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### Between Zora Neale, Hamlet, And A “Dope Black Woman”: Revisiting Language Ideology Through Alysia Harris’s Performance Poetry

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*Between Zora Neale, Hamlet,  
and a “Dope Black Woman”:  
Revisiting Language Ideology Through  
Alysia Harris’s Performance Poetry*

by Jamie A. Thomas

“It’s hard for me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it. And then again Ah’m hard of understandin’ at times.”

(“Phoeby” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, 1937)

“Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged the Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley (*sic*). Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes.”

(Richard Wright, 1937)

“High poetry.”

(Mary Helen Washington, foreword to 1990 edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*)

“So, how many of you liked *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?”

Having come to the stage only minutes before, poet Alysia Harris would soon be performing her poem “Southern”. But first, she began with a brief anecdote. As it turned out, the question had come about a decade earlier, from her high school English teacher, who had assigned *Hamlet* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for summer reading.



Quickly sensing in the audience's quiet a potential unfamiliarity with the latter title, Alysia spoke fluidly into the free-standing microphone.

"It's by Zora Neale Hurston."

Then, her face suddenly brightened by a wide smile, she charmed from the waist up with a momentarily joyful dance as she confidently declared, "Linguistic anthropologist—dope Black woman!"

She was describing Zora Neale.

Because of how the small-town characters of Zora Neale Hurston's (1891-1960) novels had transported me to places foreign to my urban upbringing, but intimately familiar in the near-tactile texture of their speech and custom, Zora was someone I felt I knew—someone I, too, would fondly describe and praise as "dope." She had been stylish, fearless, and unapologetic. And though she had surmounted the Great Depression by documenting African American voices and cultural lifeways in her creative capacities as an anthropologist, folklorist, and writer, she had ultimately died in obscure poverty.

One of Zora's manuscripts, *Baracoon*, which features her interviews with Cudjo Lewis (born Oluale Kossola), the last man to survive kidnapping in Dahomey and forced (and illegal) deportation to Alabama for enslavement, languished with publishers for eighty years until 2018 because her choice to center his nonstandard speech patterns throughout was deemed unpalatable. Nevertheless, Zora persisted in amplifying the voices of survivors of both slavery and Jim Crow. In capturing the ways of speaking that breathed life into the local medicine, ritual, storytelling, poetics, and social relationships of southern African Americans, she crafted her ethnography around the communicative landscape of the people she encountered. Zora was as much of an artist of the written word as she was a custodian of living speech and its "speakerly text" (Gates, Jr. 154-203).

## SOUTHERN LANGUAGE IDIOLOGIES

"So I raised my hand," Alysia recalled of that day when Zora's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had become the subject of attention in her high school English literature class. "And I think one other person in the class raised their hand."

From behind the mic, Alysia lifted her left hand in a reenactment of that classroom moment years before. Today, however, her hand raised with the full force of the doctoral degree she had since completed on the semantics of African American Language (AAL), and the humble dignity of her widening international profile as a writer, poet, and spoken word artist.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the year before her participation in *Disrespected Literatures*, Alysia Harris published her first chapbook of poetry entitled, *How Much We Must Have Looked Like Stars to Stars* with Finishing Line Press.



Fig. 1 Poet Alysia Harris describes Zora Neale Hurston's impact to the audience gathered for the *Disrespected Literatures* Symposium at Swarthmore College, on April 4, 2017, in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

Adjusting her pair of cat's eye glasses, Alysia slid wisps of shoulder-length waves behind her with a slight gesture, and continued to address her audience.

"Oh, how many of you guys like *Hamlet*?" Alysia spoke again with the voice of her former high school teacher. "And the majority of the class raised their hands. And when she asked, 'Why didn't you like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?' they were like, 'Well, I couldn't read it,' 'I didn't understand it,' 'It wasn't intelligible to me.'"

