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Hemispheric Parallax: Zora Neale Hurston and the Triangulation of Race

I do not profess to be an expert on the American South, and most of the work that I have published in this area has been counter-regional in its emphasis, looking for instance at how Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and Donald Barthelme were shaped by a religious ideology, Roman Catholicism, that cut against the grain of their domestic environments. I might well have become a true Southern scholar, though, since my own first exposure to the United States came when I spent two months in Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer of 1978, at the end of my second year as an undergraduate, when I stayed with the twin cousins of a friend of mine who was on a Marshall scholarship at Oxford. These twins were both professional tennis coaches, one of them good enough to have played at Wimbledon earlier that year, the other famous locally for having been to bed with Chris Evert when she had been a visiting tennis coach in Jackson the year before. Since I was on a scheme that gave you a temporary work visa for the summer, the twins drew on one of their contacts to find me a job with the Vest Construction Company, whose speciality was putting tar on parking lots and building tennis courts in the back yards of rich Jitney Jungle supermarket magnates along the I-55 corridor. Putting down tar on construction sites in Mississippi in July and August was, as you can imagine, hot and sticky work; in fact, Richard King, one of my former colleagues at the University at Nottingham, once said to me it must have been the worst thing anyone has done since slavery. However, many of the very hospitable folk in Mississippi, knowing that I was studying literature at the English version of Oxford, assumed that I had come over on a Faulkner pilgrimage, which was not in fact true – in fact, somewhat to my embarrassment, I had at that time never read any Faulkner at all. In an attempt not to seem a complete fraud, therefore, I took myself off to the Jackson

Public Library and borrowed their copy of *The Sound and the Fury*, so that I had an *echt* experience of first reading Faulkner beneath the burning Mississippi sun. Even more curiously, my hosts were distant relatives of Ross Barnett, the state governor of Mississippi who achieved national notoriety in 1962 by barring black access to the University of Mississippi at their Oxford. During the time I was visiting, there was a party in the small town of Carthage to honour Barnett's 80th birthday, and after a few drinks the gathering began launching nostalgically into some of the old campaign songs, "Roll with Ross" and so on. Even worse, as the person who had supposedly travelled furthest to be at these celebrations I was called upon to say a few words to the company, and having been compelled as a twenty-year-old to make an impromptu speech at Ross Barnett's 80th birthday party I can tell you that all my subsequent engagements to lecture in public have seemed relatively straightforward.

Despite what perhaps should have been this formative experience, I have always been suspicious of the validity of the American South as an intellectual or discursive framework. The very conception of a 'Deep South' seems punningly to imply a depth model of epistemology, and there have obviously been many studies of Southern writing in which the notion of an integral region has simply been taken for granted. Indeed, one of the problems with regionalism in general is that it tends frequently to operate as a form of mystification, an idealized formation that effectively suppresses the more contingent phenomenon of place, the harder aspects of what David Harvey calls "geographical materialism."¹ Region and geography, then, can be quite different things; in his excellent recent book, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value*, Tom Lutz shows how the very idea of the region arose in the late nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the Civil War, with areas such as Maine (in the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett) or the West (in Hamlin Garland) taking on an embattled status, as they tried to come to terms with the increasing hegemony of the federal centre. In this sense, as Lutz argues, every regional text is at some level a parable of cosmopolitanism, since it implies a passage between centripetal and centrifugal forces; John Dewey noted in 1920 that devotion to localism was one of the few national things in the United States, and it is that interplay between the local and the national that helped to structure Southern studies in the twentieth century.² The romantic discourse of the Civil War pointed paradoxically to its counterpart, to the idea of a house rec-

onciled and *undivided*, and indeed one of the driving forces behind the idea of the Old South was precisely a nationalist agenda, the Dewey configuration whereby part could be related synecdochically (and redemptively) to whole. Tara McPherson has recently done a demolition job on what she calls the nostalgia industry of the American South, pointing out how many of the plantation mansions which came to represent 'southernness' in films like *Gone With The Wind* were actually built in the postbellum period, so as to encourage the wide dissemination of "lost cause" sentiment and, subsequently, tourism.³

