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# Zora's Politics: A Brief Introduction

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## Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's contributions to political philosophy have never been well understood, partly due to the fact that her explicitly political works have long been unavailable. Her major works were all out of print when she died in 1960. By the early nineties, her fiction had been republished, but her nonfiction has been slow to appear. This is unfortunate, since her nonfiction is the main resource for insight into her political philosophy: a handful of her articles have been available since the late 1970s, but a complete edition of her essays has never been published.<sup>1</sup> Her letters are also a key source for assessing her politics, but these were published merely a decade ago, while more continue to surface.<sup>2</sup> Finally, several of Hurston's longest nonfiction works were never published during her lifetime; the manuscripts lie scattered in several archives across the country, inaccessible to the general public and the majority of academics. These gaps in Hurston's corpus have made it virtually impossible to comprehensively survey her political thought.

Lacking her complete works, Hurston's critics have nevertheless saddled her with a bewildering variety of labels. Early in her career, she was accused of being insufficiently political.<sup>3</sup> Later, her disagreements with the mainstream of the civil rights movement marginalized her political thought until long after her death. When she was "rediscovered" in the seventies, black feminists praised her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but were less excited about her politics, which they either ignored or excused.<sup>4</sup> By the nineties, she had gained a new generation of detractors, who usually critiqued her for being insufficiently leftist.<sup>5</sup> She also gained new defenders, who claimed her as the foremother of today's black conservatives.<sup>6</sup> In the past ten years, Hurston has been assigned a bewildering array of affiliations: republican, libertarian, radical democrat, reactionary conservative, black cultural nationalist, anti-authoritarian feminist, and woman-hating protofascist. The woman who once called herself "Everybody's Zora" has been made all things to all men

(often wrongly), and the ongoing controversy has paid little attention to the full corpus of her political writings.

When Hurston's complete oeuvre is taken into account, a novel picture of her politics emerges. The idea that Hurston "turned" to politics late in life is untenable.<sup>7</sup> She began publishing on political topics in the late twenties and continued to do so regularly until her death. It is clear that her positions were neither ad hoc nor ad hominem<sup>8</sup>; her judgments of particular policies and politicians arose out of deeply held convictions that remained remarkably consistent throughout her life. Significantly, these convictions cannot be reduced to origins in Hurston's race, gender, or upbringing<sup>9</sup>; these aspects of her identity played a role in her thought (as they do for everyone) but her political philosophy went beyond "identity politics." Finally, her critics and her supporters have wrongly limited her scope to "the Race Problem" in the United States. While she often wrote on domestic issues, Hurston's political perspective was always and, I would argue, primarily international.

In recent years, a few scholars have focused on Hurston's international views. Deborah McDowell (1991) offered one of the first critiques of the common tendency to limit Hurston's purview to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, and the political ambit of US race relations.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Susan Meisenhelder (1995) and John Carlos Rowe (2000) have attempted to class Hurston as an anti-imperialist.<sup>11</sup> Both scholars are rare exceptions to the general trend of branding Hurston's politics as "conservative"—whether that is meant as praise or censure—and they are essentially the only scholars to seriously consider her philosophy of international affairs. The strength of their work lies in the depth and specificity of their analyses: Rowe mines Hurston's writings of the 1930s for her views on the US occupation of Haiti; Meisenhelder highlights Hurston's writings on imperialism and communism in the 1940s.<sup>12</sup> However, in not considering Hurston's earlier writings and many of the essays from the 1940s and 1950s, the cohesion of Hurston's views across her lifetime has been obscured.<sup>13</sup> In light of this, more attention to how her international views relate to her more controversial stances on US domestic issues is needed.<sup>14</sup>

The unifying thread across Hurston's various political writings is a staunch anticolonial position.<sup>15</sup> Focusing on the question of colonies brings the central tension of Hurston's political thought into starker relief: while her critiques of colonial powers—whether European, African, or Asian—were straightforward and full-throated, her critiques of countries that lacked formal colonies were more ambivalent. The latter point made her stance on the United States very nuanced. Her support for America's ideals did not blind her to its many political problems. However, the fact that the United States had no colonies when Europe was rocked by waves of decolonization made Hurston's critique of America milder than one might expect.<sup>16</sup> Still, she remained a critic, and her increasingly negative opinion of the role of the US in global politics shaped her opinions on domestic issues. Hurston's critics tend to see her domestic stances, especially those on the politics of race, as unconnected to her thoughts on US foreign policy. Hurston was unrelenting in noting

the links between foreign and domestic policy; to understand her positions on domestic politics in the 1950s, we must first grasp her critique of colonialism.

### **Colonial Violence**

Hurston's political writing began very early in her career. In 1927, she had published some award-winning short stories and plays but had yet to begin her anthropological fieldwork or write any of the novels that would later secure her fame. From 1927 to 1931, she would write several pieces that consolidated her most fundamental and lifelong political orientation: opposition to colonial rule.

As a researcher for the *Journal of Negro History*, she contributed an article on the military history of Fort Mose, which had played a role in the British expulsion of Spanish colonizers from the Florida peninsula.<sup>17</sup> Her article was a response to an earlier article, which told the story of English slaves who had escaped their British masters and taken refuge with the Spanish in St. Augustine, Florida.<sup>18</sup> The Spanish had then freed these slaves and promised to free any others who arrived; the author notes that this policy was pursued to destabilize English power in the region (144–45). The article details how an all-Negro settlement was set up at Fort Mose, and it claims that fifteen years later these same Negroes were moved to St. Augustine, where they maintained an all-black military regiment and a farming community (149). At first glance, Hurston's article seems to be a mere supplement to this story, providing a few extra documents.<sup>19</sup> However, her sources were carefully chosen to present a different view of the history. She focuses on an event omitted in the previous article: the conquest and destruction of Fort Mose by the English in 1739. Hurston's account shows that the black residents of the fort had been active in the military long before the earlier article suggested: after the conquest of Fort Mose, they joined in Spanish reconquista of the fort that included an integrated force of Spanish, Native American, and black troops.<sup>20</sup> While the British ultimately gained Florida, they were forced in the short run to declare defeat and give up possession of Fort Mose (664).

What lesson can be drawn from Hurston's revisionist history? Above all, that if black people form alliances with others across lines of race, they can successfully contest colonial power. For Hurston, the British and the Spanish were equally culpable: both came to America as colonizers, and both held blacks as slaves.<sup>21</sup> The Spanish only freed their slaves to foment a slave insurrection in South Carolina, which served to weaken British dominance (665). Although blacks were nominally the pawns of imperial powers, they used this to their advantage, winning independence and security at Fort Mose. Even when the fort was destroyed, black troops ensured that the British enjoyed only a pyrrhic victory and were rewarded by living in the racially integrated city of St. Augustine, where they were paid well and their rights well protected (665, 666). While the original account presents blacks as wards of the

state, Hurston's shows blacks making use of the limited power available to them to oppose slavery, colonialism, and empire.

It was precisely Hurston's knowledge that these and other blacks had gone from slavery to equal citizenship within a single generation that conditioned her remarks in her autobiographical essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928). In it, Hurston famously declares, "But I am not tragically colored," and insists she will not weep about Jim Crow and racial discrimination.<sup>22</sup> She even refuses to dwell on the history of slavery: "Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the grand-daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past."<sup>23</sup> Hurston recognizes the evils of slavery but chooses to emphasize the positive political consequence of emancipation: her grandparents were slaves, but she is a citizen. She reminds us that the Civil War "made me an American out of a potential slave" (827), and that those slaves wanted what she now had: political agency as an American citizen. To dwell on her slave ancestry to the exclusion of her citizenship would be to miss the point: "I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. . . . My country, right or wrong" (829). Far from advocating an unthinking nationalism, Hurston claims her American citizenship gladly, precisely because it guarantees her freedom to protest the government's abuses.

Hurston insisted on her distance from slavery in part because she knew an ex-slave personally and had seen firsthand the differences in their experiences. At the same time that she was writing "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she was also conducting her interviews with Kossula "Cudjo" Lewis, the last surviving African to have been smuggled into the US on a slave ship.<sup>24</sup> Her unpublished biography of Kossula, *Barracoon* (c. 1931), tells how Kossula and his countrymen the Takkoi were colonized by the slave-trading empire of Dahomey.<sup>25</sup> The story does not cast the blame solely on Africa: Kossula makes it clear that the Dahoman empire could not have maintained its power without collaboration with European powers, like Portugal and France, who kept a colonial presence in West Africa.<sup>26</sup> Hurston also uses her subject to model how blacks in the US ought to respond to colonialism abroad and slavery at home. When Kossula and his compatriots are enslaved in Alabama, they nevertheless manage to resist their slaveowners, sometimes violently.<sup>27</sup> They do not grieve over the difficulty of hard work but the human indignity of being enslaved (52). After Emancipation, Kossula and his neighbors established an all-black village known as "African Town" and took full responsibility for its economic and political affairs.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, Kossula and his compatriots did not base their democratic system on the US political system but on the legal system of the Takkoi.<sup>29</sup> Hurston has Kossula insist that African law, unlike American law, cannot be contravened, showing that justice and democracy are not the gift of America to the darker peoples of the world; the American legal system, Hurston suggests, could learn much from Africa.

As one scholar has noted, the tale of Kossula must be read with "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" to understand Hurston's more flippant statement: "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.”<sup>30</sup> As Hurston shows in *Barracoon*, West Africans had highly developed cultural, religious, and political systems; “civilization” here is shorthand for American culture, which she is keen to satirize: in the same essay, she refers mockingly to “the veneer we call civilization.”<sup>31</sup> And in later writings of the 1930s, she would do much to satirize US pretensions of being “civilized.”

### **The US and Haiti**

In her often-misconstrued ethnography *Tell My Horse* (1938), Hurston critiques US imperialism.<sup>32</sup> From 1915 until 1934, the United States had occupied Haiti, exercising military and economic control over the island. When Hurston arrived to do her field research, the Marines had only been gone a year, and when *Tell My Horse* went to press, the political prospects of Haiti were uncertain. She devoted the second of the book’s three sections to exploring the “Politics and Personalities of Haiti.” In four chapters, she offers highly unorthodox political history: narrating the tumultuous years between 1908 and 1915 that preceded the US occupation, and they offer the reader a snapshot of the post-occupation moment, with all its challenges and possibilities.<sup>33</sup> Critics often read this richly allegorical and deeply ironic text for its surface meanings only, but one of Hurston’s underlying contentions is that the occupation curtailed Haitian independence for two decades. Furthermore, she suggests that theological reasoning was used to rationalize the political unrest that preceded the occupation, as well as the occupation itself.

