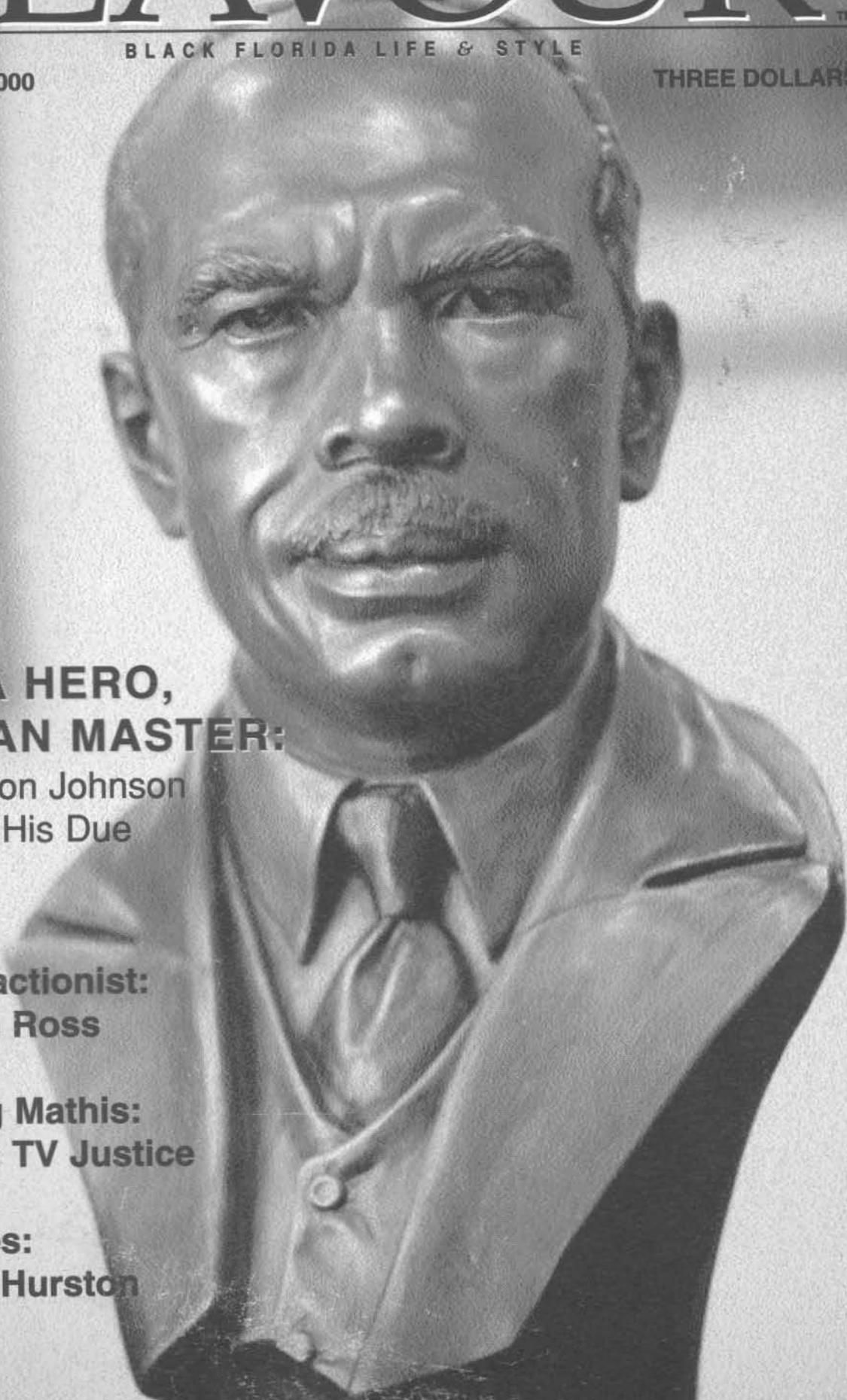


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BLACK FLORIDA LIFE & STYLE

AUTUMN 2000

THREE DOLLARS



FLORIDA HERO, AMERICAN MASTER:

James Weldon Johnson
Finally Gets His Due

**Total Abstractionist:
Gale Fulton Ross**

**Judge Greg Mathis:
Uncommon TV Justice**

**Belle Lettres:
Zora Neale Hurston**

Belle Lettres:

"Dear Langston, Love Zora"

By Irma McClaurin

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 feverishly pens 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..."



