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Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Austin: A Case Study in Ethnography, Literary Modernism, and Contemporary Ethnic Fiction

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As “regional” or “ethnic” writers, Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Hunter Austin have suffered from a neglect of their literary strategies in favor of an analysis of the cultural context of their narratives. By focusing on the incorporation of this content, we might reconsider the place of each author in the modernist canon. Far from simply recording or romanticizing “primitive” African and Native American cultures, these two authors critique the relationships among narrator, subject, and audience and construct complex narrative structures which incorporate oral forms. Their narrative techniques link them to so-called high modernists like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, whose experiments with multiple points of view and oral narrative are not, consequently, unique.

Although modern psychology’s influence on the development of stream of consciousness narrative is widely recognized, anthropology’s effect on fiction writers of the modernist period is often overlooked.¹ Many people know that Zora Neale Hurston trained under anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University in the late 1920s, and some literary critics have studied Hurston’s anthropological writings. But few have focused on how Hurston used her training in ethnography to develop new fictional forms. Likewise, critics analyze Mary Austin’s stories about Native American cultures in the southwestern United States without considering seriously how her theories of what she termed “Amerindian” folklore may have affected her own literary methods. Unlike Hurston, Austin never studied directly with Boas or any other anthropologist; nevertheless, as I will demonstrate in this “case study,” the two authors were influenced both directly and indirectly by new anthropological concepts developed by Boas and his contemporaries.

During the early part of the twentieth century, a schism was occurring in anthropology between the evolutionists and the historians.

Franz Boas and his school represented the latter approach, which stressed what today we call “cultural relativism”—the refutation of the idea that any race or culture is inherently superior to another. Boas’s *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1913) was a remarkably influential book, which no doubt affected Hurston’s ethnographic research, since she studied under him, and must have been familiar to Austin as she completed work on Native American literature and traditions for *The American Rhythm* (1930).² Both Hurston and Austin demonstrate and challenge the idea of Boas’s cultural relativism in their narratives. Following the anthropologist’s concepts, their writings valorize “primitive” cultures and question innate racial characteristics. But through their own research and reading in the field, the authors developed narrative strategies which also question ideas of “objective” knowledge and “accurate” reportage, ideas which, as a trained social scientist, Boas could ill afford to reject.³

As women, moreover, the two authors establish a different perspective than their male contemporaries who had previously dominated the social sciences. Occupying a unique stance as female researchers and literary artists, Hurston and Austin ultimately subvert Boas’s method of participant-observer ethnography.⁴ The following pages will discuss Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* and Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain*, *Lost Borders*, and *One Smoke Stories* to demonstrate how both authors create a new genre of “ethnographic fiction” from their knowledge and incorporation of anthropological methods. I hope to illustrate that, as committed cultural relativists, Hurston and Austin prepared literary audiences for an acceptance of new social science tenets and thus help disseminate changing views of culture. In this way they function as precursors for contemporary writers of ethnic fiction.

One of the major methods of modern anthropology introduced by Franz Boas was a more interactive model of collecting material called participant-observer ethnography. Instead of remaining as aloof, “objective” outsider, the collector might actually enter into the culture to take part in its rituals. Participant-observer ethnography posited a new relationship between narrator/observer and subject/material. In her first book of folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston uses this strategy. The author began her project of collecting African American folklore in 1927 while she was a student of Boas at Columbia. The narrator, Zora, who simultaneously does and does not represent Hurston herself, takes part in storytelling sessions on the porch of the local store, rather than passively describing only what she sees. At first this narrative technique appears as a simple framing device. The reader follows Zora on her folklore collecting journey from

Eatonville to Polk County, Florida and finally on to New Orleans to observe hoodoo. But the relationship between the narrator and the tales she collects is complicated by the slippage that often occurs between the frame and the material. Jokes and folktales are shared as well as introduced in the frame story; the act of observation is not separate from the reportage of data as in traditional ethnography.

Hurston represents herself in the text as both educated ethnographer and one of the folk whom she travels to study. In the introduction she intimates that as a native of Eatonville she will be able to gather stories there "without hurt, harm or danger." But collecting from "the Negro," she tells us, is difficult "because he is particularly evasive" and "offers a feather-bed resistance" to outsiders. The point of view then shifts to "we"—Hurston places herself as one of the observed—and explains that "we let the probe enter, but it never comes out" (2).⁵ Constantly shifting perspectives throughout *Mules and Men*, the narrator, or Zora, manipulates her audience and implicitly asks her readers to question the accuracy of the material she collects.

