Twentieth-Century Fiction I


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Papers

Paper 2 due November 26

Think ahead about topic and argument

Plan when you will write and revise

OG office hours today (Murray 036B, 1:15–2:30)
Review

Hurston
The Harlem Renaissance
“The American Museum of Unnatural History”
Dialect writing and the narrator’s idiom
Speech and what is beyond speech
Communal performance: speech, debate, song, story
Language and power: speech, story
  Power: at the intersection of race and gender
  Tradition enables and restrains: Nanny’s story
  “She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love” (89).
Twentieth-Century Fiction

Guest Lecture:
Zora Neale Hurston’s
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD
November 20, 2012
Wright on Hurston

Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in facile sensuality…. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes.

Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears” (1937)
Richard Wright

Hugely influential African-American writer and intellectual

Post–Renaissance generation

In early career, was a Marxist interested in social transformation

*Native Son* (1940)
Wright on Hurston

She exploits that phase of Negro life which is “quaint,” the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the “superior” race.

Richard Wright (1937)
Wright on Hurston

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater ... the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Wright (1937)
Wright on Hurston: Summary

Accuses Hurston of Primitivism:
Perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black folks by
Portraying characters/situations that are outdated representations of a pernicious cultural construct

(“phase of Negro life which is quaint”)


Hurston on Dialect

If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect ... Negro speech is a weird thing, full of “ams” and “Ises.” Fortunately we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.

Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1931)
Hurston on Dialect

One of the Negro’s greatest contributions to the English language is: the use of metaphor and simile.

The stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun....

Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1931)
Hurston on Black Folk Expression

His religious service is ... prose poetry. Prayers and sermons are tooled and polished until they are true works of art. The beauty of the Old Testament does not exceed that of a Negro prayer.

Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1931)
Alain Locke on Hurston

Her gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor keep her ... from diving down deep—either to the inner psychology of characterization or to sharp analysis of the social background.

Alain Locke (1938)
Alain Locke

Editor of *The New Negro* (1925), the publication of which inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance

One of the Renaissance’s influential figures
Locke on Hurston

It is folklore fiction at its best, which is an overdue replacement for so much faulty “local color” fiction about Negroes. But when will the Negro novelist ... come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?

Alain Locke (1938)
Primitivism?

• Wright: Hurston sets back representations of the race and perpetuates negative stereotypes (primitivism, minstrelsy)

• Locke: Hurston improves on “faulty” representations of southern black folks but does “quaint” folklore—no “social document fiction,” i.e. overt political motivation
Primitivism?

Discussion:
How are these critiques of Hurston justifiable?
How are they NOT justifiable?

- Are some characters (or voices) more “primitive” than others?
- If Hurston *does* engage in documenting the folk... is this the same as perpetuating negative stereotypes?
Another Voice

Negroes in America feel ... that they must always appear in public butter side up, in order to keep from being trampled in the contemporary onward march. They feel as if they must always exhibit specimens from college rather than from the kindergarten, specimens from the parlor rather than from the pantry. They are in the process of being assimilated, and those elements within the race which are still too potent for easy assimilation must be hidden until they no longer exist.

Wallace Thurman (1927)
Another Voice

In this 1927 essay, Thurman argues that the problem with Black representation is the opposite:

Not negative portrayals, but the desire within the Black intelligentsia (Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois) to show a “refined” Black middle-class life, not the crass “primitive” elements Hurston, Hughes, and Thurman depicted.
FIRE!!
A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists

Premier Issue Edited by
WALLACE THURMAN
In Association With
Langston Hughes    Zora Neale Hurston
Gwendolyn Bennett  Aaron Douglas
Richard Bruce      John Davis

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Volume One

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We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasures doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926)
Everyone was having a grand time.... Negroes stood by a little subdued, a little surprised, torn between being proud that certain of their group had achieved distinction, and being angry because a few of these [newly] arrived ones had ceased to be what the group considered “constructive” and had in the interim produced works that went against the grain, in that they did not wholly qualify to the adjective “respectable.”

Wallace Thurman, “Negro Artists and the Negro” 1927
Thurman on the Renaissance

Langston Hughes was the major disturbing note in the “renaissance” chorus. His first volume of verse, *The Weary Blues*, introduced him as a poet who was interested in artistic material rather than in sociological problems. He went for inspiration and rhythms to those people who had been the least absorbed by ... American *Kultur*, and from them he undertook to select and preserve such autonomous racial values as were being rapidly eradicated in order to speed the Negro assimilation.

Wallace Thurman, “Negro Artists and the Negro” 1927
Political Issues So Far

Art as propaganda?

