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Project Information
Course number and title of course for which project was completed (if applicable):

ENG 366: Modern Times

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Title of Project: Defying Objectivity: An Exploration of Ethnocentrism in Jonah's Gourd Vine

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Abstract

Fundamentally, Franz Boas viewed ethnography as a way of revealing that language, religion, customs, technology and traditions existed in all cultures in spite of the differences between these cultures. As a student of Boas and an ethnographer of African-American culture, Zora Neale Hurston was very aware of and trained in this new, modern tradition of ethnographic research and writing. However, the depictions of African-American culture in Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, do not uphold this epistemology. In this paper, I explore the ways in which Hurston violates cultural relativism and speculate why she might have chosen to do so, ultimately concluding that although she fails to be culturally relative, she does not fail at creating a valid ethnographic text.
Stephen Kearse

English 366

Research Paper

Defying Objectivity: An Exploration of ethnocentrism in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

In the early twentieth century, all ethnographic research had an inherent flaw: the universal acceptance of social Darwinism within anthropology. This universal flaw resulted in a false dichotomy in which the culture of the ethnographer and the culture of the subject were regarded as superior and inferior, respectively. Franz Boas addresses this flaw in his essay, *The Methods of Ethnology*, in which he writes:

> The evolutionary point of view presupposes that the course of historical changes in the cultural life of mankind follows definite laws which are applicable everywhere, and which bring it about that cultural development is, in its main lines, the same among all races and all peoples...it may be recognized that the hypothesis implies the thought that our modern Western European civilization represents the highest cultural development towards which all other more primitive cultural types tend. (Boaz 281-282)

As evidenced by this excerpt, Boas was aware of the unreliability of ethnographies that were embedded with ethnocentrism, especially Eurocentrism. This awareness led to the creation of the practice of cultural relativism. Because culturally relative ethnographies had the same goals as traditional ethnographies, yet sought to accomplish them differently, they can be seen as an aesthetic experiment (read modernism). Accordingly, because Zora Neale Hurston was a student of Boas and a novelist, her works participate in this aesthetic experiment.

Nevertheless, despite Hurston’s knowledge of the concept of cultural relativism, because she was an African-American studying African-American culture, avoiding ethnocentrism was especially difficult. This difficulty arose from Hurston’s personal awareness of the negative history of African-Americans portrayals in literary works. In her fellowship application to the
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Hurston wrote, “My ultimate purpose as a student is to increase the general knowledge concerning my people, to advance science and the musical arts among my people” (Cotera 71). Thus, because Hurston had the opportunity to positively influence pervading perceptions of African-American culture, she was under the pressure to prove the value of African-American culture. In her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston complicates her goal of presenting African-Americans positively by discussing the growing tension between African-American culture and modernity in the text. The presence of this tension, in addition to Hurston’s desire to depict African-Americans positively, ultimately results in her failing to be culturally relative. However, this failure to be culturally relative does not mean that Hurston fails to accurately portray African-American culture. It actually demonstrates one of the weaknesses of cultural relativism and allowed her to forge her own niche within ethnographic writing.

One of the only instances of cultural relativism within the novel occurs in Hurston’s use of omniscient narration. Although the plot of the novel focuses on John Pearson and his various exploits, because the setting of the text is foregrounded in African-American culture, the omniscient narrator is essentially an ethnographer. The ethnographic presence is especially tangible during the dancing and music that erupts during the barbeque scene. This is exemplified in the passage:

So they danced. They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins – the drum – and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them they heard it. (Hurston 29)

The audience is able to experience the passion of the music and dance without their perception being influenced by the religious, moral, cultural or ethical bias of the speaker. This is
a perfect example of cultural relativism. The culture under scrutiny is seen on its own terms without regard to the opinions of the ethnographer. Furthermore, the origin story within the exposition serves to demonstrate the cultural significance of the drum and the music it creates, leading to an enhanced understanding of the scene. Nevertheless, although the narration demonstrates cultural relativism, the events of the story - specifically the events in which modernity and African-American culture interact - do not follow suit.

