

## Silence as Speech: Reading Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

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### Abstract:

This paper looks into the almost 'unrealistic' presentation of a wholesome and complete self—undeterred by the racial prism—that Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*(1942)offer as, in fact, a mechanism to deal with and overcome traumatic psychological effects of the race problem. Written in the 1940s and 50s and covering the auto biographer's experiences of being brought up in the early years of the twentieth century, critics and scholars since long have been boggled and disappointed by the text's cryptic silences surrounding the racial issues of the period. In this regard, the present study concerns itself with understanding how, by not letting verbal and/or violent demonstrations of protest are the sole over arching or defining factors, the author constructs a self that questions the prevailing grounds on which identity is forged. Hurston's tacit use of silence as an alternative mode of resistance should be seen as formulating new ground sin autobiographical self-invention and discovery, especially when traumatic histories and memories are at stake. Taking cue from Doris Summer's work, we argue that far from being a passive acceptance, it is an active engagement in "strategic survival" and a subversive assertion of agency through deliberate denials of expectations.

**Keywords:** trauma, race problem, cryptic silences, identity, strategic survival

There is a saying in the Black community that advises: "If a person asks you where you're going, you tell him where you've been. That way you neither lie nor reveal your secrets."  
Maya Angelou, Introduction to *Dust Tracks*, xii

This paper looks into the almost 'unrealistic' presentation of a wholesome and complete self—undeterred by the racial prism—that Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*(1942) offer as, in fact, a mechanism to deal with and overcome traumatic psychological effects of the race problem. Written in the 1940s

and 50s and covering the auto biographer's experiences of being brought up in the early years of the twentieth century, critics and scholars since long have been boggled and disappointed by the text's cryptic silences surrounding the racial issues of the period. Although studied through a more sympathetic lens in recent times, few studies have focused on the alternative sense of agency that this text helps generate underneath the apparently obsequious demeanour to power that it seems to project. In this regard, the present study concerns itself with understanding how, by not letting verbal and/or violent demonstrations of protest be the sole overarching or defining factors, the author constructs a self that questions the prevailing grounds on which identity is forged. Hurston's tacit use of silence as an alternative mode of resistance should be seen as formulating new grounds in autobiographical self-invention and discovery, especially when traumatic histories and memories are at stake. Taking cue from Doris Sommer's work, we argue that far from being a passive acceptance, it is an active engagement in "strategic survival" and a subversive assertion of agency through deliberate denials of expectations.

Hurston's *Dust Tracks* has often been criticised as a text aimed at pleasing an exclusively White audience. Indeed, despite having two Guggenheim fellowships, four novels, an autobiography, two ethnographies, and several essays and short stories to her credit, Zora Neale Hurston never received her due recognition and fame in her lifetime. Her racial ideologies, which get reflected in her texts, went a long way in distancing her from major male contemporaries like Richard Wright and promoting the picture of an almost obsequious Hurston undeserving of any serious attention. It was only after the 1970s that with the efforts of writers like Alice Walker, her works were revived and received by a more sympathetic audience. However, even after Hurston's rediscovery as a major literary voice of her period, few scholars have been able to appreciate *Dust Tracks* as an alternate narrative trajectory for the Black female self. The present paper seeks to analyse her autobiography as a careful "working through," to adopt Dominick La Capra's term, of a traumatic history to create a sense of agency. Instead of holding on to a traumatic past and a continued victimised present, Hurston's autobiographical self seeks to overcome denigration by attempting to place history in perspective. Showing a rare understanding of the historical forces at work behind power structures, her autobiography goes beyond being a mere 'racial protest' text. Beneath Hurston's apparently deferential attitude to power and her apparent silences in response to injustices and oppressions, sharp criticisms of the social hierarchy—which is a result of a complex interweave of not just interracial but intra-racial relations—have been coded into the text. The deference to white power is evident in the first few pages of the autobiography itself where the author paints a picture of a homogeneous and harmonious Eatonville unmarked by any race riots or differences. The young Hurston's Godfather is a white man who not only helps with her birth but continues to take a keen interest in her life even later on. The kind of advice that this man gives her as a young, impressionable child is worth taking note of,

He called me Snidlits, explaining that Zora was a hell of a name to give a child.

“Snidlits, don’t be a nigger,” he would say to me over and over.\* “Niggers lie and lie! Any time you catch folks lying, they are skeered of something...”

\*The word Nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race (*Dust Tracks* 30).