To become an "insider," Hurston the narrator hints, an observer must surrender "objectivity," revealing a problem with Boas's participant-observer method. However much her mentor stressed surrendering aloofness, he maintained traditional scientific attitudes toward "accurate" reportage. Hurston's shifting points of view challenge the efficacy of such a method. "Subjects" will only reveal when and what they want to, perhaps never to outsiders, no matter how much researchers try to enter into the culture they wish to study. The narrator's final tale, which closes the book, confirms Hurston's skepticism about objective reportage. The story of Sis Cat conflates narrator, author, and material into one. The tale teller who invents the "lie" and the author who records it are Sis Cat; and the Rat represents Hurston's presumably white audience, which has been doubly duped by her "lies." The tale itself becomes both folklore material and a gloss of the text's ultimate purpose. The "manners" that Sis Cat learns to use after catching her Rat demonstrate the narrator's method of gathering and reporting data. As an anthropologist, it seems, Hurston has learned a new way of storytelling ("lying"), rather than adopting Boas's "scientific" method.⁶ However, the author can only reveal her strategy indirectly, through analogy and symbol, so as not to threaten the anthropological label of her study or risk rejection by her teacher and sponsor.

In Hurston's second collection of folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938), the author modifies her narrative strategy. Unlike *Mules and Men*, an academic investigation supported by Boas, the research for *Tell My Horse* was funded by two successive Guggenheim Fellowships and devel-

oped as a project expressly for Mrs. Osgood Mason, Hurston's wealthy white patron. Mason literally owned the material Hurston collected. Consequently, Hurston's purpose and audience shifted. She was not to appeal to a scholarly reader, but one who held more popular, or stereotypical, views of African American and Caribbean culture. Furthermore, Hurston was more of an outsider herself in Jamaica and Haiti than she had been on her native territory in the United States.

The author's relationship with her "subjects" is represented in the curry goat feed incident in Chapter Two of *Tell My Horse*. First Hurston must assure her audience that, although she is not Jamaican, she can still offer her reader "inside" information. She reports:

They did something for me there that has never been done for another woman. They gave me a curry goat feed. That is something utterly masculine in every detail. Even a man takes the part of a woman in the "shay shay" singing and dancing that goes on after the feed. (11)

Not only is she privileged to take part in an authentic cultural event, but her status as a woman ethnographer is overlooked. In fact, it is perhaps because of her academic status that she is able to overcome her gender. Since, as Hurston soon reveals, Jamaican society is patriarchal and denies independent action for women, she must convince her audience that she is not denied access to the culture she has come to study. Later in the chapter she makes another intimate appeal to her audience, inadvertently revealing her anxiety about the role she has assumed:

The band began playing outside there in the moonlight and we ran away from the table to see it. *You* have to see those native Jamaica bands to hear them.... As I said before no woman appears with the players, though there is a woman's part in the dancing. That part is taken by a man especially trained for that. (14; emphasis added)

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston does not address her reader in the second person, nor does she emphasize her trespassing on male territory when she attends storytelling sessions on the porch.

But in *Tell My Horse*, the narrator's position as sympathetic listener is mediated. As a black American, Hurston makes it clear that she does not necessarily share or agree with Jamaican and Haitian values, particularly those concerning the treatment of women. A frequent criticism of *Tell My Horse* is that Hurston abandons her cultural relativism for a kind of female chauvinism.⁷ In Chapter Five, "Women in the Caribbean," the author makes generalizations about

the low status of women in the two cultures and compares their situation unfavorably with American women. Gwendolyn Mikell points out that, as a black woman anthropologist, Hurston's life experiences caused her to intertwine an outsider's and insider's viewpoint. Even though "we may wish to accuse her of patronization," Mikell explains, "the skill with which she unmasked these social sensitivities remind us that, as an intellectual, she was the contradictory product of the class-and-race conscious American society of the 1930s" (222). Though the author may seem ethnocentric here, I believe Hurston is defending her own tenuous status as social scientist by distancing herself from the cultural practices she observes. Furthermore, blending outsider and insider perspectives enables her to mediate between objective and subjective viewpoints without privileging either. Her criticism of Caribbean culture in Chapter Five are counter-balanced by an equally honest appraisal of the context from which she operates. She addresses her audience at the beginning of the chapter as "Miss America, World's champion woman" (57), a lighthearted but critical epithet which indicts herself as well as her reader as snobs.

