how it feels:
a study of race and ontology
in the work of Zora Neale Hurston

by

Jada Reid
Class of 2022

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English and African American Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2022
dedicated to Zora Neale Hurston

“I have nothing of finality to say of Hurston the person. I believe any artist’s true character is seen in the work she or he does, or it is not seen. In Hurston’s work, what she is was revealed. The purpose of this anthology is to present enough of her work so that the reader can make up his or her [or their] own mind. (2, Walker).” “She appreciated us, in any case, as we fashioned ourselves. That is something. And of all the people in the world to be, she chose to be herself, and more and more herself. That, too, is something. So this book is dedicated to Zora Neale Hurston. And it is sent off to her wherever she is now in the universe with the good wishes and love of all those who have glimpsed her heart through her work…”

May people continue to think through the art you put in the world, the values you centered, the way that you loved,

and may they know that you are still here, part and parcel of the world, united through all your fragments that are not fractured, but whole within themselves.

1 Zora Neale Hurston, Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker. I love myself when I am laughing... And then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston reader. Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979.
i wrote, i am writing, this has been written
for mia, my sibling,

all the stars in the universe aligned to bring you to me.

for my mother, my first light source.
her resilience. the way our breaths collapse into each other
as she clings me closer to her
this metamorphosis inside myself,
only made her love me more

for nathan. my cousin, my friend, my brother.
i always secretly thought we’d live together after i graduated.
in some ways, this is true
you are everywhere i am.

for kai. my cosmic; part of my soul.
we are the same species
butterfly hatched in the same way
i am the writer i am
because you told me i could be.
“Love makes your soul crawl out of its hiding place.”

Zora Neale Hurston
to the people I am made of (I have so many people to thank, I refuse to not poetically express my love):

My thesis would not be here without all the love I have in my life. Without the love that I have been unconditionally given and have been taught to unconditionally give. I am forever grateful to my soul for helping me find my pals from past and future lives. I feel my core resonant with love when I am around my people.

My first thank you is to my high school teachers for helping me realize how special my ideas were and believing in me to go to college for free, even though I literally had no idea how I would get there.

Mr. Maddux, my interest in the broader world around me started in your biology class, in a field, looking for butterflies. We caught them, killed them, and pinned them (not so) delicately. Although I hope to never participate in that practice again, I learned to see nature in a way I hadn’t before, and now I can’t go on walks without looking down at the ground. When the rain comes out now; I commune with the worms, the trees, the soil, and that all started with you. You taught me that true teaching begins with watching what is around you and loving it anyway (even if it grosses you out a bit at first).

Alford, I have your voice in my head reminding me of how strong, how skilled I am and how skilled I will grow to be if I continue to believe in myself. You taught me not to take shit from anyone who refused to respect me. And you taught me to listen to other people’s ideas too. For graduation you gifted me a journal and inside you listed things to listen to and things to read. Little did I know that some of those pieces and theories would be very foundational to the thinking that led me here. You believed in my writing. That is all I could have ever asked for.

Mrs. Walley, you have tattooed your name on everyone’s heart at Collegiate. We miss you. I cannot believe you are not on this planet anymore. I always thought you’d somehow make it to my graduation. Your smile, your courage, I am graduating for you. I am learning for you, I remember when you told us how badly you wanted to go to college and how you couldn’t. The owl you crocheted me has been with me on campus since my first day here. It’ll be with me everywhere I go. “This too shall pass,” is what I remind myself when I miss you. I know how much you loved that quote.

To my family Nathan, Mikye, Mom, Mia, Momo,

Nathan, I miss you more every day. Our family is fragmented, broken in some ways, and fractured down the middle. I wish we would have talked more. I know we were thinking some of the same things. You understood me even when I didn’t realize it. You know, my favorite movie is Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind now? That movie we stopped watching because we got bored and you taught me to skateboard instead? Every time I fall off my skateboard I smile up at you.

Mikye, I need to learn more languages in order to articulate the love I have for you. You helped me find Black family. You are my Black family. You are my guide, my best friend, my heart, my soul, and you have taught me to love
completely, fully and unconditionally. I am who I am because of you. This thesis
simply would not exist in the way that it does if it wasn’t for you and our love.

Mom, I am so grateful for all your hugs, all your kisses, and all the times you
answered my calls and cried with me. I really felt like I couldn’t do this. And
every time we spoke on the phone you reminded me how I could. You were right.
I did it. I got that from you. I love you more than you will ever know. My dreams
have come possible because you believed in me from the moment I was born.
Even when we disagree. You are the strongest person I know. I get through this
life because you love me how you do.

Momo, the creative part of my soul, we all know I got it from you. The
music, the writing, my singing. I love you. Every part of me loves you, and I
would not be who I am without your tough love, your layers of paint on our old
home. Thank you for surprising me with cherries, and clothes, and hugs, and for
letting me help you even though I know you can do everything on your own.

Mia, my sunshine. This thesis is for you. Everything I write comes back to
you. I am so grateful we have each other in this universe. The moment you were
born, I could feel that anytime I felt lost, all I would have to do is think of you.
My sibling, my baby, I am so proud of the person you are becoming. We will be
friends forever. I am so blessed to watch you grow and love. Your heart is full of
light and love. You fill me with life; and I hope I fill yours with life too. I will
always be here.

My mentors at Wesleyan,
Professor Johnson. No words can describe how grateful I am to have met
you. I remember going to a meet and greet dinner in order to get to know you. I
was enrolled in your Early African American History class and I wanted to know
who my teacher would be. Little did I know, that my major would change, my
soul would shift into a new alignment. Little did I know, that I’d find the older
version of me, a version of my soul that I did not know existed on this planet. I
don’t know how I got so lucky to have such a professor, such a guide in this life
so early. You understood everything that I ever said to you in our meetings. You
read my mind. You saw my vision and you believed in it every step of the way.
You even knew that I needed lapis lazuli. Kindred souls. Cosmic comrades.
Thank you for nurturing every seed that I sowed in your office. Thank you for
talking to me almost weekly for most of my time at Wesleyan. Thank you for
challenging me and getting me out of my egos comfort zone.

Professor Murillo, my favorite moment of ours is when I was in your
office hours and the sun was setting. We both fell under silence, and then we
watched the sky change colors. I feel like this is metaphorical for how we spent
most of our time together. Your dedication to poetry, to teaching, and to loving
inspires me to be exactly who I am. You got me through some of my darkest
times, showing me the light I have inside of myself, and how lucky I was that our
light found each other. You are not only my writing professor, you are a spiritual
guide. You listened to me when I felt like no one was. And you made me laugh
even when I felt my light dulling. Thank you for answering all of my existential
writing questions. For believing in me and my writing even when I didn’t. I will
forever be grateful for every single word we’ve ever exchanged. I did not know I would fall in love with poetry until I fell into your class and you changed my relationship with writing forever. You taught me how to use poetry as a way to see.

Professor Garry, even though we met my junior year, my thesis would not exist without you. Thank you for all your guidance, your support, your jokes, and for reminding me how brilliant I am. I always felt valued in your course and am so grateful for your ability to command the classroom. Your teaching inspires me and reminds me why I want to teach myself.

Professor Vogel, thank you for holding space for me and my poetry. After finishing this project I realized the seeds of this project (even separate from Zora before I knew my thesis was preoccupied with her) started in all of my courses with you. I am still trying to understand how to translate feeling into my poetics, but I continue to channel all of our conversations and your warmth and teaching pedagogy into my very practices of writing. I did not know writing could be a ritual, could be a spiritual practice, or even a way of being in the world until you taught me so. Thank you.

Professor Ulysse - lapis lazuli
Professor Patterson-Faye, we both know we found each other late in my time at Wesleyan. But I am so blessed to have encountered you at all. The space you created in our class will forever hold space in my heart and I will never forget hugging you on the last day of class, feeling the most loved I had in such a long time. You created a space where I felt seen, I felt heard, and I felt like I could explore worlds that I had never known existed. I learned so much about the teacher I want to become by learning from you and I cannot wait to reach out to you years and years from now telling you how my syllabus has you on it. You helped me bring my whole self to the classroom. I cannot thank you enough for all of the creative energy your course sparked in me.

Dean Demetrius Colvin, your singing, your laughter, your embodiment of being exactly who you are and bringing whole self into the room, your love, allowed me to be exactly who I am on this campus, my entire time being here. You taught me how to love myself through the work that I knew I needed to do. I am so grateful to have met you as soon as I got here, and to have a mentor in someone that has guided me through all of my confusions of what it means to work towards revolution.

Professor Silber, your mentorship, your approach to writing and teaching writing, and your affect theory class have all changed my life. You taught me to be a tender, yet critical thinker and writer. I understand writing as a process, and I recognize how special that process is because of you. I am so grateful to have learned from you in all of the ways I did.

The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program,
Professor Eudell, thank you so much for your guidance, your patience, and your belief in me. I know I was occasionally annoying in class, but I wouldn’t be the thinker I am without your questions and care.
To Zubaida, Jessica, Samela, my cohort. I am so proud of all three of you. The love I have in my heart for you radiates and I am so grateful to have seen your beautiful projects grow.

Ron Brown Scholarship Program, my Ron Brown family! Thank you for all the love, all the support, I would not have made it through college without your love and care. You brought me some of my favorite people. Elijah, I am so glad we found each other, thank you for believing in me and my writing before I even saw myself as a writer. Maurice, for making me laugh and cultivating love with me. Dan, Randy, Mrs. Evans-Grevious, Mr. Mallory, thank you for your mentorship, your love, and your constant support.

To my LEDA family, Ms McMillan I am at Wesleyan because of you. I miss you more than words can express, and I am forever indebted to you and your deep belief in me. To Tola, may your soul be resting in joy and love. I will always think of that beetle we found together everytime you cross my mind. To Savannah, we are one in the same. Thank you for seeing me.

My friends, my beloveds (that I have not already been mentioned):

Genesis, living with you this year has been my favorite thing about Wesleyan. Our souls thrive off of being near each other, and my heart is so full of love that I have gotten to build a home with you.

Jaylene, my freshman roommate. Man was I blessed to have a sister for a roommate. Thank you for grounding me.

Lee, you are a light to this world, and you continuously shine it upon me every second we are together. Our friendship opened me to love that I had not felt before.

Grace, thank you for holding me through my darkest times. Sitting in silence with you is my favorite kind of silence.


Thank you to my beautiful, brilliant therapists; Priya, Kelsea

And finally, to my dreams, the souls that guide me, my ancestors who worked for love.

