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Monique Rooney
2003 C1(external)
My you: Fannie Hurst, Zora Neale Hurston
and literary patronage

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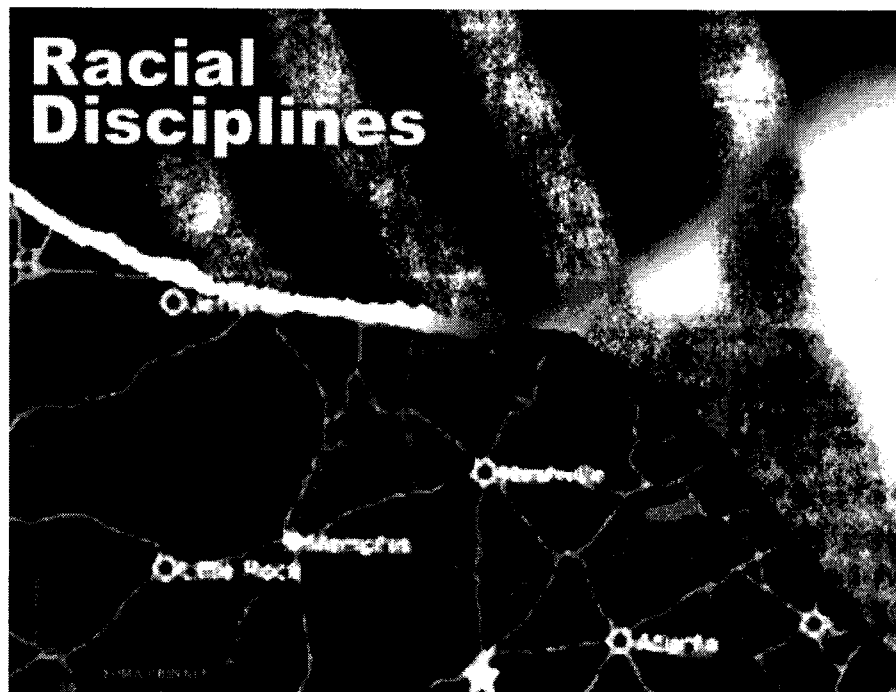
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Historicising the Historical Novel	Volume 9	December 2006
Supervision	Volume 8	February 2005
Representing Morocco	Volume 7	October 2004
The Thirties Now	Volume 6	June 2003
Racial Disciplines	Volume 5	September 2003
Teaching Renaissance Texts	Volume 4	September 2002
Linguistic Politeness & Context	Volume 3	April 2002
Value and Literature	Volume 2	November 2001
Feminist Practice	Volume 1	June 2000

[HOMEPAGE](#)

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Monique Rooney: 'Introduction'.

Julian Murphet: 'The Mulatto: an unspeakable concept'.

Monique Rooney: 'My you: Fannie Hurst, Zora Neale Hurston and literary patronage'.

Anne Brewster: 'Intersubjectivity, whiteness and race: reading Indigenous life stories (with particular reference to Ambrose Mungala Chalarimeri's *The Man from the Sunrise Side*)'.

Brigid Rooney: 'Poetry, race and nation: white desires for belonging in contemporary Australia'.

Reviews:

Ned Curthoys: 'Heroes of Postmodernity: Ian Ang's *On Not Speaking Chinese*'.

Guy Davidson on Wendell Pritchett's *Brownsville*.

Contributors

[Back to Homepage](#)

[Back to Previous Issues](#)

Working Papers on the web

My you: Fannie Hurst, Zora Neale Hurston and literary patronage

Monique Rooney

To Fannie Hurst
because she's worth a billion of anything you
choose to count?
(I wouldn't count nothing but diamonds and
emeralds).¹

Zora Neale Hurston

This dedication, in which Zora Neale Hurston expresses her desire to lavish Fannie Hurst with diamonds and emeralds, is suggestive of the fruits of their relationship and touches on the intimacy that developed between the two women. It intimates a level of familiarity that goes beyond formal patronage—the term used to describe the support Hurst gave to the African-American writer during the 1930s and 40s. Having first met at a literary contest in Harlem at which Fannie Hurst was one of the judges who had awarded Hurston first prize for best short story, Hurst and Hurston developed a friendship that was informed, and unavoidably constrained, by their racial differences. Despite, and most likely because of these differences, Hurston came to rely on Hurst's professional and financial assistance and she, in turn, occupied a significant if temporary place in Hurst's life. Hurston's performance of racially stereotyped roles for Hurst—at one time she acted as her “live in secretary” and another time as her “chauffeur”—has led to speculation about the relationship. Most critics argue that the relationship was either unequal or racist and often one term substitutes for or intimates the other. For instance, Brooke Kroeger writes that although there was an age gap of five years between them that the two women “always related to each other as if a generation separated them, in the manner of adored teacher and beloved student, older protector and brilliant young protégée”.² Gay Wilentz argues that Hurst fluctuated between being “impatient employer and loving big-sister-who-knows-best”, at times Hurst “treated Hurston as a friend, at other times as personal maid”,³ whilst Virginia M. Burke surmises that “while Zora Neale Hurston was only a diverting, often puzzling episode in Hurst's life, Fannie Hurst was a major event for Hurston”.⁴