Hurston’s depictions of modernity interacting with African-American culture tend to glorify modernity and belittle African-Americans. For instance, Hurston writes:

John stared at the panting monster for a terrified moment, then prepared to bolt. But as he wheeled about he saw everybody’s eyes upon him and there was laughter on every face. He stopped and faced about. Tried to look unconcerned, but that great eye beneath the cloud-breathing smoke-stack glared and threatened. The engine’s very sides seemed to expand and contract like a fiery-lunged monster. The engineer leaning out of his window saw the fright in John’s face and blew a sharp blast on his whistle and John started violently in spite of himself. The crowd roared. (Hurston 15-16)

In his first encounter with a train, John is extremely terrified. Of course, seeing a train for the first time is an unforgettable experience, especially in the early twentieth century, but the nightmarish anthropomorphizing of the train and John’s subsequent fear of it are mocking. There is also a psychological side to this experience. This is John’s first encounter with something more virile than him, so he is amazed, shocked that something so much more powerful than him can exist. However, the presence of people laughing at him, ridiculing him, insinuates that he is somehow ridiculous for feeling this fear and being intimidated. Moreover, when John finally rides a train he describes it as “the greatest accumulation of power he had ever seen” (104), but he feels embarrassed that he is riding it for the first time. Although John’s childlike admiration of the train is understandable, his embarrassment is troubling because it implies that White culture
and African-American culture are so technologically disparate that the latter should feel shame. This is a violation of cultural relativism because it is not the ethnographer’s role to compare cultures. Cultures are supposed to be evaluated on their own terms.

Further violation of cultural relativism comes from Hurston’s creation of a dichotomy between the two sides of the creek. John’s side of the creek is represented by ignorance and small agriculture, while the other side of the creek is represented by intelligence, business and commerce. For example, when John first encounters the school girls, one of them says, “Ah think he musta come from over de Big Creek” and laughs (14). To these school girls, because John does not live on their side of the creek, he is automatically an “other.” John’s awareness of his alterity results in him self-identifying as an “over-the-creek-nigger” (13). However, after he starts to reside on their side of the creek and begins to work, learn to read and wear new clothes, John shifts from being a pariah to being a golden child. What is particularly interesting about his clothes is the fact that they come from a white man. This suggests that his newfound acceptance is partially predicated on his similarity to a white man (a similarity that was already genetic). The lifestyle change is so dramatic that saying, “Mist Alf, Ah don’t treasure ‘cross dat creek. Lemme stay heah wid you, please suh” (41), John effectively disowns his family. By choosing his new life over his old life across the creek, John discards his old identity. One of the implications of this is that African-American culture should embrace modernity because it enables social development. However, another more diabolical implication is that in order to succeed, African-Americans have to be whitewashed. The inheritance of Alf Pearson’s clothes is literally the covering of John’s body. This implication particularly resonates when you consider the fact that John professes his desire to stay in the “white world” to a white man. Nevertheless, in either
case, because Hurston privileges one side over the other, she is failing to practice cultural relativism.

In chapter nineteen, Hurston refers to the North as, “The land of promise” (151) because labor, which is scarce in the South, will be abundant in the North. Singing, “When Ah get in Illinois/ Ahm gointer spread the news about de Floriduh boys/ Sho-ove it over/ Hey, hey, can’t you live it?” (106), the railroad workers are in perfect harmony with modernity. Although this scene is brief, it displays the utopian North that Hurston imagines. In it, labor is productive, enjoyable and natural. The sexual image of the spike being driven into the ground is particularly significant. In this scene, John is safe because he is the one positioning the spike. However, as Cameron Kunzelman describes it, the railroad he is helping to build is the “spike of modernity” and it is beginning to “penetrate the South.” If John fails to leave the South before this spike reaches him, there will be adverse consequences.