In representing "data" to an educated and, most probably, white audience, Hurston had to confront skepticism and even hostility toward their depictions of unfamiliar "primitive" cultural practices, especially native religions. She developed fictional strategies for valorizing African American hoodoo and Haitian voodoo. (Later we will see Austin using similar strategies for Native American mysticism.) Hurston surrounds her discussions of New Orleans's hoodoo with an aura of mystery. She explains in *Mules and Men* that hoodoo is more a "suppressed religion" than a foolish superstition. "It is not the accepted theology of the Nation," she states, "and so believers conceal their faith.... The profound silence of the initiated remains what it is" (185). Likewise, in *Tell My Horse*, Part III, "Voodoo in Haiti," is devoted to a description of voodoo *loa* (gods) and ceremonies. Hurston compares voodoo rites with Catholicism and shows how the two have become amalgamated in Haitian culture (230-31). She explains that it is a religion of "the mysterious source of life," but "the symbolism is not better understood than that of other religions and consequently is taken too literally" (113). In *Mules and Men*, narrator Zora travels to New Orleans to become initiated herself into this secret faith, and we are given her eyewitness account of her experiences. The strategy of withholding and giving information, telling the reader of the secrecy of the rites then only partially revealing them through personal reportage, allows the reader to experience a different culture. Throughout Part II of *Mules and Men*, the narrator alternates between describing hoodoo rituals, as when she learns

them under hoodoo doctor Luke Turner (198-202), and omitting discussion of them: "I studied under Turner five months and learned all of the Leveau routines," she states, but does not tell what they are, for, she claims, "in this book all of the works of any doctor cannot be given" (202).

Before revealing her experiences with Kitty Brown, another New Orleans hoodoo doctor, the narrator cites several conjure stories which she tells us "illustrate the attitude of Negroes of the Deep South" (231), but also testify to the effectiveness of Kitty's spells. All the evidence in this section of the book is circumstantial and no proof is given, yet no other explanation or analysis of the phenomena is offered either. Letting other eyewitnesses testify first, the narrator can both claim and disclaim the efficacy of hoodoo—and the accumulation of testimonies prepares her audience for her own eyewitness account. As on the porches of Eatonville and Polk County, the narrator again mediates a position between educated observer and curious participant in order to dispel her audience's skepticism.

In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston extends her strategy to confront the audience's disbelief in voodoo. First, she insists that the religion is too complex and comprehensive to explain in one book: "This work does not pretend to give a full account of either voodoo or voodoo gods. It would require several volumes.... Voodoo in Haiti has gathered about itself more detail of gods and rites than the Catholic church has in Rome" (131). Then, like the narrator in *Mules and Men*, she corroborates her observations of zombies with personal testimonies, "but without using actual names to avoid embarrassing the families of the victims" (192-94). Third, she narrates her own witnessing of a zombie in a hospital and verifies the account with a photograph. Throughout the text, photos of voodoo ceremonies and dances are interspersed, giving the book a kind of travelogue appearance. Hurston can assert that she was actually present at these events with the pictures to prove it.

The author uses another more subtle means of challenging the reader's skepticism, which she embeds within the narrative itself. The reader identifies with Hurston as narrator/character in her travel adventure as she first remains doubtful about the existence of voodoo. At one point in the book, she explains how she is assured by upper class Haitians that zombies are only a myth (181). Soon after, of course, she becomes an eyewitness to one, and the word of her educated hosts is in doubt. Later in the book, before she goes to visit a *bo-cor*, or voodoo priest, her yard boy is frightened by what he tells her are the "*cochon gris*," a secret society, whom he claims wants to eat his baby. When another upper class Haitian visits Hurston, he learns

what Joseph has told her, and Hurston overhears him berating Joseph for “tell[ing] a foreigner, who might go off and say bad things about Haiti such things” (203). The scene closes with the visitor and Hurston assuring each other that they understand “figures of speech,” and the reader is left to wonder whether again the upper class Haitians are trying to hide something from the narrator. Sure enough, in the next few pages Hurston describes her horrifying experience attending a meeting of a secret society. Throughout the narrative, Hurston is dissuaded from pursuing information about voodoo or the *cochon gris*, which only makes her—and the reader—more curious and determined in the search.

