



*A Zora Neale  
Hurston Forum:  
Womanism,  
Feminism  
and Issues  
of Gender*

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# “A Room of Her Own”

Feminism, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is the “Advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of equality of the sexes)”

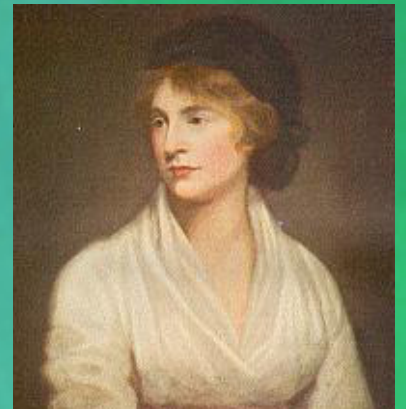
(*OED online*)

Awareness of the rights of women in the West has a long history, beginning as early as the late 1300s, when Venetian poet Christine de Pizan championed women’s right to education. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, de Pizan writes that men should no longer prevent women from being educated. When her male critics claimed that education would cause immorality, she argued, “you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong” (Bizzell 545).



crm.revues.org

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* also advocated in favor of women’s equality in education. In *A Vindication*, she writes that she feels “a profound conviction that the neglected education of [women] is the grand source of [their] misery.” Women “are rendered weak and wretched” by their daily lives (7). According to Wollstonecraft, in a state of true freedom, men and women should have equal rights. She criticizes men for considering women as “females” rather than as “human creatures” and calls for “JUSTICE for one half of the human race” (6).



www25.uua.org

When women gained the vote in 1920, the women’s movement continued to work for changes in people’s behaviors, attitudes, and unequal laws. Even so, in 1931, Virginia Woolf feels the need for more change and writes about her desire to kill “the angel in the house,” that is, the Victorian dutiful woman who places others’ needs ahead of her own. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf describes this woman:

[The Angel] was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . . in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. (1385)



ebooks.adelaide.edu.au

In *Room of Her Own* (1929), Woolf writes about the difficulties of suppressing the inner voice of the “angel” and becoming a female writer. In order to do so, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

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# “No Room of Her Own”

Unfortunately, not all women in American history had the luxury of owning or even claiming their own space. In response to Woolf’s call for “a room of her own,” Alice Walker asks: “What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself?” (235). Walker points out the obvious historical reality: black slave women certainly didn’t have rooms of their own. Furthermore, black women’s freedom was not regarded as a consideration by the early women’s movements. Even Phillis Wheatley, a “highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry”—like other slave women—had to overcome impediments, in extreme cases, such as “chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one’s body by someone else, submission to an alien religion, “ in order to create. Walker claims that a slave artist, such as Wheatley, “must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (235).

Black women were not part of 19th and 20th century organized women’s movements. In fact, they “had a troubled relationship” to the larger rubric ‘feminist,’” according to scholar Ann DuCille (“On Canons” 29). In the 19th century, when the women’s movement referred to itself in the singular as “a woman’s rights movement”—emphasizing “a sense of self and sisterhood in female body, mind, and spirit”—it was not referring to black women. The leaders of the women’s movement were all white and by “sisterhood,” they referred only to white middle-class women. DuCille explains that these white women were narrow-minded in their feminism: “The trouble stems in part from the history of elitism and exclusion that attends the development of feminism as a social and intellectual movement in the United States” (29). Early white feminist leaders tended to exclude from their circles not only black women but also lower-class, immigrant, and Native American women. DuCille points out:

Also ironic is the fact that black women, who were often relegated to the margins of the woman’s movement, and at times completely excluded from it, arguably had a keener sense of gender, as well as racial, inequality; a more nuanced, sun-up-to-sun-down, fieldhand and household experience of the sexual division of labor; and a longer and more complex history of what could be called feminist activism. (30)

Even though black women were disadvantaged not only by race but by gender, they still found the courage to speak out. Without possessing rooms of their own, the following 19th-century women found the means to express themselves:

**Terry Prince** (c. 1724-1821) is best known for her poem “Bars Fight” (1746), which describes an Indian raid in Deerfield, Massachusetts. She married an older freed slave, Bijah Prince, who purchased her freedom. Their home became a center for civil rights, and Terry Prince often spoke out for women’s rights. She appealed directly to the governor of Vermont and his council when a powerful white man was harassing her; argued her case before the U.S. Supreme Court over a land dispute; and appealed to the trustees of Williams College, requesting that they admit her son to the school regardless of his race.

