



Call for Proposals: *Hurston in Context*

- proposals due April 5, 2021 -

In her 1942 autobiographical work, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston openly declared her desire to expand the focus and direction of African-American literature, indicating not only that “I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject [of the race problem in the United States]” but that she was interested in exploring “what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (713). And while discussions of race inherently pervade much of her work, this artistic and ideological perspective—the need to “tell a story the way I wanted, or rather the way the story told itself to me” (713)—played a significant role in shaping Hurston’s literary works throughout her storied career. Whether it was using dialect to construct the African-American voice in text, driving down the coast collecting stories from Black folk whose voices had long been ignored, or delving into the lives of a white married couple in what some described as her “whiteface novel,” Hurston pursued a brand of art that was uninhibited by twentieth-century expectations of African-American literary expression, gender norms, and socio-racial constraints constructed by Black and white society alike. Because of this, Zora Neale Hurston’s short stories, novels, plays, essays, collected songs, and more remain truly rich material for scholars across the disciplines to explore.

Existing scholarship, it is true, has taken us far in this critical conversation. For instance, the 1993 edited volume *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, helps us to understand not only Hurston’s development of the Black female hero at a time when the New Negro was largely engendered male but also her role in “shaping a language, and a point of view, that appears to be directed at her black readers, rather than pandering to an imagined white readership responsible for black social mobility or economic and political amelioration” (xiii). As the fourteen essays in this collection ultimately revealed, Hurston offered a direction for Black art much less focused on propaganda than the works of her contemporaries, interested instead in probing the lives of the common Black folk whose stories of hard work and hardship, heartbreak and love, were fundamental to Hurston’s understanding of the multicultural fabric of the United States. The 2008 volume titled *Zora Neale Hurston*, edited by Harold Bloom, then attempted to expand the study of Hurston’s works. Several of the essays focused on the vernacular and cultural traditions in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though the volume also highlighted critical examinations of her autobiography, short stories, and plays.

While works such as these have certainly helped to advance our understanding of Hurston and her longstanding literary/cultural legacy, there is so much more to explore, to uncover, and to retrace. Therefore, aiming to offer readers one of the most comprehensive scholarly volumes on Hurston to date, *Hurston in Context* then strives not only to include essays on Hurston’s famous

works—from her 1921 short story “John Redding Goes to Sea,” published in *Stylus*, to her highly celebrated 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—but also to open space for scholars to probe Hurston’s equally important yet underappreciated or understudied contributions, such as her impressive collection of plays and 1930 musical revues dramatizing both African and African-American folk expression for the stage. While the following topics, especially in need of additional study, must be addressed within the volume, and while it is impossible to leave no stone unturned, interested contributors are encouraged to propose essays that probe other facets of Hurston’s life/work not reflected in the list below as we work to dig deeper (and in new ways) than ever before:

- Hurston’s anthropological work in the 1930s, culminating with her published fieldwork in *The Journal of American Folklore*
- Cultural preservation in Hurston’s 1935 autoethnographic *Mules and Men*—a collection of Black folklore (songs, sermons, oral histories, etc.) based on her travels through Eatonville, Polk County, and New Orleans
- Influential Harlem Renaissance-era figures (such as Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Charlotte Mason, etc.) and their relationships with/impacts on Zora Neale Hurston
- Hurston’s study of Voodoo practices and rituals in Jamaica and Haiti, supported by the Guggenheim Foundation and published in her 1938 *Tell My Horse*
- Hurston’s continued role as cultural anthropologist post-Harlem Renaissance, collecting stories from Black communities in Florida for the Federal Writers Project, organized by the Works Progress Administration (WPA)
- Hurston’s social and political commentary, as demonstrated through essays published in the 1950s such as “The Conscience of the Land,” “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled,” and “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism”
- Hurston’s 1952 coverage of the Ruby McCollum murder for the *Pittsburg Courier* and as part of William Bradford Huie’s 1956 *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwanee Jail*
- Hurston’s rejection of the desegregation agenda and fears of the cultural oppression that forced integration might usher in, as demonstrated in her 1955 letter in *The Orland Sentinel* condemning the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision
- Historical preservation in Hurston’s *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*—a non-fiction work based upon her 1927 interviews with Cudjoe Lewis, survivor of the Middle Passage and U.S. chattel slavery

Because of the desire to promote a more expansive review of Hurston’s life, works, and legacy in this volume, a total of thirty to forty-five chapters (each approximately three to four thousand words in length, not including the Works Cited page) will be accepted, as is consistent with other volumes in the series of which this project aims to be a part. Accepted proposals will be included in the formal proposal for *Hurston in Context* to be vetted through the peer review process for the press (a major university press), which has already expressed great interest in this project.

Scholars interested in contributing to *Hurston in Context* should then submit a CV, abstract of no more than 300 words, and a biographical statement of no more than 100 words to the editor, Dr. Christopher Allen Varlack, at varlackc@arcadia.edu by Monday, April 5, 2021, in order to be considered. *A follow-up call may be issued if there are additional topics that need to be covered.* That said, those selected for inclusion in the volume will have one year from the contract date for the volume to submit the initial draft of the essay for review. Please feel free to reach out via E-mail with any questions or queries.