Modernism's Observant Reporter:
The Folk Politics of Zora Neale Hurston

In Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she recounts her experience working in a white theater company as a teenager:

> Then I got another idea. I would comment on daily doings and post the sheets on the call-board. This took on right away. The results stayed strictly mine less than a week because members of the cast began to call aside and tell me things to put in about others. It got to be so general that everybody was writing it. It was just my handwriting, mostly. Then it got beyond that. Most of the cast ceased to wait for me. They would take a pencil to the board and set down their own items . . . They always started off with either "Zora says" or "The observant reporter of the Call-board asserts"—Lord, Zora said more things! I was continually astonished, but always amused. (107)

When reading Hurston, there are moments when her writing seems to wink at you, when it subtly and playfully signals that some event or scene from her life or the lives of others goes beyond reportage and camera-eye testimony. Here, Hurston recalls her self-appointed role as the "observant reporter" and how, at just fifteen, she grasped the power of that role. By 1942, when *Dust Tracks on a Road* was published, the "continually astonished, but always amused" young Zora was no longer a younger girl. At fifty-one, she was a well-seasoned author and anthropologist who had created an entire literature based on this "observant reporter" identity, making the scene from her autobiography a wink at careful readers, suggestive of the depth and deliberateness of this point of view and method.

In this essay, I explore how this point of view and method, evident across Hurston's body of work, intersects with "high modernism"—that is "high modernism" as a transatlantic literary movement that Hurston was engaged with as well as cultural and intellectual history that scholars continue to shape and debate. Paying close attention to these elements of Hurston's writing, I argue, expands our understanding of the relationship between high modernism and her canon as well as how Hurston's non-fiction contributes to the ideas of identity, community, culture, and politics that famously characterize American modernism, specifically "ethnic modernism," as Werner Sollors defines it. I bring these connections into relief through three questions: How did Hurston use journalism and ethnography? What is the relationship between literary journalism and modernism? And why is Hurston's observer-reporter literature estranged from popular wisdom and criticism about American modernism?

Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was met by profound objections due to its "feathery" oversimplification of rural, southern African Americans. In his review published by *New Masses* that October, Richard Wright denounced the novel, arguing that it drowns without that vessel for

interpretation—"a basic idea or theme"—and, worse, continues the racist tradition "forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique" (22). Wright urged Hurston to attempt a more "serious" and politically responsible portrayal of black life in America. Alain Locke, Hurston's former teacher and the editor of *The New Negro* (1925), a landmark anthology of African-American literature and essays, likewise challenged the writer to "come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction." In short, Locke and Wright saw Hurston's fiction as alarmingly disengaged in the struggle for racial equality. They believed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* flew in the face of the cultural politics underpinning the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro movement.

And yet, Hurston was trained in the art of "serious" documentation. In 1925, she enrolled in Barnard College in New York City where she studied anthropology and, ultimately, worked under the famed Franz Boas, who today is recognized as the "Father of American Anthropology." *Mules and Men*, a fictionalized account of black folklore based on Hurston's time in Florida as an undergraduate researcher, was published two years before *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The year following the debut of her "feathery" failure, Hurston published a study of voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica, *Tell My Horses*, conducted under a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, and later that same year, she joined the Federal Writers' Project where she helped write *The Florida Negro*, a study of black life in Florida, based on original field research by a team of black artists and scholars assembled by President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration.

These works, however, were moot to the dialogue championed by critics such as Wright and Locke. Even if they were accepted as "serious," they could not pass for "fiction," leaving us with the question of whether or not Richard Wright was right. Did Miss Hurston, as her contemporaries charged, "have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction" (Wright 22)?

