# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD*

A Project Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), is narrated in ways that the autobiographer's movements follow her growth in age, education, society, and career as a folklorist. Some scholars of American literature have studied the movement in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. For instance, Lionnet-McCumber saw movement in *Dust Tracks* as a metaphor; Kübler studied movement in the text as an adventure; and Sherrard-Johnson studied movement in Hurston's autobiography in relation to other African American autobiographies of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As the above scholars suggest, mobility is a recurring motif in Hurston's autobiography. However, these critics do not make quite explicit the relationship between some of the narrator's movements and her growth; they do not fully examine the importance of those relocations to the autobiographer's understanding of the world. To the best of my knowledge, no scholar has studied exhaustively, the significant complications of Hurston's intricate relocations, and the absence of such scholarship has created a gap, in the study of *Dust Tracks*, that requires critical intervention. Therefore, in this essay, I examine in more profound ways the complexities of Hurston's mobility in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I chart the different kinds of journeys that the narrator undertakes and how each type affects her growth and development. Thus, I employ the autobiographer's intricate mobility as agency to the actualization of the narrator's bildungsroman arc. In conclusion, I discussed the ways that Hurston's journeys portray and significantly accentuate the larger African American cultural and human movements from varied locations to Harlem, the center of the Black's cultural renaissance of the early twentieth century. The essay finds that not all the movements in *Dust Tracks* are adventurous or metaphorical, and we must also consider those that are not.

Keywords: American literature; autobiography; bildungsroman; Harlem; Hurston; mobility; Renaissance

## Autobiographical Mobility in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) was an African American folklorist, novelist, dramatist, prolific writer, and an important figure in early twentieth-century America, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. She contributed to the recuperation and preservation of traditional African American arts and culture, and through some of her works, she offered significant insights into the American Vodou practices. Her notable books include *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938), and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). After the publication of her fifth book, readers became interested in her life and career, which prompted her publisher, J. B. Lippincott, to request her to write an autobiography. According to Valerie Boyd, "Hurston objected, feeling that a look back on her life, and her career, was premature" (347). However, she ultimately agreed, and after a stringent editorial process *Dust Tracks* was published in 1942.

Lippincott editors removed sections of Hurston's manuscript that they considered provocative to Hurston's white audiences, or problematic for other reasons, and their interference, as Claudine Raynaud has shown in detail, "crucially altered" the text in many ways (37). Reacting to the first edition, the writer Arna Bontemps averred that "Hurston deals very simply with more serious aspects of Negro life in America – she ignores them" (3). About three decades later, Alice Walker famously stated, "for me, the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote is her autobiography. After the first several chapters, it rings false" (68). The restored edition of *Dust Tracks,* established by the Library of America and published in 2006 represents Hurston's original manuscript and encouraged new interest in the text. Even with the restored material, however, *Dust Tracks* must be understood as "the result of a mediation, an unequal dialogue with [Hurston's] publisher in response to the projected audience" (Raynaud 36).

This essay holds that *Dust Tracks* is nonetheless important in the study of twentieth-century American literature. It offers a portrayal of what many black women endured and what their texts went through in the hands of publishers and critics. It offers glimpses into the black cultural revival as well as its impact on those who lived through it—the ways that the Harlem Renaissance brought about rebirths in the psychology and worldview of the black artists, their re-imagination of themselves in the light of the common movement. Hurston is not left out of this revival. In *Dust Tracks*, she fashions her life's circumstances—home, age, journeys, and yearnings—in such a way that they reflect what she wants her life to look like; she re-imagines herself to suit the kind of public image she desired from the people who knew her. But also, she offers messages that could inspire hope in other women of color living or writing under harsh racial, domestic, or economic circumstances. Her rising reputation, attainment of education, and celebration of folklore parallel the rise of black cultural affirmation in New York.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, movement is a leitmotif. *Dust Tracks* is quite unlike most travelogues in that it does not give details of the specificities of moments the narrator is in transit; it does not describe the scenery of geographical landscapes or the flora and fauna of the countryside. But in certain ways, *Dust Tracks* is like a travelogue because the plot structure maps out the journeys of the autobiographer to and from geographical locations as she navigates her financial dearth, maneuvers her psychological destitution, pursues spiritual awakening, and progresses to a certain intellectual height. Above all, *Dust Tracks* is an autobiography that follows the tradition of the bildungsroman. More specifically, it represents the *künstlerroman* variant, in which "a young man or woman undergoes a process of aesthetic, worldly, or sentimental education (sometimes all three together) and achieves success as a writer or an artist" (Frow, Hardie, and Smith 1905). This pattern accords with the plot structure of *Dust Tracks*, in which the narrator travels through her teenage years and early adulthood in search of knowledge before eventually becoming a writer. Most of the stages of the narrator's growth and development—from infancy to adulthood—occur along the paths of

her journeys to various locations. Some of the movement Hurston depicts, however, is imposed on her—decided and enforced by those who have financial, religious, or academic authority over her. These compelled movements work to delay or impede her progress. This essay traces the stages of the narrator's growth as they appear like nodes in the network of journeys and wanderings and explicates their significance. The paper also examines the exceptions to this pattern, in which movement is less than free, and complicates or thwarts her aspirations. In doing so, the paper suggests ways of reading Hurston's movements as her attempts to escape the environmental, sociological, and financial constraints that are imposed on her by society, and her struggle to overcome the barriers of racism and sexism.

