

## **Erskine Caldwell, Zora Neale Hurston and Life's Lower Elements in the South of the United States: Celebrating Region and Race!**

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### **Abstract**

*Erskine Caldwell and Zora Neale Hurston are two southern authors who wrote about the American South and its people. They wrote mainly about life's lower elements or about the poor and the downtrodden of both races in the region. The present paper examines how these life's lower elements allowed Caldwell and Hurston to explore and develop a rich artistic tradition structured around celebrating what was deemed unworthy of literary representation and critical scrutiny. Caldwell and Hurston failed, it seemed, to satisfy the literary politics of the 1930s depression years and of the Southern and the Harlem Renaissance. Such failure was caused in Caldwell's case by a shift in critical perspectives which was marked by the end of the Proletarian or Marxist veneer in American Literature and by the emergence and establishment of New Criticism as a major critical strategy in literary study and analysis. As for Hurston's failure it was caused, as this paper argues, by a shift of interest- her own shift of interest. She gradually distanced herself from the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement through focusing on intra-racial conflicts instead of on interracial ones. Both Caldwell and Hurston were accused, as a consequence, of betrayal and of selling out region and race. This paper argues that instead of betrayal and of selling out region and race, what Erskine Caldwell and Zora Neale Hurston actually did was claiming or celebrating the South and its people through refiguring and foregrounding what the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem or New Negro Movement sought to exclude and marginalize.*

**Keywords:** Race, Region, South, Celebration, New Negro, Literature of Immersion, Literature of Ascension, Southern Renaissance, Proletarian Literature, Marxism, Critical Perspective Shift, Interest Shift

The following is a comparative study in which I attempt to look at how the South of the United States was celebrated by both Zora Neale Hurston and Erskine Caldwell. Despite their gender and racial differences- Hurston is female and black, Caldwell is male and white- both writers, I argue, were closely connected with their native region and its people. Both dealt, each according to her/his vision, with life's lower elements in the South and explored the rich artistic possibilities these lower elements offered. By life's lower element I mean the poor, the neglected and marginalized among both whites and blacks.

Hurston and Caldwell rose to eminence during and after the depression years of the 1930s- a time known for its social and literary realism in America and more so in Europe. But since both did not adhere to the ideologies of the era-ideologies championed by the Southern apologists as well as the proponents of proletarian literature for Caldwell and by the black literary intelligentsia under the aegis of Richard Wright for Hurston- they, Hurston and Caldwell, were soon dismissed as marginal and insignificant literary figures. After decades of negligence and dismissal, Hurston's literary achievement, similar to that of Caldwell, attracted the attention of critics and scholars the world over. This was not due to mere reversal of fortunes. It went, rather, I believe, to the heart of both authors' unconventional perception of the South or Dixie: the land and its people.

Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960) lived and died in the small town of Eatonville, Florida. She was a recipient of two Guggenheims, authored four novels, a score or so of short stories, two musicals, two books on black myth and mythology, dozens of insightful and highly claimed essays and an autobiography. She achieved late fame and recognition thanks to her much celebrated and controversial novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

The novel depicted the surfacing of a colored woman from self-effacement to self-assertion and empowerment—something that could be interpreted as a serious assault on the black patriarchal world view and structure. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exhibited Hurston's deep knowledge and skillful manipulation of black life's culture and folklore. Whatever the merits of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it was Hurston's choice to focus on her people's culture and folklore that made her one of the main auspicious figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, because of reasons related to gender, race, and politics, Hurston's promising career soon sunk into oblivion. Those who contributed to her demise were, oddly enough, people of her own color and race. Prominent black literary figures like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright were from the beginning antagonistic, to say the least, to Hurston. To them, she was not serious or relevant enough in her depiction of Negroes and Negro life in the South at a time when almost most leading black literary figures and intellectuals were concerned with social and racial significance.

