Autoethnography: Zora Neale Hurston, Noni Jabavu, and Cross-Disciplinary Discourse

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I

In one of the few book-length studies of black autobiography in America, Stephen Butterfield sets up an opposition between what he describes as the apotheosized private self, tragically masked as the alienated rebel, in white American autobiography, and the communal, consciously political self of black autobiography. The dominant tradition in white personal narratives since the Renaissance, he argues, is the individual's forging a career, a reputation, a business, or a family out of the raw material of his neighbors. Conversely, "the appeal of black autobiographies is in their political awareness, their empathy for suffering, their ability to break down the division of 'I' and 'you,' their knowledge of oppression and discovery of ways to cope with that experience, and their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people and the people find a voice in the self." I accept Butterfield's notion of the communal self in black autobiography and agree that the people find a voice in the self; however, I would argue that the voice in black autobiography is not always a consciously political voice, and that not every black self is, as he suggests, "a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canaan" (3). The self in Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road is one example of a black American who never considers enlisting in the regiment, because she defines herself in her text in terms other than warrior or defiant black activist.

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In contrast to the most well-known and often cited African-American personal narratives by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou—all of which fit Butterfield’s description—, the memoirs of Zora Neale Hurston (which Butterfield never mentions) suppress the interracial conflicts endemic to the United States in the interest of a positive analysis of black culture. Hurston’s biographer Robert Hemenway suggests that we read *Dust Tracks* not so much for its biographical facts (which present an image of its author that fails to conform with her public career or her private experience) or for its racial politics (which were suppressed at her editor’s insistence in the interest of promoting racial harmony); we should read Hurston’s memoirs as a cultural celebration of her life and career (Introduction). Given her training as an anthropologist, Hurston demonstrates a commitment to explaining herself in her memoirs as a product of the larger body of African-American culture. Hence, unlike any other African-American autobiography, *Dust Tracks* consists of an intricate interplay of the introspective personal engagement expected of an autobiography and the self-effacement expected of cultural descriptions and explications associated with ethnography.

This peculiarity of Hurston’s memoirs is best understood, I think, in a wider, cross-cultural context that includes texts by Americans from other ethnic groups as well as a few of the personal narratives of Western-educated Africans. The Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the Native American Beverly Hungry Wolf’s *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, Kenyans (Kikuyu) Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya* and Charity Waciuma’s *Daughter of Mumbi*, the Guinean (Malinke) Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*, and the South African (Xhosa) Noni Jabavu’s *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* demonstrate the same dialogic, polyphonic structure as does Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Cultural explication and personal narrative intertwine in such a way that either discourse may subordinate the other at any given moment in these texts. Furthermore, the traditional historical frame of autobiography is minimized or jettisoned; specific dates of personal events in the authors’ lives are hardly mentioned. Instead, the continuous present typical of ethnography and travel writing (a precursor of the formal ethnography) coincides with the “narrator as eyewitness” posture from which these autoethnographies unfold.

Another important distinction of these texts is that each of their narrators seems obsessed with not appearing to complain about the social condition of his or her particular ethnic group. They do not
lament the injustices white Americans or Europeans have inflicted on their particular communities, but insist on a bicultural identity that allows them to pinpoint the cultural contrasts and equivalences between the ethnic communities in which they were born and the white communities in which they were educated and, in some cases, eventually chose to reside. The manifest intention of all of these narrators is thus anthropological: to demonstrate the basic humanity of their peoples to an audience of readers living outside of the particular communities under scrutiny.

Noni Jabavu's *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People*, among all of the titles I have cited, bear the closest resemblances to Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* for several reasons. Their texts demonstrate the same avoidance of a monolithic observing self in favor of one that narrates from the multiple positions of personal anecdotes, generalized descriptions, and personal irony. Furthermore, not only do the two women suppress the South African and American interracial antagonisms they each knew to exist beyond their texts at the moment they wrote them, the African-American folk culture of the 1920s and 1930s that Hurston describes in *Dust Tracks* bears a remarkable similarity to the Xhosa-British Victorian world of the 1950s in South Africa that Noni Jabavu describes in her two memoirs. Each world is a cultural symbiosis of Africa and Europe; and in the course of their narrations, both women demonstrate not only a bicultural identity, but a personal commitment to their roles as cultural mediators.

The biographical facts of these women's lives explain their bicultural perspective and their ethnographic approach to autobiography. Both the Hurston and Jabavu families were aspiring members of Christian communities and assumed leadership roles as politicians, educators, and preachers. John Hurston, Zora's father, was thrice elected mayor of the predominantly black town of Eatonville, Florida. He served as pastor of one of the local churches and amply provided his wife and children with a large house, and plenty of food and clothing. His wife Lucy, trained as a school teacher, oversaw their children's education and urged each of them to defy racial barriers in order to realize their aspirations. Noni Jabavu's grandfather was the first black African to own and edit a Xhosa-English newspaper, and one of the few black politicians associated with nineteenth-century Cape parliamentarians such as Rose Innes and C. J. Rhodes. Jabavu's father, upon receiving an education in London, England, returned to South Africa in 1916 and took a teaching position at the black college at Fort Hare. As a linguist, he published one of the first grammars of the Xhosa
language. The Jabavus were highly esteemed among the Xhosa as a Christian, Western-educated family.

