

**Research Cluster on Zora Neale Hurston
compiled by Susan Manning
for Reggie Wilson**

Reggie first read Zora Neale Hurston's writings during the 1980s, when her work was rediscovered and celebrated by black women artists and critics, notably Alice Walker. Although Hurston had been a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance in the years between the two world wars, she had fallen out of favor in the postwar era, for her aesthetics and politics seemed out of step with the movement of civil rights and Black Power. Yet as Walker and her peers became dissatisfied with the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Hurston's writings appeared newly relevant, an inspiration and a precedent for their own artistry. In fact, the rediscovery and republication of Hurston's writings were crucial to the development of "womanism" as an alternative not only to the Black Arts movement, which all too often defined blackness only in relation to straight men, but also to "second-wave feminism," which all too often measured women's experience by the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. In her 1983 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker defines a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color....a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually....[a woman] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female."

In 2010 Reggie travelled to Israel with a group of artists as guests of the American Academy in Jerusalem, sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Culture. As he was preparing to leave his apartment in Brooklyn, his copy of Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* caught his eye, and he decided to take the book along on his trip, and reread it, partly as a way of reminding himself to keep some distance from the politics of his Israeli hosts. On an earlier trip to Zimbabwe, he found himself adopting the ethnic prejudices of his hosts, and he didn't want to repeat that in Israel, particularly in relation to the Palestinians. He soon became reenchanting with Hurston's retelling of the Moses story in the language of Southern black folklore.

At the recommendation of his dancer Anna Schon, Reggie looked up her uncle Avigdor Shinan while in Israel. Professor Avigdor Shinan, a leading scholar at Hebrew University, showed Reggie an array of images of Moses—from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and told him, "Show me your Moses and I'll tell you who you are." Reggie dates the conception of (*project*) *Moses Project* to his trip to Israel.

Zora Neale Hurston thus became one of Reggie's research clusters for his new work. On his solo research trip to Chicago in April 2012, Reggie looked through materials that Susan brought to his attention. He was particularly moved by photographs of Hurston and by a recording of her voice, and he remarked, "she looks like my family, she talks like my family." Reggie's feeling of kinship with Hurston extends to her work as an artist *and* as a collector of folklore and ethnographer. He admires how Hurston not only could analyze the black vernacular but also could create new work informed by her analysis. "I want to be Zora—to have that analytical insight and creative power," he exclaims. Reggie

particularly values Zora's ability to be "simply herself" and to not feel conflicted by her roles.

During the first studio residency in June 2012, Reggie had the dancers create "hyperliteral gestures" drawn from the Moses story, and these gestures became part of an extended movement sequence shown at an open rehearsal. Also during the first studio residency in Chicago, Reggie took the dancers to Northwestern to read the correspondence between Zora and Melville Herskovits, an influential anthropologist and early theorist of Africanisms in American culture, and to visit the Herskovits Collection, the largest library of Africana in the world.

What follows are brief descriptions of the material posted on the website that Reggie found most pertinent for his creative research:

- The photographs included in *Speak, So You Can Speak Again*, a volume of Hurston memorabilia edited by her niece Lucy Anne Hurston (New York: Doubleday, 2004), show the artist at varied stages of her life: one photo shows Zora at ease in her New York apartment (undated); a strip of images from a collecting trip in 1935 includes Zora with her informants; another photo shows Zora playing a drum that she brought back from her research trip to Haiti in 1936-37; and a final photo shows Zora in her 50s in Florida.
- The *Chronology* appended to Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002) traces Hurston's life story. Born in 1891, Zora spent her childhood in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town where her father served as pastor and mayor and where she later set many of her stories. After spending several years living with members of her extended family and working service jobs, she enrolled at Howard University in 1920 and received her associate's degree in 1924. It was at this point that Zora dropped a decade from her age, became acquainted with Harlem Renaissance writers through her teacher Alain Locke, and started writing. In 1925, she moved to New York, became deeply involved with the artistic circles of the Harlem Renaissance, and enrolled at Barnard College, majoring in English and studying anthropology with Franz Boas. She graduated in 1928, and by then she had already started extensive travel collecting folklore in Florida, the Bahamas, and New Orleans. Zora became engaged in staging her research, and in 1932 she wrote, directed and produced *The Great Day* in New York, portraying a day in the life of a Florida work-camp and ending with the spectacular "Fire Dance" she had learned in the Bahamas.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Zora was supported by Charlotte Osgood Mason, a white philanthropist who attempted to impose her own views on her protégées, including Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. (In their correspondence with one another and with Mason, the three referred to her as "Godmother.") After breaking with Mason, Zora won grants from the Rosenwald and Guggenheim Foundations and traveled to the Caribbean in 1936 to do more research. During the mid- and late-1930s, she published her major critical and creative works, including the essays "Characteristics of Negro Expression" and "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," the folklore collection *Mules and Men*, and the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

In 1942, Zora resettled in Florida, where she spent the rest of her life, writing, at times working as a librarian and even a maid. She died in 1960 and was buried in a segregated cemetery in an unmarked grave. In 1973 Alice Walker placed a marker on her grave and initiated the rediscovery of her work as a major artist and thinker.

