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# Dear Zora: Letters from the New Literati

*Kendra Nicole Bryant*

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I know a professor who acts like you're the manna from heaven. I asked her why she reveres you so much. She told me: Zora points the way to God.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston:

In a 20th-Century African American Literature class I took, my professor required the class to read an article by Barbara Christian titled "A Race for Theory" (1987), wherein she argues that the academic lens through which theory is viewed is "inappropriate to the energetic emerging literatures in the world today," particularly in regard to "people of color, feminists, radical critics, and creative writers."<sup>1</sup> Reading her article was a relief, because, as a black and female student in a predominantly white university—where the English department is entrenched in theories written for and by white people (usually white men)—I have often found myself confused in my efforts to understand what theory is because the manner in which the academy talks about and defines theory, more often than not, disregards black people and their historical and cultural experiences.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a theory is "a scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena; a hypothesis that has been confirmed or established by observation or experiment, and is propounded or accepted as accounting for the known facts; a statement of what are

held to be the general laws, principles, or causes of something known or observed." However, because theoretical discourse traditionally happens among white men, when the majority of these men theorize, they talk in a mechanistic language unfamiliar to mainstream black people; they over-generalize about black culture when they do write about it; and they disregard black people's way of being in the world as pure theory itself. In so doing, they reinforce white patriarchal superstructures—media, law, education, religion—that function to silence or repress people of color—within the imagination of the critic, within the classroom, and within the broader public discourse beyond the academy. Christian says, "People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic."<sup>2</sup> She says that black people's theorizing "is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language."<sup>3</sup> Then she asks, "How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?"<sup>4</sup> In other words, black people from Africa to the Middle Passage, from the plantation to Jim Crow, from store front porches to kitchen tables, from "yo mama" jokes to hip-hop slang, have survived in an oppressive world because their knowing how to be in the world is their knowing how to theorize about themselves and the world(s) in which they live.

After reading Christian, I thought of you, and, laughing to myself, I whispered, "My People! My People!"<sup>5</sup>

Dear Zora Neale Hurston:

I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for the third time. The first time I read it, I was in tenth grade and only remembered Tea Cake because his name reminded me of the nicknames black people give each other, like Cookie and Pumpkin, Peanut and Rooster. The second time I read it, I was a graduate student and the love between Janie and Tea Cake became relevant as I was also looking at the relationship between Tish and Fonny in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. But this third go-around, as a post-graduate student, I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as social biography: as your retelling of black people's humanity.

In an article you wrote called "What White Publishers Won't Print," you said, "To grasp the penetration of western civilization in a minority, it is necessary to know how the average minority behaves and lives."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is your theoretical offering, not so much to evoke critical discussion among literary critics—particularly those of the 1930s like Alain Locke, who claimed your work was "simply out of step with the more serious trends of the time,"<sup>7</sup> or Richard Wright, who argued your novel "carries no theme

no message, no thought"<sup>8</sup>—but to record the African American ethos, the moral nature or guiding principle of a person, as you experienced it growing up in Eatonville.

Dona Marimba Ani in *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, says the African ethos expressed itself in America by means of our black expressions: language, music, dance, thought patterns, laughter, walks, spirituality. She claims, "The system and circumstances of slavery in New Europe sought to destroy African value, African self-image and self-concept."<sup>9</sup> In other words, slavery was an attempt to dehumanize Africans. But Africans survived because their spirits survived, which were manifested in their ability to recreate the world, in their ability to express themselves.

Ms. Hurston, you were obviously ahead of your time. Your preoccupation with Negro expressions as a means of understanding Negro life in America only seemed like one more minstrel show for critics like Locke and Wright, who didn't seem to understand the significance of your reclaiming black traditions. Instead, they thought a novel about the downtrodden black was more situated in the Renaissance's idea of social protest, and was thus more appropriate for the times.

I wonder if they are rolling around in their graves, and if you are rolling around too, but rolling around like the sun rolls around heaven.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston:

I think your writing about black people's expressions was a political act.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston:

I keep thinking about black expressions, especially after reading your "Characteristics of Negro Expression," and came across Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*. Because of the dialect you use in *Their Eyes*, he calls your story a "speakerly text," a spin-off from Roland Barthes' opposition between the "readerly" text—a text that is reader-friendly, and the "writerly" text—a text that requires the reader to work for comprehension.<sup>10</sup> Gates claims *Their Eyes* "is the first example in (black) tradition . . . to represent an oral literary tradition, designed 'to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration,'" thus the term "speakerly text."<sup>11</sup> Before Gates examines *Their Eyes* for rhetorical strategies, however, he summarizes "Negro Expressions" as your claim that dialect is Negro speech. This summation becomes the foundation for Gates's arguments. Nevertheless, what intrigued me most about his essay is his historical account of black poetic diction, as well as critics' responses to its use.