Another important similarity between the Hurston and Jabavu families is the cordial relationship they maintained with whites living in nearby communities. In their memoirs both women trace the origins of these interracial links to the founding of their respective towns when blacks and whites of like minds cooperated in economic ventures that brought prosperity to all. In Hurston's words: "White Maitland and Negro Eatonville have lived side by side for fifty-six years without a single instance of enmity. The spirit of the founders has reached beyond the grave" (10-11). Hurston suggests that her birth into a racially harmonious environment enabled her to coexist peacefully with whites in spite of differences in economic status. This begins with her portrayal of a paternal relationship she had with the "white man of many acres and things" (29) whom she credits with assisting at her birth and with teaching her to "'do de best I can'" (42) in most adverse circumstances. Her belief that white people, especially white women, were attracted to her as a steady companion and confidante is evident in her discussion of the jobs she took during her vagabond existence following her mother's death and the dissolution of her family. Three of the women she describes—a "beautiful woman in her middle twenties" (120), a singer in a Gilbert and Sullivan road company, and the novelist Fannie Hurst—are linked in Dust Tracks by Hurston's revelation of their childlike private behavior with her in their homes. In The Ochre People Jabavu recalls several positive interactions she had with South Africans of various racial backgrounds as a child, such as visits with an ardent musician of the Dutch Reformed Church to practice Bach's Double Concerto on her violin and visits with her mother to a white-owned butcher shop where she played with the proprietor's son. Racial distinctions between people in her country hamlet during the 1920s and 1930s existed naturally, but did not threaten to transcend the interest in people as individuals. "If you grew up in such personal contacts you liked to feel that even apartheid is only another framework, a transitory one—like other policies that had framed people's lives in other times" (Ochre People 8).

As children, then, the two women did not suffer the intellectual and material deprivation or the racially motivated violence we read about in Richard Wright's Black Boy or Ezekiel Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue. In fact, the implications are that positive interracial relationships afforded each of them an intimate knowledge of the white capacity for human feelings towards blacks, even though their
early lives were framed by political policies designating interracial contact illegal. The racial harmony Hurston and Jabavu insist on in their memoirs is part of the larger theme of cultural equity, a basic premise of anthropology, that informs *Dust Tracks*, *Drawn in Colour*, and *The Ochre People*.

Another broad similarity between the lives of these two women is that both were educated first in predominantly black primary schools in their native villages, and then continued their educations at white institutions. Hurston attended the black institutions Morgan Academy and Howard University before enrolling in Barnard College in New York City, where she studied anthropology with Franz Boas. At his prompting, Hurston traveled back to the southern United States, as well as to the Caribbean, to collect and record African-American folk tales, songs, and religious rituals. Jabavu left South Africa at age 14 to attend a Quaker boarding school in York. She studied music on the college level at the Royal Academy of Music until World War II broke out. Like most English women, Jabavu took a war job as a fitter and welder in an engineering plant. Her first marriage to a member of the RAF ended with his death in combat, leaving her to raise their daughter alone. Before becoming the first black and first woman editor of a British journal *The New Strand*, in 1960, Jabavu held positions as a journalist and as a radio and television writer. She eventually married a British film director with whom she traveled throughout Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. Hence, Hurston and Jabavu developed and maintained an interracial and international lifestyle that fostered a bicultural perspective in them both.

Both Hurston and Jabavu wrote their memoirs at mid-life (Hurston was 52, Jabavu 43) while living outside of their black communities, and at the request of a curious white public. As the author of five publications (two collections of folklore and three novels), Hurston was urged by her publisher, J. P. Lippincott, in 1941 to write her autobiography as the first of a multivolume work that would chronicle her rise from southern rural obscurity to becoming an accomplished folklorist and novelist. According to Hemenway's biography, Hurston then accepted a rich friend's invitation to live in California, where she completed the first draft of *Dust Tracks* by mid-July of 1941 (275-76).

Notwithstanding the biographical inaccuracies that Hemenway warns us of, Hurston offers a straight, linear narration of her life from her birth and early childhood nurturing among the black folk in Eatonville, through her turbulent adolescence, to her life as a vagabond after her mother's death and her father's remarriage. She
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outlines her pursuit of an education at Howard University and Barnard College and summarizes her ethnographic research and the writing of her novels. Hence, Hurston does attempt to adhere to the conventional innocence-to-experience plot of autobiography, even though she demonstrates an aversion of specific dates and rigorously avoids mentioning many intimate details in her life.

