
Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Zora Neale Hurston on War, Race, the State, and Liberty



DAVID T. BEITO AND LINDA ROYSTER BEITO

The ideals of liberty, individualism, and self-reliance have rarely had more enthusiastic champions than Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Zora Neale Hurston. All three were out of step with the dominant worldview of their times. They had their peak professional years during the New Deal and World War II, when faith in big government was at high tide.

The parallels between them were not only ideological, but also biographical and personal. They were born within a span of five years, grew up in frontier areas, and endured long stints of economic hardship. They consistently preferred independence over convention and chafed at anyone's attempt to control them. Their marriages were fleeting and to husbands of unremarkable accomplishments. All three, but especially Paterson and Hurston, were often secretive about their pasts. None of them had an identifiable mentor, although Paterson had some intellectual influence on Lane, and the two were friends for a time (Kaplan 2002, 38–39, 774–81; Cox 2004, 216–18; Doherty 2007, 129).

Although the influence of one's sex may be overrated, it undeniably contributed to these women's attraction to individualist ideas. They were not the only ones.

David T. Beito is an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama; Linda Royster Beito is chairperson of the Department of Social Sciences at Stillman College.

The Independent Review, v. XII, n. 4, Spring 2008, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2008, pp. 553–573.

Stephen Cox, Paterson's biographer, notes that "women were more important to the creation of the libertarian movement than they were to the creation of any political movement not strictly focused on women's rights." As Cox speculates, such women as outsiders were "used to doing for themselves" and thus had "a larger conception than other people of the things that individuals can and ought to do for themselves" (2004, 195). Paterson, Lane, and Hurston's individualism drew them to strikingly similar conclusions on race, economics, war, and the growth of the state. All of them looked on the United States as the best representative of the ideals of liberty and opportunity.

Daughters of the Frontier

Despite this shared perception of the United States, the oldest of the three, Isabel Paterson, was originally a subject of the British Empire. She was born in 1886 on Manitoulin Island, an isolated place in Lake Huron. As one of nine children, she experienced the least-rewarding upbringing of the three. Her father, Francis (Frank) Bowler, was affable but irresponsible. He was a perpetual failure, and she never respected him. Every few years he pulled up stakes and dragged the family to Michigan, Utah, or another destination in a fruitless quest for stability and economic success. Isabel was closer to her mother, Margaret Bowler, a hard-working, sensible woman. Although Isabel had minimal formal education, she was unusually precocious and read voraciously (Cox 2004, 7–14, 19–20).

After leaving home, Isabel ended up in Calgary, where she worked as a waitress and secretary. She married Kenneth B. Paterson, a traveling salesman, but the match was not a happy one. They soon separated, but never formally divorced, and acquaintances knew Isabel as "Mrs. Paterson" or "Pat" for the rest of her life. In 1910, her long career as a working journalist began at the *Spokane Inland Herald*. Two years later, she moved to New York City, and in 1928 she became a U.S. citizen. During the four and a half decades that began in 1914, she penned several novels (Cox 2004, 23–31, 39, 45–58).

Her career really took off in 1924 after she started her regular column "Turns with a Bookworm" in the *New York Herald Tribune*. For the next twenty-five years, her biting wit and hard-hitting prose reached half a million subscribers. The leading authors of the time knew and sometimes feared her. Although she was not shy about giving praise, she repeatedly showed a mastery of the razor-sharp verbal barb. A favorite target was Franklin D. Roosevelt and his domestic and foreign policies. Her views did not find full expression, however, until publication of *The God of the Machine* in 1943 (reprinted in 1993). In this book, she explored the contrast between market dynamism and human creativity, on the one hand, and the harm inflicted by do-gooders armed with state power, on the other (Cox 2004, 62–63, 257).

Rose Wilder Lane was born in 1886, the same year as Paterson, and, like her, grew up on the frontier. In fact, it is almost impossible to discuss her apart from the

history of the American frontier. She was born in De Smet, Dakota Territory, to Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder, and she had an exciting childhood marked by crop failures, destructive fires, and the death of her only sibling in infancy. Much like the Bowlers, the Wilders were often on the move. First, they left for Spring Valley, Minnesota, then Westville, Florida, and finally Mansfield, Missouri. A string of adversities bolstered Rose's lifetime attitudes of resourcefulness, self-reliance, and stoicism (Holtz 1993, 8, 14–33). After completing school, she worked for Western Union and in 1908 ended up in San Francisco, where she married Claire Gillette Lane, a reporter. Their only child died in infancy. Like Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane did not take long to become disenchanted with her incompatible and unambitious husband. They separated after seven years and later divorced. She worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Post* and the *San Francisco Bulletin* and wrote short stories (Holtz 1993, 48–60).

Shortly after World War I, Lane began a brief but memorable flirtation with communism. She almost joined the party after hearing a speech by John Reed but missed out because of a bout with influenza. Nevertheless, she remained “at heart a communist” until a visit to Russia in the 1920s brought disillusionment. A peasant there struck a nerve when he told her that state planning “will not work. In Moscow there are only men, and man is not God. A man has only a man's head, and one hundred heads together do not make one great head. No. Only God can know Russia” (Lane 1936, 2–8).

Lane's literary career gained steam during the 1920s and 1930s. Her articles appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's Monthly*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. She wrote several books, including biographies of Jack London, Henry Ford, and Herbert Hoover (Holtz 1993, 66–67). A job with the Red Cross allowed her to travel widely in Europe and the Middle East, giving her many experiences that informed her fiction (Holtz 1993, 91–98). Her most successful novels, *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Free Land* ([1938] 1966), drew on the homesteading struggles of her parents and grandparents. She and her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder, collaborated closely in writing the *Little House on the Prairie* books. Lane's behind-the-scenes role in these books included editing, rewriting, and some ghost writing (Holtz 1993, 232–39, 280–83, 379–85).