The title, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is both picturesque and figurative because it has layers of meaning that it brings to bear on the autobiographer's life journeys. A dusty road's tracks paint a picture of a trodden route, suggesting the narrator's fated passage along a treacherous path. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson associates *Dust Tracks* with other titles of African American autobiographies such as Langston Hughes's *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956) and Claude McKay's *A Long Way From Home* (1939) that employ migratory and travel tropes (120). Writing about these titles that invoke migrations, Sherrard-Johnson argues that they "underscore the autobiographers' preoccupation with geographical—if not also socio-economic and psychological—movements" (120). Like these other titles, Hurston's introduces readers to a narrative that chronicles the narrator's journey through life, detailing her triumphs and setbacks, her strengths and weaknesses, her yearnings, aspirations, and struggles as she traverses time and space.

Thus, it is not surprising that the narrator discusses "time and place" and the "incidents and directions of my life" (1) from the very first page. The narrator immediately immerses the reader in the town she claims as her birthplace, Eatonville, Florida, stating, "It all started with three white men on a ship off the coast of Brazil" (1). Biographers have established that Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, with her family relocating to Eatonville in her infancy. However, these traveling white men, as Hurston tells the story, were

lured by the prospects of South Florida in perhaps the same way that Hurston's father was later lured there by the prospects of the town they founded. By recalling that historic voyage by the white men who founded her hometown in a way that makes it intrinsic to her coming into existence, Hurston signals the proximity of her life's journey to similar expeditions.

Brought to the site of convergence of wayfarers by her father, who was a wayfarer himself, Hurston presents herself as having an early inclination to wander. In her account, the urge to explore the world and discover what lies beyond the horizon captivated her since infancy. Her father had similar traits, which Hurston suggests she may have inherited from him. She portrays her father as highly mobile, even going so far as to leave his "wife and three children" (9) in Alabama while he went in search of better opportunities. Hurston claims that she "looked more like him than any child in the house" (19). The striking resemblance is not only in her physical appearance but, more importantly, in her inclination to travel. She narrates that she learned how to move early in her life by "crawling well," but didn't walk until an "old sow-hog" (22) forced her to do so. The narrator relates the story she was told as a child: that she was still unable to walk after her first year, until a hog that came to snatch the corn she was eating and compelled her to get up and get away. Once on her feet, she adds, "it seems that I just took to walking and kept the thing a'going. The strangest thing about it was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods all alone, following some inside urge to go places" (22). This "inside urge" that drives her to explore the world is her inquisitive nature and adventurous spirit, which links her to her father, "who didn't have a thing on his mind but this town and the next one" (23). "Some children," she concludes, "are just bound to take after their fathers in spite of women's prayers" (23). Hurston believes that her mobility is innate, having been inherited from her father.

As noted above, Sherrard-Johnson argues that *Dust Tracks* falls under the category of New Negro autobiographies whose characteristic attributes include "the travel narrative, the autoethnography, and the anticipation of the biomythography—a form pioneered by Audre

Lorde but nascent in Hurston's multiple memoirs" (122). More specifically, she argues that "episodes of travel and exploration constitute a significant amount of New Negro life writing" (122). Other critics have studied the implications of movement in *Dust Tracks*, although in less depth. Francoise Lionnet-McCumber, for example, emphasizes the metaphorical dimension. She commends Hurston for adopting "enabling and empowering structures of meaning" (253) that exempt her from being appraised from "Eurocentrically determined racial metaphors of the self" (253). Those structures of meanings—"the metaphor of the road" and "the allegory of the voyage"—are symbolic and derived in part from folklore, in which movements on the road typify the human journey from birth to death (253). For Lionnet-McCumber, the trips in *Dust Tracks* figuratively illustrate the autobiographer's potential to traverse life limitations, the struggle of having to cope with her mother's early death, the struggle attending school, and the hunger, both real and metaphorical, she endures from her teens until she becomes an adult.

Alternatively, Martina Kübler argues that Hurston transforms her self-life writing into an adventure narrative by modeling the character Zora's life after the archetype of the adventure narrative. She highlights the presence of adventure writing features in the text, along with aspects of the avant-garde's "effects of alienation and defamiliarization" (352). She identifies moments and events in *Dust Tracks* that represent the adventure paradigm, such as Zora's wishful request for a horse as a Christmas gift (353) and the white man, a protective figure who provides Zora with the intuitive knowledge she needs to survive (Kübler 353, 354). Additionally, Kübler asserts that many of the texts Zora reads as a child are encompassed by the genre of adventure fiction (356). Even in the reading of Bible stories, the narrator of *Dust Tracks* recalls that she focuses on the parts filled with adventures: "I happened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested. David went here and he went there, and no matter where he went, he smote 'em hip and thigh. Then he sang songs to his harp a while and went out and smote some more" (40). Kübler finds the adventure trope also in Zora's first relocation, from Eatonville to Jacksonville, identifying it as "an expulsion"

(357). This relocation is the beginning of Zora's adventure as well as the fulfillment of the first of her visions that foretell her future. Kübler reiterates in her conclusion that *Dust Tracks* challenges the literary genre of autobiography by reclaiming the motifs of mythological adventures, previously dominated by men. Hence, Kübler adds, Hurston "frequently shows herself as challenging and outperforming typical white, male bastions of adventure such as exploration and research. With this... Hurston claims agency and establishes herself as anything but an oppressed and displaced Black woman struggling for a voice" (372). In this way, Kübler sees *Dust Tracks* as subversive.