Criticism of the relationship has been informed by the many negative critiques of Fannie Hurst's popular novel, *Imitation of Life* (1933) and John Stahl's 1935 film of the same name for which Hurst was the screenwriter. Hurst's story of a white woman named Bea Pullman who gains huge financial success out of her maid, Delilah's, labour and cooking talents has been perceived as racist and read in terms of Hurst's patronage of Hurston. Jane Caputi analyses African-American responses to both the novel and film and particularly evaluates Hurston's attitude to it through a reading of her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Although, like Brooke Kroeger, Caputi notes that Hurst was inspired by Hurston with whom she was living when she wrote *Imitation of Life*,⁵ Caputi reads the relationship in detrimental terms. For Caputi, Hurston's more positive portrayal of a mulatto character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* acts as a corrective to Hurst's treatment of the mammy and “tragic mulatto” figures in *Imitation of Life*. Hurston's novel is compared to Langston Hughes's satirical treatment in his play “Limitations of Life” (1938) and to Toni Morrison's allusion to the film in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to support the argument that all three writers address *Imitation of Life*'s racism and thereby “shred stereotypic masks and topple the dominant point of view”.⁶

In this essay, I argue that both Hurst and Hurston employ stereotype as a way of overturning the necessarily hierarchical terms of their relationship. My purpose in so doing is to analyse the connection between patronage, commodification and professional, national and racial notions of belonging. I begin by discussing the marketing of the African-American maid in *Imitation of Life*. This seemingly marginal figure is read as being central to commercial, literary and cultural production. My second section deals with Hurst's deployment of the maternal in her autobiography *Anatomy of Me* (1958). In this autobiography, Hurst caricatures her self as popular author and patron, not only of racial and ethnic minorities but of the “mass” readership of and to which she writes.⁷ Hurst's overturning of her authority aligns with the marketing of the racial mother, in *Imitation of Life*, as an anachronistic stereotype. My third section studies the crossover between *Imitation of Life* and Hurst's patronage of Hurston. I argue, through a reading of their writing about one another, that both women invert the terms of the patron/artist and master/slave hierarchy. This inversion is connected to *Imitation of Life*'s mistress/maid and the Hurst/Hurston alliance is read as a gendered inversion of the master/mistress of heterosexual coupling. My aim is therefore to show how racial patronage and popular authorship informed Hurst's literary production and how these affect the workings of ownership, commodification and transmission of historical and cultural narrative. In the context of a capitalist society which was defining itself in opposition to but was not comfortably removed from the slave past, these two writers explored the limits and the possibilities of their stereotyped roles.

This argument is informed by past and present reception to both novel and film versions of *Imitation of Life*. It is undertaken not to refute African-American objections to the racist content of the novel but as a way of rereading the inter-racial aesthetic generated during the “Harlem Renaissance”, a name which portends the remaking of the old as new. Sterling Brown promoted such a reading of the past in his many essays about African-American cultural history which demonstrate the importance of understanding black writing, art and music *through* stereotyped “white readings”. Brown’s essay draws attention to the “negro’s” place in American literary and musical history and revalues such distinctly African-American forms as the folk story, “negro spirituals” and early jazz. Yet, as demonstrated in “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” (1933), Brown also emphasises an inter-racial history in which white and African-American read and influenced one another:

But whether Negro life and character are to be best interpreted from without or within is an interesting by-path that we had better not enter here. One manifest truth, however, is this: the sincere, sensitive artist, willing to go beneath the clichés of popular belief to get at an underlying reality, will be wary of confining a race’s entire character to a half-dozen narrow grooves. He will hardly have the temerity to say that this necessarily limited observation of a few Negroes in a restricted environment can be taken as the last word about some mythical *the* Negro. He will hesitate to do this, even though he had a Negro mammy, or spent a night in Harlem, or has been a Negro all his life. The writer submits that such an artist is the only one worth listening to, although the rest are legion.⁸

Although he writes that white stereotyping of the “negro” is a necessary limitation, Brown was highly critical of the Hurst/Hurston relationship and its fictional incarnation as white employer/African-American employee in *Imitation of Life*. For Brown, it was too close to that of the anachronistic master/slave of recent American history. He publicised his outrage at *Imitation of Life*’s racist content in the pages of the African-American magazine *Opportunity* magazine. Brown also disapproved of Hurston’s willingness to be patronised by wealthy whites and openly accused her of having provided Hurst with the racial characterisations and plot lines. This attack conflated patronage with racism as it read the fictional Delilah/Bea relationship as a displacement of Hurst/Hurston. Observing that the white woman’s success in the film is dependent on “Delilah, upon whose broad shoulders she rode pickaback to affluence”, Brown satirises Hurst’s extreme portrayal of the maid as a “mammy to the whole world” with “a rambunctious capacity for devotion”.⁹

In this review of *Imitation of Life*, Brown does not subscribe to a careful sidestepping of cliché as a necessary limitation. But then, neither do Hurst or Hurston. As this essay argues, Hurst and Hurston take “the by-path” and fully explore an interracial scene in which white and African-American woman freely interpret one another. Through this exploration, patronage is found to be a generative support system but also one which, based on intimate relations between unequal pairs, jeopardises the racial self-determination it promotes. This is nowhere more evident than in *Imitation of Life*, a novel which fictionalises the power dynamics of an interracial friendship through the representation of the African-American mother as a stereotyped “mammy” figure as well as the intimate companion of a white woman. Mirroring this fictional friendship, Hurst and Hurston’s imitation of racially sensitive roles confused the boundary between patron and artist, mistress and slave. In the face of Hurston’s politically motivated peers who were critical of the interracial friendship, the two women flaunted parallels between themselves and *Imitation of Life*’s white mistress/black maid. Such images as Hurston chauffeuring her patron about the countryside, separately depicted in publications by both women, suggests that both Hurst and Hurston were playing on the possibility that their interracial friendship would be seen as stereotyped, caricatured and anachronistic.

