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# “We ain’t nothing but white trash”: The ethnography of poor whites and the politics of stigma in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

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## Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate the documentary value of Zora Neale Hurston’s descriptions, in her novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*, of the condition of the poor white US Southerners known as “crackers.” By depicting a “cracker” woman’s upward social trajectory through marriage, Hurston reveals the social and existential reality of this segment of the white population. Her novel presents an objective analysis of the crackers as a socio-historical group distinct from other whites. However, Hurston also explores the subjective side of belonging to this discredited group by offering an account of her heroine’s experience of stigmatization.

## Keywords

Zora Neale Hurston, poor whites, stigma, ethnography, white trash, crackers

“The author knows her people, the Floridian cracker of the swamps and turpentine camps”.<sup>1</sup> This pronouncement was made in 1948, in the *New York Times Book Review*, by the author of a review of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. He congratulated the author, Zora Neale Hurston—one of the most famous black writers and anthropologists of her time—for her fine-grained and near perfect understanding of the “Florida crackers,” those poor white Southerners in the United States also referred to generically as “white trash,” a term that first appeared around 1830 (Wray, 2006). The reviewer was not the only contemporary

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critic to recognize the novel's documentary quality—many newspapers also echoed this sentiment. In the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* of October 10, 1948, the praise was even stronger: “The generic life of the Florida Cracker from the cradle to the grave is so documentary in the dramatization of mores and language it seems incredible that one not born to the breed, even though a neighbor and an anthropologist, could be its biographer.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet, several decades later, the book's documentary value had been entirely written off. Hurston's descriptions of the crackers and their living conditions were no longer valorized nor even identified as a form of knowledge. This knowledge seemed to have perished in the great storm caused by the many caustic criticisms leveled against the book from the 1970s onwards when its author was rediscovered. The harshest voice of all came, surprisingly, from one of Hurston's most fervent admirers: the author Alice Walker, for whom the book's problem was that it focused on “white people for whom it is impossible to care” (Walker, 1980: xvi). Presumably, the impossibility Walker described of feeling empathy for this segment of the white population also made it impossible to see any value in Hurston's depiction of the crackers. In another register, critics also lambasted the author's “white novel” as a betrayal of the black characters who had thus far populated her books (Ward, 2013). In Christopher Douglas' view, these negative readings fail to capture what he considers to be the pattern present in all Hurston's work: an anthropologically-inspired project of cultural description (Douglas (2009: 48).

For a long time, the fact she was also an anthropologist and the ethnographic nature of her fictional work were downplayed or entirely overlooked (St Claire, 1980). Trained by Frank Boas, the pioneer of American cultural anthropology, Hurston contributed to studying black folklore and drew on this in her novels. Her ethnographic and fictional works were the result of a daring blend of anthropology and literature. She was influenced by American modernist literature and openly claimed this interdisciplinarity for herself, even going so far as to state her discipline as “literary science” in her application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1936 (King, 2019: 275). And indeed she introduced the documentary style of the social sciences into her fiction, as *Seraph on the Suwanee* illustrates.

In this novel, Hurston's protagonist is a woman of cracker origin and the author traces her trajectory of upward mobility through her marriage to a man of higher birth, the son of a plantation owner. The term cracker is both a term referring to a social category—that of the poor whites principally from Florida, Georgia, and Virginia—and an insult used against them. The word replaced that of “lubber” and appeared above all during the English wars with France and Spain to refer to those white people, viewed as dangerous, who were prepared to join forces with the Indians against England's interests, refused to work, and lived a marginal lifestyle (McWhiney, 1988). The poor white populations of the South have consistently been viewed by the upper classes in terms of stereotypes (Wray, 2006; St Claire, 1998) that have varied according to the period but have always been used as a response to their poverty.

The plot of Hurston's novel revolves around the difficulties encountered by her heroine, on her upward social trajectory, when it comes to overcoming her sense of inferiority and the prejudice attached to her original social group. Through sociological

objectivation, the author documents the living conditions of a group that she presents as socio-historically distinct from other whites, placing in relief the signifiers of inferiority specific to society in the American South at the time. She also uses her heroine to reflect the subjective side of the torments of stigmatization rooted in this region's specific social structures and world of significations, which can also be viewed as "local schemes of social types" (Garfinkel, 1956: 420). To use the words of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict—a representative of the culture-and-personality school of thought, who also studied under Boas and taught Hurston—the notion of "patterns of culture" Benedict (1934) can be productively used to understand the connection between, on the one hand, a system of representations and societal norms, and, on the other, an individual's psyche and behaviors. It is from this perspective that I understand Hurston's description of the crackers' reality—a reality shaped by the particular socio-economic and historical context of the plantation society and economy.