Southern Studies today have moved on, of course, and the hemispheric perspective, the consideration of the U.S. South in relation to the Caribbean and Latin America rather than simply in relation to the U.S. North, has become much more widespread. Edouard Glissant's book on Faulkner was an important pioneering effort in this direction, and the Smith and Cohn collection of essays *Look Away!* has also been very influential.⁴ The trick here is, I think, not entirely to brush off a sense of place, nor simply to claim that the abstractions of globalization have rendered the idea of locality redundant; instead, it is to trace vectors of convergence and dispersal, so that place becomes, as geographer Doreen Massey suggests, not a form of reification but a point of intersection, a meeting place both literally and metaphorically, where different kinds of intellectual cartographies can be opened up.⁵ In an interesting essay on what he calls "the new American regionalism," Michael Kowalewski suggests an analogy between the attempt to draw deeper maps of smaller places, to attend to the specificity of local geographies, with the anti-systematic methods of New Historicism, which attempted a similar kind of strategy with respect to temporal mapping. What Greenblatt's New Historicism was attempting to do with time, in other words, Kowalewski's New Regionalism advocates with respect to space: a focus on the kind of luminous detail that undermines the more vacuous rhetoric of generalization.⁶

Another way of opening up discrepancies between region and geography is to consider liminal zones that do not fit comfortably into preconceived spatial or temporal grids. When I used to work at a university in Oregon, we had a professor who taught classes on the writing of the American West, from which he would resolutely exclude Californian-based writers on the curious grounds that, in his eyes, California did not constitute part of the American West – by which, of course, he meant Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Washington, as well

as Oregon. The same thing is true of Florida and the American South: anyone looking at a map of the United States would think that if Florida is not part of the American South then nothing is, but because of the historical legacy of the Civil War states such as Florida and Texas are commonly thought to have a 'peripheral' relation to this mythical 'region.' A lot of interesting work could be done on Florida's awkward juxtaposition both with the United States itself and with received ideas of the American South: I might mention just in passing William Gilmore Simms's nineteenth-century writings on the invisibility of Southeastern Indians, Henry James's sense of amazement in *The American Scene* at what he called "the huge band of shining silver beside the huge band of sapphire sea," José Martí's engagement with the exiled Cuban community, Hemingway's existential sense of displacement at Key West, Elizabeth Bishop's use of the landscape as a base from which to explore connections between North and South America.⁷ However, the writer I am going to focus on here, Zora Neale Hurston, is particularly illuminating for what the reception of her work tells us about ways in which Southern literature has traditionally been conceptualized.

Hurston herself was born in Alabama in 1891, but her family moved three years later to Eatonville, Florida, a small town five miles north of Orlando that she later described as the first incorporated black community in the United States. She subsequently studied at Howard University and moved in 1925 to Barnard College, where she was a research student in anthropology working under Franz Boas. It is a rather austere anthropological perspective that frames her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, published in 1934, where the stylistic emphasis is on a distinctly non-judgmental authorial voice. (In a 1938 evaluation of her own work for the Florida Federal Writers Project, Hurston claimed that what distinguished her own writing was "an objective point of view. The subjective view," she went on, "was so universal that it had come to be taken for granted.")⁸ In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, this distance and objectivity lead her to record the embedded psychological and sexual violence of the African-American community in matter-of-fact ways, so that they emerge as elements in a burlesque, almost absurdist cycle where human dignity is comically neutralized. Lucy Potts, for example, is whipped right up until the time of her marriage to John Pearson by her mother, who says "Ah means tuh bring you down offa' yo' high horse," while the fluctuating conditions of domination and subjugation in John and Lucy's twenty-

year relationship are also mercilessly recorded.⁹ Another of Boas's anthropology students at Columbia in the 1920s was Gilberto Freyre, who went on to make his name in Brazilian sociology with works such as *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), which portrayed the plantation economy in similarly sexualized terms, and though they apparently never met there are some parallels in the ways Hurston and Freyre treat their materials.¹⁰ Also apparent in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is a deliberate shift away from Alabama to Florida, as John chooses to take his family south, saying "That's de new country openin' up . . . Good times, good money, and no mules and cotton."¹¹