Past institutions and belief systems, particularly the stigma of slavery, have strongly influenced the way in which contemporary critics have evaluated the role of white patronage during the 1920s and 30s. Harlem Renaissance scholars Nathan Garvey and Bruce Kellner have articulated the essential role white patrons played during the flowering of African-American arts and writing that occurred in the post World War I period.¹⁰ Kellner goes so far as to note that the “‘renaissance’ would never have progressed beyond Harlem without the intervention and support of white patrons”.¹¹ Kellner studies varying types of support by whites, ranging from those with a largely scholarly, cultural and/or financial interest (Albert C. Barnes, Charlotte Mason) to those who were more willing to transgress personal/professional lines (Carl Van Vechten). Like Brown’s reading of “white” stereotype as a necessary limitation, Kellner argues that “white patronage, for good as well as ill, was merely an unavoidable element in getting from past to the present”.¹² Whilst patronage is seen as necessary to the production of writing, art and music that took place during the Harlem Renaissance, white/black interaction is read as either a symptom of white atavism or evidence of racial self-loathing which leads inevitably to imitation of whiteness.

Toni Morrison revisits this issue in her novel about racial image, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), set in 1941 but written during the 1960s era of Black pride and civil rights. In the novel, Maureen Peel talks of Stahl’s film of *Imitation of Life* to her schoolmate Pecola Breedlove who wishes for blue eyes and, like Peola before her, believes that physical transformation will solve her racially troubled life. Peola, the girl who passes for white in the film, is misremembered by Maureen as Pecola:

"I just moved here. My name is Maureen Peel. What's yours?
 "Pecola."
 "Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?"
 "I don't know. What is that?"
 "The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Claudette Colbert too."¹³

Maureen significantly recalls Claudette Colbert but not the African-American actress Fredi Washington who played Peola. As movie star, Colbert represents the beauty standard to which white *and* black women aspire. This standard has tragic consequences for both Pecola and her cinematic namesake, Peola. However, the theme of racial self-loathing is complicated by Maureen's allusion to not only the "mulatto" but also the white woman who cries for the "black and ugly" mother. Prompted by this ambivalent reception to "white" dominance, my reading of *Imitation of Life* hopes to elucidate the desires and identifications between black and white women.

Imitation of you

Imitation of Life, a sentimental novel, is centrally concerned with the theme of familial inheritance and possession, and its antecedent metaphorisation of a range of other kinds of property rights (racial, commercial, national, generic). At its nucleus is an all female, interracial household consisting of a widowed white woman (Bea), her only daughter (Jessie), their maid (Delilah) and her racially mixed daughter (Peola). Hybrid racial and parental alliances are formed amongst this group and these cross-cultural ties engender the transgression of stereotypical roles as well as the questioning of conventional notions of ownership. This is most prominently illustrated through the fate of the passer Peola, the lightskinned daughter who, in a dramatic repudiation of race, crosses over to a white identity. Through this act, Peola symbolically murders her biological mother, Delilah, and lays claim to her surrogate mother, the enterprising white woman Bea Pullman. However, it is Bea who initiates transgression when she passes as a businessman to turn Delilah's maple syrup pancakes into a hugely successful commodity. Bea's role as corporate head of a pancake empire takes her away from the home and her own daughter, Jessie, who is mothered instead by Delilah. This dual plot narrates the racial and female desire to enter the world of commerce as a renunciation of motherhood, as an imitation of masculinity and whiteness.

In addition to sentimentalising and authenticating maternity as a counter to these imitative identities, the novel also represents Bea's and Peola's self-commodification as a simulation of the maternal. Delilah is portrayed through caricature and anachronism and her invention, "Aunt Delilah's maple syrup", is represented as a copy. Further, whilst the "Aunt Delilah" product markets Bea's business as an image of racial unity and happy domesticity, the African-American woman is effectively excluded from the white family she has served throughout her life. Delilah dies of a "broken heart" when she is abandoned by her lightskinned daughter.

Imitation of Life is thus concerned with biological, commercial and national reproduction as simulation. Its story of close ties between African-Americans and whites dramatises the building of an interracial empire through the appropriation of a racial commodity. The narrative itself becomes an imitation of life which reproduces the racially hybrid product it markets. In the process, it destabilises the line between white owners and African-American commodities who are intimately bound up, but ultimately divided, by race.

The central plot, of a woman who becomes business head of a corporation which is built on her maid's domestic product, is in many ways representative of Hurst's relationship to her readership. Hurst's populist authorial role was dependent on and therefore never far removed from her market. Labelled the "sob-sister of American fiction", Hurst wrote about and for shopgirls, housemaids, new immigrants, those living in the tenements and boarding houses of American cities and, as Hurst herself attests, that growing sector of educated and increasingly leisured middle-class women who were reading her fiction. Her novels both catered to, and were brought into existence by, a newly industrialised, commercialised and largely female public. As Madonne M. Miner writes, since the mid nineteenth century boom in woman-oriented fiction women were recognised as consumers "with very specific demands".¹⁴ Miner discusses the way the theme of consumption in bestselling twentieth century novels such as *Gone With the Wind* relays the insatiable (and largely female) demand for stories that narrated women's lives and desires. The tropology of female consumption in *Gone With the Wind*, which Miner argues is preoccupied with "improvident mothers, hungry daughters and empty houses",¹⁵ circulates this desire as dissatisfaction or craving. This theme is also central to Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. The all female, racially mixed home in this novel is the origin of a product which grows with "gargantuan appetite" and proliferates endlessly as it feeds a national demand. This impure product, a symbol of a racially mixed family, also destabilises this family through its capacity to continually reproduce the real.

