



The Folklore Feminist of the Harlem Renaissance

By Michael Sofie

“In the first week of January, 1925,” her biographer records, “Zora Neale Hurston arrived in New York City with one dollar and fifty cents in her purse, no job, no friends, but filled with hope” (96). Fresh from her second year at Howard University, she was 34 years old, but claimed to be younger to conceal her late arrival to high school and college, and to assimilate with the younger “Niggerati,” a term she coined for the new Negro intellectuals that had gathered there (Lewis 98, Hemenway 13). Although a resident of Harlem for a brief two-and-half years in the nineteen-twenties, Hurston had influence on the African-American literature and thought of the Harlem Renaissance far after that decade. In her literary biography, Robert E. Hemenway observes that “Zora Hurston identified with this ‘Negro capital.’ She studied its language, attended its parties, and joined in the spirit. She lived for a time on 131st Street, and she mastered the idiom of the streets” (30).

Hurston had grown up in Eatonville, an all-black town in Florida, and used the South of her youth as material for her research and writing for the much of her career. “The sources of the Hurston self-confidence were her home town, her family, and the self-sufficiency demanded of her after she left home” (Hemenway 11). She would explain in “How it Feels to be Colored Me:”

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. (Baym 2159)

At Howard University, the philosopher Alain Locke had taken notice of Hurston's journeyman writing efforts, and promoted her to some of the people who were organizing black writers. With their help, she was hired as a secretary and awarded a scholarship to Barnard College, the women's division of Columbia University, as the only black student (Hemenway 20-21). In New York, she was introduced to Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay, among other writers, who had gathered in response to Locke's publication, *The New Negro*. Under the watchful eye of Locke and the editor of the National Urban League's magazine, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, this group of black writers in their early twenties and thirties were given a chance to publish what was important to them.

As Lewis proposes in When Harlem Was in Vogue, "[a]lmost everything seemed possible above 125th Street in the early twenties for these Americans who were determined to thrive separately to better proclaim the ideals of integration. You could be black and proud, politically assertive and economically independent, creative and disciplined—or so it seemed" (103). Of the assembled black writers, Hemenway concludes that "few of the literary participants in the Renaissance knew intimately her rural South...Zora Neale Hurston represented a known but largely unexperienced segment of black life in America" (61). Hughes had experienced Africa and Europe, as

he had crewed on a freighter, but many of the group were from the Midwest and North, with the exception of McKay and Eric Walrond from the Caribbean. As Hurston's graduate studies progressed, she came to the attention of Franz Boas, the groundbreaking anthropologist who was teaching at Barnard's sponsoring institution, Columbia University. As Hemenway acknowledges:

Hurston had first begun doing field work for Boas in 1926, and her measurements of Harlem physiognomy had become part of his research into the characteristics of race...Much of his research was directed toward establishing the equal capabilities of all races...He was particularly interested in the African survivals in Afro-American culture, and Zora Hurston's field work would be part of the evidence documenting this unique Afro-American subculture; if the findings refuted ignorant racial stereotypes arising from the absence of anthropological data, so much the better. (88)

For Zora Neale Hurston, the field work she gathered for Boas and her own research would indelibly imprint her study of black folklore and writing for her entire career.

Hurston's schedule in 1926 was packed with graduate work, anthropological study, and the launching of a new magazine to showcase the artistic talent of the younger writers in the group. As the editors disclosed, the mission of *Fire!* was, "[h]oping to introduce a truly Negroid note into American literature, its contributors...had gone to people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every aspect save color of skin" (Hemenway 45). Hurston's *Fire!* submission was "Sweat," a near perfect "short story [where] idea and craft were marvelously wedded" (Lewis 195). Sykes hides a poisonous snake in the laundry his wife takes in for white people: he is humiliated by the money she earns for her 'sweat'

labor, which supports them. He is bitten instead and dies, but as Lewis insists, “Delia realizes that her Old Testament vengeance and Sykes death offer her no deliverance. Hurston’s guilty die innocent, her innocent persecute[d], and the combat of jobless black manhood versus its working women everlasting” (195). The phallic symbolism of snake coupled with the aggressive man and the downtrodden, hard-working wife start to define Hurston’s defense and exposition of the burdens that were the legacy of black women.