"And I was just struck by that fact," Alysia attested, "Because I was like, 'You don't speak Shakespearean English either, but somehow you dealt with the complexity of trying to understand what was being said.' Right?"

The *Right?* had been directed toward us in the audience, as a way of inviting us to share in her disappointment.

For Alysia, poetry was a genre for the page, and also of the stage, where both poet and audience could bear witness to one another's humanity, and close the distance often fostered by the written word. This Tuesday, April 4, 2017, at the main event of *Disrespected Literatures: Poets of Oppressed Languages Take the Stage* at Swarthmore College, as Alysia lifted up the name of Zora Neale Hurston, the moment resonated something magical. All at once, her praise for Zora's literary genius paid homage to African American women, and to the language that flowed across Black cultural spaces, while acknowledging the continued marginalization of Black culture in the U.S.

More than 50 years after Zora Neale Hurston's death, and 44 years after author Alice Walker rescued her from an unmarked grave in Florida by rallying with other writers, literary scholars, and Black feminists to get her works back into print, I felt seen in Alysia's description of this "dope Black woman." And in my mind's eye, I saw back to my 12- or 13-year-old self, when I had found a copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the bookshelf at home, alongside *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, also by Zora.

I had initially been shocked as the narration in *Their Eyes* gave way to prose that demanded closer reading. That was when I discovered that Zora's words could be even better enjoyed when read aloud. Then, the voices they carried commanded both page



and stage, and I could see in the characters of Janie and Joe the fraught struggle of a woman married to a man that could not bear to see her as her own person. Janie desired to live as a 'carefree Black woman' and pursue the great loves of her life, but found herself alienated by racialized and gendered institutions, personal tragedy, and small-town tradition. Like Zora, Janie was both of her time and before her time.

They sat in judgment. Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song (Hurstons 2).

\* \* \*

"Wid you heah, Ah oughtn't tuh hafta do all dat lookin' and searchin'. Ah done told you time and time agin tuh stick all dem papers on dat nail! All you got tuh do is mind me. How come you can't do lak Ah tell yuh?"

"You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin' Ah see!"

"Dat's 'cause you need tellin'," he rejoined hotly. "It would be pitiful if Ah didn't. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves."

"Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!"

"Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one" (Hurstons 66-67).

Why should I have been surprised that those words could occupy a literary page? After all, those were the voices of my cousins from the southern states of Texas and Georgia and Florida, where my parents had once lived. My childhood had been illuminated by what my parents had brought with them as adults to California, in bedtime stories about a fictional "Mister Git'chem" and regular observations about the things "we been done had" or "we ain't finna do." In that way, I had grown up embodying both AAL and mainstream American English, and encountering Zora's works enabled me to see each of my languages dancing on the page. The AAL she depicted was a bit different from my own, in terms of specific vocabulary, but the intonational patterns I used, and grammatical features like *done* as a past tense marker, were all there.<sup>2</sup>

"But students didn't want to do that work," Alysia continued, "For understanding the characters that were at work in Zora Neale Hurston's book."

The implication was clear. Racialized language attitudes among the students in Alysia's high school English literature class were reifying the persistently narrow scope of American literature. By a show of hands, and their discourses of dismissal, Alysia's peers sought to exclude Zora's novel from the realm of literature, even though it had been included in their curriculum. Though *Their Eyes* had not been part of my high school's curriculum, the literary reader we had in the 6th grade did include the influential poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), whose achievements had

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Green discusses linguistic analysis of the talk by characters in Zora Neale Hurston's works, particularly in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, as part of her text *African American English*, 178-185.



stirred schools across the U.S. to adopt his name; my own mother graduated from Dunbar High School in West Texas. Dunbar's poetry featured lyrical phrases in AAL and mainstream American English, as in this excerpt from his "Sympathy," first published in 1899:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
    But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—  
I know why the caged bird sings! (Dunbar 102)

More than half a century later, Dunbar's poem inspired Maya Angelou (1928-2014), yet another wonderfully gifted African American poet, to title her celebrated 1969 autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. However, Dunbar's poetry was never discussed in my elementary school class because my elementary school teacher refused to teach "that junk." Dunbar remained a racialized subject within my teacher's view, and therefore his exalted cultural expression did not qualify as literature.