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The letters to Langston Hughes were written during a three-year period between 1927 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 legitimization of Black folk culture the focal point of her life.

A lover of great literature, Zora especially liked the works that celebrated the common folk. In Langston Hughes' poetry, she found

a way to share this wealth of Black literature, produced in glamorous Harlem of the late 1920s, with turpentine, railroad, and citrus workers whose everyday camp lives were harsh and mundane.

To Zora's audience, Harlem must have seemed as mythical a place as Zar.

"In every town I hold one or two storytelling contexts, and at each I begin by telling them who you are and all, then I read poems from Fine Clothes [to a Jew]. Boy! They eat it up.

Work going on well. I am getting much more material in a given area/space and time than before because I am learning technique..."

In these letters to Langston, Zora tested out her ideas and theories about the form, function, and meaning of the black folklore she collected; to her the stories, songs, and dances were creative outpourings that flourished under the most abject labor conditions in the backwoods of Florida, Alabama, and

Mississippi. Langston in turn helped Zora refine her thoughts; he provided questions, and suggestions about the direction her work should take.

...Without flattery, Langston, you are the brains of this argosy. All the ideas have come out of your head.

...I have about enough for a good volume of stories but I shall miss nothing. I shall go to New Orleans from here. Oh! Almost forgot, found another one of the original Africans, older than Cudjoe about 200 miles up state on the Tombigger River. She is most delightful, but no one will ever know about her but us...

Lovingly, Zora

Unfortunately for the world, what at the time seemed to surely be a collaboration made in heaven never occurred.

In 1931, Zora and Langston clashed over the intellectual property rights of the play *Mule Bone*. They would virtually never speak or write to each other again.

Hughes wrote: "This play was never done because the authors fell out."

George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates Jr., who edited the book *Mule Bone*, called the quarrel "a Negro tragedy ... the most notorious literary quarrel in African-American cultural history."

Their analysis is an attempt to clear up the mystery and provide a balanced description of the breakup between Zora and Langston. To present both sides of the controversy, they include excerpts from Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, and Hughes' biographer, Arnold Rampersad.

The portrait that emerges from each biographer's story reads like a soap opera. It is high drama. There is jealousy, misunderstandings, stubbornness, letters, and telegrams, and finally, a breach that years later still resonated in their lives.

Zora, according to Rampersad, was said to have told Arna Bontemps eight years after the event, "...that the one cross of ...[my] life is the fact that there has been a gulf between ...[Langston] and ...[I]."

It is this vulnerable side of Zora, and the passion with which she effused her friendship with Langston, that is frequently obscured by the *Mule Bone* controversy.

The letters Zora wrote to Langston reveal a woman eager for intellectual companionship; they show a woman with a generous spirit who encouraged her dear friend Langston to use the materials she collected about Black folk culture in his writing, and they also show a woman who desired and appreciated the support and affirmation of her good friend.

Langston seemed ever-present to reassure Zora that she was on the right track. This portrait of Zora differs drastically from those usually painted of her as egocentric, self-serving, and deceptive.

Undoubtedly, Zora Neale Hurston was a complex woman, one who may have been out of step with her times.

This remarkable and complicated woman made her way into the world on Jan. 15, 1891, according to Pamela Bordelon, editor of *Gator and muddy the water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston From the Federal Writers' Project*.

The unearthing of the Hurston's Family Bible identifies Zora's birthplace as Nostasulga, Ala.

However, the family moved to Eatonville, Florida before Zora had

reached 2 years old.

