

# Prologue

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ON A HOT AUGUST day in the 1920s, an unlikely couple motored through New England, stopping at an exclusive inn in Westchester County, New York. They were Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston, both writers, both female. One was an African American from the South whose rural southern heritage was imprinted in her color, language, and dress. The other was Jewish, and her heritage was hidden beneath her color, language, and dress. One was passing, the other could not. On many of their excursions together, they had discovered that race mattered in some places and not in others. They were welcomed into hotels and restaurants in Ontario, Canada.<sup>1</sup> At hotels in the United States, however, Hurston was often shunted off to the servants' quarters, if a place could be found for her at all. In a show of solidarity, Hurst once offered to refuse accommodation. But Zora Neale Hurston's response puzzled the white middle-class liberal, who detected no sense of indignation.<sup>2</sup> Unmoved by either the insult or Hurst's display of empathy, Hurston quipped, "If you are going to take that stand, it will be impossible for us to travel together. This is the way it is and I can take care of myself as I have all my life. I will find my own lodging and be around with the car in the morning."<sup>3</sup>

On this particular day in Westchester County, however, Hurston revealed a ripple in the apparent calm of her mental state. Fannie Hurst, dressed and behaving like a Fitzgerald heroine,<sup>4</sup> abruptly

requested that Hurston follow her as she pushed ahead at the entrance to the restaurant. Hurston, dressed in a “red head-scarf and a bizarre frock of many colors,” trailed at her heels. Not giving the headwaiter time to discriminate, Hurst announced, “The Princess Zora and I wish a table.” They were seated in a prime location. The meal that followed was filled with gaiety, and probably with a sense of triumph on Hurst’s part. It was during the drive home that Hurston’s “mental innards” surfaced. “Who would think that a good meal could be so bitter?” she mused.<sup>5</sup>

The responses of these two women—Hurst’s surprise at Hurston’s lack of indignation and Hurston’s own reflection that “a good meal could be so bitter”—can stand as markers of the terrain that framed the consciousness of a southern black woman writer in the early twentieth century. This is a portrait of how an individual very much aware of the racial and gendered world she occupied made her way through that world with dignity, humor, and at times combativeness. Her response to her well-meaning white patron (“This is the way it is and I can take care of myself as I have all my life”) stands as a classic response of fortitude in the midst of frustration. It stands, too, as a refusal to be a victim.

That is to say, Hurston took in the ugliness of her predicament as a black person yet remained fully open to the adventure of transgressing the color line and entering into a forbidden world of elegant service and excellent food. The one thing did not preclude the other: Both belonged to the American experience as she lived it. She took up her mission of documenting the lives of black southerners in a similar spirit. Certainly they were victims, and their predicament was indeed ugly, but she let no one persuade her to filter her understanding of their lives only through the lens of oppression and victimhood. Black southerners laid their tables in the presence of their enemies, in a manner of speaking. Zora Neale Hurston was on hand to record what they put there, how they spoke to one another around the table, and what they thought about the mysteries of life and the world they inhabited. Yet, while she trained her vision on the private homes and worlds that black southerners built, she never lost sight of the very public horror that

haunted and hounded black lives. How Hurston's eyes watched both home and the horror, why she chose to focus on one without diminishing the other, and how she did so unbowed, unapologetic, and unashamed is the subject of the pages that follow.

# Introduction

## *Rootedness—The History of Private Life*

I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound *rootedness* [emphasis added] in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were “discredited knowledge” that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was “discredited.” And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible.

—Toni Morrison, “Rootedness:  
The Ancestor as Foundation”<sup>1</sup>

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON is a much-misunderstood historical figure. She faithfully chronicled black life—most notably the lives of working- and lower-class black women and men, especially in the rural South, but her very role as chronicler has been used to denounce her as a traitor to her race. Although her works stand among the richest documentary sources on black life, labor, and culture in the early twentieth-century South, most

of the denunciation has emanated from the intellectual left, which has accused her of ignoring or minimizing the exploitation, oppression, and outright atrocities visited upon black people in the post-Reconstruction South.

