

About This Volume

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This volume, like all the others in the Critical Insights series, is divided into several major sections. It begins with an introductory essay by a major scholar, offers a brief biography of Zora Neale Hurston, presents four contextual essays, includes various deliberately diverse critical perspectives, and then closes with a variety of critical resources. This specific volume, however, makes a special effort to provide new historical information about Hurston and her works, including much new information about the reception of her writings. In some cases, this new information includes new—if brief—writings by Hurston herself.

Given the volume's strong focus on "reception studies," it seems appropriate that the collection should open with an essay by Genevieve West, whose 2005 book *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* is the major exploration of the ways Hurston's works were read and received during her own lifetime. In the essay included here, Professor West engagingly recounts the history of her own growing interest in Hurston as well as her responses to work by other Hurston scholars. Her "self-interview" makes one look forward to her forthcoming edited collection of Hurston's essays. West's contribution is followed by a brief biography of Hurston by the volume's editor.

Each of the four contextual essays offers a different approach to Hurston and her writings. A historically-grounded essay by Sarah M. Iler explores the life and thought of George S. Schuyler, a key African American intellectual who was most productive from the 1920s to the 1960s. Schuyler and Hurston knew each other, admired each other, and shared many particular views. Both were conservatives and were fervent anti-communists during decades when it was assumed that black thinkers would almost inevitably align themselves with

the left. Iler traces key developments in Schuyler's career, argues that he was essentially a libertarian, and then comments on how previous scholars have discussed his connections with Hurston. The next essay, by Robert Evans, adopts a comparative approach. It surveys comments by Hurston about Schuyler and by Schuyler about Hurston and reproduces several interesting "new" comments by Hurston about politics and race. Evans shows why Hurston and Schuyler admired each other so much, how they sometimes worked together to advance the causes they believed in, and how both adopted positions that put them in conflict with many other important black intellectuals. It seems fair to say that both Schuyler and Hurston were at least as much libertarians as they were conservatives, not only in their philosophies but in their ways of living.

The next essay, by Joyce Ahn, offers a valuable survey of recent scholarship on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ahn notes that Hurston has been well served by various bibliographers who have traced the development of her critical reception from the 1920s to the early 2010s. For this reason, Ahn herself focuses on discussions of *Their Eyes* from the 2010s. Her essay, in a sense, picks up where Genevieve West's left off. It provides a sense of how Hurston's most famous novel has been received by its most recent students. Finally, the contextual section of the book ends with a major piece by a particularly notable scholar, Trudier Harris, whose contributions to the study of African American literature need no introduction. In the essay included here, Professor Harris takes a lively contrarian approach to a key figure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Jody Starks, Janie's husband. Harris contends that Starks deserves better treatment than he receives from Janie in the book as well as better treatment than he has received in commentary on the novel.

The various chapters offering diverse critical perspectives are arranged in chronological order. The first reproduces fascinating first-hand information about Eatonville, Florida, the now-famous "all-black" town where Hurston spent her childhood and which she always considered home. Eatonville, of course, provides the main setting for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the documents and photographs reproduced here are from the era when Hurston and

How and why did you first become interested in, and attracted to, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?

Like so many people, I came to the larger body of Hurston's work through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I first read the novel as an undergraduate in a course focused on the literature of the American South. We read it alongside the work of Jean Toomer, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor, among others. It was 1989 or 1990. Hurston was on her way to becoming a canonical figure, but I don't remember talking about her move from margin to center or the cannon wars. Instead, I remember feeling a personal connection to the novel. Janie's longing for a life beyond her gate captured my attention. As a traditional-aged college student thinking about my own path out into the world, I responded to Janie's search for a sense of self and community. At that point, I had lived my entire life in the South and found the voices of Hurston's characters familiar. As a teenager, for instance, I heard the word *jook* or phrase *jook joint*, but it wasn't until I read Hurston's work that I understood the origins of the term—African American folk culture. I could also *hear* the voices of Hurston's characters in a way that I could not when reading Charles W. Chesnutt's collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899). I appreciated the novel, but my interest in and connection to it were largely personal. That would change a few years later.

My second encounter with Hurston triggered an intellectual response—a deep curiosity and perplexity. I was enrolled in a doctoral program and was planning to study southern literature. In a course I had the opportunity to read Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) for the first time. In my research on that

volume, I happened across Richard Wright's review of *Their Eyes*. My chance encounter with that review changed *everything* for me.

