CHAPTER IV

ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S APPEAL FOR CULTURAL UNITY AND RACIAL EQUALITY

“I found that I had no need of either class or race prejudice, those scourges of humanity ….. After all the word “race” a loose classification of physical characteristics. It tells nothing about the insides of people…. Race pride is a luxury I cannot afford… Race pride and race consciousness seem to me to be not only fallacious, but I thing to be abhorred… The world is a whole family of Hurstons”. (DTR, 323-326).

As the early seventeenth century Metaphysical poets have been unearthed by the legendary critic, poet and playwright T.S. Eliot, the worth and substance of the most outstanding novelist and autobiographer, Zora Neale Hurston has been brought to the limelight by the luminaries of African American Literature of the 1970s, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. Hurston is one of the major African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God stands alone as the finest example of a woman’s search for self-expression in African American Literature. Walker calls her a native American genius. One needs to have a thorough study of her biographical background and literary output in detail before one moves to a critical analysis of her only autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road.

Zora Neale Hurston was born on 7th January, 1891 and died on 28th January, 1960. She was an American folklorist, anthropologist novelist and autobiographer. Of Hurston’s four novels and more than 50 published short stories, plays, and essays, she is best known for her 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. In addition to new editions of her work being published after a revival of interest in her in 1975, her manuscript Every Tongue Got to Confess (2001), a collection of folktales gathered in the 1920s, was published posthumously after being discovered in the Smithsonian archives.
In this chapter an attempt has been made to outline the biographical accounts of Zora Neale Hurston and to assess how far Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography emphasizes the economic exploitation of African American artists and her constant anxiety about future funding, her role in racial politics of autobiography, the tension existing between the need to further racial equality and a fear of alienating the white audience and the drive to celebrate African American aesthetic practice.

Hurston was the fifth of eight children of John Hurston and Lucy Ann Hurston. Her father was a Baptist preacher, tenant farmer, and carpenter, and her mother was a school teacher. She was born in Notasulga, Alabama on January 7, 1891. When she was three, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida in 1887. It was one of the first all-black towns to be incorporated in the United States. Hurston said that she always felt that Eatonville was ‘home’ to her as she grew up there and sometimes she claimed it as her birthplace. Her father was elected later as Mayor of the Town in 1897 and in 1902 became preacher of its largest Church, Macedonia Missionary Baptist.

Hurston later glorified Eatonville in her stories as a place where African Americans could live as they desired independent of white society. In 1901, some Northern school teachers visited Eatonville and gave Hurston a number of books that opened her mind to literatures. She described it as a kind of birth. Hurston spent the remainder of her childhood in Eatonville, and described the experience of growing up there in her 1928 essay, ‘How It Feels to Be Colored Me’.

In 1904, Hurston's mother died. Her father remarried Matte Moge almost immediately. This was considered a minor scandal, as it was rumored that he had had relations with Moge before his first wife's death. Hurston's father and stepmother sent her away to a Baptist boarding school in Jacksonville, Florida. They eventually stopped paying her tuition and the school expelled her. She later worked as a maid to the lead singer in a traveling Gilbert & Sullivan theatrical company.
In 1917, Hurston began attending Morgan College, the high school division of Morgan State University, a historically black college in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1918, Hurston began undergraduate studies at Howard University, where she became one of the earliest initiates of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and co-founded *The Hilltop*, the university’s student newspaper. While she was there, she took courses in Spanish, English, Greek and public speaking and earned an associate's degree in 1920. In 1921, she wrote a short story, *John Redding Goes to Sea*, which qualified her to become a member of Alaine Locke's literary club, *The Stylus*. Hurston left Howard in 1924 and in 1925 was offered a scholarship by Barnard trustee Annie Nathan Meyer to Barnard College, Columbia University, where she was the college’s sole black student. Hurston received her B.A. in anthropology in 1928, when she was 37. While she was at Barnard, she conducted ethnographic research with noted anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University. She also worked with Ruth Benedict as well as fellow anthropology student Margaret Mead. After graduating from Barnard, Hurston spent two years as a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University. In 1927, Hurston married Herbert Sheen, a jazz musician and former classmate at Howard who later became a physician. Their marriage ended in 1931. In 1939, while Hurston was working for the WPA, she married Albert Price, who was 25 years younger to her. This marriage ended after only seven months.

Hurston lived in a cottage in Eau Gallie, Florida, twice. Once in 1929 and again in 1951. During the 1930s, Hurston was a resident of Westfield, New Jersey, where Langston Hughes was among her neighbours. In 1934 she established a school of dramatic arts based on pure Negro expression at Bethune-Cook Man University. In later life, in addition to continuing her literary career, Hurston served on the faculty of North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, North Carolina.

In 1956, Hurston received the Bethune-Cook Man College Award for Education and Human Relations in recognition of her achievements. The English Department at Bethune-Cook Man College remains dedicated to preserving her
cultural legacy. Hurston travelled extensively in the Caribbean and the American South and immersed herself in local cultural practices to conduct her anthropological research. Based on her work in the South, sponsored from 1928 to 1932 by Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy philanthropist, Hurston wrote *Mules and Men* in 1935. She was doing research in lumber camps and commented on the practice of white men in power taking black women as sexual concubines, including having them bear children. This practice later was referred to as paramour rights, based in the men's power under racial and related to practices during slavery times. This book also includes much folklore. She used this material as well in fictional treatment developed for her novels such as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934).

In 1936 and 1937, Hurston travelled to Jamaica and Haiti for research with support from the Guggenheim Foundation. She drew from this fund for her anthropological work *Tell My Horse*. From October 1947 to February 1948, she lived in Honduras, the North Coastal Town of Puerto Cortés. She had some hopes of locating either Mayan ruins or vestiges of an as yet undiscovered civilization. While in Puerto Cortés, she wrote much of *Seraph on the Suwannee* set in Florida. Hurston expressed interest in the polytechnic nature of the population in the regions. In 1948, Hurston was falsely accused of molesting a ten-year-old boy. Although the case was dismissed after Hurston presented evidence that she was in Honduras when the crime supposedly occurred in the United States, her personal life was seriously disrupted by the scandal. Till her death, she was not able to shed the ignoring caused by this incident. She could not recover her creative pursuit and personal dignity.

During her last decade, Hurston worked as a freelance writer for magazines and newspapers. In the fall of 1952 she was contacted by Sam Nunn, editor of the Pittsburgh Courier to go to Florida to cover the murder trial of Ruby McCollum. The wealthy black married woman was charged with murdering a prominent white doctor and politician, also married, whom McCollum said, had forced her to have sex and bear his child. Hurston recalled what she had seen of white male sexual
dominance in the lumber camps in North Florida, and discussed it with Nunn. They both thought the case might be about such paramour rights, and wanted to expose it to national audience.

Upon reaching Live Oak, Hurston was surprised not only by the gag order the judge in the trial placed on the defense, but by her inability to get residence in town to talk about the case. Both blacks and whites were silent. She believed that discrimination might have been related to Dr. Adams' alleged involvement as well in Sam McCollum's gambling operation. Her articles were published by the newspaper during the trial. Ruby McCollum was convicted by an all-white, all-male jury, and sentenced to death. Hurston had a special assignment to write a serialized account, *The Life Story of Ruby McCollum*, over three months in 1953 in the newspaper. Her part was ended abruptly when she and Nunn disagreed about pay.