Hurston suggests that religion and politics formed an unholy alliance between 1908 and 1915, one that facilitated the US occupation. Hurston’s tale of twentieth-century Haiti begins with General François Antoine Simon, who was the last president of Haiti before a flurry of presidential assassinations destabilized the country. According to Hurston, he was maneuvered into the presidency by certain factions who hoped to install a puppet government. Her analysis offers a critique of theocracy: while Hurston actively supported the practice of Vodou, she believed strongly that states should not be governed on the basis of religious principles. She draws an analogy between Simon’s daughter Celestina (a mambo of Haitian Vodou) and Joan of Arc to show that religious piety cannot overcome political realities.<sup>34</sup> President Simon is not politically savvy enough to run the country but continually takes comfort in the prophecies and visions of his daughter. It is only when he battles with Cincinnatus Leconte, a soldier who leads a coup against him, that he realizes “that the most numerous and best directed bullets always win battles in spite of the gods” (365). However, the failure of Simon and the rise of his successor Leconte is justified by the people not in political terms but in religious ones: Simon lost favor by breaking his religious vows, so divine right to rule was transferred to Leconte.<sup>35</sup> But later this process is repeated: while Leconte came to power by force, he justifies

himself as having been fairly elected and divinely favored. Hurston satirizes his reasoning: “Perhaps he could feel that divinity had pointed him to power. . . . The people willed it to be that way. . . . But evidently God did not agree with the Haitian people, for behold God repudiated their candidate by belching him out of the Palace. The poor taste of the people was corrected and Tancred Auguste became their ruler.”<sup>36</sup> Official history held that Leconte died in a freak electrical explosion that destroyed the Haitian palace, an accident well-suited to religious explanation. After investigating, however, Hurston learns that Leconte was really the victim of an elaborate plot and had been murdered in the night; the explosion was rigged afterwards to make his death seem like an accident. Hurston continues to mock the attempts of political elites to claim divine sanction, explaining that Leconte’s successor “died of a digestive disturbance that his enemies called poison. So God must have changed His mind about him also. And while he was being buried, even before his body left the Cathedral for the cemetery, the mourners heard shots being fired from different parts of the City of Port-au-Prince. The successor to Tancred Auguste was being ‘elected’” (374–75).

Hurston reads the US occupation, like the political murders that preceded it, as an underhanded political act that was justified as divine intervention. She repeatedly emphasizes that the leaders who preceded the occupation were well intentioned but stymied by internal conflict.<sup>37</sup> The major conflict was between educated mulattoes and poor blacks, and Hurston sees their refusal to compromise as a key factor enabling the US incursion. The last president before the occupation, Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, was from the black population; his political enemies were mulattoes, and Sam had imprisoned one hundred and seventy of them as hostages. “The opinion of the majority,” according to Hurston, was that the captives were heroes and Sam was illegitimate.<sup>38</sup> When Sam ordered the execution of the prisoners, an angry mob lynched him, literally tearing his body limb from limb. Hurston, recounting the lynching in excruciating detail, emphasizes that the mob was grief-stricken and in a “massed frenzy” (337). Later, she refers to Sam’s death as “horrible,” because of the extreme violence and because it directly brought on the US occupation.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Hurston, the mob views the arrival of the military as divinely inspired. At the climax of Hurston’s apocalyptic allegory, “one black peasant woman fell upon her knees with her arms outstretched like a crucifix and cried, ‘They say that the white man is coming to rule Haiti again. The black man is so cruel to his own, let the white man come!’”<sup>40</sup> And come they do: they are heralded as godlike figures whose coming answers a possible prophecy (331). But the sacrificial posture of the peasant woman is meant to be ironic: in order to gain peace, the Haitian peasantry will be sacrificed.<sup>41</sup> Sam was guilty of the murder of hundreds, but the Marines maintained order with violence that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Haitians.<sup>42</sup>

Hurston depicts the arrival and tenure of the Marines in shockingly negative terms. She titles her chapter on the military arrival “Rebirth of a Nation,” alluding with bitter irony to *The Birth of a Nation*, the extremely popular film by D. W. Griffith,

which was released the same year as the occupation. The film depicts the Civil War and its aftermath in Reconstruction, arguing that “the bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.” By the end of the film, the South has fallen into violence, and peace is restored through the “heroic” intervention of the Ku Klux Klan. The film quotes then-sitting President Woodrow Wilson, who had praised the Klan as “a veritable empire of the South.” When Hurston refers to the coming Marines as “a white hope,” she is comparing them to the Klan: bringers of peace, but also the agents of a racist imperial power. For Hurston, the occupation represents a hiatus in Haitian political history, characterized by a lack of self-determination. Hurston emphasizes her disdain for the occupation with total silence. Her refusal to comment on the three rulers during the occupation suggests that she viewed them as a puppet government installed by the United States.

Hurston’s actual statements on the Marines are very few but also overwhelmingly negative.<sup>43</sup> The most revealing appear in her conversation with an upper-class Haitian.<sup>44</sup> As the dialogue unfolds, her interlocutor spells out an anti-imperial critique, while she asks contrarian questions that lead to the revelation of further complexities. The Haitian notes that the occupation made the country poorer, but as Hurston points out, he also claims that the occupation brought needed jobs; however, the money brought in by these jobs pales in comparison to that lost by Haiti due to the ongoing US control of their coffee trade with France. Hurston counters again, this time noting that the US is holding corrupt French debt collectors at bay; claiming ignorance, her friend insists that the Marines were robbing the country, which caused the Haitians to drive them out. Hurston, knowing that the withdrawal of troops was due to activism by the NAACP and *The Nation*, calls her friend’s bluff; he reminds her that the US had no right to intervene, but Hurston notes that the US intervention stabilized the country and saved them from foreign debt. Her interlocutor gives a final flourish: “what can a weak country like Haiti do when a powerful nation like your own forces its military upon us, kills our citizens, and steals our money?” (350). Notably, Hurston agrees with his statement. This line is often overlooked in discussion of Hurston’s views on the occupation. In contrast to the peasants, who mourn the loss of the relative economic prosperity that the Marines brought,<sup>45</sup> she opposes the occupation as an unjust military and political intervention.<sup>46</sup>

Hurston also draws analogies between the Haitian and American political systems, not to show that Haiti should follow America’s example, but rather to illustrate the hypocrisy of the United States. She repeatedly defines the Haitian Revolution as the standard by which current political work should be judged. This is no romantic vision, however, as Hurston points out the imperfections and difficulties of the revolution. There were two kinds of subjection that had to be done away with. The first was colonialism: Haitians had to struggle with France to gain their freedom. The second was slavery: The mulattoes, who sought rights from the French, were also a slaveholding class; because of this, they only pushed for mulatto rights. Freeing



black slaves would have been an economic blow for them, and petitioning the French for universal rights weakened their political case.<sup>47</sup> Implicitly, Hurston compares the Haitians to the American founding fathers, who also sought freedom from colonial rule while continuing to hold slaves. Hurston writes of the Haitian Revolution and the situation of L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe with sympathy: "No country has ever had more difficult tasks. In the first place Haiti had never been a country. It had always been a colony so that there had never been any real government there. . . . they were trying to make a nation of the wreck of a colony" (346). At first, she seems to suggest that Haiti failed to do so: "Of course Haiti is not now and has never been a democracy according to the American concept. It is an elected monarchy. The President of Haiti is really a king with a palace, with a reign limited to a term of years. The term republic is used very loosely in this case" (340). This seems an endorsement of the United States, until one recalls that the sitting president was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When *Tell My Horse* went to press, Roosevelt had been reelected in a landslide, carrying all but two states. Hurston was already deeply critical of the New Deal and Roosevelt's expansion of executive power. The term "elected monarchy" is almost certainly a jab at FDR and an America that, to Hurston, seemed only a republic in the loosest sense. In the 1940s, she would sharpen her critique of the expansion of US power abroad.

### **Political Theology**

One of Hurston's most important political statements, "Seeing the World as It Is" (written in 1941), was only published posthumously. Hurston had intended for this fiery indictment of colonialism to be the final chapter of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, but her publishers forced her to suppress it, fearing US censorship at the height of World War II.<sup>48</sup> It is not hard to see why: Hurston offers perhaps her most impassioned critiques of American foreign policy and of the colonial policies of the Allied powers, written when France had already fallen to the Nazis and England had endured the Blitz. In "Seeing the World as It Is," Hurston critiques Europe with a clarity uncommon in her earlier work. She evinces little sympathy for the plight of France, England, and Holland, preferring to rehearse the history of their colonial abuses. While rebuking European colonialism, Hurston still refuses to indulge in American exceptionalism. She admits the allure of nationalism: "Being human and a part of humanity, I like to think that my own nation is more just than any other in spite of the facts on hand."<sup>49</sup> But she cannot ignore the military intimidation of Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America occurring in spite of the Good Neighbor policy (791). While her criticism of the Marine occupation of Haiti had been oblique, there was nothing subtle about her denunciation of US intervention in Asia. True, the British might be exploiting India, but "we too, have our Marines in China. We, too, consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own" (791). Hurston's perennial critique of

colonialism had a new sting when turned against the United States, and the war was no deterrent to her indignation: “I will fight for my country,” Hurston wrote, “but I will not lie for her” (792).

While Hurston’s early essays had critiqued colonialism in the Atlantic, she now turned her attention to the Pacific theater. For the first time, Asia becomes the key to her international vision: Hurston critiques both the British treatment of India and Holland’s exploitation of Java and Bali.<sup>50</sup> She also notes that the Axis powers have drawn their strategy for dominating Europe from familiar techniques. Colonial powers had economically exploited countries in Asia for centuries; “Hitler’s crime is that he is actually doing a thing like that to his own kind” (792). Similarly, Japan’s strategy to force China into economic dependence had been borrowed wholesale from US foreign policy: “We Westerners composed that piece about trading in China with gunboats and cannons long decades ago. Japan is now plagiarizing in the most flagrant manner” (792). Told in this way, World War II becomes a case of karmic *déjà vu*: what Europe and the US did to the East was being repeated, in reverse, on the West. While she stops far short of praising either Hitler or Hirohito, Hurston uses Western outrage against the Axis powers to critique the conduct of the West itself. She ends her critique by asking her readers to imagine a full reversal: “if we think our policy is right, you just let the Chinese move a gunboat in the Hudson to drum up trade with us” (793).

Above all, Hurston shows that Christianity has long served as a pretense for colonialist expansion.<sup>51</sup> From Constantine to modern times, Westerners had often used military force “to carry forward the gospel of peace.”<sup>52</sup> Hurston notes with bitter irony that the Prince of Peace has “been drafted into every army in the Occident” (789). Such hypocrisy has seldom been lost on those forcibly converted, but Hurston sees a second irony: “The Occident,” which has long sought to spread Christianity to darker peoples, “has never been christianized and never will be” (788). She insists that Westerners lack meekness and dislike such Christian virtues when they find them in non-Christians: Gandhi’s attempt to put Christian principles into practice was broadly condemned by the US, she wrote, because it interfered with the profits of colonial powers (789). Meanwhile, allegedly “Christian” nations supported aggressive colonialism and an ever-increasing standard of living: “Desire enough for your own use only, and you are a heathen. Civilized people have things to show to the neighbors” (793). This sentiment is not new; it only extends the critique of “civilization” that Hurston first inaugurated in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” But if “civilized” Europeans were not truly Christian, to which religion did they hold allegiance?