Bea Pullman's takeover of her dead husband's business, at the beginning of the novel, is based on imitation. After Benjamin Pullman dies, leaving her almost penniless and the sole support of a daughter, Bea uses the anonymity of her husband's business cards to merchandise his line of maple syrup. Meanwhile, she takes in a homeless African-American woman and her lightskinned child, Peola. The "practically white" father of this child is only briefly alluded to by Delilah. However this single mention of Delilah's history provides a background to the companionship that develops between white and African-American woman as Delilah comes to play a central and extremely intimate role in Bea's life. Delilah becomes a constant presence in the home and considerable narrative space is accorded her in the text. She takes Bea's maternal place as housekeeper, as Jessie's substitute mother and as Bea's friend and adviser. For Bea, Delilah is a "vast monument of a woman" who stood "behind the flat, prairie like quality of those days".¹⁶

Indispensable to Bea, Delilah becomes a fixture in Bea's home and restaurant business who is constrained in terms of her function as housekeeper and domestic product but becomes a consumable and expendable commodity. Bea markets Delilah's home-made pancakes and maple syrup after discovering Delilah's culinary talents: her maple sugar hearts and secret pancake recipe are made into successful commodities. The mail order business develops into a line of waffle restaurants and from there into the "B. Pullman" line of canned maple syrup and packaged products. The maple sugar hearts represent the new American commodity ("Americana") as detachable maternity. As hungry customers and returned soldiers flock in from "the wind swept boardwalk" to the "soothing" waffle booths during the "grey" depression years, a B. Pullman booth is advertised as the place where "You could soften a moment, warm a chilled hour" (149).

Like the comforting waffle booths, Delilah's massive body is put on both figurative and commercial display. Literary text is exchangeable for commercial product when Delilah is graphically depicted cooking waffles in the storefront window of a Pullman booth and is later photographed for the newly produced packet of "Aunt Delilah's pancake mix". Bea's name, masculinised by its abbreviation to an initial that conceals her gender, is invisibly attached to this commodity as the empowered logo of ownership while Delilah is caricatured through the packaged image of the southern mammy. Delilah's face—photographed for the packet mix—becomes the frozen image (a blazon of eternal maternity) that is fixed to and circulated with the commodity. Linked to the actual "Quaker Oats" brand of "Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour", Hurst's fictional "Aunt Delilah's" brand advertises the recent cross-fertilisation between consumer and popular culture and gives it a peculiarly racial flavour.

The possessive brand name "Aunt Delilah's pancake mix" literalises the novel's commodification of African-American maternity as a form of possession. Delilah's nominal ownership of the pancake mix reverses and parodies the slave's historic lack of autonomy and casts it in purely symbolic terms.¹⁷ Delilah becomes, in Lauren Berlant's words, "a living trademark" or "racial hieroglyph", a brand name made to serve an American politics of national, political, racial and economic unity via a commodification of the African-American mother's visual but silenced solidarity and conformity. For Berlant, the American white woman projects herself as only disjointedly related to this frozen body, able to abstract herself and free herself from the threat of maternity and racial difference as overembodiment.¹⁸

The African-American woman in turn is disempowered through her position as both the servant and the product of a consumer culture that stigmatises her race. This is represented through the fate of Delilah's passing daughter which demonstrates that the African-American woman's inclusion in this culture is one in which she plays a secondary role. Appearing white but tied to a partial racial inheritance, Peola is a poor imitation who must renounce her mother and her racial identity if she is to claim a legitimate—"white"—subjectivity. Whilst the white woman is able to refashion her identity outside of the home, Delilah is anachronistically portrayed as one condemned to a repetition of the past, a history in which slave mothers were robbed of their children. Hortense Spillers writes of the dispossessed black mother of American slave history in her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", arguing that the slave effectively had no right to her children. Tied to the condition of racial difference, the slave mother was denied a legal identity. In view of this condition, the black woman's overembodiment leads to invisibility:

"Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everyone knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar', 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother', 'Auntie', 'Granny', God's 'Holy Fool', a 'Miss Ebony First', or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented".¹⁹

Likewise *Imitation of Life's* Delilah is marked as the commodity itself. Her child is only a simulation of whiteness and Delilah is denied the succession of her name and the bloodline. Peola, the passer, not only abandons her mother but sterilises herself ensuring that the stigma of her mother's racial heritage will not be passed on.

Yet *Imitation of Life* also suggests, through its portrayal of inter-racial desire, that all identities are based on simulation as both black and white women struggle but ultimately fail to hold onto their influence. The desire for power and influence is destabilised through the cognate desire to reproduce the self in the domestic and the corporate arenas. This instability is represented through the disintegration of self that both women experience at the end of the novel. Bea experiences a

loss of identity when she is effectively displaced by her daughter, Jessie, who marries a man that Bea herself is in love with and whom she had hoped to make a partner in her business. This occurs after Delilah's death which is for Bea momentous (304). Just before she dies, Delilah lifts herself "out of a hypodermic-induced sleep" and pours "hot broad kisses against the bare ankles of Bea, who stood by. In the act she died" (323).²⁰ This death scene, with its religious imagery of Delilah as a sacrificial Christ figure kissing and washing the feet of her betrayer, displays the white woman's guilt as survivor. However, it is the growing business empire which outlives both women. It is represented (like the mother) as endlessly capacious, all consuming and beyond control. By the end of the novel Bea relinquishes the company which is bought out by larger shareholders. B. Pullman enterprises, separated from its creator, has become an international company and continues to grow with a "gargantuan appetite" (280) until "her enterprises joined hands to literally encircle the world, Madrid to Rome, to Vienna, to Berlin, to Paris, London, Sydney, Shanghai" (349).

Anatomy of Me

In her autobiography, *Anatomy of Me* (1958) — written almost twenty-five years after *Imitation of Life* — Hurst again ties commodification to the destabilising tropes of maternity and reproduction. Hurst charts her successful authorial career through her agonistic struggle with her mother and characterises her ambivalence towards her public life, her ambition and its relation to stereotypes of Jewish femininity. She paints a colorful portrait of her own overbearing Jewish mother and ties this, through hyperbole, to her own role as popular author. Casting herself as sacrificial mother to a demanding generalised readership, Hurst rehearses some of the themes attached to the African-American mother of *Imitation of Life*.

