

THE ENIGMATIC BRILLIANCE OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

There can be no gainsaying the fact that Zora Neale Hurston was a gifted writer, researcher, and folklorist. For quite some time, her talents were obscured, until the writer and activist, Alice Walker, sparked a revival from her article in *Ms.* magazine in 1975—fifteen years after Hurston's death.

Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Florida. Her father was a sharecropper, Baptist minister, and carpenter. Her mother was a schoolteacher. When she was three years old, her family relocated to Eatonville, FL.

Eatonville was a town inhabited primarily by Blacks, where there was an aura of freedom and individualism during a time of the entrenchment of racial segregation known as Jim Crow. Her father was mayor of Eatonville in the early 1900s. When Hurston became a teenager, her mother passed away.

After being dismissed from boarding school for nonpayment of tuition and fees, Hurston studied at the high school associated with Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. She was twenty-seven years old when she received her diploma. Subsequently, matriculated at Howard University in Washington, D.C., whereupon she departed in 1924 and received a scholarship to attend Barnard College, the constituent women's academy of Columbia University. While there, she studied with leading anthropologists and earned her bachelor's degree in 1928.

Hurston was interested in studying the culture of Blacks in the South and in the Caribbean.



Elizabeth Van Dyke in
"Zora Neale Hurston:
A Theatrical Biography,"
MARTHA SWOPE.

Often, her focus was on the folklore of the areas she visited and the religious and/or spiritual traditions. Some scholars and philanthropists found her research compelling and provided funding for her travels.

When not traveling, Hurston found a home in Harlem of New York City. She befriended Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, great writers and poets integral to the burgeoning of the artistic period known as the Harlem Renaissance. She also became a kind of protege or mentee of the philosopher, Alain Locke.

Starting in the 1920s, Hurston became a prolific writer: both as a scholar and as a writer of folklore, with concentration on voodoo, music, hoodoo, and religious expression.

In her storytelling, she often used ethnocentric dialects. Frequently, her tales were located in places similar to Eatonville.

Her book, *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, is her most well-known work of fiction published

in 1937. The novel chronicles the life of an ebullient but ignored girl who becomes a strong, independent woman in charge of her own fate. It is evident that her own life experiences are tacitly represented in the story. She captures the misogyny of the day and the transcendence of women to pursue whatever goals they desired. Here, she was bucking the system of paternalistic chauvinism and violence universally accepted at that time.

Hurston did not mind being a solitary figure. She knew her intellectual strengths and felt free to express herself without dissembling for sensitive others. For example, some of her writings were criticized by others as demeaning and insensitive: using dialect was considered to be stereotyping Blacks as dumb, primitive, and ignorant. Authors such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison did not mince any words regarding their critical assessment of her works. These jibes notwithstanding, Hurston was persistent in maintaining her literary style.

This disposition reflected some unique perspectives in her thinking. For instance, despite the fact that his father and her father's father were pastors, she came to believe that the traditional view of God as a personality was a sign of weakness. She wondered why we needed a supreme being to motivate us to live and move and gave our being. Instead, she claimed that death is just a transitioning of the person into another dimension, and that the entity identified with that person never actually deteriorates into nothing. Rather, the mass and energy specific to an individual are always morphing into something else—but never actually die or cease to exist.

Hurston was not only an atheist, but also a kind of conservative politically. She abhorred President Roosevelt's New Deal during the Depression. Although she did work for the Works Progress Administration for a while, she deplored the idea of welfare. She felt that folks could somehow make it without governmental help. If affirmative action was functioning during her lifetime, she would have put it down as permitting people not to work and simply to wait for handouts rather than making something of their own lives. It is no wonder that she supported the bootstrap philosophy of Booker T. Washington, and not the Talented Tenth philosopher of W. E. B. Du Bois. She was against the idea of marching and demonstrating to appeal to the conscience of governmental agents and the body politic to abolish racial exploitation and oppression.

The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was anathema to Hurston. She asserted that

integrating Blacks and Caucasians in the same school would not in and of itself reduce the academic achievement gap. She honored the historically Black colleges and universities and wanted to see them continue.

She argued that money would not solve racism and that integration was not a panacea. As a matter of fact, she wanted to use the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 to demand that the money and support given to white institutions should be matched for Black institutions. Only then would equality occur. She argued that the demand for the "equal" part of that decision would require a lot of funding and could bankrupt the U.S. economy. Consequently, the government would be forced to integrate society in order to save money!

Zora Neale Hurston became an iconic figure posthumously. She was a prolific writer who etched a unique place in the annals of Black history—nay, American history.

Her skills as an anthropologist and folklorist approximates the sociological work of Du Bois. However, her career was short-lived: not because she died young, but because she was a solitary figure and destitute—living in a welfare home in St. Lucie County. She had hypertension, and died from heart disease on January 28, 1960, just three weeks after her sixty-ninth birthday. Some friends celebrated her life, but could not muster the funds to bury her with the tribute and recognition she deserved. She was interred in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, FL.

In spite of her inimitable personality and perspectives, her brilliant and prodigious work screams down through the decades for continuous and substantive exploration!

I am Dr. Michael Blackwell, the Social Ethicist for *The SoulTown Magazine*. I want to thank Zora Neale Hurston for having SOUL! ☺



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Born in Philadelphia and raised in CT during the classic Civil Rights era of the 1960s. He was profoundly affected by the life, thought, and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is published in African American religious thought, peacemaking, the nonviolent direct action of Dr. King, community building, and social change. He worked for twenty years as Director for Multicultural Education at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls as the Director for the Center for Multicultural Education and served as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Philosophy and World Religions. Currently, he is retired and is the founding President and Executive Director of the nonprofit, Project for the Beloved Community, Inc. mdblwell@gmail.com
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