For Hurston, the true faith of colonialism was not Christianity but a political theology of violence. In a 1943 letter, she argued that whites actually worshipped force: “I know that the Anglo-Saxon mentality is one of violence. Violence is his religion. He has gained everything he has by it, and respects nothing else.”<sup>53</sup> In the Anglo-American mindset, Hurston suggests, colonialism need not be justified by

Christianity: since violence already has a sacral character, the inherently violent act of colonization becomes a religious rite. In a slightly later essay, "Crazy for This Democracy" (1945), Hurston explains that many viewed the defeat of the Japanese in theopolitical terms: "The inference is, that God has restated the superiority of the West. God always does like that when a thousand white people surround one dark one. Dark people are always 'bad' when they do not admit the Divine Plan like that."<sup>54</sup> In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston had suggested that Haitians relied on religious explanations to legitimate political terror; here, she makes it clear that Americans often do the same. For example, Jim Crow segregation had a religious function in the United States. It indoctrinated all citizens with a belief in the divine right of whites to rule: "Seeing the daily humiliations of the darker people confirm the [white] child in its superiority, so that it comes to feel it the arrangement of God. By the same means, the smallest dark child is to be convinced of its inferiority, so that it is to be convinced that competition is out of the question, and against all nature and God" (948). Racism persists, in the US and abroad, because it cloaks itself in a quasi-religious rationale; this results in material profits for whites, who benefit from cheap resources overseas and a lack of economic competition from blacks at home.

During World War II, Hurston came to believe that the Anglo-American "religion" of violence had a logical conclusion: exalting strong, dictatorial leaders who could execute violence on a large scale. Hurston admits that the abolition of slavery made progress towards liberty; however, with the loss of free labor and cheap materials provided by slavery, the US had sought other sources of wealth. Thus, the emancipation for slaves at home coincided with the growth of the US economic empire abroad.<sup>55</sup> In "Seeing the World as It Is," she links the persistence of colonialism to the cult of the great man: "If a ruler can find a place way off where the people do not look like him, kill enough of them to convince the rest that they ought to support him with their lives and labor, that ruler is hailed as a great conqueror, and people build monuments to him . . . with the sacred tool of his conquest in his hand" (790). Hurston had supported the unpopular Herbert Hoover, and she viewed the public adulation of FDR with great suspicion. Although the Works Progress Administration kept Hurston employed during the Great Depression, she came to regard the New Deal overall as a kind of bread-and-circus program, which massively increased the power of the executive branch and led Americans to view the president as a godlike figure.<sup>56</sup>

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Hurston became a strident critic of executive power. Although FDR had articulated the Four Freedoms in the Atlantic Charter, he failed to extend these protections to blacks in America by enforcing their equal protection under the law.<sup>57</sup> Nor was his foreign policy any better. Hurston criticized him for upholding European colonization in Africa and aiding the recolonization of Asia: "American soldiers and sailors are fighting along with the French, Dutch and English to rivet these chains back on their former slaves" (946). Hurston initially favored Truman<sup>58</sup> but soon lost respect for him after he dropped the atomic bomb

and occupied swaths of Asia.<sup>59</sup> Expanding executive power was not only dangerous for the specific policies a president pursued; it was also dangerous in principle. As early as 1945, for instance, Hurston called for the immediate repeal of all Jim Crow laws.<sup>60</sup> But for her, this should only be done through legislation in Congress, not by a special order of the executive branch: “if you turn an executive loose to go outside the law in your favor on Monday,” she wrote, “you have also given him the power to go outside the law on Thursday against you. No country is safe from tyranny unless the chief executive is kept within the bounds of law made and provided.”<sup>61</sup> In an age of expanding executive power, which coincided with continued oppression of minorities at home and abroad, Hurston called for increased involvement of citizens in the political process.

### **“I Saw Negro Votes Peddled” (1950)**

By the late 1940s, Hurston insisted a strong legislature was a necessary check on executive power. She was thus enraged to hear reports that working-class black voters were selling their votes in the 1950 Florida Senate primary. Hurston attended the election in Miami, interviewing a number of participants, and she wrote up her observations in a November article for the *American Legion Magazine*, “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled.”<sup>62</sup> While nominally interested in the outcome of the race, Hurston used the article to set down her thoughts on the history of Reconstruction, the concept of the vote, and the role of blacks as American citizens.<sup>63</sup>

Infamous for her cryptic assertions on Reconstruction, Hurston fully explains her reasoning here.<sup>64</sup> Her opposition to Reconstruction has often confused readers who see that decade as a moment of failed possibility: if Northern troops had remained in the occupied South for a few more years, so the reasoning goes, blacks could have gained an economic, educational, and political foothold, and US history would have taken a much better course. Instead the failed Reconstruction brought in its wake the rise of the Klan and the de facto nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments through lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and black disenfranchisement—the “nadir” of US race relations. But Hurston argues that Reconstruction actually *fostered* the nadir. As she explains it, newly eligible black voters were exploited by Northern carpetbaggers and Southern scalawags, who bought black votes cheaply without making lasting change for black communities. After the Northern occupation of the South ended, blacks “were called upon to pay for what their exploiters had done.”<sup>65</sup> Simply put, the nadir was an unsurprising backlash in which black pawns took the blow.<sup>66</sup> Reconstruction created a lasting suspicion of black voters among Southern whites: Hurston had already written an article on a Florida election in 1920 in which widespread black turnout at the polls led to a race riot and a lynching; whites began the riot after “citing the evil happenings of the Reconstruction.”<sup>67</sup> To Hurston, blacks selling their votes in 1950 were an insult to

those blacks who had shed their blood while attempting to exercise their right to vote in 1920.

Hurston also uses the article to forward her theory of suffrage. She casts the franchise in religious terms as “the most sacred thing that man has conceived and strived for,” contrasting the American myth of the individual against the political theology of executive tyranny that she had critiqued in the 1940s. From the time of the ancient Greeks to the US Civil War, she notes, people have had to fight to preserve and extend “this highest right in civilization,” which blacks in America now also share.<sup>68</sup> But Hurston is not simply opposed to blacks selling their votes; she also critiques the practice of “single-shotting”—showing up only to vote for a candidate while ignoring the referenda and other issues on the ballot. Voting in a bloc for politicians without also voting on specific ballot policies throws off the system of checks and balances: if representatives do not feel themselves accountable to the populace, they cease to serve as a check on the executive branch; without checks on their own action, they threaten to become as much of a danger to the populace as a dictatorial leader.

Hurston’s third main point in the article is to spell out her conception of citizenship. Hurston sees three debased forms of citizenship to which blacks can fall prey. The first is a slave mindset, which leads one to simply want a “good master” who will provide for his needs. This is the mindset of those who sell their votes. A second, better form of citizenship is the Reconstruction mindset of one who has a more sophisticated understanding of the issues but votes the party line: this voter is represented by the preacher who appears at the end of Hurston’s article. Following the advice of some “friends of the Negro,” he votes for Democrat Claude Pepper, hoping that blacks will benefit from the Fair Employment Practices Commission, which Pepper supports. A young professional then counsels him that measures supported by the “friends of the Negro” might not ultimately be in the best interest of Negroes. A third brand of voter is represented by the black middle class, made up of “physicians, dentists, lawyers, morticians, pharmacists, teachers, registered nurses, ministers, journalists, and the like” (57). These are the ones who think beyond the “single-shotting” issue of which candidate to elect; they vote on important local measures, like a bond that would make millions of dollars available for improving local schools in the Miami area (59). This third voter is commendable but still falls short of Hurston’s ultimate standards for good citizenship. For Hurston, the citizen’s true allegiance is not to herself nor to her class or racial group but to the United States as a whole. In the final analysis, the citizen has a “responsibility to serve the common good by supporting men of high caliber for important offices” (60). The citizen’s duty is to vote for the statesmen who will best serve the country as a whole, rather than the politician who panders to one race, class, or region.

An example of Hurston’s ideal statesman was Senator Robert A. Taft, who was seeking nomination in the Republican Party before the presidential race of 1952. Initially, Hurston had no particular devotion to Taft: “I have no political heroes,” she

wrote to her literary agent. “I can take them all or leave them.”<sup>69</sup> Across the nation, blacks had begun to abandon the Republican Party en masse, largely because Truman, the sitting president, had courted black votes with the promise of partial desegregation.<sup>70</sup> Hurston looked into Taft’s record and found that, despite his conservative reputation, Taft had fought against poll taxes in the South, supported public housing (which earned him a reputation for having socialist leanings),<sup>71</sup> and fought discrimination in the federal government and in unions. Taft had even been an outspoken critic of the white-supremacist senator Theodore Bilbo. But Taft had done these things largely out of “some strange passion for justice,” rather than an attempt to court the black vote.<sup>72</sup> Would it be possible, Hurston wondered, for blacks to assess Taft not solely based on what he would do for blacks in America but rather on his likelihood to benefit the country as a whole? Hurston saw this as the true test of the “political maturity” of black voters: “Traditionally, Negroes ask first, ‘But how does he feel about us? Is he a friend of the Negro?’ You can readily see that that is not enough in a President these days.”<sup>73</sup> In her article, Hurston did not endorse Taft but said that if nominated he would be likely to find support among blacks.

Taft ultimately lost the Republican nomination to General Eisenhower, who went on to win the presidency. According to Hurston, Taft lost the key support of black voters with his statement that if elected he would not attempt to desegregate Southern schools by executive order, an act he saw as overstepping the bounds of the executive branch.<sup>74</sup> Believing strongly in checks on executive authority, Hurston was impressed with his reasoning. A few years later, Hurston’s worst fears about expanding executive authority were confirmed: she accused Eisenhower of buying off pollsters and pundits to spread propaganda.<sup>75</sup> Indeed Hurston’s opposition to Eisenhower was behind one of her most inflammatory articles, “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix” (1955), which opposed the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Hurston had long been an opponent of segregation, but she argued that accomplishing desegregation through judicial intervention threatened to destroy the checks and balance system.<sup>76</sup> Once the precedent of “Govt [sic] by fiat” had been established, there was nothing to stop a more conservative judiciary from repealing other laws in the future. Hurston also saw the *Brown* decision as a risky blurring of the executive and judicial branches. Eisenhower had appointed Earl Warren to the Court in 1954, and *Brown* was his first case. Hurston was suspicious about the timing of the decision, which she suspected had been calculated to drive voters towards the Republican Party in the 1956 election.<sup>77</sup> “In fear of my freedom,” she wrote, “I am voting Democratic next time.”<sup>78</sup>

Hurston’s opposition to Eisenhower will surprise some: she was a registered Republican, and she had critiqued Democrats FDR and Truman for their expansions of executive power. But Hurston had no doctrinaire commitment to either party. In fact, she maintained that, in the early twentieth century, US political categories had shifted so much that political categories had lost their basic meanings. She quoted Taft admiringly: “A liberal is a man who believes in freedom of thought, who is not a

worshiper of dogma.”<sup>79</sup> Meaning, of course, that Taft was a classical liberal, a political position that does not fit our current concepts of conservative and liberal any more than it fits present-day libertarians. Hurston’s defense of strict separation of powers and a noncoercive state *resembled* the position of classical liberals; this explains why she voted for Taft. But Hurston was no dogmatic Republican: throughout the World War II years, she belonged to the Republican Party only because she thought it best positioned to achieve her true goal, a state that neither enslaved its own citizens nor colonized peoples abroad. When the Republicans shifted to support the expansion of executive power and interventionism abroad, Hurston was quick to abandon them. In short, she was a fellow traveler with classical liberalism, but her core commitment was anticolonial.