In fact, Hurston's eyes were watching those atrocities, but her eyes were open to other aspects of the lives of southern black folk as well. Unlike her detractors, who preferred to view black people in relation to whites, Hurston sought first and foremost to study black people on their own terms. Although she recognized oppression as a daily fact of African American life, Hurston's literary and ethnographic work focused more on what black people were doing for themselves than on what their oppressors and tormentors were doing to them. Her contrarian gaze moved black people to the center of inquiry, establishing them as subjects, a place reserved for white people in the dominant race-relations paradigm in African American history and thought.

Hurston's intellectual and political posture is consistent with a venerable tradition in the African American experience. This tradition of black self-determination includes a kind of internal, territorial black nationalism and encompasses independent black communities such as Eatonville, Hurston's hometown and literary subject. If Hurston failed to pay as much attention to oppression as she might have, it was because she kept her focus on black self-determination. With an unflinching eye on her subjects, Hurston dissected the inner world of African American life with wit and provocative narrative. By all accounts, Zora Neale Hurston had a sharp eye, an acute ear, and a barbed tongue. Among her memorable barbs are, for example, "Niggerati," the term of disaffection she used when weary of the Harlem Renaissance elite, and "Negrotarians," her term for their condescending white elite patrons. As a novelist, Hurston created memorably articulate heroines, and as an ethnographer she recorded the delicious ins and outs of "telling lies" on southern porches.

Hurston's barbs invite careful scrutiny, for their meaning is anything but self-evident. Why is a proud black woman intellectual angry enough to puncture her peers with a term that was

opprobrious even then, and downright taboo among progressive black people? And why does she imply that some white people behave as though black people are social projects? What do these terms imply about her detachment? My answer is that Zora Neale Hurston was an expert witness to her time. She imagined, as every great artist does; but she also made it her business to see, hear, and write as an ethnographer does—in detail, in depth, and by bringing to bear a deep understanding of human complexity. These qualities of Hurston's make her an invaluable witness to her era.

To understand what she meant, we must enter imaginatively into the world in which she lived, into a particular time in our country's past that formed the contours of Hurston's lived experience. This book examines what I think of as Zora Neale Hurston's "past present," centering on Hurston's folk: turpentine and sawmill workers in Florida's naval stores industries, workers in phosphate-mining industries, migrant workers in agricultural camps, and residents of an all-black town in Florida in the early twentieth century. I intend to demonstrate the value of Hurston's creative literary work as a source of historical knowledge about the period from the 1880s, when her parents married, to the 1940s, the most productive period of her life. To make this case I have used representative works from Hurston's canon: her well-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her unpublished short story, "Black Death," her play, *Polk County*, and her collection of vignettes, "The Eatonville Anthology"; I give these equal standing with her folklore study, *Mules and Men*, as well as selections from her journalism, letters, private papers, and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Hurston's portrait of black southerners, the culture and consciousness that distinguished their lives, and the peculiar forms of patronage that shaped southern as well as northern realities confront the larger historiography of the period. They challenge not only the cultural and political visions of her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries but also those of historians and literary critics in our own day. Thus we hear the judgments of writers such as

Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Stetson Kennedy echoed by such scholars as Hazel Carby. Few have appreciated Hurston's vision of southern black folk.

To move past these judgments, I argue that we must first understand the politics of the period in which Hurston and her contemporaries understood and misunderstood each other. Hurston's work, by placing in the foreground the everyday lives of residents of Eatonville, the Loughman sawmill/turpentine camps, and the phosphate-mining camp at Mulberry, cast a spotlight on the most sensitive issues in black culture—gender, sexuality, color, hoodoo, and violence. By revealing these aspects of black culture, she enables us to analyze them historically. Although these subjects were regarded as sensitive in the 1920s and 1930s, some of her contemporaries also dealt with them.<sup>2</sup>

Few writers other than Hurston, however, confronted black male sexism and violence toward women, whether among middle- or working-class people.<sup>3</sup> Hurston did, however. She also criticized black male leadership and acknowledged the violence that occurred in settled communities like Eatonville and in transient worlds like sawmill and turpentine camps. This was a bold position at a time when white violence against black people was destroying thousands in both the North and the South.

What is more, Hurston chose to represent the beauty of black culture using the very group of people that black intellectuals of the time considered the underbelly of black life.<sup>4</sup> She did so by not only celebrating the music and the poetry of their language but also by sanctioning the legitimacy of hoodoo and voodoo, an underground world of peasant cosmology that terrified and embarrassed the elite.