Even today, Hurston's works of literary journalism—her narrative ethnography, creative nonfiction, or artistic appropriation of fact, whatever label you prefer—is noticeably absent from criticism and collections aimed at delineating American modernism and, more broadly, the literary innovations and socio-political thought associated with American letters prior to the Second World War. But it is my contention that Hurston's experimental literary journalism was in fact modernist "motive fiction," though it existed outside the paradigms of "high" modernism. She was responding, through this form, to the questions of modernity: What is the role of the artist? How do we conceive, access and perhaps produce reality as well as truth? What is the relationship between form and content? Moreover, while Hurston was motivated by social interests, her conception of these interests marks a fundamental departure from many of her modernist brethren, specifically those "ethnic modernist," as Werner Sollors calls them,

whose art was critically engaged in the advancement of African Americans, European immigrants, and other minorities in American society as well as Popular Front politics.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the common view of the journalistic institution was perhaps best expressed by writer and literary critic H.W. Boyneston, "Journalism has strictly no literary aspect. The real business of journalism is to record or to comment, not to create or interpret" (qtd. Connery 4). Yet during this time, a fact-fiction tension had become increasingly evident in the dominant prose forms, modern journalism and realistic fiction, which had emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

> The line was being drawn between two distinct prose categories, the news (facts/normative writing), that world of real people and actual events, the legitimate offspring of printed prose on one side, and the novel or short story (fiction/imaginative writing), that realm of created people and events, the illegitimate sister on the other. (Sims 4)

The categorical tension ultimately erupted into the flood of overlapping genres: documentary, ethnography, oral history, folklore and literary journalism. In his 1942 landmark work of literary criticism, *On Native Ground*, New York Intellectual Alfred Kazin observed a "preponderance of descriptive nonfiction" that typified 1930 writing. With equal ambivalence he continued, "A literature of Fact – one of those periods in which, despite the emergence of so many brilliant individual sensibilities, the chief effort of many writers seemed bent only on reporting"(338). Similarly, Michael Staub argues that document fiction, which became a characteristic Depression era avenue for representing the disempowered, is still largely considered a "failure." "The timely being timely for a little while only, it no longer is: thirties social documentary in general is now as dead as the sermons of the Social Gospel," William Stott noted in the 1973 book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (qtd. Staub 3). Stott equates journalism, ethnography and documentary dealing with marginalized identities in 1930s America with the Social Gospel, a late 19th century Protestant movement that applied Christian ethics to social problems. The comparison divorces the former works from their place as art and literature, transforming them into mere extension of religious didacticism or political policy.

This period also saw the rise of the professional literary establishment. Contemporary critics such as Bourdieu and Strychacz have returned to the social context in which modernism was defined, produced, and read in order to draw on alternative lines of criticism, specifically those offered by Foucault and the Frankfurt school, to argue that modernist writers and their supporters together established an authority that was rooted in an opposition to mass culture. High modernism was a certain ivory tower that placed itself firmly on the side of capital-A Art and determinedly in opposition to popular or mass culture. Kate Campbell echoes this sentiment in *Journalism, Literature and Modernity*. According to Campbell, the designation 'journalist' was antithetical to emerging definitions of modernism, "To be a

journalist was to be part of an army of writers who offered themselves for hire in the commercial marketplace. The avant-garde literary artist, on the other hand, eschewed the mass market and wrote for the discriminating coterie"(172).

Narrative literary journalism, argues Meyer Berger, is an attempt to re-establish the fundamentally subjective relationship between "teller, listener, protagonist" (qtd. Hartsock 440). High modernism not only limited the individual's ability to engage as one of these actors, but it established a far from subjective and mutual relationship between teller, listener and protagonist. Hurston was deeply invested in this relationship, I argue, which accounts for her perceived "break" with modernism. In *Mules and Men*, she intimates these three actors through a blend of literary journalism and ethnography.

Hurston offers a common basis for shared experience and cultural production based on her state of being "in-between," a state which she highlights through the transformation of the terms of her own education, as conveyed through Zora, and the criteria for performing ethnography, for assessing cultural objects. Moreover, Hurston sees the role of the artist as bringing together these three actors in a mutual, "objective" reality. According to Thomas Connery's, *A Third Way to Tell a Story*, "The essence of [literary journalism] at the turn of the century can be captured by stating its primary characteristic: such writers desired to go beyond journalism's facts but stopped short of fictions creations and sought a fusion of the role of observer and maker into a literary journalism that presented a third way to depict reality"(18).

