Zora Neale Hurston: Jump at the Sun

Transcript

ZORA:
"I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes...I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. No, I do not weep at the world...I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

NARRATOR:
ZORA NEALE HURSTON JOURNEYED DEEP INTO THE SOUTH WITH A CAMERA AND PEN IN HAND, RECORDING NEGRO FOLK CULTURE. SHE WROTE COUNTLESS BOOKS, PLAYS, AND ARTICLES INFUSED WITH THE RHYTHMS OF HER PEOPLE. ZORA'S FAME WOULD COME FROM ONE BOOK - THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD. BUT THROUGHOUT HER LIFE, SHE WAS LEGENDARY FOR HER SPUNK.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
she was bodacious. she was outrageous. and she enjoyed shaking things up.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
She's a southern black woman who wants to be a scholar and a writer, living in a white world of letters.

PATRICK DUVAL:
that was one thing I liked about her -- her independence. And she didn't care about you and what you thought.

SARA CREECH:
Zora could go from dialect to the most beautiful English you imagined, it was like music when she spoke

CARTHEDA MANN: Zora was kinda feisty and kinda raunchy...

FRANK BOLDEN: She could tell you to go to hell and make you enjoy the trip

TITLE: ZORA NEALE HURSTON
JUMP AT THE SUN

ANNOUNCER (VO): You can send your postcard to Mary Margaret McBride care of the station to which you are listening, WEAF New York. Yes, it's one o'clock and here's Mary Margaret McBride.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
Our guest today is Zora Neale Hurston. And her book right now is Dust Tracks on a Road, which is the story of her own life.

ZORA:
Yes, this is my sixth book, Dust Tracks on the Road.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
Of course, that just gives no idea of all the things that have happened to Zora Neale Hurston -- she's going around the country collecting folklore and done a beautiful job.

ZORA: Well, much obliged, Miss McBride. Much obliged.

MCBRIDE V.O : You know there was one thing you said about children that I loved, what you said about the moon. Tell us about that.

ZORA v.o.:
Didn't you think the moon followed you, Miss McBride? If the moon is shining, you go out and you run and it will follow you. And of course, I thought it made a special effort to just keep up with me. And I was so shocked when I found out it followed other people because I thought I was just something so very special and so it was a race for the moon to follow me, whichever way I'd run it would follow me just like a puppy dog. It sort of disillusioned me when I found out that other people were making the same claims on the moon as me

NARRATOR:
THE FLORIDA VILLAGE WHERE ZORA GREW UP WAS A SPECIAL PLACE THAT HAD BEEN CREATED BY AND FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN 1887. EATONVILLE -- THE FIRST INCORPORATED NEGRO TOWN IN AMERICA.

ZORA:
"A negro town? You mean a whole town "thout de white folks? Nothin' but colored folks? Who bosses it den? Dey bosses it demselves."

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
Hurston makes a great deal of the fact that she grew up in an all black town, a place where she could have her creativity blossom and have free reign with her imagination.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Eatonville was the touchstone she always came back to all the time. She always came back to Eatonville in terms of writing.

ZORA:
"Eatonville -- the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jail house. The Negroes set up their hastily built shacks on St. Johns Hole. The negro women could be seen every day but Sunday squatting, washing clothes…and fishing. No more back-bending over rows of cotton, no more fear of the fury of Reconstruction."

NARRATOR:
FLORIDA OFFERED ZORA'S PARENTS AN EASIER LIFE THAN THEY'D HAD IN ALABAMA. BUT THE PROMISE OF A WORLD WITHOUT RACISM FOR THEIR EIGHT CHILDREN IS WHAT KEPT THEM IN EATONVILLE

CHERYL WALL/HURSTON SCHOLAR:
Her father was three times elected mayor of the town. So, even in the 1890's she has this anomalous experience of being able to go around and say I'm the mayor's daughter.

NARRATOR:
JOHN HURSTON HELPED WRITE THE TOWN LAWS. HE WAS A WELL-KNOWN BAPTIST PREACHER AND CARPENTER. HE TRIED TO WARN HIS YOUNGEST DAUGHTER WHAT IT MEANT TO BE BLACK IN THE SOUTH.

ZORA:
"Papa felt it did not do for negroes to have too much spirit. He predicted the white folks were not going to stand for my forward ways. But mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to jump at the sun.

CARLA KAPLAN:
When everybody else is trying to squelch her down and hide her gleam, her mother is the woman who tells her to show her shine, to jump at the sun, to never say never, and that she can do everything.

NARRATOR:
EATONVILLE'S SCHOOL WAS MODELED ON BOOKER T. WASHINGTONS' IDEAS THAT THE CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN SKILLS FOR JOBS IN THE TRADES. BUT ZORA -- WHO LIVED IN HER IMAGINATION -- WAS FASCINATED BY WORDS.

ZORA:
Books gave me more pleasure than clothes. Gulliver's Travels, Grimms' Fairy Tales, Rudyard Kipling and his Jungle Books…I loved his talking snakes as much as I did the hero. In Greek and Roman Myths, Hercules moved me the most. I resolved to be like him.

VALERIE BOYD:
This was a dreamer. This was a kid who you know sat under the chinaberry tree in Eatonville dreaming about places she could go and stories she could tell.

NARRATOR:
BUT ZORA NEVER DREAMED HER LIFE WOULD END SO SUDDENLY. WHEN ZORA WAS JUST THIRTEEN, HER MOTHER DIED.

ZORA:
"Mama died at sundown and changed a world. That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, BUT IN TIME… not so much in time, as in spirit."

CHERYL WALL:
At the time of her mother's death, the family disintegrates, and after that she is really a woman on her own.

ZORA:
"I was shifted from house to house, relatives and friends, and found comfort nowhere. I was without books to read most of the time. I was miserable."

NARRATOR:
ZORA WAS SENT TO SCHOOL IN JACKSONVILLE, BUT HER FATHER STOPPED PAYING HER TUITION. ADRIFT AND UNCERTAIN, FOR FIFTEEN YEARS SHE WANDERED, FIRST TO MEMPHIS, THEN TO BALTIMORE AND ON TO WASHINGTON DC, WORKING AS A WAITRESS, A MANICURIST, AND A MAID.

VALERIE BOYD:
Zora was thrust out into the world on her own, really forced to make her way into adulthood as best she could. And I think those years were important to who she ultimately became because they really developed this scrappy fighting sense of independence which we later see throughout her life and her career.

NARRATOR:
ZORA YEARNED TO GET BACK INTO SCHOOL. BUT AS A YOUNG BLACK WOMAN ON HER OWN, SHE LACKED RESOURCES AND SUPPORT.
SHE PERSEVERED AND FINALLY, IN 1919, WAS ACCEPTED AT HOWARD, ONE OF THE NATION'S LEADING BLACK UNIVERSITIES. THERE, AT TWENTY EIGHT YEARS OF AGE, SHE BEGAN TO WRITE.

ZORA:
“ I joined the Zeta Phi Beta sorority, took part in all the literary activities on the campus, I named the student paper the Hilltop. And I made The Stylus, the small literary society on the hill -- Dr. Alain Leroy Locke was the presiding genius.”

