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SHE DARED TO CHALLENGE TRADITION: *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE*, ZORA
NEALE HURSTON'S "WHITE NOVEL," AND ITS LITERARY FOUNDATION,
PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S *THE UNCALLED*

by

Jervette RaShaun Ward-Ellis

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

The University of Memphis

May 2011

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to
my Parents, Jarvis and Brendalyn Ward,
my Paternal Grandparents, Leon Ward and Alice Clyde Ward, and
my Maternal Grandparents, Isaiah Cullens, Earnestine Cullens Jones, and Walter Jones.
You have been my Strength, my Inspiration, and my Seraphs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the academic field of English argues, words are powerful, yet sometimes even they are not strong enough to fully express love, gratitude, appreciation, and respect. I would like to express my utmost love and gratitude to The One who blessed me with the opportunity and ability to write this dissertation. In addition, there are many people who have helped me in so many ways. It is nearly impossible to thank them all, but I would like to offer my deepest thanks to a special group.

To Kenneth: Thank you for your love and support.

To my precious daughter McKinley: Thank you so much for your joyful spirit and your constant faith in my ability to become “Dr. Mommy.”

To my Siblings, Brandan, Brena, Jenell, and Jenae: Thank you for ALWAYS asking how many pages remained to be written. Without your page and status update requests, this dissertation may have been only one page. Your love and support is priceless.

To Joshua: I could not ask for a better best friend.

To Ladrica: Thank you for breaking “your rule” and becoming my friend more than 10 years ago. I knew that I wanted to be a professor one day because of you.

To my Dissertation Committee Members: Thank you for your guidance and support. Your late night edits, laptop loaning, and more kept me going. I could not have imagined a better team.

To Sheena Harris: Even though your position was regularly re-advertised, I could not have asked for a better Dissertation Partner. In you, I found a deadline and a friend.

To all of my extended family and friends: Thank you all for your support and encouragement.

Lastly, I would like to thank Hurston and Dunbar for writing such fascinating texts – I would not have this dissertation without them.

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

Job 23:10

ABSTRACT

Ward-Ellis, Jervette RaShaun. Ph.D. The University of Memphis. May 2011. She Dared to Challenge Tradition: *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Zora Neale Hurston's "White Novel," and Its Literary Foundation, Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled*. Major Professor: Ladrica Menson-Furr.

This dissertation explains the significance of Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* by using Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* as a literary framework.

Hurston's novel tells the story of Arvey Henson, a pretty, poor, white woman who advances to the white middle class. Intriguingly, Arvey and her family speak in a dialect that is very similar to the "black" dialect featured in many of Hurston's other works.

Sadly, Hurston's decision to place "black" dialect or what scholars would call African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the mouths of white characters has allowed for the dismissal of one of her finest works.

The two novels are similar in many ways. Both texts feature poor whites who speak in a dialect that resembles AAVE and who are also highly religious. In *The Uncalled*, the main character, Freddie Brent, struggles with his human desires while being raised by the overly religious Miss Hester who wants Freddie to become a minister. Similarly, *Seraph's* Arvey is also consumed by religion and uses it as a crutch. In both texts, race plays an insignificant role. Hurston, like Dunbar, struggled to break from the race writing mold in which she had been placed to simply write about the human experience. Both authors wrote universal tales that could apply to any race or social class.

In this literary study, I also propose the abolishment of the linguistic term African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I coined the term Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE) because it removed the race label that is problematic in AAVE. Hurston's and Dunbar's novels have been difficult for readers and scholars

because the language patterns were labeled as black language in white mouths which often led to charges of lack of authenticity. Providing a better label for the type of language used by the white characters in the novels allows for a better understanding and hopefully embracement of the texts by readers and scholars.

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INTRODUCTION

Bastard Mulatto Texts

One afternoon while writing my dissertation, I had a conversation with a white woman who, with her husband, has adopted two girls, one of Vietnamese and one of Chinese lineage. She was explaining the alienation that exists at her daughters' predominately-white private school in the South. She admitted her internal conflict of raising two children whose ethnicity differs from their parents, particularly in an area of the country that is still very racially divided and racially sensitive. Additionally, she has the added responsibility of raising daughters who understand the privilege of their parents' financial status, but who do not take it for granted. The woman knew that part of my dissertation addresses differences in speech based on racial markers, and she thought that I might find a recent conversation with her seven-year-old daughter of interest. Her daughter, Alice,¹ recently asked, "Why do brown people talk differently?" Historically, in most private, southern, white schools, "the help," or custodial and food service employees, are mostly, if not all, black, or brown as the child so accurately described. Thus, even Alice noticed that presently "brown people" still perform most of the "service industry" of the South. Moreover, during a normal day at her private school, this second grade child automatically discerned the speech differences that exist among the social classes of her school, but because she is a child, she automatically and naively assumed that maybe the speech differences were because of the color differences that she could so clearly see. Alice does not know about social class, and she probably does not recognize

¹ Name changed for the safety and security of the seven-year-old child.

that the majority of the population does not share the life she lives.² Her ignorance exists because she is a child who has yet to be taught class and social hierarchies as her parents are attempting to protect her from some of life's harsh realities for just a little longer.

Sadly, this young child's ignorance is still a part of the make-up of many adults. A difference or especially a perceived "inferior" difference is oft attributed to race because it is an easy and unenlightened choice or decision – one must purposefully choose not to think to reach such a conclusion. Lilly, the child's mother,³ asked her daughter if certain family friends who also happen to be brown⁴ talked in the same manner that she had heard from the "service workers." Her daughter quickly responded, "No." Lilly then pointed out that the speech differences must not be due to whether someone's skin is white, brown, or yellow. Based on her mother's argument and her own intelligence, Alice agreed. I asked Lilly what was her response once Alice then asked why the people sounded different. As the mother of a seven-year-old, I correctly assumed that once Alice saw that her argument had been debunked, she would quickly demand a new answer or reason. Lilly responded that she told her daughter that the people sounded different because of the level of education they had achieved. Laughingly, I asked her why she did not simply tell her daughter about class differences because it was plainly obvious that for this mother, educational advancement was directly related to class.⁵ For Lilly, social class is directly related to social mobility and the improvement of one's

² Upper class.

³ Name changed.

⁴ For clarification, she was not referencing my family.

⁵ Which is often, but not always true about class in America.

speech patterns. Of course, if Lilly would have taken my joking advice seriously, she would have then fallen down the seven-year-old rabbit hole of never-ending questions, including the question of what is social class. That question is probably one of the hardest to define because it is one that very few people like to acknowledge, much less discuss. Not only is the idea complex, but the definitions are endless. Definitions 4a and 4b for “social class” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are, “A division or stratum of society consisting of people at the same economic level or having the same social status” and “A system of ordering society whereby people are divided into strata of this type; the pattern of social division created by such a system; a person's position in society as defined by this” (“class”). The definition itself might make one uncomfortable because it clearly explains that people are ranked which places some below and some above in relation to each other. Why was it so difficult for Lilly to discuss social class with her daughter? When I first had the conversation with Lilly, she stated that she did not want to talk about social class with a child so young, and I readily agreed because I knew that I would not go home that evening to have the same conversation with my seven-year-old. However, later we returned to our conversation, and she mentioned that it would be more than difficult to have a conversation about class with her daughter or anyone, no matter the person’s age.

My conversation with Lilly and various others throughout my life has made it plainly obvious that conversations about social class and social hierarchies in the United States are strangely difficult. Is it possible for Americans to recognize that social class and social hierarchies exist, and that because they exist, there are various traits or markers that label each class? Why is it so “easy” to point out the race of a person when one really

means class, but feel uncomfortable simply stating an individual's placement in a society or social circle? Adults must be challenged to move beyond childish thinking that allows for these race classifications to shroud the realities of social class. For one to accept race based markers, one would have to believe that people of all races all fit into one social class. In the United States, like most countries, social hierarchies are created along socio-economic lines even though most people, especially in the South, assume that the breakdown is along racial lines. Because of these racial assumptions about class, people are able to label something as white or black rather than upper or lower class. This demarcation is based on the assumption that people would rather believe that their problems are of their race and not of their class. In essence, labels of black and white appear to be simply an over-simplification of class.

Why do Americans fear class breakdowns? Class differences in food, speech, entertaining, decorating, zip codes, transportation, and more are all manifested in language and speech patterns. Is it possible that racial issues and problems are not manifestations of racial discord, but rather are manifestations of continued class conflicts that have been oversimplified? Think back to the early British colonists fleeing class oppression in Great Britain. The Early American government did away with "class and titles" as a direct action to symbolize their disdain for the shackles of British oppression. However, the Antebellum South desired class stratification and mimicked Great Britain. Even though the formal titles of social class were officially abolished, the lingering effects of social class and social hierarchies were still plainly evident in the South, the area of the country that had the greatest "racial diversity." The social structure is also evidenced in speech patterns that have been labeled as white or black instead of by social

class. Hence it is within this space, the South, that Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* has long been treated as the bastard child of her literary canon due to its mulatto form of merging white characters with "black" words. This dissertation analyzes and explains the importance and significance of Hurston's novel by using Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* as a literary framework in hope that it will lead to an embracement and adoption of these texts by both readers and scholars.

My dissertation grew out of my Independent Study on Hurston with Dr. Ladrica Menson-Furr. My study with Dr. Menson-Furr focused on reading the primary texts that make up the Hurston literary canon. Like most literary scholars, I had read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and in high school, I had read *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Those two texts and various other short pieces of her works were the extent of my Hurston library. As I worked my way through Hurston's works, my respect and fascination for this author grew. Out of all of the texts, including *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Mules and Men*, *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain*, and others, I was immediately intrigued with the story line of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Like most of her works, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is situated in Florida and tells the story of Arvey Henson, a pretty, poor, white woman who advances to the white middle class. Intriguingly, Arvey and her family speak in a dialect that is very similar to the dialects featured in many of Hurston's other works.

The semester following my Independent Study, I taught the novel in my second-semester freshman honors composition course. My students, both white and black, expressed deep interest in the text, and it was a wonderful experience to hear their perspectives. While I was teaching the Honors course, I was also enrolled in a graduate sociolinguistics seminar with Dr. Charles Hall. It was my first linguistic course, yet it

greatly influenced my reading of Hurston. During the class, I expanded upon my initial analysis of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which included the idea that Hurston appeared to tell a love story without racial constraints, and I began to explore both linguistic and literary studies. My work from Dr. Menson-Furr's course was accepted at the Eighth Biennial Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) Women's and Gender Studies Conference. The ACS Conference provided a wonderful test-run of my initial reading of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. After I expanded my original essay to include my research from Dr. Hall's course, I submitted and had my new linguistic based essay accepted at The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) 2009 Conference. Dr. Hall's course had prepared and allowed me to add a linguistic analysis to my original race studies analysis. During the MELUS Conference, I received very positive feedback from John Lowe, author of *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy*, and other scholars. Lastly, I was spurred to write about Hurston and towards completion of my dissertation by walking in Hurston's steps. (Also, as an addition to my interest in and study of Hurston's work and life, Dr. Menson-Furr, Dr. Verner Mitchell, and I were able to explore the house where Hurston lived during her time in Memphis, the city where I wrote my dissertation.)

Initially, my dissertation's focus was solely on Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*; however, after presenting at The MELUS Conference in 2009, I decided also to explore Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled*. I cannot take credit for the exploration of Dunbar's novel. Following my conference presentation, I visited the "Ladies Room." While standing at the sink washing my hands, a woman who had been in the audience during my presentation complimented my work and apologized for approaching me for a

literary conversation in the bathroom. She said she wanted to make sure she caught me so that she could ask whether I had considered the “cowboy novels”⁶ of Dunbar while I was writing my essay. Of course, I was familiar with Dunbar’s poetry, but I had never read his novels. She explained that she thought they were no longer in print, but she remembered that one did include dialect in the mouths of white characters. I eagerly and gratefully thanked her for her suggestion and discovered Dunbar’s *The Uncalled*. *The Uncalled* creates a perfect marriage/union with Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* due to class, dialect, religious, and racial similarities. Focusing my study to Hurston, but also exploring Dunbar’s text among others has allowed me to better understand the nuances of Hurston’s work. The works of Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, J. L. Dillard and others have all been helpful in my analysis. Of course, one main component will be analysis through the lens of sociolinguistics. The use of this approach has allowed me to produce what I hope is an original discussion of this work, for Hurston’s novel has been largely ignored. However, this lack of analysis has enabled me, a new scholar, to join a conversation with an impressive group of academics. Even though I strongly argue that my topic is firmly situated in the field of African American literature, I am also exploring a text that is not often addressed by academia. The scholarship focused solely on *Seraph on the Suwanee* is minimal. Most critics quickly dismiss the work as though it is the bastard child of Hurston and African American literature. Maybe, the text is the mulatto offspring of the African American literary canon. My study fills the gap that exists to create an understanding of her manuscript.

In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston tells the story of a man and a woman who happen to be white. These same people also speak “black” dialect, or what scholars

⁶ This is the name the woman who approached me gave Dunbar’s novels.

would call African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Sadly, Hurston's decision to frame her text in such a way has allowed for the dismissal of one of her finest works. *Seraph's* main character, Arvay, is a self-consuming, not very bright, poor white woman of "cracker" lineage who is married to Jim, formerly of the Southern plantation class (8). Arvay is hard to sympathize with due to her single-minded self-absorption; however, as a reader, one cannot help rooting for this strange character. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is not brimming with folk tales or Hurston's attempts at racial or cultural anthropology like *Mules and Men*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, or many of her other works. Race is an afterthought in this novel, and very rarely enters the picture. Instead, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is Hurston's attempt and success at writing a novel simply about people and the problems that people face in love and marriage.

Fifty years before Hurston published her novel about poor white crackers in Sawley, Florida, Dunbar published his novel about poor whites in Dexter, Ohio. Interestingly, Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published in 1948, and Dunbar's *The Uncalled*, published in 1898, are similar in many ways. Both texts feature poor whites who speak in a dialect that resembles African American Vernacular English. The two texts are also highly religious. In *The Uncalled*, the main character, Freddie Brent, struggles with his human desires while being raised by the overly religious Miss Hester. Miss Hester raises Freddie to become a minister. She heard "the call" to the ministry that he did not hear. Similarly, *Seraph's* Arvay is also consumed by religion and uses it as a crutch. In both texts, race plays an insignificant role. In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston writes simply about people and the problems that they face in life. Hurston, like Dunbar, struggled to break from the mold in which she had been placed to simply write about the

human experience. Both authors wrote universal tales that could apply to any race or social class.

In this literary study, I also propose and attempt the herculean⁷ task of abolishing the term African American Vernacular English. I do recognize that a replacement term is needed once the abolishment takes place. I have been arguing against the term African American Vernacular English for more than two years because it appeared that linguists were placing race labels on speech patterns. As I began to explore the phrase, I began to better understand the reasoning behind its initial creation, yet even that original creation is badly-formed and misleading. When I first began my attack, one of my esteemed academic colleagues entertained me by tossing around various ideas for the new term. Because this esteemed colleague is ever the brilliant linguist, he suggested the term Southern Debastardized Plantation Creole (SDBPC).⁸ Of course, he quickly followed his suggestion with a long and hearty laugh. However, even though the new term sounded witty and was fun to roll off the tongue, I quickly pointed out that both “inside and outside” academia, the word “Creole” usually causes the hearer to think of New Orleans, red beans and rice, and all things Cajun. I recognize that the word “Creole” also possesses an academic linguistic meaning, yet I argued that the academic meaning takes a distant second to the more readily known societal definition. Therefore, we agreed that the use of the word “Creole” would do little to help alleviate the racial biases that are inherent in the term African American Vernacular English. In our analysis of the term, I came to the following conclusions:

1. A new term is needed – a term that is accurate in both meaning and label.

⁷ At least for me.

⁸ He suggested so many, but I think this suggestion was his best one.

2. It would be ideal if the new term used the academic jargon of linguists – a term that could be easily defined based on the academic understanding of each of the words or word.
3. The new term needs to stress the origins of the dialects and its diachronic developments rather than the synchronic terms AAVE, which, however, does indeed reflect the synchronic analysis that this cluster of dialects are **now** primarily spoken by African Americans.

More than a year later and nearly a year ago, I was on the campus of a university for the infamous “Campus Visit” that most ABDs who are on the job market both long for and slightly dread. Following my Teaching Demonstration, there was a Question and Answer session. I explained during my lecture on this very topic that even though I was nearing the end of my ABD life, I had yet to create the needed term to solidify my attack and destruction of African American Vernacular English. One of the search committee members smiled and commended me for the work I had completed for my dissertation. She explained that she understood my dislike of both terms AAVE and DBPC, and she wanted to offer a suggestion. Since a lack of a new term was hindering the completion of my dissertation, I explained that I was widely open to any and all suggestions, and I hoped that she would present the perfectly crafted phrase. Alas, she did not offer a phrase; rather, she suggested that I create a new word or term! I stared, laughed, and then simply said, “Yes.” For some strange reason, I had never considered the idea or possibilities of such a suggestion. Am I not an academic who should feel both empowered and inspired to contribute to and add to the academic conversation? Someone had to create the terms that are used by linguists to mark language. One more term, my term, could change and improve the conversation that surrounds this cluster of “non-standard” dialects. I saw that her idea was opening the door to many new possibilities. A

new term created from already obviously flawed and biased linguistic terms would do little to help the situation.⁹

Considered Terms To Replace African American Vernacular English

1. Poor Underclass Southern Talk
2. Disadvantaged Deep Southern Vernacular English
3. Poor Folk Deep Southern English

Flaws of Considered Terms To Replace African American Vernacular English¹⁰

1. Speech is now not limited to the South
2. Dislike of the term Disadvantaged
3. Sound very colloquial

After much internal debate, I finally coined the term Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE). I chose IDSVE because it removed the race label that is problematic in AAVE. Hurston's and Dunbar's novels have been difficult for readers and scholars because the language patterns were labeled as black language in white mouths which often led to charges of lack of authenticity. Providing a better label for the type of language used by the white characters in the novels allows for a better understanding and hopefully embracement of the texts by readers and scholars.

Returning to the anecdote that began this Introduction, seven-year-old Alice reminded me that the discussion of class is important for this dissertation because it has allowed for the stripping away of racial markers in order to address many of the realities about speech and dialects. Speech patterns and the various dialects that exist are often categorized along racial lines. Initially, the race classification was a simple manifestation of the societal constraints that existed. Regretfully, those constraints have now become poorly classified markers for various members of society. This dissertation is a focused

⁹ For interested parties, I was offered the position – for some reason, I did not accept the position.

¹⁰ Respective to the list above.

literary analysis of Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and the coinage and use of a new linguistic approach to interpreting authors such as Hurston and Dunbar who defy the race lines—verbally and in character. In addition, this dissertation also makes the leap from the literary page to the “pages of reality,” the real life events as reported by the news media.¹¹

¹¹ See Conclusion.

CHAPTER 1

The Uncalled: Hurston's Literary Ancestor

Fifty years before Zora Neale Hurston published her novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), about poor white crackers in Sawley, Florida, Paul Laurence Dunbar published his novel, *The Uncalled* (1898) about poor whites in Dexter, Ohio. Dunbar's novel opens with the death of Margaret Brent, an abused divorced drunk. Margaret's husband Tom left her years ago, so their five-year-old son Freddie is left alone in the world. The women of the town gather to discuss what should be done with the young child, and it is ultimately decided that he will be raised by Miss Hester Prime, who Freddie will call Aunt Hester. Miss Hester is a strict, religious old maid. Dunbar's choice of names is ironic. Miss Hester Prime is the complete antithesis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* predates *The Uncalled* by merely by 48 years.¹ Dunbar's choice of name for Miss Hester constantly reminds the reader of the differences that exist between Hawthorne's more famous Hester and Dunbar's pious Hester. Miss Hester refuses to give in to any type of natural human desires. She refuses to marry her childhood sweetheart, Eliphalet Hodges, until Freddie is an adult. She waits so long to marry Hodges, that by the time they marry, people have grown so accustomed to referring to her as Miss Hester that many forget to call her Mrs. Hodges. Miss Hester's primary goal in life is to do her "dooty." In Dunbar's work, Miss Hester states, " 'You know what the Bible says about the sins of the father; well, that child needs proper raisin': so in this way the Lord showed it to me that it was my dooty to take up the burden myself'" (28). Miss Hester embraces a Christian Religion of duty. Her life choices are all made on what her duty is to society and to God. Once Freddie is given

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850.

to Miss Hester, Mrs. Warren, a woman in the town, acknowledges that Freddie ““won’t dare to breathe from this hour on”” (31). The novel’s title reiterates the religious focus of the text. Dunbar inverts the idea of ministers who answer the calling of God to preach. Miss Hester dreams, plots, and connives to make Freddie a minister. Freddie has little to no desire to become a minister, but he does so simply to please Miss Hester. Freddie is the uncalled. Yet, ironically, Freddie is one of the most upright characters of the text. The Rev. Mr. Simpson may have heard the call to the ministry, yet he is a vengeful gossip who does more harm than good. Freddie may not have heard the call, yet in one of the most important scenes of the novel, he chooses to leave his life of comfort rather than harm or belittle a “fallen” woman who is being mistreated by the church and community.

Two of the novel’s characters, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Martin, discuss Miss Hester’s answer of the calling for Freddie. Mrs. Smith exclaims, “Old Tom, drunken Tom, swearin’ an’ ravin’ Tom Brent’s boy a preacher!” (114). Mrs. Martin replies, “It’s a-shamin’ of the Lord’s holy callin’ o’ the ministry” (114). The two reiterate the true calling that Freddie has heard: “No indeed: he [Freddie] was mighty opposed to it, and so was her husband; but that woman was so set she would n’t agree to nothin’ else. He don’t pretend to ‘a’ heerd no call, ‘ceptin’ Miss Hester’s, an’ that was a command” (114). When Freddie tells Miss Hester that he does not want to be a minister, she informs him that it is wicked for him to rebel against what the Lord has appointed (115). Yet, Freddie replies, ““I don’t know how you can know so much what the Lord means for me to do. I should think He would give His messages to those who are to do the work”” (115). Of course, in true form, Miss Hester is shocked, appalled, and offended at Freddie’s argument. He gives in to her request to ensure her happiness even at the guarantee of his

own displeasure. The novel details the townspeople's inability to see Freddie separate from the sins of his parents. Dunbar's text also appears to be a biblical allusion to Roman 8:30. It reads, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (627). Dunbar's personal struggles regarding a "calling" to ministry are plainly evident in both the title of the novel and in the story presented. Freddie does not feel called to the ministry, yet in the end of the novel, he finds religion and appears to be "glorified." Freddie is not called to the ministry, but he plays the role of minister, until he can no longer take the hypocrisy of the religious town. One of Freddie's biggest supporters is the Rev. Mr. Simpson who "had been a carpenter before he was 'called'" (16). With irony and comedy, Dunbar continues to allude to other famous literary characters who either share similar names or professions. The Rev. Mr. Simpson's lack of moral cohesiveness with the more famous carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, provides an exciting twist in Dunbar's religious tale. The Rev. Mr. Simpson is also the father of Freddie's fiancée, Elizabeth Simpson. Yet, the Rev. Mr. Simpson later becomes one of Freddie's biggest foes. The Rev. Mr. Simpson is the individual who ultimately forces Freddie into his decision to leave Dexter. As the new minister of the town, Freddie is given an order to preach against a "fallen" woman and to uphold her as a warning to the community. Freddie refuses and releases all of his pent up anger and frustration on the hypocritical church members before leaving for the big city of Cincinnati.

Hurston's and Dunbar's novels are similar in many ways. Both authors place what is now perceived as "black" speech in the mouths of white characters. Also, the two texts are highly religious. The simple religion of both communities shapes the main characters

of the novels. Radically, both texts ignore significant racial discussions. Dunbar mentions race once in *The Uncalled* when he writes, “A quartet of young negroes were singing on the pavement in front of a house as he passed and catching the few pennies and nickels that were flung to them from the door” (207). Hurston’s references to race move beyond the typical white/black controversy of the South and expand to racism towards other ethnic groups, for example, the Portuguese neighbors of Arvay and Jim in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Yet, even Hurston’s references to race and racism are largely insignificant to her text. In Dunbar’s novel, the whiteness of the characters is rarely implicitly stated; rather, the race of the characters is discerned in random descriptions in certain scenes. For example, on the deathbed of Freddie’s father, Dunbar writes, “The young man stood by the bed, trembling in every limb, his lips now as white as the ashen face before him” (235). The race of the father can be discerned from the scenes description, but the race of the father is not a major factor in the scene. Both texts appear to be attempts at “raceless” writing by two leading African American authors. Neither text references African American identities, issues, cultures, or histories.

How does one construct a “raceless” text? In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison discusses the idea of blackness in the American literary landscape. She defines a raceless act as the attempt at removing race from a work, and she argues that the removal of race from a text is in itself a racial act (47-51). Morrison’s argument addresses the actions of white literature, which is of course, American Literature. Even as Dunbar and Hurston attempted “raceless texts,” their acts re-enforce and re-invigorate arguments regarding the role of race in literature. Morrison writes, “The world does not become raceless or will

not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act” (46). She goes on to write:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. (46-47)

Even though Morrison’s argument primarily addresses the removal of an Africanist presence from American texts, her argument provides an interesting gauge for Africanist texts that lack an Africanist presence even though they are written by an African-American author. Both Hurston and Dunbar attempted to write texts that would remove the ever-constant discussion of race from their literature. Hurston’s attempt came near the end of both her life and career. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is Hurston’s attempt at breaking “that silly old rule” about black writers not being able to write about white characters (Kaplan 467). “Although he was widely criticized for his characterization of the African American community in *The Fanatics*, Dunbar’s emergent desire to represent the black community in his long fiction was illustrated in the novel more vigorously than in his previous two attempts, *The Uncalled* (1899) and *The Love of Landry* (1900)” (243). Willie J. Harrell Jr. discusses the importance and change that *The Fanatics* brought to Dunbar’s career. In the essay, “‘Nemmine. You Got to Git Somebody Else to Ring Yo’ Ol’ Bell Now:’ Nigger Ed and the Rhetoric of Local Color Realism and Racial Protest in Dunbar’s *The Fanatics*,” Harrell presents an argument against critics who have “failed to appreciate Dunbar’s veiled racial protest” in the novel (243). Harrell continues, “Those who have suggested that Dunbar’s racial protest was a disappointment seemingly misinterpret the purpose of his achievement” (243). Dunbar’s move to show his view of

black people was not readily accepted. He writes “In his attempt at a validated racial protest, Dunbar had a great deal to contend with in moving away from the stereotypical images previously employed by white authors” (245). Dunbar’s attempt at breaking multiple stereotypes is clearly seen in *The Uncalled* because he was a black author writing about white people who spoke in a non-standard dialect. Harrell explains, “His first two novels, *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry*, have been called nonracial because the main characters are white. *The Fanatics* and *The Sport of the Gods*, however, have been recognized as manifestation of his racial consciousness, be it a poor representation or a respectable one. Even African American texts that appear not to be a part of the protest tradition were written in a political context...” (Harrell 247). Dunbar may not appear to be presenting a protest novel, but that lack of appearance does not mean that his novel does not protest.