Although the *Fire!* collaboration produced only one issue, it would lead to several other Hurston stories being published in 1926, with “The Eatonville Anthology” weaving together black folktales and folklore from her Florida hometown. Some of the vignettes are humorous, farfetched, or instructive allegorical tales; my particular favorite is “XII. The Head of the Nail,” where the town hussy is attacked with an axe handle by an inflamed wife. Daisy Taylor has the habit of using shingle nails to hold her hair, and as Elijah speculates, “I was just looking to see if Laura had been lucky enough to hit one of those nails on the head and drive it in” (Baym, 5th ed. 1433-4). “The Eatonville Anthology” is the literary equivalent of Hurston’s memorable performances at parties, as Hemenway affirms, “[t]he reader has the impression of sitting in the corner listening to the anecdotes” (69). Broad humor, tall tales, and unlikely situations are an integral part of the folklore that Hurston would amass in her many collecting trips.

Her anthropological work would send her to Florida, early in 1927, to collect more folklore and record the distinctive use of language among the Negro populations not affected by white America. Hurston’s research there was at the urging of Boas, as Hemenway claims, he “assumed...that her ‘easy manner’ would ‘work,’ meaning that she could enter black folk milieu at a different level from that of most previous [white] collectors” (89). Upon her return to Harlem that summer, Locke introduced her to

“Charlotte Osgood Mason an aged, well-preserved white dowager of enormous wealth and influence” (Lewis 151). Mason was already Langston Hughes patron, and accepted Hurston into her exclusive circle, because, as Lewis indicates, “[p]rimitives had always enchanted Charlotte Mason. At the beginning of the century, she had been fascinated by the American Indian,” collecting information for a book during travels to the Southwest (152). Seeing an opportunity for support, “Hurston eventually transferred her allegiance to Mason [and would delight] the old lady with ethnic capers and ‘coon’ stories” (Lewis 153). Hemenway notes that “[i]n September, 1927, when she met Mrs. Mason, Zora and Hughes were very close, having just shared her car for the extended trip from Mobile to New York” (105).

Hurston’s friendship with Hughes would not last, as her literary talent blossomed and strife developed within their close knit circle. “In a rare flash of anger, Hughes would call her a ‘perfect darkie,’ an inapposite description of this handsome, brown-skinned Howard University Transfer student with a sharp independent mind and an urge to become an innovative anthropologist” (Lewis 129). In The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many, Helbring finds that the “five months between August and December of 1928 was a dramatic time for Hurston, transforming her from an enthusiastic artist-folklorist into a mature thoughtful scholar” (161). Hurston started to grow tired of the precise notation of “the scientific folklorist, “ and preferred to allow her imagination to be stimulated by “the aura of the place” (Hemenway 101). Hughes and Hurston began a collaboration on the play, *Mule Bone*, in 1930, which would ultimately dissolve their friendship. Hughes was shocked to find that “a promising folk comedy by Zora Hurston,” that was about to be staged in 1931, was the same one that he had co-authored. As Lewis relates, “[i]t was my story from beginning to end,’ she insisted to Hughes. ‘It was

my dialogue, my situations,' and after a protracted argument, 'Hurston refused to allow the play to be mounted under both names'" (260). She would never fully explain "her destruction of her deep friendship with Hughes," other than some pointed comments about the secretary who had transcribed their notes, but as Lewis believes, "her cavalier attitude about plagiarism and Hughes fall from Mason's grace had at least as much to do with the break" (261).

