

Strange Talk? Practices and Politics of Dialect in US Literature and Media

Panel Organizers

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This panel is dedicated to the use and the perception of dialect in US literature and audio(visual) media. Transcribed dialects are a curious case of writing down sound, creating sound through writing. Dialect, as Erik Redling has argued, “is by definition a written text that pretends not to be a text. It imagines itself to be an oral performance in spite of its ‘written-ness’” (17).¹ Dialect is an oral performance that has a distinctive sonic quality, as it immediately pins speakers in specific positions, be it of class, race, gender, ethnicity, place and region. In his seminal work on the politics of dialect in regional literature, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Literature in Gilded Age America* (1999), Gavin Jones, for example, questioned the simplified conclusion that dialect in late nineteenth-century US literature was abused by predominantly white, elite authors to mark an inferior Other. He claimed that while dialect is indeed a sound that marks speakers as different from those without a dialect, it can also mark them as authentic, as sincere. Stephanie C. Palmer, in her work about local color fiction and the American middle class, stressed that “although dialect in fiction helps to polarize class and race hierarchies, dialect also holds the capacity to antagonize the genteel standard it ostensibly presupposes” (20).² This argument corresponds to Shelly Fisher Fishkin’s conclusion that dialect, “as it turns out, in the hands of sly and talented artists and astute and sensitive critics, may do cultural work that is a good deal more complicated than we might have thought” (81).³ It can challenge normative speech patterns and it can display belonging and community. In this panel, we seek out the complexities of dialect and its convergence with the vernacular. We want to revisit the use of dialect in nineteenth-century literature, and expand the focus to contemporary cultural production, including literature, music, television and film. In addition, we are also interested in practices of transcription, for example in oral history projects, and in the reading of dialect, for example in classrooms in Germany.

Works cited

1 *“Speaking of Dialect”: Translating Charles W. Chesnutt’s Conjure Tales into Postmodern Systems of*

Signification (2006)

2 *Together by Accident: American Local Color Literature and the Middle Class* (2008)

3 *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (2007)

Presentations:

Dialect and the Aesthetics of Language in the Work of Ezra Pound

James Dowthwaite (Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena)

Uncle Remus in the Disneyzone: Adapting Joel Chandler Harris

Florian Freitag (Universität Duisburg-Essen)

Talking, Storytelling, and Testimony: Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo” (2018) by Zora Neale Hurston

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