent the family and larger community from performing certain funeral rites in vogue. We don’t know why Lucy Hurston made such a request to little Zora, who obviously carried out her request; it is unclear. The detail with which Zora relates this incident suggests that it haunted her throughout her life. The lack of children’s demands for affection and John Hurston’s turning away from the family to look for a new wife combined to be their undoing.

Lucy Hurston’s encouragement of Zora Jump at de Sun have remained with her, and out of the ashes of the dying Hurston family arose, her courage, showing how independent she is and how tenaciously she withstood all her emotions. These memories are the shadows which reflect in her novels. The deaths of her mother have begun a long period of wandering for Zora. At the age of fourteen, she went out on her own, working at various jobs and travelling extensively. She has fancied herself a wanderer and a student of local cultures. She has developed survival techniques, most notably her ability to talk her way into anything she liked. According to Mr. Hughes, she is an intelligent person, who is clever enough never to allow her education to alienate her from the folk culture that has become the central impulse in her life’s
work. In this connection, one of the most interesting descriptions of her is found in Langston Hughes’s autobiography, *The Big Sea*. In her youth, she is always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of who have simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them. She does it in such a racy fashion. She is full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragic-comic stories, remembers out of her experiences. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, there are several examples of Hurston’s personal experiences in her life. Amy, John’s mother who has a lazy and abusing husband Ned, reflects her own family. But Amy will not let him do that without resistance. She is not afraid to speak her mind. For instance, when Amy forgets her “place” and is too wise and knowing for Ned’s liking, he retorts: “…. You always talkin more’n you know…. You needs uh good head stompin, dass whut. You she is one aggraatin oman” (JGV 2). Later Amy challenges Ned Saying “…. Ah dare yuh tuh hit metoo. You know Ahm uh fight in dawg and mah hide is worth money. Hit me if you dare! Ah’ll wash yo’tub uh gator guts and dat quick” (JGV 3). Amy is the true head of the family, for she is away, defending herself and her children, whether it is with words or with action.

In addition to John’s mother Amy, Lucy’s mother Emetine is also portrayed as an assertive woman, who keeps a strong hold on her family. In other words, she is very commanding, controlling and unbending, contrary to the husband, and the daughter Lucy who are depicted as easygoing and gentle. When Lucy tries to talk sense to her suspicious mother, which she interprets as Lucy being “hard-headed”, she states “Don’t you back talk me when an speak you move” (JGV 73). Later when Lucy has decided to marry John against her mother’s wishes, she says:

Dis gal done provoked me … Ah birthed her, she didn’t bith me, and Ah’ll show her she can’t runde hawg over me” and then she complains to her husband, who is on Lucy’s side, “Dat youngest gal uh your’n done sassed me out, and dared me tuh hut uh. (JVG 78).

These attempts reflect in Zora’s life in her young age. Hurston’s portrayal of the self, as well as her (semi)fictionalized characters, specifically folklore, defines an individual’s role within the larger African-American folk community. Folklore, then,
establishes identity with limited bias and, in doing so, creates more truthful, albeit unfailingly complex, depictions of both Hurston and her characters. **Jonah’s Gourd Vine** is primarily the story of John Pearson, a sharecropper and preacher, and his marriage to Lucy Potts, obviously resembling her parents, in both name and vocation; there is no reason to extend the parallel much further. Hemmingway points out that that he novel portrays John and Lucy in whom she apparently thought of her parents, and the novel’s plot does not follow exactly the family story. The novel traces the life of John Pearson, placing particular emphasis on his personal struggle with her sexuality, and his wife. **Dust tracks on a road** could be regarded as a fictionalized autobiography since it reveals much about Hurston.