Both novels appear to be an attempt by each author to put in practice Countee Cullen’s famous dictum, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet” (1311). Through the two works, Hurston and Dunbar present themselves as novelists, not Negro novelists. Cullen’s aforementioned statement made famous in Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” sparked a strong response from Hughes. Hughes writes:

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid of what he might choose. (1314)

It is odd that Hughes immediately assumes that not writing about one’s race must be because one fears the un-whiteness of one’s own race. Hughes’ assumption is not only absurd in its negativity, but it is also absurd in its presumptiveness regarding the desires

of black writers. It is highly unlikely, but possible that Hurston and Dunbar chose to write about whites because they found their own racial worlds uninteresting. Both Hurston and Dunbar wrote extensively about blacks and championed the black man and woman. Both writers wrote about black people in both Standard English and in AAVE. In

“Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Hurston writes:

The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down. . . . Moreover, the contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it. . . . Let us say that the art of mimicry is better developed in the Negro than in other racial groups. He does it as the mocking-bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated. (360)²

Hurston clearly argues that even if one is imitating or creating outside of one’s norm, that creation is still artistic and has value in and of itself. Hurston and Dunbar were both criticized for creating art that did not fit the black norm while also resembling the white norm. Hurston’s statement directly counters those critics who would belittle their art due to the artists’ “inability” to adhere to societal norms. Nevertheless, the two authors have been accused of writing texts about and for white people in an attempt to earn money. Even if money was the reason for *Seraph and the Suwanee* and *The Uncalled*, it should not negate the brilliance of the two “raceless”³ works.

In reality, neither text was highly successful. Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* has experienced a minute rebirth due to the overall literary and public obsession with

² Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is found in various anthologies. This reference is quoted from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett’s edited work, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*.

³ “Raceless” is used in this case to mean “removal of race” and not as a pejorative accusatory label.

Hurston.⁴ Yet, at the time of publication, it experienced only a short fame. In the “Foreword” to a recent edition of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hazel V. Carby discusses the public’s unfamiliarity with the novel. She explains that accusations of misconduct by Hurston with a ten-year-old boy overshadowed the initial success of the novel. Hurston was accused shortly after the novel was released, and the sexuality of the novel allowed for a societal conviction of Hurston, even though the legal charges were later dismissed (xiii). The negative press destroyed any chance of the novel’s success.

In Note 5 of the “Notes” section of his essay, “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*,” Donald C. Goellnicht writes, “Dodd Mead had published three earlier Dunbar novels, *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901), but none of them have main characters who are black. Goellnicht’s notation is an expansion of his discussion of the risk that white northern publishers experienced by publishing works by African American authors. Dunbar’s novel was mildly successful as shown by the second printing in 1901, yet many critics labeled him a traitor for straying from his black focus. Charles R. Larson discusses *The Uncalled* in his essay, “The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” and he explains that Dunbar’s choice of white characters has often earned him the title of Uncle Tom among literary critics. Larson writes, “... the term *Uncle Tom* which has frequently been applied to him during the past sixty years is simply not an adequate appraisal of his worth” (257). Three of Dunbar’s four novels⁵ feature white characters; however, his choice of

⁴ Regrettably, the rebirth has mainly created negative responses to *Seraph on the Suwanee* – see the responses from Hurston admirers Hazel V. Carby and Alice Walker in later chapters.

⁵ Dunbar’s novels include the three novels that feature whites, *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901), and the one novel that features blacks, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902).

characters does not necessarily make him a “sell-out.” In defense of Dunbar, Larson continues,

As for the expression *Uncle Tom* which has been so maliciously used when past estimations of his writings have been undertaken, it need only be clarified by remembering that Dunbar was writing at a time when protest literature was not yet palatable to the American reading public, especially Negro protest literature of a fictive nature. (257)

Larson’s analysis of Dunbar’s failures as a black author highlights what Dunbar was actually doing as a writer. In “The Fiction of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” A. Robert Lee explains that Dunbar is often viewed in a negative light because he is seen as “...a poet and a storyteller who, in a large degree, sold out his manhood, his blackness, in catering to restrictive white reading tastes” (166). Still, while Lee negates the poor description of Dunbar, later in the essay, he labels both *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry* as “‘raceless’ fiction, apprentice work of small distinction” (170). So, despite of his overall defense of Dunbar, Lee misses the fact that a “raceless” text is not necessarily a negative distinction.

Three of Dunbar’s four novels also feature white characters, yet he is primarily known for his poetry written in “black” dialect which was a larger commercial and literary success than his poetry written in Standard English. *The Love of Landry* is a western, a cowboy novel⁶ written in Standard English, but *The Uncalled* is written in dialect. In the book, *The ‘Hindered Hand’: Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction*, and in particular the chapter, “Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Triumph of the Tradition,” Arlene A. Elder writes, “*The Love of Landry* is Dunbar’s obeisance to the sentimental adventure story full of daring escapades among the romanticized mountains of the far West” (137). The characters in *The Uncalled* who speak in a form of IDSVE

⁶ Yes, imagine John Wayne.

dialect are poor whites, but the characters in *The Love of Landry* who speak in Standard English are upper-class whites. The different speech patterns highlight the fact that this cluster of dialects do not flow along racial lines, but rather along socio-economic lines.

In “Second-Generation Realist; or, Dunbar the Naturalist,” Gene Andrew Jarrett writes,

Dunbar’s oeuvre suffers from this scholarly reflex. Known for his dialect poetry and novel of racial uplift, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), he has also written many poems in formal English and collections of short stories and novels about the Midwest. His first novel, *The Uncalled* (1898), about provincial life in Dexter, Ohio, has fallen through the cracks of African American literary studies. These scholars who do refer to this novel do so in negative terms. (305)

Jarrett goes on to summarize comments from Dunbar scholars Peter Revell and Kenny J. Williams. Revell describes *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry* as “‘white’ novels, in which all the characters are white and virtually no reference is made to the presence of black people in the society” (Revell 139). Williams writes that *The Uncalled* is “‘raceless’ in the sense that Dunbar does not specify what race his characters are; neither does he by speech or other mannerisms identify them more than to make clear they are all small-town Midwesterners with the speech patterns of that locale” (Williams 171). Jarrett calls the descriptions of Revell and Williams “problematic” (305). He writes,

As Williams suggests, Revell is wrong in assuming that the novel’s failure to depict ‘black people’ automatically means that it employs White characters alone to the neglect of African American history. On the other hand, Williams’s assumption that the novel prioritizes region and class over racial specificity in human characterization discounts the undercurrent racialism amongst ‘small-town Midwesterners. (Jarrett 305)

Jarrett’s argument is that

...*The Uncalled* is neither ‘White,’ ‘raceless,’ nor anomalous in the sense of being a literary outlaw. Rather, the novel is anomalous in the sense of rejecting minstrel realism. The racialism of the novel lies not necessarily in its dialect, the main vernacular of minstrelsy, but instead in its analysis of class hierarchy and region. Dunbar draws on African American

histories of racial unrest and inequity to expose the thematic limitations of 'local color,' a more idealistic version of literary realism. (305-306)

Jarrett appears to strongly grasp Dunbar's goal of using language and dialect to portray human characteristics that transcend race. Dunbar presented a class and region analysis that was supported by a dialect that was the norm of that class and region. Race had little or nothing to do with his presentation. Jarrett briefly references Dunbar's use of dialect in the tale and his ultimate argument hinges on the premise that white writers receive the privilege of being the norm which makes any works by other writers abnormal. He writes,

...Dunbar was accurate when he said, in an interview...that African Americans must 'write like the white men,' for together Black and white authors wrote within a shared national culture. However, Dunbar also believed that a crucial difference in public perception separated these two groups: Black authors were described more often in racial terms in national terms, while the converse occurred for White authors. Thus in his critique of minstrel realism, Dunbar also sought to refute the public privileging of White authors as raceless or universal and the peculiarity of Black authors as racial 'others.' Such constructions obscure the extent to which these two groups influence each other in the tradition of American literature. (306)

Dunbar, like many other members of the black bourgeoisie, attempted to uplift black people by attacking the negative stereotypes that surrounded black people, and one of those stereotypes at the time was that black Americans spoke "that way" for genetic or physiological reasons. By rubbing in the reader's face that poor whites used ostensibly the same dialect, Dunbar was attempting to change societal views that often painted blacks as an intrinsically inferior lot. Jarrett writes,

In the court of public opinion, however, New Negro realism was losing to minstrel realism the battle over racial representation. Anglo-American critics called the bourgeois and articulate New Negro protagonists 'amorphous,' 'artificial,' and 'bitter. The protagonists of minstrel realism were ostensibly more graspable, servile, and hence realistic. (308)

Dunbar's novel would have been even more ridiculed if he would have written such a universal story but had made the characters black. Even the use of dialect would not have saved him from scorn. Dunbar's novel does not make race an issue; in fact, it is irrelevant to the tale. Making the characters black would have still been irrelevant to the universal issues of spirituality and self-awareness that he addresses in the novel.

Jarrett also discusses the lecture, "The Value of Race Literature" (1895), by Victoria Earle Matthews. Jarrett attributes the term "Race Literature" which evolved into African American Literature to Matthews. Jarrett uses Matthews' lecture to argue that "Race Literature, however, includes not only those works that flaunt racial realism – or 'race matter,' in Matthews's words – but also those that do not" (312). In essence, Jarrett argues that a work may be racially uplifting and aware with or without the inclusion of minority characters.

In contrast to Hurston, who clearly labels her characters as "crackers," the whiteness of Dunbar's characters is never explicitly explained. The absence of a race description leads one to the conclusion that the characters of the novel are white although this is in a way bowing to the belief that "white" is the default and black must be marked. However, the whiteness of the characters does seem to appear in subtle descriptions – for instance, he describes the sallow face of Mrs. Warren and other characters. The lack of discussion of race supports the whiteness of the characters because whiteness does not have to be explained or identified, it simply is. Blackness is the "other," the identity that must be clarified. The first direct mention of the whiteness of a character's face is approximately halfway into the novel; however, the revelation does not necessarily address race. When Freddie is entering the pulpit to preach his first sermon, Dunbar

writes, “The youthful face was white and almost rigid in its lines” (149). Dunbar’s simple description reveals Freddie’s race because his face is white from fear and anxiety.

Larson writes,

Since the characters in the novel are not referred to as white—the only time color is mentioned is when Dunbar refers to the four Negroes singing in the street—why can the reader not just as well assume that they are Negroes? Why can he not assume that Dunbar has given a faithful and often poignant picture of the community life of Negroes in a small town in Ohio at the end of the last century? (260)

Larson’s analysis is fairly accurate, yet he misses the fact that Dunbar *does* provide subtle hints regarding the color of the characters. Dunbar continues simply to use color as a descriptor and not as a racial analysis. Tom Brent, Freddie’s father, dies, and Dunbar writes, “The sufferer lay upon the bed, his eyes closed and his face as white as the pillows on which he reclined” (235). Again, color is simply a descriptor and not a racial marker. In the absence of a racial identifier, one can assume the race. For example, one does not need to say white American to understand that an individual is white. The label American already implies whiteness. However, one must say African American to distinguish the blackness of the American. Whiteness is inherent; blackness is the “other.” One needs to be explained and clearly identified and one does not. In the book *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt clearly explains this same idea when he writes, “The sense of personal and social restriction under which the characters in black fiction operate is affected, if not entirely formed, by the fact that they almost always perceive themselves in terms of white expectations” (129). Blackness exists in opposition to whiteness, the expectation.

Just as Hurston structures *Seraph on the Suwanee*, *The Uncalled* also presents “Negroes” simply as supporting players, almost as an afterthought towards diversity.⁷ When Freddie arrives in Cincinnati, he walks the streets of the city. Dunbar writes, “A quartet of young negroes were singing on the pavement in front of a house as he passed and catching the few pennies and nickels that were flung to them from the door” (207). Dunbar’s only mention of race is presented in a non-racial way. He appears to provide a description of the scene, and the mention of the Negroes is a part of a longer description of the scenes that surround Freddie during his first trip to the big city. Dunbar does not present the Negroes in either a positive or negative light. They simply are – a backdrop for his city scene. In his essay, “Pan-African Cultural Movements: From Baraka to Karenga,” Nagueyalti Warren argues that Pan-Africanism is usually assumed to refer only to political movements and not to cultural or literary movements. She goes on to argue that texts like Dunbar’s *The Uncalled*, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel: Or the President’s Daughter*, and others akin to them “all embraced the idea of assimilation” (17). Warren is clearly mistaken. Dunbar’s text does not embrace assimilation or an assumption of the superiority of the white race. Dunbar details the flaws of the citizens of Dexter in graphic detail. Again, Dunbar’s attempt at universal issues is misconstrued. Larson explains, “If Dunbar failed to write about the social problems of his own race, he at least transcended color and wrote a universal story of adolescent confrontations with religion, parental authority, and environment” (259-260). Regrettably, Dunbar’s appeal to various racial groups appears to assimilate rather than transcend, according to Larson. Larson is correct in recognizing the transcendent and universality of the text because in *The Uncalled*, Dunbar succeeds in writing a common story. At the time of publication,

⁷ One might view this action as an early attempt at Affirmative Action.

his use of white characters allowed his common story to appeal to both white and black audiences.

The Love of Landry, Dunbar's cowboy novel, is a fascinating love story that has also been highly criticized mainly because of its white characters and simple tale of love which makes it also very similar to *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Larson labels it his "poorest novel" (260). He also writes that it is "the novel least concerned with any touch of reality" (260). *The Love of Landry* can easily be categorized as a "beach read;"⁸ however, Dunbar's blackness should not prevent him from simply writing an entertaining if not "literary" novel. Elder writes:

It is now well known that Dunbar considered his dialect verse, the poetry that made him famous, to be secondary to his serious poems in literary English. . . .By his own statement, Dunbar wished to write honestly, yet his stories and novels, more than those of any of his predecessors, are haunted by discredited specters from plantation fiction. (106)

Elder goes on to argue that Dunbar's novels were very light in regards to subject matter. She writes, "On the contrary, he is almost completely apolitical, even antipolitical. . . . His books were meant to entertain; more than he realized, they instruct" (Elder 106). In opposition to *The Love of Landry*, Larson argues that Dunbar's third novel *The Fanatics* shows him "beginning to take a more conscious stand on the social problems facing Negroes from the Emancipation Proclamation until his own time" (261). Dunbar's novels transcend race, yet even as Dunbar and Hurston attempted to construct raceless texts, race, as Morrison so eloquently argues, "hovers in implication" around both texts due to the race of the authors (47). The hue of the skin of both Hurston and Dunbar prevents readers from forgetting race even though the novels are not about race. In the

⁸ A novel that is so easily readable and enjoyable that one would read it while relaxing on the beach.

“Introduction” to an edition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* William Andrews writes that only one of Dunbar's three novels dealt with black characters and themes (xv). Andrews' comment regarding Dunbar is situated in a larger discussion of black authors who attempted to move across color lines. Andrews acknowledges that financial success was not normally available for black authors who attempted the feat. Andrews writes that “The novels of Chesnutt, Dunbar, and Du Bois enabled Johnson to write his first novel without having to bear the burden of inventing a tradition of socially conscious, commercially viable African-American fiction on his own” (xvi). Dunbar's boldness to stray away from the norm paved the way for other major black authors, yet his road clearing role did not win him favor with critics.

In the essay, “Growing up Black: A Black Literature Unit for Schools,” Dunbar is suggested as an author who will help students explore the unit “The Black Personality As Depicted in American Literature.” The unit description explains,

The students will examine the way the black man is portrayed in literature in conjunction with the period of each literary work and discern the beliefs and the way of life of a folk whose attitudes have definitely changed. In essence, the unit is concerned with the black man both as a character in a text and as an author of a text whose personality and works are shaped by the attitudes of society. (39)

Doris D. Massenburg and Bruce C. Appelby published the essay in 1971 and place Dunbar's cowboy novel, *The Love of Landry*, on the reading list. *The Love of Landry*, like *The Uncalled*, also features white characters, but wealthy white characters. The educators suggest that even though the novel does not feature blacks (except for the train conductor), one can still discover aspects of the black experience due to the race of the author of the text. Similar to Morrison and my earlier argument, even though *The Love of Landry* does not address race, it appears that the color of the author's skin still makes a

mark or “shadow [that] hovers in implication” (47). These educators found that their students could still benefit from the text’s darkly shadowed author even though the text’s characters were white.

When writing about black people, the race of the people eventually becomes a character in whatever work is being written. Race in the United States of America constantly overshadows any story that is attempted. Hurston and Dunbar wrote two texts that transcended race. The issues that the two address are universal issues: feelings of inferiority, religion, sex, family relationships, and class. Situating the universal issues within the constructs of white characters allows the two writers to tell their stories without focusing on the character of race. The inclusion of the racial character would have significantly altered the texts because race and ultimately racism would have considerably affected the novels’ characters. No thought of racism is mentioned in *The Uncalled*. Dunbar wrote the novel without dealing with the ever-pressing concern of race because a focus on race eventually must lead to a discussion of racism. Rosenblatt writes, “In every instance black is synonymous with rejection, defeat, impossibility, or some aspect of predetermined life. Black is both the color the hero bears and the force against which he pits his strength” (9). This burden of blackness is carried into literature.

Freddie or Arvey both would have endured additional struggles if their skin would have been black. The story of their struggles with inferiority and hypocritical religion might have been lost in the larger tale of their struggle with the burden of blackness. By avoiding race, Dunbar and Hurston are able to avoid racism that has a tendency to infect and affect everything around it. The simple aspect of living life is impossible with the disease of racism because everything that is touched begins to rot and disintegrate. The

term “raceless” appears to have a negative connotation; it is thrown at Hurston and Dunbar as an insult. In the essay, “‘We Must Write Like the White Men’: Race, Realism, and Dunbar’s Anomalous First Novel,” Gene Jarrett writes:

My reading of Dunbar maintains that African American literature is neither homogeneously Black nor necessarily a form of racial realism. Indeed, as I point out elsewhere, almost every African American author canonized for racial realism has written texts complicating or avoiding this genre altogether. This fact poses a problem for scholars of African American, whose reflex is to avoid if not exclude novels from the field of study that do not strive for racial realism. (305)

Both *The Uncalled* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* have been largely ignored by scholars.

Jarrett continues, “Scholars indeed tend to dismiss texts complicating or avoiding racial realism as ‘White,’ ‘non-racial,’ ‘a-racial,’ ‘raceless,’ ‘unusual,’ ‘peculiar,’ and ‘anomalies. Even worse, they have omitted these texts as if they never existed” (305). In actuality, the term “raceless” labels the universality of the two texts, and the term should be seen as a form of praise.

A rare praise for one of the white novels of Dunbar comes from Rosenblatt when he writes:

One of the most effective early novels to deal with the white outside world is Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Uncalled*. Dunbar has been regarded by almost everyone who comments on him as an accommodationist writer, and except for his celebrated poem ‘We Wear the Mask,’ nothing in his writing, and he wrote a great deal, seems to challenge the designation. Like *The Uncalled*, two of his other books, *The Love of Landry* and *The Fanatics*, are concerned with white characters and are addressed to a white audience. A fourth book, *The Sport of the Gods*, has blacks as its main characters, but the only discernable message for blacks which the book offers is that one ought not to migrate to the sinful North, but rather stay in the South and support the agricultural economy. (130)

However, it is blatantly obvious that even as Rosenblatt praises *The Uncalled*, he has little else to praise. He continues, “*The Uncalled* (1898), Dunbar’s first novel, is, however, quite different from the ones which followed. Unlike *The Love of Landry* and

The Fanatics, it takes a steady and critical look at a white community, and despite its gentleness, in many ways it is the first successful protest novel in black fiction”

(Rosenblatt 130). If *The Uncalled* is the first successful protest novel, what was Dunbar protesting? Was it possible that he was protesting the misconceptions that exist about black people while also detailing a realistic portrayal of poor whites? J. Saunders Redding and Faith Berry argue that Dunbar “...had to portray himself as a white youth because what happened to him could not, in the limits of the patterns and the view of the general public – what happened to him could not have happened to a Negro” (145).

Rosenblatt appears to grasp the complexity of what Dunbar was attempting to accomplish in his novel. He writes:

In Dexter Dunbar is portraying his perception of the white world. He is depicting a people, who while pretending to adhere to principles of decency and to maintain an egalitarian world, efficiently and systematically stifle the freedom and honesty of an individual different from themselves, and do so in a quiet and often charming manner. In Freddie’s cast the quality of difference is that he is the son of a drunkard and therefore curses as being unfit for God or town. If he were black, he would be considered unfit for more than that.... (136)

Most Dunbar critics agree that *The Uncalled* is highly autobiographical. Elder explains, “Oddly, the novel that comes closest to revealing Dunbar’s assessment of his own development, *The Uncalled*, presents as its protagonist Freddie Brent, a young white boy” (134). In his essay, “Fictionalizing History: David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*” Klaus Ensslen discusses the important ties that exist between African American literature and history. He writes,

The concern for history, group history as well as one’s own place in national world history, continued to be a central vein in black narrative literature, although at various times it remained veiled rather than explicit in the fictional writing of Afro American authors. Dunbar, for example, dared introduce autobiographical material into his fiction only in highly

disguised form (when he transposed his experience as a young man into a white social setting in *The Uncalled*, (1898). (282)

It would be hard to imagine that Dunbar's initial desire in writing his biography would be to portray himself as white; however, it is clear that Dunbar was painfully aware that his visibility as a black boy or man in the story would be severely limited. Rosenblatt explains the problem of visibility for black authors when he writes, "...blacks who wish to be seen by such whites often have to 'turn white' or colorless in order to be seen, thereby performing a disappearing act of their own. To evoke literary situations in which black people disappear, then, is a statement of a kind of inner reality despite the seeming exaggeration of the proposition" (184).⁹ The irony of Dunbar's predicament is that his dilemma has been an age-old dilemma for black authors -

The first black novels produced in America concerned themselves with proving the black people were as good as the whites, as honorable, intelligent, and decent. The characters in the early novels were either as white in actual color as their authors could make them, or, as the line in 'Black and Blue' goes, 'white inside'; but the point was always the same, that day by day black people were becoming increasingly white because to become white was a sign of general improvement. (Rosenblatt 157)

Dunbar had to "improve" his novel's main character so that readers would see him, and the only method by which he could do so was to change the race of the character to the visible color of white. According to Jay Martin and Gossie H. Hudson, editors of *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, Dunbar once stated that he wanted "to be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are more human than African" (431). Dunbar realized that to "prove" the humanity of the black race, one did not always have to solely show the black race. The humanity could be proven by showing the white race in "black form." This black form would then show the

⁹ As an example, see Ralph Ellison's famous classic *Invisible Man*.

humanity of all. Similar in argument but opposite in explanation, Ramsey concurs in his essay, “Dunbar’s Dixie.” He writes, “Dunbar’s Northern assimilative experience and his middle class racial dream – the desire to depict black folk as ‘more human than African’ – lead him here and elsewhere to downplay ugly racist restrictions of the black nadir, to gloss over enormous social, economic, and political realities” (31). Ramsey’s accusation that Dunbar glosses over the difficult topics may be true, but Dunbar’s reason for doing so addresses the difficult topic of preconceptions about race and class. Critics like Ramsey, appear to fault Dunbar for presenting a subtle but strong form of protest.

The Uncalled is not fixed in the South, in actuality it is set in Dunbar’s familiar Ohio. Ramsey writes, “Yet, Dunbar, raised in Dayton, never visited the South until the age of 27 and never stayed there for long. Dixie was not ‘home’ for him, and in much of his fiction and poetry of the South one senses less a personal rootedness than a distance from which the region’s deep and complex problems are patly simplified” (31). In Ramsey’s essay, he explains Dunbar’s distant association with the American South. Both Dunbar’s mother and father were former slaves and his wife, Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, was a writer from Louisiana. Ramsey further explains, “Thus with one foot in the North and the other only vicariously in the South, Dunbar was qualified by life experience to write not of the South but of northern folk with southern roots” (33). In essence, Freddie Brent is another mixture of Dunbar’s Southern and Northern roots. Ramsey writes,

In *The Uncalled* (1898), his first novel, the rural white protagonist Freddie Brent is warned by his Aunt Hester that Cincinnati is ‘a strange city full of wickedness an’ sin’ (194), and ‘if there were ever livin’ hells on airth, it’s them big cities’ (195). Brent feels revulsion in seeing city kids playing in gutters and carrying beer pails for saloons (202). He is especially

‘sickened’ seeing a woman giving sips of beer to an infant (203), and shocked that there are baseball games on Sunday (206). (34-35)

Jarrett like Ramsey references Dunbar’s city and rural dichotomies and expands upon the idea when he writes, “This story about the ‘mean’ streets leaves open the possibility of a racial reading of *The Uncalled* against the backdrop of American history” (315). Jarrett explains that the poor quarters of Ohio where people like Margaret Brent lived were decaying and crowded with poor people in his essay, “We Must Write Like the White Men’: Race, Realism, and Dunbar’s Anomalous First Novel.” When Miss Hester Prime agrees to take Freddie to live with her, she is removing him from the moral, social, and physical decay of the poor section of town. He writes:

But the association between these economic conditions and urban African America is clearly there was well. Class was but one of several cultural contexts in which racism prevented Blacks and Whites from achieving equal footing in American society and culture. American literature, Dunbar suggests, must address such cultural contexts before it could transition from local color writing to more historically contingent versions of literary realism. (Jarrett 316)

It is interesting that Jarrett assumes a connection between the poor class and African Americans. He appears to argue that the poverty and social outcast status of these poor whites grants them an affinity and shared bond with blacks. Hemenway, Hurston’s biographer argues a similar idea: “In one sense, of course, it is artificial to suggest a bourgeois-proletariat division to the black community’ by some measures, all black people are the proletariat no matter how many millions of dollars they may possess. Any black person is subject to discrimination no matter how cultured his accent...” (61). In essence, the idea that readers might view the white characters of *The Uncalled* as black is simply based on the idea that blacks are always of a lower class, like the whites of the novel. Jarrett describes the novel: “... [It] probes the issues of spirituality, heritage,

destiny, and the environment to explain social marginality and moral turpitude” (290). The novels “dark” issues have allowed for a reading of the characters as dark in complexion.

