CHAPTER 5

Jumping at the Sun: *Dust Tracks on a Road*

If High John de Conquer could give something to live by to the oppressed antebellum and postbellum Black folks, ‘mules’ could become ‘men’ by dramatizing and narrating folktales and Janie could find her peace after having been to a personal horizon, the effervescent Zora Neale Hurston could ‘Jump at de Sun’ through the writing of her autobiographical enterprise *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Hurston starts her autobiography by detailing out the particulars of the place of her birth, which had a vital contribution in her entire makeup. In the opening chapter ‘My birthplace’ she tells us that:

I was born in a Negro town...not...the Black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida...a pure Negro town – charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all....the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America (*Dust Tracks* 561).¹

In this prosperous community, the best of relations existed between the neighbors – White Maitland and Negro Eatonville. Hurston then moves on to tell us about her parents in the chapter ‘My Folks’. Her father was the light-skinned grey-green-eyed John Hurston who had been a sharecropper in Alabama before migrating to Eatonville where “folks could be something” and her mother Lucy Ann Potts was a dark brown child of the land-owning Richard Potts family.

Zora had a life of plenty as a child – lots of oranges, tangerines and boiled eggs to eat and plenty of toys and seven siblings to play with, so that none of the Hurston children had to hang around other people’s houses like “no-count niggers” or “poor white trash”. All the Hurston children went to school and at home mama Hurston took adequate care of their grammar and
numbers. In the third chapter ‘I get Born’, Zora says that the details of her birth as revealed to her might be a little inaccurate. So, all that she mentions about the time of her birth is the gay time of January, which is a period of “being neighborly and giving aid” (578). She tells that she was “granned” by a white male family friend, (her father was out of town at the time of her birth and the village granny Aunt Judy arrived a little late). One important childhood feature that Hurston touches upon in this chapter is her “urge to go to places”, that is, no sooner did she learn to walk, she first wanted to wander off, even alone to the woods (580).

Chapter IV and V titled, ‘The Inside Search’ and ‘Figure and Fancy’ respectively, are extremely important as they tell us how as a child Zora found herself to be different from other children, especially girls of her age. Instead of playing with dolls, she “lived an exciting life unseen” (585). She was driven inward and developed a questioning mind. Though she did not get too many answers from elders, her probing did not stop and she kept on questioning “the gods of the pigeon-holes” (581). She lived a rich life of imagination in which she always found the firmaments leaning on her side to make her happy; sitting on top of the chinaberry tree at her gate, she imagined her house to be the center of the universe and the horizon to be the end of the world. She wanted to travel to the horizon some day. She told herself that the ‘beginning’ of the world is in her mama’s room, but she needed to satisfy herself about the ‘end’, by seeing it. So for a long time she imagined herself riding a fine horse to reach “the belly-band of the world". Another thing that Zora tells about herself is that she was “extra strong” as compared to girls of her age and always “wanted action” and so loved to play with the boys. But her family disliked this ‘un-lady’ like behavior of hers. She began taking interest in reading books, especially the ones based on Greco-Roman myths, or tales of adventure and restless energy. Some of these books were gifted to her in school by two visiting white ladies, who had found her a precocious child.

Another important incident that Hurston remembers from her
childhood is that perched atop her gatepost, she would often hail white motorists passing by and then go with them a “piece of the way”, (589) performing songs and tales for them and getting small silver change in return for all this, in defiance of the family elders. When Zora was not even seven, she remembers she started seeing visions of things to come in her future life. These, she says bred a “cosmic loneliness” within her. She desperately wanted to be like the others, but found herself “in a world of vanished communion with my kind” (598). These visions kept coming back to her in later life, too.

Though Hurston does not detail the fulfillment of each of the twelve visions in *Dust Tracks*, but after a vision had come true, it stopped coming to her. Another important event that caught young Zora’s fancy and induced word-pictures in her own mind was the “lying” on Joe Clarke’s store porch. Though as a female child, she was forbidden from the porch, but she managed to steal glimpses at times. From listening to the porch story-tellers, she began making up her own stories of birds and trees talking to her, of inanimate things coming to life as playmates for her and of other such tall tales. For all these fantasies, Zora earned the ire of her father and her grandmother, but she was encouraged by her mother. Mama Hurston encouraged all her children to “Jump at de Sun” but she considered Zora was the daughter who most resembled her and encouraged in her what Marion Kilson calls Zora’s “precocious assertiveness”. In fact Zora shared a cherished relationship with her mother, which Kilson testifies was of great personal significance for her (113).

The event of her mother’s death, therefore, when Zora was just a nine-year old child, was an event of great significance in her life. She became virtually homeless after this, more so because John Hurston took no time in marrying Mattie, his long-time mistress. At the time of her death, Lucy Hurston called upon Zora to prevent some meaningless death rituals from being observed, but because Zora was prevented from having her say by her father and village elders, she was left with a sense of guilt for a long time to come.
The chapter ‘Wandering’ begins by delineating Zora’s wanderings away from home after her mother’s death. She goes to school at Jacksonville, where she was made to feel that she was a ‘colored’ girl and generally felt unwelcome on account of being ‘sassy’. But gradually she learnt to make her adjustments. Here she fantasized a torrid love affair with President Collier of the school. She also won the prize of an Atlas and a Bible in a spelling contest. Though she did go home for a short while, as she tells us in the chapter ‘Jacksonville and After’ but it was an extremely disappointing homecoming and soon she fled home to take up a job and support herself.

Initially Hurston switched several jobs as a housemaid and children’s maid but after sometime she landed up as the maid of the Soprano of a mobile opera company, Gilbert and Sullivan, which she enjoyed thoroughly. Though not even paid for the eighteen months that she remained on this job, which she details in the chapter ‘Backstage and the Railroad’ yet the attention she got on account of being the only ‘Negro’ on the coach, the games, the stories, the backstage gags – all these made her feel “as cocky as a sparrow on fifth avenue” (653). The next chapter ‘School Again’ is a chronological description of the self-determined Hurston’s efforts at attaining higher education and of the writer Hurston’s being recognized by the likes of Charles S. Johnson and Alain Locke. First, she joined the night school in Baltimore where she was encouraged by her English teacher, Dwight D. W. Holmes to join Morgan High School Department. She worked as a waitress and housemaid once again to pay for school fees. Despite being deprived in material terms, Zora won the hearts of her schoolmates at Morgan with her knowledge and learning, won oration contests, made allegories using faculty members as characters and enjoyed the two-year stay.

At Morgan, Hurston was hand-picked by the well-known Dr. Kelly Miller’s (of Howard University) daughter who helped her enroll for a graduate degree at Howard. Here again, she became the favourite student of her English, Romance and Language teachers. She joined campus sororities and literary societies like ‘Stylus’, presided over by Alain Locke. She worked
as a manicurist to earn her own fees. Though, Hurston could not complete her degree from Howard on account of a nagging illness, but, a story she wrote for ‘Stylus’ caught the attention of Dr. Charles S. Johnson in New York, who was just launching *Opportunity* – a journal of Negro writing. She won awards for two stories in succession and was invited by Johnson to New York. This was the period of the Harlem renaissance. In January 1925, she arrived friendless, penniless and jobless but full of hope in New York. In one of the *Opportunity* award dinners, she met Annie Nathan Meyer, a trustee of the Barnard University, who helped her get a scholarship to Barnard, from where she graduated in 1928. At Barnard she says she became “the sacred Black cow” and loved it. A term paper she wrote in Anthropology was so much appreciated by Franz Boas, the father of Anthropology at that time, that he offered her a fellowship to go south and collect folklore.