For Marx and Engels, the "poor whites" or "mean whites," to use their terms, were the product of the slavery economy and, in their theorization of capitalism, were conceived as a dysfunction of the free labor market (Nippel, 2005: 27). According to them, the slavery system affected both the laboring classes and the salaried work of free whites without capital who had only their labor power to sell and who refused to do the work of black people for fear of being socially discredited (Nippel, 2005: 28). Max Weber, who also analyzed societal structure in the United States and the case of poor white Southerners, added the idea of social value and distinction (linked to birth, reputation, and so on) to differentiate between individuals and collective groups, by putting forward the concept of the "status group" alongside that of social class Weber (1947). Hurston's approach to "white trash" follows Weber's status group logic. In addition to poverty, these poor whites also faced the lack of consideration and socio-racial anxiety of their group. This perspective echoes Ann Laura Stoler's work on colonial empires in which she has analyzed the social order of distinction between whites and the problems posed by "poor whites," women, and whiteness that are assessed and reassessed in the intimate and domestic sphere (Stoler, 2001, 2002).

In order to grasp how the author of *Seraph* characterized the condition of poor whites, it is useful to turn first to her "sociological biography" (Lahire, 2010). Lahire used the example of Kafka to theorize and illustrate this concept that makes it possible to provide an account of how an author is "made" and of the existential issues that, according to Lahire, are inevitably extended into that author's work. The present article therefore begins by providing a sociological biography with two aims: first, to shed light on the documentary content of *Seraph* with reference to the dual affiliation to anthropology and literature in its author's life, and second, to identify the reasons underpinning her interest in the crackers as the topic of this book. The second section of the article then draws on the text and the historical context of its plot, which unfolds between 1900 and 1930, to offer a socio-historical account of the world of the crackers—embedded in an American South undergoing drastic change and economic development—as a marginalized dying world, subjected to the eugenic logic of its time. Finally, the third section of the article considers the stigma experienced by the novel's heroine, whose life unfolds like an existential ordeal weighed down by the social and racial anxiety characteristic of this period.

## **“Where the anthropology left off and where Zora began.” Fragments of an anthropologist/novelist’s biography**

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama (Boyd, 2002: 25). A two-time recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the author of four novels, two ethnographic anthologies, many short stories, and countless articles, Hurston was the most famous black woman writer of the 1930s. Progressively, she fell into obscurity and died poor and forgotten in 1960. *Seraph on the Suwanee* was her last published book. In order to understand the documentary aspect to her treatment of poor whites in this novel, it is important to understand the extent to which literature and anthropology were interlinked in her life and work.

An emblematic and structuring locus of her dual identity is Eatonville (Florida) where she spent her early childhood and early adolescence. This town near Orlando was the foundational space of her ethnography and the laboratory for her reflections on black folklore: she constantly draws on her memories of it in her anthropological and fictional works alike. It is no coincidence that she even, erroneously, claimed Eatonville as her birthplace in her autobiographical narrative. This lie went hand-in-hand with the lie about her age, from which she subtracted 10 years, and perhaps expresses the fact that, in her eyes, she came to the world in this town with a unique history as one of the first self-segregated all-black towns, founded by former slaves, in the United States—if not the very first (Boyd, 2002: 22). From her time in Eatonville, she retained a love of oratory, of the “tale-telling” (Hemenway, 1980: 168) typical of the Southern dialect she recorded in “The Eatonville Anthology,” a text published in 1926 in the magazine *Messenger* and that resembles the ethnographical project she engaged with as part of her university studies pursued in later life.

Hurston’s education was far from linear. It was first interrupted at age 13 when her mother suddenly died and, like the older children in the family, she was sent to boarding school in Jacksonville. Her father soon stopped paying her school fees and she was forced to leave and find employment to support herself. She took a job as a maid for an actress in a theater troupe (Bordelon, 1991: 183). She then resumed her studies at Morgan College and went on to attend Howard University in 1918, where she declared herself to be younger than her age (17 rather than 27) and so was exempt from tuition fees. After graduating, she was accepted into Barnard College with the support of Annie Nathan Meyer (Hemenway, 1980: 33). She then went on to Columbia University where, in 1926 and 1927, she attended Franz Boas’ classes. Boas, a German Jew exiled in the U.S. at the beginning of the century, was the intellectual who founded American Cultural Anthropology and one of the most virulent critics of the biological eugenics that prevailed among scientists at the time, also extending into a political sphere that gave credence to racial classification and white supremacy (Boas, 1916). He set up the notion of culture as an explanatory factor, in opposition to that of race. His interest in Hurston’s knowledge of folklore and her position as an “insider”—that he saw as an advantage for studying this particular field—led him to obtain a grant for her in 1927 from Columbia’s Department of Anthropology allowing her to collect elements of black folklore in Florida and New Orleans.

While Hurston was fascinated by anthropological research, she was just as drawn to writing fiction. She combined her two passions from a very early stage, often blurring the boundaries between science and art. For one of her ethnographic essays, *Mules and Men*, she took certain liberties with the canonical rules of anthropology by introducing a first-person narrator, both storyteller and anthropologist. She knew that this “I” went against the notions of the investigator’s invisibility and objectivity, as taught by Boas (Boxwell, 1992). In this sense, by openly expressing her own subjectivity in the text, she proved herself to be post-modern ahead of her time according to Boxwell, who also reminds us of the extent to which the scientific value of her anthology of black folklore was challenged. For Arna Bontemps, a poet and one of Hurston’s contemporaries, one never knew “where the anthropology left off and where Zora began” (cited in Hemenway, 1980: 166).