After the publication of *Free Land*, Lane concentrated on nonfiction writings, most of which championed unadulterated laissez-faire. *Give Me Liberty* (1936) recounts her break with communism in deeply personal terms. She turned against Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies and befriended Paterson. Although Paterson had considerable influence over Lane, the two had highly dissimilar literary styles, argumentative methods, and temperaments (Cox 2004, 216–17, 284–86). Lane's political outlook and worldview find their fullest expression in *The Discovery of Freedom* ([1943] 1984), a book that by happenstance appeared in the same year as Paterson's *The God of the Machine*.

At the time of *Discovery*'s publication, Lane was in the middle of one of the most

remarkable, but least studied, phases in her career. From 1942 to 1945, she was a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the most widely read black newspaper in the United States. Through it, she reached several times more readers than she reached with her other writings during this period. Each issue had a circulation of 270,000, whereas the total print run of *The Discovery of Freedom* during Lane's lifetime was only about 1,000 (Powell 1996; Simmons 1998, 81). Via the mail and hand delivery by Pullman Porters, the *Courier* found its way throughout the United States, including the South (Washburn 2006, 8).

Like Paterson, Zora Neale Hurston could be highly guarded about her past. At various times, she listed her birth date as 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1910. The truth is that she was born in 1891 in the isolated rural community of Nostasulga, Alabama. When she was a toddler, the family moved to Eatonville, Florida (Kaplan 2002, 36–37). Founded in 1887, Eatonville was a zesty experiment in black self-government and one of several all-black towns during the period. In these communities, Booker T. Washington observed, “Negroes are made to feel the responsibilities of citizenship in ways they cannot be made to feel them elsewhere. If they make mistakes, they, at least, have an opportunity to profit by them. In such a town individuals who have executive ability and initiative have an opportunity to discover themselves and find out what they can do” (qtd. in Boyd 2003, 22). Zora's first memories were of a community in which blacks had complete political control. Her father helped to write many of the town's laws and served as its mayor for four years (Kaplan 2002, 37).

Like Paterson and to a lesser degree Lane, Hurston had a distant father and a supportive mother (Hurston [1942] 1984, 227). Her mother's death brought chaos to the family, and she scrambled to survive and get ahead. She spent time in a boarding school and worked as a domestic and a waitress. Unlike Lane and Paterson, she attended college, receiving a bachelor's degree from Barnard College, Columbia University, in 1928, at the age of thirty-seven. At Columbia, she studied under the famed anthropologist Franz Boas and befriended novelist Fannie Hurst, later the author of *Imitation of Life*. Like Paterson and Lane, Hurston was not lucky in love. Each of her three marriages was brief and ended in divorce (Kaplan 2002, 39–41, 49–53, 775, 779–81).

During the 1920s, Hurston began to publish short stories. She was an energetic but not a prominent participant in the Harlem Renaissance and counted Langston Hughes and Alain Locke among her friends. She also did anthropological fieldwork in the American South on voodoo and folklore (Hemenway [1977] 1980, 24–37, 74–76, 246–49). Her big breakthrough was *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ([1937] 2006) (Kaplan 2002, 777–79). Appearing in 1937, this book was a semiautobiographical portrait of a middle-aged woman's quest for self-discovery and independence, set in an all-black town modeled after Eatonville. With much justification, Doris Grumbach in the *Saturday Review* put it “in the same category” with the works “of William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, that of enduring

American literature” (Hurston [1937] 2006, back cover). Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, appeared in 1942, a year before Paterson’s *The God of the Machine* and Lane’s *The Discovery of Freedom*.

The Basis of Their Individualism

Scholars often group Lane, Paterson, and Ayn Rand into a trio. Stephen Cox calls them the “Libertarians of ’43” (2004, 281). This comparison makes sense, given the close parallels between them. They all knew each other, and Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead* came out in the same year as *The God of the Machine* and *The Discovery of Freedom*. If Rand ever had a mentor, it was Paterson. Rand went so far as to argue that “*The God of the Machine* does for capitalism what the Bible did for Christianity” (qtd. in Cox 2004, 288–89, 302–13).

Close alignment in ideas, philosophies, and life experiences, however, creates equally compelling reasons for making a trio of Paterson, Lane, and Hurston. Hurston was fourteen years older than Rand, but only five years separated her from Paterson and Lane. Hurston’s background in Eatonville more closely resembled Paterson and Lane’s frontier experience than Rand’s coming of age in cosmopolitan and revolutionary St. Petersburg, Russia. Rand’s individualism included an almost legendary hard-line disdain for theism, altruism, and grays. In contrast, Paterson, Lane, and Hurston more often tempered their individualism with pragmatism and an appreciation of messy cultural and religious realities. Rand had a deeply flawed personal life, but, unlike the others, she lived with the same man for more than thirty years and, in her way, greatly depended on him. Hurston, however, had only casual contact at most with Paterson and Lane. She never referred to them in her writings, and Paterson wrote only three brief informational items about Hurston in “Turns with a Bookworm” (*New York Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1934, 16; September 26, 1937, 16; December 26, 1941, 11). Lane never mentioned Hurston, although both wrote, at different times, for the *Pittsburgh Courier* (Cox 2004, 59–63).

The heyday of Paterson, Lane, and Hurston was also that of the American Old Right. Best described as a political tendency rather than a movement, the Old Right included such key figures and organizations as Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio; John T. Flynn, the head of the New York Branch of the America First Committee; and Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. Most were Republicans and midwesterners. Old Right leaders accused Roosevelt of conspiring to subvert liberty and the Constitution through an all-powerful federal government and needless wars. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, they were leading opponents of Truman’s Cold War policies, such as U.S. membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Doherty 2007, 59–66).

Although Paterson, Lane, and Hurston shared many of the Old Right’s likes and dislikes, their views sprang more from life experiences than from immediate partisan motivations. As Paterson observed, “A lot of American principle is contained in the

two words, ‘Just don’t.’ Much of the rest is encompassed by the suggestion of minding one’s own business” (qtd. in Cox 2004, 199). Hurston framed the matter in personal terms: “I don’t lead well either. Don’t just tell me what to do. Tell me what is being contemplated and let me help figure on the bill” (Hurston [1942] 1984, 330). According to Lane, the “world is populated by individual persons, all of the human race, all humanity equal, each one naturally alive and free” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1943).

