

“A Unity of Opposites”

My Notes

Essay

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

by Zora Neale Hurston

1 I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating¹ circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was *not* an Indian chief.

2 I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses; the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

3 The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter.² Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: “Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin’?” Usually the automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably “go a piece of the way” with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course, negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first “welcome-to-our-state” Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

4 During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me “speak pieces” and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me, for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn’t know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora.

5 But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders,³ as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What is the tone of the first sentence of the essay? How does Hurston connect this sentence to the first sentence in Paragraph 2?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

In Paragraph 4, Hurston describes a practice by white people that is often viewed as demeaning and cruel. However, she says that she “needed bribing to stop.” What connections can you make to Alain Locke’s essay that you read in Activity 5.3? Why do the colored people give “no dimes”?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

How does Paragraph 5 serve as the end of the essay’s introduction and a transitional device?

¹ **extenuating** (v.): lessening or seeming to lessen the seriousness of by giving excuses

² **first-nighter** (n.): a person who attends the opening performance of a play, opera, or similar production

³ **oleanders** (n.): evergreen shrubs with fragrant flowers of white, pink, or red

6 But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation⁴ more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.⁵

7 Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said, “On the line!” The Reconstruction said, “Get set!” and the generation before said, “Go!” I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

8 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. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

9 I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.⁶ I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

10 For instance at Barnard.⁷ “Beside the waters of the Hudson” I feel my race. 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.

11 Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai⁸ above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeooww!* I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know.

⁴ **pigmentation (n.):** coloration due to the presence of pigments in the tissue

⁵ **oyster knife:** a reference to the saying “The world is my oyster.”

⁶ **Hegira:** Mohammed’s flight from Mecca to Medina in AD 622; hence, any trip or journey, especially one made to escape a dangerous or undesirable situation

⁷ **Barnard:** the college in New York City from which Hurston graduated in 1928

⁸ **assegai (n.):** a slender spear or javelin with an iron tip, used in southern Africa



WORD CONNECTIONS

Allusions

The word *ancestor* uses the Latin prefix *ante*, meaning “before.” *Anterior*, *antecedent*, and *antebellum* also rely on this prefix.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

From Paragraph 6, infer what Hurston means by “tragically colored.”

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

In Paragraphs 7 and 8, how does Hurston identify her philosophy of living and her perspective of history? What is the effect of the foot-race metaphor on her meaning?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What picture of the music of the time does Hurston paint in Paragraph 11? What imagery and sensory details does she include?

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KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

How does Hurston see herself as a woman and as an American citizen? How might this attitude separate her from others, both black and white? How does she justify her feelings? What does this belief tell us about her faith in herself?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Explain the extended metaphor in the last paragraph. How does this metaphor define Hurston as a natural product of and a departure from the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance?

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Sentence Variety

Notice the variety Hurston achieves in the sentences in this last paragraph. She uses simple, compound, and compound-complex sentences; sentence fragments; inverted word order; commands; and questions. This variety shows a sophisticated mastery of words and sentence structure.

12 But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer⁹ we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

13 “Good music they have here,” he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

14 Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then I am so colored.

15 At certain times I have no race. I am *me*. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

16 I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

17 Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can *any* deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.

18 But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water¹⁰ diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is a brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows?

Secondary Source Reading

In his essay “Zora Neale Hurston: ‘A Negro Way of Speaking,’” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says of Hurston:

“Virtually ignored after the early fifties, even by the Black Arts movement in the sixties, an otherwise noisy and intense spell of black image- and myth-making that rescued so many black writers from remaindered oblivion, Hurston embodied a more or less harmonious but nevertheless problematic unity of opposites. It is this complexity that refuses to lend itself to the glib categories of ‘radical’ or ‘conservative,’ ‘black’ or ‘Negro,’ ‘revolutionary’ or ‘Uncle Tom’—categories of little use in literary criticism. It is this same complexity, embodied in her fiction, that, until Alice Walker published her important essay (“In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”) in Ms. magazine in 1975, had made Hurston’s place in black literary history an ambiguous one at best.”

⁹ **veneer** (*n.*): a thick surface layer of fine wood or costly material laid over a base of common material; any attractive but superficial appearance

¹⁰ **first-water** (*n.*): of the best quality and purest luster