Unable to pay independently to return for the appeal and second trial, she contacted journalist William Bradford Huie, with whom she had worked at *The American Mercury*, to try to interest him in the case. He covered the appeal and second trial, and also developed material from a background investigation. Hurston shared her material with him from the first trial, but he acknowledged her only briefly in his book, *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail* (1956), which became a bestseller. Hurston celebrated that McCollum’s testimony in her own defense marked the first time that a woman of African-American descent was allowed to testify as to the paternity of her child by a white man. Hurston firmly believed that Ruby McCollum’s testimony sounded the death toll of 'paramour rights' in the Segregationist South (DTR, 127).
Among other positions, Hurston later worked at the Pan American World Airways Technical Library at Patrick Air Force Base in 1957. She was fired for being too well-educated for her job. She moved to Fort Pierce. Taking jobs where she could find them, she worked as a substitute teacher and as a maid.

During a period of financial and medical difficulties, Hurston was forced to enter St. Lucie County Welfare Home, where she suffered a stroke. She died of hypertensive heart disease on January 28, 1960, and was buried at the Garden of Heavenly Rest in Fort Pierce, Florida. Her remains were in an unmarked grave until 1973. Novelist Alice Walker and literary scholar Charlotte Hunt found an unmarked grave in the general area where Hurston had been buried and decided to mark it as hers.

After Hurston died on January 28, 1960 in a Fort Pierce, Florida hospital, her papers were ordered to be burned. A law officer and friend, Patrick Duval, passing by the house where she had lived, stopped and put out the fire, thus saving an invaluable collection of literary documents for posterity. The nucleus of this collection was given to the University of Florida libraries in 1961 by Mrs. Marjorie Silver, friend and neighbor of Hurston. Other materials were donated in 1970 and 1971 by Frances Grover, long-time friend of Hurston's. In 1979 Stetson Kennedy of Jacksonville, who knew Hurston through her work with the Federal Writers Project, added additional papers.

When Hurston arrived in New York City in 1925, the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak, and she soon became one of the writers at its center. Shortly before she entered Barnard, Hurston's short story ‘Spunk’ was selected for The New Negro, a landmark anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays focusing on African and African American art and literature. In 1926, a group of young black writers including Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, calling themselves the Niggerati, produced a literary magazine called Fire!! That featured many of the young artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1929, Hurston moved to
Eau Gallie in Florida where she wrote *Mules and Men*, which was later published in 1935.

By the mid 1930s, Hurston had published several short stories and the critically acclaimed *Mules and Men* (1935), a groundbreaking work of literary anthropology documenting African-American folklore from timber camps in North Florida. In 1930, she collaborated with Langston Hughes on ‘Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts’, a play that they never finished. It was published posthumously in 1991.

In 1937, Hurston was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship to conduct ethnographic research in Jamaica and Haiti. Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938) documents her account of her fieldwork studying spiritual and cultural rituals in Jamaica and Vodoun in Haiti. Hurston also translated her anthropological work into the performing arts, and her folk review, *The Great Day*, premiered at the John Golden Theatre in New York 1932. Hurston's first three novels were published in the 1930s: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), written during her fieldwork in Haiti and considered her masterwork; and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939).

In the 1940s, Hurston's work was published in periodicals such as *The American Mercury* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwannee*, notable principally for its focus on white characters, was published in 1948. It explores images of white trash women. Jackson argues that Hurston's meditation on abjection, waste, and the construction of class and gender identities among poor whites reflects the eugenics discourses of the 1920s.

In 1952, Hurston was assigned by the *Pittsburgh Courier* to cover the small-town murder trial of Ruby McCollum, the prosperous black wife of the local Bolita Racketeer, who had killed a racist White Doctor. She also contributed to *Woman in the Suwannee County Jail*, a book by journalist and civil rights advocate William Bradford Huie. In 2008, The Library of America selected excerpts from
this work for inclusion in its two-century retrospective of American True Crime writing. Hurston's work slid into obscurity for decades for a number of cultural and political reasons.

Many readers objected to the representation of African-American dialect in Hurston's novels, given the racially charged history of dialect fiction in American literature. Her stylistic choices in terms of dialogue were influenced by her academic experiences. Thinking like a folklorist, Hurston strove to represent speech patterns of the period which she documented through ethnographic research. For example, a character in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* expresses herself in this manner:

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Dat's a big ole resurrection lie, Ned. Uh slew-foot, drag-leg lie at dat, and Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. You know Ahm uh fightin' dawg and mah hide is worth money. Hit me if you dare! Ah'll wash yo' tub uh 'gator guts and dat quick. (61)
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Several of Hurston's literary contemporaries criticized Hurston's use of dialect as a caricature of African-American culture rooted in a racist tradition. In particular, a number of writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance were critical of Hurston's later writings, on the basis that they did not agree with or further the position of the overall movement. One particular criticism came from Richard Wright in his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

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... The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race. (101)
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More recently, many critics have praised Hurston's skillful use of idiomatic speech. During the 1930s and 1940s when her work was published, the pre-eminent African-American author was Richard Wright. Unlike Hurston, Wright wrote in explicitly political terms, as someone who had become disenchanted with communism, using the struggle of African Americans for respect and economic advancement as both the setting and the motivation for his work. Other popular African-American authors of the time, such as Ralph Ellison, dealt with the same concerns as Wright. Hurston's work, which did not engage these political issues, did not fit in with this struggle. In 1951, for example, Hurston argued that New Deal economic support created a harmful dependency by African Americans on the government, and that this dependency ceded too much power to politicians. The two memorable events that happened in memory of Zora Neale Hurston are:

i. Author Alice Walker sought after Hurston's grave in 1973 and planted a grave marker calling her "A Genius of the South." Walker then published "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" in the March 1975 issue of Ms. Magazine, reviving interest in Hurston's work. The renewal of attention to Hurston was related also to the rise of new African American authors such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Walker, whose works are centered on African-American experiences and include, but do not necessarily focus upon, racial struggle.

ii. Zora Neale Hurston's hometown of Eatonville, Florida, celebrates her life in an annual festival and is home to the Zora Neale Hurston Museum of Fine Arts, named in her honor. Her life and legacy are celebrated every year here at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities.

John McWhorter has called Hurston America's Favorite Black Conservative while David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito have argued that she
can better be characterized as a libertarian. She was a Republican who was generally sympathetic to the foreign policy non-interventionism of the Old Right and a fan of Booker T. Washington's self-help politics. She disagreed with the philosophies, including Communism and the New Deal, supported by many of her colleagues in the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, who was in the 1930s a supporter of the Soviet Union and praised it in several of his poems. Despite much common ground with the old right in domestic and foreign policy, Hurston was not a social conservative. Her writings show an affinity for feminist individualism. In this respect, her views were similar to two libertarian novelists who were her contemporaries: Rose Wilder Lane and Isabel Paterson. Although her personal quotes show a disbelief of religion, Hurston did not negate spiritual matters as evidenced from her 1942 autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as lay down. I do not choose to admit weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility. Life, as it is, does not frighten me, since I have made my peace with the universe as I find it, and bow to its laws. The ever-sleepless sea in its bed, crying out ‘how long?’ to Time; million-formed and never motionless flame; the contemplation of these two aspects alone, affords me sufficient food for ten spans of my expected lifetime. It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish. I feel no need for such. However, I would not, by word or deed, attempt to deprive another of the consolation it affords. It is simply not for me. Somebody else may have my rapturous glance at the archangels. The springing of the yellow line of morning out of the misty deep of dawn, is glory enough for me. I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall
still be part and parcel of the world. I was a part before the
sun rolled into shape and burst forth in the glory of change. I
was, when the earth was hurled out from its fiery rim. I shall
return with the earth to Father Sun, and still exist in
substance when the sun has lost its fire, and disintegrated
into infinity to perhaps become a part of the whirling rubble
of space. Why fear? The stuff of my being is matter, ever
changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of
denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all
my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need
for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other
assurance. (DTR, 268)