To justify their individualism, Paterson and Lane laid out grand philosophical systems. Paterson grounded hers, quite literally, in the language of engineering. She regarded the market and the social institutions of a free society as analogous to an intricate machine that governments tinker with at their peril. In Paterson’s conception, “Personal liberty is the pre-condition of the release of energy. Private property is the inductor which initiates the flow. Real money is the transmission line; and the payment of debts comprises half the circuit.” A society thrives if it respects private property and federalism and thus has a “long circuit energy-system” (Paterson [1943] 1993, 62).

Lane’s theory also centered on “energy” but, unlike Paterson’s, had elements of metaphysics, spirituality, and self-actualization. Instead of an electric current powering an interconnected machine, each autonomous individual possesses a life force in equal measure. Governments are incapable of marshalling this force, but free societies, as long as they leave people alone to exercise their “inalienable” rights, will flourish because of it: “Each living person is a source of energy. There is no other source. . . . [I]ndividuals generate it, and control it.” In contrast, the centralized state, whether Communist, Nazi, or New Deal, rests on a “pagan” theory that outside authority controls, or should control, individuals (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 8, 1943; Lane [1943] 1984, xi–xiv).

Although Hurston never tried to erect a comprehensive theory, she agreed with Paterson and Lane that liberty and entrepreneurship are preconditions for a diverse, vibrant, and prosperous society. It is a mystery how and when she came to her beliefs. Several factors, no doubt, helped to nurture and reinforce any natural tendency she had toward individualism, including her upbringing in Eatonville, where self-help was necessary for survival, years of upward striving as a black woman in a white man’s world, and insights gleaned from anthropological fieldwork. Her views had taken form by the 1930s at least, perhaps earlier (Hurston 1995, 913; Kaplan 2002, 359).

Rejecting Racism and Collectivism

Each author’s individualism eschewed racial distinctions in either a positive or negative sense. Paterson dismissed eugenics and other pseudoscience as “bunk” because they centered on superficialities, such as skin color. So-called race problems, in her view, were “strictly political problems” (Paterson 1949, 202; Cox 2004, 199–200). In commenting on authors, she usually ignored their race. She consistently con-

demned “Jim Crow laws as inequitable and without foundation of right” (Paterson to Garreta Busey, undated, Paterson Papers). Consonant with these beliefs, she opposed Roosevelt’s nomination of Hugo Black to the U.S. Supreme Court because of Black’s past membership in the Ku Klux Klan (Cox 2004, 174).

At the same time, Paterson made a distinction between public and private behavior. A private company with a government grant for a right-of-way or any other subsidy had crossed the line to become a “public enterprise.” Therefore, it had an obligation to serve all on a color-blind basis (Paterson to Garreta Busey, undated, Paterson Papers). Other private businesses, however, were not bound by this rule and hence legally, even if not morally, had the right to refuse service to anyone. For Paterson, the alternative was “slavery” or “compulsory labor, whatever the reward, or gratuity, or return.” She hoped that in the long term, whites, taught by the examples of “civilized” blacks and whites who accepted each other as individuals, would come to see the folly of their irrational racism. She theorized that “the really beautiful manners that negroes have evolved out of their servitude do constitute a triumph of civilization on their part . . . they usually have better manners than white people” (Paterson to Garreta Busey, undated, Paterson Papers).

Hurston, of course, could not have avoided the issue of race even if she had wanted to do so. For a southern-born black woman striving to overcome the barriers of Jim Crow, race was a paramount concern. Nevertheless, her antiracist critique so closely resembled Lane’s in its style of presentation that telling them apart is sometimes almost impossible. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for example, Hurston declares that bitter encounters had convinced her to shun “class or race prejudice,” those “scourges of humanity,” and she had instead “received the richer gift of individualism” ([1942] 1984, 323). Similarly, Lane dismissed race and class as “delusions,” adding that the “escape from delusion is to reality” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1943).

For Hurston, race pride was just another facet of racism. It was illogical to denounce it in whites, but then to “wallow in it myself.” Race pride was a “sapping vice” that held blacks back. Worse, it made them vulnerable to the schemes of the “racial cardsharps” who obsessed over past wrongs: “What the world is crying and dying for at this movement is less race consciousness. The human race would blot itself out entirely if it had any more” ([1942] 1984, 325–27, 331).

Hurston had no patience with attempts to tie the achievements of ancient civilizations to American blacks. One of her pet peeves was the strategy of some to adopt distinguished nonblack personages into the race by “proxy, as it were.” An example was W. E. B. Du Bois’s effort to put “that Greek slut, Cleopatra, into the same race with me” (Kaplan 2002, 533). But Hurston’s disdain for race pride did not blind her to the richness and nuances of black cultural and economic life. Her extensive anthropological documentation and discussion of black folklore, both in the United States and the West Indies, shows as much. Even so, she kept careful guard against ethnocentrism. Largely because of this care, her novels, unlike much work with racial

themes from this period, have a timeless quality. Crucial to her focus on “the Negro farthest down” was a rejection of the “oversimplification of the Negro. He is pictured by the conservatives as happy, picking his banjo, or by the so-called liberals as low, miserable, and crying. The Negro’s life is neither of these. Rather, it is in between, and above, and below these pictures” (qtd. in Hemenway [1977] 1980, 299, 328).

Hurston’s anticommunism put her at odds with many in the Harlem Renaissance, including one-time Communist collaborator Langston Hughes. In her view, the Communist Party’s attempt to enforce conformity and to promote economic equality ran contrary to human nature and American ideals. The “people who founded this country, and the immigrants who came later, came here to get away from class distinctions and to keep their unborn children from knowing about them. I am all for the idea of free vertical movement, nothing horizontal” ([1942] 1984, 343). She recalled that during the 1930s, “the nation was flooded with propaganda about there being no more frontiers; no more chances at all for free enterprise; not a prayer for a lone individual to rise by his own efforts. No more nothing but collectivism. It was like a rotting fog hovering over the land” (1951b, 58).

