About This Volume

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Zora Neale Hurston left a legacy of important works of American literature. What is particularly impressive is the sheer volume of her writings, which included poetry, drama, short fiction, essays, autobiography, folklore, novels, and recordings. Her life, research, and publications reflect the variety of interests she held in the oral and written traditions of people of the African diaspora in the United States and abroad. Her zeal, dedication, and determination to become a writer, a performer, an anthropologist, and a scholar show that she was one of the most formidable and unforgettable authors of the twentieth century. Her best-known works continue to be her novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). Her books of folklore and anthropological research, including *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938), show that she was a trailblazer in chronicling the customs, traditions, and rituals among people in the African diaspora. Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) showcases her ability to provide an engaging and entertaining depiction of her life and experiences.

In addition, her numerous short stories, articles, and nonfiction essays prove that she was adept and versatile in many genres. An accomplished playwright, she penned *Mule Bone* (1930) with fellow twentieth century African American poet Langston Hughes, as well as other plays in which she was the sole author such as *Color Struck* (1925) and throughout her life, she maintained an active interest in drama and theatrical production. As a writer during the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that emphasized African American music, literature, and theater, Hurston created numerous literary works which showed the diversity and complexity of African Americans and other groups of people as well.

Critical Insights: Zora Neale Hurston seeks to contribute to the discourse available on Zora Neale Hurston with essays that provide analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of Hurston as an author whose legacy left a lasting impact and impression. Indeed, this volume calls attention to the fact that Hurston scholarship continues to thrive as people offer up new and exciting ways of looking at Hurston's life, her publications, and her place in the American literary tradition. Utilizing a variety of critical approaches ranging from mobility studies to linguistics and analysis of letters, these essays provide new ways of looking at popular titles by Hurston as well as placing attention on some of her lesser-known works and analysis of letters, these essays provide new ways of looking at popular works by Hurston as well as placing attention on some of her lesser-known works.

In the Career, Life, and Influence section, I have contributed an essay called "On Zora Neale Hurston: Fictionalizing Funerals in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*" which analyzes the representation of funerals. Suzanne E. Smith's *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* and *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* by Karla FC Holloway emphasize the distinct and unique nature of African American funerals. This essay seeks to expand upon Smith's and Holloway's research on African American funerals by analyzing three funerals for characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, including one for Mayor Joe Starks, the mule, and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. This essay seeks to add to the critical conversation about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by highlighting how Hurston's depiction of funerals emphasizes African American culture and history.

In the Critical Contexts section, Erin Wedehase's "Mobility and Character Development in Hurston's Novels," offers a fresh insight and perspective on *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Seraph on the Suwanee*. She fills a void in literary analysis about Hurston due to her emphasis on movement in Hurston's literary texts. Furthermore, she links characters' movement,

migration, culture, and identity, which offers a fresh perspective on Hurston's texts. In the cultural and historical context essay "Janie in the Sun: Invoking Hurston's Caribbean Travels in *Tell My Horse*," Tiffany Boyd Adams shows the connection between Hurston's writing and texts by Edwidge Danticat as well as Erna Brodber. A compare-and-contrast essay on "Mrs. Turpin and Mrs. Turner: Foolish Pride in Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation' and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," by Bob Evans examines socioeconomic class, religious faith, and racial identity. "Race and Patronage: Critical Receptions of Hurston's Relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason" metacritically examines debates about the advantages and/or disadvantages of the financial support that Hurston received from Charlotte Osgood Mason during the Harlem Renaissance as well as the relationship between the two women (Hurston and Mason) by focusing on commentary about Zora Neale Hurston by Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Langston Hughes, "Drenched in Light" by Hurston, and letters written by Hurston. These essays further expand the ways we can write, think, and discuss Hurston's contributions to literary history.