Hurston was already writing fiction in the early years of her anthropology studies at Howard University (Washington) (Boyd, 2003). And from the very start, she injected ethnographic material relating to folklore into these writings. Her hybridization of social science and fiction firmly attached her to the American modernist literary tradition. While she was still a student, her first short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” was published in Howard University’s journal *Stylus*, run by the writer and black philosopher Alain Locke. The story, for which she won a literary award, garnered much attention and opened doors for her in the African-American literary world. However, it was her third short story, “Spunk”—published in 1925 in the journal *Opportunity*, run by Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League and for which she also won a prize—that allowed her to make a sensational entry into the Harlem Renaissance circle in New York that same year (Hemenway, 1980: 20).

Within this avant-garde artistic movement—referred to by one of its founders, Alain Locke, as the New Negro Movement and founded on the aim of fighting against the stereotypes facing black people—she was appreciated for her light-heartedness, her talent as a storyteller, and for being the life and soul of any gathering: “When Zora was there, she was the party” wrote the poet Sterling Brown (Hemenway, 1980: 61). Very soon, however, those who had first celebrated her, such as Locke, turned their backs on her, accusing her of playing into the hands of the whites. In 1937, her greatest novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was published; it was lauded by white critics and shot down in flames by black intellectuals. The harshest criticisms came from black writers from the Harlem Renaissance such as Ellison and Wright who considered her portrayal of black people to be primitivist. Wright denounced her use of the “minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” Wright (1937: 16). In the eyes of her black detractors, the anthropological content of her folklore, composed of narratives and character portraits and using vernacular language, was of no value. On the contrary, it was even viewed as suspect.

The criticisms levied against Hurston and her work went beyond personal attacks and became part of a broader controversy opposing two rival camps among black artists and intellectuals of the time (Hemenway, 1980: 43). The first viewed art as being at the service of elevating the race and denouncing inequality and oppression, a stance promoted by the old guard of Du Bois, Johnson, Wright, and Locke who advocated a sociological approach (Hemenway, 1980: 49). The second, led by Hurston, Hugues and Thurman, was in favor

of an anthropology of folklore upon which they drew abundantly, without necessarily openly claiming it as their own. Their intention was to free themselves from the expectations linked to their race and from the idea that art was necessarily shackled to political aims. Instead, they championed the non-defensive representation of black people, detached from any relationship to white people and following the individual experiences of black people as closely as possible. They attempted to defend this stance in their ephemeral journal (published only once) *Fire!!* (Spencer, 2004: 18)

Behind this division, which in many ways resembles a quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, we can also identify differing or even opposing disciplinary affiliations. The “Ancients” harbored a hatred of anthropology, which they perceived as supremacist (St Claire, 1980) and instead foregrounded sociology. As for Hurston and her companions, they refuted what she dubbed “the sobbing school of negrohood” (Hurston, (1928) 1979: 153) represented by a sociology centered on the problems of blacks; they opted, instead, to focus on the inner life of the people. Folklorists such as Hurston were discredited for being insufficiently rooted in the political and socio-economic realities of black lives. “Alain Locke advised her to tone up her ‘surface(y)’ ‘folklore’ narratives with hard-hitting ‘social document’ techniques” (cited in Kadlec, 2000: 471). Irritated by these criticisms, especially against her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she responded: “I was writing a novel, not doing a treatise of sociology” (cited in Nowlin, 2019: 134).

In addition to difficulties linked to the negative reception of her work among black intellectuals, Hurston also struggled with a pressing lack of money, despite her popularity in other circles. As a result, between 1938 and 1942 she secured work as an investigator for the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), a work relief program that employed struggling writers and photographers to conduct vast social surveys (as part of the Works Progress Administration). The program was established in 1935 to boost the American economy after the 1929 stock market crash and set out to paint the portrait of a nation united beyond its cultural diversity, to create an archive of American memory, and to provide regional guidebooks that could then be sold, particularly to stimulate tourism. Hurston, who was hired to gather information in Florida as a “junior interviewer,” saw her work with the FWP as a social science study. One document she wrote, now archived in the Library of Congress, shows how she tried to foreground the sociological and anthropological value of this investigation. In 1939, she was asked to put together a project for recording folklore in Florida, addressed to Henry G. Alsberg, the director of the Federal Writers’ Project.<sup>3</sup> In terms similar to those of cultural anthropology, she drew up a cartography of the same social structure that we find in *Seraph*, referring to the “the Georgia-Alabama ‘Cracker’ with his farms and cows.” She described the cracker as a long-standing figure in the local farming community, living on the Florida, Georgia, and Alabama borders, repeating the same actions as his ancestors as he went about his agricultural work. Her description clearly differentiated this category from whites of more noble extraction linked to the big English, French, and Spanish families. She went on to use this knowledge, collated as part of the FWP survey, in writing *Seraph* (Hemenway, 1980; Lowe, 1997) lending it a certain documentary quality. In 1939, her work conducting surveys for the FWP brought her to the workers at the Aycock and Lindsay turpentine camps in Cross City. In portraying the

cracker's milieu and lifestyle in her novel, she seems to have drawn on these data as well as on other studies in *The Florida Negro and Florida Guide* (Lowe, 1997: 266).