She entangled herself in the world of white patronage of the Harlem Renaissance and openly manipulated it to her advantage, but at the same time criticized this patronage for its ambition to be the custodian of black culture. If wealthy patrons sought the primitive and the childlike, Hurston accommodated them with her brightly colored clothing, off-color humor, and boisterous laughter. Her male contemporaries accepted white patronage but

looked down their noses at Hurston for playing the primitive. I regard Hurston's manipulation of stereotypes as a far more honest stance in relation to the power of white patrons than her male counterparts' pretense of equality with their patrons.

Black southern life as recorded in Hurston's work was characterized by more than unrelenting work, violence, and imprisonment. While it was a place where bondage and racial domination persisted after the Civil War, the South, for her and her subjects, was also a place of cultural creativity, family, and religion, where everyday life was lived with integrity in the midst of struggle against racial oppression. It was, in short, a place called home. Southern black culture blended "the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound *rootedness* in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other," as Toni Morrison has described it.<sup>5</sup> Black people accepted what some would call superstition and magic as practical ways of knowing things. But theirs was "discredited knowledge," in Morrison's words, because black people themselves were discredited. Hurston rejected this dominant view of the South and instead understood southern culture as the material for creativity and survival. As Hurston put it in her unpublished short story, "Black Death," black people knew things that gave them power.

Hurston also recognized that color prejudice was a part of the fabric of black culture that had particular meaning for women. It takes a historically rigorous separation of our own present from Hurston's present to grasp the nature of the taboos she violated. Her contemporaries talked about color prejudice, for example, but this prejudice was an open secret in black life, one the black elite denied publicly even as they practiced color discrimination themselves. Nearly everyone discussed it as a source of both humor and pain. Hurston also acknowledged violence as a fact of life not only in Jim Crow society but also inside black communities. Many of her contemporaries turned a blind eye to violence within black communities for fear of undermining the struggle against racist violence. In Hurston's view, the Niggerati sloughed off this culture in their striving for upward social mobility.



For the “best-foot-forward Negroes,” who sought social acceptance, southern black folk knowledge was an impediment. Hurston, by contrast, validated this folk knowledge, its beauty and tragedy, its tensions, its contradictions, and its ethos of resistance. She recorded the humor, songs, poetry, sermons, stories, and social banter of her folk and their value as literature. For Hurston, folklore, “Sprites, fairies, Puck, Caliban, Twelfth Night celebrations, Mid-Summer’s Night observances are just as much a part of English folk-lore and folk ways as hoodoo practices and Brer Rabbit are a part of Aframerican folk ways.” Like Chaucer in an England conquered and denigrated by Normans, Hurston saw beauty in the language of ordinary people, despite the scorn in which their language was held. She saw rich cultural traditions that were the raw materials of great artistic creations.<sup>6</sup>

Hurston, if read carefully, gives us a nuanced and textured history of the black experience not restricted to the area north of 125th Street in Harlem. She did not treat the northern metropolis as the quintessential cultural site of black expressive culture, but instead located this site in the South. She also criticized the prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance who had left the South and severed their ties to black folk. In their depictions, the folk became a free-floating signifier without a regional or cultural referent. In the hands of Langston Hughes, for example, black folk were everywhere, but they lacked regional distinctiveness and were uncoupled from the political economy in which they were born and shaped. Hughes could therefore appropriate the language of the folk without confronting their identity as southerners. For Hurston, by contrast, location was a historical agent and producer of culture. In the South black culture emanated from the workers—debt peons, sharecroppers, and small-town dwellers. Hurston resituated the folk in the South, recognizing that their language, songs, folklore, etc., gave these people specific regional characteristics. At the same time, she illuminated the heterogeneity of black people. In works like *Mules and Men*, Hurston depicted southern folk life as a cultural reference point for the construction of black interior life.

The chapters that follow maintain that Hurston understood the importance of people's lives and insisted that "the Negro farthest down" was a rich subject for literature. She was deeply critical of the black literati's inability to see the diversity of black people and allow them their individuality. Hurston's close-up view encompassed their names, family relations, friends and enemies; it acknowledged that they fished, gambled, quarreled, made love and discarded lovers. And it recognized that they found ways, within their southern sensibility, to resist the overt violence of Jim Crow as well as its psychic damage. In Hurston's view, each individual had a right to his or her particular identity and the ways in which that identity was shaped. Her published work and private papers suggest that she understood how living in a racist society forced groups to seek cohesion based on race, but she rejected the racist ideology that made that cohesion necessary.

