



Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
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Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography. Exploring
Race and Gender Issues

Carolina Iglesias Peña

Tutor: Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze race and gender perspectives encountered in Zora Neale Hurston's memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942). In order to do so, I have first written a theoretical chapter on the genre of autobiography and then I have contextualized the history of African Americans from the Colonial Period until the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, I have analyzed the issues of race and gender present in her autobiography in order to show the inequalities and stereotypes about colored people in the earlier American 20th century.

Key words: Memoir, Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Race, Gender, America.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta tesis es analizar las perspectivas de raza y género encontradas en la autobiografía de Zora Neale Hurston *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942). Para ello, he escrito primero un capítulo teórico del género de las memorias y después he contextualizado la historia de los Afro-americanos desde la época colonial hasta el Renacimiento del Harlem. Finalmente, he analizado aspectos de raza y género presentes en su autobiografía para mostrar las desigualdades y estereotipos existentes contra las personas de color en la América de principios del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: Memoria, Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, raza, género, América.

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INTRODUCTION

This study will be focused on the life of Zora Neale Hurston, an African American women writer who belonged to the period of the Harlem Renaissance. More precisely, the writing utilized to examine her life and to mirror it into the dissertation is her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942). She was one of the most representative writers during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s as she contributed to the search for Afro American identity and self-expression. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify, explain and analyze the oppressions and struggles experienced by Zora Neale Hurston and to show how gender was also affected by those strives. In order to do so, the paper will be divided into several sections and subsections each of them dealing with theoretical aspects and specific events within African American culture. First, the paper will be focused on the issue of memoirs. It will explain what autobiographies are, their benefits -either personal or universal-, and its flourishing in the African American community in the form of slave narratives. For a better understanding of its origins, it is essential to contextualize the readers by making an overview of slave trade and colonialism since slave narratives are a paramount account for the history of the United States. Secondly, the paper will give an overview of the historical period Zora Neale Hurston lived in: the Harlem Renaissance. To create a general idea of it, it was useful to include historical references such as violence and racist matters and the new artistic movements that were emerging or being recreated by that time. Apart from Hurston, there were many other intellectuals who were crucial for the movement, as for example Aaron Douglass and William H. Johnson's paintings, Langston Hughes's poetry, or the worldwide known trumpet player Louis Armstrong. All these authors, as well as Hurston, would play an essential role within American society in terms of fighting for their rights, their musical evolution, culture and traditions. The third part of the research deals with the analysis of race and gender issues seen through the eyes of Zora Neale Hurston. To explore her memoirs, I have selected *Dust Tracks on a Road* aiming to see and understand the struggles of Black people during the post war period caused by the stereotypical thoughts and demeanors of white supremacists. To finish the inves-

tigation, it is important to recover all the aspects already mentioned as it is memoirs, slavery and the race-gender analysis itself to show the conclusions which have been obtained during the research and assert if the hypothesis that a wide part of the American society has always been racist and oppressive or not.

1. Memoir: Definition, Aims And Flourishing In Slavery

On the spot of its development, memoirs were restricted to a specific group of people who had major experiences, had a brilliant style of writing or had accomplished something relevant through their lives. The issue with memoirs is that, as a non-fictional genre, they have to be accurate and, indeed, tell the truth. Even if the practice of writing autobiographies started very early in history, its theory as a genre has been very recently set.

Most people are not aware of the purposes and benefits that this genre conveys and they are not attempting to read life writing in the same way that they read novelist fiction. Memoir, as defined by Professor Philippe Lejeune (1982) is “a retrospective narrative produced by a real person concerning his own experience, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (193). They represent the lives of real people, in the real world, and they “imitate life in the sense that art is said to imitate nature” (Couser 2012: 32).

There are two types of memoirs which are distinguishable: full-life narratives and single experience narratives. It is obvious that the former mentioned is not seen as possible due to the length of one’s life and because of the impossibility to remember every single detail of one’s childhood and first experiences. Contrary to this, single experience narratives are conceived as more realistic since they usually focus on one particular phase of somebody’s life. The problem is that some people do not take into account the fact that memoirs have been very present in our everyday lives since we were children. There is a quote taken from G.Thomas Couser’s book which perfectly reflects these various types of life records:

What’s different and interesting about life-writing genres, as distinct from many literally and artistic genres, is how they emerge from personal and institutional practices that are initially private or instrumental. (2012, 32)

There are a several reasons which assert why life writing is beneficial. To begin with, writing about your feelings, your past or recent experiences are worthwhile to develop

good memory skills and to have less mental and social problems in the future. Secondly, it is useful to leave a heritage. When a person reads an autobiography about a figure from the 18th century, it is observable that what was regular during that period can be completely peculiar nowadays. It is a very useful tool to speak directly to future generations. Thirdly, they attempt to breed future life writers. A writer who recounts negative things that happened during his/her life, or in a specific period of their life, and complements it with some tips for people with the same problems can be very beneficial for some readers. They assist future generations who would need to overcome their problems in a more relaxed and effective way. Lastly, they help to get a better understanding of oneself. In life writing, one is constantly depicting how he/she felt, what he saw or what he experienced in particular occasions, so by reading these accounts some time after you first wrote it could open the eyes to the writer and reader to not commit the same errors in further occasions. It helps to fully know what you want from life and what you want to become.