In 1952, Hurston supported the presidential campaign of Senator Robert A.
Taft. Like Taft, Hurston was against Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies.
She also shared his opposition to Roosevelt and Truman's interventionist foreign
policy. In the original draft of her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston
compared the United States government to a ‘fence’ in stolen goods and to a
Mafia-like protection racket. Hurston thought it ironic that

the same people who claim that it is a noble thing to die for
freedom and democracy wax frothy if anyone points out the
inconsistency of their morals. We, too, consider machine
gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated
with toxic ideas about a country of their own. (DTR, 339)

She was scathing about those who sought ‘freedoms’ for those abroad but denied it
to people in their home countries: Roosevelt can call names across an ocean for his
Four Freedoms, but he did not have the courage to speak even softly at home.
When Truman dropped the atomic bombs on Japan she called him The Butcher of
Asia.
Hurston opposed the Supreme Court ruling in the Brown Vs Board of Education case of 1954. She felt that if separate schools were truly equal, and she believed that they were rapidly becoming so, educating black students in physical proximity to white students would not result in better education. In addition, she worried about the demise of black schools and black teachers as a way to pass on cultural tradition to future generations of African Americans. She voiced this opposition in a letter, Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix that was published in the *Orlando Sentinel* in August 1955. Hurston had not reversed her long time opposition to segregation. Rather, she feared that the Court's ruling could become a precedent for an all-powerful federal government to undermine individual liberty on a broad range of issues in the future. Hurston also opposed preferential treatment for African Americans, saying:

> If I say a whole system must be upset for me to win,  
> I am saying that I cannot sit in the game, and that  
> safer rules must be made to give me a chance. I  
> repudiate that. If others are in there, deal me a hand  
> and let me see what I can make of it, even though I  
> know some in there are dealing from the bottom and  
> cheating like hell in other ways. (113)

Darwin Turner, one of Hurston's biographers, faulted her for racism for opposing integration, and for opposing programs to guarantee blacks the right to work. Other authors criticized Hurston for her sensationalist representation of voodoo. In *The Crisis*, Harold Preece criticized Hurston for her perpetuation of Negro primitivism in order to advance her own literary career. *The Journal of Negro History* complained that her work on voodoo was an indictment of African American ignorance and superstition.

Jeffrey Anderson states that Hurston's research methods were questionable, and that she fabricated material for her works on voodoo. He observed that she
admitted inventing dialogue for her book *Mules and Men* in a letter to Ruth Benedict. She described fabricating the *Mules and Men* story of rival voodoo doctors as a child in her later autobiography. Anderson observes that many of Hurston's other claims in her voodoo writings are dubious as well.

Several authors have observed that Hurston engaged in significant plagiarism in at least three works. Her article "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver" was only 25% original, the rest being plagiarized. Hurston also plagiarized much of her work on voodoo.

If Nella Larsen took a bold step in delving into a woman’s psyche and flirting with the issues of sexuality in *Quicksand*, Zora Neale Hurston did her one better in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in bolder defiance of the Victorian, Romantic, Christian and other sexual restrictions on black women, by creating Janie Crawford, the namer, the challenger and the conjurer. Certainly, the novel in which Janie walks is itself a form of conjuration, whirl winding, and root working. Drawing on African Nommo, Magara and Muntu, Hurston further infuses the book with the mythologies of the folk of Eatonville, Florida of the Bible of mythologies, of the folk of Eatonville, Florida, of the Bible of Babylon and of Africa, particularly of ancient black Egypt with legends of Isis, Osiris and Set, who represent womanish dance, sexuality, magic, happiness, jealousy, exploitation and guilt. Set, the jealous brother, kills and dismembers Osiris imposing order based on a male alienating, sacrificial scapegoating, and destructing patriarchy. Thus Hurston, in an act of subversive conjuration, transforms women’s imposed silence into speech, giving power to the disenfranchised in a way that other Harlem Renaissance women writers were not able to do.

Joyce Hope Scott sees this sorcery in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel as empowerment to liberate the self and by implication the community. Indeed, Hurston’s extensive knowledge of the powers of what Isak Dinesen calls *Black Guardian Angel* of myth and of anthropology are evident throughout as Janie seeks herself and then empowers her friend Phone and her community to do the same.
To fix one’s eyes on this god, Hurston suggests, is by definition to look into darkness. She says,

However, since there will always be those things we do not understand, we create stories, myths, folk tales, in an effort to impose some order as did the conjurers of the chaotic slave plantations who imposed an order on their darkness. If the explanations one finds help one to affirm what life contains, then those explanations perhaps will serve one well. But if they persuade individuals to relinquish ownership of the self, they literally or symbolically bring about their deaths. (DTR, 121)

Subversively, Hurston works a real conjurer as she inverts all that has been accepted as male domain. First the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake is completely turned upside down. Tea Cake assumes the traditional female role prescribed by patriarchy, that is to say, he is the one without financial means and who is the younger and the weaker of the two. Janie, on the other hand, has wealth, accumulated knowledge and wisdom. She is in short, the one with the power. Second the Edenic scene is inverted and another white and male myth is deconstructed. Janie supplants Adam (or man) as the original being and Tea Cake (or man), is by the end of the tale, responsible for his own fall. To paraphrase Michal Awkward, Adam, defined the parameters of ideal human coupling. In scripting Eve’s text, Adam imposed man’s assumed and supposed superiority and inscribed woman’s inferiority. Janie as the original partner less being, unlike Adam, does not give over her spare parts or otherwise give symbolic or actual birth and therefore identification to man. Instead, she waits for him perhaps, to create himself or, like Lilith, Adam’s first “wife” and equal to be created from an equal clump of clay. However he comes to be, he must be egalitarian to remain with her and to himself be truly free. Tea Cake, however, is just a glance from God, not a full vision. And here Hurston employs a third inversion. Tea Cake/ male not Eve or Lilith or woman, proves to be a mistake. When he tries to force Janie into a
recumbent position, as Adam tried with Lilith, she refuses and saves rather than sacrifices herself. Tea Cake is not her answer to romance; more importantly, he is not her answer to being.

*Dust Tracks on a Road*, one of the most peculiar autobiographies in African American literary history, presents an image of its author that fails to conform with either her public career or her private experience. As a result, the book adds considerably to the mystery surrounding Zora Neale Hurston, a woman who lived her life, according to one commentator, half in shadow.

Written just prior to Pearl Harbor Attack and published in November 1942, *Dust Tracks on a Road* was substantially altered during editing to remove Hurston’s criticism of Western imperialism in Asia. Although her remarks are restored in this edition, they remain inconsistent with many of the conservative political beliefs expressed elsewhere in the volume. Winner of the Anisfied Wolf Award for its contribution to the field of race relations. *Dust Tracks on a Road* offers no analysis of segregation and makes little attempt to confront or explain racial discrimination. It all but ignores Hurston’s success as a novelist, although that success was the occasion for the autobiography. By 1942 Hurston’s three novels and two books of folklore had already led to a cover story in the Saturday Review of Literature, yet *Dust Tracks on a Road* devotes only an eight page chapter to her writing career. Hurston’s role in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, one of the most important black literary movements of the twentieth century, rates only a paragraph. It is difficult to explain the absence of comment about the literary life of a woman who for thirty years, in the words of Mary Helen Washington, was the most prolific Black Woman writer in America.

As a guide to Hurston’s private life, *Dust Tracks on a Road* proves equally confusing. It ignores the public record, omitting mention of her second marriage and refusing to name her first husband. It avoids placing personal events within a historical framework. One needs to read an autobiography without discovering the year of the author’s birth. Hurston’s refusal to reveal this date
becomes part of a general reluctance to locate personal experience in the common chronological record. World War I apparently never interrupted her school days. The total effect of the Great Depression of the 1930s was to do away with money for research. Neither presidents nor political events merit mention.

