

Region and the Short Form in American Literature: Symposium in Honor of Jochen Achilles  
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Abstract

Erik Redling, Halle-Wittenberg

“Literary Anthropology and Dialect Writing: Zora Neale Hurston’s Recordings of Regional and Urban Vernacular Speech in Her Short Fiction”

Typically, critics employ the expression “speakerly text” coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his influential study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Criticism* (1989) to emphasize that Zora Neale Hurston’s dialect texts such as *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) are firmly grounded in “the black oral tradition” and “the tradition of ‘signifyin’” (Gates 181). In my presentation, I will add Hurston’s training as an anthropologist (under Franz Boas) to the discussion of her dialect writings in order to highlight the ways in which she records and explores different linguistic varieties of black vernacular speech in her literary (short) fiction: Combining her literary talent with her anthropological education, Hurston embarked on a journey from New York to Florida, then to the Caribbean (Jamaica and Haiti), and finally back to New York. Her purpose was to record “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (a title of one of Hurston’s essays) in rural and urban black speech, but also to counter the objectifying tendencies of the scientific approach to black vernacular language with her creative use of subjective literary techniques, making her in effect a “literary anthropologist” (cf. Harney, Mikell, and Raynaud).

**Works Cited**

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