Another way Hurston reveals the complexity of the “primitive” cultures she documents is to foreground oral expression in her narratives, implicitly questioning the perceived superiority of written literature. In *Mules and Men*, we see a blurring between oral and written language in the construction of the narrative frame. The “conflict” of the plot, the competition among tale tellers, dramatizes the African practice of “the dozens,” or what Henry Louis Gates defines as “that age-old black ritual of graceful insult” (293). The tales told often reflect the nature of the “talking game” on the porch. For example, in Chapter Two, the men and women of Eatonville compete for linguistic primacy. The sexual battle on the porch is replayed in the tales. One storyteller, Gene, asserts, “her tongue is all de weapon a woman got” (30), prompting Mathilda to tell “why women always take advantage of men” with the well-known “keys to the kingdom” folk-tale. It seems that even in the content of the tales they tell, the women lose. In “the keys to the kingdom” tale, woman might control man’s access to the bedroom, the kitchen, and the cradle with the keys the Devil teaches her to use, but her power is strictly limited to the domestic sphere. Furthermore, Hurston makes the next performance in the chapter a song by Jack that describes one man courting three women. Although the narrator of the song might be “in hell” with “that pretty Johnson gal” in the last verse, he has still enjoyed the attentions of three different lovers with impunity.

But the tale-telling sessions also reveal women subtly resisting the patriarchal culture. The chapter ends in a dialogue and exchange of insults between a brother and sister which the sister wins. She has the last word, while he, finally overcome by all the coon-dick he has drunk “mumbl[es] down in to his shirt and [goes] to sleep” (37). In this particular tale-telling session, as in others throughout the book, Hurston’s literary construction mirrors and comments upon the verbal gaming the narrator observes, revealing complex linguistic prac-

tices of oral expression, as well as documenting the relative roles and status shared between the sexes.

The overall narrative structure of *Tell My Horse* deceptively appears as simpler than Hurston's earlier ethnography, since it is mostly straightforward first person travelogue. But here as well, the author incorporates orality into the written account of her observations. She does this by breaking codes of standard ethnography—she includes her own opinions and reactions to the cultures in a kind of breezy, conversational style that defies objective reportage.⁸ With her side comments and matter-of-fact generalizations, she might be a precursor to today's roaming television commentators. More significantly, Hurston introduces post-modern ethnographic techniques after discarding Boasian models. She includes dialogues and scenes in *Tell My Horse* which reveal her interference in the culture she observes. In Jamaica she insists upon going on a wild boar hunt (31) and even builds a stove for her hosts who have never owned one (23). Surely these actions would be considered unauthorized influence by ethnographers of the modern period. But Hurston includes the interaction and dialogues she engages in with her hosts to reveal not only the mutual exchange of cultural information, but also her self-reflexive stance. *Tell My Horse* becomes part diary in addition to travelogue, political commentary, and ethnographic description. This loosely structured, mixed genre represents a different way of transmitting oral data by replicating the ethnographer's reactions instead of censoring them for an illusory, "objective" style.⁹

By validating the "primitive" culture she studies, Hurston implicitly questions western cultural practices which deny supernatural experiences in favor of rational, objective knowing—and, thus, her narratives begin to interrogate the validity of Boasian ethnography itself. In the last two chapters of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston visits Dr. Reser, a white American man who has become a revered voodoo priest throughout Haiti. He is loved and trusted by the Haitians, because he acts as their friend, not their superior (247). He tells Hurston about his belief in voodoo gods from "several instances of miraculous cures, warning, foretelling of events and prophecies" (256). Then he describes to her his experiences of being possessed:

Incident piled on incident. A new personality burned up the one that had eaten supper with us. His blue-gray eyes glowed, but at the same time they drew far back into his head as if they went inside to gaze on things kept in a secret place. After awhile he began to speak. He told of marvelous revelations of the Brave Guedé cult. And as he spoke, he moved farther and farther from known land and into the territory of

myths and mists. Before our very eyes, he walked out of his Nordic body and changed. Whatever the stuff of which the soul of Haiti is made, he was that.... (257)

Here Hurston not only illustrates the doctor's willingness and ability to experience mysticism, but also the relative nature of culture itself. Under Franz Boas, Hurston had helped to prove that race and culture were not synonymous. In this scene, Reser becomes Haitian by fully accepting his adopted society's cultural practices; his "race" is culturally constructed.