### **“Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism” (1951)**

A central aspect of Hurston’s political philosophy was her critical attitude towards communism. Unlike the bulk of American intellectuals in the interwar period, Hurston never considered herself a leftist or supported communist causes. But Hurston never dismissed communism totally; indeed, in “Seeing the World as It Is,” she takes an unexpectedly positive stance towards it: “I see many good points in, let us say, the Communist Party. Anyone would be a liar and a fool to claim that there was no good in it.”<sup>80</sup> Hurston then offers three critiques: first, she lacks the “herd instinct” needed to submit to party discipline<sup>81</sup>; second, communist ideas are alien to American values, particularly the possibility of upward mobility; third, the notion of a violent revolution does not appeal to her.<sup>82</sup> Taken together, these three traits surprisingly resemble those that Hurston had enumerated in her political theology of Western colonialism: the colonial nations had inculcated a herd mentality in the colonized through discipline; this, in turn, made upward mobility for the colonized impossible. Both colonizers and communists believed in the necessity of violence: while European colonizers believed that the colonized must inevitably suffer violence, communists believed in the inevitable reversal of violence, by which the colonizer would be overthrown. But for this inversion, Hurston’s critique of communism was identical to her critique of colonialism.

In her article “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism” (1951),<sup>83</sup> Hurston tried to show that the Communist Party in Russia was a neocolonial power. Amid the chaos of the Korean War and the growing Cold War conflict between the US and the USSR, Hurston wonders why Stalin was suddenly so “extremely interested in the American Negro.”<sup>84</sup> Rejecting the official party rhetoric about global brotherhood, she digs until she finds a more plausible answer: “The USSR was bent on world conquest through Asia” and hoped to use blacks as a wedge to achieve it (15). Hurston gives a history lesson that takes her back two generations: “it was obvious that Soviet Russia was bent on carrying out the Czarist Russian plans to be masters of Asia. Once they had had a toe-hold in China, but had been expelled from there early

around 1904 by the more alert and ingenious Nipponese. Now, while pretending to feel for the little peoples of the whole world, meanwhile issuing hot denials of imperialistic intentions, the Soviet was bent and bound to continue the march to the East” (15, 55). Hurston recasts the Soviet revolution as Czarism redivivus. Lenin had long ago called imperialism the last stage of capitalism; for Hurston, it was the next stage of communism. As much as the European powers, the Soviet Union sought to enhance its power and profits through colonial rule.

According to Hurston, communists saw black Americans as the perfect tool in their imperial bid. For the time being, blacks in the newly desegregated military could easily work their way into the defense industry, where they could serve as spies (14). At the same time, the Soviets would use blacks as a crucial part of their effort to pit the darker peoples of the world against whites (14). First, if Stalin convinced black Americans to join the party, they would be unwilling to fight against North Korea and China, whom they would see as sharing their class interests (14). Similarly, if the Soviets could convince Asians that whites hated all nonwhites, they would likely join the USSR. The best proof of this race-hatred would be to show the persistence of segregation in the United States (55). When the opportune moment for revolution arrived, the black millions could be used as soldiers—or at least cannon fodder—to swell the ranks of the communist armies (55). However, to precipitate the revolution in America, Stalin would have to convince blacks that upward mobility was impossible for them; faced with this collapse of the American Dream, the black “peasant party” would rise up in violent revolution, and the Soviets would colonize the US (15, 55).

The bulk of Hurston’s article concerns the mass of Negroes who Hurston thinks will not buy in to this scheme, and the efforts of Stalin and white communists to woo them. Hurston argues that, for better or worse, blacks will not allow themselves to be convinced that the American Dream is a lie; having already been enslaved, blacks want nothing more than to become wealthy. Blacks are too status-conscious to yield to the Soviet fatalism that argues that they are a permanent underclass (15, 55). Realizing that this tactic was failing, Hurston writes, the party attempted to woo black workers with the promise of white wives and husbands; in general, she suggests, this “white mare” strategy failed to win very many adherents.<sup>85</sup> Hurston spends the rest of the article insisting “that nationality is stronger than race,” and that blacks are, at the end of the day, Americans through and through.<sup>86</sup> More than any of her other political works, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism” does little to critique America, which is accepted as an alternative to communist rule. Hurston’s insistence that nation is stronger than race blunts the edge of her anticolonial critique. The piece is, perhaps, too personal in tone: although putatively about the Negro masses, the article features mug shots of six black leaders and intellectuals whose reputations had recently been harmed by red-baiting.<sup>87</sup> Three of them had been close friends of Hurston: Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Her critiques of Du Bois, Hughes, and Robeson have little to do with



their communism and more to do with rancor between former friends.<sup>88</sup> As early as 1935, Hurston privately held the opinion that communists were attempting to recruit black Americans to the party, often through the promise that black men could get white wives by joining.<sup>89</sup> To understand the article, one must look past Hurston's rhetoric to analyze her political positions relative to those of her ex-friends.

One of the great ironies of this piece is that Hurston's positions very closely resemble those of one of her major targets: W. E. B. Du Bois. His autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), ended with a chapter titled "Revolution," which detailed his long engagement with Marxism. A decade before Hurston, Du Bois articulates many of the same positions: he is already aware that Russians began trying to use blacks as their pawns as early as 1927<sup>90</sup>; he also contends that most Negroes are too American in their outlook to be Marxists and doubts that the Russian model of communism could or even should be applied to the US context<sup>91</sup>; like Hurston, he critiques Russian communists for caring more about the cause than about black lives and blames communist interference for botching the Scottsboro trial.<sup>92</sup> He even objects to the use of violence as a tool for social reform.<sup>93</sup> Superficially, the main difference between them seems to be that Du Bois identifies as a socialist.<sup>94</sup> More substantively, Du Bois differs from Hurston in his ongoing support for Stalin; but crucially, Hurston's full-throated rejection of Stalin in "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" has little to do with his communist bona fides and much more to do with his support for imperialism.<sup>95</sup>

There is one figure whose absence from the article might strike the reader as odd: Richard Wright. It has long been a pastime of critics to stage a "Wright-Hurston" debate, based almost solely on the fact that Wright negatively reviewed Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937),<sup>96</sup> and Hurston subsequently reviewed Wright's short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938).<sup>97</sup> Wright wrote a fairly scathing review, but Hurston's, in general, was actually quite gracious.<sup>98</sup> Her most serious critique of Wright had to do with his communist orientation. She charges Wright with creating black characters who can only escape their plight in a communist utopia in which the state takes full responsibility for the person; *Uncle Tom's Children* exemplifies the type of writing she would later critique in "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism."<sup>99</sup> But the Wright-Hurston "debate" freezes the position of *both* authors in 1938, scarcely accounting for their evolution.<sup>100</sup>

In the 1940s, Hurston and Wright had moved towards each other on the political spectrum, a fact usually overlooked by scholars. By 1942, Wright had begun the slow process of breaking away from the party; he left quite publicly in 1944, publishing "I Tried to Be a Communist," an article that charted the rise and fall of his faith in the party.<sup>101</sup> Wright leaves the party not because he disagrees with leftist ideas, but because the leadership is so dogmatic that they stifle independent thought. "Once again," he writes, "I told myself that I must learn to stand alone," consoling himself with the goal of becoming a writer.<sup>102</sup> He could have been quoting Hurston, who had written to Countee Cullen only a year earlier: "I shall probably

never become a 'liberal.' Neither shall I ever let myself be persuaded to have my mind made up for me by a political job. I mean to live and die by my own mind."<sup>103</sup> Hurston and Wright both opposed the Communist Party for reasons of political and intellectual autonomy. By the end of the 1940s, neither Wright nor Hurston saw communism as a way forward for the darker peoples of the world.

After "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism," Hurston moved away from her anticommunist stance, emphasizing anticolonialism instead. A year after the article was published, Hurston wrote her literary agent: "the current antagonism to the U.S. . . . is not all due to Russia and communism. Russia is merely taking advantage of the known anti-Anglo-Saxon feeling in Asia and the Near East."<sup>104</sup> Here, Hurston makes her strongest case for anticolonialism: "Colonialism and race is at the bottom of the whole thing. So long as we support France and England in their colonial policies in Asia, so long shall our young men die over there. Asia no longer intends to submit, and since we ourselves have no colonies there is no sense in trying to maintain it for others" (683). In a subsequent letter, Hurston suggests that a Pan-Asiatic union is in the offing. "In my deep love of country," she writes, "I yearn for it to get into a safe position," but she fears the US will remain in danger so long as it continues to support the colonial projects of Europe.<sup>105</sup> Wright came to a similar position after attending the Bandung Conference (1955), which he discusses in *The Color Curtain* (1956).<sup>106</sup> Like Hurston, Wright saw colonization as the central issue: "Only brown, black, and yellow men who had long been made agonizingly self-conscious, under the rigors of colonial rule, of their race and their religion could have felt the need for such a meeting."<sup>107</sup> Hurston and Wright were both anticolonialist; to the extent that there was a Wright-Hurston debate at all, the key issue was not the Soviet Union: both writers agreed that the main appeal of communism in Asia was practical, not ideological. No, the real difference between Hurston and Wright concerned their opinions about the United States; Hurston hoped that it could give up support for colonialism, while Wright was sure it wouldn't.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

Above all else, Zora Neale Hurston was a steadfast anticolonialist. She came to this position early in her research, enhanced it with an increasingly global perspective, and argued more forcefully for it as World War II ended and the Cold War began. Her interest in foreign affairs—like the US occupation of Haiti, the rise of Stalin and Mao, and growing anticolonial sentiment—dictated her opinions on US politics. For pragmatic reasons, she moved towards a position that resembled classical liberalism, arguing that strict checks and balances were the best defense available against dictatorships on the left or the right. But she was all too aware that the architects of liberalism had themselves justified modern slavery, imperialism, and colonialism. She remained committed to American ideals but critiqued the abuse of minorities both within and without the United States. Anticolonial *and* American: this was the

seeming paradox of her thought. Holding this view at the height of US ascendancy led Hurston to be misunderstood on all sides: thinkers on the far left took her strong nationalism as a rejection of international issues; liberals condemned her stances on the New Deal and the civil rights movement as “conservative,” failing to appreciate that her opposition to coercive state power arose from anticolonial roots; and thinkers on the right have increasingly tried to claim her as a black conservative, without knowing or sharing her views on foreign policy. Yet Hurston was none of these: she eschewed the dogmas of all parties, constantly pursuing her unique form of anticolonial critique. Her domestic positions were often unpopular, and in rare moments, she regretted even joining the fray. “I have never been interested in politics,” she wrote to a friend, “(seeing that it is such a sorry game) I am only interested in things improving. . . . I am often so disillusioned that it hardly seems worthwhile to even be interested in a general way.”<sup>109</sup> Hurston’s apathy was feigned: by 1946, she had already written some of her most political essays. But her frustration was probably genuine: politics is a game of compromises, and Hurston was always uncompromising. Her refusal to conform to existing orthodoxies ensured that her thought was long misunderstood. As the full range of her writings comes into view, perhaps Hurston’s politics will finally become intelligible.