The conversation shows the self-loathing that the child Hurston was being fed and yet the adult author takes special care to add in a footnote that her White Godfather did not use the word, “Nigger,” in its racial implications. Indeed, she goes on with her defensive portraiture of this White man,

I knew without being told that he was not talking about my race when he advised me not to be a nigger. He was talking about class rather than race. He frequently gave money to Negro schools (*Dust Tracks* 32).

Hurston, here, seems to ignore the complex interactions between race and class: racial denigration hinders class mobility ensuring that one’s racial and class identities remain entangled. *Dust Tracks* is strewn with examples of generous Whites who extend helping hands in her journey. It is such presentations of the White world juxtaposed with her discussions of intra-racial flaws within the Black community that made Hurston the butt of criticism of so many of her contemporaries.

This paper, however, looks into the traumatic backdrops of the author’s life and tries to sort out the psychological coping mechanisms of which the writing itself forms an integral part. The need for language or voice as essential for trauma recovery has been well-established, although certain schools of trauma theory, most notably those propagated by Caruth and her likes, define trauma as the unspeakable. Language, however, cannot be an absolute and unproblematic liberating device as that liberation calls for a ‘space’ in which the speaking would take place and where it would be received by an empathic audience. In other words, language presupposes a listener and thereby, demands that the latter’s expectations be met if his/her empathy is to be attained. Speaking out makes one vulnerable to judgements and even admonitions, depending on the way the speech is received by the target audience. Trauma, then, has to be narrated in a language that is “structured” and even conditioned. In the words of Leigh Gilmore,

[I]t isn’t so much language that is sought as a public forum. The language in which one thinks to oneself, and the utterances within more fragile relationships, even temporary and/or anonymous ones, for example, do not amount to “language”...Survivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it. Thus, the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks (flashbacks, nightmares, emotional flooding) is replaced by a conscious language that can be repeated in structured settings (7).

When language is “structured” and “conscious,” there are bound to be underlying omissions and gaps. One, then, has to be aware of silences and lacunae in any narration

of trauma. More so, when we have to place the particular text within a complex weave of editors, publishers and the plausible readership. Lacking access to most publishing opportunities, and writing before the era of the 60s when the Civil Rights or the Black Power movements had made things more favourable, Hurston had to, at most times, conform to editorial and publishing demands. Moreover, she had had to keep in mind the sentiments and expectations of her generally White readers whose reception in a way decided the future run of her books. What emerged from this nexus of author, editor/publishers, and the audience is a mediated text where what finally came to be said was perhaps far from being what the writer actually intended to say. Even though testifying to one's own life and experiences, then, the account was shaped and controlled by dominating structures of power. This controlling presence has been there in Black autobiography since the time of the slave narratives when the slave's account had to follow particular patterns and be validated by a White person who would vouch for its authenticity. Having to engage in self-representation within such set confines, the slave narrator, even while writing in the first person, could exercise "little control over his or her self-image, which had been repeatedly reshaped by the abolitionists' expectations" (Reynaud56). In her essay, "'Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth'?" Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*" Claudine Reynaud quotes Robert Stepto's reframing of Bloom's "anxiety of authorship,"

In Afro-American letters, for example, while there are notable exceptions, the battle for authorial control has been more of a race ritual than a case of patricide. Author has been pitted against author, primarily to re-enact the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century struggles between author and guarantor. The competition has rarely been between artist and artist for control of an image, line, or trope; rather it has been between artist and authenticator (editor, publisher, guarantor, patron) for control of a fiction—usually the idea of history or of the artist's personal history—that exists outside the artist's text and functions primarily as an antagonistic force with regard to this text's imaginative properties (56).

The direct presence of an authenticator was no longer in force after the era of the slave narratives and collaborative autobiographies. Control over the text's narrative trajectory, however, continued to be exerted with other influences that sought to subdue the voice of the author. As Reynaud continues,

The editor (the publisher, the guarantor, the patron) carries on; acting as authenticator, he or she actively competes with the author for control over the production of the text. The resulting unequal dialogue mirrors the racial, sexual, and class tensions of society at large, the Jim Crow laws, the status of women, and especially black women, in the United States of the 1940s (56).

