

Zora The Francophone

My name is Zora Zambezi Williams. But up until the day I was born my name was going to be Jordan. At the last moment however, as my mother recalls, she decided I looked more like a Zora. A name that has thenceforth, served me well. My namesake for this new first name is the author, ethnographer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. My middle name is that of the fourth largest river in Africa, spanning from Angola to Mozambique. The last name is from my father of course. He calls us the “Williams Clan.” Up until now, I did not realize how subtly instrumental the pieces of my name have guided who I have become as a person. I do not know if the intentionality behind my parents’ decision was supposed to reach into my path in life. Was I destined to be a proud Black American with her academic interests seeped in the richness of the African continent? From my name, it would seem so. In fact, the different parts of my name mirror the different perspectives with which I approached and expanded my studies in French and beyond.

Zora

I will start with my first name, Zora. Embedded within are various facets of my personality: my Spunk, my individuality, and my Blackness. It is my Blackness that has heavily tinted my perspective in understanding and exploring French language and culture. Before enumerating the impacts, first I want to detail the development of my Blackness. My family cared a lot about developing and maintaining a strong sense of identity within me. They really wanted to make sure that they knew *who I was* and *whose I was*. Ever since I was young, I knew that I was Black, not only Black but proudly Black. In the United States, where my community was not mainstream, it was essential that my parents instilled this notion in me. A place where the allure of assimilation can be so great, finding pride in your (marginalized) uniqueness was

rare. Thankfully, my parents recognized the value in a strong identity, no matter how different or “othered” it may be perceived. Thus, my childhood was filled with regular attendance to Black Baptist churches, speaking African American Vernacular English, learning about the history of Black people in the United States and being sheltered from anti-black rhetoric. Consequently, I approached my French studies always through the lens of being Black. How I perceive different French accents, the topic of essays I chose, the French literature with which I resonated the most has always been informed greatly by my Black identity.

People tend to forget that the French and Francophone world includes a plurality of people and cultures. On the periphery of that world lies the Black American culture. The French have strong and complicated ties to the continent of Africa which by extension implicates the Black American Community. On September 19, 1956 Black America’s implication in the French world was made palpable by the “Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs.” It was a convention of Black academics and creators from around the world held at the Sorbonne in the Amphitheater Descartes. James Baldwin recounts and analyzes the event in his essay *Princes and Powers* noting that the thread tying all the various Black cultures together was “their subjugation to Europe, or at the very least to the European vision of the world.”

The Black community in the United States suffers from this disposition and as such sent representatives to the conference. In the same vein, I saw myself as a delegate for the Black community in my French classes. I always brought the perspective of the Black community to the forefront of the conversation when studying French. I would always ponder the usage of the word “noir” and if Blacks in France identified as such. I would voice the consistent erasure of Blackness in French modern thought from both the feminist and humanist traditions. I puzzled the ban of collecting racial statistics in France. Even more I mulled over the lack of a word for

race in France. Consequently, I had to endeavor to learn how to express my identity and background in French. It was a part of the process of learning. When I interacted with French people, who I was always became a topic of discussion because it was hard for them to fathom and reconcile my identity as Black, American and Francophone. Developing myself into a refined francophone would be essential in staking my place in the French speaking world with my seemingly disparate identities. For that, my classes at Stanford have been invaluable.

Zambezi

On the other side of my French language acquisition, the aspects of the Zambezi part of my name started to tinge my relationship with French. Zambezi grounds me to my distant African roots, to the severed ancestral ties of a lost land, the uprooted origins of a past identity never assumed. My most recent French classes during senior year marked the beginning of my deep reflection on my connection to French colonialism and its aftermath. In my Francophone literature class, I explored the warped portraits of the Black woman during the Enlightenment Period. Black women from colonies were paraded around Europe for having *voluptuous* bodies with fetishized features. As a black woman in the United States I have experienced the same type of unwanted attention. Yet it wasn't really until I encountered this narrative in Francophone literature via Maryse Condé that I realized it was a global phenomenon.

Similarly, Diderot's work *Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville* concretized the European outlook on the new world of Black peoples they had recently discovered. I was able to trace the origins of the stereotypes, systems of oppression and the tradition of resilience within Black communities after delving into that piece of literature. Overall, reading French literature has connected me to the Black Atlantic world. I started to realize more whose I was – I belonged to Black American tradition. Beyond that, I was able to contextualize this identity within the

plurality of Blackness that exists. I was able to realize that I was a part of so much more than the United States. I had a place, a voice and a history all around the world. Francophone west Africa was just the beginning. I believe that Zambezi led me there.

Now that I have reached a culminating point in my French studies, voicing this reflection felt like an obligation to myself and to future French students. My time at Stanford has laid the foundation for me to build my life around French. We are now irrevocably fused, and it almost feels that this was destined given the origins of my name. In the future, I plan to share my affinity for French and the global Black Atlantic world by creating a nonprofit called the Zora Zambezi Foundation. Through cultural visits to hubs of Black Diasporic culture, including the United States, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, the Caribbean, West Africa and France, I hope to meld together the Black community, one language at a time.

I have great thanks for Stanford education and my primary education in Maryland for molding me into the francophone I am today and for bringing to fruition the life my name had destined for me.