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Richard L. Murray
Eastern Illinois University

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Ebonics, Local Color, and Official Language: Who Resists Whom?

by Robin L. Murray

At a time when the media has branded ebonics “a second class language for a second-class life” and worse, a time when politicians have sought to legislate standard English as the only official language in an increasingly linguistically diverse United States, the link between the power of a single language and the power of those who determine its dominance should come as no surprise.¹ Those who, like columnist Ellen Goodman, oppose recognizing ebonics as a separate language hark back to the melting pot era in which the children of immigrants were “Americanized” in the public schools because “there was...a commitment—however ruthless—to integration, to preparing children to enter the new world.”² Learning, speaking, reading and writing the “official” language—standard English—was and still is seen as the only way children can “travel a wider world,” a world in which they cannot speak their “mother’s tongue.”³

Those in favor of distinguishing ebonics, previously known as Black English, from standard English agree that students should learn standard English, but they do not believe learning this dominant discourse should mean other language forms must be lost. The Oakland School Board based its decision about ebonics on a program called Standard English Proficiency, or SEP. According to the district definition, “SEP is a cultural-linguistic program which empowers Afrikan American students with knowledge and understanding of Afrikan and Afrikan American culture and languages. The students and teachers receive instruction in the differences between the student’s home language and culture while implementing strategies that support the students in becoming proficient in standard English.”⁴ The program teaches teachers to understand the nuances of their students’ speech, so that, ideally, they can be built upon when students are taught standard English. According to the program’s originators, defining ebonics appropriately as a distinct language will allow students to learn standard English while maintaining rather than rejecting their own language and the culture it represents.

Maintaining a language separate from that of the dominant culture is seen by journalists like Goodman as threatening the melting pot theory of America and disintegrating the Union. In the post-Civil War United States, homogenizing forces, like those employed by today’s politicians, were used to erase regional and racial

difference which were seen as equally threatening. According to Josephine Donovan, “[a]s the modern states began to take shape, casting a unitary identity upon their territory, the imposition of a standard, ‘official’ vernacular upon all regions became imperative.”⁵ Yet, like today’s Oakland Schools, local-colorist writers resisted these federalizing and homogenizing tendencies and “endorse[d] acceptance of deviance” in both the style and content of their works.⁶ Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin gave words to this tension; he noted that a dialectic exists in literary language similar to the tension between centrifugal (unifying) and centripetal (vernacular) forces in Western history.⁷ This paper will argue that just as a *linguistic* dialectic was played out within the texts of writers like Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and other local colorists of the last century, a similar dialectic is at work today in the adopted policy of the Oakland Schools.

Josephine Donovan acknowledges the presence of a subversive linguistic force in local-color literature when she argues against literary critics like Louis Renza who claim that Sarah Jewett’s writing supports a form of homogenizing “federalism.” Donovan notes Renza’s ignorance of “the feminist subtext” in Jewett’s work; she provides evidence in his articulation of the so-called “regionalist/union binary.” In contrast Donovan finds what she calls “regional eccentricity in language” in Jewett’s works.⁸ Although I too disagree with Renza’s articulation of Jewett’s federalizing move, I also disagree with Donovan’s optimistic view of the works of the Local Color School. Women writers like Jewett do resist the homogenization of a dominant language through their use of slang, dialect, and unconventional spellings and punctuation, but they also seek entry into an homogenized institution of writing that requires what Bakhtin calls “unitary ‘Cartesian,’ ‘official’ language.”⁹ Local color writers, like the rest of us, demonstrate their “own intentions” by noting the many voices they have assimilated and by “refract[ing] [them] at different angles.”¹⁰ Eventually the words of these regional literary works, like those of the Oakland School Board, being “already populated with the social intentions of others [are] compel [led] to serve [their] own new intentions,” intentions that reconcile region with union.¹¹

In Jewett’s “A Winter Drive,” for example, published in her 1881 *Country By-Ways*, Jewett offers a definition of “hylozoism” similar to that of William James.¹² Jewett defines hylozoism as “the theory of the soul of the world, of a life residing in nature, and that all matter lives; the doctrine that life and matter are inseparable.”¹³ Yet Jewett’s definition demonstrates that she has “refracted” William James’s words “to serve [her] own new intentions.” In effect, she reconciles James’s federalist tendencies with her own more regionalist ones.