Movement in *Dust Tracks* thus can be read as a metaphor, as Lionnet-McCumber has argued; as a quest for adventure, as Kübler has suggested; and as participating in the African American autobiographical traditions of the time, as Sherrard-Johnson has pointed out. As all these approaches suggest, mobility is at the heart of Hurston's text. However, these critics do not make explicit the relationship between some of the narrator's movements and her growth; they do not fully examine the importance of those relocations to the autobiographer's understanding of the world. Likewise, they do not account for the fact that not all the movements in *Dust Tracks* are adventurous, and we must also consider those that are not. This study takes mobility as a framework for analyzing the text, and I trace how growth is linked to mobility and agency. Although every stage of growth is associated with a specific movement, not every movement results in growth. In fact, there are voyages that impede her growth, and although Hurston avoids stating it directly, her gender and race have much to do with those non-progressive movements, which destabilize her will and alter her direction.

Throughout *Dust Tracks*, Hurston depicts herself as living an itinerant life, which means she has no real home of her own, but makes a temporary one wherever she finds herself. In the course of the narrative, Hurston relates relocations back and forth between the Northern and Southern States and trips to several Caribbean countries. The autobiography chronicles phases of Hurston's life during which she travels through approximately ten major states in America. She grows up in Eatonville, Florida; follows Miss M_ to her home in

Boston, Massachusetts; journeys with Miss M_ through northern Virginia; attends Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland; works in a salon in Washington DC; attends Barnard College in Manhattan, New York; tries to reconcile with her brother Bob in Memphis, Tennessee; works as an anthropologist in southern Florida and in New Orleans, Louisiana; interviews Cudjo Lewis (one of the last survivors of the last slave ship that arrived in the US in 1859) in Mobile, Alabama; and goes to stay with a friend in California, at whose house she writes *Dust Tracks.* In addition, within this time, she visits four countries: The Bahamas, Haiti, Canada, and Jamaica. The presence of Cudjo is significant. Lionnet-McCumber associates his forced relocation from his home in Africa and his predicaments in America with Hurston's own expulsion from her own home, arguing that "Lewis' story emblematizes her own sense of bereavement and deprivation" (250). Though she does not recognize it explicitly in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston is moved around by the same institutions that moved Cudjo. The duration of her stays and the reasons for her visits and departures from all these places vary; however, one consistent aspect is that she never establishes a permanent residence in any of these locations. Remarkably, she arrives and departs without encumbrances, sometimes with just a box of clothes, at other times by train, boat, or with her car and a few personal items, which is typical of the itinerant way of life.

Hurston affirms her early resolve to roam the earth, but hints at the possible consequences of such expeditions with tales from her childhood. As a child, where her legs could not take her, she went imaginatively in her thoughts. Whether physical or imaginative, there was always potentially a price to pay for movement. She recounts making plans with her childhood friend Carrie Roberts to leave Eatonville on an expedition to "the end of the world" (27). Carrie agrees initially, but at the appointed time of departure changes her mind, fearing punishment from her parents if they failed to return home on time, and tries to no avail to persuade Hurston to give up the idea (28). The story of Hurston's travel plans with Carrie has multiple implications. On the one hand is the illustration of the child's desire to move; on the other hand, is the presence of institutional authority, embodied by their parents, which

indirectly foils her plan and aims to undermine her will. Carrie's reasons for refusing to go present one of the earliest attempts to educate the young Zora against adventure and ambition, to make her see that such escapades could lead to dire punishment. Yet, after Carrie refuses to accompany her on that expedition, the narrator insists, "I did not give up the idea of my journey . . . I couldn't give up. It meant too much to me. I decided to put it off until I had something to ride on, then I could go by myself" (28). Hurston reinforces the conventional view of travel as a signifier of freedom and self-determination against the forces that would constrain or limit individual movement. Later, however, this internal compulsion for mobility will be complicated by the presence of external compulsion.

Subsequently, the young Zora makes frantic efforts to satisfy her compulsion to travel by seeking something to ride on. However, just as Carrie foretold, the next time Hurston anticipates movement, by requesting "a fine black riding horse with leather saddle and bridles" (28) as a Christmas present, she is met with serious reprimanding from her father. To further illustrate the consequences of her childhood desire to travel, I turn to the circumstances of her short trips in the carriages and cars of travelers to Orlando. The narrator begins: "I used to take a seat on top of the gate post and watch the world go by" (33). Culled from either folk culture or Vodou practices, the image of a watcher at the "gate post" is emblematic. Hurston's position intensifies her betweenness; she is standing at the liminal boundary between the domestic and the Diaspora, at the border between home and exile. Like the automobiles of the sojourners to Orlando, the human body, especially that of a traveling lone black girl like Zora, is also prone to accidents on the fraught road on which she anticipates journeying. That is, in the midst of those strangers, she is susceptible to racial prejudice, bodily harm, or even lynching. Such dangers are hinted at by her Cousin Jimmie's decapitated body, which is found on the railroad (64), and later by her father's remains found in his wrecked vehicle (141). To Hurston's grandmother Zora's "brazenness was unthinkable" (34). However, when invited to join the passengers, Hurston recollects, "I'd ride up the road for perhaps a half mile, then walk back" (34). The drivers do not hurt her, but her parents ensure she is punished for

undertaking such perilous excursions: “I did not do this with the permission of my parents, nor with their knowledge. When they found out about it later, I usually got a whipping” (34). Despite the punishment, she continues to long for the road.