2. Slavery

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the trade of West and central Africans caused the largest exodus of all time, bringing around 9 to 12 million slaves to America. It was one of the most important events occurred in the United States' history, not only due to the mass migration of Blacks to the North but because its story changed enormously from the beginning to its later abolition.

The Europeans wanted high amounts of products to export to Europe so it could enrich them, and African slaves seemed to be the perfect choice for their purposes. Africans kept coming to the Americas and between 1600 to 1700 1.3 millions of Africans were already part of the American colonies. A raise on population was produced between 1690 and 1750, but this time the slaves who were brought were different from their previous fellows. The whites regarded them as more culturally opposed, they looked more foreign, especially in terms of clothes and hairstyles, and what this provoked was that colonizers started to exclude them and little by little they became more isolated. The

problem with this change of mentality was that the possibility of marrying, having servants and owning land was then unattainable for the slaves.

The situation of black slaves in Africa was not different to the one they had in America, as most of them were already slaves or captives. Before they started the transatlantic voyage, English colonizers shaved and stripped them in order to anticipate later diseases. Once in the ship they were chained under deck and around 16% of them died before arriving due to the terrible conditions they faced and those who had signs of having any kind of disease were thrown overboard. There is a quote from Richard Middleton (2011) that says, "Instead of thinking themselves as members of particular villages or kingdoms, captives might begin to see their fellow passengers as comrades to whom they were bound by their shared misfortune, rather than as foes" (14, 345). Slaves were taken out of their identity and were converted to mere servants for people they did not even know.

In the early years of American slavery, black people failed to spawn themselves and demographically speaking they were growing thanks to the arrival of new comrades from Africa, but not because of births. Over the years, some black communities that settled in Maryland bore children and the female-male ratio became equal, as there was a great decompensation between male and female births. Despite this, there was a lack of legal recognition which prohibited relationships between slaves and if a child was born the master would be in charge of him/her. As regards to these ideas, sexual harassment and rape were a present menace for slave women because they did not have any legal safeguard towards it.

Regarding African American culture, they preserved some of their traditions in Africa, but depending on which colony they belonged to, they adopted more or fewer customs from the Europeans. For instance, slaves established as their mean of communication a variety of Creole languages which mixed west African words and syntax with English vocabulary (Gullah dialect was the most defining).

In terms of religion, they preserved their African religious customs: some of them were Muslims and others followed the typical African religion. There were others, usually Northern slaves, who were somehow forced to convert to Christianity due to their knowledge of the English language. Middleton (2011) states that, “(...) up to 40 percent of the African American population in the Chesapeake had converted to some form of Christianity by 1760, though the figure for the lower South was much less owing to the slaves’ isolation and the higher level of imports” (14, 359).

In the middle of the eighteenth century, slaves were tired and frustrated about their barbarous treatments and conditions. Thus, some of them pretended they were sick or that their tools were broken in order to work less to unfold from their masters. Some also tried to run away, but it was an option for slaves who had no family or friends as nobody would accept to leave their loved ones behind. Groups of slaves organized rebellions to claim for their rights, and even if the blacks surpassed the whites in number, New York authorities almost always could stop them. The largest rebellion which occurred in this period was the Stono Rebellion in 1739, where most of the slaves which confronted the whites died due to white authorities’ quickness. What the blacks tried to achieve with these rebellions did not succeed, and the whites started to act even more violently towards them: burning at the stake, breaking on the wheel, dismembered and suspended in chains until animals had plucked out their eyes and eaten their flesh, etc.

There were some complaints from whites to this cruel punishment techniques and against slavery, but it was not until the end of the Civil War that slavery was abolished (1833). During the 19th and 20th centuries, black Americans would continue to face violence and racial discrimination in the South. Middleton (2011) noticed that, “Americans would remain the grip of the system of race relations created by slavery until well after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Slavery was the dark side of American liberty and opportunity, and its legacy would continue to haunt Americans for centuries to come” (14, 366).

3. Slave Narratives as Memoirs

The records which exist from this period are mostly slave narratives, and most of the stories of African American slaves are autobiographical or fictional, dealing with common main topics: slavery, struggle, gender, identity, scape and freedom. These accounts were usually recorded by whites, and the black individual became the witness and oral teller of the atrocities and inequalities they had to confront. As Phillip Gould states in his essay 'Early Print Literature of Africans in America': "Struggle of Africans to write independently, especially in light of the prevailing racial attitudes in antebellum America that might distort black authorship" (2, 39). Nevertheless, even though its orality it had to follow the same requisites as other literatures: how is it composed, transmitted and performed thanks to apprenticeship. There existed writings in the early years of colonization, but it was not until Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley when it started to call the attention among white society. It emerged as an indisputable genre for the white colored society in the second half of the eighteenth century as well as during the Enlightenment.

Slave writings have shared characteristics, as black people had to face similar cruelties and lack of legal rights. These writings were mainly addressed to the African American experience in America, which attempted to show the marginalized situation and search of identity present in African American slave communities. They were witnesses and experiencers under the same situation, so the focus of the "I" is essential to understand their experiences. They had to manage the freedom discourses which criticized the slave trade as well as letting them express their opinions and feelings about that African slave's commerce.