To Hurston, the Communist Party’s opportunistic use of the Scottsboro Boys, who were wrongly convicted of rape, showed how it “looked down upon us and despised us. They discounted our abilities and integrity infinitely more than those southerners from who they were pretending to defend us.” The Communists had mistakenly cast blacks in the same role as downtrodden Russian peasants and did not understand that they were actually like other Americans in their determination to work their way up the ladder: “The biggest snob in America, bar none, is a Negro house servant. . . . Why kill the boss? He might be the big boss himself next year.” Although the accomplishments of wealthy and educated blacks showed that “it was and is obvious that you can win,” the party distorted the truth by depicting the entire black race as “a low, degraded mass, and impossible to be otherwise under constitutional government” (1951b, 55–58). As a corrective, she publicized examples of black business successes, such as Madame C. J. Walker, the hairdressing mogul, and Lawrence Silas, a wealthy Florida rancher (Hurston 1942, 18; Kaplan 2002, 503, 602–3).

The Communists failed to recruit blacks in great part, according to Hurston, because the Communists had fallen prey to the same racist stereotypes they claimed to deplore. One of these was the notion that “the highest ambition of every Negro man was to have a white woman.” The party prodded members into interracial marriages as a means of attracting black recruits. This practice only offended “the thoughtful among us because it amounts to a tacit belief that we are a people totally under the sway of sexual pleasures” (1951b, 57).

All three women considered communism to be destructive not only in politics, but also in the literary arts. Writers associated with the party, said Hurston, had prostituted their art through “social document fiction” (1951b, 58; Hemenway [1977] 1980, 241). Her review of Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* faulted him

for creating “elemental and brutish” characters who did not reflect the subtleties of black life. Wright, she warned, favored “the solution of the PARTY—state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing” (1995, 912–13, emphasis in the original). Agreeing with this sentiment, Paterson characterized books as “individualistic” rather than “social.” Though Communists might be first-rate novelists, they were so only if their characters came across as human beings, not as members of classes. “If there were only one steel worker in the world he could be just as interesting to a novelist,” she declared. “But the Communist theory requires that there shall be a mass of steel workers, or they don’t matter” (*New York Herald Tribune*, July 14, 1935, 14; July 11, 1943, 18). For Lane, the novelist “expresses the human soul’s experience. Any reality or delusion may be the medium of that experience,” including “fame, class, power, race; but these are only externals to the inner meanings which it is fiction’s function to express” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1944).

Turing Against the New Deal Welfare-Warfare State

Lane and Paterson championed capitalism, but they did not necessarily trust the capitalists. Businesspeople, in their estimation, were all too often sellouts and opportunists who used government to line their own pockets. The rich, Paterson complained, “make me sick, and if nothing else, I look forward to the pleasure of seeing them hanged to the lamp posts” (Paterson to Ayn Rand, February 19, 1948, Paterson Papers). Lane blamed the “Big Boys” for doing more than anyone else to destroy capitalism and declared, “they can get themselves murdered in cellars for all I’d care” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1944).

Paterson begged to differ with claims that the New Deal had struck a blow against concentrated private power. One time she took umbrage at none other than Franklin D. Roosevelt after he laughingly remarked at a press conference that Paterson believed in monopoly (*Oakland Tribune*, June 19, June 21, 1938). She hit back that Roosevelt’s policies had done more to centralize power in fewer private hands than was ever possible under a free market. The winners under the New Deal were “the inheritors of non-productive fortune, the beneficiaries of fixed charges and endowments, the recipients of public money . . . believing themselves moved by other principles, some candidly out for the spoils” (*Oakland Tribune*, August 8, 1938).

Paterson, Lane, and Hurston agreed that the New Deal welfare state had undermined self-help and chained the poor to the whims of politicians. Hurston characterized Roosevelt’s relief program as “the biggest weapon ever placed in the hands of those who sought power and votes.” Those who became dependent “gradually relaxed their watchfulness and submitted to will of the ‘Little White Father,’ more or less” (1951a, 152). For Lane, the social worker was all too often “a parasite, taking even his food and clothing from men who work to produce clothing and food” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 15, 1944).

No writer, however, ever penned a more devastating critique of the welfare state and the humanitarians who defended it than Paterson. Most famously in the chapter “The Humanitarian with the Guillotine” in *The God of the Machine*, she charged that “good people” were responsible for most “of the harm in the world . . . and not by accident, lapse, or omission.” The humanitarian feels “the utmost gratification when he visits or hears of a country in which everyone is restricted to ration cards.” Once he has achieved full state power, however, he “sets up the guillotine” and becomes “the terrorist in action” ([1943] 1993, 235, 241–42).

All three women believed that Roosevelt’s prewar foreign policy imperiled liberty at home and fed a senseless war fever. Paterson made her views known in 1933, just prior to the onset of the New Deal. Her credo was “liberty or death, no foreign entanglements, and the least governed country is the best governed” (*New York Herald Tribune*, February 12, 1933, 15). Her columns continued to sound these themes throughout the 1930s. She saw nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by involvement in Europe’s endless wars. Roosevelt, in her view, had used deceptive pretexts to implement the New Deal and would do the same to trick Americans into war (*New York Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1934; 15; Cox 2004, 245–46).

Paterson generally shunned political causes. When asked to join organizations or to lend her name to causes or to sign petitions, she almost always demurred. Her inclination was to follow the rule that “authors should not indulge in deliberate organized propaganda for the best cause under heaven” lest they “destroy all faith and credit in the written world.” Her contempt for Roosevelt’s policies was so great, however, that she made a rare exception in 1940 by publicly endorsing Republican Wendell Willkie, a moderate candidate whom she did not much trust (Cox 2004, 243–46).