Hurston uses journeys to new locations like a literary device, to demarcate notable events in her life. Movements begin and end events that she wants her readers to take note of. One of the most momentous events in her life is the death of her mother. She describes the trauma of helplessly witnessing her mother’s death and the lingering effects it has on her psyche: “I was to agonize over that moment for years to come” (66). She experiences this agony during “play, in the wakeful moments after midnight, on the way home from parties, and even in the classroom during lectures. My thoughts would escape occasionally from their confines and stare me down” (66). She goes on to acknowledge that “that moment was the end of a phase in my life” (66), and to separate the new phase from the old one, she must depart from Eatonville. The old phase contains the years of idyllic childhood, dependence, and abundance, while the new one is tribulation, forced maturity, and homelessness: “I was old before my time with grief of loss, of failure, of remorse of failure” (66). This pivotal moment establishes the context for the subsequent moments to unfold.

At this juncture, the reader encounters the narrator at the nexus of her familiar life and the upcoming one, both at home and anticipating her impending homelessness, with grief immobilizing her and foreshadowing her future mobility. The narrator declares that “that hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit” (67). Instead of allowing her to stay at home, her father enrolls her at Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville, the school that two of her elder siblings, Bob, and Sarah, were attending (69). So, “Two weeks later,” Hurston writes, “I was on my way to Jacksonville, too. I was on my way from the village, never to return to it as a real part of the town” (69-70). In this new stage, she commits herself to academic development. Interestingly, this removal was enforced by the father, who had previously whipped her for undertaking treacherous movements. However, the departure marks the dividing line between her old self, traumatized

by grief, and the new self, which heals from the emotional tribulation. This first major relocation inaugurates her emotional growth.

Hurston's journey away from Eatonville to school in Jacksonville is also noteworthy, as it signifies the pursuit of knowledge and marks the beginning of what Barbara Rodriguez calls her "rising from rural anonymity" (22) to urban Harlem importance. At the Jacksonville school, she matures into a teenager, shedding the innocence she possessed at the Eatonville village school, demonstrating a greater mastery of academic rigors, and showing signs of educational and psychological formation:

> I had gotten used to the grits and gravy for breakfast, had found out how not to be bored at prayer-meeting . . . and how to poke fun at acidulated disciplinarians (something she would not have done in Eatonville), and how to slip through a crack in the fence and cross the street to the grocery store for ginger snaps and pickles, which were forbidden between meals. I had generally made some sort of adjustment. Lessons had never worried me, though arithmetic still seemed an unnecessary evil. (78-79)

The transformational gap between Zora, a child, at the Eatonville school and Zora, growing into her teens, at the Jacksonville school is a marker of her growth. As she moves, she increases her knowledge and understanding of herself and the world around her, sometimes in a formal education setting but also informally through interactions with people in new environments.

Hurston's family members are presented in ways that instantiate the roles they play in preventing her progress. For instance, all her journeys at the invitation of family members turn out to impede her progress and frustrate her plans. When her brother Dick sends her a ticket to come and live with him in Sanford, the move leads to a vicious fight with her father's new wife (97). When her brother Bob invites her to come and live with him, promising to enroll her in school, she ends up serving his wife (99). These invitations have ulterior motives; the brothers seek to serve their own families, not Zora's good. Through these journeys, Hurston demonstrates the value that society assigns to the body of a black woman,

who is rated primarily for her domestic worth and the services provided by her body, not for her intellectual capabilities. Here father, too, refuses to take her in, but rather offers her up for adoption to the school in Jacksonville (81). Hurston's trips to her brothers' homes uncover the ways that even the family bond is commoditized. From the three years she labors for Bob, she gains nothing from the value she brought to his household. The exploitation leaves her in further financial distress, prompting her to making another move, taking a job as an assistant to Miss M_, an actress with a touring theatre company.

*Dust Tracks* reveals how Hurston's journey with Miss M_ allows her to meet people who teach her life lessons and help her come to terms with the racial realities of the time. The trips are laden with experiences that reshape her understanding of race relations. Although she is evasive about her experience of racism, the narrative conveys that the journeys with the members of the traveling company, along train routes, in camps, during and after performances, bring into view her otherness. Hurston recalls that "the company welcomed me like, or as, a new play-pretty. It did not strike me as curious then. I never even thought about it" (104). During their travels, the differences of her dialect, which were not obvious to her, quickly become apparent, as she learns: "In the first place, I was a Southerner and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. They were all northerners... it was not that my grammar was bad; it was the idioms" (104). She learns that her use of similes and curses, as well as her cultural stock, are different from those of the crew members: "I was young and green, so the baritone started out teasing me the first day. . . . They teased me all the time to just to hear me talk" (105), and when she talks, her colloquial language elicits humorous responses.

Throughout her days with Miss M_, Hurston continues to learn from the teasing of the group, and from the family she encounters during their trip to Boston, to develop resilience against racial stereotypes and cultural dichotomies. In Boston, Hurston encounters Miss M_'s elder brother Johnnie, who perpetuates the mockery from the company crew in a different way: "Johnnie started in to tease me right away" and "one day he played a terrible joke on me . . . I was petrified with horror and shame" (110). She emerges, however, enriched by the

knowledge she has acquired during that phase of her traveling life. It is amid this informal tutelage, in a job that is akin to minstrelsy, that her creative ingenuity begins to evolve. By the time she departs from Miss M_, Hurston writes, “I had been with her for eighteen months, and though neither of us realized it, I had been in school all that time. I had loosened up in every joint and expanded in every direction” (116). The months that she spent traveling with Miss M_ are invaluable, leaving her with life lessons and a mindset that opens her to relationships with people across racial and cultural lines. She testifies that “the experience had matured me in other ways . . . those experiences, though vicarious, made me see things and think” (118-119). She learns life lessons from the failures and successes of others and develops the ability to advise herself on how best to navigate her life.