Due to the time period in which he lived, Dunbar was very much aware of the slave narrative form. He was born slightly after the height of the publication of slave narratives, yet it is evident that his education included a study of the form. *The Uncalled* can be read as a slave narrative, a white slave narrative. White America was held hostage by the slave master religion which was then turned and used to imprison the African-American population. How was white America to obtain its freedom? Dunbar describes Freddie’s dismay at becoming a minister. He writes, “He wished that he could die then and there, for death seemed the only escape from his bondage. He was bound, irrevocably bound” (170). One of the greatest justifications for slavery was the idea that the master or mistress was “looking after” the less fortunate or unable. Little thought was given to the fact that the slave might have a mind or will of his or her own. Miss Hester tells Freddie, “‘I am so sorry, Frederick,’ she said, with some return to her old asperity, ‘I am sorry that I’ve made your life so hard that you think that you have been a slave...’” (194). Dunbar’s slave analogy would not have been lost on either David Walker or Frederick Douglass. The American slave system was the biggest influence on both of these individuals. Yet, a bigger argument can be made regarding my claim that *The Uncalled* can be read as a slave narrative. The American slave system has been the leading influence on African American Literature. Even though later writers attempt to break away from a focus on the oppression of the race simply to look at the uplift of the race, the uplift is only needed due to the oppression. Therefore, one must look back at the oppressor to move forward. Sadly, an

entire genre, an entire race, has been shaped by the slave system. Simply comparing and contrasting two of their most famous works can present a comparative discussion of Walker and Douglass. In Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* and Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," each author addresses a different audience. I would argue that the difference in audiences highlights the differences in these two men. By simply reading the titles of the two works, the dissimilarity is obvious. Walker addresses his appeal to black people. Douglass does not easily identify an audience in his title, yet one is easily able to infer to whom he is speaking in the first few lines of his text. Douglass addresses a white audience, while Walker addresses a black audience. The choice of audience is key because individuals choose to speak to those who they feel possess the power to change a situation. Walker's appeal to blacks implies that the power to change lies within the black community. Douglass' appeal to a white audience implies that change must happen within the white community and then must be passed to the black community.

The history of these two men easily explains why they addressed two vastly different audiences. Walker was born free. Yes, he was still a black man in America, which still gave him a marginalized freedom. Yet, there was no one individual who maintained power over him. Douglass was born a slave. Douglass had to seize his freedom from the hands of his white owners. Douglass recognizes the power struggle of the slave system. In Walker's appeal, he urges slaves to seize their freedom by any means necessary.¹⁰ Walker is radical for the period. Walker speaks not only against the slave system, but he also speaks *violently* against the slave system. He urges his fellow blacks to use violence

¹⁰ Somewhat of a precursor to Malcolm X.

to overthrow those who hold them in bondage. Walker's urge towards violence did not win him many fans among white America. In the appeal, Walker details the treatment of blacks at the hands of whites. Yet, Walker does not place the responsibility of the situation on whites. Rather, he simply calls his fellow blacks to action. He challenges them to take a stand and to seize their own humanity. Freddie also was challenged to seize his own freedom from the shackles of Miss Hester and her hypocritical religion. Douglass' argument is radically different from Walker's. Douglass begins his address almost apologetically. He writes in a nervous humble manner. He claims that he feels unworthy to speak to such an illustrious crowd.¹¹ After several pages of praise, humility, and apologies, Douglass finally gets to the point of his argument. Douglass asks white America how is it possible for the slave to celebrate the fourth of July. Douglass explains that the holiday belongs to white America and no one else. He explains that it is absurd for slave owners and the rest of America to expect slaves to celebrate when they are still in bondage. Douglass then asks how is it right for white America to feel justified in overthrowing the tyranny of the British government, yet lack understanding for the slave's desire to overthrow the slave system. Even as Douglass presents his entire argument, one cannot help forgetting to whom he is speaking. Douglass does not address American slaves or suggest to them that they should use the American Revolution as a guide to building their own revolution. Rather, Douglass asks white America to understand why a slave would want to throw off his or her bondage. Apparently, Douglass did not view slaves as strong enough or worthy enough to write to as equals.

Why does Douglass portray that it is necessary for white American to understand the plight of the Negro slave? Douglass' mind was still not free from enslavement.

¹¹ I do highly question the humility of Douglass!

Walker was not only born free in body, but he was also born free in mind and spirit. Walker did not need white America to understand his argument. He did not need them to support his cause; in fact, there was a price placed upon his head for violently opposing white America. Douglass's mind, body, and spirit were intricately tied to white America. For Douglass, it is impossible not to place authority in the hands of the master. His psyche allowed for no less. For Freddie, all power regarding his plight lay solely in his own hands. Freddie's enslavement was one that was infinitely easier to break; however, Dunbar uses his white characters to show that a slave struggle can be universal, and that it can be manifested in any race, simply by the type of chains that binds. Dunbar starts his novel as a slave narrative and ends it as a Civil Rights struggle. Dunbar appears to foreshadow the Civil Rights Movement,¹² with Freddie's assertion that "I'm a man, Uncle 'Liph" (253). Freddie's assertion is in the last several paragraphs of the novel. Freddie is explaining to Eliphalet that he is finally free from the religion that he was taught and has found the real meaning of religion. Freddie says, "'Lost it all? Uncle 'Liph, why, I've just come to know what religion is. It's to get bigger and broader and kinder, and to live and to love and be happy, so that people around you will be happy'" (253). Freddie breaks the slave shackles of religion, shackles that can bind any race, and finds his true freedom in his own personal relationship with God that is not bound by the hypocrisy he experienced in the religious practices of his home community. Rosenblatt expands upon the slave theme by also alluding to the Biblical Children of Israel fleeing their enslavement in Egypt. He writes, "There are also continual references to Freddie's break in his bonds. . . .And there are all the inevitable allusions to Exodus" (135).

¹² In particular, the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike.

Freddie, like Dunbar's parents, was able to break the slave shackles that bound him in order to move to freedom.

Near the end of his essay, "We Must Write Like the White Men': Race, Realism, and Dunbar's Anomalous First Novel," Jarrett writes:

The essay springs from a larger hypothesis of mine, namely that African American literary history is broken into periods defined by cultural ambassadors, arbiters, or deans who dictated the critical and commercial conditions for writers and readers to produce and consume literature called African American. Meanwhile, a number of important African American writers played truant from the school of racial realism. They produced anomalous literature that avoided and thereby critiqued the standards that would be brought to bear on these writings, even at the cost of exclusion from the canon. In the century after slavery, William Howells and Paul Laurence Dunbar were among the first such deans and truants.... (319)

Dunbar made the consciously bold decision to write a text that did not fit any of the writing molds of his period. *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry* have been excluded from the African American literary canon because they did not conform to societal preconceptions and norms.

CHAPTER 2

Seraph on the Suwanee: White-Face Minstrel Shows

Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* is a fascinating tale about the self-absorbed Arvay who is from the small town of Sawley in West Florida on the banks of the Suwanee River. Sawley is a sawmill town full of poor white religious individuals. Arvay grows up in the shadow of her older sister Lorraine (also called 'Raine). Not only is 'Raine attractive in the thick way Sawley women are supposed to be, but she is also able to catch the eye of the new minister in town. Hurston writes, "They [Arvay's parents] did not suspect that the general preference for Lorraine, Arvay's more robust and aggressive sister, had done something to Arvay's soul across the years" (9). The townspeople's constant preference for 'Raine mentally affects Arvay. The Reverend Carl Middleton ruled over the Day Spring Baptist Church where Arvay "turned from the world" after witnessing the marriage of her sister to Carl (3). Arvay becomes religiously obsessed and refuses all suitors until Jim Meserve arrives on the scene. Jim is not from Sawley, and he comes from "good stock." Jim's family owned plantations before the Civil War, so this pedigree distances him from the poor white families of Sawley. The women of Sawley all set their sights on Jim, yet he has eyes for only one person, Arvay. Even though Jim finds Arvay attractive, Arvay is never fully able to embrace the fact that Jim wants to marry her, even after they are married. Arvay spends most of her marriage seeking to hold onto a man she already fully possesses.

Ironically, Hurston opens the novel with a description of Sawley, a town on the Suwanee River, and ends the novel with Arvay and Jim lying in each other's arms in the middle of the ocean. In the town on the river, Arvay was confined by her own small

mindedness and that of the townspeople. Yet, in Jim's arms in the middle of the ocean, Arvay finally comes to the full realization of who she is and who her husband is as well. Arvay had previously been afraid of Jim, yet on the boat, she learns that his brashness with others is completely different from their interactions. In the end, Arvay and Jim are simply a man and a woman trying to figure out a way to love each other in the same way Janie and Tea Cake do in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Accordingly, in the essay, "From the Suwanee to Egypt, There's No Place Like Home," Cynthia Ward writes that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other more prominent works were able to be reclaimed¹ because black women and the black middle class were able to embrace the books as their own for their own self-awakening. The author explains that *Seraph on the Suwanee* will only be able to achieve the same level of notoriety as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when poor whites embrace the tale as their own (77). I contend that the same could be said for *The Uncalled* because it is also a tale about poor whites moving towards self-awareness. However, Ward like many other critics, ignores or fails to recognize the universal appeal of both texts for *all* races. Even though *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was initially embraced by the black middle class, it soon became plainly evident that the text had universal appeal and was being embraced by people of all races and classes. *Seraph on the Suwanee* does not need the embracement of poor whites to reach notoriety. Poor whites are just one group of the many groups who can and will benefit from Hurston's work. Arvay's tale could be the tale of any man or woman who has dealt with fears regarding love and self. All people deal with issues of love, fear,

¹ Many of Hurston's works were largely out of print until Alice Walker helped to ignite interest in the 1970s.

inferiority, and self-awareness. The strength of the novel lies in its ability to address common problems in an uncommon way.

Claudia Tate presents a Freudian reading of the novel in the chapter, “Mourning Humor and Reparation: Detecting the Joke in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, by Zora Neale Hurston.” She argues that *Seraph on the Suwanee* is best understood if one looks at it as if it was a grand two-part jest about whiteness and female submission (150). John Lowe also argues the humor of Hurston in *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy* when he writes, “Throughout Hurston’s career, she tirelessly explored the role humor plays in life, especially in courtship and marriage” (259). Humor in relationship is integral to many of her shorter works like the play, “Color Struck,” and the short story, “The Gilded Six-Bits.”

Yet, even with humorous tales, there has been little joy in the public reception of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Tate writes, “Despite Hurston’s tremendous popularity over the last two decades, *Seraph* has remained a problematic novel, indeed an anomaly in Hurston’s canon and in African American literary scholarship” (153). Even though early book reviewers² praised the novel, their praise did not spread to others. Tate continues, “When *Seraph on the Suwanee* appeared in 1948, Hurston’s white reviewers were much more amenable to her writing about white folks, whom she called ‘Crackers,’ and her dabbling in Freudian psychology than black scholars would be over the next four decades” (161). Susan Edwards Meisenhelder writes, “The public response in reviews of *Seraph on the Suwanee* indicates how well Hurston could gauge her audience. Invariably,

² Herschel Brickell in *The Sunday Review of Literature* (November 6, 1948), Edward W. Hamilton in *America* (January 1, 1949), Worth Tuttle Hedden in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (October 10, 1948), Eddie Shimano in *Common Ground* (Spring 1948), and Frank G. Slaughter in *New York Times Book Review* (October 31, 1948).

reviewers read the book as a positive picture of Southern white culture -" (94). Following the early positive reviews of the novel, later reviews were not as favorable to Hurston.

Tate writes:

Her black readers have been much too troubled by her switch to white characters to share this pleasure. And her white readers, who have already enjoyed her apparent endorsement of dominant cultural myths about patriarchal virtue and female romantic submission in *Seraph*, probably would have liked it even better if she had published the work under another name and thereby made the novel's connection to black culture less tangible. (169)

Hurston found herself in the precarious position of displeasing both her white and black fans. M. Genevieve West argues that by the end of Hurston's career, her celebrated role as a depicter of black life was beginning to wane. She writes:

Hurston was already on the margins of the black intellectual community, and her status as interpreter for white readers coupled with her failure to strenuously and directly criticize white racism further eroded her reputation. Was Hurston 'tommung'? No. Readers, however, came to her work from the period with preexisting biases against her and her previous work. By the time *Seraph on the Suwanee* appeared in 1948 with a cast of mostly white characters, Hurston was very much a literary outsider perceived by many as an opportunistic exploiter of African Americans and African American culture. (194-195).

Hurston's novel received praise upon its initial release due to the fact that reviewers saw Hurston's portrayals of whites in a positive light; however, the rebirth of Hurston's career in the 1970s did not provide a favorable backdrop for a black author writing about white people. West continues:

From one perspective, Hurston's decision to focus on white characters would seem to make her disregard for black characters and black people complete. Considering Hurston's own horizon of expectations, however, offers another rationale. Each time she had written about folklore or the folk, racist readers had manipulated her work to support racist assumptions. When she attempted to interest Lippincott in a story about middle-class black life, the publisher had rejected it. An emerging movement fellow black writers offered an appealing alternative. Writing

about white characters would not only free her of criticisms that she exploited lower-class black life for white readers but would also establish her prowess as a writer. (204)

Even though *Seraph on the Suwanee* has not fared well in the eyes of modern critics, the initial responses to the novel (before the molestation accusations became public) were favorable. West writes, “The critical response to Hurston’s last published novel is neither overwhelmingly negative nor positive. Nevertheless, *Seraph* sold better than any of her previous books, and Scribner’s ordered a second printing” (215).³ Yet, Hurston’s good fortune would not last due to readers’ perception that she failed to attack white social norms. West explains:

More than her criticisms of black life, however, her failure to criticize white oppression in the 1940s suggested that she had aligned herself politically and socially with white readers who would buy her books. *Seraph on the Suwanee* did nothing to challenge those assumptions. For years the novel was read as Hurston’s contribution to assimilationist aesthetics and evidence of her lack of regard for black life and culture. She *appeared to* have abandoned exploitative black folk characters for white crackers and their black, nonthreatening “pets.” (West 228)

In writing her white novel, Hurston appeared to have distanced herself from her black roots. John C. Charles also argues that Hurston’s last novel failed in its portrayal of the South in his essay, “Talk about the South: Unspeakable Things Unspoken in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*.” He explains that Hurston attempted to write a “counter-narrative of the South, one aimed at a popular audience, and especially designed to rebut what she considered distorted images of the region offered by Southern conservatives and Northern liberals” (21). Yet, Charles awards Hurston a failing grade in her portrayal of the South and for the novel as a whole.

³ See Hemenway’s account (323).

In *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writing by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project*, Pamela Bordelon compiles and critiques Hurston's writings during the approximately 18-month period where she worked for the federal government. In the introduction of the chapter, "Turpentine,"⁴ Bordelon writes,

As one of the best writers and ablest field researchers, Hurston was expected to find telling subjects to interview among the black turpentiners. Through her past field experience, she had developed a quick eye for finding a good story. She knew how to become one of the people, gain their confidence, and get them to talk. 'Turpentine,' was intended as a life history, describes a ride through the woods with John McFarlin, a turpentine woods rider in the employ of the Aycock and Lindsay Company of Cross City. In it, Hurston departs from the life history format and frames the piece from her own point of view. Her reasons are her own, but more than likely she had seen a good story, and like any good writer shaped it her own way. Nearly a decade later, she drew from this experience in writing her novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*. (128)

Even though the Federal Writers' Project⁵ experience was rocky like most of Hurston's employment history, she was able to use the time as the foundation of her last novel. In the "Foreword" of the entire work, Bordelon explains:

Hurston's biography is incomplete without a full reckoning of her FWP background. Her joining the FWP shows her to be a resourceful writer who found yet another institutional means of funding her writing career. Hurston's FWP experience demonstrates the type of treatment that a black federal writer could expect in the Deep South, one that varied remarkably from that of Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, Frank Yerby, and Arna Bontemps, who served on northern FWP units. In Florida, Hurston was given the lowliest position, 'relief writer,' despite the fact that she was the most published writer on the unit. She bore the added humiliation of seeing less qualified and far less talented white writers given editorial positions at double her relief salary. She watched silently while these state editors passed over much of her work and published less

⁴ Bordelon declares that the publication of "Turpentine" in *Go Gator and Muddy the Water: Writing by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project* is the first publication of the piece.

⁵ Bordelon uses the acronym FWP for all of her references to the Federal Writers' Project.

worthy pieces. As in so many other incidents in her life, Hurston bore the hurt silently and kept writing. (ix)

Hurston's silence apparently allowed her to hear clearly. As she was quietly bearing the burden of being racially oppressed, she was honing her skills as an anthropologist which became glaringly clear in her writings. Bordelon writes:

Hurston's FWP writings show her to be a serious anthropologist whose career had just hit its stride. The massive FWP research engine supplied background material for Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), a seminal connection that has never been established. Indeed, the connection between Hurston's FWP experience and *Seraph* is so complete that one can find passages where Hurston lifted sentences from her FWP field notes and placed them in the mouths of her novel's characters. (x)

Bordelon is correct. Hurston's research and collection skills gave her the ability to accurately transcribe the speaking patterns of the white and black people she encountered so that she was able to present an accurate portrayal of speech patterns. Bordelon writes, "She knew that she was being given a chance to do valuable field research that could be useful not only to the FWP, but also to her own later writings," (41). In Hurston's description of Jim, she uses many of the same words used to describe John McFarlin, "a turpentine woods rider in the employ of the Aycock and Lindsay Company of Cross City" (128). Both Jim and John "ride the woods" and deal with "chippers, pullers, dippers, and woodchoppers."⁶ Bordelon explains that Hurston drew on her notes from the Federal Writers' Project in many ways including the dialogue recorded for the FWP's *Lexicon of Trade Jargon* (44).

Hurston's ability to convey the turpentine whites is directly related to her interaction with poor whites while working on the Federal Writers' Project. She is highly skilled at conveying unique characters, whether white or black. Arvay is never fully able

⁶ See *Seraph on the Suwanee*, 42, and "Turpentine"

to recognize the love and sacrifice that others make for her own good. She is always consumed with her own perceived inefficiencies and unable to understand the depth of their love. Arvey is a hard character to read. She is hard to sympathize with due to her self-consumed mentality. Hurston's characterization of Jim, Arvey's future husband, evokes sympathy and anger. Jim loves Arvey, yet he is also willing to force his will upon her sexually and physically. Jim constantly tries to show his love for Arvey by taking care of her, yet Jim constantly questions Arvey's love for him because she refuses to acknowledge his actions. Jim is the complete antithesis of Arvey. Jim sacrifices for Arvey simply because he loves her and believes that his role as a husband is to provide for her well-being. The differing approaches lead to a rough marriage: "Jim felt that he would stand on the mount of transfiguration when Arvey showed some appreciation of his love as expressed by what he was striving to do for her. Thus they fumbled and searched for each other in silent darkness" (Hurston 76-77). For most of their marriage, Jim strives to show Arvey his love and Arvey strives to hold onto Jim. It takes the two twenty plus years to understand each other.

Even though he is a white man, Jim seems to embody the same characteristics of the black male characters of Hurston's other novels. She writes a repetitively flawed male character in many of her major works. Even though Jim loves Arvey, he begins their marriage by raping her in her sacred place under the mulberry tree. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John Buddy Pearson marries the child bride Lucy and constantly cheats. Not only does he cheat, but he also strikes Lucy on her death bed when she broaches the subject of his infidelity. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both Joe Starks and Tea Cake hurt Janie repeatedly. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston's father is the killer of her dreams.

Hurston repeatedly writes significantly flawed male characters who instill pain in the women around them. She may have written flawed men due to her own inability to maintain stable relationships with the opposite sex as suggested in one of the more recent biographies *Wrapped in Rainbows*. Hurston's fleeting and secretive marriage acts were often the manifestations of her own negative views of marriage and relationships: "Having witnessed her mother's marriage, as well as her sister Sarah's, Zora was desperately afraid that matrimony would only widen her hips and narrow her life" (Boyd 149). Hurston manifests her trepidation about relationships in her works, and it appears that her views regarding men are universal and not race or class specific. As Hurston simply writes women, she also simply writes men, flaws and all. Hemenway writes, "Biographical evidence suggests that Zora Hurston was groping toward a statement about marriage and that the novel she created did not quite achieve what she wanted to say" (308). Hurston's difficulty with marriage and relationships did not make her a proponent of the institution. Yet, Hurston's decision to focus on the difficulty of marriage, particularly this marriage between white characters, has been belittled. Hemenway writes that "the novel has little plot; basically, it is the story of Arvay's marriage to Jim Meserve and the problems that afflict it because of her uncertain sense of self and her husband's lusty, unthinking chauvinism" (309). Marriage in and of itself is a plot, a winding story with many twists and turns.⁷ The fact that Hemenway belittles the simplicity of the storyline is absurd because a great deal of plot, action, and change can happen within the confines of marriage. Like many of Hurston's critics, he appears to have fallen into the misconception that she was required to deal with "heavier" issues. Barbara Smith also discusses Hurston's affinity for writing about marriage in her essay, "Sexual Politics and

⁷ Just ask any person who has been married (whether happily or not)!

the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston." Yet, in opposition to Hemenway, she discusses Hurston's subject choice in a positive light. She writes:

Much of Hurston's fiction focuses upon marriage and family life. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) is closely based upon the author's family and the sometimes rocky relationship between her own parents. *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1939) although focused upon the Biblical character reveals a sensitivity to women's identity. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston's master work, chronicles the heroine's two unsuccessful and one successful marriages. Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) also focuses on the main character's marital relationship. Two short stories, "Sweat" and "The Guilded Six Bits," portray the misunderstanding and hatred of two married couples. Hurston is often criticized for being apolitical because she does not write traditional protest or portray interracial conflict. Yet one can only consider her apolitical if the political ramifications of relationships between the sexes are completely ignored. (27)

Hurston writes about marriage and female-male relationships within the frame of a white life novel in order to prove the universality and human issue of life, love, and marriage. As a black woman, Hurston was not given the luxury of simply dealing with a relationship and marriage while another famous author, Jane Austen, a white woman, built a career upon the idea. Hurston's race appears to prevent her from also writing a novel solely about marriage or relationships.

Hurston's most notable work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, also primarily details the relationships between men and women, yet the novel is also seen as a key component of the black feminist movement. Janie, a black woman, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more self-aware than Arvay who does not come to a full realization of herself or her relationship until the last few pages of the novel. However, Janie's realization of self and relationships allows her to run off with Tea Cake in the middle of the novel. Critics have written that Arvay's weakness lies in her whiteness; however, I

would argue that Arvay's weakness lies merely in her simplicity. In "Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics," Chuck Jackson writes, "Readings of Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) have often focused on the text's racial and gender problems, either critiquing the text's failure to measure up to the racial consciousness and feminism evident in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or reversing this critique by claiming that *Seraph*'s power lies in its heavily coded championing of its protagonist" (639). Hurston does not appear to champion her protagonist, yet neither does she condemn Arvay. Jackson further argues that both "class and gender conflict [are] at work in Arvay" (655). Hurston presents a detailed character portrayal of an individual who is afflicted with feelings of inferiority. Hurston's highly focused goal of exploring the internal conflicts of Arvay was best accomplished by removing racial analysis. Hurston made an extremely bold choice to write about a white woman, yet it was the best method for staying her course.

The relationship of Arvay and Jim begins on shaky ground. Jim purposefully gets turpentine in Arvay's eye in the midst of one of her fits. Jim then rapes Arvay right before their wedding. Yet, in the midst of this, they still seem to fall in love. Jim loves Arvay, but he also holds onto his misogynistic view of women:

Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for. Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can't think with me. Let's get this thing straight in the beginning. Putting your head on the same pillow with mine is not the same thing as mingling your brains with mine anymore than crying when I cry is giving you the power to feel my sorrow. (Hurston 35)

From the start, Jim quickly explains to Arvay that she is not needed for her brains; rather she is simply needed for her looks and her "woman skills." Their marriage partnership is stilted from its creation due to Jim's belief in the inferiority of women. Even in his name,

Jim personifies his desire to be served. Meserve or Serve me.⁸ However, Jim is not the only individual in the marriage who believes in inferiority. Arvey also suffers from her own feelings of inferiority that have lingered from her childhood and experiences in Sawley. Arvey never feels that she is fit for Jim: “There was bound to come a time when he was going to feel outdone in not finding those other things in her...She might be able to hold onto Jim, and keep him from quitting her some way or another” (36). Jim’s vocalization of her inferiority as a woman only heightens her ever-present inferiority as a human. Arvey is completely infuriating over and over again, yet it is hard not to care for her as a person.

Hurston’s brilliance lies in her ability to write in a way that evokes strong feelings and emotions. Carl Milton Hughes in *The Negro Novelist: A Discussion of the Writings of American Negro Novelists 1940-1950*, finds her development of Jim to be impressive. He writes,

Zora Hurston in *Seraph on the Suwanee* similarly⁹ achieves success with characterization. But hers is at the opposite extreme of the social ladder, for she portrays a group of people who are Florida crackers...Nonetheless, Hurston triumphs in a way that few women novelists are able to do. She portrays a man’s man. Jim Meserve answers the requirements of personality criterion for the aggressive, bold, and earthy he-man type. He makes it known at once that he is a man who knows what he wants and gets it. It is this aggressively confident manner which subdues Arvey cutting through her subterfuge immediately. As a consequence, she is never quite adjusted to him, but she finds him irresistible. The two complement each other for fictional purposes. (276-277)

Hughes’ compliment of Hurston’s skills as a writer is quickly overshadowed by his gushing praise for a man who purposefully puts turpentine in a woman’s eye and rapes

⁸ In opposition to most of the literary criticism that directly embraces the obvious breakdown of Jim Meserve, one could argue that Jim is the one who serves Arvey. For example, his name could be read in a very “he-mannish” or Tarzan-like “Me Serve you.”

