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From the Editor-in-Chief: A Celebration of American Arts and Letters

Regennia N. Williams
Cleveland State University

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A Celebration of American Arts and Letters

Editor-in-Chief Regennia N. Williams

In 2011, when I shared my preliminary thoughts on an international conference that would commemorate the life, art, and legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, I did so knowing that 2012 would mark the 75th anniversary of the publication of Hurston's greatest novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Needless to say, I looked forward to re-reading the book and working with others to implement plans for "Watching God and Reading Hurston: An International Interdisciplinary Academic Conference," which I envisioned as a grand celebration of American arts and letters-- not unlike the 2002 centennial celebrations of the birth of Hurston's Harlem Renaissance colleague, Langston Hughes. However, I could not have imagined that our plans would be the catalysts for so many Hurston-related activities, or that those activities would continue through 2014, the 75th anniversary year for the publication of another great Hurston work, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

Although the names are too numerous to include here, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support of everyone who contributed to the success of the activities on the following list of Hurston "brag points" for 2011-2014:

- The Hurston book discussions at Cleveland State University and the Warrensville Heights Public Library
- A guest lecture by Oberlin College's Dr. Gillian Johns, "African American Autobiography as Humor" (With an emphasis on Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*)
- The Zora Neale Hurston Film Series at Cleveland State University
- The January 7, 2012 "Zora Neale Hurston Birthday Party" at Cleveland Public Library, featuring a new play with music by Nathaniel Rhodes and a lecture-demonstration based on material from Hurston's research on African American religion
- Thousands of dollars in cash and in-kind contributions, including several cases of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*
 - These free books were distributed to several Hurston book discussion groups, including those associated with the Cleveland Chautauqua Planning Committee, the Novelettes Bridge Club in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and students and faculty mentors participating in the Global Leadership Summit at the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein, South Africa)
- A special 90.3 FM - WCPN Radio appearance by conference keynote speaker Dr. Cheryl Wall, the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University

- The Cleveland State University Michael Schwartz Library's creation of an online Zora Neale Hurston Research Guide
- The Fall 2012 "Harvest Time" workshop with the Spiritual Gifts Gospel Choir, the Gospel Travelers Quartet, and actors Prester and Bertha Pickett
- My receipt of the Julian Pleasants Travel Award for Hurston-related research at the Smathers Library and a related lecture and residency at the University of Florida - Gainesville in June of 2013

More than 20 scholars and artists gave presentations during CSU's 2012 "Watching God and Reading Hurston" academic conference. This special issue of *The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs*, initially planned as a follow-up publication for the conference, is, in actual fact, the culminating activity of our Hurston-inspired work from 2011 through the end of 2014. Our efforts to gain a better understanding of this "Genius of the South" really kept us busy. Sometimes, it seemed that we could not say enough about Zora Neale Hurston. She is yet deserving of every bit of the scholarly attention that her life and works have attracted in recent decades, and I imagine that Hurston would have enjoyed this attention—and the royalties from works that are now back in print!

In her 1942 autobiography from J.B. Lippincott, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston suggested that readers needed to know more about her:

Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life.

Although much (if not most) of the book was fictionalized, *Dust Tracks on a Road* earned the 1943 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award—and a \$1,000 check for the author—in Cleveland, Ohio. In many ways both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* tales about Eatonville, Florida, the all-black town that she called home during her formative years.

Every Hurston lover will, no doubt, recognize this opening passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which tells the story of the adventures and eventual homecoming of Janie, a native of Eatonville, Florida:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the same horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. So the beginning of this was a woman, and she had come back from burying the dead.

In time, these and other words from Hurston would fuel the imaginations of other writers, including Sonia Sanchez.

In an oft-quoted description of her introduction to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the tales of Eatonville—recounted in the black vernacular speech of the town’s residents, Sanchez said that she was in New York, having just graduated from Hunter College. She was about to begin a career as a teacher, when she stumbled into Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, admittedly knowing very little about the library’s collection or its curator. Fortunately, there was a very patient librarian on duty that day, who, according to Sanchez, introduced her to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In December 2014, I read yet another version of this Sanchez story in an online issue of the University of Louisville’s “Women’s Center News” (Spring 2006). It is interesting to note that, in our digital age, Sanchez still places the responsibility for teaching about Hurston squarely on the shoulders of educators. The conveners of the 2012 “Watching God and Reading Hurston” conference readily accepted this responsibility. The teachers and scholars who contributed to this publication have provided educational tools that will facilitate an ongoing celebration of American arts and letters and the further exploration of Hurston’s life, art, and legacy—in her native America and throughout the literary world.

PLEASE NOTE: In this special Hurston literary issue, contributors’ citations will adhere to the guidelines of the Modern Language Association.