Many of the characteristics of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* are redrawn in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published three years later: the focus on Southern dialect, folk wisdom and the stresses of marriage and sexual violence, represented in this novel by Janie's fight back against the oppressive nature of her relationship with Tea Cake. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become the most famous of Hurston's works, but I would suggest that readings of this novel have become radically dehistoricized in the wake of Alice Walker's famous essays reclaiming Hurston's legacy in the late 1970s. In "Looking for Zora," Walker chronicles the way she impersonated Hurston's niece and undertook a tour of Eatonville to try to find people who had known the writer personally, but this imaginary form of identification inevitably served to gloss over Hurston's own more conservative instincts: her interest in Nietzschean versions of power, in Booker T. Washington's insistence on a black meritocracy, and in other aspects of the republican agenda that were generally anathema to Walker and other Civil Rights activists of the 1960s and 1970s. After being ignored entirely by the Black Arts movement during these decades, Hurston's star had risen so far by the late 1980s that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had become one of the most widely-taught texts on all U.S. college campuses; yet, as Cornel West observed, the reasons for Hurston's popularity were based on a partial and selective view of her achievement.¹² Whereas Walker hailed Hurston as a precursor to her own postmodernist narratives of racial and sexual difference, Hurston's work itself is informed historically by the more abstract dimensions of literary and cultural modernism, and she is markedly sceptical about the idea of racial identity as a categorical imperative.

This suspicion about racial identity emerges most clearly in the non-fictional *Tell My Horse*, published in 1938, in which Hurston undertakes an anthropological study of Haiti and "Jamaica, British

West Indies,” where she finds that two percent of the population is white and ninety-eight percent a mixture of white and black. This ensures, as the author herself observes, radical differences between the way race is defined in the Caribbean and the United States: “The color line in Jamaica between the white Englishman and the blacks is not as sharply drawn as between the mulattoes and the blacks.” Whereas “the strategy of the American Negro” requires “each race to maintain its separate identity,” in the Caribbean such distinctions are impossible to sustain: in Jamaica, “a person may be black by birth but white by proclamation. That is, he gets himself declared legally white.” This opens the door to various kinds of social hypocrisy, as Hurston acknowledges: “The Englishman keeps on being very polite and cordial to the legal whites in public, but ignores them utterly in private and social life.”¹³ However, such an ascription of race on a legalistic basis rather than according to the supposedly natural category of blood also allows Hurston’s work to interrogate what she calls in her autobiography “Race Solidarity,” with all of the stereotypes such a term implies. She recalls here how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was actually written in Haiti and how she drew upon her Caribbean experiences to point out, as she puts it, “that skins were no measure of what was inside people” and that “none of the Race clichés meant anything any more.”¹⁴ This lack of interest in racial solidarity is usually explained simply in terms of Hurston’s political conservatism: her staunch sense of self-reliance, her suspicions of Communism, and her trust in conceptions of natural ‘force’ derived from social science.¹⁵ It is equally likely, however, that for all of Hurston’s characteristic mockery of pompous British authorities in the West Indies, her general scepticism about the validity of racial categories in the United States also owes something to her understanding of how race works differently in the Caribbean. In this sense, part of the relational significance of the Caribbean, reconfiguring the American South as the American Northwest, lies in the way it complicates simplistic binary oppositions between Old World and New World, triangulating both parties through a heritage of hybridity which undermines the separatist integrity of national and racial identity formations. This liminal location effectively dislocates the racial polarities which have underwritten much modern American literature, and Hurston’s fascination with the Caribbean can be attributed partly to ways in which this old colonial landscape offers a spectre of alterity which throws U.S. racial politics into comparative relief.