⁹ He is comparing Hurston’s novel to Ann Petry’s *Country Place*.

her. There is little redemption in the last line of the quote from Hughes' – his weak attempt at arguing that the pairing works for fictional purposes does not negate his earlier fawning for the misogynistic Jim. Arvey is also flawed, yet she is flawed in a sadly realistic way. In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell where Hurston also writes about dialect, she discusses her own disgust with Arvey and her issues with inadequacy (Kaplan 557). She goes on to discuss how a reader of *Seraph on the Suwanee* could not believe that anyone could suffer from such a great feeling of inferiority. She writes:

Have you ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have, and it is hell. They carry it like a raw sore on the end of the index finger... It [inferiority] is a very common ailment. That is why I decided to write about it. The sufferers do not seem to realize that all that is needed is a change of point of view from fear into self-confidence and then there is no problem. (Kaplan 558)

Hurston's response is that she wrote Arvey from her own experiences of dealing with men who felt intimidated by her success and accomplishments. For this reason, I also argue that Hurston's constant portrayal of flawed men lies in her own negative experiences with them. Even in her male friendships,¹⁰ Hurston seemed unable to find stability. Hurston's father, her first male interaction, was a sad example for her life.

It is interesting that Hurston creates a happy ending for Jim and Arvey.

Hemenway argues that the ending is inconclusive; however, he misses Arvey's realization of self at the end of the novel (310). The ending is far from inconclusive. Arvey comes to a full understanding of herself and her role in the world. Hurston writes, "And just like she had not known Jim, she had known her own self even less. What she had considered her cross, she now saw as her glory.... Her job was mothering.... She was

¹⁰ For example, Langston Hughes was a longtime friend of Hurston, yet even their friendship ended in "divorce" after their quarrel over their jointly written play "Mule Bone."

serving and meant to serve” (351-352). The last sentence is the second to last line of the entire novel, and it presents a clear picture of the person Arvay knew herself to be. The picture might not be one that appeals to feminists or womanists, but it was who she knew she was and who she had discovered along her path to self-actualization. Hemenway discusses Hurston’s portrayal of self-awareness and gives a failing grade to her portrayal. He writes, “Zora is talking, perhaps a bit defensively, about selfhood, about autonomous personality; the plot of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, interestingly, is about Arvay’s doomed search for selfhood while married to a man who believes that ‘women folks don’t have no mind to make up nohow’” (Hemenway 310 and Hurston 25). This view of Jim’s thoughts on women is presented at the beginning of the novel, yet even though Hurston does not present an internal monologue from Jim that expresses his progression in thought, by the end of the novel, his actions and his interactions with his family and friends show that he has moved from his misogynistic views. Jim’s role as a father to their daughter Angie helps to bend his beliefs on women, yet he does not make a complete change and still holds onto many archaic beliefs. Halfway through the novel, he tells Arvay, “You’re my damn property, and I want you right where you are, and I want you naked” (216). Yet nearly fifty pages later, when Arvay freezes in fear and refuses to help save him when a snake attacks him and he is saved by his worker and friend Jeff, Jim tells Arvay:

I feel and believe that you do love me, Arvay, but I don’t want the stand-still, hap-hazard kind of love. I’m just as hungry as a dog for a knowing and a doing love. You love like a coward. Don’t take no steps at all. Just stand around and hope for things to happen out right. Unthankful and unknowing like a hog under a acorn tree. Eating and grunting with your ears hanging over your eyes, and never even looking up wo see where the

acorns are coming from. What satisfaction can I get out of that kind of love, Arvay? Ain't you never stopped to consider at all? (262)

Jim is very accurate in his description of Arvay's inability to see his love because she responds to his plea for love with disbelief. She counters, "A'plenty times. But all I could ever see was that the only holt I ever had on you was the way you craved after my body. Otherwise, I felt you looking down on me all the time" (262). Arvay misses the fact that her husband has loved her in their entire marriage and has worked to provide for her due to his love. Jim reminds her that he had nothing when they married, but that he had spent their marriage working hard which enabled them to live their new middle class life. He tells her:

All I ever wanted to hear from you was that you realized that I was doing out of love, and thought of you so high, that I wanted to see you pumped away up there. I never have seen you as a teppentime Cracker like you have thrown in my face time and again. I saw you like a king's daughter out of a story-book with your long, soft golden hair. You were deserving and noble, and all I ever wanted to do was to have the chance to do for you and protect you. But never one time have I heard you mention that you understood all that. (263-264)

Thankfully for Jim, Arvay comes to a deep realization of the love they share by the end of the novel – "Arvay felt such a swelling to protect and comfort Jim that tears came up in her eyes" (351). Arvay and Jim are both able to grow and develop as individuals and in their marital relationship. They are still very much flawed individuals who have somewhat sexist views on men and women, but the ending is very rosy – Arvay "snuggled down again beside her husband" in the boat and floated along the water (352). The nearly fairy tale conclusion of Jim and Arvay lying in each other's arms on a boat that floats off into the horizon is strangely reminiscent of fairy tales. Jim even alludes to Arvay being his fairy tale heroine when he describes his image of her as "a king's daughter out of a story-book with your long, soft golden hair" (263). Hemingway is

correct in his assessment that the ending and storyline are simple because Hurston's allusion to happiness lacks details or explanations in characteristic fairy tale form.

Does Hurston write a happy ending for Arvey and Jim because they are white? The Walt Disneyesque happy ending could be a strong argument for Hurston enthusiast Alice Walker who has been highly critical of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker attempts to remove the text from the Hurston literary canon. She writes:

During the middle years of her career Zora was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself. Her work, so vigorous among the other pallid productions of many of her contemporaries, comes from the essence of black folk life. During her later life she 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, *Seraphs on the Suwanee*, which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but is about white people for whom it is impossible to care, which is.) (89-90).¹¹

Yet, Walker's disdain for the novel might simply be a form of reverse racism or disdain for a revered author creating the ideal for another white Cinderella. Literary scholars have returned multiple times to the lack of fairy tale or happy endings for black women characters. Even though Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was a strong feminist who experienced deep love, she also ended the novel as a single black woman who had to kill her true love to save herself. Patricia J. Williams humorously presents the angst that exists for the black heroine who is constantly excluded from the white fairy tale ideal. In her essay, "My Best White Friend: Cinderella Revisited," she writes:

¹¹ It is very interesting to note that apparently Walker's interest in Hurston's last novel was so miniscule that she incorrectly transcribes the two major words of the novel by adding an "S" to Seraph and an "N" to Suwanee. The correct title is *Seraph on the Suwanee*, not Walker's version, *Seraphs on the Suwanee*.

My best white friend is giving me advice on how to get myself up like a trophy-wife-in-waiting. We are obliged to attend a gala fund-raiser for an organization on whose board we both sit. I'm not a wife of any sort at all, and she says she knows why: I'm prickly as all getout, I dress down instead of up, and my hair is "a complete disaster." My best white friend, who is already a trophy wife of considerable social and philanthropic standing, is pressing me to borrow one of her Real Designer gowns and a couple of those heavy gold bracelets that are definitely not something you can buy on the street. I tell her she's missing the point. Cinderella wasn't an over-thirty black professional with an attitude. What sort of Master of the Universe is going to go for that? "You're not a *racist*, are you?" she asks. "How could I be?" I reply, with wounded indignation. "What, being the American Dream personified and all." "Then let's get busy and make you up," she says soothingly, breaking out the little pots of powder, paint, and polish. From the first exfoliant to the last of the cucumber rinse, we fight about my man troubles. From powder base through lip varnish, we fight about hers. You see, part of the problem is that white knights just don't play the same part in my mythical landscape of desire. If poor Cinderella had been black, it would have been a whole different story. I tell my best white friend the kind of stories my mother raised me on: about slave girls who worked their fingers to the bone for their evil half sisters, the "legitimate" daughters of their mutual father, the master of the manse, the owner of them all; about scullery maids whose oil-and-ashes complexions would not wash clean even after multiple waves of the wand. These were the ones who harbored impossible dreams of love for lost mates who had been sold down rivers of tears to oblivion. These were the ones who became runaways. "Just think about it," I say. "The human drama is compact enough so that when my mother was little she knew women who had been slaves, including a couple of runaways. Cinderellas who had burned their masters' beds and then fled for their lives. It doesn't take too much, even across the ages, to read between those lines. Women who invented their own endings, even when they didn't get to live happily or very long thereafter."(809)

Williams' modern day Cinderella tale reiterates and highlights the lack of fairy tale endings for black women characters. Arvay's whiteness appears to have required a happy ending just as Janie's blackness required a broken ending. The character's race appears to demand a white happy ending and a black unhappy ending. This betrayal in speech and in form has pushed *Seraph on the Suwanee* to the fringes of Hurston scholarship.

Another issue that has pushed the novel to the academic fringes is the question of who is the seraph on the Suwanee?¹² Is it Arvey because she is unlike anyone else in Sawley and ultimately realizes her power at the end of the novel? Seraphs are whites, so in essence, Hurston is discussing poor white “nearly perfect,” or supposed nearly perfect characters due to their innate whiteness. Maybe Hurston is simply playing with the concept of whiteness. As Jackson points out, “Critics have long been aware of the non-conformity of Hurston as both an author and a public persona during the Harlem Renaissance” (639). It is common knowledge that the purity of white southern females, their “innate goodness, morality, and universal purity,” made them beacons to be looked up to. However, Arvey possesses few characteristics that could illustrate her seraphic nature, yet she does embody the characteristics of the Cult of True Womanhood which could be an argument for her place as a seraph and as a fairy tale heroine. Sadly, the white nature of this novel has allowed for its universal dismissal. In the “Foreword” of Hemenway’s groundbreaking biography on Hurston, Alice Walker writes about the last years of Hurston’s life and briefly mentions *Seraph on the Suwanee*. She writes, “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,

¹² In various letters to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston tossed about various title suggestions for *Seraph on the Suwanee* which further convolute the argument of who the seraph is in the novel. The possible titles included: Sang The Suwanee in the Spring, The Queen of the Golden Hand, Angel in the Bed, The Seraph’s Man, But the Devil Wouldn’t Leave Her (Kaplan 555), Lady Angel With Her Man, Seraph With a Man on Hand, Seraph on the Suwanee River, Sung the Suwanee in the Spring (557), Suwanee to the Sea, Home to Heaven, The Goddess of the Chimney Corner (564), and Good Morning Sun (565).

which is no crime, but *is*¹³ about white people who are bores, which is” (xvi). Walker argues that Hurston was simply writing anything that she thought would provide her with money due to her financial turmoil. As Walker explains, “*Being broke made all the difference*” (xvi). She claims that Hurston’s broken spirit led her to write a broken novel that abandoned her true beliefs.

As previously mentioned Hurston opens the novel with a description of Sawley a town on the Suwanee River and ends the novel with Arvay and Jim lying in each other’s arms in the middle of the ocean. In the town on the river, Arvay was limited in her understanding of herself and of her marriage. Yet, in Jim’s arms in the middle of the ocean, Arvay finally grasps the intricacies of her marriage. Hurston writes, “It was funny that she had never known Jim in full until this night. Jim was not the over-powering general that she had took him for. Oh, he had that way with other folks and things...And just like she had not known Jim, she had known her own self even less. What she had considered her cross, she now saw as her glory” (351). Stripping away racial analysis allows Hurston to finally focus on telling a story and the empowerment of one woman. Even though *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is in essence a love story of two people, it has become entrapped in the racial and gender analysis from which Hurston often sought to distance herself. In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston is finally able to leave racial discussions. Race is an afterthought in the novel. *Seraph on the Suwanee*, in essence, becomes the story of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* without the racial analysis. Arvay and Jim are merely two flawed people in a flawed relationship. They could be everyman or everywoman. Yet, in the midst of their turmoil they are able to finally find happiness

¹³ Italics are not my own.

in each other. In addition, Arvay is any painfully self-conscious woman who must learn to love herself so that she can receive the love of others. Yet, Hemenway questions Arvay's progression to self-awareness and views it as flawed because her sense of self is based on her relationship to others. Yet, how is Arvay's sense of worth any different from any person who takes pride in being a mother, father, husband, or wife. He writes:

It is an unsatisfactory and unbelievable ending, however, because it is expressed in terms that vitiate Arvay's struggle toward selfhood. She can never define the self apart from her husband (Jim Me-Serve is cleverly named); although she comes to greater self-confidence, discovering that she no longer needs to apologize for her cracker origins, or feel insecure about what she brings to her marriage. (313)

Hemenway faults the tale because Arvay's sense of self-worth is tied to her role as a wife and a mother. He writes,

For some reason Zora could not grant Arvay the attainment of a truly independent selfhood, the kind that Zora Neale Hurston had established in her own life. In sum, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is an unsuccessful work of art, partially because Arvay's character promises a complexity of motive and a subtlety of action that is never realized. Just as Arvay begins to become interesting, she is lost again to domestic service. (314)

Hemenway criticizes Jim for being a misogynistic cave-man like character, yet his near-final words on *Seraph on the Suwanee* appear to have been spoken by Jim due to their sexist tone. His argument that Arvay is uninteresting due to her CHOICE to serve, her CHOICE to continue in her domestic sphere is sexist and belittling. Arvay was not forced into her roles; she gladly chose the roles that fulfilled her desires. Hemenway's assertions that marriage and domesticity are uninteresting and without plot appear to be the sexist views of a man who does not understand marriage or domesticity. He writes, "Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates that both Arvay and Jim are captives of the sexual roles that afflict marriage, a social institution she eventually finds unsuitable to her own life" (314).

Hemenway does not appear to view the marriage favorably which might be his reason for disregarding the subject matter of Hurston's last novel.

Claudia Roth Pierpont appears to share Hemenway's view of Arvay's choice in marriage. In *Passionate Minds: Women Rewriting the World*, she briefly references Hurston's last novel. She writes, "The book is a choking mixture of cynicism and compulsion. Hurston was desperate for a success, and hoped for a movie sale – hence, no doubt, the formulaic rape and the book's mawkish ending, in which Arvay learns to sing happily in her marital chains" (149-150). Pierpont disparages Arvay's choice to take joy in her marriage while also belittling Hurston's choice to write her that way. Hurston has not been given the same rights as other writers to write female characters who revel in their domesticity due to the blackness of her skin. Her skin color relegated her to topics of "greater importance."

CHAPTER 3

Talking Black and Looking White

This universal tale about marriage did not win Hurston kudos, not even among Hurston fans or Hurston scholars. In the “Introduction” to *I Love Myself When I am Laughing....* Mary Helen Washington completely condemns Hurston’s last novel. She writes:

Zora spent part of 1947 and 1948 in British Honduras, where she wrote the major portion of her worst novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). All of the main characters in *Seraph* are white, and, apparently Zora wrote this strange book to prove that she was capable of writing about white people. The intent may have been admirable, but all of the white characters in *Seraph* sound exactly like the Eatonville folks sitting on Joe Clarke’s front porch. The result is an awkward and contrived novel, as vacuous as a soap opera. It was as though, in abandoning the source of her unique esthetic – the black cultural tradition – she also submerged her power and creativity. (21)

In essence, Washington accuses Hurston of dressing up her white characters in black face which in Washington’s opinion created an unauthentic work; however, Washington appears to choose through his analysis of *Seraph on the Suwanee* to ignore Hurston’s training and skills as an anthropologist. Hemenway launches the same accusations at Hurston when he writes, “The folklore that had graced Eatonville and provoked Hurston’s celebration of black people now comes from the mouths of southern whites” (315). In the book *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, Christopher Douglas addresses her skills as an anthropologist in his chapter “Zora Neale Hurston, D’Arcy McNickle, and the Culture of Anthropology.” He writes:

Hurston wrote a white book, apparently reversing what *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* makes clear was a frequent attention to African American themes by white authors – both of which would be frowned upon (and thus rarely attempted) in later decades. Hemenway contends that the novel is the result of Hurston taking seriously white critics’ demands that black authors write on ‘universal’ themes, but an

alternative interpretation is that Hurston believed she could write a novel about a different culture precisely because she understood culture the way an anthropologist would: as something that might be examined and understood, to some significant degree, by an outsider. It is because Hurston believed that culture, and identity, made people different that she could write *Seraph*. (49)¹

Douglas is able to understand that due to Hurston's training as an anthropologist she felt empowered to challenge assumptions similar to Washington's that were accepted by society yet academically unsound. Douglas argues the importance of Hurston's role as an anthropologist. He writes, "Hurston's representation of black vernacular is crucial, and turned out to be one of the most influential aspects of her work when she was rediscovered by African American writers in the late '60 and early '70s" (31). Douglas explains that her friend, mentor, and teacher of anthropology Franz Boas stressed the importance of collecting and writing down oral art (31). Douglas argues that Hurston's skills as an anthropologist made her qualified to write her white novel. He explains, "...Hurston believed she could write a novel about a different culture precisely because she understood culture the way an anthropologist would: as something that might be examined and understood, to some significant degree, by an outsider. It is because Hurston believed that culture, and not identity, made people different that she could write *Seraph*" (49). Hurston's proficiency as an anthropologist was gained by both field experience and the habitually forgotten fact of her college degree.²

Hurston was confident in her skills as an anthropologist and was not afraid to take up the frowned upon task of writing dialect in the mouths of white characters. Douglas also questions her choice: "If Hurston's ethnographic expertise allowed her to imagine

¹ See *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, pages 202-203, and *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, page 308.

² Hurston received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Barnard in 1928.

that she could accurately write a novel about what white people are like, what are we to make of the use of black vernacular to tell the story and by the characters themselves?"

(50). Douglas explains that the family of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* speaks many of the same words as the family in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. To expand upon Douglas' argument, the family in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could also be added to his point.³ He writes,

There are thus quite a few idiomatic expressions shared by these two Southern families, one white and one black. Is this African American vernacular improbably ascribed to white people, and so a mark of Hurston's inability to correctly imagine white culture? A better and more culturally accurate explanation is that by the 1940s Hurston saw Southern vernacular in general as evidence of diffusion between white and black rural speech. (50)

And that comment is crucial to understanding that "AAVE" was first used by whites and blacks in the Deep South, but as the whites assimilated upwardly socially, they lost the dialect while blacks ghettoized in the North, maintained the dialect since they were literally prevented from assimilating. In a letter to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Norton Baskin, Hurston writes about her own shock about the similarities in speech among poor whites and blacks. She writes:

I too thought that when I went out to dwell among the poor white in Dixie County that they were copying us. But I found their colorful speech so general that I began to see that it belonged to them. After my fit of jealousy was cooled off, I realized that Negroes introduced into N. America spoke no⁴ English at all, and learned from the whites. Our sense of rhythm points it up a bit, but the expressions for the most part are English held over from the Colonial period. I began to read English literature and found much of the picture talk in there. The black face minstrels of the past sold America on the notion that all colorful idioms originated with Negroes. Just stand around where poor whites work, or around the village stores of Saturday nights & listen & you will hear something. (Kaplan 577-578)

³ See Chapter Three.

⁴ Hurston's emphasis.

Hurston's and Douglas' arguments clearly grasp the idea that language is determined by culture, class, and region, but not race. Douglas goes on to expand upon Hurston's point that cultures share a symbiotic relationship. He writes, "*Seraph* confirms that Southern 'white' and 'black' cultural traditions have long been interpenetrating one another, a cultural integration of which Hurston approves. It is based on a model of culture as learned behavior that might be described, not culture as the expression of an identity" (51). Douglas goes on to argue that Hurston's depiction of sharing of "vernacular expressions, religion, labor, and music" further supports the idea of interpenetration. For instance, Kenny, Arvay's son, revels in and trains with black music and musicians, respectively. In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston explains her desire to add a chapter on Kenny and his time in New York. She writes, "There is no more Negro music in the U.S. It has been fused and merged and become the national expression, and displaced the worship of European expression" (Kaplan 563). *Seraph on the Suwanee* is one book that presents multiple examples of Hurston's argument of merger, influence, and co-dependence among cultures and races. John Lowe adds to this theme:

However, as work such as Dillard's demonstrates, many of the expressions that the white characters use here actually were common parlance for both poor whites and blacks of the period. Which group generated them first or not is quite another question... [it] is impossible to decide which group originated which word or phrase or to claim that any one version of 'pure' speech indeed exists. Nothing in the United States is 'pure,' and the idea that there has been some magic wall of separation between the linguistic systems of black and white southerners simply cannot be supported (281).

As Lowe explains, no magic wall existed between whites and blacks in regards to language, and to expand upon that idea, no magic walls existed in any other areas of life including music, literature, and art. Hurston was simply portraying on the page that which was true for life.

Understanding Language Structure, Interaction, and Variation, a standard introductory textbook to sociolinguistics for non-specialists, does not even have a listing for African American Vernacular English in the “Index.” How is it possible that a sociolinguistic textbook does not have the term? According to “common knowledge” among linguists, it is not considered “proper” to use the term African American Vernacular English, but instead to use only the acronym AAVE. As most scholars know, one must always spell out an acronym on first reference, yet due to the sensitivity and misunderstanding that surrounds the term, it is usually simply listed as an acronym. It is hypocritical to use the term in abbreviated form while recognizing the flaws of the term. When presenting the term, it is crucial for the teacher of sociolinguistics to point out repeatedly that not all African Americans speak AAVE, that often the children of poor “third-world” immigrants learn AAVE from their poor neighbors, and that even today in the rural South, there is a great overlap in the non-standard speech patterns of whites and blacks. African American Vernacular English is a broad sweeping term that can be seen as offensive and derogatory because it makes the false assumption that speech patterns move along racial lines. In fact, it is an accurate description of the synchronic use of this cluster of dialects. Most speakers of AAVE are poor blacks, but that is a result of racial and class segregation in both the North and the South, not genetics. Language patterns are simple indicators of social, regional, and class status, not racial status. Even the politically correct acronym AAVE still embraces the idea that speech is a racial construct when in fact AAVE should include both ethnicity and class to be more accurate. I would argue that both Dunbar and Hurston would agree with my discomfort with the term African American Vernacular English. If one were to analyze *The Uncalled*, one would

have to label the language of the people of Dexter, Ohio, as African American Vernacular English. However, why would one want to label a poor white town with the term African American Vernacular English?⁵ A better term had to be created to identify speakers of dialect; hence, I propose the new name: Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE) which focuses on the origins of the cluster of dialects not its current racial distribution in the United States. It is highly possible that the misunderstandings of the origin and original distribution of AAVE is why *The Uncalled* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* were not readily accepted by critiques. Due to the lack of book sales and poor literary response, it is apparent that readers did not like the idea of a black author writing about poor whites. However, *The Love of Landry* is about upper-class whites, yet it was also marginalized. Hurston argues that black authors have never been given the authority to write about white people as white people have been given the authority to write about black people. Hurston calls it a “silly old rule” (Kaplan 467). Maybe the rule is simply the assumption that blacks do not possess the language powers to convey the white experience properly.⁶ Hemenway writes,

Black authors have always had to suffer the arrogance of white critics, and often their success has depended upon the amount of resistance they offer to those self-appointed arbiters of the literary establishment. One of the most frequently voiced critical prescriptions is that the black author must transcend race in order to write universally. . . . A white subject matter is offered as a remedy; the critics assume that the ultimate transcendence is

⁵ Yes, I recognize that I could simply write the shorter acronym AAVE, yet that acronym hides the racial marker that I want to make sure is plainly obvious.

⁶ Those critics would have been appalled to know that she also had other plans as well – “Some day I am going to do a piece probing why white men feel and believe that all females of darker hue are just dying to make them” (Kaplan 648). Hurston wrote this line in a letter to her agent, Jean Parker Waterbury, after being accused by Whitney Darrow (a man) of trying to “make him” after writing him a thank you note.

to not write about black people at all, believing for some reason that white people carry no racial identity. (307)

Hemenway accuses Hurston of buying into the erroneous argument that white characters are the only universal characters. He expands upon the idea:

The peril in deliberately choosing a white subject is considerable. There is nothing which prohibits a black writer from creating successful white characters, and black literature is full of brilliant white portraits. But, if the novelist consciously seeks to portray whites in order to validate his talent, to prove to the world there are no limits to his genius, the very assumptions of the decision become self-defeating. Black lives *are*⁷ universal, and black authors have not transcended but pushed deep into racial experience to prove it. In writing *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Zora Neale Hurston largely turned her back on the source of her creativity. She escaped the stereotype of the ‘picturesque’ black by giving up the celebration of black folklife, replacing the storytellers on Joe Clarke’s porch with a family of upwardly mobile Florida crackers. (307)

Hurston had written universal characters in the past, and those characters happened to be black – Janie, Teacake, Joe Clarke, and many others were all characters who possess universal appeal in addition to their black appeal. Hurston’s venture into writing about another race is her attempt at taking on another challenge which was clearly a part of her nature.

Tate argues that Hurston’s label of Jim as a “Black Irish” further convolutes the novel’s racial disparities (Tate 165 and Hurston 7). The intertwined nature of races confuses readers. Tate explains, “*Seraph* draws on the derisive banter associated with the racialization of this ethnic stereotype to portray Jim and Arvay with white bodies and what her readers identify as black voices because these characteristics speak recognizable Eatonville idioms. Thus Jim and Arvay seem to possess white exteriors and black interiors” (165). The duality of their existence and awkward acceptance by scholars is the same response often given to people of mixed parentage. In addition, the fact that

⁷ Italics are not my own.

Hurston wrote Jim and Arvey to sound like her previous black characters continues to trouble readers who want to label language synchronically as either white or black. She writes,

“Similarly, as urban blacks readily attest, when one of them speaks the dialect associated with professional whites, they are accused of speaking ‘white.’ Thus, when Jim and Arvey speak the phrases that the Eatonville blacks have already spoken in Hurston’s earlier works, they are speaking ‘black.’ Whether Sawley whites sounded like Eatonville blacks seems a moot issue because the racial valence of the Eatonville dialect, which was designated as black in Hurston’s prior publications, remains black regardless of the (presumed) racial identity of the speaker” (166).

Tate labels the language of the black characters as black vernacular, which sociolinguists would call African American Vernacular English. Again, the inaccuracy of the label highlights the need for the new term/descriptor Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE). She writes, “Despite Hurston’s adoption of what we ultimately recognize as black vernacular for her white characters, she nonetheless relied on the assumptions associated with the privilege of whiteness to stage her critique of masochistic female desire” (167). Hurston explores the idea of female desire, yet to enable the exploration, she had to make Arvey white because a black character would not have been given the same leeway for exploration of love. She writes, “White readers have tended to read Jim’s and Arvey’s bodies as racially white and to disregard their black voices even though both are effects of language. Black readers have read these incongruities as contrivances to justify marginalizing the novel altogether. Both groups of readers know how to interpret these apparent contradictions, however” (170). Tate concludes that according to American social norms, the idea that black and white racial mixing leads to black and not white, the ultimate jest of the novel is that Jim and Arvey must then be black due to the mixing of their white bodies and black voices (170). Even

though Jim and Arvey rise to the middle class in the novel, the blackness of their voices has relegated them to a low class existence in the literary world. Hence, it may be argued that *Seraphs* is a text of miscegenation.