While conducting this survey, Hurston was also continuing to write fiction but struggling to attract attention from publishers. In the 1940s, two manuscripts of novels about the black middle and upper classes were rejected (Hardison, 2013: 232). The world was not ready for such depictions, her publisher told her, as justification for the refusal (Boyd, 2002: 408). When she wrote *Seraph*, she was therefore in a situation of financial uncertainty and had limited publishing options. *Seraph* was the last book she published in her lifetime—she never managed to convince other publishers to take on her work. For her story about a white heroine, Hurston received the support of none other than Max Perkins, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' publisher. It was Kinnan Rawlings herself—the successful white author of *The Yearling*, a best-seller about the crackers that had received the Pulitzer Prize in 1939—who introduced him to Hurston (Boyd, 2002: 135)

Why write about white people and particularly a heroine from a cracker background? It is worth recalling that the context—characterized by what could be described as “crackerphilia” (Binggeli, 2009: 3) judging by the craze for literary and cinematographic depictions of poor whites—was favorable to such material. Perhaps Hurston saw a financial opportunity there, particularly with a view to funding an ethnographic expedition close to her heart in which she intended to find a lost city in Honduras. It was in Honduras that she wrote *Seraph on the Suwanee* (Hemenway, 1980). Was money her only motivation for penning this text? Or did she want to write about white characters, in the middle of a literary apartheid (Carby, 1991) that she was quick to criticize in *What White Publishers Will Not Publish*? She confided in the publisher of her last novel that she had wanted to write a book about how a sense of inferiority can ruin a romantic relationship. Lowe (1997) argues that this question of inferiority is central to all her work and rooted in her experience of rejection within her family.

Beyond her own personal experiences, however, it is important to emphasize that Hurston was writing at a time when social and racial inferiority had become a social paradigm, encapsulated in the omnipresent word “stereotype” that first appeared at this time. Coined by the influential early-twentieth-century essayist Walter Lippmann (1922), the term was inspired by the instrument bearing the same name used in printing presses to reproduce shapes. Lippman may well have contrived to capture in one word the essence of a whole era, in which the social and ethnic groups considered to be inferior were typified on the basis of a few negative traits to which they could supposedly be reduced.

Whether as an anthropologist or as a novelist, the question of stereotypes was central to Hurston's work. In *Seraph*, she shone a spotlight on whites as a group, showing their heterogeneity and the social contempt weighing upon the poorest among them. For Hurston, the inferiorization generated by a negative stereotyping of others was an inherent feature of dominant white culture. According to her, “People erred because they wanted to be above others, an impulse which eventually led to denying the humanity of those below. Whites had institutionalized such thinking....” (cited in Hemenway, 1980: 237). This critique highlights the sense of inferiority that imposes itself on bodies, subjectivities, and spaces.



## **“Whites from the backwoods”: the socio-historical portrait of a marginalized world**

Twenty years later after the publication of *Seraph*, the black sociologist Hill (1959)—a student of Everett Hughes, one of the representatives of the Chicago School—provided a socio-cultural description of the crackers and what he called “cracker country,” in a study conducted in North Florida at the end of the 1950s. Its documentary value relates to an earlier period insofar as the story unfolds between 1900 and 1930 during the progressive era characterized by economic development and changes in the social stratification of the United States. Far from being spared this shift, the South was deeply affected by the socio-economic changes that Hurston describes extensively. The author endeavors to situate both the crackers and their social position within a South in the throes of deep upheaval. They appear as a group afflicted by marginality and residual poverty, whose very existence offers a reflection of a dying world. Hill’s earlier interest was not really followed. In 2014, Elizabeth Anne Wagner (2014) has expressed regret that so little attention has been paid to the empirical value of Hurston’s descriptions of the Florida environment. As a matter of fact, Hurston explores throughout her book, the crackers as a socio-historical group embedded in the depths of the history and geography of the American South.

She first depicts the backdrop to the crackers’ world as an ecosystem marked by relegation and dereliction, evidenced by the recurring use of the expression “Backward Florida.” The crackers were associated with the primeval pine forests, destined to disappear in the early 20th century, and with swamplands. They inhabited a natural environment that was isolated, withdrawn, and closed in on itself—a world that produced the other labels regularly used in the narrative such as “whites from the backwoods” or “piney woods crackers.” The embedding of the narrative in a backwoods environment reminds us that, alongside its other various meanings, the term “cracker” was originally used to refer to men living in backwoods and border areas (Lewis, 1984).