Compared to the other two, Lane was almost a natural-born political activist. In the late 1930s, she campaigned for the Ludlow Amendment, which would have required a majority in a national referendum before Congress declared war. She made clear her rejection of pacifism, but did not want young men to be drafted again “to fight on foreign soil in a foreign war for foreign interests.” If the United States compromised its neutrality, it would return to barbarism like that evinced during World War I, “when mob-hates are loose and police power rules, when an unpopular opinion is a crime” (1939a, 4; 1939b, 5).

Neither Lane nor Paterson, however, matched Hurston’s caustic indictment of U.S. foreign policy in the original draft of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. One passage compared the United States to a “fence” of stolen goods and to a protection racket. Hurston thought it ironic that the same “people who claim that it is a noble thing to die for freedom and democracy . . . wax frothy if anyone points out the inconsistency of their morals. . . . We, too, have our Marines in China. We, too, consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own” ([1942] 1984, 341–43). Roosevelt “can call names across an ocean” for his four freedoms, but he did not have “the courage to speak even softly

at home.” Because the book was in production after the United States had entered the war, the publisher urged elimination of these and other controversial comments, and Hurston complied. As a result, *Dust Tracks on a Road* lost most of its sting ([1942] 1984, 339, 342–43; see also Hemenway [1977] 1980, 288).

Like most members of the Old Right, however, Paterson, Lane, and Hurston backed the American war effort after Pearl Harbor. Yet their support was highly qualified, and they never let go of their fear that Roosevelt was up to no good. They had no doubt in the ultimate triumph of America’s relatively free society over totalitarianism. The only possible impediments to success were New Deal bungling and bureaucratic hubris (Hemenway [1977] 1980, 297; Holtz 1993, 309–11; Cox 2004, 248–51).

Lane’s political and personal odyssey during the war was the most remarkable of the three women’s experiences at this time. She was able to share her views with a new audience through the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Although her columns appeared for nearly three years, scholars have ignored them almost completely. Her biographer, William Holtz, devotes less than two paragraphs to them, inaccurately describing the *Pittsburgh Courier* as a “small weekly Negro newspaper” (1993, 315). This neglect is unfortunate because these columns are some of Lane’s best work.

Lane began her association with the paper as a reader. She picked up a couple of issues, liked what she saw, and wrote a fan letter. The paper was still riding high, despite the recent death of its founder Robert L. Vann. Upon defecting to the Democrats in 1932, Vann had famously recommended that blacks face their pictures of Lincoln to the wall. Later, however, he gradually turned against Roosevelt for the president’s neglect of racial justice and his reliance on big government. Vann’s wife succeeded him as publisher in 1940, and his right-hand man, Ira Lewis, continued as business manager. During World War II, a stimulant to circulation was the paper’s Double V Campaign, which emphasized the twin goals of defeating fascism overseas and Jim Crow at home (Buni 1974, 194, 316–20, 325; Washburn 2006, 140–45).

Although Lane had scarcely mentioned race in her previous writings, her attraction to the *Courier* was not surprising. She obviously liked the ethnic and ideological diversity of the columnists and the lively interchange between them. They included Joel A. Rogers, a leading popularizer of black history and an antilynching polemist, and S. I. Hayakawa, a semanticist and later a U.S. senator from California (Pinckney 2002, 18–21). The paper’s star attraction, however, was George Schuyler. Dubbed the “black H. L. Mencken” because of his scathing prose, he was the *Courier*’s main editorial writer (Buni 1974, 137). Although Schuyler had not yet made the transition to conservatism, he was an unrelenting anti-Communist and flayed the party’s infiltration and manipulation of black organizations and causes. He fought many of Roosevelt’s and Truman’s policies, including the Japanese internment and the dropping of the atomic bomb (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 30, 1943; May 29, 1943; August 18, 1945).

Lane's enthusiasm and self-confidence reached full bloom in her columns. Rather than hiding or trimming her laissez-faire views, she seized the chance to sell them to the readership. She sought out topics of special interest to her readers. Her first entry glowingly characterized the Double V Campaign as part of the more general fight for individual liberty in American history. "Here, at last, is a place where I belong," she wrote of her new job. "Here are the Americans who know the value of equality and freedom" (October 31, 1942). Her columns highlighted black success stories to illustrate broader themes about entrepreneurship, freedom, and creativity. In one, she compared the accomplishments of Robert Vann to those of Henry Ford. Vann's rags-to-riches story illustrated the benefits in a "capitalist society in which a penniless orphan, one of a despised minority can create *The Pittsburgh Courier* and publicly, vigorously, safely, attack a majority opinion," whereas Ford's life showed how a poor mechanic could create "hundreds of jobs . . . putting even beggars into cars" (October 30, 1943; November 27, 1943).

No libertarian has combined advocacy of laissez-faire and antiracism more creatively than Rose Wilder Lane. Her columns emphasized the arbitrariness of racial categories and stressed the centrality of the individual. Instead of indulging in the "ridiculous, idiotic and tragic fallacy of 'race,' [by] which a minority of the earth's population has deluded itself during the past century," it was time for all Americans, black and white, to "renounce their race" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 27, 1943). Judging persons by their skin color was comparable to the Communists' assignment of guilt or virtue to persons according to their class. In her view, the fallacies of race and class hearkened to the "old English-feudal 'class' distinction" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1943). The collectivists, including the New Dealers, deserved blame for filling "young minds with fantasies of 'races' and 'classes' and 'the masses,' all controlled by pagan gods, named Economic determinism or Society or Government" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1943).

If Lane's association with the *Courier* created a new vehicle to carry forward the message of individualism and free enterprise, it also led to some painful self-reflection. Blacks had suffered from segregation, but so too had "pale-skinned" folk such as Lane herself paid a price. Before her exposure to the paper, she had wrongly "accepted the myth of 'the Negro race'" for her entire life. "Dark-skinned persons served me, and I was kind and courteous to them, with the damnable kindness and courtesy for which there is no forgiveness." Although she had heard about lynchings and other racial injustices, she had assumed that they were isolated exceptions. Reading the *Courier* had shown her, however, that she was an "utter fool" and "a traitor to my country's cause, the cause of human rights" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1943).