**Maria Stewart** (1803-79) was a free black woman, who became an advocate for equal rights. In Boston in 1832, she was the first black woman to make a public speech about women’s rights and declaring: “The country is crying out for liberty and equality.” William Lloyd Garrison, a leader of the anti-slavery movement, published her speeches in his journal, *The Liberator*.

**Sojourner Truth** (1797- 1883) was one of the most charismatic speakers of her era and spoke eloquently for oppressed people everywhere. Scholar Sterling Stuckey calls her a great Blues singer who brought out the deepest values of her people. When she addressed the Akron Woman’s Rights Convention in 1851, she used this eloquence to assert her position as a citizen of the United States:

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as welt! And aint’ I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilren, and seen ‘em mos all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?



library.newpaltz.edu

**Harriet Wilson** (1828?-1860?) published (at her own expense) the first African-American novel, *Our Nig*, in 1859. The fact that it was based on the intermarriage between a black man and a white woman, may have led to its fall into obscurity until 1983, when it was re-discovered by Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

**Harriet Jacobs** (1813-97) published her loosely veiled autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in 1861. The protagonist, Linda Brent, relates “the wrongs inflicted by Slavery,” including a harrowing seven years hiding from her brutal, rapist master. Brent’s “room of her own” was a tiny crawl space in an attic. According to Francis Smith Foster, this memoir is “The story of a slave woman who refused to be victimized.”

**Harriet Tubman** (c1820-1913) was an advocate for women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, she was the first woman to serve as a Union spy and rescued many slaves on the Underground Railroad. After the war, she continued to be an activist for women’s suffrage.



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# American Feminism

Feminism swept over the United States in a series of waves.



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- The first wave began when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Women began to seek equality in property rights, marriage and family rights, and in suffrage. Their battles culminated in their right to vote in 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states that, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”



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- The second wave of American feminism emerged in the wake of World War II, culminating in the passage through Congress of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972. In the 1960s, it was called the women’s liberation movement. It focused on all areas of political, social, and financial discrimination that existed in American culture. Many of its leaders, who were white, middle-class women, were influenced by the publications of Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex* (1949); Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); and Kate Millett, author of *Sexual Politics* (1970).



abagond.wordpress.com

- The third wave began in the 1980s as a reaction to limiting feminism along racial and class lines. Third-wave feminists wanted recognition for women of all colors, ethnicities, classes, religions, and cultures. They advocated diversity and inclusion, advancing the notion that there wasn’t a single definition of feminism. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* argue for the continued importance of feminism in politics, education, and culture. By this period, feminism had diversified into many different groups, including

Marxist feminism  
Socialist feminism  
Anarcha-feminism  
African feminism  
Conservative feminism  
Christian feminism  
Islamic feminism  
Jewish feminism

Libertarian feminism  
Postmodern feminism  
New feminism  
Riot grrrl feminism  
Ecofeminism  
Postcolonial feminists  
Third-world feminists  
Womanism