- The *Glossary* appended to Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* gives a sense of Zora's broad circle of friends and acquaintances and the worlds she inhabited as a writer, theatre artist, folklorist, and ethnographer. For example, she kept up a lifelong correspondence with Carl Van Vechten, a white patron of many Harlem Renaissance artists. (Zora coined the term "Negrotarians" to describe Van Vechten, Julius Rosenwald, and other white patrons of black artists. The artists in turn called themselves the "Niggerati.") Zora became close to Langston Hughes in the late 1920s, but their friendship collapsed after the two argued over authorship rights for the play *Mule Bone*. In 1935 she met the college student Alan Lomax on one of his collecting trips and introduced him to musicians on an island off the Georgia Coast. In 1938, while working on *Moses Man of the Mountain*, she undertook fieldwork on "sanctified" church practices in South Carolina with Jane Belo, a fellow anthropologist who had earlier worked with Margaret Mead in Bali. The list of Hurston's correspondents goes on and on: even after she faded from public view in the 1940s and 1950s, Zora kept in touch with friends from her days in New York.

- Among Hurston's many correspondents was Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas who joined the faculty of Northwestern in 1927 and worked to establish the first program in African Studies at an American university. (His extensive library forms the core of the university's Herskovits Library of African Studies.) Herskovits did fieldwork in Africa and in the Caribbean, and he argued that slaves had brought significant practices from African culture to the New World—a novel and even controversial argument during the 1920s and 1930s. Herskovits first articulated this position in a 1925 essay, "The Negro's Americanism," included in Alain Locke's path-breaking anthology *The New Negro*. His most influential publication, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, appeared in 1941 and extensively cited folklore Hurston had collected and published in *Mules and Men*.

Correspondence between Herskovits and Hurston, housed at the Northwestern University Archive, spans the years from 1930 to 1937 and reveals a complicated relationship. Herskovits, born in 1895, was actually four years younger than Hurston, although she presented herself as younger than Herskovits, and he certainly saw himself in the role of mentor. Herskovits was also a mentor to Katherine Dunham during her fieldwork in the Caribbean, undertaken just a year before Hurston travelled to some of the same field sites, and the correspondence reveals a rivalry between the two artists, both of whom used ethnographic research as source material. The correspondence also shows Hurston's run-in with Edwin Embree, president of the Rosenwald Foundation, who reduced the amount of a grant awarded to Hurston. She believed it was because she had criticized his friend, the president of Fisk University. Other sources show that Embree disliked her outspokenness and considered her not a serious enough scholar.

Here it is important to note that Reggie was impacted by Hurston and members of her circle long before she and they became a research cluster for *(project) Moses Project*. Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past* had served as something of a foundational text for his thinking. The music Alan Lomax collected over several decades travelling through the South has provided inspiration and accompaniment for his dances. In his early years as a choreographer in New York, Reggie regularly attended the Margaret Mead Film Festival, which features anthropological documentaries. In fact, Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham were both pioneers in ethnographic film-making, and Reggie followed their example on his research trips to Trinidad and Tobago investigating the Spiritual Baptists.

For Reggie, Hurston's and Dunham's very different relationships with their mentor Melville Herskovits raise all sorts of complex questions regarding leadership and power. Herskovits took on the role of mentor to both Dunham and Hurston, but whereas Hurston slyly challenged Herskovits' presumed authority, Dunham (nearly 20 years younger than Hurston) played up to Herskovits. Who is the leader and who is the follower? When do we lead and when do we choose to follow? These are questions raised by the Moses story as well as by the relations between mentors and disciples, choreographers and performers.

- In 1926 Hurston collaborated with younger members of the Harlem Renaissance to publish *Fire!!*, a journal intended to stage an alternative vision of the "New Negro" from Alain Locke's anthology of that title published the year before. Langston Hughes also participated in this venture, and Aaron Douglas contributed illustrations, which signified on motifs of visual primitivism and are reproduced on this website. The journal never appeared again after its first issue, but the point was made that Hurston, Hughes and their peers intended to "burn up a lot of old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past"—as they proclaimed in their manifesto for *Fire!*

Among the "conventional Negro-white ideas of the past" they intended to challenge were norms of respectability applied to sexuality. Sexual experimentation and exploration were important components of the Harlem Renaissance across generations. Carl Van Vechten, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay—all explored same-sex desire in differing ways in their lives and works, as did many of the female blues singers of the time—Bessie Smith, Gertrude Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter. Hurston also experienced diverse sorts of intimacies—she "fell in love with Jane Belo," according to her own account, an experience not incompatible in her view from her affairs with men. (She married, briefly, three times.) Few artists of the Harlem Renaissance celebrated their same-sex passions as openly as did Richard Bruce Nugent, who published a short story in *Fire!*—titled "Smoke, Lilies and Jade"—now considered a precursor for black gay fiction.

