

Gleam: Digital Dramaturgy

By Bonnie Lee Moss Rattner
Based on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
By Zora Neale Hurston
Directed by Marion McClinton
Jan 4–Feb 5, 2012

At 16, Janie faces a marriage of convenience and a life of quiet drudgery. Instead, she embarks on a journey that brings successes and losses enough for several lifetimes—a passage to fulfillment so singular that it manages to speak for all of our dreams. This soaring saga brings to life the vivid characters of Zora Neale Hurston’s beloved novel, a shining jewel of the Harlem Renaissance by one of America’s literary giants.



In the manner of many another writer, the greatest fiction of her career may have been the story of her life. Whether as told in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, or as related in the anecdotes she steadily doled out, the bits and pieces she rendered into her literary work, or even the details she provided for official documents, it can be tricky at best to separate fact from fiction in the construct we know as Zora Neale Hurston.

To go with a minor name change (from Zora Neal Lee Hurston as recorded in the family Bible), Hurston shaved some 10 years from her life by fudging her birth date—and not always consistently. It may have begun when she went to enroll in high school here in Baltimore; at about 26, and so ineligible for free tuition, she took advantage of looking young for her age and

dropped a decade. But the revisionism continued in other forms, some more official (like marriage licenses) and others less. And of course, she always claimed Eatonville, Florida as her place of birth—though she was actually born in Alabama and only moved with her parents to Eatonville as a child.

Then again, artists and authors have been constructing and reconstructing their public identities for eons. George Eliot and George Sand had everyone fooled once. N. Richard Nash started out Nate Nussbaum from South Philly, and Philip Barry was no Mainline WASP. Chloe Anthony Wofford of Lorain, Ohio became Toni Morrison, Nobel Laureate. Some, like Alice Childress, invent names and dates; others, like Oscar Wilde, spin out of whole cloth anything they can't refine or revise. You needn't have seen Anonymous to know of the speculation surrounding the Son of Stratford, and Molière and Plautus and Voltaire were all pseudonyms.

It seems only too appropriate for this eminent folklorist—who elevated the study and compilation of African American tale-telling into an art and a science—to be herself a form of folklore.

However, leaving aside ages and instead following dates, one can outline a somewhat more certain shape to Hurston's life—though relying on her own accounts, especially her autobiographical narratives, remains dodgy. As some have noted, her fiction was always deeply autobiographical, and her autobiography bears all the hallmarks of creative license.

Whether born in 1891 (likely) or 1901 (less so), the two most common candidates, Hurston certainly found herself growing up in the nation's first incorporated all-Black township, Eatonville. There her father, John Hurston—a carpenter, preacher, and eventually mayor—and her schoolteacher mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, resettled and began to raise their eight children. Having fled rough plantation sharecropping and the harsh world of Jim Crow Alabama, they adjusted to life in an all-Black enclave, which Zora later recalled as rather idyllic. It was an idyll that would end far too soon, in 1906, when her mother died at 39. Miserable at home under the hostile regime of her father's new wife, then equally unhappy as an unpaid drudge for a brother's family, by 1915 Zora had slipped away as wardrobe girl for a troupe of Gilbert and Sullivan performers. Eighteen months of relative delight with the eclectic band of travelling players landed her in Baltimore, where she inveigled and impressed her way into prestigious Morgan Academy.

Already an avid, capable student, widely read and enamored of literature, Hurston parlayed desire and ambition—along with a series of happy accidents, assorted odd jobs, and more self-reinvention—into lofty Howard University, and then on to Barnard in New York. In her own indirect way, she had joined the characteristic journey of the Great Migration, the flow of African Americans from a post-plantation South to the beckoning North. She arrived in Manhattan in 1925, where she soon became part of the heady Harlem Renaissance—though initially as a public persona more than as a contributing artist. Reinventing herself yet again, adjusting with apparent ease to the hustle and jostle of this urbane, cosmopolitan world, Hurston eventually began to spin tales. In them, she turned back to the world, the characters, the stories, the vernacular of the “folk” she had known growing up. Time and again, she returned in her tales to Eatonville. At the same time, she studied anthropology

with the legendary Franz Boas at Barnard, then merged her literary and ethnographic interests. Sponsored by a wealthy socialite known for her patronage of Harlem artists, Hurston set out in 1927 for five years of field work, research, observation, and adventure. Riding around in a jalopy, often armed, sometimes disguised, she spanned the Deep South and the West Indies to produce both an anthropological study and her first novel.