The next chapter ‘Research’ is all about Hurston’s enjoyable experiences of folklore and folk song collections in Polk county, South Florida, Bahamas, Alabama, New Orleans, British West Indies and Haiti. Under funding from Godmother Mason, a patron of Negro arts, Hurston went to sawmill camps, jook joints and strange and forbidden places and through the participant-observer method collected a wealth of authentic folk material. The most exciting was her participation in fearful hoodoo ceremonies at New Orleans and at Haiti. In New Orleans, she was given the status of an initiate by the descendent of the hoodoo queen, Marie Leveau. In this chapter, she also tells that about this time she developed a passion to stage a concert of genuine Negro songs and dances at New York. Her efforts bore fruit in January 1932, when on borrowed money she introduced original Bahaman action musical at the John Golden Theatre in New York, which was widely appreciated and she was invited to repeat the performance at several places. Though, she did not make money out of it, she was satisfied to introduce the concept of letting her people sing naturally on stage, as against the highly arranged Broadway spirituals.

In the next chapter ‘Books and Things’, Hurston tells about her writing
experience of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the publication difficulties she faced on account of sheer penury, the compilation of her anthropological material and the writing of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Haiti after a failed love affair. After this, on her publisher, Lippincot's demand, she began writing her autobiography in a friend's house in California.

The story of Hurston’s life, so to say, stops at the end of chapter XI. Chapters XII to XVI are more about Hurston’s views on topics as varied as color hierarchy in the Negro race, race pride, race consciousness, race solidarity, friendship, love, religion and national and international politics. She suggests that the folk label “My people! My people!” is a conscious cry of class difference within the Black race. She also narrates traditional Negro anecdotes which confused her as a child in understanding whether Negroes were ‘geniuses’, whose inventions had been appropriated by the clever whites or they were the monkeys of the ‘ludicrous’ ‘monkey see, monkey do’ tales. She has given her definitions of “Race Men”, “Race Consciousness”, “Race-Pride”. From the behavior of so-called ‘Race Champions’, who wanted to have nothing to do with anything frankly Negroid, she understood color lines within the race. It is in this context that she says “So I sensed early, that the Negro race was not one band of heavenly love” and also “…skins were no measure of what was inside people” (731).

In the chapter XVI ‘Looking Things Over’ and ‘Seeing The World As It Is’ (Appendix chapter), she has expressed general goodwill towards the humanity at large. She says she has no race prejudice of any kind because she would rather not look over her shoulder to a gloomy past. She is interested in starting afresh by being “kissing friends” with all people. Moreover, she suggests that the principle of human bondage was not true of the American South alone. A kind of neo-colonization by the ‘civilized’ nations and the economic exploitation of distant lands still prevails and amounts to “international cannibalism” (792).

In chapter XV entitled, ‘Religion’, Hurston gives her international humanism a scientific/mystic explanation, “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 fellowmen” (764). It is statements such as the above that came in for a lot of negative criticism. The four chapters of the Appendix titled ‘My People, My People!’, ‘Seeing The World As It Is’, ‘The Inside Light – Being A Salute To Friendship’ and ‘Concert’ further elaborate or repeat these themes. In chapter XIII ‘Two Women In Particular’, Hurston talks of her white female friend, Fannie Hurst, to whom she was friend, secretary and chauffeur. Hurston admired Hurst for the spontaneity and naturalness of her character. Another friend, Ethel Waters, a Black singer endeared Hurston because of her homely philosophy and her style of singing spirituals the way her mother sang them to her. In chapter XIV, ‘Love’, Hurston mentions her first true experience of love in the freshman year in college and her marriage to Herbert Sheen soon after Barnard, but her immediate disappointment and consequent divorce. She also talks of another failed love affair with a man whom she refers to as P.M.P. She could not commit herself to him on account of her professional obligations.

_Dust Tracks on a Road_ has come in for a lot of negative criticism for various reasons, the first of these being that the autobiography is factually flawed at many places. Fox-Genovese has called it “a marvel in self-concealment” (“My Statue” 193) and Darwin Turner says that _Dust Tracks_ is “the best fiction that Zora Neale Hurston ever wrote” (Introduction iv). Even Alice Walker has called it an oddly false-sounding autobiography (“In Search” 236). Robert Hemenway, Hurston’s biographer who has carried extensive research on the life and writings of Hurston set out to ‘correcting’ certain anomalies and then published his book _Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography_, to which I have been frequently referring earlier in my discussion.

Recent findings by Pam Bordelon, in an article ‘New Tracks On _Dust Tracks_: Toward A Reassessment Of The Life Of Zora Neale Hurston’ has thrown light on those years of Hurston’s life, about which she has remained
silent in *Dust Tracks*. A major debate concerning Hurston's life is the year and place of her birth, the facts of which remained in wraps in Hurston's own works. Other facts of Hurston's life missing from her autobiography are Hurston's total immersion in the Harlem party spirit in the 1920s, where Hemenway tells us she enjoyed close friendship with Langston Hughes, Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman. Hurston styled herself “Queen of the Niggerati” at Harlem, according to Hemenway and loved to ‘play the darky’ at the mixed parties of Van Vechten. Hemenway has devoted a full chapter to Hurston’s and Hughes’s joint project ‘Mule Bone’ which was to be a musical drama, on which Hurston persevered for a long time enthusiastically, but which eventually floundered due to personal differences. Hurston is absolutely silent on this episode of her life.

With her other Harlem friends, Hurston worked on a Negro journal *Fire!!* which too went up in smoke after the first issue. *Dust Tracks* finds no mention of this. Another glaring four-year gap that has been left unfilled in *Dust Tracks* relates to Hurston’s personal and professional life between 1937 (the publication of *Their Eyes*) and 1941 (when she moved to California to write *Dust Tracks*). Hemenway’s and Bordelon’s research suggests that during this period Hurston worked on the Florida Writer’s Project, a scheme for unemployed writers and compiled material for a book, *The Florida Negro*, that remained unpublished. She enjoyed cordial relations with her family during this time and at least two of her nieces came and stayed with their ‘flamboyant’ aunt Zora and loved her company. She also wrote her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* during this period.

In June, 1939 Hurston entered a second marriage which does not find any mention in *Dust Tracks*. This time she married Albert Price III, a man much younger to herself but they were divorced soon after. After this in 1940, she went on another research expedition – the South Carolina expedition with Jane Belo. The winter of 1940-41 was spent by her in New York, lecturing, doing substitute teaching and visiting friends. At this time, her publisher advised her to write her autobiography and though reluctant, she left for
California to work on *Dust Tracks*. The first draft of *Dust Tracks* was ready by July 1941, but it took another year of rewriting, as lots of changes had to be made on the advice of Lippincot, her publisher.

It is, however, not the factual flaws alone that make *Dust Tracks* “a confusing” and “untrustworthy” book to Hemenway (Introduction x) or “the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote” to Alice Walker (Foreword Biography xvii) or “the most problematical of autobiographies by Black women” to Nellie McKay, but also the fact that it neither reveals intimate details of her life, nor is it a polemic text against racial injustice (McKay, “Race, Gender and Cultural Context” 179). What earned Hurston a lot of negative criticism was what was considered to be her apolitical stance in the book. While she was blamed for writing an autobiography, which is not an autobiography at all, her bigger crime was that neither thematically nor structurally, *Dust Tracks* fitted the then prevalent genre of Black autobiographical writing. She was blamed for being ‘politically unconscious’ and for playing into the hands of her white audience by suggesting that she had no race-prejudice of any kind at a time when Negroes were facing untold oppression, atrocities and lynching in the post-reconstruction pre-Black civil rights era in the American north and south. Eva Birch has blamed *Dust Tracks* for what she calls its “placatory tone” (135) and for its blatant celebration of the self as unique, manifesting an overt denial of Hurston’s position as a soldier in the struggle for racial equality (Birch 128). Craig Werner finds Hurston’s autobiography “Unreliable” as a source of factual information, “politically quiescent” and revealing nothing of the motivations behind Hurston’s controversial actions ("Zora" 224).