The Critical Readings section also offers exciting approaches to examining the writing of Zora Neale Hurston. In "Scaling the Gender Mountain: the Architecture of Male/Female Relationships and Alternative Images of Empowered Black Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Short Fiction," Christopher Varlack offers a feminist approach to examining Hurston's short stories. In his study, he focuses on "The Gilded Six-Bits," "Spunk," "Sweat," and "Black Death." His essay addresses the complex interactions between males and females within American society as displayed in these short stories. Like Varlack, Christine Rudisel seeks to provide more commentary on Hurston's short stories by adopting a feminist and historical literary approach. In "'The Country in the Woman': Three Forgotten Fictions by Zora Neale Hurston," Christine Rudisel examines the stories "The Back Room," "Monkey: Junk: A Satire on Modern Divorce," and "The Country in the Woman." Rudisel argues that Hurston explored women's roles in

society by emphasizing sexuality as well as liberation in her fiction. These essays offer up the idea that there is still much left to explore about Hurston's work and that opportunities for research and analysis continue for scholars, especially given the prolific nature of Hurston as an author.

In addition to analysis of Hurston's short stories, there are essays in this collection which pay homage to Hurston's contribution to folklore studies. In "African Elements in the Folktales of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*," Babacar M'Baye stresses that scholars often write about Hurston's novels while neglecting or overlooking her books about folklore. Using a comparative, historical, and literary approach, M'Baye looks at linkages among Hurston's *Mules and Men* with folklore from Senegal. M'Baye shows the relationship between *Mules and Men* and African oral literature to highlight how Hurston's writing can be viewed within a global context. Another essay about Hurston's *Mules and Men* analyzes the book in a national and an international context. In her essay "Dance as 'Feather-bed Resistance' in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*," Ondra Krouse Dismukes suggests that *Mules and Men* symbolizes Hurston's attention and devotion to preserving and promoting knowledge about the importance of dancing for African Americans from a social, historical, and cultural perspective.

The scholarly interest in Zora Neale Hurston also extends to how Hurston presents herself in her writing through autobiography and journalism. In the essay "'Is It Not a Riot in All That [S]he Doeth?': Embracing Performativity in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on A Road*," Katharine Torrey argues that *Dust Tracks* differs from other autobiographical texts due to the performative nature of the work in relationship to the identity or persona that Zora Neale Hurston creates or adopts within the text. She analyzes the relationship between Hurston and her writings in *Dust Tracks*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as "Drenched in Light" and "Book of Harlem."

In addition to writing her autobiogaphy, Hurston also worked as a journalist. "Conservative or Visionary: The Journalistic Career of Zora

Neale Hurston" by Shelby Crosby examines Hurston's contributions to various publications within the context of ideas about race. These essays offer a valuable and important contribution to Hurston scholarship in evaluating writings by Hurston that many readers and scholars are not familiar or are less familiar with since much of the literary criticism about Hurston does not analyze autobiography or non-fiction essays.

Hurston's unique ability to represent the diversity of humanity made her an important contributor to the American literary tradition. Two essays in this collection emphasize this aspect of Hurston's canon. In her essay "Signifying (g) Black and White Speech in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*," Stephanie Li provocatively analyzes race, authority, and control. Jervette Ward also analyzes *Seraph on the Suwanee* in her essay "*Seraph on the Suwanee*: Hurston's 'White Novel'" Utilizing a feminist and cultural studies approach, Ward claims the novel's lack of emphasis on the lives of African Americans has affected its critical reception since Hurston was known as an author who emphasized African Americans in her writings. Li and Ward challenge us to reassess and reevaluate *Seraph on the Suwanee* as a text worthy of scholarly attention. Like Ward, Cheryl Hopson uses gender theory and a cultural studies perspective in the essay "Zora Neale Hurston as Womanist" to consider the relationship between Hurston's writing and womanism in *Mules and Men* as well as *Dust Tracks on a Road*. She uses the concept of womanism proposed by Alice Walker as a means of analyzing this aspect in Hurston's work.

Hurston's sphere of influence also extends to the world of children's literature and texts written for youths. Amy Cummins in "Adaptations of Hurston's Writings for Children and Hurston in Historical Novels for Young Readers" looks at Hurston's texts within the context of writing aimed at youths, offering an enlightening and lively discussion of how Hurston's legacy influences a younger generation, especially since much of the scholarship on Hurston has not addressed this aspect of her

literature. Cummins's assessment of Hurston in this volume demonstrates why she will continue to be a relevant writer.