Dialect is a powerful tool that has been used to exclude and include people and texts from acting as full participants in certain classes, areas, or even literary genres. In African American literature, the use of dialect is often considered evidence of “authentic Negro” speech patterns and literature, which is by definition racist since it also implies that those speech patterns follow racial lines, while the lack of dialect has often excluded texts from being considered “authentic” African American literature. African American authors, like most authors of any race, have attempted to write various types of works. Hurston wrote in Standard English and in “Negro dialect,” but she was primarily praised for her ability to capture the words and sounds of the “Negro people.” However, when she appropriately placed a variant of the dialect in the mouths of white characters, her work was disparaged and highly criticized. Tate presents a fascinating argument that pushes aside dialect issues and jumps directly to the heart of the discomfort that many readers have had with the novel. She writes, “Whether rural black and white Floridians actually speak the same dialect is not really the point, for even if they speak the same dialect with differences in intonation, timing, and gesture, the real issue is Hurston’s failure to fulfill her black readers’ expectations by writing about a white instead of a black woman” (163). Hurston’s black readers felt abandoned by their literary champion who ended her life by writing about a not so bright blonde white woman.

In an analysis of the works of Langston Hughes, in particular the tales that feature his character Simple, Rosenblatt writes, “The other device that Hughes puts to use is

dialect, and Simple handles the device in a conventional way. Hughes did not indulge in the practice, which one often sees elsewhere of misspelling words that his character pronounces correctly (for example *luv*), and therefore making it appear as if the character is an illiterate writing the sketch rather than a speaking participant in it” (108). Hurston shares a similar argument in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” when she writes the section relating to dialect, “If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burn-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of ‘ams’ and ‘Ises.’ Fortunately we don’t have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself” (363). Once again, Hurston the scientist used empirical data and not “impressions” in her work. Rosenblatt further explains this point by writing, “Such defects of language are traditionally supposed to be comic because they make the reader feel that he possesses a higher culture and more education than the speaker. This is a particular trap for the portion of the white audience that – beneath the condescension it took to be amused by the sketches in the first place – believes *all blacks to be ignorant and wants them to sound like it*” (108).⁸ In the latter part of this quote, Hurston noticeably presents the ability of the Negro writer to outwit the mainstream reader. Dialect was and is difficult to convey on the printed page. Rosenblatt writes, “Accordingly, dialect was a peculiarly touchy device for Hughes to employ because he knew that his black readers would resent anything that smacked of stereotype” (109). The resentment lies in the fact that language has acted as an important shibboleth⁹ in society. Language is not only important in delimiting or defining a society, but it is also important in defining literature.

⁸ Emphasis added.

⁹ See Judges Chapter 12, in particular, verse 6.

In his analysis of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Rosenblatt writes, “The hero also shows contempt for dialect as opposed to proper English. He notes class distinctions among other blacks in order to demonstrate to the middle-class white reader” (Rosenblatt 177). Based on societal beliefs on race and class in regards to speech, judgments are made about not only individuals but also literary texts.

The inclusion and exclusion of Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* from conventional African American literature lies solely in the discomfort readers and critics have with the “blackness” of the words but the “whiteness” of the characters.¹⁰ For centuries, judgments have been made simply on the words that have been uttered from a mouth. People have been known to place individuals in certain racial and class groups simply by the way they speak. Language in and of itself is a powerful tool for making distinctions.

In 1975, the University of Hawaii Press issued a list entitled “American Negro Dialect in Literature” in *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publications*, No. 14, A Bibliography of Pidgin and Creole Languages. The brief introduction at the beginning of the list explains that “Negro dialect has been much used in literature, first by whites but eventually by blacks as well, with every grade of skill and accuracy from almost phonographic transcription to crude burlesque. The list following this section is only a meager sampling” (530). The list may have been only a meager sampling,” but it includes Dunbar’s *The Uncalled* among the texts presented (533). The meager sampling observation is supported by the fact that Hurston only has two entries in the list: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men* (534). In “We Must Write Like the White Men’: Race, Realism, and Dunbar’s Anomalous First Novel,” Jarrett explains that “Less than one year

¹⁰ The same could be argued for Dunbar’s *The Uncalled*.

after Howells's review of *Majors and Minors*, Dunbar began writing a novel without 'race matter,' so to speak, at a time when race especially mattered for African American literature" (312). While traveling the country in 1897, Dunbar "began to wonder what would happen if he wrote a novel that avoided all the conventional types of 'race matter'" (312). Dunbar did write such a novel, *The Uncalled*. "Book reviewers and British periodicals expressed disappointment that Dunbar had written about the provincial town of Dexter, Ohio, without invoking the conventions of minstrel realism. For the most part, *The Uncalled* avoids the racially explicit dialect that had made him the preeminent African American poet" (313). Jarrett analyzed the dialect of the women who speak at the opening of the novel. He writes, "Dunbar's reputation for Black dialect poetry in *Major and Minors* invites a racial interpretation of [the women's conversation], but the identities of the speakers and their speech are not delineated with sufficient clarity to do so" (313). Jarrett recognizes that the dialect that Dunbar uses in *The Uncalled* is like the dialect used in many of his other works, yet he hesitates to make a race label for the women based on their speech. One of the women says, "It's a pity we don't know some good family that ain't got no children that 'ud take him an' bring him up as their own son," said a little woman who took *The Hearthside*" (Dunbar 24-35). About this woman, Jarret writes, "*The Hearthside* reference confirms the literacy of the unnamed 'little woman,' but her affinity for literary learning clashes with her dialect, which consistently subordinates these characters to the more educated protagonists that speak in formal English. Region, not necessarily race, marks this literary rendering of dialect. Over the course of his career, Dunbar had consistently conceived of dialect in this way. He had written in New Orleans Creole (or French-English), German-American, Irish-American,

and Midwestern (Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana) dialects. *The Uncalled* shares the same tendency to experiment with regional dialects that transgress racial and ethnic boundaries” (313-314). Jarrett clearly argues that Dunbar presents a dialect that is based on region in class and not race. Dunbar’s clear character building is a direct response to those critics who pigeonholed him as a black dialect writer only.

Race figures more implicitly in the novel’s resistance to conveying the democratic idealism of conventional local color writing. In Dunbar’s era, local color writing celebrated regional speech, etiquette, habits, vistas, and atmosphere at a time when the nation was reeling from the Civil War’s sectionalist disruption of national stability and community. . . .Dunbar’s *The Uncalled* illustrates a bleaker side of local color and, by extension, literary realism. The novel focuses on industrialism and how it produces not only moral conflicts between and within provinces but also cultural differences between small-town values and urban values. For example, *The Uncalled* complicates the polarity of good versus evil that American literature often invested in provinces as opposed to cities” (Jarrett 314).

He argues that Dunbar “complicates” the American ideals in regards to urban and rural, yet Dunbar also complicates American ideals in regards to language by breaking out of the mold of a black dialect writer.

Hurston is easily remembered for writing the literary and publicly praised *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Mules and Men*, and several other equally impressive works. Yet, her critically disavowed text, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, features white characters and is one of her most commercially unsuccessful works. Interestingly, Arvay, a poor white woman in Sawley, Florida, shares many similarities with many of Hurston’s white heroines. Arvay is poor, from the South, and she speaks in a dialect that Hurston scholars have complained is too much like the dialects of her other works. Many Hurston scholars have been appalled at Hurston’s action, but they fail to see that she was not just an African American writer; Hurston was also just a writer – with no adjective before the title. She did not allow herself to become pigeonholed by labels or titles. Hurston wrote

about people. She clearly realized that dialect is a powerful tool. Critics and readers have disapproved of Hurston's novel because it does not seem to follow the misguided synchronic norms of society, which ignore history and that argue that speakers of a certain race must only speak a certain way.

I have taught several works by Hurston, yet I have never had the opportunity to teach *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I remember reading the text for the first time in high school, and I remember my teacher explaining that Hurston's difficult dialect was her portrayal of the speech patterns of poor blacks in Eatonville, Florida. It was assumed by the all white students at my private school that all poor black people spoke in that way. I do not think that the assumption by the students is very different from the assumption of most of society. Sociolinguists were able to embrace and use the term African American Vernacular English because synchronically, society has accepted the fact that black people and white people speak differently. As sociolinguists began to understand that race is not the only determinant but must be intertwined with class, access to education, and access to assimilation, they began to move away from the term by simply using the acronym. It is still very common, especially in the South, to hear people say, "You talk white" or "You talk black." AAVE is the academic approach for saying exactly the same thing. AAVE is not era specific because judgments based on race are (sadly) timeless. Looking at the speech patterns of characters is a helpful tool for understanding and analyzing a text, but the terminology that is used to describe the speech patterns must be accurate.

The term African American Vernacular was originally used as a "culturally sensitive" term to describe the language spoken predominately by some but not all black

people and by some non-blacks. However, debates have raged concerning the obvious negative racial conclusions of the term. Do all white people speak a certain way? Do all black people speak a certain way? No, it is completely absurd to assume that one's racial make-up determines whether someone will speak "proper" English or a dialect. In the book *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*, J.L. Dillard explains:

As we know, the early slave traders practiced language mixing, so that the slaves could be more easily controlled. This forced the slaves to find a *lingua franca*, or language of wider communication, which turned out to be the Portuguese Pidgin which many of them had learned in the slave 'factories' on the West Coast of Africa. . . . In most of the United States, however, a variety of English came to be the language of wider communication. When new generations grew up which used only the pidgin, the pidgin became creolized – the term used here is Plantation Creole. Pidgin and creole varieties of English – as well as of other languages – are spoken today in the Caribbean . . . These are not wildly exotic languages but languages used every day like any other languages. It happens that several varieties of these languages are spoken mainly by Afro-Americans; but they are also spoken by whites who have learned them as second or foreign languages, in many areas. (22, 24)

From the Plantation Creole, the language that is known as Black English was created and learned by various groups of people. Hurston appears to support Dillard's point in a letter to Burroughs Mitchell where she writes, "If it [language] were African, then why is it not in evidence among all Negroes in the western world" (Kaplan 559). For example, people from Country X born and living in Country Y will not necessarily speak language X.

Dillard expands upon his and Hurston's argument:

Although many of the slaves may not have had to relinquish their African languages immediately, they all found themselves in a situation in which they had to learn an auxiliary language in a hurry in order to establish communication in the heterogeneous groups into which they were thrown. This mixing of speakers of a large number of languages, with no one language predominant, is the perfect condition for the spread of a pidgin language, which is in a sense the ultimate in auxiliary languages. (74)

Dillard goes on to explain how this blending of languages leads to a pidgin which then leads to a creole language. As a linguist, Dillard is careful to explain that even though many negative feelings surround pidgin and creole languages, those feelings should not exist. “A pidgin language has rules like any other language” (75). Hurston’s anti-genetic argument is that if one makes a racial assumption regarding someone’s speech based on his or her race then that person must first believe that all people of that race no matter their location all speak a certain way. I would argue that in the period in which Africans were incorporated into “American” society, one may have been able to argue that a Black English, or Negro dialect did exist; however, this name was simply created from the idea that the Africans and their descendents brought new languages that were absorbed in some way into the English spoken by the colonists.¹¹ Before the absorption could take place, it existed on its own, and this existence led to the naming of Black English. The problem lies in the fact that this original naming that happened because of who spoke the language has now morphed into a derogatory label that implies that only black people speak it, which is a falsehood. Dillard writes, “the children of the slave-owning class had plenty of opportunity to acquire Black English; individual families obviously differed as to whether the acquisition was welcomed or resisted” (193). Dillard continues throughout his text explaining that many of the women of the south took on much of the Negro dialect tendencies. He writes:

The greatest risk in dealing with ethnic behavior patterns – including speech patterns – is that someone will conclude that those patterns are genetic in nature. To write of Black English, or Negro Non-Standard English, or of Negro dialect is to risk having someone conclude that the dialect differences are caused by physical traits – the infamous ‘thick lips’ theory. . . . This is why it should be emphasized that social factors are more

¹¹ See page 193 of *Black English* for more background.

important than racial – or geographic – factors in determining dialect patterns. (230)

The “thick lips” theory that Dillard is referencing refers to the common belief among whites that blacks could not speak English “correctly” due to the thickness of their lips. Ironically, in true Hurston form, she muddles the water by appearing to agree with the thick lip theory. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) Hurston writes, “Very few Negroes, educated or not, use a clear clipped ‘I.’ It verges more or less upon ‘Ah.’ I think the lip form is responsible for this to a great extent. By experiment the reader will find that a sharp ‘I’ is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip. Like tightening violin strings” (364). Hurston appears to write in direct opposition to what Dillard will eventually write, but in direct agreement with the racist whites who Dillard cites. He writes:

The language of the United States also is different from England’s in easily observable ways, and perhaps for the same reason- influence from groups who did not migrate to America from England. The Negro has contributed, usually without public recognition, to the culture of the United States; it is not strange that he has contributed something to the language as well. But the fact that contributions have been made from one group to another – or reciprocal contributions – does not mean they are identical. As most of us have always known, to proclaim that the English of Blacks is identical to that of whites is to allow one’s theory to deny the evidence of one’s senses. (5)

Dillard, like Hurston, muddles the argument even more because he denounces the racist thick-lip argument while still holding onto the belief that racial markers can be broadly attached to language differences. Dillard continues by expressing his disgust with long-held beliefs that the differences in the speech of blacks were simply a matter of physical limitations. He writes, “Unfortunately, some of them allowed their otherwise accurate perceptions to be colored by the racist theory of influence by African anatomy (‘thick’) lips, the untenable notion that physiological factors determined the language differences”

(8). Fascinatingly, Hurston also addresses the idea of Negro contributions to American English in “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” She writes, “In this respect the American Negro has done wonders to the English language. It has often been stated by etymologists that the Negro has introduced no African words to the language. This is true, but it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has his revision accepted by the ruling class” (356). This embracement was one of the few that would take place among American racial groups.

In Chapter One, I quote Ward’s argument that holds that *Seraph on the Sewanee* will only be able to achieve the same level of notoriety as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* only after poor whites embrace the tale as their own. The author did not see this phenomenon happening anytime soon (77). It is possible that the unwillingness to embrace the novel lies in the fact that AAVE is seen as an inferior dialect of an inferior group of people.¹² Is it possible that *Seraph on the Suwanee* might be embraced if the class and regional aspects of the dialect were recognized and not the unfounded racial aspects? In the essay, “Critical Thoughts on Teaching Standard English,” Barbara L. Speicher and Jessica R. Bielanski respond to the furor surrounding the 1996 Oakland School Board decision to recognize Ebonics as a language. The essay explores the issues surrounding teaching Standard Spoken English (SSE) and Standard Written English (SWE). The authors explain that “Stigmatized forms [of languages] are primarily affiliated with lower socioeconomic status, groups with the least political power and recourse” (157). The dialect that has been embraced by many blacks as the remainders of the slave struggle often appears strange to readers and critics who find the language in the mouth of white characters. Speicher and Bielanski continue, “Some researchers assert

¹² Consider the Shibboleth marker in the Bible – see Judges 12:6.

that linguistic bias is a cover for racism..." (158). Speicher and Bielanski explain that popular opinion has been that non-standard dialect indicated stupidity or laziness (159). Linguistic analysis must be careful to avoid sweeping generalizations regarding the intellect of an individual. Dillard writes:

To the linguist the link between human language and human intelligence is so close that it is risking a very drastic conclusion indeed to assume that any person or group of persons is "limited" or "deprived" in language. . . .To a relatively few prominent non-linguists, on the other hand, it has recently seemed quite attractive to explain away the failures of poor Negroes in the school system by saying that they are linguistically deprived, that their language systems are "limited" or "incomplete." (31-32)

If linguistic bias is a form of racism, is critical disavowal of Hurston's white characters who speak in dialect then a form of reverse racism? Maybe readers do not want to associate white characters with a preconceived idea of an inferior language and therefore, an inferior group of people. In the essay, "Dance Dialects: Traces of Local Development or of Processes of Diffusion" by Egil Bakka, he discusses the dance patterns of older people in Norway, yet he also explores language and dialect patterns. He writes, "I would think that most of us are accustomed to think of a language as a clearly definable unity. We easily assume that languages and even perhaps dialects can easily be defined and separated from each other" (219). The language of groups that are strongly intertwined, like poor blacks and poor whites of the American South, would be nearly impossible to separate from each other. Bakka continues, "...If we analyzed all forms of spoken language in the world, we might conclude that spoken human language can best be described as an enormous varying continuity" (219). All languages, and therefore dialects, are strongly tied together. Dillard like Charles Dickens who observed the speech

similarities in white and black women on Antebellum Plantations¹³ argues for the interconnectedness of human language when he writes:

The series of quasi-legal southern reactions to the Fourteenth Amendment did much to confuse the history of southern dialects. Lumping descendants of house servants and of freedmen with the descendants of field hands, they made linguistically and culturally variant groups legally – and, to some degree, even sociologically – identical. Thus, both children whose dialect differed greatly from that of the white children of the region and those whose dialect was almost identical to that of the whites were barred from the schools which the master caste attended. There was literally no Negro dialect in the sense that there was no dialect spoken by everyone branded “Negro” by the Jim Crow laws. (109)

Even though the white and black characters of Hurston’s writings share similar dialects, the similarity does not make Hurston’s black novels stronger than her white novel or vice versa. Christopher Douglas writes, “Hurston’s representation of black vernacular is crucial, and turned out to be one of the most influential aspects of her work when she was rediscovered by African American writers in the late 60s and early 70s” (31).

Seraph on the Suwanee showcases the sheer talent of Hurston and her willingness to buck convention. Douglas continues, “*Seraph* confirms that Southern ‘white’ and ‘black’ cultural traditions have long been interpreting one another, a cultural integration of which Hurston approves. It is based on a model of culture as learned behavior that might be described, not culture as the expression of an identity” (51). Hurston grasped the fact that language and cultures mingle, intermingle, mimic, and merge. Sadly, her critics saw the dialectal blending as a mistake. However, I would have to argue alongside Hurston that the speech characteristics are not indicative of a particular race; rather, they are indicative of a class and region.

¹³ See *The Story of English*.

American society in and of itself is one based on competition, ranking, and hierarchies. Very little exists in and of itself. Most things are in relation to something else. Sports, universities, graduating classes, companies – all of these and more are presented in relation to something or someone else and must be either better or worse. In the “Foreword” of *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*, Dillard writes, “... the reader should realize that linguistics like anthropology, is a relativistic discipline: linguists do not judge one language variety as ‘better’ than another, nor do they conclude that the economic disadvantages (hopefully temporary) of any population group are the results of ‘deficits’ of language or cognition” (x). Dillard’s argument is ironic because Hurston was trained as an anthropologist. As an anthropologist, Hurston approached language in a very scientific manner. She realized that language like all other scientific disciplines did not need to be ranked, and she is supported by Dillard when he writes:

To the linguist, the explanation ‘He’s not responsible for his failure because he’s deficient in language’ is so close to meaning “He’s not responsible for his failure, he’s not quite a human being” that the linguist simply does not make statements about deficiency in language. Particularly, he insists first upon analyzing each language or language variety *on its own terms*¹⁴ before he makes a comparison to any other language. (32)

There was no need to place one language above another; therefore, Hurston was able to write in both Standard English and capture the dialect of various groups of people, white or black. When Hurston placed African American Vernacular English in the mouths of white people she was not relegating them to a lower place in society because as a scientist there was no hierarchy of languages in her mind. She was simply presenting the truth, or facts, as she knew them to exist. In his brief comparison of Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd*

¹⁴ Italics are not my own.

Vine, Dust Tracks on a Road, and Seraph on the Suwanee, Douglas lists several phrases that appear in both texts. Several of the phrases include: “Some folks kin hit uh straight lick wid uh crooked stick,” “Li’l Bit,” “hug mah neck tight,” “been in Hell’s kitchen and licked out all the pots” (50). In particular, Douglass argues that the families of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* share many similarities. He writes:

There are thus quite a few idiomatic expressions shared by these two Southern families, one white and one black. Is this African American vernacular improbably ascribed to white people, and so a mark of Hurston’s inability to correctly imagine white culture? A better and more culturally accurate explanation is that by the 1940s Hurston saw Southern vernacular in general as evidence of diffusion between white and black rural speech. She suggests the latter in a 1948 letter, writing that she initially thought that poor white Dixie County folk were ‘copying us,’ but later came to realize that the shared vernacular styles of rural black and white Floridians suggested a deeper language diffusion between the two groups, initiated when non-English speaking slaves ‘learned from the whites.’ In other words, listening to what people were actually saying led Hurston to more strongly comprehend a regional diffusion of cultural practices. (50)¹⁵

Douglas is referencing a letter Hurston wrote to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who Hurston admired for her ability to get her novels made into motion pictures. Hurston, too, had a desire, which was never realized, to see her books made into movies. Elizabeth Binggeli begins her essay, “The Unadapted: Warner Bros. Reads Zora Neale Hurston,” with these lines, “This is a study of a film that was *not* made by Warner Bros. Studios in the 1940s, of a bizarre novel that was recommended to legendary *Casablanca* producer Jerry Wald, and of the groundbreaking African American writer, Zora Neale Hurston, whose artistic production was shaped by the Hollywood industry that considered, but ultimately rejected, her work” (1). Even as Hurston shaped her tale in hopes of movie success, she refused to stray from the reality she knew which was that poor whites in the South often

¹⁵ See *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* by Carla Kaplan, pages 577-578.

sounded very much like the poor blacks in the south. Sadly, many readers, even Hollywood producers, appeared to have embraced the ranking system that is so embedded in American society. Immediately, the inferior language patterns were assumed to be Hurston's attempt at placing her white characters on the same lower social bracket that had been created for blacks. In the minds of her critics, Hurston was attacking the very humanity of white people. For this reason, among others, Hurston's work was ignored and attacked.

The aforementioned desires to rank are manifested in many other ways as well; however, cultural rankings are difficult to understand when cultural mixing is taking place. Douglass details the reality of cultural mixing and influence by writing:

...Hurston shows how African American music affects/infects white music, and her parallel observation about white Southern speech. Hurston fictionally inscribes the African American rural folk culture influences on white Southern rural folk culture and national music culture. This was, after all, another model of what assimilation looks like: not just one culture adopting that of the other, but an ongoing process of mutual interpenetration and influence. When Hurston has her white characters in *Seraph* share with her black characters a set of wide-ranging cultural practices that include vernacular expressions, religion, labor, and music, she is acknowledging such interpretations and cultural diffusion. (270)

Douglass presents Arvay's son Kenny and his musical interest and training with black musicians as evidence of the interpretations and cultural diffusions that take place among races. Even as the cultural diffusions are taking place, culturally rankings continue to exist. The black preacher has been labeled as one of the greatest examples of a person who uses language, dialect, musical, and dramatic skills for the betterment of the race. Writers consistently present this figure as a good example of the best user of Black English. Dillard writes that "...the storefront preacher, [is] often as much an artist as a Calypso or blues singer. With a wide pitch range and impressive rhythmic sense, with the

stylistic use of vocal rasp which is strongly reminiscent of Louis Armstrong, many a preacher of this type presents a better performance on Sunday than is ever to be seen on network television” (261). Racial conflict has existed for centuries due to tensions over cultural superiority. Criteria for what makes a race great has often been debated; however in the “Preface” of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson succinctly defines his criteria for what makes a race great: “The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art” (9). For Johnson, racial superiority lies solely in the art that is created by a racial group. Due to the creation of his own definition, Johnson sets out to show that the black race is great by compiling and creating black art. The creation of *The Book of American Negro Poetry* directly supports his argument. In addition, Johnson writes *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro sermons in Verse*, a collection of sermons in poetic form, to prove that not only is the race great, but also the Negro preacher. Yet, Johnson is caught in a bind. First, he has to establish that black people have value and are great in their own right, but to establish their greatness he has to also establish that the art and literature of the people is great. Clearly, it is a never-ending cyclical process because the greatness of the art is intricately tied to the greatness of the race. The title “greatest of the race” can be given to the Negro preacher as he is considered the spiritual head of the race. Johnson highlights the Negro preacher in his seven part poem. If the Negro preacher is the greatest of the race, is not his product, his art, the greatest art of the race, which would then be the evidence to prove that the race is great and therefore the art is great? Johnson showcases the greatness of the race by displaying in poetic form the greatness of the art of Negro

preachers in *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Johnson uses an age-old approach known as Signifying in his poems. Signifying can be manifested in many ways and is not limited to boasting, baiting, troping and insinuating. The literary critic, Henry Louis Gates, brings literary credibility to the black theoretical concept of Signifying as a literary tool in his book *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates compiles a collection of definitions for Signifying, a form that is plainly evident in Johnson's poems. Johnson writes *God's Trombones: Seven Negro sermons in Verse* for a two-fold reason: to validate and support the greatness of the Negro race through the evidence of art and to capture the essence of the Negro preacher without disdain and absurdity. By Signifying, Johnson confirms that both black art and that the black race are great. Interestingly, as Dillard closes his argument about the significance of the black preacher to a linguistic analysis of the race, he briefly mentions Hurston. Following his discussion of the linguistic acrobatics that take place by both the preacher and audience in a "traditional black church," Dillard writes, "His¹⁶ use of rasp regularly signals an increase in the emotional pitch of the service. (This is undoubtedly what Zora Neale Hurston was referring to when she wrote of her father's 'good straining voice' in *Dust Tracks on a Road*)" (262). Dillard's text solely deals with the analysis of Black English, yet to fully present his argument, he understood that the black preacher was integral to the understanding of black language.

For the sake of this argument, I must clearly define various terms. To clarify the concept of dialect, Dillard writes:

"In this respect, there may be some confusion about the use of the term *dialect*. As used in linguistics, *dialect* means simply the collective linguistic patterns on a sub-group of the speakers of a language. (To put it somewhat more technically, each individual has an *idiolect*, and a

¹⁶ Dillard uses J.W. Evans, a black preacher at Greater Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Los Angeles, California, as an example (Dillard 261).

collection of idiolects is a dialect.) The popular use of *dialect* to mean “humorous speechways” or “ridiculous language” is not relevant to this discussion. It seems wasteful, and pointless, to coin another term, even though *dialect* may be subject to some misunderstanding” (x).

He argues that he does not need to discuss the misperceptions that exist about the term dialect for his argument, but in this argument it is extremely relevant and necessary.