# Woman's Rights Timeline

- 1777** Abigail Smith Adams, wife of president John Adams and mother of the sixth president (John Quincy Adams), writes that women “will not hold ourselves bound by any laws which we have no voice.”
- 1784** Hannah Adams is the first American woman to support herself by writing.
- 1819** Emma Hart Willard writes her “Plan for Improving Female Education,” which although unsuccessful, defines the issue of women’s education at that time.
- 1826** The first public high schools for girls open in New York and Boston.
- 1828** Former slave, abolitionist, and feminist Isabella van Wagener is freed and takes the name Sojourner Truth. She begins to preach against slavery throughout New York and New England.
- 1833** Oberlin College in Ohio, is the first co-educational college in the U.S.
- 1838** Mount Holyoke College is established in Massachusetts as first college for women.
- 1840** Elizabeth Cady Stanton, feminist, dress reformer, and editor, omits the word “obey” from her marriage vows.
- 1840** Lucretia Mott is one of several women delegates to attend the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London. As a woman, she is forced to sit in the gallery and cannot participate.
- 1848** The first Women’s Rights Convention is held in Seneca Falls, NY.
- 1849** Elizabeth Blackwell becomes the first woman to receive a medical degree in the U.S. Women doctors are permitted legally to practice medicine for the first time.
- 1850** Women are granted the right to own land in a state (Oregon).  
The Female (later Women’s) Medical College is founded in Pennsylvania.
- 1852** Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton form the Women’s NY Temperance Society.
- 1860-65** American Civil War
- 1866** The American Equal Rights Association is founded by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Martha Coffin Pelham Wright, and Ernestine Rose.
- 1868** The 14th Amendment denying women the right to vote is ratified.  
Women lawyers are licensed in U.S.
- 1869** The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) are formed.
- 1870** The 15th Amendment enfranchising black men is ratified.
- 1872** Susan B. Anthony is arrested for attempting to vote.
- 1874** The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is founded.
- 1878** For the first time, a Women’s Suffrage Amendment is introduced to Congress.
- 1890** Wyoming is first state to allow women to vote.  
The NWSA and the AWSA reunite to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association NAWSA.  
Women begin to wear knickerbockers instead of skirts for bicycle riding.
- 1903** The Women’s Trade Union League of New York is formed to unionize working women. This group later becomes the nucleus for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU).
- 1913** 5,000 suffragists march in Washington, D.C. for the women’s rights movement.
- 1915** A petition with 500,000 signatures in support of women’s suffrage amendment is given to President Woodrow Wilson.
- 1920** The 19th Amendment is ratified, allowing women the right to vote in federal elections.
- 1923** Alice Paul and the National Women’s Party first proposes the Equal Rights Amendment to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sex. It has never been ratified.
- 1928** Amelia Earhart makes her first trans-Atlantic flight
- 1934** Florence Ellinwood Allen becomes the first woman on US Court of Appeals.
- 1961** Eleanor Roosevelt is appointed to chair the Commission on the Status of Women.
- 1966** The National Organization for Women (NOW) is founded by Betty Goldstein Friedan.
- 1970** 50,000 people march in New York City for the first Women’s Strike for Equality.
- 1971** U.S. Supreme Court rule ends sex discrimination in hiring.
- 1972** U.S. Congress passes the Equal Employment Opportunity Act.  
Equal Rights Amendment passes Congress but fails to be ratified.
- 1975** Ella Grasso is first woman governor (CT) to be re-elected.
- 1977** 3,000 women march in Washington, D.C. on Women’s Equality Day to support the E.R.A.
- 1981** Sandra Day O’Connor becomes first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- 1995** Lt. Col. Eileen Collins becomes the first American woman to pilot a space shuttle.
- 1997** Madeleine K. Albright becomes first woman U.S. Secretary of State.
- 2000** Hillary Rodham Clinton becomes the only First Lady ever elected to the United States Senate.
- 2005** Condoleezza Rice becomes the first African-American woman to be appointed Secretary of State.
- 2007** Nancy Pelosi becomes the 60th Speaker of the House of Representatives, the first woman elected.

[Source: <http://www.womenatworkmuseum.org/Womens-Rights-timeline.pdf>]

# Black Feminism

Black feminism began as a response to the fact that black women were not represented in the mainstream American feminist movement. The major feminist leaders were white, middle-class women who addressed only the needs that pertained to them. Black feminism sought the same kind of equality that white women were seeking, but they had an additional burden. Besides gender rights, black women also had to seek their civil rights because of their race. Patricia Hill Collins points out in her cornerstone text *Black Feminist Thought* that, “even though black women intellectuals have asserted their right to speak both as African-Americans and as women, historically these women have not held top leadership positions in black organizations and have frequently struggled within them to express black feminist ideas” (Collins 7).

Since the black feminist movement began, it has grown from representing only African-American women to representing all minority women, including poor white women, whom the feminist movement has overlooked. bell hooks explains that it is necessary for black women to speak out for themselves, because there is no other group that will do it for them. She explains that “black women are in an unusual position in this society [because]. . . we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression” (James and Sharpley-Whiting 144).