Hurston's training as an anthropologist is evident in her narrative stance in *Dust Tracks* in that she positions herself as a mediator between her African-American folk community and her white reading audience, speaking in both the black folk idiom and the language of a graduate of Barnard College. She not only explains folk expressions, she incorporates folk narrative into her personal chronicle to demonstrate how folklore, as Hemenway describes it, "expresses for black people the human possibilities of their particular way of life" (*Dust Tracks* xxiii). In fact, *Dust Tracks* is as much a collection of folklore as Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1934) and *Tell My Horse* (1938).

A similar demonstration of the expressive nature of the language of a black community, for the sake of a white reading audience, takes place in the memoirs of Noni Jabavu. In the Acknowledgments section of her first memoir, *Drawn in Colour* (1960), Jabavu thanks a close British friend, the Countess of Clarendon, "for being the first to urge me years ago not to be content with merely reminiscing to her and other close friends about my Bantu background but to 'write it all down in a book so that other people might share it'" (ix). In preparing both *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* for publication, Jabavu drew on memories and notes made from her observations during her trip back home to South Africa in 1955, after more than twenty years of living in London, to attend the funeral of her only brother Tengo, who was murdered in Johannesburg. She used this opportunity to travel around South Africa visiting various members of her extended family. In the course of her return to London, she stopped in Uganda to spend time with her one remaining sister, who had married there and was not able to attend their brother's funeral. Her two memoirs, therefore, recount a series of small trips by plane, train, automobile, and bus; a series of lodgings in various types of houses and geographical terrains; and a series of significant encounters with various members of her immediate and extended family (in *The Ochre People*) and with her sister and Ugandans (in *Drawn in Colour*). As travel memoirs, Jabavu's texts eschew the traditional autobiographical discussions of her unfolding sense of identity and focus instead on other Africans and the cultural underpinnings of their lives. References
to her early childhood and adolescence amount to intermittent flashbacks that are triggered by her visits to specific geographical locations and the domains of specific relatives. The narrator moves along on her trips across Africa as an unobtrusive sojourner who, though once an integral part of that world, now evaluates it in light of her European education and for the sake of her European circle of friends. She describes the flora and fauna of the regions she passed through and the manners and customs of the inhabitants, while at the same time admitting to the internal conflicts she experienced between wanting her family to be as they were when she was a child and accepting the inevitable changes that time and South African apartheid had wrought.

Jabavu's two memoirs are a tribute to her Westernized Xhosa family (whose lineage ended with the death of her brother Tengo) and a celebration of the Xhosa-British Victorian environment in which she grew up. As Hurston uses the African-American folk idiom in *Dust Tracks*, so, in the course of her narration, Jabavu cites Xhosa proverbs, songs, and expressions. In fact, she informs her reader at several points in her narratives that, in writing her memoirs, she is in effect translating Xhosa conversations she had had with her family in the course of her travels, and that it is difficult to find English equivalents for all of the subtleties of the Xhosa language, subtleties that define an individual's place in the world.

II

In labeling *Dust Tracks on a Road, Drawn in Colour*, and *The Ochre People* as autoethnographies, I am drawing on recent literary and anthropological discussions of the shifting nature of autobiography and ethnography as interdisciplinary fields of discourse. In reexamining the dimensions of autobiography and ethnography, scholars in both fields (both separately and across the disciplines) build on the writings of the German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey as to the nature of human experience and its transmission to the world at large. "Reality," Dilthey writes, "only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience" (161). Furthermore, according to Dilthey, we can transcend the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting individual human expressions and determining their relationship to the general form of the culture. Human expressions, according to one anthropologist, would include theater, narratives, folklore, murals, parades, carnivals, and literary classics such as Thoreau's *Walden* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Bruner 6).
The two disciplines, literary criticism and anthropology, merge in their stated goals to understand the inevitable gaps between experience and the production of human expressions of that experience. One critic of autobiography sets the anthropological significance above the literary in working towards an understanding of this problematic:

The literary function itself, if one would really understand the essence of autobiography, appears yet secondary in comparison with the anthropological significance. Every work of art is a projection from the interior realm into exterior space where in becoming incarnated it achieves consciousness of itself. Consequently, there is need of a second critique that instead of verifying the literal accuracy of the narrative or demonstrating its artistic value would attempt to draw out its innermost, private significance by viewing it as a symbol, as it were, or the parable of a consciousness in quest of its own truth. (Gusdorf 43-44)

By the same token, anthropologist Edward M. Bruner emphasizes the need for ethnographers to make distinctions between human expression of reality and reality itself:

The critical distinction here is between reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated). In a life history the distinction is between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression). Only a naive positivist would believe that expressions are equivalent to reality and we recognize in everyday life the gap between experience and its symbolic manifestation in expression. (6)

From the perspective of literary critics, the perceived gap between reality and human expressions of it generates discussions as to the nature of truth in autobiography. Francis R. Hart and Roy Pascal in particular have postulated that autobiography is a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an "identity" out of amorphous subjectivity. The critic's job is then to interpret the truth of autobiography in its psychological dimensions rather than in its factual or moral ones.