NARRATOR:
ALAIN LOCKE WAS A PHILOSOPHER WHO BELIEVED BLACK ARTISTS WERE BECOMING A NEW CULTURAL CLASS IN AMERICA. HE RECOGNIZED ZORA'S TALENT IMMEDIATELY. HE SENT ONE OF HER SHORT STORIES TO BE PUBLISHED IN OPPORTUNITY. A NEW NATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR BLACK WRITERS. HE ENCOURAGED HER TO GO WHERE OTHER BLACK ARTISTS WERE HEADING -- TO HARLEM IN NEW YORK CITY.

ZORA:
So the first week of January, 1925, found me in New York with $1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope.

DOROTHY WEST/Novelist:
We were all so young. Oh, how we yearned one day we could go to New York, the most wonderful place in the world. The first thing that happened when I saw New York was I saw all of these colored people. And I said to somebody, “Is there a parade?”

EMILY BERNARD:
For literary hopefuls, New York is the place to go. It's the center of not only of publishing industries, but also the important magazines that are being born at this time, like "The Crisis." Langston Hughes said he'd rather be a lamp post in Harlem than the mayor of a town in Georgia. It was just that compelling.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Zora immediately became known around town as a very striking new talent. She was a very flamboyant person. She would walk in and say “Queen Zora has arrived.” And everyone would say “Zora’s here, Zora’s here. Let’s hear some stories.

DOROTHY WEST:
She was very interesting. Zora was a very interesting person. She told wonderful stories.

ZORA:
Baby, he crooned, what’s on the rail for the lizard? I’ll tell you like the farmer told the potato, plant you now and dig you later.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
Few people realize that the Harlem Renaissance, for many of its architects and its prime movers, was about the integration of what Alaine Locke once called “The Cultured Few.” In his manifesto, "The New Negro," published in 1925, he said that there was a new assimilated cosmopolitan, artistic class, an economic class. And that these are the people who should be integrated into American society. And the slow moving masses, another direct quote from Locke, would come along much later. But in the meantime, this vanguard of the race should be allowed to assimilate.

CARLA KAPLAN:
There are serious artistic patrons who are wanting to show that they are interested but also wanting to be involved, mostly come from white patrons who have given a great deal of money so that there can be awards and big-time events. This is where we get a lot of the literary contests.

ZORA:
I won a prize for a short story at the opportunity awards dinner. The social register crowd soon took me up. If you had not had lunch with me, you had not shot from taw.

NARRATOR:
THROUGH THE OPPORTUNITY CONTESTS, ZORA RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH NEW YORK'S LITERARY ELITE. FANNIE HURST WAS A CONTEST JUDGE AND ALSO ONE OF THE COUNTRYS HIGHEST PAID WRITERS. HER 1934 NOVEL, “IMITATION OF LIFE”, WOULD BECOME A POPULAR MOVIE.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Zora came to work as her secretary. In about a week or two, they both realized that Zora wasn’t a very good secretary. Zora didn't have the kind of personality that would -- you would expect of someone who was being a secretary to a famous novelist, and so they became companions.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
Zora, tell us about Fanny Hurst.

ZORA:
Hurst just has a spring-time quality let us say, of likin to play dolls. And I suppose because she was an only child. One minute she's just a little girl, playing, but with a straight face, you know, and then the next minute she's Fannie Hurst again, taking herself very seriously, and she’s a novelist again. And sometimes she'd be a little girl, she'd call up her husband, "Jack", "Jack, what must I do about so-and-so?" and of course he'll tell her exactly what to do. The next minute some publisher sort of gets out of line, then she's just like a cave woman when the saber toothed tiger comes to the door, she grab her club and swat him all over. and gives him what we call down South a good head stompin' and a straightenin'. And just a moment before she was Jack's little girl.

ROBERT HEMENWAY
Zora and Fannie traveled together. They would stop into restaurants and Fannie Hurst would go up and say “I need a table for Princess Zora and myself.” And they would integrate restaurants because the assumption was that Zora was an African rather than an African-American

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
Hurston was not allowed to stay in the same places where Fannie Hurst stayed, And, on one occasion Fannie Hurst decided that she would not stay there either, and, and showing solidarity to Hurston. Hurston rejected her gesture and said to her I can take care of myself, refusing to be treated like a victim. And I think much of her scholarship, much of her ideas turned on rejecting victim hood.

ZORA:
Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It’s beyond me.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
African American literature was written primarily for a white audience, to show that African Americans were real human beings, that we weren't meant to be slaves, that nature hadn't made us inferior, etc., etc. We knew what fork and knife to use. However you might want to think about it. So, there was always a white, idealized white reader on the black writer's shoulder as she or he went about the process of creation.

VALERIE BOYD:
The Harlem Renaissance was known among the participants as the New Negro Renaissance. And they were aware that they were creating history, they were aware that they were doing something different. And Zora -- was the self-proclaimed Queen of the Harlem Renaissance, the Queen of the Niggerati, that was the term she came up with to describe these sort of educated and literary black people. She helped create FIRE, a magazine. It was an attempt to create a new vision of black culture.

EMILY BERNARD:
The magazine was a frank exploration and celebration of all the things the old guard hated. You know, black sexuality, scenes of juke joints and poetry that really celebrated the black body, and portraits of black women that no proper black writer should describe.

ZORA:
Oh, them half-whites, they gets everything. They gets everything everybody else wants. The men, the jobs, everything. The whole world's got a sign on it. Wanted, light-colored.

LEE BAKER:
Zora Neal Hurston actually engaged this notion of the color line and being color struck. this was this dirty little secret in black culture. there was this kind of privileging of actually very light skin , VERY EUROPEAN looking African Americans,

TIFFANY PATTERSON/Historian:
She was a rebel. She was an intellectual rebel. She was a personal rebel. She told off-color jokes in front of white people and drove her contemporaries crazy.

CHERYL WALL:
She also was one of those people who seems to act almost without a censor. And this is a very unusual thing for a black person in the 1920's. She seems to have been herself all the time and not particularly worried about the kinds of conclusions people might draw about all black people from her particular self.

ZORA:
At certain times, I have no race, I am me. I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library.

NARRATOR:
IN 1925, ZORA WAS AWARDED A SCHOLARSHIP TO BARNARD COLLEGE, WHERE SHE WOULD BE THE FIRST BLACK GRADUATE. SHE WOULD FIND A MENTOR WHO WAS CHALLENGING PREVAILING NOTIONS OF RACE AND CULTURE AT A NEIGHBORING COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - FRANZ BOAS, THE FATHER OF MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY.

Franz Boas SOT:
Nobody has been able to prove that the brains of different races are different in any fundamental way.

ZORA:
I began to treasure the words of Dr. Boaz, the king of kings. We called him Papa. The sabre cut on his cheek, which was said to be got in a duel in Heidenberg, lifted in a smile.

ZORA:
Two weeks before I graduated from Barnard, Dr. Boaz sent for me and told me he had arranged a fellowship for me. I was to go south, and collect negro folklore.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
You ought to hear Zora Neale Hurston tell the story of when she was going around the countryside collecting folklore and she was just out of Barnard, and what was it you'd say, Zora Neale?

ZORA:
I was very conscious of my Barnard education, and my Barnard English, and I would go to some of these common people to get Negro folk stories, and I would say "Do you know any of those folktales, I'm searching for some folktales?" "I never heard about 'em, maybe they heard about them over there in Sanford, or maybe the next county, I ain't never heard nothin' 'bout 'em."

