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The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston by
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The St. Petersburg Pier in 1895.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Arsenault writes with an unmistakable stylistic flair that carries the reader through St. Petersburg's absorbing history. Arsenault has placed the magnetic attraction of St. Petersburg, and of Florida generally, within a persuasive interpretive context, and he has nicely balanced the general and the specific. This well-researched and finely written study is both a visual treat and a pleasure to read. At the same time, it makes a very important contribution to modern Florida history.

Raymond A. Mohl

The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston. By Karla F. C. Holloway. New York. 1987. Greenwood Press. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 127. Cloth. \$29.95.

The Literary History of the United States, originally published in 1946 and subsequently revised and augmented several times, once offered authoritative pronouncements upon major and minor American writers for students of American literature, generalists and specialists during the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy years. It examined the career of Zora Neale Hurston in a brief but complimentary paragraph calling her "In prose depicting the humor of Negro life the outstanding writer of her race. . . . [A]n anthropologist as well as a creative writer. . . . When she describes the life of colored people in Florida, she never loses humanity and zest in the quest of science." No one-paragraph comment would suffice today for Hurston in any self-respecting

overview of American literature between the two world wars. She is clearly a writer who has rightly benefited, critically, from the new emphasis upon restructuring the canon of valued American writers through placing greater emphasis on significant works by women and by African-American authors.

A recent “Call for Papers” for a “Zora Conference” at Embry-Riddle University requests investigations of “Zora as folklorist... novelist... short story writer... as feminist/iconoclast/politician/civil rights worker... as hoodoo doctor... as Florida fisherwoman....” Actually, in her brief book, Karla Holloway deals with all these subjects except the last, but usually not in a way to benefit general readers immediately. Hers is a text – to employ one of her favorite terms – intended by the way it is written for trained readers with skills in anthropological, linguistic and deconstructionist theory. Eventually her insights, many of which are keen, may trickle down to readers less expert in the somewhat esoteric combination of academic territories over which she ranges to produce her commentary. In some ways this is a pity, for when she writes plainly she is shrewd in analyzing areas of considerable interest to good readers of ordinary training and preparation.

One of Holloway’s best passages examines the duplicity with which Hurston felt she had to live – that perhaps as a black woman was forced upon her – in order to create. Holloway wisely says of an incident when Hurston had been dragged through the mud of courts and the seeming enmity of the black press that “Her friends had been so thoroughly deceived by the persona Hurston created for them, the strong-willed, theatrical, joking woman, that they were unable to pierce beneath this veneer to comprehend the seriousness and hurt of this incident [to]... a woman accused by the very community she sought to celebrate in her fiction and in her research” (28).

The heart of Karla Holloway’s book investigates narrative strategy in Hurston’s fiction and her extremely sophisticated use of dialect. As Holloway explains in her helpful preface, she explicates how Hurston’s “narrative voice. . . speaks of, through, for and in a metaphysical blending with characters’ voices,” and “Using the concept of dialect. . . focuses on the effects of adornment, using linguistic theory as its genesis and a structural interpretive mode to achieve its results” (xvi). Throughout, Holloway takes pains to indicate the African and African-American roots of Hurston’s art. Her observations seem more penetrating when dealing with the early fiction such as *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) than with the somewhat later *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) or *Seraph on the Suwannee* (1948). The book seems cramped by the compression perhaps imposed upon it by its series’ formula. Many sentences such as “The identity implicit in this prepositional structure clearly illustrate that we must physically claim the image to meet the text’s challenge” (36) and “The black text that signifies takes its impetus from this linguistic activity and internalizes the process until it speaks to itself” (37) cry out for coherent expansion. Some matters such as Hurston’s specific knowledge and detailed practice of anthropology might be set forth. The book is remarkable in striking bright sparks whose afterglow it would be pleasing to see nurtured into greater illumination.

Jack B. Moore