While one may not deny the truth in some of the allegations brought against Hurston, the autobiographer, I wish to take these so-termed flaws as my points of departure for examining Hurston’s choice of representations about her personal self. To me, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, not in spite of, but because of its very gaps, its overtly non-polemical political tone and its radicalism of autobiographical form, becomes a supremely political text,
lodging its protest in a codified discourse, not in line with Wright’s formula of blatant protest autobiographical writing.

Before I take up the issue of defending *Dust Tracks* for its subtle political underpinnings in both content and structure, I wish to make a brief aside on the theoretical background of Black autobiographical writing. I have formed my understanding of this chiefly from my reading of Stephen Butterfield’s book, *Black Autobiography in America*.

Within the tradition of Black American literature, Butterfield stresses the importance of the autobiographical statement that originated in the slave narratives. These accounts collectively stand as testimonials to the inhumanity of the slave system and are distinguished by a social rather than a personal impulse, on the assumption that what was true of one slave was true of all. Hence, Butterfield says that the Black autobiographer is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long historic march towards Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members (Butterfield 3). He identifies the dominant voice in Black autobiography as that of the ‘mass’, exemplified in the works of male autobiographers whose texts are discussed in individual chapters. Frederick Douglass used words as “killing weapons” and made statements that worked like swords in his *Narrative* and Richard Wright, too, moaned “the essential bleakness of Black life in America” in *The Black Boy* (Butterfield 159).

Douglass’s principal concern in all his three autobiographies was the abolition of slavery, opines Butterfield, and Wright gave himself to fighting the racial atrocities that surrounded him. Although, Butterfield has devoted only one chapter to Black women’s autobiographies but this, too, taking the example of Ida B. Wells’s *Crusade for Justice* (1928), he suggests, is written in the tone of abolitionist fervor because Wells believed that slavery still existed, if not in name, at least in fact. She proposes direct action. Butterfield quotes an incident from *Crusade*, where Wells bit the back of the conductor’s hand who tried to drag her out of her seat in a railcar. Her identity in the
autobiography, according to Butterfield is that of “a mother of freedom” because of the way she exposes the facts of lynching and exploitation of Black women. Mary Church Terrell’s autobiography *A Black Woman in a White World* (1940) (Butterfield has not mentioned her) written only two years before *Dust Tracks* is also in the slave narrative tradition, documenting the group terror perpetrated against the entire Black community and Terrell’s tireless efforts for Black civil rights and Black women’s rights.

Given this background, it is not surprising that *Dust Tracks* with its statements like “I have no race prejudice of any kind” or “Let us all be kissing friends” or “I turn my back on the past” (792), has been called placatory in tone and Zora has been fervently blamed for playing into white hands in return for a few silver pieces.

The foremost charge brought against Hurston is that she has no awareness of the extent of oppression suffered by her people and so she talks of a “raceless ideal”. Arna Bontemps is most vocal in making this charge: “Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America – she ignores them!” (qtd. in Howard, Zora 41).

But this charge is futile. Hurston’s self-definition was definitely shaped by her people’s American enslavement. This historical accident had meant a cultural displacement for her and she understood very well that she was positioned inside a society whose values excluded her. While, she exhibits pride in being born in an all-Negro town, but there is an uneasy tension in her assertion that white Maitland and Black Eatonville live side by side in perfect harmony, for she never addresses why such separation was deemed necessary.

In spite of Hurston’s denial of feelings of inferiority to Whites, her father’s reminder that “You ain’t White”, and his warnings that her ambitions were such that “the white folks were not going to stand for it” (584) reflect the reality of racial politics. Even her childish action of sitting on the gatepost was considered ‘brazen’ and ‘forward” by her grandmother, who threatened her “Git down offa dat gate post!…setting up dere looking dem white folks right in the face! They’s gowine to lynch you…. Youse too brazen to live
The oppression was real, pervasive and violent, in a country where a child could be threatened even in jest with a ‘posse’. Also, as a child Hurston was warned by a white man not to be a nigger. A footnote explains that “The word Nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race” (586). Why Hurston does not question the obvious racism in this advice could be easily attributed to a timeserving servility, if she had not experienced and written articles for the Black press on Jim Crow. Her article “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience” details her outrage at the shabby treatment she was meted out at a white doctor’s clinic, whom she had gone to consult for a nagging stomach illness. Then there is the incident where Hurston, a published author, an educated Black woman was treated shabbily by the ‘liberal’ white novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, after having been invited to her house. All day long she was treated like an equal – talking, laughing and drinking together on the porch for all the world to see. But when it came to share sleeping accommodations, Hurston was treated not as a fellow author, but as a Black woman, suddenly out of place in a white house. She was banished to the servant’s quarters. This was when Mrs. Rawlings had two empty bedrooms in the house.³

Hemenway has narrated several incidents of unjust discriminatory treatment meted out to Hurston on account of her color. Once, she went for a literary tea with Dorothy Waring, a white woman with whom she was working on the script for a musical comedy. Waring told Hemenway in a personal interview that their pompous, professional hostess said to Zora “‘Come right in, darling’. Zora was not fooled: ‘You know that bitch didn’t mean it, I wasn’t her darling. She had known me but five minutes but she was just leaning backwards to impress me with liberal points of view – which I’m sure she did not have. And I would have felt more flattered if I had been Miss Hurston to her rather than darling’” (Hemenway, Biography 298). She has written candidly of racial atrocities, of race riots and lynching in “The Ocoee Riot”, an undated piece of the Federal Writer’s Project.
To deny that an inescapable racism shaped the self-definition of Hurston would thus be a misnomer. Early socialization into the gender role assigned in a patriarchal society was also a shaping force that Hurston initially imbibed but then challenged through her determined efforts. As a rural Black American woman, Hurston’s life might have been one of domestic service, a wife and a mother. Hurston had found aggrandizing patriarchal double standards about fidelity in her own parents’ marriage. She pays tongue-in-cheek homage to the idea of manhood as being defined in “cussing and fighting and drinking as became a man” (588). Her own relationships floundered because she could not hide her intellectual strengths, although she knew “it is a gripping thing to be a man and not to be able to whip his woman mentally” (620). In being reticent about the details of her failed love affair, there is an old-fashioned coyness in the statement that “Ladies do not kiss and tell anymore than men do” (743).

She has given an inside view of the in-built patriarchy and sexual politics of upper class white families from her experience of working in those houses as maids. She herself had become the victim of her second white employer Mr. Moncrief’s lust, who began waylaying her everyday she walked back home from work. He wanted to take her away with him to Canada: “All I need is a young, full of feelings girl to sleep with and enjoy life. I always did keep me a colored girl.... I’m giving you the preference”. Hurston concludes the episode by saying “He could not conceive of my not wanting to go with him” (643).

Hurston has clearly conveyed through anecdotes and real episodes what it meant to be a female – and a Black female in the then America. While doing a waitress’s job in Baltimore she again became the object of the “...presumptuous cut-eye looks and supposed-to-be accidental touches on the thigh....” She said the customers would give her good tips and then nod to her and wait at the door for her to come along. She hated it all (666). She has also heard men whispering gustily in her ear, “You passionate thing! ...You are a walking furnace!” (751). She says that it all sounded very amazing. In the
chapter on 'Love' she has slyly hinted how a man can never believe that a woman too has a right to a brief infatuation, with no strings attached or that a woman may not after all end up being a "heart broken wreck" after being supposedly jilted by 'the man' because she might have found a new interest by that time (752).