Wright's 1937 review describes Hurston as an Uncle Tom figure and the novel as minstrelsy. To say that I was taken aback by Wright's description of Hurston and the novel would be an understatement. It posed questions that would inspire my dissertation and my book on Hurston and transformed the way I thought about higher education and my place in it. If Hurston had been engaged in minstrelsy, why was she being taught in higher education? I had also read Alice Walker's comment that "[t]here is no book more important to [her]" ("Zora Neale Hurston" xiii). I wondered, how could two giants of the African American literary tradition have such opposite reactions to Hurston's novel? Why did Wright see minstrelsy where I saw Janie's search for a way to love both a man and herself? Why did he see minstrelsy where Walker and I saw beauty? These questions led me to reception studies, changed the way that I thought about reading, and informed my thinking about canonicity. My puzzling through these complex and thorny issues was the beginning of my work in Hurston studies. It changed the trajectory of my studies in graduate school and the career that has followed. In short, it was transformative. The novel opened the door to an enormous and beautiful body of African American literature that had never been a part of my education. These readings required that I confront my whiteness and privilege, as well as the deeply racist history of our nation. They changed me as a teacher, scholar, and a citizen. My relationship to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, then, is both deeply personal and professional.

What do you find most interesting and/or appealing about this book?

As a reader, I love the beautiful work that Hurston does with metaphors and images. She manages to condense immense amounts of information in a line or two. The opening paragraphs of *Their Eyes* are a great example. Contrasting the ways men and women make meaning of life speaks immediately to gender and epistemologies, which are at the heart of the novel. Janie has to learn

CRITICAL
CONTEXTS

George S. Schuyler and Zora Neale Hurston: Two Unusual Voices from the Harlem Renaissance

Sarah M. Iler

Two especially unusual African American voices of the twentieth century belonged to Zora Neale Hurston and George S. Schuyler. Hurston is mainly remembered today as a creative writer—creative even when writing what could have been merely dry nonfiction. She is most famous, of course, for her novels and short stories, although she also composed plays, an autobiography, and other kinds of creative work. Schuyler, on the other hand, is mainly remembered for his biting satire. For decades a prominent black newspaper columnist and essayist, he did author one well-known novel—*Black No More*—but was best-known during his lifetime for trenchant commentary on politics, economics, social issues, and race relations. But what made Schuyler and Hurston especially unusual was their growing commitment to conservative and/or libertarian approaches to domestic and international issues as their careers evolved. Upon their deaths, both had become fervent anti-communists, and both had developed unusual attitudes towards issues of race and African American civil rights. Hurston famously opposed the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling that desegregated public schools. In the mid-1960s, Schuyler not only opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act but eventually lost his decades-long job at the *Pittsburgh Courier* for fiercely criticizing Martin Luther King, Jr.

Because Hurston and Schuyler increasingly had much in common as their careers evolved, and because they openly admired and praised one another, this essay outlines Schuyler’s career (which is less well known than Hurston’s), to highlight some of his

key ideas, and describe how scholars have assessed the similarities between Schuyler and Hurston.¹

Schuyler's Career and Ideas

Capitalism will probably last forever because it is the first social system that has taught its slaves to believe they are free.

George S. Schuyler, "Shafts and Darts,"
in *The Messenger*, January 1926 (9)

If the albatross of welfare is to be removed from the national neck, we shall have to scrap the socialist programs interfering with the laws of free enterprise and let laboring power be sold in the economic market for what it will bring.

George S. Schuyler, "Hellfare: A Look
at the Welfare Racket," in *American
Opinion*, 1968 (26).

George Schuyler was considered one of the most renowned African American intellectuals between 1925 and 1965, although few may recognize his name today. Schuyler was a self-made man who worked his way from a transient laborer to one of the country's foremost African American writers. He worked as an editor, columnist, investigative journalist, and serial writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's largest and most influential black newspapers, for more than forty years. His popular weekly column, "Views and Reviews," made him famous as an outspoken and controversial critic of American race relations.

Schuyler's reputation crossed the color line. Throughout his career, he contributed articles to periodicals read by predominantly white audiences. Schuyler's importance as an African American intellectual can be attributed, at least in part, to his access to these publications at a time when few white publishers would publish work by black authors. Of the publications Schuyler wrote for, *The American Mercury* was among the most important.

