Zora Neale Hurston as Local Colorist

by Geneva Cobb-Moore

Since Zora Neale Hurston’s death in 1960, an impressive number of artists and scholars have rescued her from an undeserved obscurity, best symbolized by her burial in an unmarked grave in a segregated potter’s field. They have restored to her in death the fame and following that eluded her in life. Hurston’s rescue began in 1973 when Alice Walker flew to Florida and visited Lee-Peek Mortuary in Fort Pierce to locate the cemetery where Hurston is buried. Finding what she believed was the grave, Walker then had a monument erected for the site. In 1977, Robert Hemenway published her biography, Zora Neale Hurston, to national acclaim. Both Walker and Hemenway pay respect to a writer whom Barbara Christian in Black Women Novelists and Henry Louis Gates in "A Negro Way of Saying" correctly assert is the literary model for the contemporary African-American female writer who writes realistic fiction of black women seeking self-fulfillment and self-empowerment. Since Mary Helen Washington’s lament in Black-Eyed Susans (1975) about Hurston’s neglect in literature and women’s studies courses across America, Hurston’s most popular novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), has become a perennial classroom favorite. There is an annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival in Hurston’s hometown, Eatonville, Florida, which N. Y. Landhiri, one of Hurston’s most devoted loyalists, coordinates. In 1991, Nathiri edited an informational book, Zora!, on Hurston and Eatonville, containing memories of the writer by relatives and friends.

From those who misunderstood her, like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who thought her “black-minstrel” characters were created to humor a patronizing white audience, to those who loved her, like Alice Walker, Mary Ellen Washington, and Barbara Christian, who thought her a controversial but brilliant feminist, Zora Neale Hurston has stirred the emotions of critics and devotees in a variety of ways and has been called alternately minstrel, novelist, anthropologist, voodoo priestess, feminist, and folklorist. I think her real significance as writer-folklorist is best summarized by her biographer, Robert Hemenway, who writes:

Zora was concerned less with the tactics of racial uplift than with the unexamined prejudice of American social science. She became a folklorist at a time when white sociologists were obsessed with what they thought was pathology in black behavior, when white psychologists spoke of the deviance in black mental health, and when the discipline of anthropology used a research model that identified black people as suffering from cultural deprivation. Hurston’s folklore collections refuted these stereotypes by celebrating the distinctiveness of traditional black culture, and her scholarship is now recognized by revisionist scientists questioning the racial assumptions of modern cultural theory. (330)

Because the Eatonville townspeople were the models of Hurston’s factual and fictive folksy, cultural richness, I find that she emerges most clearly as something that no critic, to my knowledge, has yet remarked upon: local colorist. Local color as a genre and technique emerged after the Civil War in 1868 with Bret Harte’s “fresh pictures of California mining camps” (Simpson 3), although in its nineeth-century manifestations local color often painted a rather shallow, genteel picture of life. But the concept has undergone considerable changes because of writers like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Zora Neale Hurston. Critics now acknowledge the national or even universal dimensions and implications of regional literature and see it as echoing certain moral and historical truths about our humanity.

In The Local Colorists, editor Claude Simpson cites Hamlin Garland’s famous announcement that “only a native is equipped to write successful local fiction” because of the “depth of understanding necessary for more than a superficial view of picturesque oddities” (1). In creating “the illusion of an indigenous little world,” the local colorist captures not only the sounds and sights of his
or her region, but also the people's mannerism, mind-set, dialect, and, most significantly, mode of existence: that is, a day-to-day existence that distinguishes one group of people from another in their approach to living lives subtly influenced by social milieu and physical landscape. Early in life, Hurston recognized the importance of the luxurious Florida landscape. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), she describes her home, the two big Chinaberry trees that provided shade from the hot Florida sun, the Cape Jasmine bushes with hundreds of "fleshy, white fragrant blooms," the guavas and the grapefruit, orange and tangerine trees, and the beautiful fish in the surrounding Florida lakes (18). Eatonville is described as a "city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers . . . two schools and no jail house." Moreover, at Joe Clarke's store porch, the townspeople gather to tell tall tales on a daily basis. Because of these wildy told stories, Hurston writes that the store porch was the most interesting place "I could think of. I was not allowed to sit around, naturally. But, I would and did drag my feet going in and out, whenever I was sent there for something, to allow whatever was being said to hang in my ear" (62).