It is clear that the experience of being Black and female was shaped in the psyche of Hurston, in relation to the society within which she was operating. Added to this was Hurston’s constant companionship with poverty, at least from the time she left home after her mother’s death. "There is something about poverty that smells like death", she tells us in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In her determination to find self-definition through education, she takes a typical working-class view. Hurston’s education began in the Eatonville School, with books donated by white Maitland. In later life, too, she was dependent on the patronage of white friends and employers to pay her tuition fees. However, to suggest that she happily ‘played the darkie’ to get her way with the whites is gross misunderstanding of Hurston’s motives. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, one glimpses a defiance of whites inhered in her sense of pride in her academic progress, "I did not resolve to be a grind, however, to show the white folks that I had brains. I took for granted that they knew that. Else why was I at Barnard?" (684). A girl who could work as a waitress, a housemaid and a barbershop assistant in order to pay her way through education was not unaware of stereotypical socio-cultural expectations of her position in society, but was self-determined to challenge such deterministic definitions through education.

Hurston’s historical placing in the America of the 1920s to the 1940s encased her in a nexus of race, gender and class that seemed unbreakable to most of her contemporaries and at least needed to be highlighted again and again in speeches and writings, neither of which were taken up by Hurston as a plank of protest. She rose to become one of the few published Black women authors of her times and she refused to be overtly political in most of her works. She confesses in *Dust Tracks* that a Black American in her times was
“supposed to write about race problems” but she is “thoroughly sick” (713) of it. Hurston’s anthropological research, as we know, was directed towards disproving the self-justifying white myth of the intellectual inferiority of Blacks, which led her to weave and thereby preserve the rich oral folklore of her people into everything she wrote. She is determined to celebrate the beauty of her people and accepts no definition of them or of herself as simply ‘victims’. Yet the whole of Dust Tracks, as Birch suggests is a perplexing mixture of this pride in, but contempt for her people. In one of the Appendix chapters she says “... instead of race pride being a virtue, it is a sapping vice” (783). She also calls race consciousness “...a deadly explosive on the tongues of men”, which she chooses rather to forget (784). She maintains an ambiguous attitude towards the race leaders of her times, too.

Dust Tracks went on to win the Anisfield-Wolf award for “the best book on race relations and for the best volume in the general field of fiction, poetry, or biography which is of such a character that it will aid in the sympathetic understanding and constructive treatment of race relations”, but critics like Harold Preece have denounced the book as “the tragedy of a gifted, sensitive mind, eaten up by an egocentrism fed on the patronizing admiration of the dominant white world” (qtd. in Howard, Zora 41).

To suggest however, that Hurston remained ambiguous of her racial feelings because she never really experienced any prejudice is wrong, as I have already noted. Critics have offered various defenses for Hurston’s attitude. Pam Bordelon defends her by asserting the need to put Hurston’s ambiguity in the perspective of the backdrop of the times in which she wrote. In addition to the segregated, pre-civil rights era being difficult for Blacks – especially for a woman nurturing the ‘ludicrous’ thought of becoming a writer, certain personal factors also were important, according to Bordelon. Hurston was a reluctant autobiographer and had written the autobiography only under pressure from Lippincot, her publisher. Hurston was so pressed by financial need that she reluctantly consented, but then at least, she did not want the book not to be sold on account of alienating her white readers. The
book may have earned her the ire of 'race champions', but by filtering her racial commentary carefully and by remaining in “her place”, Bordelon credits Hurston of being able to successfully bear the burden and accolades of becoming the first Black woman to escape the narrow confines of the south and establish a professional writing career. Perhaps what Bordelon hints at by suggesting Hurston’s remaining in “her place” and achieving her goals is not much different from what Birch calls a “calculated survival strategy in her campaign to achieve the place in the sun advocated by her mother”. Birch attributes the ‘placatory tone’ of Dust Tracks to Hurston’s genuine fears of white publishers, who could silence and further impoverish her.

There is no doubt about the fact that Hurston’s work was subject to editorial censorship (Birch 135). We know that the manuscript version of Dust Tracks was sanitized for publication by the removal of her outspoken comments on American imperialistic ambitions. Pearl Harbor would have rendered these unpalatable, though no less true. Bordelon also agrees that “politics compromised the veracity of Dust Tracks...”(20). Sidonie Smith would call this “editorial colonization”, which she says has been a given at least in Black writing (98). P. Gabrielle Foreman puts it this way:

‘Anticipatory’ criticism – the reading of the critical signs of ideologies and constraints of the era – plays a very real role in silencing of, and the silencing in, literary texts. This may lead to an author’s subtextualizing or veiling, pulling away from surface level of writing. The more liminal a writer’s position vis-à-vis the literary establishment, the more veiled we can expect her voice to be. African-American women writers have had to hyperadept in negotiating the field in which these dynamics played out (657).

Hurston was definitely hemmed in by a fear of rejection by those in whose economic power she was held. In the Ms. version of Dust Tracks she even told an interviewer from New York Amsterdam News, “rather than get all of the things which you want to say you must compromise and work within the
limitations [of those people] who have final authority in deciding whether or not a book shall be printed” (qtd. in Howard, Zora 165). Birch may blame Hurston for her “guarded ambivalence” and her “irritating circumspection” but she attributes it to the power of publishers in particular and of white opinion in general. Robey says that Hurston’s autobiography makes a statement about the debilitating influence her white readership has on the act of writing an autonomous self (679).

That Hurston’s autobiography was directed to a white reading public, has been a favourite issue for critics. They quote numerous instances from the text in the nature of explanatory footnotes for Black idiomatic language, which, critics say, Hurston is clearly deciphering for her white readers: “that is a Negro saying that means...” (584); “the word nigger in this sense does not mean...” (586); “we held two lying contests, story-telling to you” (698); and also her pathetic pleas for acceptance where she offers “you all my right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you. In my eyesight, you lose nothing by not looking just like me” (769). Another critic, Pierre A. Walker has made a post-modernist interpretation of Hurston herself as the subject of Dust Tracks. He also attributes the ambiguity in racial politics, the mixture of dialect and standard English, and the conventions of oral story telling within a written text, to the heterogeneity that is characteristic of all post-modern writing. 4

Correct as all the abovesaid ways of defending Hurston’s ‘elusive’ politics in Dust Tracks might be, I would still qualify the views of Pam Bordelon, Eva Birch, Pierre Walker and others, who give Hurston credit for making it big in a white, male world despite the troubled times and place where she lived. My contention is that in the seemingly individualistic, non-autobiographical, non-political impulse of Dust Tracks, in both its structure and its content, Hurston has played a trickster on all her readers – this time Black and white both.

By offering a model of resistance in Dust Tracks on a Road, that is seemingly non-confrontational and sycophantic, Hurston was actually playing
politics in a unique way. *Dust Tracks* is a codified discourse signifying a widespread emancipatory potential. Hurston, we know hated to use the “stock phrases” of other Black intellectuals and artists of her time because to her that kind of a narrative discourse had a normative effect. Both Black and white readers at that time had come to expect from Black writers a discourse of oppression and opposition, which was attuned to the idea of accepting the intellectual authority of the western literary tradition. This discourse, to Hurston was hegemonic because it sustained a subjugated status for Blacks. She wanted to liberate herself and other Black writers creatively and empower the Black people culturally. Hurston offered an alternative discourse of opposition that conferred a liberatory subjectivity on her.

In an essay “‘We Must Speak With The Same Weapons’ : Re-Inscribing Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*”, Nghana Lewis has suggested that:

...even the most oppressive forms of domination... are not hermetic and, in fact, have cleavages, spaces, margins, and gaps that “the other” can search to acquire agency. Zora Neale Hurston’s conceptualization of human subjectivity and agency seems to have arisen from a similar theoretical foundation (311).

It is precisely such a sense of agency and subjectivity Hurston finds in her folk foundationalism. This becomes the basis for fashioning herself in *Dust Tracks* and in shaping the autobiographical posture of the book. Hurston’s life and her autobiography are not the same, nor did she intend them to be. Fox-Genovese has suggested that Hurston, “…had set her sights on an ideal beyond the [racial] horizon of everyday life [and] ... beyond the confines of her gender.” In keeping with this ideal, Fox-Genovese suggests, Hurston constructed a “statue” of the “self” she wished the world to see (“My Statue” 177).