Mark Helbring concurs, that as Hazel Carby summarizes, "[i]ndeed the Harlem Renaissance is frequently conceived as a unique, intellectually cohesive and homogenous historical moment, a mythology which has disguised the contradictory impulses of the Harlem intellectuals" (13). "As 'the dominant black woman writer in the United States' of her time, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted (1990:186) Hurston was exposed to critiques of other African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance for distorting ethnic 'reality' and pandering to white expectations and desires" (Hathaway par.17). This internal strife was not isolated, as Helbring suggests, "for McKay, Toomer, and Hurston, all three struggled with what Hazel Carby has called the 'production of self.' Although this meant very different things to each of these writers, all sought to establish the self that challenged the claims that others sought to impose" (13-14). Hurston would not publish her most important work until the 1930s, however, as Christian claims, "the effect of her presence on the Harlem Renaissance movement is instructive, for her ebullient personality and free life style did not endear her to the major literary figures of the day. She did not fit the conventional image of woman" (122-3). After a southern collecting trip to New Orleans, Mobile, Miami, and the Bahamas, as Hemenway implies, "[i]n a sense her career a folklorist ended when she finished her field notes, and after the fall of 1932 she usually conceived of herself as a creative writer—even when writing

about folklore” (159-60). In the conception of Mules and Men, “Hurston chose not to become a detached observer of the stories and folktales she collected but instead, through extensive dialogues with the people in the communities that she studied, placed herself in the center of the analysis” (Collins 214).

Zora Neale Hurston’s transformation from anthropologist to creative writer was complete with the publication of her “ethnology of African-American folklore and folkways” in 1935. Her biographer, Robert Hemenway comments, “[t]he book... was a product of the protracted effort by Hurston to get something into print that would appease her publisher’s concerns about audience, her patron [Charlotte] Osgood Mason’s concerns over ‘soul,’ and the concerns of her mentor, anthropologist Franz Boas, about authenticity” (Laudun par.7). Now with anthropology behind her, Hurston began the most meaningful work of her career, which was to prove the worth of the black in America, as Alice Walker insists, “the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora’s work: racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (Hemenway xii-xiii). Hurston would write in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road, “[I]ight came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people” (235). “If a false sense of race consciousness served to make blacks ashamed of their past,” as Hebling speculates, “the answer was not to invent a glorious past simply to assuage or massage popular opinion but to educate people to appreciate what had actually taken place” (162). Hurston discovered that “the telling form of language, indeed the search for black literary language itself, defines the search for self,” of the “African American folk culture and the

metaphorical riches of the...vernacular recorded by Hurston” (Gates 183, Trombold par.36).

Hurston placed her stories within the context she knew best, “[h]er heroines are not women of New York City—they move in that mythology of the South, the roots still for the race, the place where the black culture of the previous century had reached a particular peak, though that culture was now undergoing changes in the North” (Christian 8). Christian summarizes that “Zora Neale Hurston, in her life and work, moved the image of the black woman beyond stenotype, as she sought the ever-evolving ways of the folk” (10). Many of her themes revolved around the defense of black womanhood in a male dominated culture, as Hemenway acknowledges:

[a]lthough ‘the women folks’ would occasionally enter in [to the talk], they were more to be seen than heard. As a consequence, in her efforts to record tales and language of her people, Hurston gave special attention to the responses of women to the “lies” they, at least, were allowed to hear. In effect, Hurston could see that her own status as a woman and as an outsider, she shared common experiences and common feelings. (167)

In Mules and Men, Hurston argued for female equality through a carefully constructed sermon, “Behold de Rib,” and “[a]s [Cheryl] Wall concludes, “[t]he purposeful selection of ‘Behold de Rib’ allows her both to celebrate the verbal art she greatly admired and to register a protest against the tradition that shaped it, a tradition that for the most part neither welcomed women’s participation nor fostered their equality” (Hemenway 168).

In her book, Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Writers, Barbara Christian believes that discrimination transcends color:

[f]or all American women... the concept of class [is] a major factor upon which the societal norm of what a woman is supposed to be is based. Just as blacks as a group were relegated to an underclass in America by virtue of their race, so women were relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex...The novels of black women from 1892 to the present have had to react to the element of class as one of the factors upon which the societal definition of the black women is based. (72-3)

The 1933 story, "The Gilded Six-Bits," illustrates the virtues of a husband who discovers his wife with a "traveling Lothario," but overcomes being cuckold and allows time to heal the rift in their marriage. Both parties are deeply wounded, but in the end, reconciled with the birth of their first child. The perception of Joe and Missy May by the clerk at the store suggests racial profiling, as he greets the next customer, "[w]ish I could be like these darkies. Laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em" (Baym 2169).