NARRATOR:
WHEN MONEY FROM HER FELLOWSHIP RAN OUT, ALAIN LOCKE INTRODUCED ZORA TO A PATRON WHO FUNDED BLACK ARTISTS - A WEALTHY HEIRESS NAMED CHARLOTTE VANDIVEER OSGOOD MASON, WHO LIKED TO BE CALLED GRANDMOTHER.

EMILY BERNARD :
Charlotte Mason was one of the most fascinating and little understood figures of the Harlem Renaissance. For her, the only thing legitimate about black culture were the unlettered the untutored expressions of black culture. What was white was lettered and educated and formal and what was black was spontaneous and exotic and passionate

ZORA:
Laugh if you will, but there was and is a psychic bond between us. "Godmother" could read my mind, not only when I was in her presence, but thousands of miles away. The thing that delighted her was the fact that I was her only Godchild who could read HER thoughts at a distance.

NARRATOR:
ARMED WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, A PEARL-HANDLED REVOLVER AND MASON'S CONTRACT FOR TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS A MONTH, ZORA SET OFF FOR THE SOUTH IN 1927.

ZORA :
Florida is a place that draws people, white people from all over the world, and negroes from every southern state surely, and some from the north and west. So I knew that it was possible for me to get a cross section of the Negro South in the one state. The first place I aimed to start collecting material was Eatonville, Florida.

BUDDY MILLER/EATONVILLE RESIDENT:
Well it was all dirt roads, and it was twenty-six houses. I would walk around Eatonville with her, hold her hand. She would hold out her hand and we'd walk, swing with her. You know when she was walkin' around through Eatonville askin' a lot of questions, we didn't know what she was trying to do.

ZORA:
Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell there in.

NARRATOR:
she recorded the games children played, the songs they sang, the customs of a small town, what she called the boiled down juice of human living.

CLARA WILLIAMS/EATONVILLE RESIDENT:
And if you did anything wrong, anybody could correct you. (BUDDY: With a with a switch) CLARA: Not only

correct you verbally but they would get a palmetta and they would correct you from the rear end and they would send you home and tell your parents what you'd done and then you'd be corrected again. Anybody could do it.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
the center of Eatonville, was Joe Clark's store. and people would sit around on the front porch of the store and they'd tell stories. and Zora would hang out and listen to stories, as part of the African American oral tradition since slavery. and she just became fascinating by the sort of social dynamic of that store porch.

SOT... His mama was a big woman too. Seven-foot-tall.

CHERYL WALL:
As she is collecting folklore she writes that she wants to take some of these glints and gleams and store them away for her own use.

NARRATOR
ZORA KNEW SHE HAD TO MOVE BEYOND HER EATONVILLE ROOTS TO DIG DEEPER INTO BLACK CULTURE. ZORA WAS SEARCHING FOR VOODOO.

BUDDY MILLER:
No voodoo in Eatonville. There wasn't nothin' in Eatonville but moonshine drinkers and whiskey drinkers and lot of dancin' and stuff like that. People didn't think about that kind of stuff in Eatonville. There wasn't that many people in Eatonville, about twenty-six, between twenty-six and thirty houses. There wasn't nobody there to work the voodoo on.

Zora:
In New Orleans I dealt into hoodoo, or sympathetic magic. in order to work with these two-headed doctors, I had to go through initiation. I heard of Luke Turner, a hoodoo doctor. He tried to shoo me away.

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON:
She goes to Luke Turner, "No. I don't want to work with you. No way." She comes back. "No. Girl. I said no way." She just keeps on...."Girl." And slowly it dawned on him. Because at that time, as you know, you could be thrown into jail for any hint of practicing voodoo. And of course, refusing to take no for an answer, being gracious about it, Zora Neale Hurston proved the real methodology is patience.

ZORA:
I lay naked for three days and nights on a couch, with my navel to a rattlesnake skin. My finger was cut and I became blood brother to the rattlesnake. We were to aid each other forever. The symbol of lightning was painted on my back.

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON:
"Wow," the nzazi line that goes down her body, Congo for lightning. it makes her, shall we say, accept the responsibility of mastering so much spirit. Because lightning is a very awesome force.

LEE BAKER:
She saw this wasn't about zombies, it wasn't about magic, it wasn't about all the lurid accusations that people in the popular media were portraying voodoo as. But it was simply a very important and very rich and historical religion that people had to take seriously.

CARLA KAPLAN:
You really see the way in which she works as a trained anthropologist without judging it, and from a place that is respectful. On the other hand it is clear that she is not just interested as an academic because she deeply believes in the power of hoodoo culture.

NARRATOR:
TRAVELING ACROSS THE DEEP SOUTH, ZORA VISITED TURPENTINE AND LUMBER CAMPS COLLECTING THE FOLKLORE OF HER PEOPLE.. SHE BEGAN SENDING SAMPLES OF NEGRO ORAL TRADITION BACK TO LANGSTON HUGHES, HER FRIEND -- AND THE BEST KNOWN POET OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE.

ZORA:
Langston, man, I've got some jook songs. A jook is a clubhouse on these sawmills and turpentine stills. The real Negro theatre is in the jooks.

VALERIE BOYD:
She and Langston Hughes were writing letters to each other almost every day. They were extremely important to each other. I think their relationship was a love relationship even though it wasn't sexual or romantic. they were in some ways soul mates.

BOB DEVIN JONES/DRAMATIST:
She had a very deep connection to how black folks occurred. And that's all Langston was about. He wanted to know and be a part of and actually ultimately be appreciated by negro people.

NARRATOR:
THEIR TRAVELS TOGETHER IN THE SOUTH CONVINCED THEM THEY NEEDED TO WRITE A "REAL" NEGRO FOLK COMEDY – A PLAY THEY'D CALL MULEBONE -- SET IN EATONVILLE.

BOB DEVIN JONES:
Although Langston hadn't written many plays at that point, he was much more sure of his literary voice, and she asked Langston to organize and help her to write this play.

EMILY BERNARD:
The play was about two hunters who shot a turkey, and had a fight about who was responsible for this game, and it goes to court, and it's a very dramatic play, and eventually it evolves into a dispute over a woman. It was based on a short story by Zora Neale Hurston.

BOB DEVIN JONES:
It's full of all of Zora's collecting. Writing the play, Zora would perform a lot of it. You know, perform all the characters, and this delighted Langston.

ZORA:
singing:
oh you like my peaches but you don't like me....*

EMILY BERNARD:
After a good summer of work she quickly vanishes and he is left to kind of wonder what's going on with her.

NARRATOR:
NOW A THEATRE COMPANY WANTED TO PRODUCE MULEBONE. WITHOUT TELLING LANGSTON, ZORA COPYRIGHTED THE PLAY IN HER OWN NAME.

EMILY BERNARD:
Hughes was understandably livid. Uh, this was not sanctioned by him. In his eyes, the play wasn't finished and Hurston had disappeared months before, and had given no indication that she was finished with the play was happy with it, so this turn of events was something he could not have predicted.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She has a deep sense in the thirties of intellectual property and that is where a lot of the Mulebone tension is about. It's about her sense that one's work as a writer, as a black writer, as a black woman writer is not there to be stolen by everybody in sight, and she's very protective of that.