This trope of the backwoods is extended in the novel through depictions of a hostile nature made up of the swamps that led to the crackers also being labeled “swamp people.” Hurston begins her description of the marshland region of Sawley, where the heroine and her family live, by immediately plunging the reader into the decor of the dark swamps, a pathogenic environment eating away at the town where “there was ignorance and poverty and the ever-present hookworm” Hurston (1948: 1). In a single sentence, the author uses apposition to associate the cliché of this environment’s absence of culture with the poverty that had dogged the lives of successive generations, for example, of the heroine’s family, as well as with the scourge of an endemic disease—malaria, with which the poor whites of the South were historically associated.

To the dark swamps, Hurston adds the dark forests of the turpentine camps, the industry that employs the crackers whose lives are organized from birth to death around this work. “For ‘teppentime’ folks are born, not made, and certainly not over-night. They are born in teppentime, live all their lives in it, and die and go to their graves smelling of teppentime” (1948: 8). Turpentine was extracted from the dense pine plantations and then distilled. The industry was a key part of Florida’s regional and historical identity. Turpentine was necessary for pharmaceutical and cosmetic products and the industry

boomed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century before falling progressively into disuse (Lauriault, 1989: 303). It above all employed slaves, then, after the abolition of slavery, free blacks continued to work there but did so under the peonage system that structured the labor market at the time and was hugely disadvantageous to the employees who remained dependent upon their employers. For this reason, the industry never truly broke with slavery. Even after abolition in 1865, black people remained the captives of these places and of the plantation owners (Shofner, 1981: 168). While the majority of workers were black, some whites did work there too—as foremen but also as extremely poor workers (Prizer, 2009: 49).

From the first pages of her novel, Hurston paints a picture of a highly segregated Southern society, in which the crackers are the status group at the bottom of the socio-economic and prestige scales. This South is almost feudal and organized into castes (Mell, 1938) by a logic of endogamy in which birth is primordial, configuring a destiny from which it is impossible to escape. This is how we should understand what is said of the heroine's father: "Brock Henson was a Cracker from way back" (1948: 8). The crackers' economic position alone does not suffice to define them; they embody social infamy on account of their problematic lineage. According to this same logic, in terms of prestige, the crackers are on the opposite end of the spectrum to the whites of higher birth such as Jim Meserve, the heroine's husband. Jim is endowed with every quality and perceived by all the characters as coming from a superior social background—a "first class" man, as one of the protagonists puts it. This descendant of plantation owners, depicted by Adrienne Akins (2010) as an aristocrat, may no longer have his ancestors' wealth, but his lineage provides him with a more important form of capital that sets him apart from other whites. "He didn't have any great vast money, but this was no common Cracker boy whatsoever" (24). The shame associated with being of "low" birth also finds its expression in the numerous terms used to refer to poor whites throughout the book: "white trash" (126), "clay-eaters" (64), and so on.

Much like the water in the swamps surrounding them, the crackers stagnate in their poverty, which does not change at all over the course of the book despite the plot unfolding during a period when the region in fact saw profound change under the influence of agro-industrial capitalism that put an end to subsistence farming, replaced in large part by modern technological agriculture. This modernization is embodied by Jim, the heroine's husband, who starts out as an employee in the turpentine camps but soon leaves them behind to conquer and exploit new far-flung territories of the region, transforming untamed nature into a resource through cultivation and reclaiming the swamps as arable land. Jim is the prototypical economic but also moral entrepreneur, expressing all the stereotypes usually associated with the people described as crackers, and especially that they are lazy and refuse to work.

The dominant classes of the time also defined the "white trash" category as a function of their conviction that poor rural whites were biologically inferior, something embodied in the book in the disabilities of Arvey and Jim's son Earl. The firstborn child they had so much longed for suffers from serious mental deficiencies and physical malformations. Earl is almost entirely mute and largely uncommunicative, often expressing himself in animal-like cries. As a teenager, he goes on to sexually assault a neighbor's young

daughter thus committing an irreparable sin by attacking a “white girl,” to quote one of the neighbors in the crowd that hunts him down in the swamp where he has taken refuge in a scene reminiscent of early 20th-century lynch mobbing (Jarman, 2012: 89). Eventually, he is killed by the crowd after having shot at his own father, who tries to console Arvey afterwards by pointing to the boy’s failings: “the poor thing was not sufficient for the world he was forced to live in” (155). The putting-to-death of Earl by the broader social group is ultimately accepted by both parents as a necessity for the good of the community. This metaphor of the deficient child being killed reflects the eugenic theories for improving the human race that circulated widely in the early 20th century. Certain passages of the book offer a clear illustration of the reality of the eugenicist perspective on poor whites. Mental and physical deficiencies were ascribed to whites, but only the indigent among them, while being viewed as inherent to other races or ethnic groups—non-white, black, American Indian or southern European. This theory was conveyed by the eugenic theories in vogue until the 1930s under the aegis of the Eugenics Record Office.

