

“Language,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes in his afterword to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “is not merely ‘adornment’. . . ; rather, manner and meaning are perfectly in tune: Hurston says the thing in the most meaningful manner.”

It is this “meaning” and “manner” that draw **Dr. Neal Lester**, AHC’s most recent Distinguished Public Scholar, to Hurston’s work. A professor of English at Arizona State University, Lester is no doubt one of the people responsible for Hurston’s addition to the canon of literary studies.

Upon his first reading of Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Lester says he found himself “engaged in a book that sounded familiar, that I connected with through storytelling, just like the stories I heard in barbershops back home.”

Back home is Jefferson, Georgia, where the church expected him to get an education. After completing his bachelor’s degree from West Georgia College, he thought he would teach high school English. Almost on a whim, Lester applied for a fellowship from Vanderbilt. He soon found himself in Tennessee, studying dramatic literature, an interest also instilled by the church, where he performed in nativity reenactments and sang in the choir.

He considered majoring in theater in undergraduate school, but soon found the roles for young, African American men limiting, unless he was willing to play servants or chauffeurs. Lester gradually realized that it was not so much the stage activity but the story itself that interested him—the southern culture, language, and emotionalism of playwrights like Tennessee Williams. He began studying these works not as performance pieces, but as literature that expresses ideas about human experience. Lester received his master’s degree from Vanderbilt, with an emphasis in Tennessee Williams’s short fiction.

At the same time, he realized he wanted to teach. “Many of my professors knew their material,” he says, “but they didn’t know how to teach. I could do that!” He taught at Vanderbilt while pursuing his doctorate, completing a dissertation on Ntozake Shange, best known for her 1975 work, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Unfurled*. What attracted Lester to Shange was the same celebration of African American rituals and folklore that drew him to Hurston, along with the masterful use of language.

“What’s interesting about Shange,” he says, “is that she is so unconventional. She’s a poet who became a dramatist, and it shows in the rhythm of her words.” For Lester, it usually comes back to language—its idioms, meter, and meaning. He suggests that students read Hurston aloud, for instance, because in doing so they will discover how rhythm is part of meaning.

Shortly after receiving his PhD, Lester was hired by the University of Alabama. He was also introduced to public humanities programs by the Alabama Humanities Foundation, where he served on the speakers bureau. Hired by ASU in 1997, Lester now teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in African American literature, theater, folklore, and children’s literature, among others.

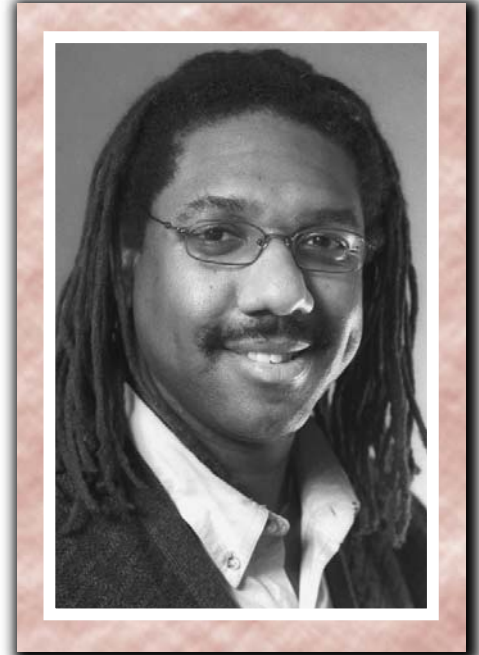
In the relatively short time Lester has been in Arizona, he has also worked a great deal with AHC. To recognize his work promoting the public humanities, he will receive the Distinguished Public Scholar Award during ceremonies at the 11th annual Lorraine W. Frank Lecture, featuring Stewart Udall, on October 16 (page 1).

Lester has been on AHC’s Speakers Bureau since he arrived here. He served as a member of AHC’s grant review panel for a year, he has developed presentations for the Arizona Book Festival, and he has been a consultant to and speaker at numerous AHC activities. For example, he worked on several AHC-funded programs conducted by the Carver Museum, such as the Black Writers Forum and an oral history project. He lectured at the Glendale Library as part of the “Jazz Age in Paris” project, and he served as a moderator for last year’s “Celebration of African American Authors” conference.

Several times Lester has facilitated audience discussions following performances by the Black Theatre Troupe. The director, **David Hemphill**, says, “Neal’s insightful analysis of the plays, combined with his passion for what he does, makes the plays more approachable. The audience gets beneath the surface story, and they develop a better understanding of plot and character. Since we’re trying to make the African American experience more accessible, to share it with a wider audience, Neal Lester is about the best thing that can happen to an organization like ours.”

Lester says that doing public programs here is different than in Alabama, although his reasons for doing the work are often the same. The difference stems from the fact that there are not as many African Americans in this region and, as a result, their stories have largely been untold. “I had no idea what the West was like,” Lester says, “but I soon realized this wasn’t the South when I heard some of my students tell me they had never met a black person before.”

That presents a challenge, he notes, because there *are* African Americans here, and they *do* have stories that don’t cancel out the stories of other groups. Lester wants to help tell those stories, not just in the classroom, but in public settings, too. “In Alabama, I soon realized the experiences and issues I was talking about extend beyond the university; they’re relevant to all, and that’s true here as well.”



What he tries to communicate is that literature does not exist in a vacuum. In his classroom, for example, he brings in dolls, advertisements, and other pieces of popular culture to demonstrate how we get trapped in stereotypes. He talks about “eliminating definition,” a concept borrowed from author Toni Morrison. “Labels restrict our thinking and behavior, and stereotypes trap,” he says. Great literature, for Lester, conveys experience without “boxing people into artificial boundaries.”

He shows in his presentations how the smallest details a writer chooses, probably unconsciously, tend to feed stereotypes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in what he calls “the politics of hair.” Meeting Lester, one can’t help but notice the wiry dreadlocks atop his tall frame, and many of his publications and presentations have titles like “Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks” and “Beyond Big Hair and a Bad Hair Day.” For Lester, hair is more than an adornment; it has cultural significance, it connotes standards of beauty, and it is linked to ritual, tradition, and identity politics.

In addition to his public programs and teaching, Lester is a prolific author. He has written dozens of articles, and he has authored books on Hurston and Shange. He’s currently working on two book projects, one a collection of essays that look at the ways race and gender are constructed in ads.

The enthusiasm with which Neal Lester discusses these and other topical issues is infectious. His mission to find “meaning in manner” begins in his literary studies, but it extends to larger social issues that literature introduces and frames, helping all of us to reflect upon and connect with the underlying ideas.