The 1893 Columbian Exposition was called “the greatest fair in history.” It was referred to as the “White City,” because it symbolized American progress at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. As part of the Exposition, the World’s Congress of Representative Women met, in order to herald the dawn of a new period of women’s rights and achievements. Six black women were chosen to speak to the delegates, including Frances Harper, who reiterated the theme that her audience was “on the threshold of woman’s era.” Another black speaker, Anna Julia Cooper, reminded the delegates of the past. She described the terrible sexual harassment that black women had suffered as “a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in a horrible death. . . . The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a free simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight . . . to keep hallow their own persons” (Carby 3). These women could only “suffer and struggle and be silent.” Fannie Jackson Coppin declared that the conference should not be “indifferent to the history of the colored women of America, for their fight could only aid all women in their struggle against oppression” (Carby 4). At first glance, the Congress seemed to provide “an occasion for women in general and black women in particular to claim a space in which they could exert a political presence,” according to Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (4). But the Congress proved to be a big disappointment for black women, who had hopefully looked to join national suffrage movements, dominated by white women, and find solidarity. Carby claims: “The struggle of black women to achieve adequate representation within the women’s suffrage and temperance movements had been continually undermined by a pernicious and persistent racism and the World’s Congress was no exception” (4). On closer examination, black women discovered that they had been invited, because they were “exotic.” They were “included in a highly selective manner as part of exhibits with other ethnic groups which reinforced conventional racist attitudes of the American imagination” (5). Frederick Douglass attended the fair and, observing the absence of a black presence, dismissed it as a “whited sepulcher.”



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lib.niu.edu

The Columbian Exhibition highlighted the vast divide that existed between black and white feminists at the turn of the century. Black feminists felt that white feminists largely ignored race and class, which were at the basis of their experience. They wanted to broaden the definition of feminism to include all women and enlarge the notion of freedom to encompass all people, regardless of race, class, and sex (23).

Oppressed both by racial and gender differences, black women carried a double burden. Scholar Elizabeth Ammons claims that race was the heavier load: “While they suffered because they were women, they suffered more and primarily because they were black: if one or the other of the two issues had to take priority, it had to be race” (23).

Scholar Ann DuCille, on the other hand, argues that race and gender cannot be separated nor can one be prioritized over the other: Under slavery black women were bred like chattel to increase the master’s labor force. Rape, concubinage, and forced impregnation were part of what made the peculiar institution thrive. Black men, women, and children were all victimized in the process, but women were exploited in gender-specific ways that took advantage of female bodies and their childbearing, rearing, and wet-nursing capacities . . . the race question did not exist separate and distinct from the woman question. Their commitment to uplifting the race was inextricably linked to a commitment to improving the social, cultural, moral, and material conditions of women. (36)

DuCille points out significantly different goals between black and white feminisms:

White Women	Black Women
Sought the right of married women to own property	Sought the right not to be slaves
Tried to change divorce laws	Tried to change the laws that prohibited them from marrying
Sought an identity outside of marriage and motherhood	Sought the freedom to live a traditional gender role as mothers and wives (“On Canons” 30)

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# “Womanism”

*Black women simply want “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose ... not to need permission for desire” (Morrison, Beloved 162).*

During the third wave of feminism in the 1970s, black female authors such as Alice Walker sought to reclaim “lost, dismissed, and otherwise disparaged texts by African American women” (DuCille, “On Canons” 38). Walker fell in love with the work and personality of Eatonville author Zora Neale Hurston and believed that she represented a distinctly black aspect of feminism, which Walker called “womanism.”

The term was defined by Alice Walker in her work, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*.

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalances of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

Alice Walker’s icon of womanism is Eatonville author, Zora Neale Hurston. Walker writes that if she were “Condemned to a desert island for life” and only allowed a few books to take with her, she’d pick two books by Zora Neale Hurston: *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Regarding the latter, she says: “There is no book more important to me than this one” (86). Walker loves the “racial health” that she finds in Hurston’s fictional characters. They possess “a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings” (85). Hurston’s work was created out of her own sense of self worth, as Walker notes: “She also had a confidence in herself as an individual that few people (anyone?), black or white, understood” (85). Walker feels that Hurston’s essay, “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” particularly embodies her womanist perspective. In the essay, Hurston declares:

I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries...sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me.” (155)

Not everyone appreciated Hurston’s bodacious attitude, as Walker recognizes: “Zora was a woman who wrote and spoke her mind—as far as one could tell, practically always. People who knew her and were unaccustomed to this characteristic in a woman. . . attacked her as meanly as they could” (Hemenway xiv). Walker celebrated Hurston’s independent spirit, which blazed its own trail. For this reason, Walker considers her a womanist icon.



Courtesy of the Florida Department of State, State Library and Archives of Florida.



Courtesy of the Florida Department of State, State Library and Archives of Florida.