Did you know that Paul Laurence Dunbar is considered the most accomplished black dialect poet, and that his presence engendered "the turn of critical attention to matters of language and voice"?<sup>12</sup> And did you know in 1866 a white woman claimed that "'The Coming American Novelist' would be 'of African origin' "? She wrote in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, "This great author would be one 'With us' but 'not of us,' one who 'has suffered everything a poet, a dramatist, a novelist need suffer before he comes to have his lips anointed.'" <sup>13</sup> She goes on to say, "The African 'has given us the only national music we have ever had,' a corpus of art 'distinctive in musical history. 'She says this great author will be "'a natural story-teller,' uniquely able to fabricate . . . 'acts of imagination,' discourses in which no 'morality is involved.'" <sup>14</sup> And although this white woman referred to "The Coming American Novelist" as a man, because using the male pronoun was more "convenient," she declares that it will be a woman who will claim the title.<sup>15</sup>

Zora, do you think she conjured you up?

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

The way I see it, hip-hop culture encompasses—and I am inclined to argue, hyper-encompasses—all of the expressions that you evaluated in your "Characteristics of Negro Expression." You would have had such a writing good time with hip-hop.

## DRAMA

Everything that is hip-hop is dramatic. With lyrics from excess money to pimps and hos, *Self Destruction* and *Cop Killer*; from dances that require lines and breaks, krumps and shoulder leans; from styles that range from Phat Farm to Sean Jean, penny loafers and hot pink high top PUMA sneakers; and language from *bootylicious* to *fo shizzle my nizzle*, *bling-bling*, and *sippin' on some sizzurp*, hip-hop resonates with "Every phase of Negro life [being] highly dramatized."<sup>16</sup>

## WILL TO ADORN

Indeed, black is beautiful, and there is nothing more beautiful than to see how black people adorn themselves, especially in hip-hop culture (and church). In your essay you said, "Whatever the Negro does of his own volition, he embellishes."<sup>17</sup> Clearly, that is an understatement in regard to hip-hop.

In hip-hop, artists are always dressed to impress whether they are wearing tailored three-piece suits, baggy fatigues, ballroom gowns, or

skinny jeans. However, their attire is never complete without their bling-bling or their iced jewelry (worn either in their mouths or on their extremities); their designer shades, shoes, and handbags; and their groomed hair, which, if cut for a male, may have art work shaved on the head, and if styled for a female, may be brightly colored. In addition to adorning their bodies, hip-hop artists also adorn (or pimp) their automobiles with hydraulics, tinted windows, booming sound systems, and spree wheels, to name a few adornments. Hip-hop artists pride themselves in their ability to adorn, as this expression expresses whether or not they are deemed a "rubberband" man (or woman).<sup>18</sup>

## ANGULARITY AND ASYMMETRY

Graffiti, one of the four elements (the others being rapping, break dancing, and DJing) of hip-hop culture, encompasses both angularity and asymmetry. "Wild-style," a form of graffiti involving interlocking letters, arrows, and connecting points, is an example of hip-hop art that welcomes deep angles and the rhythm of segments.<sup>19</sup> Although your spiel on angularity and asymmetry is in reference to Negro dancing, poetry, and furniture placement, graffiti can be posited in this exploration of your Negro expressions, for the images that graffiti artists produce are fluid, and therefore, letters dance with each other, and their placements on the abandoned wall, the subway door, or the Harlem tunnel is poetic, each piece creating a rhythm of its own.

## DANCING

Hip-hop can't be hip-hop without break dancing. But in addition to cardboard boxes laid on dance floors, upside-down head spins, and holding one's body up with one arm, with legs (angular) poised to the sky while striking a pose, dance includes almost any movement that a black person involves him- or herself in while listening to music. From simple head nodding and hand clapping, to an all-out line dance like the Electric Slide, "the Negro must be considered the great(est) artist, his dancing is realistic suggestion."<sup>20</sup>

## NEGRO FOLKLORE

Hip-hop music is a form of folklore, as rappers' lyrics are usually autobiographical stories about their own black experiences. According to Deborah Plant, you saw your own culture "as the source of renewed Black national dignity and pride."<sup>21</sup> Plant claims you "saw in it the foundations of African American self-affirmation and independence and the foundation of resistance to European cultural domination."<sup>22</sup>

Rapper Christopher Wallace, aka Biggie Smalls, who was noted for his storytelling abilities, seemed to share the same sentiments, for in his lyrics he remembers and celebrates his growing up black in Brooklyn, New York.

