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Tracing Lucille Hegamin's and Victoria Spivey's Contributions to African American Women's Literacy Practices

From the 1920s-30s, African American women blues singers helped to create the recording industry and they contributed significantly to the black arts scene. Three of the most famous blues singers from that period are Mamie Smith, Elizabeth "Bessie" Smith, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Many scholars interested in blues music typically concentrate their scholarly inquiries on M. Smith, B. Smith, or Rainey. There are, however, many other African American women blues singers who recorded and performed blues music throughout the 1920s-30s such as Lucille Hegamin and Victoria Spivey. While the two Smiths and Rainey certainly deserve attention, one of my books chapters will focus on the blues lyrics and correspondence of Hegamin and Spivey. Unfortunately, there are very few one-on-one interviews or correspondence materials left by some of the early African American blues stars; fortunately, Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book library houses important documents left by the estates of Hegamin and Spivey.

I would like to go to Emory University during Spring Break 2012 and examine the papers of Hegamin and Spivey. Both singers will be included in chapter four of my book, which analyzes the connections and dissonances between the literacy practices of late 19th century African American women activists and novelists, three African American women writers writing during the Harlem Renaissance period, and the blues lyrics of Hegamin and Spivey. Reviewing their materials will give me an opportunity to read the first-hand accounts of their time as blues stars during a pivotal moment in America's history, and, more specifically, will allow me to see how they perceived themselves as artists and activists in the 1920s and '30s. I hope to be able to discover, by reading through their materials, if they also felt a profound connection between themselves and the black masses or if they wanted to be a part of the growing number of black leaders advocating for the rights of the masses to gain full rights as American citizens.

To date, no one in Literacy Studies has placed elite 19th and early 20th century African American women activists and novelists in conversation with early 20th century African American blues women. By reviewing the primary materials of Hegamin and Spivey, I will have a unique opportunity to find out what these women were really thinking doing an important time in American history. An article related to the main thesis in my book has already been accepted for publication. My book project will allow me to extend this scholarly pursuit. By the end of summer 2012, my plan is to submit my completed manuscript.