
Mules of the world, unite: the feminine Black Atlantic of Zora Neale Hurston

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Abstract

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston states that "black women are the mules of the world": they carry the load that white men, white women and black men refuse to carry; they do the work no one wants to do, without praise or thanks. Writing at a time when Black Nationalist movements and Pan-Africanism were stirring up hopes of racial unity and self-determination within the African-American community, Hurston countered that the ideal of black modernity these groups were advocating offered limited scripts for gendered subjects. Hurston put her beliefs into practice when she left the United States in 1927 to pursue anthropological fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti. While she immersed herself completely in the lives of the people she encountered, she also developed a research methodology that granted her as much agency and presence in her work as the people she was working with. In refusing to obliterate her experience as a black woman from her field notes, Hurston created an anthropological practice that introduced female subjectivity into the discourse on black modernity. In this paper I focus on Hurston's journey across the Caribbean Sea and the anthropological writings she derived from it. I will argue that *Mules and Men* and *Tell my Horse* make female agency visible within the political discourse of the black Atlantic, and that this is achieved not only through her own testimony and personal involvement, but also through the connections she established with other black women within the communities she worked in. I conclude that in rendering visible both her experience and that of the black women she encountered, Hurston's crossing of borders and oceans allowed her to challenge the conventional roles attributed to black women in US discourse. A form of feminine Black Atlantic, her anthropological travels and their textual products call into question the gender biases of racial politics both then and now.

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