The typical conventions followed by slave writers are various although they could have deviations from its initial characteristics. These writings usually begin by referring to some account of their births, but never saying the exact date they were born, together with some information about parentage. They would continue by describing their Christian masters or overseers' methods of punishment (whipping, burning, etc.) and the hard

work they had to face in the plantations. An issue that was important to tell was their difficulties to learn how to write and read, which settled a barrier between their thoughts and their reflections. They as well explain what they ate, what they wore and the patterns of work they had based on a day-week-year basis. The stories are very descriptive and they go from depicting patrols and unsuccessful attempts of escape to their reception by Quakers. Most black writings from this period end their narration with a brief reflection of slavery, a clear overview of their pass of time throughout the slavery industry.

Accounts and records about the experiences of slaves during the colonization are wide: between 1703 and 1944 there were around 6000 records of African writings. Among those writings there are autobiographies and fictional narratives but also testimonies, journals, pamphlets, criminal confessions, conversion narratives, etc. Similarly to written records about their lives there were orally-transmitted accounts of their lives which were collected during the Great Depression. The first accounts that we find dealing with captivity were not written by the slaves themselves, as previously mentioned, rather by their white European or American holders, as they considered it was hazardous to teach slaves how to read and write. These writings provide a chronicle of the colonization seen from the perspective of the affected individuals instead of presenting that part of history from the point of view of the white supreme colonizers. Even if black people were not able to write their stories by themselves, it has been essential to leave a literary heritage of enormous significance. Writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs were clear antebellum slave writers, and they pointed out in their writings that African American individuals deserved a society based on “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

One of the first African American publications is *A Narrative of the Uncommon Suffering and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man*, a pamphlet published in 1760. Around 1773 a slave called Phillis Wheatley published her poems in London and, surprisingly, they had a great impact among the audience. What is important about

their writings is that, instead of telling their lives as slaves in a chronological way, they tried to show and make the people conscious about the mental equalities and similar intellectual capacities both blacks and whites have, in order to react to the ideas of skin color inferiority and social segregation.

The beginnings of this practice were basically recording their experiences and including some sort of defense for their rights to conclude the narration, but by 1830s the way slaves wrote was transformed. What the protagonist used to be in the writings previous to 1830, changed radically to the African slave who pursues freedom in a South-to-North travel. Most slaves had thought that slave trade was abolished but evidently it did not occur. Cotton agriculture was becoming cost-effective and the conditions for the slaves in these plantations were harder than in other fields.

These narratives adopted a new perspective as antebellum slave narratives and its main purpose was to create an activist antislavery literary collection. These writings had a clear success since the beginning of its publications and editions, becoming most of them best-sellers within a short period of time. Its popularity lays on a universal assortment as it could touch many diverse audiences simultaneously. Among these narratives, the most remarkable ones are *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845), *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), Josiah Henson's second autobiography, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858), *Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (1837) and Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853).

These authors followed similar conventions and established a common literary tradition: titles, characters, chronological references, traumatic experiences, movement towards something -freedom, North, urban areas-, religious, political and social hypocrisy, etc. All the aforementioned writers were conscious about the importance of being educated and having literary knowledge, ideas perfectly reflected in Douglass' autobiography as

he was a defender of the civil rights, an abolitionist of the slave based economies and an adviser for presidents and lecturers.

This sort of activist writing attempted to make whites join the antislavery movement, and as Francis S. Foster (1994) states, “(...) the desire to recognize oneself and to be recognized as a unique individual had to counter the desire to be a symbol, and it created the tension that is a basic quality of slave narratives” (5).

Most of these works and authors were forgotten during one entire century, but they have been essential to know the context and situation of those who belonged to this cruel time of history. Notwithstanding, even if the focus of the dissertation is put on Zora Neale Hurston, I have briefly summarized the genre of slave narratives since it is my view that they are a fundamental part of African American life writings and influence.

4. From Slavery To The Harlem Renaissance

Zora Neale Hurston lived during the Harlem Renaissance, a period in which African American culture bloomed in Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century. Artists such as Also lived there and then and created a culture that is still recognized as central to American society. However, the Harlem Renaissance had its remote and near causes in the consequences of the Civil War. I want to provide a historical overview of the years after the Civil War focused on the African American society to fully understand the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance.

4.1 Consequences of the Civil War (1861-1865)

During the nineteenth century, the South and the North of the United States experienced a radical change. Whilst the northern states started to embrace new ways of production becoming more industrialized (cotton-pickers), Southern states persisted an agricultural economy based on black labour. As Nicholas Lemann (1992) claims, “the cotton gin’s impact on American society (...) set off some of the essential convulsions of the nine-

teenth century in this country” (1,5). White superiority was still very present in the South and it caused problems with Northern inhabitants, as they claimed that slavery had to be abolished thanks to influential anti-slavery writings such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) by Olaudah Equiano. Due to the different objectives between the Southern States and the Northern ones, there occurred a division in the country. As in the South empowered whites were not supporting the abolitionist movement, they decided to become independent and to establish their own kind of economical and political ideas.

In the early 1830s, Northern states were becoming more influential about the anti-slavery cause throughout the nation. The Civil war began on April 12, 1861, when the Confederates (Southern states) wanted Major Robert Anderson, the head of the Fort Sumter in South Carolina, to surrender. After several hours of tireless attacks against the Northerners, he had no more option than to submit. The former President Abraham Lincoln, an anti-slavery supporter, called volunteers to fight against the Southern Rebellion. After 4 long years of fatalities, suffering and continuous battles, the Confederate states were defeated and a new nation far from slavery emerged.