Hurston presents her young self as knowing the importance of formal education and attempting to navigate her life toward the pursuit and achievement of knowledge. Her pursuit of formal education involves moving from place to place—Baltimore, Washington, and New York—and overcoming challenges that threaten the completion of her studies. Amy Doherty Mohr traces the movements of the narrator along this path: “she moved to Jacksonville, Florida. From there, she migrated for work and education, attending Morgan Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, and Howard University in Washington, D.C.” (77). Despite having little money and facing a bleak future, Hurston remained determined to get an education: “It was not at all clear to me how I was going to do it, but I was going back to school... I took a firm grip on the only weapon I had—hope and set my feet. Maybe everything would be all right from now on. Maybe. Well, I put on my shoes, and I started” (119).The narrator’s future is blurry; many of her visions have come and gone. Feelings of uncertainty and optimism pervaded her thoughts, as she recalls: “One minute I felt brave and fine about it all. The wish to be back in school had never left me. But alone by myself and feeling it over, I was scared” (119). But she goes, hoping for a better future.

The connection between education and mobility has long interested sociologists. Most agree that education has direct and reciprocal effects on how people rise on the social ladder.

Richard Breen and Kristian Bernt Karlson, for example, hold that "education is widely regarded as the key to individual economic and social mobility" (107). Education clearly enables Hurston's ascension in the African American social class structure of her time. Writing of her move to acquire knowledge, the narrator asks, "How then did I get back to school? I just went. I got tired of trying to get the money to go. My clothes were practically gone, nickeling and dimeing along was not getting me anywhere. So, I went to the night school in Baltimore and that did something to my soul" (122-123). Instead of seeking money or buying new clothes, she opts to acquire knowledge. This decision leads her to meet Dwight O. W. Holmes, who not only rekindles her hope but also revivifies her soul. He inspires her to aspire higher, take bold new steps, and transcend the crippling effects of her immediate problems, saying, "'No matter about the difficulties past and present, step on it,'" (124). A few days later, she "went out to Morgan College to register in the high school department" (124). After that, she "moved on to Washington" (130), enrolling at Howard University for a year and a half. Despite not completing her studies at Howard, she gains valuable knowledge from the institution, which enables her to climb the social ladder. She begins to write while at Howard and after leaving, publishing a short story for *The Stylus*, as well as the stories "Drenched in Light" and "Spunk" in *Opportunity Magazine*. She still does not make much money, but she gains colleagues in the creative arts and in the publishing industry, people like Charles S. Johnson, who were promoting the "Negro renaissance" (138). By the time's standards, she appeared to be progressing.

Hurston's narrated life in *Dust Tracks*, in some ways, applies mobility in a didactic manner. Sociologically, we conceptualize movement not only as physical relocation but also as a rise in status. The text suggests that one can indeed move upward across class hierarchies through educational qualifications, career, and cultural contributions. Through her studies, Hurston became an anthropologist and writer. Her ethnographic research and writing were relevant to the aims of the Harlem Renaissance and elevated her among her peers. By the time she published *Dust Tracks,* she was recognized as having "a considerable reputation as

anthropologist and writer" (Sherman 32). This rise up the social ladder did bring Hurston a degree of financial stability at the peak of her career. Overall, the autobiography suggests that social movement is accessible to anyone who chooses to pursue it. Jefferson-James argues that *Dust Tracks* was "released and marketed as a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches American tale" (99). What Jefferson-James refers to here is Hurston's rise from penury to security, and sometimes being in the company of opulence, even if she did not attain great wealth herself. We must understand that there is a motion, an ascent from an impoverished, inconspicuous life to prominence, as the narrator navigates her way into the academic and literary world of her time, winning awards and fellowships, and garnering recognition by bringing Black American folk culture to light. Her life, both before and after her migration from Maryland to New York, illustrates class mobility.

Hurston emphasizes, in particular, the role of education in her rise. Pushed by the lack of money and the increasing urge to go to school, Hurston embarks on an expedition from Maryland to New York, stating, "Being out of school for lack of funds and wanting to be in New York, I decided to go there and try to get back in school in that city. So, the first week of January 1925 found me in New York with $1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope" (138). She arrives in New York, as Jefferson-James may say, in "rags," but within a few months, that is, between January 1925 and May 1925, she lifts herself out of that condition of poverty. This class movement is in ascending order, purposeful, progressive, and constructive, advancing from having no money, friends, or job to a rapid series of successes: "I won a prize for a short story at the first Award dinner, May 1, 1925, and Fannie Hurst offered me a job as her secretary, and Annie Nathan Meyer offered to get me a scholarship to Barnard" (139). Her life as a student at Barnard University, New York, is also at variance with the life she lived while studying at Howard University, Washington, DC. At Howard, she merely sustained herself by menial labor, whereas at Barnard, she proclaims, "I became Barnard's sacred black cow. If you had not had lunch with me, you had not shot from taw. I was secretary to Fannie Hurst and living at her 67th Street duplex apartment, so things were going very well with me"

(139-140). She can live this new life because of her mobility, ambition, and determination to succeed. As narrator, Hurston conveys a significant didactic message that inspires hope in people who find themselves in similar poor situations: that there is a chance to rise from struggles to a life of comfort.