According to James, “the universe in this view is animated or spiritual both in its parts and as a whole, and the nature of Being is most reasonably to be conceived everywhere after the analogy of our own experienced life.”¹⁴ While Jewett’s definition reflects her familiarity

with James' philosophy, her definition not only connects life and matter but also claims they are both spiritual and animated, a move James is unable to make. She writes, "There was an old doctrine called Hylozoism, which appeals to my far from Pagan sympathies....Trees are to most people as inanimate and unconscious as rocks, but it seems to me that there is a good deal to say about the strongly individual characters, not only of the conspicuous trees that have been civilized and are identified with a home, or a familiar bit of landscape or an event in history, but those that are crowded together in forests."¹⁵ By attributing "character" to trees, Jewett refracts William James's words instead of simply reacting to them.

When writing in the "language" of the region of which they write, Local-Color writers resist homogenization in even more striking ways. According to Donovan, "Local-color literature is known for its emphasis upon regional particularities and eccentricities, upon local differences in setting, clothing, manners, and dialect." What has not been understood heretofore was that the women writers' willingness to use dialect and slang was itself an insurrectionary, heretical gesture. Ann Douglas notes it was a violation of the ideological "cult of true womanhood," because "ladies were known by their correct speech"; as a result, "The vernacular and the wit it inspired were officially off limits to American women."¹⁶

Harriet Beecher Stowe, who admitted she had an "unsanctified liking for slang," challenged this proscription as early as 1834 with her first vernacular tales.¹⁷ Later, in *The Minister's Wooing* and *Oldtown Folks*, Stowe resists homogenizing forces of all kinds through her choice of narrator, the undisciplined Sam Lawson, and her narrator's subsequent "choice" of dialect for the characters he brings to life in the stories Stowe allows him to tell. As late as 1872, when "The Minister's Housekeeper" was published in *Oldtown Fireside Stories*, Stowe subverts federalizing linguistic forces by use of the vernacular. As might be expected, Sam Lawson, who opposes the federalizing discipline of Calvinism and all that it represents, has no profession, disregards time, and resists speaking in standard English. In "The Minister's Housekeeper," however, characters who seem to represent those Calvinist disciplines resist them through their dialogue. The church deacon's wife, Mis' Deakin Blodgett, for example, exclaims, "when things once get runnin' down hill, there ain't no stoppin on 'em," when speaking with a friend about the minister's reliance on a young housekeeper rather than a new wife to replace the one he lost.¹⁸ Even the minister who might be expected to represent Calvinist disciplines resists those forces through his language and his actions when he proclaims, "I'll have him killed...we won't have such a critter 'round," in response to an incident where he fails in his attempts to force a Tom turkey to sit on some eggs.¹⁹ The minister also resists homogenizing forces of the community by choosing to marry Huldy, his housekeeper, rather than a "respectable" woman closer to his age. Yet tensions between centrifugal (unifying and federalizing) and

centripetal (vernacular) forces are reconciled when the minister "opened the minister's pew, and handed her in" under the careful gaze of church members like Mis' Deakin Blodgett.²⁰ Any resistance the language of the deacon's wife and the minister might represent become normalized in a church setting.

Unlike Stowe, who saw only men as storytellers, even of women's stories, Rose Terry Cooke believed women should tell their own stories. According to editors Fetterley and Pryse, Cooke "used dialect to direct her readers' attention to regional values, which she associated with women's experience of language and culture, as well as to identify conflict between women's and men's values as a major theme of her fiction. For dialect, appearing in opposition to the standard English of her expository passages, calls attention to the opposition her regional speakers see between the interests of men and the interests of women."²¹ In much of her fiction, Cooke offers an alternative vision for women that opposes federalizing forces that focus on women only as wife and mother.

In "How Celia Changed Her Mind," for example, Cooke affirms women who never marry or who marry and then "change their mind" by suggesting that self-love and self-respect are more important for women than marriage and motherhood. At a Thanksgiving dinner Celia gives for her spinster friends after her husband dies, Celia resists masculine federalizing forces that so limit women's roles:

An I'm thankful too that I'm spared to help undo somethin' done in that ignorance. I've got means, and, as I've said before, I earned 'em. I don't feel no way obleeged to him for 'em; he didn't mean it. But now I can I'm goin' to adopt Rosy Barker's two children, and fetch 'em up to be dyed-in-the-wool old maids; and every year, so long as I live, I'm goin' to keep an old maids' Thanksgivin' for a kind of burn-offering, sech as the Bible tells about, for I've changed my mind clear down to the bottom, and I go the hull figure with the 'postle Paul when he speaks about the onmarried, "It is better if she so abide." Now let's go to work at the victuals.²²

In this short speech, Celia resists homogenizing forces through her use of dialect; she subverts and makes "motherhood" her own by choosing to adopt her dead neighbor's children but rear them to be "old maids"; she resists and refracts the language of the Bible by concentrating on more sympathetic views of unmarried women and does the same with traditional views of the family holiday, Thanksgiving.