Then, in 1937, apparently looking to recover from another in a series of failed romances (which eventually included two husbands), Hurston took a Guggenheim-sponsored trip to study folklore in Haiti. There, in a mere seven weeks (by her account), she produced *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Whatever doubts may cling to other elements of her narrative, no shred of uncertainty clouds the stunning achievement of this work. Richly textured and dense with observation, recollection, and distillation of Hurston's own rural past, *Eyes* manages to be at once a nostalgic and a revolutionary work: the entirely original bildungsroman of a vital, self-actualizing Black woman before such a form had even been imagined.

More writing followed, including an autobiography in 1942, which not only proved her most successful commercial venture but arguably represented her deftest navigation of story-spinning, melding imagination and reality into the enduring character of Zora Neale Hurston as the world would know her. Somehow, though, success and recognition failed to follow. Harried by disapproving colleagues like Richard Wright, who chastened her for a lack of anger in her writing, she then had to retreat from a trumped-up charge of child molestation and fled back south. From 1949 to 1959, often living almost hand-to-mouth, Hurston wrote and published sporadically. Forced to move into a Welfare Home in 1959, she died only a few months later, in January 1960, and was buried in a pauper's grave.

Having built a careful construct of herself in life, she nearly disappeared in death—her grave unmarked and overlooked; only her stories and her writing enduring, in small pockets of awareness, fading further into obscurity. So it went until 1973, when novelist Alice Walker fell in love with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and famously made a pilgrimage to recover and celebrate Hurston's grave, memory, and reputation. It worked. The embers that had flickered and nearly died came roaring back more fiercely than ever, a writer and innovator far ahead of her time finally embraced by those she had lovingly championed, and by so many others. All of us, in some ways, part of her broad, humane, empathetic fictional embrace. By inventing so lavishly, in life and on paper, she created enough Zora to go around.

—Gavin Witt

SUNSHINE & SPECULATION



In 1887, when it appears that our heroine Janie was born, another auspicious beginning took place: the town of Eatonville was founded, and shortly after became home to Zora Neale Hurston and her family. Florida at that time was a fairly empty and inhospitable expanse of scrubland, swamps, and Seminole territory. It was bordered by thousands of square miles of decent but underused coastline. By 1928, when Janie's story draws to a close, the Sunshine State had witnessed a massive real estate boom (and bust), a mammoth population explosion, landscape-changing public works projects, and some epically bad weather. All of which evidently imprinted itself on at least one youthful imagination.

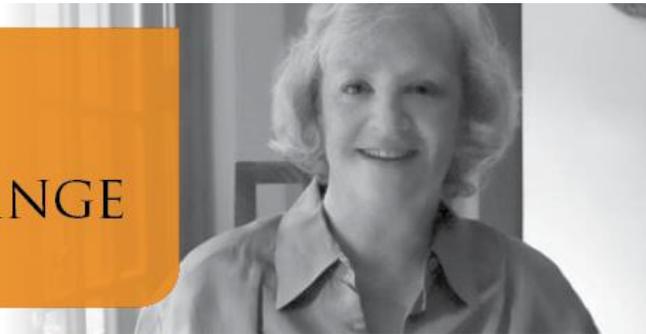
There had been a steady, gradual influx over the decades of Reconstruction following the Civil War—which devastation Florida had escaped. But this was little more than a trickle; the change didn't really take off until the 1920s, when a real estate bubble got going. Banks and speculators spread the propaganda of easy riches; folks came by the hundreds of thousands, while thousands more bought up land without ever setting foot there. Massive building projects followed. Towns and even cities sprang up like it was California, 1849. The boom was so vast and complete it changed the entire scope and nature of the state. Even the Everglades got dredged and developed.

Sustaining all this work were thousands of migrant workers, including many from across the Deep South and the West Indies. Like those before them who built the railroads and the Panama Canal, they worked for meager wages in often horrid conditions, and lived in crudely constructed communities with few, if any, amenities. Many of these migrants were the same itinerant laborers who helped support the explosion in farming as well—especially along Lake Okeechobee, often called “the Muck Bowl” for its marshy terrain. These are the people of the Muck whom Hurston introduces in her story.

