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Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space

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Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space:
Dir. by Tracy Heather Strain
Prod. by Randall MacLowry, Tracy Heather Strain
PBS American Experience 2023. 1:52:24 min.
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/zora-neale-hurston-claiming-space/

Zora Neale Hurston has been "rediscovered" in the years since Alice Walker's 1975 essay brought new attention to her. Many scholars within Women's Literature, African American Literature, Folklore Studies, and Performance Studies have written and published on Hurston's life and work, bringing her into college curriculum, often in courses on the Harlem Renaissance, women's literature or in women's history. Award-winning filmmaker Tracy Heather Strain's powerful new PBS documentary *Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space*, offers another path to rediscovery, providing stunning new ways to encounter and understand Hurston.

American Experience initiated the film after reading Charles King's award-winning book, *Gods of the Upper Air: how a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century.* Hurston, who coined the phrase "Gods of the Upper Air" in contrast with the cramped corner guarded by "Gods of the pigeonholes" to categorize tensions within the academic field, was one of the renegades King wrote about. Hurston's discovery of the discipline of Anthropology provided her both resources and obstacles.

Tracy Heather Strain, Corwin-Fuller Professor of Film Studies at Wesleyan University, produces historical documentaries on American history for public television through her company Film Posse, including the award-wining film *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes, Feeling Heart* (2017). Strain's film illuminates Hurston's considerable struggle to use anthropological methods to

document and celebrate Black lives, blending literary skills and ethnographic observations. Hurston collected photographs and film footage and recorded everyday Black experience. Assumptions of Black inferiority were commonplace during Hurston's lifetime, and she constantly confronted challenges to her authority, fighting for her work to be recognized as part of knowledge production.

Strain introduces these themes by opening the film with footage of Hurston's research trip in 1940 to Beaufort South Carolina to study religious trances. Narration and comments from the film's animated and articulate group of scholars from the fields of Anthropology, Literary and Cultural Studies, Modern Thought, African and African American Studies, and History help us understand Hurston's anthropological method. We watch her playing a drum, joining a Black church group who are singing and playing music together. "She is "someone who understands that for people to trust you, you have to be in it"… They point to what was then so provocative about Hurston's refusal of the detachment required by anthropological/scientific inquiry. "She didn't play by those rules."

Hurston, likely born in 1891, grew up in Eatonville, one of the earliest all-Black towns in the US, soaking up expressive modes of Black storytelling while listening to her elders on the porch of the general store. One of the film's strengths is its extensive use of Hurston's own words throughout, sometimes from recordings, elsewhere read expressively, while we see her typed words in print or manuscript. Early on Hurston described what seemed familiar about

anthropological methods: “I was glad when someone told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore.’ In a way, it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world, I landed in the crib of Negroism.” Leaving Eatonville, largely on her own after the age of thirteen, she described hard and lonely times: “I was not Zora of Orange County anymore. I was now a little colored girl.” She worked around in the kinds of jobs young Black women could get, and eventually found a pathway to high school in Baltimore that enabled her to gain a college education and return to an all Black world at Howard In the 1920s. As she wrote, “I was careful to do my classwork and be worthy to stand there under the shadow of the hovering spirit of Howard. I felt the ladder under my feet.”

Hurston’s early literary efforts coincided with new interest in Black writing as part of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925, her prize-winning stories and play submitted to The National Urban League’s journal *Opportunity*’s literary contest gained her an introduction to a Barnard trustee, and admission to Barnard as the college’s only Black student. She described herself as “Barnard’s sacred black cow.” She discovered anthropology in a course taught by Columbia’s Franz Boas, then involved in disputing the field’s long-held assumed norms of racial and cultural hierarchies. According to feminist literary scholar Maria Eugenia Cotera, “It wasn’t until she encountered anthropology…that she really began to see her culture as something that could be studied….it was anthropology that really showed Hurston that she could write about her culture and imagine a career that could really be the source of her literary imagination.”” Boas was interested in Hurston’s potential access to Black culture, and found her financial support for her first research trip to Florida using his methods of “participant observation.” But

observing as an “outsider” was unproductive for Hurston, who fought to use her insider vantage point as a Black woman for future fieldwork observations in the American South, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Haiti. Hurston insisted on speaking and writing as a producer of knowledge, not just an object of curiosity.

