Changing the Subject

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GENDER—and certainly “women” specifically—is a category born out of its being written and performed. And depending on who’s writing or performing, where and for whom and with what interests, the category will bear in its signification a certain set of ideas governed by a certain set of rules. The same is true for classifications of work, race, and region. These signifiers are contingent and constitutive in relation to other markers of identity. As I hope to have shown in my discussions of Mary Prince’s History alongside twentieth-century diasporic texts, gender takes a particular shape as it comes into contact with various contexts of racial and geosocial space. What appears likewise clear is that, as authors and readers write women into the texts, there is also present an interest in “righting” women—providing a proper account of their stories, indeed in getting the story “right”—and thus tendering an authentic subject whose voice and experience readers can access. As scholars write women across the African Diaspora, then, we are also attempting to right them—to offer a clear subject for analysis. These analytical projects are often cast in the progressive language of recovery and reclamation. In this manner, we scholars who are interested in recovering women’s voices (thought to lie in a specific and identifiable space all its own called “the margin”) see ourselves doing important work on the academic first responders’
team—“righting” the ship that would render women’s identities invisible to mainstream discourses in literary criticism.

In the January 2011 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors published “The Newly Complicated Zora Neale Hurston”—a piece that showcased what they gleaned from three of Hurston’s short stories that had not been reprinted before and that they deem “important because they provide fuller insight into Hurston’s engagement with urban black life” (3). Gaining new access to as yet unseen literature is undoubtedly a fortuitous result of archival research, and adding new pieces of data to the corpus of works by Hurston is a productive enterprise. Carpio and Sollors describe some of the ways in which Hurston complicates many readings of who she was:

She was also more complicated than the anti-establishment thinker some 1970s feminists wanted her to be. Focusing on Their Eyes Were Watching God, they traced a black woman’s resistance to male domination; the heroine Janie Crawford’s search for a voice and for fulfillment became the touchstone for viewing Hurston as a progressive foremother. Yet Hurston’s rural folk orientation seemed to go along with her conservative leanings and made some of her views compatible with those of the Southern Agrarians like Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate. She thought Reconstruction was a deplorable period, favored Booker T. Washington over W. E. B. Du Bois even decades after Washington’s death, and opposed the New Deal; in 1954 she also opposed the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education. (5)

Carpio and Sollors are right to complicate the reductive critical moves that would call Hurston one kind of author or another and that would suggest her writing was doing a single, definable work when she was a Harlem Renaissance standout. As I emphasized in my earlier discussion of Their Eyes, critiques of the text are misguided indeed if reading the book purely as a protofeminist bildungsroman. However, Carpio and Sollors do not go far enough. Implicit in their discussion is a vision of Zora Neale Hurston the person, and “she” (or her biography), in the process of being newly complicated, is still presented as a self-evident and clearly identifiable subject for scholarly discussion.

The language I find noteworthy here is that of a “newly complicated Zora Neale Hurston” qua Zora Neale Hurston. Carpio and Sollors’s ultimate assessment is that “New discoveries will require us all to expand our understanding of who Hurston was and what she produced. If we
think of her within only one of the categories of protofeminist, political conservative, Southern folk writer—or even a combination of those—we will miss the ‘cosmic Zora’ that existed betwixt and between, and even fully outside, such categories” (7). What we are left with, then, at the end of an introduction to three heretofore unknown stories, is “the cosmic Zora” that transcends categorization, existing completely outside of the boxes into which scholars would place her. The problem, however, is not that scholars categorize Hurston. After all, what else are we to do? How do we offer critical discussion about literature and the authors who produce it—about anything at all, for that matter—without bounding the discourse within certain limits? To pretend that we can do otherwise is disingenuous at best. The aim, then, as I see it, is for scholars to be more cognizant and straightforward about what interests are brought to bear in their particular categories and classifications. If the scholarly caricatures of Hurston that Carpio and Sollors admonish constitute a reduction, the impulse to suggest Hurston can hover outside all categories or discourse is a delusion.

Ironically, it would seem to be the insistence on the person “Zora”—in all “her” humanness and ordinariness (we might point out that her conservative stances on the Brown v. Board of Education decision or the New Deal frustrate her fans but also make her “real”)—that suggests an exceptional or transcendent status for the author. In claiming her as this or that kind of person, we are choosing the “Zora” that we want her to be—the Zora who fits our particular purposes, the one who showcases our own proximity to her life and work. Like the various agents at work in Mary Prince’s text who fashion a specific Mary Prince who fits their needs—as an unruly detriment to polite society, a doting wife, or an earnest spokesperson for the anti-slavery movement—literary critics create various Zora Neale Hurstons. Depending on one’s scholarly interests, she is the apologist for disenfranchised black working communities who constitute “the folk” of her Southern settings; she is the self-assured contrarian who stood up to male literary counterparts; she is the anthropologist interested in Caribbean culture and folklore; she is the unlikely political conservative; she is an innovator within the canon of Harlem Renaissance writers. Even when the scholarly point is to complicate a single portrait, as is the case for Carpio and Sollors, there is an imagined “real” Zora Neale Hurston lurking behind the description of her multidimensionality.