In *Mules and Men*, when Huston's narrator Zora first arrives in Eatonville, George Thomas wants to know why she came to collect folklore, "We want to set them down before it's too late … Before everybody forgets all of 'em"(8). Here, Hurston establishes one of her objectives as that of a traditional ethnographer, documenting an ostensibly dying culture. But Hurston's inclusion of this very dialogue and the subsequent telling of her fictionalized experience collecting folklore, the use of literary journalism, deliberately complicates and undermines this early confession. Of course, there is truth to Hurston's articulated motivation; she writes in a later essay, "Folklore and Music," that folk tunes, tales and characters, though still emerging, will "be finally drained by formal education and mechanical inventions"(875). But it seems that these claims are founded more so on a critical impulse – the criticism of hierarchies of knowledge and culture as well as modernity's institutionalization – than a genuine sense of pending extinction.

Franz Boas, Hurston's anthropology professor during her undergraduate career at Barnard, surmised of *Mules and Men*, "On the whole her methods are more journalistic than scientific . . . and I am under the impression that she is not the right caliber for a Guggenheim Fellowship" (qtd. in Humphries 126). Hurston challenged both the boundaries of both scholarship and literature. The documentation of people and places signified, for Hurston, *only* if the act of documentation itself became a kind of cultural

activity. This notion was lost not only on the social realist writers who objected to her "surfacey" characterization of rural southern African Americans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but also on the federal folk who, in administering a New Deal for American tourists, portrayed America's emerging culture as a dewy thing to "behold." As David Kadlec writes of her work on *The Florida Negro*:

> As they were used by anthropologists and government archivists alike, cameras and tape recorders did not play much of a role in this sort of vital activity; and the documentary aesthetics that underlay even the best FWP projects of the late 1930s were fundamentally at odds with Hurston's efforts to place *process* at the root of identity. (477)

Hurston espouses this philosophy which privileges identity formation, a natural process that can only be aided not imposed by the observant-participant reporter, both explicitly in *Works in Progess for the Florida Negro* and implicitly in *Mules and Men*. Negro folklore, according to Hurston, is vibrant not because it was authentic or indigenous to a people, place, time. It is vibrant because it is "*still* in the making." Again, folklore is not something to be documented but something to be done. In *The Florida Negro*, Hurston compares art to the law of gravity. It becomes "art" when someone recognizes it as such. Inherent in Hurston's claim is a condemnation of the deliberate, self-conscience manipulation of material reality. This assertion speaks to a rift between Hurston and those of her contemporaries who used art in service of their subjective political, economic and social interests. Here, it is impossible not to recall Locke and Wright. Barbra Folly's *Spectres of* 1919 examines 1919, the year in which the radicalism of the 1920s was forged, the significant relationship between African Americans and the organized Left, as well as the New Negro movement's radical politics. According to Barara Foley, "In the revolutionary crucible of 1919, the term *New Negro* signified a fighter against both racism and capitalism; to be a political moderate did not preclude endorsement of at least some aspects of a class analysis of racism or sympathy with at least some goals of the Bolshevik Revolution"(31-2). Alain Locke's New Negro modernism redefined realism as folk authenticity. Though Locke generally dismissed black literature written in dialect, he encouraged a proximity to the folk that employed an essentialist discourse of racial authenticity—the New Negro identity was indebted to populist and nationalist conceptions of the "folk" popular at the time. Wright's reformulation of Locke's New Negro realism as New Negro radicalism contrasts the Harlem Renaissance's romantic construction of the folk and emphasis on individualism, and pursued Locke's encouragement of black intellectuals to develop a class consciousness and to see themselves as spokesmen for the race. In turn, I can only imagine that Hurston would have viewed the critical success of *Native Son* in 1940 as a detriment to black literary expression by forcing radical realism and the politically motivated telling of African Americans struggle for respect and economic advancement as the blueprint for black writing.

