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Author
Bengtson, Jacqueline

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STUDENT SHOWCASE

Zora's Legacy: Community, History, and Decolonial Methodology in Central Florida

Jacqueline Bengtson

Rollins College
jbengtson@rollins.edu

Abstract

This essay is a reflective letter from myself, the author, an undergraduate anthropology student at Rollins College in Central Florida, to pioneering anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Arising out of an anthropology course on the U.S. South, I reflect on Hurston's foundational contributions to the discipline of anthropology, to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, and to my own institution, Rollins College, where Hurston directed and organized stage performances of folklore in the early 1930s. Despite Hurston's works falling into obscurity towards the end of her life and the decades following, her contributions to Southern literature and anthropology survive to this day, inspiring scholars, Eatonville residents, and students alike to pursue more decolonial methodologies in ethnographic research. I ask Hurston many of my unanswered questions about her life, relationships, fieldwork methods, and messages from her works. I end with a call for anthropology students to continue stewarding Hurston's legacy by engaging further with her work as an exemplary founder of American anthropology.

Keywords: *Zora Neale Hurston; legacy; ethnography; folklore; decolonization; history; Rollins College; Eatonville*

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I always struggled to conjure up an answer to the simple icebreaker question, "If you could have dinner with anyone famous, dead or alive, who would it be?" After an introduction to your life and legacy, I, Jacqueline Bengtson, can undoubtedly answer the icebreaker question with enthusiasm: "Zora Neale Hurston!" I was recently introduced to you from the seat of my very own anthropology class in the year 2022 and journeyed to the same streets you walked on throughout your youth and adult years in Eatonville. I read, watched, and listened to your life story from scholars and stewards of your legacy. I do not know you, Ms. Hurston, but would be honored to formally meet and learn from you.

For my anthropology class, I was charged with writing a piece on your legacy. To do so, I must first reflect on my positionality, an undertaking you prioritized within your own scholarship. You see, I hail from the White Mountains of New Hampshire, further north than the New York City you grew so fond of in your younger years as an anthropologist and writer. I am a white,

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female anthropology student at Rollins College, an institution you became close to yourself. As I mentioned previously, I only recently embarked on a personal exploration of your legacy and I am in no position to write for you, nor do I feel fully equipped to write about you, either. With a creative license for this piece, I want to write to you. Just as you were an ethnographer always seeking to be in dialogue with others – to speak with people rather than about them – I hope to carry on your tradition and begin a dialogue with you.

Our class this semester is an effort to de-essentialize the U.S. South, and your life's work is exemplary of this mission. You refused to write about southern Black folk in monolithic terms – as a people who are dominated by poverty, oppression, and hopelessness – a trope that even elite Black writers and figures of the Harlem Renaissance often perpetuated. Since your youth, you were empowered by Black collective sovereignty in Eatonville, and you sought to depict southern Black cultures as worthy of study and preservation just as they were. You changed the course of southern Black scholarship, and yet you were not respected as a powerful literary figure in your time. Twenty years after your passing, with your books collecting cobwebs on shelves, Alice Walker embarked on a pilgrimage to Eatonville to honor you with a dignified gravesite and headstone. Walker dusted your books off while injecting your legacy into the national consciousness as a foundational Black American writer who would be celebrated for generations to come.

Your legacy, Ms. Hurston, continues to inspire, change, and inform the social and collective memory of Black southern cultures and histories. Your legacy is visible throughout your ethnographic work, your literary masterpieces, your relationships, your hometown, contemporary anthropology, and within movements to preserve and celebrate Black lives, to name only a few. I write to unravel my interpretation of your life and legacy and how it manifests in a myriad of forms, including within myself, a student sitting at a desk just a few blocks away from your hometown of Eatonville. The lessons of your legacy ignited positive change in me as a scholar and person always in pursuit of social justice. I hope my interpretation of your story inspires others too. May all those who meet your legacy continuously confront their positionality, consciously act to not inflict harm, and give space for and amplify the voices of historically silenced people. In this way, we will preserve your legacy, not just on bookshelves, but in real time, through our values, actions, and service to others.

