Soul of a Black Woman

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

A Literary Biography.
By Robert E. Hemenway.
With a Foreword by Alice Walker.
Illustrated. 371 pp. Urbana, Ill.:
University of Illinois Press. $15.

By HENRY LOUIS GATES Jr.

THE Rev. Harry Middleton Hyatt, an octogenarian Episcopal priest whose five-volume classic collection of black myth, "Hoodoo, Conjuration, Witchcraft, and Rootwork," more than amply returns an investment of 40 years' research and the lion's share of his personal fortune, asked me not long ago what had become of another eccentric collector whom he admired. "I think," he reflected for a few seconds, "that her first name was Zora." It was an innocent question, made reasonable by the body of confused and often contradictory rumors that make Zora Neale Hurston's own legend as richly curious and as dense as are the black myths she did so much to preserve in her classic anthropological works, "Mules and Men" and "The Voodoo Gods of Haiti" and which stand as compellingly ambiguous metaphorical matrices in her fictions.

A graduate of Barnard where she studied under Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston wrote four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, and more than 50 short stories, essays and musicals between the middle of the Harlem Renaissance and the end of the Korean War. Her present obscurity reflects her staunchly independent political stances far more than it does an absence of craft or a lack of vision. Curiously ignored or disparaged by the Black Arts movement in the 60's, an otherwise noisy and intense spell of instant black-macho image and mythmaking that rescued so many black writers from remaindered oblivion, Miss Hurston embodied a more or less harmonious unity of opposites that her biographer, Robert Hemenway, describes as "flamboyant yet vulnerable, self-centered yet kind, a Republican conservative and an early black nationalist." It is this complexity that refuses to lend itself to the glib categories of "radical" or "conservative," "black" or "Negro," "revolutionary" or "Uncle Tom" — categories ultimately useless in literary criticism. It is this same complexity, embodied in her fiction, which until Alice Walker published her precious essay on Miss Hurston in Ms. magazine, has made Miss Hurston's place in black literary history an ambiguous one at best.

The rediscovery of Afro-American writers generally turns on larger political criteria, of which the writer is supposedly a mere reflection. The deeply satisfying aspect of the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston is that black women generated it largely, and generated it primarily for literary reasons. Alice Walker's moving foreword recounts her attempts to find Miss Hurston in the Garden of the Heavenly Rest, a segregated cemetery at Fort Pierce, Fla. Miss Hurston has become the metaphor for the black woman writer, if not of all black writers. Of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara, none shares Miss Hurston's political inclinations. But, in markedly formal ways, each approaches her craft through Miss Hurston, especially Miss Walker and Miss Morrison. Their attention to Miss Hurston signifies a new sophistication in black literature: They read Miss Hurston not only for the spiritual kinship inherent in such relations, but also because she used language in subtle and various ways and, in her novels — particularly in her