Hurston's ascension from poverty up the black social ladder corresponds with the peak of her career, which is a time when her mobility is greatly emphasized in the narrative. Her ability to cover distances, as well as the speed at which she moves, significantly increased with the possession of a personal motor vehicle (154). The car that she was given for her ethnographic research also elevates her in front of her interviewees, especially Slim, Lucy, and Big Sweet, who see her as belonging to a more sophisticated class. Slim "was a valuable source of material" (152), and the car helps her cultivate him as a source, by elevating him above his peers: "I built him up by buying him drinks and letting him ride in my car" (152). The car also quickens Hurston's friendship with Big Sweet, who is to serve as her protector in Polk County, after Hurston offers her a ride (154). In contrast, the car elicits envy from Lucy, Slim's friend, who assumes that Hurston's car, her lighter skin, and her clothes make her attract Slim's attention (152). In addition, her ownership of a reliable vehicle places her in a position to make her move more swiftly than at any other time. The latter is illustrated by the speed at which she departs Polk County at the height of her conflict with Lucy. When she is told she had better run, she recalls, "I really ran, too. I ran out of the place, ran to my room, threw my things in the car, and left the place. When the sun came up I was a hundred miles up the road, headed for New Orleans" (156). Hence, at this point, the car serves two principal functions: it symbolizes Hurston's mobility and exemplifies her social ascension.

However, there are also ways that Hurston's vehicle complicates those associations between mobility and social status. The fact that she was given the car by her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, who would also claim possession of the results of her research, frustrates the assumption that the car meant freedom for Hurston. It shows her reliance on others who directly or indirectly control or constrain her movement. Osgood Mason's gesture

could be likened to that of the woman Hurston describes as "The Second in Command" (81) of her school in Jacksonville, who lent her money to travel home by boat, but not to return. In both instances the association of mobility with freedom becomes problematic, as the narrator's movement is directed not by her own will but the will of her benefactors.

The limitations of Hurston's car as a signifier of liberty and self-sufficiency can be likened to the research grants she receives. These stipends take care of her immediate personal needs, and the publicity that accompanies the award parties enhances her prestige, but like the car, they bind her to her patrons. The stipends she was given were merely enough. Alice Walker likens them to "the way welfare is extended in Mississippi. One is asked, *curtly*, more often than not: How much do you need *just to survive*? Then one is—if fortunate—given a third of that" (68). The money Hurston is given for her own sustenance on these trips must also be used to insure and maintain the car. Yet Hurston needs the car and the money for her trips, for the work she wants to do, and for her safety, as demonstrated by her narrow escape from Polk County.

Hurston's mobility helps her complete her job as an anthropologist. Her professional mission focuses on what she refers to as the "search for knowledge of things" (146), particularly black folkloric traditions, in contrast to her previous movements, which were aimed at finding means of sustenance and education. The travels for professional fieldwork are not without difficulties, trials, and challenges. In Polk County, Florida, as mentioned above, she reflects, "my life was in danger several times. If I had not learned how to take care of myself in these circumstances, I could have been maimed or killed on almost any day of the several years of my research work" (146). Her work as an ethnographer exposes her to danger, but she relies on her past experiences and her ease with mobility to evade it. Despite the risks involved in these travels, there is an ennobling essence to her job as an ethnographer. She recovers some black American vernacular and oral performances, which she preserves through her writing and makes known through her theatre work, which Chanté Mouton Kinyon describes as "the praxis of performance ethnography" (499). Like John Millington

Synge, Kinyon argues, Hurston aimed to prevent her people's oral practices from being lost to the historical record (500).

Mobility also plays a role in Hurston's search for a religious understanding or practice that could fulfill her spiritual needs. Hurston presents herself as one who doubts the doctrines of the Christian religion, despite her family's roots in the Baptist Church. "As early as I can remember, she writes, "I was questing and seeking" (216) for answers to the questions in her mind about religion. She recalls wanting to know, for example, "If Christ, God's son, hated to die, and God hated for Him to die and have everybody grieving over it ever since, why did He have to do it?" (216). She carries this inquisitive mind into adulthood. After fleeing Polk County, she heads to New Orleans. In New Orleans, she undergoes initiation into Hoodoo. Hurston's narration of her initiation into hoodoo indicates that she views her mobility not just as geographical and social but also as crossing from the physical to the metaphysical realm. Physically, like a pilgrim, she undertakes an expedition to Vodou temples, where, through rites of initiation, she transcends the terrestrial earth to other rarified worlds. In the course of one of the Vodou rituals that she participates in, she expresses concern that her soul might wander "off in search of water and be attacked by evil influences and not return" (156). It is in this chapter that the curious, numinous import of her childhood role as a watcher at "the gate post" (33) becomes overt. In one of the rites of passage into Vodou, she narrates her departure from the doorpost of life into the world of dreams and hallucinations, saying, "I had dreams that seemed real for weeks. In one, I strode across the heavens with lightning flashing from under my feet, and grumbling thunder following in my wake" (156). In another account of departure and return from the physical world, she describes a ceremony she performed "at the crossroads at midnight" (157). This latter ceremony is symbolic because of the "crossroads," which is a fraught intersection, and "midnight," which is the time between the real and other recondite realms. There Hurston sat "alone and invited the King of Hell" (157).The image recalls the metaphysical import of "the gate post" on which she sat as a child and waved at strange travelers (33). Readers will recall that Hurston conceptualizes her "wanderings"

initiated by her mother's demise as not just on the physical plane but also on the incorporeal level: "Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit" (67). The complexity of this movement across realms is derived from the fact that Hurston is physically stationed on the "crossroad at midnight" and is still able to traverse a transitional chasm to invite the devil, an act that is unearthly.