Zora Neale Hurston's literary career and achievements coincide with the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century. Given her connection to that movement and time period, it is important to analyze her work in relationship with other Harlem Renaissance authors, such as Langston Hughes. In her essay "'Another Instance of Our Thoughts Clicking': Visionary Connection in Zora Neale Hurston's Letters to Langston Hughes," Katherine Cottle analyzes the relationship between the two authors by focusing on their correspondence. Using a historical approach and careful analysis of correspondence, Cottle seeks to offer insight on the very complicated dynamics that existed between Hurston and Hughes. She charts the evolution of Hurston and Hughes's relationship through the letters, even documenting their coauthored play *Mule Bone*. Cottle's essay serves as a reminder of how correspondence and letters can be a useful tool for better understanding an author's place in American literature.

The essays in *Critical Insights: Zora Neale Hurston* provide diverse, complex, and wide-ranging perspectives, interpretations, and analysis that will serve as a means of continuing the ongoing scholarship and academic discourse on one of America's greatest authors. It is my hope that the volume will thus be of value to those who have just recently become acquainted with Hurston's texts as well as those who are already familiar with her contributions to literary history; that it will help teachers, students, scholars, and others who seek to gain an appreciation and understanding of Hurston's centrality to oral and written literary traditions; and that it will facilitate further discussion, analysis, research, and publications about her life and work.

On Zora Neale Hurston: Fictionalizing Funerals in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Sharon Lynette Jones

In a pivotal scene in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the townspeople of Eatonville, Florida, attend a funeral for Joe Starks, a prominent citizen and mayor. Hurston's depiction of the funeral—which features an elaborate procession with luxury automobiles, people from a variety of social and economic levels, and a band performing religious music—highlights Starks's importance, influence, and stature in comparison to other people in the community where he resided for many years. The funerals in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for Joe Starks and other characters such as the mule and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods show how Hurston used fiction to demonstrate the rituals, customs and values of African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hurston uses funerals in the novel to reflect, represent, and reproduce social and historical aspects of African American culture.

When looking at the depiction of funerals in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is essential to acknowledge the scholarship on the distinct social and historical contexts that shape funerals and burying practices among African Americans. Suzanne E. Smith's *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* and Karla FC Holloway's *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* provide important information on these distinct characteristics that appear in African American funerals. The commentary by Smith and Holloway in their respective texts provides a context for understanding Hurston's treatment of African American funeral practices, rituals, and activities in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In *To Serve the Living*, Smith stresses that African Americans have historically viewed death as a form of emancipation. Smith claims that enslaved African Americans viewed dying as positive because it meant

they would no longer face discrimination and that dying symbolized emancipation from the brutality they endured while being forced laborers in the United States within the period of legalized enslavement (17–18). She also contends that Africans historically also believed that those who died continued to control the lives of people who lived, and that dying does not sunder the relationship or connection between those who have died and those who are still living. Smith suggests that Africans ideas about dying might have contributed to ideas among African Americans about dying which are expressed through African American funerals (19). In *Passed On*, Holloway emphasizes the economics of funerals and the idea of how African American funerals often display a lavish, public, and extravagant quality rooted within an African American cultural context (181). She also writes about Hurston's funeral (124) and Hurston's account (in *Dust Tracks on a Road*) of her mother's death (122–23). Smith and Holloway's commentaries provide an important social and historical context for understanding the role of funerals in African American communities in the past and the present within the context of American history.

Drawing on Smith's *To Serve the Living*, which shows that funerals symbolize liberation from discrimination and the connection between those who died and those who lived (17–19), and chapter 4 of Holloway's *Passed On*, which emphasizes how funerals reflect aspects of African American culture, I will argue that funerals in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serve three functions: 1) Funerals celebrate the idea of dying as emancipation from being an oppressed person or animal; 2) funerals show the important religious, emotional, spiritual, and psychological connection between those who have died and those who remain alive; and, 3) the extravagance of the funerals reinforces ideas about the stature of the person who died. In this essay, I examine how in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston's representations of the funeral for the mule, Mayor Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods also demonstrate these three primary functions while showcasing the power of African American culture and traditions in a social and historical context.