Michael Awkward’s introductory essay for New Essays on “Their Eyes Were Watching God” addresses the thorny issue of readership in
conclusion

relation to Zora Neale Hurston. The antagonistic response to her work by her contemporaries, followed by years of critical obscurity, provides a complex space in which scholars now talk about her writing. In describing the harshly negative reception of the novel by writers like Alain Locke and Richard Wright, Awkward suggests, “Such negative reactions were to become quite common, and made an unbiased evaluation of Hurston’s work nearly impossible during her lifetime” (3). Of note here is the issue of an “unbiased evaluation” that would have presumably been more fair or accurate but that was sadly unattainable during her life. Awkward cites Barbara Johnson’s assessment that Hurston’s personality-based “successful strategy for survival” in her adoption of a “‘happy darkie’ stance” “does not by any means exhaust the representational strategies of her writing” (qtd. in Awkward 3). In Awkward’s view, “Johnson’s statement suggests the fruitfulness for contemporary readers of looking past the numerous attacks on Hurston’s character and closely examining the works of this prolific and provocative Afro-American woman writer” (4). The Awkward and Johnson image of Hurston as a calculating thinker who responds strategically to the biased claims leveled against her by other writers is as problematic as a singularity as Carpio and Sollors’s “Cosmic Zora.” To Awkward’s reading, I would suggest that “Hurston” is always necessarily a product of discourse surrounding her. Putatively newer, positive responses to her work that have followed in the wake of Alice Walker’s heralded recuperation efforts are no more neutral or unbiased than those of Alain Locke and Richard Wright. They merely arise from a set of different scholarly interests—interests that became more prevalent after the 1970s-brand academia and activism that ushered in a new account of women’s authorship and the intersections of gender, race, and class.

A more productive reading of Hurston’s life and/or texts would begin by complicating the ostensible object of study. For there is no Zora Neale Hurston if her name is taken to be the signifier of a stable subject. She is simultaneously all and none of the things that literary critics describe. Further, “she” does not exist, as such, apart from those descriptive (and retrospective) lenses. Scholars would do well to be up front about just what we are talking about, then, in our work. Even after the poststructuralist turn that decentered “the subject” and offered ways of thinking about identity as endlessly constructed and contingent, contemporary scholarship will still talk about “her” identity being constructed—as if there is some agent standing outside doing the constructing rather than
seeing “her” as something only understandable through the process and project of construction.

We are, at best, only ever engaging discourse on “Hurston” rather than some notion of Hurston herself. Mistakenly, archival excavations that we undertake are thought to bring us somehow closer and familiarly related to the voices being uncovered. This would explain why Alice Walker referred in a talk at Barnard College to Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes as her “aunt and uncle.” There is an assumed literary and ideological lineage wherein contemporary writers and scholars take on the mantle from their forebears and extend a legacy of collective ethico-political struggle. Like the foray of Henry Louis Gates Jr. into genealogical mapping in his African American Lives, which is heralded as a “journey into the past” on its website linked to PBS, these analytical moves suggest clear origins and identifiable chronologies. In this way, scholars fall back on essentialist rhetoric and logic in the name of progressive ideals.

In Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance, J. Martin Favor talks about the emphasis in race studies on authenticating a kind of blackness thought to dwell in “the folk”—a category infused with class concerns. In his discussion of W. E. B. DuBois’s column “A Questionnaire,” published in Crisis in 1926, and its subsequent reprinting by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the 1987 Black American Literature Forum, Favor emphasizes what he refers to as the “discourse of black identity”—a discourse that received boundary maintenance by black thinkers during the Harlem Renaissance and that continues to be regulated through contemporary understandings of race and identity. Noting the distinctions between “true” and “false” class strata among black Americans in the 1920s, Favor suggests, “Uniqueness lies in difference, and difference is best represented by a particular class stratum. Class becomes a primary marker of racial difference; to be truly different, one must be authentically folk. In what ways, then, does this folkness manifest itself in African American literature?” (6). Like Favor, I am wary of the critical alliances with marginalized collectives. In relation to class consciousness and racial identity, Favor notes critical moves to ally scholars and the folk they privilege, citing thinkers like Hazel Carby and Barbara Smith who seem to suggest a more authentic blackness residing in the lower class: “Separated in terms of class from these critics’ notions of folk, the black middle class cannot express the ‘authentic’ African American experience. And though most critics are, by definition, middle-class, they work themselves
into a strategic alliance with folk privilege by consciously emphasizing aspects of heritage and experience that link them to the folk while downplaying their own similarities to ‘buppies.’ Black identity, as formulated on the class basis, requires a certain quotient of oppression; second-class status is essential to racial identity. The normative conditions of blackness derive from second-class status” (13).

