

Katz, Marco. "Seers and Seraphim: A Journalistic Explanation of Zora Neale Hurston's Final Novel." Modern Language Association (MLA). Los Angeles Convention Center. Los Angeles, California. 9 January 2011. Conference presentation.

As a working musician, I appreciated Alice Walker's story about Bessie Smith calling on two famous white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance. As Smith "entered, never having seen Carl or Fania Van Vechten before..., Fania... flung herself into Bessie's arms. Bessie knocked her flat, exclaiming over a glass of straight gin: 'I never *heard* of such shit!'"ⁱ Like Smith, Walker notes, Zora Neale Hurston undoubtedly "knew shit when she saw it... Yet she never knocked anyone flat for having the audacity to patronize her... The difference between Hurston and Smith? One's work — singing, to which one could dance or make love — supported her. The other's work — writing down unwritten doings and sayings of a culture nobody else seemed to give a damn about, except to wish it would more speedily conform to white, middle-class standards — did not."ⁱⁱ In fact, one of Hurston's most underrated protagonists — a desperately poor and uneducated white woman uneasily fitting into the middle classes — would certainly have never darkened the portals of the Van Vechten home. So even though Zora Neale Hurston might have knocked me flat for presuming to speak on behalf of her creation, I have come here today to make a case for reconsidering her final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. For support, I turn to Hurston's reporting on world events during the years leading up to her final novel and on local events afterwards.

No one can doubt the need for making such a case. During her "later years," writes Walker, Hurston "became frightened of the life she had always dared bravely before. Her work, too, became reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid. This is especially true of her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people who are bores, which is."ⁱⁱⁱ Another critic, Mary Helen Washington, asks, "How did this celebrant of black folk culture become, in later years, a right-wing Republican, publicly supporting a staunch segregationist and opposing the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision?" (125). Hurston knew, however, that promises from the political left had little credibility in the African American community. Architects of the New Deal paid little more than lip service to integration. Moreover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt capped his presidency by sending segregated forces to fight Fascism and sending US citizens with Japanese surnames to concentration camps. By the final decades of Hurston's life, when integration finally became a matter of serious interest to Liberals, commentators such as Duke Ellington worried that African American institutions would

simply disappear. As some of these fears proved well-founded, black separatist groups gained influence in the years after Hurston's passing. After all, orders to assimilate can sound as patronizingly oppressive as orders to segregate, causing some to decide that staying in one's own pot might prove better than melting into another's. Washington points out Hurston's belief that the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation implied "the inferiority of black teachers, black students, and black schools in the South."^{iv} Hurston, notes Washington, also remained aware of "the hypocritical notion that intolerance was located in the South, and that, by extension, the North was a haven of equality."^v Hurston, "as well as many other southern blacks, feared that they would be the losers in the integration plan," observes Washington. "It is both ironic and sad," she adds, "to realize that Hurston would not have been denounced for any of these views in the sixties or seventies. She might even have been considered militant."^{vi}

Hurston never writes more militantly than during the years leading up to *Seraph on the Suwanee*. She begins the decade with the 1942 publication of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a book heavily censored by its publisher. "Japan's application of our principles to Asia is never to be sufficiently deplored," she declares. "We Westerners composed that piece about trading in China with gunboats and cannons long decades ago. Japan is now plagiarizing in the most flagrant manner. We also wrote that song about keeping a whole hemisphere under your wing."^{vii} This was "intended to be the final chapter in the first draft of the book," reports Henry Louis Gates, Jr, "which makes Hurston's pro-Japanese statements and her criticism of U.S. imperialism even more noteworthy. Apparently she wished initially to end on this radical note."^{viii} In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston does not simply inveigh against racial discrimination, as if fixing that would leave the US with a perfected liberal democracy; instead, she lambastes the entire system of European and US imperialism. *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which came out only six years later, exposes how many of the same imperialistic forces operate domestically, oppressing and implicating white as well as black citizens.