Lane asked her black readers to appreciate how difficult it was for whites to overcome these old patterns of bigotry. The schools had taught them from infancy the collectivist delusion "that whiteness is the ineradicable mark of superior race." Half in jest, she said that "the progress of my people is slow. . . . The American White is

generally a friendly fellow, good-hearted, generous, and meaning no harm to anyone. His error, even his cruelties, come from the false beliefs instilled in him by his environment and training. He needs help to overcome them.” One way for blacks to help “solve the White problem” was to mail copies of the paper to “more ignorant whites” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 6, 1943).

Lane’s libertarian perspective enabled her to look at old problems in original ways, as when she challenged the premises of self-proclaimed “friends of the Negro.” The claim to be friends to an entire race was just as implausible to her as that of the leftist who pronounced himself a “lover of humanity.” Friendship is individual, not collective or impersonal, Lane argued. It is “an emotion felt by one person for another person; it is as unique and exclusive as love. Nobody can be a friend to anyone whom he never saw, whose very name he doesn’t know. . . . Try being a friend to musicians. It can’t be done” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 4, 1943). Thus, when George Schuyler called for abolition of the term *Negro*, she heartily approved, but conceded that it was not properly for her to decide. To millions, the word *Negro* represented “pride in achievement and the fellowship in the struggle for human rights,” and “[e]very pale-skinned American who attacks the Jim Crow wall finds himself in this dilemma: and it is a genuine dilemma” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1943).

Lane even anticipated the strategy of the lunch-counter sit-ins of the 1960s in a small way. She suggested that blacks emulate the crusade of “shy, sensitive, Victorian women,” such as herself, who had once asserted their right to smoke in restaurants: “we never questioned that individuals are responsible for any injustice that they submit to. So we did not submit. We smoked in public places. . . . A waiter rushed to your table and contemptuously told you to leave. . . . You put out the cigarette and doggedly choked down some food from your plate. The next time you ate, you did it again.” Through this method, these women wore down a prejudice bit by bit (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 19, 1944).

Coping with Roosevelt’s Wartime “Brown Scare”

Although Lane did not oppose World War II after the Japanese attack, she called attention to the assault on liberty that came with it. She was ready to applaud, or at least to express sympathy for, any hints that Americans still had a spirit of rebellion. When the United Mine Workers broke a no-strike pledge, she considered their action a hopeful, although poorly timed, sign that a union was “doggedly refusing to submit to tyranny.” By standing up to the federal government, the miners were returning to the tradition of Samuel Gompers, the relatively antistatist founder of the American Federation of Labor who “wouldn’t touch politics with a 10-foot pole” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1943).

Twice during the war Lane’s dissenting attitudes crossed over into direct action. The first time was in early 1943 in response to a broadcast featuring Samuel Grafton,

a contributor to *The New Republic* and a New Dealer. He provoked her by combining praise for Social Security and a call to send American teachers to educate Germans about democracy. Lane scribbled a postcard to Grafton that if American teachers said “to German children, ‘We believe in social security’ the children will ask, ‘Then why did you fight Germany?’ All these ‘social security’ laws are German, instituted by Bismarck and expanded by Hitler.” She added that Americans did not want to be “taxed for their own good and bossed by bureaucrats” (Holtz 1993, 316–17; Albert R. Walsh to Special Agent in Charge, U.S. Department of Justice, March 15, 1943, Rose Wilder Lane FBI File).

This missive would have ended the matter had not somebody in Danbury, Connecticut, considered the card subversive and so informed the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) regional office. A state trooper, sent at the FBI’s behest, came to Lane’s house to check into it. When during the encounter the trooper said that he did not like her attitude, she was ready to pounce: “I am an American citizen. I hire you. I pay you. And you have the insolence to question my attitude? . . . What is this—the Gestapo?” After some more back and forth, Lane asked the flustered trooper if her comments in the postcard were subversive. His answer in the affirmative brought the retort: “Then I’m subversive as hell!” The trooper promptly backed off, promising not to pursue the matter because Lane was a writer. Lane gave him no relief, declaring that it was her right as an American citizen, not just as a writer, to speak as she pleased (Lane 1943, 2; *Oakland Tribune*, August 18, 1943; *Zanesville Signal*, August 11, 1943).

The trooper beat a retreat, but Lane was just getting warmed up. She publicly demanded the name of the person who had informed on her and asked if the federal government was censoring Americans’ mail. In a letter to J. Edgar Hoover, she promised that when “an investigator puts so much as the toe of his boot across the line protecting any American citizen’s right to free thought and free speech, I regard it as that citizen’s duty to refuse to permit this, and to raise a loud yell” (Lane to J. Edgar Hoover, September 9, 1943, Lane FBI File; Lane 1943).

Lane wrote up the account of this incident for the National Economic Council, an Old Right and noninterventionist organization, which gave it wide circulation. Newspapers across the country, including some in her home state, took Lane’s side, and Roger Baldwin, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote to Hoover on her behalf (Baldwin to Hoover, August 31, 1943, Lane FBI File; *Delta Democrat-Times*, September 2, 1943; *New Haven Journal Courier*, August 11, 1943). Although Hoover did his best to defend the FBI, he privately described the original inquiry as “ridiculous,” suggesting that if “we haven’t something more important and pressing to do we ought to cut personnel” (Hoover to Baldwin, September 3, 1943, and Memorandum for Louis B. Nichols, August 14, 1943, Lane FBI File).