Dillard goes on to write, “The term *grammar* is consistently used herein to mean not “correct use of language,” but “the way a language works.” In this sense, every language (and every “dialect”) has a grammar; and it is irrelevant whether the grammar has been put into writing (a *grammatical description*)” (xi). So in essence, Dillard is pointing out

that all languages have rules or patterns. Patterns exist in African American Vernacular English because there are rules to vernacular English like all other languages. The

problem that has arisen is that because the rules of dialects, especially the rules of African American Vernacular English, are different, people are again inclined to make

comparisons followed by rankings. As previously mentioned, it is common in human nature for people to rank things that are different from themselves or from the norms as

inferior or even inhuman. Dillard explains, “Yet it seems inescapable that Black English is human language, and that if it is, it has a history as any other language has a history.

Roughly speaking, a linguistic difference correlates somehow with a historical difference” (34). The problem with the judgments about the rules of dialect is that the

judgments have been attributed to a whole race of people. Ultimately, linguistically, the judgments previously mentioned led to the label African American Vernacular English.

Dillard writes, “Dialects do not attach themselves to skin colors, but judgments about

African ancestry do. Black Americans of a certain socioeconomic group – not all Blacks – speak the dialect to be described herein” (11). It is critical to note that at the opening of

the book entitled *BLACK ENGLISH*, Dillard clearly points out that “not all Blacks” speak Black English. If that statement is true, and it is, it would be prudent for linguists to discard the term Black English, the term that evolved to African American Vernacular English.

In the essay, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Art and Literature (1928),” Alain Locke states, “Only in the late eighties did Negro literary effort recover itself, to succeed really only with two figures, Charles Waddell Chestnutt, the novelist and story writer, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, known as a dialect poet, but also considerably versatile as sentimental lyric poet, story writer and novelist” (239). At the end of Locke’s essay, he provides “Negro “Literature: A Selected Bibliography” (245). Locke lists both *The Uncalled* and *The Love of Landry*. Ironically, Hurston is not listed at all which is probably mainly due to the fact that Hurston’s writing career was just beginning to take form. Upon my initial perusal, I immediately assumed *The Uncalled* was a text about a poor African American community due to the use of dialect and because of the race of the author. Dunbar is widely known for writing poems that celebrate the dialect of the poor African American community; however, in *The Uncalled*, Dunbar preempts Hurston’s attempt at placing dialect in the mouths of white characters, which is one of the most fascinating aspects of the text. In the essay, “Some Personal Reminiscences of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” Edward F. Arnold writes that “As an educator, Dunbar taught the world the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all” (400). *The Uncalled* exemplifies Arnold’s analysis. The novel is an illustration of problems that plague the human race, and not one particular racial group. *The Uncalled* is a unifying text. Dunbar’s use of religion as the

unifier could be because of his questions regarding his own issues regarding entering the ministry (400). Jennifer A. Hughes examines Dunbar's novel *The Fanatics* in the essay, "The Politics of Incongruity in the Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Fanatics*." Hughes also explains many of the problems he faces as an author. She writes, "Dunbar scholarship has long been concerned with the artist's complicated relationship with William Dean Howells as a powerful friend who preferred and promoted his dialect poetry, as well as Dunbar's general frustration with his publisher's enthusiasm for 'broken tongue' rather than standard verse" (296). In *The Uncalled*, Dunbar gave his publishers and Howell exactly what they wanted: broken English, but he gave it to them in the mouths of white characters. For example, Dunbar writes: "'Ef I could n't keep her sober, I wan n't one o' them that set an' took part with her when she was gittin' drunk'" (6). In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Arvay's mother says: "What in the nation for, Arvie? 'Tain't a thing out there for nobody to see at all...I 'speck. I want to git out of this hot kitchen over this cook-stove" (36-37). Chuck Jackson discusses the mistake in his essay, "Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics." Jackson writes, "If *Seraph* messes up or, say, whitewashes what might otherwise be a rather clean record for Hurston's writing of complex, black folk characters, then perhaps it is with the notions of 'mess' and 'wash' that we should approach not only Hurston's most problematic fiction, but also her other writings" (639). Jackson challenges the critics who argue that Arvay is a white washed or "purified" version of her black characters. Even Arvay's speech patterns which embody many of the aspects of Hurston's black characters might be seen as a "white" attempt at "black" language. Critics have labeled Hurston's attempt as a betrayal of her black characters. Hurston does not betray nor erase the carefully created black

characters due to her creation of poor white characters who speak in dialect because like Dunbar, Hurston is writing a universal text that addresses inferiority, marriage, class, and the role of women in families and in society. In the book *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy*, John Lowe writes that "...Hurston wrote her 'white book' partly because removing race from her central field of interest made possible a more intense focus on gender but particularly class" (261). Hurston's raceless novel allowed her to explore new themes and ideas.

Carby writes that Hurston was pleased that Burroughs Mitchell, her friend and editor at the publishing house of Charles Scribner & Sons, was delighted with "...her use of Southern vernacular and idiom" (viii). Carby continues, "...Hurston had established a reputation for her representation of black language and rhythms of speech" (viii). However, Hurston argues that there is no such thing as black language. In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston writes that "Negro dialect in the South is no such thing" (Kaplan 559). Hurston goes on to explain that the language patterns of the South are "common to white and black" (559). In the "Foreword" to *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Carby explores the "black language" that is found in the mouths of the white characters. She writes:

In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, there are many phrases and sentences that evoke the language of Hurston's black figures in her previous work. Occasionally, the language is identical—whole phrases are lifted from the mouth of a black character in an earlier novel and inserted into the mouth of a member of the white Meserve family. The rhythm and syntax of Hurston's black folk haunt the reader throughout the novel. (ix)

Yes, the reader may be haunted in the words of the characters; however, the haunting by black speakers exists solely in the minds of the readers who feel haunted. The speech patterns that Hurston wrote for *Seraph on the Suwanee* should share similar

characteristics with her other novels that feature people of the same class and region. The words are not exactly the same because there are other qualifiers, but many similarities would exist. In *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, Carla Kaplan writes, “It is hard to understand *why* Hurston would have written it [*Seraph on the Suwanee*]. Why, for example, would she go from depicting the black community she knew so well, portrayed so lovingly, and criticized so handily to a story about southern crackers and their difficult rise to financial success?” (443). Hurston, like many black writers recognized that it was an accepted practice for white people to write about black people. Carby writes, “Writing about white people was thought by many white critics, reviewers, and publishers to require more literary skill, and more talent, than writing about black characters” (xii). In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston proves to critics that she can write both “black” and “white” characters. Yet, for Hurston, the ultimate desire was still simply to tell a story of people. Carby continues, “Moreover, Hurston was concerned with establishing more than linguistic similarities between white and black in the South; she was actively trying to demonstrate her ideas of cultural influence and fusion in her novel” (ix). Hurston’s understanding of the lack of rigidity in both social and cultural norms between races was ahead of her times. Carby continues the discussion of the duality of the Negro artist. She writes,

In the postwar 1940s Hurston was not the only black artist to confront the question of whether a racial art was also a segregated art, an art confined permanently within the limits of differences. For all black people, the Second World War embodied the acute contradictions in mobilizing against the ideology of fascism abroad, on the one hand, and, on the other, living with the fascist practices of racism and segregation at home. For many it was an unresolved question of whether being an American and being a Negro were compatible or incompatible categories. (xi)

For “cultural fusion” to exist, Hurston had to show her reading public that her role as a Negro writer did not negate her role as an American. However, her reading public responded with an answer of their own in the form of not purchasing her book.¹⁷ Their response loudly stated that she was wrong in her argument.

Many of the same speech patterns found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men* can also be found in the speech patterns of Arvey and her family. For Hurston, these similarities are not just a coincidence. In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston writes that “Negro dialect in the South is no such thing” (Kaplan 559). Hurston goes on to explain that the language patterns of the South are “common to white and black” (559). For Hurston, the construct of Negro dialect was a manmade construct. Southern speech moved across racial lines and moved along socio-economic lines. For example, Arvey’s mother speaks: ““Your chillun’s got plenty soul and heart in ’em, Arvie. Look how Angie sends me things every Christmas, and fine things too. You an Jim sure is raised your chaps to be nice and kind. ’Tain’t that a’way with Lorraine nor none of her whelps”” (280). The dialect is very similar to the words spoken by Janie’s Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: ““Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection. Ah ain’t gittin’ ole, honey. Ah’m *done* ole”” (15). Both speech patterns are eerily similar. However, the white characters are not taking on the voice of black characters; rather they are all simply embodying the speech patterns of poor rural southerners. Critics made the mistake of arguing that Hurston simply wrote the speech patterns of black folk. Hurston was not writing the dialect of “black” characters in her novels, instead she wrote the speech patterns of a group of people. The dialect of her black characters, who could be any poverty stricken uneducated group in the rural South

¹⁷ Seraph on the Suwanee only sold 4,368 copies (Kaplan 444).

of Hurston's time, and just happen to be a black uneducated group, showcases the underclass class status of the characters. In the book *World Englishes*, Gunnel Melchers and Philip Shaw write, "...Black (Vernacular) English can be characterized as a social as well as regional variety which in popular usage is often referred to as Ebonics" (84). Correctly, these authors, like Hurston, are presenting the argument that regional and social constructs influence language and not racial or genetic constructs. The two continue, "As the name suggests, AAVE is used by the black population of the USA, but not by all and to a varying degree; in other words, there is a continuous variation according to social class, style, and region" (84). The dialect of *Seraph on the Suwanee* is not exactly like the dialect of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; however, the dialect of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not exactly like the dialect of *Jonah's Guard Vine*. Even though all the characters in *Jonah's Guard Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are black, the dialects differ due to social class, style and region. Of course, these small differences are the true proof of Hurston's ability to reflect, not stereotype, her characters' dialects. The dialect of *Seraph on the Suwanee* is similar to many of Hurston's other works, but different due to the aforementioned reasons, and Arvey possesses many of the same speech patterns of many of Hurston's black characters due to social and regional classification. Hurston's detailing of speech patterns is not indicative of the black population; rather they are indicative of a poor working class group of people in the Deep South. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is Hurston's attempt at showcasing that race and racial speech is simply a social construct. This analysis does not negate Hurston's belief that the Negro had valuable folklore, music, hoodoo or other culturally specific qualities, rather it explains that the language of the translation is not a racial construct;

rather, it is a class construct. I would argue that Hurston's training as an anthropologist allowed her to possess a scientific approach to language. Critics of Hurston's "white dialect" fail to understand that Hurston could and should be able to fully embrace and support her black culture while exploring other races. In *Passionate Minds*, Claudia Roth Pierpont writes:

Black dialect was the very substance of Hurston's work, and that was a dangerous business. Disowned by the founders of the Harlem Renaissance for its association with the jangling, watermelon-eating mockeries of American state conventions, dialect remained an irresistible if highly self-conscious resource for black writers from Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown to Wright himself. But the feat of rescuing the dignity of the speakers from decades of humiliation – so recently reinforced by the nation-sweeping success of *Gone with the Wind* – required a rare and potentially treacherous combination of gifts: a delicate ear (Hurston derided Wright's use of dialect as tone-deaf) and a generous sympathy, a hell-bent humor and a determined imperviousness to shame. (135)

Hurston possessed a delicate ear that received not only university training, but also extensive field training due to her involvement in the Federal Writers' Project. For so long, Hurston was only able to publish her dialect because it was believed to be the speech of only black people. Hurston's struggle to break free from the rules created for her to simply write about people was a dangerous task that cost her dearly. Hurston's belief in the social construct nature of language also extended to include the belief that race too was a social construct. In her collected letters, Kaplan exposes Hurston's belief: "*In Dust Tracks on a Road*, she had declared herself an individualist firmly opposed to any unified concept of 'The Negro.' 'There is no *The Negro*,' she wrote. 'Maybe, after all the Negro doesn't really exist'" (444). Hurston was not discarding the folklore, the music, or art of a race; rather she was more apt to focus on the individual manifestations, rather than a lumped group. Hurston, like many black writers recognized that it was an accepted practice for white people to write about black people. Hurston, in characteristic

fashion, desired to rock the boat by breaking societal rules. Kaplan asks whether Hurston writes *Seraph on the Suwanee* to prove that “she could write about whites as perceptively and interestingly as she had about blacks” (443). I would emphatically respond, Yes! In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston proves to critics that she can not only write “black” characters, but that she can also write “white” characters and do it well. Yet, for Hurston, the ultimate desire was to still simply tell a story of people. There was not only a reason, but also a need for her to pen a novel about white characters to support the argument that African American authors should and could write about people of different races. The purpose of placing dialect in the mouths of white characters further challenged the preconceptions of the time by challenging long-held beliefs that people of various races are members of homogenous groups who share little or no similarities with other groups. This unique “white” novel contributes to the understanding of African American literature by broadening the label of that very term. In addition, by using the new term IDSVE to analyze the dialect of both Hurston’s and Dunbar’s novels the racial barriers are removed which widens the door of interpretation and analysis by scholars.

CHAPTER 4

White Looks Better Against Black

Published in 1948, *Seraph on the Suwanee* was the last novel Hurston published before her death in 1960. She published the novel with a different publishing company than the one used for her previous works. Like actors who have perfected a certain stock character, Hurston had become pigeonholed as a black writer and had been relegated to only writing about the poor black experience. She had attempted to break out of that mold to write about other races and economic backgrounds. In the “Foreword” to an edition of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Carby writes, “She had finally decided to leave J.B. Lippincott, the publisher of all her previous books, because the company had firmly dismissed her last two projects. Hurston had become disillusioned after Lippincott turned down her proposal for a novel about the black middle class” (vii). Hurston had planned on writing a novel about blacks who did not fit into the normal tales read by the American reading public. In Robert E. Hemenway’s groundbreaking text, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, he writes, “By September, 1945, Zora’s new book was being rejected by Lippincott’s. She had wanted to do a serious book to be called *Mrs. Doctor*, on the ‘upper strata of Negro life, and had it 2/3rds done, when I think Lippincott (timid soul) decided that the American public was not ready for it yet” (302-303).¹ Hurston’s even bolder goal of writing about crackers did not win favor with her longstanding publishers. She found a new publisher who would finally allow her to give voice to various other groups; nevertheless, even though Hurston found a publisher, she also found many critics. In the essay, “The Social Geography of Race in Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*,” Laura Dubek writes:

¹ See also *A Life in Letters* (529).

A surprising number of critics, including Alice Walker and Hurston's white biographer Robert Hemenway, spurn *Seraph on the Suwanee* as more or less an artistic failure. Compared to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by far her most critically acclaimed work, Hurston's last novel is considered more than a disappointment; it is an apparent betrayal of the writer's commitment to foreground black culture and individual black experience. (344)

The inability of the critics to see that even though Hurston, the champion and supporter of Negro folk-life, also desired to write about people who just happened to be black or white and not those who were simply "tragically of their race"² is alarming.

Yet, many critics have also pointed out that Hurston had strong desires to see her novels in films and on bestseller lists. In the essay, "Landscapes of Reality: The Fiction of Contemporary Afro-American Women" by Faith Pullin in the book *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945* by Robert A. Lee, she writes, "Hurston's work as a folklorist and anthropologist convinced her that black America had produced an authentic subculture with its own richness and vitality, owing nothing to white middle-class norms and values" (173). Yet, at the same time, "Hurston was forced at times to accommodate and manipulate the white power structure in order to be published at all..." (173). Hurston was simply putting into novel form her own personal dreams of reaching financial and professional success. One of the ways she tried to accomplish her goal was dedicating "all of her books to white patrons and friends" (Kaplan 20). In her chapter "The Black Proletarian" in the book *Black Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction*, Nancy M. Tischler twice briefly references *Seraph on the Suwanee*. She writes, "Zora Neale Hurston...has the intelligence to challenge the bourgeois ideal. In her white-centered novel (*Seraph on the Suwanee*) and

² See Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me."

her black-centered one (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) she pictures the rise of the bourgeoisie and explores the validity of the materialistic dream” (143).³ Hurston has a materialistic dream, yet that dream does not necessarily negate the many other strengths of the work.

Imitation of Life by Fannie Hurst, a friend and former employer of Hurston, details the plight of mixed race people. The 1934 film adaptation of the 1933 book details the plight of the mulatto or light-skinned black in America. The film is a blatant exhortation to blacks to know their place even as they sacrifice everything to make the life of their “good white folks” better. Hurston biographer, Robert E. Hemenway describes it as “a sensationalized novel of passing, earnestly if ineptly intended to explore the tragedy of race prejudice” (24). The black mother tells her black child that she should learn to deal with being called black and that childhood is the appropriate time to start dealing with the label. The black mother is portrayed as “simple,” and even though she is also a widow, she is expected to serve the white woman. When Delilah, the black mother, hands over her family recipe for pancakes to the white woman, Bea, instead of to her daughter, she is in essence committing both racial and family betrayal. Delilah’s daughter is shown as a villain in the tale, but another villain is racism because even though Bea is kind, she still allows class order based on race to exist in her home. Delilah, who like the Biblical Delilah also sells out her own kind,⁴ is the foundation and the reason the pancake empire exists, yet class and social order norms are so inbred in Delilah that she is unable to grasp or accept the money and social changes that are presented to her. Instead of using her wealth to provide a better racially less oppressive existence for her daughter,

³ Tischler also goes on to briefly discuss the “pet Negro” aspects of the novel (48).

⁴ See Samson and Delilah tale in the Bible, Judges 16.

Delilah's first loyalty appears to be for Bea and her new empire. Delilah swapped Peola's birthright for room and board – the swap is as absurd as the swap between the biblical Jacob and Esau. Jacob sold his birthright for a bowl of stew; however, Jacob's swap was based out of his need and hunger.⁵ Delilah also has a need and hunger; however, she makes her poor swap after she has already been given room and board, there was no need for her to reveal her recipe to Bea. Delilah reveals her recipe out of pride and a sense or need to win favor with a white woman, Bea. Her need of Bea's affection outweighs her affection for her daughter. Delilah is naive in her need to please her good white folk. Peola's⁶ true child-like nature does not allow for her to understand why she should be treated as less than human just because of her racial history. Her skin is nearly as white as the skin of Jessie, Bea's daughter, yet she is not allowed the same life as Jessie. Instead of using their wealth and power to create a new world order, Delilah and Bea instead insist upon continuing and perpetuating the status quo – to the detriment of both.

Hurst's tale of a black woman providing her secret recipe for pancakes to help a white woman build a pancake empire was a success as shown by the two major motion picture deals of 1934 and 1959 and the large number of book sales; however, Hurston's tale of poor whites climbing the social ladder was a roaring failure. In Hurst's novel and the movies, Delilah fails her daughter, but Peola also fails her mother. The tale condemns Peola for merely wanting to be treated as a human or as an equal to any other person. Peola's desire for humanity leads her to neglect her mother; however, who can fault her need for humanity? Her mother's inability to recognize the needs of her child lies in

⁵ See Jacob and Esau tale in the Bible, Genesis 25.

⁶ Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 and alludes to Hurst's text in the closely named main character, Pecola, who with many of the other black girls of the novel longs for the prettiness of white features.

sharp contrast to the spoiling Jessie receives from her own mother. Bea is unable to live her life because she is consumed with her selfish child. Jessie fails her mother because she is unable to allow her mother the personal happiness of her male companion. Bea fails her daughter because she is creating a selfish monster. These women are all stuck imitating life instead of truly living it.

Imitation of Life and its movie adaptations relate to Hurston's and Hurst's relationship. Hurston served as Hurst's "secretary/driver"⁷ for a brief period of time in the mid 1920s, a little less than a decade before Hurst published her most famous work. Even though Hurston and Hurst shared a very progressive relationship for their time period, it is glaringly apparent that Hurst still embraced many of the racial beliefs of the time. Hurst acted as a friend of Hurston and also mouthed the words of racial equality, yet Hurston questioned her true feelings. From his interview with Norton Baskin on February 27, 1971, in St. Augustine, Florida, Hemenway learned that "Privately, she expressed doubts about why Hurst was so interested in their appearing in public together; she told at least one friend that she thought it was because Hurst liked the way Zora's dark skin highlighted her own lily-like complexion" (21). Ironically, the femininity of Delilah is constantly in question due to references to her weight, race, and social life. Her position as a woman is never explored. In the various portrayals she is stripped of any desire to love or re-marry. Apparently, she was once considered desirable and was a sexual being, hence her previous marriage and child. She is never portrayed as a woman in and of herself. She exists only to highlight the femininity and beauty of Bea. For example, Delilah's relationship with Bea's feet in the 1934 film adaptation is frustrating. Both women work long hours as single mothers, yet at the end of the day Delilah massages the

⁷ See Hemenway's account of this ill-fated work partnership (20-24).

feet of Bea. The scene repeats at various points throughout the film. Even Bea appears ashamed at the continued role after they have made a fortune from their business, yet Delilah chooses to continue with the arrangement. According to the observation of Hurston, Hurst's private life was then simply a manifestation of what took place in the pages of her novel. Delilah exists simply to make Bea's life better just as Hurston existed in Hurst's world to make Hurst look better.

Thankfully, Hurst did not attempt to convey the dialect of the black characters in her novel, but instead left that special skill to be displayed in the works of her "secretary/driver." Yet, in the screen adaptations there is an obvious difference in the speech patterns of Delilah, Bea, Peola, and Jessie. Viewers of the movie could and probably did assume that the speech differences were due to the races of the characters rather than the social-economic status of the characters. It is plainly obvious that Peola possesses a different speech pattern from her mother, yet the film's portrayal of Peola implies that her speech differences exist because she is "trying to be white." However, upon close and honest analysis, it is perfectly plain that Peola does not sound like her mother because she has experienced both a different education and a different economic upbringing than Delilah. In the first film adaptation, Peola attends the same school as Jessie until Delilah arrives at her school and people learn that she is black. It is perfectly reasonable for Peola to sound like the other students. One of the most common arguments of linguistics is the fact that children learn language primarily from their peers and not from their parents. The differences in speech between Peola and her mother lie in the differences in their education and class levels not in their pigmentation.

Hurst, who reveled in Hurston's blackness and even participated in pranks that allowed Hurston to break the racial rules of the time, in her novel, still condemns the idea of a black passing.⁸ Lack of understanding for her discontentment nearly destroys Peola. Delilah is unable to understand why a roof and food – the simple bargain she made with Bea because she is a simple person – are not enough for Peola. Peola longs for more, yet her desire and need is belittled because of her race. Jessie is able to attend parties, plays, restaurants, and more, yet Peola cannot. Peola is condemned for the same desires. In Hurst's tale, it is difficult to identify an antagonist – Delilah, Peola, racism – all three act as a destroyer in some way.

In opposition, in Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, it is clearly obvious that Arvay and her feelings of inferiority are her own antagonists. Instead of Peola rejecting her "culture" as she is subtly accused in Hurst's work, she is merely rejecting societal racial constraints. Yet, if Hurst had portrayed a better ending for Peola, her novel might have found itself in the "clearance bin" with Hurston's novel. In essence, Hurst followed convention and glorified the tragic mulatta. Once again, the failure and success of the two novels highlights the public's past and present unwillingness to see black authors detail the experiences of white characters.

Why was Hurst's novel a success, yet *Seraph on the Suwanee* a failure? The two novels share similarities: both feature poor whites who move up the social ladder; the friendship of Bea and Delilah is very similar to the friendship of Jim and his "Negro" helper; and characters in both texts appear to suffer from feelings of inferiority. It is possible that Hurst's white female protagonist is more believable and acceptable to

⁸ "She (Hurst) once took Zora on a trip to Vermont, passing her off as an African princess in order to integrate a local restaurant" (Hemenway 24).

readers and movie viewers because of her “properness” of language. Bea is likable in a way that Arvay is not. Based on Hurst’s and Hurston’s relationship and writing experiences, it would appear that Hurston was correct when she mentioned the social rule that prohibited black people from writing about white people, or at least poor white people.

In Erskine Caldwell’s novels *God’s Little Acre* and *Tobacco Road*, he presents the lives of two absurdly poor white families in the American South. Caldwell’s novels have been major sellers around the world. One critic wrote that the novels have sold so well in Asian and European countries simply because people like to read about individuals who are worse off than they are (Bode 358).⁹ In *God’s Little Acre*, Ty Ty and his family refuse to farm the land that surrounds their shack. Instead, they choose to dig endless massive holes in a quest for gold. In *Tobacco Road*, Jeeter and his family are simply focused on sex and food. They need food because they are all malnourished and need to eat, and they need sex to numb the pain that exists due to their lack of food. One of the most interesting aspects of Caldwell’s two novels is his use of dialect. *Tobacco Road* is written in a dialect that is often difficult to read, yet *God’s Little Acre* is not written in dialect. In *Tobacco Road*, Jeeter says, ““Now, Lov, that ain’t no way to talk. I ain’t had a good turnip since a year ago this spring. All the turnips I’ve et has got them damn-blasted green-gutted worms in the”” (14). In *God’s Little Acre*, Ty Ty says, ““This is God’s little acre we’re sitting on right now. I moved it from over yonder to right here”” (27). The family in *Tobacco Road* is slightly poorer than the family in *God’s Little Acre*, so it is possible that Caldwell uses the differences in his language choices to demonstrate the

⁹ Maybe, the critic’s argument is valid because slave narratives were historically a big success!

differences in class level. However, it would be safe to argue that both families are of the same class. Both families are poor and white, yet they speak in a dialect that one would have to label African American Vernacular English. Is it not absurd to label these white characters as speakers of African American Vernacular English? This example is one of several that could be used to support the use of my new term, Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE). If the language that Jeeter's family speaks is African American Vernacular English, then one could then teach *Tobacco Road* as a type of African American literature, at least in a linguistic sense; however, Caldwell's novel does not fit the traditional definition of African American Literature or my expanded definition. It would be absurd to label either of these novels or the dialect as African American; therefore, I would label the dialect IDSVE.

More recently, Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Addison Gayle are three of the most easily recognized members of the New Black Aesthetic Critics. In essence, these authors present a new sense of awareness concerning the black experience. These authors stand against other black authors who accept the idea of compromise and appeasement. New Black Aesthetic Criticism is radical in word and action. An individual far ahead of his time who would also fit in with this group is abolitionist David Walker. Like members of the New Black Aesthetics, Walker ignored the oppressor and wanted to see action taken by the oppressed. Individuals who identified with this form of thought argued that too much time and focus had been given to looking outward and it was time to look within the race for solutions. Probably the most radical of the New Black Aesthetic group is Leroi Jones or as most commonly known, Baraka.¹⁰

¹⁰ Interestingly, Dillard begins *Black English* with a quote from Baraka's *Blues People*.