She also knew that race did not govern every aspect of working people's lives in the South, in spite of what people with particular political agendas maintained. Hurston acknowledged that the South was the site of the violence and discrimination that filled northern newspapers. Indeed, her artistic and ethnographic works record the ways in which that violence was woven into the fabric of black life. But the South also encompassed homes and families, private lives that were defended even in the most wretched conditions. Hurston chose to emphasize the lives made by rural workers and members of the all-black town of Eatonville. Blackness for her was not a designation in the anthropological sense but a distinctive system of cultural particulars, of ways of thinking and acting, of commonplace expectations, humor, language, and style. In her determination to present black life in such terms, from the 1920s until her death in 1960 she expressed outrage at the liberals and radicals who focused only on racist violence. As a result, her public pronouncements and writing seemed more and more conservative. But a far more complicated political persona emerges from a close examination of the context in which she made these statements. If Hurston's

insistence on rejecting the politics of victimhood sometimes led her to downplay the overt forms of violence in the South, especially in the 1950s, it is perhaps because some of her critics over-emphasized them.

Hurston was an individualist, but she did not, as some have claimed, adhere to a philosophy of individualism that advocates egoistic isolation from community.<sup>7</sup> Hurston believed that she had a moral obligation to her community, and that obligation was fulfilled in her work as an artist and folklorist and in her everyday life.<sup>8</sup> At no time did Hurston see herself as disconnected from community, although there were times that she imposed exile upon herself.

This book, then, is an attempt to see Hurston and the world she depicted in their historical context. Chapter 1 examines the meanings of what I call “past presents” and the critical methodological issues at the heart of this study. It argues for combining the traditional methodology of historians with Hurston’s ethnography and imaginative work in order to study African American culture. Chapter 2 compares and contrasts Hurston’s portrait of the South with that of her contemporary, Richard Wright. Whereas Wright focuses so narrowly on the horror of Jim Crow in black southerners’ lives that he omits everything else, Hurston presents their lives in a way that obscures Jim Crow, at least momentarily. The tension between these portrayals of the South establishes the framework for the next three chapters.

Chapter 3 explores the founding of Eatonville, Hurston’s home and the site of much of her work. It links this community to the history of maroon societies and uses the concept of maroonage and territorial nationalism as a way of understanding all-black towns within the tradition of African American resistance. Hurston’s angle of vision keeps these collective autonomous spaces in full view, but it never dismisses the ongoing struggle of black southern folk for autonomy and dignity. The population, institutions, economics, and politics of this community frame this chapter, which traces the many changes that took place in post-Reconstruction Florida. It also looks at the

history of the naval stores industry, the social organization of capital and labor, the role played by the debt-peonage and convict-lease systems, and the nature of the work. The chapter ends with examples of the white terrorism that always threatened the relative safety of black towns. This violence was periodically visited upon individuals and whole communities for transgressing the norms of segregation or for exercising the rights of citizenship, and it had a profound effect on the climate in which everyday life was lived.

Chapter 4 explores the vibrant, complex culture of all-black towns through the lens of Hurston's work. Hurston depicts Eatonville as a community that operated outside the immediate reach of white control. She examines the ways in which gendered spaces were contested in this community, how race often took a back seat to class, and how color nevertheless remained a salient factor in daily life.

Chapter 5 discusses the everyday life of black workers who lived at a distance from the brutal world of turpentine, sawmill, and phosphate work yet were shaped by the violence of that world. Drawing on Hurston's folklore—as presented in *Mules and Men* and in her play, *Polk County*—this chapter sorts out the conflicting portraits of rural black southerners in Hurston's work, those presented to her public audience and those that remained hidden in unpublished documents. The chapter ends with some clues to Hurston's complicated politics, a subject explored more fully in the concluding chapter.

As Hurston tells her life, she had a white audience from the start and had to take that audience into account throughout her life, both in what she said and in how she said it. Chapter 6 examines that audience through Hurston's own stories about the human relationships that underlie the politics of "patronage." Hurston's depiction of South and North not only differed from that of her peers but also disturbed the selective nature of black artistic representations that developed during the Harlem Renaissance. The ideas discussed in this chapter expand on the portraits of the South discussed in Chapter 2.