## Notes

Many thanks to Werner Sollors, for encouraging me to write on Hurston’s politics, and to Nina Morgan for her patient editorial work. Thanks to the staff of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, who made it possible to consult the manuscript of *Barracoon*. Glenda Carpio and Tommie Shelby have shaped my thinking in our ongoing conversations about Hurston’s politics. Jason Warner provided extensive critiques of the paper on a very tight deadline. Several friends have given helpful perspective on Hurston’s political context: Syon Bhanot, Tara Dankel, Armin Fardis, Adam McGee, Genevieve Parker, Nicholas Paskert, Andrew Pope, Rebekah Smith, Nicholas Kean Tabor, Jason Warner, and Winthrop Wells. Finally, two of my former students, Hannah Habte and Seth Pearce, engaged me in a series of conversations that first led me to reevaluate Hurston’s politics in the 1950s. This essay is theirs; all its faults are mine.

<sup>1</sup> The major collections of Hurston’s essays include Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1979); *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981); *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Library of America, 1995); and *Go Gator and Muddy the Water:*

*Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project*, ed. Pamela Bordelon (New York: Norton, 1999). In this essay, unless otherwise noted, the Library of America anthology will be the source for citations from Hurston's writings.

<sup>2</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Famously by Alain Locke, who wished she would turn to "social document fiction"; see his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Opportunity*, June 1, 1938. Richard Wright complained, "Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction." Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses* 25, no. 2, October 5, 1937, 22.

<sup>4</sup> "We do not love her," wrote Alice Walker, "for her unpredictable and occasionally weird politics (they tend to confuse us)" (Alice Walker, "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now," dedication to Hurston, *I Love Myself*, 1). Her praise for Hurston's art was boundless, but of her politics Walker wrote, "I think we are better off if we think of Zora Neale Hurston as an artist, period—rather than as the artist/politician most black writers have been required to be" (3). Mary Helen Washington called Hurston "a right-wing Republican" (Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," introduction to Hurston, *I Love Myself*, 9) and "typically erratic" (18); her politics were "unorthodox and paradoxical" (18), "naïve and dangerous" (22).

<sup>5</sup> Cornel West and Hazel Carby are two of the most prominent of Hurston's recent critics on the left; West has called her "reactionary," while Carby called her political views "usually reactionary, blindly patriotic, and, consequently, superficial." Cornel West, "Demystifying the New Black Conservatism," *PRAXIS International* 2 (1987): 143; and Hazel V. Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (1990; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 87–88. Andrew Delbanco has bemoaned her "belligerent conservatism" and dismissed her positions as both naïve and incoherent: "it is a mistake, really, to take her opinions too seriously." Andrew Delbanco, "The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 18 (1997–1998): 106.

<sup>6</sup> "She would've loved Clarence Thomas," wrote Bill Kauffman. Bill Kauffman, "Zora Neale Hurston and Clarence Thomas," *Lincoln Review* 10, no. 1 (1991): 11, 13. Elsewhere, Steve Sailer praised her as "a shamelessly conservative Republican who scorned victimism and leftist conformism." Steve Sailer, "The Secret Zora Neale Hurston," *National Review* 47, no. 6, April 3, 1995, 58. John McWhorter has written three recent articles claiming Hurston as a conservative. He has argued forcefully that her politics were joined to her work and consistent across her career, a claim that moves the debate in the right direction, but McWhorter fails to examine any of Hurston's actual *political* stances: there is no mention of her opinions on communism or the New Deal, on

colonialism or Korea, on Hamilton or Jefferson, on Nazism or the Haitian occupation. Instead he notes that she opposed Jim Crow and a monolithic black voting bloc and supported “self-reliance,” à la Booker T. Washington. Absent a discussion of Hurston’s actual political positions (both national and international), McWhorter speculates on how she would respond to present-day issues concerning race; unsurprisingly, he thinks she sounds like “Michael Steele, Ward Connerly, Clarence Thomas, Walter Williams, Thomas Sowell, Larry Elder, Star Parker”—in short, like today’s black conservatives. See John McWhorter, “Why Zora Neale Hurston Was a Conservative,” *The Root*, January 4, 2011, <http://www.theroot.com/views/why-zora-neale-hurston-was-conservative>.

<sup>7</sup> Contrast this to, for example, Crosby’s recent essay on Hurston: “as her career progressed she began to think and write about the black middle class and to adopt a more conservative political outlook.” Shelby L. Crosby, “Complicating Blackness: The Politics and Journalism of Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Zora Neale Hurston: An Annotated Bibliography of Works and Criticism*, ed. Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 112. Crosby encourages literary critics to “examine her complete oeuvre, even if that involves confronting the reactionary political views in her journalism” (109). Unfortunately, her essay examines only a few of Hurston’s essays from the late 1940s and concurs with recent scholars in seeing Hurston as a precursor to today’s black conservatives.

<sup>8</sup> The assumption that Hurston’s politics could be reduced to a quirk in her personality rather than to considered thought became a basic assumption among critics: in an influential essay on Hurston from *In a Minor Chord* (1971), Darwin Turner explicitly cites Fannie Hurst to this effect, before discussing her personal and political “myopia” for six pages. Darwin T. Turner, “Zora Neale Hurston: The Wandering Minstrel,” in *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 93–94. Later, her otherwise excellent biographer, Robert Hemenway, saw her 1950s writings as “angry,” “accommodationist,” “conservative,” “right-wing,” and “willful”; characterized by “mild paranoia,” Hurston “was not a systematic political thinker. . . . She took things personally and defined herself in relation to those who opposed her.” Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977; repr., Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 328, 329.

<sup>9</sup> Reminiscing about her a year after her death, Hurston’s close friend Fannie Hurst accused her of having a “lack of identity with her race,” which Hurst traced to Hurston having spent her childhood in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where she had “never known the pangs of discrimination.” Fannie Hurst, “Zora Hurston: A Personality Sketch,” *Yale University Library Gazette* 35, no. 1 (1960): 19.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, “Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines,” forward to *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, by Zora Neale Hurston (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), vii–xxii, especially xix–xxii. Her short essay focuses on Hurston’s fiction, but she rightly places Hurston’s politics in “a more global context of cultural production and exchange” (xxii).

<sup>11</sup> Susan Meisenhelder, “Gender, Race & Class in Zora Neale Hurston’s Politics,” *Against the Current* 55, March–April 1995, <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/2838>; and John Carlos Rowe, “Opening the Gate to the Other America: The Afro-Caribbean Politics of Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*,” in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 253–92.

<sup>12</sup> Rowe gives an excellent sustained reading of the politics of *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. While I agree with his claim that local culture is not enough to stand against the onslaught of neoliberalism (Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 291), I think he overstates the degree to which Hurston wishes to base Haitian democracy on a US model (254). Meisenhelder’s interpretations of the expurgated material in *Dust Tracks*, the unpublished letters, and “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism” are all excellent; however, her attempt to demonstrate that Hurston “worked a sophisticated and radical social analysis into her novels” weakens her analysis somewhat, since it is much more difficult to ascertain Hurston’s political positions from her fiction (Meisenhelder, “Gender, Race & Class”).

<sup>13</sup> Thus, for instance, Meisenhelder concludes that Hurston “often seems self-contradictory” (Meisenhelder, “Gender, Race & Class”).

<sup>14</sup> To his credit, Rowe does emphasize the links between Hurston’s foreign and domestic policies, but he is primarily concerned with how this plays out in her views on Haiti in the late 1930s. However, this linkage only became even more significant by the 1950s and, as I will argue, Hurston’s views on foreign affairs determined her views on domestic affairs; Rowe seems to believe that her domestic opinions determined her foreign policy, but that fails to explain the relative stability of her international opinions compared to the dynamism of her opinions on intranational politics.

<sup>15</sup> Hurston’s anticolonialism is mentioned as early as Hemenway’s classic biography; see Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*. Henry Louis Gates also takes this angle after reading Hemenway’s edition of Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); see Henry Louis Gates Jr., “‘A Negro Way of Saying,’” review of *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography and Moses, Man of the Mountain*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *New York Times Book Review*, April 21, 1985, 1, 43, 45, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/21/books/a-negro-way-of-saying.html>. However, both scholars view Hurston’s anticolonialism as specific to “Seeing the World as It Is,” the expurgated ending of *Dust Tracks*; the idea that Hurston’s commitment to anticolonialism was a principled position that she held before and after the autobiography is alien to them.

<sup>16</sup> For Rowe, Hurston’s love–hate relationship with the US brought her political thought to an impasse: “it is the conflict between Hurston’s strategies for revealing and resisting such oppression at home and abroad *and* her ideals for the spread of democratic institutions, especially as they are represented by the promise of U.S. democracy, that often contributes to the contradictory quality of her political judgments or the

impression of her *apolitical* stance” (Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 255). I find Hurston’s views on the US nuanced but not “contradictory.”

<sup>17</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Communication,” *Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 4 (1927): 664–67.

<sup>18</sup> Irene A. Wright, “Dispatches of Spanish Officials Bearing on the Free Negro Settlement of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, Florida,” *Journal of Negro History* 9, no. 2 (1924): 14–95. Wright’s article had republished a series of Spanish documents, prefaced by a chronology of the fort’s history.

<sup>19</sup> Hemenway reads this as something Hurston had no particular interest in writing (Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 96).

<sup>20</sup> Hurston, “Communication,” 664.

<sup>21</sup> Hurston’s account emphasizes that the Spaniards themselves had brought five hundred Negro slaves to St. Augustine in 1687 for the purpose of cultivating fields (664–65).

<sup>22</sup> “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.” Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 827. When John McWhorter writes, “Hurston held a fiercely asserted black conservative politics akin to Clarence Thomas’s,” he calls this quotation “her most famous statement in this vein.” John H. McWhorter, “Thus Spake Zora,” *City Journal* 19, no. 3 (2009), available online at [http://www.city-journal.org/2009/19\\_3\\_urb-zora-neale-hurston.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2009/19_3_urb-zora-neale-hurston.html).

<sup>23</sup> Hurston, “How It Feels,” 827.

<sup>24</sup> Hurston published a much shorter article, “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 4 (1927): 648–63; it included far less of Kossula’s testimony and was largely a history of the slave ship *Clotilda*, which smuggled him and over a hundred Africans to the US. This article was largely plagiarized from Emma Langdon Roche’s *Historic Sketches of the South* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1914); for accounts of this incident, see Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 96–103; and also Genevieve Sexton, “The Last Witness: Testimony and Desire in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Barracoon,’” *Discourse* 25, nos. 1–2 (2003): 189–210. Hurston later wrote *Barracoon* (1931), a longer manuscript that better represents her own work; on Hurston’s use of sources in *Barracoon*, see Hildegard Hoeller, “Race, Modernism, and Plagiarism: The Case of Nella Larsen’s ‘Sanctuary,’” *African American Review* 40, no. 3 (2006): 421–37,

especially 431–33. In a recent book on the Africans smuggled into the US aboard the *Clotilda*, Sylviane Diouf compares *Barracoon* to other accounts and concludes that, the unfortunate plagiarism incident notwithstanding, Hurston's second version of the story is the most "comprehensive" and accurate that existed until now; see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Unfortunately, *Barracoon* still remains unpublished.