To all the artists and thinkers that have shaped me and taught me how to love language: Jacqueline Woodson, Jean Toomer, Benjamin Saenz, Don Miguel Ruiz, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Valerie Boyd, bell hooks, Elizabeth Acevedo, Audre Lorde.
Table of Contents: pieces, fragments, & the swelling between

Acknowledgments, the people I am made of 5

Preface 10

Introduction: Me & Zora 13

Research as Formalized Curiosity 33

Interlude of “certain moments” 44

Cosmic & Racialized 47

“The Dream is the Truth” 58

“Covered by the waters I am…” 66

Reverberating Fragments 71
Preface: The Great Soul That Surges Between the Boundaries

humans convinced themselves they deserve control over lives that were never theirs.

they create things, but seldom do they understand trying to forget and undo. things. even that word is human-like.

out of tune with their own histories, they forget it was fiction. always a fiction.

i am change and i cannot be overridden, undermined, or erased from the world. i come and come and go and go regardless of what they tell themselves and their children, only for their children to create their own illusions in an attempt to escape the ones they inherited. they cannot change the life they were given.²

it is not that one experience is more valuable than anyone else’s. the space between all experience is worth feeling and knowing. you only exist because your neighbor does, even if that neighbor is the antithesis of who you mean to be.

i know it’s hard to remember that when everything you do is so contingent on this body, the only body you remember having.

one of these humans was just like you.
i remember the moment she fell.

randomly assigned, was their soul into this body of theirs, and it just so happened. they had an absent father whose hair and flesh this body of theirs most resembled. they possessed an always distorting sense of sexuality, gender, and race.

there are many things about her that humans might consider a “trope,” or a “cliche” a “stereotype,” simultaneously, there are many things about her that make no sense to the people who know her best. they say she isn’t real.

you’re probably wondering why i concern myself with such human matters.

after holding everything, everything, and anything that any and all of you have ever held. it has come to my attention that i must address it. not race itself, but the illusion that it makes convinces you of special treatment. that your skin color makes it that way.³ that this difference in pigment is fundamental, planned by nature. irreconcilable

---

² my cousin used to say this :)
³ Part where zora is like “I don’t deserve special treatment,” in religion part?
the idea, a loose classification of physical characteristics makes you believe you are different from each other, that this difference is fundamental and irreconcilable. i’m not sure my soul-self can even comprehend what “difference” really is. it is a silly story in this realm. we know it so intimately, that we did nothing but laugh about it.

but then changes came. there was this impulse, and laughter felt misplaced.

we had to change something. we could not allow another one of our planets to fall into the abyss.

it just so happened that this human fell into a body that was in a society where the pigment of her skin, and the features of her body were markers of status. there are many, many worlds and times where this is not the case. after your soul gets the hang of that, your present self will no longer attach to such fluid definitions.

that is what this human felt pulsing inside of her. this self that this human constructed inside of this body was so vast, so different from the one imprinted onto them that they felt the pressure collapse into them from all sides. they could feel their core molding into something that did not feel like home.

it started the moment she opened her eyes, and her soul tried to keep her from forgetting her past life.

they knew immediately. they could feel their soul shrink. they found themselves unable to make a home in this realm, so aware were they of the cosmic origins of their energy. they were not from here—they knew no one was from here, but that not everyone could always truly feel this part of themselves.

they had been forced to take identity from the oppressor’s world, swallowed it whole, and had to feel the insides of her being break into fractals.

she knew that how the world saw her was not her, but a distorted image. she searched for mirrors of herself, but found it only in stories that her took elsewhere. she couldn’t even see herself in the eyes of her mother and could never reach her father. their connection had been severed even before she had a say because of this color thing. she couldn’t confirm her own beingness until she felt a call deep, deep inside her.

she had dreams. a soul tangled in a tree, begging for her to release them from the branches. she could not remember how, but she and her sibling released this soul untangled it using the mind, not remembering how the body did its part. the soul mangled into a silhouette of a face, and even though she is no longer sleeping, sometimes she feels this face in her chest. it felt like a confirmation.
she had more dreams. ones that echoed words she had seen in the waking world.
she dreamt of bright lights releasing itself upon valleys of darkness, caves that had never been explored.

she saw a distorted body that felt like her own, breaking into small pieces. And she knew that storytelling, dreaming, imagining is where the truth revealed itself, over and over. she was revealed.

here, in dreams, before all things became known, god told her she should empty herself out. parcel through the contents, and return those pieces back where they came from. only by this, would she understand where she came from and where her soul ought to go.
Introduction: Me & Zora

I have been dreaming, thinking, realizing, writing my way into an understanding of myself through various pieces of Zora Neale Hurston’s writing since I was first introduced to her in high school through the film version of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Every year after, Zora’s creative energy seemed to find me. Through my various classes across my time in college, I came to know Zora in all of the roles she played as anthropologist, folklorist, fiction writer, archiver, and overall, artist. Zora was fascinated with the stories of Black people (including herself) and wanted to carve out a place to remember and tend to them through various realms. She sang, and even though not many people know the sound of her voice, she used it (as well as her writing skills) as an instrument of archival remembrance.

She understood that Blackness had a place in the universe and she navigated being in her body as a Black woman while also being her cosmic self. Racial identities, their labels, have never felt fully encompassing of my experiences of being racialized, as I have always felt “in the middle,” as many biracial, mixed-race people have vocalized. I wasn’t raised with any semblance of “authentic blackness,” from actual Black people for most of my childhood. The only Blackness I knew was when my white mom turned the radio louder to rap and bop along to Tupac, Mary J Blige, and TLC. Longer than I can remember, I

---

was accused of not being Black enough—of sounding white, listening to white music, and I constantly felt like my hair wasn’t like anyone’s around me.

My thesis is not interested in centering my mixedness as an experience harder than being dark-skinned and Black in the U.S. Rather, my thesis aims to center the feelings, the affects that come up with being biracial, as familiar to more than just biracial Black people, but many people who identify as Black. The biracial experience (being Black and another race) is a part of the Black experience, but I am not claiming or trying to center it as the only or most important Black experience. I do not think this is true at all, whatsoever. Part in my understanding of this, is that Zora, someone who did not identify as biracial and who was raised in an all-Black town, has similar sentiments and reservations in thinking through being Black while falling outside of what authentic Blackness is. I feel the same. My lifelong work is interested in highlighting how narratives of Black authenticity as well as narratives of identity authenticity more broadly are dangerous in perpetuating the idea that there is a “right” way to be Black. Because what race our bodies happens to be is not up to us, why should we feel the pressure to constructed rules that were created to keep us restricted from privileges in the first place? Blackness, the category, was not made with love in mind. I refuse to solely live my life through a lens of delimitations of who I am allowed to be because white colonizers decided to define Blackness as everything they did not want to be.

This project began as a potential cultural analysis of being biracial in the U.S., but after I read “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” by Zora Neale Hurston,
my focal point changed. Instead of representing and analyzing the experiences of biracial and mixed individuals such as myself, I became invested in exploring theories that enabled one to imagine themselves beyond essentialized identity categories. This included my mixedness but did not center it as the only identity to access such an experience.

Many of my identities and the way they mesh and bump into each other metaphorically inside of me, make for an interesting experience. Binaries have never felt enough for me. Not the racial boundary, not the categories of sexualities, not even how we understand race and class as mutual indicators of each other. My white family was poor, despite whiteness being associated with wealth (and also tied to wealth and success). It seemed like most facets of my identity questioned the pre-existing categories and symbolic associations of meaning. My identities and how I experienced them felt like they were clashing inside of me—I needed some other way to see myself. College was where I learned what nonbinary meant. Even nonbinary in the name itself has to be in relation to the binary because binary categorizations are at the center of how we understand the universe. I began to think about what it would mean if I understood as always shapeshifting and forming unable for a binary to catch me?

Zora’s refusal of a Black authenticity, of one way to be Black and to write about Blackness, ultimately ended in her being pushed from the Black literary canon. Regardless of negative reviews and a struggle to stay financially stable, throughout her career, she continuously wrote through facets of her identity that were interesting to her, regardless of the response. When reading How It Feels,
Dust on Tracks Road, and Their Eyes, the overlapping themes reveal this. From her cosmic identity from How It Feels being more theorized and supported in her autobiography, to Their Eyes exploring the ‘eternal feminine’ from how it feels that she believes she embodies. Janie embodies that eternal feminine. And she demonstrates the logic behind her cosmic Zora and how/why she believes in herself as having cosmic origins. Her constant refusal of being made into an image of what was expected of her as a Black woman, while also unconditionally loving and being fascinated with her Blackness (and Blackness that she didn’t necessarily identify with) called to me. She was crafting an identity that felt more applicable to me than any category I could find.

For historical context, I will briefly touch on some phrases that Alaine Locke, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison’s use to describe her work in reviews of Their Eyes Were Watching God. They attempt to define Black literature through a restrictive lens of masculinity, which inherently attempted to push Hurston outside of their definitions of Negro art. Ellison defined her work as “calculated burlesque” that, according to Wright, was riddled with “sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley.” All three authors reinforced a hegemonic, masculine imaginative of Black art that could fit into the mainstream American art, in order to be understood as markers of success.

Richard Wright refers to Zora’s Their Eyes as minstrelsy and indicates that Zora moves her characters from laughter to tears, what a white audience loves the

---

most. This immediately made me think of a moment in *How It Feels* where Zora calls upon stereotypical images of the African by associating her movements to jazz music as jungle-like, primitive, and filled with color. Rather than explain how these stereotypes are dangerous, she uses them to demonstrate how she felt her coloredness in this embodied moment where she was unafraid to feel her body and what the music was arising in her affectively. She subverts this stereotype to arrive at a deeper meaning of how she felt true to her body. This example similar in how Zora refuses to flatten black characters in order to appeal to whiteness and or middle-class constructions of Blackness. Wright could also argue that Zora’s usage of the primitive is also “minstrel-like,” but this would be untrue and dismissive of the intentions behind Zora for reclaiming her body, her autonomy and how she wants to use language to depict her experiences.

Despite many accusations against *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora enacted a story that embodied Black feminism, proving to me, that her fiction is in fact real, has theme, and does reflect *her own* understanding of her Blackness. To borrow from Hortense Spillers’ formulation of gender, Zora fictionally represents how slavery has in fact altered the way in which gender is experienced for and to Black women, and she does this by drawing from her own experiences of being Black woman and then formulating a three-dimensional character to embody and live through this.⁶

---

⁶ Not only is this shown through the novel itself, but it is enhanced when placed into conversation with Alice Walker’s *Looking for Zora*, as Walker intimately details the ways in which Zora’s book is intertwined with the reality of her experiences. Zora pulled from her own life in Eatonville, Florida, as a creative well for her inspiration in representing what she knew.
As Alice Walker wrote, “We are better off, if we think of Zora Neale Hurston as an artist, period — rather than as the artist/politician most black writers have been required to be. This frees us to appreciate the complexity and richness of her work.” By releasing Zora from the requirements pressured onto her, even more harshly as a Black woman, and by noticing this harsh treatment, we can understand why Zora would not be interested in upholding the same structures that do not have her heart at best interest. Zora reimagines and redefines what real politics consists of by centering Black women. Her writing proves the false dichotomy between serious fiction and folklore fiction, despite Alain Locke arguing that folklore fiction is primitive, and allowing us to understand that it is through masculinity her critics restricted her text’s ability to be politically advancing for Black people. Her novels and thinking were ahead of her time in how she centered Black women, Southern landscapes (rather than symbols of economic advancement and the elite), as well as the spiritual practices of Black people in the south, despite being used to stereotype Black people as unintelligible beings. She was unafraid to center the ways in which Black people’s embodied experiences create their social realities, especially when it comes to being particularly disenfranchised, even by your shared community.

Hurston’s portrayal and construction of how she understood Blackness, specifically Blackness and its relation to Black femininity, was not a definition of

---

7 Walker, Love, 3.
8 Thinking of Zora’s portrayal of colorism in Color Struck, and how Alice Walker in her anthology’s dedication she explains the possibility of Zora making Janie mixed race not because Zora was colorist, but because she was highlighting colorism as a central issue within the Black community.
Blackness that her contemporary thinkers were interested in prioritizing or popularizing. They ignored the parts she centered, to push forward respectability politics of Black literature succeeding in the United States. Her call to express blackness through folklore, dialectal speech, and the representation of her experience growing up in an all-Black town directly influenced the work she wrote. Her work was not understood as bettering the race of Black people, because Their Eyes specifically centered Black women's sexuality and sensuality.9

If, as Ellison wrote, a Black artist must “create the consciousness of his oppressed nation,” then Zora would never have fit his definition.10 Zora does not lie about how violence is perpetrated against Black women by Black men as well as white.11 In fact, she does create “a storehouse of emotional and intellectual insights to be transformed into the art of the future” and reveals the social reality of Black women and Black communities at large, just not with Black male pain at the center.12

The blurring lines of fiction and memoir in the essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” the novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, and her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road transfixed me. I drew the parallels between these texts. As Zora negotiated and straddled the space between reality and fiction, she created


10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
space for genres like autohistoria, biomythography, and imaginative autobiography.\textsuperscript{13}

Each vignette in “How It Feels” contains a trickle of unfamiliarity that Zora encountered. These unfamiliar moments like seeing a white person for the first time, or being the only Black person in a room, shatter preexisting coalescing narratives that cultivate what we understand as our present reality. This present knowingness shatters. The illusion around you cracks into small fragments, revealing a new world, a new dimension in which everything you thought about yourself is no longer true. Zora knew she was no longer Zora from Eatonville once she moved to Jacksonville and was exposed to other races, eventually making her a little colored girl…and then Cosmic Zora after processing and detaching. Through writing in companionship with Zora, I began to scratch the surface of discovering myself through writing. I put myself back together through fragments that arose after seeing the ways in which racialization had broken me down.\textsuperscript{14}

Like Zora, I am aware of the “certain moments” in which I was made into a racialized object, one that never fulfilled the ever-present goal of authenticity. Zora finds herself beyond these certain moments, and reveals in \textit{How It Feels} how she remains, she says “I am,” this statement of choosing the core of her being rather than race as the defining factor of how she plans to be in the world.