Much of Hurston's writing is thus devoted to remapping the South, to reorienting it within alternative cartographies. As a trained anthropologist she is very attuned to the epistemological implications of perspective, and in her early essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" she writes about how she became 'colored' only after moving out of Eatonville, which was an all-black town, to Jacksonville.¹⁶ She also uses the word 'angle' a great deal in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, while much of her work deploys Biblical prototypes or legends taken from classical myth to reframe contemporary conditions within alternative designs. (That, of course, is a familiar modernist strategy, as Joyce or Eliot would acknowledge.) This in turn leads her openly to mock what in one of her essays she calls "The Book of Dixie," as she devises alternative forms of mapping that parody the enclosed nature of the Old South by allowing metaphorical conceits a ludicrous literal embodiment. For instance, in "Negro Mythical Places" she describes "West Hell" as "the hottest and toughest part of that warm territory. The most desperate malefactors are the only ones condemned to West Hell, which is some miles west of regular Hell." Similarly, she talks of how there are "many golden streets" in Heaven, "but the two main arteries of travel are Amen Street, running north and south, which is intersected in front of the throne by Hallelujah Avenue running from the east side of Heaven to the West."¹⁷ The point about these and other pseudo-geographies in Hurston's writing is that they are used pointedly to demystify and deconstruct the reified contours of place and race perpetuated by mythologies of the Old South.

There is not space here to do justice to Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which first appeared in 1948 but was not republished until 1991, long after her other works of fiction. The novel has had a most unfortunate history, marred on its first appearance by the absurd charges of paedophilia that were to drive Hurston into poverty and an early grave, and subsequently dismissed by readers such as Alice Walker for what she called its "reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid" quality.¹⁸ In fact, though, I would argue that *Seraph on the Suwanee* is Hurston's most compelling and in many ways her best novel, an extraordinary account of fluctuating family fortunes across various Florida landscapes. One of the reasons Walker does not like the book is that the main characters here are white, not black; Hurston, who took issue in the 1950s with what she called court orders to "make races mix," set out deliberately here to write a novel where the Manichaean categories of racial difference no longer hold—the

main character, Jim Meserve, is called “Black Irish in his ancestry”—and where racial mixing in the Florida fishing industry is commonplace.¹⁹ Another reason this novel has been unpopular is that it seeks deliberately to travesty regional distinctions, explicitly rejecting the stereotypes that would pit ‘Yankee’ against Southerner: Jim says that while his “old man was sitting around reading and taking notes trying to trace up who did what in the Civil War, and my two brothers were posing around waiting for the good old times that they had heard went on before the war to come back again, I shucked out to get in touch with the New South.”²⁰ Again, there is a strand of pseudo-geography at work here, with the old marine hands winding Jim up as a rookie fishing captain by telling him that he has to “cross the Lick-and-Spit Mountains just back of New Smyrna” in order to “meet old Bozo and fight him,” a piece of ribbing that Jim cottons on to by recalling how Florida is in fact “as flat as a flounder.” Leaving aside such gothic fables, Jim finds himself fascinated more by the sea’s “seemingly infinity of form,” and it is an equivalent sense of displacement from the antiquated to the primitive, from ossified Southern culture to a more mobile and malleable nature, that governs this narrative. The description here of the sea as “good and . . . cruel too” acts as a metaphorical correlative to the central relationship between Jim and his wife Arvay, who one on level resents her “enslavement” but who ultimately acquiesces in the view of her daughter, as well as her husband, that love “ain’t nothing else *but* compellent.”²¹ This intertwining of pain and pleasure, black and white, makes of course for an uncomfortable reading experience, and Janet St. Clair in 1989 typically critiqued the book as “marred” by “an apparent uncertainty of moral purpose,” a novel where the “viciousness” of the main male character could be redeemed only by the “subversive undertow” that St. Clair thought she could detect beneath “the romantic rhetoric” of the text, as if to make it pedagogically safe again for college students.²² It is, however, clear from her political essays of the 1940s and 1950s that Hurston was no friend of liberal progressive causes, and my purpose here is not to justify her political stance but to point out how *Seraph of the Suwanee* perfectly embodies the logic of her own creative imagination, inspired as it was by modernist anthropology, scepticism about racial and regional identities, and an interest in psychological and sexual primitivism. Whereas *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could easily be accommodated to Walker’s postmodern imagination, *Seraph on the Suwanee* has a hard-edged quality that has made it more resistant to what