Hurston’s fiction **Their Eyes Were Watching God**, has acclaimed as her magnum opus is an autobiographical fiction. It is printed in 1937. Janie, the heroine of this novel has been to the far horizon and comes back to her community and rejoins her people. Janie narrates to another black woman (her best friend Phoebe) what she saw, heard and experienced in her life-journey, and does “return to Eatonville with her hard-won knowledge” (Kubitschek 109). Janie’s autobiography—her very act of describing to Phoebe, her childhood, her three marriages, her female guest, her awakened racial consciousness, her passionate longing not for economic security and social status but for self-discovery, self-empowerment and self-fulfillment—is actually Hurston’s efforts to register and express black women’s desire for love and life in white America. By retelling her heroine’s life stories, Hurston clearly shows the reader how she tells her story to the reader by bringing the reader’s attention to the very process through which the self is formed and reformed. James Krasner has carefully observed: “The most interesting operation in the book is not Janie’s telling of her own success story, but the narrator’s retelling Janie’s telling in order to demonstrate the way in which autobiographical fiction is constructed” (118). Neither Janie’s life stories nor Hurston’s life writing should be regarded as an absolute expression of or the only truth about black women’s joy and sorrow, love and hatred. Instead, it should be taken as the beginning, not the end, of the black women writers’ exploration into the possibilities of black womanhood. In this sense, one would like to ask: “Is it possible, then, to read **Their Eyes Were Watching God** as an example of
female autobiography” (Krasner 118). Nellie McKay suggests the main reasons why she tends to consider this novel to be an autobiographical one: first, in a continuation of one of the oldest traditions in fiction, Janie tells us the story; second, we also know that Hurston invested this narrative with the joy and pain of her own experiences of female development and romantic love, familiar conventions in women’s narratives” (51).

Robert E. Hemmingway’s literary biography of Hurston may also support McKay’s persuasive arguments: Their Eyes were Watching God is a love story. The impetus for the tale came from Zora’s affair with a man of West Indian parentage whom she had first met in New York in 1931 and then found again during her short-lived attempt at graduate school. According to Hemmingway, Hurston might have expressed her deep emotion toward this love affair when it eventually came to an end. “As she admitted, the plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in Their Eyes were watching God” (Hemmingway 231). In this sense, one could not help but identify the “author Hurston”, “the writer self” with the “fictional Janie”, “the speaker self”, since the two voices seem to resonate with each other throughout the novel. Places might be displaced or the lover’s face might be disfigured as time goes by but both Hurston’s writer’s self and speaker’s self share the real passion for their ‘bee’ men. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston lets her heroine Janie, who is very much like Hurston herself, talk and walks in her own way, make her own decisions without hesitations or regrets and pursue her female quest for love and respect even if, by doing so, she acts against others’ expectations. This love story could not simply be regarded as either Hurston’s or Janie’s autobiography. Rather than limiting herself to her “unique” and “personal” experience, Hurston, just as what Janie has done in the novel, would more like to share what she has discovered in her life journey with her black community. Hurston, in fact, by weaving and piecing together the broken fabrics that make up the quilt of a black woman’s life, represents their collective experience by putting words in Janie’s tongue.
Hurston’s love story, in this sense, could be retold or even recreated by any black woman who is ready to embark on a female quest for self-fulfillment. Referring to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker asserts, “There is no book more important to me than this one”. Added to that statement of memorial is a poem composed by Walker dedicated to the main protagonist of Hurston’s novel, a work that has rapidly become recognized as a modern classic. In her collection of poems entitled *Good night, Willie her, I’ll see you in the morning* (1977), Walker writes:

I love the way Janie Crawford  
left her husbands  
the one who wanted to change her  
into a mule  
and the other who tried to interest her  
in being a queen.  
A woman, unless she submits  
is neither a mule  
nor a queen  
though like a mule she may suffer  
and like a queen pace the floor. […]

Within the context of that poem, Walker has accurately interpreted much of the message in Hurston’s novel, understanding that Janie is not satisfied in her marriage to Logan Killicks, especially when she discovers that he plans to force her to work in the fields like a mule. Yet the more subtle psychological brutality exercised by Janie’s second husband Joe Stark is equally offensive. Just after having been elected mayor of Eatonville, he proclaims, upon having just met Janie, one of his initial responses to her cascading hair and light skin, saying that “a pretty doll-baby lak you is made do sit on de front porch and rock and an yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant special for you” (TE 45).