Some of these moments are more resonant than others, but through a sum of all of them, I become Black.

\textsuperscript{13} Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, Valerie Boyd.
\textsuperscript{14} Gloria Anzaldua
I am twelve. My hair is flat ironed “straightened,” I am wearing a white tank top covered in colorful peace signs. I am visiting my aunt somewhere in rural Missouri for the first time in years after she left St. Louis due to a heroin addiction. At an attempt to capture the reunion, and at an attempt to cling onto this memory, the picture holds me frozen, surrounded by white, yet slightly tan faces. I don’t remember taking this photo. I only remember, remembering it. And that’s when I saw that I was the only one with dark Black hair that was not naturally straight. The only one with brown skin. And the only child. I am reminded of the scene where Janie sees herself for the first time in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Ah was wid dem white chillun so much Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn’t have found it out then, but a man come long takin’ pictures and without askin’ anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us. Round a week later de man brought de picture for Mis’ Washburn to see and pay him which she did, then give us all a good lickin’.

So when we looked at depicture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’s where Ah wuz s’posed to be, but Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark child as me. So Ah ast, “where is me? Ah don’t see me.”

Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chillun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, “Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself?”

Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names. Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: “Aw aw Ah’m colored!”

Janie’s account of how when first noticed herself as colored resembles “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” and the moments where Zora becomes colored.

---

15 Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 11.
This is shown through the process of being “thrown up against a white background” repeatedly throughout her life (whether this happened in a cabaret, her university, or even her hometown during encounters with strangers). Janie, Zora, and I all “became a fast brown” becoming visible through our Blackness in particular moments and then recognizing the racialized self either in the moment or after. Such moments are reflections copies, rather than actual bodies of actual people. The photograph is a visual projection of me (opens opportunity to make me into a racialized object), not the self that I am experiencing as myself. Racial identity forms through these negotiations between reflection and experience.

Janie’s collection of memories, how she once saw herself versus the moment she says “Ah’m colored!,” push and pull at each other in order for her to encounter how she self-perceives. Each memory threatens to disrupt the previous conception.

Looking through old family photos, I remember my Blackness is a disruption of a white lineage. My being born was a hole cut in the sharp white background that is my family’s long history of white skin. The thread of the image gets caught on reproducing me as part of the whole, but the whole picture to begins to fray. Breaking down into its components, tracing their origins.

Although Janie is a fictional character, I too, felt myself being written, as well as the presence of Zora’s subjectivity and the personal anecdotes of her life in “How it Feels.” Fiction and reality become blurred—indistinguishable from one another.
In a photograph filled with white bodies, there I was: a small brown person amidst all of my caregivers and guardians who I love. It wasn’t until I had to look at myself that I realized I had always been seen as different. I have my mother’s long eyelashes, faint freckles that you can only see when you are staring hard enough, your face near mine…and then you’d notice a faint resemblance of her nose. The rest of my features are an amalgamation of my parents features, all my family before me, especially the family I will never meet.

I stare at my face in the mirror, and I cannot help but wonder how much I look like the women on my father’s side. My features must be traced back somewhere. I know that there is life in how my eyes crinkle, and in the fullness of my lips. The closest I have been to seeing this is imagining me standing in between my two half siblings I know—Mia who is also mixed and racially ambiguous, and then Kailiegh who is monoracially Black, both of which I share a parent. I imagine myself standing in between them; drawing constellations from Mia’s features to Kaileigh’s.

Zora passed away and transitioned into her next life in 1960. Nineteen years later, Alice Walker wrote “Looking for Zora,” reviving Hurston’s place in the literary canon and grieving her loss. Walker anthologized Hurston’s work the same year in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*. This anthology is not only a source of inspiration and knowledge for my thesis in content, but also methodologically paved the path this thesis continues to carve.
I was deep in my research for my creative exploration of Hurston’s literature and its connection to my life (thus both resulting in this thing that you are reading right now) when I realized I would benefit from a consolidated location of essays and papers of Hurston’s essays. This was when I stumbled across Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Genevieve West’s recent anthology, *You Don’t Know Us Negroes*. Walker and Gates’ anthologies are very different, and although I will not be detailing most of contrasting moments, I want to highlight how Walker’s serves as anthology from Zora’s fiction, her autobiography, as well as some of her essays like “How It Feels to be Colored Me.” Both anthologies republic this essay and foreground them in different lighting. It is important to me to think through the impact of both of their anthologies in re-historicizing Zora at different points in time. Walker’s anthology takes an intimate, personal approach as it ends with a personal essay where she is searching for Zora, (which I realized I am also doing), but not only emotionally and spiritually, but physically as Walker finds and memorializes Zora’s unmarked grave.

Gates and West write: “Hurston’s race pride permeates everything she writes. She exults in a ‘timeless’ but feminine self even as she sharpens her oyster knife in ‘How it Feels to Be Colored Me.’” The term “racial pride” immediately echoed in my mind, and I physically could feel that something was off.

Somewhere, Hurston had a reply, or rather a reason for them to have never said this. It was in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

---

Race pride is a luxury I cannot afford. There are too many implications behind the term […] So “Race Pride” in me had to go. And anyway, why should I be proud to be a Negro? Why should anybody be proud to be white? Or yellow? Or red? After all, the word “race” is a loose classification of physical characteristics. It tells nothing about the insides of people.17

When I began chasing the gravitational pull of “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” racial pride was not the first thought I stuck to, rather her “cosmic” self-intrigued me: “At certain times, I have no race, I am me.” Zora has been historicized as so quintessentially Black, very Black and proud to be black as Gates’ quote indicates. How does her having no race at certain times, complicate the race pride that Gates claims “permeates” all her work?

It’s no surprise to me that it took me a long time, my whole life up until age 16, before I realized people did not see me as biracial, but as Black. The two closest people to me were unable to see their colorblindness as detrimental to how I saw myself. I could not myself outside of their perceptions. It was from these perceptions that my self-understanding emerged. They refused to see how I experienced the world differently because of my skin. I was aware of these differences in my body, but my mind clung onto what me and my loved ones had in common: whiteness.

Zora writing resembles my own coming into a complicated understanding of myself that navigates how I feel, and how I am racially categorized. The way

17 Zora Neale Hurston; Maya Angelou. Dust (Kindle Location 3535).
other Black people responded to her performance of her Black writerly identity reminded me of how other Black people responded to my embodiment of my Blackness. She embraced who she felt she was, through the movement of feeling connected and disconnected in various ways to her Blackness.

In the same paragraph where Gates articulates his claim of Zora’s racial pride, a sentence after this articulation, he cites from the same page in Zora’s autobiography where she says she had to let go of racial pride. What does this reveal about the weight of historicization and its relationship to how Zora’s words speak for themselves?

Zora’s complication of racial pride lured me into her literary spaces. I’m unsure if Gates was critically thought through the weight of the word “racial pride,” in a way that Zora seemed to do in her autobiography. Zora did not exhibit pride racial pride in how it was defined during the 1930-50s, but cultural pride in her blackness. She constructed herself outside of this constrained understanding of Blackness because she knew this blackness was not originally hers to embody therefore her understanding of her coloredness is not tragic and can be understood as existing outside of how slavery has constructed and forced Black people how to understand and construct themselves. That’s why the famous line of “How It Feels,” “I am not tragically colored,” is also in this same essay where she says she feels most colored when “thrown against a sharp white background,” which is to say Blackness and whiteness as they are defined rely on each other to exist.

Raised in the all Black township of Eatonville, Florida, there was little to no whiteness—she could be just her self—and it was not until that this world began
to crack as she was forced to see herself in the way that white people saw her. She *became* a colored girl, which is a separate process than saying that she should have unwavering pride in something that she had no control over. In her autobiography she echoes a similar sentiment on race:

“It tells nothing about the insides of people…Races have never done anything…I don’t care what race you belong to…Why waste time keeping conscious of your physical aspects?”

These are just a few instances where Zora’s own words make Gates & Wests’ assertions feel obsolete, two dimensional. They lack a critical engagement with the weight of this phrase. I am not arguing that Zora has not or did not believe in racial pride at one point in her life, but that a more comprehensive understanding of her and her art, unearths that she, as a moving, everchanging being, moved between and from these ideals of prioritizing racial pride.

My thesis is exploring through embodiment within the text, of how anthologizing is identity making as well as a metaphor for how identity is made. Anthologizing not only formulates the anthologizer’s identity in how they understand someone else’s works, but also reformulates and constructs an understanding of the individuals that are being anthologized. My thesis understands itself as anthology of thoughts and dedications in conversation with Zora, “wherever she is now in the universe with the good wishes and love of all those who have glimpsed her heart through her work.”

---

of race and how it “structure(s) our culture-specific order of consciousness, modes
of mind, and thereby of being.” This order of consciousness can be seen in
moments where racial identification is in process. In “How it Feels to Be Colored
Me,” Hurston provides anecdotal insight into how racial consciousness and this
seemingly innate mode of mind comes into being. “How It Feels” reveals how
Zora navigated remaining herself beyond the construction of race being utilized to
make her into a statue of a person, rather than her authentic self.20

“Humans are storytelling animals,” Professor Eudell clears his throat,
repeating the words again, reminding me over and over the essence of what it
means to be of this particular species. We create our realities through storytelling.
Humans know that they are storytellers. We know in the sense that we do it
always: before bedtime, for school lessons, as propaganda—everything is
undergirded through story-making. Our lives unfold as they unfold (through our
perception) because we tell ourselves it is: “‘Being human is a hybridly auto-
instituting process’” by means of which the narratively instituted sense of self,
that is, what we experience ourselves to be, serves to induce appropriate behaviors
indispensable to the realization and reproduction as a species of our genre-specific
modes of mind / being.”21

20 Crispin, Sartwell. "Bits of broken glass: Zora Neale Hurston's conception of the self."  
21 Demetrius L., Eudell, "From Mode of Production to Mode of Auto-Institution: Sylvia Wynter's
Black Metamorphosis of the Labor Question." Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism20, 
We reproduce and auto-institute the very social world we are a part of through continuous storytelling, and in some ways by not interrupting the auto-instituting nature of these binding social expectations. There are affective and literal (potentially violent) consequences when veering from these social expectations. Authenticity is centered in defining Blackness (and other identities). My thesis is made of feelings and findings when I felt the tension between the ontology of myself as Black, as human, and social formulations as they were/are pressed onto me as the way I am expected to be. I re-encounter these stories, stepping inside of them, allowing me to shapeshift through remembering and choosing to center how it feels rather than how I was taught to be.

When did I tell myself that this is who I am? When did I know? The following pages negotiate my beingness and centering what that beingness is while also recognizing that I am racialized.

“Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.”