They dismissed her representation of the region and of its black people, as too easy-going and carefree. Hurston's characters were, in the words of Richard Wright, pseudo-characters "who eat and laugh, work and kill; they swing like a pendulum in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears."<sup>1</sup> Behind Wright's off-hand dismissal of Hurston's topic and mode of representation the reader detects his ideological perception of the function and purpose of literature in a racially besieged America. Being a proponent of social realism—a realism which relied on melodrama and naturalism—Wright dismissed Hurston because she used, it seems, the same turf to write a different story and provide a different picture of black life in the American South. The bone of contention between Hurston and Wright— and soon between her and her male Afro-American antagonists— was rather about territorial literary positioning as well as about who was qualified or not to speak for and about the American Negro— and by extension, in what manner and for what purpose.

If Richard Wright, for instance, traduced the American South for its racism which had reduced blacks to mere ciphers, she, Hurston, rejected this idea because it was, she claimed, "upheld by the sobbing school of Negrohood who [think] that nature somehow has given them a dirty deal..."<sup>2</sup> According to Hurston, black life in the American South was, despite of and perhaps even because of its callous and debilitating racism, rich and full of possibilities which ought to be celebrated. Her favorite metaphor for this richness and abundance was the muck in Florida's Everglades and in which most of her characters, seeking communion with their blackness, immersed themselves. The literature that Hurston produced was, by all means, a literature of immersion and not a literature of ascension.<sup>3</sup> It was a literature that claimed and celebrated black folk and black folk culture because they epitomized the roots of regional belonging and racial pride. It was not a literature that moved or ascended north in order to chronicle the displaced southern Negro in Chicago, Detroit, or New York for instance. Hurston's importance resided also in her celebration of black cultural tradition especially when dealing with issue related to women and womanhood.

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Richard. 1937. "Between Laughter and Tears." *New Masses*. 5 Oct. pp. 22, 25. Print

<sup>2</sup>Hurston, Zora Neale. 1938. "Stories of Conflict." *The Saturday Review of Literature*. 2 April. p.32. Print

<sup>3</sup>The scholar and critic Robert B. Steptoe identifies two narrative modes characterizing the fiction produced by Afro-American writer: Ascension and Immersion. Ascension implies a movement to a real or symbolic North. It privileges literacy, linguistic purity and the appropriation of a dominant discourse. The Hero of the fiction of ascension is always lonely and isolated. S/he moves beyond the limits of restraining group identity. S/he seeks freedom from both family and community. Ascension rests on a linear plot and on a past to future orientation. The Fiction of ascension is centered on the idea of self-creation. Conversely, the fiction of immersion implies a movement to a real or symbolic South. It privileges 'orature' or orality, eclectic as well as folk language. Here, the hero seeks community and ritual insight. S/he seeks movement beyond the limits of individual power in order to be anchored in family and community. The fiction of immersion has a circular or recursive plot that is anchored in past and tradition. It strives towards racial healing and recovery. See Robert B. Steptoe, *From Behind the Veil*.

Indeed, before feminism and womanish writing<sup>4</sup> became unavoidable modes or forms of literary criticism and representation, Hurston not only debunked certain gender stereotypes but also revisited and renegotiated black cultural traditions in order to claim and empower black women.

Her artistic agenda explains why her critical revival was initiated, after many decades of total neglect, by Black American women authors and critics like Alice Walker, Barbara Johnson, and many others. These women initiated Hurston's literary revival not because she was a woman but because she "has become a metaphor for the black woman writer's search for a tradition". They also celebrated her because her work presents "black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings."<sup>5</sup>

If Hurston's characters were considered by her opponents as ciphers and pseudo-characters, those depicted by Erskine Caldwell were brandished from the start as "sub-species" who were simply motivated by their biological functions and mal-functions. These negative assessments tremendously hindered Caldwell's fledging career, and ultimately categorized and pigeonholed him as a purveyor of filth. Caldwell was a Southerner from the state of Georgia. The South that he depicted was basically made of the region's poor whites or lower elements. It was the "Dixie of the Forgotten People."<sup>6</sup> His characters' lives were made of "Passion and Pellagra"<sup>7</sup>. Caldwell's literary territory extended all over the backwoods of Georgia- his native state- where sharecroppers and tenants of both races were "God Forsaken, People Forsaken" during the depression years of the 1930s and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