<sup>25</sup> Each winter, the king of Dahomey led his army of twelve thousand on an expedition that resulted in the armed takeover of a neighboring tribe; their elders were ruthlessly beheaded, and their youths taken to a port city in Dahomey where they were sold. Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* unpublished manuscript, 1931, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University Archives, 6–7. The name of Kossula's people remains disputed. Hurston gives several possible versions: Attacco, Taccaw, Taccow, and Takkoi (Hurston, *Barracoon*, "Preface"); Sylviane Diouf offers a wide variety of possibilities (Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*, 39–41). Here, I have chosen to use Hurston's preferred term, which she says is closest to Kossula's pronunciation.

<sup>26</sup> In an early passage about his childhood, Kossula mentions that his grandfather would sometimes threaten to sell his disobedient slaves to the Portuguese (Hurston, *Barracoon*, 22–23), suggesting that the lives of Africans far from the coast were still shaped by the Portuguese presence on the coast (Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*, 42–43). When warriors from Dahomey invade Kossula's town, they do so "wid French gun in de hand" (Hurston, *Barracoon*, 48), a crucial detail reminding the reader that the military might of Dahomey was partly due to their trade with the French.

<sup>27</sup> "Cap'n Tim and Cap'n Burns Mehear workee dey folks hard. Dey got overseer wid de whip. One man try whippee one my country women and dey all jump on him and takee de whip way from him and lashee him wid it. He doan never try whip Affican women no mo'" (Hurston, *Barracoon*, 52).

<sup>28</sup> As Kossula explains to Hurston, "We make Gumpa (African Peter) de head and Jaybee and Keebie de judges. Den we make laws how to behave ourselves. When anybody do wrong we make him 'pear befo' de judges and dey tellee him he got to stop doin' lak dat cause it doan look nice. We doan want nobody to steal, neither gitee drunk neither hurtee nobody. . . . We call our village Affican Town. We say dat 'cause we want to go back in de Affica soil and we see we cain go. Derefo' we makes de Affica where dey fetch us" (70–71).

<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, Kossula describes the Takkoi legal system: "De King come wid his seat and all de chiefs bring dey stool too. Dey seatee deysel and de drum beat. It speak wid de voice of de King . . . de King come, wid de chiefs of de udder villages, to help him 'cide de case. . . . In Afficky de law is de law an' no man cain make out he crazy lak here, an' get excusee from de law" (28–32).



<sup>30</sup> Hurston, “How It Feels,” 827. This was Hurston’s lifelong view; she endorsed it in “Seeing the World as It Is” (1942) and a letter to her literary agent (1951): “We Negroes here are out in front of others because there is something inherent on this continent that springs. Hence a new ingredient was given to our African material that gave it life and the element to reach people and endure. I am perfectly reconciled to slavery on that score. It had to be, or other things could not have happened” (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 645). As Carla Kaplan notes, Hurston’s dedication to the story of Kossula shows that she was all too aware of the human cost of the slave trade; in addition to *Barracoon* (which Kaplan does not discuss), Hurston wrote and published two shorter versions of the narrative (542n2). Indeed the unusual phrase “bully adventure” is almost certainly sarcastic: as an adjective, “bully” means “excellent,” but this usage has the air of affectation—it’s precisely the sort of thing an English colonial “bully” might say of a slave-trading mission to Africa.

<sup>31</sup> Hurston, “How It Feels,” 828, emphasis mine. Headon (1991) observes that the word “vener” makes Hurston’s use of “civilization” pejorative: “Hurston subtly undermines rather than promotes the grand myth of Western culture—its ‘civilization’—the concept used most commonly to justify the barbarous excesses of European imperialism.” David Headon, “‘Beginning to See Things Really’: The Politics of Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Zora in Florida*, ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>32</sup> A long line of intellectuals has misread Hurston’s views on the occupation. Darwin Turner was the earliest: calling Hurston “irritatingly naïve” (Turner, “Zora Neale Hurston,” 118), he claims that Hurston “condemned the Haitian people for ignorance and destructive self-deception, and asserted that, for their own good, they needed to be disciplined and ruled by a beneficent American government. Intelligent Haitians, she said, rejoiced when American Marines landed because they brought peace” (119). Nowhere does Hurston call the occupation necessary nor the US altruistic; furthermore, as discussed below, those who rejoice at the arrival of the Marines are part of the traumatized mob, not the intellectual class, whom she praises as restoring self-government after the Marines are finally withdrawn.

The most famous critic of Hurston is J. Michael Dash, who wrote, “Hurston has the dubious distinction of being the only black writer who actually approved of the American occupation.” J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (1988; repr., Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1998), 58. He claims that she cites William Seabrook’s racist Haitian travelogues approvingly, but as her correspondence makes clear, she actually dismissed his work entirely (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 391); he also takes her deeply sarcastic rendition of the military’s arrival at face value and misses the satirical tone of her writings on Haitian character (Dash, *Haiti and the United States*, 59). Dash legitimates his shallow reading of Hurston by linking it to her allegedly conservative politics: “Haiti was for Hurston a nightmare world fit only to be probed anthropologically and to be rehabilitated militarily. Hurston’s comments on Haitian folk culture are consistent with her reactionary politics. Other black writers could

be forgiven since their sensationalist fictions were often motivated by the urgent need to establish a common folk heritage. Hurston's only motivation seems to have been unmitigated contempt" (60).

Critics of *Tell My Horse* tend to follow Dash's assessment: Dorothea Fischer-Hornung gives an equally shallow reading of "Rebirth of a Nation" and cites Dash approvingly when she blames Hurston's "millennial jingoism" on her "generally conservative politics." Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, "An Island Occupied: The U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed*," in *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States*, ed. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Heike Raphael-Hernandez (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2000), 157–58. She considers the possibility that Hurston's statements might be "the hyperbolic, oxymoron of her double-edged signifying" (159) but finally concludes that "it is a difficult high-wire act to negotiate and I, for one, question the success of Hurston's irony – if, indeed, it was her endeavor in the first place" (160). The even more vitriolic satire of Hurston's later political writings are enough to convince anyone that irony is always among her intentions.

John Carlos Rowe offers a somewhat more nuanced perspective than his predecessors but concludes that Hurston sees the US as a good imperial power: "Hurston endorses the potentially stabilizing influence of the United States, not only on the occasion of the political anarchy following the overthrow and assassination of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam in 1915 but also in terms of the necessary modernization of Haitian transportation, economy, education, and political institutions. . . . *Tell My Horse* virtually invites the benign paternalism of the United States in Haiti, as long as Haitians commit themselves to the maintenance of a *cultural identity* that will allow them to assert a distinct national character hitherto confused and contradicted by residual elements of Spanish and French colonialism" (Rowe, "Opening the Gate," 289–90).

<sup>33</sup> These four chapters combine several forms of narration: the first uses the language of biblical apocalypse to narrate the 1915 political coup that led to the US occupation; the second swiftly sketches the history of politics on the island, then introduces the reader to the major intellectual, political, and military leaders of post-occupation Haiti, largely through Hurston's own meetings with them; in a third chapter, Hurston uses her training as a folklorist to collect several versions of the life of François Antoine Simon, the last president of Haiti before the flurry of presidential assassinations that led to the US intervention; a fourth chapter also utilizes folklore, this time to narrate the death of Simon's successor, Cincinnatus Leconte.

<sup>34</sup> "Haiti, the black daughter of France, also has its Joan of Arc. Celestina Simon stands over against The Maid of Orleans. Both of these young women sprung alike from the soil. Both led armies and came to unbelievable power by no other right than communion with mysterious voices and spirits." Zora Neale Hurston, "The Black Joan of Arc," *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 360.

<sup>35</sup> “‘Oh well,’ they conclude, ‘what can you expect? One cannot expect to proper who breaks his vows to the loa’” (Hurston, “Black Joan of Arc,” 367).

<sup>36</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “The Death of Leconte,” *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 375.

<sup>37</sup> “It is not that Haiti has had no able men in the presidential chair in the past. . . . But their good intentions have been stultified by self-seekers and treasury-raiders who surrounded them. So far there has been little recognition of compromise, which is the greatest invention of civilization and its corollary, recognition of the rule of the majority.” Zora Neale Hurston, “The Next Hundred Years,” *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 340. And elsewhere: “It is not to be inferred from this that Leconte was a tyrant. On the contrary he is credited with beginning numerous reforms and generally taking progressive steps. He was merely in the way of other men’s ambition by virtue of the office he held” (Hurston, “Death of Leconte,” 368).

<sup>38</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Rebirth of a Nation,” *Tell My Horse*, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 333.

<sup>39</sup> Hurston, “Next Hundred Years,” 342.

<sup>40</sup> Hurston, “Rebirth of a Nation,” 337.

<sup>41</sup> Hurston uses similar sacrificial imagery for the corpse of Sam: “it was the deliverer of Haiti. . . . the bloody stump of Sam’s body was to quell Haiti’s internal foes, who had become more dangerous to Haiti than anyone else” (337). But when Hurston calls the occupation the end of “greedy demagogues . . . and the beginning of peace,” she is clearly being sarcastic: The fraudulent election of Tancred Auguste is also described as a turning away from war “towards peace” (Hurston, “Death of Leconte,” 374). Indeed, as Hurston would later insist in her autobiography, yearnings for peace are almost always underwritten by war, often religiously motivated.

<sup>42</sup> “During the occupation the Marines killed more than three thousand Haitians, many of them unarmed” (Turner, “Zora Neale Hurston,” 118).

<sup>43</sup> See Rowe, who calls her references to the occupation “rare” and “oblique” (Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 288). While she dislikes and seldom mentions the Marines as an occupying force, Hurston’s positions on particular Marines are ambivalent. In her letters, she notes that she likes the ex-Navy man Wirkus, although she finds William Seabrook’s claim (that Wirkus had established his own kingdom in Haiti) to be wildly exaggerated (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 391). Hurston also had ambivalent views on Dr. Reeser, an ex-Marine who stayed in Haiti and converted to Vodou; sometimes Hurston views him in a positive light, but her portrait often satirizes him as well; see Amy Fass Emery, “The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*,” *African American Review* 39, no. 3 (2005): 332.

<sup>44</sup> Hurston, “Next Hundred Years,” 349–51.

<sup>45</sup> “A great many expressed resentment toward the whole thing. Why celebrate the leaving of the Marine corps when nobody wanted the Marines to go anyway? Their era of prosperity had left with the Marines. If President Vincent had arranged for them to go, then he was no friend of the people. The man they wanted to honor was the one who could bring them back” (352).