Zora the Anthropologist

As an aspiring anthropologist, I am encouraged by your tenacity as a writer who boldly depicted the realities of southern Black experiences and claimed your position within a discipline ruled by men and embedded in white hegemony. Your research methods, which you described as "formalized curiosity," and your unique literary approach to research are central aspects of your legacy (Hurston 2006, 143). Your rigorous study under "Papa Franz" at Barnard College informed your approach as an ethnographer who balanced different commitments within your fieldwork (Hurston 2006, 143). You addressed your positionality through understanding your fieldwork communities, maintaining what you called a "delicate balance" of anthropologist and participant (Hurston 2006, 146). When you were tasked by Boas to collect folklore in the South,

you knew exactly where to go. You went back to Eatonville, the town you regarded as home. It took rapport building to get past the community's initial suspicion of your return and project. You chose Eatonville to collect Black folklore precisely because it was your hometown. With your emic perspective, you were best equipped to collect data from a place of both distance and respect.

Your positionality as a "native ethnographer" required you to balance differing demands. You found yourself identifying with your communities of study with a "willingness to participate in their reality" (Mikell 1983, 30). At the same time, your Boasian anthropological training reminded you of your need to maintain an "intellectual separation" from your participants in order to "objectively" depict their lives (Mikell 1983). In your research on Black folklore beyond Eatonville, you engaged with hoodoo, the Haitian practice of sympathetic magic, in New Orleans. Would it be safe to say that the lines of anthropologist and participant became blurred? You took this vibrant religion seriously as an academic, but it was not just an intellectual exercise because you, too, "believed in the power of hoodoo culture" (Pollard 2008, 1:25:00). It took great effort for you to build a rapport with the hoodoo practitioners of New Orleans, especially because of their suspicion of you and the illegality of their religious practice at the time. Your ability to cultivate relationships of trust, even with untrusting communities, speaks to your ethical commitment to respecting people above all else.

Anthropology continues to reify itself in the academy, and scholars in the discipline reject that research can conclude pure objective truths. You were trained to collect unbiased and objective data, but you naturally found subjective truths from your personal experiences. This phenomenon resonated with me. You were a scholar, but also a multi-dimensional human with emotions and aspirations of your own. Thus, feelings and connections inspired and informed your work. As I have conducted fieldwork during my undergraduate career, I know that my research was, and frankly, could never be purely objective. The studies I chose to embark on initially stemmed from my own personal curiosity about a topic and people i.e., the politics of Hindu representation in central Florida. As the discipline moves forward, I believe that your example should continue to teach scholars about ethical methodologies in research as opposed to finding pure objectivity.

Collecting Black cultural expression through folk music and storytelling demonstrates again how adept an anthropologist you were. You recorded folk songs in Eatonville to understand diverse aspects of Black musical traditions. Maya Angelou explains that you wanted to celebrate and comprehensively understand how blues singers from different places had diverse sounds (Pollard 2008, 07:05). Your "formalized curiosity" shined through the passions driving your work. Additionally, in your efforts to advance a feminist tradition, your depictions of women's lives were a stark contrast to the stereotypes of the oppressed Black woman, specifically when you engaged with the gendered struggles of women in Jamaica (Mikell 1983, 32). Your works and your legacy reveal how you were invested in depicting the full and diverse realities of Black life, navigating between your complex positionality as your roles changed.

Zora The Literary Genius

Ms. Hurston, your legacy lies not solely within the anthropological tradition. You are also revered as a literary genius. Before there was anthropology, there were books that gave you "more pleasure than clothes" (Pollard 2008, 07:30). One of your biographers, Valerie Boyd, attests that you were a "dreamer" of where you could go and what you "could tell" (Pollard 2008). And the stories you told! My anthropology class admired your writing and its capacity to invoke emotions such as laughter with vivid cultural imagery. In *Mules and Men*, you narrated cultural expressions with such clarity, depicting Polk County's evening song and dance community events, the story of Young and Botts, and the Toe-Party with such vividness that we truly felt we were there with you at these events.