When Caldwell published his first and second novel, respectively *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, he was hailed by the American left as the champion of those who were left behind and unaccounted for. The subscribers to social realism and the practitioners of the proletarian novel wished to have him among their ranks. From the other side of the spectrum, the Southern intellectuals- be they the Fugitives or the Agrarians of the manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1932)<sup>9</sup>- criticized what they considered to be Caldwell's unfair depiction of their native region. They even accused him of catering for the taste of "the thrill goaded New Yorkers and would be New Yorkers of his time."<sup>10</sup> Caldwell was accused of outright regional betrayal. To his detractors, he sold the South and its people in order to please a northern audience ever ready to believe the worst about the region and its people. Moreover, Caldwell's opponents in the South dismissed his subjects and topics as unfit for literary representation and critical scrutiny. This was due mainly to the author's sustained efforts to call attention to the plight of the hopeless/helpless and forlorn of both races during the depression of the 1930s and beyond in the South.

Caldwell did not limit himself to providing a gloomy picture of the people he depicted. He went as far as taking a stand through condemning the exploitative treatment and barbaric conditions under which many of his characters belonging to both races lived and toiled. This earned him critical labels ranging from 'social realist' to 'proletarian novelist' and 'naturalist'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker defines "womanism" among other things as follows: "From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. p. xi. Hartcourt Brace and Company. New York. 1983. Print.

<sup>5</sup>See Erik D. Curren. "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God? Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror." *African American Review*, p.17.V.29. N. 1. 1995. Print.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wayne Flynt. *Dixie's Forgotten People*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1950. Print.

<sup>7</sup>Conroy. Jack. *The New Masses*. 7 April. 1932. pp. 24-25. Print. In his review of Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, Conroy asserted: "Erskine Caldwell has told with a great deal of skill the story of the decay and dissolution of the Lester family. Yet somehow his characters fail to emerge full-blown. They are all dying of pellagra and starvation, yet other organs beside their stomachs seem to plague them the most..."

<sup>8</sup>See Harvey Klevar's "Something Holy in a God Forsaken Land". *Pembroke Magazine*. pp. 65-76. XI. 1979. Print.

<sup>9</sup>*I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. By Twelve Southerners. Harper and Brothers. New York and London. 1930. Print.

<sup>10</sup> John Donald Wade, "Sweet are the Uses of Degeneracy" *Southern Review*, I (1935-6). Print

<sup>11</sup> Naturalism as a mode of representation captures the travails of characters whose lives are marked by devastating circumstances and whose means of coping do not always correspond with what is deemed acceptable in bourgeois terms. Realism, in contrast,

Caldwell's exposure of life's underside in the South, through fiction and documentary photographs, placed him among the most influential and caustic critics of American capitalist society. His name came to be associated with the American Civil Liberty Union, with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P), with Consumer Federations, with Defense Leagues, and with Labor Organizations. This exposure enticed millions of readers to sympathize with Caldwell's starved and often degenerate characters. Caldwell's writings on poverty, illness, and degradation in the South, during the depression times, signaled to his sympathetic readers the end of the capitalist system and opened the door for forging a new and different America. The years of the depression, also known as the red decade, witnessed a phenomenal growth of the communist party in the United States.

The communist party appealed to many disillusioned Americans and increased its followers or members at the beginning through downplaying revolutionary dogma and through calling for united stands against fascism. While some Americans became actual card-carrying members of the communist party, others were merely content with being sympathizers or fellow road travelers identifying with the aims of communism and participating in front organizations such as the American Youth Congress and American Writers League. Caldwell never completely satisfied the left. He was, however, influenced by it. Being a southerner, from a region where the depression was deeply felt, Caldwell was receptive to the arguments of a political mood that understood and prioritized the social realities of the poor. But the poor he depicted and celebrated failed generally to measure up to left-wing literary standards and expectations. Thus, most proponents of proletarian literature held the view that Caldwell's characters were not socially or politically conscious and that Caldwell himself lacked the social understanding necessary for genuine proletarian art. This view was motivated by the fact that the salient features of Caldwell's fiction were a deliberate emphasis on human sexuality and a propensity for the grotesque and the bizarre. Caldwell often reacted to these charges by emphasizing that he was simply exploring a favorite naturalistic theme structured around the beast within. His interests in this theme were evident in most of his work where he appeared to be more fascinated by people's stomachs than by their souls. To Caldwell, there was no better way to deal with beastliness than by stressing the sexual nature of his characters.