Unfortunately, the spike reaches him before he can escape. The tension between African-American culture and modernity culminates in the violent death of John at the end of the novel. When the two forces literally clash, the victory of modernity implies that African-American culture should not embrace modernity because modernity will destroy it, but this is inconsistent with the aforementioned instances in the text in which Hurston advocated the acceptance of modernity by African-American culture. An alternate explanation that fits better within the context of the rest of the book is that John’s death serves as a punishment for not taking advantage of his opportunity to go to the North. By not aligning with modernity when he had the chance, John sealed his fate. Thus, the death of John symbolizes Hurston’s idea that African-American culture will be destroyed if a migration to the North never occurs.
Incidentally, Hurston’s decision to not anglicize the dialogue of her characters is also a failed effort to be culturally relative. After all, culture is reflected in language, so by including the real language that was used by the African-Americans she studied, theoretically, the culture should have been authentically represented. Nevertheless, despite her intentions, Hurston’s use of dialogue is highly problematic. In response to Hurston’s use of dialogue, Richard Wright wrote, “Her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.” Wright brings up an interesting point. Language is a medium of cultural expression, but this expression is not inherently self-evident. When dialect is used without exposition, even if the reader can read the dialect, the reader may not be aware of cultural signifiers within the dialect. By including dialect without explaining the cultural significance of it, Hurston not only fails to convey the breadth of African-American culture, but also inadvertently exoticizes African-American language.

This exoticism can be seen in the statement Coon makes right before Coon and John fight. Coon’s statement, “Don’t you lak it, don’t yuh take it, heah mah collar, come and shake it” (Hurston 63), contains an inexplicable rhyme. The rhyme (and perhaps the fight too) is possibly an appeasement to Charlotte Mason’s (Hurston’s financial patron during her ethnographic career) desire for “exotic entertainment” (Lamothe 6). After all, it comes right before a vicious fight in which two virile, hyper-masculine men compete for power. What could be more exotic and entertaining than witnessing two “bucks” clash for power? Apparently, one possible answer is the ability of one of the bucks to rhyme. To clarify, the problem with this passage is not the ambiguity of the rhyme (no good reader expects everything in a text to be self-evident). The problem lies in the fact that Hurston is attempting to be culturally relative, yet she
includes scenes like this for no apparent reason. Hurston is like a translator that translates without considering syntactical differences in the languages she’s mediating. She succeeds in literally translating, but because she fails to organize the speaker’s words coherently, the message is lost. Therefore, her effort to be culturally relative via the use of dialect is compromised by her failure to demonstrate how dialect is reflective of African-American culture beyond the use of communication.

Alternatively, Hurston’s use of dialect could have been an effort to capture the musicality and rhymicality of African-American speech. According to Maria Cotera, Boas actually instructed Hurston to “pay attention, not so much to content, but rather to the form of diction...the methods of dancing, habitual movements in telling tales, or in ordinary conservations” (Cotera 81). Nevertheless, this argument does not have much merit because even if Hurston intended to convey the musicality of African-American speech, because she only captures the communication aspect of it rather than the expression aspect, she still fails.

Now that instances of failed cultural relativism have been marked, it is necessary to question the inherent assumptions of cultural relativism. In her essay, *The Politics of Ethnographic Authority*, Deborah Gordon writes, “fieldwork was cast during this period as a voyage out, a movement into the West’s unknown; the field was a separate space in which a single Westerner was to confront a time before the advent of Western society” (Gordon 154). According to Gordon, the assumption of ethnographic work under the Boasian epistemology was that the ethnographer would be studying a completely unfamiliar culture. Thus, the ability to be culturally relative was dependent on the ethnographer’s race and cultural affiliations. This puts Zora Neale Hurston in a precarious position. As an African-American woman studying a culture that she was apart of, to remain objective would have meant to suppress her ethnic solidarity.
Daphne Lamothe touches on this in her statement, “Ethnographic discourse may have had its rhetorical place, but it also had its pitfalls because it emphasized the Black intellectual’s position of superiority and detachment in relation to people who suffered the same political disenfranchisement as they” (Lamothe 15). When Hurston’s relationship to the culture she studied is considered, it becomes apparent that failing to uphold cultural relativism was almost inevitable.

