

Zora Neale Hurston: The First Loud Voice of Black Feminism

Abstract

Black feminism is a relatively new term in literary and political circles, dating to 1973. Fifty years earlier, Zora Neale Hurston (Zora) was writing on the issues of intersectionality in her fiction novels and stories, and her autobiographical works. I argue that Zora's racial pride and representative voice for Black women establishes her. Zora highlighted the themes of frustration for Black women while celebrating racial pride. She gave voice to the voiceless, leaving a legacy that encouraged women in the development of Black feminism. Her message was that Black women face trifold subjugation, including racial, gender-based, and social class oppression, the very ideals of Black feminism. An inspiration to many female African American authors of the 20th century, Zora's ideas molded the works of the first self-labeled Black feminists. I explore this connection, examining Zora's ideology in her own works, and the work of Alice Walker, an early Black feminist author who writes prolifically on Zora as her largest inspiration. I investigate Katie Cannon's Black feminist theory and her exploration of Zora in connection with the pillars of Black feminism. I conclude by expressing that Zora wrote at a time when Black women's struggles were hard to express publicly, and she worked to give herself and those like her a voice, inspiring the later existence of a more cohesive fight to end oppression on all counts for women of color in America.

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston was an activist and a writer from 1925 to 1952. She took the political message of her own writing to a new level by showing honest depictions of Southern life for women of color. Without an overtly political agenda, she focused on "the problem[s] of [being a] woman in a patriarchal society" through her writing (Beaulieu 64). She exemplified the problems Black women face when aiming to succeed in male societal roles — as writers, leaders, or career-driven individuals (64). She was a career woman who stood for a woman's right to choose themselves over a husband, and a career over motherhood or "domestication" (65). She not only lived her life holding herself to this standard, but she wrote novels depicting inspiring female characters, providing an example for all readers of what a Black woman can do in America.

Zora's unique voice and her ethos are separated out from the women of her time, cementing her voice as her legacy. "No maternal ancestor fit this new black feminist ideal quite as neatly as Hurston, whose prose brimmed with the authentic black female language and traditional black female activities" — Zora can be identified as a main inspiration for the black feminist movement, by the key players of the movement, including bell hooks, Alice Walker, Cheryl Wall, Patricia Hill Collins, Katie Canon, and Mary Helen Washington (DuCille, 7).

Zora presented a different perspective on race in her writing: she valued Black culture and encouraged identity within that, by speaking out and calling attention to "Blackness" in Southern culture, something women writers had yet to achieve (75).

Black Feminism: An Introduction

Black feminism can be characterized as a fight against intersectionality — a fight for race, gender, and class issues simultaneously (Beaulieu 68). The movement recognizes that Black women are never oppressed on only one of these issues, but always all three, and therefore the movement fights for all three to end by always connecting them, just as they are always connected against Black women. But more than this, Black feminists are endeavoring to be seen as individuals, not any of the stereotypes and ignorant judgements attached to racism, sexism, and classism. “I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womaness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable,” (Lorde, 3).

Zora: A Biography

Zora grew up in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida. Her father was a preacher who made a decent income, and her mother was an educated, motivating woman who inspired Zora to be independent and “jump at de sun” — set high goals for herself and her life (Litwin 6). Growing up in an all-black town in relative comfort, Zora did not experience racism or neglect until her mother’s death, when Zora was eleven years old, when she was removed from school. After working odd jobs, including a maid position for an actress in a traveling show, she moved up North and returned to school in Baltimore, Maryland, lying about her age by ten years in order to be admitted at age 26.

She continued her education at Barnard College, the first female student of color to study at the school (Litwin 18). She was mentored in anthropology by the notable Franz Boas, who is considered the father of modern anthropology. In many ways, Zora was the first daughter of anthropology, as she took his methods of investigation into communities and the psychology behind human culture and applied them to a new realm of the population: rural southern Black living. She investigated the folklore of the people she grew up with, and in particular, gave credence to black women like her awe-inspiring mother in a way that was not seen in any recorded field notes in anthropology, or literature as a whole, up to that point.

Political Obstacles in the Harlem Renaissance

In the height of the Harlem Renaissance, a time when African American music, literature, and art was respected by the greater American culture, Zora was a popular novelist. The Harlem Renaissance, named for the cultural rebirth of African Americans which was centralized in Harlem, New York City, gave hope to African Americans in the 1920s. Those outside of the African American community were listening to people of color telling their stories through all artistic mediums.

Black women did not often have a place in this male-dominated cultural revolution. The leaders of the movement, including Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and Countee Cullen, were all men, and the works of the time that were popular and regarded well by both the Black population and the white population were written by these and other male authors (Vincent 204). This preference for black male works stemmed from the politics of respectability of the time period. The face of the Harlem Renaissance needed to be taken seriously by the white community in order to ensure that the change, the equality, that Black people were fighting for would be seen as

necessary. The white men that need convincing are just that — men. Women didn't work as the face of this revolution because it wasn't women who the Harlem Renaissance needed support of, it was those who had the power, which were white men. The face of the movement needed to be men with northern American accents, who dressed in suits like white men did, and who were in support of racial uplift, which encouraged Black people to act like white people. Zora in particular did not meet these expectations, as a Southern, outspoken woman against racial uplift.

In a letter to the Orlando Sentinel newspaper, Hurston wrote, “Ethical and cultural desegregation. It is a contradiction in terms to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association.” Zora felt that Black communities and cultural contributions should not be lost to the agenda of racial uplift, even if that means preserving a type of ignorance by allowing rural, poor Black communities to thrive regardless of the educational boom Zora equally supported for Black people.

Zora's Ideology

Zora published her essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me” in 1928. “Colored Me” is a personal testimony to her emotions surrounding her color, and what her color means to her. It is thought to be the definitive authority on Zora's ideology, “her core message” in her writing (Cannon 9). Her message can be summarized in this paragraph that highlights her feelings towards her own color:

“But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. 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 but about it. Even in the helter skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world. I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Zora's true ideology can be found in her assessment that she is not “tragically colored”, and the other sentiments made in this essay. Mary Helen Washington believed that Zora “saw black lives as psychologically-integral — not mutilated half-lives, stunted by the effects of racism and poverty. She simply could not depict blacks as defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized, because she did not experience black people or herself that way” (Washington 7).

She did not write to preach, she wrote to tell human stories. She was always writing about herself and what she knew, from personal experiences in the South as a southerner and as an anthropological researcher of the Black southern culture. Zora wrote her characters and her books with the same feelings and components that made her who she was — inseparable parts woman, Black, and of a low economic class. She saw her writing as “uncovering herself and who she was with what she knew”, and with the exception of honest explorative essays like “Colored Me”, it is likely that she didn't formally conceptualize any greater ideology for herself (Cannon 8).

Conclusion

Zora's writing depicts a regular struggle for African Americans, for respect from outsiders to their culture and to move on from their past without losing their identity. Zora is an example of how to find one's own identity in a layered list of social and cultural identities, as a Southern American Black woman in the Harlem Renaissance. She lived a fruitful life, and experienced a time unlike any other for social change and civil rights, and she contributed to that movement in a way no one else ever had. She represents a singular contribution — her remarkable voice — in a time when women had limited voice, and women of color limited still. She paved the way for Black feminism, a lasting influence that inspired the leaders that solidified a movement — her legacy is represented in the successes of Walker, Washington, hooks, Collins, Hull, and those whom they have inspired. Zora established her voice as assertive and trustworthy, her tone as active yet not lecturing, and her readers responded, and continue to respond. Zora established her legacy in the voice she gave Black women through her writing, and in herself, the living example of that voice.

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