Dedicating her autobiography to "My Friend, the Anonymous Public", Hurst discusses her awareness of the necessity of the market to her position as popular author and at the same time parodies her crudely commercial status. This gesture perhaps admits also to the commercial impetus of disclosure: by giving away a secret to an "anonymous public", the author seems to confess to the profitability as well as the banality of the act. "Happier in the surging swarms", Hurst associates the mass with loss of identity, thematised through loss of vision and other bodily limits, and prolific fertility:

I was happier in the surging swarms. The lusty life of the heterogeneous city seemed to flow over and into me. The bluish dead-faced murals of people with the unseeing stares, sitting in rows in subways, were more eloquent, it seemed to me, than the processed epigrams of the wits of the Round Table could ever be.²¹

Autobiographically, Hurst locates herself as literary lightweight at the same time as she celebrates the production of "mass" work. Throughout *Anatomy of Me*, she repeats a jibe that had been aimed at her following the runaway success of *Lummo*: "rather be a classical failure than a popular success" (259). After meeting Willa Cather, Hurst caricatures her own popularity when she writes: "Her mind was a porcelain cup that held its content in perfect balance. I slopped over into the saucer" (260). If read against Hurst's figuration of popular author and patron as mother, "the porcelain cup" is suggestive of a breast with precious little milk.²² The literary is associated with finely crafted rigour and hard discipline whilst Hurst's populist writing figures literally as "mass", unformed excess but also generosity. Hurst's writing oscillates between authorial disavowal of her populist excess and "weight" and defensive use of the feminised popular commodity as food for her writing. Her commercial status fuels her need to belong, to insert herself within a literary family, but also her desire to lose herself to the masses.

Hurst figures herself, the popular author, as one who is both creator of and created by this mass. She displays herself, like Delilah, as the insignia of mass production. Whilst in *Imitation of Life*, Hurst separates the corporate head Bea from the labouring, sacrificial body of Delilah, *Anatomy of Me* divides the author herself into workable parts. As its title already articulates, *Anatomy of Me* is hyperbolically concerned with the autobiographical form as identity structure: body and text amount to the same thing in the title. Conversely, the title both merges and separates "me", the first person deictic that always abstractly evokes self in writing, from anatomy, the structure which gives body to this solipsistic utterance. The argument between self as content and self as structure is set out rhetorically and thematically in the "Forward", where the perilously egotistic impetus for writing the authorial "I" is articulated through an analogue that joins writerly mobility to body, mind, page and food. As Hurst begins:

The autobiography of I saw, I did, I came, I went lifts from the pages of memory as easily as a cake from its greased pan. (Foreword)

The metaphorisation of writing, as "pages of memory", abstracts authorial practice from its function as an intellectual activity and relocates it, through simile, as cooking material. The written "pages" of memory are catachrestically aligned

with a cake in a greased tin, reinforcing the body and mind as detachable parts. Lifted “as easily as a cake from its greased pan”, writing is written as a consumable product. The autobiographical as domestic, culinary industry involves the thematics of a self-punishing reprisal of content. The overcritical authorial eye invites the reader to accompany it in the volcanic eating up of private matter:

Imagine a sliver off the top of my head. Look down into the “fearful and wonderful” crater of the human mind and spirit. My mind and spirit. It is an unceasing process of change: smoke, flame, eruption. (Foreword)

The threat of a potentially explosive and therefore vulnerable and unstable subjectivity is excessively marked by Hurst. As in *Imitation of Life's* dual plot of guilty mothers and abandoned daughters, the blame for the author's volatile identity oscillates between a displacement onto the phallic mother (the figure that wants to reclaim the child as stolen nourishment) and a return to the undutiful daughter's inextinguishable guilt. The mother/daughter configuration constantly returns in the autobiography through a series of excessive metaphors and similes. In the opening paragraph of *Anatomy of Me*, Hurst's language deliberately confuses boundaries between subject and object:

From the hour I gave Mama my first stare from her bed of my birth, I must have braced my new spine against being overpowered by the rush of her personality.
When Mama walked into a room filled with ladies, she doused them like so many candles blown out on a birthday cake.
Yet on the other hand, no sooner had I left the warm cove of her body than we committed the anachronism of being one again. (3)

Literalising the mother/daughter split, Hurst thematises a synecdochal logic operating at the birth of the (authorial) subject. The mother and child, as whole and part, are separated at birth only to be anachronistically rejoined. This description of birth rhetorically joins autobiographical with populist writing and melodramatic with the experimental and experiential, as Hurst reads herself as reluctant child but writes herself as a blustering unfit mother of anachronistic sentimental fiction. As in *Imitation of Life* in which the white woman achieves recognition through her servant's death, it is through the anachronistic separation of mother and daughter that the two are re-united.

Hurst concludes her book with a projected expansion of her own pulpy tendencies:

My bright author's dream is still unfulfilled. But there is always the next book — and the next — and the next
The dark and private hours in the secret watches of the night are not too much to pay ... (366-7)

This robust appetite continued: Hurst wrote several more books in the ten years between the autobiography's publication and her death in 1968. Like the capacious Delilah whose image is simulated for mass production, Hurst's generosity as a patron and philanthropist is matched by her literary output.

