

Every Tongue Got to Confess: Zora Neale Hurston as Afrofuturist

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Zora Neale Hurston's well-known black speculative writing and her approaches to that writing situates her in the Afrofuturist practice as someone working to recover lost and hidden traditions. Hurston's use of oral storytelling challenges our western notions of how stories are documented and preserved, and the content of the oral histories she collected and wrote about often contained hidden and erased traditions such as conjure and hoodoo. Her work demonstrates how Afrofuturism serves as a recovery project that allows us to imagine a future that includes and is informed by traditions and practices that were lost, hidden, or erased by white, western modernity. Further, Hurston's work demonstrates Sankofa, which is considered an important practice and element of Afrofuturist work. To understand Hurston's influence on the black speculative practice and engagement in Afrofuturist practice, we must first understand the period she was working within—the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance was the time Hurston began to rise to prominence. During this time, she worked with renowned creators and thinkers like Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes. However, her anthropological studies and work was influenced by her mentor Franz Boas who she studied with at Barnard College. According to Carla Kaplan in the introduction to *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, Boas had “exacting standards for precise transcription” and “encouraged scientific, uncensored publication, yet, ironically, he also wanted Hurston to contextualize the stories and provide a sense of ‘the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro’...” (Kaplan xxvii). Thus, Boas encouraged a traditional, western, anthropological approach in which the life of “the other” had to be contextualized and interpreted by the collector of that history, which Hurston refused to do in her collection of folktales. Further, as a black woman sharing the culture and lives of black people as other Harlem Renaissance creators were doing during the time, her work was often dismissed for being “too simple” by black men of the Renaissance. Therefore, her ability and insistence on engaging in the recovery practice she underwent resisted and challenged both patriarchal and western notions of how black life should be presented. In this resistance and challenging of “traditional” practices, Hurston engages in the Afrofuturist concepts of Sankofa and of the recovery of lost, hidden, or erased black cultural practices.

To understand how Hurston engages in these Afrofuturist practices, we can look to her posthumously published oral history project, *Every Tongue Got to Confess*. Although not published until 2001, the work contains oral histories collected in the 1920s of everyday southern black folks to showcase the layers within black southern vernacular. This collection of folktales contains fifteen sections ranging from tales about God to tales about talking animals, witches, haunts, and fools. In these recorded tales, Hurston takes care to maintain the grammar and spelling necessary to replicate the oral story told to her. In making the effort to change spelling and grammar rules to match their oral telling, Hurston breaks away from traditional western grammar and spelling rules that are often necessary for manuscript publication. In the foreword written by John Edgar Wideman, they explain that in this collecting and maintaining of oral

storytelling of folktales that, “She’s updating by looking backward, forward, all around, the continuous presence in America of an Africanized language that’s still spoken, still going strong today” (Wideman xviii). In other words, Hurston’s collecting of spoken folktales not only recovers a language that is overlooked or erased as a legitimate form of storytelling and knowledge-making but this work emphasizes that these traditions still exist today; thus, she enacts a form of Sankofa in her ability to look into the past, consider what those stories meant for her in her present, and allows us now to speculate about a future the embraces these knowledge-making and storytelling forms and practices.

While *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, is one of the more recent posthumous releases of Hurston’s, her two other folktale books also work toward the recovery project goal of the Afrofuturist practice. Similarly, other works by Hurston, such as her famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, engage in both the recovery project of lost and hidden traditions and epistemologies while simultaneously considering how discussion of the past in the present moment can help us imagine a future centering black people and black culture. This recovery of history and simultaneous enactment of Sankofa can be seen through the fact that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins where it ends, and that the story being told is set in the past while explaining a rich history of the main character, Janie Crawford. However, Hurston pushes this agenda further by questioning traditional gender roles in the writing of a black woman in a political position of power in the same novel. Thus, Hurston demonstrated an early understanding of what we see today as an Afrofuturist feminist practice where black women imagine a liberated future for all black women.

Zora Neale Hurston remains a central figure in the Afrofuturist practice of recovery and engagement with the chronopolitical act of Sankofa as a means of generating knowledge and re-centering practices brought over from Africa or created and established during enslavement by black people. Finally, her questioning of gender roles in her fiction and focus on black women’s stories as well as men’s in her folktale collections is considered an early form of the feminist Afrofuturist practice where black women imagine a future for one another that destabilizes patriarchal structures. Overall, her careful display of black southern vernacular and her choices to recast folktales as well as to use those folktales and histories to influence her fiction are what make Zora Neale Hurston influential in the black speculative practice and today’s understandings of Afrofuturism.

Works Cited

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