Biggie Smalls, who reminds me much of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas (because he was a poor black subjugated male who hung out with his friends on street corners committing crimes), created music about his life; he created music, which eventually liberated him. In short, Biggie Smalls used hip-hop music as a vehicle in which he embraced his essential self.

Throughout his song titled "Juicy," Biggie tells his listeners about living in public housing, dropping out of high school, and fulfilling all of the "stereotypes of a black male misunderstood."<sup>23</sup> In his chorus, however, he tells his listeners "don't let 'em hold you down, reach for the stars," and provides his life as an example of a black person who went from birthdays being the worst days to sippin' champagne when he is "thirst-ay."<sup>24</sup> Like you, Zora, Biggie's "creative expression . . . [was] as much protest against establishment dictates, both white and Black, as they were affirmations of Black folk culture."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to hip-hop music being a form of folklore, call-and-response, which was popular in traditional African cultures during public gatherings, civil affairs, and religious ceremonies, is a dynamic of folklore. Similarly, the rapper and audience interact with one another spontaneously. Perhaps one of the most popular call-and-response interactions employed in hip-hop music include this now formulaic structure:

DJ/Rapper: *Now throw yo hands in the air  
An' wave 'em like you jus' don't care.*

Then the DJ/Rapper makes up the third line. For example: *an' if you like bein'  
black ya know it's all that*

DJ/Rapper: *Let me hear ya say "oh yea!"*

Audience: *Oh yea!*

DJ/Rapper: *Oh yea!*

Audience: *Oh yea!*

DJ/Rapper: *Ya don't stop.*

Finally, free-style battling, an aspect of hip-hop perFORMances, is similar to playing the dirty dozens, which is another form of folklore. Like the dirty dozens, wherein two people go back and forth insulting one another, two rappers are pitted against each other, rapping it out for the title of lyrical genius. Usually each rapper's verse includes insults toward the other, and the more insulting and clever the rhyme, the more "props" the rapper receives.

In short, hip-hop music is the word on the street. Says Plant, "through words, the individual could assume autonomy, naming and un-naming self and world."<sup>26</sup> Biggie Smalls never thought hip-hop would be the answer to his challenges in life. However, with words, Biggie narrated his own story and "create[d] a world wherein [he could] survive and become a self-determined individual."<sup>27</sup>

## CULTURE HEROES

Although Rudy Ray Moore can be considered a culture hero in regard to hip-hop culture because his 1970s "Dolemite" character influenced rap lyrics, Rudy Ray Moore was a comedic folklorist who used Africa's culture hero tales in his stand-up comedy performances. According to critics, Moore's "Dolemite" routine was filled with rhyme, arrogance, and profanity, and was, therefore, an example of blaxploitation, a hyperbolic exploitation of blacks in film.<sup>28</sup> However, for rap artists like Snoop Dog, Dr. Dre, and 2 Live Crew, who worked with Moore, imitated him, and/or included snippets of his "Dolemite" routine in their own music, Moore portrayed black expressions with truth, humor, and appreciation for black culture. Perhaps one of his most popular culture hero stories is his signifying monkey routine, wherein a monkey uses his wiles and an accommodating elephant to fool a lion. Says Douglas Martin of the *Chicago Tribune*, the tale, which originated in West Africa, became a basis for Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*.<sup>29</sup> But Zora, it was through you, as well as through Ishmael Reed, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Wole Soyinka and others, that Rudy Ray Moore was able to narrate his story in the first place.<sup>30</sup> Zora, because of you and your comrades, Gates is able to talk 'bout signifyin'.

## ORIGINALITY

Zora, you asserted "to get back to original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas."<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that hip-hop artists have modified ideas. Perhaps one of the biggest illustrations of modification is the hip-hop artist's ability to modify language. However, since you are fully aware of black people's ability to transform language and noted how black people have modified "whites' musical instruments, so that his interpretation has been adopted by the white man himself and then re-interpreted,"<sup>32</sup> I want to tell you how hip-hop artists have used and modified instruments used to create hip-hop music.