- In 1934 Hurston published two critical essays in *The Negro Anthology*, edited by Nancy Cunard, that have remained influential until today. "Characteristics of Negro Expression" outlines the traits that Hurston observed in the expressive arts of all but the educated elite, which W.E.B. DuBois called the "talented tenth." Hurston identified and

illustrated qualities such as mimicry, the will to adorn, angularity, asymmetry, and “dynamic suggestion”—qualities that later commentators such as Robert Farris Thompson and Brenda Dixon Gottschild would call Africanisms in American Culture. “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” pushes Hurston’s analysis further and challenges W.E.B. DuBois’s characterization of the genre as “sorrow songs.” Rather, Hurston insists that “there never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere” and that the renditions made famous by college singing groups such as the Fisk Jubilee singers and by soloists as Paul Robeson were “*not* spirituals,” for “[spirituals] to be heard truly must be sung by a group... bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects.” In both essays Hurston sets up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic expression that has had far-reaching reverberations.

- In 1939 Hurston published *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and her “Author’s Introduction” notes the “numerous” and “varied” “concepts of Moses abroad in the world.” She continues, “All across Africa, America, the West Indies, there are tales of the power of Moses and great worship of him and his powers. But it does not flow from the Ten Commandments. It is his rod of power... For he is worshipped as a god.” Hurston’s source—and inspiration—for the novel was her research on “hoodoo” (the American variant of voodoo), which she had collected a decade earlier and published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1931. There she noted that “all [practitioners] hold that the Bible is the greatest conjure book in the world. Moses is honored as the greatest conjurer.”
- Early reviews of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* captured Hurston’s intent and inspiration. In the *Saturday Review*, Louis Untermeyer wrote, “Zora Hurston has depicted the central figure of the Old Testament not so much as a questioning rebel or an illuminated lawgiver but, chiefly, as the great voodoo man of the Bible.” In the *New York Times* Percy Hutchinson wrote, “This is the story of Moses as the Negro sees and interprets [him]... Moses was just about the greatest magician ever in the world.” Yet both reviews also note limitations in the novel, notably, the mixing of black dialect and “straightforwardly ‘correct’ [diction]... in the ‘white’ manner.” In contrast, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had used dialect consistently throughout, and critics could not understand why Hurston had mixed registers in her subsequent novel.

Early reviews by black writers were less generous than Untermeyer and Hutchinson. In *Opportunity* Alain Locke called the novel “caricature rather than portraiture,” and in the *New Masses* Ralph Ellison asserted that “this work sets out to do for Moses what ‘The Green Pastures’ did for Jehovah: for Negro fiction it did nothing.” Although Locke had advocated for folklore as source material for black fiction in the 1920s, by 1940 he had shifted his critical allegiance to realist fiction, in part because he believed that “folklore fiction” reinforced primitivist stereotypes of black folks. Indeed, the reviews by Untermeyer and Hutchinson demonstrate the hold of such stereotypes.

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Strikingly, the Hurston revival launched by Alice Walker mostly overlooks *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Compared to the mountains of literary criticism published on *Their Eyes*

were *Watching God* published over the last three decades, there is relatively little on *Moses*. One exception is Valerie Boyd's biography *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003). Boyd comments, "A hundred pages into the novel, you're no longer sure if Moses is black or white, Egyptian or Hebrew. But you realize that it doesn't matter—and that perhaps race itself doesn't matter, at least not based on skin color. Perhaps, Hurston suggests, identification, culture, and 'inside feelings' are the only things that count." Was Hurston's mixing of black dialect and "white" poetic diction intended to underscore her challenge to racial purity in the novel?

Valerie Boyd continues, "In the end, Moses decides that he has done all he can. 'He had meant to make a perfect people, free and just, noble and strong, that should be a light for all the world and for time and eternity. And he wasn't sure he had succeeded,' Hurston writes. 'He had found out that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal.' With this powerful statement, Hurston lays out her own views: There is no such thing as a perfect people or an earthly utopia. And freedom is an elusive thing—won, day by day, from within."

Reggie acknowledges that Hurston's dismissal by earlier critics is partly what drew him to her work. Is it too much of a stretch to see a parallel between the Africanist and postmodernist dimensions of Reggie's work and the "the mixing of black dialect...[and] the 'white' manner" in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*?