In a strategy aimed at resisting the negatives of the racial and/or sexual gaze, Hurston rooted her autobiographical identity in the collective self of Eatonville. Françoise Lionnet says that, “…*Dust Tracks* amounts to
autoethnography, that is, the defining of one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history and ethnographical analysis..." ("Autoethnography" 383). To Lionett, Hurston "...opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto—) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing of singularity cannot be foreclosed" ("Autoethnography" 391).

It is because Hurston considers cultural forms more significant than specific events, Lionnet continues, that the self she fashions through language is not a fixed essence, partaking of an immutable and original racial substance. Rather, it is a process of self-discovery through self-invention by means of the folk narratives of ethnic interest (Lionnet, "Autoethnography" 411). The cultural forms thus created are neither static nor inviolable but dynamically involved in the creation of culture itself. It is in this respect that Hurston’s ‘subject’ of autobiography and the ‘subject-matter’ of folklore become homologous structures because both are in a constant state of flux and both transcend pedestrian notions of referentiality. Dust Tracks, thus, puts forth a paradoxical self-portrait of Hurston that remains fluid and multidimensional, refusing to be framed and packaged. Lionnet goes to the extent of suggesting that for Hurston "... the discursive enterprise of self-portraiture is a process of collecting and gathering, of assembling images and metaphors to portray a figural self..." ("Autoethnography" 398). That is why the picture is that of the field worker who echoes those "private" experiences which have collective value. Alice Deck also agrees that the manifest content of Dust Tracks on a Road, "...is ethnographic but autobiographical questions concerning the narrative self’s understanding of her relationship to the culture under scrutiny function in the narrative presentation" (248).

Nellie McKay, who had earlier blamed Hurston for her ‘lies’ in the autobiography, its evasions and lack of honest self-disclosures, her deviations from the strict patterns that defined early Black autobiographical writing and her non-confrontational racist politics, also agrees that “.... even though she blatantly rejects the idea of her autobiography as a race-representative document, Hurston never separates herself from the Black community”
McKay, “Race, Gender” 180). In her essay ‘Race Gender And Cultural Context in Zora Neale Hurston’s Dust Tracks on a Road’, McKay quotes scholars like Suzan Friedman who had suggested that group identification with community is a feature of all autobiographical writing outside the dominant group. Besides minority group autobiographies, this also includes women’s autobiographies. This is important according to Friedman, because it enables these individuals to move beyond alienation within the dominant culture to construct meaningful lives in writing and otherwise.

Community identity permits the rejection of historically diminishing images of self, imposed by the dominant culture; it allows marginalized individuals to embrace alternative selves constructed from positive images of their own creation. This, however, does not imply an individualistic isolated self, but a merging of the individual with a unique collective group identity. In this sense, the self of a personal narrative is also a self that transcends the socially imposed limits of race, class and/or gender. McKay suggests that in her bid for independence, Hurston changes the traditional system of signs and shatters the boundaries of previous forms of ‘authentic’ self-representation. *Dust Tracks* is “a deliberately staged work” with a “considered design” (McKay, “Race, Gender” 187). In not revealing the intimate details of her personal life and not making her text an overt polemic against racial injustice, Hurston is in line with those Blacks who have employed language strategies, particularly artifice and concealment in attempting to cope with the powerlessness and vulnerability of their racial selves. A dramatist and storyteller at heart, Hurston had anyway never held truth as an ideal. Only a few years earlier she had written in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). “Now, women forget all those things they do not want to remember, and remember everything they do not want to forget” (561), and *Mules and Men* as I have discussed in chapter 3, was her book of the subversive potential of ‘lying’.

McKay further defends Hurston by suggesting that Hurston was not the first Black writer to create an image that did not offer a wholly accurate
reading of the self. In ‘The Literature Of The Slave’, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. examines new biographies of Frederick Douglass which reveal the discrepancies among Douglass’s three narratives. Gates concludes that a significant aspect of the Black autobiographical tradition is, “the positing of fictive Black selves in language, in a mode of discourse traditionally defined by large claims for the self. The self in this sense does not exist as an entity but as a coded system of signs, arbitrary in reference” (Figures 119, 123). Audience strongly influences the nature of both the hidden and the fictive Black self. Given these strategies of Black self-representation, I wish to place Dust Tracks on a Road within the paradigm that Gates identifies.

Much has been debated about the year of Hurston’s birth, which she keeps in wraps in her autobiography. She starts the chapter ‘I Get Born’ by saying that “This is all hearsay. Maybe some of the details of my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but... I really did get born” (577). She further says that it was the “gay time” of companionship, of hog-killing in January, when she was born. But Hurston neither mentions the date nor the year of her birth. Whereas Robert Hemenway, Hurston’s biographer puts the date of her birth as Jan 7, 1901, Hurston herself remained purposely inconsistent all her life about the year of her birth which varied between 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902 and 1903. Recent research on Hurston, however, especially by Pam Bordelon, who has worked on a book on Zora Neale Hurston, puts the date of her birth at Jan 15, 1891 and the place of birth as Notasulga, Alabama and not Eatonville, Florida. Bordelon’s argument is based on the family record page in the Hurston family bible which she happened to trace to her eldest surviving niece, Mrs. Winifred Hurston Clark. In her pictorial essay titled ‘New Tracks on Dust Tracks: Toward A Reassessment of the Life of Zora Neale Hurston’, which I have already mentioned above, Pam Bordelon has also included clippings from this key document. The “family record” page of this bible furnishes other vital biographical documentation that provides insight into pivotal events in Hurston’s life, and is by far the most authentic document on these matters.
Hemenway suggests “the original deception may have occurred when she self-consciously entered high school at an advanced age, but the willful subterfuge is characteristic of her entire career...” (Biography 13). To me Hurston’s subterfuge had deeper political connotations. Going back into slavery time, it was the deprivation of time in the life of the slave that first signaled his or her status as a piece of property. Slavery’s time was delineated by memory alone. One’s sense of one’s existence depended upon memory. This dependence upon memory made the slave, first and foremost, a slave to himself or herself, a prisoner of his or her own power of recall. Within such a time machine, not only had the slave no fixed reference points, he also had lived at no time past the point of recollection.

To the end of his life, the mystery of his birth had remained to Frederick Douglass, a source of unhappiness. In one of his narratives, Douglass moans, “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (310). Harriet E. Wilson too was uncertain of the year of her birth as 1827 or 1828. By un-remembering the date and year of her birth, Hurston is making a dig at whites who believed the darker-skinned races were be-nighted with respect to self-consciousness and memory. She has put this absence of memory to her advantage, by appearing to be younger than she was. She seems to be chuckling to herself, ‘I am happy to remain in forgetfulness about the date and year of my birth, if that pleases you. But you can’t stop me from celebrating this memory loss. I love myself for it’.

Another important reference point of which the slaves were not supposed to know anything was where they came from. Butterfield tells us that a slave narrative was supposed to “begin from nothing” i.e. no exact age, date or place of birth or family name. Hurston has put this deprivation of place also to her advantage. Though authentic evidence establishes that Zora was born in a plantation cabin in Alabama, where her father was a sharecropper, but she loves herself for forgetting this, too. Facts in the
Hurston family bible suggest that the baby child Zora was about a year or so when the family migrated to Florida. How is Hurston supposed to remember anything before that! She is happy to call the self-governing Eatonville her birthplace and she continued to do so all her life. That is more impressive to her and one can picture the ‘mean’ Hurston chuckling to herself with another successful ‘lie’.

The dynamics of intercultural contact have put the meaning of ‘lying’ into a new perspective. In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston tells us, “I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the Black backside of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town...” (561). In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* she says that this town was incorporated in 1889, but in *Dust Tracks*, the date is mentioned as Aug 18, 1886. What endears this Floridian town to Zora is its nature’s plenty but more than that is its mythical creation. At a time, when no one could even dream of an “all-Negro town”, Eatonville was virtually created out of sheer Black-white goodwill and Black self-determination and self-confidence. This Eatonville helps Hurston remap what Nghana Lewis calls “the psychosocial positionalities of Black and white people” (318).