Nevertheless, despite Hurston's eager participation in Jamaican and Haitian culture, she does not take the final step of becoming part of the culture, as Dr. Reser does. In *Tell My Horse* and *Mules and Men*, she maintains the status of outside observer, interested and sympathetic, but still removed. Both books close with folktales—or primary ethnographic data—(*Tell My Horse* ends with Dr. Reser's tale, "God and the Pintards"), and Hurston affirms her position as cultural interpreter. She explains to the reader: "[b]ut the most important reason why I never tried to get my information second-hand out of Dr. Reser was because I consider myself amply equipped to go out in the field and get it myself" (252). So although throughout her narrative she questions accepted ethnographic techniques and challenges their assumptions of objectivity, she still represents herself as a fieldworker in the end, a consummate outsider-insider.

While not celebrated as an ethnic or ethnographic author like Hurston, Mary Austin, nonetheless, uses ethnographic methods in her fiction. An autodidact, she immersed herself in Native American culture, through participating in its rituals and studying its literature. She familiarized herself with anthropological terminology and methods. Like Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, Austin's first two collections of short fiction, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Lost Borders* (1909), depict the relationship between narrator and tale as a function of the participant-observer relationship. It is important to note that Austin, while sympathetic and knowledgeable about Native American culture, was nevertheless Caucasian and thus unable to participate or validate her experiences as completely as Hurston could in studying her own Eatonville neighbors for *Mules and Men*.¹⁰ To overcome the handicap of her outsider status, Austin often poses as witness and listener. She does so not only in individual narratives like "The Land" and "The Woman at the Eighteen Mile," but also to introduce collections of tales. *The Basket Woman* (1910), subtitled *Fanciful Tales for Children*, establishes the author as listener in the preface:

I know that the story of the Coyote-Spirit is true because the Basket Woman told it to me, and evidently believed it. She said she had seen Coyote-Spirits herself in Saline Valley and at Fish Lake. I know that the story of the Crooked Fir is true, because if you come up the Kearsarge trail with me I can show you the very tree where the White Bark Pine stood; for I was one of the party that took it on its travels over the mountain: and the rest of the stories are all as true as these. (vi-vii).

By establishing a relationship with her "subjects" through listening and watching, Austin attempts to shift the emphasis away from her own ethnicity; still her anxiety about an authentic voice is evident. Contrary to Hurston, whose shifting viewpoints often playfully tease the skeptical audience (as in the Sis Cat tale), Austin's multivocal narratives become a means of validating the original sources of the author/narrator's information.

Austin's stories often contain multiple layers of narration through hearsay and gossip. Like Hurston's *Zora*, Austin's narrators call into question the "truth" of the "data" presented, but instead of challenging the accuracy of the tales themselves by calling them "lies," they withhold crucial information from the audience or claim incomplete or contradictory knowledge. Perhaps by doing so, Austin hopes to tempt her readers into the mystery of her tale much in the way that Hurston teases her audience by conflating narrator and character "Zora."

In "The Walking Woman," the last story in *Lost Borders*, the narrator learns of the elusive wandering woman about whom she writes "by report" when she stops at various places on her travels. She wants to meet the walking woman in person, for one reason, because people disagree about whether or not she is comely or if she limps. The narrator, it seems, mistrusts her sources more than her audience. In this story and in others, the narrator pursues a "trail" of hearsay in order to find her plot and confirm the truth behind it. In "The Woman at the Eighteen Mile," an earlier story in the collection, the narrator confesses, "from the moment of hearing of the finding of Lang's body at Dead Man's Spring, I knew I had struck upon the trail of the story" (203). Often the story the narrator wants to tell is not the typical male adventure of a lost explorer or a discovery of a mine in the desert; instead, as in "The Walking Woman" and "The Woman at the Eighteen Mile," it is a portrait of a mysterious individual, whose life may not be glamorous, but whose survival on the harsh desert landscape is remarkable. Following trails to stories becomes the overall plot structure or frame of Austin's story collections. Through these shifting

and mediating points of view Austin foregrounds the act of collecting their story material as much as the tales themselves.

Like Hurston, Austin reveals the unreliability of her narrator. We see this strategy especially in the opening story of *Lost Borders*, "The Land." The narrator recounts an incident when a friend brings her a potsherd and tells her that she "ought to find a story about [it] somewhere" (158). She replies that she will, rather, invent a story about it, which she proceeds to do. Later, after she has told the story and published it in a magazine, strangers approach her and confirm its truth, telling her how her version differs from the accepted one. The narrator then admits, "By this time, you understand, I had begun to believe the story myself" (158). This revelation reverses the narrative act: life imitates fiction. The audience's trust in the narrator is lost if the very nature of the tale-telling is called into question at the beginning of the book.