Her claim of Eatonville as her birthplace may be the result of it being her only memory of home. The move to Eatonville was crucial in shaping Zora's character.

She wrote in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

"I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town's charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America."

The foundation for Zora's own independent spirit, and what some critics say was her advantageous manipulation of white folks stereotypes of black folk to advance herself and her career, had its genesis in Eatonville's history.

It is to this place that Zora would return to collect folklore, to write, to take a respite from the cruel world of white patrons who demanded their pound of flesh in requiring tedious justification of every penny they provided to what Zora called their pet Negroes.

Eatonville still revels in the prestige and notoriety that Zora's presence and continued allegiance brought.

Today, it is an historic landmark. There is a museum to honor the prodigal daughter, Zora. The Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. sponsors an annual festival at the end of January that draws thousands of visitors and vendors from all across Florida and throughout the United States who come to celebrate Black culture with the spirit of Zora presiding.

And Zora Neale Hurston deserves every bit of this local, national, and international attention. She was one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance period in the 1920s, and one of the few Black women who was recognized as an equal during a time when women's

roles were confined primarily to the home.

Black women during the 1920s had few career choices: they were either domestics or schoolteachers. For Zora to take the risk of making her living as a writer attests to her spirit, fortitude, and creative vision.

Hurston was not only a writer, she was the first Black woman to graduate from Barnard College in New York City with a degree in anthropology. Under the kind eye of the preeminent Franz Boas, considered the father of American anthropology, Hurston found support for her folklore research.

Even today, Hurston's field work and scholarly analysis of Black folk culture is considered by Black anthropologists to be innovative and enduring. In addition, the issues she struggled with about being a "native anthropologist" and studying her own people are topics that have emerged as significant in anthropology over the last decade.

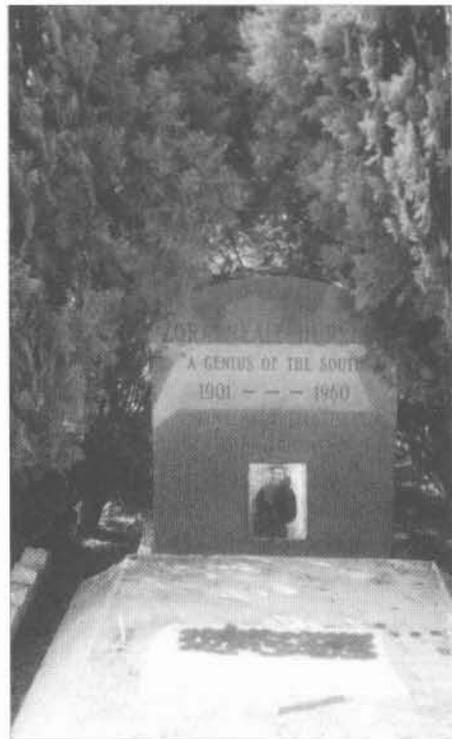
But Hurston's greatest contribution to American anthropology is her writing. She used the literary style of novels and short stories to convey her anthropology, an approach that has only gained acceptance among mainstream anthropologists in the last decade or so.

Today, Zora Neale Hurston, who died in 1960, stands a woman before her times, testing and blurring boundaries, and infusing social science with creativity and vision.

This portrait of Zora differs drastically from those usually painted of her as egocentric, self-serving, and deceptive.

Editor's note: Irma McClaurin is associate professor and director of the Zora Neale Hurston Diaspora Studies Research Project in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Florida, which offers a Zora Neale Hurston Graduate Fellowship. She is the editor of *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Praxis, Politics and Poetics* (Rutgers, 2001) and author of *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America* (Rutgers, 2000 [1996]) and *Pearl's Song* (Lotus Press, 2000 [1988]). She is currently working on a book entitled *Dear Langston, Love, Zora* about the correspondence between Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. Archival research was funded by a Donald C. Gallup Fellowship in American Literature Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Yale University and University of Florida CLAS Humanities Enhancement Grant.