Literary critics often discuss the arbitrary imposition of limits, beginnings and endings, on the continuity of life as an individual reconstructs it in autobiography (Gusdorf; Hart; Olney). A small but growing number of anthropologists as well are now considering human expressions, be they verbal or visual, as socially structured units of meaning. In words that echo almost every critical discussion of autobiography, Bruner, in the course of defining the "anthropology of experience" as an emerging dimension of the discipline, describes the temporal dimension of human experience and its re-creation in structured units:
Every telling is an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory, in that we highlight some causes and discount others; that is, every telling is interpretive. The concept of an experience, then, has an explicit temporal dimension in that we go through or live through an experience which then becomes self-referential in the telling. (9)

As texts, both autobiography and ethnography can be understood as fictions—not in the popular sense of something merely opposed to truth, but in the sense of something made or fashioned, based on the word's Latin root fingere. In the course of systematically interpreting experience (highlighting some causes and discounting others), autobiographers and ethnographers produce constructed truths that astute readers accept as partial representations of what actually happened in a life or what was actually out there in front of the ethnographer. We can discuss the "art" of autobiography and ethnography as a skillful fashioning, be it the fashioning of a select group of experiences in a life or the fashioning of useful artifacts from a particular culture. The making of both tests is artisanal, "tied to the worldly work of writing" (Clifford 6). George Gusdorf tells us that an autobiographer "sets out to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life, and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch" (35). Likewise, the Japanese-American anthropologist Dorine Kondo sums the task of an ethnographer this way: "Writing ethnography offers the author the opportunity to encounter the Other 'safely' to find meaning in the chaos of lived experience, through retrospectively ordering the past" (82).

With ethnographers' awareness of the self-referential nature of human experience and its relevance to their field work, and with their acknowledging themselves as artisans, as producers of texts, a subgenre of ethnographic writing, the self-reflexive field work account, has assumed more importance for its authority-giving personal experience of the cultural scientist:

With the 'fieldwork account' the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait. The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage. He or she can speak of previously 'irrelevant' topics: violence and desire, confusions, struggles and economic transactions with informants. These matters have moved away from the margins of ethnography, to be seen as constitutive, inescapable. (Clifford 14)

Two self-reflexive field work accounts, Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1983) and Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980), demonstrate the constitutive, inescapable nature of autobiography in ethnographic writing. The introductions and epilogues to these texts contain all of the tropes of the personal ethnographic narrative: the arrival at the field site,
the initial reception by the indigenous people, the slow process of learning the language, the efforts each made to overcome rejection, and their personal aversion to some of the local customs they each witnessed but never fully understood. Shostak's and Crapanzano's desire to ground themselves in their respective field experiences was profound, as evidenced in their autobiographical assessments of their development in the field as individuals and as anthropologists.

What are the differences between a self-reflexive field work account and what I am calling autoethnography? The ethnographic observations of Crapanzano and Shostak are verified by numerous references to other anthropological and historical studies. Hence *Nisa* and *Tuhami* read like hierarchies of voices; those of the academic outsiders serve to validate those of the indigenous characters Nisa and Tuhami. Furthermore, the autobiographical components of self-reflexive field work accounts such as *Nisa* and *Tuhami* are concentrated in the introduction and epilogue and cover the ethnographer's "life" in the field—the experiences occurring between the arrival and departure. While a personal development in the field is part of the discussion, rarely does the ethnographer use the field work account to trace her or his growth in Western society from child to adult; nor do we learn what led to the study of anthropology in the first place. Those anthropologists inclined towards revealing these aspects of their lives have written memoirs, clearly stating, as does Margaret Mead in the Acknowledgments section of her *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*, that autobiography, not ethnography, is their intention: "This is not a book about the South Sea peoples I have studied through the years. I have written about them in many books and the interested reader can find there what is taken for granted in this narrative of my own life."

The texts I listed at the beginning of this discussion as autoethnographic were written by individuals indigenous to the culture under scrutiny, who are as concerned with examining themselves as "natives" as they are with interpreting their cultures for a non-native audience. Whether trained as anthropologists or not, these writers have produced texts which are a hybrid of ethnographic explication as well as autobiographical concerns with their personal development as children within, and their adult relationships to, their native settings. As "indigenous anthropologists," Hurston and Jabavu were spared many of the problems Shostak encountered in trying to understand and adapt to life among the !Kung. Neither had to worry about learning the
language, setting up a residence, or overcoming rejection by the local residents. Both enjoyed the type of rapport with their "informants" that Shostak yearned for during her stay among the !Kung women—a reciprocal trust that fostered an intimate discussion of the details of their personal lives. Of equal importance is the fact that Hurston’s and Jabavu’s indigenous status allows each of them to promote their interpretations of their worlds as authentic without the validation of other social scientists.