Joe Stark has an intention to make a lady out of the one who has, in his estimation has been gifted with physical beauty and hopefully, a submissive
disposition. It is rather difficult to believe that the similarities in Hurston’s novels are mere coincidence. Born in Eatonville, Florida, at some unidentified point near the turn of the century, Hurston describes in her autobiographical Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) how she “used to climb to the top of one of the huge Chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate, and look out over the world” (DT 2). Young Zora is anxious to behold all that a full life might afford the individual. Further on, in that autobiography, the author tells us, “It grew upon me that I ought to walk out of the horizon and see what the end of the world was like” (DT 9). Similarly, in the very first line of her novel, we are provided with the reflection that “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board” (TE 1). Hurston goes on to explain how some of those ships come in with the tide while others “sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight” (TE 1). Even those men who do not attain their dreams have at least at some point in their lives been able to express themselves, fulfilling their fantasies. At sixteen, the age when the search for identity is most profound, Janie slips out of her grandmother’s house and imagines, “Oh to be a pear tree — any tree in bloom!” (TE 5). Janie expresses complete fulfillment; however, it must be noted that she identifies not with another person, but with a part of Nature. As a “tree” she will be in possession of great strength, awesome beauty, and communion with the natural world” (TE 5).

Hurston’s novels are clearly influenced by the blues, jazz and gospel impulses. The prose of her formal autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road, seems relatively flat in comparison. Its reception is uniformly unfavorable, and it has frustrated as many readers as it has enlightened. Unreliable as a source of purely factual information, Dust Tracks on a Road both seems politically quiescent and reveals almost nothing of the motivations behind Hurston’s controversial actions, though it attempts to create a new type of black woman’s narrative, demanding a specifically public, and decisively autonomous, persona. Hurston presents her life as a self-motivated escape from the forces that would limit her, whether imposed by blacks or whites. Ironically, the original publisher of Dust tracks on a Road eliminated or required substantial revision of three chapters included in the original manuscript. The chapters “My people, My people!” and “seeing the world as it is
(DT) were revised and the novel reflects a much sharper political awareness than anything included in the first published version. Because Dust Tracks on a Road evades or misrepresents certain facts of Hurston’s life – her birth date is the most famous example – Robert Hemingway’s Definitive Zora Neale Hurston: A literary biography (1977) is of inestimable value.

The first fully realized biography of an African American woman writer, Hemingway’s book does an admirable job of untangling the factual evidence concerning Hurston’s life and identifying unresolved biographical issues. Although Hemingway has chosen, largely on the basis of the chronological structure of Dust Tracks on a Road, the year 1901 as Hurston’s likely date of birth, a subsequently discovered birth certificate verifies the date as 7 January 1891. The difference in those ten years is significant. Although Hurston has presented herself as a relatively naïve “girl” in her early twenties when she arrived in New York, she has in fact already accumulated a great deal of experience. In addition, the discovery of Hurston’s birth date creates a somewhat different image of her childhood experiences. Hurston’s parents were John Hurston, a preacher who served as moderator of the South Florida Baptist convention, and Lucy Hurston, whom Zora remembered as an image of female strength.

Hurston records her youth in relatively pastoral terms, emphasizing the unified consciousness she developed, growing in all black Eatonville, although her mother Lucy’s death, while Hurston is in her teens, became a recurrent theme in her imaginative re-creations of childhood. Responding to her mother’s death-bed instructions, Hurston sought to prevent the adults from carrying out two traditional death-room ceremonies: removing the pillero from the head of the dying (to soften the passing), and covering the clocks and mirrors (to prevent the reflection of the corpse from attaching itself). But against the wishes of both Lucy and Zora, the community carried out both rituals. This conflict, which greatly disturbed Zora, seems to have precipitated the decay of her relationship with her natal community. The tension following her father’s remarriage to a woman who was hostile to Zora, culminated in her departure from Eatonville, sometime around 1910. She also used
her autobiography as a platform to express her skepticism towards democracy, traditional religion and classification according to race or background. Hurston chose to write an unconventional autobiography, the reader may complain of not knowing who Zora Neale Hurston really is, yet the attentive reader can pick up on all her tricks and lies and know that this is all a part of the persona of Hurston. However some aspects of the outcome of her autobiography were beyond her control, yet she proclaims her status as a liberated woman having her identity and autonomy.