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Confused? Let's break down the citation!

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The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and a Theory of “Touristic Reading”

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*Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God is the focal point in this article for a discussion of “touristic reading,” a process that occurs when a reader assumes a fictional text is an authentic and complete representation of its source culture. Although this can happen even when the ethnicity of the writer and reader match, the dynamic is often intensified when their ethnicities differ—that is, when readers read across ethnic (or other) boundaries. Folkloric content in fiction may make texts particularly vulnerable to such readings, but the presence of ethnographic material may also help undermine touristic readings, as evidenced by the resistant and subversive aspects of Hurston’s text.*

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In his essay “Authenticity Reconsidered: Toward an Understanding of a Culturalist Reading Paradigm,” Matt Herman relates a telling anecdote from his experience teaching N. Scott Momaday’s novel *House Made of Dawn* at Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy Reservation in north-central Montana. During a discussion of the ways the book had been packaged and marketed, Herman drew his students’ attention to a jacket blurb that proclaimed the novel “almost unbearably authentic and powerful” and asked for their reactions to this description. As one of his students slyly and brilliantly observed, “Well, I don’t know so much about what unbearably authentic means, but I do know that it says ‘fiction’ right up here in the left-hand corner” (Herman 1997:126).

This text is the title of the article which is enclosed in quotation marks.

This article includes the name of the primary source (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) within quotation marks.
This article includes the name of the primary source (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) within the title. In this case, italicize the title of the work referenced in the title.
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The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and a Theory of “Touristic Reading”

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When confronted by an allegedly text. Many of us have certainly heard comments similar to those voiced by students in my own American literature classes, such as the white student who objected to Richard Wright’s criticism of Zora Neale Hurston’s use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, saying, “But that’s how people really talked back then,” or the African American student who praised Amy Tan’s descriptions of early twentieth-century China in *The Joy Luck Club* for “really making you feel like you’re there.”

On a certain level, these students are correct: Hurston’s remarkable ear for language one of the qualities that makes *Their Eyes* such a joy to read, and Tan’s almost fairy

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The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and a Theory of "Touristic Reading"

Abstract (back to top)

Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God is the focal point in this article for a discussion of "touristic reading," a process that occurs when a reader assumes a fictional text is an authentic and complete representation of its source culture. Although this can happen even when the ethnicity of the writer and reader match, the dynamic is often intensified when their ethnicities differ—that is, when readers read across ethnic (or other) boundaries. Folkloric content in fiction may make texts particularly vulnerable to such readings, but the presence of ethnographic material may also help undermine touristic readings, as evidenced by the resistant and subversive aspects of Hurston's text.

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Rosemary V. Hathaway
The Journal of American Folklore
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Page Count: 23

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Rosemary V. Hathaway

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Abstract (back to top)

Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God is the focal point in this article for a discussion of “touristic reading.” A reader assumes a fictional text is an authentic and complete representation of its source culture. Although this can happen even when the reader’s background matches, the dynamic is often intensified when their ethnicities differ—that is, when readers read across ethnic (or other) boundaries. The presence of ethnographic material may make texts particularly vulnerable to such readings, but the presence of ethnographic material may also help undermine touristic resistance and subversive aspects of Hurston’s text.

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Those of us who teach literature have undoubtedly wished we had students as astute when confronted by an allegedly “Other” text. Many of us have certainly heard comments similar to those voiced by students in my own American literature classes, such as the white student who objected to Richard Wright’s criticism of Zora Neale Hurston’s use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, saying, “But that’s how people really talked back then,” or the African American student who praised Amy Tan’s descriptions of early twentieth-century China in *The Joy Luck Club* for “really making you feel like you’re there.”

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