On the other hand, each of these advantages had a parallel disadvantage that combined to create a different set of problems for both Hurston and Jabavu during their visits with friends and relatives. To begin with, their long years of residence outside of their respective black communities made each somewhat of a stranger to her own culture. Moreover, living at home during their visits meant each had to assume the role expected of a family member in their respective positions within the household group. The ordinary field situation Shostak and Crapanzano faced reversed itself for Hurston and Jabavu, each of whom became an observant participant. Their primary duty was to participate; to observe became an incidental privilege. Their status as “natives” did not afford them the immunity, usually granted to visiting anthropologists, from observing all of the taboos and attending to all the obligations their respective African-American and Xhosa cultures prescribed for them. They both had to accept restrictions on their interactions with other people, or be prepared to face the consequences of ignoring such restrictions. In *Dust Tracks* Hurston describes how close she came to losing her life in a saw mill camp when a knife-wielding woman, jealous of how much time Hurston spent talking to the men in the camp, attacked her in a jook joint. Noni Jabavu describes herself in *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* obediently resuming her position as a child in her father’s household, where children were expected to remain seen but not heard when in the company of elders: "I was ‘adult’ now, but so long as your parents are alive, when in their house you are never really regarded as such" (*Ochre People* 8). Hurston and Jabavu risked ostracism for their occasional nonconformity, but large sections of their memoirs discuss how they slowly achieved a precarious balance of roles that allowed both of them the mobility and freedom to make their “observations” as well as to be accepted and taken seriously.

Every telling of an experience in autobiography or ethnography requires a double consciousness of what took place. In narrating past experiences, the autobiographer is both participant and
observer in that the younger protagonist was part of the experience while the older narrator, temporarily removed from the past, is the detached witness to the experience through memory. "In ethnography, there are always at least two double experiences to be dealt with: on the one hand, our experiences of ourselves in the field, as well as our understanding of our objects; and on the other hand, our objects' experiences of themselves and their experiences of us" (Bruner 14).

In my reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and Noni Jabavu's *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* as autoethnographies, I see a layering of the autobiographical double consciousness (myself in the past compared to myself at the present moment of narration), along with the two-dimensional ethnographic awareness, on the one hand, of the self "in the field" (their native villages) among the family and friends that constitute the objects of their study and, on the other hand, of the objects' experiences of themselves (which Hurston and Jabavu could only observe) and their experiences of Hurston and Jabavu as "visiting daughters." As I suggested earlier in this discussion, the manifest content of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Drawn in Colour*, and *The Ochre People* is ethnographic, but autobiographical questions concerning the narrating self's understanding of her relationship to the culture under scrutiny function in the narrative presentation. Both Hurston and Jabavu, for example, ultimately settle on discussing the two most important social units in their native villages—the church and the family—to demonstrate how religious rituals and kinship governed the behavior of people in their respective communities. These discussions in turn force each of these women into an analysis of the consequences of her responses to the church, and her place within her family, to her self-esteem.

In a chapter entitled "Religion," near the end of her memoirs, Hurston combines an ethnographic explanation of the traditional services held in her father's Missionary Baptist Church with an autobiographical statement on her own inability to completely accept the church's teachings: "You wouldn't think that a person who was born with God in the house would ever have any questions to ask on the subject" (266). She claims to have faced the most difficulty as a child in pretending to declare a love for "a being that nobody could see," but "when I was asked if I loved God, I always said yes because I knew that was the thing I was supposed to say. . . . I just said the words, made the motions and went on" (268, 269). She simply learned not to think about the rituals or search for rational answers: "As I grew, the questions went to sleep in me" (269).
Hurston does not completely dismiss the church rituals but pinpoints instead those aspects of the services that appealed to her highly imaginative nature. The high drama characteristic of baptisms, funerals, and revival meetings kept her enthralled, and she participated in the prayers and songs during these services even though she remained spiritually detached from the communal ethos. She attributes her detachment to her preference for the literary adventures she absorbed from *Gulliver’s Travels*, Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, Greek and Roman myths, and Norse tales (“My soul was with the gods and my body in the village” [56]). Yet at the height of its revival meetings, when potential converts stood before the congregation to be admitted on “Christian experience,” the church did satisfy Hurston’s yen for imaginative adventures and great struggle. The testimonies, known as visions, were traditional, and like the rest of the congregation, Hurston knew them by heart: “. . . but still it was exciting to see how the converts would handle them. Some of them made up new details. Some of them would forget a part and improvise clumsily or fill up the gap with shouting. The audience knew, but everybody acted as if every word of it was new” (272). The antiphonal structure of the recitations—the call-and-response pattern—placed the convert in a continual dialogue with the congregation, allowing the individual at one and the same time to preserve his or her voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his or her fellows. Hence, the congregation, according to Hurston’s description, “shuddered and groaned” at the picture the convert painted of hanging over Hell by the strand of one hair while flames of fire “leaped up and all but destroyed their ever-dying souls.” The improbability of such scenes was never questioned because “the visions must go on.” At the end of each testimony, the convert shouted. Ecstatic cries, snatches of chants, old converts shouting in frenzy with the new. When the tumult finally died down, the pastor asks if the candidate is acceptable and there is a unanimous consent. He or she is given the right hand of fellowship, and the next candidate takes the floor. And so on to the end. (274)