How do I remain myself when the very notion of self has origins outside of me that do not have me (who I really am) in mind? How do I remain myself, and what does this “self” consist of? Processing Zora Neale Hurston’s work interwoven with processing my own experiences of how I coming to understand race, I will illuminate how I am searching for a version of myself that does not

---

22 Hurston, How It Feels.
23 Melancholy of race “what is a minority without his/her race?”
center racialization as core, or most important of who I am as a human outside of my racialized experiences.

My immersive exploration of Zora’s work will draw attention to the way her narrative provides a way of reimagining and finding new meaning in being racialized. Rather than allowing the pain of being racially oppressed in the world be the beginning and the end of her self-definition, my reading of this piece argues that Zora provides us with a way to see our social world as the beginning of how we make sense of ourselves, but never the ending. By understanding writing as a process of identity formation, as well as understanding race as a process of making meaning, our scope of understanding Zora Neale Hurston and race in the present context expands. This expansion makes space for exploring the ontology of what it means to be while also being Black.

To access how it feels for me to be in the world, while also being racialized as Black: dreaming, imagining, and embodying who and how I want to be in the world is central to this process of sinking into my being-ness. In How It Feels Zora reaches a cosmic self and posits this arrival after experiencing embodiment and a deep awareness of how her identity as a colored woman has shifted across space and time. This awareness is a form of embodiment that this thesis poses as a methodology for knowing. In this prose piece, Zora uses vignettes to articulate different moments in time through a process of collaging these moments in order to tell the story of how it feels for her to be colored. It is important for me to mention that I do not believe stories belong to one individual. I am in no way saying that this thesis is made of my stories. I did not create them. I am reproducing them and showing you what resonates and how Zora and I fashioned ourselves through these certain stories.
In Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust On a Tracks Road*, she mentions how the questions kept scratching inside of her in her chapter on religion. These questions did not let her rest for too long, and eventually, all the questions that interrogated the makeup of her world came rushing.

“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. But as early as I can remember, I was questing and seeking. It was not that I did not hear.”

“As I grew, the questions went to sleep in me. I just said the words, made the motions and went on.”

“The thing slept on in me until my college years without any real decision. I made the necessary motions and forgot to think. But when I studied both history and philosophy, the struggle began again.”

In this section, she illustrates an attempt to ignore the questions through making “the motions” and going on. So although Zora felt the pressure of the auto-instituting society around her, the questions that she felt inside of her body refused to let her let them go.

In the moments where Zora is revisiting her childhood in her autobiography, she ultimately illustrates the ways in which her family tried to reign her into their ideas of what Black people were supposed to be. From a young age, she did not fit into this, or want to listen. *How It Feels* touches on this briefly in how Zora was fascinated with the white Northerners passing through her all Black town.

“Grown people know that they do not always know the why of things, and even if they think they know, they do not know where and how they got the proof.

---

Hence the irritation they show when children keep on demanding to know if a thing is so and how the grown folks got the proof of it.” 25

This very notion of adults not knowing the why of laws they persist to stand by, illustrates how we learn to be in the world is socially inherited, and rarely questioned. The very existence of Zora and how she chose to be in the world centered questioning this. Why do we do the things that we do? Zora wanted to know. I want to know too.

I want to posit that this process of wondering, thinking, and searching inside oneself (The Inside Search as Zora calls it) is a process of dreaming. Thus, I want to pose that the through-line of my project is this dreaming. Through my words on the page, I am illuminating how we are taught to me in the world, and then dreaming up a new way to imagine myself, deeply connected to my core.

25 Hurston, Dust, 25.
“Research as formalized curiosity”

Race as a social construction cannot be devoid of feeling, the verb, and how feelings affect one’s internal gravitation towards performing identity. What makes someone identify a certain way, and in what moments do they act their identity in honor of authenticity? Feeling is always present when we are talking about race, because it frames our affectual orientations towards or away from racial meanings that we either gravitate towards, or want to refute. Choosing identity labels, having those categories forced upon us, and feeling our internal responses to those racial identity expectations are a process of meaning making that across time, allow us to define who we are, and simultaneously define those around us. I am not interested in turning away from systemic manifestations of racism and how oppression as the “way things are,” but rather I am interested how the action that follows after racial feelings is a part of those systemic manifestations of racism. Every individual has a relationship to and with race, and I am exploring how one’s relationship with their own racial identity is developed across time and what this reveals to us about our attachment to stagnant identity categorizations, even though the very existence of our identities depends upon its shifting-ness. How do our limited understandings of identity categorization bar us from living our more expansive, fluid lives, that enable us to imagine spaces where we can simultaneously embrace exactly who we are and also actively remember and mourn the histories that come along with our personal histories?

Although my project was foregrounded inside of me (and inside of the universe) way before I read these pieces, the following scholars, helped me cultivate language, images, to translate into words, what my body knew of my experience. The only word I had in my vocabulary to understand how I didn’t want racial identity to be something that hindered or kept me closed off from how I wanted to embody selfhood was the word “transcendence.” The phrase ‘transcending Blackness’ is associated with the pathologizing of Blackness as a problem rather than anti-black sentiments being the source of racism and the problem of racialization. I am not interested in transcending my Black identity, nor am I interested in erasing the material implications that race has on mine and other people’s Black bodies. I am not attempting to emotionally escape my Blackness. I do not want to leave my Blackness, or my other racial, sexual, and gendered identities. I want to sink down into what it feels like to be Black, biracial, asexual, and nonbinary and how this can free me. What would it mean for me to feel deeply inside of my identity in ways that feel generative and explorative in who I want to be? Even though the labels we use to define our identities did not originate from me, how can my experience and narration of how I experience them shapeshift and shatter preconceived notions of what it means to be these identities? How is my beingness in conversation with how Blackness is placed onto me (as well as other identities)? How is my whole embodiment as a human an antithesis of the practice of categorization…the act of fitting someone who is made of an infinite number of pieces into one box?
My arrival at reading Zora Neale Hurston as a source of this line of thinking resulted from the following texts mixing and meshing inside of my mind for the past few years.

In *Melancholy of Race* written by Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Kenyon Review*, she explores whether or not it is possible to “get over (50)” race. I wondered whether or not it was possible to detach from race, a phenomenon that heavily dictates (through governmental and historical intentionality) how we exist in the world. She draws on Freud’s concept of melancholia in order to analyze the U.S. ’s relationship with racialization as well as the minority’s status in being racialized. She ultimately comes to the conclusion that racialization itself is a process of attaching oneself to something that is lost, even though for the racialized and the oppressor the experience of what is lost and what is being attached to, is different. She says “Moreover, that incorporation of loss still retains the status of the original lost object as loss; consequently, as Freud reminds us, by incorporating and identifying with the ghost of the lost one, the melancholic takes on the emptiness of that ghostly presence and in this way participates in his/her own self-denigration.”

Cheng uses the novel *Invisible Man* to give an example of “an excellent dramatization of the minority as the object of white melancholia.” Cheng also invokes Toni Morrison’s *Playing in The Dark* and states “The canon is a melancholic corpus because of what it excludes but cannot forget. The Afro-American presence, Morrison concludes, is ‘the ghost in the machine,’”

---

27 Cheng, Melancholy, 50.
28 Cheng, Melancholy, 11.
internalized loss of the minority, to explore whether or not the minority can also be melancholic. She asks “who and what are they forgetting in order to remember? If we were to exhume, as Morrison suggests, the buried body in the heart of American literature, what exactly is the nature of the ‘presence’ that would be uncovered?”29 This question is ultimately at the heart of my thesis.

What is the nature of my presence as a racialized person in this country? Cosmic Zora has something to do with the answer for me.

Cheng poses “What is a minority without his/her race,” and my revision of this question became “What can a minority be and experience without the restrictions of his/her/their racial identity?” Though Cheng has a myriad of cultural analyses of a few different texts, what stood out to me specifically was her reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, as well as her usage of Zora’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Although I was very familiar with Zora at this point, reading Cheng and Zora in tandem with each other cracked open dimensions. Zora analyzes the co-construction of race by white people and Black people (which Cheng also argues) and in addition, Zora is also concerned with the construction of the nature of being (which she refers to through the term “cosmic”) in relation to the racialized container that is forced onto Black people.30

Cheng uses Ellison to highlight racism as a possible illness that is inside of both parties (everyone who is *raced*) and Hurston’s essay, to bring attention to the inversion of the question of ‘who is watching who’ when it comes to racial

29 Cheng, Melancholy, 50.
30 I will be returning and returning and returning to this idea of the cosmic self/cosmic Zora. I am using Zora’s words.
performance and embodiment of identity. Cheng’s question “what is a minority with his/her race,” can be addressed through immersing ourselves in Hurston’s creative prose, even though Cheng doesn’t necessarily do this in her article at great lengths.

Cheng adapts of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the melancholic to explain how the U.S. makes the racial minority into a melancholic subject. Zora’s “How it Feels” provides us with an evocative case of a minority subject refusing to be made into a melancholic object.

In order to uphold America’s concepts of freedom and liberty, America and its citizens must forget and refuse to remember the very people that they build the country’s false values on top of. But this got me thinking; how do I remember myself? What am I outside of my own Blackness if Blackness was only constructed to limit me? When reading Cheng’s concept of the racial melancholic, in conversation with Hurston’s prose, one can begin to understand what Zora means when she says “The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed.”

My interest in this line of thinking is understanding the possibility that one’s identity cannot be conceived without the opposite of that identity or the nonexistence of such an identity also being conceived at the same time. The ghost that does not thrust its leg against Zora’s is one that refuses to acknowledge its own melancholic attachments.

---

31 Hurston, How It Feels to Be Colored Me.
How is it possible for the minority identity to exist within their own right without a dependency on the position that makes a minority well, a minority. Cheng posits that her work isn’t to “repathologize” the oppressed, but to rather address the identity of the minority “without his/her injury.”32 This isn’t to say that the person holding the identity is only their identity, but rather to ask what is at cost if a minority is identifying their oppression as all of who they are. When a minority closely identifies with their identity it’s possible that clinging to this identity restricts the more expansive possibility of being who they desire to be. Is it possible for the subject of oppression to be more than the marginalization, when the very organization of the society that the minority lives in is to continue to experience such oppression? Does the very organization of society crumble if that minority realizes that they are/can be more than the position they were born into?

“To propose that the minority may have been profoundly affected by racial fantasies is not to lock him/her back into the stereotypes, but to perform the more important task of unraveling the deeper identificatory operations—and seductions—produced by those projections.”33

What lives beyond the ghosts left behind from American racism and racist projection? As I grow deeper into my topic of the relationship between affect theory and racialization, I couldn’t help but realize canonical figures like Zora Neale Hurston and WEB DuBois use the world “feel” when referring to their condition of being black or ‘colored’ in Hurston’s words. Cheng doesn’t fixate on this usage of the world ‘feel,’ but she does say that the following quote of Hurston’s: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” “refers to not only the constitution of blackness, but of whiteness as

32 Cheng, Melancholy, 5.
33 Cheng, Melancholy, 54.
well, each defining each other’s pathology.”

It’s through this feeling that Hurston arrives at such a conclusion that Cheng pulls from. It is both simultaneously the whiteness that makes the Blackness and the Blackness that makes the whiteness, which another one of my sources argues as well. My project is interested in imagining how self-identity can be formed, outside and away from the hegemonies that restrict our very understanding of who and how we can be in the world.

As the minority subject, as I, venture into exploring who I am beyond racialization, I cannot help but think of the grief that arises when one realizes everything that has been taken from them and their ancestors who were also oppressed, especially in more physically painful conditions.