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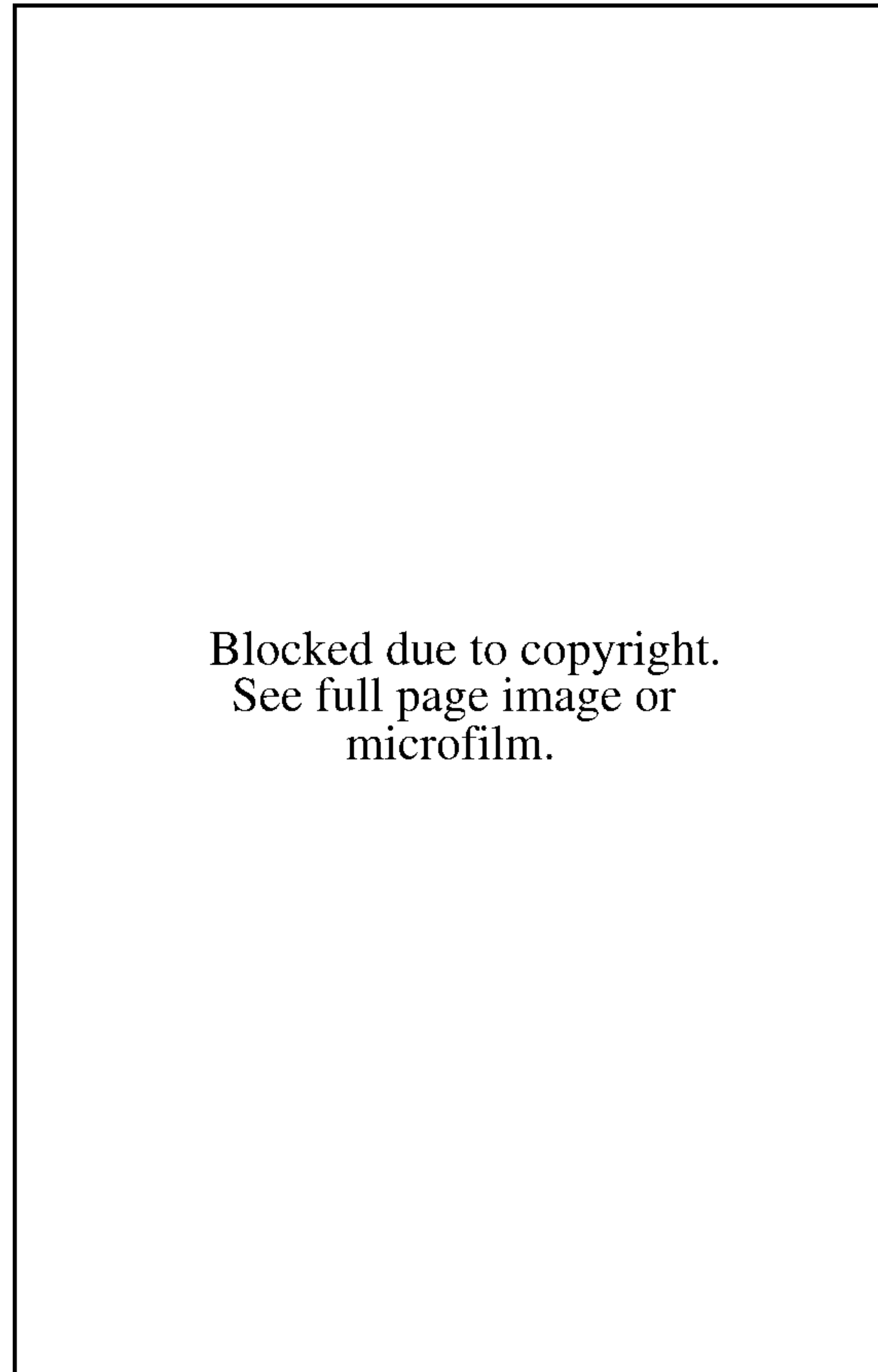
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Zora Neale Hurston

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Black Woman

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masterpiece, "Their Eyes Are Watching God," published in 1937 — used the coming to consciousness so absent in other black fiction as the fundamental framework for her work.

"Their Eyes" is a lyrical novel that inversely correlates Janie Starks's first two husbands' need for ownership of progressively larger physical space and the gaudy accouterments of middle-class sham with the suppression of her self-awareness and personal fulfillment. Only with her third and last lover, a roustabout called Tea Cake whose unstructured frolics center around and about the Florida swamps, does Janie at last bloom as does the large pear tree that stands beside her grandmother's tiny log cabin. "She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!" As poignantly as the fecund imagery, the narrative itself shifts from third to first person, signifying this awareness of self in Janie. "Their Eyes" is a remarkable novel, related more to Henry James's "Portrait of a Lady" and Jean Toomer's "Cane" than to the proletariat literature of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, which was so popular during the Depression.

Part of Miss Hurston's received heritage — and perhaps the traditional notion that links the novel of manners in the Harlem Renaissance, the social realism of the 30's, and the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts movement — was the idea that racism had reduced black people to mere ciphers, to beings who react only to an omnipresent racial oppression, whose culture is "deprived" where different, and whose psyches are in the main "pathological." Anthropologist John Szwed calls this the "Social Science Fiction Monster," and representations of this fiction have been prescribed by ideologues as dissimilar as socialists, separatists and civil-rights advocates.

Miss Hurston thought this idea degrading, its propagation a trap. It was against this that she railed, at times brilliantly and systematically, at times vapidly and eclectically. In a sensitive and perceptive chapter, "The Pots in Sorrow's Kitchen," Hemenway demonstrates the dubious victory of this pathological theory of black culture — that remarkably hearty fiction that undergirds Gunnar Myrdal's "An American Dilemma," almost all of the N.A.A.C.P.'s desegregation briefs, and Patrick Moynihan's melting-pot panderings — and Miss Hurston's determination to render it sterile. "While proving that there were no racial differences in mental capacity," Hemenway observes, "anthropologists went on to claim that there were no significant cultural differences between the races." Anything peculiarly "black," then, resulted from "environmental deprivation or cultural stripping."

Miss Hurston called this "the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a dirty deal." Unlike Hughes and Wright, Miss Hurston chose deliberately to ignore this "false picture that distorted." Freedom, she wrote in "Moses, Man of the Mountain," "was something internal . . . the man himself must make his own emancipation." Further, "Their Eyes" is a manifesto against the "arrogance" of whites assuming that "black lives are only defensive reactions to white actions." It was not a strategy calculated to please.

Predictably, Richard Wright found "Their Eyes" to be "counter-revolutionary," primarily because Miss Hurston avoided interracial confrontation for intraracial communion. Responding to Wright, Miss Hurston contended that she had wanted at long last to write a black novel, "not a treatise on sociology." It is this urge that resonates in Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon" and in Miss Walker's depiction of Miss Hurston as our prime symbol of "racial health — a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature."