The magazine supplied him with his literary mentor H. L. Mencken, its iconoclastic editor. Under Mencken's tutelage, Schuyler developed into a gifted satirist and formidable critic of American culture and democracy. The regular appearance of Schuyler's work in *The American Mercury* over thirty years (even after Mencken's departure as editor) proved equally important. In the *Mercury*, Schuyler contributed his unique perspective on the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, World War II, the early Cold War, the modern Civil Rights movement and countless other events that transformed and shaped American life in the twentieth century.

But George Schuyler seemed to contradict himself over the course of his career as my two opening quotations indicate. The first quote of Schuyler's is taken from *The Messenger*, a socialist magazine, and seems to reflect a socialist viewpoint. Indeed, he was a member of the Socialist Party when he arrived in Harlem during the early 1920s. Here, Schuyler is critiquing the exploitation of labor by capital interests.

The second quote of Schuyler's seems to speak against that very idea. These words appeared forty-two years later in the pages of *American Opinion*, the archconservative magazine published by the John Birch Society. They reveal him as a free-market capitalist and suggest an underlying current of anti-statist sentiment. This paradox has defined historians' treatment of Schuyler's biography.

The narrative briefly runs something like this: George Schuyler arrived in Harlem a card-carrying member of the Socialist Party. He met fellow socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, who introduced him to Harlem's black intellectual circles and hired him to write for their magazine *The Messenger*. During this time, Schuyler believed that America's race problem could be solved through a gradual socialist revolution led by the interracial working class. The revolution would supplant the capitalist system, which he felt was the underlying cause of racism.

Schuyler's star began to rise in 1924 when the *Pittsburgh Courier* hired him as a columnist and contributing editor. Throughout the 1920s, Schuyler used his weekly column to lampoon the state

of American race relations, debunk cultural and racial nationalism, attack racial separatism, and challenge the authority of black leaders, churches and fraternal organizations, all while encouraging collectivist solutions to the class and race problems he observed. In 1926, he contributed an article to *The Nation* entitled “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Schuyler opposed the essentialism of the Harlem Renaissance, arguing against the existence of a distinct African American culture. The controversial article created a stir among black intellectuals in Harlem and solidified Schuyler’s status as a firebrand public intellectual.

The 1930s represented the busiest and most formative decade in Schuyler’s “race towards the Right.” He became something of a social activist during the Great Depression. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as business manager for *The Crisis* and founded the Young Negroes Co-operative League (YNCL) to support the development of consumer co-operatives in local communities. Schuyler traveled to Liberia to investigate indigenous slavery, toured the American South on a fact-finding mission for the NAACP, and engaged in several national speaking tours. In addition to writing weekly columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he published two novels and numerous articles in popular publications, such as *Review of Reviews*, *Modern Monthly*, *The Crisis*, and *The National News*. During this time, Schuyler regularly contributed to the *American Mercury* and also befriended H. L. Mencken, who became his mentor.

But the flashpoint in Schuyler’s move towards the far right was the Communist Party’s dubious involvement in the legal defense of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama. Schuyler developed into an arch foe of communism. After 1935, fighting the communist threat at home and abroad became a prominent theme in his writing. This shift has led biographers Oscar Williams, Jeffrey Ferguson, and Jeffrey Leak to interpret Schuyler’s anti-communism as the cornerstone of his later conservatism (see Ferguson 1–29 and Leak xv–xxiv).

In the 1940s, Schuyler grew disillusioned with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the liberalism of the New Deal. He resented Roosevelt’s refusal to challenge southern racism and

objected to the president's expansion of the federal bureaucracy and the welfare state. But Schuyler's overwhelming concern during this time remained American race relations. Much of his writing focused on exposing racism and racial inequality within New Deal programs, particularly in federal employment and housing practices.

Schuyler also turned his critical eye to the clouds of war gathering in Europe. Despite his misgivings about European totalitarianism, he nevertheless disagreed with US entry into World War II. Schuyler resisted the idea that a "war for democracy" would end with actual democracy. Furthermore, the notion that African Americans would be fighting for freedom and democracy abroad in a segregated military that treated blacks as second-class citizens struck him as hypocritical and laughable. Thus, Schuyler urged African Americans to oppose the war. Nonetheless, he dutifully supported the *Pittsburgh Courier's* "Double V" campaign between 1942 and 1943. The campaign called for the elimination of racism and racial inequality at home, and totalitarianism abroad under the slogan "victory at home and victory abroad."