If *Dust Tracks on a Road* fails to discuss the public events of Hurston’s private life, it also diverges from the private reality of her public life. Professor Cherry Wall of Rutgers University, working from the 1900 census records for Eatonville, Florida, Hurston’s hometown, has established that Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, rather than the usually cited January 1, 1901. The census records signed on June 18, 1900, accurately list nine year old Zora and all of her family, as well as many of the Eatonville characters Joe Clarke, Elijah Moseley and Daisy Taylor who figure prominently in her fiction. When matched with corroborating evidence from Hurston’s family these census sheets explain many discrepancies in Hurston’s account of her personal history. The authenticity of the 1891 birth date, however, raises even larger questions for understanding her less than candid autobiography.

Since Hurston was deliberately ambiguous about her birth date during her life time, variously citing 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1910 on public documents and since she deliberately avoided the issues of a birth date in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Wall’s discovery should not surprise any reader. But when the 1891 date is imposed upon the events of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Wall’s discovery is not at all a surprise. But when the 1891 date is imposed upon the events of *Dust Tracks on a Road* the missing decade creates a new reading of the text. What happened during those missing ten years? Was it then that Zora acquired her middle ten years? Was it then that Zora acquired her middle name Neale? Was there a Mr.Neale in Hurston’s life, in the manner of the older farmer, Logen Killicks, in Hurston’s semiautobiographical novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? If so, then who is the Mrs. Neale of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, who supposedly gives Zora her name? When she finally entered high school by enrolling in Baltimore’s Morgan Academy in 1917, Hurston was apparently twenty six rather
than sixteen. But did she pass at sixteen? Her autobiographical account of these years gushes with a schoolgirl’s enthusiasm, an odd response for a twenty-six year old domestic worker, who had traveled with a theatrical troupe and worked years as a waitress. Is the mature author creating a teenager who never was or perpetuating a myth created in 1917? Hurston entered Barnard College, we now know, at the age of thirty-four yet those who untried coed, an illusion *Dust Tracks on a Road* tries hard to maintain. Was her public account meant to cover an earlier deception?

What difference does all of this make? Autobiography is not history. The autobiographical act incorporates emotional truths that inevitably distort public events and private experiences. No one expects Ernest Hemingway to tell the truth of the lost generation in a *Moveable Feast*. He recasts events as he remembers them from advantage of age, reporting only the emotional reality of a man settling scores for posterity. If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. Yet Hurston’s ten years memory lapse reveals something about her relationship with the *Dust Tracks on a Road* reader. She tests that reader’s good faith, challenges credibility and asks for a considered suspension of scrutiny. Hurston redramatizes her life for the autobiographical text, manipulating character and event, creating a document intended to further the progress of American race relations. It is no accident that the book won a race relations award at a time when the white reading public was still reeling under the shock of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.

Hurston’s non-confrontational strategy was not unusual for the period, but modern readers should know that *Dust Tracks on a Road* sacrifices truth to the politics of racial harmony. “I have no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard” (DTR, 180), Zora reports, “I became Barnard’s sacred black cow” (DTR, 186). A curious metaphor, especially when one knows that Zora occasionally became Barnard’s sacrificial animal. Her private letters show that she was ordered not to attend the Barnard Prom held at the Ritz Hotel. Her benefactor, the college’s founder, Mrs. Annie Nathan Meyer, found the idea unseemly. One knows that Hurston’s classmates mocked her French pronunciation and laughed at her
recitations. Chapter Thirteen in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, ‘Two Women in Particular’, includes a flattering portrait of her friend, mentor and employer during the Barnard years, the novelist Fannie Hurst. Yet the manuscript version of this chapter reveals how Hurston’s interest grew partly from the exotic fun that an African American companion brought to her lifestyle:

> Behold her (Fannie Hurst) phoning to a swanky hotel for reservations for herself and the princess Zora and parading me in there all dressed up as an Asiatic person of royal blood and keeping a straight face while the attendants goggled at me and bowed low. Like a little girl, I have known is her in the joy of a compelling new grown to take me to tea in some exclusive spot in New York. I would be the press agent for her dress, for everybody was sure to look if they saw somebody like me strolling into the Astor or the Biltmore. (DTR, 67)

If much of *Dust Tracks on a Road* is untrustworthy, it is questionable about the reading the book. Because it provides a fascinating self portrait, despite its inconsistencies, of one of the major black women artists of the twentieth century, an author whose novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, stands alone as the finest example of a woman’s search for self expression in African American literature. Zora Neale Hurston says Julius Lester, made her glad to be herself. Alice Walker, winner of the Pulizer Prize, considers Hurston the major influence on her work, a writer who was a native American genius. Walker says of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, that there is no book more important to her.

Another reason for reading *Dust Tracks on a Road* is its representative nature. It is the account of a woman who triumphed against greater odds that she will ever admit to her to secure an education and capture fame. Yet at the moment her autobiography was published, Hurston had no security, no steady income no guarantee that her career would extend beyond the prepublication publicity for an
autobiography she had hesitated to write. A decade after the publication of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston was working as a maid in a wealthy Miami home, hoping to save enough money to fund her next book project. Her struggle for survival as a writer represents the struggle of a whole generation of pre-1960s black artists. Her autobiography, placed in the larger context of her biography, illustrates the special kinds of pressures faced by black writers of the 1930s and 1940s. In her case the pressures were both racial and sexual. She was a pioneering role model, a woman who rejected sexist roles, traveling with only a handgun, a two dollar dress and a suitcase full of courage through some of the roughest and remotest parts of the rural South. Hurston’s career exemplifies the economic exploitation of black artists, the fiscal uncertainty that left talent dangling from book to book, from fellowship to WPA to anthology editing to Black journalism intended to explain what the Negro wants.

Although Hurston never edited an anthology, she worked for the WPA’s Federal Writers Project and did her share of journalistic labor. It is hard to believe that her constant anxiety about future funding played no role in the racial politics of her autobiography. Throughout the book a tension exists between the need to further racial equality, a fear of celebration of African American aesthetic practice.

The conflicting forces help to create confusing racial statements, both in the published version and in the manuscript chapter, *My People, My People* written in Haiti in 1937 and published here for the first time. One of the many unexplained paradoxes of Hurston’s career remains how the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God and Mules and Men*, both books that have become spiritual resources for other black writers, could offer up political judgments and racial commentary in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that seem expedient, wrong-eased and naïve. As the late Larry Neal said in his introduction to the 1971 edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

At the moment she could sound highly nationalistic. Then at other times she might mouth statements which in terms of
the ongoing struggle for Black liberation were ill conceived
and were even reactionary. (DTR, XV)

One reads Dust Tracks on a Road, finally not so much for its biographical
facts, not so much for its racial politics, but for the cultural celebration of
Hurston’s life and career. She spent a lifetime studying the Negro farthest down
because she believed this figure created the greatest cultural wealth of the
continent. As Alice Walker has stated, implicit in Hurston’s determination to make
it in a career was her need to express the folk and herself.

Obsessed with not appearing to complain about the condition of being
black, Hurston simultaneously glorified in the cultural expression of blackness.
She gauged her audience very carefully. When she wrote for a Black audience, in
Negro Digest, for example, she had no trouble discussing humiliating Jim Crow
experiences. Nor in her private letters did she hesitate to express outrage at racial
injustice. When she objected to the inadequate, segregated facilities for training
black signal corpsmen in St. Augustine, she told a friend: “I feel that something
should be done because this thing concerns all of us. This is for all of the Negroes
in the United States America. We are being highly insulted and mocked
here”(DTR, 223). Yet, when she wrote Dust Tracks on a Road, Zora reviewed the
history of injustice in America and concluded that justice, like beauty, is in the eye
of the beholder.