NARRATOR:
THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO WRITERS SHATTERED. PRODUCTION OF MULEBONE STOPPED. BUT ZORA STILL BELIEVED THAT DRAMA COULD REVEAL THE TRUE NATURE OF NEGRO CULTURE. GODMOTHER AGREED TO FINANCE ZORA's FIRST PLAY -- A FOLKLORE CONCERT SET IN A FLORIDA RAILROAD CAMP.

ZORA:
singing: SHAKALAKA lining song

CHERYL WALL:
There would be work songs. There would be courtship rituals. And Hurston performed herself. She was one of the actors, singers, dancers.

ZORA:
We are going to try to make plays on Negro life in the negro manner. We want to build a drama out of ourselves. Our drama must be like us or it doesn't exist.

VALERIE BOYD:
She felt this kind of expression of black life was really at home on the stage. Even more so than on the page in some ways. And so that was part of why this idea of getting together a troupe of performers, going to different communities to dramatize black culture really appealed to her.

ZORA:
"This is the greatest wealth of the continent. This stuff won't be around long. AND I aim to show the world the beauty and appeal there is in genuine Negro material."

CHERYL WALL:
Hurston SAYS, I was glad when somebody told me I could go out and collect Negro folklore. What she doesn't say is that, of course, they also told me it wouldn't belong to me. That it would belong to my, my patron.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Well, Mrs. Mason was a very rich woman and -- and people of wealth have an entourage around them always, and that was certainly true of Mrs. Mason, ah, including lawyers, who are going to make sure that -- that she doesn't give away too much of her money, I think. And I think she was being advised, "If you're going to support this young black artist, Zora Neale Hurston, ah, you need to make sure that she understands her responsibilities especially if she's going to be collecting folklore in the South." And there came to be a kind of assumption of a commercial relationship, that Zora was collecting folklore, ah, on contract with Mrs. Mason.

CHERYL WALL:
Mrs. Mason can tell her well, no, no, you can't, ah, you can't talk about the kind of your material. You can't talk

about voodoo. That's too precious. That can only go in a book. You can't use that in your folklore concerts. It's mine.

CARLA KAPLAN:
During the 5 years that Hurston is working as Mason's agent, she does lots of work on the side and lots of work that she doesn't even want Mason to know about, because she rightly considers it her own and she doesn't want Mason interfering.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
She walked a very fine line. There's a very fine line between saying what white folks want to hear, particularly at that time, ah, and being proudly independent on your own. In the end I think Hurston managed that trickster role pretty well.

ZORA/OVER LETTER:
My Darling Godmother. You are gods flower. May I on your birthday sing my most pure and up rushing love, darling flower, most devotedly, your pickaninny, Zora

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
It's very easy to cast stones from here, some of the things, if she were to materialize right here, right now, I would want to ask her why in the world you'd sign a letter to your patron, "Your Favorite Pickaninny." Uh, maybe there's a subtext I don't understand. But on the face of it, it seems offensive to me.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
She's been severely criticized for pandering to these white people. The people who were criticizing her for that in her own time were also taking money from the same white people, ah, and they have not been criticized in quite the same way.

NARRATOR:
FOR FIVE YEARS, MASON SUPPORTED ZORA'S COLLECTING IN THE SOUTH. IN 1932 HER SUPPORT ENDED. FINALLY FREE OF MASON AND HER BAN ON PUBLISHING, ZORA MOVED BACK TO FLORIDA WITH A SUITCASE FULL OF FOLKTALES.

MARY MCBRIDE:
There was a time when you'd just written some short stories for Story Magazine and some of the others, and then suddenly out of the blue comes about five letters from New York publishers saying, we would like to publish a book by you.

ZORA:
Well, you see, Mr. Lippincott, he wrote a nice soft letter (laugh) and he kept on writing me every week.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
Sort of gentle like?

ZORA:
Yes. I was afraid of the rest of them. I had sold a short story but I'd never gotten face-to-face with a publisher. So I was sort of afraid of them, but he wrote so so soft you know and gentle like. So then I started to write Jonah's Gourd Vine, my first book.

MMM You had a little trouble, didn't you, your landlady sort of put you out. Didn't she like the typewriter, or what?

ZORA:
No I didn't even have a typewriter then. I wanted to but I didn't have one, you see. I got twenty dollars from Story Magazine for The Gilded Six-Bits. So I hired this house with no electricity in there -- I promised the people a dollar and a half a week rent, I paid one week and then I just didn't seem to have the money and I just went on writing the book as fast I could. And it took me about seven to eight weeks to write the book, and they began to nudge me real hard about the rent on November the third, and on November the sixteenth, the day I was put out of the house, I got an acceptance by wire from Lippincott. they offered me $200 advance royalty. I dashed to the telegraph office and sent off a wire "Terms accepted. I'm singing on my silver singing trumpet."

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Jonah's Gourd Vine is really a novel about her father. Her father was a black preacher who proved every Sunday morning that he was an artist. Zora understood the way that black ministers were poets, they were people who became inspired when they began speaking. Ah, and the sermons that they created were very much an artistic production.

ZORA:
I heard de whistle of de damnation train that pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo goin' to hell. Jesus stood out on her track like a rough-backed mountain. And she threw her cow-catcher in His side and His blood ditched de train. He died for our sins

FRANK BOLDEN:
Her father was a jack legged minister and he liked life, liberty and the happiness of pursuit. He pursued women. And, her mother used to have to whip his head once every three weeks according to her own stories.

ZORA:
Papa and Mama were really in love, in spite of his wanderings. Maybe he was just born before his time. They didn't have these zippers on pants in those days, and button-up flies were tricky and betraying.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
She created worlds. worlds like we know in our neighborhoods. which really bothered many of her contemporaries, because they wanted an official negro to be represented—refined African American who didn't gamble, who didn't engage in extra-marital sex and didn't tell lies and signify.

ZORA:
What I had wanted to tell was the story of a man and from what I had read and heard Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-such, regardless of race.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
Part of the genius of Hurston is she uses her community as a laboratory. You can not fully understand her literature without connecting that to her ethnographic work.

NARRATOR:
ZORA'S NEXT BOOK, MULES AND MEN, WAS FUELED BY HER ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH. IT INCLUDED STORIES FROM JOE CLARK'S PORCH IN EATONVILLE AND ZORA'S ADVENTURES IN A JOOK JOINTS FULL OF LOVE DANGER.

VALERIE BOYD:
Mules and men is a non-fiction book but a sort of stylized non-fiction where she sort of created herself as this

um character who's taking you on this journey through the south and it's totally rooted in her ethnological research.

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON:
There is a passage where a guy's flirting with her and he says, "Uh, if you stay with me, what make it so cool, I wouldn't let you make me breakfast. I'd get up and make it for you. Set it aside over the burner, just for you, Baby." What make it so cool? What make it so cool, so generous? What make it uh, so suave, so socially ingratiating? She uh, caught, because her ear for black speech was impeccable, she caught the yes quality, wrapped in this supreme black metaphor. and she documented it in context. In the process of being flirted with. And that's what…that's what makes Zora, she will not date because her pages are really scenarios, they're films.

LEE BAKER:
Rural country folks have what she called a psychic savings bank. They could draw from these cultural tales, and, she wanted to both celebrate that and share that these folks that were otherwise seen as stupid, lazy, ignorant, that were not at all. They were very smart, hard-working, hard-loving, hard-fighting and, above all, they use this folklore as a way to really figure out social relations.