IN SHORT, this book examines Hurston's work as a form of historical documentation. As part of the context for that work, it will be useful to turn briefly to a biographical sketch of Hurston's life.

Zora Neale Hurston was born on 7 January 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama, but she always claimed the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, as her birthplace. She was the fifth of eight children. Hurston's father, John Hurston, was an Alabama sharecropper and a "yaller bastard... from over de creek," as Hurston's maternal grandmother described him.<sup>9</sup> Her mother, Lucy Ann Potts, was from the landowning Potts family, a class difference that influenced interfamily relations. Lucy Potts defied her family's wishes when she married John Hurston, who was considered unworthy of the proud, educated, comparatively well-off Potts family. John Hurston and Lucy Potts were typical of blacks who settled in Eatonville in search of a better life during the post-Reconstruction era.

John Hurston sought a place without the restrictions of Jim Crow, where a black man could have some say in how his life and community were run. He had high ambitions for his wife and eight children—a home, financial security, education, and protection from terror—elusive goals, more often than not, for a freedman. He found possibilities in Eatonville, where he could make a living as a carpenter and minister. In Eatonville, Lucy, a former schoolteacher, could be a mother and housewife and avoid "working out" in the homes of white people, one of the few black women in Eatonville able to do so.<sup>10</sup> Eatonville offered opportunities for political and economic freedom and therefore social and cultural comfort. John Hurston eventually served as mayor of Eatonville, from 1912 to 1916, as pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, and as pastor of Zion Hope Baptist Church in nearby Sanford, Florida.<sup>11</sup> He was thus able to serve as a leader in his community while avoiding confrontations with the white power structure.

Zora was a precocious youngster who ran afoul of her father's conservative views on the proper behavior of both black people in general and young "ladies" in particular. His daughter's audacity and spirit needed to be contained, lest white folks get riled.

John Hurston's relations with his daughter show that his status as a minister and even as mayor of Eatonville did not erase the restrictions of Jim Crow, which he carried in his soul.

Zora's mother, by contrast, the symbol of strength in the family, encouraged her daughter to "jump at de sun" and encouraged the spirit of independence that later characterized her life.<sup>12</sup> Lucy felt that her daughter should be allowed freedom of imagination and behavior. In Hurston's account of her childhood, this freedom to think and wonder and move and explore was pivotal in the formation of her personality. In spite of the restrictions against which she would struggle in later life, she held on tenaciously to this psychic freedom, even when her physical freedom was held in check. This early experience placed the young Zora at the center of many family battles.

The death of Lucy Potts in 1904 was devastating for thirteen-year-old Zora.<sup>13</sup> She lost the maternal protection that had allowed her spirit and independence to flourish, and she was haunted by the death of her mother for many years. After Lucy's death, Zora's father struggled to hold the family together, but failed.

John Hurston sent his young daughter to a boarding school in Jacksonville, where her sister Sarah and brother John could look after her. Less than a year later, however, her father ran out of money for the tuition and at the same time married a woman Zora described as insensitive and self-serving. Thus Hurston was robbed of a home and became, in her own words, "a wanderer." Her wandering apparently lasted for several years, as she lived sporadically with her father, other family members, friends, and strangers. She tried to support herself as a maid but not too successfully. The humility expected of a maid was not her strong suit, nor was she available to the fancies of white men. Finally, in late 1915, Hurston joined a traveling Gilbert and Sullivan drama troupe and worked as a maid to an actress who eventually befriended her. She left the company in Baltimore eighteen months later to finish her education.<sup>14</sup>

Hurston entered Morgan Academy in Maryland in September 1917 and had fulfilled her high school requirements by June 1918,

at the age of twenty-seven. In the fall of 1918 she attended Howard University Preparatory School. She entered Howard University in 1919 and received her Associate of Arts degree in 1920. She continued to take classes while working part-time at various jobs until 1924. She also met and fell in love with another struggling student, Herbert Sheen. Sheen wanted to be a doctor but instead became a musician, an occupation that led to long separations from his beloved Zora. Their relationship lasted for several years, with plans for marriage always postponed to sometime in the future.