## DIALECT AND DISRESPECT

Hearing Alysia on stage, I couldn't help but think that had Zora's books been part of my school curriculum, they could have complemented our reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, or helped me stomach the weary disconnect I found in *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Crucible*, or *The Sound and the Fury*. But for all of the contemporary and posthumous acclaim Zora received, White critics centered upon her use of "Negro dialect" and "idioms peculiar to the Negro" as aspects that made her stories entertaining and quaint, with "caricatures" of "this primitive people" (Felton 4-5). The term 'dialect' surfaces in these criticisms as a derision reserved for those languages and ways of speaking innovated by less empowered communities, even as its linguistic and academic definition may refer to any and all languages, each of which constitute a particular form of language.

However, some Black critics also faulted Zora's portrayals as little more than unidimensional entertainment for Whites. Celebrated author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Richard Wright was a contemporary of Zora, but saw her priorities clashing with his own. Across the ways of speaking, mannerisms, and tribulations that populated *Their Eyes*, he could only see "the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh" (*sic*), which played to "that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears" (Wright 17).

Wright desired for Zora's characters to speak with the spellings of mainstream American English, and to mount overt challenges to the White Supremacist order. However, Zora was intent on depicting the compromises and hardships of a Southern life that neutered the verbal jujitsu and figurative "signifying" of Black speakers with the harsh, punitive authority of whiteness. Her novels illuminated a patriarchy that



constricted the dreams of Black women through intersectional oppression experienced in the racialized and gendered circumstances of marriage, from the porch steps, to the kitchen, and a courtroom consisting of an all-White, all male jury.

Years later, it was in recognizing the overlapping and intersecting ways that Black women—like Zora’s protagonist in *Their Eyes*—experience exclusion from U.S. legal protections centering White women and/or Black men, that legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the theory of intersectionality in 1989. Crenshaw’s notion of intersectional oppression draws upon documented court opinions and judgments that deny the additive and coordinated impact of both racism and sexism on outcomes for Black women (Crenshaw 139-67). Using this framework Crenshaw has, for example, assessed the outcome of the 1976 Missouri lawsuit *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*. In that case, the Court responded to evidence the car manufacturer systematically fired its Black women employees in 1970, by maintaining that because the company had hired women employees (these being exclusively White women) prior to 1964, a time during which it did not hire any Black women, there had been no subsequent discrimination on the basis of sex (that affected Black women). The Court also dismissed claims of combined race and sex discrimination, because it reasoned this would afford Black women more protection than they were entitled to under the recent Civil Rights Act (1964), even as the Court’s own discourse firmly anchored the notion of ‘women’ to whiteness:

[P]laintiffs have failed to cite any decisions which have stated that Black women are a special class to be protected from discrimination. [...] Thus, this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both (as quoted in Crenshaw 141).

Following Crenshaw’s contributions, intersectionality has become an increasingly adopted concept and terminology for examining Black women’s experiences, and the social exclusion and legal vulnerability that persist across overlapping categories of discrimination in the U.S. and around the world. To include intersectionality within discussions of linguistic inequality, as I am doing here, is to intentionally view race, sex, and gender as inextricably linked to the powerful language and discourse that constructs them as accomplices in discrimination, poverty, and death.