Florida's rich topography, the Eatonville community, and Joe Clarke's store porch are permanent features in Hurston's local colorist works. Eatonville is at the heart of her upbringing, from living in this all-black town to attending an all-black school to being an inheritor of an all-black oral tradition, revived gloriously and hilariously on a local entrepreneur's front porch where people gathered to bask and bake in a hot Florida sun. When Hurston writes in "How It Feels to be Colored Me" that she is not "tragically colored" and does not belong to the "sobbing school of Negrohood who hold[s] that Nature somehow has given them a . . . dirty deal," we look to the proud racial heritage of the Eatonville community to understand and appreciate her racial pride.

This was no easy feat in the Jim Crow decades of the 1920s, 30s and 40s when African-Americans were made to feel their apartness from the rest of humanity by ubiquitous signs that read "For Whites" and "For Coloreds." Hurston's attitude and her emergence as a local colorist was bolstered by Columbia University anthropologist and scholar Franz Boas, a German emigre, who encouraged Hurston as a Barnard College student to develop the anthropological tools required to enable her to return to Eatonville and collect, record, and examine the rich folk material passed around matter-of-factly on Clarke's store porch. It was Boas who questioned the theory of Anglo-Saxon superiority in the twentieth century, stating it "is hardly possible to predict what would be the achievement of the Negro if he were able to live with Whites on absolutely equal terms" (Montagu 15).

Hurston's return to the South and to Florida was essential to her development as scholar of local culture and to her legacy as a precursor of Afrocentric scholars. Boas and Hurston knew that unlike black Northerners, black Southerners retained distinct Africanisms due to the rigidity of a Southern ante-bellum and post-bellum racial system that kept whites and blacks separated, culturally as well as physically. In *Mules and Men* Hurston writes: "I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger... As I crossed the Maitland-Eatonville township line I could see a group on the store porch. I was delighted" (Walker 83-84).

Many of the folktales that Hurston retells are a curious blend of the townspeople's healthy racial ethnocentrism, rooted and nurtured in a region that appears lovely but primeval, and their hilarious racial stereotyping. Consider the tale of Gold, a bold woman who enters the male-dominated sanctuary of Joe Clarke's porch and tells the tale of how God "gave out color":

. . . one day He said, 'Tomorrow morning, at seven o'clock sharp, I aim to give out color. Everybody be here on time. I got plenty of creating to do tomorrow, and I want to get out this color and get it over wid. Everybody be 'round de throne at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. So next morning at seven o'clock, God was sitting on His throne with His big crown on His head and seven suns circling around His head. Great multitudes was standing around the throne waiting to get their color. God sat up there and looked east, and He looked west, and He looked north and He looked Australia, and blazing worlds were falling off His teeth. So He looked over to His left and moved His hands over a crowd, and said, 'You's yellow people'. . . . He looked at another crowd . . . and said, 'You's red folks!'. . . . He looked towards the center and moved His hand over another crowd and said, 'You's white folks!' . . . Then God looked way over to the right and said, 'Look here, Gabriel, I miss a lot of multitudes from around the throne this morning'. . . . Gabriel run off and started to hunting around. Way after while, he found the missing multitudes lying around on the grass by the Sea of Life, fast asleep. So Gabriel woke them up and told them . . . Old Maker is might wore out from waiting. Fool with Him and He won'- give out no more color! . . . they all jumped up and went running towards the throne, hollering, 'Give us our color! We want our color! We got just
as much right to color as anybody else... [they were] pushing and shoving... God said, 'Here! Here! Git back! Git back!'... they misunderstood Him, and thought He said, 'Git black!' So they just got black, and kept the thing-a-going! (66-69)

This is an interesting tale for other reasons than the hilarity of the story. For in reporting Gold's tale, Zora Neale Hurston does several things: she mirrors female dominance and authority in a patriarchal setting; she shows the depth and security of local black Southerners who can tell racial jokes even at their own expense, yet in doing so appear to give credence to the widely held stereotype of their lazy and whining nature; she portrays everyday citizens as mythographers, daring an attempt to penetrate through comedy the mystery of God and creation; and she reveals the utter charm of "nigger-dialect" and verbal art. There is more, however, significantly so, to Gold's tale. For whether or not Gold and other unschooled, illiterate, and poor Southern blacks realized it, they were reviving and celebrating an ancient African tradition of oral expression.