Above all, you utilized your "Black pen" and anthropological training to valorize Black life and language as a personal and political commitment, despite pushback and criticism (James and Tynes 2020, 45:25). After studying in New York City, you became acquainted with influential Black writers, artists, and activists like Langston Hughes and Dr. Alain LeRoy Locke, and you developed relationships with white patrons like Fannie Hurst, a literary contest judge, and your longest enduring relationship with Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, who simultaneously aided and hindered your scholarly pursuits. I learned that your use of Black English (BE) frustrated Black elite writers who worked to distance themselves from stigmas associated with southern Black cultural expression. Just as you navigated complex relationships within your ethnographies, your writing shows how you moved through and between both white and Black spaces.

You stood out as a powerful Black female voice never succumbing to being seen as "tragically colored" (Walker 1975, 88). Your work pushed against the notion that southern Black women are poor, oppressed, and helpless by telling stories of Black women who are "willing, contributing partners, despite slavery, historical oppression, and the exploitation of colonialism" (Mikell 1983, 32). You justly depict Black female voices as agentive, something that both white and elite Black intellectuals of the day had obscured.

Scholars remember you as an activist against Jim Crow, taking a stance out of alignment with Civil Rights agendas. This perspective could be attributed to your childhood in Eatonville, the first Black-governed municipality in the U.S. I read that you grew up with your father as a prominent Black leader, three-time elected mayor of Eatonville who facilitated the drafting of the city's laws and government. You spent between six and eight years at the city's all-Black Hungerford School and grew in your education at the historically Black Howard University. Your experiences growing up within empowered and sovereign Black spaces influenced and informed your political commitment to Black independence. You found pride in building your education surrounded and supported by all-Black communities, without the need for integration (Pollard 2008, 1:14:09).

Still, you had to rely on relationships with white patrons to conduct your fieldwork. As you said yourself, you had a "curious" relationship with "Godmother," your white patron, R. Osgood Mason. She supported your work but imposed specific stipulations and dictated what would be left out or altered before publication. She "wrapped you in love" when you conformed to white

ways of living on Park Avenue in New York City during the 1920s and 30s (Hurston 2006, 145). Having partaken in odd jobs to make ends meet throughout your life, Godmother gave you a salary, and with that, you could do what you loved – write Black stories. I think about the nuances of your relationship here, pondering how she aided and inhibited your fieldwork and writing. Even without the restrictions imposed by Godmother, however, you struggled for publishers to pick up your work later in life. In the 1940s, publishers would only accept depictions of Black victimhood, which you always refused to write.

Dialogue with Eatonville Folklore

Ms. Hurston, your ethnographic work, *Mules and Men*, does not resemble the analytical literature created by anthropologists today. I often read ethnographic analyses written as journal articles and books, delineating a series of events in fieldwork, and analytically interpreting findings. You were different. At Joe Clark's store at the Center of Eatonville, you sat with residents on the front porch and recounted the folktales of their lives, where your interdisciplinary voice did not analyze, interpret, or define their folklore. This approach testifies to the fact that these "tellin' lies," as they called them, have varying and multivalent meanings, changing and being reinterpreted over time. You were there to preserve their folklore, not to define it or give it a singular meaning.

One story that deeply resonated with me was "How the negroes got their freedom" from *Mules and Men* (2008 [1935], 80–83). This story aligns with the characters and themes within other folktales in the book. John and Ole Massa, his master, have a quasi-companion relationship. They ride a horse and mule side-by-side, and the master trusts his slave John, even when he proclaims to another plantation owner that he can tell fortunes. Ole Massa trusts John so much that he bets his plantation against the other owner if John could not prove to tell fortunes. When John guesses there to be a Racoon under the plantation owners' washpot, Ole Massa grants him his freedom. Ole Massa gets fooled again when attempting to lynch John after he was caught throwing a ball in his absence. John prays to God to send lightning if he were to die. Then, Jack, John's friend, lights a match to the tree, which frightens Ole Massa, who now believes John's fortune-telling abilities. He frantically flees the plantation.