Anatomy of Me's intertwining of metaphors of domesticity and maternity, racial self-image and commodification relate closely to *Imitation of Life's* themes. There are also metafictional connections: in particular the similarities between Delilah and the role Zora Neale Hurston played in Hurst's life and professional career. As already mentioned, Hurston and Hurst had first met at an *Opportunity* Awards night in 1925 at which Hurst was one of the judges and Hurston won second place for “Sweat”, a short story with many obvious thematic crossovers with *Imitation of Life*. Originally published in the politically transgressive, “young negro” journal *Fire!!*,²³ “Sweat” (1926) tells the story of an abused washerwoman named Delia, who lives in an all black town and supports herself and her philandering husband by washing clothes for whites in the neighbouring village.²⁴ The striking similarity between the names Delia and Delilah suggests that Hurst's Delilah, of *Imitation of Life*, was an intertextual tribute to her predecessor, Delia. It also possibly plays on the uncanny similarity between the names, Hurst and Hurston. Delilah is also the name of the temptress and Philistine of the old testament. The wife of Samson, Delilah seduced her husband into telling her the secret of his strength and, passing this information onto her people, enabled his capture and torture. In Hurston's “Sweat”, Delia is the object of her husband Sykes's punishing scorn because she is subservient to whites. She cries to him: “Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!”²⁵ Although Delia is a slave to her husband and is her white employers' menial, she significantly severs conjugal rather than occupational ties. Sykes's plan to kill Delia backfires when a rattle snake, left in Delia's washing basket as a trap, bites him instead and Delia leaves him to die. This radical representation of Delia as

the subservient African-American woman turned murderous avenger, whilst suggestive of the biblical Delilah, appears to contrast with *Imitation of Life*'s allegory of sacrifice and altruism. However, Hurst's Delilah is also a character capable of racial betrayal, this is plotted not only through her allusion to Peola's "practically white" father but in her alliance with Bea. In both stories, the use of seduction to transmit secrets thematises loyalty and/or transgression of racial affiliations through close, conjugal ties.

Despite these crossovers, *Anatomy of Men* only elides Zora Neale Hurston, it barely mentions Hurst's attitude to, and writing of, *Imitation of Life*. Hurst was an elderly woman in her seventies when she wrote *Anatomy of Me*, and she had lost contact with Hurston decades earlier.²⁶ Even so, the elision is curious given that Hurst's autobiography was published in tandem with the release of Douglas Sirk's cinematic remake of *Imitation of Life* (1958). In fact, Hurst promoted *Anatomy of Me* publicity talks for the film. Yet, in what almost reads as a dismissal of her involvement in racial politics and aesthetic production of the twenties and thirties, Hurst perfunctorily states (referring to the original film and not her novel) that *Imitation of Life* was "the first of the race pictures" (John Stahl's 1935 version), adding that her personal interest in race was a result of a more general race consciousness (339). This vague reference masks the active role Hurst played in racial politics and culture in the twenties and thirties and evades the specifics of her relationship with Hurston, particularly Hurston's role as "racial informant" for the "racial" book. Hurst also neglects to mention the affectionate tribute she had written for Zora Neale Hurston seven years earlier, on the occasion of her death in 1961. This tribute and other (fictional and factual) portraits shed light on themes that are left untouched in Hurst's autobiography.

My you

The collected correspondence between Hurst and Hurston, which begins in 1926 and ends in the late forties, documents the financial assistance Hurst gave Hurston as well as the help she gave Hurston in gaining entrance in Barnard College. They also record the references Hurst wrote for Hurston when she applied (unsuccessfully) for a Guggenheim scholarship. In 1949, Hurston sent a letter requesting money from Hurst. This was a year after Hurston was arrested, along with two other adults whom she had apparently never met, and charged with the sodomy of a ten year old boy. Although Hurston was acquitted of the charge, the facts surrounding this incident remain unclear.²⁷ In the letter Hurston wrote to Hurst requesting the money for legal costs, she leaned heavily on the role she played as racial informant: "By the way, when I see you and give you all the details, you will even have a more powerful book than *Imitation of Life*".²⁸ After she received the money, Hurston wrote a letter of thanks. This letter was not addressed with the formal "Miss Hurst" or "Fannie Hurst" of her previous letters. Complicating the ordering of the African-American subject as either violent, criminal perpetrator or powerless, subservient victim, Hurston blurs the subject/object boundary when she addresses the letter "Dear My You".²⁹ The use of "My You" is a curious, provocative and extremely intimate address which plays with inversion and the issue of possession. Through this address, Hurston may be announcing her epistolary reading of Fannie Hurst ("My" version of "You"). Instead of being written (as Delilah in *Imitation of Life*), Hurston is now writing Hurst. "My You" also possibly overturns the hierarchy of patronage and, by implication, slavery. Although financially indebted to Hurst, Hurston in her address owns Hurst. The next letter Hurston wrote to Hurst was after Hurst had been hospitalised, she wrote: "I am at your feet and at your service. There is nothing that I would not do for my benefactor and friend".³⁰ Hurston's depiction of herself as a slave to her patron may be read as racist. It may alternatively be read, in the tradition of courtly love in which the courtier debases himself so as to worship his lady, as heroic. This overturning of the master/mistress roles, a convention of romance literature, is also applicable to the scene of Delilah's death in *Imitation of Life*. In this death scene, Delilah kisses Bea's feet whilst escaping her betrayer through death.

This reading challenges the argument that Hurst was merely a financial necessity for Hurston and that she in turn, functioned only as a leisurely opportunity, as access to racial themes and epistemologies. Instead of reading white patronage in terms of Kellner's formulation, that it was "merely an unavoidable element in getting from the past to the present", Hurst/Hurston's relationship may be seen as a necessarily limited reading of the past and as a way of reinventing the present. Both women insistently link reading and writing to maternity and the primal scene of reproduction and risk employing stereotypes and anachronisms that are perhaps too easily labelled racist.