Eatonville may be at the ‘margins’ of society, but the history of its coming into being and its location side by side with white Maitland makes its position a marginality which seemingly distances and disempowers, but is in fact an advantageous space for nurturing Black individuals who foster and sustain Black communities, Black consciousness and Black culture. It therefore, becomes a “cultural threshold” not a “cultural barrier”, (Terms used by Nghana Lewis). It is in this plush Eatonville, where her father was Mayor and Pastor and her mother, the family pillar, that Zora’s exuberant self took form. The incident of her birth too, is almost fairytale: she was granndied by a kindly, rich white man because the traditional Aunt Judy arrived a little late. As soon as the baby Zora learnt to walk, she says that she developed an inside urge to go places, which continued for the rest of her life.

Hurston’s ideology of an autonomous empowered Black self is also
submerged in the rhetorical strategies she uses with respect to representing her childhood self. She suggests her “difference” from other children of her age: “I got my joys in other ways” (580). These other ways include making up stories, telling tall tales, living in a world of myth or fantasy, either self-generated or found in books. “I was driven inward” and “I lived an exciting life unseen” (581), Hurston tells us. Beginning with her self-created relationship with the firmaments, Zora imagines that she is the moon’s favored child and it follows her wherever she went. Similarly, sitting on top of the chinaberry tree in her house, she looked out over the world and imagined that her house was the center of the world, but she must take a trip to the horizon, which appeared the most interesting thing she saw. She even imagined herself riding a fine horse to explore the “belly-band of the world” (584).

When her dream of getting a Black saddle horse as a Christmas present from her father is rejected as being sinful and shameful, she is not fully disheartened. “I made me one up” Hurston tells us and “Often I rode my prancing horse” to the end of the world and saw things in far-off places (585). Myth-making and the creative power of imagination are the child Zora’s forte which help her empower herself in the absence of material fulfillment. “Hurston’s innermost thoughts were the only place in which she could escape societal limitations and censorship and freely express herself” (Plant 11).

To Hurston, Joe Clarke’s store porch was “the heart and spring of the town” as against the opinion of other folk of her town who thought that the church and the school are the most important institutions. On the store, men sat “…on boxes and benches and passed this world and the next one through their mouths” (599). In the “lying” sessions, God, Devil, and all wood folk – Brer Fox, Brer Rabbit, Sis Cat walked and talked like natural men. These tales “stirred up fancies in me” and only confirmed what she had believed all along. From listening to them, the child Zora began making up stories herself. Once she told her mother how she had climbed a bird’s tail and talked to her, another time she told her how she walked all over the lake without wetting her
feet. The wind passing through the tree is “body-fied” by Hurston, for it said things to her. She sat alone under the “loving pine” which talked to her and sang songs to her in “a mighty fine bass voice”. The child Zora also quenched her imaginative needs by clandestinely personifying discarded household objects, thereby creating a world of her own. In a chapter entitled ‘Figure and Fancy’, Zora picked up an ear of corn and

...crawled under the side of the house to love it all by myself.

In a few minutes, it had become Miss Corn-Shuck, and of course needed some hair. So I went back and picked up some corn silk and tied it to the pointed end. We had a lovely time together for a day or two, then Miss Corn Shuck got lonesome for some company.

I do not think that her lonesomeness would have come down on her as it did, if I had not found a cake of sweet soap in Mama’s dresser drawer.... So Miss Corn-Shuck fell in love with Mr. Sweet Smell... (607-8).

When inanimate objects stopped communicating with her, they gave way to animals which had lives and characteristics only Hurston knew. Once a man became an alligator only for her amusement and she told this fantastic tale to her friends with so much conviction, that they all looked for alligator signs on him. She says she kept on adding new chapters to the Pendir-alligator story and loved to fight her fantasies with the facts. Hurston herself confesses, “His life had not agreed with my phantasy at any point” (614). But it is surely the sheer power of creating a tale that she enjoys. By making Mr. Pendir return from the dead in alligator form, Hurston also privileges irrationality over sheer reason and the power of imagination over factual details. Hurston also kept on expanding on tales and anecdotes that she heard on the store-porch: “Life took on a bigger perimeter”, she suggests.

In all her story making “Mama never tried to break me”, Hurston tells us, but her father wanted to whip her and her grandmother wanted to “stomp
her guts out”. To me, Hurston’s tale-telling has the same political significance in her childhood world, in undermining her father’s and grandmother’s authority, as the lying contests on Joe Clarke’s store porch or the ones in Polk country sawmill camps and jook joints, of which I have already talked at length in chapter 3 and partly in chapter 4 of my thesis.

Most of the tales that Hurston created as a child, one notices, were those governed by personified images. In an essay, “Projecting Gender: Personification in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston”, G.E. Thompson suggests that the technique of personification is the power to remake reality – the ability to, “... project their designs, fears, or desires upon inanimate objects or even other characters to transform the world into a more manipulable and manageable environment” (742). Basically then, personification amounts to a power to control the world and thus becomes a technique of self-affirmation especially for women who in a way change their life by seeing the world anew.

The myths and stories in books that most influenced Hurston as a child were the ones involving tales of bravery, adventure and travel: Gulliver’s Travels, Grimms fairy tales, Greek and Roman myths, Jungle Stories by Kipling, books by R.L. Stevenson and Hans Anderson and the Norse Tales were her favourites. “My soul was with the gods and my body in the village” and “I wanted to stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle” (595-96), Hurston tells of herself. She wanted to be like “Hercules” who had chosen “Duty” over “Pleasure” and had climbed the hills of fame and glory by performing many impossible tasks. The great and good Odin is defined by her as majestic because for his zeal to go down to the well of knowledge and drink deeply out of it, he did not even mind sacrificing one eye, which was the price of knowledge. In her own later research down in the south, even at the cost of contracting a serious illness, Hurston identifies herself with him. Norse Tales, in which Norsemen are symbols of restless energy, influence her deeply. The mythical Persephone/Isis is also Hurston’s alter ego in Dust Tracks and throughout her works. Persephone/Isis are the mythical queens of the realm of
‘interiority’ in Greek mythology and command worship on account of their power to be able to move freely between two realms. Hurston tells us that whenever Persephone came back to the outer world there was sunshine and summer all around. For the three months she spent in the world down below, it was winter. This mythological knowledge enables Hurston to identify herself with their kind of power, especially again in the light of her later experiences as a hoodoo initiate, when she herself travels to the dark underworld and comes back with rich mystical experiences.

Hurston’s detailing of the tragic event of her mother’s death is another important scene that is politically charged. The veiling of the mirror represents severed connections with the past (especially with the communal mothers) and on her deathbed, Lucy Hurston’s advice to Zora not to allow the mirror to be veiled is symbolic in that sense. But the child Zora’s inability to prevail over village elders in disallowing this death ritual from taking place, proves futile and she tells us that she suffered a lot of anguish on account of this failure, for many years to come. She knew that her mother depended on her for a voice. In a sense, her life and her wanderings become symbolic of the cultural necessity of restoring severed connections with her mother. To Hurston, restoring connections with one’s maternal heritage is empowering.

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, where Zora’s alter ego is Isis, in a similar dying scene, Lucy Pearson had told her dying daughter, “tuh git all de education you kin. Dat’s de onliest way you kin keep out from under people’s feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin’... You got de spunk,... Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self” (Hurston, *Jonah’s 110*).