> For what we call civilization is an accumulation of recognitions of the commonplace. How many natural laws of things have been recognized, classified, and utilized by these people? That is the question that is being asked in reality when the progress of a locality is being studies … The apple hit Newton on the head and made him see the attraction of the earth … So we have the law of gravity.
> In the same way art is discovery in itself … In a long range view, art is the setting up of monuments to the ordinary things about us in a moment in time. (876)

While writing for the FWP in the late 1930's, Hurston defines folklore as the arts of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art, a creation that is not "recognized, classified and utilized"—a far cry from the way it was envisioned and appropriated by the Locke's and Wright's of her day. Moreover, the preceding passage suggests a clear tension between the unique threat of the civilizing force to the Negro world as well as the constructive potential inherent in the demand of progress to celebrate—"setting up monuments to"—natural law. "That is, laws of human nature as well as laws of human process, the truth of the group's experience as well as the principles of physics," elaborates Hurston biographer Robert E. Hemenway in his essay *Wrestling with Mules and Men* (23). Hurston use of ethnography and journalism positions her as cultural Newton. Newton's work existed between the established field of science and the unknown scientific reality of gravity, a reality that careful observation made him privy to and for which he needed to develop new formulas, new ways of expressing this unrecognized objective fact. Hurston also existed between a recognized and unrecognized reality that demanded its own language, style, and form—her trademark and cherished telling of the story in the idiom of the Negro—to release its unrealized genius.

In the section titled "Art and Such," Hurston's seeming sensitivity toward the limited artistic contributions of African Americans rapidly erupts into a deeply critical polemic against Negro "creation in its stumbling infancy." Huston acknowledges that only three generations removed from slavery, her people continued to wrestle with the legacy of enforced silence. Yet, she is not speaking to the legacy of folklore and music – the wares of "many undreamed-of geniuses." She is focused on those who would call themselves artists but have been unable to transcend this history of slavery.

Hurston views the Negro as plagued by the ideological constraints under which he labors. And no one is more responsible for this contagion than the "Race Man"—those self-conscience "race leaders" who are compelled to pathologically recreate the "tragic unit of the Race" in their own identity, the identity of the collective Negro community and, in turn, those characters that inhabit their artistic works. Much like Ralph Ellison's young invisible man, Race Men and Women serve of the white community, "Just let them hear that white people have curiosity about some activity among Negroes, and these 'leaders' will not let their shirt-tails touch them until they have rushed forward and offered themselves as an authority on the

subject"(907). They define themselves within white hegemony in a way—formally, stylistically, conceptually, and in terms of content—that the white man can understand, appropriate and consume. In turn, they are rewarded with a stage, the ears of the communities *leading* citizens, and if they're lucky, a calfskin briefcase. Perhaps this impulse is not so different from what later propels Ellison's grown invisible man to assault a white man, "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world" (4). Hurston was no fool. She, like Ellison, was aware of the incredible power of the "the real world," and I believe it is this, the painful desire to "exist," that *Mule to Men* and *The Florida Negro* respond to.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes in her analysis of the marginalized literary journalism of Agee, Olsen and Anzaldua, *The Borderlands of Culture*, "He who wields political and economic power usually manages to control the power to name and narrate as well"(133). Hurston seems to subtly confirm Fishkin's suspicion that formal experiments in journalism, a deviation form of literary expression, centered on the "wrong" race, class, gender or ethnicity "lost the conflict" over cultural territory to dominant paradigms. According to Hurston, the contemporary tradition of privileging the unimaginative "Race Men," smothers artists who do not adhere to its dictates, like herself. Likewise, Hurston insists that the pressure on blacks to conform to these political standards has not only stifled but stymied creativity. The scarcity of artists is proof. She can only cites five Florida artists—one painter, one sculptor, a musician and two writers, herself included. Werner Sollors points out in the book *Ethnic Modernism* that from 1910-1950 ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity were successfully portrayed as political dynamite, a legitimate threat to the American ideal of unity by virtue of its "balkanizing potential." Proponents of immigration often viewed assimilation into Anglo-America as the best method for incorporating this diverse population, while opponents championed restriction and exclusion (38). In turn, American ethnic writers overwhelmingly perceived the stakes to be high, "for a 'general reader' might judge the writers ethnic group on the merit of a single book." This led "Ethnic Modernists" to go against commonly held stereotypes, testify against other ethnic groups, and boast of accomplishments and upward mobility with the respective ethnic group as a whole and with America – "homemaking myths"(44). Of course, Sollors' analysis of the phenomenon is more sympathetic, but Hurston is nonetheless addressing this precise moment. "But the idea was not to produce literature—it was to "champion the Race," she resentfully concludes "Art and Such."