For Hurston, the language of the black folk in her stories was important; the cadence, syntax, metaphors, images, and the clever use of "double-descriptives" defined her people. In her anthropological article, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston proposed that "the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics." Lacking their own written tradition, the Negroes in her stories compensated by embellishing their discourses and tales with colorful language that included picture-words and "verbal nouns," like doll-baby, Mouth-Almighty, Double-Ugly, lap-legged, and Him-with-the-square-toes, as in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

This expressive language draws the reader into their world, as they interact with it, as Nanny explains to Janie:

[y]ou know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. (187)

While telling Janie about her birth after the rape of her mother, Nannie discloses the genealogical complexity of the slave, and her wish for a better life for her granddaughter. Nannie's dream is for Janie "to marry off decent like," and not be promiscuous and take up with any old, sweet-talking man that came along (185).

Despite her grandmother's warning, Janie Crawford finally comes to the point of beginning to understand herself, after her ill-fated three marriages. She came to the realization that Killicks, Starks, and Tea Cake married her for very different reasons, but when Janie finally does find the love she desires with Tea Cake, it ends in tragedy. Life is not easy in these black communities, and it is only through the support of friends, self-deprecating humor, and pathos that they move forward. As Crabtree finds, "Hurston is a master at transforming the language of a folk group... the West Florida Blacks...into convincing dialogue. The authenticity of the language although documented, is much less important as a slice of life than as an implicit claim of authority about Black life" (par.9).

Hurston liberally uses colorful metaphors and similes to illustrate folk wisdom in the terms that even the illiterate among them could understand. As Janie warns Pheoby, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, “[s]o ‘tain’t no use in telling you somethin’ unless Ah give you understandin’ to go ‘long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain’t no different from a coon hide” (180). In comments about her tough life, Nannie would plead, “[h]ave some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate” (190). When Joe Starks first meets Janie, he exclaims, “[y]ou behind a plow! You ain’t got no mo’ business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday!” (197). After their marriage, when Starks lies on his sick bed:

“[s]o Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the square toes who lived way out in the West. The great one who lived in a straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house...watchful and motionless all day... waiting for the messenger to bid him come...Rumor, that wingless bird, had shadowed over the town. (242).

Hurston’s language creates images of a simple people, who are tied to and identify with the land, and are superstitiously reverent. Like Janie believes, Death resides in the west, where the sun sets and darkness rules the long night. When Mayor Starks is dead, Janie realizes that “[d]is sittin’ in de rulin’ chair is been hard on Jody’ she muttered out loud. She was full of pity for the first time in years. Jody had been hard on her and others, but life had mishandled him too” (245). The young girl was now replaced by an older, wiser woman, and as by our experience, we either come to understand or refuse to grow.

The long narration of Janie's story to her friend Pheoby in Their Eyes Were Watching God, is sown with many inventive and intriguing images, like, "she went on thinking back on her young years and explaining them to her friend in soft, easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and blackness" (182). Hurston's eloquence is best disclosed in this passage:

{s}o Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things?...She knew things that nobody had ever told her.

For instance, the words of the trees and the wind...She often spoke to falling seeds and said, "Ah hope you fall on soft ground"...She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. (194).

Powerful images, told in a lyrical and wondrously loving way. As Crabtree concludes, "the folkloric material is directly relevant to Janie's final achievement of harmony and peace. Folklore is a thematic element, as well as a component of the themes of Janie's search for identity and self-determination as a Black and as a woman" (par.19). Not all critics consider her anthropological work in folklore authentic and meaningful to African-American culture, but as literature, her stories legitimize that culture and its history. The British linguistic scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison believed that "[l]anguage is as much an art and as sure of refuge as painting or music or literature." If scholars prefer to discount

Hurston's contribution to literature, then they must confer upon her the title of artist or composer for her works, because they are both pleasing to the eye and ear.