I thus conclude with a reading of two separate articles in which Hurst and Hurston describe one another's personalities as well as the nature of their relationship in which their desire to reinvent racial and sexual categories is thematised. In these profiles, both writers exceed, invert and even caricature conventional hierarchies and expectations. Two years after the publication of *Anatomy of Me* and one year after Hurston's death, Hurst published (at Carl Van Vechten's request) a eulogy of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurst was 75 by the time she wrote the tribute to Hurston with whom she had long since lost contact. According to Hurst it was Hurston's death that had "revealed her whereabouts".³¹ Hurst evokes Hurston's familiar voice:

She walked into my study one day by telephone appointment, carelessly, a big-boned, good-boned young woman, handsome and light yellow, with no show of desire for the position of secretary for which she was applying. Her dialect was as deep as the deep south, her voice and

laughter the kind I used to hear on the levees of St Louis when I was growing up in that city. As Zora expressed it, we ‘took a shine’ to one another and I engaged her on the spot as my live-in secretary.³²

The association of Hurston’s voice with nostalgic childhood memories has a narcissistic quality; Hurston’s voice transports Hurst back to her own pleasurable past. Hurst evokes the “deep south”, the locus of America’s imaginary and often racialised heritage, adding a mythic, national dimension to her personal history. Like the characterisation of Delilah in *Imitation of Life*, the reference to the “deep south” conflates the personal and the national as Hurston is represented as historical mother. This distancing technique elides the hint of intimacy with Hurston and emphasises a working relationship. Hurston is disconnected from the urban, modernising north and from Hurst’s own populist, commercial status. Tropologically aligned with the “deep south”, Hurston is relegated to an originary place, in early twentieth century New York, as artisan, southern writer, folklorist and exotic primitive.

Hurst’s rhetorical self-reduction (author to child) informs the structure as well as the content of her description of Hurston. Virginia Burke observes that Fannie Hurst not only omits details that Hurston includes in her description of this period of their lives but that she also contracts time. According to Burke, Hurst first met Hurston in 1925 but it was not until the 1930s, when they were no longer living together, that they began touring together. In the following caricature of the employer/employee relationship, the temporal framework is distorted:

But after more and more of the same her gay unpredictability got out of hand. “Zora,” I exploded one morning after she yawningly announced she was not in the mood to take dictation but felt like driving into the countryside, “consider yourself fired. You are my idea of the world’s worst secretary. As a matter of fact, I think I should be your secretary. But you are welcome to live on here until you are settled elsewhere.” In the end she remained on for about a year, still in my employ, but now in the capacity of chauffeur. She drove with a sure relaxed skill on the frequent trips north, east, south, and west that we took together.³³

Doubling as chauffeur and racial tour guide, Hurston navigates Hurst with “sure relaxed skill” to the “Harlem bad-lands” and to Hurston’s home town of Eaton, Florida. Hurston represents for Hurst the figure of *otium* (ease or leisure), the opposite of what Ross Chambers locates as *neg-otium*, “the busyness (sic) and productivity of a new industrial age”.³⁴ Associated with aristocracy, leisure is often feminised through this binary in which masculinity is associated with business and regulation. “Uninhibited as a child” (18), Hurston is infantilised and feminised but then attributed the adult, masculinised qualities of capability, strength and determination. Hurston, feminine in her leisurely carelessness, remains masculine in her function and appearance, a “chauffeur”, “handsome” and “big boned”. For this drive at least, Hurston is depicted as the master/mistress of Hurst’s destination.

Zora Neale Hurston does not attempt, any more than Hurst, to transparently represent the self in writing. Although she writes herself, in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on A Road*, as a character who wants to “jump at de sun”, Hurston thematises the opacity and limitations of the body and text, “Just because my mouth opens up like a prayer book”, Hurston writes, “it does not just have to flap like a Bible”.³⁵ Elaborating on her life through a trope of eager and often needy self-production and consumption, Hurston’s writing is overtly tied to self-production and survival. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston tells how once in her capacity as chauffeur she was persuaded by her patron to take a detour to Niagara Falls, traditionally a honeymoon destination, instead of following a scheduled trip to Maine. The two women spent two weeks touring Niagara Falls and its environs, staying in hotels and eating at restaurants. At one restaurant, Hurst passed off the dark skinned Hurston as an African princess so that she would be allowed admission. The racially inflected patron/artist role is inverted in Hurston’s description of this trip as she describes Hurst as a “runaway” (an intriguing metaphor connoting the history of slavery) and a “curious child”.³⁶ In describing Hurst as a child rather than a parent, Hurston inverts the conventional racial order as well as overturns the patron/artist hierarchy and seems to imply another kind of passing. This is Hurston on Hurst:

The next afternoon around five o’clock, we were at Niagara Falls. It had been a lovely trip across Northern New York State.
 “Here we are now Zora. Hurry up and take a good look at the Falls. I brought you all the way over here so that you could see them.”
 She didn’t need to urge me. I leaned on the rail and looked and looked. It was worth the trip all right. It was just like watching the Atlantic Ocean jump off Pike’s Peak.
 In ten minutes or so, Miss Hurst touched me and I turned around.
 ... Well, we spent an exciting two weeks motoring over Ontario, seeing the countryside and eating at quaint but well appointed inns. She was like a child at a circus. She was a run-away with no responsibilities.

... Fannie Hurst, the author and the wife of Jacques Danielson, was not with us again until we hit Westchester on the way home.³⁷

At the topographical threshold between land and water, with its vertiginous fears and possibilities, the narratives of both Hurst and Hurston seem to meet at a crossroads. Hurston's sublime experience of the Niagara Falls,³⁸ like watching the "Atlantic Ocean jump off Pike's Peak", is analogous to Hurst's explosive and sensational reading of the volcanic authorial body as a loss of limits, a transgression of boundaries.³⁹ With its melodramatic scenery, the experience and spectacle of the Niagara Falls becomes a trope that, like Hurst's figurative and literal touch, transforms the emptiness of displacement into the meeting of spatial and temporal difference.