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# Zora Neale Hurston as a Womanist Author

## *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Hurston's womanist perspective was displayed in her novels. She did not often speak out about gender issues; instead, she displayed her views through her characters. Of all the characters in Hurston's stories, the one who most embodies Hurston's attitude toward feminism and gender issues is Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie especially demonstrates womanist ideas of courage and willful behavior. Janie's ultimate realization at the end of the novel shows that she has matured as a human being: "two things everybody's got tuh do for themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (192).

In the beginning of the novel, Janie's grandmother, Nanny, tells her to follow traditional gender roles that cause women to play a subservient role in marriage. Nanny had been a slave and views the black woman as "de mule uh de world." As a young woman, Nanny did have aspirations but had no opportunity to achieve her goals: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high. But they wasn't no pulpit for me" (15). She wishes a better life for Janie and feels Janie can rise not by her own achievements but through marriage.

After marrying three men and finding out that her grandmother's wisdom is too restrictive, Janie evolves into a free woman, who embodies many feminist ideals by the end of the novel. Her last relationship with Tea Cake, particularly, helps her to find her own voice when he takes her to the area around Lake Okeechobee to work in the fields. Their affair ends after a great hurricane rips through the area, and Janie is forced to shoot Tea Cake after he has succumbed to rabies and threatens her life.

The storm as a metaphor has always been symbolic of creation, destruction, and regeneration, because it involves the mingling together of the four elements. By uniting air (wind), water (rain), and fire (rays of light in the eye of the storm), all of which disturb the fourth element, earth, the hurricane symbolizes cosmic synergy. Primitive peoples such as early native Americans worshiped the hurricane as a "deity of the winds and waters, and also of the heavens" (Cirlot 147-48).

Feminist critics, such as Deborah Plant, believe that once the storm has passed and Tea Cake is dead, Janie is: "freed from external, patriarchal control. No longer entrapped by gender roles and expectations, [Hurston] and Janie can follow wherever the inside urge leads" (173). At the end of the novel, Janie is lost in her memories of the dead Tea Cake; they "commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room," until Tea Cake's image comes "prancing around her." She tells herself, "Of course he wasn't dead. . . his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall" (184). These words suggest that Janie has opted out of patriarchal society altogether. She has transformed the horrible experience of the hurricane and her shooting of Tea Cake into a spiritual one. Love is the transforming agent, as Hurston acknowledges its power in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: "[love] seems to be the unknown country from which no traveler ever returns. What seems to be a returning pilgrim is another person born" (265). Tea Cake's memory, even the "day of the gun, and the bloody body," has now become the grist on which her creative imagination can work; her imaginary world has now commenced to sing. As Houston Baker points out, Janie has become "a storyteller and blues singer par excellence" (59). No longer her nightmare, Tea Cake is now her inspiration. Janie's state of mind—"Here was peace"—indicates that she has passed out of the eye of the storm into the timeless world of art.



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# Zora Neale Hurston and Education in Eatonville

Zora Neale Hurston acquired her self esteem by growing up in Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-black town in the U.S. Ever since its establishment in 1887, the residents of Eatonville made the education of their children a top priority. Hurston attended school at the Hungerford School, which called itself “A Vocational Institution for Leadership and Training of Colored Youth.”

## Origins of the School

Shortly after the founding of Eatonville, the residents felt the need to establish a school for their children. Education for black children at the time was at best difficult to come by if not completely impossible. In order to fill this need “the school and town started within months of one another” (Nathiri 124). After a community appeal to Booker T. Washington, “Russell C. Calhoun and his wife, Mary, both graduates of Tuskegee Institute, were sent by Washington in 1889 to set up the new school” (Magbie et al. 48). The school was named after Robert Hungerford, “a medical doctor who died after contracting malaria fever while treating some Negro children in the lowlands of Louisiana,” according to town historian Frank Otey (13). Robert’s parents, Edward C. and Anna Hungerford, donated 160 acres for the school in 1898. After this generous donation, the school that was created to solve this issue of education in the newly freed black community began to take shape.