Theorists and practitioners of eugenics, including many social actors tasked with conducting social surveys or psychometric tests to measure IQ established these deficiencies through the use of expressions such as “feeble-minded,” “bad blood,” or “unfit families” that are echoed by Hurston’s characters. For Chuck Jackson, who has analyzed the eugenicist influences in *Seraph* from a psychoanalytical perspective, “the moment of anthropological eugenics works to signify ‘white trash’ culture as the defiling element of white America, polluting not only genetically, but structurally as well” Jackson (2000: 645). During this period, the intention was to valorize good genes in white families by organizing baby and family contests, while at the same time tracking down traits inherited from families labeled as “dysgenic” or “bad stock.” Eugenicians founded this ideology on studies of poor white rural families such as the emblematic Kallikak family to which the psychologist and eugenicist Henry H. Goddard devoted a book (Wray, 2006: 84). Their poverty and alleged immorality, particularly that of the women, were considered to be linked to their poor genetic heritage. These theories crossed the Atlantic via the Carnegie Commission and were applied in South Africa, where poor whites generated racial anxiety (Fourchard, 2012; Stoler, 2001). Eugenics in the USA sometimes limited itself to controlling births through sex education but also sometimes went as far as including the forced sterilization of poor, young, white orphans, suspected of being too shameless and so potentially capable of crossing the color line, thereby becoming vectors of miscegenation. Florida did not pass any laws allowing forced sterilization, unlike other States such as Virginia, but it did set up an organization—the Florida Farm Colony for the Epileptic and Feeble-Minded—with a view to separating epileptics and the mentally ill from the rest of the population and segregating them according to sex to prevent them from having any children (Noll, 1990: 67).

In Chuck Jackson’s view, Hurston took up eugenicist tropes and perpetuated the stereotypes current at the time. It is certainly true that the author of *Seraph* did not engage in any critique of negative representations of the crackers. Does that, however, necessarily mean that she lent credence to this prejudice? To my knowledge, she did not support it in her other writings unlike, for example, Virginia Woolf who wrote in her diary that “imbeciles should certainly be killed” (cited in Leonard, 2005: 205). Without being able to

speak to Hurston's personal views, it seems to me that this is not the subject of her book and that the portrayal of eugenicist stereotypes present throughout *Seraph* is made to serve a particular purpose: revealing the social reinforcement of the stigmatization facing the crackers, which is indispensable to understanding what an individual member of that group, such as her heroine, might feel.

### **The existential ordeal of the white trash stigma**

Entering into her heroine's stream of consciousness, Hurston reveals an unhappy awareness of belonging to an inferior group and a personal lack of self-esteem linked to her body. This goes hand-in-hand with a strong sense of illegitimacy vis-à-vis her husband and the milieu he represents, testifying to Arvey's internalized sense of the social hierarchy in which crackers are devalued. Very early on, she sees the social distance between them as an obstacle. "What in the world did she have to win him with? Ah, no, this pretty, laughing fellow was too far out of her reach (...). This was first class, and she was born to take other peoples' leavings" (1948: 24). From Arvey's perspective, she has no assets whereas Jim is endowed with all the natural qualities of a well-born man. She therefore becomes convinced that he is only spending time with her for sport: "After Jim had made a public show of her, he would naturally get himself a regular girl" (1948: 18). Her mother also fears that marriage with this son of a good family will prove to be a false promise and her daughter will end up pregnant and dishonored, saddling her family with the burden of a further mouth to feed. The anxiety of mother and daughter alike echoes the reality of a period when inter-class marriages were disapproved of and, according to Russ Castronovo, viewed in similar terms as the outlawed unions between whites and people of color referred to as "amalgamation" [Castronovo \(1998: 252\)](#).

Despite her upward social mobility through marriage, Hurston's heroine remains convinced that she will never be able to rid herself of her social origins. "She was a Cracker bred and a Cracker born, and when she was dead there'd be a Cracker gone" (1948: 272). This conviction was accompanied by the fear that the marks of stigma would betray these origins. One scene in particular offers a salient illustration. During a visit to her family, she rediscovers with astonishment all those things that the distance between them had led her to forget, seeing these now as signs of her family's "trashiness," in keeping, it should be noted, with all the stereotypes of the time: the dirt, their thinness, their malnourished limbs, their ragged and grotesque appearance. "What awful gang of Crackers is that?" she exclaims (1948: 133). With this expression, Arvey herself validates the social labels applied to poor whites, revealing a powerful internalization of the dominant value system. Testifying to her family's inferiority no doubt also reflects this inferiority back to her, exacerbating her own lack of self-esteem, which we know is fuelled by the shame she feels about her cracker background.

Ever tormented by the fear that her cracker origins will be revealed, Arvey scrutinizes her children's bodies searching for marks of this stigma fearing some biological confirmation of a verdict of abnormality and inferiority: at stake is the issue of passing on "bad blood," something she experiences with horror when her eldest son is born. A few minutes after she gives birth, she sees in her black midwife Dessie's eyes that something is

wrong: "Dessie! Dessie! What is the matter with my child's hands?" (1948: 67). What she sees gives rise to a cry of horror. Her child's hands, fingers, head, and feet—everything about him is deformed to the point that he no longer looks human. Rather than a child, she is holding "a little red bundle of flesh in her arms" (1948: 68). The pain is even greater when the baby's resemblance to one of her mentally impaired relatives becomes evident to her: "Arvey looked at her baby, and then she understood. It was nothing like Jim at all (...). He looked like her Uncle Chester, her mother's youngest brother. (...) The one who was sort of queer in his head. Oh, Jesus! How could she show this child to Jim?" (1948: 67–68). She hopes that her husband will not notice the child's abnormality, but this hope proves vain and when he does, he points out to her that, in biological terms, the child's handicap comes from her "side," while adding somewhat contradictorily that this is not her fault: "It come through your father's folks, but you didn't have nothing to do with that" (1948: 125).