Lane’s second foray into direct action was a one-woman protest against rationing. Her method was to become almost self-sufficient on her three-acre farm in Connecticut. “If a person admits government has the right to say if he can eat,” she

declared, “there is no liberty left” (*Sheboygan Press*, April 4, 1944). She raised her own hogs, cows, and chickens, grew her own vegetables, made eight hundred jars of preserves, and used honey as a substitute for sugar. Her only monetary income was the \$60 per month she earned from her columns. This time, however, relatively few people came forward to defend her. Complaining was one thing, but striking at the life blood of the war effort, even in this small way, was another. Walter Winchell, then at the height of his fame as a radio commentator, indignantly wrote that the taxes she boycotted also funded the U.S. military that protected “Americans such as Rose Wilder Lane” (*Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, April 9, 1944; and *Troy Record*, April 10, 1944).

Lane was not about to give up, and she extended her personal campaign into the postwar years. In 1946, a long and sympathetic update from the *Chicago Tribune* found that she was still largely self-sufficient. According to Lane, governments had tried to fix prices “since before the big flood and it’s never worked.” This self-sufficiency also freed her from paying taxes to support government agencies she opposed, such as the War Writers Board (*Kansas City Star*, October 25, 1946; *Sheboygan Press*, April 4, 1944).

By being so vocal, Lane was engaging in risky behavior and must have known that she was doing so. Despite World War II’s reputation as the “good war,” the protection of civil liberties was often shaky during the war years, when President Roosevelt created a “Brown Scare” directed against noninterventionists on the political right. Government leaders relied on the same methods of censorship, character assassination, and guilt by association later to be deployed against Communists during the Second Red Scare. The Brown Scare culminated in 1944, when the attorney general staged an ill-fated show trial of antiwar isolationists on trumped-up charges of promoting sedition in the armed forces (Ribuffo 1983, 178–224). The Brown Scare’s chief publicist was Avedis Derounian (also known as John Roy Carlson), the author of two-best selling undercover exposés of isolationists. Writing under a pseudonym, he asked Lane to elaborate on her views. Lane, of course, was always ready to oblige the request of an apparently sincere neophyte, but her lengthy reply mystified Derounian. It “made little sense. Her extreme individualism and extreme *laissez faire* attitude have seemingly alienated her from events in this world” (qtd. in Carlson 1946, 282).

Hurston and Paterson did not emulate Lane’s high-profile wartime political activism. Their dissent for the most part appeared in their private correspondence. Paterson opposed wartime conscription and cheered on attempts to investigate Roosevelt’s failure to take precautions against Pearl Harbor (Paterson to Robert S. Henry, September 25, 1945, Paterson Papers). Because her job at the *New York Herald Tribune* was not secure, Paterson had to be careful about what she said publicly (Cox 2004, 249). The same was true for Hurston, then struggling to win acceptance from a broader audience. Writing to Ayn Rand, Paterson lamented that “you can’t say what you think now and it is wartime and freedom is compulsion, and

God damn them all to hell is what I say” (Paterson to Rand, February 2, 1944, Paterson Papers).

These (mostly private) comments also faulted the conduct of the war itself. Condemning the Allied “obliteration bombing” as needless slaughter, Paterson made a special appeal to Whittaker Chambers, then a book editor at *Time*. Without success, she urged him to raise questions about it. Much like Lane, Paterson stressed the dirty past of Roosevelt’s wartime friend Josef Stalin. When Truman ordered the dropping of the atomic bomb, she condemned him for using science “to fry Japanese babies in atomic radiation.” In Paterson’s estimation, their deaths did not even have practical value because of an almost immediate Japanese surrender once a U.S. invasion force had landed in Japan. The only bright spot for her was that Truman compromised his demand of unconditional surrender by letting the Japanese keep the emperor (Cox 2004, 250).

Hurston often commented on wartime racial injustice. Although she never thought that enough blacks would join her, she wrote in 1943 that “this poor body of my mine is not so precious that I would not be willing to give it up for a good cause. . . . A hundred Negroes killed in the streets of Washington right now could wipe out Jim Crow in the nation so far as the law is concerned” (Kaplan 2002, 482). After thirty-four died in a Detroit race riot, Hurston concluded that “the Anglo-Saxon is the most intolerant of human beings in the matter of *any* other group darker than themselves” (qtd. in Hemenway [1977] 1980, 297, emphasis in original).

Hurston shed no tears when Congress ended the Fair Employment Practices Committee. In her view, Roosevelt had tricked A. Philip Randolph into calling off his March on Washington in exchange for an insulting act of patronage. Instead of settling for an Executive Order, Randolph should have pushed for a new law. The government did not owe her any special favors: “I want it done as my RIGHT AS A CITIZEN! Why those Negroes do not see that anything that is done under favoritism can be withdrawn?” Her preference instead was always to get strict enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (Kaplan 2002, 543–44, 681, emphasis in original).

Hurston continued her drumbeat against Roosevelt’s double standard of fighting oppression overseas but letting it flourish at home. She was “crazy about the idea of this Democracy,” but, as a black American, she did not know the meaning of the word *democracy*. Only “the repeal of every Jim Crow law in the nation here and now” could give it true meaning (Hurston 1995, 947). Like Paterson, Hurston condemned Truman’s dropping of the atomic bomb. It showed, she said, that he was nothing less than the “BUTCHER OF ASIA” (Kaplan 2002, 438, emphasis in original). Paterson and Hurston were not the only conservatives and libertarians who held this view. Others who criticized Truman’s use of the bomb included Leonard Read, George S. Schuyler, David Lawrence (the owner of *U.S. News and World Report*), and William F. Buckley Jr. (*Pittsburgh Courier*, August 18, 1945; Maley and Mohan 2005, 1–3; Doherty 2007, 155).

Final Years

Paterson, Lane, and Hurston all lost influence in the postwar period. They were aging and getting tired. More important, their individualist and anti–New Deal attitudes had gone out of fashion among opinion leaders and the public. Yet each of them struggled on and had occasional triumphs.