Billy Middleton has argued that Hurston is "the author most closely associated with American Voodoo and Hoodoo" and that her research in New Orleans challenges misconceptions about Hoodoo and highlights how the practice could present new opportunities to segregated blacks in the 1920s and 1930s American South (156). She maintains that "Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti and the ceremonies were both beautiful and terrifying. I did not find them any more invalid than any other religion. Rather, I hold that any religion that satisfies the individual urge is valid for that person" (169). Hurston's openness to and defense of voodoo is testimony to the satisfaction she derived from its practices. Contrary to the disbelief she registers regarding her parents' religion, she finds something beautiful in voodoo and argues that it should be regarded as other religions that fulfill the spiritual aspirations of their members.

Hurston's movement as an ethnographer forms a narrative. She presents herself using the trope of a voyager in search of her race's latent treasures, and through those tropes, she claims her role in the discovery of practices and talents that otherwise would have perished in obscurity. Her journey takes her from Louisiana to Florida and then to the Bahamas (157). In the Bahamas, she discovers Bahaman songs and dances, which she introduces to the theater in New York upon her return (159). Through these travels along the path of her work as an ethnographer, she reclaims her race's cultural history and diversity. *Dust Tracks* showcases how Hurston mobilizes black cultural practices and artifacts across geographical and artistic boundaries and significantly influences their reception and adoption by other artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston explains, "I wanted to show the wealth and beauty of the material to those who were in the field, and therefore I felt that my job was well done when it

took on" (158-59). She highlights the richness of folk culture by bringing it to the New York stages, and she succeeds to the extent that the black population begins to take up some of the materials that she introduced (173). Her actions at this stage, more than others, signal the movement of cultural artifacts from the Caribbean to the United States and highlight her mastery of her professional duties. She acknowledges that she did not make "real money out of concert work" but finds satisfaction in knowing that she "established a trend and pointed Negro expression back towards the saner ground of our own unbelievable originality" (285). Her movements aim to rescue cultural items in danger of being lost and to ensure their recognition and preservation. These efforts bear fruit when they receive recognition in the media and in productions: "Theater Arts Magazine photographed us and presented us in its April issue . . .  the Folk Dance Society presented us at the Vanderbilt. We appeared at the first National Folk Festival in St. Louis in 1934, at Chicago in 1934, and at Constitution Hall in Washington D.C." (285).

I suggest readers divide the narrator's movements into two broad categories: deliberate or purposeful, and impulsive or without a specific aim. I have covered the deliberate relocations above, which include her journeys to school, her pursuit of financial independence, her ascent up the class structure, and her travel for work. While her wanderings may not directly contribute to her personal development, they are nonetheless meaningful. She primarily wanders to satisfy her curiosity, which, as discussed above, began early in life: "once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods all alone, following some inside urge to go places" (22). As an adult, those wanderings continue, in keeping with what Kübler has called the adventure motif.

The Great Depression of the 1930s prompts some of these wandering movements. Unlike Hurston's previous relocations, which corresponded to her growth and development, from Florida to Massachusetts, Maryland, Washington, and eventually New York, the later journey starts in reverse order, from New York to Memphis, Tennessee, and finally Florida, her birthplace. The trip back to Florida is crucial to our reading because it initiates the

downward curve of her bildungsroman arc. And here lies a twist in the structure that unsettles the progressively linear plot. After reaching her career peak in Manhattan, the narrator retraces her path back to Eatonville. The world economic meltdown necessitates retrogression. Frow, Hardie, and Smith accept that such retrogressions may occur in a bildungsroman and clarify that "regression sometimes proves as formative as development" (1906). Her decline is not part of her plans to explore the world, rather, "in May, 1932, the great depression did away with money for research," and she finds herself "back in my native village" (173). From Eatonville, she moves to Sanford, where she says, "I rented a house with a bed and stove in it for $1.50 a week. I paid two weeks, and then my money ran out" (173). Her condition is one of penury again, leading the reader to imagine her as reliving the life she has overcome in the past. Her life in Sanford in the 1930s bears certain resemblances to the life in Maryland in 1925 before her departure for New York. Against this expectation, however, this time she regains financial stability through her literary work, using the time to compose *Jonah's Guard Vine*.

Even though *Dust Tracks* is didactic about the possibility of rising in social class, it also reveals that Hurston often lacked control over where she found herself, as financial dependency often forced her into unfamiliar and unchosen circumstances. Fanny Hurst, Hurston's employer for a time, takes Hurston on a trip that embodies the qualities of an adventure narrative, but it is one over which Hurston has no choice and no control. What begins as a proposed trip to "Belgrade Lake in Maine to pay Elizabeth Marbury a visit" (195) unexpectedly transforms into a two-week journey to Canada. The spontaneity, the numerous stops along the way, and the aimlessness complicate attempts to relate the movements to growth. Hurston writes that Hurst's "impishness broke out once on the road" (195) and implies that her only option was to go along. According to her narration, "next day we were on the road... As we drove into the heart of town, she turned to me and said, 'Zora, the water here at Saratoga is marvelous. Have you ever had any of it?'" (195). Zora responds negatively to the question, causing them to abruptly halt their journey so she can take a sip of water. On