Like other folktales, here too the slave outwits the master to gain freedom from slavery and subjugation. To me, Ms. Hurston, this lie creates meaning through multiple aspects. It evokes humor for the listener. I can only imagine the laughter you heard from Joe Wiley and other Black folks there with you when you documented it. I interpret this folktale to represent sensibilities of Black empowerment and agency against their white oppressors. I can envision this tale building collective solidarity between Black folk engaged in its retelling from their current and ancestral traumas. After engaging with your work, I see how you wrote value into stories as a vehicle for preserving and valorizing Black history. John and Jack, just like you, were never defined by victimhood, but were agents of their own freedom. Concluding with "that's how come" Black folks "found their freedom today" demonstrates how this folktale tells Black history reflexively while demonstrating the agency they have always possessed (Hurston 2008, 83).

I see your legacy in this folktale, Ms. Hurston. While the lie might not be true, does it need to be a fact to hold significance? This reminds me of the common interpretation of you as an "unreliable narrator."[1] Just as you write ethnographies to preserve histories without revealing explicit interpretations, perhaps scholars of your legacy should do the same with you. While you may not have been transparent about your birthplace in Alabama, perhaps you did not see the significance of recounting an "accurate" account of your detailed life? Stewards of your legacy today honor you for how you loved your work of documenting the realities and cultural histories of Black lives. Your youth in Eatonville, a town with collective Black autonomy, shaped every aspect of your research and writing. What does it matter if you were not born there?

Your Lasting Impacts in Anthropology, Florida, and Rollins College

Your work as an ethnographer about a century ago informs the current decolonization efforts within anthropology. The coloniality of anthropology is not a phenomenon of the past. It is clear that hegemonic Eurocentric influences are embedded within the ethnographic method. It is deeply colonial for anthropologists to enter a community and attempt to extract its reality. But it was only in the 1980s that some anthropologists rejected finding "objective truths" as a positivist form of knowledge production. Today, decolonial theory works to include subjects of the research as key actors in a more participatory approach, rewriting histories to tell the stories of the marginalized, and ensuring findings are more accessible to a wider audience.

Your approach to ethnography exemplifies a decolonial methodology because you prioritized telling community stories over your own interpretation. You immersed yourself through fieldwork in the cultures of your research, and you actively engaged your participants in the research process. While you were trained in the Boasian tradition aiming for pure objectivity, I wonder if you ever sought objectivity in the communities of your fieldwork? Your practices align with and foretell the ongoing movement in anthropology to dismantle the colonial subject/object research relationship. You were a chameleon, flowing in and out of white and Black spaces, lifting up Black life while dismantling monoliths of southern Blackness. Additionally, your charisma and tenacity supported rapport building so much that you found yourself not just a participant of, but somewhat belonging to communities in Eatonville and New Orleans.

In addition, you were a pioneer in disseminating your research to reach a greater number of people through theater and music. In the 1940s, when you moved to Belle Glade and joined an interreligious club, you disseminated your life's work through stories and songs. You also discovered the value of disseminating your work in the form of theater early on in your career, beginning this project by writing and performing on voodoo culture with Langston Hughes, who once also worked with Godmother, Ms. Mason, as his patron. You believed that theater would effectively represent Black lived experiences through acting, singing, and dancing. When Godmother financed your first play, you insisted that "our drama must be like us or it does not exist" (Pollard 2008, 31:24-27). Black cultural expression would not be confined just to books, because you brought it to life.

[1] Scott French, Eatonville Walking Tour, January 17, 2022.

