

Afterword

In the afterword to "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Henry Louis Gates Jr. reflects on the legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent African American writer whose contributions were initially overlooked despite her significant influence. Hurston, a Barnard graduate, authored seven books and published numerous shorter works during her career, but her independent views and refusal to conform to mainstream literary expectations led to her obscurity after the early 1950s. Gates highlights Hurston's complex identity and her rejection of simplistic categorizations such as "radical" or "conservative," which complicate her legacy in the literary canon.

The resurgence of interest in Hurston's work, particularly among black women writers, seeks to connect her to their literary heritage. Alice Walker's influential 1975 essay played a pivotal role in this rediscovery, presenting Hurston as a symbol of black women's search for identity and tradition. Gates notes that Hurston's notable employment of vernacular language deeply resonates in her novels and is especially evident in "Their Eyes Were Watching God." This work, according to Gates, embodies a bold feminist narrative where the protagonist, Janie Crawford, evolves from being an object of her husbands' desires to expressing her own autonomy, thereby aligning the novel with modern feminist discourse.

Gates draws parallels between Hurston's relationship with her mother, as depicted in her autobiography "Dust Tracks on a Road," and the markedly different portrayal in Richard Wright's "Black Boy." While Hurston frames her experience as a search for voice, Wright presents it through a lens of pain and emotional distance. This contrast exemplifies the bifurcation between their literary approaches and significances.

Moreover, Gates critiques the societal ideologies that pigeonholed black literature, suggesting that Hurston's optimistic portrayal of black identity was dismissed by her contemporaries as politically regressive. He argues that her refusal to conform to prevailing narratives about race led to her underappreciation during her life but has resulted in a remarkable renaissance of her works and themes in modern literature.

The final sections provide insight into Hurston's stylistic complexities and her dual identity as both a woman and a black individual in America. Gates argues that her legacy today is a testament to her skillful navigation of language and identity, both in her life and in her work, asserting that Hurston's art continues to influence and inspire contemporary writers and scholars alike.