By the end of World War II, Paterson’s political views left her marginalized at the *New York Herald Tribune*. Finally, in 1949, after she had spent more than two decades writing columns for that newspaper, her employers forced her out (Cox 2004, 320–22). In the end, she was also her own worst enemy. Her prickly personality and exacting standards drove away many of her old friends. Living on a modest pension from the *Tribune*, she retired to Connecticut and then New Jersey. Nevertheless, she did not fall into complete obscurity. A by-product of *The God of the Machine* was a dedicated coterie of fans. Several were pioneers in the modern libertarian and conservative movements, including Russell Kirk, Robert LeFevre, Murray Rothbard, and William F. Buckley (Cox 2004, 292, 325–26, 335–43, 358–60). Despite her aversion to political causes, Paterson was an early booster of Leonard Read’s proposed free-market promotional effort that later took shape as the Foundation for Economic Education. He was, she said, “an extremely intelligent and honest and courageous man . . . he is just the man we have been wishing for” (Paterson to Ayn Rand, January 11, 1944, Paterson Papers). Paterson occasionally contributed reviews and articles to conservative publications, such as the *National Review*. She died in 1961 (Cox 2004, 343–63).

Lane probably had the happiest final years of the three. They did not start out that way, however. In 1945, she lost her job at the *Courier* (Holtz 1993, 325). As in Paterson’s case, her political views probably played a role in the firing. Her last column described her fight against zoning in Danbury, Connecticut (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8, 1945). Under zoning, an American no longer had a right to live in his own home, but was “merely to be permitted to occupy it.” Was it possible, she wondered, that Joseph Goebbels was right in his prediction that the winners of the war would end up adopting the economic principles of National Socialism (*Danbury News-Times*, July 23, 1945)?

During the late 1940s and through the 1950s, Lane played a hands-on role in launching the *libertarian movement*, a term she apparently coined. She wrote book reviews for the National Economic Council and then for the Volker Fund, which later spawned the Institute for Humane Studies. Later still, she lectured at and gave generous financial support to the Freedom School headed by libertarian Robert LeFevre. One of the budding activists who came under her wing was Roger McBride, a future Libertarian Party presidential candidate as well as her designated heir. Another admirer was economist Hans Senholtz, who became president of the Foundation for Economic Education after his retirement from Grove City College. Lane’s previous noninterventionist views in foreign policy gradually fell by the wayside, though. She

favorably covered on the scene the U.S. war effort in Vietnam and was preparing to go there again at the time of her death in 1968 at eighty-two years old (Holtz 1993, 346–47, 359–68; Doherty 2007, 18, 131–34).

Hurston's hand-to-mouth existence in her final years contrasts sadly with Paterson and Lane's relative comfort. She started out energetically by working for Grant Reynolds's congressional campaign. Reynolds, a well-known black integrationist, had won the Republican nomination and was making a spirited fight to unseat Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, then a first-term member of the House of Representatives. Although Reynolds made a determined effort, the Democratic grip on the district proved too difficult to overcome. During the same period, Hurston organized a community-based "block mothers" campaign in Harlem whose goal was to help women by encouraging them to provide day care through mutual aid. Paterson and Lane, no doubt, would have applauded her justification: "It's the old idea of, trite but true, of helping people to help themselves that will be the only salvation of the Negro in this country" (qtd. in Hemenway [1977] 1980, 303).

Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, appeared in 1948. In a change of pace for her, the book focused on white characters, thus illustrating her rejection of "that silly old rule about Negroes not writing about white people" (Kaplan 2002, 443). Sales were disappointing at 4,638 copies, and Hurston began a slow descent into obscurity. To make ends meet, she briefly worked as a maid in 1950 (Hemenway [1977] 1980, 325).

Despite circumstances, Hurston had not lost her knack for writing nonfiction. One of her best articles was the red-hot but unjustly neglected "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (Hurston 1951b), which appeared in the *American Legion Magazine* in 1951. Few of her writings better reveal her libertarian sympathies. Although the article showed her fervent anticommunism, she was not an uncritical cheerleader of Cold War policies. She blamed anti-Americanism in the Third World not on communism, but on U.S. support of the old colonial empires (Kaplan 2002, 686–87).

Meanwhile, she touted the presidential ambitions of Ohio senator Robert A. Taft, the then-acknowledged leader of the Old Right. In an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* (Hurston 1951a), she saw Taft as the best hope to break black dependence on the New Deal welfare state. She sought unsuccessfully to sell two proposed novels based on the lives of Madame C. J. Walker and King Herod of Judea. In a series for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, she covered the trial of Ruby McCollum, a wealthy black woman charged with murdering a politically powerful white doctor who was also McCollum's lover (Kaplan 2002, 602, 605–6).

A letter to the editor opposing the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision brought Hurston back into the limelight. Had she shifted from her earlier opposition to Jim Crow? Not really. For her, a trade-off had to be made. Although she continued to oppose segregation, she feared that *Brown* would further empower a tyrannical federal government to threaten individual rights as well as to undermine

black schools. Afterward, she wrote sporadically, but her health was failing. She became unable to care for herself, and friends brought her to a welfare home in Florida in 1959. She died in 1960 at sixty-nine years old and was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery (Hemenway [1977] 1980, 33–37, 336–37, 347–48).

Conclusion

The reputations of all three authors have risen in the decades since their deaths. In 1993, William Holtz's biography *The Ghost in the Little House* uncovered Lane's close collaborative role in the writing of her mother's books. Most recently, Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism* (2007) has highlighted her importance in the modern libertarian movement. Stephen Cox's insightful biography *The Woman and the Dynamo* (2004) has finally given Paterson her due as a literary craftsman, critic, and political theorist. The revived interest in Paterson and Lane, however, has not even come close to equaling the new fascination with Hurston. Since her rediscovery by Alice Walker in the 1970s, a kind of Zoromania has taken hold, giving rise to at least two biographies (Hemenway [1977] 1980; Boyd 2003) and a multitude of writings on her novels and essays.

Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Zora Neale Hurston belonged to essentially the same tradition. Each went her own way, but the three arrived independently at remarkably similar conclusions. Their lives show many common threads. As daughters of the frontier and independent women, they upheld individualism and small government in an era of intense statism. Today, their insights about the New Deal welfare-warfare state and the internal contradictions of communism appear to have been remarkably prescient.

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