My racial identity is always being created in live time. Rather than it being a category or a container to hold in/represent who I am/who I ought to be, I am striving to understand it as an opportunity, a possibility to begin the process of assessing who I really am, in relation to what the racial world expects of me. E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness* proposes racialization as a “meaning-making process” that can help us avoid searching for “fixed underlying meanings” which allows us to acknowledge how our realities, as they are constructed by identity categories, to be made, unmade and then remade in real

---

34 Cheng, Melancholy, 54.

time. Johnson is not only referring to race as a meaning making process, but also the practice of reading cultural artifacts as a process of understanding how identity is being enacted, rather than searching for a fixed meaning as we attach presumed meanings to the identity of the cultural producers. As we intake what is around us, we collage figments of the world around us, leaving us with bits and pieces of ourselves in the cracks.

This immediately challenges our current understanding of race as something as stagnant and presupposed, or innate. By combining Cheng and Johnson’s concepts together we can understand race as a meaning making process, in tandem with the creation of race as a way in which meaning is made and communicated. Whiteness has a meaning of purity attached to it, while Blackness has a meaning of criminalization and stain. And each time these historical and social meanings are communicated; they are reinstated and can appear more natural/innate and less intentional. Not only is racial identity as a process a form of communicating deeply sticky meanings, it also is a process that the individual uses to distinguish oneself from others (which everyone does in all facets of identity). It’s these historical and social meanings that have deep, sticky (affect) attachments to these races (and even the colors) that enable us to make quick actions in life as we respond to how these ideas come up.

To move beyond the understanding that race is constructed, I am interested in how our very notion of existing in the present moment often is tied up with how we perform or don’t perform our racial identities in the present moment. If we understand race as a meaning-making process like Johnson posits,
we both are acknowledging our personal stakes in recreating race in the present moment, while also realizing that we are a part of a larger collective (everyone that is) who has the power to create it and assign weight and power to certain meanings. This text allowed me to interrogate how “whiteness is embedded within the production of blackness” as the way that we create our identities as always in relation to what is absent, which is exactly what Cheng touches on when she theorizes about America making the minority a forgotten, melancholic subject, even though the American identity within itself relies on this imagined absence. By placing Cheng and Johnson in conversation with each other Cheng’s assertion that: “Words from the invisible man remain to haunt us: "You carry part of your sickness with you." You carry the foreigner inside. This malady of doubleness, I argue, is the melancholy of race, a dis-ease of location and memory, a persistent fantasy of identification that cleaves and cleaves to the marginalized and the master,” 36 can open up potentialities of how to close read Zora’s work. Cheng’s note of ending on an identification that cleaves to both the marginalized and the master is the argument that there is an attachment of feeling onto an imagined identity that allows the relationship between the master and the marginalized to continue. This kind of understanding of race and/or oppression and even identity making more broadly is dangerous if we assume that identity is being made in a vacuum, as if the identity of the marginalized is not being made under the subjection of the master.

36 Cheng, Melancholy of Race, 575.
To return to *Appropriating Blackness*, the author tries to understand race as a fiction, rather than an “unchanging biological fact.” By viewing it as a fiction, it gives power to the perceiver/the liver of the life, to make and create race in the present moment as something that has meaning. This doesn’t take away the weight and the impact of history and how race was created (and continues to be created), but it does point to the fact that race itself is not a stagnant concept or a stagnant way of understanding the world as the very races that are conceived are constantly shifting across time based on the historical, political and social moment. This text allowed me to locate my interests in finding the balance between understanding the importance of *feeling* (verb) identity making and impulses that guide one towards *feeling* that they are a certain race. And this text allowed me to understand that Blackness is not always how we construct it to be. But that it is “expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness.” This is what is black culture, and arguably is what culture is more broadly-- the only thing that really defines culture is the fact that it is constantly shifting across time and space, so it only makes sense that the very components of culture (like identity labels) are also a part of that shifting movement. It’s not something you can point your finger at directly to define, but rather it is the very movement of the thing that defines it.

Is the restoration of subjectivity possible for people who have been deprived of such autonomy and humanity (as one can define humanity through the ability to

---

feel and to choose to feel?). Hurston’s “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” and WEB DuBois’ The Souls of Black Folk both use the word ‘feel’ to articulate the racialized experience as Black person—or to quote Du Bois, “They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem?” Feeling has to be present in order to understand one’s identity. Feeling lends to a question of power, feeling as a way to articulate one’s experience of subjection. I do not use these texts or any of my work to push forward or argue that Black people are human. I already assume my reader knows this as I do. We are human. But I use these to argue that historically within the Black canon, an attention to feeling has already been present. DuBois “How does it feel to be a problem?” and Hurston’s “How it Feels to be colored me,” leads me to believe that there is something essential about feeling and experiencing one’s blackness to understand it as something to defend, love, and ultimately choose to embody. It is both this feeling that I believe gives us purpose to live, but also in some ways can push us to restrict others if we believe that one is not feeling the way that we are.
An Interlude of certain moments

I’m standing naked at the end of the bathtub; my fingers pruned. I have been standing under the water for far too long. I am eight. my curls float outward, my head submerged under the water.
i hear is my mother’s muffled voice through the closed door as i wait for her, i shut my eyes. i pretend that i am nothing.

i am nothing, and the water holds me as such.

. . .

My skin is free of any dirt, fleshed from the hard rubbing of the rag.
I heave a yell from my chest. No answer. Before I can get louder, the door opens.

I can’t get all the soap out of my hair

She (softly, but loud enough for me to hear it) sighs.
Rubs her fingers through my hair and rubs the shampoo in between the kinks.
I scrunch my nose in hopes that the pressure of my tightening face will take me away from the sore scalp.
My mother pulls my head into the water, pulls to all the moments where her hands have been in my hair, unraveling each curl from itself, knots unraveling into nothing. Pulled back to all the moments where she would make me sit in the tub, holding my hair under the faucet. I would hold my breath, not trusting the water or the mechanics of the tub.

She tugs the strands, her hands too familiar with the texture but without an understanding of the strength of her touch. Unaware of how the weight of her hand directs the movement of my head. Stop moving she tells me, even though it is she who is moving me.

Stop moving. My mom takes gel in her hands, clings onto the strands in what feels like the tightest grip ever, interlocking the pieces into a promise.

I never liked my hair. Why must I care for something that did not seem to care for me. My mother’s spectating fingers through the thickness of my hair, raising her voice just a little, enough to scare me into listening. If you don’t comb your hair it’s going to lock up! Do you want that!

Years later, I imagine my hair locking up as a kind of freedom.

For a majority of my life up, no one around me had hair that resembled my own. Although my friend group growing up was racially mixed, everyone had looser curls, straighter textures. I tried to emulate it. I hoped that somehow cutting my hair would straighten out the texture.
I’m staring into the mirror, am thirteen and am trying to will the texture from my hair. I ask my mom for the second time this week if I can cut my hair again. She shrugs. I ask her if she’s mad at me.

At this point, I have never gotten my hair professionally cut. At this point, no other Black person has ever done my hair.

I ignore the girl in the mirror. I brush my heat damaged, straightened hair, ignoring how it fragments at the ends. I cut them off soon thereafter. I keep cutting and refuse to see that the mirror reflects back to me a girl, who is afraid to see how the scissors did not change the genetic makeup of my curls.

“I cut my hair last night.”
“I didn’t even notice.”
“That’s because I cut in a ponytail, straightened.”

Kelsey has short blonde hair. She looks at me confused. It isn’t until later that I recognize she knew I shouldn’t have done that, even though I had convinced myself it would work.

. . .

It’s me and the mirror again. This time I am in high-school. S peer I don’t know very well is watching us. Her skin is darker than mine. I always thought she was prettier and more confident than I had ever felt. She’s my roommate for a few days while we visit Missouri State. I’m steadily forcing my large hair into a hair tie not made for my hair type when I catch her staring at me.

“You could pass as a nigga, you know that right?” I’m staring at myself in the mirror. Age 16. Trying to tame my hair that I still have not learned to love. The knots are too much. My roommates’ (at this college visit) voice hit my ears. And I looked at her. “What?”

“You got nigger hair. I can’t even tell your momma is white just by looking at you.” Huh. The moment I realized– people did not see whiteness when they looked at me. My Blackness came first. The part of me that felt absent, was the most present on my skin, and how the world shaped itself around me.

. . .

“Has anyone ever twisted your hair?” India, my RA (at a summer program my junior year of high school) looks at me lovingly as she asks me this question. I shake my head and they seem shocked, but excited. I like to think that for them, these emotions were tied up with one another. India always wore their hair in
twists, an undercut below, and was my first exposure to someone genderqueer. I didn’t know what that word meant until they told me. We were the same skin tone, and although I was biracial and they weren’t, we jokingly called ourselves twins. I loved taking pictures with them, and having people tell us how much we were alike.

... 

I feel their hands tugging on each strand of my hair. It smells of coconut oil and shea butter. I had never had my hair twisted before, I had only ever had little braids that my mom would do when I was younger, in order to tame my long, poofy, curly hair.

Every twist, every strand she touched: I saw myself. India was my first mentor that was a Black. She was only two years older than sixteen year old me, but they were the first time it felt like I had a Black elder. She twisted my hair. Opening up a space in my heart to recognize that there were ways my hair loved me. I had to love her back.

...
Cosmic & Racialized

I’m not inviting us to “transcend” race in a way that erases the accountability of those in power who push forward agendas of white supremacist terror. But rather I’m inviting us to hold, even just for a second within our own hands, the possibility that we don’t have to force or pretend to be anything or anyone except for what we naturally already are. I cannot tear off my Black/Brown skin, nor can I extract from myself the cultural ways of being I’ve learned from my white mother. I am both. Regardless of our phenotypes, our cultures, and our ancestry, we should be able to hold ourselves as we are, without a fear of not being authentic enough. I am real enough because I am being.

People define and articulate Black racial authenticity when the cultural identity factors of phenotype, culture and ancestry are perceived as aligning or strongly not aligning with traditional conceptions of what it means to be ‘Black.’ Phenotype, culture and ancestry background are what are used to measure one's authenticity. Searching for authenticity also bleeds with a yearn for sincerity in celebrities’ performances of Blackness. Understanding and seeing authenticity as a restrictive way to understand Blackness lead me to understand how a restoration of nuance is necessary in order to shift from a politics of authenticity to centering the felt experience.\(^{38}\) Regardless of how experiences do or do not fit into these containers of identity, the lived experience is what guides our humanity, and it is this lived experience full of all its messiness, its excess, in which we must return.

Because so many Black people individuals (including mixed-race Black people with Black and white, but also other biracial people) have felt the push and pulls of authenticity debates, it led me to wonder where notions of authenticity lie when your phenotype and your cultural performance are not perceived as traditional or fitting into the 20th/21st century constructs of race (gender and sexuality and class also are included). Should my Black authenticity immediately be questioned considering I was raised by a white woman? What about my ancestry? What happens to my authenticity if we understand that I have white ancestors as well as Black ones? Does being raised by a white mother make me less Black? Can Blackness even be quantified? If one feels they hold both whiteness and Blackness in a number of ways and feels the shift of both within them, then doesn’t that prove that Blackness can be anything? If we understand Blackness as “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness [as] the very thing that constitutes ‘black’ culture,” where does my (and other people’s) mixedness (whether known or unknown) come in? Is it possible to be Black and mixed? Am I immediately not purely Black because of my whiteness? Does pure Blackness even exist? What happens to our understanding of the category ‘Black,’ when we parcel out the nuances and begin to understand that the categories were never built to encapsulate true human experience sincerely, but

rather to continue the very intentional political agenda of white supremacy.

If Blackness is measured culturally/experientially, phenotypically, and genotypically, is it even possible to truly comprehend one's blackness within the fabricated template of what it means to be authentically and purely Black? Jackson considers: “What happens when “blackness” is embodied?” and I’m interested in the question of what if it isn’t? Embodiment can be considered spiritually but also physically. I embody who I am via my personality, and I embody who I want to be physically in the world materially through performance of how I choose to move through the world. I have a body read as Black, but my cultural upbringing was not by Black people, but rather white poor people. When thinking about who my mother surrounded herself with, and even her choice to mostly date Black men, without reflecting on the potential impacts of her children, as well as consuming what is marked as Black culture through music, movies, and black vernacular, I feel uncomfortable. When understanding the embodied nature of said culture we can understand that “Blackness” does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups."