<sup>46</sup> Scholars have also critiqued Hurston for her claim, at the end of her conversation with the upper-class Haitian, “that every word of it was a lie” (350). However, Hurston only says this about his final claim: when she insists that Haiti borrowed money from the US to pay off French debts, he swears that no such debt existed. Earlier, Hurston had explained that the upper-class Haitian will often lie “to save his own and the national pride” in the face of “the malicious lies of foreigners” (348). Indeed her claim that the Haitian people have a “habit of lying” (346) must be understood in light of her earlier ethnography, *Mules and Men* (1935); Hurston explains that in African American oral traditions, “lies” are another word for stories or tales that may not be *literally* true but reveal a deep moral truth when told. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 13. As John Carlos Rowe has suggested, *Mules and Men* needs to be read alongside *Tell My Horse* for exactly this reason (Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 256–58). When George Thomas in *Mules and Men* tells Hurston “Ah’m gointer lie up a nation” (Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 24), he anticipates the Haitian who “lies” for the cause of national pride. And Hurston, too, tells “lies” in this passage: when she says that Haitians defensively speak of their country as if it had no problems, she is serious; when she mocks them for blaming their troubles on “some outside influence, . . . usually the United States or Santo Domingo” (84), she is half-joking: as she explains later, both countries *are* exerting influence on Haiti, but the inability of Haitians to resist has more to do with selfish decisions made by the Haitian president than anything else (88). Rowe’s position on Haitian “lying” can serve as an answer to Fischer-Hornung, who objects to Hurston’s tongue-in-cheek assessments of Haitian character: “It is her comments not only on Haitian politics, but also her blanket judgments on the Haitian people that make it so difficult for me to consider her text irony or parody” (Fischer-Hornung, “Island Occupied,” 159). One of the major modes of Hurston’s early and late writing is humor, and even satire; *Tell My Horse* is no exception.

<sup>47</sup> “In 1789 it was estimated that the mulattoes owned at least ten per cent of the productive land and held among them over 50,000 black slaves. Therefore when they sent representatives to France to fight for their rights and privileges, they would have been injuring themselves to have asked the same thing for the blacks. So they fought only for themselves” (Hurston, “Next Hundred Years,” 339).

<sup>48</sup> Carla Kaplan discusses the expurgations in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 436–37.

<sup>49</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Seeing the World as It Is,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 790.

<sup>50</sup> On India, see *ibid.*, 789; on Java and Bali, see *ibid.*, 792.

<sup>51</sup> My discussion of “Seeing the World As It Is” has been informed by Kaplan (in Hurston, *Life in Letters*); and Meisenhelder. While both scholars give excellent readings of the anti-imperialist dimensions of the essay, neither highlights her exploration of the political theology of violence, which serves as the rationale for colonialism.

<sup>52</sup> Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 761.

<sup>53</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen, 5 March 1943, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 481. It is worth noting that Hurston does not think violence to be some inherent biological trait of Anglo-Saxons; in “Seeing the World as It Is,” Hurston had already rejected “the solace of easy generalization” about races (Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 782). Instead, as she makes quite clear, “Anglo-Saxon” here is shorthand for the political elite, who happen to belong to the same race for historical reasons; they were not born with an innate love of violence but rather acquired it through socialization: “The idea of human slavery is so deeply ground in that the pink-toes can’t get it out of their system” (793).

<sup>54</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Crazy for This Democracy,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 947.

<sup>55</sup> Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 790.

<sup>56</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “A Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 8, 1951, 152. Here again, Hurston reads the expansion of executive power in terms of religious feeling: “Throughout the New Deal era the relief program was the biggest weapon ever placed in the hands of those who sought power and votes. . . . [D]ependent upon the Government for their daily bread, men gradually relaxed their watchfulness and submitted to the will of the ‘Little White Father,’ more or less. Once they had weakened that far, it was easy to go on and on voting for more relief, and leaving Government affairs in the hands of a few. The change from a republic to a dictatorship was imperceptibly pushed ahead” (152).

<sup>57</sup> Hurston, “Crazy for This Democracy,” 945.

<sup>58</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Katherine Tracy L’Engle, 4 November 1945, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 535.

<sup>59</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Claude Barnett, 16–21 July 1946, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 546: “[Truman] is a monster. I can think of him as nothing else but the BUTCHER OF ASIA. Of his grin of triumph on giving the order to drop the Atom bombs on Japan. Of his maintaining troops in China who are shooting the starving Chinese for stealing a handful of food. Of his slighting the Inauguration of the new nation of the Philip[p]ines by not bothering to be present. Of his lynching all the able Japanese under the guise of ‘War Criminals.’”

<sup>60</sup> Hurston, “Crazy for This Democracy,” 947, 949.

<sup>61</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Mary Holland, 2 July 1957, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 763–64.

<sup>62</sup> Darwin Turner, in one of the early and only serious discussions of this essay, dwells almost exclusively on the fact that Hurston published “unsubstantiated allegations from unnamed sources” and critiques her for placing the article in a “periodical which had few Afro-American readers because it was the official voice of an organization which in 1950 discouraged black membership” (Turner, “Zora Neale Hurston,” 96). The first objection is not terribly important: Hurston uses her unnamed sources to give a general flavor of what was in the air on the day of the election, not to assign blame to a particular person or group. As for the placement of the article, we now know that Hurston’s literary agent, Jean Parker Waterbury, frequently tried to place Hurston’s articles in the liberal *Saturday Evening Post* first, and only in the more conservative *American Legion Magazine* if they were rejected, as they occasionally seem to have been, for political reasons. See Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 659n2. One of the articles that was accepted by the *Saturday Evening Post* was “A Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft,” discussed briefly later in this essay. This article is crucial for making sense of Hurston’s political views at the time; unfortunately, the *Saturday Evening Post* declined to allow the republication of the article in this issue, even though they could not prove with any certainty that they hold the copyright. The author and the editor would like to thank the *American Legion Magazine* for generously and immediately agreeing to let us republish both “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled” and “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism” free of charge.

<sup>63</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Hurston had no interest in the outcome of the race: she had, in fact, supported Smathers, perhaps partly because she was well acquainted with his family and was ghostwriting his father’s autobiography (Carla Kaplan, “The Fifties,” in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 595). But the article was published six months after the May election and is surprisingly free of divisive party politics. She insists that the election matters, not because of the candidates’ positions, but because some blacks—regardless of party—were willing to sell their votes. Zora Neale Hurston, “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled,” *American Legion Magazine*, November 1950, 59–60. Because the issue is the behavior of voters at the polls, Hurston does not even bother rehearsing the candidates’ positions; indeed, as Jonathan Bell notes, she even avoids blaming either party for baiting voters with race and class—which both candidates undeniably did. Jonathan W. Bell, “Conceptualising Southern Liberalism: Ideology and the Pepper–Smathers 1950 Primary in Florida,” *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 38. Given these facts, it is somewhat baffling that Robert Hemenway describes the article as if it were a long rant against Smathers: “Writing at a white heat just after the primary (which Smathers won), Zora was not the most objective reporter of the campaign; there is spite in the article, and perhaps sour grapes as well” (Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 328).

<sup>64</sup> A representative sample of Hurston’s anti-Reconstruction quotes would include the following: “I see no reason to keep my eyes fixed on the dark years of slavery and the Reconstruction. . . . No doubt America would have been better off it never had been. But it was and there is no use in beating around the bush” (Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 787); “If you take in the twenty-odd years of intense Abolitionist speaking and writing that preceded the Civil War, the four war years, the Reconstruction period and recent

Negro rights agitations, you have at least a hundred years of indoctrination of the Negro that he is an object of pity” (Zora Neale Hurston, “Negroes without Self-Pity,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 933); “the dramatics of UNCLE TOM’S CABIN, the lore of the underground railway, general abolitionist sentiment and the pernicious ‘friends of the Negro’ of Reconstruction” (Zora Neale Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, c. 9 April 1951, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 654); “I think that it is time that we Negroes came out of the Abolitionist propoganda, and the ‘pet’ role of the Reconstruction” (Zora Neale Hurston to Helen Worden Erskine, 15 November 1951, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 680); and “Since the days of the never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction, there has been current the belief that there is no greater delight to Negroes than physical association with whites” (Zora Neale Hurston, “Court Order Can’t Make the Races Mix,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*,” 956).

<sup>65</sup> Hurston, “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled,” 57.

<sup>66</sup> Though Hurston does not say so explicitly, there is a parallel here with her earlier writings on colonialism: here the North is figured as the occupying colonial power, the South a colonized nation, and blacks are used as political tools by the colonizer against the colonized, only to get caught in the middle when the tables turn.

<sup>67</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “The Ocoee Riot,” in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*,” 898.

<sup>68</sup> Hurston, “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled,” 55.

<sup>69</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, c. 9 April 1951, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 654.

<sup>70</sup> “It wasn’t until Harry Truman garnered 77 percent of the black vote in 1948 that a majority of blacks reported that they thought of themselves as Democrats. Earlier that year Truman had issued an order desegregating the armed services and an executive order setting up regulations against racial bias in federal employment.” Brooks Jackson, “Blacks and the Democratic Party,” FactCheck.org, April 18, 2008, <http://www.factcheck.org/2008/04/blacks-and-the-democratic-party/>. Cf. Carla Kaplan: “In fact, throughout the South, those blacks who registered to vote prior to the mid-1940s were virtually all registered as Republicans. In Florida, the shift toward the Democratic Party, first evident in 1946, has largely been attributed to a ‘concerted drive for Negro votes made on behalf of Senator Pepper.’ Whereas no blacks were registered Florida Democrats in 1944, by 1950 there were more than 100,000 registered black Democrats and only 9,000 registered black Republicans” (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 596).

<sup>71</sup> See John F. Kennedy’s chapter on Taft in *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper, 1955).

<sup>72</sup> Hurston, “Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft,” 150.

<sup>73</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, c. 9 April 1951 and 1 May 1951, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 654, 655.

<sup>74</sup> Kaplan, “Fifties,” 763–64.

<sup>75</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Mary Holland, 13 June 1955, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 735: “Dr. Gallup, by timing, by selection of subject, and by the way it is put, manages to forever make Eisenhower sound invincible so as to discourage other aspirants of both parties. Then I read somewhere that he holds a position under Eisenhower on the Voice of America or something like that. If so, he cannot but be prejudiced. Next thing we know we will have a dictatorship on our hands. Further, I note Ike’s fondness for publishers. If he hires them all up, where will be public opinion in the USA? He’s got the majority of the big ones on his payroll already.”

<sup>76</sup> See the discussion of “Crazy for This Democracy” above. As recently as this year, scholars have continued to insist that Hurston *avored* segregation simply because she opposed the judicial *method* of desegregation and also saw value in some separate black institutions (see Crosby, “Complicating Blackness,” 114). This argument is baffling. First, one can certainly favor desegregation but critique a particular way of enacting the policy; second, one need not support compulsory segregation to see value in separate black institutions. Desegregation was meant to end government-enforced *segregation* of public facilities, not to do away with voluntary *separation* of private institutions.