Re-reading Miss Hurston, I was struck by the density of experience she cloaked in a verdancy of words. It is this concern for words, for what a character in "Mules and Men" calls "a hidden meaning, jus' like de Bible . . . de inside meanin' of words," that unites Miss Hurston's anthropological studies with her fiction. For the folklore Miss Hurston collected so meticulously as Boas's student became metaphors in her novels — the traditional, recurring metaphors of black culture. Much more a novelist than a social scientist, even Miss Hurston's academic collections center on the quality of imagination, "the image-making faculty," that makes these lives whole and splendid. In "Jonah's Gourd Vine," for instance, the errant preacher, John, "is a poet who graces his world with language but cannot find the words to secure his own personal grace." This concern for language and for the "natural" poets who "bring barbaric splendor of word and song into the very camp of the mockers" not only connects her two disciplines but as well makes of "the suspended linguistic moment" a thing to behold indeed. Always Miss Hurston's writing depends for its strength on the text, not the context, as does John's climactic sermon, a tour de force of black image and metaphor. Image and metaphor define John's world and lead finally to his self-destruction. As Hemenway concludes modestly, "Such passages eventually add up to a theory of language and behavior."

Miss Hurston's theory of language and behavior, as exemplified in "Mules and Men," is that the capacity to forge myths in commanding images is an unadulterated sign of psychic health. Using "the spy-glass of Anthropology," her works celebrate rather than moralize; they show rather than tell, so that "both behavior and art become self-evident as the tale texts and hoodoo rituals accrete during the reading." She, as author, functions as a "midwife participating in the birth of a body of folklore," the "first wondering contacts with natural law." The myths she describes so accurately are in fact "alternative modes for perceiving reality," and never just condescending depictions of the quaint. "The Dozens," for example, that age-old ritual of graceful insult, Miss Hurston sees as, among other things, a verbal defense of the sanctity of the family, conjured through ingenious plays on words. Though attacked by Wright and virtually ignored by his literary heirs, Miss Hurston's theory of language and her conception of craft became the warp and the weft of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," which remains the classic black novel. Indeed Ellison's art, even more than Miss Morrison's and Miss Walker's, is heir to Miss Hurston's theory of the novel.

Robert Hemenway's biography is a subtle blend of fact and close reading that re-creates the internal mood of a black writer between the Jazz Age and the McCarthy era. Scrupulously avoiding sentiment and simplification, Hemenway has told Miss Hurston's story with as much integrity and attention to language as Miss Hurston evinced as an anthropologist. His biography, so much more readily than the standard sociological rendering, traces with compassion the manner in which economic limits determine our choices even more than does violence or love. Miss Hurston wrote well when she was comfortable, wrote poorly when she was not. Financial problems, poor book sales, grants and fellowships too few and too paltry, ignorant editors and a smothering patron produced the sort of dependency that directly influenced, if not determined, her style — a problem she explored somewhat ironically in "What White Publishers Won't Print." Never does Hemenway oversimplify the relation between Miss Hurston's art and her life; never does he reduce the complexity of her postwar politics — which, rooted in her distaste for the pathological image of blacks, were markedly conservative and Republican. She publicly endorsed Representative George Smathers over a more liberal Senator Claude Pepper in 1950, supported Taft in 1952, and questioned the Supreme Court desegregation decision in 1954.

Nor does Hemenway sentimentalize her disastrous final decade, when she found herself working as a maid on the day the Saturday Evening Post published her short story, "Conscience of the Court," or when "she was frequently without money, sometimes pawning her typewriter to buy groceries," surviving after 1957 on unemployment benefits, substitute teaching and welfare checks. "In her last days," Hemenway concludes dispassionately, "Zora lived a difficult life — alone, proud, ill, obsessed with a book she could not finish."

Perhaps Hemenway's excellent biography will allow Miss Hurston to be read again, for all the right reasons. No doubt black feminists can find a model in Janie Starks, and white feminists a model in Arvay Henson Meserve of "Seraph on the Suwanee." But ultimately, we must find Miss Hurston's legacy in her art, where she "ploughed up some literary and laid-by some alphabets." Her importance rests not in whom she voted for in 1952, or what she thought of the N.A.A.C.P.; rather, her importance rests with the legacy of fiction and lore she preserved so tellingly. As Miss Hurston herself noted, "Roll your eyes in ecstasy and ape his every move, but until we have placed something upon his street corner that is our own, we are right back where we were when they filed our iron collar off." If, as a friend eulogized, "She didn't come to you empty," then she does not leave black literature empty. Perhaps now, as she wrote of Moses, she has "crossed over." ■

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