## Acquisition of Land and Funding for the School

Russell and Mary Calhoun started the school on just a few acres of farmland. The crops from this farm “were used to purchase additional acreage and to begin construction of essential school buildings” (Otey 12). Of course, the most notable aid for the beginning of the school was the Hungerford family’s donation of 160 acres. Booker T. Washington also donated \$400 and George B. Cluett donated an enormous sum of \$8,000 (Otey 13) to the school. The Booker T. Washington Hall and the Cluett Hall were named after these benefactors and were the first and second buildings, respectively, to be built on the Hungerford campus. These donations helped the school to grow “from 40 acres to 340 acres by 1935” (Otey 13). The school sent out pamphlets to encourage further donations and listed the following needs: “funds for a daily budget maintenance. . . scholarships to help students remain in school, and cash to meet maintenance requirements” (Hungerford Pamphlet 3).

## The Hungerford Normal and Industrial School Curriculum

The Hungerford School’s mission was to provide students with a well rounded education that not only consisted of book knowledge, but also practical knowledge that could be put to use in the town of Eatonville. Because Eatonville relied on the members of its community so greatly, the school filled a need to educate the students in a manner that would further improve the workings of the town. By giving students academic as well as vocational knowledge, the school succeeded in preparing the students for either continuing education or starting profitable careers of their own choosing.

In addition to the typical school subjects, the students of Hungerford were taught a variety of necessary life skills. These extra skills were added to the curriculum, based on Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, in hopes of giving service back to the Eatonville community. For instance, the saw mill taught students about the logging and woodworking industries. Students also took care of chickens, as part of their farming instruction. “A policy of the school was “learning by doing” (Hungerford Pamphlet 2).

## Societal Impact of the Hungerford School

The children of Eatonville had an incredible educational advantage when Hungerford was created. In addition to building a better community, the students were taught to build a better world and be proud of their culture and heritage. Paintings of former mayors of Eatonville adorned the walls of the school as a constant reminder of success for the students. The school was highly successful from its inception. When it became part of the Orange County Public School System in 1950, Hungerford was considered “one of the top schools in Florida,” according to Otey (42). The school today is no longer in operation.

## The Hungerford Curriculum for Girls

The Hungerford school gave many black females a chance at education that they would not have had in other communities at the turn of the century. The general curriculum centered around female-oriented jobs, such as “cooking, sewing, dressmaking, laundry, ironing, housekeeping, hairdressing and handicrafts” (Hungerford Pamphlet 2). Not only were girls allowed and encouraged to achieve an education, they were also involved in sports and other activities that were typically male centered. This education paved the way for females at Hungerford to go directly into jobs related to their skills or to seek higher education.

## The Hungerford Curriculum for Boys

Male children at Hungerford were taught necessary skills to help them enter the labor force upon graduation. The policy of the school—“learning by doing”—encouraged boys to work in the following fields: “farming and gardening, poultry raising, animal husbandry, carpentry” (Hungerford Pamphlet 2).

## Zora Neale Hurston and the Hungerford School

As a member of the early Eatonville community, Zora Neale Hurston attended Hungerford School. When she attended, Russell Calhoun was still serving as the first principal. Her father, Reverend John Hurston, became Eatonville’s third mayor. One of the major contributions he made to Eatonville “was his emphasis on education and religious training, especially of the town’s children. He encouraged the citizens to send their children to school rather than require them to work” (Otey 18). All six of his children, including Zora, attended the Hungerford school. According to Otey: “Zora received her first six or so years of schooling at the Hungerford School, then went on to Jacksonville, Florida, to further her education. She graduated from the high school division of Morgan College in Baltimore, MD. From there she went on to Howard University in Washington DC” (Otey 30). Later, in 1928, Hurston graduated with her bachelor of arts degree from Barnard College in New York City as “the school’s first black student” (Nathiri 22). Hurston achieved an enormous amount of success by completing such high levels of education for a black female at the time and by becoming the great author who is studied today. However, “acquiring an education was not easy, or free, and Zora worked, at times, as a manicurist, maid and waitress in a struggle to keep ahead of her [school] debts” (Nathiri 22). She achieved her great education by starting at Hungerford. Had the Hungerford School not existed in Eatonville during Zora’s childhood, she would not have been able to go as far as she did with her education. The school allowed her to embark on her upward educational path.

## Significance of Education in Hurston’s Texts

Throughout many of Hurston’s texts, education plays a role in both the plot and the development of her characters. Because Hurston was a very well educated woman and went through great struggles in order to achieve her education, it is evident that education plays an important role in her texts. For instance, in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the main reason for John to cross the creek to the other side of the river is to achieve an education. John is astonished when he first sees the school house and observes: “Negro children going to read and write like white folks. See! All this going on over there and the younguns over the creek chopping cotton” (Hurston 13). This scenario also demonstrates the fact that education for black children was not available for many people. Hurston and the other students of Hungerford were very lucky to live in an area that had a school, specifically designed for the education and success of black children.