In A History of West Africa English historian Basil Davidson writes that while some learning in West Africa involved formal education, most learning was received by word of mouth, especially in the "teaching of skills, customs, laws, traditions and the like. It was done for the most part without the aid of writing and reading: the culture was non-literate" (164). In Africa: Before They Came Galbraith Welch states that the oral history of Africa, as told by griots or oral historians, was the essence of Africa's mind. Welch explains that in the "bookless regions and in the old pre-colonial days the recital by a specialist was a big element in popular life," akin to the production of a stage play or a great literary event. European travellers were mesmerized by many speakers' deliveries, reporting that a griot "would deliver an historical discourse for days on end, his narrative interspersed with apropos songs and pantomimes" (286-87). The oral tradition did not represent in its entirety factual experiences of kings and tribes: there was some embellishment of history and even some ribald tales (288).

Anthropologists, psychologists, and social scientists unfamiliar with West African history and culture, then, would not be equipped to understand or appreciate any of the symbolism of Gold's tale and Hurston's interest in reporting it. As Robert Hemenway writes, many of these professionals simply dismissed people like Gold as culturally deprived. Similarly, in Black Culture and Black Consciousness Lawrence W. Levine says that while Joel Chandler Harris, a white Southern local colorist, became famous for popularizing the tales of Uncle Remus, he was "as blind as he could be to some of the deeper implications of the tales he heard and told" (112). Hurston, undoubtedly familiar with the Uncle Remus tales and Joel Chandler Harris's reputation for sometimes creating happy, docile and dumb "darkies," refutes the stereotype, subtly, and presents the texture of an environment as formally unschooled but informally well-educated in its cultural history—although, perhaps, even the people themselves were unaware of this reality.

A favorite Hurston remark to be found in almost all of her fiction is "the porch laughed" or "the porch was boiling now." The use of metonymy stresses the communal gathering on Joe Clarke's store porch and the townpeople's enjoyment. The tall-tales had, also, the distinction of breaking the monopoly of daily tedious while encouraging the socialization of men and women who were miraculously transformed on the porch into griots, poets, and philosophers. Hurston makes the reader cognizant of a congenial, group-like ethos of Eatonville society. The people were one. According to Levine, even this communal oneness is rooted deeply in the early African-American experience and its slave legacy. Levine argues that "in the midst of the brutalities and injustices of the Antebellum and post-bellum racial systems, black men and women were able to find the means to sustain a far greater degree of self-pride and group cohesion than the system they lived under ever intended for them to be able to do" (xi). Joe Clarke's store porch was not only a place for entertainment and cultural exchanges, it was, too, a safe haven, sheltering locals from a larger hostile environment while creating the illusion (or perhaps the reality) that no other world existed or mattered.

In Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), Hurston chooses the subject of adultery to unveil the community mores in Eatonville. This first novel is a thinly-disguised autobiography treating her father's adulterous behavior and the havoc it wreaks on the community, the church he pastors, and his family. The language is as expressive here as it is in Gold's tale, but the characters use language to express their pathos rather than their comic flair. Church members call a conference so they can chastise their minister, John Pearson (John Hurston), about his affair with another woman. Because of Pearson's "bold and unusual" demeanor, the members become cowed and lack the resolve to carry out their plans. Cleverly, an official approaches Pearson and tells him, "Look heah, Elder Pearson. Ah reckon you done heard dat some dese niggers is throwin' lies 'bout you and some woman over 'bout Oviedo. Ah ain't tole yuh nothin', and you be keerful uh dese folks dat totes yuh news" (121). This implicit criticism of Pearson's behavior is followed by more explicit
criticism from his wife, Lucy Pearson (Hurston's mother, Lucy Hurston). She asks her husband to identify his Sunday text. John answers, "Iss Communion so Ah reckon Ah'll preach de Passover Supper in de upper room." Lucy warns him, "Don't you preach it" (122). The sacredness of holy communion, John's unrepentant sins, and the quiet but festering anger of the church membership are too incongruent for the pure-hearted Lucy.

