

SOUL OF ZORA
PRESS RELEASE

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“The Soul of Zora: A Literary Legacy through Quilts Exhibition”, featuring nine quilts inspired by inaugural Alabama Writers Hall of Fame member Zora Neale Hurston, will open with a reception at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, March 14, 2019 at Tuskegee University’s Legacy Museum. The exhibit, co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Alabama Bicentennial Committee, marks the official start of activities made possible by a two-year grant to Tuskegee University from the NEH, “Literary Legacies of Macon County and Tuskegee Institute: Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph W. Ellison, and Albert Murray.” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Tuskegee University’s College of Arts and Science have also provided support for the exhibit which is free and open to the public.

Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, to her father, a formerly enslaved minister, John Hurston, and Lucy Potts Hurston, a school teacher. Zora was a graduate of Barnard College and is most well-known for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which she completed in seven weeks while in Haiti. Her travels took her far from the rural Alabama town of her birth, yet her semi-autobiographical work *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), recalls historical landmarks of Macon County, such as Tuskegee Institute and the creek, a natural border and life-source. Most recently, *Barracoon*, published posthumously in 2018, has attracted widespread acclaim. This compelling text provides an account based on Hurston’s interviews of Cudjo Lewis, who was taken to Alabama on the last slave ship to reach American waters.

The beautiful quilts in the exhibition are on loan from Marla A. Jackson, executive director, of the African American Quilt Museum and Textile Academy Museum in Lawrence, Kansas, and reflect the imagination and talent of nine contemporary quilters from across the country who are committed to preserving this important art form. Inspired by Zora’s use of southern vernacular, her ideas about love, and her beloved character, Janie’s, quest for autonomy and freedom, these quilters pay homage to the writer who yet reminds us to “jump at de sun.”

In addition to Hurston’s literary contributions as a Harlem Renaissance writer, she was also a folklorist and anthropologist. She was a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and famously remarked in her 1928 essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” “. . . I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. . . . Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation. . . . No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

The Soul of Zora: A Literary Legacy through Quilts Exhibition. The *Literary Legacies Grant* is being administered by Dr. A. T. Ankumah, Principal Investigator, and Drs. Rhonda Collier and Zanice Bond, Co-Directors. The exhibition will close on July 14, 2019. Upcoming events and community outreach programs will be announced on the *Literary Legacies* website which is currently under construction.