The letter from Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes was used with the kind permission of the estate of Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was re-issued in October 2000 in the original hardcover edition with a new introduction by Edwidge Danticat. Also, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, edited by Carla Kaplan, will be published in fall 2001 by Doubleday Books.



Zora Neale Hurston is buried in Fort Pierce at the Garden of Heavenly Rest. Author Alice Walker placed a gravestone at the site of Hurston's unmarked grave in 1973.

Key dates in a notable life *Zora Neale Hurston Biography**

- 1891, Jan. 15:** Zora Neale Hurston is born to parents John and Lucy (Potts) Hurston in Nostalgia, Ala.
1893 (approx.) Family moved and settled in Eatonville, Florida.
1904, Sept. 19: Mother Lucy Hurston dies.

Zora's footsteps

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.

Nor can I say for sure now whether it was Zora who brought me to Florida to teach in the anthropology department at the University of Florida, or whether it was the warm weather, and the fact that azaleas bloom madly in the spring, and the Spanish moss drips off the oak trees lending a delicate beauty to the Florida landscape.

I can only say that now, having read her letters to Langston, having perused her handwritten and typed manuscripts, her spirit walks with me.

I now feel compelled to reveal a side of Zora that has never found its way into the pages written about her so far. She was a complicated woman whom I believe loved Langston Hughes passionately as a friend.

He was her intellectual sounding board. To him she could be vulnerable. She was enthusiastic about his work, and sometimes hid behind it. In the railroad, turpentine, and citrus camps when people asked her about herself, she frequently responded by reading Langston's poems. It was an effective diversion.

In their delight with this poetry derived from jazz and blues and capturing the heart and soul of the common folk, her inquisi-



tors forgot that they had learned little about Zora herself.

She remains to this day somewhat elusive.

Each year, more and more books and articles about Zora Neale Hurston's life and work are produced, showing the depth of her complexity as a writer and thinker, as a black woman, and her endurance as one of the most prolific and profound writers, thinkers, scholars, anthropologists of the 20th century.

Only someone from Zora could accomplish such a feat.

Love, Irma

1912-1916: Father John Hurston served as mayor of Eatonville.

1915: Wardrobe girl and maid in theatrical traveling group.

1918: Graduates from Morgan Preparatory School.

1918: John Hurston dies in car-train collision.

1919-1924: Attends Howard University.

1920: Receives Associate's Degree, Howard University.

1925: Awarded scholarship to Barnard College.

1927: Marries Herbert Sheen.

1928: Receives BA from Barnard in Anthropology.

1930: *Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas* published.

1931: Divorced from Herbert Sheen.

1933: Drama instructor, Bethune-Cookman College.

1934: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (novel) published.

1935: Begins graduate work in anthropology, Columbia University, under Franz Boas. *Mules and Men* published with introduction by Boas.

1936: Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship; conducts fieldwork in the West Indies.

1937: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (novel) published.

1938: *Tell My Horse* (non-fiction) published.

Works in Florida for Works Progress Adminis-

tration for one year.

1939: *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (novel) published.

1948: *Seraph on the Swannee* (novel) published.

1940: *Dust Tracks on a Road* (autobiography) published.

1948, Sept. 13: Arrested and charged with committing an immoral act with a minor. Lists Langston Hughes as a character witness.

1948, Oct. 15: Pleads not guilty.

1949, March: Charges dropped; damage already done to her reputation.

1949-1951: Writes articles for several newspapers.

1951-1956: Lives in Eau Galle, Florida.

1956-57: Librarian, Patrick Air Force Base, Florida.

1958-59: Writer for *Fort Pierce Chronicle* and part-time teacher. Has a stroke and enters St. Lucie County Welfare Home.

1960, Jan. 28: Dies and is buried in unmarked grave in the Garden of Heavenly Rest, Fort Pierce.

1973: Gravestone placed on unmarked grave by Alice Walker.

*Chronology based on Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, eds. *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. (New York: Amistad, 1993.)