When one thinks of poetry and art, one might imagine the beautiful and the serene. Gayle in *The Black Aesthetic* argues that “Art for Art’s Sake” is absurd. Art, especially Negro art needed to have a higher calling and purpose. Gayle writes, “The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man?” (xxiii). Art that did not speak to the Negro experience, art that did not bring attention to the plight¹¹ of the Negro was unnecessary.¹² The New Black Aesthetic is also against the “universal.” Literature that is universal cannot have a part in the black aesthetic because the new black aesthetic is highly separatist. One cannot be a part of mainstream white America, yet still be involved in the plight of the Negro. In the “Introduction” of his 1974 book, *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt directly points out the main questions that surround the study of African American literature. Ironically, the questions that he posed in 1974 are many of the same questions that surround the discipline and mimic possible questions from the New Black Aesthetic critics. He writes:

(1) Should black authors address themselves solely to the conditions of black life in America or to a wider, or international range of subjects? (2) Who is better equipped to judge the quality of these books, a black critic or a white one? (3) Is social protest the only proper aim and theme of black writers? (4) Is it right (sensible fair) to talk about black fiction as a genre or only to discuss individual novels, short stories, and authors? (5) Is black fiction a genuine subject, separable from modern American fiction as a whole? (1)

¹¹ Proponents of this thought probably would not like this term, but for my argument it works.

¹² Based on this argument alone, Gayle would probably toss *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *The Uncalled* from the African American literary canon.

In response to Rosenblatt's question three which directly ties to the commands of the New Black Aesthetic Critics, I would question how does one define "social protest." Does social protest have to be blatantly "in one's face" obvious or can it be more subtle? For example, Hurston's novel is very much social protest in regards to language beliefs, hence the blackballing of the text, but because it was not necessarily "attack-like" in nature, would most scholars label it as "protest?"¹³ On first thought, one might argue that New Black Aesthetic Critics would be violently opposed to such as *Seraph on the Suwanee* due to the lack of focus on the black experience. In a simple read of the text, it may appear to assimilate or to be a simple artistic piece with little merit. However, the deeper goals of Hurston would ingratiate her work to the New Black Aesthetic critics. Her work brings attention to the plight of the Negro by highlighting incorrect beliefs that exist about the speech patterns of the Negro people. However, New Black Aesthetic critics would question the universal nature of the text. Because Hurston's novel addresses common human troubles that exist among people of all races, the New Black Aesthetic critics might question the author's commitment to the black experience. In *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Keith Byerman analyzes several of the works of novelist Leon Forrest. Byerman argues that much of Forrest's work critiques the

Black Power and cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. But more generally, he is attacking those forces that push the artist toward ideological expression rather than deeply felt creation. For African American artists, these forces can be both whites who presume to know what black art should be and are willing to pay for that and only that, and blacks who have their own agendas and use racial politics to enforce them. The artists who surrender to these pressures and temptations have, in

¹³ In response to Rosenblatt's question five, I would argue that most universities have answered the question by creating African American literature concentrations inside their English departments.

Forrest's view, compromised their art. Despite some pointed barbs at Alice Walker and, by implication (through her white patron), at her literary heroine Zora Neale Hurston, he is more troubled than angry at the artists involved. They become victims of their own ambitions and insecurities. (151)

Hurston attempted to write according to her own rules, but even she was susceptible to the dictates of money and Hollywood dreams. Yet, in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston appears to attempt to fit the molds of Hollywood while still trying to appease her activist nature.

As Hurston's literary ancestor, Dunbar like Hurston has been accused of assimilating and not directly attacking white oppression or promoting black culture. In his discussion of the idea of black writers writing like white authors, Jarrett discusses the idea of cultural monism in his analysis of Dunbar's first novel. He writes, "Cultural monism believes that Anglo-American individuals represent 'America' in the most general sense, when in fact, according to Dunbar, they represent only one ethnic group of American people" (317). Instead of negatively portraying Dunbar as an assimilationist to white culture, he positively portrays him as joining, adding, and contributing to American culture. He explains, "By contrast, Dunbar's use of the modal 'must' is not a way of insisting that African Americans *should* write 'like the white men.' Rather, he means that African Americans *necessarily* write like white men, because both write from within and in response to the same national culture" (316). Jarrett continues,

For Dunbar, the decisive factor was that the races shared a common national culture. *The Uncalled* tried to prove this point by arguing that the races could advance a common national literature through the use of realism. However, the novel also acknowledges that the cultural differences separating Blacks from Whites can result from certain kinds of racism that precludes this advancement. One kind, which Howells and many American writers of his day could not overcome, is the fallacy that Whiteness is raceless and universal while Blackness is racial and peculiar. Anomalous African American literature – as exemplified by Dunbar's first

novel – refutes this belief. Both Whiteness and Blackness, it turns out, are visible, dialectically engaged with one another, and historically contingent constructions of racial, cultural, and national identity. (318)

Jarrett’s argument logically transitions into the Black Arts Movement. He writes,

“Anomalous African American literature is valuable because it forces us to interrogate these constructions, particularly the universalism of Whiteness and the racial realism of Blackness. This value contradicts the scholarly dismissal and commercial neglect of anomalous texts, especially in the wake of the Black Arts Movement (1960s-70s). By approaching the racial authenticity and folkloric verisimilitude of Black art, this movement inspired the canonization and commercialization of African American literature that reflected only these qualities” (Jarrett 319). Jarrett appears to argue that BAM prevented the study of works that did not follow the blunt pro-African American focus it espoused. Jarrett continues, “Consequently, the version of African American literary history shared by most scholars, teachers, and students today excludes movements that subordinated these qualities to other cultural issues. In the postwar 1940s and 1950s, for example, demonstrations of national identity or ‘American-ness’ in ‘universal,’ ‘raceless,’ ‘White,’ or multi-ethnic African American literature tried to resist the racial essentialism later espoused by the Black Arts Movement” (319). It appears that for BAM that unless African American culture was openly promoted, it was not valued or appreciated. Jarrett explains that the thinking of this period often led to misunderstandings about whiteness and blackness. He writes, “We now know that this period marks the greatest proliferation ever of anomalous African American literature. Thus we must determine how and why certain African American writers during that period complicated the literary meanings of Whiteness and Blackness for the sake of American cultural nationalism, above all” (319). Dunbar and Hurston both attempted the

formidable task of attempting to write a black protest novel in a form that appealed universally.

In the chapter, “White Dissolution: Homosexualization and Racial Masculinity in White Life Novels,” of the book *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness* Stephen P. Knadler claims that “Wright’s *Savage Holiday* (1954), Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), and Demby’s *Bettlecreek* (1950) can all be read as activist texts that disrupt the regulatory fictions that govern the gendered and racialized reproduction of white male subjectivity” (146). Knadler maintains that in the novel, Hurston creates various homoerotic relationships between Jim and other males in the text, in particular the black male Jeff. In his analysis, Knadler also argues that in writing *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston was not only challenging white culture, but she was also challenging black culture as well. He writes, “While in *Seraph* Hurston turns her gaze back upon the dominant southern white fathers who have ‘de-formed’ her self-making, she in turn challenges the repressive racial and gender power system in her own black community that would stifle one’s voice” (168).¹⁴ Due to Hurston’s desire to see *Seraph* as a bestseller used in book clubs and to see it made into a movie, Knadler explains that critics have “tended to read Hurston’s novel intertextually against such white-authored popular fiction as Marjorie Rawlings’s *The Yearling* or Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*” (169).¹⁵ Meisenhelder argues that Rawlings had a significant impact on Hurston. She writes,

On the surface Hurston seems to have paid careful attention to Rawlings’s work. In fact, the basic situation and characters of *Seraph on the Suwanee* strikingly parallel one of Rawlings’s sketches in *Cross Creek*, that of Tom

¹⁴ Look at Barbara Johnson’s essay and Susan Meisenhelder’s book.

¹⁵ He cites Meisenhelder page 115.

Glisson, a poor Southern white who rises above his poverty. Like Jim Meserve, Tom Glisson has no education, but ‘he talks with a flair for the picturesque and the dramatic (14). (93)

Jim’s flamboyance in speech and action has allowed for him to be read as a black character. The blending of race in the analysis of Jim leads to further racial blending.

Knadler argues that Hurston is even surreptitiously active in regards to racial equality. He writes, “At the end of the novel, Hurston even notes, Jim hires both blacks and whites based on merit to serve as captains and workers on his shrimping boats, thus creating one of the novel’s few integrated spaces where men of diverse races work and socialize together” (170). Following her analysis of Arvay’s and Jim’s relationship, Meisenhelder briefly discusses the few black characters in the novel. She writes:

Jim’s effect on the black characters in the novel is equally pernicious and insidious. Although they move only on the margins of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston carefully shows that their world, does not escape unscathed by the values that dominate the novel. Like Arvay, in fact, the black characters are domesticated and diminished, stunted in the soil of white culture, as the name of one shipmate – Stumpy – graphically suggests. (113).

Meisenhelder explains that Jim’s success is built upon the backs of his black workers, and that even as he takes credit for completing huge tasks like clearing the swamp surrounding their home, the black workers do most of the back breaking work (113). She goes on to explain Jim’s use of the vernacular which Hurston has been strongly criticized for allowing him to use. She writes, “Jim also similarly usurps the rich verbal art of black culture for his own profit. Blessed with the ‘gift of gab,’ he is able to insinuate himself into the black community, not so much to participate in its rich traditions but to extract gain for himself” (113). Meisenhelder further argues that Jim’s exploitation of the black workers was repeated by his son Kenny who took black music and profited from it as

well (114). Joe and Dessie, the black husband and wife who work for Jim and Arvay, provide a comparison that does not end favorably. She writes:

The damaging effects on black people living in a Jim's world are also outlined in the changes that occur in Joe and Dessie's relationship. Even though Jim sees his role as one of benevolent protector of his pet (a role Joe never disputes), the money Joe receives from Jim cuts him off from his roots and finally culturally impoverishes him. . . .As the fate of every black character in *Seraph on the Suwanee* suggests, living in Jim Meserve's world adulterates black culture and destroys a healthy black identity, both male and female. (114-115)

In essence, Meisenhelder argues that the white world that Hurston creates is oppressive and destructive for anyone who is not a white male. She writes, "Detailing the diminishment of black people and white women in this way, Hurston thus paints a picture of racial and sexual domination in ironic contrast to the idealized relationships Stephen Foster immortalized and she alluded to in her title. . . .she takes an intimate look at a white world whose exploitive hierarchies deny full humanity to all people – male and female, black and white" (115). Even though Hurston was accused for not obviously attacking the white male system that oppressed women and other races, Meisenhelder argues that Hurston does attack the system, but she argues that Hurston does so in subtle character and plot form.

Yet, even in his sharp analysis, Knadler also appears to take several long reaches in regards to the novel's theme. He argues:

In looking at Zora Neale Hurston's white life novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* in light of Cold War black and white representations of homosexuality, I have tried to argue that alternative readings of Hurston's novel that simply see her as a trickster pulling one over on white folks, directing laughter and anger back across the color line, may themselves silence other alternative readings. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is a queer text in which an ambivalent homosexual desire threatens both the dominant and subaltern, white and black, decodings of the texts. Not simply double-voiced, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is a text that tries to find possibilities both

within and outside the white and black, heterosexual and homosexual social orders. In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston allowed herself in part to be exploited, to be led by the white publishing impresarios who demanded a pulp fiction sensation about white folks who make good. But in the end, she creates within this performance moments of narrative crises when the audience, both black and white, hears and sees too much, making visible the complex sexuality that has remained invisible behind stereotypical representations of patriarchal cultures. (175)

Knadler appears to be reading way too much into this text. Yes, he has every right to use a theoretical analysis of Queer Studies on *Seraph on the Suwanee*; however, I strongly argue against the idea that Hurston was attempting to write a homoerotic novel. Knadler and most Hurston scholars agree that Hurston was creating a novel that she hoped would be a blockbuster both in print and on the movie screen. For the period in which she hoped to accomplish this feat, homoerotic was not accepted by mainstream society. Nearly two decades later, the 1961 film, *The Children's Hour*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine as a lesbian couple faced major challenges to be displayed on screen. The movie story included a three-way triangle of love between a man and woman and another woman's love for the woman who was in love with the man. The original 1934 stage-play written by Lillian Hellman was based on a true story and told the drama of two school teachers who were accused of having a lesbian affair by a student at the school. The tale had been a Broadway play and had been shopped around to various producers in hopes of creating a movie; however, due to the strict laws regarding "morality," it was many years before the tale was showed as a movie near to the original story line. In the essay "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*," Mary Titus explains that the true story was based on a nineteenth-century Scottish lawsuit, "The Great Drumsheugh Case," where neither teacher ever admitted to being a lesbian, neither committed suicide, and neither was involved with

another man – all in opposition to the movie version (216-217). In 1936, the play was also adopted into a movie entitled *These Three*, which blatantly highlighted the fact that a man was involved in the triangle. Even the return to the original play title for the 1961 adaptation did not erase the male member of the triangle. In the essay, “Something's Missing Here!": Homosexuality and Film Reviews during the Production Code Era, 1934-1962,” Chon Noriega summarizes the harsh reactions from critics to films that featured lesbian themes. He writes, “That "tradition" of responding to lesbianism as a moral threat to the social order dominated film reviews. *The New York Times* even conflated lesbianism with dramatic tragedy in faulting *These Three* for "lack[ing] the biting, bitter tragedy of *The Children's Hour*." But such a fault was seen as minor, given that all reviewers applauded the changes required by the Production Code: a heterosexual triangle was tragedy enough for filmgoers” (24). In essence, both public opinion and public laws both negated the desire for homosexual tendencies on the screen. As a writer in Hollywood, Hurston would have been very much aware of the public and legal guidelines. It is highly unlikely that she would have written a tale that might have limited her chances of reaching her blockbuster goals.

Hurston might not meet Knadler’s sexual reading, but she did write *Seraph on the Suwanee* to further explore her own fascination with love and relationships. Even though, Hurston was never successful in love¹⁶, she repeatedly attempted relationships in a quest for love. Tate writes:

Racial whiteness, I would add, allows Hurston the opportunity to explore the effects of love’s bondage without having to defend the freedom and dignity of her fictive, black, heroines, with whom she probably identified. Like the whiteness of Richard Wright’s Erskine Fowler in *Savage*

¹⁶ As far as we know, and by the “love” standards of literary scholars.

Holiday, Arvay's whiteness is probably a defense. It allows Hurston to examine issues, behavior, and desire she too possessed without recognizing or acknowledging it as her own. (163)

Seraph on the Suwanee provided Hurston with a literary opportunity to explore the difficult nuances of love. Tate explains, "Regardless of Hurston's motives, though, *Seraph* is the most comprehensive published account of the subject that continued to fascinate her – erotic love" (164). Yet, Hurston's tale about a woman dealing with love is not very empowering for women. Arvay chooses a very dependent type of love and self-awareness. Tate writes, "...women readers find themselves in the awkward position of feeling like traitors to their sex if they like this novel" (164). If women in general find the "like" of the novel problematic, black women readers are even more so in a bind due to the passively dependent white main character. Tate also argues that the entire novel's joke is ultimately on female readers who "are lured into thinking that it is possible to set a story of female development within the context of romantic love" (177). In general, Hurston's novel muddies the feminine idea of Eros and completely destroys the usual feminist tenets that are bestowed upon her. Yet, in another letter to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston cynically discusses a woman's ultimate appeal for a man – her weakness. She explains the weakness of Arvay and the allure that it creates for some men:

You know yourself that a woman is most powerful when she is weak. Men were willing to do a thousand times more for Mary, Queen of Scots than for Elizabeth, and Lizzie so well knew it. All a woman needs to have is sufficient allure, and able men will move the world for her. . . .Nor have any 'strong' women inspired that kind of love to make him get out and do it. He fights like a tiger to protect some alluring, weakly thing. Even the men whom Elizabeth advanced were ready to desert her for Mary. (Kaplan 562)

Hurston's portrayal of what it takes for a woman to obtain a man would quickly cause her to lose her place of honor in women's literature.

In addition to her movie dreams and her skills as a novelist, Hurston was also a skilled dramatist.¹⁷ *Color Struck*, *The First One*, and *Mule Bone* written with Langston Hughes all showcase her skills in that genre. In 1950, Zora Neale Hurston made a declaration regarding what types of works publishers would provide for readers. Sadly, the declaration said that publishers ignored realistic portrayals of African Americans in order to favor stereotypical portrayals of them. In the article "What White Publishers Won't Print" for the April 1950 edition of *Negro Digest*, Hurston offered this account:

The realistic story around a Negro insurance official, dentist, general practitioner, undertaker and the like would be most revealing. Thinly disguised fiction around the well known Negro names is not the answer, either. The "exceptional" as well as the Ol' Man Rivers has been exploited all out of context already. Everybody is already resigned to the "exceptional" Negro, and willing to be entertained by the "quaint." To grasp the penetration of western civilization in a minority, it is necessary to know how the average behaves and lives. Books that deal with people like in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* is the necessary métier. For various reasons, the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America. His revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear, and which ever expresses itself in dislike. (173)

Publishers argued that they displayed simply what the public desired. It is interesting to conjecture what the response or possibility would have been for the success of Dunbar's *The Love of Landry* if the tale's characters would have been black. As mentioned in Chapter Two, *The Love of Landry* is a straightforward cowboy novel. Racial issues do not play a role. The family is wealthy and includes a devoted father and two daughters. One of the daughters falls in love with the cowboy hero who is also from a wealthy family but

¹⁷ She also worked in the film industry. Hemenway writes, "She served from October, 1941, to January, 1942, as a story consultant at Paramount Studios, trying to interest that firm in making movies of her novels" (276).

who hides his heritage due to a scandal. The tale is simple and sweet and if presently placed on a Barnes & Noble Shelf, it would probably be labeled as “Chick Lit.”¹⁸ The biggest problem that the characters face is the sickness of the daughter who falls in love. Using Hurston’s argument, publishers would not have printed Dunbar’s text if the characters had been of another race. It is surprising that Dunbar was able to get his text printed at all. Hurston argues that texts that feature “everyday” blacks could be accepted just as well as Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*. Unfortunately, it appears that Hurston’s suggestion was ignored.

I would very much like to argue that advancement has been made in regards to the portrayals of African Americans, yet I do not think that evidence exists to do so. However, I realize I cannot fully argue that there have not been texts that have shown the everyday struggle of everyday blacks. It is not that I am straddling the fence on this issue, but my answer is slightly more complex. On one hand, African American characters and plot lines have not evolved from the stereotypical into the realm of the inner lives of the “average, struggling, non-morbid” African American experience, as Hurston referred to them in “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (173). Authors have continued to write those texts that Hurston suggests white publishers will print. Yet, at the same time, other authors have presented story lines that explore the average African American experience. The difference between the two types of presentations lies solely in the popularity and money created from the works. For this argument, I offer two literary dramatists and one mainstream dramatist: August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry, and Tyler Perry. Wilson and Hansberry may be considered two prominent figures of the African American dramatic canon, yet Perry is probably the most recognized and commercially successful.

¹⁸ Books that appeal to women.

August Wilson's *Fences* is a fascinating work that explores the everyday struggles of Troy and his family. Troy must deal with racism and poverty. Wilson's text is a beautiful text, yet is Troy not the embodiment of the African American male stereotype? Troy has been imprisoned. He is unfaithful to his wife and fathers a child outside of his marriage. Troy loves a sport, baseball. Troy is illiterate. Even though Wilson brilliantly displays the entire family, many stereotypes surrounding the African American community are presented. Moving further into the African American dramatic tradition, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* even better supports my second argument that there has been some type of progression away from the normal stereotypes surrounding African Americans. The Younger family is poor, yet they have dreams. Their dream to move into a better neighborhood¹⁹ and to create a better life for themselves separates them from the stereotype. The Younger family is a compelling example of Hurston's *Main Street* ideal. The Younger family longs for a main street dream, and they are all working hard to obtain it. Yet, even in this drama there are still remnants of the stereotypes that surround the African American experience. The head of the poor family is still a female, and the son wants to open a liquor store. Lastly, I turn to Perry. I will not choose a particular play of Perry because most of his plays follow the same story line. Whether it is *Madea Goes to Jail*, *Madea's Family Reunion*, or *Why Did I Get Married*, the premises are all the same. The leader of the family is a woman. A broken down character²⁰ will be saved by religion and a member of the family who "made it." Perry, more than any of the others, supports Hurston's 1950 argument that publishers continue

¹⁹ Which, of course meant a "white" neighborhood during the time period of the play's setting.

²⁰ Usually due to drugs or sexual immorality.

to present the stereotypes of the black experience. I mentioned earlier that my argument flows both ways. Even though dramatists like Hansberry and Wilson present everyday blackness that contains some aspects of the stereotype, Perry simply presents the stereotype that contains aspects of everyday blackness. The reason my argument is complex is because even though academics study Hansberry and Wilson, the culture knows and embraces Perry. Hansberry and Wilson have not enjoyed the same level of success as Perry. Unfortunately, the publishers that Hurston references appear to be correct. Society has been presented with other options besides the stereotype; however, the stereotype sells. *Seraph on the Suwanee* has fallen prey to societal whims and regretfully academia has also joined ranks with mainstream society.

Hurston is truly a talented writer; however, she appears to have had a problem separating her private life from her literary works. There is not necessarily a problem with her personal becoming public, but it is often frowned upon in the “literary world.” Nevertheless, Hurston’s inability to separate the two often makes it easier to analyze her handiwork. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like many of Hurston’s other works, is very much a feminist text because Hurston herself was a feminist. Everything about Hurston exudes avocation for the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Scholars have praised Hurston for her feminist text, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, yet *Seraph on the Suwanee* has been portrayed as an attack on feminist ideals due to Arvay’s spinelessness in her marriage. The chapter, “The Ways of White Folks in *Seraph on the Suwanee*,” from Susan Edwards Meisenhelder’s book *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick* primarily presents Hurston’s last novel in comparison to her most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She writes:

Having used white cultural models of male and female identity as the thematic backdrop for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston focused directly on that world in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Although Hurston's last published novel is often read as evidence of her growing conservatism or ambivalence about race and gender, careful reading of its metaphors against those of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* lays bare Hurston's most thorough critique of the dominant culture, one that details the emptiness of its models of identity and relationships for black women and men. (92)

Ironically, Hurston situates her epic feminist text within the confines of marriage.

Marriage, at least in the traditional sense that has been perpetuated by different cultures, has often been a sore spot for feminists because the traditional aspect of marriage has often acted as a hindrance for women.²¹ In marriage, women have been viewed as the subject or property of their spouses. Women are often relegated to the role of cook, maid, mother, and sexual provider. Marriage is normally viewed as the simplest arena of inequality. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft details many of the injustices that women have suffered simply due to the institution of marriage. As the mother of a seven-year-old girl, I have had the pleasure of watching the movie *Mary Poppins* at least 20 times in the last few years. Like most other little girls, I had seen *Mary Poppins* as a child, yet it was not until I started watching the movie as the mother of a little girl who I hope is also a feminist, did I realize the feminist message of the movie. The movie opens with the nanny, Katie Nana, attempting to quit her job as nanny for the Banks family. Interestingly, Wollstonecraft addresses the sad plight of British women, but for the period, it could be any woman, who must find outside work if they do not obtain a husband. The respectable job roles for women were nannies, maids, or

²¹ The concept of marriage is also discussed in Hurston's most recently discovered short story, "Monkey Junk: A Satire on Modern Divorce." Three never released Hurston short stories, "Monkey Junk: A Satire on Modern Divorce," "The Book of Harlem: Chapter I," and "The Back Room" were all recently discussed in the article, "The Newly Complicated Zora Neale Hurston," by Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 2, 2011).

traveling companions. The less desirable option of prostitute was also very common. Mrs. Banks is able to afford a nanny because her husband is wealthy. Mrs. Banks does not have many of the problems that most British women suffer, yet she is still concerned with and absorbed by an interesting cause. Mrs. Banks breezes into the front door and forces her female cook, maid, and nanny into her song and dance routine for rights for women. Mrs. Banks begins by explaining that women love men individually, but that as a whole, the sex is “rather stupid.” She continues (in song) to explain that the political oppression of women is wrong and that women must stand against the subjugation. One of the favorite lines in my home is, “Our daughter’s daughters will adore us, and they’ll sing in grateful chorus, ‘Well Done!’” Mrs. Banks somewhat neglects the work in her own home, yet she realizes that hopefully her female descendents will recognize and praise the work and stance that she has taken. Mrs. Banks does not win much approval from her husband for neglecting her role as a wife and a mother. The movie adaptation of *Mary Poppins* simply portrays a battle that women have been fighting for generations. How does one act as a feminist when one is involved in the “historically oppressive” pastime of marriage? Hurston attempts to answer the question in the life of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Janie first enters marriage due to force. Janie’s grandmother realizes that her beautiful granddaughter is becoming aware of her sexuality. In the opening of the novel, Janie spends a good bit of time lying under a tree. Hurston creates a parallel world in the blooming of the pear tree and the blooming of Janie’s body and sexuality. The buds on the tree are just beginning to burst forth, just as Janie’s body is beginning to bloom. Janie feels a sexual awakening as she lies near the tree. Janie experiences her first kiss near the

tree; sadly, her grandmother also experiences the kiss. Janie's and the grandmother's realization of the powerful force that soon will be awakened leads to Janie's first marriage. Janie is forced to marry a much older man who is unable fully to please her. Even though she is entering into a marriage, she is still taking the first steps toward her own self-empowerment or self-actualization. Janie enters into her second marriage by choice. She accepts the second marriage proposal because she hopes that she will be able to become more of herself with a man who promises her the world. Through these marriages, Janie begins to experience social, economic, and political empowerment. Yet, it is not until her final "marriage" that Janie is fully able to become self-aware. The liaison with Teacake allows Janie to break free from the rules of her small town and society, and she is able to swing her hair freely and to walk with her head high. Janie loves a younger man, dresses her body and hair as she pleases, and governs her home as she desires. Even though Janie accomplishes her social, economic, and political empowerment through the avenue of marriage, it does not make Hurston's text any less than a feminist text. Hurston recognizes the inability of most women to "escape" marriage. Marriage is a social, political and religious construct that has been embraced by most people. Hurston's brilliance lies in her ability to use a universal concept to build a feminist argument.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a feminist text written by a black woman and *Seraph on the Suwanee* is a feminist text also written by a black woman. Janie and Arvay are very different, yet in some ways they are still very similar. Arvay's empowerment is also realized through marriage, only one marriage, but still through a marriage. Arvay enters marriage with no clue about who she is; however, Arvay is sure of one thing, her

inferiority to her husband Jim and most other people. By the end of the text, Arvey realizes that she is Jim's equal and his partner and that she has an important role IN their marriage. In *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom*, Deborah G. Plant briefly mentions *Seraph on the Suwanee* throughout the text, usually as a way of analyzing Hurston's more famous works. In the chapter, "Politics of Self: Ambivalences, Paradoxes, and Ironies of Race, Color, Sex, Class, and Gender," Plant argues in agreement with Carby and other Hurston scholars that *Seraph on the Suwanee* is difficult to read as a feminist text due to Arvey's issues with inferiority and her ultimate decision to simply serve her family. Of course, Plant situates her main criticism in opposition to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She writes:

The difficulty for a feminist reading of *Seraph* is that *Seraph* is not a 'feminist' text. Neither is *Their Eyes*. Among the differing criteria for a feminist or womanist text, woman as an autonomous, self-determining, self-defining agent is a constant. Janie finds her voice and speaks, then is slapped into a silence that continues until Jody's death. The freedom Janie gains is circumscribed by Tea Cake's desire to dominate her. (168)

Even as Plant recognizes the feminist interpretations of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she challenges the idea of Janie as a strong woman character. Both Janie and Arvey remain in oppressed roles. Janie was able to escape her oppression through the deaths of her men, yet Arvey chooses to find a role for herself as a "servant" in her household because her man does not die. Hurston creates a different type of realization for Arvey than for Janie. Janie's oppression seems to be more of a cultural or societal oppression, while Arvey suffers from a self-imposed oppression. Hurston's two texts seem to argue that both external and internal forces can thwart the goals of feminism. The goals of feminism can be attacked by society and by one's own being. Even though the texts are racially different, they both possess universal appeal.