"Death had to take him like it found him": The Mule Funeral in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the funeral for the mule symbolizes emancipation in addition to symbolizing the connection between the deceased mule and the rest of the community who remain alive. Also, the structure and content of the funeral reflects aspects of African American culture and traditional ways of memorializing the dead in African American communities. In chapter seven of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Starks, the protagonist (and wife of Joe Starks), laments the treatment of a mule by people in Eatonville, Florida. Although she is the wife of the mayor and lives in relative comfort, she still cares about the less fortunate mule. This empathy stems from her own feelings of being oppressed in her marriage by a controlling husband who stifles her independence, and her voice. Like Janie, the mule also faces a situation where he is exploited, mistreated, and given second-class status. The mule's owner, Matt Bonner, is notorious for not properly feeding the mule or treating it in a humane manner. Other people in the community are also abusive, mocking, and disrespectful toward the mule because it is an animal of low status. Janie most likely identifies with the mule because she feels badly treated in her own marriage by Joe Starks. After she expresses her disgust at the townspeople's behavior towards the mule and her empathy for the mule's situation, Joe decides to liberate the mule by purchasing it from Matt Bonner.

After Joe purchases the mule, the mule lives for awhile, and then dies. Unfortunately, Joe Starks denies Janie the opportunity to attend a funeral for the mule by alleging it would be inappropriate for her to be there due to her gender and high economic status. Instead, the funeral features eulogies by Joe Starks, townsperson Sam, and commentary by a buzzard later on after the humans leave the funeral site. In "Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, " Sharon Davie states, "She cannot come with the rest of the community, just as she cannot exchange stories with the others on the front porch of the store" (450).

In contrast, Joe gets the opportunity to eulogize the mule at the funeral. In the article "From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Julie A. Haurykiewicz states, "His eulogy is an attempt at self-aggrandizement, and he, significantly, stands on the dead mule in order to make himself heard, just as those in power stand on the silenced" (58). In addition, a male character named Sam speaks at the funeral for the mule. Describing Sam's eulogy, Hurston writes, "He spoke of the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses running through it, and most glorious of all, *No* Matt Bonner with plow lines and halters to come in and corrupt" (60–61). Sam's exploitative and abusive comments about Matt Bonner constitute a kind of retribution in which Bonner is treated as he had treated the mule in the past. In mimicking the behavior of humans at a funeral for humans, people react to the powerful sermon by Sam by shouting in a kind of imitation of religious ecstasy.

After Joe and Sam's eulogies, birds gather and another funeral ceremony occurs, featuring buzzards. The funeral ceremony featuring the birds follows the "call and response" pattern of the African American oral tradition in churches in which the preacher makes a statement and the congregation or onlookers respond to that statement, so that there is a constant dialogue between the pastor or preacher and the listeners. Gorman Beauchamp points out, "And when the people leave, the buzzards hold their own funeral rites over the departed, with a call-and-response parody of Negro church services" (78). In *Passed On*, Holloway writes about how "call-and-response" functions as a vital part of funerals for African Americans in general (175). Even the mule's funeral follows the traditional way of eulogizing a human being in the African American cultural context, and Hurston brilliantly highlights this aspect in her depiction of the mule funeral.

The mule becomes memorialized in a way. Hurston writes, "The yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for

the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in the spirit of adventure" (Hurston 62). In reality, the mule continues in "porch talk" (Hurston 62) and the funeral for the mule by people represents the centrality of the mule to their existence in both the human and the natural world. It also illustrates the importance of mules in African American communities in the early twentieth century. Thus, Hurston's rendering of the mule funeral reinforces the idea of emancipation as revealed in Sam's eulogy for the mule, the concept of the mule being connected with members of the community after he dies due to "porch talk" (Hurston 62) and recollection of the mule through the oral tradition, and the evocation of "call and response," which is an important part of African American funeral traditions.