No doubt a part of Hurston believed in what she wrote. Afraid of being
thought part of the sobbing school of Negrohood, she went to great lengths to
assure readers she was not bitter over the treatment of her people. As she puts it,
“To me, bitterness is the underarm odour of wishful weakness. It is the graceless
acknowledgement of defeat” (DTR, 280). She was willing to forget the past, if she
could settle for from now on. She assured readers that she had no race prejudice of
any kind and offered herself to all in the final passage of the book,
let us all be kissing friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet, or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue. (DTR, 221)

This notion of a heavenly barbecue illustrates a bicultural motif present from the first in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, which contributes to tension between the public and private Hurston persona. The private Hurston was a writer whose own circumference of everyday life, as she put it, was with her kin-folks and skin folks. Born in an all black town, she collected folklore in all black communities, spent the last years of her life writing for a black newspaper while substitute teaching in a segregated school and was buried in a segregated cemetery. The public Hurston was a segregated cemetery. No matter how far she travelled, Eatonville was home. The public Hurston was a graduate of Barnard, a Guggenheim Fellow, a writer for the *Saturday Review*, the *American Mercury*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, a book reviewer for the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, a woman who moved easily in an integrated world.

A writer whose career has assumed this pattern exhibits certain biculturalism and Hurston’s self consciousness about this fact informs every page of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Indeed, this self consciousness is what distinguishes *Dust Tracks on a Road* from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the novel Zora could simply let Janie Crawford’s story must be interpreted, made comprehensible for an audience who asks, why is this life worth reading? The conventions of autobiography create the expectation that Zora will explain how she came to her position of prominence in the world, how she made it in a society structured to deny both equal opportunity and black achievement. Hurston’s reaction to this convention is to avoid offering such an explanation of personal success, substituting instead an interpretation of black cultural life meant to deflect attention away from herself. She seems committed to explaining herself as part of that larger body labelled African American culture, perhaps because she hoped to establish
that African American cultural life, contrary to white presumptions, explains success very well. In order to communicate this message, however, Zora must assume the role of cultural translator, moving back and forth between readers ignorant of black references and her own insider’s knowledge.

Zora constantly stresses in *Dust Tracks on a Road* her awareness of coexistent cultures. Even the process of assigning names demonstrates American biculturalism. Blacks refer to a lake as St. John’s Hole; whites rename it Lake Lily for the tourist trade. Cape Jasmine bushes offer up blooms for free in Eatonville; New Yorkers call them gardenias and charge a dollar. Just a little of Zora’s sugar used to sweeten her father’s coffee, a Negro way of saying, she explains to the uninitiated, that his patience was short with me. To interpret the world she puts it in Negro idiom. When white women give young Zora an Episcopal songbook, she loves some of the hymns, but as for others, “If white people liked trashy singing like that, there must be something funny about them that I had noticed before” (DTR, 210). Such a statement demonstrates how Hurston distinguished between individuals and cultures. The generous Episcopal women were nice on an individual basis. It never occurred to Zora that she was not their equal, that her race could ever be interpreted as making her inferior to another. Culturally, however the Episcopalians were different. Zora would cast her lot sing her song, with the Baptists and Methodists of Eatonville, where real singing took place. Aware that many of her readers were culturally different, Hurston sometimes stops to address the difference: “We held two lying contests, storytelling contests to you and Big Sweet passed on who rated the prizes” (DTR, 121). ‘You’ may refer to whites or it may mean anyone unfamiliar with lying contest but in any event Hurston sees her autobiographical roles as that of a cultural translator for an audience who does not share her cultural knowledge.

Hurston was not a racial separatist, but a graduate anthropologist, conscious of cultural equity, trained to interpret one culture to another. Contrary to much of the social science thinking of her day, she saw nothing pathological about African American life. She did not view black people as deviating from a white cultural
norm. The men on Joe Clarke’s store porch were not unemployed laborers, but storytellers. Her Uncle Jim’s sexual adventures were not examples of black sexuality, but human frailty. Aunt Caroline’s expeditious healing of those frailties was not a pattern of domestic disturbance, but an oft told tale for the town’s communal benefit.

These themes are summarized in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, when Hurston speaks of her native village in Chapter Five of her autobiography “Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle. So every man’s spice box seasons his own food”.(DTR, 74) The passage emphasized fundamental principles of anthropological theory that people are products of their culture, culture creates different angle of vision and the anthropologist studies, compares and interprets those visions.

As a child, Hurston absorbed what she could do around Eatonville. As an adult, she returned to Eatonville as an anthropologist with a new perspective. As she puts it in *Mules and Men*:

> 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”. This spyglass enables Hurston to “know that Joe Clarke’s store was the heart and spring of the town.(DTR, 141)

The Big Picture Talkers who sit around the store and use the side of the world for a canvas are cultural creators, men and women who express the values of their
culture in the indirect narratives of folklore. A moral judgment becomes: “To save
my soul, I can’t see what you fooled with her for. I’d just as soon pick up an old tin
can out of the trash pile”. (DTR, 321) A status symbol becomes a new pair of red
shoes. And literature becomes a Big Old Lie, a story of snail or Brer Fox, who
walk and talk like natural men.

Hurston’s use of animal tales especially reveals her biculturalism. An
etiological tale from Sis Snail about racial origins “pleased me more than what I
learned about race derivations later on in Ethnology”. (DTR, 117) A revealing
admission, even if only a pose, the statement suggests an author acutely aware of
her double consciousness as both, Columbia ethnographer and Eatonville native.

Sis Snail’s story, an old one about blacks being characteristically late for
God’s gift of race, is culturally ambiguous, probably by design. The late comers to
God’s throne misunderstand his command to Get Back, Get Back as they crowd
forward. At one level the story both celebrates and criticizes the stereotypical
notion of a black sense of time. “We will not be run by a white man’s clock, but
we will also pay a price for our independence of it”. (DTR, 128) At a much deeper
level, however, the tale affirms the common origins of mankind. Black people and
white people are both of the common human stock, and it is only happenstance, a
freak of the clock, a misunderstanding, that some are black and others different
colors. A young child absorbing the deep structure of such a tale need never doubt
her own humanity. Hurston’s retelling of the story was meant to ridicule the notion
of divinely sanctioned racial difference; she ended the manuscript version of the
story, reprinted here in the appendix, “So according to that we are no race. We are
just a collection of people who overslept out time and got caught in the
draft”(DTR, 311)

Every time Hurston resorts to folk narratives in Dust Tracks on a Road she
makes essentially this point. African American folklore expresses for black people
and the human possibilities of their particular way of life. That way of life need
never feel inferior to another, because it contains its own unique expression of a
universal humanity. Racial equality, therefore, becomes a function of basic cultural equity, which is the initial premise of anthropological research.

This bicultural equity eventually subsumes a geographic component in *Dust Tracks on a Road* and as soon as it does, the intersection of race and region inevitably leads back to the politics of race. The attempt to explain her acceptance by whites in a traveling Gilbert and Sullivan troupe becomes a regional hypothesis: Hurston says,

> It did not strike me as curious then. I never even thought about it. Now I can see the reason for it I was a Southerner and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. They were all Northerners. It was not that my grammar was bad, it was the idioms. They did not know of the way an average Southern, child white or black, is raised on simile and invective (DTR, 318).

