

Zora Neale Hurston's Self-Introduction: How It Feels to Be Colored Me

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat to me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually the automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county-- everybody's Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown-- warranted not to rub nor run.

But 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. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think--to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen--follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something--give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

"Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music! The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knifeblade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two, still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place--who knows?

[--Zora Neale Hurston (from *The World Tomorrow*, 1928.)

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Going Down the Road

In a Town Apart, the Pride and Trials of Black Life

By DAMIEN CAVE

EATONVILLE, Fla. — Hidden in the theme-park sprawl of greater Orlando, a few miles from the shiny, the loud and the gargantuan, lies a quiet town where the pride and complications of the African-American experience come to life.

Eatonville, the first all-black town to incorporate in the country and the childhood home of Zora Neale Hurston, is no longer as simple as she described it in 1935: “the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, 300 brown skins, 300 good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools and no jailhouse.” It is now a place of pilgrimage. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ruby Dee have come to the annual Zora! Festival in Eatonville to pay their respects to Hurston, the most famous female writer of the Harlem Renaissance.

And yet in many ways, the town she described — and made a tourist stop by including it in the Florida travel guide produced by the Depression-era Federal Writers’ Project — remains a place apart. It is as independent, dignified and private as it was in the 1930s, when Hurston wrote that rural blacks in Florida often resisted sharing their true thoughts with the white man, who “knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing.”

Even now, in a year when a black presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama, has called for an open conversation about race, many here remain wary of the outsider’s gaze.

“We’re very cautious about how our story is told,” said Hortense Jones, 59, a lifelong resident and member of the town’s oldest church. “It needs to be right.”

Eatonville has long been defined as a paradox of triumph and struggle. It is both a historic model of black empowerment and a community of nearly 2,400 where the poverty rates are twice the national average. It is a literary hub but also an oak-shaded example of rural Southern black culture — sometimes disdained, sometimes praised — that was born of American slavery. Not surprisingly, residents here are both proud and protective.

And the concern about Eatonville’s image really began with *Zora*, which is all anyone here calls Hurston. She introduced the world to her hometown through heartfelt, dialect-heavy books like “*Mules and Men*” (1935) and “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (1937).

Five paragraphs in the Florida guidebook transformed the town, just off Route 17, a road that runs through the oft-forgotten center of Florida into a stage of black history and human drama. Bold as a bass drum in both life and literature, Hurston led readers to the store owned by Eatonville’s first mayor, Joe Clarke, then veered into more private areas. “Off the road on the left,” she wrote, “is the brown-with-white-trim modern public school, with its well-kept yards and playgrounds, which Howard Miller always looks after, though he can scarcely read and write.”

She also mentioned the new husband of Widow Dash and wrote that Lee Glenn “sells drinks of all kinds and whatever goes with transient rooms.”

So in just a few hundred words, Hurston linked Eatonville with self-government but also illiteracy, remarriage and sex. Clearly, Fodor’s this was not.

In fact, it was not a portrait everyone appreciated.

“Zora told it like it was,” said Ella Dinkins, 90, one of the Johnson girls Hurston immortalized by quoting men singing off-color songs about their beauty. She added: “Some people didn’t like that.”

Hurston is still remembered here as a vivacious eccentric who frequently returned after her family moved to Jacksonville, Fla. Augustus Franklin, 77, recalled that when Hurston sped into town, she usually arrived without notice in a thumping Chevrolet, smoking and wearing pants in a town that even today prides itself on dignified dress. Most residents were fascinated, Mr. Franklin said, while many sneered.

“People were always glad to see Zora,” Mr. Franklin said. But, he added, rocking in his chair on a back patio overlooking Lake Sabelia, where Hurston was most likely baptized, “she never did stay too long.”

When Hurston died in 1960, she was poor and her books had fallen out of print. Along with much of the world, Eatonville seemed to have forgotten her.. Though she was once a literary star, a contemporary of Langston Hughes and the only black woman at Barnard College in the 1920s, she was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Fla., where she had been living.

In Eatonville, there were no major memorial services, no grand public readings. “I don’t think they understood her contribution to the world or her legacy at all,” said Valerie Boyd, author of “Wrapped in Rainbows,” a Hurston biography published in 2003.