Hurston's argues that there is no room for her in the tradition she inherits. As Charyle Wall contends, "In [*Works in Progress for the Florida Negro*] her critical intervention anticipates pronouncements by black women artists such as Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker, who similarly faced the need to create, revise, and extend a tradition in which to locate their art." It is clear, in "Art and Such" particularly, that

Hurston is invested in reconstructing this tradition by positioning racial art born of culture rather than politics as its foundation. In this way, she radically diverged from the overwhelming acceptance by her 1930's modernist brethren of Popular Front ideology, which inextricably married art and politics, and their congruent privileging of the artist over the masses, the collective. While Hurston never named her contemporary "Race Men," outside a subtly allusion to Du Bois, it appear to be a clear allegory for her intellectual experience. "She was one of Deboi's talented tenth—the gifted and educated leadership of the race on whom Du Bois based his hopes for African American ascendance—without seeing herself, as members of the tenth often saw themselves, as victims caught tragically between two worlds, black and white"(xvii), writes Arnold Rampersad in the foreword of *Mules and Men*. Hurston's writing suggests that she never saw her positionality as a tragic form of victimization. It was, in fact, her position that allowed Hurston to explore and fulfill her own understanding of authorship.

It may seems Hurston made an ironic compromise by ascribing to the authority of documentation – a method that has been tied historically and theoretically to the perpetuation of structures of unequal power – but as suggested earlier, the way that she carries out and imagines documentation, as a engaged *process*, prevents Hurston from undermining her own goals. Writing in the third person about her work (an authoritative move that calls to mind the Glossary of Negro folk terms and the extensive Appendix she includes at the end of *Mules and Men*), Hurston characterizes it by its "objective point of view" and its language, which gives "verisimilitude to the narrative by stewing the subject in its own juice." "Objective" clearly, in part, is an affirmation of her refusal to advance the race leader's political agenda. It also provides an insight into her most valued artistic identity: the observer. Her corresponding mediums and methods reflect her interest in objectivity. And at last, there is an undeniable irony to this claim amidst an essay saturated in the discourse of creativity. Objectivity is typically tied to fact and normative writing while subjectivity is seen as creative writing, the realm of the artist. This ostensible paradox is critical. Michael Staub's book *Voice of Persuasion* is, at its core, an attempts to replace the consensus amongst scholarly and popular discourse that 1930's reality-based writing was defined, and subsequently failed, dues to its conflict between the contradictory demands of art and didacticism or politics. Staub argues that these writers were aware of the contentedness of historical truth—a la poststructuralist theory—and, therefore, their conflict was not choosing between art and politics but rather "how to persuade readers of their version of reality." Although this argument is significantly flawed, Staub sheds light on Hurston's distinct definition and use of objectivity in her writing. Hurston did not want to "persuade" her readers, this action is too reminiscent of the Race Men and Women and ethnic modernists whose work appeared to be about the negroes but was always in fact rooted in the perceptions and anticipated responses of the white man. Hurston did not want her work to be a reply to the white world; rather a kind of bridge. She

saw that there were multiple versions of reality around which monuments had not yet been made and so her creative rendering of the objective folk world is an effort to bring one magnificent concealed reality into the light.

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston creates the participant reporter Zora, or more accurately, she inserts herself into the narrative as the semi-fictional and self-effacing Zora, which challenged generic and cultural boundaries as well as the conventions of anthropological case studies. In the introduction, Zora is glad when she is given the opportunity to collect Negro folklore.