Hurston also comments on her experiences at Hungerford in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. She explains how white people from the North would tour the school, “always, the room would be hurriedly put in order, and we were threatened with a prompt and bloody death if we cut one caper while the visitors were present” (Hurston 34). She also points out that upon being asked if she liked school, she would lie and say yes. Hurston liked geography, reading, and recess, but “whoever it was invented writing got no thanks from me” (Hurston 37). Later, Hurston would go to great lengths to continue her education as she began to follow her passions and make her mark in the world of literature.

*“Inspiration, motivation, and the development of a positive self image were the driving forces of all students who attended the school. The insistence on excellence was paramount, even from its beginnings. Students were taught to set goals and to work toward the achievement of those goals with dignity and respect.”*

—Frank M. Otey, Principal of Hungerford School, 1949–1967, and Eatonville Town Historian

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# African American Occupations in Florida at the Turn of the Century

Although the transition from slavery to freedom after the Civil War was difficult, African Americans proved to be resourceful, motivated, and highly skilled in the work place.

Zora Neale Hurston traveled extensively throughout central and southern Florida, studying black people at work as part of her anthropological research. She visited the migrant agricultural camps in the Everglades; observed the turpentine, sawmill, and railroad camps; witnessed the phosphate mines; and traveled through the towns and cities of Florida's Atlantic coast interviewing laborers. Throughout her travels, she noted the black communities and their occupations in books, such as *Mules and Men*. Even in her fiction, Hurston portrays the occupations performed by African American in the period between the Civil War and World War II.

One of the most challenging problems after the Civil War was labor. White society had depended on the black work force as a source of cheap or free labor for centuries, and without black laborers, white society did not believe they could succeed, especially on the plantations. The plantation system had dominated the South for generations. After the Civil War, whites believed blacks would not work under the free labor system without the constant supervision of an overseer, so once the Freedmen's Bureau was established, agents were disseminated to regulate the new system. According to the Bureau's guidelines, it "insisted freedmen must be free to choose their own employers, and substitute slavery would not be tolerated; but at the same time they told the Negro he must fulfill his duties as a citizen, and must work and not be idle" (Richardson 57). The Bureau recommended contracts between whites and the Negro work force, with its agents approving the contracts and retaining records to prove compliance. Unfortunately, the guidelines were ignored; what resulted was a malicious sharecropping system in which the freedmen suffered from unfair contracts and outright dishonesty.

Many contracts left the freedman indebted to the planter because any provisions required by the freedman were deducted from the payment at the end of the season; in other cases, freedmen were just outright cheated out of their money. In Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the deceitfulness of the sharecropping system is illustrated by Ned and Amy Crittenden, who are sharecroppers for Rush Beasley. Beasley cheats Ned out of 16 bales of cotton, which is an entire year's pay for the family's work, and they are left penniless at the end of the season.

By the end of the century, when railroads reached Florida, the demand for black labor at sawmills, phosphate mines, cotton mills, and naval store factories began to spring up. Hurston covered many of these locations in her books. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tea Cake works for the railroad in Jacksonville, and in *Seraph on the Suwanee* Hurston takes her readers from the turpentine camps, to the orange groves, and finally to the Atlantic Ocean shrimping industry. Although *Seraph's* Jim Meserve is white, the men he employs in the groves and at the turpentine camps are blacks. It is these men he oversees; they are the chippers and the dippers: and "their pay depended upon the number of trees streaked or dipped. The number of trees could be reduced by the number improperly worked" (42).

Although a large number of male freedmen worked on plantations, at the mills, and in various camps; blacks worked in other positions as well, as shown by the following table from Joe Richardson's *African Americans in the Reconstruction in Florida*:

Black Occupations in Florida—1870 Census					
Blacksmith	115	Grocer	12	School Teacher	38
Brick Mason	37	Hotel Servant	30	Sailor	55
Carpenter	365	Housekeeping	13,060	Servant	2161
Cook	519	Laborer	2368	Steamboat Worker	22
Draymen	95	Mill Worker	31	Stevedore	20
Farmer	1730	Minister	59	Teamster	49
Farm Laborer	22,944	Nurse	166	Timber Worker	121
Fireman	17	Painter	15	Turpentine Worker	83
Fisherman	30	Railroad Laborer	366	Waiter	28
Gardner	21	Sawmill Worker	297	Wheelwright	22

A few additional African Americans worked in the professions. Henry S. Harman was the first black to practice law in Florida, and several more men would join him by the end of the century. Elijah Woods was an inventor, who created "a boat propeller to be used on boats in streams previously navigable by steam vessels" (Richardson 69). As the census shows, 59 men became ministers, such as John Buddy Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The church became the social center and gathering place for many black residents, and the minister became a man of leadership and power.

