

Black Love: A Symposium
The 80th Anniversary of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
September 14-16, 2017

CALL FOR PAPERS

On September 18, 1937, Zora Neale Hurston's seminal novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published. It initially received tepid praise, at best, along with needlessly harsh criticism from fellow fiction writer Richard Wright for its supposed counterrevolutionary minstrel image. Ushering in a new era of protest literature, Wright objected to Hurston's publication of a love story at the height of Jim Crow oppression during the Depression. Yet Hurston's work, with themes of sensuality, self-discovery, spirituality, and voicedness inspired by the writer's own bittersweet love affair, has endured in African American literary history. Black women writers and scholars, such as Alice Walker and Sherley Anne Williams, began to reclaim Hurston as a pivotal writer in the African American literary tradition in the 1970s. By 1980, Hurston's significance was all the more enhanced with the publication of Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Today, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a fixture of American arts and letters. It is frequently read in classrooms, engaged in scholarship, and cited as an inspiring influence for other creative works.

In celebration of the 80th anniversary of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Dr. Ayesha K. Hardison and Dr. Randal Maurice Jelks propose to explore the legacy of Hurston's novel by examining themes of Black Love in African American art, literature, religious thought, and cultural ways that predate as well as succeed its publication. By love, we mean romance, Eros, and erotic desire between and among black persons. As Janie Crawford explains to her friend Pheoby, "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets." We contend that an exchange about the evolving aesthetics and politics of Black Love is just as important now as it was in 1937 given that its expression is still too often disavowed and pathologized in critical discourses or deemed illegible and unprofitable in popular culture.

As a result, Lerone Bennett Jr.'s affirming words for the 1981 annual *Ebony* magazine special issue on Black Love bears one of this symposium's framing tenets. In his article "The Roots of Black Love," he refutes the notion that African Americans' history of struggle destroyed their intimacies:

As a matter of hard historical fact, the true story of Black love—love colored by, love *blackened* by the Black experience—is the exact opposite of the traditional myth. There is, moreover, plenty of evidence to show that Black men and women—despite slavery, despite segregation, *despite everything*—created a modern love song in life and art that is the loveliest thing dreamed or sung this side of the seas.

We see Bennett's words as apropos, and we invite scholars, writers, and artists to reflect upon Black Love—its history, its reiterations, and its futurity—at a symposium to be held at the University of Kansas September 14-16, 2017.

We envision a discussion of Black Love organized broadly around six panel themes:

- Political Economies of Black Love
- Imaging Black Love
- Black Love Languages and Literatures
- Traditions and Social Principles of Black Love
- Ethics and Faiths of Black Love

- Rhythms and Tonalities of Black Love

Symposium presentations may cover, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Romance novels
- Urban or hip-hop fiction
- Nonfiction relationship books
- Dating sites and apps
- Film
- Scripted and reality television
- Visual Culture
- Print art
- Personal narratives and family stories
- Marriage and coupling
- Economics
- Social institutions
- Cultural spaces
- The diaspora
- Formal and informal education
- Music (i.e. Soul, R&B, Hip Hop, and Jazz)
- Celebrity culture and public figures
- Gendered ideologies (i.e. masculinity, femininity, cisgender and transgender identities)
- Sexuality (i.e. same-sex love, queer love, and heterosexual love)
- History
- Psychology
- Sociology
- Philosophy
- Theology

Guidelines for Submissions: please send an abstract of 250 words in Times-New Roman size 12 font and a brief two-page CV to blacklove2017@ku.edu. The deadline for submission is January 9, 2017.