It therefore becomes all the more significant that rather than silence and disappear her Black female protagonist, Zora chose to give Janie a voice in *Their Eyes*, and illustrate how that voice transformed under the weight of its ‘embodied difference,’ a concept that I have written of previously to describe how our subjectivities are created in relation to how society perceives our bodies: “Filtered through expectations of gender, beauty, intelligence, class, age, and (dis)ability, visible markers of difference, as captured within the body’s biology, behavior, and appearance, can be regarded as *embodied*” (Thomas 5-6, emphasis in original). These embodied differences are present towards the end of *Their Eyes*, when Janie is forced to testify in a courtroom for her own self-defense. They are also key to the novel’s opening scene, which chronicles Janie’s return to her hometown after surviving her wrongful prosecution for murder. During this scene, we see Janie choose to reject “figural, speakerly mastery in favor of a privatized sense of self-determination and action” (Bond 215). That is, Zora constructs



in Janie a character whose variability in voice reflects a Black woman's embodied struggle for self-determination.

Indeed, the language of Zora Neale Hurston's novels and non-fiction so affected and challenged others within the literary and publishing establishment with its unwillingness to conform to standard (hegemonic) convention, that her innovation in the Black female story went largely underappreciated during her lifetime. So strong were (and are) people's beliefs about what *counts* as language, and *how* words are to be spelled if they deserve being said or written at all, that Zora's marginalization illustrates how tightly bound concepts of literature are to our ideologies of language. How fitting, then, that she should be mentioned in the context of 'disrespected literatures.'

"And so," Alysia summed her observations, "That was when I was like, "Wow, like, the way Southerners talk—the way Black folks talk, isn't worth wrestling with, isn't worth finding truth in."

The language ideology that Alysia described, through its differing impact on the reception of *Hamlet* and *Their Eyes*, was not just about language. As linguistic anthropologists, sociocultural linguists, and others continue to show, language ideologies reflect processes of social domination that "envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology" in ways that may coerce assent through overt, or otherwise subtler, means (Woolard and Schiefflin 56). This is how literature, and the *designation* of literature, comes to have its power within the West and the world at large, as an extension of societal control over the varied cultural systems of meaning that continuously and dynamically emerge in everyday local language, speech, and communication in ways that often defy the gravity of the written word.

In the past 50 years, African American linguists have championed Black cultural speech patterns through research that explores the continuities and variability of African American Language's (AAL) stylistic, syntactic, lexical, phonological, and semantic contours, as well as the forms of imitation and Mock AAL that abound in popular media.<sup>3</sup> This labor has uncovered a great irony persistent within linguistics, namely, that inasmuch as AAL has become the most studied language of U.S. linguistics since the 1960s, the numbers of African Americans that have been fostered by the academy remain astonishingly low.<sup>4</sup> This "unequal partnership," as linguist John Rickford has described it, also bears connection with Alysia Harris' own experiences as a writer and linguist (Rickford 186).

In a later interview recorded as part of the *Disrespected Literatures* events, Alysia shared how the language ideologies of others in her MFA program conspired to judge and constrain her expression:

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Geneva Smitherman, "Black Language and the Education of Black Children: One Mo Once." Also see Lisa Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, as well as Mary Bucholtz and Qiwana Lopez, "Performing Blackness, Forming Whiteness: Linguistic Minstrelsy in Hollywood Film," and Maggie Ronkin and Helen E. Karn, "Mock Ebonics: Linguistic Racism in Parodies of Ebonics on the Internet."

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, John Russell Rickford, "Unequal Partnership: Sociolinguistics and the African American Speech Community." See also, the joint statement by several linguists active in the professional association, the Linguistic Society of America: Anne H. Charity Hudley et al., "Linguistics and Race: An Interdisciplinary Approach Towards an LSA Statement on Race."





I remember people...in my MFA program, telling me—I used some kind of dialect in a poem, and they were like, “Well, can you be more uniform throughout this poem? You’re using both standard and nonstandard, and like, for the nonstandard to be authentic, you have to use it more.” And I was like, “No (side eye), like variation is like, a part of my dialect.”<sup>5</sup>

As a result of this experience and others like it, Alysia takes note of how performing the ownership of her dialect through her embodied performance pushes back on prescriptive formulations of her identities.