By 1925, however, Boom became Bust. Land prices rose to such heights that, almost overnight, the market for Florida land plummeted, prices with it, and the whole house of cards collapsed.

Almost on top of this bursting bubble, two terrible hurricanes hit South Florida within two years of each other, in 1926 and 1928. Both hit the migrant communities especially hard. Thousands died. More than 13,000 homes were destroyed. Entire communities lay in ruins, many not to recover for another decade at least. The only consolation was that when the Great Depression hit in 1929, there was no further for most of these communities to fall.

BONNIE LEE MOSS RATTNER & THE LONG, STRANGE SAGA OF GLEAM



“stage worthy dialogue that is so pure and lyrical, it positively stings and pierces the heart.”

Bonnie Lee Moss Rattner earned a B.A. in English Education from Michigan’s Wayne State University in 1962, then studied briefly at The Sorbonne in Paris and the University of Michigan before beginning a career as a secondary school English teacher and mother. She returned to Wayne State University in 1965 to undertake graduate studies, which culminated in 1979 with her earning a Master of Arts degree in English.

It was at Wayne State in 1978 that Rattner discovered *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an encounter that she has described as life-changing. She decided to adapt the novel for the stage as her Master’s thesis under the guidance of Professor L. Todd Duncan—a play initially titled *Eatonville*. She then spent the next several years in a long, involved, and arduous quest to obtain the stage rights from Hurston’s estate and longtime publishers. The piece, now retitled *To Gleam It Around, To Show My Shine*, had its first performance at Wayne State’s Hilberry Graduate Theatre in 1983. Rattner devoted herself to convincing producers across the country to stage the play, which she referred to as her “second child.” Readings followed at many leading regional theaters. Then the play received an award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays in 1987, followed by its professional premiere in a production at New Jersey’s Crossroads Theater in 1988. Under the direction of Crossroads’ Artistic Director Rick Kahn, and featuring Denise Nicholas and Novella Nelson, the play won universal plaudits—including from Alvin Klein of *The New York Times*, who wrote of its “stage worthy dialogue that is so pure and lyrical, it positively stings and pierces the heart.”

Subsequently, another series of readings and workshops followed through the late '80s and on through the '90s, as several theaters and producers pursued the play. Over the years, a host of luminaries—including Samuel L. Jackson, Morgan Freeman, Leslie Uggams, Alfre Woodward, and others—were drawn to the play as it continued to evolve. Wynton Marsalis composed a score, and a series of almost-weres and near-misses had it just missing financing or suffering from cutbacks at various venues.

Meanwhile, Rattner co-wrote an adaptation of Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*. She also became co-producer of *Asinamali*, a musical that opened on Broadway in 1987; and she sought wider recognition for the work of Phillip Hayes Dean, whose plays Robeson and Freedman obtained international success. In the '90s, Rattner and Duncan joined forces again for a book on the life of former Michigan Supreme Court Justice Otis M. Smith, the state's first Black Supreme Court Justice. All the while, she continued to work on and believe in her adaptation. Finally, fast forward to August 2011, when CENTERSTAGE came calling. Now, today, the play will enjoy its third production and first revival in nearly 25 years.

“To Show My Shine”

-- An interview with **Bonnie Lee Moss Rattner**, compiled by **Janice Rattigan**, **Dramaturgy Apprentice**

Recently, the playwright responsible for adapting *Gleam* sat down with one of our dramaturgy apprentices to talk about how this project originally came to be, and to reflect on the journey that she has been on with it over the decades.

I had an assignment for class [at Wayne State University], to find an out-of-print novel by an American female writer. I went to the library and shuffled through many books, when a small paperback copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fell at my feet. It was like an act of God. I had never heard of Zora Neale Hurston, and I didn't know this book. I sat down right there in the aisle, on the dirty carpet, and read the whole thing, cover to cover, in two hours. I absolutely loved it. It was indeed out of print, and I thought it deserved the attention of the American public again. One way I imagined achieving this was through an adaptation; my first thought was for the screen, but eventually this. At first, I looked for someone to adapt it, through a friend in the theater-producing game, Robert Niederlander, and then through another producer, Liz McCann. Then I thought, I'd been writing for years, why not do it myself? I discussed it with my graduate adviser, and got approval for it to be part of my Master's Thesis. I had to include a critical introduction, and an appendix tracking all the changes or adjustments that I made from the original novel to the script. It took one whole year. Through it, I was fortunate to have an advisor who was very tough on me. I finally finished and received my Master's, and then the head of the Theater Department wanted to produce the play. It took me another five years to secure the rights (for one thing, there were 11 indirect heirs to the Hurston estate), and the first production went

up at Wayne State's graduate theater, Hillberry Repertory, in 1983. All the effort was worth it, and I never doubted—the process was like falling in love—you just know.