The form and structure of these recitations, like the music that accompanied them, presented the converts with a potential outlet for their individual feelings, even while continually drawing them back into the communal presence, and permitted the comfort of basking in the warmth of shared assumptions of fellow congregants. Hurston does not agonize over her inability as a child to be completely moved by the “inner thing” (274) that drove the services and united the rest of the congregation. Instead, she appreciates the services as an aesthetic rather than a spiritual experience and
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links the revival meetings with the "lying sessions" she witnessed on Joe Clark's store porch; these traditional religious and secular tales fed her imagination and became the raw material for both her anthropological research and her creative writing.

The narration/description duality in Hurston's discussion of the revival services in her father's church parallels Jabavu's discussion in *Drawn in Colour* of her brother's funeral service held in her family's African Wesleyan Methodist church in South Africa. Jabavu is as concerned with rendering a picture of the ceremony as with recalling the anger and grief she felt over her brother's death. As the last male in the distinguished Jabavu line, Tengo Jabavu's death (at the hands of Johannesburg gangsters) was mourned by a wide cross section of the population in the eastern Cape region of South Africa. The church, in Jabavu's words, "was packed with Africans, liberally sprinkled with Boers, and 'Europeans' (as we say for English), Coloureds, Indians. . . . one could see . . . motor cars, buses, lorries. People had come on horseback too and on foot, by train, by air, in their thousands" (13). Many Xhosa in attendance told Jabavu that they had come just to see for themselves that Tengo, "who would have been a precious doctor for our people," was in fact dead, "else had we condemned ourselves to go to our own deaths not satisfied, because not believing." As Jabavu's description of the ceremony proceeds, it is clear that she shares her people's need to hear the details of her brother's death, and to see him buried, before she too can be satisfied that the Jabavu line had come to an end. At one point during the services, one of her uncles from Johannesburg, with whom her brother had resided while attending school there, arose and narrated the details of the murder. He blamed the abhorrent slum conditions in the black townships for the tragedy and used such graphic images that the entire congregation responded: "As he spoke in these terms that were common knowledge to all, moans and groans and spontaneous exclamations rippled uneasily through the church; he made the people's flesh creep and spontaneously they gave expression to their feeling, crying out loud, 'Taru Tixo! Have Mercy oh God!' " (15).

Her uncle's speech raised the tension in the congregation to such a level that "an unknown woman burst out praying, her Xhosa voice ringing to the rafters" (15), imploring them all to "pray for that gangster . . . lest we find ourselves committing the sin of judging him. Let us remember, oh-community-of-ours, that that bullet would not have found its target if God had not pointed the way for it with his finger!" Jabavu recalls being as moved by the power of the woman's voice and her command of the congregation's emotions
at that point in the service as she was disturbed by the inner turmoil caused by the Christian ethics the woman advocated. "Her voice pierced the huge overflowing church in the shrillest tones. . . . I could not possibly agree with the concept that God knew what He was doing in letting my brother be brutally murdered and it made me writhe." She defuses her disparity into an ethnographic assessment of the various sentiments expressed at that point in the service: "... I was curiously aware of the mixture of sentiments being expressed here, pagan and Christian, not to say of the latter how Western, outmoded Victorian middle-class" (16).

Jabavu links herself to the rest of the congregation in describing how everyone struggled to suppress the impulse for revenge. This collective tension was relieved only when one member of the congregation spontaneously began singing "as in a long pleading recitative" (16), and everyone else joined in. Although the song was a simple repetition ("'A-men, am-e-hen! Ah-men, ah-men, ah-men!'" [17]), the effect was to make people collect themselves: "It was in this joint act that all of us now turned the woman's difficult injunction over in our hearts and minds." During the singing a man raised his voice imploring, "It is hard to forgive but forgive we must!" The group responded with a renewed round of singing "'A-men" while the man's voice, according to Jabavu, continued to ring on above the singing, "combining with it in a strangely cathartic, shared performance."