In a most graphic description of pain, a deathly-ill Lucy tells a church member:

Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots.
Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done raise agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin' kin touch mah soul no mo'. It wuz hard tuh loose de string-holt on mah lil' chillun.... Buh Ah reckon Ah done died too. (131)

Impatient with his wife's illness, fearful of her impending death, and guilt-ridden, John Pearson is afraid to have direct eye-contact with her; so he stands "where he could see his wife's face, but where Lucy's fixed eyes might not rest upon him." After she dies, he marries the other woman, Hattie Tyson, who is superstitious and braids a "piece of John-de-conquer root" in her hair and places the roots of voodooism in front and inside the house. Both fail to tame the philandering John, who has other affairs and is finally killed driving home one day. One finds a great deal of theology and theological symbolism in 

Jonah's Guard Vins. Like the rebellious biblical Jonah who stubbornly defies God and is swallowed by a "great fish," John Pearson is likewise punished, and Hurston writes dispassionately and unapologetically about her father's behavior, allowing his moral decline and the community's reaction to it to speak sufficiently to that end.

Feminists praise Their Eyes Were Watching God as one of the first novels by an African-American female author to explore a black woman's search for wholeness and fulfillment. Janie Stark's quest for individuality was certainly a unique idea for black womanhood in 1937. The process by which Janie achieves this sense of self is traceable to her attachment to and detachment from three husbands. Only the last husband, Tea Cake, encourages her self-development; the other two, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, limit her development so they can fulfill their own needs. As Barbara Christian suggests, Janie is a mule to Killicks, working beside him in the fields, and Queen of the Porch to Joe Starks, standing erectly and prettily for all to see as his sole possession. However, it is the sketch of the ugly provincialism of the townspeople, especially the women, that is commanding from a local colorist perspective in the novel.

The novel opens with the folks sitting on the porch, watching and discussing the return of Janie Starks. Typical small-town gossips, the people ask questions among themselves about Janie's return, attire, financial and marital status. They accuse her of "doin' wrong" because she left town with a much younger man, Tea Cake, and her dead husband's money. Breathlessly, they speak:

What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? — Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?
— Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? —
What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? — Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? — Thought she was going to marry? —
Where he left her? — What he done wid all her money? — Betch a he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hair — why she don't stay in her class? — (2)

The barrage of questions, highlighted by dashes, emphasizes the townspeople's anxiety, envy, smallness, and the shallowness of those small lives that one can easily identify in any small, isolated community.

It is this last that sets Janie Starks apart from the other women in the book, whose lives of drudgery consist of washing, cooking and cleaning, and staying home while their husbands enjoy outside activities, like fishing in the cool Florida lakes. The quiet desperation of their painful enclosure and their clear sense of Janie's freedom (announced by her stride into town, wearing denim overalls and a new hairstyle) cause Pearl Stone to laugh "real hard because she didn't know what else to do" (2). Other female characters mask their pain, finding laughter an unsuitable release for what they are feeling. Instead, they seek refuge in Lulu Moss's remarks, "She ain't even worth talkin' after.... She sits high but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say, 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys" (3). Only Pheoby, Janie's friend, has the courage to go to Janie and to satisfy her curiosity about her friend's new freedom. When another woman volunteers to accompany Pheoby because "De booger man might keetch you," Pheoby's reply is a telling one: "mah husband tell me say no first class booger would have me" (4). The emotional hunger and starvation of married women is as much a major motif in Their Eyes Were Watching God as Janie Starks's pre-feminist emergence and rebellion against the type of life.
that too many women were forced to lead.

Hurston's handling of a town's ugly narrowness is a sweeping victory. With the creation of Janie Stark's character, the novelist is able in one clean stroke to accomplish several things, aside from giving the local women an attractive model on which to rebuild their own thwarted lives, which Pheoby promises to do after hearing Janie's experiences as "a delegate to de big 'sociation of life." For when Janie marries Tea Cake, whom she describes as the "love thoughts of women," the two lovers transcend the superficial barriers of age (she is 40 and he 25), of money (she is rich and he poor), and of an internal color caste system (she is light-skinned and he dark-skinned). Hurston crafts her main character to defy the conventionalisms that stifle life in small-town communities.

Finally, Zora Neale Hurston develops a distinctive African-American female voice in literature. It is a voice deeply rooted in the African-American experience from Africa to America. As a local colorist, Hurston presents an intimate portrayal of lives changed and yet strangely unchanged by the experiences of the African Diaspora. By capturing the reality, the vivacity and the cultural wealth of the Eatonville community, Hurston immortalizes folk characters and their spirited survival and expands the meaning of local color. She proves once and for all that while physical bodies can be restricted, the imagination is always free.

Works Cited