The tours and detours, crossings and inversions that Hurston's and Hurst's travelogue maps, in which primitivised artisan becomes leisurely aristocrat, and established author and patron becomes curious child, enhances narrative as a place of both shelter and temporary freedom. The writerly occupation becomes, in this scene of interracial patronage, a divergent excursion but also signposts the dangers that accompany such illegitimate wanderings.

ENDNOTES

¹ Box 152 in the Fannie Hurst Collection, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, The Harry Ransom Research Center (HRC), University of Texas. All of the letters quoted throughout this essay refer to the HRC collection. The letters are reprinted with the permission of Brandeis University and Washington University, St. Louis.

² Brooke Kroeger, *Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst* (New York: Random House, 1999), 126.

³ Gay Wilentz, "White Patron and Black Artist: The Correspondence of Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston", *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin* 35 (1986): 28.

⁴ Virginia M. Burke, "Zora Neale Hurston and Fannie Hurst As They Saw Each Other", *CLA Journal* 20.4 (June 1977): 446.

⁵ Brooke Kroeger writes that the novel *Imitation of Life*, originally titled *Sugar House*, started to form in Hurst's mind during her road trip to Canada with Zora Neale Hurston in June 1931. *Fannie: The Talent for Success*, 194.

⁶ See Jane Caputi "'Specifying' Fannie Hurst: Langston Hughes's 'Limitations of Life', Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes* 'Answers' to Hurst's *Imitation of Life*", *Black American Literature Forum* 24: 4 (Winter 1990): 713.

⁷ Hurst was a hugely successful author who became a celebrity within ten years of publishing her first novel and an image of her as a generous philanthropist was widely promoted. As one newspaper article put it, "success and achievement have not robbed her of the common touch, the understanding of fundamental emotions and simple people which has furnished the magic in her work." *The Georgian*, July 29, 1931 pasted in "Miscellaneous Clippings 1931, 1932, 1933", Fannie Hurst Collection, HRC. Hurst's role as spokesperson on racial and ethnic issues and working class causes strengthened this reputation. She was an advocate for the black vote and black civil rights, she served on the Board of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for the New York Urban League and other racial organisations. Like her friend, fellow popular write Carl Van Vechten, Hurst attended charity balls in Harlem, acted as judge at literary contests and gave assistance to writers like Hurston, Langston Hughes and Dorothy West. She also gave public lectures on women in business and public life, and continued to work for migrant and working class causes for much of her life.

⁸ Sterling Brown, "Negro Characters as seen by White Authors", originally published 1933, reprinted in *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling Brown* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 149-83.

⁹ Sterling A. Brown, "Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake", *Opportunity* 13 (March 1935): 87.

¹⁰ Nathan Huggins writes in *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford, 1971, p. 127) that "black and white Americans have been so long and so intimately a part of one another's experience that, will it or not, they cannot be understood independently".

¹¹ Bruce Kellner, "'Refined racism': white patronage in the Harlem Renaissance", *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, edited by Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 94.

¹² Kellner, 94.

¹³ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970, London: Vintage: 1999), 52.

¹⁴ Madonne M. Miner, "Guaranteed To Please: Twentieth Century American Women's Bestsellers", *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 187.

¹⁵ Miner, 193.

¹⁶ Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1933), 99. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

¹⁷ On the relationship between popular and consumer culture see Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's

Window", *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 30-39.

¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life", *Comparative American Identities*, edited by Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 110-40.

¹⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 384.

²⁰ The death of an "innocent" is common in sentimental fiction and has been the source of recent debate. Ann Douglas argues that the death of the "innocent" white child in Uncle Tom's Cabin is emotively powerful but politically ineffective. See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1978), 4. See also Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: the Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition", *Representations* 24 (Fall 1998): 49 and Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²¹ Fannie Hurst, *Anatomy of Me* (1958; New York: Arno, 1980), 226. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

²² I thank Dr Bruce Gardiner for this and the other fine insights he contributed to this paper.

²³ Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat", *Fire!!: Devoted to Younger Negro Artists* 1:1 (1926): 40-45.

²⁴ See also "Sweat": Zora Neale Hurston, edited by Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

²⁵ "Sweat", 40.

²⁶ See Cynthia Ann Brandimarte, "Fannie Hurst: A Missouri Girl Makes Good", *Missouri Historical Review* 81: 3 (April 1987) 284.

²⁷ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 319-23.

²⁸ Letter of 10 February, 1949, Fannie Hurst Collection, HRC.

²⁹ Undated letter of 1949, Fannie Hurst Collection, HRC.

³⁰ Undated letter of 1949, Fannie Hurst Collection, HRC.

³¹ Fannie Hurst, "Zora Hurston: A Personality Sketch", *The Yale University Library Gazette* 35 (1961): 17.

³² Hurst, "Zora Hurston", 17.

³³ Hurst, "Zora Hurston", 18.

³⁴ Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 216.

³⁵ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942, New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 192.

³⁶ Virginia M. Burke discusses the "little-girl" imagery which dominates Hurston's autobiographical description of Hurst. See "Zora Neale Hurston", 443.

³⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 176.

³⁸ Joseph Boone writes that the "image of female passion as a 'thundering' flood — which Luce Irigaray relates to a mechanics of fluids neglected by masculinist science — turns up repeatedly in narratives of female sexual awakening that emerge with an explicitness worthy of Vashti at the beginning of the twentieth century. *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 64.

³⁹ See Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Chloe Chard writes that "the sublime readily becomes entangled with the needs and desires of transgressive travel". *Crossing Boundaries and Exceeding Limits: Destabilization, Tourism and the Sublime*, *Transports: Travel, Pleasure, and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*, edited by Cloe Chard and Helen Langdon (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 130.