Hurston's careful depiction of hoodoo as an arcane but not ersatz religion affirms her stance as cultural relativist. Austin, likewise, celebrates Amerindian cultural practices and mysticism through her invocations of the mysterious influences of the desert and her depictions of wise Native American women. In the preface to *The Land of Little Rain* she writes:

I confess to a great liking for the Indian fashion of name-giving: every man known by that phrase which best expresses him to whoso names him.... For if I love a lake known by the name of a man who discovered it, which endears itself by reason of the close-locked pines it nourishes about its borders, you may look in my account to find it so described. But if the Indians have been there before me, you shall have their name, which is always beautifully fit and does not originate in the poor human desire for perpetuity. (3)

Naming instead of possessing land is a repeated motif in Austin's short fiction. "Not the law, but the land sets the limit," the narrator asserts in "The Land of Little Rain" (9). The desert is associated with Amerindian culture and figured as impenetrable by Austin. Her characters are often overcome by "desertness" which moves them beyond the boundaries of "civilization" or white man's culture. In "The Land," the interaction of two cultures is again emphasized by the dichotomy between law and nature. Out there where "the law and landmarks fail together...almost anything might happen" (156). Actually, beyond the borders is where Austin gathers her stories. But the land that Indians inhabit, the desert, is also treacherous, for it claims both lives and souls. While celebrating its beauty, the narrator also cautions against its power. Austin's narrative strategy, like Hurston's,

invites readers to identify with the mysterious allure of the landscape and the people who inhabit it, while simultaneously undercutting their own bias of cultural superiority.

In her stories about Native American women, particularly "The Basket Woman," Austin makes implicit cultural comparisons in order to authenticate Amerindian culture. Seyavi, the basket woman, has "set her wit to fend for herself and her young son" (*The Land of Little Rain* 93) after the death of her mate, and she does so by selling baskets. The narrator describes Seyavi's art of basket making by comparing it to white woman's hairstyling: "In our kind of society, when a woman ceases to alter the fashion of her hair, you guess that she has passed the crisis of her experience.... The Indian woman gets nearly the same personal note in the pattern of her baskets" (95). The irony here is unmistakable; Austin elevates Native American art by re-contextualizing it in familiar terms and trivializing white culture as a result.

The narrator describes Seyavi's basket designs, which have "a touch beyond cleverness" (95), and explains how when Seyavi cuts "willows for baskets the soul of the weather [goes] into the wood" (96), something readers can only understand by owning one of her creations. At the end of the story we are given what might seem to be a pitiful picture of Seyavi, old and blind, sitting by the fire in the campoodie sharing gossip with her three other blind companions. But in this description is also a tribute to her "spiritual ichor" (98) as well as to the Indian way of life which allows her dignity to the end. Seyavi remains part of the campoodie, and if her only privacy is in her blanket, she still "sits by the unlit hearth of her tribe and digests her life, nourishing her spirit against the time of spirit's need..." (99).

Throughout Austin's fiction, in fact, the figure of the Indian basket maker functions as a kind of *chisera*, or wise woman, for the narrator. In *The Basket Woman* Austin introduces her as the real narrator of the text, who retains primary authority over it; the author is only a recorder of the stories she is told. As with Hurston, who learns secrets of hoodoo from Kitty Brown, Austin's narrators are initiated into the mysteries of Native American culture through women.

Austin's stories similarly reflect the literary techniques of the culture she observes. In *The American Rhythm*, she describes the effects of her study of Amerindian speech on her writing. It has "given to [her] literary style its best thing, a selective economy of phrase, and its worst, a habit of doubling an idea back into its verbal envelope..." (390). Here, I believe she is explaining the structure of her stories as "trails," without traditional plot development. The motifs of landscape imagery in individual stories, coupled with the reappearance

of characters like the basket woman and the pocket-hunter, constitute the "doubling back," a Native American literary technique Paula Gunn Allen discusses in "The Sacred Hoop." One instance of recurrence can be noticed by juxtaposing Austin's first two collections of stories, *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders*. The first story in each describes the desert in essentially identical terms. In both, the land is first invoked from the outsider's perspective as a wasteland, then revealed from the native view as mysterious and powerful. Another motif reinforcing what Gunn Allen calls the "mystical and psychic" in Native American thought is Austin's image of the wise woman, who, though not always Native American, seems to subscribe to Indian cultural values. In *The Land of Little Rain* this character is represented by Seyavi, the basket maker, and in *Lost Borders* she is transfigured into the walking woman and the woman of the eighteen mile. Such motifs in themselves are not peculiar to Native American literary techniques, but their mystic quality underlines aspects of the culture the author describes.