When also placed into conversation with the privilege that arises with proximity to whiteness, is it whiteness that dictates what consists of Blackness? I want to detail that I’m not going to refer to this privilege as just white privilege, but rather complicate the ability of Black people, monoracial and biracial, also

---

41 Ibid.
accessing facets of what white privilege holds. For example, a black child raised by a Black family has a different relation to whiteness than a Black biracial child raised in a white household. This biracial child in lighter phenotype, as well as culturally can possibly benefit from proximity to whiteness almost through a kind of osmosis. If a black person sits in a room of all white people, she will feel her Blackness, even if this person is mixed, but phenotypically Black. And if a mixed or biracial yet phenotypical Black person sits in a room of all Black people, they will feel their whiteness. The narrative shifts when you add the nuance of how these people would feel their “purportedly racial selves crammed up inside of” them “and serving as invisible links” or disconnects “to other people,” These selves rushing to the surface level to meet interpretation. Which only gets more complicated when understanding the nature of performing ones’ identity against the stagnant categories.

Phenotype, culture, and lineage are analyzed at the expense of objectifying those being authenticated. When discussing performance studies “...the initial discomfort becomes the site where issues of difference and sameness come to the fore, removed from the abstract and supplanted in that space where the self and Other meet toe to toe,” but my concern lies within the performance and practice of race.

What occurs when one seems to feel the self and the Other within one body? By this, I mean to highlight how mixed-race individuals often feel the push

---

43 Jackson, Jr., John L. Real Black, 15.
44 Johnson. Appropriating Blackness, 230.
and pull of their racial communities' expectations, even though they themselves are just one body and thus are read racially all at once when one encounters them, rather than in isolated moments. As I explored in my intro paragraph, no one can extract their ‘opposing’ identities from their singular body.

Within the categories we use (have been forced to use) to identify ourselves, we see these identities as fixed, unchanging ways of being in the world. We view identities as inherently separate entities without truly understanding that they need each other in order to thrive and exist. There is a reason why everyone is forced to identify racially. We need identities that oppose each other in order for the system (and the people who support it) to uphold its power dynamics that center whiteness. Through the reifying of these racial categories in authenticity conversations, we ignore the inherent “whiteness embedded within the production of blackness,” simply because we don’t believe whiteness has anything to do with blackness. It’s terrifying to truly grasp that the cultural identity we feel deeply in our spirit and our bodies is just made of signifiers that anyone can access. If my white mother can easily enjoy Tupac more than I can, even though she isn’t phenotypically Black, like myself, this reveals to me that any imaginary boundary lines we draw can be easily crossed and will be crossed simply because they can be, and will be, due to white supremacy. My mother doesn’t reap any personal consequences from crossing racial lines via her consumption of Black culture or her Black mixed children. But I, on the other hand, have inherited a myriad of internal and collective identity crises and dilemmas that have me

___

45 Johnson, _Appropriating_, 225.
questioning my Black authenticity, even though growing up I didn’t bat an eye when my mom chose Black music, but I shunned it because I didn’t believe it was mine. Black people, and even people of color more broadly are questioned on their authenticities because it is ingrained within our society to objectify them, consume and profit off. Authenticity as an objectifying process only deepens this practice, even within the realm of our own community.46

We all, consciously and subconsciously, cross racial boundaries. Instead of prohibiting cultural crossing within the Black community (because it is already mixed) out of retaining Black culture, and protecting it from the anti-blackness of other communities, how can we instead embrace our nuanced experiences (prioritizing Jackson’s conception of sincerity) while also holding the material implications of white supremacy and its impact on Black life? Is there a way for mixed race people to hold themselves accountable for their possible complicitness in anti-blackness, while also embracing that they too can be a part of the community? In order to center darkskinned Black queer people at the center of a revolutionary movement, we must be able to hold two truths: the first one being that as Black people, as mixed people, as a people, we all have shared experiences, some of which are at the expense of white supremacist oppression, while other similarities being cultural experiences and even physical characteristics like hair type (but even these things have large variations). Because of this sharedness, we can bond with each other, hold each other and radically choose love in a world that teaches us we are meant to hate ourselves. The second

46 Jackson, Real, 15.
truth is that these few shared experiences must not reduce our all uniquely personal human experiences to stagnant categorizations that limit our ability to embrace our varying experiences of being Black in the United States and in the world. We must leverage our differences as power, rather than using it as a separating force.

My experience of what was culturally expected of my social experiences and how those are racially expected to correlate with phenotype highlighted the faulty nature of such flexible categories. When another Black person told me, I could “pass as a n***er,” I didn’t question her. But what I did question was the possibility that if I could “pass,” that meant she viewed me differently than how I internally perceived myself. She only knew my difference because she had met my mother--she knew the depths of my personal experience which is the difference between authenticity and sincerity.\(^47\) She knew I couldn’t pass because she saw through the category of Black via my white mother, but knew that without this information; my experience was just asopaque and easily categorized like hers. Ultimately, her statement revealed to me that she understood I could ‘authentically’ pass phenotypically, but sincerely this passing would be incorrect due to my non-Black upbringing. Genetically, I have supposed ‘drops’ of Blackness from my father, and a dark enough phenotype to not be questioned on the presence of my Blackness. It was my experience of having a white mother and growing from a culture that made me realize I would not be considered ‘authentically’ Black.

\(^{47}\) Jackson, *Real*, 17.
One other example I’ll draw from to express my coming-of-race story is when I was first told I “spoke white.” All I remember was I was standing with a white friend and a Mexican friend. A black boy yelled across the playground just to tell me that the white girl standing next to me was Blacker than I would ever be. This begs the question of authenticity. How could she be Blacker than me, with her white skin and white parents? In Johnson’s book he briefly explains an assignment where a white student chose to perform a middle aged black female character which lead to discomfort and frustration in the Black students in the class. This white student’s performance was read as minstrel-esque, and after the Black students were told to coach her into doing a more acceptable performance, they still didn’t feel comfortable. But in my instance, the white girl next to me was used as a drawing board to measure my own Blackness. If a white person embodies this authenticity that this boy was so interested in proving, just so that he could explain how I was not Black enough, this reveals an understanding of the flexibility of who embodies cultural practices, even if said cultural practices seem to be fixed to the body. My performance of Blackness was simply uncomfortable to him because it didn’t fit his understanding of Blackness. But because my white friend was white and was not being placed against authenticity measurements, her performance was good enough. This is because her skin already did not fit the script of the culture. There was an innate disconnect in expectation, but for me the expectation remains. And in the classroom example, the white student didn’t fit the script culturally, or phenotypically but because it was a staged, handcrafting performance, the Black students took issue with how she was embodying
Blackness. The difference in these instances reveals to me moments in which performances of Blackness by white people are acceptable: when harm is not being understood as being done to any representation of Blackness. My white friend passed the authentication test culturally, so she wasn’t scrutinized, but the student in this excerpt did not. And same with me, as my Black skin wouldn’t shield me from a culturally inauthentic performance of my Blackness.

The expectations of my Black phenotype were not seemingly in alignment with my “white” voice, or my “white” taste in music. Although my white mother would jam to Tupac and TLC in the car, as soon as I heard their voices, I would immediately disengage being that I felt like the musical experience was not mine to hold because I was not Black. I did not understand the crossing of racial boundaries, and how it wasn’t traditionally acceptable in some ways for my mother to be listening to Black musicians. I didn’t understand that I was visibly Black, even if I felt foreign to the culture. But the thing is, white people’s racial performances bear a different weight because white people are not objectified in the same way that Black people are. Jackson explains how “authenticity presupposes this kind of relationship between an independent, thinking subject and a dependent, unthinking thing.” To continue, “Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside because they cannot simply speak for themselves” or in this case, the authenticator doesn’t want to hear what the object has to say--nothing could be said that derails the fixed

48 Jackson, Real, 14.
49 Jackson, Real., 15.
understanding of Blackness. So even within the Black community, we are perceiving each other as unthinking things. And specifically you see in the media that Black mixed women are scrutinized and debated over their performances of mixedness and Blackness because our society is built in a way that supports the objectification of women, almost in a way that seems natural, in the same way that it objectifies, and dehumanizes black people. One twitter user @destinyjollyxo says: “yall will quickly dismiss mulatto and sawetie for being biracial but quick to claim obama and drake as fully black...i see the pattern im just not gon say nothing lmao”

Race was simply created as an ideology to ‘divide and conquer’ so in order for the Black community to reunite in revolutionary means, we must prioritize nuance and sincerity to understand that we can all support the ending of white supremacy while also leveraging our differences as power as Audre Lorde has articulated.

Because the category of Blackness was not made to contain all that Blackness can be, in order to move away from white supremacy, we must also move away from the implications that Blackness is fixed and stagnant in how it exists. We must try to “[speak]ing against the construction of a monolithic experience,” by moving outside of the narratives that seek to generalize and constrict what Blackness can be. All experiences of Blackness are “true” even if

---

the majority of the people do not share this said common experience. We must ask ourselves “why...could [can we] only feel bonded to each other if our narratives [echo]ed...why [is] it impossible to speak of an identity emerging from a different location?”

Because biracial-ness (half Black and white), in addition to other varying forms of Blackness are nuanced experience of navigating Blackness, one with different kinds of privileges, it should not be prioritized over other Black experiences, but still placed into conversation to have a more deeper understanding of how Blackness is constructed.

---

The Dream is the Truth
Part One: Dreaming Up Parallels

Shortly after falling asleep, Jada’s dreams fall into fragments of phrases, words, impulses. Sentences are floating around her, circling and echoing in sounds as if there is a performance happening. A stage appears as Jada orients herself in this world. As the curtains are drawn from the center, a middle-aged Black woman is softly tapping her foot up against the wooden floor. She breathes and leans closer into her desk and begins typing away. The sound of the typewriter is one that Jada always wished she had known. As this older woman writes at her desk, an overlay voice speaks out, and Jada feels herself feeling the words on the edge of her skin. Jada sinks into the sound of the typewriter as it boldens. The older woman types away, almost as if she knows the faster she types, the more Jada can feel it. The typing intensifies so much, that Jada can feel it in the pounding of her chest. The sound booms and booms, waking Jada up from her dead sleep. She scrambles for her journal tucked underneath her pillow and begins to write. It didn’t necessarily feel like Jada knew what she was writing—at first the voice coming from her did not sound...like her. It sounded like all-knowing. And she didn’t know where all this story was coming from. It wasn’t hers, but was somehow hers to tell?

Everybody’s Eatonville Zora

Having grown up in an all-black town, white people differed to her in that they moved through the town, rather than remaining like the people that she knew. Little Zora pieced the fragments of herself together in order to conceive of the whole that she always knew she was, despite how her family and community expected her to be in the world. She was colored, this she knew, but from a young age, even if she was unaware, refused to let that be the defining factor in who she wanted to be as life played out for her.

Crawling atop the gatepost, Zora from a young age was fascinated with the white people that would pass through her town. She talked to them, made jokes, and wanted to understand why they were always moving, and why she remained. She was a show for the passerbys—she would dance and sing, but little did they know that they, were also a show for her. She perks herself upon
gatepost, observant with her eyes and ears and even follows them sometimes—following her inner knowing into understanding of how the other world lived.

“Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin’?” Cars would halt, horses would pause, and Zora would walk a piece of the way with them, showing off her various skills, and behind that performance, she would watch them, watching her. Most of the time, she got away with her performances, but every once in a while, her family would spot her crossing such lines, and then negotiations would be rudely broken off, she’d be whipped, and yet she’d continue talking her pieces, and dancing her dances.