Strain’s film creates a sense of intimacy with her subject by its extensive use of recordings of Hurston’s voice, and careful use of the film footage Hurston herself shot. There are electrifying moments when we hear recordings of Hurston singing work songs, synced to filmed image of Black labor. Elsewhere, films of every day Black male labor, Black women, and Black children accompany her descriptions of her collecting technique, read expressively by an actor: “I am getting much more material than before because I am learning better technique. Am keeping close tabs on expressions of double meanings, too…I have about enough for a good volume of stories.” A recording in Hurston’s own voice describes how she learns the songs, ”I just get in the crowd with the people…I keep on till I learn all the songs and all the verses and then I carry it in my memory…”And then we hear her singing the song, part of her effort to convey the power of Black culture by bringing Black folklore to the stage.

Strain’s film enables viewers to momentarily see what Hurston saw by its effective use of the footage Hurston shot, indicated via subtitle and additionally signaled by visual images of film sprockets. She took pictures of Black women, Black children playing, Black people working. She filmed Cudjo Lewis, thought to have arrived on the last US slave ship during her several months with him collecting his stories. One of the most powerful uses of Hurston’s film footage accompanies the film’s discussion of Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*

which anthropologist Irma McClaurin, describes as "Zora blending of her literary skills and talent as a writer and also her skill and talent as an anthropologist and ethnographer." To watch Hurston's own footage of a young Black woman coming toward the camera from the porch, then smiling, and then seeing her with another woman on the porch, huddling close, is to see the woman-centered Black sensibility in *Their Eyes were Watching God* coming to life. Literary scholar Carla Kaplan suggests that Hurston may be "Our first Black female ethnographer documentary filmmaker."

Another important aspect of Strain's film is its continuing reminders of the precarity of Hurston's work in anthropology, the constant potential for discrediting her study of "her people" in the face of her insistence on documenting Black vernacular culture in the process of being created. She was able to publish her research in prestigious academic journals, popular magazine, and ethnographic books, but the reception of her work was very uneven. Charles King comments that "throughout her entire life, the powerful people around her consistently thought of her as an outsider, less than talented, a marginal figure." It is painful to confront the damning letters Boas and Ruth Benedict wrote in 1933 when asked to recommend her for a Guggenheim Fellowship , describing her methods as "journalistic rather than scientific" and her as "not Guggenheim material." It is also painful to hear the critical response to *Their Eyes were Watching God,* which scholars consider her most personal novel*:* from Richard Wright ("it carries no theme, no message, no thought") and from Alain Locke who suggested she was drawing on old fashioned literary traditions. Her publisher excised Hurston's own wartime thinking about colonialism in her 1942 memoir, *Dust Tracks on the Road*. In 1955, Hurston

herself jumped into controversy regarding the 1954 Supreme Court Decision, particularly questioning the way it assumed that racial equality would be furthered by ending school segregation. In an opinion piece for a Florida newspaper, she wrote: " How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them…It is a contradiction in terms to scream "Race Pride and Equality' while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association." (Both W.E.B.Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr. privately expressed similar concerns over how the decision would affect Black teachers and Black children.)

The film also reminds viewers of the weight of financial insecurity born by Hurston throughout her life. As a young woman she supported herself through multiple forms of low paid wage labor; as Barnard student and then as an aspiring anthropologist doing field work, patronage from wealthy white women helped at various points but was never adequate; foundation grants were sporadic and she could not support herself by income from periodic writings. Briefly, she was employed by the Florida Writers Project in 1939 and she worked as a drama teacher at a black university. By the 1940s, despite strong sales for her autobiography/memoir *Dust Tracks on the Road*, she could not get funding for additional fieldwork; the trip to Beaufort, South Carolina which opens the film was her last funded field work. The scholars remind the viewer of the tenuous health and circumstances of an aging Black woman, with "no children and no husband" when "the Negro is no longer in vogue."

In the end , *Zora Neale Hurston; Claiming a Space* powerfully illuminates Hurston's dogged tenacity in holding on to her cultural insights, despite many obstacles external as well as self-

imposed. Historian Tiffany Patterson defines Hurston's legacy as " her vision of the legitimacy of Black people as a people, as a culture", a legacy which will resonate in our moment when "Black Lives Matter" is a continuing if hotly contested refrain. Strain concludes her remarkable and moving film with Hurston's own fighting words: "Negro reality is a hundred times more imaginative and entertaining than anything that has been hatched up over a typewriter. Go hard or go home."

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