As a consequence, Jeeter Lester in *Tobacco Road* could be construed, in view of his degeneration and decadence, as standing for a warped Darwinian perception of mankind where it is more accurate to speak of devolution instead of evolution. By the same token, TyTy Walden along with the union leader Will Thompson in *God's Little Acre* could be defined as typical celebrators of uninhibited sexuality. TyTy lived unconventionally whereas Will moved from speech to act only after sexual intercourse. His death by the end of the novel was futile and meaningless from a leftist political perspective. Neither the destitution of the Lesters in *Tobacco Road* nor the decadence and degeneration of the Waldens in *God's Little Acre* achieved the awareness and social relevance long sought by the proponents of proletarian fiction.

What these novels achieved, however, was establishing the fact that poverty and deprivation were universal problems. They undeniably established the fact that there *is no virtue* in poverty and in deprivation. In dealing with these problems, Caldwell combined tragedy and comedy. Implicit within that combination was what some critics called 'the Erskine Caldwell paradox' which prevailed during the 1930s and 1940s. The tragic scenes in his stories and novels resulted, on the one hand, in horrified protest. On the other hand, the comic aspects of those same stories and novels made the painful realities of his characters aesthetically more bearable and palatable to the reader. The first critic to grasp the above mentioned paradox was Joseph Warren Beach. In his insightful *American Fiction; 1920-1940*, Warren Beach saw Caldwell in an aesthetic dilemma: how could the horrible conditions he was so serious and well informed about be created so as to give aesthetic pleasure? Warren Beach considered that:

Caldwell is probably the best example we have of the artistic imagination working consistently in matter of concern to the social conscience, and yet not subdued, like the dyer's hand to what it works in. By this I mean that dealing with data of the most obvious economic and sociological significance, he does not treat them in the manner of sociological treatise or reformist propaganda, but keeps\_ in his novels and stories \_ within the strict

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suggests that everything has a moral sense when located in an orderly world. For an in depth definition of 'Proletarian fiction', see Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States*. Cambridge. Harvard Press. 1977. Print.

limits of aesthetic presentation. And the result is curiously enough, that he is the cause of bewilderment and scandal to many serious and cultivated readers.<sup>12</sup>

Warren Beach's suggestions contained one of the most positive and rare responses to Caldwell's work and aesthetic imagination. Unfortunately, this response was not taken up or expanded by other critics and Caldwell's ensuing criticism was, I firmly believe, largely a failed enterprise. As Sylvia Jenkins Cook has shown, the failure of Caldwell's criticism derived from the critics' fundamental refusal to face the nature of the author's goals and achievements. Bearing in mind this fact, one is tempted to add that the failure of Caldwell's critical enterprise was also due to *a shift in critical perspectives* during the late 1930s and beyond. This shift was marked by the end of the Proletarian and Marxist venter in American Literature and by the emergence and establishment of New Criticism as a major perspective in literary study and analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Being a textual approach, New Criticism focused on the text and neglected everything that was outside it: author, society, history, etc. Moreover, most of the American New Critics were the former Southern Agrarians whose hostility to Caldwell was open and secret to none to say the least.