The main impact this war caused was the Great Migration (1910-1930) but it did not start right after the war -this issue will be later on revised in section 4.3. Slaves, apart from being tired of their inferior and violent treatment in the plantations, started to be replaced by machines, and their labour hand was in many cases unnecessary. Their minds were changing as they acknowledged there were better opportunities and a wider variety of job placements in the North. Nicholas Lemann (1992) states, “between 1910 and 1970, six and half million black Americans moved from the South to the North” (1, 6). Black Americans started to be seen as less impulsive, capable of working in alternative jobs, and suitable for fighting at the battle field. Nevertheless, this vision was still being criticized by white Southerners, since after the Civil War most of the former slaves wanted to regain their jobs as cotton planters due to the lack of opportunities of

establishing an agrarian life by themselves. However, little by little cotton-based plantations were starting to deal with economical problems, as black people were migrating up North to work in factories.

4.2 Reconstruction and Violence (1860s-1870s)

With Abraham Lincoln's death and a purpose for reconstruction still necessary in the Union, his successor, Andrew Johnson, had various things to do for a better future in America. Lincoln's ideas about non-racial segregation, rights to vote and emancipation were frustrated during the first years of Johnson's political career. The northern states, unsatisfied with his decisions - especially with the "black codes", created the Freedmen's Law and the Civil Rights Bills over presidential veto. The Civil Rights Act was a success and it was the first major bill in the Union to grow into law. The Northern Congress, after Johnson's ouster in 1868, continued its struggle to build a better future for their Nation. They created the Reconstruction Act of 1867 which organized the different governments and divided the South into 5 districts. It required the southern states to follow the 14th and 15th amendments which warranted equal security and rights to vote to all citizens in America. These changes had a great impact and the constitutions established during this period are regarded as the most progressive of America's history. As Jeff Wallenfeldt (2010) writes, "in addition to the extension of civil rights and the participation of African Americans in government, courts were reorganized, judicial procedures improved, public-school systems established, and more feasible methods of taxation devised" (9, 250).

Due to the new privileges colored people were obtaining in these last decades of the 19th century, opposed forces based on white supremacy and racial segregation appeared. One of the most well-known organizations was the Ku Klux Klan formed in 1866, which by the end of the 1920s killed almost 4000 blacks, mostly in the Southern areas, and had around 5 million members all along the country. This racial discrimination and violence is present in almost all African American writings, as for example in

Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* which will be later on revised in section 5. As stated in *Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence* (1997), "anyone could put on a sheet and a mask and ride into the night to commit assault, robbery, rape, arson or murder. The Klan was increasingly used as a cover for common crime or for personal revenge" (12). Even when the Klan was dismantled, that sentiment and ethnic prejudice against colored people still persisted among several conservative whites until the very end of the 20th century.

4.3 The Great Migration (1910-1930)

When African slaves gained their freedom after the Civil War, their sense of identity and hope for a better future started to flourish. Their possibilities of finding jobs in the South far from working as labour hand in plantations were very limited, and the still present violence against blacks became a major trigger to find new opportunities. From the 1870s onwards, Africans started to migrate to the Northern states because they were acknowledged as free people and little by little whites started to treat them in a good manner as well as supporting the abolitionist movement. A Chicago newspaper publisher called Robert S. Abbot launched one of the drives who brought African Americans to Chicago in 1917. He called it "The Great Northern Drive" and was one of the several events which helped African Americans to reach the Promised Land.

Thanks to the emergence of a new industrial economy during WWI, America became enormously wealthy. As N. Lemann (1992) states, "the object of the drive was to exhort Southern blacks to come to Chicago, in order to make money and live under the legal benefits of citizenship" (16). This meant that African children were able to receive education, and that the whole African American community had an opportunity to scape racial discrimination and segregation, as well as being away from the Jim Crow Laws which were fully detrimental for them. The whites were desperate to find workers due to the lack of white employees who were demanded to come from Europe, so this led to a wave of African Americans enrolling the army. Propaganda among the Northern states

was a way of persuading the remaining South African Americans to move upwards. Black Americans who had already obtained a job in the North wrote letters to their loved ones or friends who were still down and confirmed that the messages of hope coming from the North were true. The common destinations of black Americans were mainly the industrial centers such as New York or Chicago and there they received help to get jobs and accommodation by service organizations (i.e. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or NAACP).

This migration, divided into two periods (before and after the Great Depression), caused a strong impact in American society with regards of demography, culture and social relations. In the words of Lemann (1992), “the millions of blacks who migrated did so in order to have lives more like those of most other Americans. Their presence in the North made the rest of the country more aware of African-American culture than it had ever been before” (199).

4.4 The Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

Due to the new economic turn which occurred in North America, African Americans started to move from the rural South to the industrialized Northern states. One of the most important cities which offered colored people social, as well as mental liberty, was New York. African Americans became acquainted about their talents and it led to a new artistic movement never seen before among the black American population: the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance. This new cultural event, as Cheryl A. Wall (1995) says, “[...] was to achieve through art the equality the black Americans had been denied in the social, political and economic realms” (1).