- images matter
- desire for “respectable” images (black bourgeoisie)
- desire for overt political intent / content (“sociological” novel)

Art as revitalized by Folk Traditions

depends on how you view “the Folk”
Misfit Minorities
Resisting Uplift in Twentieth-Century Fiction

My dissertation looks at a tradition of 20C novels and novelists defined by the concept of the *misfit minority*. 
“Misfit” fictions depict “minorities” in a specific way:

They represent experiences of exile from majority culture...

... and from minority identity & community
Misfit Minorities
Resisting Uplift in Twentieth-Century Fiction

Resisting the call for uplifting or overtly sociopolitical representations (Locke, Wright, Du Bois)

and

Resisting the social norms of autonomy and agency that define the modern individual
Features of Misfit-Minority Fiction

Preponderance of **negative emotions** and “**bad romance**” (loving the one you shouldn’t, not loving oneself)

An ethos (or persona) of **antisocial impersonality and self-effacement**, even self-abnegation
Features of Misfit-Minority Fiction

Above all...

Misfit-minority fiction is identifiable through its resistance to uplift and resistance to rugged individualism.
What this means: no happy ending, no fictions of development (\textit{Bildgunsromane}), and perhaps no social re-integration.

No emotional or social or political rescue, in other words.
Is THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD a Misfit Minority Text?

Discussion question:

How does Hurston’s novel both fit and not fit within this misfit-minority paradigm?

Consider: Is Janie a “misfit”? If so, is she this kind of misfit: self-effacing, antisocial / removed from her own community...?
Is THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD a Misfit Minority Text?

**NO:**
- Black female/feminist Bildungsroman = fiction of development

  **Social integration:**
  Though Janie is a misfit, she eventually finds her own community, “down the muck”

  **Autonomy:** Janie progressively embraces herself and increases her autonomy

  **Serious Uplift:** affirming story of self-empowerment
Is THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD a Misfit Minority Text?

YES:

- Somewhat antisocial: Janie is not a good fit within Eatonville / Mayor Starks’ bourgeois community; antibourgeois; not fully integrated at the end of the novel (aside from Pheoby)

- Self-effacement: she fades into the background at first; Tea Cake remains as her internal vision of self-investment--not fully autonomous
I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.

“How it Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928)
Others on Hurston

Hurston idealized Eatonville, the town where she grew up, because it was, as she put it, a “pure Negro town,” a self-sufficient, independent place, a “burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged-individualistic setting,” filled with black pride and self-determination. She believed in empowering black individuals and communities to gain economic and social justice for themselves, instead of depending on white Northern liberals or the federal government.”

Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors (2011)
Political?

Burden of representation on “minority” artists/writers

What is “political”?

Gender as field of political struggle not appreciated fully as “legitimately” political relevant at the time (1930s)

Eye of the beholder regarding what counts as political advocacy in a literary / artistic text

... and what kind of political significance we glean from the text
Who will speak?

It is the great merit of Miss Hurston’s work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her childhood. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life.

Franz Boas, Foreword to *Mules and Men* (1935)
Who will speak?

Once Sis Cat got hongry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat ’im. Rat tried and tried to git loose but Sis Cat was too fast and strong. So jus’ as de cat started to eat ’im he says, “Hol’ on dere, Sis Cat! Ain’t you got no manners atall? You going set up to de table and eat ‘thout washing yo’ face and hands?”

Sis Cat was mighty hongry but she hate for de rat to think she ain’t got no manners, so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone.

*Mules and Men*, end (1935)
Who will speak?

So de cat caught herself a rat again and set down to eat. So de Rat said, “Where’s yo’ manners at, Sis Cat? You going to eat ‘thout washing yo’ face and hands?”

“Oh, Ah got plenty manners,” de cat told ’im. “But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards.” So she et right on ’im and washed her face and hands. And cat’s been washin’ after eatin’ ever since.

I’m sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin’ my manners.

_Mules and Men_, end (1935)
Who will speak?

When it was all done she stood in front of Joe and said, "Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you...."

Hambo said, "Yo’ wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat befo’. She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts.”
Who will speak?

“Leave heah, Janie. Don’t come heah—”

“Ahn knowed you wasn’t gointuh lissen tuh me. You changes everything but nothin’ don’t change you—not even death. But Ah ain’t goin’ outa here and Ah ain’t gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo’ you die.”
Who will speak?

She was full of pity for the first time in years….She thought back and forth about what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man. Then thought about herself.

(87)

Tea Cake wasn’t strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life. Look how she had been able to talk with him right off!

(99)
“Evenin, Mis’ Starks. Could yuh lemme have uh pound uh knuckle puddin’* till Saturday. Ah’m sho tuh pay yuh then.”

“You needs ten pounds, Mr. Tea Cake. Ah’ll let yuh hav eall Ah got and you needn’t bother ’bout payin’ it back.”
A beating with the fist. (98 n)

Discussion: what is the significance of this footnote? Why is the connection between happy speech and violence flagged here?