Several of Schuyler's biographers have argued that the onset of the Cold War marked a new phase in Schuyler's conservative transformation. After World War II, Schuyler was no longer *becoming* conservative. He was growing *more* entrenched in conservatism through his involvement in the growing anti-communist movement. He publicly supported Senator Joseph McCarthy's (R-WI) anti-communist crusade in his weekly column and began contributing to conservative publications including *The Freeman* and *National Review*.

In 1950 Schuyler joined the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), an international coalition of intellectuals and artists engaged in the fight against communism. That same year he served as a delegate to the inaugural meeting in Berlin. Dismayed by what he saw as the organization's soft stance on anti-communism and its refusal to unequivocally support McCarthy, Schuyler resigned his membership in 1954.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Schuyler turned his critical eye to the burgeoning civil rights protests in the South. In his *Courier*

CRITICAL READINGS

A Second Eatonville Anthology: Original Documents Concerning Hurston's Hometown_____

Joe Clark, Russell C. Calhoun, et al.

Editor's Note: Zora Neale Hurston was famously the resident of Eatonville, Florida, the first town in the United States incorporated and governed entirely by African Americans. Hurston lived there physically until her early adolescence, but she never really left the town, either emotionally or spiritually. She always considered it her home. Her experiences there helped shape both her life and her *outlook* on life, and the town figures prominently in much of her fiction and nonfiction. It is, of course, the main setting for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.¹

1889: An Invitation to Eatonville

The following advertisement, inviting black people to move to Eatonville, was written by Joe Clark (sometimes spelled “Clarke”), the town’s first mayor, one of its most influential citizens, and also, of course, the model for the character named Jody (Joe) Starks in *The Eyes Were Watching God*. This advertisement appears prominently on the first page of the four-page June 22, 1889, edition of the *Eatonville Speaker*, the town’s newly formed newspaper (this issue was vol. 1, no. 2). Clark makes his attitudes toward white racists—and whites in general—unambiguously clear. He also makes the attractions of the town and the surrounding area sound as appealing as they do in *Their Eyes* itself:

COLORED PEOPLE
OF THE
UNITED STATES!
SOLVE THE GREAT RACE PROBLEM
BY SECURING A HOME IN
EATONVILLE, FLORIDA
A NEGRO CITY GOVERNED BY NEGROES

EATONVILLE, Orange County Florida, is situated six miles north of Orlando, the county seat of Orange County, two miles north of Winter Park and a half mile north of Park House station and one mile northwest of Maitland; all of these places are noted winter resorts, Winter Park being the location of the far-famed Seminole Hotel. During the years between 1875–77 an effort was made by Allen Ricket, J. E. Clark and another colored man to purchase land for the purpose of establishing a colony for colored people, but so great was the prejudice then existing against the negro that no one would sell them land for such a purpose. In 1883 Mr. Lewis Lawrence, who came to Maitland in 1875 from Utica, New York, a whole souled philanthropist, came to the rescue by purchasing the land on which is now located the city of Eatonville of a Mr. Eaton after whom the town is named, at the request of Mr. Lawrence, who at once built them a church and several cottages giving them a chance to pay for the same on easy payments. Tony Taylor and Allen Ricket being the first to take up their residence in Eatonville. Six years have passed and to-day Eatonville is an incorporated city of between two and three hundred population with a Mayor, Board of Aldermen and all the necessary adjuncts of a full-fledged city, all colored, and NOT A WHITE FAMILY in the whole city. Situated in the Piney Woods, surrounded by four beautiful lakes, Lake Catherine on the east, Lake Sabeila on the north, Lakes Carolina and Park on the south and west, makes [sic] it one of the most healthy regions in South Florida. These lakes are stocked with a variety of fish, while in the woods are found deer, turkey, quail, etc., etc., making it a veritable sportsman's paradise in an equable climate and that, adjacent to a city and colony of colored people, enhances the value of the situation to every intelligent negro seeking a solution of the race problem. For

here is found a soil adapted not only to raising the various tropical fruits but also vegetables of both tropical and temperate zones; add to the above attractions that of good water which is found here in abundance, and what more need you ask? And that too where the slightest frosts are almost unknown, while in summer it averages less than 97 degrees with cool nights; then, too, a home can be purchased at a reasonable price. Five and ten acre tracts can be bought for five and ten dollars per acre, according to location and improvements. In Eatonville lots, to actual settlers (colored), 44x100 can be bought for thirty-five dollars cash; and fifty on time.