As this project came almost hand to hand with “the war to end wars”, the sentiment through American society was optimistic and full of hope. Whites started to take part in Negro parties, cabarets, and social events, and even they wanted to learn to dance Charleston, as it became the most important and nationwide dance of the 1920s. The

main consequence this movement had was the recovery of identity among African Americans, aiming to be away from being submissive and serviceable (the 'Old Negro'). The Harlem Negro or New Negro, on the contrary, had to be autonomous, smart and besides be full of life and hope. This awakening brought together all kinds of culturally elite individuals: musicians, writers, painters, dancers, etc. It is still uncertain the exact time the movement was originated as there were different facts or literary expressions which claimed to have created this new phase of the African American blossom. Furthermore, it is imprecise when did the movement end, as during the WWII the Harlem Renaissance was not as optimistic as it was in its former years.

One important aim for this cultural movement was to define African American culture in a different way than Europe in order to show their democratic spirit and racial equality. They were attempting to create a Nation where people, disregarding their ethnic origin, could live together in peace and help one another. A good artistic form, and one of the most paramount for the Renaissance, was music. Blues and jazz became well-known and positively accepted throughout the world. It expressed the sentiments and melancholies of the colored working class as the oppressed side of the society. Among the most important musicians and singers we find Alberta Hunter, Louis Armstrong and Clara Smith.¹ They were experimental artists, and in a short period of time, they were incorporating new instruments and ways of performing.

The situation of women, either black or white, was changing enormously in Harlem. They had more opportunities to find jobs which were not related to child care and cleaning, and they started to express freely and to be heard. One of the triggers that led women to a new era of openness and creativity was their allowance to vote in 1920. This event gave a turn to what women were understood to be in the past decades and lots of them started to move to the place where everything started: Harlem. In the words of Lisa B. McKissack (2007):

¹ For further information have a look at *Deep River: Music and Memory in the Harlem Renaissance Thought* by Paul Allen Anderson

Women came from all over the country. A young nurse from Chicago pursued her dream of writing. Another from Philadelphia became a powerful editor. A vibrant and curious writer from Florida found an audience for her stories of the Rural South. A young talented sculptress became one of the leading artists of her day. And a young musician rose from the vaudeville stage to become one of the greatest singers in history. (7)

The third artist McKissack refers to in the previous statement is the anthropologist, writer and limelight of the analysis Zora Neale Hurston. During her early years in Eatonville, the first all African American community to be ran by African Americans, she was poor and was changing residence over and over. It was not until she went to Harlem when her life started to change and where racism was starting to be blocked by the new cultural movement.

The continuous parties, lectures and concerts taking place in Harlem's neighborhood made women aware of the situation and they realized that this new atmosphere had much to offer: they wanted to be listened, seen, appreciated and respected. Nonetheless, the HR as conceived nowadays -happiness, joy, intellect, economic growth- has been sometimes criticized by writers and scholars as it did not show all the reality behind it. Apart from trying to be talented and recognized by whites, or by anyone present during social events, the competition among artists was rough. Hurston and other authors reflected this issue in their writings. As Claude McKay writes in his autobiography *A Long Way From Home* (1937), "(...) each one wanted to be the first Negro, the one Negro and the only Negro, for the whites instead of for their group. Because an unusual number of them were receiving grants (...) they believed that Negro artists as a group would always be treated differently from white artists" (322). This hidden reality was obvious for all blacks in Harlem, but there is a difference is between the ones who decided to tell it and the ones who decided to remain silent.

4.4.1 Hurston in the Harlem Renaissance

“There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.”

– Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

It is important to state that Hurston was very influenced by this cultural movement not only because she was able to spend her time with black fellows with similar interests but also because it opened her view about the world that surrounded her. Many of the previously mentioned artists and writers were in touch or aware of Hurston’s collection of Folklore and writings and despite the fact she was more close to some of them, they helped her to develop her future ideas about race and literature.

Hurston was a very curious little girl since her early years, and this helped her to become an artist in the Vogue period of the 1920s. As she states in her autobiography, “I could hardly sleep that night. I had yearning for so many months to find out about the end of things [...] I was going to see the end, and then I would be satisfied” (583). Although she did not write much in Harlem, she published 7 different books during her literary career. She was unable to stay quiet, to remain sit or to not know all the places she was interested in. Zora’s letters, autobiography and collection of folklore made of her a paramount writer. She moved to Harlem in 1918 and short after her arrival, her new apartment in Harlem was one of the most visited spots of the city. Thanks to the influence she received from authors such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, they published an African-American magazine named *Fire!* in 1926 or in the words of Leantín L.Bracks (2014), “*Fire! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artist.*”(123). There they wrote about their recent change of mind away from the sentiments of racial segregation, homosexuality, prostitution and the recovery of the African American identity. The reason of calling the magazine *Fire!* was to express their anger against the typical thoughts some whites had about African Americans, and it represented the burning and rebirth of the Negro cultures and traditions. However, it was not so well accepted due to the explicit content of homosexuality and prostitution. One of her passions was anthropology, and thanks to a prize that she won for a short story, Hurston says, “Fannie Hurst offered me a job as her secretary, and Annie Nathan Meyer offered to get me a scholarship to Barnard” (683). She received help from many influential figures, includ-

ing the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, and what it provoked is that she became part of them without even noticing.

5. Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960): *Dust Tracks on A Road*

This last section of the dissertation will deal with aspects such as race and gender present throughout her work. This memoir was intended to show the problems faced by Hurston in the period after slavery. However, some of her black fellows criticize her work, as being inaccurate -in terms of veracity, and unfaithful to the African American cause. As Sharon L. Jones (2009) quotes from Phil Strong, *Dust Tracks on a Road* “is more a summary than the autobiography it advertises itself as being” (10).

Despite the critics, she remained impassive and loyal to her ideals - which in many occasions are not completely clear. Hurston’s autobiography is divided into 16 chapters, each of them dealing with a specific moment or event which was important both for her and for the period she belonged to. Even if she was born in Alabama (Notasulga), the place that made her feel more comfortable as well as influenced by many black artists of all kinds was the Harlem Renaissance which, as mentioned in section 4, was the period of blossoming of the African American culture and search for identity in the twentieth century.

What Hurston attempted to achieve was to write an autobiography which was neither addressed to black neither addressed to white: she took liberties to write in a style none of her contemporaries would have used. Memoirs are very important, not only for the black community but to leave a heritage of what occurred in a period of time which was mainly dominated by white supremacists. Thanks to her collection of folklore and to her sympathy for a wider cultural vision her work is considerably unique. As Langston Hughes (1940) states in his autobiography, “she was the perfect darkie (...) naive, child-like, sweet, humorous and highly colored Negro” (239). Her collection of folklore contains several customs, tales and religious matters that she and her friends experienced in their youth. Even if those stories are only tales, they are as well a good account for the transmission of the African American knowledge.

5.1 Race

This following section will explore racial hints present in *Dust Tracks* in relation to the society and circumstances behind the life of a black-woman writer. There are several aspects that should be taken into account for a better understanding of Hurston's ideas about race, so the most useful fragments have been selected according to the issues to be treated.

5.1.1 Perception and Treatment

Hurston starts presenting her early years in the all-colored community of Eatonville. This is paramount to understand Zora's personality and perceptions about whites, as her as well as her community had the advantage of escaping the inferior and violent treatment from whites. Zora depicts this community as a "pure negro town" (561) where Whites and Negroes - as she refers to her fellows, have good relationships. Conversely to her contemporaries, she had benefits most of them could not experience so her view about whites is not comparable to the perception former slaves or other colored people could have in those times. After explaining how and when this community was founded, she puts an eye on the reason why all of that occurred, paying special attention to the issue of receiving a respectful treatment from whites:

Now, these founders were, to a man, people who had risked their lives and fortunes that Negroes might be free. Those who had fought in the ranks had thrown their weight behind the cause of Emancipation. So when it was decided to hold an election, the Eatons, Lawrences, Vanderpools, Hurds, Halls, the Hills, Yateses and Galloways, and all the rest (...) never for a moment considered excluding the Negroes from participation." (564)

It is clear to notice that, in this specific community, not all whites were violent or had racist ideas, even if they were part of the South side of the country, and they treated Blacks with the respect they were supposed to receive disregarding their skin color.

Her sympathy towards white people could be also explained through her birth. When her mum was about to give birth to her, there were no people attempting to help her to bring her to the world, except for one white grey-haired man who later on became a

friend of the family. Not exclusively he helped the mother to bring Zora to the world but he was going to visit Zora to tease her and prevent her from crying. The facts she presents are contentious to determine if she really believed in the equality of both races or either she wanted to live like the whites, the beneficiaries.

It would not be until after her mother's death when she starts having a clearer view or perception about whites. Whereas in Eatonville and Maitland whites and blacks lived peacefully and did not treat colored people as inferior, in Jacksonville, where she had to move after her bereavement, things seemed different. She became aware that she was black, and moreover, it made a difference. All the good things she experienced were lost when she arrived to the new school, she claims: "Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl. (...) I was no longer among the white people whose homes I could barge into with a sure sense of welcome. (...) I didn't get a piece of candy or a bag of crackers just for going into a store in Jacksonville" (621). Due to the new life she started, she was little by little comprehending that whites and blacks were not treated in equal terms in any kind of aspect, field or establishment, even if not all of them believed on racial separation, and that being black and a woman did not make anyone receive special treatments but rather the opposite.

5.1.2 Racial Prejudice

Since the beginning of her writing, she does not let emotions out, creating a certain distance from her readers which made impossible to feel her in many different aspects. Her way of connecting with the readers is through humor: she achieves to create ironic passages and sentences which were part of her daily life and were fully developed when she became a folklorist. This use of paradoxical sentences and humor means she was capable of thinking, as well as reasoning, and that she had an intellect often imperceptible among her fellows, either black or white. It can be clearly seen at the beginning of her autobiography, "(...) some of the details about my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really get born" (577). This occurrence

opposes to the former ideas about Blacks being unable to reason or to execute certain activities very present throughout slavery. Another good example concerning this issue is when she tells about how his dad disliked working on a plantation and says that “cotton plantation was crushing to his ambition” (567). These matters reflect Hurston’s revolutionary thoughts about America’s situation in those years and that she does not see differences (disregarding skin color) between both sides. In her view all people should have the same opportunities to work and to be educated, as intelligence is not marked by your descent.