In addition, it is essential to point out that while this concept of a funeral for a mule might seem quite surprising in the text, Hurston actually wrote about an animal that was memorialized very much like a human in *Tell My Horse*. Edwidge Danticat in her "Foreword" to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has even suggests that the mule funeral in *Their Eyes* bears similarity with a Haitian goat funeral that Hurston wrote about in *Tell My Horse* (xiii–xiv). Although the publication date for *Their Eyes* was 1937, the publication date for *Tell My Horse* was 1938 ("Chronology" 215). Hurston writes about this extravagant ceremony in honor of the goat that died in *Tell My Horse*. Thus, Hurston's representation of the funeral for the mule in *Their Eyes* was not her only foray into writing about an animal that receives the type of memorializing that one would associate with a human being. In this sense, however, the key difference lies in the fact that, unlike the account in *Tell My Horse* which purports to be truth, in *Their Eyes* Hurston fictionalizes a funeral for a mule and sets the ceremony within an African American community, using the funeral as a means to symbolize the ideas of emancipation, the connection between those who die and those who live, and the ideas that the extravagance of the ceremony reflects the status of the deceased within this particular African American community in Florida.

Chronology of Zora Neale Hurston's Life

1891	On January 7, Zora Neale Hurston is born to John Hurston and Lucy Potts Hurston in Notasulga, Alabama. Hurston is a toddler when her family moves to Eatonville, Florida (inc. 1887)—the oldest self-governed, all-black town in the United States.
1904	Hurston's mother dies.
1917	Hurston studies at Baltimore's Morgan Academy.
1918	After completing the high school requirements at Morgan Academy in June, Hurston attends Washington, DC's Howard Prep School from 1918 to 1919.
1919	Hurston enters Howard University, earning an associate degree in 1920. Hurston continues her studies at Howard until 1924.
1921	"John Redding Goes to Sea," Hurston's first published story, appears in Howard University's literary society magazine, *Stylus*.
1925	Hurston enters a story ("Spunk") and a play (*Color Struck*) in *Opportunity* magazine's literary contest, and each entry wins second place. The magazine publishes "Spunk" in its June issue. Hurston transfers to Barnard College in New York, where she studies under anthropologist Franz Boas.
1926	Hurston conducts field research in Harlem. Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman start *Fire!!* magazine, which publishes her short story "Sweat" in its only issue in November.
1927	*The First One*, a play, appears in *Ebony and Topaz*. Hurston heads to Florida in February to undertake folklore research. On May 19, Hurston weds Herbert Sheen. In September, Hurston meets with Charlotte Osgood Mason to see if she will fund Hurston's folklore research in the South. Mason agrees to fund Hurston's research, and Hurston signs a contract with her in December.

Works by Zora Neale Hurston

Books (Autobiography, Novels, Folklore)

Jonah's Gourd Vine, 1934
Mules and Men, 1935
Their Eyes Were Watching God, 1937
Tell My Horse, 1938
Moses, Man of the Mountain, 1939
Dust Tracks on a Road, 1942
Seraph on the Suwanee, 1948
I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive (Ed. Alice Walker), 1979
Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings (Ed. Cheryl A. Wall), 1995
Novels and Stories, 1995
Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project (Ed. Pamela Bordelon), 1999
Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States (Ed. Carla Kaplan), 2001
Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters (Ed. Carla Kaplan), 2002

Drama

Meet the Mamma: A Musical Play in Three Acts, 1925
Color Struck: A Play in Four Scenes, 1925
Spears, 1926
The First One: A Play in One Act, 1927
Cold Keener, 1930
De Turkey and De Law: A Comedy in Three Acts (with Langston Hughes), 1930
Mule Bone (with Langston Hughes), 1930
The Sermon in the Valley (with Rowena Woodham Jelliffe), 1931
Four Plays from Fast and Furious, 1931
The Fiery Chariot, 1932
Spunk, 1935
Polk County: A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp with Authentic Negro Music in Three Acts (with Dorothy Waring), 1944
Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays, 2008

Short Stories and Story Collections

"John Redding Goes to Sea," 1921
"Drenched in Light," 1924
"Spunk," 1925
"Magnolia Flower," 1925
"Muttsy," 1926