NARRATOR:
MULES AND MEN WAS PRAISED BY CRITICS AND SCHOLARS. Hurston had SHED LIGHT ON WHAT MANY THOUGHT WAS A BACKWARD WAY OF LIFE. AND SHE HAD GIVEN THE WORLD A NEW WAY TO LOOK AT THE SOUTH.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
The Northern intellectuals saw a South determined solely by horror. The horrors of lynching. The horrors of economic deprivation. The horrors of Jim Crow. Hurston saw the South as home. As a place where people lived. And what she foregrounded in her ethnography and her literary work were the everyday lives of black folk and provide a window on to people as human beings, as she was so fond of saying, as individuals.

ALICE WALKER:
She loved her own roots, and she loved her people, just the way they were. She wasn't um feeling as many of the people in the Harlem renaissance felt that they had to be changed and they had to be you know refashioned reshaped into something that was presentable. Uh, to whoever, you know. She felt that they were great, uh, in all their messiness.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
She presented their humor in its rawest form. She presented their gender relations in their unconventional form. She didn't want to wash off and clean up the unwashed masses. She wanted to present them as they were.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
You know some of your words I love. Do you remember how you say "friended with?"

ZORA:
Yes, making verbs out of nouns. We do that a lot.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
She was "friended with". What's that one about "putting your foot up?"

ZORA:
Putting your foot up, when you get ready to really play the dozens to somebody, lay them out, you see?

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
Play the dozens (laugh).

ZORA:
You go to their house and you put your foot up on their step, you see, with one hand on your hip, and you really tell them what you think about them, and all the folks way back for five or six generations. Maybe like the old man was a double humped camel and their mama was a mule, that's putting your foot up on them. See, you intend to be very emphatic when you put your foot up.

MARY MARGARET MCBRIDE:
What's “specifying”?

ZORA:
Oh, well, that's giving all the details, they use that sort of loosely. Sometimes a person is talking a lot or giving the details, low-rating you in front of the public, and they say, "Ain't she specifying?", telling all about 'em.

CHERYL WALL:
Hurston wanted to talk about language. for example, ah, she would talk about how people would say, you know, I killed him dead. Ah, then if you were really angry, you might say I killed him cemetery dead. Ah, that .. there was something about the language that was invented, that was creative. And, this is at a time when the common belief is that black people could not speak English correctly. Hurston argues not only could black people speak English differently, but the way they spoke English had been so influential that it changed the way Southern white people spoke.

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON:
Every white boy, every white girl goes around saying, "Uh-huh. unh-uh." Now, their Anglo Saxon ancestors said "yea," and "nay," and "yes," and "no." But not "un-huh, hmm-mmm." That is African. Un-huh and unh-uh are the most dramatic Africanisms in the speech of America.

MAYA ANGELOU:
West Africans in Senegal call Le langue doux, the sweet language. The sweet language was a language dependent entirely upon tone. And even the lengthening out of a word. So if you spoke if I spoke the sweet language to you uh in the south instead of saying “Hi there, how are you?” I’d say, “Heeeeey. How ya doinnnnn?” Well I never heard white folks use the sweet language and I heard black people use it all the time.

NARRATOR:
IN 1935, ZORA BEGAN WORKING ON AN ASSIGNMENT FOR THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. THE PIONEERING MUSICOLOGIST, JOHN LOMAX, AND HIS SON ALAN, WERE CREATING A REPOSITORY AT THE LIBRARY for AMERICA'S FOLK SONGS.THEIR WORK DOCUMENTING BLACK MUSIC HAD BEEN LIMITED TO SOUTHERN PRISONS.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She was a fan of the senior Lomax, less so of the son. she was fascinated with the work they were doing with Leadbelly.

LEADBELLY SOT:
“Good night Irene……..in my dreams.”

JOHN LOMAX SOT:
That's fine Leadbelly, you're a fine songster. I've never heard so many good negro songs."

LEADBELLY SOT:
"Thank you, sir boss."

NARRATOR:
ZORA AND TWENTY-YEAR-OLD COLLEGE STUDENT ALAN LOMAX RECORDED MORE THAN 200 SONGS JOURNEYING From THE SEA ISLANDS OF GEORGIA TO THE SHORES OF LAKE OKEECHOBEE. THEIR WORK INCLUDED A STOP IN EATONVILLE.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She kept being involved in circumstances in which her actual boss for folklore collecting, who was sending her back in some cases to her very own hometown, knew much much less than she did, but had all of the social authority and the economic power to direct the project.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
she convinces Alan Lomax to blacken up. that he would never be accepted in this black town unless he blackens his face. he did it, he blackened up, now there is no way that a white man could blacken his face and not be noticed. and she would do things like that and I think these antics on her part were also ways she expressed her displeasure with the racial structure.

ZORA:
"This song I got in Callahan Florida, which is the railroad center in the northern part of Florida...

Zora singing:
Ah, Ft. Myers,
Ah, in Florida,
Ah, let's shake it,
Ah, let's break it,
Ah, just a half... "

ZORA:
A railroad rail weighs nine hundred pounds and the men have to take these lining bars and get it in shape to spike it down. And while they're doing that they have a chant and also some songs that they use the rhythm to work it into place.

ZORA SINGS:
...then the boss hollers "Bring them a hammer, gang" and they start to spike it down.

CHERYL WALL:
She really wants to understand black people's cultural expressions. And, so many people don't even want to acknowledge them. They think there is nothing to understand even the people who want to celebrate want to say, well you know, they just know how to sing and dance. Ah, and she wants to say, no there are very profound principles.

ZORA: No matter where you go you can find versions of Uncle Bud. It's a typical negro pattern of the same line repeated three times and a sort of flip line on the end.

MUSIC: Uncle Bud

MAYA ANGELOU:
Blues singers from different places had different sounds. The Brazos guys sounded like this, “Baby I just want you to know I just don’t, want you to…” The guys in from the delta sang like this, “Baby please don’t go.” Way back in their throat. “Baby please don’t go.” It was so beautiful. Goodness!

NARRATOR:
IN 1936, ZORA WON A GUGGENHEIM GRANT TO GO TO HAITI TO RESEARCH A BOOK ON VOODOO. LEAVING BEHIND A RELATIONSHIP WITH A MUCH YOUNGER MAN. THE FAILED AFFAIR INSPIRED HER MOST FAMOUS NOVEL.

ZORA:
I wrote Their Eyes Were Watching God in Haiti. It was damned up in me and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. The force from somewhere in space which commands you to write in the first place, gives you no choice. You take up a pen when you are told and write what is commanded. There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.

VALERIE BOYD:
Their Eyes Were Watching God is a story of Janie Crawford discovering herself through her relationships with three very different men—Logan Killicks, her first husband—her second husband Jodie Starks—and then her third husband Teacake, who really encourages her to accept and love herself as she is.

ALICE WALKER:
A friend of mine gave me a copy of Their Eyes Were Watching God, and I read it in a sitting, and absolutely loved it.

CHERYL WALL:
It’s a novel that can be laugh out loud funny. Hurston is a very gifted comic writer…for some readers it's a love story and that's a very unusual thing in the African-American tradition. We’re in 1937, we don't have many love stories.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
But there's another way to read it, which is…it's a novel about the capacity of the African American vernacular to narrate a novel, to tell a story.