the same trip, Hurst inquires if Zora has seen the Niagara Falls, to which Zora replies that she has not, leading to a detour to see the US side of the Falls. Again, Hurst inquires, "'Zora, have you ever been across the International Bridge? I think you ought to see the fall from the Canadian side" (196). Hurst steers towards Canada, and "we spent an exciting two weeks motoring over Ontario, seeing the countryside and eating at quaint but well-appointed inns" (197). Lovalarie King mentions that "the stories about Hurst are fraught with ambiguity and deal mostly with the tricks she used to play on Hurston while she functioned as Hurst's assistant/chauffeur/confidant" (82). Hurston narrates this trip as spontaneous, lacking in plan and purpose, and initiated entirely by Hurst. This type of travel contrasts with the kinds of movements that are presented as integral to Hurston's development.

The trip with Hurst across the border is significant enough to be included in the autobiography, yet Hurston is silent about many aspects of the experience. She reveals that when they arrive at "the famous United States Hotel" (195), Hurst goes in to inquire about a reservation but is disappointed that the hotel is closed too early, which is odd for such a season. On the Canadian side of the border, Hurston recalls relishing the meals they ate "at quaint but well-appointed inns" (197). It appears that she is concealing the fact that in the US, she is not allowed to check in to a hotel because of her race but is allowed to eat in attractive inns in Canada. Hurst, in a sketch of her relationship with Hurston, describes how Hurston worked for her "in the capacity of chauffeur. She drove with a sure relaxed skill on the frequent trips north, east, south, and west that we took together" (22). Hurst's account corresponds with Hurston's but reveals complications that Hurston does not. Contrary to what Hurston wants people to know, she experienced racism during some of these trips. Hurst writes that "on our excursions, we repeatedly encountered the ogre of discrimination. At hotels, Zora was either assigned to servants' quarters or informed that they were full up" (24). This accords with what Hurston writes, that the United States Hotel oddly was closed, but Hurston chooses not to go into details. These experiences of being on the road do not hold the glamour Hurston anticipated in childhood.

Notably, this narrative of development through mobility was written in yet another place Hurston had not intended to go: "*Dust Tracks* on a Road is being written in California, where I did not expect to be at this time" (176). Hurston admits that she did not travel there out of her own volition, but rather went at her friend Katharane Mershon's insistence: "I did not come out here to California to write about the state. I did not come to get into the movies. I came because my good friend, Katharane Edson Mershon, invited me out here to rest and have a good time" (176). Hurston indicates that financial struggles force her to accept Mershon's amiable offer: "1941 was a hard year for me" (176). Against the purpose of her trip, she commits her time productively to writing: "I have written a book here and gone to work in the movies. This surprises me because I did not think that I would live long enough to do anything out here but die" (176). However, California differs from the environment she thrives in, and Mershon's energy challenges her, leaving Hurston exhausted. Accepting Mershon's hospitality also means enduring Mershon's arduous hiking on mountainous paths. "Before it was over," Hurston writes, "I felt like I had spent two months walking a cross-cut saw" (176). The tone is comical, radiating Hurston's humor and sharp-witted trenchancy, but it conveys a real discomfort.

In territory she does not like, and moving in a way she has not chosen, Hurston turns against the spirit of adventure. To illustrate how out of place she feels, Hurston turns to an animal allegory: "Mershon is a mountain goat while I am a lowland turtle. I want to rock along level ground" (176). Turtles are semi-aquatic slow-crawling creatures accustomed to their habitats, whereas highland goats are sprinters and used to climbing. Turtles and goats are also popular characters in folklore, and Hurston, being a folklorist, intends their meanings in the text to be derived metaphorically. Hurston, who thinks of herself as being mobile on her own terrain, encounters Mershon, whose mobility overwhelms her. Boyd recounts the numerous road trips that Mershon and Hurston made to northern and southern California: "traveling in Mershon's Buick from San Diego up, Hurston saw deserts, poppies, Joshua trees, orange groves . . . took in redwood forests, cable cars, giant sequoias, wharves, and plenty of

mountains" (348). Adventures are typified by exciting, wild, or strange obstacles—like the mountains of California—and victory over those adversities. But Hurston detests the obstacles presented by the mountains and declares that if elected the governor of California she would level them: "and I do mean LEVEL!!!!" (176). Under these circumstances, she wants no more adventure.

Ultimately, I suggest that Hurston's *Dust Tracks* is a journey autobiography that delineates the various geographical and cultural settings that molded and impacted the author. Hurston's autobiography highlights the belief that life is a journey, and it effectively chronicles her own odyssey. The narrative exposes the challenges faced by the author, emphasizing Hurston's unwavering resolve and tenacity as she navigates her way through life. Each relocation conveys new experience, and these experiences contribute to her cognitive, educational, and interpersonal development. Julia S. Charles finds that "there is something expressive, transparent, and especially resolute in the voices of the fictional women [Hurston] has given us and in the self she reveals in *Dust Tracks* on a Road" (48). The self that Hurston presents in *Dust Tracks* is certainly resolute. From the time she learns to walk, Zora develops the urge to move and does not stop moving until the end of the story. The narrative teaches that one can depend on one's inner strengths and choices to achieve what one intends to achieve, as the narrator depends on her choice to travel and her strength along the path for her growth and the realization of her dream. At the same time, the narrative conveys how her movements were sometimes compelled by others and how social institutions worked to limit her freedom, suppress her aspirations, and inhibit her growth.

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