She is deeply wounded by his observation and even more so when she realizes his lack of interest in the child, whom he considers dangerous and eventually wants to place in a psychiatric institution, an idea that enrages her: "Putting my child in some crazy house?" (1948: 125). Her anxiety about giving birth to an abnormal child, which in her view places her marriage in jeopardy, grows with each pregnancy. The arrival of her second baby fully satisfies her however: "The child was perfect. Not even a birthmark to mar the tender white skin" (1948: 85). This perfection is linked to the little girl's physical resemblance to her father and lack of any stigmata associated with the crackers. Arvey's relief when she sees her flawless child is coupled with relief at the distance this establishes from her disadvantaged social background. Read in light of the social context of the time, this passage highlights the important role played by women, and mothers in particular, in constructing whiteness as both a racial and social category (Watson, 2013). It also shows that the responsibility for ensuring a perfect white lineage, cementing the legitimacy of belonging to the right social class, falls upon women for whom, it may reasonably be assumed, this is a source of considerable stress, as illustrated by the case of the novel's heroine.

From Arvey's point of view, revealing her cracker identity would lead to a form of disgrace. Her anxiety about this revelation plays out on the conjugal and domestic scene. She fears this unmasking as something that would reveal her true self and that she would experience as a "degradation ceremony" (Garfinkel, 1956). In this sense, despite her white skin, the experience of Hurston's heroine is similar to the trope of "passing," classic in African-American literature. The literary genre of the "passing novel," popularized in 1920 by Nelle Larson's book entitled *Passing*, always depicts a young woman with light skin married to a white man who is not aware that she has the famous drop of blood that serves to classify those of mixed race as black. The dramatic tension arises from the heroine's fear of her origins being revealed. Hurston's heroine's terror about being unmasked can be read as an adaptation of the issue of passing to the experiences of poor and despised white women. In doing so, it erases the severity of the risks facing the women accused of passing as white—in certain States, marriage between whites and blacks was a crime subject to the death penalty. The theme of passing allows an understanding of the fear experienced by poor whites about losing racial standing and being

disgraced, for the contempt in which they are held makes them honorary whites only, to be tolerated but never completely accepted. The fear of being unmasked hides another fear: that of losing the status bestowed by whiteness and that functions for poor whites as a compensation placing them above people of color. Behind the fear of being assigned, or reassigned, to her social group, for Arvay there are also important stakes attached to belonging to the group of whites. This a form of racial anxiety around the pureness of whiteness recalls Ann Laura Stoler's work on poor whites in the colonies, where she identifies strong similarities with the situation in the United States (2001). Hurston indirectly demonstrates that whiteness is a construct (2001) and that in some cases belonging to the group of whites is never irrevocably acquired but constantly needs to be reconfirmed through social relations. This is clear in the heroine's strategies to avoid individuals of despised social or racial origins.

For Arvay, what matters is managing to avoid being reduced to an inferior status, crossing neither the color line nor any social boundaries. This fear is evident in the way she handles her proximity to blacks, immigrants, or anyone she identifies as an undesirable acquaintance. Unlike her husband, she has an overwhelming need to distinguish herself from those she considers unfit to come near her. This produces a racist attitude towards Joe, her husband's right-hand man, and his family, who live right beside them. Feeling excluded from the close work-based relationship between the two men, she shows herself to be jealous and demands that the black family be sent away. In order to explain this closeness, she refers to the "negro pet system"—an expression that, according to Hurston, designates a form of domination between blacks and whites that is specific to the South and in which the former enjoy from the latter the protection and affection that one might give to a pet animal. Hurston theorizes this consenting and violently asymmetrical domination, without validating it, as a key element in how social relations are structured in the South. The black sociologist Mozell C. Hill observed a similar relationship subordinating blacks to whites in the same region, referring to it in less ironic terms as white "sponsorship" (1959: 538).

Having succeeded in getting Jim to send Joe and his family away, she soon regrets this when they are replaced by people she considers to be just as undeserving of respect because they are not a truly "white family" despite her husband's assurances to the contrary. Arvay is furious and considers herself to have been duped concerning the identity of her new neighbors. "Jim had said they were white folks, but the man turned to be a Portuguese, and his name was Corregio. That made them foreigners, and no foreigners were ever quite white to Arvay. Real white people talked English and without any funny sounds to it. The fact that his wife was a Georgia-born girl that he had married up around Savannah did not help the case one bit, so far as Arvay could see. The woman had gone back on her kind and fallen from grace" (1948: 120). Her racism leads her to tell herself that they do not have the same smell as "regular folks." She refuses to welcome into her home this woman who, in her eyes, has debased herself by marrying a foreigner. Her fear of losing the respect attached to whiteness reflects the racist and nativist context of the 1920 and 1930s, illustrated by the National Origins Act adopted in 1924 and instigated by—among others—Madison Grant, a historian and theorist of White America against whom Boas was firmly opposed (Alexander, 1962: 85). This law limited the

immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans perceived as non-white. Arvay's struggle to maintain her rank involves taking social distance from blacks and immigrants, but also from despised white women such as the prostitute Fast Mary who admonishes Arvay for her disdain.