ALICE WALKER:
You start reading it and you think you won’t be able to understand it. And then you realize that you understand it perfectly. And not only that, it’s very funny. And so it almost gives you the pleasure of learning a new skill in a way.

ZORA:
The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed his chains. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel.
“De lake is comin!!” Tea Cake gasped.
“It’s comin’ behind us!” Janie shuddered. “Us can’t fly.”
“But we still kin run,” Tea Cake shouted and they ran.
The gushing water ran faster

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
It uses a literary device, a well-known literary device called free indirect discourse, when the uh, voice of the

narrator and the voice of a character merge into a third voice. The narrator becomes educated by the black vernacular characters.

ZORA:
Joe Starkes was the name. Been working for white folks all his life. When he heard all about em making a town all out of colored folks he'd knowed that was the place he wanted to be. He'd always wanted to be a big boss, but the white folks had all the say so. That was right too -- the man that built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if they wants to crow over something.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
That novel will continue to be read as one of the most sophisticated uses of free indirect discourse, which, after all, Flaubert used and uh, Henry James and Virginia Wolfe and a thousand and one other people. But none ever did it in a collective way, to capture the collective voice of an entire community in the way Zora Neale Hurston did. Zora Neale Hurston established herself as a genius with that accomplishment alone.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
The mainstream press hailed it as a very exciting literary event. The Times, the mainstream newspapers and magazines, all gave "Their Eyes Were Watching God" excellent reviews. Simultaneously, the black literary establishment all trashed Hurston's work.

ALICE WALKER:
the thing that struck me most and that I could not understand, was how people just completely didn't see the love. They completely ignored it. And this is a real problem because it means that the people who read it had so little love for themselves, ancestrally that they really had no patience for their ancestors, thought that they were just outdated, outmoded folk, and however they sounded was wrong.

NARRATOR:
EVEN ALAIN LOCKE - ZORA'S LONGTIME MENTOR - CRITICIZED THE BOOK, LABELING HER CHARACTERS AS "PSEUDO-PRIMITIVES". HE PRESSURED ZORA TO MATURE AS A WRITER BY TACKLING "SOCIAL ISSUES" IN HER WORK.

ZORA:
Alaine Locke is a malicious little snot. I get tired of the envious picking on me -- one who lives by quotations trying to criticize people who live by life. I will send my toe-nails to debate him on what he knows about Negroes and Negro life."

NARRATOR:
ZORA'S HARSHEST CRITICISM CAME FROM RICHARD WRIGHT. IN 1940, WRIGHT WOULD BECOME AMERICA'S FIRST GREAT BLACK PROTEST WRITER WITH his BESTSELLING NOVEL "NATIVE SON".

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
Richard Wright trashed it as being reactionary. He said it was about a bunch of darkies making love and playing the banjo down on the muck in the Everglades. Wright felt Black Art was about the dramatization of white racism. Hurston wrote a book that is not about white racism at all. Or not primarily. White people, white racism occur offstage.

WEST:
don't tell me about Richard Wright. I couldn't stand him. I couldn't stand him. Don't ask me about Richard

Wright. Oh, my God. (Laughter). Oh, God, he didn't like white people, he didn't like colored people or whatever…he might have been a little bit jealous of Zora.

ALICE WALKER:
She was the healthy side of black life that was pretty much absent from Richard Wright, whom I also love very deeply. But to me they are polar opposites in a way, because she is a very vibrant self-loving spirit.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT:
This book is such a strong feminist book. What makes Janie Crawford stand out is that she is not a victim, this is not a woman who is sorry. who is pitiful, who is asking for our forgiveness or sympathy or our pity, she is just telling her story.

ALICE WALKER:
I think what women love about that book is that she really is at that place where she's in her own space, she's very happy with herself, you know, and she's basically contemplating life, and being very grateful for life. But she's not grasping for anything, she's not feeling she needs anybody, and that's a very good place to be.

NARRATOR:
IN 1940, ZORA WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF HER CAREER WITH FIVE BOOKS IN SIX YEARS, INCLUDING HER NEW NOVEL, MOSES MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN AND HER BOOK ON VOODOO, TELL MY HORSE. SHE SPOKE AT COLLEGE CAMPUSES, GAVE LECTURES ON DRAMA, AND WAS INTERVIEWED ON THE RADIO. SHE DROVE HER RED CONVERTIBLE FROM OHIO TO FLORIDA. AND IN BEAUFORT, SOUTH CAROLINA, SHE BECAME INVOLVED WITH A ROADSIDE CHURCH GROUP -- THE COMMANDMENT KEEPER CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD.

ZORA: The seventh day church of god seems to be a more African form of expression. A protest against the stereotyped form of churches among literate negroes. Its keynote is rhythm.

NARRATOR:
ZORA WAS INTERESTED IN RECORDING THE MUSIC THEY PLAYED IN THEIR SERVICES. HER COLLEAGUES FROM BARNARD HELPED HER SECURE FUNDING FROM MARGARET MEAD.

NORMAN CHALFIN:
I was asked to put together a crew to film and record what was going on in a Baptist church in Beaufort, South Carolina and Zora prepared all that in advance. That was one thing we could say about Zora. She was a pretty good organizer.

CARRIE BELLE SMALLS:
Her camera crew took my picture, and I remember her laughing, but when she spoke to her crew, she had that authority voice. That girl walking down the street, that was me.

NORMAN CHALFIN:
When we met them and told them that we were going to make motion picture film, they explained that in the Bible it says Thou shalt not make a graven image of the Lord, and they wouldn't let us do it. And Zora knew exactly what was going on. I found her very persistent.

CARRIE BELLE SMALLS
The person that was playing the tambourine that was me. Music seems to take away the evil spirits I would say. Then we, um, when you get into it then you notice it's the rhythm. It's the rhythm. And the spirit comes in with the rhythm.

CONGREGATION SINGS and plays music....

ZORA:
During the ceremony, Julia Jones goes first into ecstasy then a trance. After which she sometimes utters prophesies to the whole congregation. Her eyes are half-closed and her movements are like a sleep walker. She said one time, I feel hate in here...hate. There's the suggestion of the African witch doctor smelling out evil-doers at this phase.

NARRATOR:
ZORA HAD LIVED A LIFE FEW COULD HAVE IMAGINED -- AN ANTHROPOLOGIST AND A NOVELIST. HER PUBLISHER THOUGHT HER ADVENTURES WOULD INTEREST READERS AND ASKED HER FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. SHE RELUCTANTLY AGREED AND TITLED IT DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
The most important thing to remember about an autobiography is that the author starts with the person they wish to define here and now. Then you look backward at their life, and justify everything from their birth in their lives to this point in time. People misrepresent themselves to justify who they were and Zora Neale unfortunately did the same thing.

CHERYL WALL:
In Mules and Men she had written that black people did not reveal that which the soul lives by. And I think writing an autobiography must have been extraordinarily difficult, because she wasn't going to reveal that which her soul lived by. And so there are lots of misrepresentations of fact about her life. She claims to have been born in Eatonville. She is very careful not to say when.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Zora was a master at disguising her birth date. Throughout her life – she would give completely phony dates for when she was born. There's been a lot of controversy about this but we now know for sure she was born in 1891 and interestingly she wasn't born in Eatonville though she always claimed to be born in Eatonville, She was born in Notasulga, Alabama.

DOROTHY WEST:
Well, she lied a little, as you know, maybe she was ten years older than she said she was but we can forgive her that.