A similar anxiety hampering the Black woman writer's authorial agency relates to the kind of 'appropriations' that testimonial writings are generally subject to. Writing mostly from within the straitjacket of different constraints and depicting stories of personal pain, Hurston's autobiography can be seen as a 'testimony.' In *Against*

*Literature*, John Beverly's seminal study regarding non-hegemonic, "non-literary" forms that could challenge literature's established genres, conventions and norms, he argues for the huge cultural appetite for testimonies. Since it is the voice of the subaltern that purportedly comes across in testimonies, the question of the author's supremacy in his/her textual universe does not arise and therefore makes possible a greater "fraternal or sororal" (77) bonding between the narrative "I" and the reader.

As Doris Sommer has pointed out, however, ties of familiarity or intimacy can actually be covert and subtle means of denying authority—the reader demands and assumes total knowledge and mastery of the testimonial account and thereby, intrudes upon the narrator's individuality and privacy,

Maybe empathy...is a good feeling that covers over a controlling disposition, what Derrida calls "an inquisitorial insistence, an order, a petition...To demand the narrative of the other, to extort it from him like a secret less secret."...In effect, the projections of intimacy invite appropriations once the stretch is shortened between writer and reader, in disregard of the text's rhetorical (decidedly fictional) performance of a politically safe distance (198).

Beverly's "fraternal or so oral" bonding, rather than being innocent filial ties, might underlie an 'appropriating' tendency whereby one comes to believe that the 'Other' can be known and laid bare.

Trapped within multiple layers and structures of oppression, self-representational projects for Hurston, then, was about carving a niche for her within an Eurocentric and andocentric culture which worked to deprive her of any autobiographical agency. Her text exemplifies the kind of dilemma faced by Black women who sought to resist domination and assert narrative control but had to do so within the controlling presence of those very structures of power. The process of self-representation, thus, gets strained by a fear of "excessive self- exposure" which might engender risks for the entire community (Smith and Watson, 12).

In her essay, "Three Women's Texts and Circumfusion," Gayatri Spivak has discussed the tension at the heart of testimonial projects—the pressure to engage in resistance 'strategically,'

Persons in that space of difference usually had to be interpellated or hailed as testifiers for some truth of the dominant, although not necessarily to mobilize for resistance, which would be to bring subalternity to its own crisis. It is well to keep that possible distinction in mind—testimony and resistance. The resistant subaltern may sometimes agree to be hailed to testimonial in the belief that resistance will thereby find effective consolidation.

It is in the light of such arguments that we argue that Hurston's autobiography needs to be read. She triggers observant readers to see her silences surrounding painful and humiliating racial encounters as strategic omissions. By such deliberate removals, she was trying to safeguard herself and the community for sure. But she was also promoting a picture of "racial health," thereby frustrating and challenging the view of the

Black psyche as nothing more than ‘pathological’ and of the idea of Blackness as a reactionary existence to an omnipotent and omnipresent whiteness. The silences in the text are calculated ones and “cautions privileged readers against easy appropriations of Otherness into manageable universal categories” (Sommer 199).

Indeed, a careful reading of the text shows her observation and understanding of internal loopholes that contributed to the suppression and denigration of Blacks. But what also cannot be ignored are her scathing comments on religious politics and other contemporary geo-political matters. Establishing relations between power structures and religion, she comments,

Military power was to be called in time and time again to carry forward the gospel of peace. There is not apt to be any difference of opinion between you and a dead man...Will military might determine the dominant religion of tomorrow? Who knows?(*Dust Tracks* 223).

Similarly, she exhibits a clear understanding of colonialism as an extension of slavery. In an imagined conversation between her and the grandson of an erstwhile slave-owner, she puts forth her views,

“Are you so simple as to assume that the Big Surrender banished the concept of human slavery from the earth? What is the principle of slavery? Only the literal buying and selling of human flesh on the block? That was only an outside symbol. Real slavery is couched in the desire and the efforts of any man or community to live and advance their interests at the expense of the lives and interests of others...Do you not realize that the power, prestige and prosperity of the greatest nations on earth rests on colonies and sources of raw materials? Why else are great wars waged?”(*Dust Tracks*230).

*Dust Tracks*’ seemingly ambiguous and ambivalent stand on race, the paper argues stems from the socio-economic and material specificities of her time. Borrowing critical ideas from scholars like Sommer, Gilmore, Spivak, Smith etc., as already mentioned, we place her text and its cryptic silences amidst a complex nexus of editorial pressures, problems of authorship, reception politics and the pressures of narrating traumatic elements without revealing ‘inside’ secrets. Hurston’s omissions, as much as her revelations, are strategic and the gaps contain as much message as the stated words.

## **References**

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