Her family loved her, and for this, they did not want her interacting with the moving-through white people. “Don’t you want me to go a piece of the way with you?” Zora cleared her throat, unafraid of these strangers knowing that she was just as intrigued as they were. And before she could get her expected answer she heard the front door crash open, “Git down offa dat gate post! You li’l sow, you! Git down!” Zora knew that another whipping was coming, and this was the only thing that could really stop her (if even just momentarily) from finishing such a performance. “Stop setting up dere looking dem white folks right in de face! They’s gowine to lynch you, yet. And don’t stand in dat doorway gazing out at ’em neither. Youse too brazen to live long.” All she wanted was to watch the world go by—these were her joyful tendencies. She loved the walk back after going half of the way through the town, and knew that what she was doing was wrong. Whiteness had yet to become clear to her as something to strictly avoid. Although her grandmother had been enslaved, Zora hadn’t quite understood why
she had to stay away from people that were nothing like her. She chased the
horizon, chased the strangers and their strange, fleshed hands. She loved
Eatonville, she was everybody’s there, but the familiarity had a dullness to it, she
couldn’t hear the chorus of the village, her ears were too busy looking for other
sounds; sounds that weren’t as familiar.

**Now a Little Colored Girl**

So Zora lived this way up until age thirteen. It was then, that she started
going to school in Jacksonville. Her all black town was no longer the perimeter of
her world. As she got off of her river-boat, arriving at her new town for schooling,
she was no longer the same Zora. This was the moment she became colored, and
knew it. Her heart swelled, and she became a fast brown. Zora stood in front of
the mirror, and finally had something to compare herself to. The white passerby’s
had been the beginning of cracking open an illusion, but they were definitely not
the end.

She knew she was colored. She could see it on the looks of the people
around her. She was different; no longer matching in color. But this sea change
was not enough to convince her that her skin color was any more than just a skin
color. She knew that her race had nothing to do with her soul. That the sorrow of
being black did not keep her up at night, but rather propelled her into carving out
the version of herself that she wanted to be. She knew that nature, she knew that
God, had nothing to do with slavery. Nature had not given her a lowdown dirty
deal; and she knew that life was hard and strong regardless of what she looked
like. People didn’t always like this about her, but it didn’t bother her much. Zora
knew where power originated, and it was not in the hands of those who labeled her as colored.

Zora would lie asleep at night. Deep breaths and all; and there were never any ghosts keeping her awake. She had the whole world in her hands; if only she could see it, tend to it, and know that she was in control of how she saw herself. There was no melancholic shadow following her and her goals; she left that for those who claimed it. What she did have was visions. They came and they did not stop. From a young age Zora had a knowing about herself and how the stories of her family around her would unfold. These premonitions were not dreams in the positive sense, but glimpses of reality to come. After her mother died, and her father could no longer take care of her, Zora was on her own, supporting herself and finding ways to keep observing and learning from the world around her. Not to be passive; but to know which way she wanted to go.

Zora observed every moment. From the moments she first encountered white people and saw how their hands were different from hers; sometimes she sunk in observations, immersed in the curiosities that begged for her attention. She swallowed in the world around her, only to spit back out her own understanding. She did not digest victimhood or let herself be rigidly defined by the statues of humans that were stuck groveling around her.

... Although moving to Jacksonville forced Zora into her coloredness, it did not keep her there. She never felt glued or stuck to this feeling, but rather could feel herself flow in and out of it. Even after aging and losing the very people that
built her, she could still reach and settle into the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before she suffered a sea change of a fast brown– hitting her up against the mirror. Yes, she could feel her coloredness, but sometimes she could feel her whole self underneath what was pressed up onto her. She sat at her typewriter and wrote the following words:

“Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.”

Feeling as knowing, Zora knows who she is underneath the rustling whiteness that begs for their definitions to stick onto her.

Sometimes, she could feel her coloredness in the contrast of just one white person disrupting the flow of her coloredness. Her jungle self, despite this being a part of ourselves that was demonized, she embodied it, reclaimed it, and used those colors to begin a process of finding her cosmic.

Part Two: Imaginative Gestures from Dreams to Body

Biographer Valerie Boyd observed how Zora’s Dust Tracks on a Road was critiqued for not being fully factual, rather than giving her credit for writing an “imaginative autobiography,” the term used to describe the work of Ralph Ellison. This same judgement again sees how Zora was not rightfully credited for the work she was doing, but criticized more harshly because she was a Black woman. Hurston bridges the space between fiction and reality, which is not to say that one is more valid than the other, but to rather collapse them on top of each other as

54 Hurston, “How It Feels.”
overlapping, opening up possibilities for new dimensions. Janie came from Zora; Zora came from Janie; the characters (fictional and/or real) overlap and blur. How are we to say where the origins of these worlds came from? Who are we to validate which one true? Is it possible that Zora found herself through Janie? Just as I seem to be finding myself through Zora; though having never met her?

As Boyd points out, if we read *Dust on a Track Road* through a line from *Their Eyes*—“women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth”—then how does the relationship between the dream and the truth illuminate how we understand Zora’s writing? What about the dream is true? The dream is where identity is affirmed and the embodiment of the dream (the story that is being told) is how one self-fashions their identity. In Hurston’s canon, the sum is larger than the parts because identity unfolds through a place of acceptances and refusals. It may be difficult for the reader to discern what, exactly, that identity consists of, but maybe it’s in between all of the spaces and the silences. If we understand dreams as fragments of reality, then we can understand reality as fragmented into different distortions of moments that are real, true, false, experienced, not experienced, dreamt up, imagined.

If dreams are various moments (refusals, agreements, memories) and we formulate all of them together to make a whole; can we understand someone’s entire reality and someone’s entire conception of themselves as a dream?

Dream may be a form of dual projection that first, originates from exterior life but is processed and reprocessed through the interior psyche and then
projected again externally to understand the exterior world through internal reflection. Dreaming is embodied, but also exists beyond the body in another realm. Gloria Anzaldua provides one way of thinking through this process. According to Anzaldua, the concept of *nepantla*: “perceiving something from two different angles creates a split awareness that can lead to the ability to control perception, to balance contemporary society’s worldview with the non-ordinary worldview, and to move between them to a space that simultaneously exists and does not exist,” is how I am thinking of myself and what happens to my racial identity as I am aware that my biracial Blackness has me cracking open binaries that do not actually exist.

“How It Feels,” is a “gesture of the body,” on the page, is autohistoria, is a process of identity making. This is why it reflects and invents a skeletal praxis for how racial identity forms.

Zora’s negotiation between having her racialized body but also tapping into such deep, immanent, part of herself through embodiment, allows her to find this threshold that Anzaldua articulates:

“The point of contact between the worlds of nature and spirit, between humans and the numinous (divine) This liminal space facilitates the bridging and joining of these two worlds through ritual transformation”

This space of contact between nature and spirit has been possible for me to imagine, to dream up, through reading Zora’s art. I am interweaving her worlds
across all the times in which she gestured, all the different but same variations of scenes. I am tossing threads from scene to scene, mapping a constellation of stories that ultimately hold her heart, across the work that she produced over the span of her lifetime. Zora’s Blackness and her femininity gave her access to a split awareness that ultimately let her access a deep part of herself.

In the beginning of Anzaldua’s *Light in Dark*, there is a image of a sprout, a flower, breaking through concrete. No one knows more what this feels like than the sprout and the moment its roots turn into stem; coming into contact with the concrete. To think that your life is ending; just to see the sky above you.

This split in awareness is ultimately what seeing beyond essentialized definitions of identity labels (and authenticity politics) allows us to do. I am the stem below the concrete, and the flower that arises, reaching towards the sky.
“Covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again”

My racialized, sexualized, classed, and gendered self is separate from my soul self. The part of me that had nothing to do with these classifications, and the part of me that will remain after I die. But on the other hand, this soul, cosmic self of mine has everything to do with how I am racialized, sexualized, classed and gendered because it is through this embodied, material experience that I exist in this world. I am real and realized through seeing how the world meshes around me and these identities that have been prescribed onto me. I identify with these categories of being Black, and woman, and nonbinary, and queer and poor because in this realm they are indiciative of how I am to move in this space, and how I am seen–how people are to move around and onto me. Calling myself, seeing myself as Black helps it feel real, helps it make sense as to why my mother and I get looked at differently when we are next to each other. Calling myself Black, helps me understand why I feel uncomfortable when I remember and re-notice that I am the darkest one in the room at all times with my family. Calling myself queer, drawing a circle around myself to indicate: this is how I am different from so many people around me helps me place myself on the straight line of tradition; and to realize that I am not on that straight line, but that I’ve had to move myself off of it.

I am a person with a body that has all these ways of being marked, but these markings have less to do with what my soul is/holds and more to do with how I can learn about myself through these random prescriptions that I just so

56 Hurston, How It Feels.
happened to fall into. I had no choice in whether or not I’d be Black, or white, or asian, or any other race. I had no choice in whether or not I’d eventually identify as Black and biracial. I consciously choose to self-identify in these ways; but I did not make the cosmic fated decision to be such a thing. I don’t know if there was an energy that made such a decision, but I like to think that that energy was of randomness. We’re all here to experience these varied human bodies, and it just so happened, that this is mine.

This randomness doesn’t at all mean that what I experience in this body is unimportant, or that I shouldn’t take these experiences seriously. But that I could have been anybody. And I believe that at some point I was somebody else. I was many somebody else’s and right now in this present moment the only reason I exist in the form that I do, is because I have interacted with others who are exactly who they are. Who they are, is what makes me what I am. We are nothing without each other.

I am proud to be Black. I am proud to be biracial, and queer, and low income. I’m proud to hold all of these identities because they make me beautiful and they’ve allowed me to eventually find Zora Neale Hurston and her work. All of the identities that make you that specific version of yourself right now, the one that’s reading this; all of those things that seem a bit unimportant… they have combined so randomly to make this version of you that my words are interacting with right now. I am not proud to be these identities because they make me more important than the next person. But I am proud because I embrace them in what they bring me. Blackness brings me a lens in which I understand a history that did
not want me to believe in myself as whole. My biracialness brings me a lens in which I understand my racial identity as always moving and never stagnant. That yes I am Black and beautiful and full of history, but that my Blackness is complicated. That all Blackness is complicated in different ways and that no one Blackness exists (which Zora also articulates in her dedication to representing the various cultures within Blackness).

“There is no The Negro here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My people!”57

When I see other Black people on my college campus, I get excited. I smile at them, give them the nod, I try to make sure they know I am acknowledging them. Sometimes, they don’t always acknowledge me. I don’t think this has anything to do with them, but this is to say that my acknowledging them has more to do with me than it does them. I see them as connected to me, and I’m wanting them to know that I see that connection. But this is predicated on the belief that me and the other Black people I see on campus have something in common. We are looked at as Black. We experience the world through Blackness and through a relationship between our skin color and a presumed shared history. But what happens if not all of us see each other as connected in this way?

I did not always see myself as Black, until it became apparent to me that other Black people saw me as one of them. This made me feel like I could then self-identify. Their view of me made my race feel real, I had been osmotically

protected from my mothers’ whiteness, that I hadn’t recognized racism upon myself. I had yet to be racially conscious. But the moment a Black person claimed me, I realized that understanding myself as Black made it so that my experiences felt more mine. It made more sense as to why it was hard to grow up with a white mother. I finally understood why I hated my hair so much. I understood why I felt like I didn’t understand pieces of myself, and why I felt that I had come from nowhere.

We all come from nowhere. This nowhere is only a nowhere because we can’t exactly pinpoint where we originated in the universe. Humans just kind of happened. Life, just kind of happened. And of course, now we think we are “somewhere,” because as humans we like to center ourselves in the Universe. But in this “nowhere” where we originate, I believe we are all made of the same substance.