In certain ways, people are only interested in one kind of narrative of womanness, or one kind of narrative of Blackness, and one kind of narrative of Southernness, or whatever—Midwesternness. And if you don’t fit—or your literature, or your experience, or the way that you write, doesn’t fit that particular understanding of the way that people want to market, or think about, that particular identity group, then sometimes people don’t count you among the writers of that group.<sup>6</sup>

The social exclusion Alysia describes contributes to her subjectivity as an African American woman invested in affirming the works of predecessors like Zora Neale Hurston. At the same time, what Alysia carries with her is the additive impact of the many signals she has received, across formal schooling, especially, that vary in their affirmation of her “authenticity” and linguistic variation.

In the U.S., linguistic differences have long been weaponized against speakers and writers from marginalized groups, particularly through formal education. Daily corrective judgments, limited or blocked access to bilingual instruction and resources, and (in)visibility as a multilingual or multidialectal speaker (and not just simply someone unable to speak in the dominant speech pattern), each inform how minoritized students learn to value or disregard the language(s) they bring from home.

For critical sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, the experience of American formal education before the Civil Rights Era was highly oppressive; her best survival strategy was that of silence:

Thus effectively silenced, I managed to negotiate success in the educational system by keeping my mouth shut—until, that is, as a young adult in college, I had to take a speech test to qualify to go into teaching. In those days, many teacher training programs in several states had such tests, which required you to pronounce lists of words and use the grammar of extemporaneous discourse that was characteristic of middle-class, Northern, white, male speech (Smitherman 97).

Having arrived to college as the under-resourced daughter to rural 1940s African American sharecroppers (tenant farmers), because of her use of AAL, albeit as a masterful writer in Standard English, Smitherman was classified as having a speech impediment (Smitherman 97). Subsequently required to enroll in a speech therapy class, Smitherman found herself among others whose language abilities cast them

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<sup>5</sup> Alysia Harris interview with Martin Haswell, April 2017, at 3:41 minutes.

<sup>6</sup> Alysia Harris interview with Martin Haswell, April 2017, at 5:34 minutes.



outside of the scope of whiteness—college students for whom “they speech ain’t too cool either” (as she describes it in AAL) (Smitherman 98). This included other speakers of AAL, as well as Spanish-speaking students, and a couple of White students, who Smitherman retrospectively regards as a speaker of Appalachian English and Bronx, New York City dialect, respectively.

Years later, after passing the speech test and becoming further empowered through her studies as a PhD linguist, Smitherman joined with other emerging African American activists in turning academic attention toward the systematic innovations of AAL, and the punitive impacts of language ideologies in U.S. schools. Smitherman served as an expert witness in the 1979 Michigan court case *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District*, which affirmed that “Black English” (AAL) was a distinct home language of students underserved by the school district. The *King v. Ann Arbor* court decision would ultimately encourage the Oakland Unified School District of California to adopt a 1996 resolution similarly affirming “Ebonics” (AAL) as a distinct home language of many of its students, with a goal of directing bilingual education resources toward improving and expanding literacy programs and teacher training.

Though the Oakland Resolution had been painstakingly informed by the evidence-based research of several prominent linguists, mixed public response reflected politicized discourses of dialect and disrespect, and an unwillingness—even among some African Americans—to view the innovations of African American language and culture as more than a collection of ungrammatical slang or Broken English. In fact, some of the most vocal criticism of the school district’s resolution came from beyond California, from Senator Joe Lieberman (Connecticut), Governor Mario Cuomo (New York), and Reverend Jesse Jackson, a civil rights leader known for his emotionally affective uses of African American speech styles, including Black preaching style (Britt 216).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, on a December 1996 airing of the nationally televised news commentary show *Meet the Press*, Jackson said that the Oakland School District had made a laughing stock of itself, and rather derisively described the language issue through comparison to basketball, a sport often racially linked to African Americans:

“We demand that the goals be 10 feet high and the [basketball] rims have the same circumference,” [Mr. Jackson] said. “We’re not going to teach basketball down and don’t teach English and science and literature down” (Lewis 1).