For further particulars address

J. E. CLARK, EATONVILLE, ORANGE CO., FLA.

1889: Life in Eatonville

Joseph E. Clark was listed below this advertisement as the town's mayor, while Columbus H. Boger was listed as clerk; John N. Watson was listed as Marshal; and Matthew B. Brazell, David Yelder, and Jesse T. Taylor were listed as aldermen. Beneath these listings, in turn, appeared an ad for Clark's store, which is a main setting of Hurston's novel:

CLARK & CO.,
DEALERS IN
STAPLE—AND—FANCY
GOODS,
EATONVILLE, FLORIDA,
CALL OVER AND SEE US

Clark's name, then, was literally all over this issue of the *Eatonville Speaker*, whose admirable motto was "Endeavors to Speak the Truth."

Other aspects of this second issue of the *Speaker* are suggestive. For instance, one brief article, also on the front page, announces the visit of a local schoolteacher:

Prof. M. I. Boger called in our office on Wednesday;
he manifested much pleasure in our enterprise

[i.e., the new newspaper]. He is closing a short term of school teaching in our town, to the entire satisfaction of parents and to benefit the pupils. (1)

Presumably, Professor Boger was a relative of Columbus H. Boger, the town clerk already mentioned.

Many of the articles, stories, and tidbits of information in the *Speaker* have nothing to do with Eatonville; examples include a few paragraphs of helpful advice titled “Little Things Make Life” and some paragraphs of facts titled “Concerning the Centipede” (1). Many items, indeed, have nothing to do with black people but instead are borrowed from white newspapers from elsewhere in the country. This issue included a short story by James C. Purdy titled “Miss Gardiner” (2), and, indeed, much practical information was published for the benefit of gardeners and farmers. Most of the advertisements, meanwhile, were for different medical potions and other promised cures.

Brief bits of news, however, reinforced the sense that Joe Clark was a major figure in the town. This notice, for instance, shows that he was a trustee of the local school:

At a patron meeting on the 18th inst.
[i.e., in June], trustees were elected for school No.
70, viz:—

J. E. Clark,
S. M. Mosley,
M. S. Green,
C. H. Boger,
T. W. Taylor

Without hesitancy a choice selection to
provide for the educational destiny of our town.
(4)

In the column immediately to the right, the following items appear:

Eatonville Post Office is open. . . . /
Our side walks need repairing. Council [i.e.,

Council], see about it! / Let's pay our teacher;
the laborer is worthy of his meat. . . . / Ex-mayor
C. H. Boger holds five official positions in our
town. O, how well matured. . . . / Mr. J. E. Clark,
post-master, can look with pride over his prolific
orange grove which has not been much injured by
the dry weather. (4)

1889: Advice for Eatonville

One of the most interesting items in this column, however, reads as follows: "Don't fail to read Mr. Samuel Blodgett's newsy letter on The Race Problem, [sic] it is very interesting" (4).

Although Blodgett's letter, which starts at the top of this column, is too long to quote in full, it *is* worth summarizing and quoting from. Blodgett writes as a recent and friendly white visitor who admires Eatonville, wishes it well, and has some advice to offer. Under a headline titled "The Race Problem," Blodgett asserted that people of all races are human and that all "have the same Creator, the same essential nature, and the same destiny" (4). "The Black," he continued, "is as truly the brother of the white as Abel was of Cain, and it grieves me to see the spirit of the first murderer so frequent among my own color." He called racial prejudice unworthy and ungodly and then credited black people with "a forgiving spirit" despite abuse from "those priding themselves on a fairer skin." Even as slaves, Blodgett wrote, blacks were often friendly with whites even though many whites now refuse to have anything to do with them, including even refusing to be buried alongside them in cemeteries.

Turning now to the present and future of African Americans, Blodgett wrote that they

have falsified the predictions of their enemies that to free them would be to make them paupers. Notwithstanding the discriminations against them on account of a race prejudice, they are not only holding their own but many of them are achieving