Hurston’s pride in region, despite the system of racism that segregated the South, leads her into an ideological cul de sac from which *Dust Tracks on a Road* never fully emerges. As Larry Neal said, the South also represented for her a place with a distinct cultural tradition, when it came to the South, Zora could often be an inveterate romantic”. It seems no accident that most of the volume is devoted to her early childhood in Eatonville, a period that she claims was free of discrimination or racial confrontation. The product of an all black town in which black people controlled the institutions of Government, Zora never quite accepted the segregated reality of the South for many of her brothers and sisters, willfully ignoring the more vicious aspects of the Jim Crow system out of a desire to avoid writing about the race problem: “I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject, My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such and so regardless of his color”(DTR, 314).
What has not received proper emphasis is the way in which Hurston’s pride in region combined with her bicultural perspective to lead to accommodationist politics. If one believes that she is uniquely qualified to describe the two cultures created side by side in the South, then one is eventually led, by a kind of personal logic, to a position that transcends race. Hurston moves beyond cultural difference in *Dust Tracks on a Road* to identify cultural unity, emphasizing at the end of the volume those idioms and ideas shared across cultural more than the differences that make cultures Distinct. In her autobiography Hurston’s final stance is transcendent, the spyglass of anthropology becoming the telescope of universal personhood:

Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside no measure of what was inside people (DTR, 333).

Significantly, Hurston attributes this revelation to her maturity, a period in which she had got to the place where she could analyze.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* highlighted the process that led Hurston away from biculturalism toward cultural transcendence, an intellectual position that she could not sustain as a black American of the segregated 1940s, and a methodological disaster for her writing. *Dust Tracks on a Road* is the sixth of Hurston’s seven books and it is fair to say that she never created any major work after its publication. The reason is her sense of biculturalism led her to a position of cultural interpreter rather than cultural dramatist. In her journalism of the 1940s and 1950s, especially when writing in white publications, Hurston usually assumed the role of spokesperson, explaining to whites what the Negro wanted, translating black happenings for white readers. Her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwannee* has almost all white characters and Hurston admitted that she wrote it that way by
design, perhaps to break down unwritten rules that black authors could not create white experience.

Just how far Hurston would go in promulgating this view of the author as transcendent seer is illustrated by an episode that occurred as Zora participated in the usual publicity interviews for *Dust Tracks on a Road, A New York Herald Telegram* reporter, apparently taking by the book’s moderate stance, tried to draw her out on the race problem.

Written by Douglas Gilbert, the story quotes Hurston at length. Affirming a main theme of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora assured readers that she don’t see life through the eyes of a Negro, but those of a person. This personal view led to some startling conclusions. Attacking the North’s self satisfaction, its refusal to see the racism in its own backyard, she provoked New Yorkers by saying. “The lot of the Negro is much better in the South than in the North. There is, of course, segregation. But of everything put up in the South for white people there is the equivalent for the Negro. In other words the Jim Crow system works”.(DTR, 56)

Hurston’s remarks were widely reported and soundly repudiated. Roy Wilkins of the African American CP editorialized against her. Many accused her of only trying to sell copies of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Although Zora did not always think before she spoke to reporters, she was upset by the article, primarily because it misrepresented her position. She wrote Claude Barnett, an old friend who was an editor with the Associated Negro Press, stating that it was so untrue, so twisted. Gilbert had first asked her about Nazi sympathizers in Harlem, a particularly troublesome worry during the early days of World War II. On the West Coast American citizens of Japanese descent were being herded to relocation camps and the issue of minority loyalty to a Government that still segregated its armed forces was much on people’s minds. As Hurston told the story to Barnett:

I said that I did not know about the Nazis, but as for Japan, what those men had said out loud, millions were thinking
and he might as well know the truth. He wanted to show me where Negroes up North had nothing to worry about, but I contended it was everywhere the Anglo Saxon set his foot. I mean race prejudice (DTR, 336).

She concludes by with her attack on the monstrosity Anglo Saxon tribes,

I deny off in the South. I am positively ill over it. I know how impossible it is to get a retraction from a newspaper. But one thing is definite. I am ready for anything to overthrow Anglo-Saxon supremacy, however desperate. I have become what I never wished to be, a good hater. I no longer even value my life if by losing it, I can do something to destroy this Anglo Saxon monstrosity (DTR, 337).

Hurston included in this letter to Barnett a copy of the letter she sent to Gilbert protesting the story. If Zora was outraged, she controlled her anger well. The letter to Gilbert is polite, but firm. Hurston further speaks in support of her stance,

For instance, you remember that I said that I did not see the business of race prejudice as a sectional one; that there was plenty of race prejudice both north and south, but that the South by opportunity of long practice, had worked out a system, while the North, caught between its declarations of no prejudice and its actual feelings when the situation was up to Northern Communities was grouping around for the same thing, but with fine phrases. I told you how I laughed to myself watching northerners, after saying to Negro individuals how distressed they were about the awful conditions down South, trying to keep negroes from too
close a contact with themselves. The South, having been perfectly frank all along, was unembarrassed. (DTR, 324)

Hurston is also aware of racial segregation and her own racial consciousness. While she makes an outburst of her feelings, she makes a compromise by telling the following words.

In the matter of segregation, I said that the Negroes had their own theaters and places of amusement, sometimes owned by Negroes, but often owned by whites and managed by Negroes; that Negroes were happy in their social gatherings and had no more desire to associate with the whites than the whites had to associate with them. I made this point deliberately, because this “social equality” has been the red herring that white people like Tallmadge, who do not what Negroes to have equal opportunity drag across the issue to be cloud it. Their claim is that Negroes are eager to marry into white families and so they have to exert themselves to prevent it. They know that this is not true, but it has been a useful cliché for a long time. Neither did I say that Negroes are better off in the South than in the North. What I did say was that there is a large body of Negroes in the South who never got mentioned. They are wealthy, well educated and generally doing good for themselves. I said that the propagandists always talk about the sharecroppers and the like but never mention these people. I said that they do not move north, because they are making good where they are. That they are respected by the whites of their communities, even highly favored, and treated quite differently from the uneducated and shiftless Negroes, they hold a sort of prestige in their communities, which they would lose in the North (DTR, 325).
Fundamentally Hurston is an accommodationist and she is in the least bothered about racial discrimination. Being an anthropologist, she has developed zero tolerance about all kinds of racial pride or racial segregation. She says,

I hate talking about the race problem. I am a writer and leave sociological problems to sociologists, who know more about it than I do. Therefore, I was hoping that the phases of my work that we talked about would be the spirit of the article, instead of the race problem. I am frankly distressed that the race angle has been stressed. Perhaps that is not your fault, since I know that you feel my interest and you know how I feel about such discussions, but editors and the powers that be will have their way. It looks as if a Negro shall not be permitted to depart from a stand pattern. As I said, the nation is too sentimental about us to know us. It has a cut and dried formula for us which must not be violated. Either there is no interest in knowing us, or a determination not to destroy the pattern made and provided. We are even supposed to use certain sentences at all times and if we are too stubborn to do so, we must be made to conform to type (DTR, 325)

Hurston’s letter to Barnett displays well both the public and private Hurston, the dual persona who inhabits in the Dust Tracks on a Road text. This letter describes the frustration of an author constantly cast in the role of racial spokesperson. Her distress at Gilbert’s use of the racial angle coexists with her awareness of herself as an author who needs publicity to sell books. Careful to express only disagreement, not outrage, she still feels that the Herald Telegram article distorted her views.