As Caldwell persisted to ground his literary output in a social reality that he blamed for his characters shortcomings, the New Critics went on ignoring his work and dismissing him as a minor if not a marginal author. Reminiscing about his relationship with his critics and criticism in general, Caldwell wrote in a manner that implied his injured pride and bruised ego:

It was a revelation to find that the majority of reviewers, when not unconsciously demonstrating an ignorance of their calling, were often contemptuous or sadistic in their appraisal of a book of fiction. There seemed to be reasonable evidence, after all, that there might be some truth in the belief that a good many reviewers and critics were impotent lovers or unsuccessful authors. Perhaps, a would be reviewer or critic should be required to demonstrate his ability either to make love or else to write a published book.<sup>14</sup>

Caldwell's reminiscences about his critics occurred in the late 1960s, at a time when his bookstore fame was firmly established both at home and abroad due, mainly, to new traditions in the publishing industry.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this bookstore fame was still met with a failing critical reception. The few critics who returned to Caldwell's work, tended to repeat most of the standard assessments about him. And when they returned to his work, they did so either because they were under pressure from the academic system to publish or because they themselves wanted to be published.

Caldwell's personal trajectory with his early critics brings back to mind Hurston's personal trajectory with her own critics. Like Caldwell, Hurston appeared to be heading towards a promising career as an author. Yet, she was soon pushed to oblivion by reviewers and critics of her own race and color. She was accused, as pointed out earlier, of racial irrelevance and lack of seriousness. But whereas Caldwell's critical demise was caused by a *critical perspective shift*, Hurston's was caused, one is tempted to say, by a *shift of Interest*- her own shift of interest that is. Indeed, she started to distance herself from the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement where the racial politics during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were bent on refiguring the depiction of black life in literature and entertainment. Instead of dealing with interracial conflicts, Hurston preferred to *focus* on intra-racial issues. She chose to focus on the rural black folk in the South as they evolved away from the prevailing racist attitudes and images with which sentimental and reactionary literature of the previous decades was replete.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Beach, Warren Joseph, *American Fiction; 1920-1940*. New York. MacMillan. & Co. 1940. Print.

<sup>13</sup>1936 marked the end of the proletarian trend in American Fiction. Among the famous novels belonging to this trend we can mention: J.T. Farrell's *A World I Never Made*, Michael Gold's *Jews without Money*, Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited*, Robert Cantwell's *The Land of the Plenty*, and John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*. For more data see Rideout, Walter; *The Radical Novel in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1977. Print.

<sup>14</sup>Erskine Caldwell, *Call it Experience: The Years of Learning how to Write*. New York. McFadden Book. 1966. p. 68. Print.

<sup>15</sup>I refer here to the advent of the twenty five cent pocket sized books initiated by Kurt Enoch and Weybright who launched the label 'Signet Books'. 1946 witnessed the reissue of Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* and within six months the sale of this quarter reprint amounted to a million copies.

<sup>16</sup>Popular fiction such as Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman* (1905) sought since the Post Reconstruction Era to reinforce perceptions of blacks as barbaric, rapists, and sub-humans. When the *Klansman* was adapted as the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D.W.

Thus, when Hurston published *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), where her blacks laughed at ease, seemed unconcerned about racism and completely unaware of being a 'problem', she generated critical controversies which mushroomed and spread well over the 1940s and 1950s.

Hurston's choice of the rural South as locus and landscape for her work was perceived by many as a discursive displacement, a kind of diversion from the political contingency that urban Afro-America was offering. That contingency meant that black authors and artists must be political and race people; they must defend black people and protest against racism and oppression through focusing on the tragic black. As evidenced in Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1937), *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), the theme of the tragic black became the yardsticks by which racial protest and significance were gauged. Wright's ability to depict the violence and brutality of oppression in urban and ghetto America cast him as a race author. His literary perspectives clashed radically with Hurston's where being black did not necessarily mean being tragic.

In *Mules and Men* as well as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston deliberately eschewed the tragic black theme and dealt instead with Negroes content with isolation and simple life in the Everglades of Florida. She focused on black life as it existed apart from racism, injustice, segregation, and oppression. Her characters were plain blacks rooted in an insular folk tradition and depicted within a specific culture rather than through the prism of their relationship with whites. As a consequence, Hurston drifted away from mainstream black radical thought and was treated as a reactionary and a publicity hound ever ready to sell out her people in order to promote her books. Her run-in with her critics and mainly with Richard Wright reached beyond sheer distemper. It was, I believe, a quarrel over literary positioning fed by a genuine shift of focus.