Jewett, Stowe, and Cooke prove successful in their attempts to reconcile the regional with the federal because their societal position as white and middle class allowed them at least a little time and opportunity to publish their work in periodicals. Authors like Francis E. W. Harper, who also recognized and took advantage of the subversive power of the vernacular, faced what Frances Smith Foster

calls “grave risks” in writing *Iola Leroy*, a novel that contradicted predominantly racist literature of the day. As critic John Ernest suggests, Harper’s failure to “refute the myths created by writers such as Thomas Nelson Page” could be seen as evidence of not only a failure of her abilities but as proof of African-American “artistic inferiority.” To combat racist forces, Harper “appropriates the discourse of racial difference.”²³ In other words, Harper refracts official language and makes it her own, for, as Bakhtin notes, “language...becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker...appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.”²⁴

According to Ernest, “In [the] subtitle [of *Iola Leroy, Or, Shadows Uplifted*] Harper appropriates [the] word [Shadows], and combines in it interracial politics, intraracial aims, and educational ideals. The subtitle announces the novel’s central argument: the shadows of cultural confusion, miscomprehension, and racial tension that threatened the nation’s future would be lifted only when other ‘shadows’—those whom Harper calls in her address on ‘Enlightened Motherhood’ a ‘homeless race’—were lifted to their rightful place in the communal home.”²⁵ And the text of the novel itself discusses the need for a subversive language among African-Americans as early as page two when the narrator becomes curious about what Harper calls “unusual interest manifested by these men in the state of the produce market.”²⁶

According to Harper, during the Civil War, “when the bondman was turning his eyes to the American flag,” “some of the shrewder slaves...invented a phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle-field.”²⁷ Harper explains that, “In conveying tidings of the war, if they wished to announce a victory of the Union army, they said the butter was fresh, or that the fish and eggs were in good condition. If defeat befell them, then the butter and other produce were rancid or stale.”²⁸ Harper’s bondman looks to the flag, a symbol of federalizing forces, to escape the discipline of region; yet, Harper’s novel is written decades after the Civil War as a means to combat racist federalizing forces, which constructed the quintessential American as white.

According to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, “Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of ‘American-ness’ that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering.”²⁹ Because of its struggle to separate itself from the “Old World,” the United States sought various means of defining its citizens. Morrison claims that, “What was distinctive in the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans. The distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social status—and their color.”³⁰ Morrison also contends that even though in countries like South Africa, to identify a South African, an adjective like “white” or “Black” is attached, “In this country it is quite

the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.”³¹

Succeeding in that struggle even partially is exulted in *Iola Leroy* where *Iola Leroy* finds that “prejudice pursues us through every avenue of life, and assigns us to the lowest places.”³² For example, Dr. Latimer, Iola’s eventual husband, achieves a higher position in society so not only is described as “a true patriot and a good citizen,” but is assigned the task of passing on the “sentiments of good citizenship...but his patriotism is not confined to race lines. ‘The world is his country, and mankind his countrymen’”³³ At the same time, the novel seems to argue against a federalist imperialist project it claims focuses solely on “a nation building up a great material prosperity, founding magnificent cities, grasping the commerce of the world, or excelling in literature, art, and science,” at the expense of “sobriety.”³⁴ The novel also highlights the racial difference of its protagonist and, especially, of Miss Delaney, a teacher said to be “of unmixed blood,” as a means of extending “American-ness” beyond its white origins. *Iola Leroy* argues that “Every person of unmixed blood who succeeds in any department of literature, art or science is a living argument for the capability which is in the race.”³⁵

In *Iola Leroy*, then, by highlighting racial difference while also redefining American-ness, Harper rewrites the language of racial difference and makes it her own. Now, in the contemporary debate over ebonics, racial differences seem to be highlighted as a means of sustaining an official language—in this case, standard English. Although many Americans are appalled that African-Americans would claim their dialect as a “language,” according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “the tenets underlying the [ebonics] decision are uncontroversial to linguists, who have studied what they call African-American Vernacular English for 30 years.”³⁶

In fact, on January 3, 1997, the Linguistic Society of America unanimously adopted a Resolution on the Oakland “ebonics” issue:

1. The variety known as “ebonics” is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties....
2. The distinction between “languages” and “dialects” is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones....
3. As affirmed in the LSA Statement of Language Rights (June 1996), there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity....
4. There is evidence from Sweden, the U.S., and other countries that speakers of other varieties can be aided in their learning of the standard variety by pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of the other varieties of language.³⁷