Austin's highly descriptive language conforms to her own study of Native American poetic form which uses the "glyph" or "type of Amerindian song which is lyric in its emotional quality and yet cannot be expressed by the simple lyric cry" as its primary form (*American Rhythm* 53-54). The lyricism of Austin's narrative, with its sometimes diffuse and even transcendental imagery, simulates the form of the glyph. Both the glyph and the "inter-communicative silences" the narrator describes in "The Walking Woman" highlight aspects of Native American mysticism.

Austin's narrative frame also demonstrates the transference of tales from spoken to written form. *One Smoke Stories* (1934), the author's final collection of short fiction, are literally meant to be told during the length of time it takes to smoke a ceremonial cigarette. Genre is determined by the combination of content plus culture, not the other way around. For instance, she explains in the introduction, "one-smoke stories are common to all who live in the area: the form is so admirably conceived for oral telling that all anecdote in the Indian country tends to fall into that shape, which accounts for my including in this collection tales of other peoples than Indians" (xiii-xiv). The author develops her theory of the origins of genre further in *The American Rhythm*, when she explains the effects of landscape and environment on literary form.

Like Hurston in *Tell My Horse*, Austin questions scientific objectivity and affirms the relative nature of culture in her fiction, without rejecting her own position as interpreter of it. "White Wisdom," a tale in *One Smoke Stories*, epitomizes the author's ethnographic fiction.

The story is narrated by a Ute Indian, an outsider to his audience of Navahos, yet, like the author herself, no stranger, but rather another "tribesman" who has sympathetic reasons for sharing his "telling" (182). White "wisdom," as to be expected, is treachery for the Indians. Dan Kearny, the protagonist, is a supposed mixed-blood who never fits completely into either white or Ute culture. Ultimately his offer of marriage is rejected by a white woman and he accepts his Indian name of "Twice-Bitten." But while the story makes clear how white culture threatens Amerindian survival, it does not affirm Indian culture unequivocally and thus avoids reverse ethnocentrism. Instead, the wisdom of the tale is represented through the foreknowledge of the *chisera*, the narrator's mother, who divines all along that Dan is not Ute at all by blood, for his parents were both white. The twist at the end of the story is not this revelation, however, but rather that Dan's ethnic origin is irrelevant. He has lived as a Ute most of his life; therefore, he has become one. Like Hurston's Dr. Reser in *Tell My Horse*, Austin's character illustrates the relative nature of the culture. One's race or membership in a particular society is not biologically determined.

Finally, despite her deep, personal involvement with Native American mysticism, as an author, Austin, like Hurston, remains apart from the culture she records in order to maintain the delicate balance between her subject and her audience. As adopted outsiders, Dr. Reser and Dan Kearny represent the extreme of assimilation into another culture. Posing as ethnographer/narrators in the text, both authors circumvent the complete subjectivity of cultural immersion experienced by their characters.

Thus incorporating oral and literary techniques from the cultures they studied, Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Austin developed original and complex literary forms. Their experiments with narrative form constitute part of a new tradition of writing by women regionalists in the modern period—"ethnographic fiction." In addition to Hurston and Austin, many of their contemporaries were influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the developing social science of anthropology.¹¹ Tracing narrative strategies among these writers might help reveal how the reading public received and accepted ideas of cultural relativism. With new immigration restrictions and a rising tide of xenophobia occurring in the 1920s in the United States, the nation faced crucial decisions about whether to become a "melting pot" (cultural assimilation) or a "salad bowl" (cultural relativism and multiculturalism). Authors Hurston, Austin, and others, through their ethnographic narratives, questioned the ethnocentrism of their

dominant Anglo-European culture. These questions have resurfaced in the 1980s and 1990s with a new generation of ethnic writers.

In fact, an important connection might be established between regional writers of the modern period and contemporary ethnic authors. Critics have explored Zora Neale Hurston's influence as a literary foremother for a generation of black women writers from Alice Walker to Toni Morrison, but they often overlook her narrative strategies in favor of her heroic female plots. Mary Austin is often recognized as a precursor for Willa Cather and her novels about the southwest, but she is perhaps as much a model for Louise Erdrich and Barbara Kingsolver, who depict Native Americans interacting with white society. Today's ethnic authors can assume their audience is already familiar with multivocal narratives that question of objective reportage and challenge ethnocentrism.