Hip-hop technology (instruments) includes turntables, amplifiers, and synthesizers, as well as voices (for beat boxing, rapping, and call-and-response), and hands (for scratching, clapping, and spinning vinyl) to create sounds reflective of the African diaspora.<sup>33</sup> One of the most modified technologies, however, is the turntable, whose intended use was limited to spinning records. However, the expressive dynamics of hip-hop culture—which is a mixture of African American cultures—merged with the ever-present DJ who spins the records, transformed the turntable into a multipurpose piece of machinery. The traditional record spinning of DJs, in combination with other technologies, resulted in the use of turntables to scratch, as well as mix songs and beats, originating a hybridity of sounds unique to black music. Eventually the sampler, which is closely related to the synthesizer, was invented. The user records multiple sounds on the sampler, which then plays each recording back based on how the instrument is configured. With the sampler, sounds didn't have to be generated by scratch, which not only led to the elimination of turntables, but also the elimination of the use of the voice to beat box, imitating a drumming sound. Now that blacks have reinterpreted instruments to fit the demands of hip-hop sound, hip-hop technologies have been further modified, allowing anyone to *do* hip-hop music.

### IMITATION

Because hip-hop music is a mixture of be-bop, blues, R&B, gospel, rag time, jazz, [and more], hip-hop artists heavily imitate (sample) other artists. However, what made me smile really big was your reference to dances that imitate animals. When it comes to hip-hop, the dances are endless. Not only do dances imitate animals, but they imitate personal traits and machinery. A few of my favorite dances include the California worm, which requires the dancer, standing erect, to squiggle her arms, neck, and torso as a worm would; the Young Joc (named after rapper Young Joc), which requires the dancer to pretend she is sitting on a motorcycle, back leaning, and arms extended as if gassing a motorcycle; the Superman, which requires the dancer to extend his arms in front of him like the Superman hero, and hop to the side as if flying; the pony, which requires the dancer to trot in place like a pony; the toilet bowl, which requires the dancer to move her lower torso (legs closed) imitating a flushing down of water; the sissy, where the dancer prances around snapping his fingers, winding his arm in large circles, and walking rapidly (but with short steps) on his toes; and the robot, which requires the dancer to stiffly move her arms, feet, and head like a robot with limited movement.

### ABSENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF PRIVACY

One of the characteristics of hip-hop is braggadocio. Therefore, very little of a rapper's life is kept private. Your claim, "The community is given the benefit of a good fight as well as a good wedding. An audience is a necessary part of any drama,"<sup>34</sup> is right on in regard to the hip-hop community. (I might argue, however, that the media's interest in black people's defamation plays a role in the lack of privacy associated with hip-hop artists.) Nevertheless, perhaps the most talked about, most publicized, and most criticized debate—after the openly East Coast, West Coast rivalries that left rappers Tu Pac and Biggie Smalls dead—is R&B singer Rihanna and hip-hop artist Chris Brown's public domestic dispute. Every detail about their quarrel, from the cause of the argument, to the location, to the car Chris Brown was driving, to Brown's public apology and images of Rihanna's bruised face, was made available to the public. Obviously, with the advancement of communications technology, people have more access to information than ever before. However, hip-hop culture is notorious for airing out its dirty laundry, for negative publicity is better than no publicity at all.

### JOOK

After watching Steven Spielberg's rendition of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, I wanted Harpo to build me a Jook joint. Watching those black folks jook to Jook music was my pleasure, and listening to Shug Avery singing "Miss Celie's Blues" was my dream. Nevertheless, hip-hop artists Andre 3000 and Big Boi of OutKast played in the 2006 film "Idlewild," which reminds me of Harpo's Jook Joint.

"Idlewild" is a juke (jook) box (guitars) musical set in the Prohibition-era American South, where Rooster (Big Boi), a speakeasy performer and club manager, must contend with gangsters who have their eyes on the club, while his piano player and partner Percival (Andre 3000) must choose between his love, Angel, or his obligations to his father.

I thought you might appreciate knowing that Rooster's wife's name is Zora.

Nevertheless, "Idlewild" is filled with the characteristics of the Jook joint you describe in "Negro Expressions." The club is a bawdy house where the men and women dance (mainly the jitterbug), drink, and gamble. In addition, the guitarist and pianist play blues and jazz, as the movie is set in the 1930s. Many of the musical numbers were

written and performed by OutKast and were previously featured on their albums *Big Boi and Dre Present . . . OutKast and Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*.