Ironically, Hurston never seemed to succeed at marriage. Various biographies detail various secret liaisons and marriages between Hurston and different men, yet none of the partnerships appeared to succeed. As a child, Hurston was unable to witness successful marriages, and in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a loosely biographical tale of Hurston's father, she portrays another doomed marriage. Hurston may have used the confines of marriage to create a feminist text, yet I question whether Hurston thought that a successful marriage was possible. It is difficult to gather a positive portrayal of marriage in any of Hurston's texts. Even in the play "Color Struck," the male and female main characters were unable to live "happily ever after." The only marriage that may even meet the requirements may be the marriage between Ham and his wife in the play "The First One." The two appear happy and continue to support each other even after Noah issues his curse of blackness. Whether or not Hurston positively portrays marriage does not negate the fact that she was able to use the idea of marriage to create strongly feminist texts. Even though *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been embraced as a feminist text, it has first and foremost been embraced as an African American text. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is not a racial text, and for that reason it has not been readily embraced.

Ironically, other black novelists who strayed from racial themes have received praise. Ann Petry, another black female of the African American literary canon wrote *Country Place*, a novel that also features white characters. Yet, in *The Negro Novelist: A Discussion of the Writings of American Negro Novelists 1940-1950*, Carl Milton Hughes writes,

A performance that exhibits a high level of competence in fictional writing is Ann Petry's *Country Place*. The author's second novel differs from her

first best selling, *The Street. Country Place* is her assertion of freedom as a creative artist with the whole of humanity in the American scene as her province. Petry's departure from racial themes and the specialized Negro problem adds to her maturity. (160)

Hughes' 1953 text is ironically positive in note. He uses a Freudian lens in which to analyze the text. His psychological approach endeared him to the novel. He writes, "Her transition from preoccupation with racial themes to the psychological novel with Florida poor whites as characters does not surprise her readers at all" (172). Sadly, Hughes' optimistic belief has been far from the truth. Readers and critics alike have accused Hurston of blatant betrayal of her people. Because race is an after-thought and not the focus of the novel, Hurston is able to subtly introduce racial equalizers. Hughes writes:

Hurston introduces a number of comments on American society in this novel. The scene at the railroad station is typical. The little white and Negro children, playing with affection and enjoyment together, rather than with friction or race consciousness, is a subtle comment on the paradox entailed in the adult world. Inhibitions here prevent the daily freedom of human relationships on a man-to-man basis. Another instance of this type of comment is the shrimping trip. When the men go out on the Atlantic ocean, Arvay meets Negro captains of ships with whom business men are congenial. In addition there are mixed crews, and people accept racial equality in the situation as a matter of course. These nuances are fraught with potent suggestions which the writer handles well. (175)

Hughes' glowing praise of Hurston's novel includes labeling her ending as "satisfactory" and her relaying of the idiom of Florida whites as "successful" (175-176). Hughes briefly expands upon Hurston's ability to capture this authentic speech of poor southern whites by writing:

The idiom which the Florida cracker uses becomes a problem in itself since it does not conform to the accepted pattern of cultivated, general, American speech. Hurston mounts successfully all of these difficulties with a characteristic finesse which has made her an outstanding American Negro author. . . . Hurston captures the flavor of ordinary speech in her dialogue in this novel. (176-177)

Hughes' praise of her dialogue skills is just one of many praises he heaps upon Hurston. He continues, "If the Negro novelists has not produced a classic during the forties, such productions as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ann Petry's *The Street* . . . Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* . . . make a bid for permanency in American literature" (277). Sadly, Hughes' glowing recommendation has not helped Hurston's text. The lack of acceptance and the disavowal of *Seraph on the Suwanee* by both the white and African American community, including literary scholars lie firmly in the belief by critics that the text lacks important social criticism or awareness. In the chapter, "Negro Fiction of the Depression" in the book *Negro Voices in American Fiction*, Hugh M. Gloster discusses the important Negro writers of the period, based on his estimation. His analysis of Hurston is primarily limited to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. In brief analysis of Hurston, he sums up the latter part of her career by writing, "In general, Miss Hurston is more interested in folklore and dialect than in social criticism. Neglecting the racial tensions which attracted many of those with whom she associated during the Negro Renaissance (sic), she usually presents Southern folk life without shame, rancor, or protest" (237). Gloster, like many other critics, failed to realize that Hurston's interest in dialect was social criticism.

CONCLUSION

Embracing and Adopting the Bastard Mulatto Texts

Hughes' glowing hopes for the future of *Seraph on the Suwanee* have yet to be recognized. In the "Introduction," to *Zora in Florida*, Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel explain that *Seraph on the Suwanee*'s "literary significance has yet to be determined" (xiv). In *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and Protocols of Race*, Claudia Tate argues in her "Introduction," that Emma Dunham Kelley's¹ *Megda* (1891), William E. B. Du Bois's *Dark Princess* (1928), Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) all break "the conventions of racial protest writing by expressing fantasies that do not involve the focus on racial oppression typically found in canonical black novels" (7). Tate goes on to explain that even though both Du Bois and Hurston are members of the African American literary canon, these marginal works do not share the same privilege (8). Due to the whiteness of the characters, Tate claims "*Seraph on the Suwanee* seems drastically to depart from the rich vein of black culture that had characterized all of Hurston's other works" (8). Tate clearly argues that racial protest has been consistent in its conventions, and regrettably, authors who have strayed from those conventions have seen their works excluded from literary canons. *Seraph on the Suwanee* would have had a greater chance of success if Hurston had told the exact same story with black characters who possessed black cultural characteristics. Tate further explains:

...I argue that *Seraph on the Suwanee*, by Zora Neale Hurston, critiques the sadomasochistic tendencies of romantic love and the essentialized

¹ Not a black author as previously assumed by Gates in his text, *Schomburg Library of 19th-Century Black Women Writers*.

constructions of race by encoding these issues in a story about female self-discovery and romantic fulfillment. *Seraph* employs the mask of white privilege to depict these critiques and to explore stories of class and gender oppression that are denied to the black female protagonists Isis of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (20)

Black female characters have not been able to enjoy the same privileges as white female characters. Williams' Cinderella tale that I mention in Chapter One and various other stories about black women clearly illustrate that the black heroine is not blessed with the opportunity of solely exploring "female self-discovery and romantic fulfillment," as Tate lists (20). The black heroine must also deal with other burdens. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins explains her Matrix of Domination which argues that black women face the multiple oppressions of racial, class, and gender labels (299). By creating a white heroine, Hurston was attempting to avoid the shackles of the Matrix of Domination; however, avoiding those shackles did not mean that her work did not have some type of protest element. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Hurston clearly protests societal beliefs regarding the correlations between race and speech. However, even if Hurston had not taken up this protest, why should she be restricted to always writing about issues of race, protest, or culture? It appears that in addition to the Matrix of Domination black women writers² have been prevented from simply writing stories about womanhood or love. Once again, the black woman is prevented from simply enjoying her "Prince Charming and Happily Ever After." Furthermore, Hurston's novel does take up a black cause, yet because her cause did not conform to the black protest mold, she has been accused of not protesting. As Tate clearly explains, racial protest has been consistent in its conventions, and regrettably, authors who have strayed from those

² I would argue black men as well.

conventions have seen their works excluded from literary canons. Tate lists other works that also address white themes. Some of the authors are better known than others, yet most of the texts are still not widely known or studied. She writes:

If there were only a few such novels of black characters, this problem would be inconsequential. However, the Schomburg series contains several additional 'white' or 'racless' works: Megda's sequel *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898) and two of the extant novels of Amelia E. Johnson – *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894). At the turn of the twentieth century, well-known black writers also wrote 'white' novels. These novels include, for example, Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901); and William Stanley Braithwaite's *The Canadian* (1901). (23)³

These novels, some by leading scholars have also enjoyed the same bastard mulatto role or obscurity as *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Dunbar's *The Uncalled*. Tate continues:

African American literary scholarship has typically dealt with such novels by relegating them to obscurity. However, our recent efforts to construct a more complete understanding of the literary culture of African Americans by recovering marginalized works demands that we ask new questions to determine what we mean when we say a work is 'black.'" (23)

The issue appears to be the same issue that Henry Louis Gates grapples with in his theoretical works. Again, there appears to have been constructed some unspoken but universally agreed upon societal and academic guideline for what is or is not a black work. Even though Christopher Douglass points out that leading African American Literature scholar Gates cannot clearly specify the rules of black literature, rules do exist.⁴ Tate explains that black works that were not well-received were erased from history by scholars and thus rapidly went out of print (29). Alice Walker worked

³ Tate is referencing the 1988 *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* by Oxford University Press. She analyzes the text *Megda* which she argues is like these other works in that "conventional racial paradigms do not fit this novel" due to its "white social context" (23).

⁴ See Chapter Two page four.

valiantly to restore Hurston to the literary world and is correctly credited in renewing scholars' interest in Hurston. In addition, she constantly sings Hurston's praise, yet in Lillie P. Howard's edited work *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*, which includes various essays that explore the works of these two authors, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is mentioned only once, and the mention is simply a part of the listing of Hurston's novels (8). Walker has been brutally direct in her dismissal of Hurston's last novel. Walker has chosen to embrace Hurston and her other works, yet she refuses to embrace or adopt Hurston's bastard mulatto text. As black characters become white, Hurston's visibility as an author fades.

It is necessary to embrace and adopt Hurston's bastard mulatto text as well as her literary ancestor Dunbar's work because until these works are analyzed and discussed just as their more famous works, African American literature is done a great disservice. How does this adoption and embracement affect "real life?" For illustration, in English literature, we, and by we, I mean academics, are often accused of dealing with an imaginary world that exists just on the pages of novels and short stories. We are often accused of being locked in our "Ivory Tower" and not cognizant of the real world and what is taking place outside of us and around us. One of the biggest pitfalls that I wanted to avoid was writing a dissertation that was read by one other academic who had some interest in linguistics and African American literature. My ultimate desire was to create a text that could be helpful in some way to people in general. How does this idea of class, language markers, and racial labeling relate to real life existence? How is it necessary to the everyday man? In the last several years, several events have transpired that make this dissertation not only relevant, but also necessary.

I would like to provide the following four media accounts to illustrate my point:

1. President Barack Obama's "Blaccent"

Following the 2008 historic election of African American Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America, political scandals regarding race politics were not surprising to the American public. In fact, certain racial furors that arose led to increased conversations based on false premises. In an editorial printed in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal Newspaper*, Washington Post writer Ruth Marcus led with the following headline: "Reid was dumb, but correct" (A8). I would hesitate to label anyone as dumb, but Marcus' argument about Reid's actions also appears to be significantly flawed. Marcus explains that in 2008, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid participated in an interview with Mark Halperin and John Heilemann for their book, *Game Change*. During the interview, Reid explained that Obama's chances of winning the election as a black man were higher because he possessed light-skin and did not have a "Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one" (A8). In essence, Reid was only stating what he, Marcus, and a majority of Americans believed regarding speech and race. Reid's admission of incredulity that the black President Obama does not possess any Negro Dialect tendencies directly supports the idea that most people incorrectly think that black people must all speak a certain way. Amusingly, Reid also argued that the President has the skills to "switch languages" – President Obama is able to speak "white English" and as Reid calls it "Negro English." It is also amusing that in Marcus' column, her first concern was with the fact that Reid used the word "Negro." She writes, "For anyone in public life to use the word 'Negro' in 2008 is beyond stupid. What was once polite has become demeaning ..." (A8). Marcus explains that the idea of a politician commenting on the race of another

politician is a bad idea politically, yet a few paragraphs over she readily admits that societal preoccupation with skin tones remain the norm. Ironically, Marcus in essence calls Reid “dumb” not for what he said because she agrees with what he said; instead, she calls him “dumb” because he SAID it. She writes:

But, to a degree, Reid’s assessment of the salience of Obama’s skin tone was on target. Not only do we not live in a colorblind society, we live in an exquisitely color-sensitive one. A 2007 study that used magnetic resonance imaging to examine brain reactions to photos of light-and-dark-skinned subjects found more activity within the amygdale, which reflects arousal to perceived threats, when dark-skinned faces were shown. (A8)

Marcus expands upon her scientific support of her skin color argument by writing that the study also showed that features that possess African qualities normally lead viewers to make stereotypes regarding the individual. I do not argue against her scientific support; however, I do highly question the last part of her editorial. Marcus ends her piece with an analysis of “Negro dialect.” She writes, “Well, do we all have to pretend we don’t know what Reid is talking about? There is a distinctly recognizable African-American voice and many African-Americans dial it up or down depending on the setting” (A8). Marcus even accuses the President of using a “blaccent” when convenient (A8). Either Marcus felt that her argument was so strong that she did not need evidence to support her last point or she could not find evidence that could do so because she does not provide any scientific support for this last major position. She simply recounts a humorous tale of how the President sounded Southern when he spoke in Southern states. Sadly, Marcus’ and Reid’s views have been the mainstream views or beliefs that have been readily accepted, but rarely tested or supported by evidence.

2. Black and White Hearts

On a smaller scale, but equally important, Methodist North Hospital in Memphis participated in a research trial as a part of The Equity Quality Improvement Collaborative, a band of eight hospitals who participated in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation investigative study. On January 13, 2010, National Public Radio's Memphis affiliate WKNO broadcasted a report about health disparities in cardiac care. According to the Reporter Eleanor Boudreau's transcript of the broadcast, "Heart disease is the number one killer in the U.S., and African-Americans are 30 percent more likely to die of it than whites." The broadcast, entitled "Heart of Inequality," announced that the initial study had to be discarded and redone because some of the patient demographic data was collected over the phone. The problem was not that the data was collected over the phone; rather, the problem was that instead of researchers asking patients to racially self-identify, the researchers simply assigned race based on the way the patients spoke. Again, due to beliefs about race-based language, important research regarding heart disease could have been inaccurate.

3. Wanted: Negro Translators⁵

Recently, the U.S. Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Administration, commonly referred to as the DEA, posted a job listing for Linguists for its Atlanta office. Nine positions for Linguists who could serve as Ebonics Translators were posted in May 2010; however, apparently notice of the posting did not become widely and publicly

⁵ Various media outlets reported this story including the local Memphis newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal* (August 28, 2010 A1). Various stories can be accessed at the following addresses:

1. <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/bizarre/justice-department-seeks-ebonics-experts>
2. <https://jobs.chenega.com/careers.aspx?adata=q4xIFCf9NY9BI8nB1mdR47tc9FektDdnnWWxXuncx%2bQdF6fPJvsUTfZD4mw1ooMO5FSX3Uq47NzF42LZUikbyjhkqU04Pur>

known until August 2010. Following the August media alerts in newspapers, on television, and on the internet, outrage ensued, and journalist, commentators, politicians, bloggers, and more all accused the Federal government of being racist in their job postings. A quick perusal of the DEA's list of languages clearly shows the language Ebonics firmly placed alphabetically between the Ebo and English languages. The DEA's language list assigns languages to countries instead of races, so Ebo is listed as Nigerian, Ebonics is listed as American, and English is listed as a worldwide language. The outraged individuals argued that the government was implying that the "broken English" spoken by black people in America was so bad that translators were needed for good communication to exist. Like most things that cause alarm, the job listings were immediately removed and apologies were issued. Ironically, in direct opposition to Marcus, Reid, and the hospital researchers, people argued that it was crazy to say that "black English" needed to be translated into "white" English, or in this instance the Standard English of the DEA Courts. Even though the DEA did not assign Ebonics to blacks, it was culturally assumed that Ebonics is only spoken by black people which led to the accusation of racism on the part of the DEA.

4. Middle-Class Queen to Be

As an interesting final observation, this idea of race and class markers based on speech patterns can be expanded to other countries. On November 16, 2010, Crown Prince William of the British monarchy announced that he will soon marry his longtime girlfriend, Kate Middleton. As I explained, in my Introduction, class consciousness in British society is a cultural norm. When Prince William announced that he would marry a "commoner," the media both inside and outside of Great Britain became obsessed with

the story of the soon to be “Cinderella Princess” primarily because she was not of “noble” birth. News outlets created special shows and programs focused solely on the royal married couple to be. However, the happy occasion was marred by class turmoil. Shortly after the announcement, these same news outlets began to analyze the pair’s class differences: “For some, the fiancée of Prince William is an ordinary woman from a hardworking family whose acceptance into the royal ‘firm’ shows a monarchy embracing modernity in a country where class is no longer a barrier. For others, media obsession with Middleton’s class background shows a country still ossified by status envy” (A8). It has been commonly reported that in the eyes of some Brits, the offspring of coal miners should not be married to royalty. It was clear that even as many hoped that the idea of the prince bucking normal traditions and choosing to marry a woman outside of the gilded cage of royalty would help expand the conversation regarding the often stultifying obsession with class that openly exists in Great Britain, they were to be sadly disappointed. However, the picture was not so simple. Yes, Middleton is a descendant of coal miners, but she is also the daughter of self-made millionaires who could afford to send her to the same schools as the Prince. Arguments about whether or not Middleton should be labeled a “middle-class lass” as the article put it have ensued. What makes this news story so fascinating is that the method by which the article chose to determine Middleton’s class was by analyzing her accent:

Middleton’s Marlborough education helped give her an ease around the upper classes and – on the evidence of her one television interview – polished manners and a genteel accent to match those of her royal fiancé. Accent is still a key class signifier; although, times have changed since those of humble origin had to shed all hints of working-class or regional origins if they hoped to rise in the world. Today it’s just as common to

find upper-class kids adopting ‘mockney’ – mock Cockney – accents in an attempt to seem cool. (A8)⁶

The news outlet argued that due to not only her family’s wealth, but also and more importantly due to her accent, Middleton was definitely no “middle-class lass” (A8). Great Britain has been openly forthright about its obsession with class, titles, and social order both historically and presently. The stance of Great Britain is in direct opposition to the stance of its neighbor across the ocean. American mentalities still wholeheartedly embrace the idea that class not only does not exist in society, but that if it does, it is within every possible reason extremely possible to “pull one’s self up by the bootstraps” and take one’s rightful place in a higher social or economic group. In addition, the idea that people mark individuals based on how they speak is exceedingly evidenced in national media.

These examples and many others support the argument that the study of Hurston’s novel and the racial protest issue that she addresses in *Seraph on the Suwanee* is very much important to how Americans interpret and deal with real life. The ability to label speech patterns as white or black has led to not only the dismissal of both Hurston’s and Dunbar’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *The Uncalled*, but also the perpetuation of ill-formed ideas about race, class, and speech. By removing the racial markers of speech such as AAVE, individuals are able to fully explore not only these works but also real life concerns such as heart studies and politics.

I would like to return to that story about the little child that I told in my Introduction. Once again the issue is that adults, politicians, columnists, medical

⁶ *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw, more famous in popular culture as the movie adaptation, *My Fair Lady*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison in the leading roles of Cockney speaking flower-girl and the phonetics professor, respectively, humorously details upward class mobility through the loss of lower class speech patterns.

researchers, are not moving past childish tendencies, childish labels, as they move into adulthood. If people are entering adulthood with the same ideas that Alice has as a seven-year-old child, and they are using these same labeling tools to mark races, chaos, political scandals, and incorrect health studies will continue to take place. This uninformed and unenlightened labeling causes a great deal of problems in society, problems that must be and should be avoided. How can this dissertation hopefully cause a change in society? I hope that it will challenge people to be willing to take that next adult step, that next adult leap, when they look at dialect, language patterns, or when and how they label people's speech. Race in and of itself is already a social divider. Why are additional dividers needed in society, and why must class or race labels be placed upon people's speech patterns? The idea of listening to someone speak and making a race based judgment is not only absurd, it is insulting. Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* is the perfect tool for tearing down the falsehoods that exist in society regarding speech patterns and accents. It is time for society to eschew class and speech markers based on race. Hurston's novel provides a literary and enjoyable means of sparking this much needed discussion and change.

How does one define African American literature? Is it literature written BY African Americans? Is it literature written ABOUT African Americans? Is it literature written FOR African Americans? Who determines what is or what is not African American literature? Should Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* be considered African American literature? Can Dunbar's *The Uncalled* or *The Love of Landry* be considered African American Literature? Can Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* be considered African American Literature? What are the guidelines for determining what is

or what is not African American Literature? I completely recognize the barrage of questions; however, I also recognize that when I examine the phrase “African American Literature,” I question how one can get to that title without first determining what African American literature is. I would argue that it can be anything written by, about, or for African Americans. Does my definition simply widen the meaning? It does, but I do not think that the widening of the door is necessarily a dire option. When I initially began the Ph.D. process, I was enrolled in an English program called Textual Studies. Many people, including me, questioned this term. As I began my journey into the world of Textual Studies, I learned that the term was chosen in hopes of widening the door of the world of literature. The term “Literature” has been used to guard the doors of English Departments, and it implies a loftiness that can be seen as exclusionary. In opposition, Textual Studies allows almost anything to be studied in a literary manner. Using the concept of Textual Studies, I would like to widen the door of African American Literature. Implying that Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not a part of African American Literature is like implying that a white person cannot teach African American literature. Just because one is not of the race does not mean that one cannot write about or for the race. In the same way, it is absurd to think that Hurston’s novels regarding white characters cannot be considered as both African American Literature and simply as American literature. As pointed out in Chapter One, the hue of an author plays a role in the author’s work, especially if the author’s hue is not white. In Henry Louis Gates’ *Signifying Monkey: Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, he analyzes the idea of what is and is not African American literature; however, Christopher Douglass

contends that Gates does not clearly present criteria for making the decision. Douglas writes:

The obvious question that Gates never quite addresses, however, is given the formal and performative criteria for inclusion in the African American canon according to his theory, are we ready to include in that canon racially non-black writers who meet those cultural criteria and to exclude from that canon racially African American writers who do not meet those cultural criteria? By such textual and non-biographical criteria, would it not be better, for example, to include Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, in a tradition of fiction about poor white evangelical Southern women that extends from such writers as Flannery O'Connor to Dorothy Allison . . . Is *Seraph's* anthropological insight about the interpenetration of black and white Southern vernaculars still within Gates's model. (314)⁷

The difficulty of classifying *Seraph on the Suwanee* is made even more difficult when even leading African American Literature scholars seem hesitant to delineate. Douglass expands upon his argument:

Thus we see that despite the proper ambition of the brilliant *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates too must collapse his carefully constructed cultural definition of African American literature back into the very racial basis of the tradition that he has fought so hard and so explicitly to avoid. And in doing so, he is part of our paradigm of literary multiculturalism that grounds purported cultural differences and identities in race. . . . Thus while Margaret Atwood, neither black nor American, cannot count as an African American novelist, she appears to have written an African American novel, albeit one without any black characters. That is what it means to clearly distinguish between race and culture in the way that Gates says we must. (317)

It is devastatingly clear that a clearer guideline regarding the demarcation of literature is needed because due to the lack of guidelines, works that do not easily fit the "normal" molds are often tossed aside. Claudia Tate writes, "Because it has no strategy for synthesizing the social and latent content, African American literary scholarship has relegated [W.E.B.] Du Bois's *Dark Princess*, [Richard] Wright's *Savage Holiday*, and

⁷ See Henry Louis Gates' *Signifying Monkey: Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, pages xxii-xxiii and 128.

Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* to its margins, even though their respective authors are otherwise famous" (180). The field of African American literature would be well-served if it broadened its understanding of what it should be. Both *The Uncalled* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* are firmly situated in African American literature and American literature and deserve greater prominence for the extraordinary feat they accomplished.

Both Hurston and Dunbar present two highly religious characters who struggle to find their own identity and self-worth. Neither author needed to include the character of race to convey the stories of inferiority or religious calling. The two novels are universal. When writing about black people, the race of the people eventually becomes a character in the text. The inclusion of the racial character would have significantly altered the texts because race and ultimately racism would have considerably affected the novels' characters. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes concludes, "We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves (1314). Dunbar's and Hurston's attempt and success at writing novels about poor whites in America is their badge of individuality and courage. Hurston followed Dunbar up the mountaintop to proclaim her freedom as a writer and as an African American. As her literary ancestor, he provided the literary foundation for *Seraph on the Suwanee*. There is absolutely no reason why Hurston should have been limited to writing only about black people.

My goal has been to situate my unique criticism in the large and impressive body of Hurston scholarship with the hope that it will spur scholars to read and study her marginalized work. In addition, I hope that my brief analysis of Dunbar will also spur Dunbar scholars to re-examine his belittled "white novels." Dunbar's *The Uncalled*

provides a chronological and respectful frame for my analysis of Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* because he wrote his novel featuring white characters first. My argument is two-fold, but the arguments are codependent and symbiotic in nature. Both Dunbar and Hurston understood the use of language, and I am confident that they made the choice to write their novels to break commonly held but untrue beliefs about race and language. They were both criticized for writing their "white" novels, yet their treatment has been inequitable. In addition, the language that has been used to label and study the dialect of *The Uncalled* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* is flawed and a better term must be used. Impoverished Deep Southern Vernacular English (IDSVE) provides a better label for the dialect used by the poor white characters in the novels.

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