However, racial prejudice was not only limited to white fellows as in contrast there were also black people who were thinking of it. Hurston’s father was considerably explicit about his anger and rejection to whites. There is a passage where Zora tells him that she wants “a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles” (584-585). The response she receives from his dad is more similar to what “radical” black rights defenders and writers would write about: “A saddle horse! (...) it’s a sin and a shame! Lemme tell you something right now, my young lady; you ain’t white.” Negroes had particular ways of talking, and in their slang meaning you are “white” meant simply to be ambitious — in a pejorative way. Instead of trying to fight for a state of balance which should be present in any multicultural society, Zora’s father believes that Blacks are not able or not meant to have too much, perhaps as a way of differentiating himself from the white community.

Hurston’s controversial ideas about race would be finally comprehended in the last chapters of her autobiography. At the beginning of chapter 11 she states, “what I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (713). What Hurston is trying to explain with these couple of sentences is that what she looks for in somebody is her or his individualism, regardless race, gender, circumstances, language, and so on. What is remarkable of this is that she seems to attempt

to talk about the Negro Problem but oppositely she starts talking about the writings she wrote and published, leaving behind what the readers would expect from a black woman writer on the époque. For her what is important about a person is to acknowledge that a bad morality does not depend on your heritage or ancestry and she supports the idea that a good demeanor and spirit are achieved through one's self not in terms of 'Race Pride', 'Race Consciousness' or 'Race Prejudice' (720). She is quite liberal and prefers to chase people's individualism rather than promoting equality between sexes and races.

Critical essays have been written about the issue of the "Negro Problem" present - or not, in her autobiography and in other of her writings. One of the critics who draws the attention to this issue in *Dust Tracks* is Richard Wright. In his essay "Between Laughter and Tears" (1937) he states that, "her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill (...) orbit in which America likes to see the negro live: between laughter and tears" (New Masses, 25). Nevertheless, she was supported by many and they believed that there was a deeper meaning in her writing as well as a message to transmit about African Americans situation even if it is not externally presented in many occasions.

5.1.3 Language

An important aspect which makes readers reflect about whether she was attempting to account the problems of Blacks or was simply writing about her life without any other kind of intention is the language she uses. She shifts from the standard American English to the use the black vernacular language very rapidly. Related to this is the issue of capitalizing both the word "white" and the word "black". Customarily, what happens with African American authors from this period is that they only capitalize "black" in order to reflect some kind of distinction from "not-colored people" or to give more authority to the Negro population, as some white writers were doing precisely the same to maintain their stance of superiority. She is trying to put both "colors" at the same level because she has seen and feel the equality between both of them since her early years at

Eatonville. She does this at the beginning of the autobiography but after her mother's death, as stated before, she starts not caring about who was more important than who and starts placing her attention on the self. Another issue is that she always specifies when a person is Black, as if it was honorable to be something else than Black, being something more (teacher, preacher, major, etc.). This can be controversial in regards to the following aspect. As she always specifies if this man was Negro and the other one was White, it could be confusing rather she wanted to put colored ones in the same frame as not-colored individuals or if she wanted to make a distinction, disregarding if one was more important than the other. As Hurston points out, "the Negro Mayor and Marshal and the White City Council took office peacefully and served their year without incident (...) White Maitland and Negro Eatonville have lived side by side (...) without a single instance of enmity" (565-566).

5.2 Gender

Even if Hurston is hugely introvert about her feelings, thoughts and ideas, there are several tracks during her lifetime that show the readers her feminist perspective. As a negro woman living in an almost all-negro male environment, she begins criticizing the typical patriarchal society since the first pages of her autobiography. Her father was one of the most important members of the community so he took some advantages as well as taking for granted that he was more powerful than others, especially more than a woman. Within the community there were always cases of gender-based violence but the focus would be put on the Hurston's family. Domestic violence is one of the triggers which made Zora become a women's defender, as it was not only her mother who was suffering mistreatments from his husband, but there were several cases when she had to suffer from them as well. Men were in many occasions aggressive but in most of the occasions violent treatments were not carried out at all. Most of the times those attempts were merely to menace or warn about what would happen if they - women, misbehaved. Hurston states, "In fact, on two occasions, I heard my father threaten to kill my mother if she ever started towards the gate to leave him" (570). Despite this air of superiority he

felt, which would have terrified any other woman, Hurston's mother was not scared of it as her children, their care and education were above everything for her. This is a very conservative way of presenting a woman and it would not be surprising to think something opposite about her. However, Zora's mother response to the previous quote shows that she is aware of the situation of women, not only in Eatonville but in many other places of America and the world, and that she would not let anybody control her or tell her what to do only because of her biological condition. Hurston says, "he was outraged and angry one day when she said lightly that if he did not want to do for her and her children, there was another man over the fence waiting for his job" (570).

Again Zora shows she goes against the grain and she always held her ideas and beliefs, no matter which or the consequences. Sometimes she presents the women who surround her as being able to confront gender-based abusive situations but other times she shows that some women did not do this or that to not get their husbands angry. For instance, when Hurston's parents were going out with two other friends Zora writes, "mama dared not to laugh (...) for fear of stirring Papa out more" (570).