## DIALECT

There is not a hip-hop artist whom I am aware of who does not use dialect as you have described in your "Negro Expressions." Even if lyrics are written in standard American English, the performance of the English is undoubtedly dialectical, as rappers tend to (purposely) fail to enunciate every letter sound in particular words, similar to your explanation of "I" versus "Ah." Although you claim "the lip form" is responsible for blacks failing to pronounce a sharp "I," because "By experiment the reader will find that a sharp 'I' is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip," I believe black people purposely alter the pronunciation of standard English as a means of claiming their own language, a rejection, if you will, of standard English. Rapper Mos Def, begins his song, "Hip Hop," stating that he speaks in a tongue native to his community, culture, and political history. He used to speak in standard American English, "But caught a rash on my lips / So now my chat just like dis."<sup>35</sup> In other words, it seems Mos Def is claiming that before colonization, *African* Americans spoke a language particular to their divinity. However, because standard English was forced on them as an oppressive tool to further dehumanize them, *African* Americans abandoned the standards of American English as a way of reclaiming their humanity; therefore, *this is dis*. Moreover, and Zora, I am sure you can appreciate this, instead of positioning himself as a downtrodden black who wallows in race matters, Mos Def celebrates black people's resilience and creative spirits, claiming that black people went from working in chain gangs to working in hip-hop, a culture that has rendered them visibility. Like Tea Cake, in your *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mos Def is another black man who, while making a living, is creating and jooing to good music. Mos Def is making the "mos" out of his Negro Expressions, even marketing them, I might argue, in order to expose *African* Americans' ability to theorize.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

If my professor believes you lead the way to God, do you think she believes hip-hop artists can lead her there too?

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I'm up to my eyeballs in criticisms about you and about your work. I asked my professor about how she still comes up with so much to

write about in regard to you. Her response: "How many poems are there about roses?" But *everyone* still has *so much* to say about you: Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Maya Angelou, Hortense J. Spillers, Marjorie Pryse, Barbara Christian, Valerie Boyd, Carla Kaplan, Cary D. Wintz, Cheryl A. Wall, Sterling Brown, Ruby Dee, Rita Dove, bell hooks, Nathan Huggins, June Jordan, Ishmael Reed, Mary Helen Washington, Addison Gayle, Deborah Plant. They call you a fore-mother, say you gave them voice, like you were their *nommo*—the *force* within the universe that they used in order to effect other beings.<sup>36</sup> You were their vehicle, they merely the vessel. I guess you were the "Genius of the South."<sup>37</sup>

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I hadn't thought about black people being geniuses until I heard you were named one. In my academic training, "genius," looked like Albert Einstein, or Mozart, or William Shakespeare. And black people—although I knew they were politicians, artists, inventors, warriors, and scholars—I thought them brilliant, never *genius*. But Alice Walker claimed you "Genius of the South."<sup>38</sup>

Says Harold Bloom, in order to discover one's genius, a person must look inside her or himself, because ". . . there is a god within us, and the god speaks."<sup>39</sup> I think you knew black people were geniuses all along—and by speaking for them, you introduced the world to God.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I get it.

Black expressions derive from the black ethos, which is the divine self. In order for *African* Americans to survive in an oppressive state, they create. They create language, music and dance, art, stories, drama, church. They create hip-hop. And because creation is divine, as God—the ultimate Creator—dwells in people acting as their spirits, the Creator manifests itself in people's ability to create. Creating, then, is not only an expression of the divine, but it is an expression of humanity. It is theorizing.

Through your storytelling, you, too, are theorizing, as well as giving black people voice and exposing their divinity, which is also their humanity, to a world that did not view them as human beings. You see, to be able to speak in your mother tongue (black dialect, dramatics, folklore, adornments) is to be able to maintain your identity and sense of belonging in a world that attempts to exclude you by imposing values on you that are foreign—that are not your own. So, Zora, your story about a black woman who washes white people's clothes in order to support herself and her cheating husband,<sup>40</sup> and your story about a

black couple whose love survives despite adultery because the wife thinks that sleeping with another man will earn her a gold piece for her husband,<sup>41</sup> and your story about a black man believed to be killed by a bobcat, which is actually the spirit of the man he murdered<sup>42</sup>—along with the secondary stories told on Joe Stark's storefront—stories told in jest in order to keep from crying—was your way of re-narrating black ethos. Matter of fact, you, as storyteller, are the embodiment of Negro expression. You are divine Truth, as are the black characters in your stories.