Nevertheless, although Hurston’s cultural depictions are ethnocentric and hyperbolic, they are not necessarily invalid. Deborah Gordon sees Hurston’s ethnocentrism as “not something that the ethnographer simply puts away in her field diary, but is part of the construction of relations in the field. The anthropologist is not god-like but as caught within the fieldwork as the ‘native’ ” (Gordon 156). To Gordon, Hurston’s method of ethnography is true participant observation. Rather than attempting to separate the anthropologist and the foreigner, Hurston acknowledged that they were inextricable. Because she did not attempt to veil the reality of her ethnocentrism, in some ways she was able to understand the cultures she studied in greater detail. In a way, Hurston’s method of ethnography is a reconceptualization of Boas’ method that is arguably more effective because it does not work under the illusion of absolute objectivity. However, it must be realized that Hurston’s approach to ethnography is not necessarily the best. After all, it probably only worked for her because of the cultural similarities between her and her subjects. If Margaret Mead had attempted to capture Samoan culture under the same method as Hurston, she would have been quite unsuccessful. Essentially, Zora Neale Hurston just found a niche and made it work.

Although Zora Neale Hurston was familiar with the doctrine of cultural relativism, ultimately, she was unable to use it. The intersection of her political agenda, her cultural
upbringing, her personal ethnographic technique and her familiar object of study simply could not allow her to objectively represent African-American culture. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the failure to uphold cultural relativism is perceivable, but it does not invalidate her representations of African-American culture. Even if all of her representation were inauthentic, the text’s discourse on the tension between African-American culture and modernity would still be worth interrogating. Ultimately, because Hurston embraced her ethnocentrism, her representations of folk culture revealed some of the inadequacies of cultural relativism and allowed her to discover her own niche within ethnographic literature.

Works Cited


Railton, Stephen. "Wright Reviews Hurston". University of Virginia. May 2, 2010

Stephen Kearse

Research Methods

My research began after I wrote my abstract. Writing my abstract first allowed me to
narrow down the body of research that I would have to engage and made it easier to remain
focused while writing. After my abstract was written, my first move was to search the library for
relevant books and articles. Because my intended paper would be approaching the text from a
historical and biographical standpoint, I first sought biographical information about Zora Neale
Hurston and her mentor, Franz Boas. Searching for this biographical information was greatly
facilitated by the library’s online catalog. The weather was memorably bad, so being able to
check for the availability of books from my room was much appreciated. Upon finding relevant
books, I went to the library and perused them. For the most part, they were very topical, lacking
the information I sought, and in the end I did not use them for the actual creation of my paper,
but I used the bibliographies of some of those books to lead me to other books, so they still
played a role. The subsequent series of books that these initial books led me to also did not assist
me in the end, but I still felt satisfied because I had traced my sources as far as possible.

Seeing that researching purely biographical information was not very helpful, I began to
seek literary criticism and analysis of Hurston’s texts and narrowed my search for biographical
data on Hurston to a search for information about her anthropological methods. These paths of
inquiry were the most effective. Using Galileo to access the MLA database, I first sought literary
information. There were not many electronics sources available, but there were a few books. All
of these books had to be acquired via interlibrary loans, but this was no hassle. The books arrived
rather promptly and I began to read them.
I was prepared to take up the aforementioned anthropological line of inquiry after reading the books acquired by interlibrary loan, but this was not necessary because the books provided me with literary and anthropological information. I still checked the bibliographies of these books for further information, but I did not press much further than that because I already had the information necessary to write my paper (plus the paper’s deadline was drawing near).

My research paper clearly could not have been written without the vast resources of the library. Whether I needed convenient, remote access to the book catalog or the MLA database or access to electronic and concrete sources not immediately offered by the library, the library was there to support me. I was especially grateful for the speed with which interlibrary loans were processed. Because I began research about eleven days before the paper was due, it was crucial that the books I requested through interlibrary loan be available as soon as possible just in case those books were not exactly what I was looking for. Thankfully, the library handled that very efficiently. I had typically used Google Scholar in the past, but writing this paper showed me the resources of the library.