

READING BLACK, READING FEMINIST

A Critical Anthology

Edited by
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A MERIDIAN BOOK



Art and Such

Zora Neale Hurston

When the scope of American art is viewed as a whole, the contributions of the Negro are found to be small, if we exclude the anonymous folk creations of music tales and dances. One immediately takes into consideration that only three generations separate the Negro from the muteness of slavery, and recognizes that creation is in its stumbling infancy.

Taking things as time goes we have first the long mute period of slavery during which many undreamed-of geniuses must have lived and died. Folk tales and music tell us this much. Then the hurly-burly of the Reconstruction and what followed when the black mouth became vocal. But nothing creative came out of this period because this new man, this first talking black man, was necessarily concerned with his newness. The old world he used to know had been turned upside down and so made new for him, naturally engaged his wonder and attention. Therefore and, in consequence, he had to spend some time, a generation or two, talking out his thoughts and feelings he had during centuries of silence.

He rejoiced with the realization of old dreams and he cried new cries for wounds that had become scars. It was the age of cries. If it seems monotonous one remembers the ex-slave had the pitying ear of the world. He had the encouragement of Northern sympathizers.

In spite of the fact that no creative artist who means anything to the Arts of Florida, the United States nor the world came out of this period, those first twenty-five years are of

tremendous importance no matter which way you look at it. What went on inside the Negro was of more importance than the turbulent doings going on external of him. This post-war generation time was a matrix from which certain ideas came that have seriously affected art creation as well as every other form of Negro expression, including the economic.

Out of this period of sound and emotion came the Race Man and Race Woman; that great horde of individuals known as "Race Champions." The great Frederick Douglass was the original pattern, no doubt, for these people who went up and down the land making speeches so fixed in type as to become a folk pattern. But Douglass had the combination of a great cause and the propitious moment as a setting for his talents and he became a famous man. These others had the wish to be heard and a set of phrases so they became "Race" Men or Women as the case might be. It was the era of tongue and lung. The "leaders" loved to speak and the new-freed field hands loved gatherings and brave words, so the tribe increased.

It was so easy to become a Race Leader in those days. So few Negroes knew how to read and write that any black man who was proficient in these arts was something to be wondered at. What had been looked upon as something that only the brains of the master-kind could cope with was done by a black person! Astonishing! He must be exceptional to do all that! He was a leader, and went north to his life work of talking the race problem. He could and did teach school like white folks. If he was not "called to preach" he most certainly was made a teacher and either of these positions made him a local leader. The idea grew and traveled. When the first Negroes entered northern colleges even the northern whites were tremendously impressed. It was apparent that while setting the slaves free they had declared the equality of men, they did not actually believe any such thing except as voting power. To see a Negro enter Yale to attempt to master the same courses as the whites was something to marvel over. To see one actually take a degree at Harvard, let us say, was a miracle. The phenomenon was made over and pampered. He was told so often that his mentality stood him alone among his kind and that it was a tragic accident that made him a Negro that he came to believe it himself and struck the tragic pose. Naturally he became a leader. Any Negro who graduated

from a white school automatically became a national leader and as such could give opinions on anything at all in which the word Negro occurred. But it had to be sad. Any Negro who had all that brains to be taking a degree at a white college was bound to know every thought and feeling of every other Negro in America, however remote from him, and he was bound to feel sad. It was assumed that no Negro brain could ever grasp the curriculum of a white college, so the black man who did had come by some white folk's brain by accident and there was bound to be conflict between his dark body and his white mind. Hence the stultifying doctrine that has not altogether been laughed out of existence at the present. In spite of the thousands and thousands of Negro graduates of good colleges, in spite of hundreds of graduates of New England and Western Colleges, there are gray-haired graduates of New England colleges still clutching at the vapors of uniqueness. Despite the fact that Negroes have distinguished themselves in every major field of activity in the nation some of the left-overs still grab at the mantle of "Race Leader." Just let them hear that white people have curiosity about some activity among Negroes, and these "leaders" will not let their shirt-tails touch them (i.e. sit down) until they have rushed forward and offered themselves as an authority on the subject whether they have ever heard of it before or not. In the very face of a situation as different from the 1880s as chalk is from cheese, they stand around and mouth the same trite phrases, and try their practised-best to look sad. They call spirituals "Our Sorrow Songs" and other such tom-foolery in an effort to get into the spotlight if possible without having ever done anything to improve education, industry, invention, art and never having uttered a quotable line. Though he is being jostled about these days and paid scant attention, the Race Man is still with us—he and his Reconstruction pulings. His job today is to rush around seeking for something he can "resent."