<sup>77</sup> Hurston, “Court Order,” 957: “This ruling being conceived and brought forth in a sly political medium with eyes on ‘56, and brought forth in the same spirit and for the same purpose, it is clear that they have taken the old notion to heart and acted upon it. It is a cunning opening of the barnyard gate with the white mare ambling past. We are expected to hasten pell-mell after her.”

<sup>78</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Mary Holland, 13 June 1955, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 735.

<sup>79</sup> Hurston, “Negro Voter Sizes Up Taft,” 151.

<sup>80</sup> Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 793–94.

<sup>81</sup> Hurston offered a similar critique in her September 8, 1944, letter to Henry Allen Moe: “I keep telling her [Rose Rolanda] and others that if I ever meet a Communist with a sense of humor, and a sentence he or she thought up him or herself, I will take the matter under serious consideration. Pooling material things is not so bad, but if I have to quote [a]nd repeat the same identical phrases, down to the last stress on a syllable as everybody else, they can count me out of the Party” (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 501).

<sup>82</sup> Hurston, “Seeing the World,” 794.

<sup>83</sup> The title of the article is often listed as “Mourner’s Bench, Communist Line: Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” but as Carla Kaplan explains, this was only the working title (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 638n1).

<sup>84</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” *American Legion Magazine*, June 1951, 15.



<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 56–57. For an excellent reading of Hurston’s “white mare” metaphor, see Werner Sollors, “Of Mules and Mares in a Land of Difference; or, Quadrupeds All?” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1990): 167–90, especially 170–71 and 187n8.

<sup>86</sup> Hurston, “Why the Negro,” 59.

<sup>87</sup> The mug shots are actually a distraction, since most of the article is not about the few Negro leaders who *have* bought communism and are now paying for it, but the mass of Negroes who will *not* buy in.

<sup>88</sup> The collapse of Hurston’s friendship with Langston Hughes is legendary, though it happened a full twenty years before her article. For an overview of the “Mule Bone incident,” see Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s introduction to *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston (1931; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 1991); for a sense of how their feelings softened, the reader can consult Hurston’s mentions of Hughes after 1931 (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 242, 247, 255–56, 262–63, 312, 718). For Hurston on Du Bois, see Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 108, 643–44, 652. For Hurston on Robeson, see Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 720–21. See also Carla Kaplan’s discussion of why Hurston may have been so willing to name specific communists (Kaplan, “Fifties,” 614).

<sup>89</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to John Lomax, 16 September 1935, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 359: “[Mary Elizabeth Barnicle] like all other Communists are making a play of being the friend of the Negro at present and stopping at nothing, absolutely nothing to accomplish their ends. They feel that the party needs numbers and the Negro seems to them the best bet at present.” In the same letter, Hurston accuses Barnicle of attempting to seduce the singer Lead Belly to lure him into the party. See a similar claim in her letter to Countee Cullen, 5 March 1943, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 481.

<sup>90</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Revolution,” *Dusk of Dawn*, in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1996), 763. To put this point in greater context, Carla Kaplan notes that the NAACP magazine, the *Crisis*, also denounced communists for using blacks as pawns in 1951 (Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 613). The fact that Du Bois, the NAACP, and Hurston—each of whom by now had deep political differences from the others—could agree on this point shows that black anticommunism cut across the political spectrum: far left, liberal, and center right.

<sup>91</sup> Du Bois, “Revolution,” 766, 763.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 772, 771. Hurston on the Scottsboro boys: “God knows that we have had the experience of communist help, and it sure has been a lesson to us. The notorious Scottsboro Case is a horrible example of how they ‘help things out.’ The case was wormed out of the hands of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who had taken steps for a quick and quiet settlement. The party wanted nothing of the kind, and they got it. The party stirred up years of world-wide publicity for

themselves as the defenders of darker peoples. The boys got life-time in jail and other unhappy bonuses” (Hurston, “Why the Negro,” 57).

<sup>93</sup> Du Bois, “Revolution,” 763–65, 774–75. Indeed Hurston’s position in the 1940s on the cult of whiteness as a religion of violence sounds as if it were heavily indebted to Du Bois’s essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920).

<sup>94</sup> Du Bois, “Revolution,” 1187.

<sup>95</sup> Hurston, “Why the Negro,” 15. One of the great paradoxes of Du Bois’s career is that he failed to see his commitment to anti-imperialism and his lasting admiration for Stalin as incompatible. See Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 348n52. Still, Du Bois was hardly alone among American intellectuals in waiting too long to reject Stalinism; while Claude McKay broke with Stalin in 1923 (before he came to power), a move William J. Maxwell has called “precocious” (William J. Maxwell, “Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright–Zora Neale Hurston Debate,” in *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1999], 201), Richard Wright remained a Stalinist even after leaving the party—although perhaps, as Maxwell suggests, this had little to do with any support for imperialism or pogroms and more to do with Stalin’s support for ethnic minorities (162–64). An unrelated but more amusing paradox: the Dom Lupo illustration for Hurston’s article has a communist sign declaring “NO U.S. Imperialism” (Hurston, “Why the Negro,” 14)—a communist position with which the anti-imperialist Hurston would have sympathized.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” review of *These Low Grounds*, by Waters Edward Turpin, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *New Masses* 25, no. 2, October 5, 1937, 22–23.

<sup>97</sup> Each writer stands in for a series of oppositions: Hurston (Southern, rural, folk, female, anthropological) vs. Wright (Northern, urban, modern, male, sociological). Paul Gilroy has noted this tendency in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 176–77, but the best recent diagnosis of this phenomenon can be found in Maxwell, “Black Belt/Black Folk,” especially 155–56. That critics and biographers keep rehashing this debate suggests a desire to celebrate fights between black intellectuals (Booker T. vs. W. E. B., Martin vs. Malcolm, Baldwin vs. Cleaver, etc.). In his 1985 article on Hurston, Henry Louis Gates Jr. restaged the Wright–Hurston debate; after reviewing Hurston’s strident anticolonial critique in “Seeing the World as It Is,” Gates pauses, “One wonders what Wright would have thought had he read this restored material” (Gates Jr., “Negro Way of Saying,” 43). There is nothing to wonder about: Wright would have agreed; the ongoing debate obscures their similarities.

<sup>98</sup> In “Stories of Conflict” (1938), Hurston writes, “some bright new lines to remember come flashing from the author’s pen. Some of his sentences have the shocking-power of

a forty-four. That means he knows his way around among words.” Zora Neale Hurston, “Stories of Conflict,” review of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, by Richard Wright, in Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*,” 912. She also writes, “he has handled himself well” (912), and that, “aside from the broken speech of his characters, the book contains some beautiful writing” (913). Although critics often assume that Hurston dislikes the “lavish killing” in Wright’s stories (see Maxwell, “Black Belt/Black Folk,” 153–54, for example), Hurston herself had just written the most lavish scenes of violence in her career: the butchering of several Haitian leaders in Part II of *Tell My Horse* (1938), and the unpublished essay “The Ocoee Riot” (1938), which includes a race riot and a shootout, and ends with a lynching. When Hurston writes of *Uncle Tom’s Children* that “numerous Negro writers, published and unpublished, have written of this same kind of incident” (Hurston, “Stories of Conflict,” 912), she is slyly referring to herself.

<sup>99</sup> “In the other three stories the reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else. Mr. Wright’s author’s solution, is the solution of the PARTY—state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding oneself. And march!” (Hurston, “Stories of Conflict,” 913).

<sup>100</sup> William J. Maxwell’s excellent “Black Belt/Black Folk: The End(s) of the Richard Wright–Zora Neale Hurston Debate” (1999) diagnoses this problem (176, e.g.) and challenges the idea that the two authors were diametrically opposed by reading their stories from the 1930s side-by-side, and in particular by showing that Wright’s story “Fire and Cloud” (1938) seems to respond directly to Hurston’s story “The Fire and the Cloud” (1934). But even Maxwell barely considers the authors’ evolution in the 1940s or 1950s, and he also makes the mistake of using Hurston’s anthropological perspective as a stand-in for her actual political views (see, e.g., 164). Anthropology was a professional methodology for Hurston, but it did not determine her political positions.

<sup>101</sup> Richard Wright, “I Tried to Be a Communist,” *Atlantic Monthly* 174, no. 2, August–September 1944. It was later republished as chapter three in *The God That Failed* (New York: Harper, 1949), a collection edited by Richard H. Crossman that profiled six intellectuals and their eventual disenchantment with communism.

<sup>102</sup> Wright, “I Tried to Be,” in Crossman, *God That Failed*, 157.

<sup>103</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen, 5 March 1943, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 481.

<sup>104</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Jean Parker Waterbury, 6 March 1952, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 683.

<sup>105</sup> For me, Hurston’s statements here reflect her desire to end colonial oppression abroad while guaranteeing national security at home. Rowe has accused Hurston of clinging to “her own version of American idealism” and sees this somewhat differently: “Her notorious political conservatism in the 1950s reflects in part, I think, her long-standing commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism in the interests of a

democratic United States that would be the *social model* for the rest of the world” (Rowe, “Opening the Gate,” 254, emphasis original). But Hurston did not wish the US to be a *social* model for other countries; her anthropological respect for cultural differences was too strong to have other nations slavishly imitate America. Nor did she see the US as a *political* model for other nations; Hurston held democratic ideals as a goal towards which all peoples should strive, but she located the model for this in the first century BC milieu of Judea, specifically in the reign of Herod the Great. Compare her letter to Carl Van Vechten, 12 September 1945, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 528–32, and her letter to Mary Holland, 13 June 1955, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 728–35. While the US plays a key role in this story, it has no monopoly on democracy.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (New York: World Publishing, 1956). See especially “Communism at Bandung,” reprinted in Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2008), 553–68.

<sup>107</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, 439. After attending Bandung, however, he was convinced that differences of race and religion would stymie efforts at Pan-Asian or Pan-African unity. That being said, Wright argues compellingly that, at least in Asia, communism and Christianity are not seen as being diametrically opposed (563–66). This allows for collaboration between communists and Christians; Wright says less about the possibility of communists allying with Muslims and Hindus.

<sup>108</sup> This is not to suggest that Hurston and Wright held identical anticolonial positions. Unlike Hurston, Wright was skeptical that the United States—to say nothing of France, England, or the Netherlands—could muster the political will to decolonize; colonialism would have to be fought from within by Asians and Africans themselves. However, understanding the long-ignored similarities in their stances can tell us much about the current political climate in academia. Nothing is more common than for scholars to reject or ignore the late-life writings of Hurston and Wright. One might assume this to be a simple distaste for antileftist critiques: both authors seem less appealing when their political positions become anticommunist. But this can hardly be the issue: the popularity of right-wing modernists—from T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound to Paul Claudel and Carl Schmitt—continues unabated within the academy. Instead it may be that Hurston and Wright, like most black thinkers, are less well understood the more pronounced their internationalism becomes. For most readers, the politics of Hurston and Wright become confusing as they leave the ambit of US racial politics, and virtually unintelligible once they leave “the Black Atlantic.”

<sup>109</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Claude Barnett, 21–26 July 1946, in Hurston, *Life in Letters*, 545.

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