Linguists see the controversy surrounding ebonics as signifying Americans' fear of difference, of the vernacular, of centripetal, seemingly anti-federalist forces. According to Walt Wolfram, a linguistics professor at North Carolina State University, "The fundamental misunderstanding is about the nature of dialect diversity. American society treats dialects that aren't standard as aberrations."³⁸ According to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, in response to such federalizing forces, the Oakland Schools "stripped the word 'ebonics' from its newest report in an attempt to quiet controversy."³⁹ Newspapers applauded the decision, calling it variously "a wise move"⁴⁰ and a "remov[al of] some of the more explosive terms."⁴¹

Yet, few media representatives seem to recognize the subversiveness of the Oakland Task Force's plan. Instead of eliminating their policy on language development, Olszewski suggests that Oakland "still plans to dramatically increase the number of teachers who use ebonics methods with their African-American students by this fall," perhaps because it may actually be effective.⁴² According to *The Chronicle*, "using African-American Vernacular English in the classroom as an aid to learning standard English improves reading performance. In one such study, students' reading levels increased by 6.2 months, compared to 1.6 months for a control group."⁴³ Sylvester Hodges, chair of the Task Force, maintains, "The reality is our children are not learning and we want to refocus the community's attention on that (rather than on the ebonics fight)" even as he downplays the ebonics issue, claiming "ebonics has always been just one phase of our strategy. We also want to recruit more African-American teachers, operate more homework centers and train parents."⁴⁴ By "stripping" the word "ebonics" from their policy while preserving most of their program, the task force has reconciled the centrifugal unifying forces of dominant voices in the community with their own centripetal vernacular strength.

Perhaps those on both sides of the ebonics argument could learn from local color writers. In national terms, the region and the union can be reconciled without the negation of the vernacular. Like American women regionalists of the nineteenth-century, those in the Oakland Schools should be given the means to honor vernaculars while helping all students make the official language "their own." This is especially the case when, as the Linguistic Society of America has underscored, the decision to honor linguistic diversity has been shown in itself to be a most effective pedagogical strategy.

Notes

- ¹Ellen Goodman, *The Oklahoma Observer* 15 (January 1997), 19.
- ²Ibid., 15.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴This definition was posted to the Internet at AFAM-Lit@Listserv.
- ⁵Josephine Donovan, "Breaking the Sentence: Local-Color Literature and

Subjugated Knowledges," in Joyce W. Warren, ed., *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 229.

⁶Ibid., 232.

⁷See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) and Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁸Donovan, 231.

⁹Ibid., 229.

¹⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 300. and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹¹Bakhtin, 300.

¹²Sarah Orne Jewett, "A Winter Drive," *Country By-Ways* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1881), 163-185. William James, "Introduction," in Paulsen, *Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Longman, 1895).

¹³Ibid., 168.

¹⁴Jewett's letters reveal that she read James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he elucidates his definition of panpsychism, a philosophy very similar to his view of hylozoism. James' definition is contained in William James, "Introduction" *Introduction to Philosophy*, 91.

¹⁵Ibid., 168.

¹⁶Donovan, 233.

¹⁷Quoted in Donovan, 233. Stowe's story, "Uncle Lot," was published in *Western Monthly Magazine* in 1834, when the cult of domesticity disallowed verbal wit of any kind for women.

¹⁸Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Minister's Housekeeper," in *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910* (New York: Norton, 1992), 47-57.

¹⁹Stowe, 56.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, eds., *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910* (New York: Norton, 1992), 93.

²²Rose Terry Cooke, "How Celia Changed Her Mind," in Fetterly and Pryse, eds., *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910*, 137-153.

²³John Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 181.

²⁴Bakhtin, 293.

²⁵Ernest, 187.

²⁶Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy, Or, Shadows Uplifted* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

²⁷Harper, 8-9.

²⁸Ibid., 9.

²⁹Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 47.

³⁰Ibid., 48.

³¹Ibid., 47.

³²Harper, 207.

³³Ibid., 207, 279.

³⁴Ibid., 219.

³⁵Harper, 199.

³⁶"Linguists Find the Debate Over 'Ebonics' Uninformed," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 1997, A16.

³⁷Linguistic Society Resolution on "Ebonics," May 30, 1997.

³⁸*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 1997, A16.

³⁹Olszewski, *The San Francisco Chronicle* (April 1997), A17.

⁴⁰Ibid., A20.

⁴¹Colvin, *The Philadelphia Inquirer On-line* (April 1997).

⁴²Olszewski, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, A17.

⁴³"Debate Over 'Ebonics'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A17.

⁴⁴Hodges quoted in Olszewski, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, A17.

Robin L. Murray is assistant professor of English at Eastern Illinois University.