How has this Race attitude affected the Arts in Florida? In Florida as elsewhere in America this background has worked the mind of the creator. Can the black poet sing a song to the morning? Upsprings the song to his lips but it is fought back. He says to himself, "Ah this is a beautiful song inside me. I feel the morning star in my throat. I will sing of the star and

the morning." Then his background thrusts itself between his lips and the star and he mutters, "Ought I not to be singing of our sorrows? That is what is expected of me and I shall be considered forgetful of our past and present. If I do not some will even call me a coward. The one subject for a Negro is the Race and its sufferings and so the song of the morning must be choked back. I will write of a lynching instead." So the same old theme, the same old phrases get done again to the detriment of art. To him no Negro exists as an individual—he exists only as another tragic unit of the Race. This in spite of the obvious fact that Negroes love and hate and fight and play and strive and travel and have a thousand and one interests in life like other humans. When his baby cuts a new tooth he brags as shamelessly as anyone else without once weeping over the prospect of some Klansman knocking it out when and if the child ever gets grown. The Negro artist knows all this but he conceives that a Negro can do nothing but weave something in his particular art form about the Race problem. The writer thinks that he has been brave in following in the groove of the Race champions, when the truth is, it is the line of least resistance and least originality—certain to be approved of by the "champions" who want to hear the same thing over and over again even though they already know it by heart, and certain to be unread by everybody else. It is the same thing as waving the American flag in a poorly constructed play. Anyway, the effect of the whole period has been to fix activities in a mold that precluded originality and denied creation in the arts.

Results:

In painting one artist, O. Richard Reid of Fernandina who at one time created a stir in New York Art Circles with his portraits of Fannie Hurst, John Barrymore and H. L. Mencken. Of his recent works we hear nothing.

In sculpture, Augusta Savage of Green Cove Springs is making greater and greater contributions to what is significant in American Art. Her subjects are Negroid for the most part but any sort of preachment is absent from her art. She seems striving to reach out to the rimbones of nothing and in so doing she touches a responsive chord in the universe and grows in stature. [Here, Hurston intended to add names of Savage's most important work.—ed.]

The world of music has been enriched by the talents of J. Rosamond Johnson, a Jacksonville Negro. His range has been from light and frivolous tunes of musical comedy designed to merely entertain to some beautiful arrangements of spirituals which have been sung all over the world in concert halls. His truly great composition is the air which accompanies the words of the so-called "Negro National Anthem." The bitter-sweet poem is by his brother James Weldon Johnson.

Though it is not widely known, there is a house in Fernandina, Florida whose interior is beautifully decorated in original wood-carving. It is the work of the late Brooks Thompson who was born a slave. Without ever having known anything about African Art, he has achieved something very close to African concepts on the walls, doors and ceilings of three rooms. His doors are things of wondrous beauty. The greater part of the work was done after he was in his seventies. "The feeling just came and I did it," is his explanation of how the carpenter turned wood-carver in his old age.

In literature Florida has two names: James Weldon Johnson, of many talents and Zora Neale Hurston. As a poet Johnson wrote scattered bits of verse, and he wrote lyrics for the music of his brother Rosamond. Then he wrote the campaign song for Theodore Roosevelt's campaign. "You're Alright Teddy" which swept the nation. After Theodore Roosevelt was safe in the White House he appointed the poet as Consul to Venezuela. The time came when Johnson published volumes of verse and collected a volume of Negro sermons which he published under the title of *God's Trombones*. Among his most noted prose works are "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," *Black Manhattan* and his story of his own life, *Along This Way*.

Zora Neale Hurston won critical acclaim for two new things in Negro fiction. The first was an objective point of view. The subjective view was so universal that it had come to be taken for granted. When her first book, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a novel, appeared in 1934, the critics announced across the nation, "Here at last is a Negro story without bias. The characters live and move. The story is about Negroes but it could be anybody. It is the first time that a Negro story has been offered without special pleading. The characters in the story

are seen in relation to themselves and not in relation to the whites as has been the rule. To watch these people one would conclude that there were no white people in the world. The author is an artist that will go far."

The second element that attracted attention was the telling of the story in the idiom—not the dialect—of the Negro. The Negro's poetical flow of language, his thinking in images and figures was called to the attention of the outside world. It gave verisimilitude to the narrative by stewing the subject in its own juice.

Zora Hurston is the author of three other books, "Mules and Men," "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (published also in England; translated into the Italian by Ada Prospero and published in Rome), and "Tell My Horse."

It is not to be concluded from these meager offerings in the arts that Negro talent is lacking. There has been a cruel waste of genius during the long generations of slavery. There has been a squandering of genius during the three generations since Surrender on Race. So the Negro begins feeling with his fingers to find himself in the plastic arts. He is well established in music, but still a long way to go to overtake his possibilities. In literature the first writings have been little more than the putting into writing the sayings of the Race Men and Women and champions of "Race Consciousness." So that what was produced was a self-conscious document lacking in drama, analysis, characterization and the universal oneness necessary to literature. But the idea was not to produce literature—it was to "champion the Race." The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments got some pretty hard wear and that sentence "You have made the *greatest* progress in so and so many years" was all the art in the literature in the purpose and period.

But one finds on all hands the weakening of race consciousness, impatience with Race Champions and a growing taste for literature as such. The wedge has entered the great inert mass and one may expect some noble things from the Florida Negro in Art in the next decade.