A 1956 book, *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee County Jail*,^{ix} helps place the politics of Hurston and her final novel. The substantial contributions by Hurston reveal racialized aspects of life in that Florida county, and demonstrate her determination to expose systemic abuses to a wider audience. Far from acting as a fearful reactionary, Hurston demonstrates courage and conviction in these journalistic efforts. William Bradford Huie investigated the McCollum case and published this book at the instigation of Hurston, who had reported on McCollum's first trial for the Philadelphia *Courier*. Hurston believed that as a white man Huie would have better access to the defendant and, in general, to the Suwannee

County legal system. Huie, a native of Alabama, comes in hoping to exploit his position as a white southern insider, and in some ways deals with Southern whites in the same manner that Hurston had dealt with Southern blacks, using anthropological techniques to explore the reasoning behind his people's actions. According to Huie, he the judge "are both Yellow Dog Democrats — we'd both vote for a 'yellow dog' before we'd vote for a Republican — and we both, no doubt, voted for Eisenhower in 1952, though the Judge ain't saying."^x This bonding tactic does not turn out as well as Hurston and Huie hope. Among other setbacks, Huie ends up in jail.

In her portion of the book, Hurston describes her impressions of the trial as "one of a smothering blanket of silence. I gained other vivid impacts," she writes, "but they were subsidiary and grew out of the first. It was as if one listened to a debate in which everything which might have lead to and justified the resolution had been waived."^{xi} Black people, observes Hurston, are afraid to speak out, and white people are "afraid of 'outsiders' — what the outside world might learn and say."^{xii} In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston comprehends the white people who feel left out by focusing on a protagonist, Arvay Henson, who believes that her husband, Jim Meserve, prefers the company of up-and-coming white people like himself. "You come from some big much-de-mucks," she scolds, "and we ain't nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash"^{xiii} Jim cheerfully uses his wife along with the downtrodden whites and African Americans around him without caring about the fact all of them make out much less well than he does. Later on, Jim Meserve runs a still in collaboration with his African American partner, Joe Kelsey, who takes far greater risks. Jim has his impoverished white son-in-law run numbers and work a Boleta racket.^{xiv}

Striking similarities appear in the communities portrayed in the domestic comedy of *Seraph on the Suwanee* and the legal reporting of *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee County Jail*. Ruby McCollum shot Dr. Clifford LeRoy Adams to death on Sunday, August 3, 1952 at 11:34am, and her trial took place in Live Oak, Florida, the Suwannee county seat. In a conversation with Huie, the judge insists that the county "conducted everything in a quiet orderly manner. We gave the Negro woman a fair and square trial."^{xv} Huie asks whether the Judge has forbidden conversations between the defendant and the press. "That's correct," replies the judge. "When Guy Crews was her lawyer, he raised the question of letting some of the Negro reporters [like Hurston] from Northern newspapers see her. But I didn't want her bothered by these strangers. They were a threat to a quiet, orderly manner of trial. So I entered an order that would prevent their seeing her."^{xvi}

Determined to pursue his investigation, Huie discovers that the Judge conspired with

other community leaders in order to keep facts about the victim covered up. Like the Joe Kelsey and his wife, Ruby and her husband ran gambling schemes that were protected by the doctor and other respected whites. Huie also uncovers the doctor's checkered past and secret affairs, including a longstanding liaison with Ruby McCollum. By excluding representatives of the press and limiting testimony and cross-examination, the Judge forced an outcome that demonstrated Ruby's guilt with the skimpy motivation that she did not want to pay a relatively small medical bill owed to Dr. Adams. Ruby was not, however, a stereotypically poor black defendant. Even after payoffs to well-placed white protectors, she and Sam made a great deal of money from 'bolita' and other gambling rackets. Adams has good reason to erase his connection to Ruby, since at the time of the killing he has begun to acquire money and power that Jim Meserve would have envied. The illegal enterprise that made it possible for black players to gain power from the white need for secrecy also converted them into potential threats in need of elimination.

Digging ever deeper into Adam's life, Huie speaks with insurance companies who reveal some of the scams the doctor employed to rip off patients and nurses working in the doctor's office. Adams, Huie finds, defrauded the Veterans Administration,^{xvii} botches surgery,^{xviii} cheats local business people,^{xix} threatens to testify falsely in order to make a patient sign over the deed to a house,^{xx} and forges the signature of his friend LaVergne Blue on a will. This last episode may have formed part of a murder plot with Adams planning to use this fraudulent will as a means of collecting all of Blue's "real and personal property."^{xxi} Eventually, Huie uncovers Dr. Adam's purchase of a .410 pistol and other evidence indicating that he might have planned Ruby's murder.^{xxii} A .410 pistol has few practical uses. Unlike other pistols, it fires "not a bullet but a shotgun-like shell. No .410 gauge pistol can ever be identified as a murder weapon."^{xxiii} Adams, observes one witness, "was trying to become a better citizen."^{xxiv} In order "to get rid of Ruby he knew he'd have to kill her."^{xxv}