By the 1930s, most occupations fell into the following three categories: agriculture (exclusive of citrus), domestic employment (including the tourist industry), and commerce (docks, railroads, warehouses, and factories) (McDonough 40). The turpentine, lumber, and building industries followed behind in popularity. The agriculture industry was mainly located on the east coast, in the Everglades, in south-central, and northwest parts of Florida. This latter industry was highlighted in Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when Tea Cake and Janie leave Eatonville for agricultural work on the Muck (the area surrounding Lake Okeechobee). They live in cabins and cultivate and pick crops during season. Janie helps Tea Cake plant and pick beans as they both work for the boss man.

In her anthropological work, Hurston sets herself apart from female authors who wrote clichéd sentimental stories of love and loss. Hurston, instead, uses folklore and African tradition to celebrate to culture, race, and gender. Her personal appreciation for Florida and her ability to connect herself to an entire black culture is best seen in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Here, she writes about her experiences in Polk County, through song and rhythm. She not only writes about the ways music and rhythm create an impact on her as an outsider, but also how it influences the people that she is observing.

Unlike authors who wrote about the pain and suffering of black laborers in the thirties, Hurston reveals the dignity, pride, and strength associated with working outside in the heat, for example in this song that she recorded about a black laborer named Hank:

*Polk County. The clang of the nine-pound hammers on railroad steel. The world must ride.  
Hah! A rhythmic swing of the body, hammer falls, and another spike driven to the head in the tie . . .*  
Oh, Mobile! Hank!  
Oh, Alabama! Hank!  
Oh, Fort Myers! Hank!  
Oh, in Florida! Hank!  
Oh, let's shake it! Hank!  
Oh, let's break it! Hank!  
Oh, let's shake it! Hank!  
Oh, just a hair! Hank! (148)

The image of "Hank" is sexualized by the female speaker. In her portrait of him, wielding the heavy hammer, she records her overwhelming desire to dance and "shake" with him as he works. Writing about black working men this way, from a female perspective, gives the men agency for the work they do. Although they are oppressed, underpaid, and taken advantage of, their women admire them. After work, they will put their oppressors out of their minds and celebrate as a community.

In the 1930s and 40s, the outlook for employment began to look more positive, because working conditions improved, education had become more accessible, and blacks were making "wholesome, constructive organizational gains" in many of the trades, which led to better jobs and working conditions.

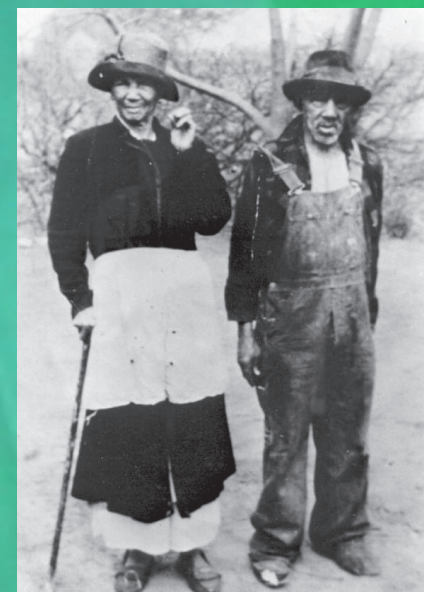
In conclusion, issues of gender for African Americans—whether in the workplace, in education, or in society—have been inextricably entwined with race since the beginning of American history. The work of Zora Neale Hurston, though, suggests a vision of society in which gender, race, and class do not matter. It is not that Hurston did not care about these issues, but that she wished to transcend them. Elaine Showalter in *A Jury of Her Peers* tells how Hurston "was exceptional in her determination to stay free of all ideologies, parties, and narratives of victimization. . . . In a decade of women marching to the tune of a party or a grievance, she danced to her own song" (351).

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