If one looks at Hurston’s life in *Dust Tracks* after her mother’s death, it looks like a moving picture version of the very words that the dying mother spoke. Hurston has here used the rhetorical strategy of the visionary ability of prophesying, that confers power even on a dying Black person and exercises control over but also gives direction to Hurston’s young and adult life. Françios Lionnet has rightly suggested that Hurston’s self-portrait then
becomes her effort to fill the void of individual/collective amnesia. Her self-portrait is her conversation with the past, a ceremony for the dead mother(s), but one that also empowers the living (Lionnet, “Autoethnography” 407).

In all her efforts at educating herself, Hurston wants to fulfill the prophetic words of her mother and remain connected to her. It is for this reason that Hurston’s higher education, instead of alienating her from her people, brings her closer to them. By acquiring for herself the analytical and trained mind of an anthropologist, she had actually acquired the power of a ‘weapon’ in the race for cultural equality. This ‘weapon’ may not be the “killing sword” of a Frederick Douglass who called slave traders “a pack of fiends” and “a set of debased villainous creatures” or the “just-like-white-folks” armor of a DuBois, but it was the hand of peace and equality. Hurston’s was a weapon of peace, not war. It was based on the foundational premise of anthropology — the basic humanity of all races. Hurston, the soldier, in her march to Canaan, wanted to fight her war with this weapon of self-affirmation, which is linguistic and dialogical.

It is in this light that Hurston’s later life experiences need to be interpreted. In her struggle for self-support, she has thrown particular light on her backstage job in the Gilbert and Sullivan musical repertoire because here she had the opportunity to immerse herself completely in her ‘Dixie’ background as a part of healthy “communal living”, devoid of any racial sensitiveness or malice. She says:

In the first place, I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. They were all northerners…. They did not know of the way an average southern child, white and Black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names. It is an every day affair to hear somebody called a mullet-headed, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, gator-faced, shad-mouthed,... goat-bellied, puzzle-gutted, camel-backed... unmated so and so! Eyes looking like skint Ginny nuts, and mouth looking like a dish-pan full of broke-up crockery! They can tell you in simile exactly
how you walk and smell. They can furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like.... Since that stratum of the southern population is not given to book-reading, they take their comparisons right out of the barnyard and the woods. When they get through with you, you and your whole family look like an acre of totem poles (651).

What came to Hurston naturally, made her a “play-pretty” to the others. She says it did not strike her as curious then, why she was so welcome. But “now, I can see the reason for it”, (The analytical anthropologist’s mind is at work here).

Hurston also put the creative power of her imagination to use by writing pert comments under each group member’s photograph or on daily doings on the coach. She succeeded in undermining the authority of all the people on the coach by using ‘signifying talk’ on them. Making ‘signifying talk’ was also her way of getting over the pain and hazards of having to work at her age. If she could get ice-cream sodas and Coca-Cola also in return for it, so much the better. This experience of her life, Hurston tells us, also helped her secure “an approach to racial understanding” (664) among a group of thirty odd people made up of all classes and races. The important lesson she learnt in this job was that:

...You are bound to be jostled in the “crowded street of life”. That in itself need not be dangerous unless you have the open razors of personal vanity in your pants pocket. The passers-by don’t hurt you, but if you go around like that, they make you hurt yourself” (664).

The Morgan school experience is Hurston’s way of suggesting the importance of nurturing a material or intellectual networking among Blacks. This fosters communication and cultural development. After indulging in a little piece of self-mockery for her having only “one dress, a change of underwear and one pair of tan oxfords”, Hurston says that she never lacked in the offer of the dresses from her peers for a college programme or a get-
together, which was their way of showing respect to her for being a “knowledge bug”. While “resources” were thus exchanged, so was the intellectual dialogue between faculty and students and among students themselves, which was very rewarding. It provided for programmes of an interdisciplinary nature and also opened up avenues for students beyond high school. It is Dwight Holmes, Hurston’s Morgan school teacher, who encourages her at Howard also. Morgan thus becomes Hurston’s way of suggesting the benefits of indirect organized Black resistance.

An incident that takes place at a barbershop where Hurston worked part-time to pay for her Howard education, is symbolic of her views on how the hazards of intracultural division and intercultural collaboration combine to weaken Black political authority. At an elite barbershop run by Blacks, where only whites could be served, a Black man comes and insists on getting a haircut and shave. The Negro barber politely tells him to find a Negro shop. When the client insists on his constitutional rights, he is physically thrown out by Negro barbers and white customers. Hurston says that though she remained a mute witness to the incident, yet realized later that factors like disharmony among the Blacks and spontaneous, unorganized resistance, as also Black-white collaboration had given sanction to racist discrimination which was detrimental to long-term Black interests.

Hurston has pressed the need of Black unity as an indirect political weapon, through various other suggestive episodes. A most shocking and an eye-opening discovery for her is the information that comes to her from Cudjo Lewis, the last of the surviving African slaves who had been brought to the New Land on the Mayflower. She learns from him that Black slavery had been brought about on account of Black disunity and the greed of some of their own people. In the chapter ‘My people! My people!’, where she says that some ‘Race champions’ and ‘Race men’ look down upon the ‘low-class’ Negroes, Hurston wishes to suggest that this could spell doom for Negro well-being. In the Eatonville incident, where all men rally together and go into the woods in the dead of the night to save a member of their race, Hurston has
again brought forth the importance of Black solidarity as a veiled weapon to fight any racial war. Same is the message contained in the Big Sweet episode. It is her protectiveness towards Hurston that gave Hurston the confidence to continue with her ‘lies’ collecting (I have already talk about this in the chapter on *Mules*).

Some folk tales and folk parables especially included in the chapter ‘My people! My people!’ which cause the Black man to laugh at himself is Hurston’s way of inscribing laughter as a device of resistance. The tales of the ‘Monkey see, Monkey do’ type, or the folk tale where a Negro prays to God to get all Negroes together, but knows God can never do it, lead to full-throated self-laughter among the Negroes. Nghana Lewis’s comments in this regard are pertinent, “to laugh and, more importantly, to laugh at oneself is to mask and release the stress that accompanies conflict, failure, opposition, and oppression” (327). As a child when Zora heard tales of Negro stupidity, laziness and monkey-ish behaviour on the one hand, and of Negro ingenuity and inventiveness on the other, she became confused. It was only as an adult and after receiving the analytical anthropologist’s training that her confusion regarding Negro self-mockery was removed. In this sense, all tales of the Negro, making fun of himself are actually a part of Hurston’s signifying talk.

Hurston’s keen interest in the highly dramatic religious ceremonies of her father’s Baptist Church, as also her adult passion in staging a genuine Negro Concert, are her ways of suggesting the importance of Negro’s remaining true to his own cultural forms. She hated the ‘just-like-white-folks’ cult that was becoming popular among a few ‘think-they-are-better’ Negroes. Through her commitment to retrieving genuine Negro material and bringing it to New York theatres, she wanted to set an example for others to follow.

In the narration of her research experiences, one almost senses the sprightly Hurston wrapped up in all the singing, laughing, cursing and boasting that goes on in Polk County and later in the Bahamas. Even after learning of the risk to her life, she continues collecting material in Polk County jooks. Even in describing the in-fighting and the jealousies of the folk,
one understands that she is digging into the ‘primeval’ flavor of the scene. She is interested in recording the complex life of the Blacks -- the hard work in the mines and on railroads, but also the good times in the jooks. She talks of the Lucy-type killers among Negroes, but does not fail to mention the Big Sweet-type protectors among them, too. Of the forbidding hoodoo ceremonies, in which Hurston participates, she confesses that her keen interest is partly on account of her belief that these might be the source of some of the most advanced secrets of medical science. The hoodoo ceremonies of New Orleans and Haiti in which Hurston participates make one’s hair raise on end. In one of them, she was made to lie naked on a couch for three days and three nights with no food and her navel was touching a rattlesnake skin all the time. In another ceremony, she sat at the crossroads in the middle of a dark night and made a pact with the Devil. Of Hurston’s participation in these hoodoo ceremonies, Hemenway says:

It is the act of a dedicated anthropologist willing to place herself in both physical and psychic peril. One does not participate in such rites for pure adventure. The act is not casual, and a person enters into it with fearful knowledge of its dangers and an anxious sense of its possibilities. It is the kind of act that separates Zora Neale Hurston from the Harlem literati and adds a different dimension to the sources of her imagination (Biography 121).