We sang on now as if to comfort and help him as well as ourselves . . . . It was when his speech finally died away and with it spontaneous interjections from all over the church and we wound up the final swooping "Amens" that we realised how this outbreak of singing had so to speak allayed the wounds we had been on the point of inflicting on ourselves, had calmed the savagery that had reared within, the primitive in us all. (17)

The highly dramatic call-and-response pattern of the singing in Jabavu's church closely resembles the pattern of testifying and singing in Hurston's church in Eatonville. In both settings, one member of the congregation engages in a dialogue with the rest of the congregation that allows the individual simultaneously to preserve her or his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with the group. Each woman's description of these scenes in her memoirs, however, reveals an important difference in their assessments of the relevance of the rituals to their personal lives. In Dust Tracks Hurston not only looks back at herself as a child who remained an observing participant in her father's church. She also describes herself at nine years old fighting a losing battle against her community when, at her mother's deathbed, they insisted on
performing folk rituals believed to help ease her passing and the family grief. Her training as a social scientist forces her to see herself as distinct from "the great masses who fear life" and need religion (be it folk or Christian) to help them face its consequences. She defines herself as a self-determining individual whose mind will help her work out her destiny: "I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny. It seems to me that I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose" (278). Jabavu's attitude in *Drawn in Colour* towards the Christian and Xhosa rituals performed at her brother's funeral is one of gratitude. As an adult writing her memoirs in England, Jabavu continued to extract psychological comfort from her memories of the customs her family followed at the funeral. After the Christian services, the family adhered to the traditional Xhosa practice and remained in seclusion at home to deal with its grief privately. Once the family had been ritually cleansed (through incantations and the slaying of an ox on which the family feasted), it resumed its interactions with the rest of the community—"the tragedy now consigned to forefathers and ancestors, the injury healed" (19). Jabavu repeatedly states her appreciation for the ritual's healing property and how it enabled her to accept her brother's death: "Judging from the effect it [had] on me, I [can] not help feeling how profoundly custom—*isiko*—is based on psychological need" (17).

When we compare Hurston's and Jabavu's autoethnographic discussions of their respective families, broad similarities emerge. Both women express pride in the economic security and social prestige their families enjoyed. The two fathers are comparable in their roles as traditional providers who maintain an illusion of domestic dominance, while the two mothers are described as the real powers behind the patriarchal thrones. Both the Hurston and Jabavu households were part of an extended family kinship network that divided itself along generational lines. Children were expected to be seen but not heard when in the company of the adults. However, the most intriguing similarity between the Hurston and Jabavu analyses of their respective families is that, in the course of writing, both women continue to lament the deaths of their respective mothers and express a similar, lingering resentment of the women their fathers subsequently married.

Hurston creates a stereotypical wicked stepmother in *Dust Tracks* who instigated arguments and fights between John Hurston and his children, even his favored daughter Sarah, until most of them left home to live on their own or with other relatives and friends of the family. The few children, including herself, who remained at home
were, according to Hurston, reduced to wearing rags and going without food. Even her father, whom she describes in early chapters as "a stud-looking buck" and who is championed by all of Eatonville for once having "cold-conked a mule with his fists," becomes a broken spiritual and physical wreck after his second marriage: "Papa's shoulders began to get tired. He didn't rear back and strut like he used to" (114). Her family's dissolution in this manner and her feelings of displacement from the house she had been born in are offered as the primary motives for the altercation between Hurston and her stepmother.

Hurston shapes her discussion of her stepmother to show that none of the Eatonville establishment approved of John Hurston's choice of a second wife. Her mother's closest women friends are said to have had their own "hot word battles" with the second Mrs. Hurston on the church grounds not long after the altercation with Zora. John Hurston, according to the narrator, was even abandoned by his male companions after his second marriage. Hence, at the moment of the fight, the autobiographical persona in Dust Tracks defines herself as the heroic avenger of both Lucy Hurston's domain and the communal will. The stepmother in Dust Tracks is eventually displaced from the two most important institutions in Eatonville—the church and the preacher's family—as a way to preserve the integrity of the establishment.

This is in marked contrast to the way in which Noni Jabavu's stepmother moved comfortably into the family and the larger community in The Ochre People, a fact that dramatizes the differences between the African-American and Xhosa infrastructures described in the two texts.