Zora, do you see yourself as the storyteller of God? Or as God's journalist, trying to explain everything that happens around us?

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

I'm on a roll now. I've read your *Dust Tracks on a Road* and all of your short stories—"John Redding Goes to Sea," "Drenched in Light," and "Story in Harlem Slang," being among my favorites—and I think I'm on my way to seeing God. I realize, although spirit cannot be seen, one's language gives it voice so that it can be heard, and then deemed visible. However, to strip somebody of her ability to speak, that which makes a person heard, is to strip her of her identity, which is deeply rooted in spirituality. So, it's like as a storyteller, telling stories from the time you were a little girl, to re-narrating stories you heard orated (and often fabricated) on Eatonville's storefront, I've come to the conclusion that language is home, and Gloria Anzaldúa says it is essential that people be given permission to be at home in their language,<sup>43</sup> for home is where the heart is. Albeit, a trite phrase, it is one that is very appropriate, for the spirit dwells in the heart, and "where the spirit is, there is liberty."<sup>44</sup>

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

According to Paul DeMan in Lea Ramsdell's article, "Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States," "the self is constituted by language."<sup>45</sup> Says DeMan, "language precedes identity [and] language is what grants humans 'the self-reflexive dimension of their consciousness' and their ability to interact with others, thereby developing their own subjectivity."<sup>46</sup> In other words, without language, human beings cannot develop their own individuality. So, if a person is stripped of her language, she is unable to interact with other human beings, and unless she creates a new language, the language becomes dead, as does the spirit of that culture and its people. Therefore, since language is an art, as an artist you wrote about Negro expressions in your re-narrations of African American folklore, in order to sustain African American culture, as well

as to showcase how Africans used their ethos (theories) to survive in America.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

Don Miguel Ruiz, who wrote *The Voice of Knowledge*, says, "If other people try to write your story, it means they don't respect you. They don't respect you because they consider that you are not a good artist, that you cannot write your own story, even though you were born to write your own story. Respect comes directly from love; it is one of the greatest expressions of love."<sup>47</sup> Although Ruiz's "you" refers to the individual self, I think "you" can also mean a cultural group, as Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Alice Walker—who stand on your genius—are in the business of re-narrating African American history in an attempt to debunk myths that suggest African Americans inhuman. But Zora, you celebrated African Americans and all of their Negro expressions. You were born to write your story, as well as the stories of those blacks who were silenced. And your respect for African Americans as human beings is a great expression of love; it is an expression of God.

Dear Zora Neale Hurston,

Your mother told you to jump at the sun, and in the spirit of her genius, you encouraged others to do the same. I'm jumping Zora. I'm jumping at the sun, and I can see God in the horizon.

Fondly Yours,

Kendra Nicole

Daughter and Negro Artist

## NOTES

1. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987), 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 52.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Arno Press, 1942), 223.
6. Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 121.
7. Quoted in Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), viii.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Dona Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1980), 14.

10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 198.
11. *Ibid.*, 181.
12. *Ibid.*, 174.
13. *Ibid.*, 174.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Higgins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 225.
17. *Ibid.*, 227.
18. A "rubberband" man is a person who is carrying so much money that he has to use a rubberband to secure all of it.
19. Sacha Jenkins, "Graffiti: Graphic Scenes, Spray Fiends, and Millionaires," in *The Vibe of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 39.
20. Hurston, *Negro Expression*, 228.
21. Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 64.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Biggie Smalls, "Juicy," *Ready to Die*, Executive Producer, Sean "Puffy" Combs (New York: Arista Records, 1994).
24. *Ibid.*, verse 3.
25. Plant, *Every Tub*, 70.
26. *Ibid.*, 78.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Douglas Martin, "Rudy Ray Moore, 81, 'Dolemite' star, precursor of rap, dies," *Chicago Tribune.com* Oct. 2008. *Chicago Tribune*, 8 May 2009.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, preface.
31. Hurston, *Negro Expression*, 230.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Houston Baker, "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy," in *Black Music Research Journal*, 11.2 (1991): 217–221.
34. Hurston, *Negro Expression*, 231.
35. Mos Def, "Hip-Hop," Verse 1, *Black on Both Sides* (Los Angeles: Rawkus Records, 1999).
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