I chose to put this on the stage rather than the screen for a number of reasons. Mainly because of the dialogue, which is the main thing I fell in love with. On the screen, there can't be as many words. So many books and plays are transferred to the screen without a thought to what the stage can do. Also, I'm a more theatrical person, it was my natural inclination. Theater was the vehicle for my voice, the place where I made it my own. People seem to find it odd, a white woman speaking for an African American piece of literature—and many people may not want to admit that fact—but I'm not afraid of addressing it. In actuality, it really shouldn't matter. I am secondary to Zora Neale Hurston's voice.

As far as changes go, it's always been a work in progress. There are always new details I discover about the story I want to tell, or how best to serve Hurston's story. I knew from the beginning, though, that the focus would always be on Janie's story; it had to be. Still, there were some areas I struggled with while adapting the novel. For example, Nanny's famous speech from the novel I cut more and more, until I decided to cut it out of the play entirely for this current version. It was very autobiographical, and in the history that it offered, people had heard it before. Another area in which I struggled was in depicting Tea Cake's death. I resisted having her shoot him, so at Hillberry, it was a snakebite that killed him. It may have been the longest death scene in the history of American theater. But over the years, I realized that he had to die as the novel dictated; because yes, he saved Janie but now she has to defend herself. She has to go on.

Personally, I've had the best time with this process. I've kept a journal. Each time you revisit it, you can bring a new experience with you. It's been an extraordinary life, I've loved and lost love, raised a child, been rich and been poor, I have lost the love of my life. My husband, my Tea Cake, gave me the strength to be who I am, so I feel I've had the best possible life. I haven't done or had it all, but I am at my most mature. The main question I ask with returning to the script, is how am I feeling Janie now?

To me, what this story says now is the same as it has always been. It's a transcendent message: a woman's quest for self-realization, for meaning in her life. I hope it will speak to my granddaughter, that she will be happy with herself and proud. This play communicates the eternal quest for women, regardless of skin color.

I think this story, and working on it for so long, has taught me important lessons. You know there's something deep down inside of you, and you have to go show it. People are always going to try to stop you. As Janie says, I have to show my shine.



LETTER FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the mid-'70s, I was in grad school. Having been given an assignment to find an out-of-print novel and research its critical and publishing history, I was in the fiction stacks of the graduate library, pushing books to the side, and a paperback fell on the floor. I picked it up. It was titled *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I thought it was an intriguing title. Also, the author's name was unfamiliar: Zora Neale Hurston.

Seduced by the title and the lyrical name of the author, I distinctly remember I felt I had to immediately read this book. So, I sat down on the worn carpeted floor and read the novel in two hours. At that point in time, I did not realize the direction of my life had changed forever.

Indeed, the novel was out of print, as was most of Hurston's earlier published work. In recent years, Hurston's work has been discovered in many places, including the Library of Congress.

Sitting on that floor, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of Hurston's language, the arrangement of the words, and the story of Janie and her daring search for a meaningful life. To me, she was the American Shakespeare. After that first reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I knew I had to bring the novel to the public's attention.

After months of consulting with theatrical producers, professors, my graduate advisor—Professor Todd Duncan—and my own attorney husband, the late Lawrence Rattner, I decided I would adapt the novel for the stage. That first version, titled *Eatonville*, took a year to write. Every word was precious, every sentence was discussed and evaluated. Along with a critical introduction, and a large appendix of the changes made for the adaptation, *Eatonville* completed the requirements for essay section of the Master of Arts degree in American Literature in the English Department in the College of Liberal Arts at my alma mater, Wayne State University. The story of the development of the play is more than 30 years long, and still growing. Please know I am so proud of this production of *Gleam*. I sincerely hope you will be amazed and captivated by the beauty of Janie's quest.

My best regards,
—Bonnie Lee Moss Rattner, Playwright

I would like to dedicate this work to the memories of Lawrence Rattner, Seth Schapiro, and Michael Frazier. <http://www.neabigread.org/books/theireyes/>