NARRATOR:
ZORA, WHOSE CLASSIC NOVEL CENTERED AROUND A WOMAN WITH THREE HUSBANDS, WOULD NEVER PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE HER OWN THREE MARRIAGES. SHE MET HER FIRST HUSBAND, HERBERT SHEEN, AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY, AND MARRIED HIM IN 1927.

DOROTHY WEST:
I don't know why she married that man. Never saw him and nobody else – she did marry him, I mean she did marry him. But there she was there, and we never saw him.

CARLA KAPLAN:
THERE'S A LOT OF EVIDENCE THAT SHE HAD THE KIND OF LOVE FOR SHEEN SHE HAD FOR HER LIFELONG FRIENDS. AND HURSTON WAS BOTH AN INCREDIBLE LOVER, AND SHE WAS AN INCREDIBLE HATER, AND WHEN SHE HATED SHE WAS REALLY GOOD AT IT, AND SHE'S A LITTLE SCARY.

CARLA KAPLA:
The other two husbands, both marriages lasted well under a year, and both marriages again where she barely lives with them as far as we can tell. The Albert price marriage is the one that's most startling, because of the amazing age difference of 25 years, he's 23, and she's 48.

VALERIE BOYD:
She said she was afraid that marriage would only widen her hips and narrow her life? Her work was her master, and she followed its commands. And you know, she loved these men but they were mere men.

FRANK BOLDEN:
She liked freedom. I asked her why she didn't stay with her husbands. She said cuz they bored her. After a certain time they bored her, so she just left, or they broke up. Because she didn't like confinement, she didn't like to be anybody's prisoner.

NARRATOR:
ZORA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY DUST TACKS ON A ROAD WAS PUBLISHED IN 1942. IT SOLD WELL. BUT IT WAS NOT THE BOOK ZORA HAD INTENDED TO PUBLISH.

VALERIE BOYD:
As World War II began, there was sort of a climate in this country um, that discouraged speaking out against the government, much like the climate we have today. She wrote some political views that her publisher said, these can not go. So those were just cut out of the book.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
The unpublished portions of her autobiography were radical. There she connects the US interests to the interests of colonizers, she is very critical of World War II, she raises the question of what's happening in Africa, Asia, and what's happening to people under colonized regimes. And of course the publishers would not publish it.

ZORA:
All around me, bitter tears are being shed over the fate of Holland, Belgium, France, and England. I must confess to being a little dry around the eyes. President Roosevelt could extend his four freedoms to some people right here in America before he takes it all abroad. He can call names across the ocean, but he evidently has not the courage to speak even softly at home. I will fight for my country, but I will not lie for her.

NARRATOR:
DURING THE WAR, ZORA OWNED A HOUSEBOAT. SHE LIKED BEING ABLE TO LIVE AND WRITE IN SOLITUDE. ON THE WATER, SHE WAS FREE FROM JIM CROW LAWS.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
one time SHE EVEN took a trip from New York to Daytona Beach. It was a very romantic lifestyle. Very fiercely independent which is the way Zora was. And she had a pretty productive time. She wrote a lot of journalistic articles during the war on that houseboat.

GORDON PATTERSON/Humanities Scholar:
Hurston, in early 1943, was interviewed, she alleged to say something to the effect that conditions in the south were not as bad as they were portrayed in the north, and was alleged to have said that Jim Crow works.

ZORA:
I was misquoted. I said that colored people in the south had their own places of amusement and social

gatherings, and had no more desire to associate with the whites than the whites had to associate with them. My stand is that the south is wrong in segregation, but the north is not guiltless. It's only a matter of degree. Harlem is a segregated neighborhood just like any in the south.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Hurston received a lot of criticism for the political positions that she took. she became so fiercely independent and so fiercely focused on what black people had accomplished without any political help that she really kind of fell out of step with where black politics were. SHE drifted very much into the Republican camp. she wrote an article for the Saturday Evening Post about Robert Taft who was considering running for the presidency on the republican ticket.

NARRATOR:
ZORA BACKED POLITICAL CANDIDATES WHO OPPOSED WELFARE. SHE THOUGHT SPECIAL TREATMENT OF MINORITIES WOULD MAKE THEM COMPLACENT. TOO MUCH DEPENDENCE UPON GOVERNMENT, SHE ARGUED, PAVES THE WAY FOR A DICTATORSHIP. OR EVEN WORSE, COMMUNISM. AND ZORA HATED COMMUNISTS. HER IDEAS KEPT HER NAME BEFORE THE PUBLIC BUT HER PUBLISHER STILL REJECTED THREE NOVELS OVER FIVE YEARS.

CARLA KAPLAN:
So she's writing a great deal however, she's finding it increasingly hard to get published. And her frustration in the 1940's about what publishers want from black writers is building to a point that it really starts to impact her own writing.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Well Seraph on the Suwanee published in 1948 I think most people feel is her poorest book. It's a novel where she really turns away from the African American environment and deals with a Florida cracker environment. The novel's mostly about white people. It's really like no other book she ever wrote.

CARLA KAPLAN:
she was trying to get away from the straight jacket black writers were in: You must write about black culture, you must have an angry social protest voice, you must write about urban poverty, your stories should ideally start with an alarm clock and a large rat. Right? I mean it's the Richard Wright trap, and she was very much trying to get away from that.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Maybe the lack of success for that book is the fact that it was published in a very short period of time after she was accused of molesting a child.

ZORA:
I am charged with meeting this boy at 4:30 every Saturday afternoon in the basement of a house where I have never been. The very time when I was in Honduras. I swear by all I hold sacred that not one word of this vile charge is true.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Absolutely false charge, it was thrown out of court, but the story of the charge got into the Baltimore newspapers, and the New York newspapers that served the African-American community, and Hurston was just devastated by this. As a matter of fact, she wrote a letter saying "I'm seriously considering suicide. I just don't see how my reputation is ever going to survive this."

ZORA:
My race has seen fit to destroy me without reason. Please do not forget that this thing was not done in the south, but in the so-called liberal north. No acquittal will persuade some people that I am innocent. I have resolved to die.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
They were able to show that the times supposedly that these acts of molestation had occurred were times that she was out of the country. The charges were thrown out. The district attorney simply said that there was not enough evidence to argue for the charge and I don't believe that she's guilty.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She went back to Florida. She never returns to New York again to live. She remains a public person. She remains a professional writer, but that incredible laughter that was a part of that public person she crafted basically from that point on is gone.

ZORA: singing
SEE YOU WHEN YOUR TROUBLES GET LIKE MINE…

CARTHEDA MANN/Belle Glade resident:
She wanted to come to some place where she could kind of just lick her wounds and feel better. And she came here she settled among people who didn't require anything of her really except to just come and have some fish with them every now and then, not BE too dressed up, but kind of relax and just be herself.

ZORA: singing
"Oh Mama Come See that crow, see how he flies…"

NARRATOR:
ZORA MOVED TO BELLEGLADE, FLORIDA AND JOINED AN INTERRACIAL GROUP, ENTERTAINING HER NEW FRIENDS WITH STORIES AND SONGS.

MARION SPEIGHT/Professor Bethune Cookman College:
She just sat there and just lovingly told stories. Everybody was just fascinated with her. She was not a beautiful woman but she would just hold you in in so that your attention was directly on her.