One example of the parallel between modernist and contemporary ethnographic literature is Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), which explores the family and ancestry of an urban African American woman. In the first few pages of the novel, the narrator introduces the main characters and adds an anecdote about "Reema's boy," who leaves his rural home on the island of Willow Springs to become "educated":

Look what happened when Reema's boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth, all excited determined to put Willow Springs on the map.... And then when he went around asking us about 18 & 23, there weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about "ethnography," "unique speech patterns," "cultural preservation," and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little gray machine. (7)

One problem with Reema's boy, the narrator explains, is that he fails to listen to the people of Willow Springs to understand their stories, but instead arrives with pre-determined categories of analysis. Naylor's introduction is a cautionary for would-be ethnic authors. Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Austin avoid the trap that Reema's boy falls into of treating their subjects as objects. Like Naylor's narrator, they know the pitfalls of appropriating the voice of the "other." Affirming cultural and narrative relativity, their ethnographic fiction illustrates a vital link between modernist regional literature and post-modern multicultural texts.

Notes

1. See Manganaro's introductory chapter to *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, a collection of essays on modernist anthropology. He traces the cross-disciplinary influences between the humanities and social sciences to show how "anthropology vitally participated in the century's most important cultural and...literary movement" (vi). Also included in this volume are essays considering Ruth Benedict's poetry and ethnography (Handler) and Margaret Mead's and Zora Neale Hurston's innovations in ethnographic reportage (Gordon).
2. According to her biographer, Esther Stineman, Austin was a self-educated ethnologist; she sought out scholars in the field and corresponded with them (172). Austin was probably familiar with Boas's theories from her wide reading in Native American ethnography. Ruppert confirms that in her contribution on aboriginal literature in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* she quoted frequently from scientists such as Densmore, Fletcher, and Boas (255).
3. Later Hurston also suffered for disregarding accepted scientific methods. When she wanted to begin work for her Ph.D. in anthropology in 1935, her funding source, the Rosenwald Foundation, withdrew its support when it was discovered that she would spend only three semesters in classes before fieldwork. Edwin Embree, the foundation's president, felt she needed more "discipline" in learning ethnographic methods. See Hemenway (208-10).
4. For a relevant discussion of postmodern ethnography and its relation to feminist theory, see Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen. They argue that, unlike male anthropologists, feminists have been aware of the presence of the "other" for forty years. Only now are post-modern ethnographers (i.e., post-Boas) recognizing the need for the "other" to speak. Participant-observer anthropology, while concerned with the relationship of the dominant to the culture observed, nonetheless, still spoke from the position of the dominant (11).
5. I am indebted to Johnson for this critique of Hurston's outsider/insider status in *Mules and Men*.
6. See Willis's chapter on Hurston, "Wandering: Zora Neale Hurston's Search for Self and Method" (26-52). Willis explains how *Mules and Men* represents Hurston's "specifying," or verbal one-upmanship, in written form (31). She equates the author's "manners" in the Sis Cat tale with her aggressive writing strategy (29). Johnson and Boxwell also analyze this tale. Johnson concludes: "To turn one's own life into a trickster tale of which even the teller herself might be the dupe certainly goes far in deconstructing the possibility of representing the truth of identity" (289), while Boxwell uses the image of Sis Cat to underscore Hurston's self-representation as ethnographer in her text.
7. See Hemenway, who considers *Tell My Horse* as Hurston's "poorest book, chiefly because of its form." He objects to naive political analysis, her chauvinism, and her inclusion of legend instead of historical fact (248-49).
8. See Gordon for more on how Hurston departs from standard ethnographic genre in *Tell My Horse*.
9. This focus on self as both interpreter and creator of "data" resembles current post-modern ethnographic techniques more than modernist methods. See, for instance, Clifford.
10. See Rudnick and Ammons. Rudnick acknowledges Austin, Mabel Doge Luhan and Alice Corbin Henderson's Anglo "patronizing" control over a subordinate culture but also affirms the positive exposure these artists gave Native Ameri-

can political and social issues (25). Ammons asks whether it is ever possible for "a member of a dominant group honestly to cross cultural boundaries," then answers her own questions that Austin came closer than most. She never assumed that she could completely understand or represent "Amerindian" art and culture (102).

11. Other writers I consider part of this tradition include Anzia Yeziarska, Mildred Haun, and Sui Sin Far.

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