In instance after instance, the Ruby McCollum story shows the ideological suppression of entrenched segregation that usually needs no force to back it up. When needed, shows of force and even violence are readily produced to maintain the power of a select circle of white people over the rest of the population; normally, however, white powers need no violence as the blacks fearfully submit. Huie writes, "The law and the courts are instruments of white men; and the Negro has had centuries of practice in avoidance."^{xxvi} One sees this most obviously in white on black oppression, but many instances demonstrate that the powerless whites have little more opportunity than the powerless blacks to make their voices heard. Women of all colors have even less power than the men.

Huie ends on an ambiguously hopeful note. Although he eventually succeeds in having Ruby's sentence reversed, the defendant ends up doomed to spend most of her remaining years in a mental institution, having been declared unfit to stand a second trial. Like Huie, Hurston finds what hope she can in the materials at hand. Hurston performs this work, journalist and novelistic, in a persistently difficult environment. "Every Southern white man has his pet Negro,"^{xxvii} she observes in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Members of the Kelsey family accept the subordinate position implicit in this patronage, even replicating the slave era habit of identifying themselves as members of the family. "Meserve's don't mistrust one another," Kelsey's son tells Arvay.^{xxviii} Both become Meserve's, Arvay as a wife and Kelsey as a fixture on the property, through a feudal acceptance of Jim's protection. In "What White Publishers Won't Print," Hurston notes how seemingly well-intentioned editors continue to view black writers as similar fixtures. "He is still a savage, and no amount of translating Virgil and Ovid is going to change him," writes Hurston in her approximation of white views as she sees them. "In fact, all you have done is to turn a useful savage into a dangerous beast."^{xxix} Publishers, Hurston felt, only took an interest in morbid stories about African Americans.

In a *PMLA* article, Cynthia Ward asks if "a critical mass of working-class readers" could "stretch the boundaries of imagined community to embrace 'Crackers' and 'poor white trash'" and decides "no: such a development is categorically and practically impossible for a number of reasons." Ward's reasons include a middle-class readership that causes the working-class author to, in various ways, "deauthorize" her voice and the class distinctions created by literature that cause readers to separate the characters with whom they identify from those with whom they are differentiated by the manner in which works portray them.^{xxx} Ward makes a strong case for a new reading of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, one that could eventually make her own conclusion obsolete. Seen this way, Hurston clearly authorizes her black and white characters. Published in the middle of the twentieth century, *Seraph on the Suwanee* does not present a feel-good multiculturalism so unreal that it would have destroyed her fiction; instead, she challenges an imperial system by scrutinizing its inner workings. Whatever hope one may find in *Seraph on the Suwanee* will come from the ways in which we learn its lessons.

ⁱ Walker Alice. "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design." *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1986. 103-106. Print. 105 emphasis in original.

ⁱⁱ *Ibd.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Walker, Alice. "A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View." *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed.

-
- Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1986. 63-69. Print. 67 emphasis in original.
- iv Washington, Mary Helen. *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1986. 123-38. Print. 134
- v Ibid. 133
- vi Ibid. 143
- vii Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper, 1991. Print. 250
- viii Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. in Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper, 1991. Print. 212
- ix Huie, William Bradford. *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee County Jail*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1956. Print.
- x Ibid. 14
- xi Ibid. 89
- xii Ibid., 91
- xiii Hurston, Zora Neale. *Seraph on the Suwanee*. New York: Scribner's, 1948. New York: Harper, 1991. 126
- xiv Ibid., 186
- xv Ibid. 14
- xvi Ibid. 14-15
- xvii Ibid. 141
- xviii Ibid. 160
- xix Ibid. 169-70
- xx Ibid. 173-74
- xxi Ibid. 115
- xxii Ibid. 188
- xxiii Ibid. 187
- xxiv Ibid. 156
- xxv Ibid. 157
- xxvi Ibid. 198
- xxvii Hurston, Op. cit. *Seraph on the Suwanee*. 61
- xxviii Ibid. 313
- xxix Hurston, Zora Neale. "What White Publishers Won't Print." 1950. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*. Ed. Alice Walker. Old Westbury NY: The Feminist P, 1979. 169-73. Print. 170
- xxx Ward, Cynthia. "From the Suwanee to Egypt, There's No Place like Home." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. 115:1 (Jan 2000): 75-88. Print. 77