Reading modern novels in relation to slave narratives provides a useful way to begin moving beyond categorical fixity in terms of both genre and identity formation. Mary Prince’s History is one example of how the women onto whom we impose labels of “authenticity” destabilize rather than embrace such identification. Rather than believe ourselves to be scholarly benefactors of personal liberation, we should start to interrogate how our quest for the “truth” in diasporic women’s experiences does not adequately account for the ways in which signs like “gender” and “work” converge and conflict with each other. A study of migration, of how these signs get reworked in different social and geographical contexts, allows for feminist and postcolonial literary scholars to begin keeping up with the narratives that have already embarked on journeys that interrogate descriptive approaches to identity and that complicate static understandings of subjectivity.

Thus, I am interested in the ways in which migration unsettles that very notion of a clear and exceptional feminized and black diasporic subject. In Black and White Women’s Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations (2004), Cheryl Fish describes “mobile subjectivity” as “a fluid and provisional epistemology and subject position that is contingent upon one’s relationship to specific persons, incidents, ideologies, locations, time, and space” (6–7). My project has focused on the contingencies of gender and physical labor, both of which I understand as fluctuating analytical categories that receive varying formative expectations based upon the social and physical geographies that frame the texts I have discussed. My approach rejects phenomenological approaches that place authority in experience and that speculate on personal intent or the mind-set of migrating subjects. Instead of imagining the significance of feminized subjectivity or the presumed stability of women’s migration narratives, this book is a call for a more sustained critique of the rhetorical and theoretical tools that literary, postcolonial, and feminist scholars use to describe women’s experiences.

Specifically, my approach alters the way in which identity theorists talk about agency. A tempting move is to render authority to the ambiguous category of experience. After all, the act of a woman of color telling
her story can so easily be viewed as one that grants or proves her agency. I have intended not to suggest that agency cannot exist or that it has no place in critical conversations of identity. Rather, I have meant to suggest that the manner of talking about agency as a kind of personal holy grail one finds at the end of an arduous quest is insufficient. The narratives discussed in this book show agency to be, like any other category, an endlessly contingent thing.

In Authentic Blackness, J. Martin Favor takes scholarship in an important direction by calling for a critical coalition politics, noting that since there is no such thing as the “perfect” performative text, there is use in reading alongside one another texts that dislodge the stability of identity signifiers, a practice he calls “a sort of coalition politics of reading” (152). He has the following to say, then, about the prospect of theorizing black identity:

Do we really need a “grand unified theory” of black identity when comparing and contrasting a plurality of positions immensely instructive in its own right? If it is through coalition and an empowerment of diversity that we are to come to the destruction of discrimination, let us begin that mission by creating the largest possible space in which coalitions may be formed and diversity displayed. (152)

To this, however, I would add that we not too quickly count on neoliberal “big tent” politics to do the work for us of contesting the stability which is so often located in identity categories. Expanding the space of discourse and political action is perhaps a desirable outcome, but expansiveness is not alone sufficient as a critical method of talking about black—or, more for that matter, postcolonial or diasporic—identities. After all, to form coalitions and display diversity, decisions would have to be made about what identities to include in a particular coalition for what purpose, as well as what “diversity” means, for that matter, and what contributes to or detracts from it. Who makes those decisions, with what interests and to what ends, is just as important as the ostensible coalition or diversity “itself,” for there is no body politic apart from the agents at work in its construction. Scholars interested in identity, narrative, and migration would be well served to keep our critical eyes on the ball. Metaphorically speaking, doing so means not looking at the ball but rather the pitcher.

The negotiations of memory and migration in the texts I have discussed help shift a critical focus on supposed truth to inescapable contexts.
Reconsidering the ways in which those of us in postcolonial literary studies might approach conversations about origins, diasporas, and identities is important if we are to take seriously the complex ways that discourses about these categories work to meet certain scholarly ends. If we stop reading migration as an exception to some geographically stable rule, and if we start having more substantive dialogue about how the rhetoric of authenticity functions ideologically for scholars emphasizing clear points of departure and return, then we might more productively discuss narratives that reveal identities shifting across spatial-social contexts. If Roland Barthes was on to something when he said “show me how you classify and I’ll show you who you are,” then we might think about how our portrayals of African diasporic identities say more about ourselves than about Africa or its diasporas. We might also stop looking so hard for the “authenticity” of this or that and, rather, change the subject of our discourse by looking at the ways in which people decide to talk about authenticity. In other words, when it comes to personal narratives, there does not exist so clearly “the subject” as there does a discourse on the thing we call the subject. With this distinction in mind, we can read women’s migration narratives as a series of physical and textual migrations that unsettle the very notion of a cohesive diaspora and unsettle our critical strategies and theoretical certainties.