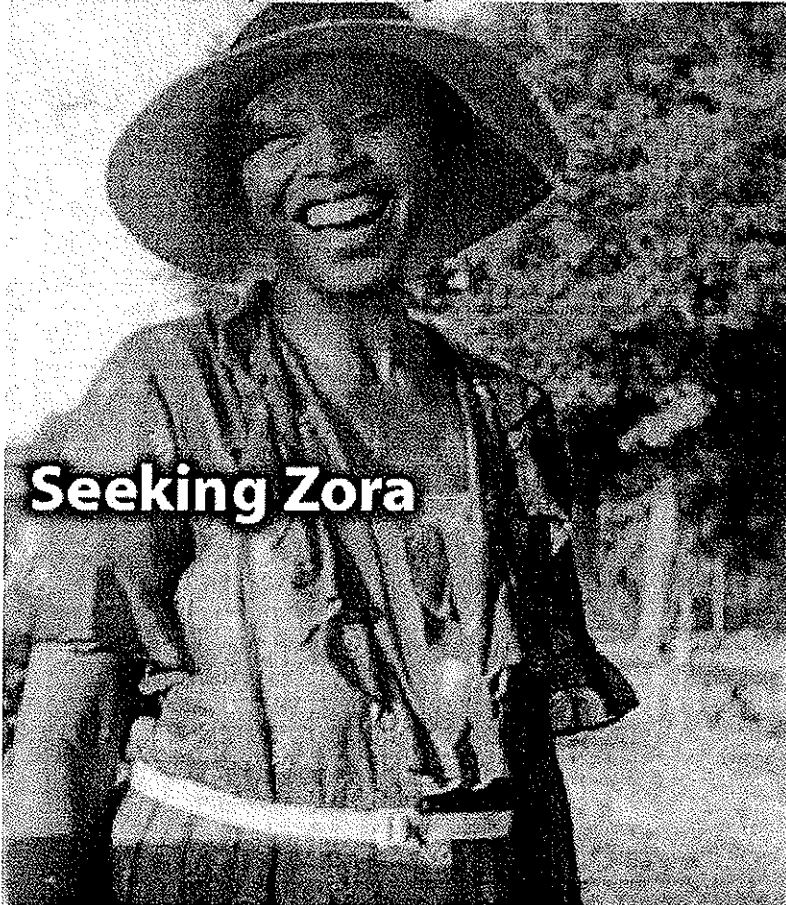


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# CLASnotes

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## Seeking Zora

### Zar.

**This is the farthest known point of the imagination.  
It is way on the other side of Far. Little is known about the doings of the people of Zar because only one or two have ever found their way back.**

--Zora Neale Hurston

Spanish moss hangs like antique lace from the firm upstretched branches of the great oak tree. Under its shaded canopy sits a Black woman dressed in coveralls, a cigarette dangling from the side of her mouth, her hand occasionally pushing up a few strands of curled hair from her sweaty forehead. It is late morning in early July 1928, and the Southern heat has begun its punishing assault.

Not far away, the sounds of the railroad workers' camps drift in occasionally to punctuate the scratching of her pen on the blank paper or the peck of her typewriter against the wind.

To any passer-by, she might have seemed a distant recluse, so deep did her writing take her into Zar. But on this day, she is inclined to be less concerned about what the onlooker might think. She is battling the demons of writer's block.



Zora Neale Hurston



Langston Hughes

Zora Neale Hurston is feverishly penning one of her many *belle lettres* to her friend and confidant, Langston Hughes.

*"Dear Langston,  
I have been through one of those terrible periods when I can't make myself write. But you understand, since you have them yourself..."*

The letters to Langston Hughes were written during a two-year period between 1928 and 1930 and sent bi-weekly.

They always began "Dear Langston," and ended with the salutation, "Love Zora," or "Lovingly Zora."

They were filled with descriptions of her fieldwork in the worker camps where she found much of her folk material: stories, songs, dances.

Zora confided in Langston about her book ideas and revealed her vision of a time when they would collaborate and bring the Black folk culture she found in her own Florida back yard of Maitland, Eatonville, and Jacksonville, and in places like Magazine, Ala., to the stage and the public's attention. Zora was to make this documentation and legitimatization of Black folk culture the focal point of her life.

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The above excerpts are from an essay I wrote titled "*Belle Lettres: 'Dear Langston, Love Zora,'*" which was published in *FlaVour*, a Black Florida life and style magazine. The essay is about the correspondence between Zora Neale Hurston, famous Florida anthropologist and novelist, whose novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* has sold one million copies to date, and Langston Hughes, one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

I discovered this exchange of ideas and letters during my tenure as a Donald C. Gallup Fellow in American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, a residency also supported by a CLAS Humanities Enhancement Fund Grant. I used the letters found in the James Weldon Johnson Afro-American Studies Collection at the Beinecke as a point of departure to speculate about this particular moment in the life of Zora Neale Hurston. I drew on my background in anthropology, my MFA in English, and my experiences as a published poet, journalist, and essayist to create a narrative that blends literary conventions of fiction with ethnographic and archival research. My goal was to produce an unusual portrait of Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist, ethnographer, writer.

“ I cannot say that I followed Zora's path consciously. I can only say that now, having read her letters to Langston, having perused her handwritten and typed manuscripts, her spirit walks with me. ”  
Irma McClaurin

Researching the rare book archives on Zora Neale Hurston at both Yale and UF has transformed me into somewhat of a literary and anthropological detective. Deciding to write the article for *FlaVour*, a magazine geared toward a popular audience, allowed me to build on the parallels between my own background in creative writing and anthropology and that of Zora, who also wrote for audiences beyond the academy. Finally, this work is my contribution to the formation of a "public anthropology," a hotly debated field dealing with the relationship between scholarship and politics, and the need to build better communication between intellectuals and "the folk."

I count myself among that generation of Black anthropologists and writers strongly influenced by Zora's example. I cannot say that I followed Zora's path consciously. I can only say that now, having read her letters to Langston, having perused her handwritten and typed manuscripts, her spirit walks with me. 🍷

--Irma McClaurin



Irma McClaurin (*left*) is an associate professor of anthropology and the coordinator of the Zora Neale Hurston Diaspora Studies Research Project at UF. She is currently on sabbatical as an American Association for the Advancement of Science Diplomacy Fellow working in the Bureau of Policy and Program Coordination at the United States Agency for International Development. McClaurin's work-in-progress is a trade book about the period in Zora Neale Hurston's life when these letters were written. Excerpts from "*Belle Lettres: 'Dear Langston, Love Zora,'*" are reprinted with permission of the publisher; the original article appears in the Autumn 2000 issue of *FlaVour*.

Photos:

Ray Carson (McClaurin)

Courtesy Library of Congress (Hurston and Hughes)

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