A turning point came in the 1980s. Orange County officials wanted to put a five-lane highway through town to replace Kennedy Boulevard, the community’s pattering two-lane main street. Orlando’s sprawl had already pushed Interstate 4 through the western edge of town. The proposal came as Eatonville was still recovering from a difficult period in its history.

Forced integration, among other things, had ended the community’s relatively idyllic isolation. In the 1950s, the fight over racial mixing brought hate to the community’s doorstep.

“During that time, a bunch of white boys, they would come through and throw oranges and things at people sitting down on the side,” Mr. Franklin said. “We actually had a lady that got killed from that once. They threw a watermelon out of the car.”

In a 1955 letter to The Orlando Sentinel, Hurston questioned the Supreme Court’s demand for forced integration, calling its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* “insulting rather than honoring my race.” Residents now say that the desegregation of schools, while positive in some respects, diluted Eatonville’s cohesiveness and undermined the confidence of its youth.

“Black children were accustomed to being hugged — I remember this — you hugged your teacher in the morning, you hugged your teacher at night,” said N. Y. Nathiri, the daughter of Ella Dinkins and the executive director of Preserve the Eatonville Community, a nonprofit group.

That lasted, she added, until the teachers and students did not come from the same place. “You were not hugging your white teacher because your white teacher — I mean there’s a cultural divide there,” Ms. Nathiri said.

Civil rights, however, helped create space for many more Zora Neale Hurstons — black writers, actors and artists who rose above prejudice, like she did, with buoyant self-assurance and lines like: “How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It’s beyond me.”

In 1975, the writer Alice Walker trekked to Hurston's unmarked grave and began fighting to resurrect her reputation. Five years later, an acclaimed Hurston biography by Robert E. Hemenway hit bookshelves, reintroducing her to the American canon.

The highway project arrived just as Eatonville's most famous daughter had once again found the spotlight. And this time, Hurston's old neighbors saw her as a savior.

The community began planning in 1988 for a Hurston festival to show what the county could ruin with its highway. Thousands of fans came to the inaugural event two years later, and each January, many return for the celebration.

After several years, the county backed away from its road proposal. "The five-laning of the highway resurrected, it put in what you'd call warp speed, real civic pride," Ms. Nathiri said.

Ms. Boyd put it more simply: "Zora saved Eatonville."

Victory over the highway project has helped change the town's self-image. Out-of-towners like Rachelle Munson, a lawyer who began coming to church here in 1993, started to appear in larger numbers, and residents started to revalue the past.

Eatonville joined the national historic registry in 1998. A new one-story library (named after Hurston, of course) opened in 2006 on a repaved and beautified Kennedy Boulevard.

Today, Eatonville remains a Florida anomaly: only six miles from downtown Orlando, it can, at times, feel like a back street in a summer rain, as small as it did when it was founded with just 27 black families in the 1880s. (It is 90 percent black today.) Outsiders who come looking for Eatonville's story, its meaning, are often still treated with caution.

Advance permission is required for most interviews, and certain things — like the murals at Eatonville's oldest church, painted by a white man, showing black men in the fields — are not allowed to be photographed.

Many in Eatonville, like Ms. Jones, a bold, confident teacher partial to bright red, still fear that their insular community will be misunderstood.

And yet, as the Hurston festival has expanded, a heightened level of hometown pride has also emerged. Young people, in particular, tend to see Eatonville as Hurston saw her entire race: beautiful, problems and all, no better, no worse and as proud, creative, hard-working, silly and mixed-up as other racial and ethnic groups in America.

It is sincere civic affection that can be heard in the voice of Mr. Franklin's nephew, Edwin Harvey, 18, who plans to come back to Eatonville after college to work in local government or for the Police Department, which he said could use some help.

And even those who are younger, like Alondra and Alexia Kenon, 11-year-old twins from Winter Park, seem to have learned to describe Eatonville correctly.

"Most people, if they just drive through here, they'll think, 'Oh, this city is nothing compared to any of the other ones,'" Alondra Kenon said after church on a recent Sunday. "But if you actually stop and take a moment to look at the history, it's a very nice city."

Link to article on Zora Neale Hurston's hometown:

In a Town Apart, the Pride and Trials of Black Life

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/us/29florida.html?ex=1380427200&en=8b4bd5ac5ac8e284&ei=5124&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink>