

Haiti as Muse for Zora Neale Hurston

Barnard College recently marked 100 years since the enrollment of a young woman who had to shave 10 years off her actual age to attend public high school in Baltimore—and who was about to embark on the greatest adventure of her life. Zora Neale Hurston was transferring from Howard University to Barnard, where she would join the vanguard of an emerging science called anthropology mentored by Franz Boas, and where her fiction would make her a shining star of the Harlem Renaissance. A little more than a decade later, Haiti, like Barnard, would transform Zora's life. Not only was it where Zora wrote her way into the canon with her iconic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it was also where she came of age as a folklorist and anthropologist, nearly solving the science of zombies. Haiti is also where Zora began her memoir, in which she created her own personal mythology.

For Zora, the year 1936-37 was unlike any other: with a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, a rented house of her own with a Haitian servant (richly ironic for Zora, who had and would again be a domestic), Zora was free from the money worries that would plague her to the end. In Haiti, her creative powers had the time and space to unfurl. Just as important, as a budding anthropologist, Zora chose the perfect crucible to study the ultimate creativity of syncretism, that powerful blend of the African, European, and Indigenous culture that are vital components in Haiti's rich culture. When Alice Walker hunted down Zora's forgotten grave, overgrown with weeds, she erected a tombstone that re-inscribed her place in history: "Genius of the South: Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist." In Haiti Zora proved to be a genius of the Global South: in all three realms, a beacon for future generations.

My debut novel was inspired by Zora and her Haitian domestic Lucille, about whom nothing is known, except what has been forever inscribed in history with Zora's epigraph in *Tell My Horse*.

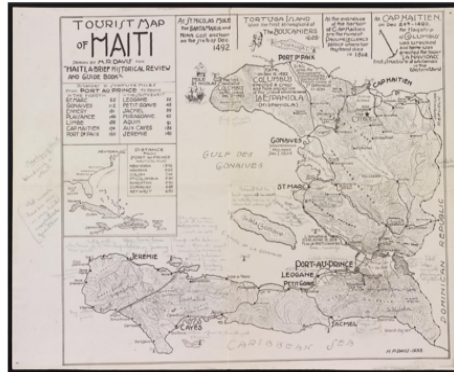
This incident struck me as strange, the more I thought about it. It was not usual for Lucille not to want to do anything I wanted done because she loved to please. Already I was beginning to love her and to depend upon her. Later on I put her on the roster of my few earthly friends and gave her all my faith. Lucille with her great heart, her willingness to help, her sympathy under varying conditions and her great honesty. The treasury of the United States could be left in her hands with absolute safety. In addition, she is extremely kind.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 1938

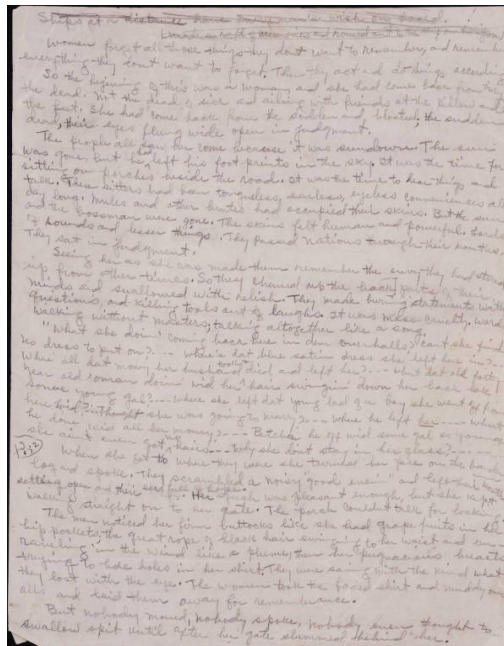
Knowing Zora's capacity as a trickster and creator of tall tales that tell the truth, this epigraph could be interpreted as a commentary on the brutal US occupation of Haiti that lasted from 1915-1934 (ensuring the stability of Haiti's treasury was an excuse given at the time), and that ended only two years before Zora's arrival in Haiti. Lucille is only mentioned in a few other passages, but not in Zora's letters. The character herself was inspired by my great-grandmother, who always, as the Haitian proverb says, "just had to go see where the street makes a corner."

On this panel, I will explore how and why Haiti was Zora's muse and inspired one of the most creative years of her life.

[The front matter or endpapers will include the map Alan Lomax used in Haiti in 1936-1937 when he paid a visit to Zora, a "Tourist Map of Haiti" drawn by M.P. Davis for *Haiti, a Brief Historical Review and Guide Book* (1933)]



The first page of Zora's handwritten draft of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, written in Haiti



The song Lucille sings for Alan and Zora is "Latibonit":

This modern acoustic guitar version is by the Haitian-American musician Leyla McCalla



The song Lucille sings in the forest gathering is “Mesi Bondye”

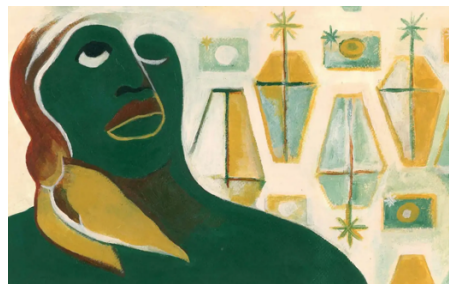


The song Oreste plays in an adaptation for Lucille is one of Haiti’s most famous,
“Choucounè”

English translation of lyrics by Dady Chery for *Haiti Chery*
Creole lyrics, by Oswald Durand, courtesy of Gage Averill
Music by Michel Mauleart Monton, performed by Martha Jean-Claude
History by Louis J. Auguste, MD
Haiti Chery



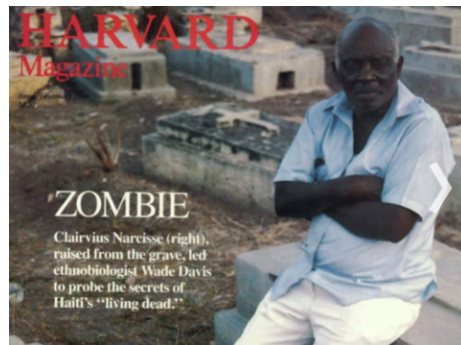
This essay explores the novel’s time period “When Zora Studied Zombies in Haiti”



This is the infamous photo taken by Zora in “Black Haiti: Where Old Africa and the New World Meet,” *Life* magazine Dec. 13, 1937:



Science would prove Zora was right, but only decades later:
“The Secrets of Haiti’s Living Dead” *Harvard Magazine*, Jan.-Feb. 1986



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Digital Archive, Zora Neale Hurston. Includes opening page of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, handwritten by Zora in Haiti, 1936:
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<http://www.myoldmaps.com/renaissance-maps-1490-1800/302-la-espanola.html>

Map of St. Domingue: <https://www.mapsland.com/maps/north-america/haiti/large-detailed-old-map-of-haiti-with-other-marks.jpg>