SARA CREECH SMITH/Okeechobee Interracial Council:
She had on a red turban and a dress that was just slinky right along with her body right down to her ankles and on those occasions she would swing into A spiritual or she would do the railroad songs and when she did that or when she was dancing, Zora went with that costume she was wearing and her whole body participated in whatever she was saying.

NARRATOR:
ZORA MOVED TO MIAMI AND LIVED ON A FRIENDS BOAT WHILE SHE STRUGGLED TO RAISE FUNDS FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPEDITION. THEN AT THE AGE OF 61 SHE TOOK A JOB AS A MAID. WHEN HER IDENTITY WAS DISCOVERED, HER EMPLOYER CALLED THE PRESS.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
Zora said, "Well I'm just here because I'm thinking about doing a novel about domestic workers and this is a good way for me to do research for my novel. As you know, I'm a famous novel and that's how I'm spending my time right now.

ZORA:
MIAMI is certainly Hurston conscience. I have offers to do some ghost writing. All I wanted was a little spending change when I took this job, but it certainly has turned out to be one slam of a publicity doodad.

VALERIE BOYD:
Magazines started to contact her and said, “Oh, we didn’t know you were still around writing why don’t you write a story for us? So she was able to use that media attention to her own advantage. So she quit working as a maid immediately after this story appeared.

NARRATOR:
BUT ZORA’S DEPICTION OF RURAL SOUTHERN LIFE WAS OUT OF STEP WITH THE TIMES. THE SOUTH WAS NOW THE FOCUS OF AN HISTORIC CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. IN 1954 THE SUPREME COURT ORDRED AN END TO SEGREGATED SCHOOLS IN AMERICA. ACROSS THE SOUTH, WHITES WERE ANGRY. AND SO WAS ZORA NEALE HURSTON.

ZORA:
The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people. How much satisfaction can I get from a court order? For somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them. If there are adequate negro schools and prepared instructors and instructions, then there’s nothing different except the presence of white people. For this reason, I regard the ruling of the United States Supreme Court as insulting rather than honoring my race.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She’s absolutely anti-segregation, she’s anti economic segregation, profoundly anti-jim crow, writes about it in many ways, but she is also anti-insult.

VALERIE BOYD:
This was a woman who had grown up in Eatonville in an all-black community and felt that she had received everything she needed and that she didn’t need to sit next to white kids in school to be as educated, as intelligent, as productive.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
Hurston was very critical of the decision because she felt it slighted black institutions which had been built behind the walls of segregation

CARLA KAPLAN:
Her view is, YOU FOLKS, white America, YOU'RE LUCKY TO GET US. And the idea that they would have to be legislated, forced, into those riches seems to her insulting and patently absurd.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
Unfortunately for Hurston, she decided to enunciate this through the Republican party (A), precisely at the time of the great boom in the Civil Rights movement in the early 1950’s. Well these people couldn’t afford to allow this kind of criticism to go unanswered. And so they scorned Hurston. They thought Hurston was hopelessly out of touch. And in some ways she was.

NARRATOR:
SHE WORKED ODD JOBS WHILE LIVING IN A TRAILER. HER QUERIES FOR BOOKS AND ARTICLES REJECTED. THEN IN 1958, SHE WAS OFFERED A JOB WRITING A COLUMN FOR A BLACK NEWSPAPER IN FT. PIERCE.

ANN WILDER:
I had never heard of Zora, but when she came to town, Marjorie called me one day and she said "This wonderful woman has moved to town she's a wonderful author. Marjorie had been in New York at the time of the Harlem Renaissance and while I don't think she ever met Zora she knew who she was and was very impressed that someone like that should be here in Ft. Pierce.

ALICE WALKER:
She had lots of friends. She did a lot of visiting. She loved to eat ice cream and she loved to talk while eating and she told stories until she couldn't and you know fished and walked around Florida and you know she had a life.

CARLA KAPLAN:
She's living in a small two-room house in Fort Pierce, writing a column for the local newspaper, She is writing novels and she couldn't get anyone to take them and there's really really angry letters to her agents. Her last years she starts having really terrible health problems. She was looked after by people in her community, neighbors and their children who loved her very much.

VALERIE BOYD:
We sometimes think of her life as this rags to riches to rags story, but the truth is she never had the riches. You know? She just she did her work. She understood the enduring value of her work and she also understood that it wasn't work that necessarily paid well. But she was okay with that as long as she got to chronicle and celebrate the lives of ordinary black folk who had influenced her from the beginning of her life in Eatonville.

NARRATOR:
ZORA DIED ON JANUARY 28TH 1960. SHE WAS SIXTY-NINE BUT THE PAPERS LISTED OTHER AGES -- FIFTY-SEVEN AND EVEN YOUNGER. SHE WAS BURIED IN AN UNMARKED GRAVE. AT THE TIME, ALL HER BOOKS WERE OUT OF PRINT.

TIFFANY PATTERSON:
She died working on a novel. When she had her stroke she was working on Herod the Great and there are letters, one of the saddest things I have seen are a series of letters at the University of Gainesville in which she is writing to publishers trying to get her novel published. And it is clear from the change in her handwriting that she is ill, and they are sad. It's a sad ending to a brilliant life.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
When she died, there was just this trunk of manuscripts and they actually at the rest home took them out and started to burn them. The local deputy sheriff said, "You know I think I remember Miss Hurston was a great writer maybe we shouldn't be burning these manuscripts" and they got a garden hose and put them out.

ALICE WALKER:
When I read Robert ROBERT HEMENWAY's biography I felt that I really needed to find her and pay my respects. It was very simple, just to pay my respects, and to leave a marker so that people would know this was someone who did great things.

NARRATOR:
FOR MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS, ZORA WAS FORGOTTEN. THEN, ONE BY ONE, HER BOOKS CAME BACK INTO PRINT. HER FILMS AND PLAYS TURNED UP IN VAULTS AND LIBRARIES, AND A NEW GENERATION OF READERS DISCOVERED THE LEGACY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON. THE WOMAN WHO HAD CONSISTENTLY

BEEN ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY IS NOW EMBRACED BY THE WORLD AS A LEADING FIGURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT:
In this revival, she triumphs. I think she's made us all stronger, bolder, and um, much more willing to experiment I think, in trusting that um, if you tell the story in your voice, others will have to learn that. If you tell it in your language, they'll have to learn that language.

ZORA: singing Uncle Budd

FRANK BOLDEN:
I guess she could have done better financially with her books but she didn't push for that she just wanted enough to live on. She was content. Now I can criticize her for that, but she didn't care, she wasn't worshipping money. She would have liked for you to have her books and read them free if necessary, she didn't care if you bought them or not. See, she was a free spirit, a free spirit.

ROBERT HEMENWAY:
I think that most of us are pretty predictable. We don't take big chances. Zora wasn't predictable. She took big chances and lived life to the fullest every single day.

HENRY LOUIS GATES:
I was listening to National Public Radio, and they were talking about their book club, and they said, "Our book for this month is 'Their Eyes Were Watching God,' and I was thinking lord lord lord lord lord, If Zora Neale ever looked down and sees that it would totally blow her mind.

ZORA: Well, that is the way things stand up to now. I can look back and see sharp shadows, highlights, and smudgy in-betweens. I have been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. That I have stood on the Peaky Mountain, wrappen in rainbows with a harp and a sword in my hands.

THE END