Within this quarrel, Hurston refused to share the assumption, widely present in Wright's opus, that black life was nothing but a response to white stimulus. She also objected to the frustrating violence that characterized the work of black male authors. Hurston's rejection of violence was in reality a rejection of the enervating 'masculinism' of black protest literature. Juxtaposed with her male black peers and as a woman author who grew up saturated with the wisdom of folk culture, Hurston refused willingly to submit to their pressures. Her refusal to acquiesce or go along with Wright's favorite theme of the tragic black caused her critical demise.

We can, thus, clearly lay out the similarities between Hurston and Caldwell. Both of them were victims of misinterpretations if not of deliberate misunderstandings. Indeed, to accuse Hurston and Caldwell respectively of racial and regional betrayal was ill-founded and lacked intrinsic or extrinsic textual evidences. Also, to deny Hurston and Caldwell racial and/or social relevance had no bearing whatsoever. Thus, instead of selling out race and region, what Hurston and Caldwell actually did was claiming and celebrating both race and region. And the most striking feature of their respective opus when dealing with the race issue was their positive attitude to whites and blacks respectively. Indeed, Caucasians who appeared in Hurston's work were positively drawn.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, blacks who figured in Caldwell's texts were depicted as whole, healthy, and not stunted by the effects of racism when not in contact with whites<sup>18</sup>.

Zora Neale Hurston and Erskine Caldwell were, then, two southerners who dealt with the down-trodden and the misrepresented. They were closely linked to two twentieth century American literary movements: The Harlem Renaissance and the Southern Renaissance. Both were deeply interested in folk and folk culture. Hurston was a trained anthropologist and her work was permeated with black and African traditions namely voodoo and hoodoo. Caldwell also experimented with folk culture through supervising and editing the series "Folkways". Their careers swung from appraisal to dismissal. Hurston was dismissed by her fellow black males and Caldwell by his fellow white southerners.

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Griffith, the images of hordes of uncontrolled blacks fed the fears, anxieties, and political attitudes of white mass audiences. The movie *Birth of a Nation* led to officially implementing segregation in the White House and in all the federal facilities in the United States. Woodrow Wilson, the 1<sup>st</sup> Southerner to be elected president of the U.S since the civil war, ordered the implementation of segregation in the white house.

<sup>17</sup>See Hurston's novel *Seraph on the Suwannee* which focuses on Arvey Hensan Meserver, a white protagonist, who battles against oppression and more importantly against the mental submission to oppression.

<sup>18</sup>All Caldwell's black characters appear to display a moral integrity superior to that of their white counterparts. Blacks are happier, healthier when they evolve among themselves and away from whites.

At the core of Hurston's contention with her fellow blacks was the representation of the Negro: how to represent the Negro? Which Negro to represent and for what ideological purposes? As for Caldwell, he basically went through the same trajectory in his open conflict with the southern agrarians and regionalists on the one hand, and with the Marxists and Proletarians on the other. In the long run, Caldwell's art was antagonistic to both and therefore dismissed as not serious at all.

The revival of both writers took place in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their themes- namely vitality of folk tradition, race and gender- allowed Hurston and Caldwell to resurface again. Yet, if Hurston's revival was sustained due mainly to feminist, gynocriticism and/or multi-culturalist studies, Caldwell's critical renewal in the eighties was irresolute. And regardless of their respective fortunes, both Hurston and Caldwell were forced to pay the price for being autonomous spirits and for having authentic imaginations at a time when there was no room for autonomy or authenticity. Hurston did not feel tragically colored or black<sup>19</sup> and Caldwell was not swayed by belligerent critical assessments. He wrote about human vagaries and in doing so, "he counted as one of the most important group of writers who, in interpreting the region to the rest of the world, had taken the magnolias out of the South"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>See her single act play *Color Struck* (1925). "Color Struck" means according to the anthropologist John Gweltney "accepting Euro-American aesthetics and racial values".

<sup>20</sup> W.M. Frohock. *The Novel of Violence in America: 1920/1950*. Dallas. Southern Methodist University Press. 1950. p. 133. Print.

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