At Rollins College, you continued disseminating folklore through plays at the collegiate level, instilling your legacy within our campus community. You initiated a patronage relationship with Edwin Grover, the Professor of Books at the college, to develop "a Black folk theater" (O'Sullivan Jr. and Lane 1991, 130). Grover connected you to Robert Wunsch, who had already been trying to find ways to teach his students about Black folklore (Figure 1). When you were able to perform, after a year of rehearsals and planning in the face of Winter Park's conservatism, your play, *From Sun to Sun*, was a huge success. You performed again with a community theater, which brought you to perform in a major theater in the winter of 1933. You grew fond of my soon-to-be alma mater, attributing your theater experiences at the college to the revival of your literary career and dedicating your next book to Grover.

Winter Park, Florida,
October 29, 1932.

Dr. Hamilton Holt,
Winter Park, Florida.

Dear Dr. Holt,

I hope to begin among the students at Rollins during the current school year a genuine interest in American folk material, particularly in Florida lore; for I believe that out of such an interest can come great creative impulses, impulses to write drama of the people. There is no reason why we cannot develop in Winter Park a native theatre that will challenge the attention of the whole country.

I can imagine, without difficulty, the students gathering the folk material, writing one-act plays out of the fullness of this experience, reading these plays aloud to the audiences of discriminating people, presenting the best of these dramas in the Annie Russell Theatre.

I have set as my objective for the year the breaking of the ground, as it were: to make the students sensitive to the lyric beauty of swamp and citrus grove, sense the pageantry of the Ponce de Leon explorations, find the drama in the life of fisherfolk and sponge divers and cowboys, sense the tragedy and comedy of the boom days, revivify the old days of the missions and fortresses--in a word, to get the students to "dip their nets where they are."

I can think of no better way to introduce the students to the honest-to-the-soil material at their own doorsteps than to present to them in a program of folk songs and dancers a group of Eatonville negroes, headed by Zora Hurston. Zora, a national authority on negro ways, has won an enviable place for herself in American dramatics. Last year she presented a company of negroes in the John Golden Theatre and elicited the unstinted praise of the leading critics. It is this same program of folk material that I am eager for the students and townspeople to see in our own recreation hall, if arrangements can be made.

May I add that the program is similar to that given by the Fiske Jubilee Singers and those given by other negro groups that have toured the country, nothing pretentious, just the heart and soul of the negro in song and dance and pantomime.

I am enclosing a program of the concert given in the John Golden Theatre, also interesting information about Zora Hurston, the director.

May I hear from you at your convenience. I hope you will be able to grant us permission to present on our campus a program of folk material as indigenous to the Florida soil as are the moss-bearded oak trees. I know it will be an inspiration to the students.

Very sincerely,

W.R.Wunsch

W.R. Wunsch,
Delta Rho Gamma House,
Winter Park, Florida.

Figure 1. Letter from Robert Wunsch to Dr. Hamilton Holt regarding the invitation of Zora Neale Hurston to perform folklore on the stage at Rollins College
(Photo by author, courtesy Olin Library, Rollins College)

You remain deeply loved and cherished by generations of Eatonville residents. In January of 1990, the Zora Neale Hurston Festival was established and continues to be celebrated annually. Famous literary figures come to honor you. Others come on a pilgrimage to find you, attesting to how your life's mission continues to inspire generations. The first event "raised funds to preserve its histories and environs" along with an academic conference, book sales, as well as airing recorded tapes of your collected folklore and song (Bolles 1990, 16). In June of 2022, right outside your museum in Eatonville, this festival dedicated to you will proudly complete 32 years.

Your example stretches beyond Eatonville into the greater Orlando community. The other day, I visited the museum at Hannibal Square Heritage Center (HSHC), a participatory preservation effort established by the historic Black community of Hannibal Square in Winter Park. Their non-profit showcases the histories and stories of their Black community. I was fortunate, Ms. Hurston, to speak with Fairolyn Livingston, a leader in community archival projects at HSHC. In our discussion of Black history in the region, your legacy surfaced in the conversation. Just like you, Fairolyn went to the Hungerford School of Eatonville, established a connection with Rollins College, and now works to preserve the Black stories of her community, following in your footsteps. Fairolyn, too, wishes she could have the honor of meeting you.

