

Anna Lillios. *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. xv + 198 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3500-0; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-3809-4.

Reviewed by Amy Schmidt (Lyon College)

Published on H-Southern-Lit (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Anthony Dyer Hoefler



The Same Creek Twice: Maintaining the Segregation of Southern Literature

Anna Lillios's *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* presents intriguing material that will serve scholars of both Hurston and Rawlings well. Lillios's book attempts to "dynamite the rails" (to borrow the phrase used by Michael Kreyling and Patricia Yaeger [1])—a disruption that would likely please both authors. However, the latter portion of the study is rather poorly executed; after chapter 1, the majority of the analysis ironically segregates the discussion of the two authors and so fails to live up to its promise and potential of a friendship that surmounted rigid racial barriers.

Chapter 1 represents the best of Lillios's integration of the two authors and the implications of their relationship, as its subtitle, "The Hurston-Rawlings Friendship," suggests. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are organized around the authors' main works, moving sequentially from their most well-known—Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Rawlings's *The Yearling* (1938)—through their autobiographies—*Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and *Cross Creek* (1942), respectively—and onto their less-celebrated late works. These later chapters unfortunately segregate the discussion, organized as they are around subheadings of each major work.

While the analytical discussion of parallels is lacking, Lillios describes interesting similarities between the women's lives and their works. For instance, she conjectures that Hurston may have been inspired to write *Ser-*

aph on the Suwanee (1948) by the commercial success of the 1946 film adaptation of Rawlings's *The Yearling* starring Gregory Peck. Additionally, Lillios argues that at the time of their deaths, both authors were working to find "a new way to define themselves as writers and as human beings" and struggled with their autobiographies because of such efforts at redefinition (p. 2).

Lillios also includes numerous examples of the racial norms that the authors were forced to navigate and negotiate during their interactions with one another. Intriguing episodes include Hurston sneaking up the back stairs of a hotel owned by Rawlings and her husband in a maid's uniform to attend a dinner given in her honor. However, such bizarre, racially inflected episodes are not fully explored by the book. Lillios, to her credit, acknowledges the problematics of these episodes even if she fails to fully elucidate them. For instance, she reiterates Hurston's propensity for playing to the white folks as a cautionary lens with which to view Hurston's assertion in a letter that Rawlings was her "sister" or that she regretted she was unable to fill in for Rawlings's maid because she was working on a novel. While Lillios astutely points out the double-speak going on in such exchanges, she fails to assert a complete argument about it.

In addition to presenting intriguing connections, Lillios's study is undeniably well researched; in fact, her research at times threatens to take over her narrative. For example, even her main argument about Rawlings's less-

ening racial prejudice has already been adequately argued. Similarly, while she provides a nice overview of what Paul Gilroy, John Lowe, and Annette Trefzer discuss in terms of the African survivals in Hurston's work, she fails to add anything new to that discussion. While chapter 4 does more than chapters 2 and 3 to integrate the discussions of the authors, it is too dependent on long quotes from other scholars (e.g., pp. 162, 164-171, 174-176, 180-181). One would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge Lillios's original contribution to our view of these two authors: ultimately, she challenges the accepted version of the friendship between the two women as being forever rife with Rawlings's racism. As Lillios astutely points out, such matters are always much more complicated than what they may at first seem.

Significantly, several points in Lillios's ironically segregated study provide opportunities to more fully integrate the material and, thus, to fully capitalize on her original contribution. For instance, Lillios discusses Rawlings's willingness to participate in moonshining to fit in with her "subjects" (p. 12), and later she relates Hurston's willingness to pose as a bootlegger's woman for similar ends. Such discussions are ripe for analyzing similarities and their rather messy implications. Similarly, when she discusses Rawlings's cracker stories as studies in collective psychology, the same could be said for much of Hurston's ethnographic work, especially that in *Mules and Men* (1935). To capitalize on such opportunities, however, Lillios would need to reorganize her chapters internally. For instance, she ends chapter 2 by sketching out in the space of one page all of the parallels that the chapter suggests between the two authors;

one wonders why Lillios fails to begin the chapter in that vein, reorganizing it around those overlapping concerns rather than dividing it up according to major works.

Less concerning than her segregated discussions are Lillios's tendencies to repeat well-known information and to summarize primary works. For instance, the section of chapter 2 dealing with Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* spends quite a bit of space on an overview of Hurston's relationships with Franz Boas, Alain Locke, and other leading male intellectuals of the time. For Hurston scholars, this information is well-known and less than original. However, if readers are seeking an introduction to Hurston, such information would be useful. Additionally, chapters 2 through 4 contain summaries of each author's works; if one has read the works themselves, the summaries are a bit tiresome, and these chapters would be much improved by replacing the summaries with more in-depth examinations.

Despite the above mentioned short-falls, this reviewer nonetheless recommends Lillios's *Crossing the Creek* for anyone interested in either Hurston or Rawlings, though readers be forewarned that you may lose patience as you progress through the study. The first chapter alone, however, makes the entire study a worthy read.

Note

[1]. Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), ix; and Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 34.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-southern-lit>

Citation: Amy Schmidt. Review of Lillios, Anna, *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*. H-Southern-Lit, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39036>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.