



Portrait of Zora Neale Hurston in midlife (above) and image of program from the 2000 premiere of “Polk County” at the Library.

Writer’s Reputation Grows with Rediscovery of Copyright Deposits

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Zora Neale Hurston died in obscurity in a Florida nursing home in 1960. But her standing as a distinguished writer of African American literature was already on the rise in 1997, when retired visual arts examiner John Wayne identified 10 little-known play scripts she had deposited decades earlier for copyright registration. The discovery of the scripts, added to other known Hurston plays, established her as an important 20th-century dramatist.

Born in 1891, Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, and began writing and publishing short stories, poems, and plays while attending Howard University. Later, she won a scholarship to Barnard College, where she studied with noted anthropologist Franz Boas and earned a bachelor’s degree. She conducted folklore studies under his direction in the American South in the 1920s and recorded folk music there and in the Caribbean in the 1930s with folklorist Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress. She drew on this work and her own life experiences in her writing, celebrating African American folkways of the rural South.

Interest in Hurston revived in 1975 when acclaimed novelist Alice Walker published an essay, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Ms. Magazine*. Hurston’s books came back into print, her life became the subject of study, and a commemorative stamp was created in her honor.

Hurston was known initially as a folklorist and a novelist before she became known as a playwright; her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is regarded as an American classic. It was the rediscovery of the scripts she deposited

for copyright registration that uncovered the extent of her dramatic aspirations. She deposited them between 1925 and 1944. All but one—*Mule-Bone*, coauthored with Langston Hughes—remained unpublished when Wayne found Hurston scripts while volunteering with the Copyright Drama Deposit Collection.

The collection consists of drama deposits registered as unpublished with the Copyright Office between 1901 and 1977. Different Library divisions acquired select titles over the years, but the bulk of the collection was transferred to the Manuscript Division in the 1980s. Since then, division staff, interns, and volunteers have been researching and inventorying it. Eventually, the entire collection will be microfilmed; selected scripts, including Hurston’s, will also be retained in paper format.

“The discovery of the unpublished Hurston play scripts radically changed scholarly appraisal of Hurston,” said Alice Birney, the collection’s curator. “It now seems that the theater may have been her best medium for integrating folklore, autobiography, and music.”

Between 1997 and 1999, Birney organized a series of lunch-hour staff readings at the Library of the unpublished scripts. The readings culminated in the professional production of “Polk County” on December 11 and 12, 2000, in the Library’s Coolidge Auditorium; the Arena Stage of Washington cosponsored the production with the Library. Hurston had deposited the script of the folk comedy, which she coauthored with Dorothy Waring, in 1944.

“I am particularly pleased to see one of our 250,000 unpublished copyright drama deposit typescripts come to the professional stage here for a world premiere at the Library of Congress,” stated Librarian of Congress James Billington in 2000. “This work is but one of a rich treasure chest of neglected creative items deposited for copyright in the past but never performed.”

The Arena Stage produced the play again in its own theater in 2002. To accommodate scholarly interest, the Library has since made the Hurston scripts available online. ©