> In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Breer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I went off to college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through that. (1)

In the opening passage, Zora compares folklore—Breer Rabbit and the Squinch Owl—to a tight chemise. Of course, a chemise is not natural. It is a piece of clothing, a smock or a woman's undergarment which has since been replaced by brassieres, girdles, and slips. Again, you are not born in a chemise, it is a material condition. The use of "tight" could allude to discomfort, but Hurston does not experience catharsis or relief upon its removal. Likewise, the removal of the chemise is neither violent and painful nor liberating and sublime; it is but an inevitable and disorienting consequence of being plucked out of one's native surroundings. She could see herself as somebody else, an indication of her divided sense of identity, and she can stand off and look at her negroism, which reinforces her unique place as an insider and outsider as well as her ability to observe and be observed. Most significantly, Hurston draws attention to her education and method. Zora sees through the "spyglass" of Anthropology. Not simply an education, but an education in the traditional institution and high scholarship of Anthropology that offers Zora a new lens to examine her identity and that of the collective. This passage is committed to expressing the tensions that defines Zora the reporter (her formal education against her folklore roots) and, in turn, gives great consideration to the role of the artist-reporter-writer-observer.

In the section "Folk Tales," Zora calls attention to her formal education by recalling her more structured training in the practices of hoodoo. Then, amidst one of the hoodoo initiation rites that leads to Zora receiving the "hoodoo crown," she equates the crown with her diploma, "The crown without the preparation means no more than a college diploma without four years of work"(188). And by the end of the section she suggests it is even more of an achievement than her university laboring. This careful metaphor establishes Zora's authority as an insider and legitimates hoodoo—though she does not comment on her own beliefs—in a way that does not alienate her potential readership (as opposed to the

audience of her subjects). Hurston perpetually describes Zora's relationship to the immediate audience of her subjects that, in part, serves to establish her relationship to a disparate audience of readers—connecting to two different cultures and worlds. This careful bridge can also be seen through her language. Hurston moves back and forth from the often unrecognizable dialect of the Florida negro in dialogue and what can be considered formal English in the narration.

Of course, this effort is present from the start. Zora explains that collecting folklore is difficult because the best sources exist outside influences. Consequently, those individuals are usually the most underprivileged and shyest. Moreover, Hurston defines negroes by their "feather-bed resistance," that is: the prober may enter but he never knows the Negros soul, only his laughter and dismissive pleasantries.

> The white man is always trying to know somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song. (3)

This passage immediately calls the entire work into question, as Hurston herself is an African American. It resonates with her conclusion in which she compares herself to the disarming folk tale of Sis Cat, "I'm sitting here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin' my manners"(246). And while it is important keep Huston's keen wit and deliberate spirit of trickery in mind, this passage once again brings focus to the role of isolation between the white and black world. Here, the disconnect is a result of the failure on the part of the "prober." Perhaps, Hurston, beyond messing with her reader, is defining and accepting the role of the reporter as necessarily participating in the modernizing process which opens "feather-bed resistance," new meaning of representation, and new ideas of community.

Hurston's encounter with modernity led to a body of work defined by questions of authorship, freedom, and identity, especially the complex relationships between authorship and community and that of authorship and the responsibility of representation during a period marked by such incredible upheaval.

> Hurston's vernacular aesthetic practice centered as it is on the collectivity created and owned material of folk cultures, is an aesthetic derived from and deviating from oral traditions. Complicated questions of cultural ownership and ethics of use are involved, questions we know Hurston struggled with in the form of loyalties divided between the writer's desire to publish and the daughter's desire to protect the cultural secrets of vernacular tradition. (109)

Ladd aptly defines Hurston as a writer and a daughter. The role she created of the observant-reporter was defined by the space Hurston inhabited in-between the folk daughter from Eatonville and the Anthropological scholar from New York. Hurston championed an artistic tradition that defined authorship as the process of committed reporting, a cultural act in itself that can foster critical identification in the face of modernization and its congruent threats. As Zora once remarked of *Mules and Men*, it's about "the folklore done over and put back in their natural juices."

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