The heroine has no interest in the opinions of those she does not esteem. Only her husband's opinion counts. But she is convinced that he looks down upon her from his position of higher birth.

"Throw it up in my face!" Arvay blazed. "I know that you been had it in you to say all the time. [...] My folk don't amount to a hill of beans in your sight. You come from some big high muck-de-mucks, and we ain't nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash. Even niggers is better than we is, according to your kind. [...] Earl is always wrong because he is like my folks." (1948: 125–126).

She feels humiliated and shunned as his wife: "He had never taken her for his equal. He was that same James Kenneth Meserve of the great plantations, and he looked down on her as the backwoods Cracker" (1948: 130). She feels all the powerlessness of her status as a woman, entirely dependent upon her husband, and struggles to imagine a possible emancipation from his rule, so caught up is he in his masculinist role, providing money and protecting her. She ultimately tries to free herself from her husband by returning to her family and turning the stigma on its head in such a way that what was before tawdry now strikes her as noble. "The corroding poverty of her childhood became a glowing virtue, and a state to be desired" (1948: 272). She attempts to convince herself of her own social value and seems to find some peace in that solution, but it is short-lived insofar as when she makes her final return to her family home, she soon returns to reality at the same time. She reassesses the situation in the light of this world that has not changed and the upward mobility her marriage has afforded her, deciding to return to her husband and fight for her marriage. Taking stock of the situation, she concludes that she is responsible for their problems: "She had been weak and cowardly in the past, never realizing what he had done for her, and making not anything of being his wife. But then on the other hand, she had suffered about everything that a woman could suffer through loving and clinging to Jim. From where she had come from, Jim could never realize what it had cost to her to scramble and struggle along to keep alongside of him the way he travelled in life" (1948: 342). She finally understands that if she almost lost her husband, it is due to the conflict generated by her sense of inferiority. This ultimate realization is disconcerting to say the least as it forces her to rethink everything she has experienced and felt thus far as groundless. When Hurston's works were rediscovered, she was criticized for this ending. Whereas feminists expected the story to show a woman choosing emancipation—in keeping with the author's free lifestyle, which she lived all guns blazing, as well as with the choice made by Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston instead has Arvay accept her condition as a wife. In this novel, which many have found disappointing in its engagement with gender, it seems that the author was instead addressing the issue of class-based power and individual agency. In keeping with the culture-and-personality school of thought in anthropology, Hurston uses her cracker

heroine to analyze an individual's sense of (not) conforming to a social system and highlights her protagonist's attempts at self-affirmation. Hemenway suggests that the ending can be explained by the fact the author was in hurry to finish the book (1980) and it is true that Hurston was in dire need of money. But she was also an anthropologist novelist who, in her own way, engaged with the social and individual issue of stigma in *Seraph*.

## Conclusion

By focusing on inferiority among whites, Hurston paves the way for the reflection on deconstructing whiteness that Toni Morrison called for in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison offered an extensive critique of the way North American literature assigns color to blacks but absolves whites of all chromatic specificity, wrapped up as they are in the privilege conferred by neutrality (Morrison, 1992). Many years earlier, Hurston had broken the rule of the invisibility and universality of white people, shining a light on their heterogeneity through her narrative that showcased the poor whites as representing the "tainted whiteness" of the undesirable, whose economic indigence produced racial and social anxiety. Hurston plays on stereotypes and explores their trajectory through her upwardly mobile heroine's consciousness, in order to reveal the full extent of the insecurity they generate. In this sense, the novelist was in step with readers of the time and with commonly held representations of those referred to as white trash, considered to be the dregs of American society. While she did not openly criticize structures of domination, keeping to herself her belief that this could only ever be done in vain, she did not deny them either, instead approaching them with all the pragmatism derived from her life experiences and that was also part of her temperament. She obstinately refused to let herself be affected by prejudice just as she asserted: "I am interested in the problems of individuals, white ones and black ones" (cited in Nowlin, 2019: 134). Her emphasis on people's subjectivity, irrespective of whether they are white or black points to a "post-social" sensitivity that could justify reading *Seraph* as an invitation to move beyond the color line.

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## Notes

1. Franck Slaughter, *The New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1948, p. 24. <https://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/hurstonarchive/?p=contemporary-reviews>
2. The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review, Worth Tuttle Hedden. October 10, 1948. In: Gates and Appiah (1993: 36).
3. Proposed Recording Expedition into the Floridas, [http://www.loc.gov/resource/afc\\_corresp.afc\\_corresp\\_essay1](http://www.loc.gov/resource/afc_corresp.afc_corresp_essay1)

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