Is Zora playing both sides of the street? Speaking one way to blacks and another to whites? Probably not, her compliant to Gilbert seems plausible and anyone who has ever had words twisted by a reporter can sympathize with her
dilemma. Yet the episode arose because of Hurston’s decision to assume the public role of person rather than black American author, one reason she is so upset at the racial angle. Her concluding statement to Gilbert had been, “As for me, I prefer to leave it to the sociologists. As I said, I view life through the eyes of a person, not as Negro. I shall continue my studies and my writing on that basis” (DTR, 311).

Such a statement can only be a public pose, not a private reality indeed, it is impossible to assume as a private reality in a country like the United States. As Hurston admitted in Dust Tracks on a Road, “No Negro in American is ever likely to forget his race” (DTR, 323). The same author who states publicly that she does not look through racial eyes wrote Barnett in 1946, shortly after the end of World War II.

Hurston’s thoughts about Asia in this 1946 letter were not a byproduct of the war itself. They were consistent with attitudes expressed when she wrote Dust Tracks on a Road in California during the summer of 1941. Japan was carving out a Pacific empire and some Americas sensed a world war on the horizon. Hurston, hard at work on her autobiography, wanted to conclude her manuscript with a global perspective consistent with the transcendent persona she had adopted near the end of the book. Chapter Fourteen of the Dust Tracks on a Road manuscript, printed in this edition, reveals an autobiographer unafraid to criticize Western imperialism. Hurston’s bold remarks about Western Imperialism are as follows,

We Westerners composed that piece about trading in China with gunboats and cannons long decades ago, “she reports. “Now the Nipponese are singing our song all over Asia”. Her critique of imperialism extends to Europe, even to the point of implying that Holland’s imperial chickens are coming home to roost in the German occupation: “I have not heard a word against Holland collecting one twelfth of poor people’s wages in Asia. (DTR, 334)
Such views, of course, were impossible to express after Pearl Harbor Zora had finished the manuscript in the summer of 1941, submitted it to Lippincott’s and had begun the editorial process when the Japanese attacked. It is clear from the editorial remarks from the manuscript, however, that her international opinions would have had a difficult time being published under any circumstances apparently seeing international politics through the eyes of a person was not as easy as it looked.

If much of *Dust Tracks on a Road* confuses or compromises racial militancy to an ideal of racial harmony or turns out to be less than frank about Hurston’s life, at least one major part of the book never disappoints Hurston’s style. The style dazzles, capturing the subtlety, energy, and rhythm of Southern black idiom. Subtlety becomes ‘hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick’. There is no more to poor white trash ' than the stuffing’s out of a zero'. Her mother’s method of shaping her father is to ‘bare-knuckle him from brogans to broadcloth’. Motivation is a 'rod of complement laid to my back'. Rewriting becomes 'rubbing paragraph with a soft cloth'.

Hurston’s style rich and expressive, is a natural byproduct of her attempt to represent the oral voice in written narrative, a process that marks the only times that public and private personae come together in the *Dust Tracks on a Road* text. Yet even at such moments the famous writer and the young Eatonville girl usually coexist rather than fuse, demonstrating the dual perspective that characterized so much of Hurston’s experience.

When her mother, during courting asked her family about John Hurston’s parents, she found that the Hurston’s were “niggers from over de creek…Regular hand to mouth folks. Didn’t own pots to pee in, nor beds to pushed under.. The inferences, was that Lucy Potts had asked about nothing and had been told". (DTR, 220) The idiom is Southern black, the language Zora grew into from birth rough, earthy and effective. But “inference” sticks out in the sentence like a sore thumb. Essential to its meaning, but not its imagery, inference is the language of the Eatonville ethnographer who feels compelled to interpret for her audience. She
explains the communication process meant to instruct young Lucy Potts in the courting practices appropriate to her class and status.

The passage suggests that Hurston never found a voice that could unify the dualistic vision of _Dust Tracks on a Road_. Interestingly enough, this admission comes when she is describing her reaction to first reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s _Kubla Khan_. The adult writer, a professional woman of words, describes the process whereby literature creates its personal effects for the Eatonville notice. If Hurston has a fault in _Dust Tracks on a Road_, it may be that she over estimated the power of the image and underestimated her audience’s curiosity about what is behind the image.

Hurston’s account of men enamoured of their own sexuality is visually hilarious: “I may be thinking of turnip greens with dumplings, or more royalty checks there is a man who visualizes me on a divan sending the world up in smoke”. (DTR, 168) If a lover persists after her momentary ardor has cooled, calling up to remind her of every still thing I said. The image begs for another dimension, for the sources of Hurston’s sexual independence, for the trials of chauvinism that she had faced. But we are left only with the image, and the mystery of the woman who can so easily visualize her own amorous exploits as warmed over turkey hash.

Emphasizing the process of Hurston’s vision leads to the twelve visions meant to structure her life for her autobiography. Although intended to explain Hurston’s life, these visions do not successfully shape the book. She even forgets about them after a while, so that the twelve visions, each like clear cut stereopticon slides that flashed before her as a young girl, end with vision nine in the text.

However, the visions do suggest Hurston’s literary dilemma in the autobiography. A conscious literary device, the visions were intended to explain how an imaginative young girl could travel from Eatonville to the horizon, discovering fame and fortune as a nationally known author. But the visions also beg the question of how she got there, a black writer in a white world, a woman
who refused the roles men imposed, a Southern agrarian who learned her way around the city. The private Zora Neale Hurston of Eatonville, a mischievous child who used to take a seat on top of the gate post and watch the world go by, never actually becomes one with the famous black novelist and anthropologist whose life story is of sufficient interest to merit an autobiographical statement. How did the transformation take place?. Hurston never really explains the inner workings of the metamorphosis. As she admitted about *Dust Tracks on a Road*, “I have the feeling of disappointment about it. I don’t think that I achieved all that I set out to do. I thought that in this book I would achieve my ideal, but it seems that I have not yet reached it. It still doesn’t say all that I want it to say”. (33)

The paradox of the public and private Zora Neale Hurston, the enigma of a personality who could be culturally nationalistic and politically accommodationist, is never fully explained or explored in the picturesque prose of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In the end, style in *Dust Tracks on a Road* becomes a kind of camouflage, an escape from articulating the paradoxes of her personality. Hurston used her talent for visual imagery as a snapshot photographer, not as a serious painter. Her style deflects high seriousness and implies that life is simpler than it is. Finally though the style does not deflect enough, and serious questions multiply. As Mary Helen Washington has argued, the chapters on her adult life become a study in the art of subterfuge.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* fails as autobiography because it is a text deliberately less than its author’s talents, a text diminished by her refusal to provide a second or third dimension to the flat surfaces of her adult image. Hurston avoided any exploration of the private motives that led to her public success. Where is the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? One is never sure in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, even as one knows that the mystery behind the question who is Zora Neale Hurston? will continually send us back to the *Dust Tracks on a Road* text for whatever clues might be wrestled from its enigmatic author.
Dust Tracks has been criticized as one of the most anomalous and peculiar autobiographies of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s. Hurston’s devout admirer, Alice Walker says that Hurston should not have authored her autobiography. Hurston’s noteworthy biographer Robert Hemenway in his introduction to Dust Tracks is of the view that “an image of the author that fails to confirm with either her public career or her private experience” (DTR, ix). Another commentator adds that she lived her life half in shadow. Unlike other autobiographies of the Harlem Renaissance, “Dust Tracks offers no analysis of segregation and makes little attempt to confront or explain racial discrimination” (DTR, ix). Hurston devoted just a paragraph to the historical movement of the 1920s despite being the pioneer among the black women writers in America. She fails to include other important public or political events or the impact of the Great Depression. The readers get baffled with Hurston’s non-confrontational strategy when she says about her college experience at Barnard, “I have no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard. I became Barnard’s sacred black cow” (DTR, xiii).

