

Jim Crow

Despite some legal changes after the Civil War, former slaves and their children had little assurance in the South that their freedoms would be recognized. When Hurston was a child in the 1890s, a system of laws and regulations commonly referred to as “Jim Crow” emerged. Most of the laws separated such public facilities as parks, schools, hotels, transportation, water fountains, and restrooms into “Whites Only” and “Colored.” Race-mixing laws deemed all marriages between white and black both void and illegal.

The term “Jim Crow” probably originated in 1830, when a white minstrel show performer first blackened his face and sang the lyrics to the song “Jump Jim Crow.” At first the term was no more derogatory than black, colored, or Negro, but soon became a slur. Although using violence to subjugate blacks was nothing new in the South, its character changed under Jim Crow. Brutal acts and mob violence were common. Torture became a public spectacle. Railroad companies sold tickets to lynchings. Some white families brought their children to witness such violence and body parts of dead victims were sold as souvenirs.

Hurston and Jim Crow

Hurston’s lifetime spans the Jim Crow era almost exactly. She often said in her autobiography and letters that she was “sick” of the “Race question,” and tried to avoid it in her fiction. Nevertheless, Hurston was often the object of discrimination.

In the 1944 *Negro Digest*, Hurston published “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience,” an experience that took place in New York, not the South. Hurston needed medical treatment that she

could not afford. For over a year, she had been suffering from a digestive problems. In 1931, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston’s “Godmother,” arranged for her to see a white doctor. But when Hurston arrived at the specialists’ office in Brooklyn, an embarrassed receptionist took her to “a private examination room”—in other words, a room with soiled towels, dirty laundry, and one chair.

To avoid the Jim Crow coaches during her southern folklore collecting travels, Hurston and her brother John agreed that she should buy a car. The coaches were often poorly ventilated and dangerous for women traveling alone. In February 1927, she bought a used car for \$300 (with payments of \$26.80 a month), which she soon dubbed “Sassy Susie.”

In white motels and restaurants, Hurston could not escape the “aggressive intolerance” from white faces. Even when Hurston traveled with the famous white novelist Fannie Hurst, both women resorted to tricks to procure equal treatment for Hurston. Hurst records one occasion when she announced to the waiter, “The Princess Zora and I wish a table.” Hurston’s African attire inspired him to believe her, so he quickly seated them at the best table. But no tricks would allow white hotels to place Hurston anywhere other than servants’ quarters. To avoid this disgrace, sometimes she would sleep in the car if a colored hotel room could not be found.

Source: Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner’s, 2003.