These details are important in illustrating how language ideologies, and the ideas of appropriateness they inform, guide the coordinated racialization of language across education, literature, politics, and popular culture, in ways that linguists are also describing as *raciolinguistic* (Alim 3). Vocalized by public figures like Rev. Jackson, operationalized as ‘speech tests’ in college requirements, or surfacing in the dispreferring of particular literatures, these raciolinguistic ideologies “produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Black preaching style, see Erica Britt, “‘Can the Church Say Amen’: Strategic Uses of Black Preaching Style at the State of the Black Union.”

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engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white (*sic*) subjects” (Flores and Rosa 150).

This is why it is significant that Alysia Harris publicly affirms herself as a speaker of AAL through her performance, and draws upon her studies of linguistics in her discussion of language ideology and language discrimination. Alysia’s response to detractors, and those most comfortable with monolingual and monolithic presentations of identity and artistry, is to reaffirm her self-identifications: “I’m definitely a Black woman writer,” she says confidently, “Black Southern woman writer.”

When asked about her style of delivery in performance, Alysia responds by describing her interest in developing a candid communicative frame while on stage as an act of resistance that asserts her right to speak in ways she hopes implicates those around her.

I tend to like, try to be very honest with people on stage—even just talking in between poems, or in poems, and I confess a lot of things that have gone on in my life publicly, because, I think it has real power for people who are dealing with like, shame, and silence, and stigma, to feel the permission to be able to speak...<sup>8</sup>

This confirms that the talk she delivers outside of the formal boundaries of her poems is also an intentional part of her performance and work to redress the minoritization and marginalization she herself intimately knows.

## LITERATURE’S IMPLIED AUDIENCE

Having grown up in British-governed India, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has reflected on a childhood in schools that designated British English as literature’s exclusive vehicle. She describes how in teaching English literature, “the goal is at least to shape the mind of the student so that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied reader of the literary text, even when that is a historically distanced cultural fiction” (Spivak 36). In Spivak’s case, this entailed copious doses of Rudyard Kipling’s colonial writings on South Asia and Southeast Asia, to the exclusion of Indian authors in English, Sanskritized Bengali, or colloquial Bengali, among other languages—even as the figure of the Indian woman in these literatures was highly constrained by patriarchal desires of both British colonial and Indian origin.

This reveals that the designation of literature (perhaps through its approval for publication, or its inclusion in school curricula), along with the teaching of literature, participates in a process of social formation. In other words, “the problem of the teaching of English literature is not separated from the development of the colonial subject” (Spivak 41). ‘Literature’ and language therefore share an entangled power, consolidated within the publishing house and the classroom alike, that can have readers limiting their own female emancipation, or identifying with a culture they have been trained to see as their paternal superior.

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<sup>8</sup> Alysia Harris interview with Martin Haswell, April 2017, at 14:34 minutes.



Spivak's notion of the implied reader is meaningful within the context of Alysia's high school peers, who viewed themselves as intended and appropriate readers of *Hamlet* but not of *Their Eyes*. The students' cultural continuity with *Hamlet's* centuries-old Elizabethan vernacular is renewed each time the play is framed as a fount of Western sensibility and epistemology. This Eurocentric ideology constructs the 20<sup>th</sup>-century prose of *Their Eyes* as distant from mainstream American (and Western) identity, such that its implied reader is also more narrowly defined as marginal and racialized. In essence, the same teaching that creates readers of *Hamlet*, by convincing them of the need to draw closer to the historically and culturally distant language and custom of Shakespeare's context, may also teach a hegemonic dismissal of other patterns of cultural value, including those ways of speaking that are the reader's own.