Zora sometimes refers to a greater power, or God, as the Great Stuffer of Bags, or the Original Maker. I want to refer to this greater power as the original storyteller.

My soul emerges from and around and out and from within this body of mine constantly. I am this soul and I am this body. I am only this body, because it has a life source that connects me to the flow of the universe. My “cosmic self” is forever present connected to this body of mine. It’s this body that I experience this dimension of consciousness. I believe Zora was fully aware of these separate realms. She was Black. I do not disagree that she loved being Black. She was connected to her cultural roots and she was connected to the writing and art she
produced. She processed and created Black culture at the same time as analyzing it and understanding it for the sake of her cosmic soul.

I do not think that Zora Neale Hurston was filled with racial pride towards the end of her life. I think by that time, she had processed so much about her soul, about the universe, and about experiencing this world in a racialized body, that she could not have a static understanding of identity politics. Did she honor her Blackness and think through it during her time on this planet? Yes. But did she think Blackness was superior in all its essence, did she think that Blackness had one story, one form, and should be revered for such a form? No. Not at all.

In “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” Zora interrogates race as a construction. She exudes love for herself, her people, but she’s critical too. Why must Blackness delimit her, when her cosmic self is so much more beyond any material category that Man could have created? Zora did what so many of us are unable to do. She embraced what made her Black. What made her feel colored. Without letting it be the only thing that defined her and who she believed she wanted to be.

I do not want my Blackness to be the only thing that people remember about me. My Blackness is important to me. It’s made a case for my heart, and has introduced me to love. But it is my Blackness that has led me to my soul. My soul is not Black. My soul is made of stars and moves beyond anything materially conceivable. A long history of white people did not invent the bounds of who I can be. If anything, my soul cannot be translated into a race, a gender, a sexuality, or a social class. My soul cannot even be translated into language, at
least not the English language. I know no other languages right now, but if I find one that seems to have the right words, the right cadences to embody what my soul is, I will let you know.

Zora defined conventions of all kinds. She was so black and yet was not Black enough for her peers. She was so talented and skilled at her craft, but not enough to have a marked grave after she died.

I can’t tell you or myself if souls are real. If energy really connects us all. But it is the story I will continue to tell myself. Zora is living through me because I say she is. I want to believe that she’s called me here, to continue the art that she made, and to reinterpret it into this moment.
Reverberating Fragments

Throughout the span of this project, I learned that my attention span is short, my brain is always wandering, and reading linearly is not a part of my skill set if my intuition has any place in deciding the direction of my research impulses. I will not claim that I read a million books for this project, or that I have read every single one of Zora’s artworks. But I do know there are pieces of her scattered all over the planet. Every word of hers whether it be on the page, a poster, random websites that quote her. She has made her mark, left imprints and shadows. I felt called to retrace some of those imprints into a form that resembles myself and the processes of which I have come to know myself.

Through researching and listening to Zora’s word, my methodology of practice centered on intuitive listening and feeling. I would not have arrived at the project that lies before you if I did not sink into my body to dictate what direction to move in. If I did not speak to myself, in between the collapsing of my breaths, holding lapis lazuli in my left hand, waiting for an answer to come to me. Only to feel my body reaching back for Zora’s autobiography.

I’ve read a lot of disparate things about and from Zora. I’ve looked at anthologies of her work, quote pages filled with fragments of her writing. I would read her words or other people interpreting her words and it would either sit with me, or it wouldn’t. There are phrases that I couldn’t help but search for its source if I found them fragmented, floating somewhere in the internet. These words would reverberate in my ears, and I would search for its source, regardless of how long it took. I’ve used digital copies of her books, physical copies of her books,
and have teetered back and forth between different editions of her essays and excerpts from novels. I do not know Zora Neale Hurston. I wish I did. But I am trying to understand how I can continue this process of getting to know myself, through what seems to be the process of her knowing herself and the vast world that she explored and recorded. As Alice Walker said, “In Hurston’s work, what she was is revealed.” And through that immersion of learning of her heart, I begin to find mine.

This project did not begin at a place of imagining/wishing/dreaming for ideological (and literal) revolution where we're free. I want that. But I didn’t really think it was possible to think about those ideas through my own personal experiences of being a biracial, yet phenotypically Black queer person who is always in a state of questioning their identity. This project became a search for an ideological revolution when I realized that what I was attempting to do through my words was to free myself.

Now, I do not think this is possible. And you’re probably wondering, well why are you writing then? And it’s because writing is the process of rendering it possible. Language will not save me alone in of itself. We will save each other. Me and you. And we can only do that through communication. And maybe that will be through words, movement, embracing. Gesturing through words first, I let these words move through my body. I can begin tending to the movements, the impulses I feel in our world and how to respond to them and enact change in how I see others and their differences.

58 Walker, Love, 2.
Gloria Anzaldúa refers to writing as a “gesture of the body.” Zora’s body is the medium that allows her soul and material self to transcribe themselves onto her pages. If writing is a constant gesturing of the body onto the page, then what makes it to the page is a product of thoughts moving through the body and making themselves visible as words. What is left on the page and translated there even if we do not know that it is there, through the process of writing, we absorb through reading.

As I write, I am gesturing towards a figment of Zora that I am imagining. I want it to be connected to the real her. I want her to feel my calls as I am simultaneously calling for myself. Because through everything I have read of hers, even the parts that have absolutely nothing to do with anything I recognize, I still find myself looking and contemplating parts of myself so deep within that I didn’t know they were there. So as I am gesturing towards Zora, and you, and myself, and the place where all three of us overlap, I want you to gesture towards me. What is reading if writing is a gesture of the body? Is reading a gesture of receiving such a movement? Does that mean you should feel my words moving through you as I feel the words moving from me? As I mentioned before, I am finding Zora in the fragments.

59 Anzaldúa, Light.
Dreaming Up Zora

dreaming up zora
from porch scene to the jungle jazz club,
you taught me to speculate.
to spectate & to know that i am spectated
all at the same time,

little zora watches herself mold into a blackness
and in the mirror there is me. waving back at her

waiting for the moment where across time,
we meet each other, only to find that everything we thought was different about
us
pointed to something all the same.

bits of broken glass, and our voices. this is how i speak
in pieces and

little zora knows whiteness only in that it passes her.
moves past, and forward, leaving her there. leaving

what is at the core? what happens if you split me open,
dump out all of my memories, all of the things i’ve ever loved
and the space they take up inside of me

would a god be in there?
   would i just be matter?

paper bag next to paper bag, emptied
finding me, shattered and all; bits of a broken glass and a door never opened

part and parcel of the same star that i came from,
tell me zora; what is it that you see that we don’t?

i cling for your words, try to pierce them into my body
and sometimes i pretend they are mine.

not to plagiarize but to imagine that i am the person that wrote the words
that seem to call me back inside of myself

i string your cleverness, your humor and i use it to chisel
to cut down and out of the way people
figment you into something of a statue.

refusal. refusal. refusal.
Dear Zora,

I have been reading and thinking about your words for the past four years. I’m about to graduate from college and no year has passed where I haven’t felt the need to write about what you’ve already written.

I feel lost, Zora. I feel like I don’t know how to write large projects and I can’t help but think about you writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks. What did that feel like? What did writing feel like when you were doing it? Did the story feel so alive in you that you had to tell it? I think I feel that way about you, or well, at least how I’ve imagined you all these years.

Did you separate yourself from Janie when you were writing her? Did she feel like she came from you, or that you came from her? Maybe somewhere in between?

Yesterday I was asked what famous writers I would like to meet. And oddly enough, you weren’t the first person that came to mind. And then when I realized this, I was angry at myself. You were fourth. And I realized, after choosing Alice Walker as one of those writers, I realized I would be so nervous to meet you. What would you think of me? What would you think of my Blackness? But I think in part…being submerged in your pieces, I don’t think you’d want me to care. In fact, I like to think you’d ask me questions about why I care. It’s hard to be able to comfortably imagine that you would like me. But it’s not hard for me to think about whether I would like you. I know that I would have so many questions to ask you, that I wouldn’t be able to gage my feelings until after we spoke for hours.

I felt like I always knew you didn’t have racial pride permeating your texts. I read that and was like…Zora would not agree with this! It never felt that way to me. It felt like there was self-pride. But ‘pride’ doesn’t feel like the right word to be using! It feels like you were unafraid to know yourself and to let everyone know that you knew. That you would continue knowing. To translate those things felt in your body into, onto the page in scribbles that didn’t necessarily have to be legible by other people, especially those who were too attached to constructions of normality (in relationship to what normal Blackness, femaleness, humanness…is supposed to be). For so long I only read *How It Feels* as you are centering racial pride because that’s what people were telling me. But I just kept reading and reading. Feeling and feeling. It didn’t feel like an essay to me, or just words on a page. But a poem, a story, a scene where I felt myself submerged. A narrative, a poem, an autobiographical short story exploration. I didn’t see racial pride as the most outstanding aspect of *How It Feels*, especially if we use the canonical definition of racial pride as it is narrowly defined from the perspective of the Black masculine imaginary. If we understand racial pride and race men as the people who are articulating the requirements for the practice of race pride…if
Black art has to tend to the ‘betterment’ of the race…how could you ever have it exemplified in your texts when your work consistently worked outside of the constructs of what was considered valid art and cultural production during the New Negro Arts movement…If your very ideas subvert how Blackness is originally meant to be relegated to, how could you exhibit that kind of racial pride?

Thinking about your words forever,
Jada Reid
Dear Zora,

I’m feeling overwhelmed again and not sure how to express what it is that I think you meant to articulate in *How It Feels*. I think part of it is that I wish the reader could be inside of my brain and just understand all of the context that I need to give them. It feels like there are way too many things I have to say and I don’t know the right way to say them, so I feel stuck, like I can’t say them. I think in some ways this is an issue I have a lot. I start something and it becomes really difficult to try to finish it. I feel so passionate about the things I’ve learned from you and I just wanna make sure I can get them onto the page in a way that at least someone can understand.

I haven’t read every single thing you’ve published, but I really want to. I wonder if you’ve kept journals. I wouldn’t necessarily want to intrude, but it would be cool to know how you managed everything you lived through. And then to try to put that into words? That so many people see themselves in?

Wherever you are, bits and pieces of the matter that once made you still takes up space in the universe. I don’t know what this even means for me right now. I guess it means that we found each other.

And even though *How It Feels* is only one of the pieces of art you put into this world, it will stick onto me forever. My impulse was to say that words cannot explain what your autobiography and your prose piece have done for me, but I think my thesis is an attempt to use words to do just that. I don’t know if I did it. I don’t know if I want to ever admit that this is something I could do and ever truly be finished with.

The other day I heard your voice for the first time— all the recordings of the folk songs you archived. I think what I am trying to do with your words is to archive them inside of this moment and this body of mine, just how you did with all of those beautiful songs.

I hope you are resting, rolling and dancing between the movement of the trees, especially your favorite tree if its still here on this planet.

P.S. I’m so sorry if me calling you by your first name is a crossing of boundaries. I just really feel like your first name fully embodies how I understand you! Please send me a dream signal if I should refer to you as Hurston.

All my fondness and admiration,
Jada Reid
Bibliography


Heard, Matthew. ""Dancing is dancing no matter who is doing it": Zora Neale Hurston, literacy, and contemporary writing pedagogy." College Literature (2007): 129-155.


Hurston, Zora Neale. Their eyes were watching God. Prabhat Prakashan, 2020.


Hurston, Zora Neale, and Mary Helen Washington. I love myself when I am laughing... And then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston reader. Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979.


Ulysse, Gina Athena. "Writing anthropology and such, or ‘once more, with feeling’." Writing anthropology: essays on craft and commitment (2020): 251-5
Works Consulted