Your life inspires contemporary students of anthropology to follow your mission and educate audiences throughout the nation. Anthropology PhD candidates Alyssa James and Brendane Tynes invoke your legacy in their podcast *Zora's Daughters*, which educates viewers on Black culture and to confront racism. They speak to your legacy, specifically your later years and burial, as a form of misogynoir (James and Tynes 2020). You were not honored for the powerful literary figure that you were. But your story compels them to question what it means to love a "Black woman in and out of death," to love you and your legacy as best as they – and we – can now and in the future (James and Tynes 2020, 45:25).

Figure 2. Center of Eatonville, February 2021 (Photo by author)

My Words to You

Although you were subject to erasure and your work was pushed into obscurity, I am inspired to join efforts in anthropology to preserve your legacy. I will be leaving the Winter Park area upon graduation, but I have developed a deep affinity for this area. I have been here for four years, only to learn in my final semester how close you have been to me all along. While I studied late hours in the Olin Library, your work and life were preserved right below me in the archives. While I took classes at the Hannibal Square Heritage Center, your story was enshrined in the exhibit, your soul's mission scaffolding the building. While I walked the brick paths of our campus, I would pass the stone honoring your memory countless times, never realizing it until now (Figure 3). But I met you for the first time, Ms. Hurston, on a walking tour of Eatonville. That day I walked the paths that separate majority-white Maitland from historically Black Eatonville and entered your home, a place that nurtured your strength and talent.

Figure 3. Memorial stone, Rollins College (Photo by Hannah Carlan; reproduced with permission)

Figure 4. Hurston home historical marker, Eatonville (Photo by Author)

The walking tour, led by Orlando historian Scott French and John Beecham, a member of the Preserve Eatonville Commission, invoked your legacy by taking us to the plot of land where you grew up, the place where Joe Clark's store stood, and even to the Hungerford School where you were a student. It was profound to read about your bold and passionate life, but it was surreal to walk the same streets that you did when you conducted your ethnographic fieldwork. As committed stewards, Ms. Hurston, there are efforts to maintain your legacy in Eatonville proper. Mr. John Beecham regretfully shared that while Eatonville has a rich history, its buildings and heritage have been deteriorating. For example, The Thomas House, one of the first church meeting houses, is all boarded up and unkempt and so is Club Eaton, a historic musical venue, with cobwebs collecting at the main window (Figure 5). Paradoxically, you are featured in the front of Club Eaton in two paintings, tapestries of you alongside influential Black artists and leaders. John has been encouraging the mayor to invest in saving these spaces, but there needs to be greater mobilization to incentivize the mayor to act. Your house and Joe Clark's store – the site of so many of your folktales in *Mules and Men* – are no longer there, but it is so important to maintain the buildings that are still standing.

Figure 5. Zora Neale Hurston honored among powerful Black figures. Downtown Eatonville. (Photo by author)

I realized how close you are to me only after visiting the Rollins Archives. Your legacy directly touched me when I learned about your work with the school to get students engaged with Black folklore through theater. The archival record at the school values your commitment to supporting the liberal arts, too. In our class, we pondered why we had not heard about the theatrical performances you directed here in the 1930s. We were inspired to ask the theater department if they would ever bring back your plays again, to continue to spread your work to a greater audience. I hope you think fondly of the memories and relationships you made at Rollins. Beyond Rollins, I'm encouraged by the efforts of young anthropologists to preserve your legacy as a founding figure of American anthropology, and I hope to do the same by sharing your life and stories with my peers.

Ms. Hurston, thank you for engaging with me in my personal exploration of your life and legacy. I feel called on to embark on my own pilgrimage to find you, or perhaps I already have. I hope, before I part ways with our mutual friend, Rollins College, for a while, I will be able to visit you at your gravesite and honor you in my own personal way. There I can give you this letter, so we can officially begin our open-ended dialogue.

Sincerely,
Jacqueline Bengtson
Rollins College
Winter Park, FL

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