

## PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

### ZORA NEALE HURSTON

folklorist, novelist, anthropologist, academic

*"It's a funny thing, the less people have to live for, the less nerve they have to risk losing nothing."*

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Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

#### Background Information

Born January 7, 1891; Died January 28, 1960

Zora Hurston was born on in Notasulga, Alabama. She was the daughter of two former slaves and was raised in the first incorporated all-Black town in the US. Hurston joined a traveling theater company at 16 and moved to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that embraced and celebrated Black culture free from White narratives or stereotypes. Hurston studied at Howard University and studied anthropology under Franz Boas at Barnard College, graduating as the first Black female student ever.<sup>1</sup>

#### Hurston's Resistance

Hurston's writing portrayed a southern, working class Black narrative, which was a departure from the middle class narrative most authors of the Harlem Renaissance focused on. Hurston's most famous piece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, highlighted the southern Black experience of womanhood and feminism. Several of her books and poems were foundational texts for some of the most prominent civil rights figures. Today, Hurston's literature is a critical piece of college and university curricula. Hurston helped unpack dominant White narratives against Black culture and excellence.

Hurston faced false molestation charges, which severely damaged her reputation and mental health. Although the child in question confessed that the allegation was false, the district attorney's office allowed the case to continue. Attorneys neglected to dismiss the charges for months.<sup>2</sup> Hurston continued to write, but publishing companies would not work with her.<sup>3</sup>

#### Achievements

Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, helped revive Hurston's name. Walker helped Hurston rightfully claim her title as an influential civil rights activist. Hurston is now accredited as an influential writer and social change catalyst.

<sup>1</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. Zora Neale Hurston: American Author. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zora-Neale-Hurston>

<sup>2</sup> Prison Culture. "Prison Culture " When Zora Neale Hurston Was Falsely Accused of Child Molestation..." Prison Culture , March 31, 2013. <https://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2013/03/31/when-zora-neale-hurston-was-falsely-accused-of-child-molestation/>.

<sup>3</sup> Blumenthal, Ralph. "Party for Zora Neale Hurston, Obscure No More." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 15, 2002. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/15/books/party-for-zora-neale-hurston-obscure-no-more.html>.

### Essential Questions

1. Hurston uniquely wrote about the southern, working class Black experiences and culture within the Harlem Renaissance, which was different than the urban, middle class voice of other prominent Black authors. Why was it important that Hurston offer a different perspective within the Harlem Renaissance that reached beyond urban environments?
  
2. Hurston struggled to continue her work after she was falsely accused of a crime. Who can you think of who has suffered a similar fate in today's society?
  
3. *"It's a funny thing, the less people have to live for, the less nerve they have to risk losing nothing."*
  - a. What is Hurston's suggesting in this statement. Do you agree with this position? Why or why not?