Just as the folk's spirits in her stories could not be broken, "Zora Hurston was a woman of fierce independence who lived for her writing," and she held many menial jobs to tide her over between books. "Hurston's contemporaries, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes were almost the only authors who made a living by writing," but "[s]he never really compromised with the American economic system, and she spent a lifetime refusing to accept the roles prescribed for black women intellectuals" (Hemenway 5). As Howard reports, "[w]hen World War II began, Hurston was living in Saint Augustine, Florida, teaching part-time at Florida Normal, the local black college" (par.37-9). There she corresponded with Marjorie Rawlings after reading Cross Creek, and Rawlings's publishers would later take an option on Hurston's last novel published late in 1948. "From the early 1940s throughout the '50s," as Gilliams discloses, "Hurston's letters exemplify a steady progression of disappointment and bitterness as she was increasingly betrayed by both black and white people. The pride, vibrancy, and fierce independence that mark[ed] Hurston's 1930s letters nearly dissipated in the last two decades of her life" (par.7). By the end of the 1950s, "[s]he was now sick and lonely, penniless and forgotten, without either fame or the wealth such a career would seem to have earned" (Hemenway 4). This "woman who rejoiced in print about the beauty of being black" died in 1960 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in the Florida that she cherished (Hemenway 6, 347)

Although "[i]nterest in Hurston had diminished long before her death...Hurston continues to live in her works and in the hearts and minds of those who have read them," as Howard predicts, "her honesty and power as a storyteller will one day earn her the

place she deserves in the history of the American novel” (par.49). Henry Louis Gates has recently observed:

[o]f the various signs that the study of literature in America has been transformed, none is more salient than the resurrection and canonization of Zora Neale Hurston. Twenty years ago, Hurston’s work was largely out of print, her literary legacy alive only to a tiny, devoted band of readers who were often forced to photocopy her works if they were to be taught...Today her works are central to the canon of African-American, American, and Women’s literatures. (165)

Her biographer concludes, that “[h]er attempt to distinguish black culture from white forecast the direction of much subsequent research; in the last thirty years the social sciences have begun to systematically collect the data that Zora Hurston indicated was there all along. We now have a body of ‘scientific’ literature that provides evidence for the existence of a number of distinctive Afro-American cultural domains, including that domain of black esthetics which so interested her” (Hemenway 331). Hurston’s life’s work appeals to a wide range of critic’s viewpoints, and they seem to discover new wisdom and insight in her texts (Gates, Jr.180).

The relevancy of Hurston’s research and writing was rediscovered by “[t]he contemporary feminist movement of the 1970s, which had many of its roots in the Civil Rights Movement in much the same way the nineteenth century women’s Rights Movement sprung from the Abolitionist Movement, raised critical issues about the nature of sexism in this country” (Christian 124). “Hurston’s work has been immensely important to a wide range of feminist readers who have made language central to their exploration of Hurston’s historical and cultural importance,” comments Helbring (166).

Owing to her participation in the black culture of the 1920s and 1930s, Zora Hurston's collecting and interpretations are a valuable historical link to the obscure past, which helped to shape the African-American culture of today and "lies at the core of Black feminist thought" (Collins 15). As Christian relates, "[i]n the contemporary period, black women novelists," like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, "have continued to analyze the relationship between class, race, and culture" (72). In regards to Hurston, Sorensen indicates that "[a] survey of recent criticism yield accounts of a purely literary genius who chafed in the confines of ethnography, a radical experimental anthropologist, a critic of identity politics, a misguided dupe of primitivist ideology, and a champion of black transnational cultural identity" (par.1).

Hemenway admits that "[a]n unmarked grave is a romantic, poignant resting place,... it represents human tragedy, [but] Zora Neale Hurston was a nontragic person...[w]hen her blues came, when bigots and liberals and racial missionaries got her down, she retreated into a privacy that protected her sense of self" (6). In the introduction to Hurston's biography, Alice Walker explains:

[i]n my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form an unholy trinity. Zora *belongs* in the tradition of black women singers, rather than among the "literati."...There were extreme highs and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, her passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from the "common" people. (xvii-xviii)

Hurston's candle lit the Harlem Renaissance for only a short time, and when it was over, her genius flared and illuminated the path for her people to move out of the darkness into

their rightful place in the world. Perhaps in the future, Hurston's champions will restore her to her rightful place in American literature, black and white, but in the meantime, Zora Neale Hurston may be content to know that she made a difference for the people she championed.

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