Despite all these odds, unfavorable comments and bizarre inconsistencies, one prefers to read Dust Tracks for various reasons. The first reason is, it is a fascinating self-portrait and second, “it is the account of a woman who triumphed against great odds to secure an education and capture fame” (DTR, xiv). Hurston is a unique and bold woman and Hemenway adds further that “she is a pioneering role model, who rejected sexist roles” (DTR, xvi) travelling with only a handgun, a two-dollar dress, and a suitcase full of courage through some of the roughest and remotest parts of the rural South” (DTR, xiv). One needs to subscribe to the views
of Hemenway that *Dust Tracks* is readable for “the cultural celebration of Hurston’s life and career” (DTR, xvi).

Hurston accepts the reality of racial prejudice and discrimination but does not complain about it. She believes in disseminating the cultural expression of blackness. When she wrote *Dust Tracks* Hurston reviewed the history of injustice in America and concluded as follows:

> Let us all be kissing friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. May be all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet, or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue. (DTR, xvii)

Hurston may be viewed as a biculturalist also through the study of *Dust Tracks*. She plays the role of cultural translator. It would be a valid point to note that Hurston’s native town Eatonville consists of all-black community and therefore there was no racial tension as such. In addition to that, Hurston heard the opportunity of studying anthropology as her subject of choice under the guidance of an erudite scholar, Professor Franz Boas at Barnard college. She had shown keen interest in her studies and Professor Boas was able to find out her academic acumen in the subject. He had gone to the extent of recommending her to Columbia University for further studies. Instead she chose to do the field study on folklore and folktales under the supervision of Prof. Boas. This academic exercise made her look at the human races and the humanity as one self, that is the universal self. The fundamental principles of anthropological theory is “people are products of their culture, culture creates different angles of vision, and the anthropologist studies, compares, and interprets those visions. (DTR, xxi) As Hurston looked through ‘the spy-glass of anthropology’ she is able to make a compromise with the race and its problems in America. This attitude would demystify the mystery behind her non-confrontational and accommodationist politics. To quote Hemenway,
Hurston moves beyond cultural difference in *Dust Tracks* to identify cultural unity….In her autobiography Hurston’s final stance is transcendent, the spy-glass of anthropology becoming the telescope of universal personhood (DTR, xxv).

One can fully understand Hurston’s hypothesis about race in her own words in *Dust Tracks:*

> Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people (DTR, xxv).

According to Hemenway, the very purpose of Hurston’s writing her autobiography is the process of leading her from biculturalism toward transcendence. Her mental maturity and balanced observation about the nuances of human life can be perceived from her saying, “I don’t see life through the eyes of a Negro, but those of a person” (DTR, xvi). There may be an accusation against Hurston that her private and public life is enigmatic and paradoxical—being culturally nationalistic and politically accommodationist. One can get a solution to all the mysteries and riddles about her autobiography if only one attempts to apply the theory of autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a form of self-reflection and writing that explores the researcher’s personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings. It involves self-observations and reflexive investigations in the context of ethnographic field work and writing. Hurston, the Eatonville ethnographer and Columbian anthropologist does the insider ethnographic study about her owns self and race in the midst of other races and cultures.
The modern critics of Hurston probe her autobiography with a new tool of critical approach called the study of autoethnography. As the nomenclature sounds, ‘auto’ refers to self, ‘ethno’ means race and ‘graphy’ implies writing. An Autoethnographic writer must be a member of her own race which attempts to make a study. It is a sub-genre of autobiography wherein one needs to prove that the work is both an autobiography as well as the documentation on the writer’s culture, politics and social beliefs.

Here, Hurston makes a fusion of self-study and an ethnic study or ethnographic study of the African American race to which she belongs. Hurston’s *Dust Track* is an experiment with Truth and she makes the confession only to God and thus making it known for the consumption of the public. Hurston was a graduate in anthropology from Barnard College and also a disciple of world renowned professor of cultural anthropology, Dr. Franz Boas. After graduation she had the opportunity of doing a research work on folklore studies in rural areas under the guidance of Dr. Boas. She was born and brought up at her all-black native town Eatonville, Florida. Her father was a lawyer and mayor of Eatonville. As she had lost her mother at the age of thirteen, and her father preferring second marriage, she had no one to take care of. She had her studies at Jacksonville supported by the Church. With the help of quite a few white patrons like Mrs. Osgood Mason, she was able to continue her higher studies. She eked out her livelihood by doing menial jobs and devoting her leisure to writing. Her life itself was full of challenges and because of this adverse atmosphere in personal and social set-up, she has undertaken an inside search by criticizing and commenting her own people, race and ethnicity. The critic Lionett observes,

*Dust Tracks* amounts to autoethnography, that is, the defining of one’s subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis, in short, that the book amounts to a kind of “figural anthropology” of the self. (Lionette, 97)
The writer of autoethnography tries to resolve not only the inner conflicts of the self but also the impediments which the self faces along with the race in embracing the political set-ups and economic structures and social beliefs of other races in general. In other words, the writer, while keeping the self at the centre of study, she anxiously wishes to bridge the self as well as the collective self of the race with the world at large in order to lead a conflict-free and amicable life.

Hurston does not position herself as the victimised black since she does not locate the origins of her subjectivity in the history of oppression or the violence meted out to African American race. The writer starts from the point of segregation and proceeds to the point of proclamation of integration. Hurston is of the view “Race Pride and Race Consciousness seemed to me to be not only fallacious, but a thing to be abhorred (DTR, 326). She is an ardent follower of Du Bois’ philosophy of promoting ‘universal human brotherhood’. She further argues that “there could be something wrong with me because I see Negroes neither better nor worse than any other race. Race Pride is a luxury I cannot afford” (DTR, 324). It is worthwhile to think over Hurston’s outspoken and candid statement about herself “I do not have much of a herd instinct. Or If I must be connected with the flock, let me be the shepherd my ownself. That’s just the way I am made” (DTR, 345).

Therefore, an autoethnographic study of *Dust Tracks on the Road* can bring out the hidden intention of the autobiographer and her idea and message needs to be properly construed. One would come to the conclusion that the loud cry of the writers of the literatures of the challenged communities including the African American writing during the Harlem Renaissance is not for the recognition of the marginalized people but as equals of all in the world. It is nothing but a cry for universal citizenship. The contemporary readers understand Hurston and her writings with a different perception and interpretation unlike the myopic readers of the 1920s. The most prolific writer of twentieth century, Alice Walker has rightly and appropriately made the observation about Hurston that she is the mother figure for all the women African American writers of the 1970s. Therefore, Hurston’s
autobiography and other works deserve a rereading through a sociological and anthropological approach.

On the other hand, Linda Anderson is of different view when she talks about *Dust Tracks*. She says “it is a difficult text to situate within the ‘radical’ tradition of black autobiography because; instead of claiming an identity Hurston deliberately draws attention to the autobiographical self as a fiction” (Anderson, 107). She further argues that self representation monumentalizes a self which is absent or never existed. Hurston plays the role of both observer and interpreter mediating the black world for white readers. She is able to tolerate even bitterness in life. She honestly admits “To me, bitterness is the underarm odor of wishful weakness….I have no urge to make any concessions like that to the world as yet” (DTR, 280). She was much affected with the demise of the only support of her life, her mother. She felt the situation of homeless and wandering. When she describes the death scene of her mother in *Dust Tracks*, she says that her mother “looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice” (DTR, 86-87). It is suffice to say from the aforesaid quote that Hurston is given the responsibility of speaking for the silent mother, thus suggesting her future role as a writer. A microcosmic study on her autobiography while applying all the theories of psycho analysis and cultural anthropology would unravel many such unexplored myths of this profound and prolific writer.