And whereas Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes*, had endeavored to live her life more fully as her narrative wore on, Ophelia, perhaps the most memorable female character of *Hamlet*, chose to drown herself, a fact confirmed by her gravediggers.

Gravedigger: It must be *se offendendo*, it cannot be else. For here Lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drowned herself wittingly (Shakespeare, Act V, Scene I, 377).

Such was the demise of Ophelia, that it consolidated the play's message about a woman's worth. This was also stated most eloquently by Hamlet himself, when he dismissed Ophelia by cursing her—"Get thee to a nunnery, farewell"—and insulting her female form as man's eternal taunt.

Hamlet: If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go—and quickly too. Farewell.

I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no mo marriage (Shakespeare, Act III, Scene I, 283-284).

With disjunctures such as these in mind, Spivak suggests a radical decolonizing of literature through its critical teaching, to "challenge the contrast often made, in 'Western' colonial discourse studies, between 'Western' literature as 'central,' and third world literature—in this case 'Indian' (!)—as 'marginal' or 'emergent'" (Spivak 41). This sentiment was encapsulated by the *Disrespected Literatures* event, in its aim to visibilize the oral, written, and signed works of figurative and lyrical cultural expression that continue to be marginalized by mainstream conceptions of both language and



literature. In its takeover of the performance stage, the event critiqued the notion of literature, by *using* literature as a vehicle for social and cultural commentary on structural oppression.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have focused on the anecdote Alysia Harris shared in the preface to her performance of “Southern” at *Disrespected Literatures*, ahead of two other poems she delivered that evening, “Parade” and “On Deconstructing the Myth of Blackness.” I have autoethnographically examined language ideology as it surfaces in her discourse, drawing upon linguistic anthropology, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies.

Through her references to Zora Neale Hurston, I witnessed in Alysia Harris’ stage presence and embodied discourse a celebration of the critical joy of ‘disrespected literatures.’ Describing Zora as both a “linguistic anthropologist” and “dope Black woman,” Alysia affirmed the cultural innovation and agency of Black women, in concert with the empirical contributions of linguistic anthropology. Altogether, Alysia spoke back to the intersectional oppression that seeks to marginalize and erase her own literary contributions to what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall has described as “the culture we never see, the culture we don’t think of as cultivated,” which is the people’s culture (Hall 9).

Coming together across cultural and linguistic differences, the participants in *Disrespected Literatures*, including poets Alysia Harris, Melissa Castillo-Garsow, Fernanda de Araujo Machado, Margaret Noodin, Velma Pollard, and linguistic Donna Jo Napoli acknowledge what Spivak has also outlined, that:

Literature might be the best complement to ideological transformation [...] literature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for the slow transformation of the mind (Spivak 38).

Though Alysia never tells us whether her high school peers ever grew to appreciate *Their Eyes*, she does express how much those events continue to impact her craft.

“And so, that just like—I think that’s always colored my understanding of what I do.”

This aesthetic sensibility frames the presentation of her performance poetry, encouraging audiences to grasp the import, as she does, of the epistemological value of disrespected language and literature, and the Black female voice. When asked in a later interview about how her craft has evolved over the years, Alysia remarks, “Joy is necessary for sustained resistance,” and that, “finding moments of joy, and gratefulness, and gratitude,” helps her build a sustainable practice.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alysia Harris interview with Martin Haswell, April 2017, at 10:01 minutes.



She carries this gratitude with her on stage, as she confronts the lingering tensions that most challenge society: "So this first poem I'm going to do is called 'Southern,'" she said, "And it's about the really tense relationship of growing up in the South. It's not necessarily from my perspective, but it's about all the different kind of histories that are at play in this place."

And as Alysia launched into her formal poem, I was struck by the realization that everything she had said leading up to "Southern" had offered us a critical joy, itself a kind of dope poetry that like Zora's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, implores us to value not only the beauty of diverse linguistic representation, but also the structural power and social agency that it is often excluded from.

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