Making an intensive and extensive anthropological study in Africa or in the Bahamas and in Haiti is also Hurston’s method of humanising the Negro by giving him agency. She upholds their way of life, their loves and hates, their squabbles and their stories, their songs, prayers and their magic as valid as anyone else’s. To blame Hurston for being a “cultural showcase” (Larry Neal’s term), as many of her critics have done, is a gross misunderstanding of Hurston’s radically subversive strategies. A woman who could sell off her car, pawn her radio and typewriter and risk her life only to collect and preserve genuine Negro material, at least deserves to be
understood for her evangelical zeal.

True, at times Hurston has made statements like “…we are no race” or “I turn my back upon the past…” or “my race but not my taste,” but one should also remember what she said in the Appendix chapter ‘Seeing the World As It Is’: “I 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 blonde” (793) and also “I will fight for my country, but I will not lie for her” (792). It was statements such as these and her open fierce attacks on white colonisation of ‘the so called inferior people’ that the Appendix chapters had to be excised from the 1942 Lippincot version of *Dust Tracks* on the publisher’s plea that international politics has no place in an autobiography.

There is absolutely no ambiguity in Hurston’s own politics despite at times seemingly ambiguous statements which she had to make under the effect of what I have already referred to as “editorial colonization” (S. Smith 98). But the irony of it all is that while appearing to concede to the publisher’s wishes, Hurston actually played a major joke on that very publisher by writing an autobiography which is actually not an autobiography. She may have at times written what she was told to or what she knew her white readers wanted to hear, but to my mind these are Hurston’s various ‘performance strategies’, through which she signified on all of them, all the time. In understanding the context of her statements and in unraveling the radicalism of her aesthetic and rhetorical conventions of lodging Black protest, lies the key to a proper understanding of Hurston, the person and Hurston, the autobiographer.

My reading of *Dust Tracks* has been that of a paradigmatic signifying text where Hurston ‘lied’ as she pleased, annoyed when she needed to and flattered when she benefited – all those things that helped her to “jump at de sun” without losing that personal/communal integrity which comprised her subjectivity. In the depiction of her communal self in various folk parables and real-life anecdotes, in her lies, in the use of folk-idiom and formalized language, in her banterous discourse, in the non-autobiographical form of her
autobiography, Hurston employed “discreet mechanisms” through which she encoded and marshaled Black resistance. Nghana Lewis suggests that “every personal action in and every personal reaction to a given social situation in *Dust Tracks* is inevitably, politically charged” (317). Lynn Domina is right in saying, “What seems to be revelation is camouflage. Language need not create vulnerability for the speaker….language can actively protect the speaker” (207). While dressing up as what Gates calls “a masquerader for a ball” (“A Negro” 43), Hurston succeeded in playing a trickster on all her readers.

François Lionnet has rightly suggested that if at times Hurston seems to be aspiring towards a “raceless ideal” the reason is that she thinks “race” in that context is but a reasonable, pseudoscientific category for dealing with a basically fluid, diverse and multifarious reality: “the stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost” (764). Lionnet also defends Hurston for her sense of history which deprivileges as degenerating the memory of paralyzing images. To recall the past in order to transcend it is the only emancipatory stance one can confidently adopt without the risk of falling a prey to reactionary forces. Lionnet further quotes Frantz Fanon in defense of Hurston when he had said, “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny” and also “I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence” (Lionnet “Autoethnography” 392-93). Hurston too affirms that she would rather “turn all [her] thoughts and energies on the present”. This is a creative release from “the clutching hand of time” and an utmost freedom in “seeking into individual capabilities” (786-87).

It is important to retrieve those past traditions that can become a source of wholeness, for it is more important to learn from those traditions, than to dwell on pain and injustice. This recovering and revising also has a healing power which is humanistic in nature. It leads to the erasing of boundaries and fosters métissage, which is Lionnet’s term, for mixing. Cultural métissage has subversive potential because it rejects the notions of racial/cultural purity.
Lionnet reads the mixed/non-canonical structure of *Dust Tracks*, too, in this light. Because *métissage* upholds multiplicity and diversity by debunking exclusionary practices, it challenges canonical constraints and fosters dialogic exchange. In form it leads to erasing of “pure” boundaries between autobiography and fiction (Lionnet “Introduction”).

Hurston has thus inscribed her resistance not only in what she wrote, but also in how she wrote it. She has structured her autobiographical narrative in a distinctly Black, distinctly anti-narrative form. She had to court blame for writing a failed autobiography, particularly on account of her including the last five chapters of the main autobiography and for the five chapters of the Appendix. But to make evaluative judgments such as these, takes away the multiple possibilities of autobiographical expression based on a unique response to life’s conditions. Robert Hemenway has blamed *Dust Tracks* for Hurston’s mentioning of visions which are never fulfilled or which are ill-integrated into the narrative structure (Introduction xxxvii). But perhaps it must have been immaterial to Hurston to move in a chronological/logical order of cause and effect. What was important to her was perhaps the empowerment that a young Hurston achieved by a series of “self-generated narratives” in addition to the powerful emotional impact these visions had on Hurston at the time of her life when they appeared (Krasner 114-15). Fox-Genovese, too, says that in *Dust Tracks*, “Hurston became an accomplished ‘liar’ who also spun her tales to suit her purposes, became an accomplished artist who also crafted her work to satisfy her imagination” (“Myth” 227).

Kathleen Hassall writes:

Hurston was expected to report and interpret Hurston; instead she presents Hurston – or rather she presents an assemblage of fictionalized Hurstons, irreconcilable in some ways both with each other and with the known facts of her life, and yet by their very contradictions revealing her essential strength. Complex, passionate, proud, she was all her life engaged simultaneously in celebrating the culture of her race while thwarting reductive
definitions of herself and refusing restrictive choices. The authenticity of her autobiography lies in its performance of the strategies she so often used: here she reinvents facts, withholds information, blurs the distinction between history and fiction, insists on privacy, changes hats, wears masks, serves her own purposes, refuses conscription — even in a good cause (qtd. in Roark 332).

Another critic, Barbara Johnson, had said that “Unification and Simplification are strategies of domination, not understanding.” If art is to deal honestly with life, Johnson opines, then it must avoid fulfillment and symmetry (B. Johnson 218). Hurston, too, had claimed that Black art is essentially asymmetrical:

It is the lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so hard for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes...

The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but they are there....There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments....Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled, it is lacking in symmetry (Hurston, “Characteristics” 833).

The overall self-portrait/statue that Hurston has thus constructed for herself is that of ‘a marvellous collage’ from her communal experiences. By combining her skills as creative writer, anthropologist and ethnographer with political savvy and ingenuity in order to indict the socio-political and economic disadvantages Black people endure(d) in America, Hurston was fully able to ‘play politics’ while at the same time secure her place ‘in de sun’.
Notes

1 All references to Dust Tracks on a Road hereafter are given parenthetically with page number only.

2 Butterfield’s discussion of Crusade for Justice appears on 201-3.

3 Hurston fails to mention this real life episode in Dust Tracks. Pam Bordelon has quoted this incident (Robert Hemenway has also mentioned this in his Biography) and justified Hurston’s silence in Dust Tracks about her bitter feelings, as a “wise choice” because she did not want to “alienate her largely white audience”.

4 This is a gist of Pierre A. Walker’s critique of Dust Tracks in his 1998 article, “Zora Neale Hurston and the Post-Modern Self in Dust Track on a Road”. 