

Zora Neale Hurston entered Barnard in 1925, when she was thirty-four. (No one knew her age; Hurston always lied about it.) After graduating, she spent two years in the doctoral program before dropping out, but by then Boas had got her started collecting African-American folklore in central Florida, where she had grown up. She published her findings in 1935, as “Mules and Men,” with a preface by Boas, but the real importance of the work she did was that it provided material for the astonishing representation of African-American speech in her singular novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” That book was published in 1937 and slowly sank from view—Richard Wright accused Hurston of minstrelsy—but it was “rediscovered” in the nineteen-seventies, and is now a staple text in English-literature courses.



The anthropology these people practiced had two motives that might seem, from an orthodox scholarly perspective, extracurricular—except that knowledge is always pursued for a reason. One motive was to record ways of life that were rapidly disappearing. Even in the nineteen-twenties, it was almost impossible to find groups of humans untouched by Western practices. The island that Mead’s research subjects lived on was an American possession. It had an Anglo-American legal system, and the Samoans were all Christians.

Mead did her best to minimize these circumstances, because she wanted to capture behavior and mores that were remote from American Christian moral and legal conceptions—in particular, Samoan attitudes toward premarital sex, which is the part of the book that got all the attention. So she centered her account on what she took to be the distinctively “Samoan” aspects of her subjects’ lives.

Early-twentieth-century anthropologists were highly self-conscious about this recovery mission. They worried that the world was losing its cultural diversity. “Western civilization, because of fortuitous historical circumstances, has spread itself more widely than any other local group that has so far been known,” Benedict wrote. “This world-wide cultural diffusion has protected us as man had never been protected before from having to take seriously the civilizations of other peoples.” The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who did his field work among indigenous groups in west-central Brazil in the nineteen-thirties, once suggested that the word “anthropology” should be changed to “entropology”—the study of the homogenization of human life across the planet. Cultural anthropology was the West’s way of memorializing its victims.

The other motive—and this is what accounts for the popularity of Mead’s and Benedict’s books, and of Hurston’s novel—was to hold up a mirror. What is of interest to the anthropologist is difference, but all difference is difference from something, and the “something” in these books is the anthropologist’s own culture.