Even though it seems that Hurston's father did not like her wife, there are passages that show the opposite as if of a normal married couple it deals with. Zora says:

The woman who got spoken out threatened to whip my mother. Mama was very small and the other woman was husky. But when Papa heard of the threats against Mama, he notified the outside woman that if she could not whip him too, she had better not bring the mess up. The woman left the county without ever breaking another breath with Papa. (...) I take it that Papa and Mama, in spite of his meanderings, were really in love. (570)

It is surprising how in just one page Zora is able to show opposite hints regarding gender. The matter with her autobiography is that readers never know what will happen next: in one paragraph she tells about how violent her father was and how much did she dislike that demeanor and in other paragraph she tells how her mother loved him and how they admired each other. It is difficult to trace Zora's thoughts about gender, but what is pretty clear is that from these passages onwards she will reveal that, at least at

the time of writing the autobiography, she would always put the women above or at least try to place them in the same frame as men. In page 572 she declares that she is a feminist, although a little bit radical for the time, when she claims, “any of her children who had any tendencies like that must have got it from the Hurston side. (...) things like that gave me my first glimmering of the universal female gospel that all good traits and leanings come from the mother’s side.”

Despite the fact that her parents loved each other, there was not a little bit of respect from her father’s side towards her mother. He was always trying to underrate her and what she did, as if she was not able to do this and that just because she was “a poor weakly thing”. This clearly shows that patriarchal society was still very present in the different groups of American society. It is remarkable that even if the majority of blacks had already been slaves or at least they had people to tell them what it felt to be such a thing, continue to think that hierarchies and supremacist ideas would work.

She supports the idea that a man, in physical terms, would always beat a woman, but in other respects they would have nothing to do with them. There is a passage that shows how Hurston’s revolutionary thoughts about gender issues were very well defined from her earliest years:

He could tackle Aunt Caroline, all right, but he had his hands full to really beat her. A knock-down didn’t convince her that the fight was over at all. She would get up and come right on in, and she was nobody’s weakling. It was generally conceded that he might get the edge on her in physical combat if he took a hammer or a trace-chain to her, but in other ways she always won. (574).

The fact that a woman was at that time conscious about her mental power shows how it would impact Zora in the future. Indeed, it is important to notice that the matter of saying that a woman has a higher knowledge or intellect about issues not concerning physical strength threatens the widespread idea white supremacists held about blacks being unable to reason. In chapter 4 we can see how she argues this, “I discovered that I was extra strong by playing with other girls near my age [...] I was always hurting some-

body [...] everything was alright, however, when I played with boys.” (585). It is even more shocking that not only they were colored intellectual people but also they were colored intellectual women. The key aspect of this is that, as women were conscious about this situation, several men as well were able to recognize their capacities in some way. Hurston states, “later on when they asked Uncle Jim how Cal’line managed to get into the lady’s house, he smiled sourly and he said, ‘Dat Axe was her key.’ When they kept on teasing him, he said, ‘Oh, dat old stubborn woman I married, you can’t teach her nothing” (575). Even when men confronted the most obvious situations where women did something in a proper manner or showed that they did know how to manage to do things which were mostly limited to males, they would always try to turn things down and try to undermine their abilities.

6. CONCLUSION

African American writings, more precisely slave narratives and autobiographies, have been very helpful not only from a historical point of view but also because they show the emotions and opinions of the minorities. As stated in section 1, it is very important to leave accounts which deviate from the typical history-teller supremacist point of view and it helps to see the reality behind a country that has abused of its power. In every society it is common to know history from that perspective and very often they do not achieve to sympathize with groups of people that do not fit in their ideal nation. Apart from being accounts for history, slave narratives always have a double meaning, and what they attempted to do by the time of slavery was to show their rejection for a society that was unable to see towards their skin color.

Racial stereotypes opened a way for radical groups to be established, and these organizations can be understood as a clear example of what to avoid in the future if a nation had to face similar problems. It has been proved that if a movement such as the Harlem Renaissance would had never appeared in America, that racial segregation and widespread racism would still be very present in almost every American white individual. Thanks to colored people claiming for their search and recovery of identity and culture whites were little by little being able to recognize Africans as fellows and to accept their differences. However, the issue of racial segregation and oppression can be still seen in the 21st century, and if those autobiographical or fictional accounts were familiar to everyone, not only American citizens, people could be more conscious about what the colored community had to suffer.

In terms of gender, America was very traditional in the time Hurston lived, as the role of the woman was very limited to the household and the education of the children. However, Zora gives the readers her own perspective by showing that even if she was a black poor woman, she was able to work in different fields until she found what she really wanted to be. It is also revolutionary the way that even under her conditions she was

able to receive help to become a student and later on to become an anthropologist. All the changes that occurred to women in Harlem, as for example gaining their rights to vote, have been embraced by women worldwide, and thanks to the ones who claimed for their rights, women in the present era are able to study, work and have benefits that were in Hurston's life almost unforeseeable.

It is clear to see that race differences were very present in the 20th century America. Despite the several attempts to create a nation based on equality with ideals that offer same opportunities for all the citizens disregarding their ethnic origins and political ideas, America has more than once failed to carry out all the purposes they wanted to accomplish. It is noticeable that having a perspective of America, not only as a geographic location but as a society, through the eyes of a black woman is very beneficial to reflect about the errors committed in the past (i.e.: slavery).

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