First of all, the Jabavu family arranged her father's second marriage—carefully selecting a Christian, Westernized woman whom they thought would befit the distinguished professor. In Drawn in Colour Jabavu describes the day, not long after her brother's funeral, when she accompanied her father and future stepmother to their civil wedding ceremony. She was actually pleased that her father would not be left alone in his declining years. Secondly, the Jabavu household thrived under the direction of her stepmother. She proved efficient in dealing with servants, gardeners, and the many organizational tasks demanded by a large household. Ironically, this efficiency and the accompanying domestic tranquility are what upset Noni Jabavu upon her return to her father's house a year after his marriage. She had not anticipated her own feelings of jealousy over the couple's deep affection for one another: "I could see how she loved, consoled,
cherished my father. He had become gay, contented, as when my mother had been alive. I had expected to be happy on being back again after their year of marriage. Instead I found I was seized by emotions that conflicted and bewildered me” (Ochre People 13-14).

In The Ochre People Jabavu describes herself grappling with as intense an antagonism towards her father’s second wife as does Hurston in Dust Tracks; but her tightly knit, maternal relatives helped her to keep her feelings under control during her visits to South Africa and to accept the inevitability, even emotional need, of her father’s marriage. Her ethnographic explanation of this is that among the Xhosa, a patriarchal people, one’s maternal relatives (“the umbilicals”) are expected to attend to the emotional needs of the family:

One’s maternal relations are “attached to you by the navel,” the figurative expression referring to “the intuitive sense” that they are supposed to feel on your behalf, and about how they expect to help, protect, intercede for you when “situations about blood” arise, and to correct your attitudes and behaviour if the fault is yours. (15)

In contrast to Hurston’s insistence that she could find no rational, civilized manner with which to deal with her resentment toward her stepmother, Jabavu in The Ochre People is counseled by maternal cousins, uncles, and her Aunt Daisy to suppress any negative feelings that would disrupt the delicate family network. Whereas Hurston presents physical violence as her only recourse, Jabavu’s one angry outburst against her stepmother takes place in the course of a conversation with a cousin. She does admit to carrying her resentment with her back to London, but at least the integrity of her father’s household in South Africa remained intact.

III

In summing up his views on “the anthropology of experience,” Clifford Geertz makes this suggestion as to the nature of ethnographic research:

We cannot live other people’s lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions they say about their lives. . . . Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces. (273)

What I have argued in this discussion is that autoethnographic texts such as Hurston’s Dust Tracks on a Road and Noni Jabavu’s Drawn in Colour and The Ochre People do much more than scratch the surface of black culture. As “indigenous anthropologists,”
Hurston and Jabavu understood the subtleties of their respective black cultures, subtleties of expression that reveal exactly how things stand with the "inner life" of their communities. In fact, the call-and-response patterns of the worship services, the extended family kinship systems, and the folk rituals designed to maintain these social units are but outward expressions of fundamental African-American and Xhosa beliefs in the interdependence and interrelatedness of individuals.

Only an insider could understand and explain, as does Hurston in one of the later chapters of *Dust Tracks*, all of the ambiguities and emotional overtones of the African-American expression "My People, My People!". As one who grew up hearing it among the residents in Eatonville and later among the "new Negroes" in Harlem, Hurston knew its contradictory implications of race pride and cohesiveness, and race ridicule and discord. Her training as an American social scientist, however, helped her to see that these paradoxes in African-American thought resulted from economic and social diversities among individuals in the community, diversities comparable to those in any other ethnic group in the United States. What matters most in Hurston's mind is her observation that, should any one branch of the black American community cry out in a critical need, the group is there to respond (231).

Only someone born and reared in a Xhosa household could understand the full implications of the traditional adage *Umntu Ngumntu Ngabantu* 'a person is a person because of and through other people.' A constant refrain throughout both her memoirs, Jabavu uses it to show how individuals in both the traditional and Christian Xhosa communities extolled self-effacement in the interest of collective sharing. Individuals in her world were taught to conduct themselves inconspicuously "otherwise success too often leads to conceit and failure to humiliation" (*Ochre People* 69). Each individual, furthermore, was thought of as a representative of her or his family; and family history, not individual aspirations, explained one's purpose in life. This is the lesson on Xhosa culture that Jabavu wishes to convey.

Specific contrasts and equivalences between the African-American and Xhosa-British Victorian worlds described in these texts are less important than is the fact that Hurston and Jabavu both chose, when faced with requests for their memoirs, to render their lives through ethnographic frames. Both use personal anecdotes of their experiences within their worlds to authenticate their observations of the cultural underpinnings of black people's lives.
Note

1In this respect Hurston establishes a pattern of intellectual alienation from the communal ethos of the African-American church in her memoirs that repeats itself in Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. Unlike Hughes, Wright, and Moody, however, all of whom voice a bitter antagonism towards their religious experiences, Hurston, as an anthropologist, discusses African-American religiosity in the wider context of human nature: "People need religion because the great masses fear life and its consequences. Its responsibilities weigh heavy. Feeling a weakness in the face of great forces, men seek an alliance with omnipotence to bolster their feeling of weakness, even though the omnipotence they rely on is a creature of their own minds. It gives them a feeling of security" (*Dust Tracks* 277-78).

Works Cited