Slavoj Žižek has called the accumulative discourse of “multiculturalism; or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism.”²³

Žižek seems a good place to conclude, because his most recent work, *The Parallax View*, is specifically about bringing to light what he calls the “unthought” of an object, “its disavowed presuppositions and consequences” through the displacements caused by a shift in the position of the observer.²⁴ I would argue that Hurston’s work in general engages with a mode of hemispheric parallax, since it evokes alternative forms of geography – mythical geographies, as well as those taken from Florida and the Caribbean – so as to redescribe the encrusted landscapes of the American South. I would also suggest that rather rigid assumptions about the legitimacy of ‘Southern’ writing and culture have done a disservice to the author’s subsequent critical reputation. Hurston died in 1960, the same year that Ross Barnett became governor of Mississippi, and though of course they had little in common there is a curious sense in which some of their enemies were the same. Now that the Civil Rights era of the 1960s is fully half a century away and beginning to fade away from living memory, it will be important analytically to consider what the movement excluded as well as the obvious social and political gains that it made. Hurston is one of those writers whose twenty-first-century reputation might well turn out to be quite different from the way it appeared in the late twentieth century, just as the literature of the American South more generally may begin to emerge in a more variegated and diffracted light.

Notes

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 359.

² Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) 25, 36; John Dewey, “Americanism and Localism,” *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Vol. 12, 1920, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 15.

³ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 35-45, 96, 102.

⁴ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi* (Paris: Stock, 1996); Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, ed., *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 154.

⁶ Michael Kowalewski, “Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism,” *American Literary History* 6.1 (Spring 1994): 171-83.

- ⁷ Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907), ed. John F. Sears (London: Penguin, 1994) 321.
- ⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, "Art and Such" (1938), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995) 910.
- ⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1995) 67.
- ¹⁰ On this topic, see Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, "Telling Anthropology: Zora Neale Hurston and Gilberto Freyre Disciplined in Their Field-Home-Work," *American Literary History* 4.3 (Fall 1992): 464-88.
- ¹¹ Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* 88.
- ¹² Cornel West, "Demystifying the New Black Conservatism," *Praxis International* 7 (July 1987): 143.
- ¹³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938; rpt. New York: Harper and Row – Perennial, 1990) 3, 6-8.
- ¹⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Hemenway (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 218, 235. The first edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* was published in 1942.
- ¹⁵ Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 20, 119.
- ¹⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" (1928), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* 826.
- ¹⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, "The 'Pet Negro' System" (1943), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* 914, and "Negro Mythical Places" (1938), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* 895-96.
- ¹⁸ Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" (1979), *In Search of Our Mother's Writings: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press, 1984) 89.
- ¹⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, "Court Orders Can't Make Races Mix" (1955), *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* 956-58, and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), *Novels and Stories* 605.
- ²⁰ Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* 755, 782-83.
- ²¹ Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* 800-02, 906, 723, 759.
- ²² Janet St. Clair, "The Courageous Undertow of Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*" (1989), rpt. in Gloria L. Cronin, ed., *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Hall, 1998) 211, 204, 201.
- ²³ Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or, The Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (Sept.-Oct. 1997): 28-51.
- ²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) ix, 17.

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