Poverty stalked Hurston, and financial insecurity became a life-long companion. Although she worked hard, she was rarely out of debt, and therefore her pace in school was slow. Despite her academic training and artistic brilliance, it was as a maid that she began and ended her working life. Domestic work was often her last resort, an experience she shared with many black and working women in both urban and rural areas, who made up a permanent service caste in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.<sup>15</sup> Even after becoming a well-known writer, Hurston resorted to domestic service to support herself. Poverty was the familiar companion of many artists, of course. Langston Hughes, among many others, had many lean days. Most artists required the assistance of patrons. Literary success did not bring Hurston financial security, however.

In addition to working as a maid for prominent families, she was also a manicurist in a fashionable shop and a waitress at the exclusive Cosmos Club.<sup>16</sup> But Hurston's working-class existence did not exclude her from Washington's "Negro Society," and her experience in its circle undoubtedly left its mark on her life and work. She entered the black upper-class world of Washington society, where she forcefully asserted her southernness in an implicitly condescending northern milieu. Hurston's keen intelligence and stubbornness allowed her entrance into a world that she desired but also enabled her to move in and out of the working-class occupations that kept her afloat in hard times. This wandering across class and cultural lines meant that Hurston had continually to

negotiate borders, which only refined her skills as a witness to the changes taking place in African American culture. As she migrated between rural and urban locales, between black and white society, Hurston learned how to unlock the doors that blocked her entrance to the world of artists and intellectuals.

She made connections with well-placed blacks and began what became a life of scholarship and letters, blending scholarly modes of expression with the southern folk vernacular that anchored her soul. Her efforts were encouraged and assisted by such luminaries as Alain Locke, poet and Rhodes Scholar, anthropologist Lorenzo Dow Turner of Howard University, and Georgia Douglas Johnson, a prominent black poet who entertained young artists at her home, known locally as Halfway House, with long evenings of poetry, music, and intellectual conversation. At Howard University the literary club *Stylus* admitted Hurston only after she had prevailed against stiff competition. Alain Locke and drama instructor Montgomery Gregory, the club's cosponsors, were intrigued by the dramatic presentation of folk life. Hurston's membership in *Stylus* undoubtedly facilitated the publication, in 1921, of her short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in Howard's literary magazine, also named *Stylus*.<sup>17</sup> Locke recommended Hurston's work to Charles S. Johnson, who in 1924 published her second short story, "Drenched in Light." Hurston learned quickly how to use these opportunities, impressing those she met with her wit and talent.

Buoyed by her experiences and with encouragement from Johnson, she left for New York in January 1925 with \$1.25 in her pocket, though evidence suggests that she had visited New York as early as 1922 and had published both poetry and prose in Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*. In September she entered Barnard College, where she studied anthropology with the distinguished scholar Franz Boas.<sup>18</sup> Boas became her mentor and had a profound influence on her intellectual development. As with her writing, Hurston's education in anthropology was aided by a series of patrons who would come to play a significant role in her life, among them Annie Nathan Meyer, benefactor of Barnard College,



and popular fiction writer Fannie Hurst, for whom Hurston worked as a secretary.

Hurston continued to write fiction while studying anthropology. In June 1925 her short story "Spunk" was published in *Opportunity*; another story, "Muttsy," was published in August 1926. In collaboration with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and others, Hurston edited the short-lived magazine *Fire!!* in which her short story "Sweat" appeared in November 1926. In 1930, again collaborating with Langston Hughes, she wrote a play entitled *Mule Bone*, a comedy about African American life that drew on Hurston's intimate knowledge of rural folk life. Never performed in her lifetime, *Mule Bone* highlighted Hurston's blending of scholarly and popular forms. With the aid of her most important patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston wrote *Mules and Men*, a volume of anthropological folklore published in 1935. *Tell My Horse*, on Caribbean folklore, was published in 1938. Meanwhile, Hurston was turning her attention to the novel.

In 1934 she published her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, loosely based on the lives of her parents, particularly her father. Her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was published in 1937, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in 1939, and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, the least successful of her works, in 1948. Equally important in Hurston's canon is her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Published in 1942, this book situates Hurston within the turbulent cultural and political changes that shaped the period from the 1890s through 1940.

The way Hurston lived her life, the issues she addressed in her work, and especially her portrayal of the South and southern folk pushed to their limit the concerns over identity and representation that galvanized intellectual discourse in her day. This body of literature forms the basis for my examination of the interior worlds of turpentine, sawmill, and phosphate labor camps, and of the residents of rural southern black towns.